



Article

Self-entrepreneurship in uncertain futures: The case of performing artists in Italy

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Abstract

This article contributes to contemporary debates on self-entrepreneurship in cultural work by focusing on project-based theatre actors in Italy. Drawing on in-depth interviews, the study considers performing artists' narratives of success, unsuccessful, and future expectations to shed light on how entrepreneurial projects are negotiated in neoliberal cultural work. The article expands current research by considering how self-entrepreneurial projects are lived out in insecure working environments, taking into account a geographical area and a creative sector often overlooked by studies of creative labour. In a context where precariousness is normalised, actors' discourses point at the emergence of disaffection towards neoliberal entrepreneurial ideals of autonomy and competition and to the loss of a progressive idea of biographical projects. The research highlights that an ongoing status of insecurity can mine optimistic and entrepreneurial orientations, questioning the sustainability of neoliberal ethos of work as a future-oriented project in times of enhanced insecurity.

Keywords

Cultural work, insecurity, precarious labour, temporality, creative work, entrepreneurship

Introduction

During recent decades in Europe, work has been at the centre of transformative processes that have shaped both its material articulation and its societal significance (Beck, 2014; Sennett, 2000). In post-industrial economies, the tendency to implement policies of flexibilisation of the labour market has led to a growth of short-term project-based work and autonomous work (Kalleberg, 2009; Pulignano, 2017). Especially in the South of Europe, the combination of neoliberal policies, low salaries, and a stagnant labour market has contributed to modelling workers' experiences around notions of precariousness and

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insecurity (Armano et al., 2017). With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic across Europe in February 2020, scholars have pointed to the increasingly difficult position of vulnerable workers (Ravenelle et al., 2021; Reichelt et al., 2021) and of those working in the cultural and creative sectors (Comunian and England, 2020; Pulignano et al., 2021).

In the contemporary context of work, governmental approaches have underlined the disciplinary power of neoliberal discourses that constitute workers as self-entrepreneurs committed to enhancing their capital in arenas of competition (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1989). The cultural and creative industries have been considered pivotal entrepreneurial sectors (Marttila, 2017; Scharff, 2016) where neoliberal mantras of autonomy and ambition have been paired with discourses on passionate work and self-realisation (McRobbie, 2016). The debates on creative workers' identities have underlined cultural workers' aspirational and entrepreneurial inclination, focusing on self-cultivation practices and competitive instances (Duffy and Pooley, 2019; Gill, 2014; Scharff, 2016). However, scholars have pointed at the need to consider the communitarian and anti-economic instances embedded in cultural work (Banks, 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2017). In this sense, cultural and creative work appear as an ambivalent space where neoliberal practices of competition coexist with non-economic rationales and community values (Banks, 2006). Scholars have been engaged in analysing how cultural workers possibly challenge individualised understandings of work through practices of care and community (Alacovska, 2018, 2020) and through individual acts of resistance to neoliberal logics (Norbäck, 2021).

Deepening the connection between precariousness and cultural work, this article contributes to the study of self-entrepreneurship by considering Italian performers' narratives of their professional paths. Looking at performing artists' discourses on future and entrepreneurship in a context marked by Covid-19 allows the study to grasp how biographical projects are negotiated in conditions of enhanced insecurity. Furthermore, theatre actors' experiences appear to be particularly relevant for the study of self-entrepreneurship as subjects' bodies and emotions are positioned at the core of the production of value (Bassetti, 2014). Considering the Italian context allows the study, on the one hand, to focus on an environment where creative and cultural workers studies have been overlooked in recent decades and, on the other hand, to offer a perspective on creative self-entrepreneurs from an area where the consequences on livelihoods of recent austerity policies (Pavolini et al., 2015) and the Covid-19 crisis have been most evident (Saraceno, 2021). In this sense, the article answers scholars' call to decentralise the study of creative work (Alacovska and Gill, 2019), offering a perspective from an overlooked creative sector in the South of Europe. The effects of Covid-19 on creative work have merged with and exacerbated existing dynamics of exclusion (Auriemma and Iannaccone, 2020; Menta, 2021) and amplified feelings of insecurity already present in precarious experiences of work (Pun et al., 2022). Focusing on actors' discourses around success, unsuccess, and future expectations, the results presented show how self-entrepreneurs are immersed in an environment of crisis ordinariness where aspirations of good life (Berlant, 2011) and linear biographies (Adkins, 2009) are increasingly difficult to sustain. The article aims at considering how, in precarious contexts marked by the Covid-19 outbreak, entrepreneurial invitations are lived out at a subjective level and how individual instances of critique are emerging.

The article is structured as follows. The first section considers scholars' contributions to the debate on self-entrepreneurship and precariousness in the context of creative and cultural industries. The second section deepens the methodology adopted and the research context. In the third section, the research results are presented considering: (1) the articulation of narratives of success and failure and (2) actors' discourses on future expectations. The fourth section proposes a discussion of the research results considering precariousness and entrepreneurship in the context of enhanced insecurity. The final part offers a conclusion that relates disaffection towards optimistic future projections with the possibility to question neoliberal demands in the domain of work.

Creative workers, entrepreneurial attitudes, and uncertain times

Social theorists have underlined how the same individualisation processes that grant subjects an expanded possibility of autonomy can lead to an increase in social isolation and the loss of societal bonds (Bauman, 2013; Giddens, 1991). In late modernity, subjects are required to engage in ongoing biographical work to construct personal meaning (Beck, 1992; Lash, 2003) that takes place through an imperative reflexive project of the self (Archer, 2012). Thus, notions of self-realisation and the subjective experience of working activities are central to contemporary subjectivation processes (Farrugia, 2021; Colombo and Rebughini, 2021). During recent decades, Western societies have witnessed a radical transformation in the meaning of work (Beck, 2014; Du Gay, 1996; Sennett, 1998) and in its material articulations, which have been increasingly precarised (Armano et al., 2017; Kalleberg, 2009). If subjects are necessarily involved in self-reflexive activities to construct meaningful paths (Beck, 1992), they also have to do it in a precarious environment in social, economic, and existential terms (Butler, 2004).

Scholars in the Foucauldian tradition have underlined how the prominence of economic rationales has had consequences that go beyond the organisation of production but create a cultural system that invests subjects' experiences of the world (Du Gay, 1996; Read, 2009; Rose, 1989). This cultural shift resides in the fact that individuals are constituted as subjects by their capital in terms of competition, becoming entrepreneurs of themselves (Foucault, 1978). In a context where competition is considered the legitimate way of distributing rewards, investing in personal capital (Feher, 2009) and assuming individual responsibility for personal conditions become central terms of contemporary working experiences (Sennett, 1998). Alongside with the implementation of neoliberal policies, entrepreneurial discourses have been naturalised in everyday life (Brown, 2003).

Creative and cultural workers have often been considered a privileged point of observation on the transformations of work and subjectivities (Duffy, 2016; Gill, 2014; McRobbie, 2016). On the one hand, the sector's structure on project-based and autonomous work lead workers to engage in self-managing and self-branding activities in order to maintain their occupational position in the labour market (Neff et al. 2005; Scharff, 2016; Vallas and Christin, 2018). On the other hand, creative and cultural working environments are permeated by narratives on passionate commitment and self-expression, configuring an individualised working space (McRobbie, 2016; Taylor and Littleton,

2012). Scholars' analyses have focused on the role of power structures in defining subjects' spaces of action, shedding light on both the internalised self-governing practices enacted (Gill, 2014; Mäkinen, 2016; Ursell, 2000) and the disciplinary power of insecure working environments (Duffy and Pooley, 2019; Vallas and Christin, 2018). In this context, subjects appear to be framed around individualised rationales where systemic problems are often perceived as personal inadequacies (Baker and Kelan, 2019; Gill, 2014; Scharff, 2016). However, since subjectivities are both enacted and act upon power structures (Butler, 1997), several scholars have urged a move beyond a pessimistic view of cultural workers' possibilities of agency and autonomy (Alacovska, 2018; Banks, 2006; Norbäck, 2021).

In the contemporary framework of work, personal aspirations and future beliefs are fundamental for the development of meaningful biographical paths (Bauman, 2013; Beck, 2002). Studies on self-entrepreneurship and creative professions have pointed to the regulatory position occupied by the promise of future success in individual experiences of work (Duffy, 2016; Hughes, 2013; Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013). Developing an optimistic vision of the future has been considered central in entrepreneurial discourses where notions of self-cultivation and performance optimisation are a relevant part of project-based work (Carr and Kelan, 2021; Lamberg, 2021). If hope labour and aspirational narratives have been regarded as disciplinary commitments in everyday working activities (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013; Mackenzie and McKinlay, 2021), hope has also been framed as a 'psychosocial temporal resource oriented to the present' (Alacovska, 2019: 3), which can help subjects not only cope with a context of insecurity but also create social- and artistic-oriented practices (Alacovska, 2020; Avramopoulou, 2017). However, future-oriented attitudes and hope labour are central components in the affective attachment of workers to fantasies of 'good life' (Berlant, 2011). Combining future desires of job security and personal fulfilment with a present and ongoing condition of precariousness and insecurity, mechanisms of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) are not only forging aspirational and future-oriented selves but also contributing to perpetuating the existing precarious working conditions (Bone, 2021). However, at the same time, workers' time perceptions appear to be locked in the present of the event (Adkins, 2009) where precariousness and social positionings limit subjects' choices and the possibilities of projecting actions beyond an ongoing and continuous present (Armano et al., 2017; Bone, 2019).

Research context

During the past decades, insecurity and precariousness have been configured as a central experience for young adults in Southern European (Colombo and Rebughini, 2019; Lodovici and Semenza, 2012) and especially for those working in creative environments (Armano et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2013).

Despite the last century's process of institutionalisation of the theatrical sector having increased actors' working conditions, the adoption of neoliberal-inspired reforms and the reduction in public expenditure has tightened the labour market and deregulated working contracts in the Italian theatrical sector (Serino, 2020). Independent, project-based, and formally autonomous contracts have become increasingly common

(Bertolini and Luciano, 2011) while social protections during periods of unemployment are often uncertain (Bertolini et al., 2019). Researches conducted in the past decade have underlined that low salaries and multiple job holding are widespread as precariousness emerges as an everyday reality for workers in the performing arts (Di Nunzio et al., 2017; Turrini and Chicchi, 2013). In this sense, Italian performing artists have already been experiencing a condition of vulnerability before February 2020, when Covid-19 regulations forced their working category into a condition of forced unemployment and dependence from public subsidies (Bataille et al., 2020). However, scholars have underlined that the Covid-19 emergency acted as a trigger of awareness for the performing arts sector, unveiling the absence of solid perspectives as well as structural malfunctions of the working environment (Campolongo and Iannuzzi, 2020; Naclerio, 2022b).

Methodology

The findings are drawn from a qualitative research conducted between November 2018 and December 2021 among performing artists working in Milan, Italy, aimed at comprehending the experience of young adults. The fieldwork entailed the collection of 40 in-depth interviews, performed between November 2019 and December 2021, which thematised research participants' educational backgrounds, career experiences, and everyday working activities. The research adopted a sampling strategy that mixed snowball and purposeful sampling. The composition of the respondents is balanced in terms of characteristics such as gender and educational path and varied with regard to the theatrical genres prevalently practised. Regarding race and class, the vast majority of the sample shares a White, middle-class, Italian background and two respondents had a non-European heritage. At the time of the interview, most of the research participants were aged between 30 and 36 years and had spent less than 10 years working in the performing arts, in this sense, the research field tackled the experiences of work of early career young adults. The interviewed artistic activities covered theatre and performing arts as well as cinema and radio production. Some of the research participants have had main roles in Italian movies and television shows or received prestigious awards for their theatrical interpretations but none had, at the time, risen to national or international fame. All the performers interviewed were involved in short-term project-based employment performed under hybrid employment relations (Murgia and Pulignano, 2019). In this context, performers have to find their own working opportunities and negotiate their salary for each gig. Research participants careers are characterised by alternate periods of overwork and underemployment. In order to deal with employment discontinuity and low salaries, several research participants were occasionally involved in artistic-related working activities such as teaching acting techniques and taking part in shootings for advertisement companies. The majority of the research participants was, at the time of the interview, based in Milan. However, the sample also includes performers based in other Italian cities that had educational or working connections with the theatrical environment of Milan. When compatible with Covid-19 regulations, the interviews were conducted in public spaces such as parks or university campuses, otherwise they took place online. Each

interview lasted between 40 and 100 min and was audio-registered and transcribed with the explicit and written consent of the research participant. The interviewees' names have been pseudonymised.

Analysis

The texts collected were coded with NVivo software through a process inspired by the grounded theory's approach (Charmaz and Belgrave, 2012). The first stage of the analysis assumed an emic perspective and aimed at recognising emerging themes in the accounts. Subsequently, textual data were organised into concepts such as future expectations, chance and luck. In a second stage of the analysis, the concepts emerged were approached through discursive analytical lenses in order to access research participant views (Weatherell et al., 2001). My positioning as a White, middle-class young adult involved in precarious work and living in Milan allowed me to share a certain amount of everyday experiences with the research participants which facilitated access to the field as well as the assumption of an emic perspective (Riessman, 1987). Considering meanings in qualitative research to be the result of a situated co-construction (Yanow, 2015), the research results do not aim at being representative of all Italian actors' experiences of precariousness, work, and future expectations. However, the research presented can provide insights into other contexts of study where similar characteristics are involved in terms of generational age, creative occupation, and working conditions in a post-pandemic and urban context (Schofield, 1993).

Explaining success in times of ordinary crisis

As emphasised by previous studies on creative and cultural workers, actors' narratives embrace the centrality of passion and self-realisation in the professional field in the quest for a 'good life' (McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2016) and stress the importance of making the most out of a precarious labour market through adopting an entrepreneurial stance (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2021; Oliva et al., 2022). However, in the context analysed, the uncertainty of the labour market seems to exceed the condition of sacrifice required to early careers (Armano and Murgia, 2013) and to be a permanent characteristic of workers' professional paths (Alacovska, 2019). Dealing with project-based work, subjects are required to engage in a continuous confrontation with insecurity and structural conditions, which has emerged as being very costly in both emotional and social terms:

Every time that you finish a piece of work it is like you have to start from zero; the fact that I've been working for five years with a Theatre Company, that two of my shows were nominated for super prestigious prizes, it doesn't matter, it means nothing. (Bill)

Prizes are important, they do well, gratify, put a point in your path but everything passes. Truly, everything goes away in this world, the wheel spins very fast, all is very ephemeral. (Paul)

From the data collected, the performing arts' working environment results in extremely uncertain outcomes, where both the presence and the absence of economic rewards and

professional satisfaction are temporary conditions. In fact, it seems that even having reached certain professional recognition, symbolised in receiving an award, cannot exempt workers from taking part in the labour market competition. In the quoted excerpts, Bill and Paul remark on the project-based structure of the performing arts sector and describe the perceived radical impossibility of building on previous work, expressing feelings of disempowerment. Facing the ever-changing conditions and unpredictability of the working environment, the interviewees thematise the difficulty of reaching a cornerstone in their career that can assure them of increased social security and better economic revenues. Rejecting the relevance of prizes for career progression mines the consequentiality between hard work, achievement and rewards that is characteristic of entrepreneurial discourses. In this sense, feelings of precariousness seem to be not only related to economic and social compensation but also to permeate and shape the totality of workers' experiences in the performing arts where exerting control over work seems to be impossible. In the following excerpts, the role of luck in narratives of career paths is detailed and is considered in relation to subjects' perceived impossibility to impact on reality:

The situation is catastrophic, I told you what I told you and I think that I am more than lucky and more than privileged [. . .] there are colleagues that are great, they have nothing less than me and I don't understand why they don't work, why they have just small gigs. (Pier)

E: How do you construct your working opportunities?

F: I don't know. . . Well, I proceed a bit randomly, if there are auditions, I apply, and I am lucky because usually I win the position. (Filomena)

Filomena and Pier believe they have had fortunate professional paths but do not seem to have elaborated a rationale of their career in comparative or meritocratic terms. A reflection on career progression and personal attitudes seems to be missing from Filomena's account, while Pier appears unable to explain what differentiates his professionalism from those of his colleagues who have fewer working opportunities. In this sense, having a satisfying career seems to be the result of a series of randomness. If success and unsuccess are distributed casually, trying to control and direct the career path could be a useless endeavour. Furthermore, in the narratives reported, all actors are described as having the same possibilities of flourishing. Thus, differences in professional paths are not considered in relation to class, gender, and educational background but are reduced to generic, unpredictable, and external factors such as chance or the subject's intuition. On the one hand, emphasising the randomness of events and the impossibility to make future-oriented choices due to structural disadvantages points at the difficulty in connecting subjective temporal dimensions in a narrative elaboration (Sennett, 1998, 2000). On the other hand, referring to chance in order to explain professional outcomes can be interpreted as a way to make sense of injustices, otherwise obscured in an entrepreneurial and neoliberal narrative framework where everyone appears to have the same opportunities of success:

Let's say that someone has the possibilities, the point is that this is your talent, is it not recognised by people who matter? The fact is that [some actors] they work a lot, are they good because they had an encounter [with someone]? Someone gave them the possibility to do the beautiful things that they did. And what when it does not happen? (Leonardo)

This is the system, it doesn't matter just being good at it, it doesn't matter just talent; there are much more factors that matter, and for us, as women, those factors are even more of the ones usually at stake. (Caterina)

If Pier and Filomena articulated their thoughts from a successful position, on the opposite side of the spectrum are Caterina and Leonardo, whose professional careers are perceived to be unfortunate. In this case as well, the actors point out the impossibility of being able to control the outcomes of their efforts in their working environments. However, Caterina's talk appears to acknowledge the relevance of her social location in career construction, pointing specifically at the relevance of gender positioning. In a more nuanced way, Leonardo's excerpt recognises the role played by social capitals and networking in gaining professional recognition. Thus, some of the research participants' discourses critically acknowledge both the relevance of social structures and the effects of inequalities in career construction. In this sense, Caterina and Leonardo develop their discursive positioning outside of the optimistic stances of entrepreneurship. However, even when the effects of inequalities are recognised, research participants' discursive elaboration appears to be stuck between a critical awareness and the impossibility to control their future career.

Future times in unstable biographies

In a context where the ingredients for success are obscure and where professional achievements are rapidly vanishing, the possibility of leaving insecurity behind vanish off the horizon. During the fieldwork, when invited to talk about future projects or personal projections for the future, research participants were uneasy, reacting to the question with questions, or reported generic and standardised statements such as the wish to carry on working and be realised or the desire to earn more:

E: What are your projects for the future, what would you like to do. . .

S: I don't know. . . truly. . . (laughs) [. . .] I don't know, at the moment I don't have a precise picture, but, well, I have to admit that I don't even have a blurred picture. . . I am proceeding little step by little step. . . it is already difficult to visualise myself in three months. (Ariel)

E: How do you see yourself in five years?

V: No, no, no. . . I have no idea. I am too used to living day by day and maybe it is what saves me. Maybe you wanted to ask me what I desire but, even in this case, I don't know [. . .] Maybe I'll tell you something now and in five years' time I'll be happy that it went differently. (Aurora)

In the reported excerpts, the research participants' difficulties in projecting themselves into the future appear evident as well as the unfamiliarity with this kind of reflection among the actors' daily self-reflexive practices. In emphasising a 'step-by-step' progression, actors allocate their actions in a temporality of extended present (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002; Nowotny, 2018) that excludes long-term projects and the possibility of orienting today's effort towards tomorrow's rewards (Leccardi, 2008). Among such tendencies to focus on the present, the narratives of those interviewees who shared a reflection on their future focused on sentiments of disempowerment and fatigue that transcended issues of economic dependency or self-realisation, investing the everyday reality of the working practice and of subjects' self-perception:

Today, I am starting to feel the fatigue of this work's structure, for example I pay rent in [City] but today I pay rent also in [Other City]; for two months, I can't leave the apartment in [City], but I need a place in [Other City] because I need to rest. About this continuous moving, I am 32 now, I am starting to think about having a child, but it is impossible to think about it with this work, especially if your partner is an actor as well [. . .] Maintaining sentimental relationships is very hard, I had a boyfriend who could have been the right one, but he wanted me to come back and I couldn't just move to a city and be there. (Filomena)

F: If you work a lot, you also suffer a lot because you are everyday out of home, I will move with my boyfriend on November 1st and on November 4th I have to leave until May – is this life?

E: You won't come back until May . . .

F: I will come every two months, they don't pay me, it takes five months to get paid, I work, I swear, 360 days out of 365 and I earn a monthly stipend of 1,000 euros, and I worked in huge productions as the main character. Everyone calls me but I earn 1,000 euros per month and sometimes I think that I would be earning more if I worked in a supermarket [. . .] I say, it is not true that at a certain point things start to go well, also [*Well known Actor*] has to stay months far away from his family and has his problems, even if he won [*Important Prize*] [. . .] it is not that at a certain point things take off. People tell me 'You are lucky, you are working'. Yes, it is but careful because things aren't easy for me. (Morena)

In the quoted excerpts, Filomena and Morena report the difficulties they encounter in constructing a satisfying private sphere due to their economic conditions and to the structural characteristics of actors' work. In this sense, acting is an itinerant occupation where workers spend most of the year travelling. While decades ago, workers could enjoy longer engagements and higher salaries, the same is not true for today's workforce (Gallina et al., 2018). Spending most time touring and travelling implies, in the interviewees' words, not only the emotional fatigue of being away from loved ones but also a physical effort that becomes increasingly difficult to manage over the years. These characteristics of the job, alongside the low economic rewards that are granted to workers, shape subjects' aspirations and possibilities of thinking about family life. Among the 23 actresses interviewed, two had a child: while the first did not thematise maternity in her interview, the second explicitly connected her positive experience of being a working mother with the economic possibilities of her partner. Women's

position in the working environment, in particular, appears to encounter a milestone during the 30s (Naclerio, 2022a).

My objective is realising myself, as a professional and as a woman. [. . .] The two things are connected, I am almost 34 years old, and I'd like to have the possibility to form a family, unfortunately it is based on economic aspects. (Caterina)

While Filomena and Morena have set out on an artistic path that is leading them to work in big productions and to gain a reputation in their working environment, Caterina had a more complex experience that eventually led her to undertake a double career in event production to increase her economic safety. The theme of physical and emotional fatigue is experienced and reported by women and men and emerges in different discursive places in the interviews. Neoliberal narratives of work ethics make use of attributes traditionally attached to young people, such as enthusiasm, flexibility and energy, to construct workers' ideal qualities (Farrugia, 2018). However, the lived experiences of workers raise questions about the sustainability of this model in the case of older workers (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008). In the data collected, cheerful positivity and passionate commitment were largely introduced especially during the first phase of the interviews while, in other discursive places during our interaction, research participants assumed an ambiguous posture, reporting their difficulties in applying the same system of values to their adulthood.

Sometimes we are crystallised in an eternal present, the future has sunk, and you can't clearly imagine it, you prefer not to go there with your thoughts [. . .] It is an eternal present also as the season of youth, but we are becoming adults, not to say older [. . .] When you open your eyes on the horizon line and you start projecting yourself [. . .] Oh my God. [. . .] The feeling of being in a world that despite your efforts; I work a lot, sometimes work rhythms are just crazy but it wouldn't cast away the anxiety of how I will live [. . .] And it will become even worse because it will become increasingly difficult to maintain this workload, it is a biological matter [. . .] We will never have retirement pensions, the future, it is truly black but maybe something in between would happen. (Gabriel)

In Gabriel's account, the difficulty in facing the future appears to be related to a system where the standard workloads become increasingly hard to bear after 30–35 years of age, in both physical and emotional terms. As was underlined, in a professional system that appears unable to recognise past achievements and career advancement, the subject is forced into a continuous performative effort in order to secure future working opportunities and economic revenues while, at the same time, it is requested to assume a discursive position that celebrates passion and commitment to artistic work. In the data collected, the passage between youth and adulthood emerged as a painful omission, of a substantial part of subjects' existential experience which remains unfulfilled. The impossibility of imagining an exit from a condition of precariousness, which encompasses economic dependency, scarce possibilities to exert control over career paths and a condition of emotional and physical fatigue, delineates an ontologically insecure environment for actors. In this discursive context, the subjects' possibilities for self-realisation as workers are exalted while the relevance to constructing fulfilling, caring, and emotional

relations for subjects' realisation and well-being is silenced. Thus, workers are required to perform as if they were in a never-ending youth where the future, adulthood, and the opportunity to construct a fulfilling family life are excluded from narratives of creative work (Farrugia, 2021).

Discussion: Negotiating biographical time, entrepreneurial ethos, and precarious futures

Although the aspiration for self-actualisation through working activity is considered a necessary precondition for a fulfilling life in contemporary societies (Beck, 2014; Farrugia, 2021; Giddens, 1991; McRobbie, 2016), from the analysis conducted, the difficulty of manipulating reality and of imagining a 'good life' emerge as a central experience of subjects involved in performing arts work. Imagining and pursuing a life project beyond the present time used to be central for modern experiences but, nowadays, subjects planning abilities appear to be increasingly affected by processes of social acceleration and augmented instability (Banks, 2019; Leccardi, 2008; Rosa, 2013). The excerpts presented report feelings of disempowerment and deflection when self-projecting in the future and imagining long-term planning – features that have been considered characteristics of experiences of precariousness (Armano et al., 2017). Entrepreneurial discourses on the necessity to research and cultivate autonomy, hard work, and meritocracy to succeed in the cultural work field (Gill, 2014; Scharff, 2016), even if reproduced in certain discursive spaces of the interviews, short-circuit when juxtaposed with subjects' reflections on future expectations. In this sense, cultural work's optimistic orientation, despite providing workers with an ideal 'cruel scene of desire' (Bone, 2021: 279), appears to struggle in front of unpredictable temporal lines and non-foreseeable futures. From the analysis conducted, an improvement in living conditions is not considered the natural outcome of a hard-working career path – instead, success appears to be randomly distributed in a context where subjects seem to have no illusion of self-determined and autonomous careers. Contextualising success and unsuccess in a sequence of casual events risks obscuring social and cultural capitals that are central to mastering a precarious environment (Colombo et al., 2018). Thus, a future dimension appears to be marginally attached to present actions where discursive elaborations around luck and chance seem to have taken the role of meritocracy in making sense of the distribution of rewards. In the confrontation with continuous ruptures but also with the relevance of economic and cultural capitals in the career progression, workers appear to take an emotional distance from optimistic entrepreneurial discourses of autonomy and competition. Similarly, self-improving operations aimed at enhancing personal capital (Feher, 2009) appear to be weakened when confronted with the impossibility of controlling the outcomes of present actions. If, in certain narrative spaces, research participants perform coherently with dominant narratives around cultural work, in other places they adopt minoritarian discursive structures, revealing how different tensions coexist in the neoliberal space and the complexity of subjects' responses to subjectification processes (Binkley, 2014). The construction of workers as aspirational future-oriented subjects (Allen, 2014; Duffy, 2016) seems to collide with the perceived

impossibility of mastering future time. In the context analysed, marked by the effects of austerity policies and the pandemic crisis, precariousness is not experienced as a transitory problem but, rather, is elaborated as an existential condition (Alacovska, 2018). Thus, maintaining linear biographical narratives becomes a socially and emotionally demanding ongoing task that is unlikely to adhere to the temporal norms of modernity's life course stages (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008; Leccardi, 2008). Scholars of the creative working environment have underlined the changes that invest workers' life transitions (Umney and Kretsos, 2015); in our case, the construction and maintenance of caring relationships is difficult to imagine from both a precarious positioning and in the structural organisation of the profession. The possibility to master precariousness and to construct a fulfilling personal and professional life appears to be tied to subjects' social locations (Anthias, 2013). Furthermore, emotional fatigue and physical efforts in bearing workloads are reported by both male and female actors in their 30s. In this sense, the working environment appears to be discursively constructed around an idea of the physical and emotional age of eternal youth. Furthermore, the same attributes of youth are qualities that are increasingly requested outside of creative spaces in other domains of working activities (Farrugia, 2021). The system of values centred around subjects' passion, readiness, and commitment is hardly applicable to an imagined adulthood which, being a different time of life, has other needs (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2008). Angela McRobbie (2020) describes neoliberal discourses on femininity as directed to orient women's ambition from altruistic notions to professional goals. In the case examined, contemporary narratives of precariousness and entrepreneurship in creative work on the one hand produce subjectivities oriented to dedicating all their time to working activities and, on the other hand, silence subjects' possibilities for self-realisation in the private sphere. Project-based and precarious work are both tied to a presentification of chronologies (Adkins, 2009; Nowotny, 2018) where the possibility of controlling precariousness and experiencing a linear biographical time is related with the subject's positioning in the social space and to existing patterns of inequality (Banks, 2019; Friedman et al., 2017). The perception of indeterminacy, enhanced by the emotional consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic (Rebughini, 2021), seems to represent an upper limit to planning abilities and rational reflexive elaboration. However, the impossibility of structuring working activities on a temporal basis is not a novel condition brought by the pandemic but rather a structural characteristic of precarious experiences. Missing the chance to consider each gig as an element that contributes to a broader biographical project can undermine the role of self-discipline and give rise to depression and unhappiness (Sennett, 2000). Grasping the impossibility of mastering a hypercomplex social reality (Lash, 1993) and suffering from time discrepancies between desired life courses and accelerated modernity (Rosa, 2013), the fantasy of a neoliberal 'good life' in which work provides fulfilment, stability and recognition seem to vanish from workers' horizons. In this sense, the research findings underline the emergence of critical points inside the promises of neoliberal fantasy (Vadolas, 2012). Project-based work and a prolonged status of precariousness devitalize a linear and progressive idea of improvement and question the sustainability of neoliberal ethos of work as a future-oriented project in times of enhanced insecurity.

Conclusion

The article draws on cultural workers' accounts of personal and professional paths to shed light on the relationship between precariousness, future, and entrepreneurship in neoliberal environments of project-based work. Considering the Italian performing arts sector allowed the research to analyse self-entrepreneurship in a cultural sector that has been marked by policies of austerity, unemployment, and underemployment as well as by the Covid-19 crisis. Focusing on theatre actors' narratives around success, unsuccess, and future expectations, the analysis delineates how self-entrepreneurial projects are lived out in a highly insecure working environment. The main contribution of this work highlights how, in a context of enhanced insecurity and precariousness where life courses are increasingly difficult to control, fantasies of a good life (Berlant, 2011) and the quest for linear biographies (Adkins, 2009) require physical and emotional efforts that are increasingly difficult for subjects to sustain, triggering a disaffection towards neoliberal ideals of competition, meritocracy and hard work that can be regarded as standpoints of resistance to entrepreneurial subjectivation processes (Norbäck, 2021). The difficulty to master the conditions potentially enabling the realisation of desired futures situates contemporary subjects' experiences of time outside modern paradigms (Nowotny, 2018). In times of multiple crises, the loss of the prospect of a 'good life' and the impossibility of conceptualising future times as progressive (Gandini, 2020) appear to question a future-oriented temporality where optimism operates as a survival strategy (Berlant, 2011) and open the possibility of moving away from individualised solutions towards a collective questioning of dominant rationalities.

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Résumé

Cet article contribue aux débats contemporains sur l'auto-entrepreneuriat dans les métiers de la culture en s'intéressant plus particulièrement aux comédiens de théâtre qui travaillent sur des projets en Italie. À partir d'entretiens approfondis, l'étude analyse les récits de succès, d'échecs et d'attentes futures des artistes interprètes pour mieux comprendre la manière dont les projets entrepreneuriaux sont négociés dans le travail culturel néolibéral. L'article élargit la recherche actuelle en examinant comment les projets d'auto-entrepreneur sont vécus dans des environnements de travail précaires, en prenant en compte une zone géographique et un secteur créatif souvent négligés par les études sur le travail créatif. Dans un contexte où la précarité est normalisée, le discours des comédiens indique l'émergence d'une désaffection envers les idéaux entrepreneuriaux néolibéraux d'autonomie et de compétition et la perte de l'idée de progression dans les projets de vie. La recherche fait ressortir qu'un statut permanent d'insécurité peut miner les orientations optimistes et entrepreneuriales, remettant en question la viabilité de l'éthique néolibérale du travail comme projet orienté vers l'avenir en période d'insécurité accrue.

Mots-clés

insécurité, temporalité, Fois, travail culturel, travail précaire

Resumen

Este artículo contribuye a los debates contemporáneos sobre el auto-emprendimiento en el trabajo cultural centrándose en los actores de teatro que trabajan en proyectos en Italia. A partir de los datos de entrevistas en profundidad, el estudio considera las narrativas de éxito, fracaso y expectativas futuras de los artistas para arrojar luz sobre cómo se negocian los proyectos empresariales en el trabajo cultural neoliberal. El artículo amplía la investigación actual al analizar

cómo se viven los proyectos de auto-emprendimiento en entornos de trabajo inseguros, teniendo en cuenta un área geográfica y un sector creativo que a menudo se pasan por alto en los estudios sobre el trabajo creativo. En un contexto en el que la precariedad está normalizada, los discursos de los actores apuntan al surgimiento de una desafección hacia los ideales neoliberales empresariales de autonomía y competencia y a la pérdida de una visión de avance progresivo de los proyectos biográficos. La investigación destaca que un estado continuo de inseguridad puede minar las orientaciones optimistas y emprendedoras, cuestionando la sostenibilidad del ethos neoliberal del trabajo como un proyecto orientado al futuro en tiempos de mayor inseguridad.

Palabras clave

inseguridad, temporalidad, idem, trabajo cultural, trabajo precario