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## **Educational and Professional Trajectories of Knowledge Workers: By Way of Introduction**

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## **Educational and Professional Trajectories of Knowledge Workers: By Way of Introduction**

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This special issue of the *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* is devoted to the presentation of case studies aimed at analysing “Knowledge workers’ educational and professional trajectories” in Southern Italy. In particular, the papers published discuss the results of the qualitative and quantitative analysis developed by the research unit of the University of Salento within the research project “Public Sphere Professions in Hard Times”, funded by the PRIN 2010-2011 programme of the ‘Italian Ministry of Education’ and coordinated by Mario Morcellini.

Public sphere professions have been experiencing a severe crisis. However, they still have a crucial function, both due to their intermediary role between the individual and the collective dimensions of social life, as well as the relevance of the kind of knowledge they rely upon for understanding contemporary society (Morcellini, 2012). The choice of paying specific attention to knowledge workers arises from two main arguments: first of all, knowledge workers seem to embody and exemplify most of the challenges that have characterised the transformation of public sphere professions; secondly, the precariousness and flexibility of knowledge work is one of the main effects and, at the same time, one of the causes of the significant transformation affecting work in the Western World. Thus, analysing knowledge work offers the chance to observe the transformation process of work in light of the continuous reshaping – through the emergence of the so-called “knowledge society” – of forms of

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work organisation, work ethos, cultural patterns, educational paths, as well as – with this being one of the most vital aspects of the case studies presented below – of the ways biographies and work trajectories are nowadays experienced and defined by social actors (Sennet, 1998; Leccardi, 2006; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Gil Calvo, 2009; Scanagatta & Maccarini, 2011; Merico, 2012).

Among the various aspects characterizing the aforementioned process, the papers published pay specific attention to the educational and professional dimensions, since they seemed to be the most suitable to outline the social, biographical, and ethical aspects of the present-day process of change. More openly and to set the context: after playing a vital role in giving coherence and stability to biographies throughout (solid) modernity, work has increasingly become – to recall the categories most widely used in sociological debate – uncertain, precarious, fragmented, characterized by the ambivalent combination of opportunities and risks produced by a kind of flexibility that falls roughly entirely on the shoulders of the individuals (Sennet, 1998; Beck et al., 1995; Giovani, 2005; Lo Verde, 2005; Longo, 2007; Palidda, 2009; Gallino, 2014). On the other hand, education (in particular tertiary education) assumes an unparalleled pivotal yet controversial role in the definition of life trajectories (Chisholm, 2014; Walter et al. 2016). The resulting lifelong-lifewide perspective involves a complex re-contextualisation of learning processes, the deconstruction of practices, their refocusing through a life-course perspective and the recoding of the relationship between the different learning areas (Chisholm, 2008). Nevertheless, it also involves – as widely discussed in the following essays – the emergence of new and intense contradictions, in particular with reference to the transition from education to work (Blossfeld et al, 2011; Scanagatta & Maccarini, 2011; de Luigi et al, 2014; Viesti, 2016).

It is also worth remembering that the “production” of knowledge diverges significantly from that of material goods. Knowledge economy (or the so-called ‘cognitive capitalism’) requires time, space and relations of production that assume new characters. The most noteworthy include: the distinction between work and spare time becomes blurred; the “time of production” takes roughly the shape of a “timeless time” (Castels, 2009) which, overlaps with the overall life-time rather than with the working day; production is no longer located into a single fixed physical place, but it has

been relocated into an endless sequence of “polycentric” spaces; relationships develop in new directions, more fluid and networked, but also increasingly individualised and disjointed. Briefly, “It is individual life that today is put to work”, thus producing new forms of subjectivity and alienation (Cvijanović et al, 2010, 55).

Overall, educational, professional and life trajectories increasingly take the shape of a de-standardised juxtaposition of pieces of an abstract mosaic that is very difficult to recompose (Taylor, 1991; Bauman, 1995; Walther et al, 2002; Cesareo, 2005). Therefore, as they are meant here, knowledge workers become an emblematic illustration to shed light on the causes, effects and steadiness of the condition of work and workers’ biographies in late modernity. At the same time, the specific role that precariousness and flexibility play in the definition of the identity of knowledge workers gives us new insights into understanding the strengths and weaknesses of ‘knowledge economy’, as well as the consequences it has on individuals.

Our arguments become even more relevant if we take into account four specific dimensions, related to the context in which the case studies have been carried out. The first deals with the profound contradictions that characterise both the Italian labour market – with its high rates of unemployment and inactivity, and the specific problems faced by the tertiary sector and network economy – as well as the Italian educational system – with a specific emphasis, for our discussion, on tertiary and university education. The second dimension concerns the social categories primarily affected by the previously mentioned processes, namely young people – and increasingly more young adults – as well as women, for whom the intertwining between educational and professional choices and practices often assumes “atypical” paths. The third refers to the particular educational qualifications chosen as a target in the whole research project, namely degrees in political, social and communication sciences – increasingly considered as “weak degrees”, since they are more likely to lead toward weaker employment prospects and conditions. The last dimension, vital for the analysis carried out in what follows, is connected to the peculiar economic and social conditions in Southern Italy – where the changes that are taking place in education, labour market and youth conditions seem likely to get worse (Longo, 2007; Palidda, 2009; Cortese, 2012; Lo Verde, 2013; Rauty, 2015).

These brief introductory notes undoubtedly do not cover (and are not intended to discuss) the complex issues underlying such a broad and multifaceted subject but rather their aim is simply to give a rough picture of the background upon which the case studies presented in the following essays have been conceived and developed.

The research carried out as part of the whole project by the unit of the University of Salento has considered different contexts, in which the ethos of knowledge workers, their educational and professional trajectories, along with their identity construction have been analysed: in particular, the papers take into consideration the cases of social planners, call centre operators, digital media workers and “precarious” researchers.

The first paper deals with the analysis of the “contentious balance between education, professional skills and labour market” that characterise “the work culture of the social planners”. Drawing on data collected in Apulia using qualitative research techniques, Emiliano Bevilacqua and Katia Lotteria provide a comprehensive picture of this profession, that allows to exemplify the main recent transformation within a larger cognitive work field. Social planners present a multifaceted and blurred profile, that may vary significantly with regard to education and training, skills, visions of the self, income, professional experiences and occupational roles. However, according to the Authors, these professionals seem to be all experiencing a critical ambivalence between an ethos that “tends to blend the individual and cooperative dimensions” and reveals “a potentially virtuous cycle between training, individuality and social motivations”, on the one hand, and the perception of a deep discontent to their income, professional status and, above all, social recognition of their work, on the other.

In the second paper, Luca Antonazzo and Marta Vignola explore the “career paths” of call centre operators. Moving from the debate on cognitive capitalism and knowledge economy, the “factories of voices” are considered as a sociological “laboratory” in which it is possible to observe the “disciplining mechanisms that from bodies move to the identity of workers”. The analysis is based on interviews carried out in two call centres located in the province of Lecce, and aim at exploring the educational paths, working experiences and role in the working context of the operators. It results in a portrayal that combines four main aspects: the gap

between the level of education attained and the tasks requested, that reveal a “danger of ineffectiveness” of weak degrees; the pervasiveness of the “ethos of flexibility” and its consequences over personal and professional identity; the disciplining mechanisms that run over body, space, time and words; and, finally, the loss of the sense of future, together with the chance to design, dream, or imagine it.

The following two papers are devoted to the analysis of digital media workers. Gennaro Iorio analyses the relationship “between work flexibility and higher education”. The first part of the essay offers an outline of the main transformations in the connections between university instruction and the labour market, thus providing the background to understand the “extreme fragility” of the digital economy in Italy and its southern regions. In the second part, the results of thirty qualitative interviews with digital workers carried out in Salerno are presented. The trajectories of the interviewees seem to evolve in a context qualified by a threefold ambivalence between: the degree attained and the competencies required; the qualified workforce demand and supply, which immediately produce hyper-specialization and underemployment; and, not least, between the process of flexibilization produced by digital technologies and the uncertainty of workers’ personal lives. In summary, their work (and life) trajectories seem to follow – as Iorio suggests – the ‘logic of poverty’ rather than the ‘logic of integration’, thus triggering a potential “crystallization of [...] precariousness”.

In their paper, Davide Borrelli, Sarah Siciliano and Mihaela Gavrila explore the “Identity, Values and Educational Needs” of the freelance digital media workers who participated at the “Lecce European Capital of Culture” project. Moving from what the Authors define “the productive energy of knowledge”, the results of the analysis of in-depth interviews and focus groups allows to draw a detailed picture of a process in which professional and training insecurity, along with flexibility increasingly often tend to “affects [...] one’s private status and biography”. At the same time, the workers interviewed claim the positive aspects of professions that are perceived as freed from “the constraints and standards of the traditional ‘job’”. The result is a sort of “double bind” that underpins their educational and professional trajectories, emphasizing a process “ranging from dynamic subjectivity to rigid environments, from the possibility of

growth to fear of marginalisation between uncertain prospects and stagnation”.

In “Precarious researchers”, Giuseppe Gaballo presents the main results of a research carried out in 9 small and medium universities in central and southern Italy. The Author analyses the results of questionnaires administered to PhD students, research fellows and research assistants. The researchers interviewed present very long and fragmented paths; most of them carry both official and unofficial workloads (from teaching to administrative activities), as well as paid and unpaid activities; at the same time, they spend more hours than expected on their work and, often, need to find an extra-job in order to get an adequate income. This results in a low general level of satisfaction and in the shortening of future prospects, with precariousness that “becomes a trap”. In the second part of the paper, this broad picture is further developed through the analysis of in-deep interviews carried out in the University of Salento in order to better understand the biographical dimension of the (precarious) academic experience.

The special issue is complemented by a paper dealing with “the relationship between financial education and society”. On the basis of a three year web-monitoring, Emanuela E. Rinaldi analyses and classifies a sample of 120 financial and economic education projects targeted at students. The Author discusses three interpretative models, “linear”, “dialectic” and “negotiation”, associated to three main theoretical perspectives, each one addressing different functions of financial education and representations of the relationship between financial education and society. The analysis carried out allows to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the projects examined, as well as to identify a set of critical points useful for planning future activities aimed at raising the level of financial literacy amongst young Italians.

Despite the diversity of the subjects analysed, the various theoretical and methodological approaches applied, and the specific characteristics of the contexts analysed, we think that the following essays provide an opportunity to identify the plurality of issues, contradictions and problems that are knowledge workers’ educational and professional trajectories undergoing, as well as – following the connection recognized at the beginning of these introductory notes – to question the statute of public space professions. Furthermore, we also hope that the discussion developed

in the following papers could offer a contribution to understanding the wider changes and challenges that the lives of individuals are facing through the de-materialisation of production and the consolidation of what we are increasingly used to defining as the “knowledge society”, while also stimulating new research questions and lines of inquiry.

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