The precariousness of knowledge workers:

hybridisation, self-employment and subjectification

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ABSTRACT

In knowledge-based industries, work is circumscribed by the cognitive frames of creativity in the representations of subjects, but simultaneously demands adaptability, in a context in which deregulation and individualisation are now normal. The ethics of self-activation are therefore inextricably intertwined with the demands of intensification, standardisation and self-commodification. The first volume of this Special Issue – which is composed of two different parts – is focused on the phenomena of hybridisation, self-employment and subjectification, at the core of the experiences of precarious workers in the knowledge societies. This article introduces the first of a two-part Special Issue on the precariousness of knowledge workers.

Introduction

The notion of 'knowledge worker' has become the focus of a rich range of debates in a variety of scientific approaches and disciplines, from sociology to economics, from political science to neo-Marxism, all of which offer their own particular conceptual tools and perspectives.

Since it was first used in an essay published in the 1950s by the economist Peter Drucker (1959), the term 'knowledge worker' has been increasingly commonly used to identify the range of new occupational categories that are becoming important for employment in the tertiarised economies. In subsequent years, the term has also been used to mark the transition from regulationist industrial Fordist capitalism – consisting of machinery and workers in overalls, and based mainly on the production of tangible goods – to a digital capitalism increasingly characterised by neoliberalism, and represented by flexible technology, knowledge, services, briefcases, suits, financial transactions and investments in intangible assets.

Since the 1990s, there has been growing interest in the analysis of the conditions of knowledge workers – a heterogeneous and expanding social group in the service society, made up of people who entirely or mainly use their cognitive, relational and communicative faculties, in collaboration with others or with machines, to perform work which involves the combined use of diverse kinds of knowledge (Butera, Bagnara, Cesaria & Di Guardo, 2008). Thus defined, knowledge work is undertaken by a large segment of the labour force that deploys both encoded technical and communicative knowledge, in a sense also conveyed by the phrase 'network economy' (Castells, 2000). Knowledge workers can therefore be seen as characteristic of the current world of labour, embodying some of the main changes now under way. It could be said that, in fact, today all work has become more cognitive, communicative and flexible with regard both to employment relations and the requisite abilities. However, the broad term 'knowledge work' embraces a range of jobs and occupations that differ greatly in terms of responsibility, pay, contract, and autonomy. Knowledge workers do not form a homogenous group either in terms of composition or of self-recognition, unlike other social groups in the past. Nevertheless, as we shall see, they have features in common that contribute to the formation of a new occupational category and hence evidence the change that has taken place in the social structure of all societies with tertiarised economies.

It is possible to distinguish two broad types of knowledge work: on the one hand, generic knowledge work, which mainly involves the treatment and transformation of information, and, on the other, specific knowledge work, understood as a set of activities that process information to produce innovation and generate new knowledge. This distinction translates into a further distinction within knowledge work. Here, the first category can be termed 'cognitive-replicative'

1　work, that is to say work that is low cost, easily automated, formattable, standardised, and

2　substitutable on a global scale (Alquati, 2001). The second category, co-existing with this,

3　includes segments of knowledge work that contain generative knowledge (Rullani, 2014), less

4　impersonal work that is more closely tied to the intelligence embodied in persons and the

5　networks and innovation clusters in which they cooperate (Magone & Mazali, 2016).

6　　　　Among the logics that are shared by these two types of knowledge work, the first one is

7　what could be defined as the logic of 'hybridisation', which is the focus of this Special Issue.

8　Indeed, unlike their counterparts in the traditional professions that were consolidated in the last

9　century, knowledge workers are characterised by features that find their own specificity in this

10　concept of hybridisation (Murgia, 2016): they have diverse types of contract; they form a

11　component of professional work that is increasingly exposed to the logic of the market; and they

12　are required to draw on and activate their own resources, empathy and autonomy. The notion of

13　hybridisation becomes applicable when elements originating from different social orders merge

14　to the extent that they are no longer distinguishable from each other (Laville, 1998). Like the

15　image on the cover of this Special Issue, which can be read as either as a duck or as a rabbit, the

16　ambivalences embedded in hybridisation show the double face of contemporary capitalism, a

17　duck/rabbit dualism which on the one hand impels individuals to put their own lives into

18　production, but also leaves room for individual creative capacities (Boltanski & Chiappello,

19　1999; Marazzi, 2010). It both creates new forms of affective labour (Hochschild, 1983; Hardt,

20　1999; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2008) and blurs the boundaries of work (Gill & Pratt, 2008;

21　McRobbie, 2011).

22　　　　Global capitalism can continue to accumulate, but it may also overflow, spreading

23　pervasively through (technological) devices while simultaneously opening up a multitude of

24　times and spaces (Thrift, 2005), in which individuals struggle to find their place. Emblematic

25　forms of work in this regard are those in the knowledge-based and information and

26　communications technology (ICT) industries, in which knowledge work is enclosed by the frame

27　of creativity but simultaneously demands adaptability, in a context in which deregulation and

28　individualisation have become the rule. The ethics of self-activation are therefore inextricably

29　intertwined with demands for intensification, standardisation and self-commodification. In this

30　framework, the organisation of knowledge work is subordinated to the disciplines imposed by

1 global production chains (Berger, 2005; Huws, 2010a, 2010b, 2014). Indeed, in several countries
2 the attack on the condition of knowledge workers proceeds along different but convergent lines
3 of neoliberal logic. In both the Global North and the Global South, the progressive precarisation
4 and proletarianisation of knowledge work can be seen, accompanied by phenomena such as
5 mismatches between people's skills and their jobs, and low pay, especially in the case of self-
6 employed knowledge workers.

7 Freelancers, self-employed workers, and independent professionals have recently
8 burgeoned in number and today represent a large proportion of the global labour force. In
9 particular, the recent increase in the number of solo self-employed workers reflects a change in
10 production and work paradigms (Rapelli, 2012; Eichhorst et al., 2013; Murgia, 2016). New
11 labour market figures are emerging, engaged in professional, scientific or technical activities, in
12 human health and social work, and in the information and communication sector.

13 Sergio Bologna has identified some distinctive features of the new generation of self-
14 employed workers. The first of these features relates to the non-prescriptiveness of the activities
15 performed, which constitutes a domestication of the workplace and a different organisation of
16 working time. In particular,

17 compared with the salaried workers who used to spend most of their lives in a
18 space that was not theirs, but which belonged to others who had shaped and
19 organised it, and where others had written the rules to be respected within it,
20 self-employed workers develop a greater sense of 'ownership' of the rules in
21 force within the spaces, and consequently less acceptance of others' rules.
22 (Bologna & Fumagalli, 1997:14–17)

23 The aspect to be stressed, and which is implicit in the described phenomenological features, is
24 the disposition to forego pre-established and pre-designed models and subjectively self-define
25 possible trajectories of activity, learning and choice. This disposition shapes and characterises
26 the subjectivity of knowledge workers. When viewed from this perspective, the issues of
27 motivation, relationship to knowledge, and socialisation are thus decisive for understanding the
28 subjectivity of knowledge workers. Conversely, interpretations of knowledge workers that
29 instead read them solely on the basis of categories such as their freelance status or

1 entrepreneurial activity fail to fully grasp this interesting aspect of discontinuity. The category

2 'enterprise' may in fact be inadequate for interpreting knowledge work. Likewise, exclusive

3 attention to employment and contractual forms may lead, on the one hand, to regarding these

4 subjects as weak by definition (because they are workers with precarious contracts) and, on the

5 other, to representing them as micro-enterprises that still need to grow before they can compete

6 on the market. A great deal has been written about the precarious contractual conditions of

7 freelancers and micro-entrepreneurs, and rightly so; but this tells us nothing really original about

8 the ongoing hybridisation of working and social forms. Moreover, an approach that only

9 considers the perspective of enterprise and work fails to grasp the novel features of the 'new

10 knowledge professionals', especially those not protected by membership of recognised

11 professional associations, because it is assumed that after an apprenticeship – similar to those of

12 the traditional professions – they will automatically become professionals themselves. In this

13 way, the subjectivity of these individuals is not considered except as a 'painful subjectivity' of

14 those who must endure conditions that are inevitable, thus overshadowing their projects,

15 horizons and values, which correspond neither to those typical of a dependent employee nor

16 those of professional or entrepreneurial work. But, above all, there is no recognition of the role

17 played by these knowledge workers in social design and innovation, which is no longer

18 conceptualised as internal to the production process, because innovation springs from a sort of

19 'cooperation among brains' which comes about also, and perhaps especially, outside formal

20 work (Corsani, 2002).

21   Within the framework described above, the aim of this Special Issue is to develop a

22 critical discussion on the conditions of knowledge workers in the new global division of labour.

23 Specifically, we have divided the Special Issue into two parts, forming two different issues that

24 focus on the following aspects:

25   First, knowledge workers are knowledge producers, and their desire for self-expression

26 and self-realisation characterises their work and their identity. At the same time, their capacity to

27 produce innovative and generative knowledge is valuable for firms, which seek to capture and

28 control this expertise in terms of both individual and network.

Second, autonomy is a constitutive but ambivalent feature of knowledge work. It characterises the liminal relationship between autonomy as possibility for self-realisation and autonomy as a vehicle of 'passions' which produces specific forms of work intensification and precariousness.

Precariousness in knowledge work takes the form of a social process to be explored as resulting from hybridisation among subjective, contractual, organisational and market conditions.

The ambivalent and individualised positioning of knowledge workers in global labour supply chains makes it particularly difficult for them to experiment with new forms of coalition and individual and collective resistance to precarisation.

Contents of this issue

This first part of the Special Issue explores the multiple interactions among the dimensions described above. It draws on the results of field research on knowledge workers conducted in Germany, France, Spain and Italy as well as theoretical insights from Brazil. Particular attention is paid to the theme of self-employment, which – in the contributions to this issue – is explored from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. In what follows, we present the articles contained in this first of the two issues, highlighting the reasons why we believe them to be of interest with respect to the questions highlighted.

Maria Norkus, Cristina Besio and Nina Baur examine the subjectivity of knowledge workers drawing on the results of empirical research carried out on precarious young researchers in Germany. Specifically, the authors highlight how recent neoliberal university reforms in Germany have not only affected knowledge production processes but also intensified the promotion of short-term research projects, with the result that precarious young researchers are exposed to the risk of self-exploitation. Of particular interest in defining the precariousness of knowledge workers is the authors' elaboration of the notion of 'projectification', in substantial continuity with Hodgson's (2004) study. This conceptualisation enables the authors to describe the new forms of subjectivity of research knowledge workers, highlighting the difference between the old Fordist model and the current neoliberal model of work and society based on self-entrepreneurship which offloads risk onto the individual.

1   Oscar Pérez-Zapata, Amparo Serrano Pascual, Gloria Álvarez-Hernández and Cecilia
2   Castaño Collado focus on the processes of subjectification and self-discipline – and in particular
3   on the shifting boundaries among social pressure, internalisation of goals and self-exploitation.
4   Their contribution is based on a qualitative case study conducted in Spain shortly before the
5   explosion of the global economic crisis. The analysis centres on highly qualified young
6   knowledge workers specialised in ICT working for a Spanish subsidiary of a leading American
7   ICT international company publicly recognised as a 'great place to work'. This article can be
8   situated among studies of subjectivity in high-tech companies (Kunda, 1992). It explores the
9   self-management dynamics enacted by the workers and the features of precarisation in which the
10   external-internal governance of subjectivity is a key organisational power device aimed at
11   intensifying work.

12   Hybridisation between contractual conditions and subjectivity is also the concern of
13   Paolo Borghi, Guido Cavalca and Ivana Fellini, who investigate independent professionals in the
14   Milan area. Their article is based on an extensive qualitative survey of workers and their
15   representative organisations. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the multiform precariousness
16   of independent professionals in the early stages of their careers, highlighting how they
17   experience and cope with the 'new' knowledge-based global capitalism. The results show that
18   precariousness is not only a matter of employment instability; it also concerns the presence or
19   absence of self-realisation, the degree of autonomy in work, remuneration, economic
20   independence, satisfaction and professional reinforcement. Their article goes beyond simple
21   contractual insecurity to explore experiences of entrapment in vulnerable work and life courses.

22   Elsa Vivant also focuses on the subjective condition of self-employed knowledge
23   workers and, in particular, on the French case. Her article centres on the use of a new tax regime
24   designed to facilitate the development of 'auto-entrepreneur plans' by skilled young people
25   entering the labour market with their first self-employed activity. The research results show that
26   the auto-entrepreneur plan has different meanings and uses for different workers: while for all
27   knowledge workers it contributes significantly to the formation of their identity, for some of
28   them it brings the identity of being 'independent salaried', for others 'entrepreneurial
29   unemployed', and for yet others a 'covert entrepreneur'. More important than self-realisation, the
30   results highlight the weight of the rhetoric of employability (availability, self-learning,

1 adaptation to market constraints, autonomy, etc.) as a disciplinary discourse device used to

2 legitimise and govern precariousness. Reactions to this model range from rejection, through

3 passive acceptance, to active compliance.

4   The contribution by Tiziano Bonini and Alessandro Gandini focuses on the precarious

5 subjectivity that spills over from the jobs of knowledge workers in the creative industries into

6 their private lives. The authors discuss the main findings of their ethnographic research on

7 precarious workers employed as radio producers in the Italian cultural radio industry and their

8 professional self-positioning within the digital content industry. Particular attention is paid to

9 their passion for their work and its content, social capital, knowledge and the interpersonal

10 relations developed in the work environment. These are the main resources with which the

11 precarious workers studied attempted to cope with flexibility, interruptions in their contracts and

12 the temporary nature of their jobs and income; and it is with these same resources that they

13 sought to address the present and project themselves into the future.

14   Marie-Christine Bureau and Antonella Corsani investigate the hybridisation of

15 knowledge work by considering collective action and focusing on the complex relationship

16 between autonomy and knowledge appropriation among creative workers. They compare three

17 case studies of knowledge workers in the cultural and creative professions in France,

18 demonstrating the tension between self-realisation and self-exploitation in each case. The

19 research results reveal a demand for autonomy that goes beyond control over working hours,

20 work organisation, and negotiation in the market. With different nuances, the aspiration of these

21 creative workers is to build autonomous social co-operation models in terms of common rights

22 and shared meanings, such as engagement in 'common knowledge production'. Knowledge work

23 is therefore understood, not as work 'without rights', but as work in which people seek out new

24 rights based on autonomy, solidarity and neo-mutualism.

25   Completing the empirical studies presented in this first issue of the Special Issue is an

26 article by Carolina Salomao and Solange Souza, which proposes a theoretical model with which

27 to address questions concerning the precariousness experienced by knowledge workers on a

28 global scale. The authors adopt a post-workerist approach: in light of the development of

29 'cognitive capitalism' they explore the shift of focus in the production of value, towards

communicative, affective and relational activities, corresponding to new forms of control and exploitation, marking a definitive shift from the Fordist industrial phase to the new 'biopolitical composition of work' (Morini & Fumagalli, 2010). The analysis of what they term 'cognitive work' – although this is not superimposable onto what we have called 'knowledge work' – is theoretically important for the study of the precariousness of knowledge workers. In particular, in light of the specific features of the precariousness experienced by knowledge workers, the authors try to imagine what could be the new margins for resistance and coalition, and to define new rights.

Conclusion

The articles in this issue expose the highly ambivalent position of knowledge workers in global knowledge-based economies. However, there are several aspects that cut across the various contributions.

A shared feature is that of the temporary horizon that characterises project work: of work experiences, of employment relations, of job contacts, and of knowledge at risk of obsolescence. Immersion in a task-orientation logic, absorbing but temporary and revocable, starts at the contractual level but then affects biographies and redefines the worker's identity. Task-oriented work designs around itself an entire organisational world of intersubjective devices and meanings, just as 'clock work' characterised the representation of the industrial age. In this context, identities are structurally permeated by the plurality of experiences, i.e. by the differentiation of conditions and by their fluidity, which refers to the volatility of the positions temporarily reached.

A further feature shared by the contributions to this issue is the attention paid to the new sense of autonomy of knowledge workers. This is closely tied to their cognitive skills that need to be improved and innovated, and thus connected to the constraint-resource of the network, which is relational more than it is technological. On the other hand, knowledge workers seem to suffer most from the difficulty of giving form to an oriented narrative, defining a story and doing so collectively, recognising a 'plot' in the activities performed, as well as identifying a recognisable goal to achieve. Besides contractual precariousness, therefore, there is a specific

form of professional precariousness which consists in the difficulty of reconciling one's experience and aspirations to self-realisation with the opportunities available. Escape from this kind of precariousness relies on embodied knowledge and the ability to build oriented and cumulative work trajectories both subjectively and cooperatively.

The articles that follow – all devoted to the interweaving of precariousness and knowledge work – examine these issues. They consider knowledge workers as constituting a category emblematic of current employment relations and which therefore makes it possible to grasp some of the main transformations currently taking place in work, as well as in the production of subjectivity.

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