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# **The *precariousnesses* of young knowledge workers.**

## **A subject-oriented approach**

### **Abstract**

Over the past decades, a number of EU member states have recorded large rises in the use of temporary employment. Young people are far more likely than other groups to be employed in precarious jobs, independently of their education and skills. In the midst of the global economic-financial crisis, in fact, the assault on the conditions of knowledge workers goes on, according to the different lines of the neoliberalistic logics, that juxtapose with the current precarisation processes like under-payment and misalignment between subjects' educations and their working activities. How do young precarious knowledge workers recount their experiences? What relation holds between a high education level and the possibility of effectively deploying the competences and skills acquired? How do knowledge workers represent and deal with their precarious conditions? To answer these questions, this article proposes a definition of the concepts of 'precarity', 'precariousness', and 'precariat', and then focuses specifically on the precariousness experienced by young knowledge workers in Italy, and the importance of investigating precarisation processes in light of their experiences. Hence the present article discusses the invisible face of the conditions of young knowledge workers that collides with the official one, which superficially considers them to be 'independent professionals', although they increasingly experience conditions similar to those of dependent workers and suffer the effects of the further precarisation brought about by the crisis, but without trade-union or political representation.

**Keywords:** *Knowledge workers, Subjectivities, Precarity, Precariousness, Precariat, Self-Identification, Self-Exploitation, Experience of misalignment*

## **The precariousnesses of young knowledge workers.**

### **A subject-oriented approach**

*How many graduates are hired for jobs which do not match their qualifications  
("to make photocopies," as the saying goes)?  
How many fixed-term contracts pay 500, 800 euros a month?  
And for how many hours? Have we forgotten that when talking of a wage  
it is also necessary to state the working hours?  
A freelance contract for three months, then a wait of six months,  
and then another freelance contract for another three months.  
Is this work, is this employment?*

Sergio Bologna

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, numerous quantitative studies on the conditions of knowledge workers have emphasised the objective nature of their inquiry, the researcher's non-judgmental stance, and the measurability of the phenomena investigated. By contrast, this paper takes the opposite approach by recognising that narrators and listeners – the interviewees as well as the researchers – develop their representations and narratives within situated systems of power and knowledge. Our analysis therefore assumes the point of view of the subjects, and it assumes that this 'bias' is heuristically important. It therefore adopts a subject-oriented approach which is less interested in verification of the 'facts' of lives. These it considers to be less significant than the manifold experiences and life-stories that every individual can elaborate (Personal Narrative Group 1989).

At the centre of our narrative is the precariousness experienced by knowledge workers, and in particular by precarious highly-educated and highly-skilled young people in Italy. The analysis centres on the intersubjective constructions of meaning by which young graduates represent their lives, and in particular their work. The principal models and methodological references are Bourdieu's *Practical Reason* (1985), the tradition of social inquiry and 'co-research' (Alasia and Montaldi 1960; Alquati 1993), and narrative studies (Schutze 1987; Riessman 1993).

We therefore asked ourselves: how do knowledge workers represent their condition? And how do they cope with precariousness? To answer these questions we shall conduct critical

reflection on the trajectories and subjectivities of young knowledge workers. The discussion is based on the results from two qualitative research projects conducted in northern Italy between 2006 and 2011 (Armano 2010; Murgia, Poggio and Torchio 2012).

## **2. Knowledge Workers' Subjectivities hanging in the balance: the Experience of Precariousness between Job Precarity and Precariat**

Having outlined the approach and the research questions, we now briefly state the theoretical perspective which guided our inquiry. Investigating the conditions and subjectivities of young highly-skilled people in Italy primarily concerns the formation of a young precariat. Before addressing the concept of precariat, however, we think it important to try to resignify and circumscribe some key terms often interchangeably used to describe precariousness although they refer to very different situations.

We first define the concepts of 'job precarity', 'precariousness', and 'precariat'. We then specify what we mean by the expression 'knowledge work', a social world which graduates endeavour to enter.

One of the standing points of our analysis is that for understanding how the process of precarisation is one of the essential features of current forms of subjectivisation, the definition of a precarious condition required to be extended beyond the narrow confines of the labour market (Murgia 2010; Arienzo and Borrelli 2012).

Investigation must therefore not be restricted to temporary, discontinuous, uncertain, and largely unprotected employment – in which, nevertheless, precarity is particularly evident. It is necessary to go beyond the term 'precarity' in its restricted sense of 'job precarity' so widely used in continental Europe (Booth, Francesconi, and Frank 2002; Clark and Postel-Vinay 2009) and in Italy (Berton, Richiardi, and Sacchi 2009), but little developed in the English-speaking countries and northern Europe.

We believe that the experiences of precarious young knowledge workers can be denoted (albeit with numerous nuances) by the term 'precariousness', which numerous authors employ to indicate the transformation of social relations amid uncertainty (Bourdieu 1998), especially at a time of the large-scale deregulation of the capitalist system (Castel 1995; Sennett 1998). This is not so much the effect of job precarity as the product of the liquefaction of the modern institutions (Bauman 2000) and of the insecurity and vulnerability of the entire corpus of social relationships now deconstructed by the diffusion of risk (Beck 2000). In this scenario,

individuals are required to take charge of their destinies as entrepreneurs of their selves (Foucault 2008), their lives, and their social protection (Ross 2009; Chicchi and Leonardi 2012). This condition transforms people into entrepreneurs of their own ‘human capital’, and it therefore entails processes of self-construction centred on individualisation. Above all for young knowledge workers, in fact, the experience of precariousness is inextricably bound up with job self-identification, which generates self-exploitation and conveys subsumption of skills, personal qualities and emotions that are put into value. Because the concept of precariousness – or perhaps it would be better to say *precariousnesses* – concerns the experiences of persons in their partiality and situatedness, it induces us to consider different, manifold, but simultaneously dynamic, positions that not only differ among individuals who define themselves as precarious but also change for the same individual over time. In a certain sense, therefore, we may use the term ‘precarity’ to denote a structural condition tied in particular to work and the contract. Instead, ‘precariousness’ denotes an experiential condition to do with the person’s life as a quality inherent to that person and his/per specific positioning. The aim of this article is to make an original contribution to the debate that recognises precariousness as a condition so extensive that it permeates the entire life of individuals and transmutes into *existential precarity* (Fumagalli 2007) and *social precarity* (Murgia 2010).

A third concept, different from both those of ‘precarity’ and ‘precariousness’, situated in the critical Anglo-Saxon thinking, has been proposed by Guy Standing (2011), who identifies in the ‘precariat’ an emergent social actor potentially able to become a new political class with universal rights and legitimated to express an innovative politics marked by equity and social solidarity. Standing defines this emergent *class-in-the-making* broadly as those who face a number of related and often overlapping insecurities: labour market insecurity, employment insecurity, job insecurity, work insecurity, skill reproduction insecurity, income insecurity, and representation insecurity. The precariat therefore consists of a wide array of self-employed autonomous or dependent workers, freelancers, migrants, students, women, and young people, increasingly less protected by an inadequate welfare system. It also comprises temporary workers, as well as permanent employees whose jobs are threatened and who are subject to blackmail. To be stressed is that the growth of the precariat does not derive entirely from changes in the labour market and the increase in temporary contracts; it is also driven by the transformation of production processes, the rights connected with them, and, above all, the deliberate governance strategies of capitalist society. In this complex scenario, it thus becomes difficult to understand the delimitations of the definition of ‘precariat’ (Bailey 2013).

Standing himself, for that matter, stresses that the precariat does not consist of people with identical backgrounds. This means that there co-exist varieties of precariats, with different degrees of insecurity and attitudes to having a precariat existence. It therefore seems that this concept fully demonstrates its importance, not so much in defining a distinctive socio-economic group as in identifying the potential to construct an identity, an imagery, and a collective experience of precarious subjectivities. “Moving from symbols to a political program” (Standing 2011, p. 3 ) is, in our view, the shift which constitutes Standing’s main contribution. And among the main protagonists of this shift from a condition of precariousness to one of precariat are the precarious young knowledge workers at the centre of our following discussion.

Having theoretically defined the concepts of the precarity-precariousness-precariat, we now turn to the concept of knowledge work, which was of specific concern to our research on young highly-educated and highly-skilled workers. Firstly, who are knowledge workers? Much time has passed since the first definition of knowledge work formulated by Peter Drucker. According to Drucker, knowledge workers are persons who use, entirely or predominantly, their intellectual, cognitive, relational, communicative faculties, in collaboration with others, to perform their work (Drucker 1994). This very broad and inclusive definition gave rise to systematic reflection: Florida (2003) described knowledge workers with a certain celebrative emphasis as a new creative and innovative elite; conversely, Lessard and Baldwin (2000) described them as the victims of flexible technology. A large body of literature then developed, from the analyses of Manuel Castells on the network society (1996) to the debate in Italy among authors arguing from sometimes very different theoretical positions – among them Federico Butera (2008), Sergio Bellucci and Marcello Cini (2011), and then Sergio Bologna and Dario Banfi (2011). A broad definition of knowledge work comprised a wide range of occupational categories, from managers to call centre workers, with marked differences in pay and employment conditions. Thus identified was a form of work which in recent decades has burgeoned numerically in all the tertiarised societies. Here we would specify that, from the analytical point of view, by ‘knowledge work’ we mean ‘(meta)knowledge work’, i.e. not a concrete type of activity but a generalisation from a composite set of activities.

A distinctive feature of knowledge workers is that the majority of them are self-employed (at least formally): collaborators, consultants, freelances (Armano 2010; Bologna and Banfi 2011). In this regard, the expression ‘molecular capitalists’ (Bonomi 1997) has been used,

although it is a definition that empowers a form of work that we would instead term ‘*de facto* wage-earning’. One witnesses, in fact, the ‘enterprisation’ of work and human activity (Alquati 1997) and a process whereby precarious workers become enterprise. Here the emphasis is not on becoming the entrepreneur of oneself, but rather on a work condition that has only the constraints of an enterprise, because it is the individual worker that must assume, subjectively and creatively, enterprise risk (Rullani 2005).

Already in the 1980s in the Western countries, the use of formally self-employed labour and less regulated contracts enabled firms to outsource functions, increase organisational flexibility, and reduce costs (Harvey 1990; Standing 2011). However, the precarity of the 2000s went even further, and off-loaded risk in all its forms – productive, financial, and social – on to the individual. Above all, it subjected the latter to the logic of ‘enterprisation’. The new pattern of proactive participation and promotion of personal resources entirely overturned the system of discipline and obedience typical of Fordist society. At work was a financialisation of people’s lives (Formenti 2011) which in everyday life took the form of a set of practices that replaced those that structured the previous paradigm. The place of wages regulated by rights and collective bargaining – still formally persist in some cases – was taken by individualised pay scales based on performance, productivity, and reliability accompanied by increments linked to market results, leasing, indebtedness, and credit. The rhetoric of self-fulfilment, and the dominant principle of merit and skill rewards, positioned workers in a field of internalised intents and aspirations (Lazzarato 2012), different from the field of values and choices from the past. The aim of this paper is to understand these changes through the use of a subject-oriented approach.

### **3. The Italian context: the precarity shared by young highly-educated and highly-skilled workers**

In this section we briefly describe some features useful for contextualizing the condition of young highly-educated and highly-skilled knowledge workers in Italy. This is a particularly interesting category because it is the protagonist of what has been called the new spirit of capitalism (Sennett 2006). These are workers who have both wanted and experienced task-oriented project work connoted by wide margins of autonomy. The ‘artistic critique’ carried forward since the protest movements of the 1960s to claim the right to express creativity (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999) has in fact been skilfully incorporated into both business

organisations, which soon realised that large part of profits depend on worker's inventiveness and imagination, and into the regulation of work and the reforms enacted in Europe in recent decades. These processes of structural transformation of work are more comprehensible if one observes the experiences of young people who, on the one hand begin to work in a production system already profoundly transformed, and on the other, unwillingly circumscribe and resignify the new social contexts of becoming vulnerable and open to blackmail of desire and subjectivity.

In Italy this process began later than in other European countries, but it then developed rapidly. The labour-market reforms of 1997, 2003 and 2012 substantially altered the types of employment contracts. They fostered the rapid and extensive spread of *formally* autonomous employment relationships, such as 'semi-dependent' or 'quasi-subordinate' jobs based on fixed-term, project, or temporary contracts, and the 'self-employed/dependent' or 'fake-autonomous' jobs undertaken by self-employed freelances working mainly for one employer. The features shared by these diverse forms of employment are the high education levels of the workers concerned, job insecurity, frequently low pay levels, and the absence of the rights and protections typical of dependent employment, which is still the main channel of access to the Italian welfare system (Ranci 2012; Samek Lodovici and Semenza 2012).

In Italy, as in other tertiarised countries, one therefore witnesses the emergence of 'hybrid' cases such as that of highly-skilled self-employed workers nonetheless exposed to the risk of unemployment, a lack of income, and social marginality (Murgia and Poggio 2012). The onset of the economic crisis has exacerbated this trend, producing further insecurity for this category of workers (Villa 2010; Samek Lodovici and Semenza 2012). Nor does possession of a tertiary-level qualification provide protection. Graduates are, in fact, most at risk of unemployment: in 2009 the number of unemployed upper-secondary diploma holders or graduates increased to a greater extent (20%) than did the number of persons with lower qualifications (9.2%). And those most affected were freelances and 'self-employed/dependent' workers (Istat 2010; ACTA 2012; Armano 2013). Also pay levels seem to be increasingly less proportional to the investment made in training. In Italy, graduates aged between 25 and 34, in fact, earn only 22% more than high-school diploma holders in the same age class, compared with an OECD average of 40% more. There are also marked differences between those graduates who remain in Italy and those who go abroad to work: four years after graduation, those who have gone abroad earn almost 1,800 euros net a month,



while those who have remained in Italy earn around 1,300 euros. There is, moreover, a wide gender gap in all occupational sectors (Barone 2013).

Finally, compared with the rest of Europe, Italy confirms its particularly problematic position in regard to the match between educational qualifications and jobs, even though the proportion of highly-educated young Italians is decidedly lower than the average of the other countries (Terraneo 2010). For many graduates, the transition from university to a permanent job is not only more protracted but also more difficult in terms of occupational stability, employment conditions, and professional content (Blasutig 2008; Ballarino and Bratti 2009). Instability rates are higher among higher-skilled workers: 33% among graduates under 35 compared to 25.5% for high-school diploma holders and 23.6% among workers with a lower-secondary education diplomas. Moreover, in regard to occupation types, the most unstable working lives are found mostly among young adult professionals (aged 25-34), which indicates that “a greater investment in training and human capital development is not finding an appropriate response in the labour market, where work is predominantly non-stable, even for the over-35s with a high level of education” (Dota 2013, p. 29). The dynamics just described depict a widespread and enduring mismatch (both quantitative and qualitative) between the demand for and supply of skilled labour (Schomburg and Teichler 2006; Blasutig 2012). The phenomenon of *over-qualification*, already present in Italy, has indubitably been accentuated by the economic crisis: in 2009 it affected around a million more people than in 2004 (3.4 million workers, with a 15.6% incidence). Of these, around half (47.1%) were young people aged under 34 (Istat 2010). In the same period, the incidence of workers with jobs requiring skills inferior to their qualifications rose from 24.2% to 31% among 15-to-34 year-old workers (compared with an increase from 5.3% to 8.5% among workers aged over 55. This applies all the more to young graduates, almost half of whom have jobs which do not match their qualifications (44.9% compared with 34.1% of the total labour force). Those most penalised are women, even though they outnumber men in almost all the disciplinary fields (Istat 2010).

Job precarity, which inevitably impacts on all the other spheres of a person's life, has thus expanded to become an existential precariousness. It characterises the lives of all young people, but with specific features for those with high qualifications, who are over-represented among self-employed workers and freelancers. In the next sections we shall discuss – through presentation of the main results of research conducted in various cities of northern Italy – the precarious and invisible circumstances of young knowledge workers that contradict the

official account that superficially considers them ‘independent and professional’, though they more frequently have working conditions similar to those of dependent workers and experience the effect of the further precarisation brought about by the crisis, but without a trade-union or political representation. Starting from job precarity, we shall investigate the *precariousnesses* that extend beyond the confines of the labour market. Finally, we shall consider the difficulty of constructing collective experiences and practices against precariousness which might enable identification of an emergent actor: that is to say, the precariat.

#### **4. Research context and methodology**

The discussion that follows is based on two different research projects conducted in northern Italy between 2006 and 2011. The first was carried out in Turin between the summers of 2006 and 2009, and it concerned events during the period which followed the Turin Winter Olympics of 2006. The study was based on 39 in-depth interviews conducted with young and adult knowledge workers employed in diverse sectors: information technology, digital production, the Web, the new media, multimedia arts, publishing, training, and research (Armano 2010; 2011). Most of the interviews were carried out during various events held in Turin – Virtuality, Linux Day, Film Festival, and Artissima.

The second research project was conducted in the cities of Milan, Bologna and Trento. During 2011, 30 narrative interviews (Schutze 1987; Riessman 2001) were conducted with precarious highly-skilled young people. All the interviewees had at least five years of work experience and high educational qualifications (degree, master or doctorate), of which 8 in sciences and 22 in socio-humanistic subjects.

In both research projects, the large majority of the interviewees worked as semi-subordinate employees or freelancers, both in jobs consistent with their training and in ones very distant from it.

The next section discusses some of the main results of the analysis of the interview texts. It will show two dimensions that characterise the lives of knowledge workers: (i) an ambivalent search for independence and freedom to express creativity; (ii) the experience of misalignment, an experiential state of rescission, a sort of incongruity of status with respect to both training and previous work experience (which gives rise to the phenomena of deskilling,

devaluation and impoverishment of knowledge) and the future, which appears uncertain, as well as distant from desires and expectations.

## **5. Discussion of the research results: stories of precariousness of young knowledge workers**

The research results evidence a very broad array of specific situations. Whilst the concept of homogeneity was applicable in the Fordist world, the condition of young knowledge workers is today characterised by heterogeneity and variety.

Notwithstanding the different concrete circumstances of the interviewees, some common and recurrent features emerge. In what follows, we shall describe a phenomenology of subjectivity which expresses precariousness in knowledge work. On the one hand, we shall examine the identification/self-exploitation nexus; on the other the experience of growing misalignment between the desires and aspirations of young knowledge workers and their everyday lives.

### ***5.1. Precarious knowledge workers: between self-identification and self-exploitation***

One of the main features apparent in the interviews was the self-identification of the respondents with the object of their work – to the point that they were willing to do their jobs for free, or almost. This is an aspect which defines subjectivity in the new forms of work: indeed, according to some authors it is an attitude typical of the new *esprit du capitalisme* (Boltanski and Chiappello 1999). Because of these ‘passions’, jobs no longer have fixed time schedules, and contractual provisions apply only in formal terms.

“It’s great because – I’m lucky enough to work at the Polytechnic of Turin with organisations of a certain prestige. I have the good fortune of being in contact with people who can impart a great deal from both the cultural and personal point of view. [...] The positive aspects of my job [...] are certainly lifeblood for me. [...] I think that *if you do something with pleasure, that’s the most important thing* [...] you’re happy and stimulated. You can easily put in an extra two to five hours. But doing two hours more, or even a minute more, in work that you don’t like certainly grinds you down” [29 years old\_Turin\_Research Fellow]

I like my job because it's very stimulating, because I switch from dealing with a review of the \*\*\* Festival to following a cultural event, which I usually find interesting and *that I also share as values... because obviously I've catered to my interests*, so that when planning the festival I select a review that interests me, and I therefore attend the planning meetings... deciding what films to discard or not... I watch the films at home... Then, of course, I'd like to earn a bit more. Now I don't get even one thousand euros, and there's always the issue of the six-month contract, and you never know if they'll renew it... There are two roads according to me: the job of your life and the job that pays, and *I'm trying in every way possible to do a job that impassions me*, even if I don't earn very much [32 years old, Milan, Freelance in a cultural association]

The key to understanding the phenomenon of work self-identification is the fact that a large proportion of knowledge work is immaterial and relational, with the consequence that behaviour, motivation, as well as social and emotional skills, play a significant role in its qualification and enhancement (Chicchi and Roggero 2009; Fumagalli and Morini 2009). And because human capital is inextricably bound up with its possessor (Cohen 2001), it transforms the person into a sort of enterprise based on the identity socially granted to it, and on remuneration which is primarily motivational, not economic. This motivational and identitarian remuneration makes it possible to withstand what we have called job precarity and which, in the stories of the interviewees, often translated into dreadful working and contractual conditions:

I wake up at half past six... I leave home in the car at a quarter past seven, lessons from eight to one o'clock... lunch at around a quarter to two... a quick stop-off here [*the interviewee's home*] to pick up my things, perhaps a last look at my lesson notes... by three o'clock at the very latest I must catch the train to be in time for the lesson, which begins at half four. Lessons end at six or a quarter past... By half past seven I'm at home, supper and then preparing lessons or correct exercises or looking up something for the school or writing an article... And then... okay, so I'm stupid... I became the contact person of the school/work transition project at my school, so I had to organise all the visits by the students... the work experience placements, contacts with firms, and so on... And I wasn't paid for it either... which is right because they didn't let us lack for anything! But I was wrong, wasn't I?. I was certainly wrong. But it seemed a really

sensible thing to do... *I believed in that project...* [31 years old\_Bologna\_Teacher at an upper-secondary school]

... It's in the past two years that I've gone into economic ...meltdown... I'm drawing on my funds, previous savings.. and... scraping away at them as long as it lasts... or until I'm fed up with it all. Because there are moments when I'm so discouraged that I say... *these are all jobs that I like, so much passion, but ...* Advanced training is all very well, and so are jobs which I won't say are prestigious but are of a certain level, right? However, teaching at university... I'm proud of what I've achieved. However, if this is the situation... it sometimes seems to me that I've done everything wrong. That's for sure. I want so much to emigrate... [33 years old\_Milan\_Spanish Teacher]

Moreover, in project work, self-identification with the job combines with the phenomenon – a spillover from ‘second-generation self-employment’ (Bologna and Fumagalli 1997) – called ‘domestication’, the end of the distinction between the person and his/her work role, between home and work, the voluntary and free contribution of time, knowledge, resources, relationships, and constant availability (Marazzi 2005), in which the worker is voluntarily and wholeheartedly committed to fulfilment of the goal, despite the expansion of working time. The interviewees stressed the growth in the amount of free work that is ‘normally’ required upstream, downstream, alongside, and beyond the formal employment contract. This phenomenon assumes the characteristics of an extremely ambiguous process which involves the creation of a potentially new kind of freedom and a more invisible type of subordination which pushes people to work constantly, and which blurs the distinction between work and private spaces.

It's a shambles, as I see it. I have enormous difficulties in combining our schedules, because I love my job but I don't want to neglect my family. Because there's my schedule, my wife's schedule, and then there are the schedules of my children, although they're obviously not aware of them. I have often to travel for my job... it becomes really... In fact, I've invented a small code for the taking and fetching... every week we draw up a plan in my diary... my wife has her shifts, I have my shifts, plus the children to be taken to school, so I've invented... who'll take the boy? One code for me, one for my wife, one for the boy – who'll take him, who'll pick him up. I mark us like this, so I

can see all the various tie-ups during the week. It's a mess... extraordinarily difficult. [34 years old\_Trento\_Architect].

I'd say there's a very blurred boundary between work and, let's say, private life. This is generally so, by now it's a generally recognised feature of precarious work... you get on top of it whenever you can, so that there isn't time for private life and time for work. Things are mixed together. I reckon I belong in this new category because, among private lessons, more institutional work, collaborations... perhaps work for other people, for other employers... it's obvious that I must fit my work time into any space available during the day [...] Also because you always need to look for new projects to have continuity of income, but also to keep on working. And this is time that's not counted as working time, even though it's the constant feature of my days [34 years old\_Milan\_Freelance researcher in History]

Finally, it is necessary to emphasise that partly underlying the identification/self-exploitation nexus is the implicit ambivalence of free work. On the one hand, in fact, the work of young knowledge workers is strongly based on informality, the free management of time, and the expression of creativity. On the other hand, it is poorly paid, as well as pervading all the spaces of private and family life (Beverungen et al. 2013; Chicchi et al. 2013). Empathic identification with one's work may therefore lead to devoting much more time to it than is actually paid, to the detriment of the private sphere, and, moreover, without this corresponding to guarantees of continued employment (Zambelli, Murgia, and Teli 2014). Identification mixed with the constant blackmail (both material and emotional) to which precarious young knowledge workers are subject is, we believe, one of the main obstacles to the construction of spaces for collective action in which to construct practices of resistance against precariousness.

## ***5.2. The other side of the coin: the experience of misalignment***

In the previous section, we described the experiences of highly-educated and highly-skilled young people who, although they had jobs that they regarded as rich with meaning, were at the same time liable to precarious subjectivisation because of the passion, involvement, and creativity of their work. In a certain sense, this particular category of workers is caught in

what we may call a ‘passion trap’ (Murgia, Poggio, and Torchio 2012). On the one hand, they have jobs that are a source of passion and pleasure; but on the other they experience passion – in all spheres of their lives – in the most literal sense of the term: pain, suffering, and fatigue caused by unstable contracts and working conditions. This is the paradox that typifies contemporary flexible capitalism, which puts cognitive and emotional skills into production (Chicchi 2011) but constructs deceptive spaces of freedom (Magatti 2009).

However, even more problematic – in that they add strong dissatisfaction and a lack of recognition of the work performed to the experience of precariousness – are the experiences of the interviewees who, because they not could afford long periods of inactivity after the end of a job consistent with their skills, had to accept another one far from their qualifications and previous experience. The high incidence of young people in jobs for which they are over-qualified testifies that the distress caused by a precarious job combines with that due to its poorer quality and its misalignment with abilities and expectations.

You can’t afford to have any gaps. I’d like to have loads of gaps, because it would mean that I’m living on a private income. But I don’t have a private income. So the fact I’ve accepted a job for two years in a call centre has obviously been for purely economic reasons. Like the year I spent in a bookshop. They were jobs that I found through a temporary employment agency because I needed to work. [33 years old\_Bologna\_Expert in gender policies]

Being a graduate and qualified, and having a curriculum with five hundred courses on it, rather than... is an aggravating circumstance. You’re worse off. You’re worse off than anyone else. Because any job that they can offer you is anyway a lower-grade one. [34 years old\_Trento\_Administrative worker]

Most exposed to situations of this kind are workers most liable to blackmail, with scant resources – particularly family support and income – on which to rely. Not to be forgotten, in fact, is the total absence in Italy of both a guaranteed minimum income and unemployment benefits for workers with quasi-subordinate or freelance contracts (Vercellone 2013).

The lives of young precarious knowledge workers therefore seem to oscillate between two situations of extreme difficulty: working precariously (or for free) in a job consistent with their training, or – as in the cases just described – working for low pay in a job which does not

match their skills. This the principal ‘precarity trap’ (Standing 2011, p. 73) in which young people with years of investment in training and upskilling are at risk of falling. The difficulty of finding jobs which match their qualifications and aspirations, so that they accept temporary as well as under-skilled work, is the result of their need for income. What happens is a mechanism whereby “if they turn down the temporary dead-end job, they may be branded as lazy and a scrounger. If they take it, they may be on a losing track. [...] In the end, the precarity traps reflect a discordance between young people’s aspirations and the ‘human capital’ preparation system that sells credentialist qualifications on a false prospectus” (Standing 2011, pp. 74-75).

To be stressed is that the mismatch between education and aspirations concerns an experience which involves not only income and work but, in broader terms, also a sort of renunciation of one’s *expected*, as well as desired, identity. The precariousness trap, in fact, leads – often inexorably – young knowledge workers towards underskilled careers, so that they are caught in what has been called a status incongruence (Dogan 2011; Raffini 2013). This constantly growing phenomenon is not explainable – at least not solely – in terms of the temporariness of employment relationship. Rather, it should be considered in light of its implications for subjectivities and, above all, the way in which it contributes to the creation of fertile ground for individualistic tendencies and the erosion of collective identifications.

Misalignment, moreover, was experienced by the interviewees both because of the mismatch between their everyday lives and the investments made in the past – which caused deskilling and the impoverishment of knowledge – and, especially, the discrepancy between their present lives and those imagined in the future as increasingly uncertain and distant from desires and expectations.

I imagine myself as an ordinary person who does an ordinary job. If you live in a situation where a set of factors independent of you can decide that – in one day’s, one month’s, or six months’ time –. you may find yourself not only out of work but also having to change your lifestyle, this means that in every area of your life you don’t have the strength, the courage, the lucidity to be able to make choices – not epic choices or ones that affect the next twenty years, but life choices like buying a car, buying a house, deciding to study Kant, or anything else extraneous to your most immediate worries. However, as I see it, life has quality only if choices of this kind can be made. But also



the social utility of any individual, whether functional to or critical of the system, develops only if he or she has stability. [29 years old\_Turin\_Research Fellow]

For young knowledge workers on temporary contracts, as they shuttle from one job to another, between work and non-work, between unemployment and training and the multiple contexts of social life, the greatest suffering caused by precariousness seems to be their difficulty in shaping a coherent narrative, defining a story, recognising a ‘plot’ in their activities, identifying a goal to be achieved, and consequently the means to do so. They suffer because their lack of credible long-term goals may make them extremely vulnerable to the urgency of the moment. The metaphor of the jigsaw puzzle, which must be assembled without the final picture being known, and without the certainty of having all the pieces necessary to complete it, effectively conveys the uncertainty of life-courses (Bauman 2003).

What becomes important in this scenario is knowing how to manage the transition between one contract and the next, the interruption, the new hiring, the transfer from one city to another. These moments of transition assume central importance in biographies (Murgia 2010), those phases of bargaining and/or informal negotiation, conflict, dialogue, growth and learning, social promotion, exclusion, and flight. One gains the impression from the narratives that the subjectively key elements are condensed in those particular moments of transition.

The young knowledge workers considered here were therefore in transition between a *no longer* and a *not yet* that redefines not only the world of work and its meanings but also the subjectivities of those who experience precariousness in their everyday lives. In fact, identity itself is configured as a short-term identity tied to the variable duration of employment. As Standing (2011) emphasises, subjects who live in precarious conditions do not have the sense of having an occupational identity, and that they are developing themselves through work and the labour market. Yet, if on the one hand occupational instability is not the pivot around which to build one’s identity, on the other it nevertheless influences how one relates with others and with one’s social world.

According to me, our generation has absorbed it like a mindset, we’re trained into believing that everything comes to an end, that we must live for the moment, and that what will happen later is unknown [...] you can’t go beyond a certain limit. Also thought is short-term. [26 years old\_Turin\_Teacher working as a freelance]

They're always friendships that come and go... because my job is a bit here and then somewhere else, so I keep in contact with only a few people [...] I spend time in one city and then in another, so that friends usually become colleagues. Periods pass in which I don't have any real company to go out with... because those that I used to go out with have gone away, and I have make myself a group, and this is certainly a negative aspect.  
[36 years old\_Turin\_Programmer]

The difficulty of planning in the long term, however, does not seem interpretable as a lack of projectuality and self-confidence. Rather, it seems due to a widespread practice of 'playing it by ear', a self-projection into the future which is entirely restricted to the opportunities that arise from day to day. The remote future therefore becomes merely the sum of numerous proximate futures, and the space of experience and the horizon of expectations become detached until they lose every reciprocal reference.

The experience of misalignment thus acquires the features of a 'precariousness trap'. As the present detaches itself from past investment, as well as from desires and expectations concerning the future, this experience of misalignment also becomes the device constituting the precariousness experienced. Moreover, young knowledge workers not only must decide their lives from time to time, constantly changing their expectations, but they must also do so individually. This *precarious generation* (Bourdieu 1998), in fact, is grounded on the well-known processes of individualisation and atomisation that make construction of solid collective identities and imageries difficult. It is a generation that has not yet developed forms of mobilisation and representation with which to turn a shared experience of marginality into political strategies for change, and it struggles to merge manifold precariousnesses into a collective experience that extends beyond individual subjectivities to construct a collective political actor. In other words, the difficulty is in constructing possibilities for individual precarious subjectivities to coalesce into a precariat expressing what Standing (2011, p. 3) has termed "the agency of a politics of paradise".

## **6. Discussion and conclusions**

This concluding section discusses the two faces of precariousness experienced by young knowledge workers in the Italian labour market.

The foregoing analysis has shown that young knowledge workers suffer a precariousness increasingly dissimilar from the contractual and occupational precarity due to the temporary contracts much discussed in recent years. The different precariousness of knowledge workers with respect to that of other temporary workers is characterised by the precariousness of trajectories: that is to say, the need to be part of a network and to reconcile aspirations (and self-identification) with work opportunities, especially in the long period.

The precariousness of trajectories is specific to knowledge workers because they must know how to make choices. And knowing how to make choices is more important than it was in the Fordist system, where once workers had been hired, their careers consisted of a series of predefined advancements.

The main findings of the comparison between the two research projects can be summarised as follows. The categories that emerged from the interviewees' accounts centred on:

- *high informality and the network as an ambivalent environment* midway between a resource and a drawback, between the sharing of knowledge and its expropriation;
- *job self-identification as a trap for self-exploitation* as an attempt to give meaning to one's work, and at systemic level with the free production of a commodity made possible by the subjectivation processes described;
- *impoverishment of skills and invisibilisation*, i.e. the 'choice' between two equally unacceptable options: precarious work in a job consistent with one's training or underpaid work in a job that does not match one's skills;
- *precariousness of trajectories* as a Darwinian mechanism of long-term social selection between workers with sufficient resources to handle the transition between one contract/project and the next, and those who do not possess those resources.

Whilst the first two categories are mainly of help in disentangling the self-identification/self-exploitation knot, the last two more effectively illustrate the experience of misalignment, which we have described as a experiential state of rescission with respect to both one's skills and one's future and desires. All four of them, however, interweave to produce various combinations of the relationship between precariousness and knowledge work.

We believe that these are the main representations with which the respondents created a counter-intuitive self-image. They enable fruitful exploration of the concepts of precariousness and knowledge work. The latter thus emerges from invisibility and takes

shape, contradicting the dominant discourse of the mythical e-topia enjoyed by the creative class (Florida 2003), and the facile rhetoric of professionalism (Prandstreller 2003).

Finally, in order to frame the most important findings of this specific empirical study within the more general debate, we may describe knowledge workers as forming a category with marked internal stratification, contractual differences, and diverse experiences of social and private life. They do not constitute a homogeneous group in terms of either material conditions or self-recognition as a class. Nevertheless, they share a number of subjective features which embryonically depict the physiognomy of a new and numerically growing occupational group.

Although partial and localised, the results of the research fieldwork have allowed us to delineate some exemplary subjective characteristics of knowledge work. The results have shown a condition based on contingent project works, so that in digital capitalism the world of industrial production – centred on what the English historian of industry, Edward Thompson, termed ‘clock-work’, regulated by the criterion of time as measured by the clock – has been replaced by a task-oriented world measured by the criterion of the result obtained. However, in that knowledge work is typically project-based (objective-result), it comprises new forms of subordination and precariousness which depend more directly on internalization of market constraints and assuredly less on the external disciplinary power exercised by the clocking-in machine of industrial society.

To bring the issue of subordination to capital into focus, we may say – recalling Deleuze (1990) – that we have shifted from a form of external disciplinary control to a control interiorized in the social factors of the work. Precariousness, therefore, is not solely contractual, and hence does not consist solely in job precarity. Rather, it is connected to the job self-identification which generates self-exploitation and conveys a subsumption of skills and emotions that are put into value. Immersion in a task-oriented logic (demanding, temporary and revocable) and in contingency (of employment relationships, work contacts, and knowledge at risk of obsolescence) distinctly reconfigures experiences centred on autonomy, identification, and the informality of relations, and it prompts broader reflection on precarisation processes.

Thus emerging from this transition is a new occupational category with an artisanal mentality embedded in the person (who dangerously does not perceive alienation) able to use/combine various forms of knowledge, including technical-scientific ones (Sennett 2008; Ross 2009). This requires reconsideration and enrichment of the notion of the *precariat* (Standing 2011) in

light of the subjectivity of a young precarious and thinking generation which embraces values and desires of self-fulfilment that do not necessarily correspond to either dependent employment or entrepreneurship. The key theme underlying these reflections concerns the implications of such processes for forms of representation and new models of welfare.

In this regard, we would stress two features that seem particularly significant: the economic and social impoverishment of cognitive work and the lack of a public voice which characterise an entire generation, well-educated and highly-skilled, but primarily engaged in precarious knowledge work with freelance, consultancy or project contracts. The precariat, therefore, consists of a generation whose public existence is based on blackmail: either accept an extremely precarious job (of which free labour is emblematic) in order to have work consistent with one's training, or – in order to be paid and at least minimally protected – suffer downskilling and under-employment, and in this case entirely forgo expression of one's knowledge in work and society. Thus apparent is an impoverishment of resources in the sense of a growing mismatch between training and the job. This risk is exacerbated by increased subordination and decreased autonomy, even though contracts define these employment relationships as freelance.

In general, all the features described above entail a redefinition of the knowledge precariat in light of the subjectivity evidenced by the empirical research. Evident from the foregoing discussion is the advent of an increasingly clearly-defined, new precariat. However, the transition from the multiple precariousnesses experienced by individuals to the construction of a collective actor able to develop shared strategies to resist precarisation is still obstructed by the anomic condition of separatedness between the individual and social sides of subjective action (Chicchi 2005), and by the progressive erosion of all that is *common* because of the extreme competitive rivalry widespread in the world of work (Ehrenberg 2010). In this frame, even more evident is the historical cleavage of representation that coincides with transition to a post-Fordist society, which requires the reconsideration and redesign of forms of collective action and coalition able to respond to the challenges of the present. From this point of view, the proposal of co-working schemes, forms of income continuity (citizenship income), and the growing mobilisation of the cognitive precariat (Allegri and Ciccarelli 2011; Caruso et al. 2010; Rete dei Redattori Precari 2011; Rete San Precario and Intelligence Precaria 2011) suggest numerous ways to elaborate new forms of action undertaken, not by individual subjectivities, but by a collective actor – the precariat – which only through political action can develop new practices of resistance and aspire to becoming *the new dangerous class*.

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