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Hybrid areas of work in Italy

Hypotheses to interpret the transformations of precariousness and subjectivity

Emiliana Armano and Annalisa Murgia

Introduction

In this period of late-capitalism and austerity, new areas of work are emerging outside the current system of regulations, and they seem to be expanding out of all proportion. Our contribution proposes the concept of ‘hybrid areas of work’ as an alternative to the more common one of ‘grey zones’ (Supiot 1999; Freedland 2003). The intention is to supersede the polarisation which counterpoises a ‘black’ and a ‘white’, and to question the historical binary opposition between standard and non-standard work arrangements, and between employment and self-employment. Moreover, while the adjective ‘grey’ evokes the idea of being undefined and undistinguishable, with ‘hybrid’ we refer to the co-existence of features usually attributed to categories that have been traditionally kept sharply distinct, by acknowledging the kaleidoscopic and complex character of contemporary work. In our understanding, a renewed interpretation of work is also needed in order to rethink the concepts of inequality and precariousness as they emerge from subjective experiences. Indeed, the emerging areas of work are no longer – or at least not only – mere containers of the growing forms of ‘non-standard’ employment; they also concern the ideology, expectations, and social imagery that permeate forms of work that, though organised around neoliberal rules, can create zones of experimentation and withdrawal from the dominant model (Corsani 2012).

In light of the Italian case, and twenty years after the introduction of so-called ‘project work’ into labour law, the questions that we address are these: How is the social world populated by freelancers structured? How is precariousness perceived in hybrid areas of work? And above all, what are the devices of subjectivity that invest experiences and representations poised between growing inequalities and growing margins of autonomy?

Querying the concept of hybrid areas of work for a renewed understanding of social inequalities

The case of precarious freelancers and project workers

The aim of this chapter is to conduct a discussion that is wide-ranging but starts from a specific context, that of Italy. In terms of employment relations, the Italian system has undergone profound changes in labour law. They began in 1995 – the year when the National Social Security Institute (INPS) established a special fund for freelancers and ‘project workers’ – and continued with the reforms of 1997, 2003, and 2012, and then the more recent ‘Jobs Act’ of 2015. These reforms have substantially altered contractual work arrangements by fostering the rapid and extensive spread of employment relations impossible to classify in terms of the classic dichotomy between salaried employment and self-employment. In this chapter, we focus on a hybrid area of work which falls formally under the heading of ‘self-employment’ (Bologna and Banf 2011; Armano and Murgia 2013), but which is extremely heterogeneous in its composition. Indeed, so-called ‘project workers’ comprise both

‘dependent self-employed workers’, hired on a self-employed contract only because this was the cheapest option for the employer (Muehlberger and Bertolini 2008; Eichhorst et al. 2013), and highly skilled professionals, who work project by project in a mode of work organisation typical of freelancers (Rapelli 2012).

Therefore, at the core of this study are the experiences of different subjects comprised in the heterogeneous category of self-employed workers, who possibly represent themselves differently, and who work in different sectors and with different pay levels, but all of whom were hired on the same self-employed contract. In particular, we shall analyse some key dimensions around which social inequalities have been traditionally articulated – a precarious status, a low pay level and a lack of rights and social protection – and then re-interpret these inequalities in light of the transformations of subjectivities.

As discussed in previous works (Armano and Murgia 2013), in our view, the process of making people precarious, or social precarisation, is a mode of subjectivation. In other words, it is a process essential for shaping contemporary forms of subjectivity as a whole. Therefore, while we recognise that precarity is particularly evident in temporary, discontinuous, and uncertain employment relations, our interest is not restricted to ‘employment precarity’, which characterises a structural condition tied to the employment contract; rather, our concern is with ‘precariousness’, a term which better describes an experiential state that permeates the entire lives of individuals (Murgia 2010; Armano and Murgia 2013), a quality inherent to a person’s specific position. In these terms, the concept of precariousness concerns experiences that are partial and situated, so that the different, manifold, and dynamic positions differ not only among individuals – in this case independent professionals or dependent self-employed workers – but also for the same individual over time.

In regard to inequalities connected to the economic dimension, it has been emphasised that the recent economic crisis has exacerbated the polarisation of incomes by widening the range of income distribution (Piketty 2013). A recent study on project workers and freelancers in Italy (Di Nunzio and Toscano 2015) has highlighted the situation of these ‘new working poor’: 57.8 per cent of a sample of 2,210 subjects, in fact, declared that they earned less than 15 thousand euro gross per year. However, according to neoliberal doctrine, this condition of impoverishment does not necessarily lead to the emergence of new inequalities, since it is often perceived as normal performance-related pay and therefore not as unfair. Income inequalities, which according to the logic of Fordism were generally represented as such, are now not even recognised as inequalities, but rather as the consequence of different remunerations for differing capacities. Thus as incomes diminish, there is a growing sense of inadequacy with respect to social expectations, goals, and self-perception in the socially dominant model of the neoliberal culture.

Finally, a last dimension usually analysed in order to understand social inequalities in the emerging areas of work regards the forms of social protection. In fact, the changes in the socio-productive system have come about in a context of deregulation of the Fordist welfare system, which selectively protected key actors in the production cycle, but today is out of joint and increasingly distant from a social structure no longer founded on salaried and permanent employment. Thus, in recent years, inequalities in terms of access to social rights and welfare have been exacerbated by several factors: the precarisation of work, which has become normal for a large part of society (Lorey 2015), the related growth of hybrid areas of work characterised by unprotected or weakly protected contractual forms, and the simultaneous existence of a welfare system still excessively patterned on a Fordist model. In this regard, while recent studies on freelancers and project workers in Italy (Di Nunzio and Toscano 2015) stress that these workers should have access to social security (e.g. maternity, paternity and

parental leave, sickness leave, unemployment benefits, etc.), they also report a marked propensity for associative commitment (grassroots and auto-organised groups, co-working spaces, freelancers' cooperatives, etc.). Therefore, the apparently non-organisable character of precarious workers – especially in the hybrid area composed of different kinds of self-employment – seems to require new forms of collective action outside the traditional trade union system, in order to address the issue of precariousness by alternative forms of representation based on shared knowledge and on the network as the organisational form.

Interpretive hypotheses: Re-reading inequalities in light of the transformations of subjectivities

Inequalities and precariousness do not refer merely to the polarisation which has occurred in past decades in the distribution of good and bad jobs, levels of income, access to rights and social protection (Kalleberg 2009; Vosko 2010); they also refer to how they are represented and legitimised in the current social imagery and dominant culture. These changes have led to the emergence of unprecedented social inequalities which reconfigure the perimeters of the risk zones drawn by the above-mentioned structural factors. Indeed, in contemporary knowledge societies, the wide and multiple senses of precariousness and inequality experienced by people can no longer be read within the narrow confines of employment relations; rather, they should be considered as intertwined with the subjectivities of individuals and with their different positions.

We maintain that, in order to conceptualise the phenomenon, it is necessary to analyse the dominant cultural representations by adopting a critical approach (Deleuze 1990). In this regard, we hypothesise that representations are socially constructed into an order of ideas based on principles of individualisation and meritocracy different from those of the past. In this scenario – based on a systematic evaluation of individuals with respect to performance on the job and their ‘potential for development’ – the ways in which ‘merit’ and individual performance or ‘excellence’ are interpreted by those concerned differ according to their adherence to that order. Cultural representations are therefore themselves social processes and products. They are constructs consisting of interactions among different social actors; interactions whose outcomes are open and not at all predetermined. In fact, while on the one hand the current forms of freelance and project work are increasing economic self-precarisation and thereby sustaining neoliberal capitalism (Puar 2012), on the other, the construction of innovative and creative formats also leaves space for the invention of new subjectivities able to face the emerging inequalities collectively (Lorey 2015) within the hybrid areas of work.

To contextualise the discussion on forms of inequality in highly tertiarised economies, we refer to the transformations of subjectivity that have fashioned the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999). We therefore assume as our interpretative framework that there are now broad processes where human activities tend to come about according to the typical logic of business. We are witnessing a process in which the subject becomes an enterprise (Gorz 2001), in particular self-employed workers; in other words, the dynamic of neoliberalism foresees the capitalisation of the self – that is, making oneself into competitive human capital (Dardot and Laval 2009).

In this chapter we concentrate in particular on the case of project workers and precarious freelancers in Italy, who engage in different activities and professions, regardless of the skills level. The theoretical-interpretative approach adopted explores the subjective, existential, as well as work-related condition of precarious self-employed workers, conceptualised as a broad and composite social group. This positioning is in fact connected to employment conditions – which are usually considered to classify

workers as ‘dependent self-employed’ or as ‘independent professional’ – but it is primarily and variously characterised by the individual assumptions of risk by social actors and by the cultural representations to which they adhere.

Case studies and research design

The discussion that follows is based on two different research projects focused on precariousness and knowledge work, and carried out in Northern Italy between 2006 and 2012. In the first project, we conducted 39 in-depth interviews with knowledge workers employed in different sectors: information technology, digital production, the Web, new media, multimedia arts, publishing, training, and research (Armano 2010). The second project was carried out in Milan, Bologna and Trento in 2011–2012. Thirty interviews were conducted with highly educated precarious workers who had at least five years of work experience (Murgia and Poggio 2014).

As mentioned above, the precariousness of knowledge workers in the hybrid areas of work is highly heterogeneous. On the one hand, there are those who choose to work as freelancers, managing the discontinuity of income and the transitions between one job and another. On the other hand, there are those who are also self-employed, but who perceive themselves as fake self-employed, since they would opt for salaried employment if they had an opportunity to make decisions on their contract. Nonetheless, our research identified some common and recurrent aspects that point to a phenomenology of subjectivity that cuts across these different positionings. In what follows we discuss four devices that, in our view, transform subjectivities according to the new spirit of capitalism and generate new inequalities and a sense of precariousness in subjects’ trajectories within the hybrid areas of work. In order to shed light on the main devices that characterise the transformation of subjectivity, we shall outline some exemplary subjective characteristics; that is, devices that we assume to be common to the various experiences considered.

Research findings

The task-oriented logic and the contingency of employment relations

The first device that we consider consists in the task-oriented logic, and in the sense of the contingent which is the core of the imagery that can be constructed around that logic. The Fordist model of industrial production, which used to be based on the system that the British historian of industry Edward Thompson termed ‘clock-work’ – work regulated by the criterion of time as measured by the clock – has shifted to work regulated by tasks, projects, and objectives, and measured by results. This task-oriented logic grounded on performance-based criteria is a *modus operandi* that shapes the new organisational form of capitalist production and the positioning of the self in relation to others typical of knowledge work.

I have various project jobs ... on or of the books. [...] I don’t know if they’ll pay me, plus other projects and other things that are more or less always ... I try to stay within the area for which I’ve been trained. [32 years old, Milan]

These work times are tied to project deadlines [...] with ever shorter schedules and more and more standardised products, a lot of copying and pasting, and especially processing times reduced to the minimum, with heavy mental stress. Until a few years ago I saw only the advantages, today after a few more years ... there’s a downside. I don’t know anyone who’s never spent a weekend working

or stayed up all night because the next day they have to deliver and they're late. [39 years old, Turin]

In the experiences of the interviewees, self-employment and freelancing exhibit new forms of precariousness and subordination which depend more directly on the internalisation of market logic and certainly less on an external disciplinary authority as in the age of the clocking-on machine in industrial society. In this sense, the interviewees appreciate the supposed freedom that derives from the absence of the forms of external control typical of industrial work (fixed schedules and clocking on and of machines). But they feel the strain of having to balance different projects in order to maintain work consistent with their training, and of respecting the increasingly tight deadlines that must be met to obtain payment.

What at first glance seems to be a choice and a form of freedom thus shows its dark side: the difficulty of self-imposing limits to engagement in productive activity. To cite the thought of Foucault and Deleuze, we may say that with the expansion of forms of work based on the accomplishment of tasks, we have moved from a form of external disciplinary control to control internalised in the social body of work.

Identification, 'passion trap' and free work

The second subjective feature – closely related to the previous one – is the identification of the self with working activities, which is connected in two ways with precariousness to become a source of self-exploitation and a vehicle for the subsumption of personal qualities and emotions whose value is exploited, as well as professional competences and skills (Morini and Fumagalli 2010). It is a part of the process defined as self-precarisation, which has become a normal way of living and working in neoliberal societies (Lorey 2006). In this logic of valuing passion and the most intimate and emotional aspects, passions and desires may become traps. In fact, when a person's passion for a certain job acts as a driver of his/her action based on intimate and emotional involvement, then this involvement may become an outright trap (Ballatore *et al.* 2014; Murgia and Poggio 2014) which induces that person to accept even unbearable working and contractual conditions. Moreover, this dynamic leads to a qualitative amplification of the phenomenon that years ago Sergio Bologna and Andrea Fumagalli (1997) termed 'domestication', i.e. the non-distinction between life and work, which does not simply consist in a lack of distinction between the times (and places) of life and work; indeed, they are so profoundly fused in the person's identity that s/he can no longer distinguish between being a worker and being a person.

I believe that my work and life are the same things. I mean, I'd like my work to be my everyday life, in the sense that my work is very dynamic. I have so many different things to do. I'm in contact with lots of people, so I don't have one day like any other. I devote most of my free time to my work. In the end, I don't have any free time, even if my excuse for being self-employed is to say 'I manage my free time as I want' ... [39 years old, Trento]

Personally, I live with these materials in my everyday life as well ... even the films that I go to see at the cinema ... a DVD ... a magazine that I buy. There's no discontinuity among my personal life, hobbies, and job. [35 years old, Turin]

This ambivalence translates into a device that leads even to the possibility of working for free (Chicchi *et al.* 2014), beyond contractual obligations and fixed working hours; and it breaks down the distinction between life time and work time. Emblematic in this regard are the concepts of 'free work'

(Beverungen *et al.* 2013; de Peuter *et al.* 2015) and ‘free labour’ (Ross 2016) that identify working activities which are free but also unpaid, and act as devices to maintain precarisation in a process of normalisation. In this regard, it is crucial to understand the difference between the meaning that individuals attach to their practices – a sense of achievement and remuneration in terms of identity – and the function performed at a systemic level by gratuitous participation in the production of value. In fact, the way in which people represent social inequalities, and whether or not they perceive having suffered them, is closely bound up with their level of emotional involvement in their work, which may change – even with the same income and contractual conditions – from one individual to another, but also for the same individual over time. In a sense, we may argue that the system of social inequality is more pervasive, the more it is not identified as such. Indeed, the model of contemporary capitalism seems to set up an invisible chain sustained by the same people that it alienates. While exploitation has been defined as the extortion of surplus value, today it more closely resembles ‘voluntary servitude’ (Durand 2004).

The promise of (material and symbolic) recognition

The device of the promise – which is closely connected with the above-described mechanism of a person’s identification with his/her work – consists mainly in the repositioning of the person within a debtor–creditor relationship that overlaps with and replaces the relationship between the worker and the employer.

The specific moral of promise (like the power of debt, as argued by Lazzarato 2012) is not exercised with repression, but rather with the internalisation of those values and desires that induce the subject voluntarily to assume commitments. In exchange for a promise, the person therefore renounces and self-divests his/her rights, and his/her capacity as a choice-maker. The logic of the promise, far from concerning the employment relation alone, impacts on public and social life. In fact, it is not exclusively a form of economic compensation by the company – a new (paid) job or the renewal of a contract – but a (personal) relationship between the employee and the employer in which symbolic value plays a crucial role.

They told me ‘Two years, then we’ll see ... there’s a two-year project, then we’ll probably give you a one-year contract.’ [...] So you make sacrifices, give up having a family, hope that things will soon get better. But you say ... I can hack it till the end of the month and continue to do something that I enjoy. [...] But you always have to live with compromises. [37 years old, Bologna]

The main worry at work is that they promise you, they promise you, and then ... you’re still waiting, and you continue to work like crazy. My fear is ... but not so much at the economic level, more at the personal one, in the sense that I really believe in the project that I’m doing. [...] And I’m afraid of getting caught up in this thing ... which might then disappoint me ... my worry is that I’ll switch of. [34 years old, Trento]

Among the various studies that have investigated the device of the promise in recent years (e.g. Bascetta 2015), of particular interest is the one by Carrot Workers (2012), which has declined the concept of promise as the ‘syndrome of free labour’ by discussing the results of a self-inquiry – a critical collective practice, therefore – conducted among interns and precarious workers in creative jobs in the UK. The analysis concerns workers’ expectations and the unpaid work performed by virtue of an explicit or implicit promise. More specifically, it focuses on the lives of a generation of young people ready and willing to stake their subjectivity, their relationships, and more generally their lives, on a process that leads to an overlap between new inequalities and subjectivation processes.

Network and relationality

This fourth feature, which subjectively characterises self-employed knowledge workers, is relationality, i.e. embeddedness in a relational network. The jobs of project workers and freelancers typically take place within a dense network of contacts extending beyond the formal boundaries of the workplace as a physical and regulated space. In fact, thanks also to mobile technology, working activities re-territorialise themselves in a space of connectivity in which trust, work, and learning relationships are constructed and need to be constantly reproduced and maintained.

Then there began another recent trend [...], free work, right? All very free, ‘Look, come in only when it’s necessary.’ Bloody cell phone, it makes you almost always contactable. It’s gone from being a very free job, where I could be somewhere in Italy and say I was in Turin, which nobody bothered about, to being a job with two cell phones constantly ringing... [30 years old, Turin]

We’re constantly in contact with customers, we’re asked to be ... there’s always someone who’s working and has to get results, so ... they ask us to keep our cell phones switched on even when we’re on holiday ... you’re always connected, and in any case friendship starts with the customers. They’ve got your personal contacts; it’s difficult not to answer. But you can still find ways to disappear; you have to have imagination [*laughs*] ... [31 years old, Trento]

The interview excerpts show that the jobs of the project workers and freelancers interviewed took place within a network that was reterritorialised in an intermediate space, neither public nor private, which constituted a veritable transcorporate network. While in the Fordist period, the physical locus was the office or the factory, in knowledge work the physical place extends to other spaces (often elsewhere in the metropolis) where the various projects on which people work are located. The main feature of these networks is the relational dimension: interpersonal relationships are essential for survival, but at the same time they discipline work relations. In fact, while on the one hand the workers acquire degrees of freedom in terms of mobility and time management, on the other, they must be constantly available, precisely because of the ‘subjective’ nature of their work contacts. Moreover, the importance of interpersonal relationships and friendships does not replace that of formal relations, which instead flank and intertwine with them. Hence the rules of employment contracts continue to exist formally; but predominant are practices which are apparently more fluid but in fact substantially more rigid and binding. It is in this type of professional network – in which the more it becomes personal, the more it functions professionally – that the new inequalities in hybrid areas of work are constructed. Nevertheless, the person still has margins of freedom to self-organise in the looser mesh of the networks and the creative interweaving of their threads.

Discussion: Devices of subjectivity and of value extraction – emerging inequalities and the precariousness of trajectories

The above-described devices transform contemporary neoliberal subjectivities and generate new inequalities and a sense of precariousness in people’s trajectories.

The combined effect of the four devices is to produce a Darwinian mechanism of social selection between those with the resources to manage transitions from one project to another and those who do not possess those resources. This, therefore, is a systematic mechanism implicit in the system, although it is invisible, which transfers the weight of social, as well as business, risks to single individuals.

In order to define how such subjectivity devices engender new inequalities in employment relations, we have focused on what we have termed the ‘emerging hybrid areas of work’ in Italy. These are populated by workers who, although they have formally independent contracts, cannot necessarily enjoy wide margins of freedom and autonomy. Our intention, however, has been not so much to take part in the debate that seeks to distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘bogus’ self-employed workers (Eichhorst *et al.* 2013) as to give account of a complex, polysemic, and sometimes highly contradictory area of work where inequalities between individuals assume unprecedented and constantly changing forms. The fact that job precariousness has extended to all professions and social classes does not mean that inequalities have been eliminated or that individuals have become equal in insecurity. In fact, as efficaciously highlighted by several inspiring authors: ‘the logic of neoliberalism thrives on inequality, because it plays with hierarchised differences and governs on this basis’ (Puar 2012: 172).

In our opinion, the hybrid areas of work make up a category emblematic of the changes taking place in the world of work and the new inequalities that characterise it. Freelancers and self-employed workers – but to an increasing extent all categories of workers – are required to have skills different from those of the past. They must first demonstrate cooperative and interpersonal skills, which translate into both new expectations of corporate loyalty by the employee and informal norms related to the ‘affective work’ inherent in large parts of the emerging forms of work (Hardt 1999; Morini 2010). This is especially evident in knowledge-based production and the service sector – where deregulation and individualisation are the norm and adaptability a core requirement – as well as in the new media and training industries, in which cultural representations of ‘creativity’ and self-promotion fuel and circumscribe the imaginations of individuals (Dardot and Laval 2009; Corsani 2012; Cingolani 2014). Common to many of these areas is an ethic of work and self-activation that accompanies an unprecedented intensification of work and a process of self-precarisation.

Consequently, the hybrid, ambivalent and contradictory nature of this condition cannot be investigated by means of linear and simplifactory analyses. If we adopt this perspective, we can no longer be content with counterposing self-employment and dependent employment, or (supposed) standard work and (not further defined) ‘non-standard’ work. Beyond reductive and simplifying labels, what is crucial, we believe, is understanding how experiences of subjectivity are varyingly patterned by economic/contractual and symbolic issues. Therefore, to speak of hybrid areas of work is to speak of free work, identity, lifestyle, and how the devices of subjectivity and value extraction are activated. Moving in this direction, moreover, would also mean acknowledging that the acquisition of new rights is also a matter of subjectivity management. From this perspective, analysis of the fabrication of the neoliberal subject loses the semblance of abstract theorisation to become pragmatically oriented and crucial for interpretation of the changes taking place.

Conclusions

To conclude the argument of this chapter, we shall discuss the relationship among emerging hybrid areas of work, new inequalities, and social and political action: that is, what Standing (2014) in one of his latest works has called the transition between the ‘class-in-becoming’ (composed of temporary workers) and ‘citizenship-in-becoming’. In this scenario – characterised by the dynamics described in the previous sections – the challenge is to combat inequalities while bearing in mind that – at least potentially – people in the hybrid areas of work are already opposed to both the neoliberal agenda (scant social protection, vulnerability to blackmail, loss of control over personal time) and the social-democratic tradition based on monolithic professional identities and wage labour as providing access to welfare.

This can be done on the one hand by embracing the ‘beyond employment’ approach (Supiot 1999; Vosko 2010), which pursues a vision of labour and social protection inclusive of all people, regardless of their labour-force status, in periods of training, employment, self-employment, and work outside the labour force, including voluntary work, unpaid caregiving and civic engagement (Lee and Kofman 2012). On the other hand, however, it should also theoretically address the issue of the managerialisation of subjectivity to understand how it can be reappropriated by withdrawal from commodification and valorisation. It is therefore not just a matter of determining what, or how much more, workers in the hybrid areas of work should be paid, and the benefits and forms of social protection to which they should be entitled. It is also necessary to understand how to mobilise collective social action when the value-extraction device merges with expression of passions, when free work is self-gratifying, when the wage itself becomes a promise, and when professional relationships become intimate and personal. How can these devices of subjugation and subjectivity be removed? The tradition of industrial work was based on respect for promises and agreements, which then became employment contracts. But today the contracts that really matter are the informal, ‘psychological’ ones in a Faustian dimension where life-time now is given in exchange for a future that is expected but utterly uncertain.

In an attempt to answer these questions, some theorists have talked of micropolitical practices of resistance to inequality; others have envisaged a return to mutualism through the invention of new forms of social cooperation and a bottom-up welfare state. These experiences involve embryonic, but important situations, especially at a time when traditional forms of collective representation have progressively lost their efficacy. At the same time, however, they do not currently have the necessary impetus to change the balance of power in society and to alter national and international agendas. The underlying problem is that, in the age of precariousness, models of social coalition and (self)representation should primarily foresee and include recognition of subjects with such differently positioned expectations and demands. The prospect to be hoped for is the creation of affirmative and recompositive practices, so as to hold together social cooperation and new institutions, autonomy and neo-mutualism, also on the basis of demands for a minimum income as a social equality which takes into account and respects differences, and a new project for social change.

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