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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the second of a two-part Special Issue of this journal on the precariousness of knowledge workers. It aims to explore the ambivalences and liminal relations among autonomy, identification and task orientation, which – for knowledge workers – represent both a source of self-realisation and a generator of multiple and distinctive forms of precariousness. In particular, we focus on the forms and critiques of autonomy and self-representation that, in knowledge societies, extend far beyond the fact of being a self-employed worker. We argue that knowledge work is in fact sustained by devices of subjectivity which derive their power from being self-constructed and which provide tools for managing precarious lives.

Introduction

This text is the outcome of a project of collective research and analysis launched in 2014 in Yokohama as part of the World Congress of the International Sociological Association (ISA). On that occasion, we proposed a session entitled 'Knowledge Workers. Processes of Hybridisation, Marketisation and Subjectivation', with the aim of developing a critical discussion about knowledge workers' conditions and subjectivities. We invited papers that would explore two dimensions in particular: first, the risk of

precariousness that may derive from market-driven professionalisation; and, second, the mechanisms of subjectifiation and the strategies adopted to avoid them, including collective practices, paying particular attention to new forms of coalition, sociality, and the social features of welfare, with their limitations and potentialities.

This immediately attracted strong interest from scholars, traversing disciplinary and geographical boundaries. The network of people thus constructed then rapidly expanded, mainly due to two events. The first was the call for papers published in this journal, edited by Ursula Huws, who has always been interested in the theme of knowledge work from a global standpoint (Huws, 2006). The second was another conference, organised in 2015 in Milan: the ISA Interim conference of the Research Committee of Sociology of Professional Groups, which explored *Boundary Work, Knowledge Workers and Professionals in the Cities of Global Events*.

The aim of this Special Issue was therefore to proceed further with this ongoing collective reflection, with an array of contributions from different approaches and disciplines.

The first part of the Special Issue (published in 2016 as *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* Volume 10, Number 2) focused on trends among self-employed knowledge workers, which were explored using a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. In it, we highlighted some of the distinctive features of precariousness among knowledge workers and the ambivalent nature of relationships, hybridisation and autonomy (Murgia, Maestripieri, & Armano, 2016; Murgia, 2016; Armano & Murgia, 2017) that typify employment relations and working conditions in service sectors and in the creative and cultural industries. The analysis focused especially on the condition of self-employment among knowledge workers. In particular, the articles in that collection paid attention to autonomy as a basic characteristic of knowledge work (Bologna & Fumagalli, 1997), a characteristic that plays an important role in attracting people to these types of jobs. This promise of autonomy does not only occur in relation to the contractual conditions of self-employed workers and independent professionals but spreads more broadly across the field of knowledge work.

This second part of the Special Issue on the precariousness of knowledge workers brings together a rich group of empirical and theoretical studies that analyse the autonomy of knowledge workers, whether actual or supposed. Here, the main objective is to highlight representations, transversality, shared dimensions, possible turning points, and transformations in how knowledge workers represent themselves and, ultimately, the extent to which they are able to claim recognition and new rights.

When analysing the forms and critiques of autonomy in knowledge work, an important distinction must be drawn between 'independence', which is more connected with the work arrangement and the employment contract (in particular, the formal designation of self-employment) and 'autonomy', which specifies the degree of freedom from the employer and the cross-cutting skills required of knowledge workers to perform their jobs. Autonomy requires skills such as time and project management and the ability to choose the projects in which to be involved. We hypothesise that autonomy characterises knowledge work in its entirety and beyond the different kinds of employment, although to different extents (Bologna, 2015).

In short, knowledge work maintains a substantial amount of autonomy for the worker in its means but is often determined by others in its ends, which are increasingly specified and expressed in exogenous and predefined formats. In this sense, knowledge workers are exposed to different levels of autonomy or heteronomy (Gherardi & Murgia, 2013), but (albeit to different extents, in different forms) can still choose how and when to adopt whichever methods are needed to achieve their objectives (Boltanski & Chiappello, 1999). This is incompatible with the bureaucratic mentality, which is based on external definition and formal compliance with rules and procedures. This characteristic is what makes knowledge workers proud of not having supervisors, of being able to manage their working hours by themselves and able freely to organise their work activities and projects, fostering the feeling and the peculiar condition of being 'one's own boss'.

Knowledge workers perceive themselves as 'creators of sense'. They consider their work to be a source of identity which may easily generate different forms of self-exploitation (Chesnais, 2000) and subsume the skills and emotions that contribute to generating value. Moreover, the fact that knowledge workers are evaluated almost exclusively by their achievement of performance objectives fuels 'projectification' of their experiences at work. Consequently, a task-oriented logic is at the basis of an entire organisational world of intersubjective devices, and constitutes one of the main characteristics of knowledge work, just as 'clock-work' characterised the industrial age. Therefore:

> the world of industrial production – centred on what the English historian of industry, Edward Thomson (1967), 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 internalisation of market constraints and assuredly less on the external disciplinary power exercised by the clocking-in machine of industrial society. (Armano & Murgia, 2013:13)

The phenomenon of internalisation and self-regulation is then linked to remuneration by results, not by time, and this can create, regardless of whether the worker is employed or self-employed, a voluntary enslavement and extension of work which is often unremunerated and performed 'spontaneously' by workers convinced that they are doing it for themselves (Zarifian, 2009). In this framework – in which work is measured by results and not by time – contracted working hours are no longer relevant (Eurofound, 2017). The fact that safety limits for maximum daily hours are prescribed does not prevent overwork, which is perceived as an individual inability to achieve workers' own objectives within the designated time.

The articles in this Special Issue show that the professional life stories of knowledge workers imply that one must be able to be responsible for oneself by oneself, leveraging one's own material, cognitive and social resources. Indeed, knowledge workers share a number of key characteristics necessary to survive in their environment: the creativity, self-enactment, flexibility, ability to learn quickly, communication skills and ever-readiness that are the main elements of the widely studied phenomenon of

individualisation (Beck, 2000). Today, in fact, creativity has become a quality which is no longer rejected, as it was in the Fordist era, but is rather highly required, encouraged and necessary (Ross, 2007) for the construction of successful 'boundaryless careers' (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Cohen & Mallon, 1999).

Hence, the precariousness of knowledge workers stems not only from employment instability and income discontinuity but also from those devices that shape these workers' experiences and aspirations. They are now expected to be neither 'passive' nor 'conflictual' executors of tasks and instructions, but to perform their jobs actively and creatively. This means that a subjectivity motivated by (the promise of) valorisation and autonomy becomes the condition and the instrument for the realisation of the work process. Thus, precariousness is situated also in the intersubjective experience which derives from the devices that constitute the subject at work and transform subjectivities according to the new spirit of capitalism by generating new inequalities and a sense of precariousness in subjects' trajectories within knowledge work.

This is the frame of what it is commonly termed 'knowledge work', in which a person's being an 'entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer' (Foucault, 2008:229) is increasingly crucial. Following this logic, André Gorz was already arguing in 2001 that 'the person becomes an enterprise'. The rhetorics of self-realisation, autonomy and meritocracy have induced individuals to represent themselves in a field of internalised intentions and aspirations completely different from the range of values and choices that prevailed in the past. New devices of subjectification are in place, requiring deconstruction and exploration.

This collection, the second part of this Special Issue, discusses these aspects in detail. It centres on the liminal relation among autonomy, the project dimension, and task orientation. On one hand, these are sources of self-realisation; on the other hand, they are generators of multiple and distinctive forms of precariousness related to self-regulation and self-exploitation. Knowledge work is sustained by devices of subjectivity that base their power on self-construction, which goes far beyond mere contractual conditions.

This Special Issue aims to contribute to the analysis of the emerging possibilities for reimagining forms of autonomy that avoid the precariousness mechanism currently incorporated in the concept, and reinventing new forms of self-representation and self-determination. In such a new formulation, autonomy could be reconceptualised not only in the sense of organisational autonomy and cooperation, aimed at choosing the best way to realise the work activity, but also as a collective autonomy intended to organise workers and their rights, and to mobilise emerging forms of representation.

Contents of this issue

The second part of this Special Issue focuses on how precariousness is critically correlated with autonomy, exploring the concept through a subject-oriented approach (Armano & Murgia, 2013). It centres on a concept that extends beyond a mere normative definition of precarity to encompass a wider condition of economic insecurity, individual uncertainty, and increasing social vulnerability (Maestripieri, 2014). The distinction between autonomy – as self-management – and independence – as self-employment – also necessitates a methodological advance able to further the ways

in which scholars investigate the problem of precariousness among knowledge workers. The empirical analysis proposed in the current and the previous Special Issue encompasses new methods of investigation ranging from the auto-ethnography conducted by Ovetz to the visual analysis of Charalambides, inspired by the cultural studies tradition. By breaking from an objective contractual condition, a subject-oriented approach (Armano & Murgia, 2013) reframes the sociological perspective on the condition of knowledge workers by opening up new spaces for radical and reflexive qualitative approaches that are better able to grasp the subtle nuances that autonomy assumes when it is embedded in knowledge work.

Yannick Kalff's article explores the process of projectification by reconstructing its historical roots right back to Daniel Defoe's (1697) ironic account of the concept. Kalff looks at projects in a two distinct ways: as hegemonic organisational structures which characterise post-industrial society, and as biographical metaphors functional to describing a mechanism of self-exploitation and subjectification which draws on the reproduction of precariousness. He introduces the notion of the 'projectified self' to analyse how knowledge work and its dynamics impact on private life, shaping it to reproduce a labour force which is characterised by knowledge-intensive activities, creativity and individuality. This author's contribution, at the crossroads between a Foucauldian perspective and the debate about knowledge work, enhances the theoretical reflections about the 'project society', which date back, in the field of sociology, to the publication of the groundbreaking 'New Spirit of Capitalism' by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999).

Ana Paula Marques and Diana Vieira continue the discussion about the notion of precariousness by exploring it from the point of view of Portuguese graduates undertaking the increasingly complex transition from education to the labour market in the context of the current global financial crisis. Their article reflects on the contradictions embodied in these new graduates: on one hand, they are required to enter the neoliberal competition by demonstrating a desire for leadership and commitment; on the other hand, they are offered jobs in deregulated and vulnerable socio-professional positions. This status incongruence, determined by social and structural constraints, places them in a condition of subjective precariousness shaped by a growing fragmentation and subjectivity of labour relations in their normative and symbolic dimensions. However, the authors highlight how the subjective condition of these young graduates is also generating broader risks because the collective costs of having a lost generation confronting high unemployment and NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) rates, and increasing over-qualification imposes a serious challenge to the future sustainability of European societies.

Robert Ovetz shows how the system of online education and the growing importance of adjunct lecturers in academic labour in the USA is shaping new divisions of labour that are functional to the creation of a self-disciplining future workforce. Drawing on his personal experience as an adjunct lecturer in political science in online courses, Ovetz puts discipline at the centre of the new system that is becoming hegemonic in online education, involving adjunct lecturers and oriented to teaching working class students and students of colour. His interpretation draws on the self-imposed desire to comply with the invisible authority that it is mediated by digital

devices designed to develop a disciplined workforce compliant with the intermittent and contingent demands of 'just in time' production. Ovetz's frame is deeply rooted in Foucault's perspective and relies on the metaphor of the panopticon to explain the phenomenon of adjunctification, which is profoundly changing the way in which tertiary education is delivered within neoliberal academia.

Sarah Charalambides explores the notion of self-precarisation as it has been discussed in the scope of the *Kamera Läuft!* (*Camera Rolling!*) video project enacted by kleines postfordistisches Drama (Small post-Fordist Drama) in Berlin. The idea behind this production is to generate discussion on the extent to which the agency of subjects plays a role in voluntarily and consciously accepting the deteriorated condition of labour in the cultural sector. In problematising critical thinking and collective resistance, the concept of self-precarisation proposed by Charalambides, who follows Isabell Lorey's (2006, 2015) approach, serves to highlight the process of subjectification that is now becoming the normative organising principle in the self-regulating neoliberal labour market.

In the last article in this Special Issue, Andrés Rabosto and Mariano Zukerfeld propose a distinction between the notions of 'precarity' and 'precariousness' in order to explain the subjectivities of workers in the Argentinian software and information services sector. Following the approach of Armano and Murgia (2013), they distinguish between precarity, as a structural working condition, and precariousness, which is the subjective condition experienced by individuals, in order to describe the process that has led to the precarisation of labour in IT services. Moving from an in-depth analysis of the structural conditions of the software and information services sector, the authors consider the (missing) role of unions and professional associations, the ideological behaviours of companies and buyers and the subsequent internalisation of precarising practices by workers.

Final remarks: self-determination and autonomy in unknown trajectories

In their different ways, each of the articles described above claims that autonomy is a concept that is crucial for understanding the precariousness of knowledge workers. However, autonomy, in its various aspects (whether organisational or related to working relations, training or the employment contract), appears ambivalent. This means that it is not possible to read autonomy solely as a resource, on one hand, or as a precariousness trap on the other. Autonomy has, in fact, both positive and negative impacts on the professional careers of knowledge workers. Within knowledge work, temporary contracts, a sense of temporariness and 'playing it by ear' are flanked by identification with and passion for the job. Knowledge workers enjoy the flexibility and the spontaneous cooperation that arise from abandonment of the 'clock-work' model. Therefore, the long-hours culture and the attitude of working by projects or by objectives go together with a great investment of time and energy (Sennett, 1999). They are characterised, one might say, by high informality and self-exploitation, but not alienation.

In this scenario, individuals are required to take charge of their own destinies as entrepreneurs of their selves, their lives and their social protection. This condition

transforms people into entrepreneurs of their own 'human capital', and entails processes of self-construction centred on individualisation. The experience of precariousness then becomes inextricably bound up with job self-identification, which incorporates the risk of self-exploitation. This is the reason why it is so crucial for knowledge workers to keep their socio-professional networks alive. The jobs are insecure and earnings may be discontinuous, but, with substantial motivational and emotional rewards, even a low-paid job can be accepted because of the high level of self-identification, and because of the risk of losing their networks.

However, autonomy contains a profound and constituent ambivalence which redefines the notions of precariousness and of innovation based on risk. The 'duck-rabbit' created by Silvia Maglioni and Graeme Thomson for the cover image of this Special Issue, perfectly evokes this ambivalence. On one hand, innovation of attitudes is experienced as a 'promise' of devising one's own career path and of accessing opportunity, with an abundance of social relations and possibilities. On the other hand, autonomy within unknown trajectories means uncertain self-determination, individualisation, continuous change and reversibility of temporarily attained positions. This, along with the fact that precariousness cannot be circumscribed because of atypical employment conditions alone, shows how much social relations can be exploited. This leads to insecurity and precariousness at work that contribute to difficulties in planning the future, with the consequent need to stay in the socio-professional network.

There is a sort of compulsive, lively and coactive sociality in which the norm is to be in the network (Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Lovink & Rossiter, 2007). Knowledge work, often informally, connects people and objectives in a porosity of fluid and interchangeable roles among various projects. This implies a deep dialectic between self-expression and exploitation (Huws, 2010). Being in the network, an informal area of temporary roles with temporary rights and duties, seems be the sole condition for not being excluded from everything: access to contracts/projects, income and identity. And informal learning through participation in work is the preferred means for developing new skills. In a situation in which knowledge becomes quickly obsolete and is updated with extraordinary rapidity, individuals feel the need and the pressure to keep up with the standards of knowledge. Their attempt to keep up to date simultaneously crushes the energies dedicated to the employer and to their self-realisation at work. More than a specific salary or particular professional and contractual role, it is the wish to maintain one's own activity in the field of the knowledge economy which is the hallmark of the socio-professional condition of the knowledge worker. The precariousness of knowledge workers differs in this respect from that of other temporary workers. It places a particular emphasis on 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 term.

This condition of knowledge workers, closely linked, as it is, to a strong desire for self-determination, has implications for the social protection system and how it could be reimagined for the future in ways that enables knowledge workers to stay within a specific sector, in a way that makes it possible to combine adequate protection with

respect to income discontinuities with retaining continuity and connections in cumulative working trajectories.

Finally, the precarious condition of knowledge workers is not only a subject of study per se, useful for gaining insights into a particular segment of the labour market or social group; it is also an observatory of the entire spectrum of the social world in transformation. For this reason, it is necessary for interdisciplinary and collective reflection to continue. As many of the contributions in the two parts of this Special Issue have highlighted, there is a need to create connections between critical analyses of precariousness and its risks in order to produce interpretations on a collective and political level. This is particularly important in the light of the historical cleavage of collective representations that coincides with the transition to a post-Fordist society, which necessitates the reconsideration and redesign of forms of collective action and coalition able to respond to the current challenges.

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