

# Introduction

## *The Art of Raccomandazione*

Like the skill of a driver in the streets of Rome or Naples, there is a skill that has its connoisseurs, and its esthetics exercised in any labyrinth of powers, a skill ceaselessly recreating opacities and ambiguities—spaces of darkness and trickery—in the universe of technocratic transparency, a skill that disappears into them and reappears again, taking no responsibility for the administration of a totality. Even the field of misfortune is refashioned by this combination of manipulation and enjoyment.

—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Long before I actually went to Southern Italy to conduct anthropological fieldwork, I had had some brushes with *raccomandazione*, even if I did not recognize it as such. During an extended stay in Rome in 1986–87, my acquaintances would occasionally offer to “talk to a friend” to help resolve some problem or other I was experiencing. I would politely decline, obtuse in my Anglo-Saxon faith in meritocracy and in following procedures to reach a goal, and all told, I really did not see the usefulness of all of this cumbersome mediation. A few years later, I undertook a study of chronic youth unemployment in Bernalda, a small town in the deep South of Italy, in the province of Matera. At this point, the topic of *raccomandazione* cropped up with great insistence in interviews and conversations with unemployed youths and their families. I noticed, though, that this *raccomandazione* went beyond the sphere of employment; in fact, the further the study progressed, the more it appeared to be a “total social fact,” to use Marcel Mauss’s famous expression. I designed the research project on *raccomandazione* more than six months before the beginning of the ground-shaking events of Tangentopoli in February 1992, and by the time I reached the field that May, “*raccomandazione*” and “*tangente*” [bribe, kickback] formed a pair on everyone’s lips. As I developed the analysis, I became even more firmly

convinced of the merit of an anthropological study of *raccomandazione*, because it enabled me to pose the research problem in terms of the people's emic perspective (or as they put it, "mentality") and cultural behavior, and to conceive the issue of clientelism more broadly than it had been previously.

From the beginning of fieldwork to the publication of this volume, the overarching issue of corruption surrounding the cultural category of *raccomandazione* has acquired new urgency, even as the memory of Mani Pulite began to fade about the edges. And not only in Italy: it has been apparent how crony capitalism led to a financial crisis in Asia starting in 1997 and to the emergence of oligarchs in post-Soviet Russia. Geographically closer to Italy, the European Commission has been rocked by various corruption scandals, even the hitherto unimpeachable Germany, landing a heavy blow to ex-chancellor Helmut Kohl and his party, the CDU. Bribes and kickbacks [*tangenti*] are still alive and well in Italy. Considering the political climate in Italy at the time of the initial fieldwork and the optimism over the nascent "Second Republic" in the immediate wake of Tangentopoli, I thought that an anthropologically informed perspective on the issue could be useful by formulating different sorts of questions: for example, how do people elaborate the distinction between corruption and correct behavior? It is essential to avoid devoting our attention exclusively to the *tangente*, striking though it is; rather, we need to ask what connection bribes and kickbacks have to other practices and ideologies in the culture, if our daily microbehaviors and our common sense about "the way things are" actually offer a valid support for constructing something new and, ideally, noncorrupt. But we should also question ourselves with regard to the nature of the "new" we are seeking: is it to be simply a mirror image of the "old" or, instead, a new synthesis that retains some of the valid elements of the past? An anthropological view can help shed light on the sedimentation of tradition and ideology that make up cultural categories like *raccomandazione* and the various forms it assumes, like the *tangente*. With this volume, then, I hope to offer some new observations in this regard. The ethnographic approach is based on long-term qualitative research in a small Southern Italian town, and I have sought to use the community setting as a springboard for considerations that go well beyond the local level.

Some very fundamental aspects of an investigation of *raccomandazione* might initially seem obvious or taken for granted by the average Italian or to Italianist scholars. For such readers, I therefore beg their indulgence in allowing me the opportunity to present such elements,

which, aside from being considered from a new vantage, are a necessary point of departure for a more penetrating analysis. In the case of this study, by going into and within the very commonplaces and pat expressions that make up so much of local “common sense,” what seemed at first glance to be obvious and shared by all the members of the community instead turns out to be the site of a variety of positions, of numerous points of contention and ambivalence. And if *raccomandazione* can be deemed an “art,” as I suggest, we must reflect upon what makes some people more talented artists than others.

Additionally, I would like to justify the accent I place on the South. Undoubtedly, there is a widespread perception among the general Italian public that there is “more” *raccomandazione* in the South than in the Northern and Central areas of Italy. One would be hard-pressed to come up with quantitative data to check the validity of this idea, but more than its actual veracity as a reflection of empirical reality, what is really interesting is the ideology that lies *behind* this perception: that is, the various reasons that it appears *natural* to us that there might indeed be more *raccomandazione* in the South. In the Northern context, the word “*raccomandazione*” might conjure up the well-known revelations of Tangentopoli, but beyond this there are surely other examples of it (as many emigrant participants noted in my study). I have not conducted research on *raccomandazione* in the North, and therefore I cannot be sure that the *raccomandazione* existing there is identical to the phenomenon as it is manifested in the Meridione, as the South is also known. Nonetheless, as I observe in this study, while *raccomandazione* is part of a certain conception of Southern identity, at the same time it also clearly features some elements that are linked to a wider sense of “Italianness.” Ideally, some colleague could carry out a similar investigation in the North in order to have a better basis for comparison. But even without considering the Center-North *per se*, in the discourse on *raccomandazione* the Southern Question and the problem of power relations between North and South loom large on the horizon, and the present work considers the role of *raccomandazione* precisely in this perspective. From Lombrosian anthropology—with its measuring of Southern noses and crania—to Banfield’s “amoral familism,” Southern Italy has often been presented in the social sciences as synonymous with deviance and backwardness.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxical as it may seem, this treatise on *raccomandazione* is in part an attempt to go beyond some of the negative, stigmatizing depictions of the South. In a certain way, then, it proposes a different sort of *meridionalismo*, scholarship on the South for a land that has adopted me.

## Introductory Comments on *Raccomandazione*

Whenever I happen to speak about this study with friends, family, and colleagues in the United States, I usually encounter significant difficulty in my attempt to explain its central object—the ideology of *raccomandazione*. It is not an easy task to translate, even with several English words, the vast terrain neatly summed up in Italian as “*raccomandazione*,” but that does not mean that examples of it are unknown or lacking in my native country. In the area of Southern Italy where I live and work, people refer to *raccomandazione* as a fundamental, deeply rooted element of their society. Sometimes they call it a *spinta* [push] or a *spintarella* [little push], a *chiave* [“the right key to reach a big door,” as one person explained], or even a *calcio nel sedere* [a kick in the rear end to propel you forward]; the current, more official euphemism is *segnalazione* [signaling]. *Raccomandazione* is invoked with reference to *agganci* [contacts, lit. hooks], *conoscenze* [acquaintances], *amici* [friends] and *amici di amici* [friends of friends]. In its most reductive sense, the concept describes a process of gaining influence or clout through intermediaries in order to achieve a goal.

While there are indeed resemblances between “*raccomandazione*” and its English cognate “recommend” in some of the latter’s significations, *raccomandazione* also encompasses meanings that have become archaic in present-day American English. The obsolete form “recommend” has completely dropped from the English language, and several senses of “recommend” that relate to the Italian usage are rare, if not awkward, in our contemporary, everyday language (vide the *Oxford English Dictionary*). We find, for example with reference to Christianity, individuals who “recommend” themselves to the Lord or to another person’s care for protection. The most common current uses of “recommendation” are the following: a recommendation as informed advice or counsel, and a recommendation as a letter of reference that makes up part of an application, especially for a job or entrance into a university. Many Italians with whom I have spoken marveled over the fact that an American job or university application would actually *request* that the applicant submit a certain number of such recommendation letters, generally from a past employer or instructor who is supposed to praise the candidate’s work and character. Thus, in the United States, the recommendation process is institutionalized in this letter-writing practice, and unlike the Italian *raccomandazione*, there is little secretiveness to it, though at times there is a modicum of embarrassment surrounding it. Yet what we Americans call a recommendation recognizes only a small part of what the Italian cognate denotes: it does not refer to the “dealing” or clout

maneuvering that actually does take place among people of influence in the United States (and practically everywhere else in the world).

The fact that the active American English vocabulary has collapsed much of the earlier richness of the term “recommendation”—a richness preserved to a great extent in modern Italian—has perhaps led us Americans to believe that such human and divine assistance has little to do with the way in which we conduct our lives; the American concept of personhood, in fact, is quite atomistic, realized in the ideal of the “self-made man.” For this reason, the question often posed to me by interlocutors left me groping for a satisfactorily intelligible answer: “Don’t you have *raccomandazione* in America?” Quite aside from the institution of the letter of recommendation, some of what we do have in the United States in terms of *raccomandazione* remains unmarked, lying hidden in the shadows of our “technocratic transparency,” falling through the cracks of a rational-universal order or veiled beneath the purdah of meritocracy. In the Southern Italian community I studied, on the contrary, interpersonal connectedness is openly acknowledged and ideologically marked, among other things, by the attention given to *raccomandazione*.

The presence or absence of a cultural marking on our constructions of reality draws our attention to the heuristic value of ideological analysis. Phenomena that may appear quite different on one level of (positivistic) analysis—organized crime, old and new forms of clientelism, *l’arte dell’arrangiarsi* [the art of making do], and even some forms of religious devotion—assume a new hue in an ideological analysis, one that helps us to see some interconnections we may not have noticed before. By the same token, what appears to be the same, even at the level of one word, becomes as dispersed as light through a prism. We are not looking merely at a set of cultural codes that govern thought and behavior; rather, we are interested in the cultural media through which different subject positionalities both connect and clash.

The *raccomandazione*, where it has received attention in the social science literature on Southern Italy, has usually been subsumed under the categories of patron-client relations or clientelism, and in any case within the “political” aspect of social and cultural life. The work I present here, however, attempts to go beyond the bounds of some of the reified descriptions of clientelism in the literature: patronage as a form of mediation between the local community and the “outside world,” as the “patron-client dyad,” or as a relationship based on the more or less compelled dependence of the weaker partner, the so-called “client.” From an ethnographic perspective, the *raccomandazione* is not merely a utilitarian practice, though some of its subgenres like the *tangente* approach the purer utilitarian end of the continuum; on the whole, the *raccomanda-*

*zione* is inserted within a wider web of affective relations. Throughout this volume, I argue that *raccomandazione* is both an ideology and an ideological phenomenon, one that informs the stylistics of many genres of social relations in Southern Italy. For this reason, the condemnation of *raccomandazione* made by many Bernaldese cannot simply be countered by faithfully enacting its presumed opposite: that is, “following the rules.” To remove oneself from *raccomandazione* as a modality of social being implies modifying subjectivity itself; it amounts to wanting to declare oneself an “individual” in its most exquisitely post-Enlightenment, rationalist sense—what Bakhtin has called a “monological” or “finalized” consciousness (Bakhtin 1984).

While so much good descriptive work has been done on phenomena of political patronage, I aim to complement that literature by analyzing how *raccomandazione* gets played out in the minutiae of everyday life. Where others have analyzed the local exercise of power, I focus here on *raccomandazione* as a site of contrasting ideological accents related to class positionality, as well as its role in the consolidation of a certain hegemony. Another, equally important aspect of the study is its treatment of emic evaluations of *raccomandazione* as a fundamental element of Southern Italian life and its role in Southerners’ sense of identity. That is, in addition to the actual manifestations of *raccomandazione* phenomena, I am interested in the rich local discourses that weave them into a construction of what it means to be Southern. Finally, I consider *raccomandazione* as an interface of “democratic” ideologies with class hierarchy and also some of its implications for relations of power both within Italy and without.

Much of the literature on patronage has carefully outlined the exercise and management of power in patronage systems, and thus also the construction of hegemony in that context. Early anthropological studies of patronage had the flaw of remaining too confined to the level of the village or small community without considering encompassing and interconnected fields, but this fault was rectified to some extent in later work that made reference to connections between local and extralocal spheres. Here, I will instead shift the analysis from a somewhat mechanical view of the management of power through patronage to one in which power is seen as operating on a *discursive* level. Thus we cannot look at patronage in isolation from the wider discursive systems that differentiate themselves from it—that is, those perspectives that purport to be “normal” (in linguistic terms, the “unmarked case”), the rational-universal paradigm from which *raccomandazione* is observed and judged as “deviant.” As such, this study attempts to examine not only the local-level hegemony of *raccomandazione* but also the hegemonic struggle be-

tween *raccomandazione* and rational-universalism, a struggle that gets mapped onto Italy's national and international relations, especially with Northern Europe and the United States. Metaphors of gender become one medium through which the struggle takes place: *raccomandazione* is metaphorically associated with "feminine" irrationality, personal connectedness, and the private sphere. Even if patronage is rooted in patri-, as in *patrimonialism* and *patriarchy*, it has been one-upped by a masculinist discourse of formal rationality that positions it as feminine and therefore inferior. If rational-universalism seems to be the perfect antidote to a town, nation, or world pervaded with *raccomandazione*, then it behooves us to consider it more carefully.

On the ground level where ethnography dwells, we see the discourses and daily-life tactics that inhabit these spaces.

## A Life Cycle of *Raccomandazione*

The discourse on *raccomandazione* became most noticeable when I began researching the problem of youth unemployment in Bernalda: so many young people and their parents insisted that they could not successfully obtain work without a *raccomandazione*. This form of *raccomandazione* is surely the most "classic" one, the one that most readily comes to mind when the subject is raised. Even so, as I spent more and more time in the community, I learned that the same approach to doing things was present in virtually every sphere of daily life, even if it didn't always get specifically identified as "raccomandazione." To give the reader a sense of the pervasiveness of *raccomandazione* in town life, we may use a life-cycle framework to offer, in a concise manner, numerous examples of its various manifestations, examples that emerged from interview material and participant observation.

Let us begin with the birth of a child, our exemplary protagonist in a life cycle of *raccomandazione*. Many Bernaldese women give birth at the nearby village hospital of Tinchi, which may employ friends or family, and in any case they will find fellow townsmen [*compaesani*] with whom to socialize during their stay. However, many also choose to give birth in other public hospitals in the province (Policoro or Matera) or in private clinics in nearby Apulia (especially in Bari and Taranto). A pregnant woman about to deliver often obtains a *raccomandazione* for a bed in a particular hospital, or perhaps to have a private or semiprivate room—that is, alone or with just two beds, rather than six). One woman related her experience of giving birth in a private clinic in Bari: the first two days she was in the *convenzionato* ward, meaning that it was

paid through the public healthcare service, and her husband and mother “recommended” her to the nurses by leaving them small sums of money at every change of shift.<sup>2</sup> “And then I moved to a private room—it was a completely different thing! Pleasant nurses, cleanliness, the doctor who passed every four hours.” Other interlocutors reported giving “gifts” of £300,000–£500,000 to the nurse obstetricians who assisted their family member in her delivery, and this was in public facilities.

As the child grows, parents begin to get information on the available preschool classes. Many townsmen reported that a *raccomandazione* is helpful to get a child into the class of a teacher who has a particularly good reputation. Similarly, from elementary school on through the entire school career, parents jockey their *raccomandazioni* to get their children into “better” sections. A *raccomandazione* might also be employed for special programs offered by the school. People told me that mothers would get themselves recommended with the principal for English and French instruction, the research taking place in a period before these subjects were even part of the elementary school curriculum.

Throughout the school years, Bernaldese parents commonly intervene with teachers to have their child pass a class or receive a higher grade, perhaps giving the instructor a gift at Christmas. A student who is the child of a local notable, such as the mayor or a professional, has a certain “autoraccomandazione,” as one man put it, that renders such parental intervention superfluous, while children of other teachers tend to be given special consideration.<sup>3</sup> One teacher told me how it once happened that, out of one hundred students preparing to take state school exams, five were without *raccomandazioni*; given the situation, the school principal declared that she herself would personally recommend the five. *Raccomandazioni* are commonly used to gain entrance to schools with limited enrollment. For example, a piano teacher observed that a child who studies piano would obtain *raccomandazioni* in order to be admitted to the music conservatory in Matera. Miraculously, she said, one of her students was admitted the previous year without a *raccomandazione*, upon which her husband commented, “Yes, but you did put in a word for her. That’s a form of *raccomandazione*.”

The *raccomandazione* is so commonplace in this setting that it forms an interpretive frame for virtually any situation. A local priest, an active leader in the Association of Italian Catholic Guides and Scouts [Associazione Guide e Scout Cattolici Italiani] complained that the limited number of openings for Scout membership gave rise to the impression among some parents that a *raccomandazione* was necessary to enter the group. One unfortunate boy had been on the waiting list for three years. Finally, his exasperated father said to the priest, “Ah, I understand . . .

you need a *raccomandazione* even here!” Shortly thereafter, the priest received a telephone call from another priest in Matera asking him to accept the boy into the Scout group.

At age eighteen, young men who face their period of compulsory military service might get *raccomandazioni* for a desk job, for a transfer closer to home, or even to get out of the service altogether, though the latter rarely occurs. One young man who had recently completed his service related the following:

When they take you and you go, they tell you that things function differently there, not in the usual Italian way [*non nel solito modo all’italiana*]—but it’s all bullshit. If you want to do twelve months sitting pretty [at a desk], maybe you can do it if you know this guy or that. But if you don’t know anyone, they treat you like shit.

The majority of Bernaldese youths who proceed to the university level end up studying in nearby Bari, though a substantial number attend the regional university, with branches in Potenza and Matera, or else migrate to the universities of the Center-North. Students face a highly discretionary environment in which one comprehensive oral examination almost always determines the grade for a subject. As with the primary and secondary schools, university students often seek a *raccomandazione* with the professor to obtain a higher grade. Again, the *autoraccomandazione* plays a substantial role. One young man explained as follows:

In the classic exam situation, if the professor is pissed off, if he woke up on the wrong side of bed, he treats you badly and flunks you. This sort of treatment doesn’t happen with the son of another professor, so he gets ahead.

Carmelina,<sup>4</sup> a law student, told me how her brother asked her if she wanted to get recommended for an exam, since he had a contact [*un aggancio*]. “I told him, ‘Look. If I wanted to get a *raccomandazione*, it would only to be treated normally, to receive fair treatment.’” As an occasional member of exam commissions, I myself have been approached by persons who have asked for an *occhio di riguardo* [favorable attention] for a friend or relative, but on the whole I think my superficially rigid Anglo-Saxon demeanor tends to discourage such solicitations.

Overall, however, the students from Bernalda who go on to university are relatively few. Most young people do not continue their education past the compulsory school age of fourteen or after obtaining a high school diploma, and, together with those who leave school before earning a middle school degree, they enter the job market earlier

than university students. The use of *raccomandazioni* to obtain a job is undoubtedly one of the most notorious manifestations of the phenomenon. With astronomically high rates of unemployment, and in particular youth unemployment, job selections are extremely tight: the number of applicants always far exceeds the number of positions available. As there is a cultural premium on public sector jobs, a political *raccomandazione* is commonly sought, since it is presumed to be the most effective. Entering the job market later, university graduates often face similar pressures and cultivate their *raccomandazioni* as well. There is also a widespread notion that job competitions are rigged in favor of certain recommended people, that the results are already known in advance. In my investigation of chronic youth unemployment in Bernalda (Zinn 1998), the *raccomandazione* was an ever-present topic. Chapter 6 will present some of my findings in dealing with the role of *raccomandazione* in the search for work.

While *raccomandazione* in the arena of employment is highly striking, the ideology of *raccomandazione* also conditions many spheres of daily life in Bernalda. In dealing with what is perceived by citizens to be a slow and labyrinthine bureaucracy at all levels, a *raccomandazione* may be necessary to get things handled [*per sbrigare le cose*.<sup>5</sup> An example of this application of *raccomandazione* was offered by a friend who described how he got his passport:

Silvio: When I wanted my passport, I didn't go to the Police Headquarters in Matera. No!

[Another friend interrupts:] Because you have to wait too long.

Silvio: Because there is clientelism [*clientelismo*], if a file arrives [recommended], it moves all of the others to the back. So I go to my friend [an officer], and I say, "Ué [an informal, dialect-inflected greeting] X., I need my passport." And he gets me the papers.

Notice that the presence of other recommended parties is cited as part of the rationale for the inefficiency of the system and for the use of further *raccomandazioni*.

The public healthcare system is apparently subject to the same sort of bureaucratic delays. In this field, a *raccomandazione* can speed up an appointment with a doctor or for diagnostic work, or it can help one gain entry into a particular medical facility—in many instances, a hospital or clinic of renown. A town priest commented,

There are situations in which it's necessary to intervene, situations of injustice. It gives you a measure of Italy the fact that you need a *rac-*

*comandazione* even for a hospital stay. Especially for a hospital like the Gemelli in Rome, or Fatebenfratelli [two prominent Catholic hospitals]. Sometimes I don't even know who to turn to for a *raccomandazione*. In the case of a hospital, I call a priest I know who knows someone in Rome.

A married couple living in Milan, the husband having emigrated from Bernalda, made this observation:

Domenico: With healthcare, if I need some testing, I have to wait six months for the test. If I know someone who is on the inside, I get it in the space of ten days.

Roberta: Or if you pay, you get it the next day.

Payments of varying degrees of illegality are a key part of the overall discourse on *raccomandazione*, and they will figure into the discussion of *tangenti* below and in chapter 4. But returning to our general discussion of *raccomandazione*, in its broadest sense, we see how it touches yet other spheres of daily life: the deployment of *raccomandazioni* can also move up a person's number on the rank list for public housing; a *raccomandazione* might move things along for obtaining a permit to build where one cannot do so legally, as often is the case in historic centers. Even the legal system is far from untouched by *raccomandazioni* that might influence a judge. A retired lawyer told me of one such case, which was actually rather amusing and perhaps for this reason less disturbing than some other *raccomandazione* stories. As one might expect to see occasionally in a small town, both parties in a lawsuit had the exact same name. One side managed to get a *raccomandazione* with the presiding judge, but it backfired, because the judge was confused by the names and inadvertently ruled in favor of the adversarial party.<sup>6</sup>

In spiritual matters, Bernaldese often recommend themselves to the Madonna or the saints for *grazie* [instances of divine grace, even miracles]. The *raccomandazione* may be punctuated with a vow [*voto*], a promise to the saint that usually takes the form of a sacrifice. The saint is held to be an intercessor with the Lord for obtaining the *grazia* requested by the devotee. Officially, the Catholic Church does not advocate some aspects of this relation to the saints, and it seems to be becoming a bit less common as the Church encourages a different relationship with the saints and as contemporary life is increasingly secularized. Nonetheless, *raccomandazioni* with the saints are still very present in the area and maintain a dynamic capacity despite secularism, as demonstrated by the popularity of the relatively recent cult of Padre Pio. Chapter 3 explores the connection between earthly and divine patronage as two forms of *raccomandazione*.

There is another level of *raccomandazione* that some (but not all) Bernaldese will explicitly label as *raccomandazione*, which refers to petty manifestations. Just as Bernaldese complain about needing *raccomandazioni* to obtain what is due by right in bureaucracy or with the public health service, the same might be true in the case of consumers' rights. In one instance, a young woman couldn't leave the house and asked a friend to exchange a birthday gift her daughter had received the day before, purchased in a shop in Matera. The shop owner made a fuss about exchanging the gift, until the friend mentioned that it was for her friend "Maria," who had a personal relationship with the owner. "Oh, why didn't you tell me before that it was for Maria?" the owner said, changing her tone. "I didn't know that you needed a *raccomandazione* even for exchanging an item," huffed the friend.

Probably more often than obtaining one's due, however, the petty *raccomandazione* simply offers a means of bettering one's quality of life in some small fashion. For example, instead of waiting in the usual, interminable bank lines to carry out a transaction, you might cut to the head of the line if you are friends with the bank teller, as Gilda relates:

Gilda: I go to the bank every day. I know the cashier, the director. If I go to the bank and there's a line, since my friend is behind the counter, instead of waiting in line like the other people, I say, "Hey, X., I'm leaving this with you. I'll be back in a couple of hours." This is a form of clientelism. Of course, it's a risk for me, because if he wanted to, I could give him this envelope with two million [lire] and he could say, "What? You never gave me anything."

DLZ: So there has to be trust?

Gilda: Yes, friendship.

Or, as one shop owner told me, a person identifies himself as so-and-so's relative or friend in order to get special treatment or a discount. In his study of Pantelleria, Galt (1974) cites informants who state that a *raccomandazione* is necessary even to change a large denomination bill:

You know it isn't very easy to find someone who will change ten thousand lire without recommendations. If you have a friend, he'll say that he'll change it for you, but if he isn't a friend, even if he has the money in his pocket, he won't change it (Galt 1974: 200).

During my period of fieldwork, I once visited with an American friend who was working nearby on the archaeological excavations in Metaponto. Although she had been to Italy a few times previously and

spoke a good bit of Italian, I was having some difficulty explaining my research project to her, in particular clarifying the concept of *raccomandazione*. About a week later I saw her over coffee, and she told me excitedly that she had received her first *raccomandazione* a few days before. She entered Nuccia's coffee shop to buy some croissants, and Nuccia gestured to her to come forward ahead of a long line of people waiting. My friend, who is very polite and unassuming even by American standards, hesitated to cut in line, but then she was given to understand that she was being recommended. "It's a good thing you had just explained *raccomandazione* to me," she said. "Now I get it." She was thrilled, and buoyed by this positive experience, she subsequently attempted to test out her fledgling ability in trying to locate a good pizzeria in Matera, with mixed results.<sup>7</sup>

The small advantages to be accrued in daily life also regard leisure time, as I learned from a group of young people at a private beach in Metaponto, as I recorded in my fieldnotes:

When the subject of *raccomandazione* arose, everyone emitted a knowing "hmmmm."

One of the women burst out, "Right now, we're all *raccomandati*." "Why is that?" I asked. "We've all taken these spots [on the beach] because we know these people [the owners]. If someone else came here, eh, they'd throw him OUT [gestures with a kicking motion, adding in dialect for added effect:] with kicks in the ASS! [Everyone laughs heartily] And on this little level—imagine the bigger things." "So this is a form of *raccomandazione* for you?" I probed. "Yes," she replied, "In this moment, we are on a private beach."

The life cycle of *raccomandazione* does not necessarily wind down with age. With the astronomically high level of unemployment in the area, many Bernaldese approaching retirement are still preoccupied with seeing their grown children squared away [*sistemati*]. To obtain one's retirement pension with less delay, the bureaucratic *raccomandazione* is often of great assistance. One elderly woman who had immigrated to Germany for work told of her difficulty in this regard:

I had the Italian pension, they took it away. To get an Italian pension you need a *raccomandazione*. [...] For pensions, you need a *raccomandazione*, or you wait years. While in Germany, they send you the form. You don't even have to apply for it.

Finally, upon the death of our exemplary *raccomandato*, a bureaucratic *raccomandazione* may also be helpful for settling the inheritance.

The reader has perhaps noticed the use of conditional forms in the picture drawn here. Indeed, *raccomandazione* is by no means mandatory in the absolute sense, and many people either refuse outright to seek *raccomandazioni* on principle or else feel that they do not need an explicit one. With this life-cycle frame, I do not mean to imply that every aspect of a person's life in Bernalda is perforce touched by *raccomandazione*; rather, I am attempting to indicate the vastness of the spheres in which it potentially (and very often) takes place. As one person put it, "With the *raccomandazione*, if you don't do it, nothing [bad] happens. But it's effective to do it."

By using the frame of the life cycle, I have presented a view of *raccomandazione* that has stressed the position of the *raccomandato* trying to achieve some aim. However, it is important to note that it is not always the case that he initiates the process by looking for someone to recommend him, a *raccomandante*. Sometimes, the latter offers his help to someone he knows to be in a possible situation of need. Depending on their relationship, this knowledge may be used for instrumental gain. For example, my friend Cristina had been looking for a job for quite some time. During the last election period, a politician up for election came by her parents' shop and said, "Hey, Cristina still hasn't found a job? Tell your daughter to present herself in Matera on [day x] . . ." Cristina went on the appointed day and was hired for ten days in the pre-election period, and her whole family voted for the man who helped her obtain the job. Immediately after the elections, she was let go.

In such a case, the *raccomandante* may not be sincere in his or her offer to help. Not all instances of volunteered *raccomandazioni* are so bleak, however. I have heard of some situations in which teachers on their own initiative offered students *raccomandazioni* for their exams, as there was a certain kinship or family friendship between them. Carmelina offers such an example:

In the fifth year of high school, while I was preparing for my [graduation] exam, I received a proposal for a *raccomandazione*. A friend of my mother's. She said, "If you want a *raccomandazione*, even to get a higher grade . . ." She knew one of the teachers on the commission. I refused: I want to be capable of making it on my own.

In yet another situation, a young woman who had just taken the bar exam to practice law told me how a family friend on the commission was almost offended that she had not sought a *raccomandazione* from him.

The various manifestations of *raccomandazione* that I have outlined are attributed to diverse, yet related, ideological justifications by members

of the community. The prevalent *raccomandazione* used in job-seeking is motivated by the claim that there is “no work” in the South. Despite government-backed discourses in recent years aimed at dismantling the predominant aspiration of young people to get permanent public jobs, the perception of the lack of employment is still intimately bound up in the ideal of a steady job, preferably as an office employee in the public sector, and hence a political *raccomandazione* is among the most highly prized. What I group broadly under the heading of “bureaucratic *raccomandazioni*” is justified by the perceived inefficiency and slowness of the bureaucratic apparatus, which, as we have seen, may be attributed to the presence of other *raccomandazioni*. Other *raccomandazioni* dealing with public institutions may be used to obtain what one is not due, strictly speaking, for example passing a child who has not studied or awarding a construction permit when it should not be given. The general heading of “petty *raccomandazioni*” that I described, such as in shopping or banking, permit the *raccomandato* small privileges that enhance his quality of life.

These various justifications for using *raccomandazioni* are closely related to perceptions of the state and to the cultural code of *furbizia* [cunning, slyness].<sup>8</sup> First of all, many Bernaldese complain that “the system forces them” to seek *raccomandazioni* to obtain what they should have “by right,” and thus *raccomandazione* is depicted as a survival mechanism. Second, some interlocutors suggested that *raccomandazioni* introduce an element of flexibility into an excessively rigid system, a point developed in the work of other scholars (for example, Campbell 1964; Galt 1974). Above and beyond this, though, there is a use of *raccomandazione* to enhance one’s image, as when one asserts and makes visible a privileged position, even in as banal a situation as that of waiting in line in a bank. In some cases, more than enhancing one’s image, it may be a matter of face-saving: since people claim that “everyone is recommended,” this in itself becomes a compelling motive for action according to *furbizia*. Corrado, the wealthy member of an old family of landowners, made the following observation:

If nine out of ten are *furbi* [wise guys], the one [who isn’t] maybe appears to be an idiot. So even he gets caught up in the desire to behave this way. If you don’t adapt yourself, you get left behind as the last idiot.

Whether or not one succeeds in achieving a given goal through the use of *raccomandazioni*, there is at least the benefit of positioning oneself in the camp of the *furbi* and not that of the *fessi* [fools].<sup>9</sup> However, the evaluation of *raccomandazione* as advantageous or harmful to one’s

<sup>8</sup>“Raccomandazione: Clientelism and Connections in Italy” by Dorothy Louise Zinn.  
<http://berghahnbooks.com/title/ZinnRaccomandazione>

image is not as straightforward as it might initially seem: as will become apparent in this work, *raccomandazione* is a double-edged tool for carving public images.

### **Subgenres of *Raccomandazione***

The preceding discussion drew several examples of *raccomandazione* in sundry spheres of life, according to the social space in which they take place, but the distinction between various subgenres of *raccomandazione* also has analytical importance, for these subgenres have divergent moral evaluations in the community. The classification of the subgenres takes shape, basically, according to the modality of mediation employed, for mediation is central to all forms of *raccomandazione*: one turns to another person for intervention with other parties. The following categories are etic, externally imposed groupings to the extent that not all members of the society would formally or explicitly classify some of the phenomena as *raccomandazione*. Nonetheless, despite the etic perspective, the analysis has drawn upon a number of indigenous concepts and terminology to delineate what appear to be stylistic affinities.

One of the subgenres would seem to be an exception to the central fact of mediation in *raccomandazione*: the *autoraccomandazione*, in which the *raccomandazione* is itself implicit by virtue of the person's social position. For a youth, the *autoraccomandazione* might derive from his parents' role in the community if they are prestigious figures like the mayor, a doctor, or a university professor (the latter having far greater social prestige in this setting than generally held in the United States). The *autoraccomandazione* would seem to lack the quality of mediation, but in terms of the "poetics of voice" it features, as I describe in chapter 3, it actually functions in the same way as the other *raccomandazione* genres do.

The next subgenre of *raccomandazione* to consider is the *raccomandazione di simpatia* [fondness, liking], in which no material exchange such as a gift or payment takes place between the parties. The *raccomandazione di simpatia* may come from a friend, a relative, or even a fellow townsman when the two parties are in a foreign setting, and it can range from favoritism without a concrete *raccomandazione* to outright nepotism. A teacher on good terms with a student might offer this sort of *raccomandazione* by raising a grade. In one case described, a woman wanted to see a "big shot" medical doctor [*un professoreone*]. First she saw his associate, a less important doctor, who told her it would take several months to get an appointment with the "bigger" one, until he learned where the woman was from and noted that he had relatives in the same town. By

virtue of this *simpatia*, tenuous as it was, she was then able to see the big doctor after a much briefer wait than she would have otherwise.

The subgenre of *raccomandazione* that undoubtedly draws the most attention is that which entails some form of exchange: as many interlocutors stressed, “You can’t get anything for nothing.” The item of exchange offered by the *raccomandato* might be one of any number of things: a vote, a favor, a gift of food, sexual favors, or money, just to name some examples. There is a strong moral emphasis on reciprocity in this setting, and as the distance in relation between the two parties increases and a simple *raccomandazione di simpatia* becomes less probable, a “gift” is commonly used to create an obligation for action—that is, the execution of the *raccomandazione* on behalf of the gift-giver.

The “purchased” *raccomandazione* [*la raccomandazione comprata*], particularly when money is given, straddles the boundary between the *raccomandazione* of exchange and the genre of *tangente*, the latter including payoffs, kickbacks, bribes, and extortion. Here the lines of distinction become rather fuzzy, but on the whole we may recognize that the purchased *raccomandazione* is subject to greater legal and moral sanction than what might be considered gift-giving.<sup>10</sup> The introduction of money into the transaction is not the decisive factor for this classification, though many purchased *raccomandazioni* do take place through monetary payments. Instead, one of the key distinguishing elements in the purchased *raccomandazione* is that it is the *raccomandante* who stipulates a price instead of receiving a spontaneously offered gift. In Bernalda, for example, I heard numerous stories of people willing to help someone get a job (particularly in the civil service) for a payment of several million lire. In one episode told to me, a woman who obtained a job as a nurse through a *raccomandazione* was obliged to purchase a car for her *raccomandante*. In some cases, the recommended person agrees to forfeit his salary to the *raccomandante* for a period after being hired. As public jobs offer great security and benefits, many people view such a sacrifice as worthwhile.

During the fieldwork, I encountered a great deal of commentary to the effect that a “mere” *raccomandazione*, especially one based on friendship, is no longer enough and that a *raccomandazione* purchased with money provides surer and/or quicker results. Some interlocutors speculated that buying a *raccomandazione* entails the risk that one is hired, only to be let go shortly thereafter and thus swindled out of the money. In practice, however, I never heard of an actual instance of this occurring when money was involved, whereas there were cases of this happening when a vote or sexual favors were used for the exchange. While the purchased *raccomandazione* might promise surer results, it did not create or

contribute to an enduring bond between the parties in the way that the *raccomandazione di simpatia* or some of the other *raccomandazioni* with exchanges do.

In the context of discussing *raccomandazione*, the topic of *tangenti* emerged quite consistently. Undoubtedly this was partly an artifact of the Mani Pulite investigation, which had erupted only a few months before beginning fieldwork in the town, and which subsequently extended from Milan to other areas of Italy throughout the research period. When the Tangentopoli scandal broke, shocking many Northern Italians, the reaction of many Bernaldese was, “So, they’ve found out the obvious [*hanno scoperto acqua calda*]. What else is new?” People explained to me that a *tangente* was often paid in order to move things through the bureaucracy, to receive a license or obtain a public works contract, and even for things to which one is entitled as a right, such as specially earmarked funds from the government. While both *raccomandazione* and *tangente* were discussed in the same breath, no clear-cut, absolute distinction between the two emerged from the fieldwork data. On the contrary, there were conflicting views as to their boundary or equivalence, and precisely the fault lines for disagreement on this issue offered me rich insight. Generally, though, people do perceive the phenomena as related, though *tangente* consistently has a more negative moral evaluation than *raccomandazione*.

Another meaning of *tangente* that is notorious in the South, and which has arrived fairly recently in Bernalda and the surrounding towns, is that of extortion: a shopkeeper is threatened with violence (often a bombing) if he does not pay the *pizzo* [payoff money]. This brings us to the last category to include in this overview of *raccomandazione* subgenres, that of mafia. As with the *tangente*, people often spontaneously introduced the concept of mafia into conversations about *raccomandazione*. Here, we are not dealing with a reference to mafia as an entity, a bounded, secretive organization, but rather as a form of behavior with highly negative moral evaluations. When they allude to the “mafia” of some public institution, for example, people do not mean a literal crime syndicate, but a style of behavior that, in this analysis, bears an important relationship to *raccomandazione*. In chapter 4, I consider the interconnections of *raccomandazione*, mafia, and *tangente* in greater detail.

## Polyvocality of the Term “Raccomandazione”

While the concept of *raccomandazione* is ubiquitous throughout Italy, its actual definition is in point of fact quite ambiguous. But from the

perspective of this anthropological analysis, precisely these variations in its definition, with all of their nuances, are of great interest: they make up what we may term the *polyvocalic* qualities of the word, rendering it a rich mine for ethnographic prospecting. Moreover, as some thinkers from literary theory and the philosophy of language note, a word is an ideological sign, and its polyvocality reveals traces in which ideological struggle takes place. The different interpretations of *raccomandazione* are therefore not casual linguistic subtleties: the various inflections of the word must be correlated to the social and ideological positions of the speakers who experience *raccomandazione* as a reality. I conclude this general introduction to *raccomandazione* by outlining three important aspects that emerged from the analysis.

The first aspect has to do with the denotative qualities of the word *raccomandazione*. If the term *raccomandazione* arises spontaneously in a local conversation, the listener usually tends to assume that it refers to a *raccomandazione* for a job, this being one of its most common uses. Yet as we saw above, the term has a much wider denotative resonance beyond the concept of the *raccomandazione* for employment, and on the broadest level of denotation it can mean advice or counsel (as in English) or a recommendation with divine agents, especially the saints. While I devote some consideration to these denotations, the main focus of this study is those forms treated above as stylistic subgenres: the *raccomandazione di simpatia*, the *raccomandazione di scambio*, the *raccomandazione pagata*, *tangente*, and *mafia*. Taken together, these subgenres form an ideological complex, an overall paradigm of *raccomandazione* that may be contrasted with rational-universalism.

A second aspect of the word “*raccomandazione*” lies in its connotative qualities. Again and again, I would casually mention to someone that I was doing research on *raccomandazione*, upon which they would present me with a decisive nod and a meaningful syllable: “Eh!” For these people, *raccomandazione* conjures up an entire vision of “the way things are” and “the way people are” in Southern Italy, sometimes even Italy as a whole. Here, *raccomandazione* does not merely refer to the act of recommending per se, but it also connotes certain qualities that members of the community see as, in part, defining their identity. As such, chapter 7 deals with the role of *raccomandazione* in conceptualizing Southern Italian identity.

The polyvocality of the lexeme *raccomandazione* is also manifested in what we may call the diverse, intersecting evaluative accents it bears. Following Volosinov (1973), these accents linguistically embed evaluative orientations in an utterance and affect its meaning. With respect to *raccomandazione*, the evaluative orientations may be positive, neutral,

or hostile; it often happens that people adopt more than one of these orientations simultaneously. For example, the *raccomandazione* may be reviled as a violation of “democracy,” “meritocracy,” and “rights,” or else it can be appreciated as an instrument for protecting the weak. It might even be regarded with a certain indifference, as many Bernaldese suggested that today the *raccomandazione* “no longer has value.” Yet a close analytical attention to such different orientations reveals that they tend to be associated with specific class positionalities. Basically, members of the subaltern classes give much greater weight to the *raccomandazione* in assessing their life chances than do members of the dominant classes. As I will argue in chapters 5 and 6, this class-based difference is partly an artifact of the dominant classes’ capacity to manipulate cultural capital, gathering implicit or invisible *raccomandazioni* while at the same time possessing the authorized forms that enable their success to appear “meritocratic.”

Finally, in addition to such class considerations, the contrast in the evaluative accents of *raccomandazione* also has consequences in terms of political discourse. Some Bernaldese expressed a blanket rejection of *raccomandazione* in favor of what they termed “order” or “normalcy.” The last portion of this book offers a critical examination of the dichotomy between the paradigms of *raccomandazione* and rational-universalism, where formal rationalism has become a modern fetish that aspires to curb the feminine “disorder” of *raccomandazione*. The opposition gets played out against the background of relations of dominance between North and South, both within Italy and without.

This study, therefore, is meant to be a scientific inquiry into the *raccomandazione*, one that attempts to go beyond facile moralistic assessments and instead takes its object as a starting point for identifying some of the threads of meaning, subjectivity, and power that are cast by people and in turn cast the people themselves. I apologize to the participants in the research for the presumption of being able to say very much about *raccomandazione* in the few pages of this book: several of them asserted that an encyclopedia in several volumes would be needed in order to deal adequately with the subject, and they are doubtlessly correct.

## Notes

1. Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) founded the Italian school of criminal anthropology, which promoted the idea of using anthropometrics to predict deviant behavior. For a review of how Lombroso contributed to negative stereotypes of Southern Italy and influenced nascent pseudoscientific race theory on an international level, see Gibson

(1998, 2002). With regard to Southern Italy, Gribaudi (1997) offers a good discussion of denigrating images; see also the preface in Petrusewicz (1998).

2. When conjugating the Italian verb *raccomandare* in the past tense, here and elsewhere in the text I switch to the English cognate “recommended.” As a noun, however, I maintain the Italian *raccomandato* (fem. *raccomandata*), indicating someone who has received a *raccomandazione*. The person who issues a *raccomandazione* is a *raccomandante*. Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations from Italian are my own.
3. I found this neologism of *autoraccomandazione* to be quite useful to denominate a widespread phenomenon that receives relatively little mention, so I adopt it in my discussion in this book.
4. The name is a pseudonym, as are nearly all of those presented; I mention public authorities with their real names.
5. See Herzfeld (1992) for a discussion of negative stereotypes of bureaucracy.
6. While the episode seemed to have the makings of an urban legend, it was actually confirmed in its substance by other interlocutors.
7. The experience of this friend calls to mind the commentary of Norman Douglas, who wrote travelogues of Southern Italy at the turn of the century:

No wonder even Englishmen discover that law-breaking, in Italy, becomes a necessity, a rule of life. And, soon enough, more than a mere necessity. [...] For even as the traveler new to Borneo, when they offer him a durian-fruit, is instantly brought to the vomiting-point by its odour, but after a few mouthfuls declares it to be the very apple of Paradise, and marvels how he could have survived so long in the benighted lands where such ambrosial fare is not. [...] Even so, in Italy, the domesticated Englishman is amazed to find that he possesses a sense hitherto unrevealed, opening up a new horizon, a new zest for life—the sense of law-breaking. At first, being an honest man, he is shocked at the thought of such a thing; next like a sensible person, reconciled to the inevitable; lastly, as befits his virile race, he learns to play the game so well that the horrified officials grudgingly admit (and it is their highest praise): “Inglese *italianizzato*—Diavolo incarnato.” Yes, slowly the charm of law-breaking grows upon the Italianized Saxon: slowly, but surely. There is neo-barbarism not only in matters of art. (Douglas 1915 [1985]: 36)

8. *Furbizia* as a cultural code in Southern Italy has been discussed at length in Galt (1974) and in Schneider and Schneider (1976); I will treat it further in chapter 4.
9. Schneider and Schneider (1994) present some examples of grassroots efforts in Sicily to remove positive connotations from *furbizia* as a cultural code and value.
10. According to the Italian Penal Code, Articles 318, 320, and 321, “gifts” to public officials and civil servants may be considered corrupting under certain conditions: one may give gifts, but only if they are of modest value and in no way proportionate to the service rendered. They cannot be gifts of money no matter how modest. Moreover, “retribution” must not be obligatory in order to obtain a service from a public office.