

## COLORNIAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP?

### Findings and ideas for reflection

by Vincenzo Marino<sup>1</sup>

*Humans have made true progress whenever they notice that they are not the centre of the universe. (...) throughout the history of civilization there are these “leaps outside ourselves”, this awareness that the laws that we had attributed to reality were, in essence, nothing other than an imagined reality made in our image and likeness as a good servant of our needs. Every time a step like this has been taken mankind has gained understanding from it and engaged better with reality, and powerful tools with which to control nature have fallen into our hands. The more man has dominated nature, the less he has felt like its master, its central figure. (...) You could say that the entire evolution of thought (...) made progress every time the concept of “essence” was replaced by that of “relations”. But to do this requires an enormous effort of honesty and, you might say, of asceticism. It requires the courage to look at ourselves as if we were outside ourselves (...) to give up our habits of thinking. In this sense, morals and science are the same thing. And every scientific discovery, I would say even every technical achievement, is like a slap in the face that says: things are not the way my model would like them to be organized.*

**Eugenio Colorni<sup>2</sup>**

#### 1. Introduction

What has Eugenio Colorni got to do with being an entrepreneur? Does it make sense to speak of Colornian entrepreneurship? And above all, is it useful?

It seems to me initially profitable to trust in the viability of these questions. Although in fact originating from a personal experience, both cultural and practical, that has at least partly influenced its orientation, this paper aims to explore the possibility of further advancement in understanding the entrepreneurial phenomenon and its role in promoting economic and social development.

During the course of a thirty-year collaboration with Luca Meldolesi<sup>3</sup>, the themes of entrepreneurship and businesses have always been at the center of our shared interests (which include research, policy, and evaluation).

I have thought it worthwhile to examine in greater depth some parts of the work we have done to verify their relevance in an explanation of a specific point of view.

In this exercise, it is obviously essential to avoid the danger of falling into mere “classification”, of a purely definitional character. Identifying the possible attributes of the Colornian entrepreneur or, *mutatis mutandis*, defining a Colornian “way” of reading business phenomena cannot simply be an end in itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Letter to his wife of 12 December 1938, in “*Eugenio Colorni. Microfondamenta. Passi scelti dell’epistolario*” L. Meldolesi, ed., Rubettino 2016

<sup>3</sup> And with the group of economists, private and public managers, and researchers in the orbit of the project of analysis, research, policy-making, and evaluation now under the auspices of AC-HII.

The idea of singling out some particular elements of entrepreneurs' and managers' behavior and connecting them with the work and writings of Eugenio Colorni is in fact both attractive – from the point of view of identity and for the “lessons” that can be learned – and risky – because it is essential to avoid being perceived (by those who deal regularly with businesses) as “second-rate sorcerer’s apprentices” and thus be exposed to the risk of mutual intransigence.

In a Colornian way, this operation makes sense if it succeeds in disclosing features not fully revealed by other approaches, if it sheds light on behavior, performance, and management modes, or more generally provides a perspective on business and the business person that reveals, or rather highlights, elements that up to now have gone unnoticed.

The line of reasoning in the following pages, then, is both a point of arrival and a point of departure.

It is a **point of arrival** in the sense that it is the result of a long-term effort, alas going back years, concerning the role of business in economic development (particularly in the Italian South). Over the course of thirty years we have been involved with policies for businesses, the operational development of business in the South, strengthening and consolidating companies, business networks and local production systems, the development of consortium initiatives, business cooperatives...

The result is that a specific point of view undoubtedly exists regarding businesses and entrepreneurs. And that it is an approach that has numerous points of contact with other ways of looking at the entrepreneurial phenomenon, for example from the perspective of Business Economics, from the viewpoint of Local Development Economics, or from that of the Civil Economics<sup>4</sup>. But it is also a specific and unusual way of looking at businesses and business people, and that is as a social and collective phenomenon. One which at bottom connects its function to the direct or indirect positive effects that it generates, or rather could generate, for the purpose of public happiness and possible pathways for development.

In this respect, the business and the entrepreneur are not observed, negotiated with, managed, incentivized, facilitated, conversed with as categories in themselves .... But as possible tools for economic development.

And therefore, in this perspective, they themselves are both the object and subject of socioeconomic research, experimentation and economic policy. They can act directly or indirectly for the pursuit of the common good. Which is not the product of an invisible hand that miraculously solves collective problems thanks only to the pursuit of individual goals, but rather comes from the actions of a number of subjects, entrepreneurs included.

It ought to be pointed out, on the other hand, that the intention here is not to emphasize – much less mythologize – the figures of the entrepreneur and the company, or to glorify – for whatever reason – their social function and responsibility. It is a field of endeavor which is in my opinion lacking in interpretive and normative content even though nowadays, as a matter of fact, this is rather inflated<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> As “Civil Economics” we here refer to the work of some Italian economists (Stefano Zamagni, Luigino Bruni and others) who focus their analysis on relational goods, starting from the legacy of the early works of Adam Smith and/or Antonio Genovesi.

<sup>5</sup> The reference here is to the dissemination of various approaches to what is known as “business ethics” and the Business or Corporate social responsibility. The excessive emphasis given by these approaches to general principles and their successive “easy” (if not hasty) assimilation as regulatory features have created a climate of compliance around the issue. Thus, in the extreme case, it is now enough to have a well-crafted social budget to be considered a socially responsible company. In contrast, our approach accepts methodological and research considerations regarding the effectiveness of business values in action as well as the fact that these must be concretely verified in the

If anything, the mechanism is the reverse: it is in fact necessary to investigate in what contexts and conditions, and specifically and concretely in what ways, the entrepreneur and business can perform the functions that generate collective well-being.

From this standpoint, our line of reasoning is also a **point of departure** and, if you like, a research project. The Colornian entrepreneurship represents a hypothesis about entrepreneurial behavior, but also an idea about the function of an entrepreneur in society which has to be verified again and again in the individual and social actions of the entrepreneur, the running of the company, and relations with stakeholders.

Inevitably, as we shall see, this point of view includes the ambitious subjective pedagogic presumption that even an entrepreneur can “learn to learn”. In thinking in a “Colornian way” about business and entrepreneurship and in studying entrepreneurial behavior from this angle, it is possible to derive indications about how to improve the company’s ability to participate in the wider collective enterprise of generating well-being (for the country).

It is as if the entrepreneur were asked to “come out of him/herself” – out of his or her own specific function – and look at personal certainties and successes in order to call them into question “self-subversively” and to activate and re-activate new capabilities for generating individual and collective value. Within certain limits, therefore, this is an “incremental ability” whose use provides the foundations for successive evolutionary developments in its applications.

*“In other words, the Colornian entrepreneur and manager is also a humble person who doesn’t become big headed, who subordinates him/herself and accepts, indeed encourages, processes of social democratization at all levels and in all contexts, even very far from the business, because he/she thinks that the progressive enhancement of the abilities of everyone (without exception) applied to every walk of life (not only that of the company) is the decisive key for the pursuit of the welfare of all. He/she has a choral vision, like that required of teachers, doctors, public executives, and so on” (Cf. Meldolesi, dialogue, Spring 2017).*

## 2. The beginning, starting from Eugenio

1. The occasion for reflecting on the idea of Colornian entrepreneurship came from my reading *Microfondamenta*<sup>6</sup> and from the preparation of a review of it for a meeting of the Institute on the subject. I have used part of this review in my argument<sup>7</sup>. The book is a selection of the prison letters from Eugenio to his wife Ursula Hirschman. It is a nimble text that affords a gradual approach to the work and person of Eugenio Colorni and displays a specific gravity of its own.

But it should also be read along with his wider opus and in the light of his lifelong effort to build a new way of seeing and discovering the world. This reading surely promotes a better understanding of the moral, intellectual, and practical workings that Eugenio had long placed at the center of his daily striving. Viewed in this way such a reading becomes both powerful and active.

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strategic actions taken by the entrepreneur and the business (cf. Marco Vitale in *Valori imprenditoriali in azione*, V. Coda, M. Minoja, A. Tessitore, M. Vitale, eds., EGEA 2012).

<sup>6</sup> *“Eugenio Colorni. Microfondamenta. Passi scelti dell’epistolario”*, L. Meldolesi, ed., Rubettino 2016

<sup>7</sup> Remarks given at the meeting of AC-III of 20 January at the Fondazione con il Sud, Roma.

Along with his previous writings and other Institute publications, *Microfondamenta* reopens the possibility of truly understanding Colorni and what he had to offer (let's say worldwide) to the development of knowledge and to people's moral and cognitive growth.

This is basically cultural "seed capital" that can sprout elsewhere... It is as if Colorni had sought and found the formula for a fertilizer that could be used in many fields.

It is clear, then, that in my opinion his is an extraordinarily useful point of view, one that truly helps us understand the world (and ourselves) because it condenses in itself heuristics and capabilities for mastering reality through a way of observing things that is constantly open to discovering. Indeed, it is precisely this "obsession" with useful discoveries that makes this approach so fruitful at a cognitive and interpretive level.

This is a central aspect of Colorni's contribution—the continual reference to understanding rather than explaining that Eugenio brings to bear during the course of his explorations. His basic criticism of what he defines as "the philosophical malady" is precisely this—that philosophers have been more concerned with explaining the world through a systemic conception than with understanding it.

When Eugenio speaks of useful knowledge, which is knowledge that actually affects people's lives and their ability to come to master reality, when he recalls the extraordinary value of a discovery... whose effect is to enable someone to do new things, previously undreamt of... he is actually achieving a "revolution" with respect to the position of traditional philosophy and the prevailing need to lay down a "conception of the world".

If it weren't for the fact that it is a work that originated specifically from the struggle against the "philosophical malady" with the purpose of rekindling the capacity of knowledge to affect real problems, it might be said that Colorni's (and Hirschman's) position outlines and puts into practice a specific approach to the philosophy of science.

On the other hand, as we know, this approach lives on in Albert Hirschman. It lives in the abundance of his findings and discoveries, it lives in texts, observations, experiences that "never repeat" either in their object or mode. The concepts of trespassing and self-subversion, the selection of objects of observation that are always different (connections, exit and voice, passions and interests, public happiness and private happiness, the rhetoric of intransigence, etc. etc.) seem to have been devised to escape the temptation of being sucked into the "internal coherence" of theories (worse: of a single theory).

And all this without Hirschman worrying too much about the job of codification<sup>8</sup>, which would have exposed him to the risk of falling into the type of error that Eugenio attributes to "systems of thought"—always insisting on internal coherence or a closing of the circle.

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<sup>8</sup> "Codify? We have to agree on what it means. Putting ideas in order and organizing them well is certainly possible—essential, actually. To see this just think of the care Albert took with his writings. It is also essential to avoid letting go of things: a production line of thought can last over time (according to Albert, one of his character traits was being able to follow it to the end). Finally, you have to get everything possible out of the material, as in the surprising appendices of *Journeys*. But theorizing is another story. Here the risk of being dragged out by "systemic thinking" is ever present: Eugenio never missed a chance to ridicule it. The problem remains of where to draw the line between the two. ...I don't think Colorni would ever have codified (in the literal sense) what he was writing. Instead, he would always have tried to demonstrate in practice the concrete advantages of what he was saying. And in so doing would have shown how this or that discipline would reap the benefits of his way of seeing the world". (Cf., Meldolesi, dialogue, Spring 2017)

2. In the selected correspondence with Ursula in *Microfondamenta*, Eugenio Colorni's references to practical knowledge are precise, carefully thought through and I believe tested as well. Eugenio progressively abandons philosophizing in order to move closer to discovery. He reads physics and biology because he is progressively more passionate about a way of thinking that facilitates new discoveries and new findings. Discoveries and findings that do not set for themselves the goal of explaining reality, but rather of understanding it so as to master it to the fullest.

"Useful knowledge" is the point. And isn't this, I asked myself, an interpretive key for a better understanding of companies and entrepreneurs? Isn't it perhaps, if not the only one, the main characteristic of business activity to translate knowledge into utility, value and development?

In the end, indirectly, the entrepreneurial exercise is another field in which interpretative "power" becomes "actuated" and reaches important concrete results. This is a common feature of many virtuous accounts of entrepreneurs and businesses, and it more generally permeates the daily work of popular, widespread entrepreneurship in vast areas of our country... people who can't do anything with knowledge as an end in itself... but who "find peace" if they are able to apply it in satisfying needs and solving problems<sup>9</sup>.

And yet, all this is perhaps still not enough to give a complete picture of the Hirschman-Colorni reference we make when we talk about businesses. I think this choice is best explored on at least two fronts:

1. A "possibilist" reading of the business and the entrepreneur as social and collective phenomena, with an explicit focus on the development side.
2. A reading of the business and the entrepreneur as a set of behaviors by definition susceptible to improvement, reorientation, subversion.

Before we begin exploring these perspectives, it is useful to highlight the fact that they are also the endpoint of a specific operation of action-research carried out on, with, and for businesses over the course of more or less thirty years.

### **3. The road traveled: a brief review**

1. At the beginning of the 1990s, in the departments concerned with economic policy and development economics at the University of Naples, a research movement inspired by the work of Albert Hirschman was created for the purpose of understanding Southern Italian society and defining and building (multiple) routes for development.

Naturally, a specific area of investigation in this context was reserved for the phenomenon of entrepreneurship.

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<sup>9</sup> Several years ago, in a conversation with Attilio Giuliani (business consultant, partner at Considi, expert in marketing and in "Nuovo Modo di Fare Mercato" [New Way of Doing Business]) about issues of business development and consolidation, specifically concerning the company I was then CEO of, Attilio made a comment, penetrating and enlightening at the same time, on the refined and theoretically complete way I made my arguments: "...but all this knowledge—what do you do with it? What use is it? Shouldn't it all be put into practice, concretely tested? Made useful?"

This was not only because of the obvious consideration that in a market economy the company is the key tool for generating value and development<sup>10</sup>. It was also the fact that the theme itself and even its effect on Southern society were seriously undervalued by the economic and political mainstream of the time.

In those years, the explanations given by traditional Southern studies of the situation of the South were heavily influenced by the dualist approach and its main corollary—the identification of “prerequisites” for the activation of the development process<sup>11</sup>.

And nevertheless, an endogenous dynamism in Southern society could have been detected. While even official statistics showed that the gap was not closing, in the overall growth of the country it had in fact remained fairly stable over time. A sign that endogenous growth indeed had to be there... living standards, behavior, wealth creation seemed in some areas of South similar to those in the Central Italy and the North. How was it possible?

The Colornian-Hirschmanian intuition regarding the “philosophy of discovery” together with the many avenues of attack on the problem suggested by Hirschman’s own works and by the particular methodological conditions created by the work of Luca Meldolesi, Nicoletta Stame and Liliana Baculo allowed a group of young researchers to pursue a “journey of discovery” during their exam courses and graduation theses, in which their task was – simply – to look for unknown stories of entrepreneurial (or economic or administrative) success and to explain this<sup>12</sup> in an evaluative light.

2. An initial starting point was the evaluation of public policies involving research carried out in the 1990s on Law 44/86 concerning the “Creation of new youth entrepreneurship in the South”. Here, under a rigorous analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the program, dozens of subsidized companies and public officials involved in the program enforcement were interviewed. One of the most important results of this work was that it allowed **the potentially strategic value of small businesses in Southern Italy to emerge for the first time in Southern Italian society**. The issue concerned both the cultural significance of the law which, for the first time and in a revolutionary way, placed financing, assistance, and support for new business initiatives from young people at the center of the development strategy for the south, and the direct consequence of this reasoning (never sufficiently emphasized in my opinion), which is that there were no anthropological obstacles to the development of entrepreneurship in this large area of the country. At the same time, the field investigation would later show the flowering of business ventures, isolated as well as within local *milieus*, and often specialized by sector (textiles - clothing, footwear, packaging, but also precision mechanics in the suppliers of Aerospace and Railways industry). The entrepreneurial density in a given sector, even though this did not emerge statistically in the specialized indices used

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<sup>10</sup> In addition, this consideration, while obvious, collided with a socioeconomic and cultural context in which demand for “semi-public” welfare assistance prevailed. There was a perception of the function of endogenous entrepreneurship as residual if not marginal to the functioning of the Southern economy, and a call for large public and private investments from outside the region to meet the unemployment problem (held to be widespread) in the South.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the issue see, among others: D. Cersosimo and C. Donzelli “Mezzo Giorno. Realtà, rappresentazioni e tendenze del cambiamento meridionale”, Donzelli Editore 2000; V. Marino “Percorsi e Strategie di sviluppo locale nel Mezzogiorno” 2002 Doctoral thesis; L. Meldolesi: “*Il nuovo arriva dal Sud. Una politica economica per il federalismo*”, Marsilio 2009.

<sup>12</sup> It is the intuition that, in order to understand certain world operations, it is not necessary to run grand statistical elaborations (which, as Aaron Levenstein puts it: “... are like bikinis. What they reveal is striking, but what they hide is more important”). It is also useful to look at and understand reality directly ... starting from what we have right under our nose.

to read the situation of the Italian industrial districts, showed an entirely respectable level of dynamism and importance to the local economy, with businesses operating even in foreign markets and acting within a dense local network connected with the entire national economy.

This “looking beyond your nose in your own backyard” and discovering unexpected things (from good public practice<sup>13</sup> to the presence of many invisible agribusinesses) reinforced **the image of a hardworking South able to compete in the markets**, and led to a recognition (first extra-statistical and later statistical) of the local systems of the South and a recognition of widespread and “popular” entrepreneurship, otherwise invisible to many eyes.

**At the same time, this work of discovery was also a manner to give value to the business pathways of the entrepreneurs who had been observed.**

At the end of the millenium, a real “information campaign” on the hidden economy was undertaken, which culminated in the birth of the *Comitato per l’Emersione* [Committee for Surfacing] and the many projects for local development connected to it. This favored a further important phenomenon – the recognition (and self-recognition) of the socioeconomic role of small and medium-sized enterprises in the South, with company development at the center of the picture.

This gave rise to various projects of technical assistance and support, such as the C.U.O.R.E. help desks in Naples<sup>14</sup>, and the projects on business consortia<sup>15</sup> (animation, design, planning, management) in the sectors of clothing (Positano, San Giuseppe Vesuviano), canned tomatoes (Sant’Antonio Abate), and artistic crafts (Porcelain of Capodimonte). Business schools at the local level<sup>16</sup> reinforced the original point of view (of the centrality of businesses in the virtuous functioning of wide areas of the South<sup>17</sup>).

The work on the slack of the southern economy, the search for hidden, dispersed or badly used resources thus became a field for experimentation, a “laboratory”, on both the public and private fronts. The action of “rationalization” in the service of development, aimed at enhancing existing endogenous potentials and promoting their development (whether territorial, administrative, or business) was undertaken both outside and within businesses.

The widespread result of this work – which it would be an error to call the prime mover, the only cause of these results, and which should be seen as part of the profound change that Southern society has experienced over the last 30 years – is that the South, even where it preserves its character as “*terra*

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<sup>13</sup> Various research groups have been set up to look in several directions at the many dimensions of development: SMEs, Public Administration, Latin America, European Union. Field research also benefited from the possibility of study abroad using facilities provided through targeted investments by Luca Meldolesi and Nicoletta Stame (in Cambridge MA, Paris, Berlin and, in the future, Brussels).

<sup>14</sup> Centri Urbani Operativi per la Riqualificazione Economica delle Imprese [Urban Operational Centers for the Economic Redevelopment of Businesses] emerged from a collaboration between the Interdepartmental University Center URBAN – ECO in Naples and the City of Naples. Many young researchers were employed in action-research with hidden businesses in a number of neighborhoods in the center of Naples. The daily activities of these “emergence desks” were aimed at the identification, emergence, and resolution of problems – sometimes very concrete – that had led to the total or partial immersion of businesses.

<sup>15</sup> For a fairly exhaustive picture of the work on business consortia, see “*Primo forum sugli strumenti per l’emersione. Tra Pubblico e Privato il ruolo possibile dei consorzi per l’emersione e lo sviluppo locale del Mezzogiorno*”, Quaderni del Comitato per l’emersione del lavoro non regolare, Presidenza del Consiglio 2000

<sup>16</sup> The experience of area business schools, set in motion in the sphere of the same research group, has been spreading and improving (FIELD Calabria, SISanità, SiPavia, Giugliano Scuola d’Impresa etc.), along with the attention given by social science to the study of entrepreneurial behavior.

<sup>17</sup> This process of collective emergence of the phenomenon of entrepreneurship has brought about a very real and far-reaching process of entrepreneurial emancipation in the South, not least psychological. While still seen as residual and marginal by mainstream political economy, it was nothing of the kind in the daily life of the country.

***hostilis*”, no longer rejects the idea of business as one of the possible instruments of change and improvement for itself and the world around it.**

For a young person in 1980, running a business was considered a heresy (compared to working as a salaried employee, preferably for the government). Today this is no longer the case... and businesses (small, social, and dilapidated, that solve some of a community’s problems along with the large, successful ones that compete in global markets) represent one of the keys to credible development in the South.

Seen from another angle, this process – built by observing the Italian South and conversing with Albert Hirschman – allowed the emergence of an alternate interpretive hypothesis on questions concerning the development of the South and the country which, without hiding the gravity of such questions, went looking for possible ways out.

The same progressive expansion of economic and social potentials in the South was thus accompanied by the development of an effective awareness of them.

Finally, over the last ten years the task of field research has been enriched by a further “change in viewpoint” – that of democratic federalism<sup>18</sup>.

The inter-Italian dialog with Marco Vitale, the study of federalist thinking, both Italian (Cattaneo, Sturzo) and European (starting with the work of Eugenio Colorni at Ventotene), the expansion of the field thanks to the experiences of the federalist countries of the new world (United States, Canada, Australia), and the search for possible connections with Italic potential around the world are all exercises that have helped to address the problem of the development of the South and the country from a precise perspective: the progressive democratization of society and the country in a federal key.

In the words of Marco Vitale: *“democratic federalism... is not an institutional mechanism, but rather a way of fueling, reanimating, and reinforcing participatory democracy; it is a way of experiencing democracy, a political and civil culture. In the meantime federalism is a positive value in that it helps us live better as responsible citizens in a democratic state. And historical experience (across several continents – ed.) shows us that federalism has been a useful tool in the pursuit of this goal”*<sup>19</sup>.

Meldolesi directs his efforts toward the necessary process of democratizing the country and the consequent construction of a virtuous process of collective education concerning the positive consequences of a democratic federalist approach: that it is a form of federalism in which it is not institutional features that take center-stage, but rather individual and collective behavior—that is, the leading role and responsibility of people in society, administration, business and the state.

The implicit challenge of democratic federalism is that all these different dimensions should converse harmoniously among themselves and with the territorial dimension.

Within this frame of reasoning, it is easier to understand how businesses and entrepreneurs (like the other roles and responsibilities throughout the national collective, the state, the administration) should be asked for an extra effort over and above the exercise of their specific primary function. This is the effort of the active citizenship to construct a democratic society based on individual and collective responsibility to the common good. And fortunately it is also a process of continual and progressive possible learning<sup>20</sup>.

3. It is appropriate, at the end of this brief review, to recall some further findings useful to our line of reasoning.

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<sup>18</sup> See, among others, L. Meldolesi’s: *“Milano Napoli. Prove di dialogo federalista”* Guida, 2010; *“Federalismo democratico. Per un dialogo fra uguali”*, Rubettino, 2010; *“Federalismo, oltre le contraffazioni”* Guida, 2011; *“Italia Federanda”*, Rubettino, 2011; *“Italici e Città” IDE*, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Introduction to L. Meldolesi *“Federalismo Possibile. Per liberare lo Stato dallo statalismo e i cittadini dall’oppressione”*; Edizioni Studio Dominicano, 2012

<sup>20</sup> Cf. L. Meldolesi *“Imparare ad imparare. Saggi di incontro e di passione all’origine di una possibile metamorfosi”*, Rubettino, 2013

3.1 In the first place, **the effects of the action-research on the subjective level**. The deeply Colornian sense of this work lies in the fact that the discovery process is also a process of self-discovery, both for the observer (whose improved analytical ability, interaction with reality and command of it amount to self-improvement) and for the observed (who enters a psychological dimension of recognition of the “self in relation to the world”, previously unexplored). An important part of this action-research has in fact been the capture of the widespread urge for prominence that existed and exists in Southern society, especially among the young, and its translation into acceptance of responsibility.

This is true in the everyday lives and personal growth of those lucky enough to be part of this small but lasting collective venture<sup>21</sup>, as well as for the individual “objects” of the research.

The work on informal sector emergence, as mentioned, indeed had the dual purpose of making known the vitality of many business experiences in the South, and at the same time allowing these businesses to recognize themselves as potential agents of possible change.

3.2 A further aspect to highlight is **the effort made to create a harmonious condition of work** for the different dimensions of analysis. For example, putting together the analyses on the improvement of the state, on federalism, evaluation and businesses. Also, putting together the private and public fronts, in the collective interests of the country.

From this perspective, the company, although historically proven to be the main tool for creating value and utility, does not have the exclusive role as development activator. Because in a possibilist approach, the mechanisms of activation (the way one thing leads to another) and of development consolidation (the way a thing stabilizes over time) can also be public as well as private. They may be intentional in nature, but they can also be an intrinsic effect of human action (individual and collective); they may result from exogenous shocks (such as importing a technology or a change in the pattern of foreign markets), or from a conscious movement on the part of the socioeconomic actors of a territory<sup>22</sup>.

The priority of emphasis on the business front has therefore always been accompanied by two other priorities: working for improved performance from public administration, and reinforcing the processes of democratization and the activation of civil society.

3.3 Obviously, the idea that a smoothly operating administrative machine at the level of municipalities, regions and the state should be strategic and linked to its dissemination, both geographical and in the social fabric, is a fact taken for granted – and considered “ideal” in common parlance.

But the particular step forward our work represents is in **the core position of change and in the force – centripetal and centrifugal at the same time – of the possibilist approach**.

In other words, the idea of seizing any and all opportunities that come up to bring about change—opportunities that appear not only in the “normal” alternation between private and public happiness<sup>23</sup>, but also on those occasions when the mutual strengthening of the two dimensions – public and private – can be generated; opportunities that stem from stimulating the adoption of

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<sup>21</sup> Later merged in “A Colorni - Hirschman International Institute”.

<sup>22</sup> For a complete representation of the richness and possibilist versatility of the Hirschmanian approach, see “*Alla scoperta del Possibile. Il mondo sorprendente di Albert Hirschman*.” L. Meldolesi, il Mulino 1994, reprinted by Rubettino nel 2017, trans. into English as “*Discovering the possible. The surprising world of Albert Hirschman*”, Notre Dame University Press, Notre Dame, Ill. 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. A. Hirschman “*Shifting Involvements, Private Interests and public action*”, Princeton University Press, 1982

policies that motivate behavior favorable to development<sup>24</sup>; and from catalyzing the possible unintentional consequences that emerge from a certain policy, for example, or a technological transformation<sup>25</sup>.

On closer inspection this is a key element of the approach, one we have been practicing for some time by contributing to a small Colornian-Hirschmanian tradition in which the two dimensions (public and private) are deeply interconnected and linked to the ability to generate possible change.

In this sense, once again, enterprise and entrepreneurship are among the keys to development, and are called upon to interact with other dimensions, and to be aware of the triggering and induction role they may have in activating and consolidating development processes.

Business and entrepreneurship are vectors of possible change for an entire society and can (must) openly interact with it.

Hence the *democratic federalist* appeal for harmony among the various (even subjective) dimensions of development; hence the ongoing attempt to build mechanisms of dialogue between the different possible dimensions of change. Hence the ongoing efforts to keep communication channels open, and a proactive role both in business and entrepreneurial development and in the improvement of public administration.

3.4 And thus a further element emerges: there is in the work of the Institute an explicit reference to Colorni's Socratic (maieutica) approach at the level of collective education. It is an attempt to test this construction of a renewable way of dealing with problems so as to solve them collectively.

The exercise of Colornism as a subjective activity is already in itself delicate and complicated, but practicing it as continuous construction the way Luca Meldolesi has done and continues to do with young and not-so-young people is a special collective cultural experiment that has no counterpart, I believe, anywhere in the world, even among those who draw on Albert Hirschman's work.

This focus of attention on a social and collective application of Colornism as an exercise in rallying and releasing the dormant energies of the South has its own specific applications in the education of young people, in work on local development in the South, in improving the performance of public administration, and in the promotion of collective entrepreneurship.

And this modality, as Luca Meldolesi points out, coexists with the idea of a variety of possibilisms, corresponding to the subjective and objective conditions in which the various dramatis personae may find themselves: *"In short, there is a remarkably vast space – for people and experiences that are very different from each other, but are linked by the possibilist cognitive approach"*. (Cf., Meldolesi, dialogue, Spring 2017).

In the words of Cardinal Bergoglio to the Argentine leadership classes: open tracks instead of occupying spaces.

3.5 Finally, from time to time **this point of view has opened dialogue channels** in several directions and among different disciplines trying to interact at the levels of analysis, policy, and

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<sup>24</sup> On this point, see the illuminating *"Uno Schema per il Sud"* in *"Sud. Liberare lo sviluppo."* L. Meldolesi, Carocci, Roma, 2001; also, *"Spendere meglio è possibile"* Il Mulino, 1992

<sup>25</sup> Incidentally, it is perhaps possibilism's centrifugal potential to look in many directions that explains the professional "diaspora" we have seen in our work group, which has remained intact even as it has been enriched by many different professional dimensions and different careers. The possibilist approach has helped to foster professional positioning that respects the expectations and attitudes of individuals, with people in politics, public administration, private management, professional associations, management of private entrepreneurial initiatives, training...

evaluation, centrally as well as locally, and in public administration activity as well as in private ventures<sup>26</sup>.

This is another case of a “genetic” propensity of the Colorni-Hirschman viewpoint. Widening the gaze beyond the habitual field of analysis in order both to avoid the risk of falling back on oneself and to seize the opportunity to discover new things is one of the teachings of the philosophy of discovery<sup>27</sup>.

This is “ante litteram” trespassing, which we find in the work of Albert Hirschman<sup>28</sup> and which comes down to our own time in the development of integrated social, economic and political analyses. It is the passage from economic development to local development, to public administration reform, to doing better with less, and to federalism; the attempt to develop the widest possible view of the entire theme of development in the South and in the country.

#### **4. Innovations and compatibilities in a new way of looking at business**

1. Before embarking on the conclusion of the argument, it is useful to recall a dialogue that has been initiated from time to time with analysts, scholars, policy makers and administrators. Specifically, for our purposes, this is the interaction with proponents of the idea of Italian industrial districts at the end of the last century, and the more recent interaction with the business school linked to the ISVI initiative promoted by Marco Vitale and Vittorio Coda.

Classical political economy (Smith, Genovesi, Marshall) and later local economists, especially of the Italian school (Becattini, Brusco, Rullani, Garofoli, Fuà, Dei Ottati) developed an analysis of business linked largely to its socioeconomic role, both as an agent of development and in its relational dimension (with other businesses and with the local area), that went so far as to analyze complex organisms on a territorial scale, such as industrial districts, the manufacturing belt, local labor systems and so on.

Between 1995 and 2005, our participation (first as guests, later as co-protagonists) in the Artimino seminars organized by IRIS in Prato enabled the theme of local production systems of the South to emerge at the national level and fueled a debate with those who had until then dealt with the question of local development looking almost exclusively at the phenomenon of the industrial districts of the so-called “Third Italy”.

This dialogue, in support of the program of analysis begun in those years at the University of Naples (cf. above, section 3), led to the emergence of the question of entrepreneurship in the South as an active potential to be pursued, showed that while there was indeed a different (sometimes imposing) intensity of tone from one region to another, there was more equality within the country than had been imagined.

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<sup>26</sup> To get an idea of this it is useful to refer to, among others, “Il nuovo arriva dal Sud. Una politica economica per il federalismo” L. Meldolesi, Marsilio 2009.

<sup>27</sup> This is clearly seen in one of the last letters in the collection “Critical Thinking in Action”, Rubettino 2017, pp. 77-84, in which Eugenio hypothesizes the involvement of philosophers, biologists and physicists in the creation of a multidisciplinary scientific journal. And in his deep commitment to accomplishing this during his approximately two years of hiding before his death (cf. “La Malattia della Metafisica”, Geri Cerchai, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> The seed of trespassing sprouted primarily at Princeton when Albert Hirschman collaborated with Clifford Geertz in founding the School of Social Science. It occurs in many of Albert’s writings and explicitly in the title of a 1981 text in which he tries to overcome the obstacles between economics and politics: “Essays in Trespassing: Economics to Politics and Beyond”. Cambridge (U.K.); New York: Cambridge University Press.

It allowed us to absorb useful considerations on policy and on local development policies that placed entrepreneurship, companies and business systems at the center of the action<sup>29</sup>. It allowed us to open the reasoning of our interlocutors to a freer interpretation of the concepts they proposed based on their research findings so that these would not be the “shirt of Nessus” that would poison their interpretation of the “different world” of the South.

I wrote in fact in my doctoral thesis (2002, cited above): *“At this point it becomes easier to understand the usefulness of local development studies in the outlining of an interpretive framework for possible change in the South. In the same way, the motives become clearer for turning attention to the spontaneous formation, even in this area of the country, of specialized production zones. Southern business systems, while not able to fit the ideal district type and not possessing all the requirements of the northern benchmark, nevertheless present signs of systemic organization, a “district vocation”. The possible spiral shape of their hoped-for process of competitive consolidation suggests that the theme of strengthening Southern local systems and their businesses should be one of the cornerstones of a development strategy for the South.”*

On this basis as well, the aforementioned local territorial action including support for businesses, for the creation of consortia and for local development laboratories has been strengthened. The idea of interconnected business at the territorial level, together with the coexistence of mutually supporting analysis and policy, has proved particularly compatible with the opportunity to highlight the “community” function of business and to extend the perimeter of observation for this beyond the limits of the single company.

2. More recently, it has been possible to initiate a similar dialogue with the “school” of business economics founded by Marco Vitale and Vittorio Coda.

As is well known, business, the company, and the entrepreneurial function have become the object of a widespread and thorough literature. During the course of over a century of knowledge “accumulation” on the subject, fields of specialized business study have developed that extend in many directions: Business Economics, Accounting, Organizational Behavior, Entrepreneurship, Business Management, Marketing etc.

It is not the task of this short essay to provide a reasoned reconstruction of this scientific process of development, which in many fields and directions has brought about the emergence of true schools of thought as well as cultural and interpretive traditions. It is nevertheless worthwhile to recall the severe critical sentiment from within these disciplines recently expressed by Marco Vitale, among the keenest

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<sup>29</sup> *“The specifics of local business systems are about how the economy of the business system is integrated and how it is fueled by its environmental background. The local milieu is in fact the point of arrival of a natural and human history that provides the production organization with essential inputs such as labor, entrepreneurship, material and immaterial infrastructure, social culture and institutional organization. This territorial key thus exposes the circular or rather spiral-shaped and composite nature of the production process: production means not only transforming a set of inputs (data) into a finished product following given technical procedures in a given time frame, but also reproducing the material and human prerequisites that start the production process. The production of goods includes the social reproduction of the productive organism: along with goods, a truly complete production process should co-produce values, knowledge, institutions and the natural environment that serve to perpetuate it. The theoretical specificity and relevance of the local context lies therefore in the opportunity/necessity that it offers to examine production in vivo as a circular phenomenon that places technical or economic aspects (in the narrow sense) in “intimate relation” with those that are social, cultural and institutional.”* G. Becattini, E. Rullani in “Mercato Globale e Sviluppo Locale” *Economia e politica industriale* n. 47, 1993.

Italian observers of business phenomena: *“...managerial doctrine, dealing with issues such as power and responsibility, service and property, organization, evolution and the transmission of 'human know-how' intersects with a central point of general cultural development. And it is precisely the inability to find a place for itself at this central point in general cultural evolution that accounts for the lack of cultural and civil maturity in the doctrine of management. It is my belief that the doctrine and therefore the practice of management will not be able to reach a more mature phase of development if they cannot situate their basic problems in a broader and more personal cultural perspective that includes the theory of responsibility, property, social organizations and their ends, learning processes, and general development”* (cf. M. Vitale, in *“Valori d’impresa in azione”*; cited above).

And undoubtedly, the approach of Vitale and Coda at ISVI is in this respect particularly compatible with our work.

*“The business values that ISVI has committed itself to developing and disseminating since its foundation may be summed up in a far-sighted conception of the company, its aims, its way of being and operating, the role it is called upon to play in society, and the relations it establishes with its various partners. In this conception, profit is neither absolute nor undervalued, but is pursued as a result of competitive strength and cohesive ability, and its primary purpose is to fuel these basic elements of success. If this conception of the company and its success becomes part of the way business is done and what it means to be an entrepreneur and manager, then economic and ethical values will tend to work in harmony, just as social and environmental needs tend to be in harmony with the needs of competition and profitability. This is a different approach from that of business ethics or corporate social responsibility. Indeed, it is characterized by a unitary, systemic and dynamic vision of business issues that is held by the person guiding the business, who has a grasp of its problems of ethics and social responsibility within the greater context of what constitutes good management and good governance”.* (cf. ISVI, *Missione del Portale* section of website).

Consequently, *“A company is an institution of public interest under private management. A strategic and operational tool for collective development”* (cf. Vitale, *ibid.*, cited above).

The high compatibility of this position with a research method based on the reality and especially the sharing of the principle that any merit evaluation of a business’s role revolves around the actual behavior of the company and the entrepreneur are the main findings of this inter-Italian dialogue between business and development economics<sup>30</sup>.

Of course it seems obvious that in the ISVI approach the company’s contribution to the common welfare is seen essentially from the position of the company itself. The good management and governance of a business inspired by precise entrepreneurial values, put into practice on a daily basis by the entrepreneur, guarantee (through the mechanism of the company’s values in action) the company’s contribution to the common good. The primary responsibility of the entrepreneur therefore lies in the sound management of the company and its mission of creating value for the people and the community.

Our approach is somewhat different.

It is as if, entering a planetarium and looking up, we were to observe the constellations that generate development: in one approach the brightest stars would be businesses, while in the other the greater

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<sup>30</sup> These are efforts, points of view, actions and conclusions that result from intense research and interaction with reality and are fueled by a fruitful interrogation of facts rather than starting from a conception of the world. This is a mutual innovation that should be preserved and nurtured!

brightness derives from a specific multidimensional combination of factors favorable to development, including the behavior of individuals, the local administration, public institutions in general, and businesses.

As Meldolesi puts it, *“It is one thing to maintain that entrepreneurs have an important role even (and especially) in Southern society, and another to subsume (as philosophers used to put it) everyone’s lives under those of a few, even the most enlightened entrepreneurs. “In that case, why not scientists?” my scientist brother would say, his pride wounded by all this talk of business people. Or moralists? Or magistrates? In the history of political and social thought, attempts have from time to time been made to find a sector of society that has more right than others to understand and thus manage public interests. Happily, democracy has swept such gibberish away...”* (cf. personal communication, Spring 2017).

## **5. Wrapping things up: ideas for further study**

1. At this point the scope of the Colornian aspect of business and entrepreneurship should be a bit clearer.

This is in any case a reflection on the object under investigation (entrepreneurship and the entrepreneur), the research method and the approach utilized to explore the topic, and the political and economic implications to be drawn from it.

On one hand, it is in fact a specific way of observing the workings of businesses and the behavior of entrepreneurs which links them to the general and specific needs of the surrounding environment, the area and the people. Considering the social function of a business “from the standpoint of society” obviously also means measuring its effectiveness in terms of the overall betterment of the socioeconomic system in which the entrepreneurial venture comes to life. It means observing the behavior of individuals, but also evaluating the social development of the basic entrepreneurial theme, linking it to the evolutionary dynamics of the territory and the country.

But it also means looking at the enterprise as a collective possibility to emancipate people from less developed conditions. The company (with the related derivatives of self-entrepreneurship and self-employment) is a tool for building the personal dignity of individuals.

2. At the same time, as we have seen, this is (metaphorically speaking) a micro- and meso-economic exercise that interacts with the macro-economic level but avoids being absorbed by it in a search for general conclusions (or recipes). It is an exercise that everywhere seeks the possibilities for activating pro-development changes and that attempts, through “laboratory-style” procedures, to multiply their effects. These are research areas where the discovery of something new is also the further discovery of oneself. Where acting to favor development can generate subjective spillover that is very potent in terms of individual action.

This I believe explains the attention given to findings concerning people’s lives (be they entrepreneurs, public and private managers, or researchers) and to valuing them fully in doing research. Here there is a temptation to recognize something extra in “our Colornian entrepreneurs” as compared with others. That something extra that makes them aware of the role they play even outside their business lives, namely the function of building common and collective public welfare. And this is not only the result of a process of accumulating behaviors, culture and relations that starts with the company and the way

entrepreneurs and managers value their relationship with the vast community that revolves around it.

It is also the opposite. That is, putting the idea of public welfare first and asking what the entrepreneur can do beyond the process of accumulation within the company (of all the types of capital I mentioned). And it will be consequently obvious that there is a behavioral value dimension that needs highlighting: the shift from the dimension of behavior oriented in keeping with the specific purpose of the company to the full assumption of responsibility to contribute actively to the common good (cf. below, point c).

3. Obviously, this approach gives the function of active citizen back to the entrepreneur. It calls for the assumption of wider responsibilities beyond the essential one of managing the business. It calls for conscious leadership based on the needs of society, not solely on the utility of the goods and services the firm produces.

This is the most delicate point in the argument. And it is important therefore to be clear.

- a) The Colornian entrepreneur certainly assumes the primary responsibility of managing the company to create value for the business, for the clients, for the collaborators and stakeholders.

The development of the business is never out of his/her mind. It is not enough to have arrived at a specific rent position and to maintain it; the question should be how to exercise the function of development innovatively and continuously. The Colornian entrepreneur joyously emulates, we would say with Albert Hirschman, the labor of Sisyphus<sup>31</sup>. There is joy in the effort of pushing the boulder up the mountain, but even more in letting it go and starting again.

Such an entrepreneur is Schumpeterian *even toward him/herself*, and not only in the ability to be an “instrument” in crisis resolution and the reactivation of the economic cycle. He/she must be wary of the satisfaction that comes from success, needing, as Nietzsche would have it, always to do more.

The continuous process of interaction with the market is certainly helpful in this, as, by definition, it stimulates the entrepreneur constantly to seek conditions that regenerate competitive advantage, but this has to be done independently and with humility and the results obtained need to be questioned, in the interest of creating new competitive conditions.

Thus the focus of Colornian entrepreneur’s behavior and goals is continuous learning and improvement.

- b) With this in mind, it is moreover not enough for an enterprise to produce value and innovation. It also depends on “how” it produces them. The goal-directed obsession with innovation, which is

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<sup>31</sup> Homer recounts in the *Odyssey* XI, 746-758:

*“And I saw Sisyphus too, bound to his own torture,  
grappling his monstrous boulder with both arms working,  
heaving, hands struggling, legs driving, he kept on  
thrusting the rock uphill toward the brink, but just  
as it teetered, set to topple over –  
time and again  
the immense weight of the thing would wheel it back and  
the ruthless boulder would bound and tumble down to the plain again –  
so once again he would heave, would struggle to thrust it up,  
sweat drenching his body, dust swirling above his head”.*

fundamental for the entrepreneur, has to be deployed in the way he/she organizes the company and stimulates colleagues to pursue continuous improvement<sup>32</sup>.

People are at the center of the entrepreneur's own actions and those of the business, and it is for then and with them that value is built<sup>33</sup>.

It should be noted that this is not about a romantic idea of a business as a place for the expression of the personal views of the workers. The idea is rather of a workplace that everywhere stimulates the assumption of responsibility. A workplace that stimulates people in the direction of personal growth and improving their skills, replacing a culture of duty-fulfillment with one of taking responsibility and which here again becomes a tool for people's real emancipation.

In this regard, the Colornian entrepreneur applies to him/herself and others the principle of assuming responsibility as a guiding element of behavior.

- c) At this point it is easier to understand the calling of the Colornian entrepreneur to a higher level of responsibility even beyond the limits of the business. Our question then becomes this: faced with of the needs of the country and the obvious need for a leap of collective quality in terms of development, does it make sense to ask more of our entrepreneurs, private managers and consultants? Does it make sense to ask them for a direct commitment to improving public affairs through activism and responsibility in fields outside business? How can this be done and what should be done?

Is it possible to travel this Colornian-Hirschmanian road without falling into pointless rhetoric? Is there a way to verify this in the field? Acquisitions made in other fields of human life, the trans-disciplinary element, and a view of business from the standpoint of economic, democratic and civil development, fueling a dialogue that goes beyond the limits of the single enterprise – will these things lead to entrepreneurs doing their jobs better? And finally, this work is constant, personal, and continuously aimed at discovering the world and ourselves... will the ability to recognize these features in entrepreneurial matters perhaps help in the building and training of Colornian entrepreneurs?

Until now, our findings lead us to give affirmative answers to these questions.

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<sup>32</sup> It would be too long to go into detail about another series of events that led me to develop these considerations. But perhaps it is at least worth mentioning. Over the last ten years I have engaged with the topic of the centrality of people in entrepreneurial issues from the specific standpoint of a manager of a cooperative who actually deals with cooperation. As is known, the cooperative formula is based on the principle of democratic participation in company decision-making, collective entrepreneurship, and mutuality. These are topics that by definition point to the centrality of the person. Observing cooperatives, expanding their operations in various sectors, talking with presidents and managers, committing myself to organizing Confcoopertve in the fight against false cooperatives, I became even more aware of how crucial this theme is in the success and value of many cooperative entrepreneurial pathways.

<sup>33</sup> In a discussion with Nicola Lamberti, mayor of Borgarello (PV) and co-founder of 7pixel, a successful company in the information field, he told me in commenting on the reasons for a conflict with his business partners: *"I'm not interested in creating value regardless. What I want is to create value for others and with others. I think businesses' capacity for growth, especially in our sector, is bound to the ability to equip themselves with the best and most creative professional resources, and to create an organization that brings out the best in them without confining them in 'work to rule' hierarchies. I cannot accept that my business should work in any other way"*. Nicola Lamberti, personal communication, 1 June 2017.

