

# 87 | the feminization of labour in cognitive capitalism

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## abstract

The article starts with a definition of the concept *feminization of labour*. It aims to signal how, at both the Italian and the global level, precarity, together with certain qualitative characteristics historically present in female work, have become decisive factors for current productive processes, to the point of progressively transforming women into a strategic pool of labour. Since the early 1990s, Italy has seen a massive increase in the employment of women, within the wave of legislation that has introduced various flexible contracts – so-called atypical work. I show how cognitive capitalism tends to prioritize extracting value from relational and emotional elements, which are more likely to be part of women's experiential baggage. The results of a study conducted in November 2006 among freelance workers of the *Rizzoli Corriere della sera* group, the largest publishing group in Italy, will be used to show how women are able to move more easily on the shifting sands of precarity, within the context of cognitive work.

## keywords

feminization of labour; cognitive capitalism; relational values; knowledge workers; Italian case studies

## definitions of the concept

For several years now, the concept *feminization of labour* has increasingly been incorporated into analyses conducted on changes in the labour market linked to new trends in the global economy. This concept is used to define not only the objective aspect of the quantitative increase in the active female population, around the world, but increasingly underlines the qualitative and constituent character of this phenomenon. Or rather, it defines those characteristics of the current *information-based economy*, as defined by Manuel Castells (2002), or even better that which others prefer to call *cognitive capitalism* (Vercellone, 2006; Fumagalli, 2007), within new contexts of production. In other words, this concept is intended not only to emphasize the role women play within today's economy, but also to highlight the paradigmatic nature of this reference.

Saskia Sassen postulates the idea of 'the existence of a systemic relationship between the globalization and feminization of paid work', in the sense that 'the productive structures that cannot be transferred offshore and must operate where demand exists, can use a female workforce, whereas the structures which lend themselves to being transferred abroad can use lower-paid workforces in less developed countries' (2002:126).

In neoliberalism, the processes for the efficient use of capital are extended on an international scale, with different types of development. Within the complex domain of the multidimensional shifts in which women are deeply involved, the Italian picture offers a particularly interesting model. It has seen, from the early 1990s, a very marked increase in female immigration boosted by the demand for domestic work, but with the simultaneous exclusion of migrants from any other type of welfare benefit (Andall, 2000: 63). In general, the number of women in paid employment has risen. In the USA in 1950, 15 per cent of women with children under the age of six had a job. Today, this figure has risen to 65 per cent and, overall, 72 per cent of American women have a job.

If women in the First World make a career for themselves and devote a great deal of time to demanding professions, their nannies and helpers, who arrive as a result of the increasing demand for help at home which has become a veritable industry, are experiencing a similar but far bigger situation. That two women work to earn money is perhaps a lovely idea, but that two working mothers devote themselves entirely to work is a lovely idea which has gone too far. When all is said and done, women from both the First World and the Third World are pawns in a far wider-reaching economic game for which they didn't write the rules (Hochschild, 2004: 26).

In a broader sense, the feminization of the work process we are dealing with here is therefore indicative, on the one hand, of an exponential implementation of low-paid labour on global markets. On the other hand, in the West it emphasizes the trend towards the progressive insertion of women into the service industries,

which is assuming ever-increasing importance. At the same time forms of individual bargaining are developing in line with the cognitive uniqueness of the service provided. Women from the world's under-developed countries have been transformed into salaried substitutes of the reproduction of women from the developed countries, at the expense of their own capacity or wish for reproduction; women in the developed countries are driven towards production and indeed towards a future where life is artificial and/or sterile. The significant ties suggested by these kinds of links, do not, simplistically, relate to cause and effect. They are important multidimensional intersections that hold the new imperial order together (Haraway, 2000: 278).<sup>1</sup>

In this article, it will not be possible to consider the full complexity of work performed by women in global markets. The aim of this article is to focus on the implementation of the use of cognitive capacities within the paradigm of present accumulation. The attention given to the dimension introduced by cognitive capitalism does not mean inventing, abstractly, a new centrality: cognitive labour represents one of the new critical forms of domination which today stimulate the labour scene. From this point of view, it is argued that the close examination carried out on the subject must not be considered antithetical to other analyses on economic relations and exploitative relationships, but can, rather, represent enrichment and integration for a greater understanding of the reality of the contemporary work scene (cf. Federici, 2003; Federici and Caffentzis, 2007).

Both in the case of migrants who move from their country of origin to work in the First World, and that of their ever-growing employment in the service industries in Western countries, women seem to represent a model that contemporary capitalism looks at with growing interest, both in terms of the forms of the *administration* of labour (precariousness, mobility, fragmentary nature, low salaries) and in terms of the contents, given the new anthropological focus that work claims to assume through the intensive exploitation of quality, abilities and individual skills (capacities for relationships, emotional aspects, linguistic aspects, propensity for care).

Capitalism has aimed, in general terms, to appropriate for itself polyvalence, multi-activity and the quality of female labour, exploiting thereby the experience brought by women which stems from their historic function in the realm of reproduction and domestic work. Following this interpretation, the Deleuzian concept of 'becoming a woman of work' points to the biopolitical nature of current labour relations, taken as a whole. Foucault helps us to clarify this further. We should note the *performing* character – in its meaning of one of 'modelling reality' – of contemporary labour, its marked individualization and division and its de-intellectualization. The body ends up de-subjectified, disciplined: 'the relationships of power have an immediate effect on it, they take it over, they make their stamp on it, they train it, they torment it, they restrict it

<sup>1</sup> For more in-depth commentary, see Mezzadra (2006) and Sacchetto (2001).

to certain types of work, to certain ceremonies and demand signs from it' (Foucault, 1976: 29).

Work is an effective occasion for the emancipation of women in the face of male oppression, albeit within the limits set by the hierarchical organization of work. Thanks to the level of generalized precariousness, which has been transformed into a structural element of contemporary capitalism, 'work which becomes a woman', is tantamount to saying that the fragmentation of the service provided and the complexity of the dependence/absorption which women have experienced at various times in the labour market, ends up becoming a general paradigm irrespective of gender. In this sense, it can be maintained that the figure of social precariousness today is *woman*: in cognitive capitalism precariousness, mobility and fragmentation become constituent elements of the work of all persons irrespective of gender. The model advanced is pliable, hyper-flexible and in this sense it draws on the *baggage of female experience*. By employing this terminology, I am aware that I am using a generalization which might seem vague. To make statements valid 'for women' is impossible, unless through the endless work of articulating the partial worlds of situated knowledge (Spivak, 2004). To speak of 'women' and their 'experience', thus, does not mean thinking along only one single line, but rather is intended as a simplification that remains conceptually distant from theories that make reference to a fixed heterosexual and eurocentric nomenclature. On the contrary, it is the very presence of persons from different origins and different sexualities and the observation of the tendency towards absorption by capitalizing on all the differences and all the forms of life that help us to note, with even more force, how a model of the body which is totally and traditionally subjected to the power of capitalist organization draws on a sexual and racial paradigm: 'the black person, the woman in a junior position, the migrant and the exile, are all under the spotlight' (Puwar, 2003: 13).

The family, the city and relations between humans are progressively being transformed into an economic space. Our daily work pattern features deeply embedded linguistic-emotional components. In this sense, care work provided by women fits perfectly within a far wider mechanism that also includes relationships and these in turn become an economic asset.

Recourse is made to migrant women who, through the channels of the globalized economy, are replacing cognitive workers in their reproductive skills which then become part of a salary dynamic (Morini, 2001). Moreover, everything seems to be tending more and more in that direction in the sense of an industrialization of reproduction through genetic engineering (Franklin, 1993), an issue that cannot be discussed here with the care and attention it deserves. What is involved here is, thus, the reproductive freedom of women, in its various facets, as well as reproduction being transformed into merchandise, which is opened up to the market (cf. Pateman, 1997; Ongaro, 2003).

The atomization of current working situations generates a paradox that is all the more interesting since profit is based on the summation of the wealth brought to capital by the cooperative multitude, but this extraction is made possible solely by its being broken down into an infinite number of individual situations. Each single individual today has a correspondingly individual situation in terms of his/her work. The predominance of individual contracting in the labour market has the effect of fostering the denial of any social corporeality or of any corporeality 'of class'. Giorgio Agamben (1990: 47) highlights the risk that all this will be translated into an *ordinary singularity*, composed of individuals 'whose community is not linked by any condition of belonging or by the simple absence of conditions (...). They cannot form any *societas* because they do not possess any identity to put forward, any link of belonging that can be recognised.' The condition of precariousness that stems from individual bargaining on the one hand heightens one's own perception of *uniqueness*, and, on the other, favours full availability to ratify consumption models, lifestyles, types of speech, brand names. From there stems the victory of the globalized neo-liberal productive paradigm, which tends to establish dominion over what is defined as *one way of thinking*, the *unirationalization of life*.

Cognitive capitalism touches on the individual spheres of the experiences of men and women, both native and migrant, but at the same time seeks to impose a unique and homogenous command mechanism for work: it is these very differences and the exploitation of them that translate into surplus value. From this point of view, the simple and binary dichotomies of production/reproduction, male work/female work lose their meaning to the point of pushing us to hypothesize a gradual process of the *degendering* of work.

When we speak of the feminization of work in cognitive capitalism, we should therefore increasingly consider the process in a broader context than just the exclusive area of 'production'. When we say 'work' in cognitive capitalism we mean less and less a precise and circumscribed part of our life, and more and more a *comprehensive action*.

## **characteristics and contents of contemporary cognitive labour**

In areas where there is a greater diffusion of cognitive capitalism our comprehensive action becomes, ever more glaringly, productive labour. A characteristic peculiar to current production is indeed the use of our ability for creation, reaction and relationships. These are the linguistic and cooperative exchanges: the precarious person becomes part of a network of relationships and in fact has no sense of consistency outside of these. Personal, social and communicational identities identify with each other in a sort of short circuit.

At other times in history, the workplace played a fundamental role in the way it composed and formed a part of people's lives (Bravermann, 1978). Today, cognitive capitalism combines archaic and innovative forms of work and brings them all together as current forms of work. On the one hand, we are witnessing a partial process of the re-Taylorization of intellectual work and, on the other, the transformation of social and human activities into directly productive work. It is not by chance that the workplace is no longer the sole centre of training for a person but work requires ever greater levels of skills that are activated by the entire social and territorial network within which a person moves. This is tantamount to saying that it tends to encompass all the vital spheres of society. Out of everything that individually and subjectively gives us nourishment, it is *current work* that nourishes us. This can no longer be traced back to something clearly defined within precise spaces. In work there is an excess of sense, meaning, symbolic production of which our subjectivity at work is of course a contributor since the economy of current knowledge translates thoughts, desires, impulses and emotions into elements that can be quantified, measured and expressed in terms of monetary value. It aims to reduce lives and their complexity to a 'strategic asset' for the company (Moulier Boutang, 2007).

We are witnessing the creation of a blending of the two categories of 'creation' and 'production', to the point where it would become necessary to work in a detailed manner, and even subjectively, on these two concepts in the light of the new processes. We now need to understand archaic and new forms where exploitation, reification, alienation and pathology are apparent. And, at the same time, we need to analyse the places and the times when invention, creation and action are generated.

Computer technology has completely changed the connection between conception and execution and thus the connection between intellectual content and its material execution (Berardi, 2001). As Gorz says (2003: 137), 'the most common unpaid, routine activities become confused living productive activity in an inhabited environment and become the *object* of the work itself', thus establishing a *bioeconomic* process (Fumagalli, 2005). It deals with a mechanism of uninterrupted production of information and symbols which is intended to control and channel every impulse, thought and human desire towards work (Fumagalli, 2007). *Live work*, it could be said, in this situation does not manage to win over *dead work*. This is what activates the process of *mortification* of what appears, *ab origine*, as *live work*.

What is particularly interesting is the potentially 'transformative' aspect that work, in this context, has/can have in connection with the person. This is the capacity for humans to tend towards modification and their way of existing and *feeling* the world, which triggers 'anthropological' variation (Marazzi, 2005). This tendential 'variation within the species' generated by contemporary transformations in work is primarily produced through the perceptive mechanisms created by

precariousness starting from the separation of the categories of *time* and *space*, and through the new processes of enhancing cognitive capital and social control (Bologna, 1997).

The form work takes today includes subjective time and quality and in this sense, women represent a strategic and particularly attractive pool of workers. One fundamental aspect is less so: the separation between work and the worker. To bring into play emotions, sentiments, the whole of one's life outside work as well as territorial and social networks means, in fact, to make the whole person productive. What has to be thoroughly examined therefore is this new nature of work, being part of *active life* rather than 'just work', clearly separated from the biological–reproductive–emotive sphere.

It is possible that all this might bring about, as Christian Marazzi maintains, 'the end of the category of work' in the strict sense (2002). But certainly not from a Rifkin perspective and even less so in relation to the idea of freedom from work. It could happen for precisely the opposite reasons: work claims to *take everything for itself*, thus sanctioning once and for all that *existence becomes work*. It aims to blend work and worker. 'The problem is not the end of work and work without any end to it,' as Cohen (2001) wrote so effectively. The problem is not 'being flexible'. Today, the problem is inflexible flexibility.

Objectively, in the last twenty years, we have witnessed a constant lengthening in the working day. Research in the early 1990s conducted by Juliet Schor (1992) showed that the working life (professional and domestic) of Americans over the previous twenty years had grown to such an extent that only sixteen hours of free time a week were left. Certainly today, working time which is immediately necessary for material production (in terms of actual manufacturing) has diminished thanks to automated processes. But, at the same time, what has expanded hugely is the time spent in live linguistic–communicative–relational work, interacting with other people and working together to create value.

Michel Foucault explains that after an initial taking of control over the body, which occurred through the disciplinary technologies of work, we have a second taking of control which is linked to massification and the permeation of the economic world as a reflection of the centrality the language factor, in a broad sense, has assumed.

In contrast to discipline, which assails the body, this new technique of non-disciplinary power, a biopolitics of the human species, is applied to the life of men, or rather, it assails not so much man as a body but man who lives, in other words as a living entity. We could say that it assails man as a species.

(Foucault, 2005: 49)

Two macro-environments show how the characteristics of work today are closely linked with what has been argued and draw on the female experience of space and time.

(1) *Spatial reorganization*: The home office or the domestication of work which delineates the new home landscape of work. Private life and working life are combined inside domestic spaces and the two environments are mutually transformed into hybrids. Does the house expand to encompass working arrangements themselves or, conversely, does work invade an intimate and protected area? One can also see the totally symbolic aspect of the aesthetic reorganization of work spaces which has taken its cue from the culture of difference and diversity, as notes Eleonora Fiorani (2003). We are on the point of *becoming nomads* of the office and the workplace: 'work and its physical location are expressed in small areas which are decentralised and linked virtually and this ends up by configuring the new changes in living'(Fiorani, 2003: 246).

It is an example of the transitory and changeable nature of work and it captures a picture of the encompassing of *other* spheres of existing (thinking, relaxing, doing physical exercise, socializing) within the work space. The house and the private area become part of the productive space. They become an *explicitly money-related space*, where economic subjects can be found (people who use their own house as an office and also cleaners, baby sitters, carers). In this sense, the decline of the separation between reproduction and production becomes even more obvious.

(2) *The reorganization of time*: Working hours are changing, which eliminates the difference between time spent at work and free time, even to the point of altering the time between waking up and going to sleep. One could talk of the end of any separation between the different social times, and to the introduction of a perception of the day where there is practically no end.

Cognitive capitalism pushes ahead because double and triple work roles are taken on and it introduces the idea of infinite adaptability and flexibility, which are realities well known to women. There does, in fact, exist a female tendency to transfer the modalities and logistics of care work, particularly in the context of the mother-child relationship which, practically, *does not have limits of time and dedication*, and to make them part of the person's professional work. These are modalities that can also be configured as a strategy, subjectively experienced by women, to reconcile the various environments and govern their separation (Prokop, 1978: 63). In other words, it is a question of women's 'cultural attitude' that becomes absolutely functional to the needs of contemporary corporations. Work can claim to be a living body that constantly needs every care, word and action. If life itself enters the economic arena (bioeconomic accumulation), women are encouraged to divert all their time, care, words and attention towards the 'company-living body'.



Throughout Europe and particularly in Italy (where the average number of hours worked per person is 1,804, Ocse 2007 data), there is a progressive increase in the number of working hours (quantifiable also in a generalized drop in the number of public holidays, days off for sickness and other causes of absence from work).<sup>2</sup>

At the root of the increasing commitment to work by Americans and the tendency among Europeans to emulate them, there is, above all, the fact that we are becoming uncertain and insecure about the way we live beyond the frightening and pressing drive to increase consumption at a time when salaries are tending to lose their purchasing power. In the 'work-and-spend cycle' of contemporary Western societies, we can see the trend – which Galbraith identified as early as 1967 – to desire more consumer goods and less free time. But we can also note and stress how, behind the impetus of the spectre of precariousness, people bend towards an *adaptable/sacrificial/oblative position* which is a cultural feature in the history of female experience.

## conclusions

What conclusions can we draw about the feminization of work at this point in the discussion?

(1) The organizational model of current work – insecure, adaptable, spasmodic, *nomadic work in the nomadic office* or the provision of services from home but with new machines (computers), the autocrats of the contemporary era – presents itself, in its salient features, as a historical modality of female work. At the same time, it is this condition of overall/intensive exploitation of the subject that can serve as a metaphor for the new forms of pressure and violence to which a large part of humanity, irrespective of gender, seems to be condemned to in relation to work.

(2) To illuminate this aspect of *incessant work* (in terms of time and meaning), of *nomadic work* and *domestic work* means understanding the *essence of the feminization of work*, or rather why women represent an extraordinary paradigm for the aims of current capitalism.

(3) We can consider being on the cusp of an *inflexible flexibility*. We are aware of the fact that part of workers' demands in the 1970s, particularly in Italy, were also based on the 'refusal of work', aimed at greater flexibility (which meant winning back time spent on living rather than time spent on machines). Post-Fordist production functioned as social and cultural criticism of the Fordist model of the 1970s (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Today, the reality with which we are faced, for all the reasons given above, is not configured as a form of true flexibility but presents itself rather as a form of a growing link between existence and intelligence at work.

<sup>2</sup> According to a study by Lionello Tronti from Istat, the number of hours worked by employees in the private sector is, in Italy, 'equal on average to 1,694 hours a year: 153 hours more than their opposite numbers in France, 225 hours more than the Germans, 73 more than the British and 60 more than the Spanish. Moreover, the number of hours worked across the year in Italy is 143 more than the average of the 15 countries that used to make up the European Union and, if compared with the larger of the countries which have just joined, it is shown to be significantly lower than only Poland and Romania' (www.lavoce.info, 9 January 2006). Italians are the only workers within the EU to be on a par with the hours worked in the USA with 1,810 hours per year in 2003 (1,817 hours for Americans) and thus significantly above France, Germany and the United Kingdom (on average, 1,498 hours).

The structure of work at present displays an extreme *rigidity*, a *prescriptive* vocation, and, at the same time, *greed* (everyone wants more 'time', more 'space', more 'sense', more 'attention'), which will reverberate on the life of the individual precisely because it is part of an extremely flexible model for the company.

(4) Rampant precariousness implies, apparently only for women, the risk of a wider *crystallization of social figures*, an idea suggested by the fact that the informalization of the working relationship also operates at the level of social organization. Conversely, it is possible to maintain that precariousness contributes, down the line, to the de/reconstruction of identity and the *degendering* of work. In this respect, it can be noted that precariousness, for the purposes of the new processes of flexible accumulation, triggers and matches the process of the feminization of work, dominating a transformative aspect of the person and leading to a gradual giving into the Fordist man/woman, production/reproduction dichotomy. Today, more obviously than ever, the differences are all becoming the object of the extraction of value in capitalist terms.

## knowledge workers

The percentage of working women in Italy is among the lowest in Europe at 45.2 per cent. Work performed by women is concentrated in three main sectors of the service industries (training, health, assistance). Within this overall picture, Milan is ahead of other cities and represents an anomaly. According to the province's Observatory on the labour market,<sup>3</sup> in 2004 the percentage of women working in the Milan area was almost twelve percentage points higher than the national figure (56.9 per cent) and almost two points higher than the figure for the whole of Lombardy (55.0 per cent), with constant growth over the last decade. The incidence of female participation in relation to overall participation in work has highlighted a significant trend in the past ten years, rising from 38 per cent in 1993 to 43 per cent in 2004. If such progress continued in the next decade, it would be possible to estimate that in 2020 half the labour force in Milan would be women.<sup>4</sup> Total figures for Milanese working in the service industries make up the majority of total jobs and during the course of 2004 accounted for 68 per cent of the total, a figure never previously reached. Of these it can be estimated that half (34 per cent of the total number of people employed) are carrying on an intangible cognitive activity and their number seems destined to grow. The number of people employed in industry, on the other hand, fell to 31.6 per cent. In greater detail, manufacturing activities, in the strict sense, registered an incidence of 25.7 per cent of the total. Milan shows at the highest level what is now described by several bodies as the transformation of labour into one involving the service industries and one where work is carried out by women: the greatest opportunities for women to get a job (employability)<sup>5</sup> are available mainly within the sector of cognitive production.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Province of Milan, *Il lavoro difficile, Rapporto 2004 sul mercato del lavoro e le politiche del lavoro in Provincia di Milano*, F. Angeli, Milan, March 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Province of Milan, *Il lavoro difficile*, op. cit., p. 53 et seq.

<sup>5</sup> If the data are broken down by age,

It is in this context that the new processes for accumulating capital subsume all the intangibility/tangibility of sentiments, knowledge, bodies, experiences and life resources. Thirty-four per cent of people employed in the intangible service industries in the Milan area make up the principal vessel in the development of 'cognitive work'. By this we mean everything which today evokes the extraction of value from the cognitive activities and relationships of human beings – in other words from knowledge, training, the symbolic apparatus and experiences of each individual person, their creativity and the way they act in a natural spirit of cooperation. If Fordism represents the era of the tangible production of goods and, to that end, uses the strength of the body, cognitive capitalism embodies the era of the production of knowledge through making proper use of the cognitive faculties to form relationships and communicate effectively.<sup>6</sup>

However, these faculties are always more subject to a tendency towards standardization and control. Its primary protagonist is knowledge which, in order to use it properly, is codified and turned into an object, to be reduced to something immediately transmittable, in other words into a simple *object of consumption*. This tendency aims to transform knowledge into an alienable factor that can be separated from the elements that have produced it.

Some areas, such as research, training and information, are helping to spread the conditions of precariousness that then become structural. There are around 50,000 journalists on precarious contracts in Italy compared with 17,000 editors with an open-ended employment contract, while there are around 45,000 researchers at universities on precarious contracts.<sup>7</sup> We feel that this depends precisely on the characteristics implicit in the service industries ambiguously straddling the individual use of cognitive and creative capacities and ever-growing standardization in forms of knowledge, information and training. The frame that includes and sets the parameters for all this describes an increase in attention to profits *tout court* and even attempts at measuring the time and productivity of the people involved. On the other hand, the individual aspect implicit in these services is offset by the tendency of the individualization of working relations which ends up becoming existential precariousness and leading to the progressive and apparently unstoppable worsening of working conditions through the systematic dismantling of any form of guarantee.

The process whereby work becomes precarious affects the substance of these professions, where the individual being, the person, the player – with his/her own quite personal cognitive skills, capacities, knowledge and experiences – has a determining role and is the root of forms of self-exploitation. This includes the difficulty of managing conflictual links and relations (e.g. in relation to claims made by trade unions, or in connection with hierarchical structures). In this sense, the control mechanisms are truly becoming immanent in the social field and we find them spread around people's bodies and brains. We are being

levels of employment and unemployment, it is seen to be even more split than the national data for the age range between 25 and 40. After the age of 40, there is a sudden drop particularly in the levels of female employment.

**6** Among the many sources available, we could cite the studies carried out by Alfred Tomatis, according to whom the need for communication 'stems more than anything else from the desire not to break off (or possibly to renew) the sonic relationship with the mother in the prenatal period. The human being wants to keep or find a world to link it to the outside world and towards the other one from which, when still in the embryonic state, it drew the greatest levels of satisfaction' in Tomatis (1977: 248).

**7** As the data involved have not been properly confirmed (in Italy, there is no relevant accurate census information on these various categories), we cannot give a definitive percentage for the female content of the data. From a series of individual statistics compiled in newspapers and universities, it can be deduced that women are, still, the relative majority within these professions.

confronted with independently chosen forms of alienation, which stem, precisely and incredibly, from the desire for creativity by the people themselves.

This type of process ends up also influencing, in a very explicit way, the distribution of gender within the cognitive professions, exactly in the sense argued above. In other words, women are more appreciated precisely because of the qualitative/adaptive characteristics they are assumed to guarantee. According to the research carried out by Francesca Gambarotto and Giorgio Brunello (2005), the precariousness experienced by researchers in their working conditions can end up influencing the distribution of gender in university teaching posts, and strengthen the process of feminization at the intake stage of university careers. This situation is already apparent in the case of Italian universities where 39.3 per cent of researchers are women compared with 19.1 per cent of professors. But it is the trend that is particularly interesting:

The process of segregation by sex usually goes arm in arm with low salaries and less favourable working conditions. It is not clear, however, whether it will be the low salaries which will make the role of the researcher rather undesirable socially and thus make places available for women. Or whether, conversely, it will be the strong presence of women at the lowest level of university teaching which will reduce the financial value because of social prejudice (...). Low reward for the work of a researcher, apart from highlighting the modest social value our country assigns to this profession, reduces its prestige, above all for highly talented young people. (...) We can therefore imagine that the social prestige of academia will be recreated through the formation of a dual professional path: a flexible and predominantly female base of researchers, prepared to accept low financial rewards and poor career opportunities with the top posts occupied by men, often trained abroad and able to acquire those professional and relational skills needed to participate in networks and to benefit from international research grants.

(Gambarotto and Brunello, 2005: 1)

Research I carried out (in September–November 2006) among freelance journalists at Rcs Periodici (which is part of Rcs Media Group, the main Italian publishing group) shows some very interesting results.<sup>8</sup> The first thing to note is that women represent 58 per cent of the sample, a piece of data that unequivocally shows the feminization trend within the profession. Thirty-one per cent of them are aged between 25 and 35 (against 38 per cent for males), whereas another 31 per cent are between the ages of 35 and 45 (38 per cent for males). These data are not surprising: the age bracket most closely affected by the phenomenon of precariousness is that of people in their 30s and 40s (it drops to 20.6 per cent for those between 45 and 55 and to 10.3 per cent for those over 55). Sixty-two per cent are graduates and 20.6 per cent have post-graduate qualifications (percentages that drop dramatically for men: 47 per cent and 14 per cent, respectively), confirming the fact that there is a higher level of education among women compared to men. From a quick descriptive analysis, we

**8** The research was carried out by sending out 300 questionnaires – there were 80 non-completed replies and 50 completed. The statistics were produced from the completed forms. There are approximately 600 freelance workers working for the Rcs Periodici group (while there are 270 on regular contracts). But the

see that women more often have an employee employment contract, albeit atypical (30 per cent against 17 per cent for males).

In all, 42.8 per cent of women interviewed already have children, while 57.1 per cent do not. To the question put to those who did not have children whether they felt that their 'non-structured' labour condition to some extent influenced this type of situation, 12.5 per cent replied 'very', 31.2 per cent 'fairly'. These two pieces of data combined tell us that 43.7 per cent of the freelance women in the sample see a systemic link between their own working situation and the difficulty of exercising autonomous life choices in a sphere that has extremely important implications, including from a psychological point of view. The survival strategies that precarious workers have to adopt glaringly complicate women's existence, making it, objectively, even more difficult to manage both their private and public selves. From this perspective we can see just how much, work ends up hugely contaminating other planes of existence and assuming a central role in a person's thinking both in terms of the present and the outlook for the future.

Of the women in the sample, 10.3 per cent earn less than 600 euros gross a month, 24.1 per cent between 600 and 1,200, 20.6 per cent between 1,200 and 1,800 euros gross a month. Analysing the male sample, the percentage of men earning less than 600 euros rises to 28 per cent. This discrepancy is probably due to the higher incidence of women with employee employment contracts, which guarantee, albeit in a limited way, a higher flow of monthly income than that of people who are self-employed or work freelance. It is, however, more likely that the relatively higher income for women is due mainly to the process of de-gendering for journalists working in the magazine/journal industry, as a result of a greater female presence: women, in this case, end up by actually counting. Another important aspect is the nature of relationships and the various channels for creating loyalty: female journalists are probably more adept at weaving networks compared with their male counterparts.

However, the majority of the sample can count on figures that certainly do not make it possible to govern one's own existence in an independent way. The issue of the inadequacy of the direct salary – apart from demonstrating how, in Italy, there is still a glaring problem over the proper evaluation of the so-called intellectual professions in terms of salaries – becomes far more pressing for this sector if set alongside the policies of privatization in the public sector begun at least a decade ago, in Italy as in the rest of Europe, which end up reducing income further, forcibly channelling it towards private forms of insurance. This factor becomes even more pressing for women who, as a rule in Italy, can be sure they will have salaries relatively lower than those of men.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, for the 39.5 per cent of the women who responded to the questionnaire, it is 'autonomy' that appears as the prime reason for satisfaction with one's own

questionnaire was sent to only 300 of them, in other words to those who had (and could prove they had) a structured collaborative relationship of at least a year with a publication. The full text of the survey carried out can be seen at <http://www.lsd.it/dossier/precariato/index.html>.

<sup>9</sup> In 2004, families resident in Italy in conditions of relative poverty come to 2,674,000,

equal to 11.7 per cent of resident families, for a total of 7,588,000 individuals, 13.2 per cent of the entire population. In the 2001 report, the following appears: 'The incidence of poverty is greatest families where the head of the household is a woman, especially in northern Italy where the incidence for women is 7 per cent compared with 5.1 per cent for males' cf. 'La povertà in Italia nel 2000. Note Rapide', Istat, Rome, 21 July 2001, p. 3.

current working condition. This is followed by 18.7 per cent who emphasize 'lack of monotony' and 18.7 per cent who choose 'dynamicity'. It is not difficult to infer from these assessments, the existence – still there, in spite of everything – of a desire, an outlook that encourages women to choose autonomous employment. What were in no way considered as worth ticking were the headings 'salary', 'consideration', which did not obtain any consensus (as could be easily imagined, precisely for what has been said above), while even the topic of 'relations', long important for women, obtained only 4.1 per cent, a significant reflection of the worsening of relations within the working environment, bound up with a growth in competition and individualization (30 per cent indicate competitive relations with other precarious colleagues and 30 per cent indicate indifference). Conversely, the theme of autonomy *in itself* and that of possible mobility, variation, experience and pleasure which hides behind the theme, is, for all that, valued and recognized. If we compare these data against the male sample, it is interesting to note that the most macroscopic difference relates precisely to the satisfaction that stems from 'relational' activities (12 per cent).

To the question 'what does not give you satisfaction in your current working condition?', 22.8 per cent replied 'poor and transient working relations'. This is not to be understood as a contradiction of what is maintained above, but rather as something to reinforce it: if the horizon is still one of autonomy and dynamicity, it is true that the absence of any form of network and support for precarious work, in Italy, make living all the more uncertain. It is thus particularly difficult to actually express that potential autonomy and that dynamicity. It is no chance fact that, if they had the choice, 37 per cent would not like open-ended employment and 18.5 per cent would 'only because I think I would earn more' and 7.4 per cent simply said 'they had never thought about it'.

Over time, the women interviewed stress that above all, they have witnessed a worsening of salaries (17 per cent), then a worsening in the quality of work (14.6 per cent), relations with the company (12.2 per cent) and an increase in competition (12.2 per cent).

In all, 61.2 per cent felt that being a journalist was 'interesting', 16.1 per cent that 'it's a job like any other', 19 per cent that working in this profession involves making many sacrifices. More than 60 per cent of the sample are not in a trades union and 75 per cent feel their interests are not looked after by it. If they could choose, however, the women interviewed would, in 36.6 per cent of cases, like "income guarantees irrespective of the work", and 43.3 per cent to always enjoy different experiences. Only 20 per cent would like, as an outlook for the future, a job with an open-ended contract. There is, however, a significant difference in the male opinion, where virtually half of those interviewed (45 per cent) would opt for stable working relations and only 20 per cent have as their prime objective continuity of income. From this point of view, women appear more focused on the

future and less dependent on visions that are more traditionally tied to a work ethic based on Fordist principles.

## conclusions

Based on the definitions and analyses conducted, we can try to draw some partial conclusions.

(1) The linguistic nature of the post-Fordist regime makes it necessary to redefine social productivity. The ability to use language and mental resources: these are the instruments on which the current capitalist assessment in cognitive capitalism is based. What already seems evident is the non-existence of any possibility whatsoever of a distinction between *intention and instrument*: thanks to new technologies, knowledge is no longer incorporated in machines, materials or finished products but in the cognitive work itself. Codes and languages allow knowledge to circulate on its own, irrespective of the fixed capital. And already – without taking up again the theme of longer working hours – it is possible to deduce a type of circularity in production that can potentially be combined with life into one single unit, where the *active ingredients* are words, language and emotions. Moreover, precariousness of conditions, as has been said, makes work more powerful in respect of the individual, reverberating its orthodoxy over life choices, blending production and reproduction, in other words *generalizing sentiment, perception and transience* to the whole of existence.

(2) The feminization of cognitive work can bring with it a traditionally segregational aspect. Research carried out among freelance workers at Rcs Periodici does not contradict this trend. Indeed, it shows that the world of periodicals is today very largely inhabited by women and this could be read as a lesser interest on the part of men to be at the top of the tree in certain areas, regarded as less attractive in terms of remuneration and social consideration.

The responses from the female sample at Rcs, however, sing an interesting 'different tune': the request for autonomy, the value which is attributed to variation and experience, mobility and therefore infidelity understood as perennial dynamicity, as an infinite tension within a person. They demonstrate reduced interest in a job with an open-ended contract, with preference given to the idea of income irrespective of the work. All of these things, in addition to the particularly new and significant fact of increased earning (albeit relative) allow us to see that women have a greater capacity *for moving on shifting sand*, as Bauman put it (2005: 131). They could be assumed to have a greater capacity to adapt, brought about by their greater powers of determination which, in turn, makes them more resistant and more reactive. Men – because of the historical and social conditions in place, including a sex-based social construction – find it harder to adapt to the new polyvalent and qualitative dimensions required by

new enterprises in the new world. It is these very characteristics, therefore, that make women attractive for the current labour market; it is *precisely their capacity to adapt* that can be transformed, in terms of power, into the wider area the labour market might have to confront in the near future.

(3) The force of contemporary cognitive capital is in combining the various individual essences of experience to meet the needs of production. The attempt to carry out a complete *makeover* of the individual within the productive processes is flawed from the start, because it cannot provide fully comprehensive standardization. The knowledge of individuals is not ever in fact transmittable outside the circuit of experience. At this precise point, the *surplus* can take shape and this can become the centre, or the root, of new strategies for adapting, surviving, waging conflict, in other words, further down the line, subtraction. This is where the other semantic field is now triggered, diametrically opposed to the first, of the term precariousness, which hints at mutation, questioning, possibility and the future. Given certain conditions, there is a prospect of liberation, at least partial, from work. *The problem, for capitalism, would then become not that of successfully encompassing, but rather avoiding, the differences.*

(4) A gendered perspective and women's perspective can reveal more clearly the internal contradictions in the process that tend towards the overall reification of humans, in accordance with a complete remake of the human being, by dint of an experience long embedded in the past. What has not been sufficiently emphasized, especially in Europe, is that women have always worked and nearly always in the worst possible conditions.

(5) The real problem, these days, is that of politically highlighting the link between paid and unpaid work. Focusing therefore on redefining social productivity, as was stated in point 1, is tantamount to saying that we should examine in detail the biopolitical nature of current work relationships. We are having to face a particular way of thinking about merchandise, of forced entry into a *market economy* or a mercantile economy – based on exchange value and commercial value – in a whole range of areas, which, until very recently, were less affected by such processes. The overall, intimate, individual and different capacities of humans and even emotional and sexual relationships are beginning to become part of the framework of businesses and economic relationships, both individually and collectively.

In this picture, it is vital that we force ourselves to change our outlook, introducing new concepts of interrelations, inventing and imposing new value indicators, new mechanisms to assess social wealth (and the real questions to ask would be: is there and what is a fair value? What value can possibly be given or calculated as a payment that would be vaguely commensurate to something as huge as *the essence of the person?*).



It then becomes unavoidable not to ask a serious question of redistribution, of updating the welfare system, which would definitely have as its centre the minimum wage, the minimal form of economic rebalancing in relation to what we are asked to spend daily in the current labour market. Based on the replies from the journalists interviewed, it could be argued that the question of income is identified, straight away, as one of the most useful and urgent frontiers of social intervention by increasingly larger segments of society.

The gender paradigm can provide an instructive point of observation and knowledge about these attempts at the complete reification of humankind. Today more than ever, unpaid social reproduction has, in fact, a primary role in the accumulation of primary resources for today's accumulation of capital which actually claims to encompass the living whole.

Jane Jacobs published *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961 (Jacobs, 2000). Today, more than forty years later, it is still a book that says something new. Its usefulness probably resides in the significance attributed to informal relations compared with the structural and functional mechanisms of economic and social systems within highly organized contexts. These are now, plainly, those of large cities within the knowledge economy.

Today's categories of *networking and production in common* can be extremely useful to women for a re-reading of Jacobs's book in times of cognitive capitalism. The author seems to devote specific attention to the complex and articulate dynamics of the relationship of the subject to the physical space and local, territorial society of which he/she is a part. She makes reference to essential, interpersonal and informal relationships, especially within societies that are complex, highly organized and technologically advanced where the extraction of surplus value is done through the use of knowledge networks in the broad sense. One would need to assess whether, down the line, it would not be possible to put leverage on the networks of informal participation for the purpose of opening up areas to construct economic alternatives and other types of political action. Sassen (2002) calls them 'sticky webs' because of how they are interconnected with each other. David Lyon maintains that 'the new social movements, although not able to overthrow the existing organizations all on their own can, however, show which road to take for the redefinition of alternative forms of social organization' (2002: 108).

## **acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the Sconvegno group in Milan, Italy for discussing parts of this text with me. I am also indebted to the suggestions by Judith Revel, Università Nomade and the staff of the journal *Posse*. I would like to thank Andrea Fumagalli, Carlo Vercellone and Stefano Lucarelli for helpful comments on a first

draft of this paper. The suggestions and comments from an anonymous referee greatly improved the paper. I thank her. The usual caveats apply.

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400367