

TASC workshop: The new European precariat?  
Educated young people in temporary employment  
25 April 2017

**At Risk of Deskillling  
and Trapped by Passion:  
The case of Precarious Highly Educated  
Young Workers in Italy**

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# Higher Education and Employment in Italy

- The proportion of highly educated young Italians is lower than the average of the other EU countries: in EU 38% has a university degree, in Italy, less than 25%.
- In 2009, university graduates were the most affected by the increase of unemployment among young people.
- The employment rate for highly educated young people is currently 56.7%, more than 20% below the European average (ISTAT 2015).
- Although there are relatively few young graduates in Italy, the national labour market is not able to offer them good opportunities to benefit from their investment in education.

# Research Design

**Research project:** Trapped or flexible? Risk transitions and missing policies for young highly-skilled workers in Europe (2011-2013).

**Funding:** European Commission, Pilot project to encourage conversion of precarious work into work with rights (VP/2010/016)

**Project partners:** Institute for Employment Studies (Brighton, UK); Centro de Estudios Economicos Tomillo S.L. (Madrid, ES); IRS (Milano); University of Trento; Amitié (Bologna).

**Italian case:** Milan, Trento, Bologna

**Research design:** 30 narrative interviews with male and female highly-educated young workers:

- Aged between 27 and 34.
- With at least five years of work experience.
- Solo self-employed workers (professionals vs. fake self-employed).

# 1. Passionate Precarious Workers

- Young adults with **precarious jobs, but consistent** with their education.
- **Knowledge workers** (Drucker 1994): workers are required *to be the work* that they do.
  - *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999).
  - *Bio-capitalism* (Marazzi 2010).
  - *Affective capitalism* (Karppi et al. 2016).
- **Passion trap** (Murgia 2012, Ballatore et al. 2014): work as a source of pleasure – an activity full of meaning and with a high level of self-identification, but ‘passion’ is experienced also in the most literal sense of the term: the suffering caused by insecurity.

# 1. *Passionate Precarious Workers*

My days at school ... The alarm clock went off at 6.30 ... drove off at 7.15, lessons from 8 to 1 o'clock, quick stop-off at home ... at 3 o'clock at the very latest I had to catch the train to be in time for the lesson, which began at 4.30. At 6, the end of lessons ... home by 7.30, dinner and then after dinner, preparing lessons or correcting exercises or looking up something for the school. **And then ... silly me ... I'd become responsible of the vocational program at my school, so I had to organise all the visits by the students ... the contacts with companies, etc. etc ... And not paid ... I was wrong, wasn't I? I was certainly wrong. But it seemed a really meaningful thing to do ... I believed in that project ...** [Teacher in two private schools, 31, Man].

**I like my job. I'm managing to do a job that I like,** I'm in a big third-sector organisation in Milan working with the Roma community. **It's a job that makes sense... So I'm perhaps simply looking for sense in the things that I do, and at present it seems to me that this one makes sense.** Although it's difficult too because I have to hustle everybody ... to coordinate the work ... but **I'm happy now. This type of work satisfies me.** Because I've also entered a happy and deliberate downshifting phase, especially this year ... so I don't spend very much. It's not that I want to get rich ... but **look, three jobs like this in one year, 5000 euros each, and I would be happy.** [Freelance Researcher, 34, Woman]

## 2. De-Skilled Precarious Workers

- Young adults with **precarious jobs, but NOT consistent** with their education.
- **Under-skilled careers:** Mismatch (both quantitative and qualitative) between the demand for and supply of skilled labour (Schomburg, Teichler 2006; Blasutig 2012 ).
  - The *impoverishment of knowledge*.
  - The *discrepancy between present lives and those imagined in the future as increasingly uncertain and distant from desires and expectations*.
- Young workers are caught in a **status incongruence** (Dogan 2011; Armano, Murgia 2013).

## ***2. De-Skilled Precarious Workers***

**You can't afford to have any period of unemployment.** I'd love to have lots of days without working, because it would mean that I'd be living on a private income. But I don't have a private income. So **the fact that I've accepted a job for two years in a call centre obviously depends on purely economic reasons. Like the year I spent in a bookshop, still with a solo self-employed contract.** It was clearly an abuse, but I needed to work. [Call Centre Operator, 33, Woman]

An electrical technician would be much better at my job than I am, and I also believe that he'd be much more interested, more motivated, and find it much more enjoyable. I did materials physics ... honestly, there's nothing about machines that interests me ... Yes, it's a job and I should do it the best that I can ... but intellectually it really doesn't interest me. [Technician, 30, Man]

**Being a graduate and qualified, and having a curriculum with five hundred courses on it ... is an aggravating circumstance.** You're worse off. You are worse off than anyone else. Because **any job that they can offer you is anyway a de-skilling.** [Secretary, 34, Woman]

# What do they have in common?

- Young precarious highly educated workers with jobs consistent vs. non-consistent with their qualifications and skills.
- They share the fact to be employed with a solo self-employed contract, in a country in which the founding **principles of the welfare state are still centred on employees** with a dependent contract (Ferrera 1996).
- **In Italy solo self-employed workers are the 15% of the labour force and have increased by +59% between 2000 and 2011** (Eichhorst et al. 2013)
- The features shared by the two groups of young interviewees are mainly related to **social protection**, in terms of a lack of pension rights, sickness benefits, paid maternity leave and unemployment benefits.



# What do they have in common?

**The three things that I can cite are certainly social security...** because I'm not really building a **pension...** then **maternity**, because I know that wanting to have children would be a problem... And then, a problem that I've already had several times, **income...** in the sense that what I need is income support. **It's not fair that I'm not eligible for benefits like an employee...** [Freelance Researcher, 34, Woman – job consistent with education]

**I mean, you can't think that simply because a worker is ill and has to stay at home they shouldn't be paid.** Because you don't get ill of your own free will, so it's not that I want to party or go around town expecting you to pay me. But if I put in a medical certificate ... **it's fine with me if I'm paid by the hour, but if I put in a medical certificate for those days, it should be taken into account.** [Call Centre Operator, 30, Woman – job not consistent with education]

# Conclusions

- The two groups of highly educated young workers are **two extremes of the same phenomenon** (both extremes can be experienced by the same person in different stages of life, or even at the same time).
- **Precariousness is not only related to work.**
- Connections between the subjective and the structural level:
  - **Focus on new work arrangements** and the lack of welfare systems, in order to understand the structural conditions which are shaping the work culture and the subjectivities of workers.
  - **Focus on workers' experiences**, in order to give an interpretation able to go beyond the type of contract and the employment sector.

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**THANKS!!!**

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