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## **Self-employed and non-standard workforce collective identities in Italy and the United Kingdom: A comparative perspective on discourses of new collective actors**

### Introduction

The evolution of new forms of employment (Mandl et al. 2015) and the transformation of self-employment has been rapid and, to a certain extent, uncontrolled. While the relationship between self-employment and the total number of employed workers in Europe (from 2008 to 2018), has remained almost constant (Borghi, 2020), significant changes have occurred within the self-employed workforce due to the expansion of the services sector (Fulton 2018). In this context, although not exclusively, self-employment plays a relevant role because of the increase of outsourcing in various sectors (Eurofound 2017). The growth of non-standard employment relations since the 1980s (Cordova 1986) occurred alongside a reduction of workers' rights, thus also fuelling the debate on the increasing threats to collective representation all over Europe. As a reaction, in more recent times, new collective actors have emerged with the aim of giving voice to and representing the significant number of unrepresented non-standard and self-employed workers (Countouris and De Stefano 2019; Pirro and Pugliese 2015; Semenza and Pichault 2019). In different times and with different strategies, new actors, along with traditional ones (Countouris and De Stefano 2019; Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2017), are structuring an offer of representation re-framing, re-building and raising workers' collective identity.

This paper considers, from a comparative perspective, four new collective actors representing non-standard and self-employed workers (genuine and bogus) in Italy and the United Kingdom. Although the two countries are different in terms of industrial relations systems, similar organisations aim to represent this wide and heterogeneous category of workers, performing both high and low-skilled jobs. This paper aims to analyse how the new actors of collective representation react to the fragmentation of the workforce fostering collective identities; in particular, we focus on how collective identities are conceived and discursively performed. Discourses on collective identity, in fact, define boundaries and bridges among organisations and other actors in the same field of action as well as among workers. Through discourses on collective identity the organisations position themselves in relation to the market, the public institutions and society as a whole, doing the same with the workers to which they refer.

On one hand we consider, as the reference macro-frame, the debate on neoliberal trends in advanced societies developed by industrial relations scholars; on the other hand we aim to contribute to the debate on collective identities developed in Social Movement Studies (SMS), showing how their theoretical tools can be fruitfully applied to other contexts – in this case to the organisations representing self-employed and non-standard workers. In doing so we demonstrate how different ideas of collective identity are under construction and evolve over time, in order to grasp and shape a fast-changing workforce that is highly fragmented and individualised.

The structure of the paper is as follows: first, we define the theoretical framework; second, we present the methodological approach and the case studies selected; third, we introduce the findings, and finally we discuss them and conclude.

## Theoretical framework

The debate on varieties of capitalism boosted by Hall and Soskice (2001) stimulated an articulate discussion on the role played by collective organisations representing workers, recognising a variety of unionism (Frege and Kelly 2004). According to Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman's classification (2013) Italy and the UK belong to two different clusters. The former is classified among the Southern countries “with a history of strong Communist parties linked to adversarial and weakly institutionalized industrial relations” (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013, 4). The latter instead – the cradle of the industrialisation process – is classified among the Anglophone countries, dominated by the *lassaiz faire* economic doctrine and a “common law system within which the freedom (of individual) contract was paramount” (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013, 25). Despite different institutional arrangements, common trends toward neoliberalism have been detected both in Italy and the UK, as well as in other European countries (Baccaro and Howell 2017).

Since the end of the 1970s and over the following two decades, union power decreased in Italy, with changes “driven through national corporatist pacts in which government played a key role” (Baccaro and Howell 2017, 121). In this frame, the division of Italian trade unions has been historically shaped by political fractures. Nevertheless, during the 1980s, this did not impede unitary initiatives at the local level (Regini 2007). The economic crisis of the 1990s and the European integration process were approached through the increase of corporatist pacts, justified as emergency measures. In 1997, a new reform was introduced with the aim to increase labour market flexibility, followed by Act 30/2003, which further increased the variety of non-standard jobs. Then, in a different political scenario, two more recent reforms were approved in 2012 (the so called *Riforma Fornero*) and 2015–2017 (Jobs Act and Jobs Act for self-employment). Over the years, the decline of union density has been constant, with a slight non-homogeneous growth from 1998 to 2010. The overall picture over 30 years from 1980 to 2010 shows that the unionisation rate decreased from 50% to 35% (Regalia 2012).

As far as the UK is concerned, Howell underlines how in a context where the industrial relations system was strongly oriented toward decentralized collective bargaining, two decades after 1979 (when Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party came to power), “the core institutions of collective regulation were systematically dismantled” (Howell 2007, 256). This implied significant growth of employers' unilateral decision-making power, the decline of trade union membership and of collective actions in favour of individual legal cases. After the political shift towards a New Labour majority in 1997, the core elements of Thatcher's neoliberal orientation remained almost untouched (Howell 2007) with a continuous decline of union density and bargaining coverage that started in

1980 and lasted for three decades (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013): union density passed from 51% in 1980 to 27% in 2010, whereas bargaining coverage decreased from 70% to 33%.

Against the historical and institutional backgrounds sketched above, more recent non-standard forms of work have emerged, particularly in the service sector, where the disintermediation of traditional forms of representation is becoming 'the new standard'. How collective organisations – in particular the new actors of collective representation – react to the fragmentation of the workforce and foster collective identities is the focus of this paper. We refer here particularly to SMS which, since the late 1980s, considered the collective identity a central issue in framing reasons to act collectively (Melucci 1989; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Taylor 2013). Most of this literature focuses on the transformation of repertoire and dynamics of contention, especially in Western countries due to significant changes connected to migrations, social relations, network structures, shifting demographics that affect cultural processes, and social structures. This is even more evident if we consider the fast evolution of the communication environment fostered by the digitalisation process, whose pervasive effects influence both social activism (Gerbaudo 2012) and society at large (Papacharissi 2011).

Klandermans and De Weerd (2000) emphasise that collective identity pertains to the relationship between the individual and the group because understanding 'who we are' always implies reflecting on the sense of belonging that sets 'I' and 'we' up in a contentious relationship. The tension between individual and social identities underpin the recognition and evolution of the collective identity conceived as a process (Melucci 1989) that continuously shapes and reshapes a group. The identification process in a group is therefore something continuous instead of a discreet and circumscribed act. It always implies the dialectical definition of meanings arising from the negotiation of interests, the definition of boundaries, and the creation and communication of common knowledge (Jenkins 2014) and intentions.

Melucci (1989, 1995), with the aim of overcoming the limits both of the structural analysis and of the individual motivation perspective in SMS, suggests focusing on links and gaps between behaviour and meaning. He aspires to understand "how social actors come to form a collectivity" (Melucci 1995, 42). This purpose also implies the need to focus on the creation, maintenance, evolution and changes of a collective identity conceived as a process instead as something static and essentialised. The production of meaning therefore, becomes the focus of his analysis with the aim of understanding "how individuals and groups make sense of their action" (Melucci 1995, 43). The collective identity is rather the dynamic and unstable result of multiple interactions and actors which face "opportunities and constraints offered to collective action" (Melucci 1985, 793), instead of a pre-constituted cage.

Based on Melucci's definition of collective identity, Taylor and Whittier (1992) identify three main overlapping processes which contribute to the formation of a 'we': 1) the definition of boundaries that distinguish a category of persons and dominant groups; 2) the consciousness of the criteria which can explain the position of a group and its interests; and 3) the politicization of commonalities and differences, which contribute to the creation and re-creation of new self-affirming collective identities. Moreover, Taylor (2013, 39) underlines the "significance of network ties, the multiple identities, and contentious performances or protest for the construction of collective identity' of social movements conceiving them as 'discursive communities". From this perspective the collective identity emerges as a dialectical result of multiple actors from both within and outside the group; the internal and external dialogues and conflicts therefore contribute to the structuring process of collective identities.

Discourses on collective identities consequently are one of the building blocks of each organisation, considering that they are not just 'a tool to explain' but also 'a tool to perform', being able to define a fluid and continuous reshaping of the organisations. This is even more evident when

the communication environment implies multiple channels and the production of a continuous flux of contents as happens with social media. The focus on collective identities discursively performed by the members of the organisations studied, and more precisely the focus on foundation stories, allowed us to understand why organisations have been created and how they have interacted since their founding, both with other collective actors and with the workers they refer to. The focus on foundation stories also stimulated a self-reflective process that led to reasoning about the changes occurred over time, revealing the fluid and processual nature of the collective identity (Melucci 1995), through which the ‘we’ and ‘others’ are continuously reshaped (Taylor and Whittier 1992) with the aim of adapting internal assets, repositioning the organisation, imagining and explaining practices.

## Methodology

This paper is based on a broader multi-sited and cross-national ethnography<sup>1</sup> (Abramson and Gong 2020; Marcus 1995) in six European countries. The paper considers four case studies, in Italy and the UK, selected as emblematic cases of emergent collective actors involved in workers’ collective representation in the service sector, where many self-employed and non-standard workers are concentrated. More specifically, two of the four cases selected, ACTA in Italy and IPSE in the UK, cover the range of high-skilled self-employed among the reference organisations in their respective countries. The other two organisations, Deliverance Milano in Italy and IWGB in the UK, are instead relevant organisations that represent workers of the gig economy (riders in particular in the case of Deliverance Milano) and outsourced workers of the service sector.

ACTA (Associazione Consulenti del Terziario Avanzato<sup>2</sup>) was an Italian organisation created in 2004 in Milan by a group of 20 consultants. In recent times it has gathered translators, consultants, graphic designers, trainers, and publishing and communication professionals. The organisation and its activities were managed through the voluntary work of its members and by two consultants for the website and social network profiles. At the time of the fieldwork, it counted around 700 members. ACTA was part of EFIP – European Forum of Independent Professionals.

IPSE was an association created in 1999 in the UK as the Professional Contractor Group before becoming IPSE: Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed. It started representing independent contractors and consultants, then widened its target to include freelancers from different sectors. At the time of the fieldwork, it counted 67,000 members and its activities were managed by a team of 30 people, spread between employees and collaborators. IPSE (as PCG) was one of the founders and main funders of the European Forum of Independent Professionals (EFIP), until recent times before Brexit.

Deliverance Milano was a grassroots group based in Milan that was created in 2016 by five young activists (also precarious workers) belonging to different groups who shared the idea of fighting against precarious work. Deliverance Milano was created with the purpose of supporting protests by food delivery riders. Over the years it has played a relevant role in the national debate on platform workers and it was one of the promoters of the national network ‘Rider X i Diritti’ which includes grassroots groups and trade unions.

IWGB – Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain – was an independent trade union based in London. At the time of the fieldwork it counted ten branches representing foster care workers, cleaners, security guards and other workers of the Universities of London, private hire drivers, charity workers, yoga teachers, game workers, couriers and other workers of logistics, cycling instructors.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written within the SHARE project, which received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 715950)

<sup>2</sup> Association of Consultants of the Advanced Tertiary Sector.

The IWGB is one of the main unions focused on migrant workers and workers of the gig economy in the UK.

Access to the organisations and the terms of cooperation were negotiated with members at different positions within the organisations. Research included six months of extensive ethnographic fieldwork carried out between July and December 2018 in Italy (with some further interviews realised in January 2020 and others in March 2020), and between March and August 2019 in the UK. We participated in public meetings and in some cases also in internal coordination meetings; the ethnography also included our participation in demonstrations, pickets and public events, thus providing the opportunity to plan formal and informal interviews. Throughout the whole period, we collected documents addressed to members as well as to experts in the field or to a more general public (e.g. position papers, reports, surveys, press releases, official statements, etc.) The ethnography was conducted in Italian and English; the field notes and the interviews were all transcribed, translated into English and shared with the research team through a remotely accessible server every two weeks in order to discuss them collectively and to exert self-reflexivity.

The data analysis followed an inductive approach, applying a thematic analysis to the material collected using Atlas.ti. This method included the iterative reading of each set of texts (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) to identify relevant themes; the analysis aimed to find similarities and differences across organisations. During the coding phase, data and relevant issues that emerged were constantly reorganised in order to effectively address our research question. Once the datasets for each organisation had been analysed separately, we discussed the comparative strategy. This procedure was developed following the collective approaches to reflexivity in research (Gilmore and Kenny 2015).

## Findings

### Foundation stories

Foundation stories are at the same time individual – because they are relayed by specific people who took part in the foundation of the organisation – and collective – because they frame (or re-frame) the birth of the organisation, therefore marking the beginning of a common history. Being rooted in the past, foundation stories become a reference point for members, floating between historical facts and mythological (or at least evocative) suggestions. Foundation stories are therefore one of the sources of meaning which strengthen collective identity. They can explain the initial spark, the reason for a group's existence, connoting at the same time the relationship with other existing groups. During an interview, one of the founders of the Italian organisation ACTA<sup>3</sup> shared how the idea to create an organisation for freelancers emerged:

*The idea emerged a long time ago but I had two young daughters and no time to organise anything. When they grew up the idea became more tangible. Freelancers had no rights, no social protection, so I spoke with trade unions, but they didn't know who we were, and they were not interested in us. I tried to understand if an organisation for freelancers already existed, but there was nothing. So, with another 20 people we founded ACTA in 2004. (Interview, IT, co-founder of ACTA)*

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<sup>3</sup> The board of the organisation and the most active members use the term 'quasi-union' to define their organisation. The term is muted by Heckscher, C., and Carré, F. (2006). Strength in networks: Employment rights organizations and the problem of co-ordination. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 44(4), 605–628. The authors define quasi-unions as “the broad range of organizations that have emerged to represent the interests of otherwise unrepresented people in their work lives and in their relationships with their employer, seeking to address matters of worker rights and to improve working conditions” (p.606)

In this case, the personal conditions of several individuals who directly experienced a lack of representation became the reason to firstly explore the possibility of a dialogue with existing organisations, trade unions in particular, and secondly, after having perceived the lack of options, it pushed people to act directly in creating a new organisation. This choice, supported by an aggressive communication strategy strongly based on a website (at the beginning) and social media (after a few years), allowed ACTA to foster the Italian debate on freelancers. The term ‘freelancer’ in fact became familiar in the Italian public debate thanks in part to ACTA, which used it to frame the solo self-employed of the tertiary sector without a professional chamber.

The creation of IPSE (previously PCG) instead was stimulated by the intention of the government to introduce legislation aimed at tackling the misuse of personal service companies (PSCs) for tax avoidance purposes. The legislation, commonly called ‘IR35’, so named because this was the number of the budget press notice announcing the measure, was finally approved in April 2000:

*In 2000 the government introduced a piece of tax legislation, which was going to impact on certain types of self-employed people. So, some people got together and formed what became known as the Professional Contractors Group. ‘Contractor’ is a word which is sometimes used for self-employed, a bit like freelancer or consultant... the language is quite difficult [...] PCG was really put in place in direct opposition to this specific tax law, which is still something we’re talking about now (Interview, UK, IPSE director of Policy)*

The creation of PCG therefore was a reaction to the regulative intention of the government; 20 years later the IR35 is still a contested issue due to many attempts to reform it (Seely 2020) and its problematic application at the time of Covid-19 that strongly affected self-employed workers in the UK. When PCG was created, most of their members were contractors in oil and gas, engineering, IT and telecoms, as well as interim managers. They defined themselves as a “professional trade organisation” representing “knowledge-based workers” conceived as “professional person who completes a task using intellect and experience rather than machinery and tools”<sup>4</sup>. Years later, PCG, renamed IPSE, has expanded its activities and redefined its targets. The attempt to adapt the meaning of the term ‘contractor’ – in the quotation above – is significant. ‘Contractor’ evokes a well-established professional, as most of the founder members of PCG/IPSE were, but in the interview its meaning overlaps with terms such as ‘self-employed’ and ‘freelancer’, which included, at least in present times, a wider variety of professions and working conditions.

While in the birth of ACTA, personal experiences were intertwined with the collective need to fill a wide-ranging representation gap, especially around social protection related issues, in the case of IPSE an ‘episode of contention’ triggered by the government stimulated the collective aggregation of professionals.

The case of Deliverance Milano, on the other hand, is the story of activists who carry out various professional activities precariously coming together to organise riders’ protests.

*Deliverance Milano was created after the protest of a self-organised group of Foodora riders in Turin, which gathered under the name ‘Deliverance Project’.*

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<sup>4</sup> This information comes directly from the old PCG website, which is still accessible online: <http://www.pcggroup.org.uk/about.html>

*They were paid less than their colleagues in Milan. Due to this reason they were looking for someone in Milan to spread the protest but there were no workers willing to start the same mobilization and trade unions were not interested at that time. I was involved in the San Precario movement and I was also part of a self-organised group of precarious workers supporting protests in logistic. With the protests of riders in Turin we felt that something was changing, we thought it could trigger the debate on precariousness again. We set up an informal group of precarious workers (in school, communication, consulting) and we organised the protest of the riders in Milan as an opportunity to restart the debate on precariousness in our territory. (Interview, IT, co-founder of Deliverance Milano)*

In this case, young activists perceived the symbolic power of riders' protests as well as the need to stimulate the aggregation of workers (not considered by trade unions) whose identity was mainly embedded in the storytelling of workers who performed 'a second job for young people who love cycling', as managers of Foodora used to describe their workforce. The choice of the name was clearly explained by one of the founders:

*We called ourselves 'Deliverance Milano' in order to highlight a symbolic connection with the first protest in Turin. With the workers instead we organised an assembly that met regularly and we called it 'Strike Raiders'. (Interview, IT, co-founder of Deliverance Milano)*

The foundation story of Deliverance Milano shows the attempt to forge at least a double collective identity, that of activists (Deliverance Milano) and that of riders (Strike Raiders). This is not just anecdotal: the ethnography revealed a specific strategy to support the creation of riders' collective identity supporting their self-determination choices.

Similar intents emerged also in the case of IWGB, an example of a new independent trade union, created in 2013 from a conflict within existing unions:

*When we started it was just cleaners and harder outsourced workers in University London sites. These people were unsatisfied about the work done by Unite and Unison and they were fighting for their rights. [...] Unions are used to having their proper procedures in place to look after migrant workers especially and the final point with Unison came when IWGB officials, or let's say people who would become IWGB, were about winning elections. [...] They started running campaigns through IWGB, one was the campaign of "Tres cosas". It aimed to improve holidays, pay and pensions, using a combination of strikes and direct actions. (Interview, UK, coordinator of IWGB)*

The internal struggle in Unison was about how to implement actions aimed at improving the working conditions of migrants and, more generally, on the strategy of the union. Internal elections sanctioned the split that gave rise to the new independent trade union, which was more aggressive in combining direct actions and strikes decided by workers as a way to actively involve them, putting employers under pressure and building a collective identity from below.

The focus on foundation stories revealed that specific episodes of contention played a relevant role in the emergence of the organisations studied. In three of the four cases (PCG/IPSE, Deliverance Milano, and IWGB) the public collective dimension of the contention already existed and triggered the creation of new organisations to cover gaps in representation. The case of ACTA was slightly different, starting from an individual condition of a lack of social protection which, when shared collectively, emerged as a problematic condition that was common to many. Moreover, evidence shows that the creation of the new organisations were intended to fill a representation vacuum that was not adequately covered by existing organisations. In three of the four cases (ACTA, Deliverance Milano, and IWGB), criticisms of the existing unions clearly emerged.

### Different ‘we’, many ‘others’: collective identities and self-reflexivity

The discursive performance of the collective identity also passes through the self-definition of a ‘we’, which tends to connote distinctive traits with respect to ‘others’. In addition, ‘we’ could have different meanings, referring to the strict group of active members, the broader group of low active and non active members, or the even more nuanced group of followers and/or workers conceived as the reference target. In all these cases the attempt to define a ‘we’ draws boundaries and bridges. Nevertheless it is a necessary step to give shape to a group, creating at the same time a space of action, recognising spheres of confidence and spheres of hostility in relation to other collective actors and in relation to the potential target groups, as emerged in the interview with a long-time member of ACTA:

*I think that the core of our membership, the group of ACTA-vists, is made of special people, they are better equipped to face the market because they know how to better protect themselves. We did a great job till now, what is difficult is to spread this experience among the majority of freelancers. Most of them in fact do not trust the organisations, they don't trust in solidarity, they prefer the individualistic approach that includes isolation, but I think it's suicide. (Interview, IT, member of ACTA)*

According to this interviewee's perspective, being an ‘ACTA-vist’ (a pun frequent used by members) implies having something more than exceptional skills for surviving individually in the labour market. It implies the embodiment of a collective approach to fostering the challenges of the labour market as well as the will and the energy to foster solidarity among freelancers. The definition of a ‘we’, the subjective perception of a collective identity, therefore implies in this case traits of exceptionality in front of a wide portion of freelancers crushed into individualistic approaches which, according to the interviewee, only generate the illusion of personal salvation.

The fluid and negotiated dimension of the collective identity emerged by investigating the different perspectives of those who were most active in the organisation, as in the case of the coordinator of a group of young professionals in the publishing sector, who had recently joined the organisation:

*We – the new generations of freelancers – are more precarious, and I think that historical members of ACTA hardly understand our condition; that's the reason why they tried to involve people like us in the organisation. Another difficult thing to understand is that we need to be engaged physically, before intellectually; there*



*is an emotional side they hardly understand. During a board meeting when I communicated that we would have met once a month, one member of the board was complaining saying that we wouldn't have anything new to share in monthly meetings. On the contrary, we think that a collective dimension requires periodic meetings to discuss common problems, that also foster a shared identity...* (Interview, IT, young member of ACTA)

Belonging to an association goes hand-in-hand with a continuous renegotiation of its identity through an active and dialectical dialogue with other members, a dialogue that implies the legitimization of different needs, perspectives and practices, as in the case above. Shifting attention from inside to the outside means drawing boundaries, which identify where a group ends, therefore connoting its collective identity. During the interviews as well as during several public events we attended, a clear definition of these boundaries emerged as in the case below:

*We just represent professional freelancers, not self-employed in trade or craft work because they have different interests and needs and they belong to an old representation system [...] I think that during the years, institutions and other stakeholders have recognised our competence and our approach because we have never fought for privileges, we are not corporative.* (Interview, IT, co-founder of ACTA)

In this case, the rise of a new collective subjectivity also implies a clear differentiation from existing organisations which target specific and different portions of self-employment. Every 'we' brings specific needs to be represented, those of freelancers, and a new way of conceiving self-employment representation – not the traditional corporatist way promoted and reproduced by the 'old system' implemented by craft-workers and retailers' organisations.

The efforts to define a 'we' conceived as the restricted group of activists is often connected to a struggle aimed at defining a world outside of other organisations and target groups to which the organisation refers. Alternative ideas about the workforce an organisation aims to represent are part of the struggle, crossing national borders and bringing out the dialectical confrontation between organisations belonging to the same network, as in the case below:

*Some organisations of our European network are convinced that self-employed workers are enterprises; also the European Union defined them as enterprises... one man enterprise, one man firm. I think that is completely absurd because the idea of enterprise is an idea of a classical organisation and economists have explained it very well. In each enterprise there are different roles, the role of the capital, the role of the management, the role of the workforce. It's impossible that all these roles are concentrated in one person.* (Interview, IT, member of ACTA)

What is relevant here pertains the effort to shaping self-employed workers as a wide collective group to represent. It is a more articulated and wider potential 'we', that is itself part of the struggle on collective identity; it is a 'we' rooted in the economic and productive sphere: the wide group of self-employed, which cannot be considered the same as enterprises. Significantly, this position contrasts

with other ideas shared by other organisations, such as the British IPSE, that was also part of the same European network (EFIP) as ACTA:

*I like to think of self-employed workers as someone who is working for themselves, by themselves. They're basically running their own business. They are the smallest type of business that you can have. [...] The role of the policy team, which I sit in, is to specifically influence the government, but also to think about the kind of business environment and even the social environment and try to promote self-employment as a positive thing for individuals that are choosing to work in this way and also for the businesses which want to engage them. (Interview, UK, researcher of IPSE)*

According to this interviewee, the collective endeavour of her organisation aims to foster the growth of businesses for self-employed workers, which nevertheless remain individuals facing the market and different business environments.

Retrospectively, the interviewee retraces some of the turning points and the contradictions, which emerged during previous phases. She reflected on the attempts to redefine their name and their purposes, reframing the target group at the same time:

*We actually half-changed our name around 2010, from being the Professional Contractors Group, to being 'PCG – the Voice of Freelancing' because we wanted to say we were giving voice to freelancers. But then that was a bit difficult because people, after that change, would say 'well, what does PCG stand for?' and it was a bit... So then we said, we'd just completely rebrand and we got IPSE, Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed. This was really part of a big kind of shift, in order to think about the broader self-employed populations, going from, you know, very, very highly paid and qualified self-employed, way down to people engaged in the gig economy as side work, being employees. (interview, UK, board member of IPSE)*

The attempts to grasp common traits of a variegated workforce in some cases overcome sectors focusing on the working condition, trying to distinguish the self-employed as closer to employers in terms of the material conditions that characterize their way of working and the majority who work as solo self-employed:

*We feel that solo self-employed have very different needs to those who are, in essence, employers. So we really do focus on the solo self-employed in a lot of our research and indeed in a lot of the resources we offer and things like that. I think they're two kinds of slightly different beasts, in a way, but, so, looking at the data I think it's, out of the 4.8 million, 4.4 million are solo self-employed, so it is the vast majority. . (Interview, UK, researcher of IPSE)*

This interviewee emphasises that employers and solo self-employed differ ('slightly different beasts') not just in number but also and primarily in terms of needs, working approach and role in the economy. This was the situation at the time of the interview; the investment in research and services for solo self-employed and the evolution of their network that includes the trade union Community,

which recently tried to promote initiatives for freelancers, revealed a relevant shift in relation to the original target group of PCG/IPSE, the contractors. During the interviews, the blurring boundaries crossed by self-employed workers, in different periods of their career, were perceived as a more and more common condition that cannot be represented by rigid labels, which fix and distinguish self-employment in its different forms from solo self-employment to entrepreneurs:

*We know that we have some members that do that, who have been self-employed for a long period of time, then they think 'I need some help, so I'm going to employ someone, right, I'm going to employ someone to help me with my business' and then maybe they won't employ them again. They're still really self-employed, aren't they? Or have they suddenly become something else? (Interview, UK, member of IPSE)*

Looking at the organisations focused on the precarious workforce that is often outsourced or forced to work as self-employed, the point of view of one of the founders of Deliverance Milano highlighted the struggle of forces underpinning the social aggregation, where narratives give shape to reality and contribute to reproducing the isolation of workers:

*We know that aggregation of precarious workers of different sectors has to be stimulated. Consider riders... without support, they would remain crushed and isolated in the edifying narratives on self-employment, in the rhetoric of the 'entrepreneurs of themselves', or passively accepting the rules imposed by companies and markets when they have precarious contracts. This is why participation and the emergence of a group must be powered, supported. This is what we are trying to do also through Gigaworkers, our political group. . (Interview, IT, member of Deliverance Milano)*

The interviewed activist underlined that collective identity is something to be built and supported, not something that can easily and naturally emerge – common interests and needs can be entrapped by rhetoric and narratives which reflect opposing interests and unbalanced power relations between workers and enterprises. Although Deliverance Milano focuses on food delivery riders, the political group created by its members – Gigaworkers<sup>5</sup> – which gathers activists, lawyers, social workers, and academics, some previously involved in the San Precario movement, supports the actions of different precarious workers.

At the time of the ethnography, as previously seen with the group 'Strike Raiders', activists were engaged in activating workers, fostering autonomous collective identities against precariousness supporting assemblies and sharing legal advice with Almaworkers (call centre operators) and other groups such as health care workers from private hospitals in Milan. This specific approach, based on autonomous and self-determined groups, characterises the whole story of Deliverance Milano, as one of the founders observed:

*We have to distinguish at least two collective identities since the beginning of the story. There has been a process of identity construction in Deliverance Milano and a process of collective identity construction (still ongoing) among riders. I'd say they are two different social subjects. We have been able to consolidate the image*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/GigaWorkers>

*of Deliverance Milano over time through a strategic use of social networks and mass media. We gained visibility, stimulating and orienting the debate, using effective narratives. Then we mobilised people. For a long time, Deliverance Milano has been a group of five militants with different political backgrounds and ideas on trade unions. As long as the aim was organising workers, these differences were not a problem. Problems emerged when the organisation survived but workers previously part of the first assembly disappeared. (Interview, IT, co-founder of Deliverance Milano)*

On the one hand, therefore, the existence of at least two distinct collective subjects, independent but mutually interconnected, emerged. The mutual dependence became critical when the evaporation of the workers' assembly also challenged the collective identity of the activists' group due to different political orientations. This implied the redefinition of political strategy, including the substitution of some members who left the group when the first wave of protests diminished.

The case of the independent union IWGB was slightly different. It tried to foster the active aggregation of workers in different branches covering specific sectors or workplaces. Branches – especially the couriers' branch and the cleaners' branch – became a strong source of meaning, constituting the reference point for workers' action and collective identity. One interviewee explained how they try to reconcile different interests:

*All of our branch chairs are people who are working or have worked in the sectors that they're talking about, so they really know first-hand the experience of the workers. Then we try to reconcile different needs of workers of different sectors we are dealing with, essentially in our executive committee. We only have five officials that act on behalf of across the whole union. Branches are really independent; we are trying to have that loose dynamic structure, that actually helps workers perform actions instead of trying to teach them a lot about like the rules and regulations, strikes and protests and things like that. (Interview, UK, branch coordinator of IWGB)*

The interviewee underlines the strict relation of branch chairs with sectors and workplaces of members; this favours trustworthy relations as well as effective support of workers engaged in protests and strikes. Branches therefore appeared as the enabling tool for workers' actions instead of the shaping tool of collective and common identity of the union that pass through the light executive committee on one hand, and through positioning the union on cross-sector strategic issues, as in the case below:

*I think that a good example of a common frame we managed to share with our members was on Brexit. We backed the people's vote. But when the executive committee discussed this, there was some... there were some ambiguous messages from some branches, even branches that represented migrant workers. They didn't vote for the backing of people's vote. They didn't vote against it either [...]. So sometimes that can happen. But yeah, I think it's about, you know, building the structure that encourages solidarity and things like that. And... when the vote passed, that becomes the union's position on the issue. (Interview, UK, coordinator of IWGB)*

The focus on efforts aimed to define a 'we' showed the relational nature of these attempts and cross-national interactions and similarities. The members of the organisations are engaged in reshaping organisational collective identities through both a continuous dialectical dialogue with members and other organisations of the network (in the case of ACTA and IPSE), showing that the definition of collective identities implies a struggle over alternative ideas of a 'we' and the definition of 'others'. Moreover, the layered nature of collective identity emerged especially in the case of Deliverance Milano and IWGB. The former distinguished activists and workers' groups by assigning to the political group the effort to connect different workers' struggles, thus shaping a common frame. The latter combined efforts to sustain collective identities linked to the workplace and more general efforts linked to union membership. Generally, the four case studies showed a common intent to frame cross-professional collective identities without neglecting professional and workplace specificities.

## Discussion and conclusions

This paper focused on four new actors (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2017), two in Italy, two in the UK, created with the aim of representing high-skilled self-employed (ACTA in Italy, IPSE in UK) and low-skilled self-employed in the platform economy and outsourced workers (Deliverance Milano in Italy and IWGB in UK). Based on a multi-sited and cross-national ethnography, the focus on collective identities discursively performed shed light on the processual dimension of collective identity (Melucci 1995). Its fluid and multi-layered traits dialectically call into question the definition of different forms of 'we' and different 'others' (Taylor and Whittier 1992).

The comparative analysis of similar new collective actors belonging to countries with very different industrial relation systems reveals significant cross-organisational similarities as well as relevant differences.

First a representation vacuum as well as specific episodes of contention (McAdam et al. 2004) connote the foundation stories of the four new actors studied.

Second, there is a common shared intention to face disintermediation trends in working contexts where an individual approach to work is the standard and workers' representation is severely hampered.

Third, the processual definition of collective identities (Melucci 1995) implies the definition of boundaries between 'we' and 'others' (Taylor and Whittier 1992). In the case of the Italian ACTA, based on the voluntary work of its members, the 'others' are clearly identified in the corporatist groups of self-employed craft workers and retailers (at national level) but also some organisations, at international level, which are part of the same European network. Opposing ways of conceiving of freelancers are at stake: on one hand, freelancers are part of the workforce dealing with (and in some cases, opposed to) the interests of the market; on the other hand, freelancers are equated with enterprises. The struggle between organisations with different points of view and approaches to self-employment is therefore also a struggle over the role of freelancers, conceived as a collective group. It is not just a matter of definition but an issue that implies shaping relations among organisations as well as between organisations and workers. In this respect, IPSE reveals a different perspective in both the collective identity of the organisation and the collective identity of self-employed. The former is conceived as a professional enabling tool that is market-oriented, with several employees, fostering inclusive market growth. The latter is drawn through discourses on the fluid boundaries between self-employment, solo-self-employment, and entrepreneurship. The orientation to the business therefore prevails in IPSE, while the orientation to social rights and decent work prevails in

ACTA. The divergent perspective could be traced back to the different historical and institutional contexts in which IPSE and ACTA are embedded, despite both contexts show neo-liberal tendencies (Baccaro and Howell 2017). The former acts in the frame of a liberal market economy where the self-employed are conceived of as the ‘smallest type of business’, whereas the latter acts in a national context where several reforms aimed to foster labour market flexibility increased competition between self-employed (and non-standard workers), with a significant worsening of working and earning conditions.

Deliverance Milano in Italy and IWGB in the UK represent different cases. Both were created with the aim of counteracting workers’ precarisation process, which has been fostered by the platform economy and increasing outsourcing trends (especially IWGB). Their approach combines the focus on specific groups of workers in the service sector and a potential common political identity, in the process of being defined, shared with the heterogeneous workforce experiencing precariousness fostered by neoliberal policies in both Italy and the UK (Baccaro and Howell 2017; Howell 2007) and the decrease of union density (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013). The evidence collected shows a common intent, shared by Deliverance Milano and IWGB, to foster the activation of workers and their self-determination as a collective group. Discourses show common intents to foster decentralised and autonomous collective identities, considering gaps and commonalities at the base of the relationship between activists or trade unionists and workers. Multiple collective identities emerged on both a professional identity basis and the common sense of belonging to a larger group fighting precariousness in different working contexts.

Autonomous collective identities based on sector and workplace, therefore, continuously interact with more general common frames that are confirmed and reconfirmed by democratic processes based on assemblies and voting, which produce common frames and knowledge (Jenkins 2014), as well as the clear position of the group, its interests and the politicisation of commonalities (Taylor and Whittier 1992). The different layers of collective identity coexist, both in that they rely on informal enabling structures (Deliverance Milano) and in the case of the more formally structured IWGB that is a recognised independent union with different branches and representatives in companies and public institutions. We argue that the common traits detected among the two organisations focused on low-skilled self-employed and non-standard workers, is made possible by the particular material conditions of the workers to whom they relate. In this case, in fact, the market does not reserve any kind of concrete opportunity for emancipation, as is still partially promised to high-skilled self-employed workers with different degrees in different countries. This fracture is detected by organisations involved with low-skilled self-employed and non-standard workers in different countries, allowing the emergence of similar collective identities among politically-engaged activists, unionists and workers.

To conclude, from a theoretical point of view, this paper shows how the debate on collective identities developed in SMS (Melucci 1995; Taylor and Whittier 1992; Taylor 2013) can be fruitfully applied to other contexts in which struggles, rights and collective identities are at stake.

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