

## Book Review - Debates



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Emiliana Armano, Arianna Bove, Annalisa Murgia (Eds.)  
*Mapping Precariousness, Labour Insecurity and Uncertain Livelihoods: Subjectivities and Resistance*  
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Two visions predominate in the sociological literature on professionalism (Evetts *et alii* 2009; Saks 2016). An optimistic one, representing the line drawn from Durkheim, going through Carr-Saunders and Wilson, Talcott Parsons, Wilensky or the Chicago School; all of them emphasising the autonomy of professionals, their competence in their field of knowledge, the associationism and their willingness to serve their client over their own interests. Conversely, there is a more pessimistic or critical conception which follows the lines of Weber (power, rationality, bureaucracy) or Marx (control); here, professionals are seen as maintaining an ambivalent relationship between knowledge and power, a relation which allows the social and public recognition of their knowledge and competence to establish a monopoly over a segment of the labour market. This happens by controlling the access via university careers, the establishment of mandatory requirements which need to be met in order to belong to an association or through the control of their own professional practice. In this sense, a good part of professional associationism is dedicated to the drawing of borders between professions, an endeavour leading to (non-permanent) forms of social closure set to last until the next battle over jurisdictional borders. The State, in the exercise of its sovereignty, keeps for itself the role of setting the game's rules and legitimising the closures mentioned above. Additionally, the sets of ideas related to human capital (accumulation of knowledge and experience) and meritocracy – which are supposed to enable professional achievement – have accompanied a debate which has also dealt with professional ethics and its relationship with economic interests.

However, these dilemmas are transforming very quickly as globalisation and financialisation affect economic activities, the accompanying requirements of flexibility and precariousness are breaking professional horizons in terms of privileges, competence and deontology. While both the sociology of professions and institutional and organisational analysis continue to focus on the work of professionals with and within institutions – incorporating some references to currently occurring changes – the labour relationships that can be actually observed in the labour market (or the commercial relationship between professionals and companies) are undergoing

profound changes which, ultimately, could have an extraordinary impact on the very concept of “profession” and “professional”.

The interest of Armano, Bove and Murgia’s book lies at this point. Both Annalisa Murgia and Emiliana Armano are recognised specialists in the field of precariousness, with a most notable contribution in the form of their two volumes entitled *Mappe della precarietà* (2012) –especially volume two, dedicated to knowledge workers. For her part, Arianna Bove, with a background in philosophy, has specialised in the field of ideas and social movements. This is, thus, a book edited by female authors in which both the gender perspective and the connection between work/occupation and life (family, households) are also present.

From a descriptive point of view, the text provides us with experiences and reflections concerning three complementary aspects: a) the experiences in different countries and the different subjectivities associated to them; b) the forms of resistance and the social movements derived from them and, finally; c) the conceptual perspectives. Concerning the latter, it is worth mentioning Isabell Lorey’s proposal – found in the *Chapter 15* – which differentiates between three dimensions of the precarious: *precariousness*, *precarity*, and *governmental precarisation*. According to the author, *precariousness* «describes a socio-ontological level (...) is shared with others; it points out the fundamental connection with others, but does make everyone the same» (200). It is a dimension of life which is being devaluated by capitalism. *Precairity* «designates conditions of legal, political, economic and social inequality (...) in short, (...) designates the conditions of domination that are divided up and distributed through protection, care, and safeguarding» (ibid.). *Governmental precarisation* «emphasizes how the conduct of state governance and individualised self-governing are intertwined in a mode of governing that uses insecurity as its main tool» (ibid.).

But the text also entails an epistemological rupture, as it directly addresses the roots and foundations of these changes. Thus, while a good part of the academy continues its production as if nothing was shaking the ground beneath their feet, the text’s authors take into account the flexibility-precariousness coupling implemented by neoliberal thought and practice, and complement it with a wake-up call: if in times of globalisation, financialisation, and new technologies (ICT, AI), the market, the black box or the invisible hand are the arbiters of the professional field, then qualifications, associationism, ethics or professional honour may be under a devaluation process or may even no longer count at all. This process could gradually drag with it both the expert field and the very voice of the experts.

This becomes apparent in Armano and Murgia’s *Chapter 3* on the hybrid areas of work found in Italy. Here, the authors emphasise how, in these areas, time control is replaced by objectives, results and projects. In a certain way, the implacably timed rhythm of the Fordist assembly line is replaced by an internalised form of cadence and discipline. Although we could also argue, following the example set by the contrast between manual and non-manual work (whether linked to knowledge or not), that this succession of projects could be considered a form of piecework. There, apparently, time does not count, just because the hybrid zone professional owes all of its time to its employer. However, Armano and Murgia propose an additional second characteristic, understanding that the introduction of precariousness in the professional field entails an identification of the professional with their work activities which, in turn, leads professional competencies and qualifications, personal qualities and emotions to become subsumed in the very act of carrying out said projects. An exercise of *artistic critique* (Boltanski, Chiappello 2001) that leads to self-exploitation or, in terms of La Boétie, to voluntary servitude. This is the sort of free work that is also spreading throughout universities and research centres, or that often serves as an access requirement for professional practice (assistants, scholarship holders and other similar formulas that substitute former guild or industrial apprentices). The Australian university’s case presented by Morgan and Wood (*Chapter 6*) illustrates this phenomenon; here, the scholarship acts as a bait linking the academic world with professional values, not only for the acquisition of skills or human capital, but mostly for the modulation of attitudes needed to face the fluid world of flexibility and professional precariousness. This new managerialism, when applied to the universities, generates a period of learning and accommodation to the new procedures found in professional relationships, which are in turn linked to the neoliberal bureaucracy. This has all been excellently described by Graeber (2015) and precisely reflected in the experiences of Di and Marian postdocs, the cases presented in Morgan and Wood’s chapter.

A third characteristic of these new times can be taken from Papadopoulos’ contribution in *Chapter 10* of the book:

(in front of) the contentious mobilisations of the working classes and subaltern populations of the 1960s and 1970s (...) we see two main transformations unfolding as a response of these mobilisations: stagnant wages, underemployment and the flexibilisation of labour markets as well as finance-led accumulation with the introduction of securitisation and increased consumer, corporate and sovereign lending. (138-139)

Capital's response to the problems in profitability or the increases in workers' bargaining capacity has resulted in the outsourcing of the production of goods and services, but it has also caused a displacement of the workplace towards the workers home's and daily life, effectively blurring the lines between production and reproduction.

The consideration of work as a commodity is the euphemistic resource that legitimates the relationship between employer and worker as a mere result of the market, as it is assumed that the employer and the employee carry out an exchange under the same conditions of freedom. Nevertheless, as the authors point out, in the hybrid areas such supposed freedom – to offer one's labour power – goes one step further in the euphemistic ladder, so that the candidate under the "syndrome of free labour" ends up carrying out projects for free, with the promise of – hopefully – better-remunerated ones at some point in the future.

Several chapters throughout the book follow Foucault in their notion of a new form of government driven by neoliberalism. For example, the French Business and Employment Cooperatives (BEC), presented by Corsani and Bureau (*Chapter 4*), «constitute a political laboratory for experimentation and institutional innovation so as to prefigure a new horizon of emancipation beyond salaried work and individual entrepreneurship» (61).

Its use as an instrument of workplace and welfare discipline in an era of declining wages and rising insecurity means that positive psychology, like employability, has moved out of the pages of self-help manuals and into the public sphere. As Barbara Ehrenreich puts it in *Smile or Die*, a study of the positive thinking industry in the United States, in recent years the pressure to «act in a positive way has taken on a harsher edge». (73-74)

In more specific terms we can find the case of Greek media workers, reported by Spyridakis (*Chapter 7*), in which self-employment and freelancing lead to precarious work: lacking any guarantee of continued employment, carried out in unpredictable locations, with low – or very low – income and low to non-existent access to social protection (although, at least, the workers are free from unemployment).

Of course, the scenarios posed by the authors are also contradictory, as Richter stresses in *Chapter 9*, dedicated to Japan:

This model is simultaneously shaped by the informationalization and computerization of production and communication processes, facing workers with new challenges that paradoxically take the semblance of both impositions (intensification of work and control) and opportunities (autonomy, creativity, self-responsibility, flexibility). (125)

A paradox that leads young Japanese to a variety of flexible jobs, that ultimately brings the author to talk about the existence of "working poor" and a "lost generation".

The commodification of all aspects of human life entails a sort of vulnerability (precarity and precariousness) that erodes safety nets and legalises the reproduction of poor work as a pure commodity not embedded in society (Spyridakis). However, it is possible to build new networks after the destruction of traditional communities; this is why Papadopoulos points out how, in the face of risk and uncertainty, *people mobilise*. But, at the same time, companies and the very economic system are in turn transformed into what the author – following Foucault, Butler and Lorey – calls «biofinancialisation: the financialisation of everyday life, subjectivity, ecology and materiality» (140).

During the Fordist period, the labour market functioned as a hinge between two separated and distant worlds, that of occupations and that of households, which also divided productive from reproductive work (care and assistance). Neoliberalism, by implementing flexibilisation and precarisation, has managed to establish a direct link between life and work, appropriating people's existential continuum through the quantitative evaluation of our actions, the expropriation of community structures of cooperation and reciprocity and through the individualisation and privatisation of social reproduction. Moreover, neoliberalism is also tied to a subjectivity built on the

accommodation or adaptation to these new circumstances. In a recent study, a young unemployed man whom we interviewed told us the following – which we consider very illustrative of the contradictions this book analyses and which we would like to highlight (Jódar, Guiu 2018):

This idea that work gives you dignity and rights does not make much sense when work is something secondary, because you last three months in a job. And this was already happening before the crisis. A young man who is 25 years old and is not working does not consider himself unemployed, he is simply not working. He is studying for a master's degree, a short course (...) or, now, "just working to give it a try" (...) It is a generational issue. Also, all this governments' ideology about the need to be an entrepreneur, to educate yourself and to become a self-made man are a laughing stock (...) in a city like Barcelona, this whole hipster thing (the gentrification apparent in design bikes and cool clothing stores, etc.) responds to a generation of young people whose aspirations (at least for the most elitist, those driven by meritocracy) are to own an illustration studio or to become a liberal professional, in other words, to become an own-account worker! Some succeed, but the majority doesn't, and anyway the "cultural model" penetrates. In a way, it is not just about values, they are the true idols of this generation. Choosing between being unemployed or feeling like an entrepreneur – even if you only make 300 euros per month – the choice is clear (...).

It can thus be appreciated how the necessity to show professionalism – or professionalisation – even when the conditions of a certain job, project or entrepreneurial venture are highly precarious, turns the presentation of oneself as a professional into something attractive enough as to make one experience – and accept – the syndrome of free labour discussed by Armano and Murgia. Additionally, this way one's presentation becomes – both symbolically and materially – far removed from the poorly-esteemed wage labour or the dreaded unemployment. And yet, precariousness is acquiring an important dimension among professionals and senior technicians (those with higher education), as we have also observed in a recent survey conducted in Barcelona (Bolíbar *et alii* 2018).

Graziano (*Chapter 12*) points out Negri's question: «Who is the worker and who is the boss today?». He argues that the violence and suffering have not vanished from labour relations, no matter how much the narrative or the dominant form of common sense try to disguise them. It is at this point where the existence of prefigurative practices of reaction to the discomfort generated by the rapid mutations of financial capital is posed. The new managerialism, the *artistic critique*, captures not only peoples' bodies, but their hearts and souls too. The society of the spectacle trades not only in fetishes and fictitious commodities, but it also enshrouds us in a hazy dream of godly markets descending unto the earth to save us from our miseries and, while their mirages seduce us, inequality skyrockets and, perhaps – as the author explains, mentioning Frédéric Lordon (2010) – so do the alienation and the subjugation of workers and citizens of societies where democracy has been steadily devaluating.

The portrayal of the migratory experience in Spain made by Casas-Cortés and Covarrubias (*Chapter 13*) also shows a new and interesting facet of the contradictions expressed so far. It is a round trip experience: on the one hand, that of the immigration of non-EU workers and refugees, who are being stigmatized from xenophobic positions and, on the other hand, that of the emigration of young Spanish university students (after the crisis of 2008), whom the Spanish labour minister characterized as people of "adventurous spirit" in search of new (formative) experiences. The authors cite the *prec-mig hypothesis*, which

posited that «working conditions suffered by migrants today (such as informality contracts, vulnerability in the workplace, intense links between territory and employment, low salaries, lack of union rights, temporality, demand of total availability, etc.) are spreading to the rest of the population, including natives from the EU». (171)

However, this does not bring together migrants and natives but, instead, it rather diversifies citizenship depending on the several institutionalised discrimination processes (visas, permits, legalisation etc.), which only increase the number of atypical occupations and experiences of illegality.

Although perhaps it is Ross' exposition on the expansion of free work (*Chapter 14*) that upon which anyone who has recently entered the professional world – or who intends to do it once completed the mandatory academic and associative procedures – should reflect the most. According to Ross, free work is grounded in the mechanisms of debt expansion (see Soederberg 2014), which begin to act as ways of financing higher education and that are then carried on through the financing of housing needs or the many kinds of unforeseen expenses which cannot

be covered given the precariousness of most jobs and the reality of low wages and professional income. There are two other remarkable reflections in Ross' contribution: first, around the free labour we carry out for the so-called GAFAs (Google, Apple, Facebook and Amazon), as every connection established with their services produces marketable data which we voluntarily give away; second – and last – on the changes introduced by the expansion of free work in the way professionalism and career prospects are being developed.

Concerning professional work carried out in the digital realm of big data or big tech, e-lance programs (mechanical turk, task-rabbit etc.) can decompose a wide array of professional tasks into few minutes long micro-tasks – in the best Taylorist tradition – effectively turning them into a form of piecework which is then arranged at very low prices. In any case, ICT (and AI) join forces in questioning professionalism through organisational – and not exclusively technological – techniques, of which outsourcing constitutes a good example (even if it expands in apparently “friendlier” formats of crowdfunding or collaborative economy). These new technologies allow the manager to take control of a process in which tasks have been decomposed, disqualified, dispersed and even deprived of the knowledge supposed to be fundamental for their execution; this way, the actions of the multitude of “taskers” only make sense in the hands of the controller. Furthermore, the AI's can de-professionalise not only professional tasks, but even the most creative and artistic ones.

In reference to the changes in professionalism, Ross introduces us to a variety of free professional work, starting at the University through the use of – mostly unpaid – internships in companies and institutions (to this we could add, however, that in Spanish high schools there already exist “business management” subjects that include short business internships). This trend persists in most universities for scholarship holders, PhD students and post-docs, who function as a source of both precarious labour and drivers of change in professional subjectivities by reproducing compliant attitudes with the current state of affairs. A different problem affecting already established professionals (especially those working for a salary but, naturally, also those working in projects and as subcontractors) is the need to carry out endless working-days; often just out of sheer presentism. This affects both the private sector's companies and the public administration's experts and managers. Ross also highlights here how the collaborative economy, under its facade of cooperation and mutual aid, is actually hiding the presence of large companies which are opening up highly profitable markets and generating new services consumption habits (Airbnb, UBER etc.), all while subjecting their workers to draconian conditions of false or dependent self-employment. In these activities, paid work is offered just as freely as the contracted obligations: in most cases, it turns out to be “voluntary” work devoid of legal protection, trade unions, or any form of collective bargaining.

This new managerialism, bound to neoliberal common sense, has generated its own vocabulary revolving on efficient management. This entails a specific demand for professionals endowed with skills and competencies such as a capacity for negotiation, leadership, communication, strategic vision, client orientation, empathy, teamwork or entrepreneurial spirit. Some of these abilities have already been introduced in both secondary and higher education. But perhaps more important than the knowledge itself is the acceptance of a set of authority-based rules and forms of behaviour which have the acceptance of the world “as it is” as their core value. Talent or intelligence, the “artistic” virtues that professionals should have acquired, serve little purpose when what matters is the market and not the professional code, when it is the economy, and not society, that which establishes the rules. Failure, then, will ultimately be attributed to those workers and professionals unable to be sufficiently entrepreneurial.

Armano, Bove and Murgia have published a book that presents us with different cases of expansion of precariousness in occupations, professions and labour-related activities in different countries far away from each other, as well as diverse forms of resistance (mostly centred in Europe). It is a work without a universalist vocation, but it does allow us to understand the multiple facets and dimensions of the phenomenon, as well as its significance for those who work precariously. It is a good example of how qualitative insights on selected case studies enable a rich description and further theorisation of complex emerging realities. By so doing the whole book and particularly, the third – and conceptual – part provides us with the much necessary tools of analysis for future research. In short, this book represents an important work if we are to understand the transformations happening in the world of work, of professional life and, also, its repercussions in everyday life and the sphere of reproduction and care. Let us think of the paradox that is leaving our children, our elderly and dependent parents, or our sick family members

under the tutelage of private services were low wages and business mentality prevail, whereas what they really need (and, ultimately, what we all need), both for our wellbeing and our peace of mind, is simply a professional treatment guided by the, now abandoned, moral and ethical criterion.

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