

“Representations of precarity in Italy. Collective and individual stories, social imaginaries and subjectivities”, Annalisa Murgia, published in *Journal of Cultural Economy*, vol. 7, n. 1, 2014, pp. 48-63.

## **Introduction**

This contribution is focused on collective and individual stories of precarity in Italy. At the present time, when work and the imaginaries socially constructed around it are more and more individualised and fragmented, imaginaries and collective references – whether they be social movements, trade unions or professional groups – have given way to ever more particularistic and singular experiences, which hinder the construction of a coherent identity for workers, either professionally or socially.

At the beginning of this century, despite the growing de-institutionalisation and individualisation of both working and biographical trajectories, some social movements in Italy promoted a shared elaboration of precarity, aiming to bring the subject to the public arena through a dissenting collective movement. But the recent financial crisis has once again shattered this nascent collective story of precarity into a multiplicity of individual trajectories. The economic crisis that hit both Europe and Italy (and the latter in a particularly hard way), together with the individualisation process, already ongoing for decades, has accentuated the subjective perception of the risks conveyed by precarity, further reducing the social and collective handling of problems and support to individual conditions of vulnerability. The question to be asked, in light of such phenomena, is then: how is it possible to elaborate a new collective imaginary of precarity and

reclaim new rights? Activists, scholars and academics, from different and in some cases overlapping perspectives, are trying to answer this question.

The article is organised as follows. I first analyse the phenomenon of non-standard work in Italy, characterised by a growing rate of precarity that mainly concerns the instability of work, but also extends pervasively to other spheres of the lives of people engaged in it. I then move on to consider the activities of the Network of San Precario, a cultural phenomenon that managed to develop new kinds of social claims based on bottom-up and horizontal practices. The activities of this network enabled the elaboration of a sharp critique of the Italian government's inability to deal with precarity, a growing trend since the mid 90's. I also discuss the return to an almost exclusively individual approach to the question of precarity, which forces subjects to bear the management of their professional life trajectories before a structural economic crisis. To conclude I offer both an analysis of social movements' recent efforts of self-organisation and some reflections on the possible role of social sciences in elaborating tools for planning new policies capable of instituting a renewed welfare system.

## **1. A glance at changing work. Scenarios and interpretations of the sociology of work in Italy**

In Italy, as in other advanced capitalist countries, sociologists of work have highlighted the development of contemporary transformations of work ([Castel 1995](#), [Bourdieu 1998](#), [Sennett 1998](#), [Beck 1999](#)) linked to the expansion of service industries, the loss of stable employment, the centrality of relational competencies, the diffusion of new technologies and the 'feminization' of labour. Advanced economies are witnessing a reconfiguration of productive and social systems, in contexts where information and communication technologies have clearly contributed greatly

to the development of new forms of work organisation and to the merging of what used to be sharply distinct domains: work time and life time, professional and private spaces, production and reproduction. In Italy as elsewhere, these processes have, on the one hand, been accelerated by the advent of the so-called knowledge economy (Barley & Kunda 2004), which requires advanced language and communication skills (Marazzi 1994, Lazzarato 1997, Virno 2001), and, on the other, facilitated by the diffusion of ubiquitous mobile technologies (Armano 2010). The precarization, cognitivization and feminization of work are phenomena which combine to produce diverse and multiple working conditions (Morini 2010).

With regard to soft skills and competencies, there is a greater need for management capabilities to cope with transactions of different kinds – emotional, cognitive, ludic or culture-related – and this is a need that concerns the entire world of work. This process involves individuals in different ways and at different times, producing new levels of inequality. Increasingly, workers must know how to relate to the content of their work in an active and creative manner. Post-Fordist firms can and must be lean, modular, networked, virtual and supranational. The overriding necessity is for a process whereby knowledge is ‘translated’ from an informally-circulating personal and social good into intellectual capital valuable to the firm. Transversal to these changes there emerges the profile of the flexible knowledge worker – a salaried specialist consultant – engaged in ‘typically post-fordist work’ (Rullani 2004). This particular new class – dubbed by Franco Bifo Berardi ‘the cognitariat’, the proletariat of the cognitive work (2001) – has been caught in what we might call ‘the passion trap’ (Author 2012a). They are promised that their work will deliver passion and pleasure – a satisfying professional experience, on the one hand, but on the other they experience passion in its literal meaning: suffering, sorrow, pain caused by the contractual and destabilising conditions the members of this class are often forced to accept. In fact, the peculiar condition of

self-identification by people with the work that they perform and their conviction – in the case of certain activities rich with meaning – that they are doing something beautiful, important, and working for themselves, subjects them to twofold forms of stress and self-exploitation (Formenti 2011). These are workers who in their workaholic hyper-identification are both *voluntarily* and *compulsorily* ‘in production’ (Armano & Murgia 2011).

The above mentioned processes, which refer to the transformations affecting the world of work, are distinguishable in Italy by the proliferation, which began in the mid 90’s, of what has been defined as non-standard or ‘atypical’ work - that is, any working situation which is neither dependent nor independent full time employment. Studies of work in Italy refer to atypical work, flexibility, de-standardisation, and ‘partial and selective deregulation’ (Accornero 2000, Esping Andersen & Regini 2000, Schizzerotto 2002). Yet, only recently has the term ‘precarity’ entered the debate (see for instance: Berton, Richiardi & Sacchi 2009). Only very few sociologists of work (Borghesi & La Rosa 1998, Chicchi 2001, Gallino 2001) and some scholars who are part of the post-labourist movement of thought (Marazzi 1994, Bologna & Fumagalli 1997) had already focused on this concept.

One of the objections to the use of the term ‘precarity’ in the debate of Italian sociologists of work at the end of the 90s and at the beginning of this century pointed to the fact that it was still premature to evaluate the reforms of the labour market in Italy in the long run (the main reforms were approved in 1997 and 2003). The dominant view within the discipline supported the idea that flexibility was much needed by the Italian labour market, that it could certainly lead to situations of precarity, but that this would be limited to youngsters and to the few years immediately after the entry into the market itself. Another reason why labour precarity has rarely entered the debate within the sociology of work in Italy concerns the supposed focus of the

concept on individuals rather than the labour market and the contractual regulations which have always been the privileged object of analysis in this field. Sociology of work has in fact more often looked at the more structural elements of professional paths: selection mechanisms in the labour market, typology and duration of contracts, retribution levels, ascribed and acquired characteristics of the subjects involved in the phenomenon, and so on. Limiting the study of work instability to the structural analysis of career paths has not allowed a full understanding of the processual and eminently social dimension of the precarity phenomenon as it is perceived and recounted by the different people who experience it. This cohort of workers is characterised by a high heterogeneity of conditions and lifestyles (Tiddi 2002). In this sense, I believe a translation of the analytical category of reference might be useful, moving from the concept of *labour precarity* to that of *social precarity* (Author 2010). This does not only mean taking into account other areas of life besides the working life but rather also considering the concept of precarity to describe a dimension that spans multiple aspects of life, mapping out a condition of shared existence, precarious emotions, languages and affections (Tari 2006). *Precarity*, which depends on features that are specific to the world of work, widens then to become *precariousness*, which refers instead to an on-going and developing social phenomenon. Around this phenomenon we can witness the mobilisation of different actors and actions that contribute to shape it and its boundaries. 'Labour and social life, production and reproduction cannot be separated anymore, and this leads to a more comprehensive definition of precarization: the uncertainty of all circumstances in the material and immaterial conditions of life of living labour under contemporary capitalism' (Frassanito-network 2005).

This kind of approach to the phenomenon of precarity between the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although not central within the academic debate, laid the

foundations for the construction of what we can call an 'antagonistic collective story about precarity'.

## **2. The construction of an antagonistic collective story about precarity**

Whereas Italian academia has until recently kept its focus mainly on the legislative, economic and productive conditions of the labour market, social movements have created areas of protest against the uncertainty connected to work, and the notion of precarity has emerged as a key analytical concept for social and cultural theory.

The informal relations set up by the Seattle movement between different realities, that is, social centres, students' movements, grass-root unions, and artists' collectives, flowed into the so-called May Day parade, an event first organised by socially precarious workers in Milan on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001. The chosen formula for this parade of social precarity, which would also characterise its future editions, was that of celebrations, of the street parade, of the carnival with allegorical figures and sound-system equipped trucks, following the style of Berlin's Love Parade and Gay Pride parades. This event represents a symbolic ground where experimental forms of cooperative and conflictual action defy the assumption of the 'unorganisability' of the temporary employment universe. There are at least two elements that characterised the birth of this movement: first, the movement took the lead by gathering temporary employees, the cognitariat, and migrant workers as a basic step to becoming a political subject, rejecting intermediate forms of organisation that could stand for its needs within formal and informal settings. Secondly, contrary to assumptions often conveyed by studies of work in Italian academia, the movement did not identify work in terms of paid activity. As a consequence, the movement did not seek more guarantees for

workers. Rather it called for access to a citizenship not linked to the job in a strict sense, so as to give relevance to individuals' life trajectories and needs: urban transportation and health care services; free access to education, knowledge and culture; rights to an emotional life; de-fiscalisation and facilitation in the search for housing; alternative income sources for maternity (regardless of the forms the individuals decide to give to their interpersonal relations) and a break of the connection between the residence permit for migrants and the employment contract. In other words, the complexity of individuals' lives became a central issue in the movement's demands. This involved the discarding of the endogenous point of view according to which the job is separated from other existential trajectories and activities, needs, and interests of men and women in so far as they are considered workers. The May Day movement appears in this sense as an attempt to make precarity and the 'precariat' a new widespread social phenomenon, producing a subject able to revise and modify a variety of political strategies, languages, symbols and practices of action (Exposito 2004, Mattoni 2008).

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In fact, May Day is not a unique event. It started in 2001 but in 2004 a transnational network of European political activists was formally established and was able to organise EuroMayDay Parades in almost all European countries. Moreover, in 2004, which can be considered as the high point of this movement, the group of political activists from Milan involved in the organisation of the May Day parade created the figure of San Precario, the patron saint of temporary employees, cognitarians, migrants and freelance workers. From the beginning San Precario was imagined as a *détournement* of the popular tradition, which was imported in its formal aspects and subverted in its contents (Tari & Vanni 2005). The life of the Saint, for example, is told according to the canons of the religious genre and translated into the relative symbolic artefacts: statues carried in procession, iconographic attributes, a hagiography, some holy pictures to be distributed to the

faithful, a prayer, and so on.<sup>1</sup> The chosen date to celebrate San Precario was the 29<sup>th</sup> of February. This date has a double symbolic value: it is an intermittent recurrence because it only happens once every four years and at the same time in 2004 the 29<sup>th</sup> of February fell on a Sunday, a day of the week that, for those who have a temporary job (but not only), loses more and more the connotation of a public holiday (Fumagalli 2003). The first appearance of San Precario, organised by the Chainworkers collective, and performed by another twenty groups and collectives, followed the rules of the procession. San Precario was portrayed with many arms, to symbolise the diversity of jobs that can be performed at the same time and the necessary skills that precarious workers develop to refine different kinds of expertise and to keep them all in balance (Bruni & Murgia 2007). And San Precario was not the only collective imaginary and symbol of the movement. The foremost expression of the Parade can probably be identified in 2005, the time of the birth of a new network of radical symbolic entities, 'the Unbeatables', each portrayed on bubble gum style picture-cards and representing 'super heroic' resistance to precarity (rather than super heroes), small gems of conflictual experience, talents and relations, which had found their expression in the weeks before May Day in a series of programs broadcast by a well-known community radio station (Chainworkers 2005). Each sticker represented what various groups, crews and collectives, among them the Chainworkers who had been promoting the event since 2001, brought to the parade: the creation of a shared project to agitate and communicate the message of May Day. Some examples, among others, of picture-cards are: *Teatrix*, a precarious actor, *Superflex*, the most precarious woman in the labour market, *Wonder Bra*, multiple arms woman, daytime telephone operator, sex worker at night, housewife during her spare time, *Ricercatoro Seduto*,<sup>2</sup> who together with the tribe of the UniverSioux breaks the boundaries of the

reserve where he is confined to run again across the grasslands of free research and free knowledge (Chainworkers 2005).

In 2006, during the parades, special 'precarity survival kits' for transportation, knowledge, affects and income were distributed among the protesters. The following year, 2007, the organisation gave out the 'Tarots of Precariomancy'. These precarity tarots were presented as symbols to be interpreted in order to read the reality around us. They represented 'desires, ambitions, or needs of our present, of our past, or our future. For this reason drawing the card from the deck is a bit like telling a story ... To make your life better tarots are not enough: you will need to roll up your sleeves and struggle' (EuroMayDay 2007a). Among others was Tarot number 3: *The Operator*. 'The call centre Operator dodges a thousand voices and difficulties. Her nature is fleeting and immaterial. Her destiny is forever uncertain. She is the symbol of precarity, and her skill in holding many threads at once wins her the sympathy of precarious workers and the spite of those looking to her to solve the problem with their DSL". Or, again, the Tarot number 12, *The Hanged Man*: 'He is the outsourced, the one who waits for the renewal of his contract or payment of a job he did six months ago. He is the most unstable of the precarious workers and his destiny is manipulated by something far high above him' (EuroMayDay 2007b).

The May Day Parade transformed the traditional Labour Day into an opportunity for visibility and conflict on the issue of precarity through ironic and subversive forms of communication. It highlighted the role of culture and cultural expression in the elaboration of social struggles surrounding shifting employment conditions, at once depicting the desire and anxieties of precarious workers and aiming to communicate with and involve in struggle a generation of younger students and workers who had grown up under the image-conscious and depoliticised culture of *Berlusconismo*. The figure of San Precario, which from the beginning was considered

the symbol of the movement, has been defined as a mythopoeitic character, a collective fantastic mythology (Tari & Vanni 2005). It narrates and performs a community into existence. As a result, this narration becomes a collective narrative 'in action', the ability and desire to create a sense of cohesion, based on shared stories and experiences.

As Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter (2008) have stressed, this collective story has progressively split into an endless number of individual experiences, therefore losing its energy. At least, from a certain point of view, the goal of putting precarity at the centre of the public agenda has been partially achieved. The San Precario Network and the collective promoters of May Day have in fact performed a work of 'cultural action' on the precarity issue, promoting the birth and consolidation of self-organised work groups in a variety of employment sectors – from call centres to universities – as can be seen by looking at the site *precaria.org*, which collects their experiences.

Interestingly, the decline of precarity as a political concept boosting social movement activity has corresponded with the emergence of precarity as an object of academic analysis, for a number of reasons. On the one hand, while movements against precarity could not affect the policies connected to work and welfare, protests concerning the situation of migrants and students have become more relevant in Italy as well as in the rest of Europe. On the other hand, statistical data have by now become available showing a scenario, in Italy, that leaves no room for interpretation. Short term recruitment is nearly always the rule. Moreover, even at a governmental level, ten years after the last reform of the labour market, there are no data able to back up the optimistic vision of an up-coming stabilisation and increase in youth employment. The introduction of non-standard work has in fact undoubtedly produced a series of advantages for the companies that engage more elastic and flexible relations with workers, having in some cases

the possibility to 'test' new recruits and, more frequently, to employ staff for a limited period. On the other hand, however, it has largely failed to reach the stated goals, because in the end it has not contributed to the reduction of youth unemployment rates; on the contrary, a further process of market segmentation and consequently of occupational segregation has been started, leading to disadvantages particularly for young people and women.

### **3. From collective to individual stories, from the social imaginary to single subjectivities**

In a situation where processes of individualisation are being more and more pushed forward, and the building of collective imagery is particularly lacking both in terms of political activism, and – even more – in terms of support from political parties (Berlusconi's government has finally fallen, but it has been succeeded by yet another 'technical government' that has acted from the beginning in open contrast with the three major trade union confederations), people involved in the phenomenon of precarity tend to fragment into a multitude of singularities and differences.

During a series of qualitative interviews that I conducted in northern Italy between 2008 and 2011 on the precarity phenomenon within different areas and sectors (ICT, research, arts and culture, consultancy services, public administration, retail sector, etc.), I explored the trend towards the progressive individualisation of work and of experiences of subjects as a result of the recent economic crisis. Such a crisis has no immediate precedents in terms of its globality, intensity and the speed at which it was created and spread. But it is also unprecedented as regards its effects on weaker social categories in terms of occupation and income level and on the overall structure of social inequalities. In the Italian context, in fact, the growth of temporary work and contingent hiring practices has recast the labour-market hierarchy and widened the gap between

weak and strong groups. At a time of economic crisis that hits temporary employment first, not even a good level of education appears to have provided a safety net: the decrease in non-standard employment in 2009 affected not only the less well-educated, but also high-school diploma holders, and especially university graduates, who represented 32% of the overall reduction in the number of temporary contracts. At the same time, university graduates were most affected by the increase in unemployment among young people: in 2009, the number of unemployed with lower educational qualifications grew less (9.2%) than that of individuals with high-school diplomas and university degrees (over 20% in both cases) (Istat 2010).

In light of these statistical findings and of qualitative interviews, I focused on the individualization of working trajectories, whose risks should be addressed individually as portrayed by a neoliberal culture of work. In fact, the instability of work is associated, on the one hand, with erosion of the collective identity tied to occupations, and on the other, with the individualization of work understood as an increasingly singular experience rather than as part of a collective process.

I draw inspiration from different qualitative empirical materials to propose some reflections on the reconfiguration and the tightening of the implications related to precarity in recent years; such material comes from three different research projects (Author 2010, Author 2011, Author 2012):

(i) my doctorate research project, conducted mainly in 2008 and entitled 'From Working Precarity to Social Precarity. Biographies in Transit between Work and Non-Work'; (ii) the project 'Support actions to the quality of life and work destined to temporary service suppliers' conducted in 2010 and supported by the European Social Fund Office of the Autonomous Province of Trento (Italy); and (iii) a EU Pilot Project, conducted in 2011 which aimed to encourage conversion of precarious work into work with rights, promoted by the European

Parliament and entitled 'Trapped or Flexible? Risk transitions and missing policies for young high-skilled workers in Europe'.

All three research projects have been realised by adopting a biographical and narrative approach (Bruner 1990, Riessman 1993, [Atkinson 1998](#), [Poggio 2004](#)). The use of a narrative approach has allowed me to break up the paradigmatic framework of traditional studies on work, which consider work and workers as objects of analysis rather than letting them speak for themselves. Therefore, the focus was not on giving a full account of the *facts* and on-going transformations in the contemporary labour market. It was rather on showing the individual narratives as a practice that helps the subjects begin to elaborate new imaginaries of work, following the narrative process of interpretation and meaning attribution. The challenge was to grasp such imaginaries of work starting from the working subjects themselves, and to listen to their stories – stories in which subjectivities, relations, passions and affections cannot be separated from the *market*.

The instability of work, in the stories I collected during the above mentioned research projects, was found to be linked – in an ever more evident way from 2008 onwards – not only to the erosion of identities tied to occupations (Gorz 1991, Casey 1995) but also to the individualisation of work, understood as the increasing articulation of work to individual experience as opposed to collective processes. In this sense, the individualisation process appears to have completely lost its ambiguous and ambivalent character (Castel 1995, [Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002](#)). The proliferation of situations in which individuals are not part of a community, and do not even possess the necessary resources to carry out their life ambitions, has in fact almost entirely taken precedence over the increase to the margins of autonomy and freedom from traditional social roles. This is due, on the one hand, to the accumulation of work activities that do not allow the building of a clear professional and social identity because of extended unemployment periods

(not covered by any form of social protection), and, on the other hand, to the disappearance of collective references (be they social movements, trade unions, colleges, the company or a professional group) that in the past constituted the basis of the social collocation of individuals.

If the beginning of this century was, therefore, characterised by the attempt to elaborate traditional narratives on labour in order to produce collective imaginaries of the experience of precarity – from the May Day Parade to the creation of the icon of San Precario to the ‘Unbeatables’ project – the advent of the economic crisis eroded the image of ‘precarious workers’ as a collective subjectivity in the social and political debate. From about a hundred interviews I carried out between 2008 and 2011, it strongly emerges that it is extremely difficult for workers with short term contracts to identify with a collective imagery, regardless of the contract type and the type of work they do. Whether subordinate workers or self employed, women or men, young or less young, from different regions or countries, the resulting constant is the experience of work fragmentation to the extreme, where the individual condition prevails on the social and collective one, also due to mutual competition between workers, which undermines any possible group of affiliation and thus the collective interest it should be based on.

Below are some excerpts of the interviews that give account of the heightening of the phenomenon of precarity as a result of the economic crisis. Even in those cases where precarity is perceived as a collective condition, in fact, it is experienced in an individual way, due to competition for the renewal of the contract and exponential unemployment growth, especially among the younger population.

Besides perceiving myself, it is the whole atmosphere of precarity that reigns in here. And this is very unsettling, because, however, you learn to know people, learn to work with

them, you then say 'But these people with whom I get along so well, will they still be here next month? And will I still be here?' It is all very unstable and this creates some tension, the famous wars between the poor, they do exist. [*Francesco*, 35]

We all are in a precarious state in any case, some more than others. We go from the scholarship to the collaboration contract, there are those who have a VAT, and there are employees, and then contract works. And apart from employees, I think, everybody else has this feeling, not pleasant, I mean, this feeling of precarity, but I think there are big differences, different battles. I think that... I mean, the fact of having these situations, a bit different, in the end it affects your work, you are always different from the others in the end. [*Rossana*, 33]

The heterogeneity of work contracts in Italy, and the polarisation between protected and unprotected subjects, also makes relationships particularly complicated – within the workplace – especially among colleagues on a permanent versus temporary employment. In the stories of those who work with non standard contracts, those with a stable employment, in fact, are often regarded as 'privileged', not only for reasons of status but also for different treatment regarding protection and remunerative aspects.

But above all it is the unequal treatment in terms of protection that is absolutely unbearable, this is the complaint, the most serious injustice for which we are second class workers. Really, an employee can stay home for a headache a whole week while I have no sick leave rights. I tell you, I've worked in appalling conditions, in short I couldn't say no

because I would have lost a hell lot of money anyway, also because they don't always pay monthly, they are careful to pay you in very large tranches, when targets are met. But they don't wonder how can you survive if they pay you every four months!. [Antonio, 38]

Yes, yes, most of us are temporary, that is with a term. Unless they are relatives then ...

those have levels, they have permanent jobs, they have all comforts, they take 40 breaks and nobody notices them. You take a break, they are there with the watch keeping an eye on you, it is all crap this way. It is slavery, yes, we are back to the middle ages... I get harrassed even if I need to go to the toilet beyond the 5 minutes break, while they do whatever they like. Because they are not part of the inferior class, the precarious workers. [Claudia, 45]

These are accounts in which the interviewees take an opposed position against and make claims on those who have a permanent job, highlighting the conflicts that can arise due to the polarisation in the world of work between *core workers* and *contingent workers*. In both the above excerpts, the speaker uses expressions to counterpose these two situations – ‘us second class workers’ and ‘the inferior class of precarious workers’ – to underline the gap both in terms of rights, which concern particularly sick leave, maternity, payment forms and income continuity, and the organisation of daily work and the relationship with superiors. Vice-versa, the differences related to the type of contract are not perceived in equal terms by those who hold a permanent position, who seem to assume that for the colleagues with temporary contracts it is a provisional situation, lasting until a permanent position will be gained.

It becomes problematic when working side by side, precisely because we really have two totally different contract situations, theirs is extremely rigid, ours is very little regulated. Then it is clearly us who adapt to their schedules if we have to work with them. I wonder how much people who haven't lived this condition of work precarity do realise about the frustration that we anyhow have to swallow. It seems that they assume this is the ranks that everybody has worked their way up through, but then, one day, we will also stabilise. Something that to me seems very unlikely however, considering all the people leaving and that ten years have passed since my first employment contract in here, and they keep renewing it year after year. [Raimondo, 32]

There are colleagues who don't even look at your face, they don't even greet you and there are colleagues that as soon as you arrive: 'Come on let's go for a coffee, let's go for a cigarette', that is they put you at ease, there are some. There are some that are there, they look at you, 'This is from the temporary agency, he's not worth anything', you are the leftover basically, the fifth wheel. It is up to you to show that: first, you know how to work, second, you don't need to work, because otherwise they take more advantage of you. [Giulio, 36]

The stories collected do not describe a situation of sharing the precarious condition that the subjects I interviewed find themselves in. It is therefore not surprising that, while explaining their issues, workers with temporary employment rarely refer to a collective dimension, be it represented by the trade union or other alternative forms of associative relation that can defend and protect them with respect to non-standard types of contracts. The greatest difficulty lies,

probably, in the process of differentiation of the conditions and work experience, which lead interviewed people to perceive themselves as individual subjects and makes it difficult for them to identify with a group. As previously pointed out it is, in fact, almost impossible to identify with the workplace, which often changes, as well as with the activity performed, which may also change, and, even more hardly with collective organisations or the trade union. And this is due to the progressive segmentation between protected and represented workers (with a standard contract) and poorly protected and under-represented workers (with a non-standard contract) (Cimaglia, Corbisiero & Rizza 2009). Furthermore, having a short-term contract, together with the growing unemployment, makes it even easier to blackmail workers and, therefore, it acts as a brake for those who would like to participate in different types of public protest initiatives and collective demands.

## **Conclusion**

In light of the reflections pursued in this contribution, the question I would like to pose is: how is it possible to recover a shared dimension, a collective narrative of work and of contemporary biographic trajectories when precarity takes to an extreme the already ongoing process of disintegration of the experiences and narratives of work, and when both studies of work and social movements based around it have difficulty in elaborating new interpretations? The aforementioned social movements, politicians and scholars of work have all tried to give an answer to this question and, in an attempt to elaborate new interpretative keys, to understand the transformations of the world of work and in particular of the ways in which these are experienced by subjects.

With regards to the San Precario Network and the collectives revolving around the May Day Parade, efforts were focused on rewriting the vocabulary and the symbolic imagery surrounding work. This process of 'self-representation' has in recent years been joined by a new process of 'self-organisation'. In a scenario of distrust for political parties and trade unions to address the issue of precarity, these movements, refusing the relegation of social conflict, are trying to promote modalities of action based on network organisation, knowledge sharing and direct representation. In this sense the most meaningful initiative is probably the experience of 'San Precario Points', information and counselling desks that also became channels of transmission of experience, which emerged at first in metropolitan Lombardy and then spreading to other Italian local areas. In relation to the self-representation moment, that of self-organisation of workers is thus chronologically subsequent. At the beginning of the new millennium the challenge posed by precarity to social movements was firstly that of identity affirmation. In other words, precarious subjectivities had to gain credit in the public debate with respect to a dominant – also in the academic context – narrative, tending to minimise, if not negate, the wild deregulation of the labour market and the difficult life and working conditions of part of the population. The emergence of precarity in a structural way has subsequently encouraged a redefinition of the political action in the direction of a real collective undertaking of the social conflict in the workplace.

At times of crisis, when precarity has reached a systemic level in the Italian context, the traditional interlocutors of the workers – the trade unions – have in fact not been able to intercept and defend the instances of those who are outside the standard nets of labour market. It is exactly in this void of representation that the San Precario Network is trying to configure itself as an experience of self-organisation for precarious workers. The goal, in this second and renewed

phase, is not any more only that of giving voice to the self-organised precarious subjectivities at a symbolic level, but also that of making them direct speakers of conflicts and divergences they live in the workplace, without delegating in the first instance to the trade unions. Therefore, this contributes to create a 'conflictive agency' – as defined by these activists – that takes direct responsibility for defending precarious workers' rights, combining modalities typical of traditional legal action and forms of activism that come from a different political tradition, associated primarily with social movements. Moreover, MayDay 2012 is now focusing on three new objectives (Franchini 'Frenchi' 2012): a) the spread of the precarious point of view as a key to understanding the contemporary processes of transformation and as knowledge enabling the elaboration of strategies for collectively resisting precariousness; b) the construction of a movement No Expo 2015<sup>3</sup>, to affirm a different idea of urban development, against speculation and overbuilding; c) the dissemination of a World Mayday, starting from transnational mobilization around the MayDay to involve movements born in Greece, Spain, United States, with the aim of organizing a global mobilization against precariousness and a 'strike of precarious lives'.

This is the direction taken by the network of collectives that revolve around the figure of San Precario. What is, instead the route to be taken by the scholars of work who want to avoid a new detachment between on one side the analysis of the mechanisms and the dynamics at the basis of the recent economic crisis and on the other the experiences lived by subjects? How to account for the endless situations faced by single individuals and how to 'take seriously' the narratives of those who live precarity in times of crisis? A first step, in my opinion, can be made by pursuing the research based on new interpretative categories that question the theoretical apparatus of studies of work exclusively based on economic and structural determinants.

The analysis of work – as highlighted in this contribution – needs to take into account the diverse articulations of the spheres that constitute the life of the individuals, in a continuous transition between work and other spheres of life. The changes to work, however, do not affect everyone in the same way, but assist in the emergence of new configurations that are appearing alongside the old ones. The interconnections between the different spheres of life – working and not working – are not in fact preconceived and do not follow fixed patterns, but are differently characterised and vary from subject to subject and for the same subject over time.

For this reason, it is exactly by using a biographical and narrative approach, which allows the emergence of subjectivities and their imaginaries, that it is possible to build an instrument of analysis that is adequate to interpret the world of labour in a comprehensive manner, thus avoiding dichotomies (like standard vs. non-standard, full-time vs. part-time, autonomous vs. dependent, etc.) that are as easy as they are useless.

The real problem for unstable jobs in Italy is in fact basically a problem of welfare, i.e. it is related with the reduced or nearly non existing possibility of accessing social rights that are not attached to non-standard forms of employment (sick leave, pension rights, paid maternity leaves, unemployment benefits, etc.). Even though unstable and temporary work conditions have multiplied, the basic principles of social organisation have remained virtually unchanged; such principles associate a full access to a concrete citizenship to dependent and permanent work conditions only, while they do not guarantee the same access to those who do not hold a permanent position in the labour market. In other words, the problem in Italy is not strictly speaking the precarity connected with work, but rather the lack of support in between one occupation and another and, more generally, of the concrete acquisition of full citizenship (Samek Lodovoci & Semenza 2008, Berton, Richiardi & Sacchi 2009).

Thinking about future prospects and areas of research that could be opened on these themes, I believe that biographical and narrative research could become an approach capable of supplying 'new maps of precariousness' even to policy-makers. Narratives have in fact been increasingly recognised as useful instruments for planning new policies (Chamberlayne, Bornat & Wengraf 2000), both as a users *profiling* instrument and as an evaluation instrument. In the former case, biographies of subjects allow the identification of their needs by going beyond *a priori* labelling that depict them as beneficiaries of one intervention or another; in the latter case, the evaluation of *biographical impact* can inform the support of subjects while building their life projects and contribute to heighten awareness of the growing individualisation and personal consequences of uncertainty and precarization (Spanò 2007).

The practices and interpretations of social movements and of scholars who focus on the phenomenon of precarity are faced – in this period of crisis – with an opportunity for dialogue. Both parties can in fact suggest world visions – on which to build new and urgent policies – based on a new welfare, capable of including, rather than excluding, segments of the population as widely as possible. The lowest common denominator might be a renewed capability of listening to and understanding the – working and non-working – experiences of subjects, paying attention not only to workers and to the kind of imaginaries and contracts they have, but rather to the rights of citizenship that they should be granted, both inside and outside the labour market.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The official prayer of San Precario is available on the website:

[http://www.chainworkers.org/SANPRECARIO/index\\_multi.html](http://www.chainworkers.org/SANPRECARIO/index_multi.html)

<sup>2</sup> The Italian translation of the name of the famous Sitting Bull is Toro Seduto. Ricercatoro sounds close to Ricercatore, researcher.

<sup>3</sup> The No Expo Committee is a coordination of associations, local committees, squats, citizens, which opposes the candidacy of Milan to host Expo 2015.

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