

PRECARIOUS IDENTITIES IN ITALIAN MOBILIZATIONS AGAINST PRECARIITY¹

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Introduction

In the past decades Italy has been crossed by several mobilizations against insecure and precarious work, which spread in Italy from early in the 1990s due to a series of legal measures aiming at rendering the Italian labour market more flexible than in the past.² These transformations considerably increased the number of precarious workers, here defined as those workers who are short-term, do not benefit from basic workers' rights and have a no social welfare protections. In Italy, many studies assessed that this condition is experienced, in particular, by younger generations. As it happens in the case of many other contentious issues, the field of contention linked to precarious work was and still is crossed by a number of political and social actors which deploy different organizational patterns, forms of collective action and political outcomes at the micro, meso and macro levels of societies. Among the others, the most relevant social and political actors attempting to organize (and self-organize) precarious workers in Italy were new branches of traditional trade unions, like the NIDIL-CGIL, radical trade unions, such as the RdB-CUB and COBAS, groups of self-organized precarious workers, like the Precari Atesia Collective and the Rete Nazionale dei Ricercatori Precari, and grassroots activist groups, like those managing the so-called "social centres" (Choi and Mattoni forthcoming).

Social and political actors involved in mobilizations against precarious work were looking for both material and immaterial changes in societies in order to improve their working and living conditions. In other words, struggles of precarious workers were struggles for "recognition and redistribution" at the same time (Honneth 2001). In the search for recognition at the public and political level, protesting precarious workers engaged in ongoing "collective identification" (Melucci 1996) processes. While protesting, precarious workers defined the boundaries between them and other kinds of workers, between them and other kinds of political actors, and between them and other kinds of social movements. In short, while protesting precarious workers engaged in "boundary-making activities" (Hobson 2003) within societies. Moreover, protesting precarious workers sought recognition in society at large: they claimed to be "invisible", to have "no name".

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² According to Gallino (2007, 63-71), four main legislative measures were responsible for increasing work precarity in Italy: the 'Ciampi Protocol' in 1993; the '*Pacchetto Treu*' in 1997; the Legislative Decree, 2001, no. 368; and probably the most significant of all, the *Legge 30* in 2003 and the Legislative Decree 276, 2003.

Through their struggles, therefore, they attempted to render themselves visible and to transform precarity, their working and living conditions, into a recognizable social problem worth addressing at the social and political levels.

In this paper, I present the analysis of a specific set of mobilizations against precarity in Italy that share some characteristics despite involving different clusters of social and political actors. They all 1) had loose organizational patterns based on networks of relations whose degree of hierarchy changed according to geographical level and the type of protest event, though none were fully vertical and rigid; 2) revolved around collective action as a resource for mobilization and engaged in the appropriation either of resources acquired from work places, among which informational and communication resources played a central role; 3) employed both traditional, though reinterpreted, and more innovative contentious performances, amongst which direct actions had a crucial role and were also used as a strategic means of collective identification; and, finally, 4) depicted precarious workers as a new, composite and inclusive social category for whom precarity was both a challenge to be faced and an opportunity to be explored. On the whole, finally, these mobilizations involved radical trade unions, self-organized precarious workers and grassroots activist groups which together organize according to the “grassroots participation” model mainly based on direct actions, participation of activists and horizontal organizational patterns (della Porta and Diani 2006).

I discuss in particular two relevant aspects linked to this set of mobilization. Firstly, I present in detail some characteristics concerning the development of collective identification processes related to the political category of “precarity” and “precarious work”. I especially focus on the creation of alternative discourses that activist groups fostered during these mobilizations. Secondly, I take into consideration the category of youth movements starting from the empirical findings of my research, arguing that changes at the labour market level have an impact on the way social movement studies conceive the very category of youth movements, whose changes are already visible in mobilizations against precarity in Italy.

This paper develops as follows. Firstly, there is a brief methodological section about the reconstruction of collective identification processes. Secondly, there is a comparison of different mobilizations related to precarious work along the dimension of collective action frames. Thirdly, conclusions sum up the main findings of the paper and discuss the relevance of labour market transformations in the study of youth movements.

1. CASE STUDIES AND SOME METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

The investigation revolved around five mobilizations against precarity occurring in Italy from 2001 to 2006: 1) the transnational parade against precarity named the Euro Mayday Parade, which has taken place in Milan every 1st May since 2001; 2) two direct actions, one in a mall and the other in a bookshop, which took place in Rome during a national demonstration organized by radical trade unions on 6th November 2004; 3) the false fashion show organized by a group of activists and precarious workers who managed to infiltrate the Milan fashion week in February 2005; 4) the mobilization against the reform of public universities and, in particular, the national demonstration in Rome organized by university students and precarious researchers on 25th October 2005; and 5) strikes, pickets and other forms of protest carried out by a small group of precarious workers within one of the biggest call centres in Europe, named the Atesia, in 2005. I sum up the main findings for each dimension below. Among the five case studies, only mobilizations against the reform of public universities clearly involved the presence of a great amount of university students and young researchers. However, as I also explain below, also the other mobilizations were crossed by many young activists who considered precarity as a relevant social problem that directly affected their lives. What is important, however, is not the amount of older and younger activists involved in mobilizations against precarity. What seems more relevant, indeed, is the construction of precarity as a social problem and as an inclusive political category directly linked to some relevant transformations in the experience of being youth nowadays in Italy.

In order to catch these connections I draw on an empirical research about activist media practices in mobilizations against precarity that I conducted from 2004 to 2007. Apart from data directly related to activist media practices, I reconstructed collective identification processes linked to these mobilizations in order to understand the main features of the emerging categories of “precarious workers” and “precarity” at the level of grassroots activists groups, radical trade unions and groups of self-organized precarious workers. I did so because I was also interested in an analytical reconstruction of these mobilizations from the point of view of those mobilizing against precarity, an unexplored aspect of precarious and insecure employment.

In this paper, employ narratives about these mobilizations (and the related media practices) collected through 34 semi-structured interviews with those activists more directly involved in the organization of the five mobilizations against precarity in point.³ Concerning age, activists in their

³ Activists I interviewed, therefore, reproduced the point of view of those activist groups that more actively participated to the organization of mobilizations. For this reason, the results presented in this dissertation mostly concern the point

twenties and thirties form the majority of the interviewees, but some are older and belong to different generations of activists.⁴ This may signify that mobilizations against precarity mainly involved young people, as is the case in some sectors of the global justice movement (Juris and Pleyers 2009), to which they are strongly linked. The presence of other generations of activists, however, signals that precarity, although probably experienced more by younger generations, is also a relevant experience for the older ones, especially among radical trade unionists, who then consider political engagement on this social problem as important. I integrated this data set with another one made up by relevant social movement documents, amongst which call for actions, public declarations, leaflets and other artifacts. In total, I collected and then analyzed 108 social movements generated documents. Since I was interested in how activist groups represented themselves and their struggles at the public level, I employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2000) to the data analysis. This means that I relied on open and axial coding procedures, especially with regard to interviews. Without going into detail, I started from some general sensitizing concepts which were then reconstructed adopting an abductive research strategy (Blaikie 2000, 181). In short, what follows is an interpretative reconstruction of activists discourses, narratives and perceptions related to them.

Drawing on Melucci (1996), I argue that collective identities are not ‘things’ that we can pick up in the real world and take with us, nor, as researchers, analyze (Melucci 1996, 80). Instead, collective identification processes continuously takes place in social movements. They cross different levels of social reality at different speeds: sometimes they slow down and are publicly visible, as happens in demonstrations and other protest events; yet most of the time they develop in those stages of social movements that are semi-public, such as preparatory meetings and assemblies, or in private, during informal gatherings among individual activists for example. When collective identification processes slow down and become public, social actors engaged in social movements present themselves, push their claims and ask for recognition. It is in this moment that a central tension in collective identification processes comes to light: that “between the definition a movement gives of itself and the recognition granted to it by the rest of the society” (Melucci 1996, 74). The methodological challenge is, therefore, how to operationalize collective identification processes in order to catch them at the empirical level, or, better, to catch valuable snapshots of them. In order to do so, I employed a working definition of collective identity derived from the work of Melucci

of view of specific minorities of activists within social movements and not the more general point of view of more loosely committed protest participants.

⁴ Three interviewees were older than fifty years, four older than forty and younger than fifty, thirteen older than thirty and younger than forty, eleven older than twenty and younger than thirty, three younger than twenty. Other demographic details are available under request.

(1996), which provides the means to develop a multi-dimensional analysis revolving around four analytical categories: organizational templates; resource mobilization processes; collective action frames; and contentious performances.⁵ In this paper, I especially focus on the last dimension, leaving in the background the other three, because I was interested in grasping how people mobilized about precarity perceived and narrated the condition of being precarious workers and thus constructed a series of collective action frames able to represent publicly alternative system of meanings about precarity. Despite other dimensions also presented peculiar characteristics, collective action frames about precarity were particularly meaningful if considering the mobilizations at stake from the point of view of youth movements and the experience of being young.

2. COLLECTIVE ACTION FRAMES ABOUT PRECARIOUS WORKERS AND PRECARITY

Collective identification processes imply work at the cognitive level of meaning elaboration which is then visible at the level of language and embodied in “a set of rituals, practices and cultural artefacts” (Melucci 1996, 70-71). In order to grasp the construction of a new system of meaning including the definition of “we” and “others” concerning precarity, I looked at framing activities. On the whole, a frame can be understood as a cognitive device that individuals use to know what is going on in the situation in which they are involved (Bateson 1972). More specifically, frames has been defined as cognitive schemata, which allow individuals to interpret and understand a certain situation from elements belonging to the situation itself and thanks to interaction among individuals taking part in the same situation (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1974). Therefore, a frame is not a static given, but extremely fragile and subject to continuous redefinition and adjustment. It depends on the context in which it is developed and is kept stable in certain situations thanks to the active role of individuals. Drawing on these definitions, the literature on social movements extensively employs and further elaborates the notion of frame at the collective level in order to explain individual engagement in protest activities, the construction of collective identities and the creation of alternative systems of meaning at the public level (Snow, Rochford et al. 1986; Gerhards and Rucht 1992; Snow and Benford 1992; Hunt and Benford 1994), by introducing concepts such as the “collective action frame” and “framing” (Benford and Snow 2000).⁶

⁵ I will discuss the data analysis in the chapter on methods (§ 2.4). Here, I limit the focus to the conceptual foundations of the data analysis in point.

⁶ Although I agree with Polletta and Jasper that “collective identities are expressed in cultural materials – names, narratives, symbols, verbal styles, rituals, clothing, and so on [...]” (Polletta and Jasper 2001) and that narratives in particular seem to be a powerful analytical tool in reconstructing identification processes (Polletta 1998), I decided to focus on framing activities as visible in social movement documents and interviews with activists because their

Collective action frames refer to identification processes in a direct way, in the sense that they allow us to see how activist groups define themselves, in this case as precarious workers, and the social problem from which they suffer, in this case precarity. They also give information about possible long and short-term solutions. Since they explicitly address questions such as “who we are” and “what problems do we experience”, they are explicitly linked to the elaboration of collective identities. To analyze collective action frames, I followed the working definition provided by Snow and Benford (1992), who consider three tasks that framing processes accomplish: they define the social problem and the social subject experiencing it (prognostic framing); they single out potential solutions to the social problem on a short-term and long-term basis (diagnostic framing) and they propose a motivation for people to act collectively – that is to go into the streets and demonstrate their dissent (motivational framing). Since I am particularly interested in collective identification processes, in the following I focus on the prognostic and diagnostic dimensions of framing activities.

The social construction of precarious workers

Activist groups mobilized about precarity engaged in the definition of the new social subject of the precarious worker. In the majority of the cases, they did so by giving a name to their own working and living experiences: starting from the individual level they collectively elaborated a new language to define themselves. To understand the importance of this definitional work, it is worth stressing that in Italy the term “precarious workers” was not known at the beginning of the new century. Although it had sometimes been used in past cycles of mobilization, especially during the two year period of struggle from 1975-1977 (Grispini 2006),⁷ and applied to specific categories of workers, such as high school teachers, it remained confined to the social movement milieu and even here lay at the margins of critical discourses. The same situation applies to the term “precarity” as applied to labour. Activists participating in protest events against precarity were embedded in this discursive context and engaged in the production of alternative systems of meaning about employment flexibility, which often started from the working and living conditions that activists experienced daily. Each of the case studies revolved around the concept of the “precarious worker”

theoretical construction, such as the distinction between prognostic and diagnostic framing (Snow and Benford 1992), renders them more suitable as analytical dimensions of collective identification processes.

⁷ For instance, the presence of irregular, occasional and underpaid jobs were already experienced by young people and also mentioned as a source of difficult material situations in current analysis of class composition developed by those journals such as *Quaderni Piacentini*. These people were currently named the ‘non-garantiti’, an expression which literally means ‘not-granted’ and single out a collective social actor that is not the same as traditional factory workers. In an article published by A and Traverso, another independent, radical journal of the 70s, the student movement and the ‘proletariato giovanile’, the younger proletariat defined their collective identity as follows: ‘we are unemployed, we are forced to occasional work, to misery’.

and its multiple meanings. While the expression used was the same, activists attached many interpretations to it in order to define themselves and the social subject that the “precarious worker” concept addressed. Sometimes they even proposed new expressions that emphasized some aspects of being a precarious worker more than others. Despite common features, such as short-term contracts and a frequent lack of basic working rights, individuals could be precarious workers in several different manners, depending on factors such as the labour market sector in which they worked and the kind of employment contract they held.⁸ For this reason, each case study sets the social construction of precarious workers as a social subject in a different position and contains its own interpretation of what precarious workers are.

In the case of the *Precari Atesia*, for instance, precarious workers are those call-centre operators employed on short-term contracts. Without denying the existence of other kinds of precarious workers, those activists participating in the *Precari Atesia* strikes focused on their direct experience in the call-centre. For the workers belonging to the *Precari Atesia* collective, their struggles were more meaningful than other mobilizations related to precarity, since their working and living conditions represented the social subject of precarious workers most closely. The *Serpica Naro* fashion show followed the same direction of the *Precari Atesia* strikes, in that it focused on a specific labour market sector, the fashion industry, and thus on a specific kind of precarious worker: those working in the Milan Fashion Week. Unlike the *Precari Atesia* strikes, however, the *Serpica Naro* fashion show also introduced the gender issue when speaking about precarious workers, whose working and living conditions were considered from the point of view of women. The organizers of this protest event performed a peculiar fashion show that spoke about precarity in an ironic manner, since it presented a series of special clothes intended to help women facing precarity.

In the case of the *Ddl Moratti*, the focus was also on a specific type of precarious workers, namely “precarious researchers” in Italian universities who considered themselves particularly affected by the *Ddl Moratti* and, as they did in 2004, decided to mobilize about precarity in their specific labour market sector. In this case, however, the meaning of the precarious worker concept was stretched to include university students, who extensively and massively participated in the mobilization all over Italy. What happened, then, was a “frame extension process” (Benford and Snow 2000, 625) that allowed some activist groups to participate in a legitimate way in mobilizations about the *Ddl Moratti*. University students, indeed, interpreted their living conditions as precarious, although not in a univocal way. Some activist groups stretched the concept by thinking about the future of

⁸ For a recent reflections about the experience of being a precarious worker and its (micro)political consequences see (Papadopoulos, Stephenson et al. 2008).

university students, who were almost all potential precarious workers and so university students empathized with precarious researches in the name of an imagined future of widespread precarity.⁹ As is also stressed by some interviewees, this interpretation of university students as precarious workers was mainly elaborated by those activist groups linked to the *Giovani Comunisti* and, more precisely, the Trotskyist thread within *Rifondazione Comunista*.¹⁰ Other activist groups participating in the *Ddl Moratti* mobilization, on the contrary, considered university students to be precarious workers already. Assuming that universities are “knowledge factories”, many activist groups linked to the Rete per l’Autoformazione believe that universities are places that revolve around the production of knowledge, in which production university students also participate. On this subject, Antonio explained the condition of university students in the following manner:

“they are precarious [workers] who already work. It is not that they educate themselves: they are being trained to go to work. They are already working. Therefore, we catch the new dimension of the university as a productive place for both students and researchers. Therefore, assuming that these two figures, both precarious, are both “put to work” (“messe al lavoro”) means first of all to finding the relation between these two subjects”

According to the Rete per l’Autoformazione, therefore, those conducting research and those studying in universities share the same condition of precarity at the same moment. Similarly, some high school activist groups that participated in the *Ddl Moratti* mobilization also stressed the same point, defining themselves as precarious both as high school students and as future workers. In line with this, Matteo defines high schools as “temporary employment agencies” that place students with external employers that do not pay them.¹¹

The frame extension process, however, was even broader in the cases of the *Reddito per Tutti** direct actions and the Euro Mayday Parade. The latter is particularly suited to the analysis of the ongoing framing activities that the activist groups engaged in its organization carried out. In the case of the Euro Mayday Parade, frame extension occurred for two main reasons. From the very beginning, the activist groups that invented the parade tended towards the construction of a broad category of precarious workers inclusive of all those people with uncertain living and working conditions. In this way, the parade was able to represent and hence attract numerous types of precarious workers. Frame extension also took place due to the participation of a wide variety of activist groups, especially from 2003 onwards. The definition of precarious workers had to be loose and general

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¹⁰ See also (Aringoli, Calella et al. 2006) and interviews with Antonio, Aldo and Roberto.

¹¹ See interviews with Matteo and Cecilia.

enough to represent all the activist groups participating in the parade's organization. The outcomes of frame extension are visible in the call for action, agreed during preparatory meetings, reproduced on posters and in leaflets for the Euro Mayday Parade, that defined the category of precarious workers.¹² The call for action for the first parade, which took place in 2001, defined the collective identity of precarious workers as follows: "We are precarious, atypical, subordinate-like, temporary. We are in training, short-term, apprentices. We are rented and fixed term".¹³ Activist groups chose expressions belonging to the established national language to describe their condition and name themselves, expressions such as "atypical", "precarious" and "temporary". Precarious workers, moreover, were described through their working contracts, such as the generic "short term" or the more precise "job training" and "apprentice". In 2001, therefore, activist groups underlined differences among precarious workers by picking up expressions and labels that were already part of the established Italian language. While the decision to hold a parade organized autonomously of conventional political actors linked to labour was an innovation, there was none such innovation at the symbolic level of an alternative system of meanings such as social movements usually create. This happened the next year, when the activist groups that sustained the Euro Mayday Parade used a new expression, "social precariat", to address all precarious workers:¹⁴

"The goal is to mobilize the whole social precariat through new forms, more direct and less ideological, so that union activism networks spread all over Italy and the EU".¹⁵

This expression was not explained in the call for action, though posters and cards used to promote the parade refined the meanings attached to the concept of precarious workers. One of the posters used the term "tempworkers", carrying the slogan "These two workers are not identical... one has his days

¹² "Frame bridging processes" (Benford and Snow 2000, 624) also occurred in the Euro Mayday Parade. In 2003, for instance, the call for action for the parade contained strong references to the demonstrations against the Iraq war that had taken place that February, when millions of people all over the world had mobilized to stop the imminent attacks unilaterally decided by the U.S.A and its allies. In the same year, the parade was crossed with mobilizations in favour of the forthcoming Italian referendum on broadening the number of workers protected by the "Article 18". The poster of the parade mirrored the frame bridging process, declaring "*no to the Iraqi war. Yes to the referendum*".

¹³ Source: 2001 call for action, available at www.chainworkers.org. Due to the use of specific terms linked to Italian labour market regulation, the English translation cannot express the exact meaning of the Italian call for action, which is the following: "*siamo precari, atipici, parasubordinati, interinali. Siamo in formazione lavoro, a termine, in apprendistato. Siamo in affitto e a scadenza.*"

¹⁴ In 2001 the parade poster already featured the term "precariat" as a synonym for precarity rather than as a collective name to single out the social subject protesting against precarity. This difference was more and more explicitly addressed in the following years. And some activist groups also stressed this in self-reflexive documents they produced about the Euro Mayday Parade. When precarity as a social problem entered the political agenda, however, the term "precariat" was mainly used to define the precarity condition instead of the social subject. For activists developing this concept, the misuse of the term mirrored the lack of understanding of the needs precarious workers had. See interview Francesco, Danilo and many other among the interviewees.

¹⁵ Source: 2002 call for action, available at www.chainworkers.org. Translation by the author.

numbered”.¹⁶ A second poster employed the term “chainworkers”, referring to those precarious workers employed in multinational commercial chains like McDonalds and Burger King. Finally, the third poster used the term “brainworkers”, a neologism referring to all those workers employed in sectors where intellectual faculties are more important than physical ones.¹⁷ These new terms nuanced the expression “social precariat” and singled out three types of precarious workers belonging to it. The framing process went further in 2003, when activist groups organizing the Euro Mayday Parade clearly defined the expression “social precariat” in their call for action:

*“The precariat is to postfordism what the proletariat was to fordism: precarious people are the social group produced by the neoliberal transformation of the economy. It is the critical mass emerging from the everlasting whirl of multinational globalization, while firms and popular quarters are demolished and office districts and commercial chains are erected. It is the tertiary of malls and commercial chains, of services to firms and individuals; it is the cognitariat of information technology and the communication industry. We are all precarious, consciously exploited or treacherously deceived by the flexibility ideology”.*¹⁸

Here, despite differences precarious workers all belong to the same “social group” created by neoliberalism and the “flexibility ideology”. The construction of the concept therefore includes a strong critique of neoliberal globalization. This, in turn, openly connects the Euro Mayday Parade to the global justice movement and the transnational level of mobilization. The “social precariat” is therefore a conceptual category in which a variety of individuals, with different jobs and lifestyles, may recognize themselves (“we are all precarious”). To some extent, precarious workers are no longer merely workers with short-term contracts. Other social subjects at the margins of the labour market may be included in the conceptual category of the “social precariat”, such as unemployed people, students, and migrants.¹⁹ At the national level, activist groups used the same conceptual category in the two *Reddito per Tutti** direct actions, as I will explain in the following paragraph (§ 3.4.2).

At the transnational level, the conceptual category of the “social precariat” was also used, albeit through the European lens. The very name of the parade already suggested this and the activist groups sustaining the protest campaign actually decided to change it, initially the parade was simply called the Mayday Parade. The use of multilingual posters also signalled this turn in the conceptualization of the

¹⁶ Interestingly enough, the term “tempworker” as well as the others introduced in the following lines, are used in the original English by activists.

¹⁷ There seems to be an allusion here to the theoretical discourse elaborated by the Italian post-workerist school, according to which it makes sense nowadays to speak of widespread social factories, where relational abilities and cognitive skills are put to work by capital thanks to a sort of self-exploitation by immaterial workers (Lazzarato 1996)..

¹⁸ Source: www.chainworkers.org

¹⁹ Migrants were considered one of the emblematic figures of precarious workers due to law 189/2002, more commonly known as the Bossi-Fini Law after the names of the two Ministers who proposed it. This law linked Italian residence permits to employment contracts. The majority of migrants in Italy at that time lived, and still live, in conditions of great uncertainty. From 2002 onwards, the Euro Mayday Parade calls for action explicitly addressed this problem and framed migrants as precarious workers. It was only in 2008, however, that the presence of migrants during the parade became higher compared to previous years.

category of precarious workers: the “social precariat” was no longer Italian, but European. In this vein, the 2005 call for action underlined that precarious workers were the majority of people in Europe,²⁰ and the 2006 call for action referred to the anti-CPE movement in France as a symbol of all struggles against precarity rooted at the local levels in Europe.

Precarity as a challenge and an opportunity

The definition of “precarious workers” encompasses many meanings and a variety of working and living conditions. Quite obviously, multiple interpretations of “precarious workers” lead to manifold elucidations of the other central concept singled out through prognostic framing, namely “precarity”. On the whole, the results show that the system of meaning constructed around the concept of precarity is a dual one from a semantic point of view. Precarity, in fact, was conceived at the same time as a challenge to be faced and an opportunity to explore. Yet while the first meaning was particularly evident in the documents produced by activist groups, the second emerged in many interviews with activists. This was probably due to the fact that social movement documents served to highlight and then diffuse the existence of a social problem, precarity: the “injustice frame” (Gamson 1992) had to prevail over the positive aspects of being a precarious worker. The dual semantic nature of precarity was more evident in some case studies than in others, and more clearly expressed by some interviewees than others.

In the case of the *Precari Atesia* strikes, in particular, precarity was seen first of all as a social problem, a risk to be taken and a challenge to be overcome. This was due to the peculiar situation of precarious workers, who claimed to have all the duties of open-ended contract workers without their rights. They perceived, therefore, a situation of “relative deprivation” concerning their working conditions as compared to the “reference group” of open-ended contract workers (Runciman 1972, 11). Accordingly, diagnostic framing led to the elaboration of precarity as a negative working and living condition to be changed. To put it in other words, activists and protestors involved in the *Precari Atesia* strikes felt exploited by their employer, who used short-term contracts in order to pay lower taxes and thus make more profit. As already pointed out above, each of the case studies elaborated a collective action frame which underlined the negative outcomes of from being a precarious worker, although none as neatly as in the case of the *Precari Atesia* strikes. Two elements in particular shaped the elaboration of precarity as a challenge to be faced in the Euro

²⁰ Cfr. “Precarity is the most widespread condition of labour and life in Europe today. It affects everyone, everyday, in every part of life: whether chosen or imposed, precarity is a generalised condition experienced by the majority of people. Precarious people are now the corner-stone of the wealth production process”. Source: 2005 call for action, available at www.chainworkers.org

Mayday Parade, the *Serpica Naro* fashion show, the *Reddito per Tutt** direct actions and the demonstration against the *Ddl Moratti*: one was linked to the material level of individuals' lives, namely the "lack of income". The other was related to the symbolic level of collective representation, namely the "lack of institutional political representation" and, as a consequence of this, invisibility at the public and political levels. The Euro Mayday Parade clearly expressed the latter concern as early as 2001, when its call for action read: "We are the majority of those who enter the labour market. But we have no voice, we do not exist. Our condition is obscure, suffered in silence and in solitude".²¹ This lack of conventional and institutional political representation also referred to traditional and sometimes also radical trade unions. This was evident in the case of the *Precari Atesia* strikes, whose collective action frame was opposed to traditional trade unions, specifically the CGIL, blamed for representing the interests of the employer instead of those of precarious workers. Similarly, activists supporting the demonstration against the *Ddl Moratti* argued that political parties and trade unions were largely absent, even from participating in the demonstration.²² The same situation was seen in the Euro Mayday Parade, as Goffredo explained:

"the first year, the [l'Euro Mayday Parade] was snubbed by many of those who dealt with labour issues: traditional trade unions obviously, but also radical trade unions, that at the beginning said that this was a just a joke, that this was not the way in which the issue [precarity] should be treated, that the issues were open-ended contracts and national agreements"

According to this activist, neither traditional nor radical trade unions supported the parade because precarity was not even a social problem, and labour struggles should centre on open-ended contract workers. This problem was also present at the transnational level of the Euro Mayday Parade, as the 2005 parade poster shows: "we are invisible and count for nothing in the traditional forms of social and political representation or in the European agenda".²³ According to activist groups mobilized about precarity, therefore, the recognition of precarity as a social problem by conventional political actors was lacking at both the national and transnational levels. The upward scale shift towards the transnational level, therefore, also included changes in the collective action

²¹ This sense of "political loneliness" was explicitly reinforced by the poster of the parade which features the famous astronaut Yuri Gagarin saying "may day, may day", the classical cry for help used in dangerous situations. Source: 2001 call for action, available at www.chainworkers.org.

²² The exception was the involvement of university student collectives linked to the *Giovani Comunisti*, the youth branch of Rifondazione Comunista. The *Giovani Comunisti*, however, often maintained a dialectical position towards their political party of reference and many of their members had strong ties with grassroots movements. Therefore, they cannot be considered a conventional political actor in the strict sense.

²³ Source: 2005 call for action, available at www.chainworkers.org

frame, looking at the contentious issue from a European perspective,²⁴ though maintaining specific collective action frames in each of the countries involved in the parade's organization.²⁵

Apart from the symbolic level of political recognition and legitimization, precarity was also framed as a social problem that caused material diseases. The activists and precarious workers I interviewed felt that precarity led to worse working and living conditions than those of open-ended contract workers. As a consequence, a stable income was missed and a constant feeling of uncertainty was experienced. This, in turn, brought other changes, the most important being the difficulties that precarious workers had in thinking about their futures and making long-term life plans. Here, there was a mix between material needs, such as the possibility of owning or occupying a stable home, and individual, more intimate desires, such as the possibility of having a family and children. In this sense, precarity acquired a gendered meaning: unlike men, almost all the women I interviewed stressed that being a precarious woman worker was extremely difficult, and that being a precarious working mother was even more difficult to imagine. Collective action frames associated to the Euro Mayday Parade and the *Serpica Naro* fashion show partially included the gender issue as it emerged during the interviews.

This happened more, however, at the visual level than at the textual level of documents generated by social movements (Mattoni and Doerr 2007; Mattoni 2008). In the *Serpica Naro* fashion show, for instance, the Chainworkers Crew designed some special garments for women facing precarity and revealed them the very day of the protest event during an ad hoc fashion parade. The outfits addressed problems that women might experience while working and that might become particularly difficult to manage as precarious workers, such as sexual harassment, high stress levels, gender-based discrimination, and the possibility of getting pregnant. That said, framing precarity as a gendered issue was not common to all five of the case studies, which tended more towards the construction of a general social problem in which a variety of social categories could recognize themselves. In this vein, the elaboration of the "social precariat" as a concept indicating a broad social subject was matched by the development of "social precarity" as a concept referring to a general social problem affecting individuals' lives at various levels. Due to a lack of a stable

²⁴ That said, the European dimension of the parade was sometimes questioned within the transnational network of activist groups who organized it. The most important "frame disputes" (Benford 1993) were related to the recognition of Europe as a reference political space where struggles against precarity should be rooted. On the one hand, Europe was considered a common and fruitful space for struggle, recognizing the European Union as a political institution to which protests and claims should be addressed. On the other hand, some activist groups refused to consider the European space as a field of struggle and stressed their connections with the global justice movement as a whole instead.

²⁵ For instance, in Germany and Spain precarity was strongly associated with migrant issues. This was due to the national contexts, but also to the activist groups involved in the organization of the parade and their main interests.

income, certainty and difficulties in making long-term projects, in the *Serpica Naro* fashion show, Euro Mayday Parade and *Reddito per Tutti** case studies the expression “social precarity” was used to highlight that precarity concerned various aspects of existence: affection, mobility, knowledge and income. Precarity, therefore, was not framed as a social problem strictly linked to the use of short-term contracts, but as a more general social condition, a “new form of life”, as Claudio put it in one of the interviews, affecting numerous social categories including students, workers and migrants. The collective action frame of the *Reddito per Tutti** direct actions went a step further, claiming that the “social precariat” was made up of a variety of individuals that were producers of wealth simply by being a part of society, as the call for action argued:

“When language becomes production, each of us immediately becomes a social producer, each of us produces value. We produce value when we create innovative languages which advertising expropriates from us, which constantly draws on the patrimony of the streets; through the use of goods that are valorized by our own use of them, like when we wear the brands of multinational corporations, we also produce value when we consume or when we pay attention to advertisements in our consumption: for this reason we have to be paid.”²⁶

In this case, there was a frame extension to include as many social categories as possible. This was achieved by addressing one ordinary activity, purchasing, that everyone performs on an almost daily basis. The social problem at stake in this case was indeed “constantly increasing prices” as well as precarity. In the case of the Euro Mayday Parade, frame bridging with other contentious issues took place, such as the war in Iraq in 2003 and the migrant issue in 2006.

So far I have illustrated the negative semantic connotations associated with the expression ‘precarity’ in the collective action frames elaborated in the five case studies. With the exception of the *Precari Atesia* strikes, however, diagnostic framing also led to the construction of positive understandings of precarity. Although precarity was still considered a social problem, the perception of relative deprivation was to some extent balanced out by some positive aspects of flexible jobs. In this, precarious workers escaped from the label of victims and claimed agency over the development of their own life projects. In this perception, the concept of precarity goes hand in hand with another pivotal concept: freedom of choice as linked to working conditions. In this line, many activists stressed that precarity or, rather, flexibility could be the result of an active choice by individuals, and that being a precarious or, rather, flexible worker could be a resource: autonomy and freedom in planning life and work time, and balancing them according to one’s preferences and

²⁶ See call for action published in *Indymedia Italy* on 4 Nov 2004 (*indy041104_F*)

needs was the most valuable aspect of precarity. Antonio, for instance, expressed this point of view: “*Flexibility is not simply a negative condition of passivity, of blackmail and suffering, it also has the potential for autonomy, for freedom from the traditional prison of work*”. This approach to precarity refutes the construction of precarious workers as mere victims, imparting instead a rather positive reading of precarity and flexibility. Despite all the negative consequences of being precarious workers, in fact, the majority of the interviewees appreciated the potential linked to short-term contracts or simply being a precarious worker. In this line, having more than one job in a lifetime was considered stimulating in that individuals might gain new skills useful outside the working environment. To complement these arguments, some activists also underlined that precarity or, better, flexibility as an autonomous worker’s choice was a claim expressed by certain activist groups during past cycles of protest in Italy. The reference here is frequently to the two year period of struggle between 1975 and 1977. In a sense, therefore, present forms of short-term contracts are considered the long-term outcomes of past struggles. As already stated earlier in this section, the reconstruction of the positive meanings associated to precarity was more evident in the interviews than in documents generated by social movements. While the latter contained public grievances over the inequalities and exclusions of precarity, the former represented reflections on the same concept that circulated mostly within the social movement milieu. Though they remained in the shadow at the textual level of calls for action, leaflets and posters, these attitudes to precarity were visible at the visual level of protest, where contentious performances were often colourful and joyful, as in the case of the Euro Mayday Parade and the *Serpica Naro* fashion show. As I will explain in the next paragraph, the stress on positive aspects of being a precarious workers were frequently underlined in a more explicit way through the prognostic framing process, in which social movements elaborate and propose solutions to those social problems they identify (Snow and Benford 1992, 137)

Solutions to Precarity: From Open-Ended Contracts to Basic Income

Each case study presented a different collective action frame in which precarious workers as a social subject and precarity as a social problem had a variety of meanings. These differences came to light when considering the prognostic framing processes through which activists elaborated possible solutions to the social problem of precarity which they then expressed in claims and demands. Differences were partially due to the type of protest event in which activist groups engaged, but they also reflected the way in which the concepts of “precarious workers” and “precarity” had been conceived and framed. While it is impossible to speak of a homogeneous master frame of precarity, it is certainly possible to consider each collective action frame as

internally consistent, in the sense that there were no great conceptual gaps or shifts between their diagnostic and prognostic elements. In the *Precari Atesia* strikes, for instance, the main claim was to transform short-term contracts into open-ended contracts. Prognostic framing led, therefore, to the development of concise, material and immediate demands. A similar situation happened in the case of the demonstration against the *Ddl Moratti*: Since these actions were against the introduction of a particular law, the main claim targeted the Parliament and basically asked Italian deputies not to approve the law under discussion. Once again, the demand was as concise as the protest target. Both these case studies, moreover, asked for changes in the immediate future.

In the *Reddito per Tutti** direct actions and the *Serpica Naro* fashion show, instead, prognostic framing led to the elaboration of solutions experimented during the protest events themselves. In the former, precarious workers were constructed as producers rather than consumers. In line with this, they gained access to goods during two direct actions and re-distributed them to others attending the protest event. To some extent, they put into practice a symbolic representation of the solution they had elaborated in order to face precarity: income redistribution. In this way, moreover, they also evoked the claim around which the protest event revolved - as its name suggested: a “basic income” for everyone, distributed in the forms of both money and services, such as free public transport and low rent homes for precarious workers. In a similar way, the *Serpica Naro* fashion show also put into practice some of the solutions it proposed. The fashion parade of garments for precarity addressed some of the problems that precarious workers, and among them women especially, face due to their peculiar working conditions. There was yet another solution, however, that the Chainworkers Crew elaborated and actually practiced. Since one of the problems that precarious workers experience is their isolation, the very development of the sham fashion show provided the opportunity to establish new social ties among some of those employed in the fashion sector. There, the practical and immediate solution was to establish a network of precarious workers or, as the press release claimed, “Putting people and their knowledge together. People and knowledge that are usually networked from above to create and recreate ideological outposts”.²⁷ In other words, the Chainworkers Crew explicitly addressed one of the features that every protest event implies: the creation and subsequent maintenance of social ties among individuals that have similar concerns related to the same contentious issue. The difference here is that, in the *Serpica Naro* fashion show, this outcome was one of the declared objectives of the protest event, which also aimed to reveal the precarious equilibrium on which institutions, firms and enterprises employing precarious workers rest, as Alessandra pointed out:

²⁷ Source: www.chainworkers.it

“In two words, this is to render more precarius those who render us more precarious. In the sense that if you render us more precarious, we can render you more precarious. Because when you propose an awful wokring contract to me, you can’t claim my loyalty. Because the absurd thing is that they also ask this, not only that we work ten hours per day, but also that we be loyal. But precarity has a price.”²⁸

Alessandra summarizes one of the most important aspects of the *Serpica Naro* collective action frame: precarious workers suffer from their working and living conditions, but they overcome their sense of isolation and frustration positively through participation in the media hoax and the creation of the sham fashion show. They did so by creating a temporary possible world in which precarious workers exploited in the Milan fashion week were able to connect, to put their knowledge to use in a common cause, and to uncover the intrinsic fragility of their employers. Paraphrasing the title of a book about alternative media, they were able to create a temporary “fissure in the fashion system” (Rodriguez 2001). Both the *Reddito per Tutt** direct actions and the *Serpica Naro* fashion show represent instances of “prefigurative politics” in which collective action renders the solution protestors are fighting for possible (Epstein 1991; Polletta 2002). While in the other protest events prognostic framing activities lead to solutions to be achieved in the future, in these two case studies activist groups experienced, on a temporary basis, how their lives would be if their protests succeeded.

During the Euro Mayday Parade, a protest campaign that developed over several years and at two geographical levels, prognostic framing was made up by a wide range of claims, which varied according to changes occurring both within and outside the social movement milieu. From 2001 to 2002, for instance, the calls for action expressed general claims against precarity without any precise protest target, while from 2003 onwards one of the demands of the Euro Mayday Parade was the abrogation of Law N°30/2003, which introduced several forms of short-term contract, including which on-call jobs and job-sharing. A change that occurred at the legislative level affected the prognostic framing activities of the activist groups sustaining the parade, who considered the abrogation of the law a prerequisite for improving the working and living conditions of precarious workers. This dynamic was similar to what was seen in the *Precari Atesia* strikes and the demonstration against the *Ddl Moratti*. Transformations occurring at the legislative, social and political levels usually activate social movements that react to change and propose new solutions. On the whole, however, the Euro Mayday Parade went one step further. Instead of simply reacting

²⁸ In Italian, the first sentence was “precarizzare i precarizzatori”, a slogan that immediately evoked one of the most important aspects of the collective action frame related to the *Serpica Naro* fashion show.

to legislative and political changes, activist groups proposed innovative solutions to precarity framed as a challenge to be faced and, at the same time, an opportunity to be explored. It is exactly in prognostic framing activities, indeed, that the dual semantic interpretation of precarity was shared in asking for “new social rights” for precarious workers and the introduction of a “basic income” in Italy.²⁹ The expression “new social rights” refers not only to basic working rights such as maternity leave, but also to other social rights which may be grouped under the umbrella “access rights”. The claims expressed in the Euro Mayday Parade addressed the right to (access) to public transportation, to a home, and to knowledge. The fulfilment of these “new social rights” together with the introduction of a “basic income” was the pivot of the new welfare state system that precarious workers demanded through the parade. Changes at the level of welfare state measures, instead of the re-introduction of generalized open-ended contracts, was the solution that the Euro Mayday Parade proposed in order to maintain the positive outcomes of having a short-term contract (see §3.4.2) whilst neutralizing the negative outcomes of being a precarious worker.³⁰

When the Euro Mayday Parade shifted from the national to the transnational level, prognostic framing activities also occurred in considering Europe as a political space in which claims could be elaborated and diffused. The construction of a European network of activist groups struggling against precarity thus also led to a shift in prognostic framing activities. Even though a national call for action focusing on the Italian political and social space continued to be elaborated, claims acquired a more transnational meaning. While in 2001 one of the proposed solutions to precarity was the introduction of “new social rights”, in 2004 the network of activist groups organizing the parade at the transnational level asked for “European equality”, “European social rights” and the adoption of the European directive on temporary workers.³¹ Something similar happened in 2005, when the call for action read:

“We demand social equality for all, the end of labor precarization and all forms of flexploitation, after two decades of labor market deregulation which have caused diffuse poverty and NOT reduced unemployment. We demand FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT for migrants and INCOME SECURITY FOR ALL as fundamental steps toward a truly social Europe.”³²

²⁹ See calls for action 2004 and 2005.

³⁰ As I said, the Euro Mayday Parade included a variety of activist groups demonstrating against precarity. While they all agreed on the general call for action, some had different proposals about how to improve the working and living conditions of precarious workers.

³¹ See call for action 2004.

³² See call for action 2005

As stressed in the call for action, the issues at stake included not only precarity, but also the construction of “a truly social Europe”, and migrants, besides being precarious workers, were also included among those who should have the right to “income security”.

As seen with diagnostic framing activities, the elaboration of solutions to solve precarity followed different paths and led to different outcomes in terms of claims and demands. While some protest events, the *Precari Atesia* strikes and the demonstration against the *Ddl Moratti*, stressed more concrete solutions for the immediate future, others concentrated on more structural and long-term solutions, such as the Euro Mayday Parade. Finally, the *Serpica Naro* fashion show and the *Reddito per Tutti** direct actions, while also elaborating some demands for the future, temporarily rendered possible what activist groups imagined in their prognostic framing activities. In doing this, they engaged in “prefigurative politics” that created in the here and now what social movements demanded for future societies.

3.5 CONCLUSIONS

Apart the very condition of precarity, one of the most important problem that precarious workers have to deal with is the lack or representation of their interests at the private, public and political level (Rizza 2005). Related to this point, the elaboration of shared system of meanings concerning precarity during mobilizations was a very important step towards the recognition of precarious workers as a relevant social category and of precarity as a problematic condition to deal with at the political level. With this regard, collective action became a crucial generator of resources, since mobilizations against precarity were mainly based on active political participation, rather than on linkages with other, more conventional political actors. Collective action was, moreover, used as a means to stress the boundaries between the “we” and the “others”. In doing so, collective action worked as a resource generator also at the cultural level, in the sense that mobilizations against precarity contributed to the creation and diffusion of new “symbolic tools” in societies both “contextual”, that is situational, and “public”, that is subject to reinterpretation and context over their meanings (Williams 1995, 127). On the whole, the result is that precarious workers were constructed as a new social category that encompassed many forms of social exclusion and inequalities in contemporary societies. The resulting “we” was therefore extremely composite and potentially inclusive. It was able, in addition, to convey a certain sense of novelty as connected to the rise of the precarious worker as a social and political actor. This definitional work, also conducted through the choice of certain organizational patterns, certain resources to be created and

mobilized and certain contentious performances to be chosen, is only the first step towards a gain of recognition at the public level and in the political arena.

As in many other struggles for recognition occurring in contemporary societies, mobilizations about precarity act at the double level of recognition and redistribution (Fraser 2003). Without entering in the theoretical debated about how recognition and redistribution interplay in such mobilizations,³³ here it is sufficient to notice that those mobilized against precarity in Italy also asked for material changes related to the distribution of economic resources: demanding strong interventions at the welfare state level means, in fact, asking for material inclusion of precarious workers in societies. These requests are not surprising given that the Italian welfare state system revolves around full-time, open-ended workers and hence excludes, with some experimental exceptions at the regional and local level, precarious workers from basic work and social rights (Tronti and Ceccato 2008).³⁴

Another interpretation, probably complementary with the one just presented above, is also possible. Juris and Pleyers elaborate the concept of “alter-activism”, which they link to youth political participation in the global justice movement. According to these authors, alter-activism is a new form of activism linked to societal transformations that have occurred “in the past two decades”, amongst which are the rise of “precarious job markets”. As a consequence, young people have been allowed more free time for activities such as “experimenting with alternative lifestyles, travelling, and activism” (Juris and Pleyers 2009, 71). To some extent, what McAdam named “biographical availability” (McAdam 1988) of students participating in the U.S.A. student movements of the 1960s, seems to be amplified when being a precarious workers. That said, it is also true that due to the high flexibility that is required when hired through precarious forms of contracts, expanded biographical availability for young and also less young workers could develop according to rather unpredictable patterns for precarious workers themselves. This aspect, therefore, can undermine the participation to both latent and non-latent stages of mobilization.

That said, many of the activists I interviewed, especially the younger among them, considered the experience of being precarious workers as leading to some opportunities they did not want to renounce to, amongst which the possibility of changing workplace, of acquiring new competencies and of exerting a greater degree of agency on the working time and spare time allocation. Claims

³³ For a debate on this topic see Honneth (2001) and Fraser and Honneth (2003).

³⁴ Apart from the exception of the Precari Atesia collective, which engaged in struggles to see their contracts recognized as illegal and hence aimed at the reintroduction of open-ended forms of employment, in the four other mobilizations against precarity under investigation the main claims revolved around material changes at the level of the welfare state system.

and demands formulated during mobilizations against precarity, therefore, did not aim at eliminating the social category of precarious workers, considered as a fundamental and growing part of contemporary productive systems. The ultimate scope was, rather, the introduction of those changes in the welfare state system that would allow precarious workers to overcome income discontinuity and social exclusion.

Transformations in the labour market sector leading to the spread of the precarity condition to some extent reshape the transition of young people to adulthood (Zucchetti 2005, 37). As already noticed elsewhere, the youth is lesser and lesser linked to biological life course (Melucci 1996 quoted in Rossi 2009). Rather, it is to be intended as a condition shaped by social, cultural and economic constraints, amongst which labour market flexibility plays a crucial role (Buzzi, Cavalli, De Lillo 2002; Schizzerotto 2002). This means that, taken a certain biological age, an individual can experience the condition of being young and another individual can experience the condition of being adult. In the past it was more common that teenagers already experienced some traits of adulthood, including being either employed or self-employed. Nowadays, instead, the situation seems more nuanced: those who once would have defined as mature adult can nowadays experience some traits of youth, including being dependent on their parents' income. These undergoing changes pose some questions to social movement studies when engaging in the investigation of contentious politics in contemporary societies. As this paper suggests, for instance, the understanding of claims and demands produced in the context of mobilizations against precarity also passes through the analysis of being young as an experience, with both positive and negative sides, that is determined also though not exclusively by labour market transformations.

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