The unleashed power of opportunities?
Entrepreneurship, values and integrity in startup companies of the Silicon Valley today

Davide Torsello
Professor of Anthropology, Central European University

This talk presents the preliminary findings of ethnographic field research conducted in the San Francisco Bay area in the last four months. This research focuses on the ways how values are transmitted, accepted and re-negotiated in small startup companies located in the Silicon Valley region. In the anthropological and sociological tradition values are not only defined as “social expressions of the (un)desirable”, they constitute some of the most fundamental elements of culture and organizational culture. Following the Marxist anthropological approach revisited by Turner, one can purposely agree that values are not only “concerned with the production of commodities, but also of social persons” (2008: 49). This is what becomes manifest when dealing with emerging startups in the Valley area. The prominence of value building as a main activity of entrepreneurship is connected with processes of signification and reification (Robbins 2015) as expression of two forces: the innovation drive, and the networking imperative. These are highly symbolic activities that mark the present life of small enterprises mushrooming in what has never been a peaceful valley. The paper analyzes the main aspects of entrepreneurship linking them with cognitive processes of value building and social patterns of interactions within and outside organizations. One of the most commonly used narratives relates to the “filter of integrity”, which reflects not only a widespread preoccupation with lowering ethical standards, but also a symbolic expression of the need to tame the “unleashed power of opportunities”.

Davide Torsello, is Professor of Anthropology at Central European University, Budapest & Vienna, director of the Center for Integrity in Business and Government and visiting researcher at Stanford University, Department of Anthropology. He has published on topics such as trust, social networks, postsocialism, Japanese rural society, clientelism and corruption. His latest book is: Corruption in Public Administration: an Ethnographic Approach (edited, 2016 Edward Elgar).

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