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Identity, Values and Educational Needs of Digital Media Workers. The Lecce European Capital of Culture 2019 Project

Davide Borrelli *, *Mihaela Gavrilă* ** and *Sarah Siciliano* ***

Abstract: This research explores the framework of identity and value of self-employed knowledge workers involved in the Lecce European Capital of Culture project. This issue is analysed on the basis of the capability approach of Martha Nussbaum, who argues that developing capability, i.e. freedom to do and to choose otherwise has a greater educational value than producing previously established functions, promoting capacities means promoting spheres of influence and this is not the same getting people to operate a certain way (Nussbaum, 2011). Using three focus groups, we have explored the consequences of this flexible employment status on their social and emotional life, concentrating on two aspects. The first aim of the study is made up of an exploratory study of the professional practice of these workers to see if there is a particular ethos of their value systems and culture that they identify with. The second aim was to look into their personal satisfaction and see to what extent their academic background and professional training had informed and enriched their current activities. The focus of this study is not to judge the quality of their education, but rather an attempt to analyse the educational needs for this sector in the light of the professional experiences of these knowledge workers.

Keywords: digital work, flexibility, educational needs, capability

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Introduction

This paper¹ aims at exploring the professional and educational world of freelance workers involved in the different activities that had been planned and activated for the project, *Lecce European Capital of Culture 2019*².

We have called them *digital media workers* (DMW) of knowledge³. These workers are all self-employed and come from diverse sectors including, communications, public relations and IT.

Inspired by a strong emotional involvement, the 21 DMW's interviewed in this sample have invested not only their time but also their souls, to bring about change for the better: "in that moment, none of us thought about our immediate personal futures.

As a team we were all focussed on the possibility of our community's regeneration, sharing a common objective in a team that existed for all of us without conflict", stated one of them, the philosopher who specialises in accessibility.

Many of them had begun the work as unpaid volunteers and had, over time, found paid employment.

As we will see, it is difficult to precisely define their specific roles: their professional lives have been varied but, in general, most came from backgrounds in the humanities. Indeed, they themselves had difficulties in defining themselves.

In general, the world of the DMW's⁴ is a complex working ecosystem characterised by a constant tension between freedom and limitations,

¹ The research that inspired this article was developed within the investigations initiated by the local unit of the University of Salento for the PRIN: "Public Sphere Professions in Hard Times", coordinated by Mario Morcellini.

² The project "European Capital of Culture is an EU instrument, born in 1985, with the aim to "activate positive processes in terms of change and strengthening the identity of a city. A city is not designated Capital for its historical, artistic or environmental, but for its ability to create a new sense around this heritage, taking into account the urban and productive contexts in which action is taken. In fact, the criteria to be met by the candidate cities program are twofold: the European dimension and the relationship between city and citizens, called to have an active and lasting role in the cultural development of the city. The city is invited to enhance their peculiarities and to give proof of their creativity. Source: <http://www.lecce2019.it/2019/capitaledellacultura.php>.

³ Who are the DMWs? To frame the subjects of our investigation, we found it useful to refer to the national framework of these workers, in relation to the professionals repertoires encoded by ISFOL, ISTAT, and the survey of 100 professions of communication of Arjuna Tuzzi (2006) (more information can be found in the methods section).

⁴ The need to use the term 'knowledge workers' (knowledge workers), as has been widely questioned since the 60s because it was too broad (Florida, 2002; Benkler, 2006), arises

dynamism and risk (Scanagatta & Maccarini, 2011). Both in normative and social terms, it is an open and constantly evolving field, which is, for the most part, still incompletely defined (Accornero, 2000). For the most part it is made up of actors with tertiary qualifications whose characteristic common trait is essentially that of the flexible employment scheme typical of “freelance life” (Banfi, & Bologna, 2011).

By focussing on the DMWs this research seeks to shed light on the category as a whole. In particular we have concentrated on the following two aspects. The first is the professional practices of the DMWs to see if there is a particular ethos in their value systems and culture that they identify with. The second led us, in particular, to assess the levels of satisfaction and perceived effectiveness the DMWs have of their own specific training courses during Higher Education.

The focus of this study was not to judge the quality of the education the sample had received from their Alma Maters as, for example, the research coordinated by Gianfranco Viesti University of Southern Italy (Fondazione RES 2016). Rather, it was an attempt to analyse the educational needs for this sector in the light of their professional experience, and, in particular, look at the experience of *Lecce European Capital of Culture*. We also concentrated on the extent to which their freelance environment impacted positively or negatively on their ability to work in this sector. What emerged was complex and far from clear, with shades of grey ranging from dynamic subjectivity to rigid environments, from the possibility of growth to fear of marginalisation between uncertain prospects and stagnation. Naturally it was not our intention to judge or impose our own meta-perspective on this sector but, to identify and explore the idiosyncrasies of their situations to identify how much their university backgrounds had contributed to their professional activities (Facchini, 2015).

The productive energy of knowledge: changing the work

Information Technology is radically changing the worlds of economics and manufacturing. It is a change that not only affects organisational

from the fact that the universe that we are exploring, characterized by high intellectual content professions, always brings with it new professions that until a few years ago did not exist and would have been unthinkable, but which are now based on new social needs. To date, any attempt to codify knowledge workers is obsolete, because the situation is constantly changing. Hence the need to update the concept of knowledge workers (Butera, 2012, pp. 3-44).

aspects of work, but is evidenced in every sector and goes to the very heart of the concepts that underpin capitalist society. On the one hand, advancing technologies have meant that machines have, in many cases, replaced human activity on the production line and, consequently, reduced labour demand. Furthermore, digital products cost less and have limitless growth potential.

Since the production process tends to be increasingly automated, the share of human work shrinks progressively and, as a consequence, profit margins also erode (Mason, 2015). On the other hand, most of the goods and services within the economy are produced at zero marginal cost, with digital products, now being made available at decreasing prices and with virtually unlimited life cycles, being a prime example (Rifkin, 2014).

According to the MIT Technology Review, before 2030 half of the traditional work will be replaced by PCs and automation. What will remain or emerge will be work AI will not be capable of undertaking. As Alessandro Ovi argues in an article in the NYT by Tom Friedman, less educated people are more likely to be unemployed: 13.8% for people who do not finish High school, 8.7% for high school graduates, 4.1% for those holding, at least, a bachelor's degree. Friedman points out that digital technologies are causing these consequences to increase ever more rapidly (Ovi, 2015).

This means that digital work both provides a window of opportunity and accessibility for society while at the same time being a strategic point of conflict (Scholz, 2013). While an almost infinite possibility of widespread knowledge and access to information is fostered by new IT, those who have already been empowered have tried to create inaccessible monopolies of information and intellectual property. Unlike the past, in which tangible products were manufactured, new technologies and the products they produce exist only in the digital world, thus creating a dichotomy between the haves and have-nots based on intellectual rather than material property (Lessig, 2008). On the other hand, Tiziana Terranova argues that immaterial labour severs digital activity from labour association and frees it from any parameters of what constitutes a knowledge worker. Even more so than free immaterial labour allows for the conceptualization of the online space as a site where knowledge, art, and cultural ideas and norms, are often produced collaboratively, but with only a few people actually being compensated (Terranova, 2000; 2004).

It follows that, since almost all industries today are in fact "cultural industries" which incorporate a growing part of immaterial labour into their productive inputs, this conflict between knowledge and property tends to

become a systemic contradiction that creates the conditions for a potential depletion of the model based on capitalist accumulation. In a world in which work has essentially become 'informalised' and productive energy consisting of essentially cognitive, technological innovation, no longer automatically gives rise to an increase in value, and labour itself tends become less and less productive in terms of its value creation (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014).

Taking a classic definition from Marx, Alberto Asor Rosa defines production as "that work which, in fact, at the very moment in which it produces goods, produces and reproduces capital, i.e. contributes to the enhancement of capital itself; unproductive labour is that which, in some way, slips through the process of exploitation" (Asor Rosa, 2007, p. 39).

Moreover, as pointed out by Alberto Asor Rosa, "in economic terms, labour, within capitalist society, is always a process of exploitation" (Asor Rosa, 2007, p. 39). Even training, not unlike the production process itself, is required to enhance and be modelled according to the logic of economic utility. Indeed, that which is not be immediately aimed at pure and simple economic value production, is generally accused of futility. Already in the early Nineties, Thurow talks about of the "brainpower industry" in his "Wealth Building", which has, as its competitive advantage over the productive activities of traditional industries, its knowledge-intensity and investment in economic processes (Thurow, 1999).

Yet, training produces a type of asset that is not immediately obvious from the economic point of view, and, as such, gives the impression of being a cost rather than an investment. While the need to focus on culture as a lever of development is continually mentioned, cuts are made with ease to the funds dedicated to education and training, thus making a mockery of such sentiments. Today, more than ever, flexibility in managing an innovative market can become an opportunity to the extent that one is able to exploit the resources of the cognitive capital even before that of economic capital.

This is the general political and economic environment in which cognitive workers find themselves today. The open networks of their knowledge and their creativity are in fact the raw materials of developed economies. However, in order to maintain the system, the relations of production between capital and labour, these same economies limit imaginative potential and knowledge by legal and surreptitious hierarchical constraints. In other words, today, the main contradiction in modern capitalism is between the possibility of free, abundant socially produced goods, and a system of monopolies, banks and governments struggling to

maintain control over power and information. That is, everything is pervaded by a fight between network and hierarchy (Mason, 2015).

The universe of higher education gives an excellent insight into this bitter struggle between the network and hierarchy. While, on the one hand digital networks create easy access to knowledge and increase ‘abundant’ infrastructures, resources and sources of knowledge, steering bodies on the other hand become stronger and tend to restore their hierarchies, and modes of production and circulation. From this point of view the contemporary explosion of accreditation and so-called quality ranking systems (of universities, scientific journals, researchers) and the media emphasis which they enjoy, and not only in our country (Bouchard, Candel, Cardy & Gomez-Mejia, 2015), are phenomena that can be read as an attempt to artificially reproduce scarcity of knowledge administered in an environment where information would instead be plentiful and available at almost zero marginal cost (Hazelkorn, 2015).

The almost constant journalistic polemics about the quality of the university system focussing particularly on the alleged “uselessness” and obsolescence of humanities and social knowledge are likely to be part of this political and cultural strategy that tends to reaffirm the imperatives of the hierarchy over the network. However, in contrast to these polemics, it was noted, in a study focusing on communication disciplines, that students were trained to deal with competent professional profiles and multitasking which allowed them to better cope with the complexity and speed of change in the economy and the digital society (Morcellini, Faccioli & Mazza, 2015). At the centre of this process is knowledge, creativity, desire and the ability of the social actors, which made us look at the ongoing revolution with a new eye, often revealing new and surprisingly valuable connections (Gauntlett 2011). These aspects, from a psychological point of view, can refer to a more general ability to assume different and multiple perspective (Marchetti, Castelli, Cavalli, Di Terlizzi, Lecciso, Lucchini, Massaro, Petrocchi & Valle, 2014).

The national context does not appear, however, very encouraging. Not surprisingly, the Human Capital Report (www.weforum.org), published annually by the World Economic Forum, shows a grim image of Italy for 2016: Italy, in terms of investment in human capital, ranks 34th out of 130, showing a gradual trend towards the destruction of skills in our country. This risk should be averted, above all, by strengthening investment (not only economic) in training, but especially by imagining a different training architecture and probably a profound redefinition of its meaning, its

purpose and of the space that it should occupy in the lives of people. Our research into the DMWs adds further consideration to this.

Methodological choices and main research findings

How do the DMW's⁵ who collaborated on *Lecce European Capital of Culture* see and talk about themselves? And how are they perceived by others, such as, their families, stakeholders and general public opinion? Do they tend to see their condition as flexible workers as an obligation, or rather as a real lifestyle choice? How does the process of flexibility affect their professional expectations and life narratives? Can flexibility produce cultural and professional growth or is it interpreted in a context of deprivation of rights and uncertainty? Furthermore, according to these DMWs, is university training, that almost all of them have acquired, able to respond adequately to the knowledge / skills required in the workforce? These were some of the questions that have guided our research. We have tried to provide some answers to these questions through three focus groups, comprising 21 DMWs who worked on the project *Lecce European Capital of Culture 2019*.

⁵ Our idea was to explore these subjectivities and check the relationship between university education and the knowledge and skills required in the workplace. Among the professions coded by ISFOL (Public Institution for Research on Social Policy issues of Education and Employment) the DMWs can be collocated in many fields of work (legislators, managers and entrepreneurs, intellectual, scientific and highly specialized, technical professions). Yet, if we try to choose the professional units that correspond to the maximum level of detail currently available, the alphabetical search offers us very little. For example, if we insert "mediator", the database only leads us to the agent's technical profession of business. This data occurred two years ago and does not seem to have been updated in any way. The same applies to the ISTAT, the National Statistics Institute (<http://cp2011.istat.it/scheda.php?id=2.5.3.2.1>): here the ecosystem of DMW seems under-represented and framed generally between "intellectual, scientific and highly specialized" (class 2). More complete is the repertoire of communications intellectual professions, the result of research carried out in 2006 by Arjuna Tuzzi (Tuzzi, 2006), which translates into 100 different job opportunities to job opportunities for graduates in Communication Sciences. Comparing the data emerging from ISFOL, ISTAT, and from research carried out by Arjuna Tuzzi, it seems that institutional entities do not communicate with the world of research, and that research, in turn, does not communicate enough with the world of work, so that these strongly articulated professionalism can placed together in a single 'pot'. The risk is that this lack of recognition disqualifies intellectual work, and therefore the jobs of the future, which cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence.

To investigate the self-representation of the DMWs in Salento, we have resorted to qualitative methodology through five in-depth interviews and three focus groups, attended by 21 DMWs who have worked on the project Lecce European Capital of Culture 2019, for a total number of 26 social actors.

The in-depth interviews were made between 2014-15, with five opinion leaders, who were either directly involved or acted as observers in the project (three men and two women, journalists and managers, all aged between 30 and 60), had an exploratory function. This was critical to better focus the complex issues to be subsequently addressed in the focus groups phase. Immediately after the event, descriptions of the direct experiences and the perception of citizenry of the project were solicited (Blanchet & Gotman, 1992): this was useful to obtain a better focus on the guidelines. In particular, the focus groups provided very interesting information: this qualitative technique, which is by now fully integrated into the ethnographic approach, combines the depth dimension of the interview with participant observation and allows analysis of group dynamics that develop from the discussion topics proposed by the moderator. As result, the social interaction and self-reflexivity of the group is added to the debate the on issues being analyzed. This new dimension could hardly emerge from a simple interview or a questionnaire that would impose the conceptual categories of the researcher (Corrao, 2000; Krueger 1994). In the case of our research, this dimension was particularly important since it allowed for an in-depth analysis of the “human costs of flexibility” (Bagnara, 2012, p. 51).

The focus groups were held in 2015, after Matera had been declared European Capital of Culture for 2019. Of the 21 DMWs who participated in the focus groups, 12 were women and 9 men, all aged between 29 and 44 and all holding a degree in humanities (philosophy, cultural heritage, archaeology, languages) or social sciences (sociology, communication sciences). Most of them had some previous learning experiences and/or work abroad and 8 of integrated their education with management and computer studies. They are designers, communication experts, translators, photographers, journalists, accessibility experts, sociologists, mediators, and cultural workers, and share a common high cognitive content that characterizes their work. The research design was divided into eight stages: study of the literature on the topic; definition of the research object and construction of the core themes to be explored; design of the track of the interviews; interception of the social actors to be involved, making interviews and construction of groups for focus; realization of the focus

groups and preparation of the reflections on the field; transcript of the discussion; hermeneutic analysis of the results; internal discussion within the working unit and translation of the resulting data into functional information to research.

Both of the interview guidelines as well that of the focus group, were built with the aim of:

- understanding how actors define their work and if they see flexibility/insecurity as an obligation or a choice;
- checking the impact of their work on daily life (experienced anxiety or positive challenge, self-control or lack of control, impact on social and emotional life).

Richard Sennett (1998) analysed the sense of profound socio-economic change affecting the present by explaining change in terms of a radical transformation, from *career* to *job*, with regard to educational and professional pathways. It is, more specifically, through the description of the transition from a conception of labour as a linear and uninterrupted path (*career* is etymologically “cart road”) to that of a heterogeneous set of occasional tasks (*job* means “piece, block”) which, from time to time, require conversions of both skills and expectation horizons. This flexibility is not only limited to changing professional and public activities, but it also affects, and indeed, often traumatically, one’s private status and ‘biography’, or sense of ontological security and the ability to control one’s own existence (Gallino, 2001). Symptoms of this potential “corrosion of character” (Sennett, 1998) are quite evident among the DMWs interviewed. Their subjective expectations, as well as their pace of life, bear significant traces of a professional and training insecurity that tends to become existential and places us within the dangerous field of the “job insecurity” that tends to reduce psychological well-being and job satisfaction, as well as increase psychosomatic complaints and physical stress (Jacobson, 1991; De Witte, 1999).

I have always done everything that came up, from being a bartender, rubbish collector, to bellboy. When I have a choice I like to be project planner, but it is not always so: I have to live (male, project planner).

The quality of work is frustrating, as is the lack of professional and social recognition. It is a waste of important resources (female, communication expert).

It is no coincidence that the precariousness and the underlying uncertainty of these atypical workers is apparent when they present their work publicly and need to define themselves as professionals of the public space at a time when the notion of public space tends to become foggy and be perceived as nothing more than a sum of spaces and private instances.

Defining my profession throws me off balance. It puts me in a crisis (male, cultural worker).

It is not easy to explain my work to others. When I call myself a social and cultural planner I am greeted with: "What? What do you do?" (male, project planner).

Non-standard employment is not perceived as being a real profession by most people (male, expert in accessibility).

If I think of how others see me, I think of creative work. When my father asked me what I did I simply replied: "I'm a photographer", and he replied "and the serious work?" It's like some kind of problem (female, photographer).

There is greater difficulty in identifying non-canonical professions in / of the public space. There are few professions that can be truly defined. There is a lack of public awareness and education concerning public space. I'm not speaking of behavioural education but of educating to understand that atypical professions are a job, and not an afternoon hobby followed because one is rich (male, expert in accessibility).

My mom says that she has not yet figured out what my job is. And yet, it is less complicated than it seems. Only, it is not encoded (female, communication expert).

Making these types of work related to public space becomes even more problematic in cities in Southern Italy, as is born out from the experience of some of these people even though they are not lacking in training and professional experience obtained in other areas of the country. In Lecce, and probably in the South of Italy as a whole, the failure to recognize this type of professional identity is even more apparent.

In Italy there is a strong stigma attached to this work. Especially so in the South. This is the scope of our business [of the DMW] and it is not yet well identified. There is difficulty in recognising certain professions, so I often find myself in the position of not being able to explain exactly what I do. The problem of the public sphere is to shed light on the new professions,

and the working condition of flexible workers can become counterproductive if they are “forced” to adapt, to transit, from one activity to another (male, sociologist).

The non-recognition by the average person here [the context of Salento] and by those who should identify and make use of these workers is a big problem [local authorities and the economic reality as a whole]: moreover, the new professions mostly have English names, and this becomes a communicative obstacle (male, cultural worker).

It must be said that the strategies used by respondents to indicate their professionalism is a problem that seems to be experienced especially in the South, where is perceived a strong uncertainty about their own work.

Abroad, but also in the North, work is organised differently, so you can't waste time. Here we have a social/cultural flexibility which is reflected in work. Maybe in other places you can't afford to waste time or to get people to do something they do not wish to, or could even hurt them. Outside the South work is more sectorial. That does not mean it's better. Elsewhere there are more efficient systems (female, communication expert).

However, as has been conveniently argued, considering the phenomenon of precarious work “solely as a condition of suffering would be radically wrong” (Standing, 2011). In fact, what emerges from our research on DMWs is the expression of attitudes, perceptions of self and rather heterogeneous, and at times conflicting, value orientations. On the one hand, they are unanimous in their condemnation of the social costs and the difficulties of a professional and existential condition that is perceived as insecure and lacking in guarantees for the future. On the other hand however, is the claim, sometimes even proud, of a model of training and labour organization that allows one to follow autonomous life choices freed from the constraints and standards of the traditional “job”. It is no coincidence that the self-understanding of the DMWs often refer to the self-employment dimension, or, put differently, as a representation of the “self” as an individual enterprise capable of enhancing its own human capital. Hence the emphasis they place on the freelance status and the voluntary nature of their precarious condition, as well as the intolerance towards the classic “job”.

For me, precariousness is a condition that I have chosen. I want to work as a freelance and invest in myself, so I got a VAT number (male, expert in accessibility).

The idea of a permanent job for me would be alienating. My dream is to invent a job: create a need and work (male, project planner).

For these subjects, insecurity it is not necessarily seen as the coefficient of job insecurity and as synonymous with the absence of collateral guaranties. On the contrary, in the view of some of the respondents, this solution offers an opportunity, not only for a profession that can be exercised more freely, but also for greater autonomy in the management of their non-professional life. This specific dimension of precarious work seems to be particularly appreciated by female professionals, likely to be engaged in reconciling their double-duty of work and family.

In my life I have made choices. I now see myself as my own employer. There are times when I want to devote my time to other things and this kind of work enables me to do just that (female, communication expert).

We must be enabled to know that we can also become something else (male, sociologist).

What emerges overall is a strong positive identification with their own professional environment, which results in reducing the sense of insecurity and a perception of their work as a choice and a gratification.

On the other hand, there is no lack of awareness among the DMWs of the substantial time commitment which results in a condition of being flexible workers. The obligations which they have seem largely voluntary since these are effectively dictated by their very freedom. But, since the freedom of power has no limits, it actually ends up producing more constraints on each discipline of duty. In essence, these are jobs without times and defined spaces, which represent a possibility of emancipation but also a form of oppression for these workers. Most of the time it boils down to work that can be done anywhere and this results, mostly, in a requirement to continually work. The physiological alternation between work and leisure gives way to a new form of alternation between various tasks and types of work, and between real work and activities (training, guidance, public relations) aimed at constantly acquiring new opportunities of work. And this is why, despite the fact they mostly feel free and autonomous subjects, in reality these workers behave as exploiters of

themselves. Despite the absence of masters, they themselves, as entrepreneurs of themselves, voluntarily satisfy the need to be constantly updated and competitive which in turn exposes them to new forms of immaterial production. Work becomes their main, if not indeed, only concern, while all other interests (even private life) are in danger of slipping into the background when compared to their professional involvement.

Precariousness means to continually have to go out in search of work. I spend half my time building up the background, and forming awareness that creates demand. The sense of insecurity is there, and makes me divide my time between being a sales representative and a technician (male, expert in accessibility).

Working for oneself often means being involved much more than if I were at someone else's beck and call ... I never have free time because I force my exhausting work schedule on myself, something I would not accept from any boss (male, cultural worker).

The impact of our work on private lives is extremely dangerous: when you do something that grips you, you are at war with yourself, because your life becomes work, and everything else is secondary. This leads to a series of repercussions from the point of view of sentiments, family, and friendships. Your life is shared with colleagues, with whom you only speak about work, and you're almost too boring to talk to about anything else. It becomes dangerous to manage romantic relationships (male, sociologist).

What emerges from respondents more or less conscious perceptions is that they are subjected to a sort of "double bind" which translates into a paradoxical requirement to be autonomous or, on the other hand, in a choice embraced as a conscious challenge for which, however, there are no feasible alternatives, a choice, that is, for which there is in fact, no choice. This double bind generates a spontaneous downsizing of expectations, and they sometimes end up expressing the hope that the precarious job becomes a "structural condition", without, however, ever turning into a permanent position. But it is also a double bind that combines adult responsibilities with the ability to cope with responsibilities which are in fact adolescent.

Flexibility for me is the acceptance of a challenge: I consciously chose this path, but I chose it because I was forced: I had no alternative. This insecurity is alleviated by the certainty that one can always find work: not

necessarily always in the same sector, or for an extended period, but a job that will enable me to live independently (male, planner).

It is not the idea of a permanent job that sustains us, but rather that job insecurity can be a structural condition of the system, which means that, once a job is completed, I can always find another. Only uncertainty reigns as a result: I can't think of myself as a worker, nor as a subject, because I can't make long term decisions (male, cultural worker).

A big issue for us DMW is not being able to plan our own future, the ability to raise a family. We are to live as over-thirties with adult responsibilities, but in the conditions of a child (male, planner).

In statements made during the focus a demand for a professional dignity and social legitimation of their work was perceived. It is not infrequent that, when questioned by relatives or friends on their profession, these workers struggle to explain their professional activity in the lexicon of traditional jobs.

On the one hand, the idea of a permanent job with a salary at the end of the month, attracts me, but on the other it robs me of my daily challenge and enthusiasm that I put into my daily work. The quality of work in Italy is very low: there are those who do not pay you, those who do not understand what you're talking about. Working with a stimulus is very fulfilling. The waste of resources, however, lies in investing half one's own time in making it clear to potential users what one is doing and the utility of one's job. Half of my efforts go wasted because the other person often does not understand what I do, because the world of work does not have the necessary open-mindedness to accommodate professionalism that is not codified (female, communication expert).

If there is a common ethos to these workers, it is to be found in the prevalence of competitive and meritocratic value-orientations. It is not entirely clear to what extent this ethos is the result of convictions and freely undertaken subjective attitudes, or whether they are the result of a reaction formation. Indeed, judging from certain declarations, one might argue that such values can be understood as making a virtue out of a necessity in a highly competitive environment:

The precarious nature of this kind of work in Italy is characterized as a kind of looting operation: I have to kill someone to get the job in his place. This is the worst condition of precariousness, not insecurity as such. In the group

in which I work, when contracts are about to expire, there is an unhealthy air: in the most emotional people this causes problems with others (male, sociologist).

When we approach the end of the contract we are in crisis, and the weak are unable to deal with their emotions. The first time is the hardest. After that it becomes an existential condition and is faced with greater optimism, at least with regard to stress management skills (male, sociologist).

The precarious situation is a highly competitive environment, and competition is not on equal terms: if I'm on the market I prefer to go to the highest bidder, the most trustworthy one. The problem is that there is a lot of improvisation in the precarious world. This applies to anything (female, reporter).

A separate, though closely connected issue, with regards to the professional status of this category of knowledge workers operating in the field of communication and organization of public events using advanced technology platforms, concerns the budgets they themselves make for their training. These are often non-linear and the result of personal interests and passions. Moreover, these workers hold academic qualifications in the humanities or social sciences and the assessments they make of their own education produces somewhat mixed results. Common to many of them is the feeling that their formal curricula (Bachelor programs, teacher training but also PhDs and MAs) are not sufficient to provide the skills that are actually required by the specific labour markets in which they operate. It is not infrequent to find cases of perceived mismatching between acquired skills and tasks performed. Some feel that their formal studies are not particularly pertinent to market needs, and especially so in a market such as Salento, which is neither prosperous nor advanced.

My university education itself would not allow me to do the work I do. It gave me so much in terms of mental openness, but as soon as I began to compare myself with the work I had to do, I actually had the feeling of being a fish out of water. The distance between formal studies and the reality of everyday work was just too far, at least here in our reality (male, cultural worker).

I have a degree in translation and interpreting. I am able to translate from one language to another, but my study program did not prepare me for the market demand for cultural mediators (female, translator).

Almost all respondents, while reconfirming their own educational decisions that had been taken for reasons of personal inclinations, favour, with hindsight, a profound transformation of the educational curricula which would be geared in the direction of creating more effective links between teaching of job requirements. These complaints mainly come from graduates in the humanities and social sciences:

If I could go back, I think I would prefer more practical activities from formal teaching. This would both facilitate entry into the job market and give students assistance in making future choices (female, designer).

It would be necessary to reinforce partnerships with entities operating in the territory and greater student involvement in collaborative projects with companies (male, sociologist).

In a way, when I was studying at the university it was like living in a happy oasis in a self-absorbed and peaceful world, but isolated from the real society. In comparison, the world of work, it's like an ongoing challenge in which you are always in motion and under pressure, and where, if you stop you're lost. You can't afford the luxury of wasting time (male, sociologist).

We could continue with a long list of testimonials all of which share the same content. It should also be said that the majority of respondents agreed in declaring that the development value of the acquired skills was mostly a consequence of personal achievement that each of them found necessary to develop, on their own, after completing university studies. In some cases, this was a conscious decision (the sociologist who had studied the Master of Management) while in other cases the choice, guided mostly by instinct and passion, was only understood at the end. When some participants spoke about "open-mindedness" deriving from formal studies, they were, curiously enough, not always able to relate this kind of expertise to their ability to develop effective self-training strategies and flexible adaptation to a complex and changing environment. The exception is the following statement, made by a philosophy graduate. This interviewee recognizes as added value a type of knowledge that would generally seem too abstract and theoretical, and, in any case, professionally "useless":

Background in philosophical studies gave me a thorough approach to reading, and taught me to learn very difficult concepts. Now I deal with accessibility. Doing research comes naturally to me. I think it is a matter of

forma mentis acquired during the years of my university education” (male, expert in accessibility).

One might think, however, that the emphasis which is sometimes attributed to the critical spirit which the humanistic or sociological training has given them could in fact simply be a way to avoid the risk of experiencing forms of cognitive dissonance resulting from training choices which, in retrospect, are not easy to deny or admit as being inadequate.

I do not regret anything about my training. If I am what I am, I owe it to the studies that I did, and if I had pursued other studies this does not mean that today I would not be working in this sector, which anyway, apart from the many difficulties I encounter and largely unsatisfactory economic gratification (male, cultural worker).

What is common to all respondents is their strong involvement in their work, fuelled by a strong passion for what they do.

In the Lecce Capital project there was a very strong emotional component based on the common good. We felt a bit like heroes, and the idea of conditioning our private lives on behalf of the common good did not seem too high a price to pay. During the project, competition between us evolved into solidarity aimed at a common goal: that of winning. Our enemies were not the other competing cities, but rather the status quo: the possibility of not succeeding. For the first time I was able to actually experience first-hand what I had only read before: I refer to the time when humans did something for an ideal and not for personal gain. Previously this had been a philosophical / literary thing for me, because in reality if you do something in general you have your own personal gain (male, expert in accessibility).

They all strongly believe in work, even if the outcome was different from what they expected.

It is important that the administrators believed in a project that was unfamiliar them and far from classical canons. This was a very courageous choice. For us this is already a good result, as it shows an openness towards change. Giving your car keys to someone coming from the town you hate and against which you compete in sporting events, and telling them: “Go, become great. I need you to drive my car, because I can’t see from the inside”. This made us feel powerful. I do not know if, nor how much, we have sown in terms of human capital and activated social relationships. I do not know how long those relationships will last, nor whether they will

consolidate and bear fruit. However, I read the decision to give the keys of the city to a stranger as a sign mediated change from below (male, expert in accessibility).

The attitude to flexibility that characterizes the DMW is also revealed in the interpretation with which they interpret their work:

We were able to reach a critical mass that has allowed the city to activate participation processes from below. We made a cultural map of the area, showing us what they want the Salento. The work done is not only functional for the project. It can serve more. What will be done with this legacy? (female, communication expert).

The agenda of the future: ideas for an “idiot” training

We have seen how the subjective framework of the professional values of DMWs involved in the project *Lecce European Capital of Culture* is particularly problematic, and not without ambiguity. We tried to illustrate the sense of their codes of conduct and their professional ideals, the effects of the type of work they perform daily, their alternate experiences ranging from anxiety to positive challenge, their subjectification processes in the difficult balance between self-control and feeling the lack of external control, and we finally examined the consequences of this flexible employment status on their social and emotional life. We can assume also that knowledge workers must continually learn and share their expertise to manage their role ambiguity (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016). But perhaps one of the most important results of our research can be found in a latent research function which we were able to identify through the work with the focus groups: i.e. having shed light on a class of workers who, as we have shown, typically struggle to subjectively perceive themselves as members of a profession, united by the similar material needs and requirements for symbolic recognition.

Regarding the educational profile of DMWs, on the basis of the findings, it should be said that in flexible working conditions there could be a growing awareness of the need for more open and more appropriate training aimed at acquiring long-term empowerment objectives, rather than the production of immediately expendable human capital. The feeling that many of the respondents expressed is that while their University training was interesting and valuable in itself, it failed to translate into the world of work and that this is certainly experienced by them as the symptom of a

training failure. However, from the perspective of education as an instrument of emancipation, this perceived “failure” can also be seen as a strength.

To quote Martha Nussbaum, who argues that, developing *capability*, i.e. freedom to do and to choose otherwise, has a greater educational value than producing specific operations, promoting capacities means promoting spheres of influence and this is not the same getting people to operate a certain way (Nussbaum, 2011). So, relating the world of university education directly to the spheres of economics and business would mean giving precedence to some particular professional operations, but for that very reason would sanction the renunciation of cultivating the sphere of plural freedoms and human capacities to transcend conditions and invent personal destinies.

In the context of a broader debate about new techniques of the power of neo-liberalism, the philosopher Byung-Chul Han provocatively suggests that it is only making themselves ‘idiots’, namely evading optimal functioning and performances required by a system, that people can sometimes make choices that make them truly free and creative. Therefore, if intelligence is knowing how to “*choose among (inter-legere)*” then this, in itself, will not ensure true freedom, only because this is exercised only within pre-established options (that is already seen, already chosen and already imagined) within the system. In other words, intelligence never comes to direct its thinking in the direction of the Im-thought. It does not have [...] a truly free *choice*, but a *selection* of choices offered by the system. Intelligence follows logic and is immanent to a system [...] Thus, intelligence does not have access to the *completely Other*. It inhabits the horizontal, while the idiot breaks through into the vertical, since the idiot abandons the dominant system, i.e. intelligence (Han, 2014). For this reason, it appears today more risky to follow the fashion of wanting to “scrap” the knowledge of the human and social sciences, which offer at least the opportunity of ‘vertical mental openness’ which allows subjects to deal with constant challenges while, maybe, learning to build new content and open up to new forms of knowledge. Steve Jobs, and Adriano Olivetti, to name two pioneers of very different stages of industrial culture, were fully aware that humanistic sensibility and scientific genius are inseparable ingredients necessary to making a difference but, above all, to be different: to quote with Steve Jobs, “We are here to put a dent in the universe”.

Yet, what remains is the strategic problem of giving a response to the frustration of overqualified professionals who fail to fully capitalize on their studies as a function of the status and remuneration to which they

legitimately aspire. Rather, than thinking in terms of new forms of managing higher education systems, this problem should be seen in cultural terms and would imply an overall rethinking of the university's social function. A solution, for example, could probably be found in the proposal made by Guy Standing who suggests transforming 'capital goods' into 'products for leisure', or in facilitating *lifelong learning* solutions to ensure that people are encouraged to follow university studies throughout the course of their entire adult lives, and not just at the end of upper secondary education, "the dream of the precariat may be a sort of 'universitisation' of life, a world in which one learns selectively and broadly at all times. For that, one must have a feeling of greater control over time and access to the public sphere. Thus, enhancing education and re-envisaging it as a slow and deliberative process" (Standing, 2011, p. 160). Obviously, the debate about this "universitisation of life" goes beyond the goals we have set in this investigation, and as such, a reform of higher education may be mentioned here only as a suggestion to be explored and as a food for thought for the future.

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- European Capitals of Culture: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture_en
- Human Capital Report 2016: www.weforum.org
- ISFOL: <http://professionioccupazione.isfol.it>
- ISTAT: http://cp2011.istat.it/index.php?codice_1=2
- Lecce Capitale Europea della Cultura 2019: <http://lecce2019.it>