cambio
Rivista sulle Trasformazioni Sociali

Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/cambio

Monographic Section

Rethinking tourism work: bridging gaps, making connections and exploring new frontiers

Francesco Eugenio Iannuzzi[1,*], Marco Marrone[2]

[1] *Ca' Foscari, University of Venice, Italy*
[2] *University of Salento, Italy*
*Corresponding author. Email: francesco.iannuzzi@unive.it

OPEN ACCESS

Citation: Iannuzzi, F. E. & Marrone, M. (2024). *Rethinking tourism work: bridging gaps, making connections and exploring new frontiers*, in «Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali», Vol. 14, n. 28: 5-16. doi: 10.36253/cambio-17872

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Tourism is often associated with movement, leisure, and pleasure. Yet behind every journey lies a dense and uneven infrastructure made up of routines, spaces, and workers that sustain the rhythms of travel and leisure. From hotel rooms and dining services to cleaning, entertainment, transport, and emotional care, tourism rests on a labour force that is highly segmented and exploited, and often rendered invisible, both in public discourse and in academic research. While the guest's experience may appear seamless and immersive, this smooth surface is sustained by a workforce subjected to fragmented schedules, insecure contracts, and low wages, irregularities conditions that reflect the structural precarity underpinning the tourism economy.

This special issue begins from that blind spot. It brings together contributions that share a common concern: to foreground labour as a central category for understanding tourism. Labour is conceived as a constitutive element that defines what tourism is, how it functions, and how it materialises in practice. Consequently, the authors approach tourism not merely as an economic sector or a cultural practice, but as a field in which specific social relations, institutional arrangements, and spatial hierarchies are produced and contested.

By situating tourism within the world of work, the five articles that compose this special issue move beyond celebratory accounts of creativity, mobility, and experience. They examine instead how tourism labour is produced, managed, and contested across different geographies and through diverse empirical and theoretical lenses. From grounded case studies to varied analytical frameworks, these papers explore the concrete ways in which tourism depends on, and contributes to, evolving labour regimes, modes of value extraction, and forms of social inequality.

Building on the concerns raised by the contributions collected in this special issue, this introduction unfolds in five parts. It begins by retrac-

ing the historical trajectories through which tourism labour has taken shape, highlighting its roots in servile, reproductive, and gendered forms of work. The second part examines the epistemological marginality of tourism labour, reflecting on the historical and disciplinary mechanisms through which it has been rendered invisible or illegible within both tourism studies and labour research. A third section maps recent transformations in the tourism economy, exploring its expanding pervasiveness, the role of digitalisation, and its connection to broader regimes of value extraction. The fourth part addresses precarious working regimes in the tourism sector, focusing on the ways in which they are produced and reproduced not only by the organisational and economic conditions of the industry (which are far from immutable), but also through processes of segmentation, gendering, and racialisation of the workforce, as well as through a discursive order that contributes to constructing this work as a marginal, temporary activity devoid of value and rights. Finally, the fifth part reflects on the analytical and political implications of recasting tourism work as a theoretical object, one that invites us to rethink the very boundaries between production and reproduction, visibility and erasure, centre and periphery. Taken together, these sections outline a research agenda that takes tourism seriously as a site where labour is made, governed, and contested under contemporary capitalism.

HISTORICAL GENEALOGIES: FROM HOUSEHOLDS TO THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

The consolidation of tourism as a distinct economic sector – and the subsequent attention of scholars to its dynamics – are both recent developments. Yet the labour that sustains this sector has a far longer and more layered history. It formed through the absorption, reorganisation, and commodification of heterogeneous forms of service and care, often informal, gendered, and socially devalued (McDowell 2009; Nakano-Glenn 1992).

To understand the contemporary organisation of tourism work, it is thus necessary to look back at its earlier configurations. In the centuries preceding the emergence of tourism as a distinct field of activity, many of the practices that would later come to be associated with tourism were already embedded within specific systems of social organisation, characterised by particular forms of labour, hierarchies of roles, and differentiations of status and function.

Prior to the rise of modern tourism, practices of hospitality and service were integral to a diverse range of mobile activities, including religious pilgrimages, trade expeditions, colonial ventures, and aristocratic travel (D'Eramo 2017). These journeys depended on the provision of food, lodging, and care, typically offered by monasteries, inns, local communities, and private households. While certain forms of remuneration existed, hospitality was embedded in domestic economies and community-based systems of exchange. It operated predominantly through informal arrangements, outside professional frameworks, and was only partially subjected to commodification. From the seventeenth century onwards, elite travel practices such as the Grand Tour – a form of aristocratic and educational travel across European cultural centres (D'Eramo 2017; Lai and Baum, 2005) – began to stabilise specific arrangements of care and service. A permanent domestic staff ensured the well-being and distinction of travelling guests while maintaining the household's internal order. Tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and serving were distributed according to social and gender hierarchies within a highly stratified domestic economy (Adib and Guerrier, 2003; Nakano Glenn, 1992).

In the late nineteenth century, a slow but significant transformation began to unfold. As domestic service declined in both availability and social prestige – a condition described in the historiography as the "servant crisis" (McNeill 2008) – many upper-class households gradually moved away from reliance on live-in staff. In their place, they increasingly turned to a growing array of commercial providers (hotels, boarding houses, restaurants, and travel services) that began to assume the functions of hosting, feeding, and caring for guests. What had previously belonged to the private sphere of domestic service was thus redistributed across emerging institutional settings, lending hospitality a more public, standardised, and infrastructural character (Clancy 1998).

The spilling over of servile labour beyond the private sphere of the household led to its redistribution across new spaces and institutions. Hotels, in particular, emerged as infrastructures of comfort and social distinction, taking

over many of the tasks once performed by domestic staff and reframing them within formalised systems of service (Zampoukos and Ioannides 2011). Yet, despite the outward shift, many of the symbolic codes of hierarchy and subordination persisted, now expressed through rituals of etiquette, standards of professional conduct, and the aesthetics of discretion (Adib and Guerrier 2003; Christian, 2016; Longo, 2015; McDowell, 2009; Sherman, 2007).

Building on this gradual shift from domestic service to commercial hospitality, the consolidation of tourism as an industry unfolded through successive waves of expansion, each shaped by distinct political, economic, and institutional dynamics (D'Eramo 2017). After the Second World War, mass tourism expanded rapidly across Europe and North America, supported by rising wages, public investment in transport and hospitality infrastructures, and national development policies that promoted leisure as a pillar of social welfare. In this phase, tourism remained largely national and regional in scope, embedded within welfare state strategies and Fordist temporalities that aligned paid holidays with industrial rhythms.

A new phase began to take shape in the 1990s, when tourism entered the global stage with unprecedented speed and scale. The liberalisation of air travel opened new routes and drastically reduced the cost of mobility. At the same time, waves of financial and real estate deregulation encouraged investment in large-scale tourist infrastructure, while multinational hotel chains and vertically integrated tour operators expanded their reach (Clancy 1998; Christian 2016; Niewiadomski 2016; Bianchi and De Man, 2021). Tourism is no longer a regional affair but a strategic vector of post-industrial development, promising regeneration, employment, and visibility on the global map. This reconfiguration profoundly altered the spatial and social organisation of tourism work, anchoring it within broader dynamics of flexibilisation, informalisation, and uneven development (Bianchi, 2000; Büscher and Fletcher, 2017; Britton 1991).

This long transformation did not produce a homogeneous or linear process of professionalisation. Instead, it generated a layered and contradictory regime in which formal and informal dimensions coexisted, and in which tourism continued to rely on social characteristics historically associated with domestic and servile labour. Two features exemplify this continuity. First, the persistence of occupational titles – such as waiter, porter, valet, maître, and concierge – directly inherited from the vocabulary of domestic service, signals a symbolic lineage that still structures perceptions of status and authority. Second, the reproduction of mechanisms of invisibilisation and devaluation: service roles continue to be associated with gendered and racialised bodies, framed as vocations rather than skilled professions, and positioned at the margins of institutional recognition, union representation, and labour protections. Employment relations are often fragmented, shaped by peculiar combinations of formal and informal regulations, and short in duration, reflecting the seasonal rhythms of the industry. Wages and protections remain among the lowest across the service economy (Ladkin et al., 2023; Ioannides and Zampoukos, 2018; ILO, 2015; Baum et al, 2016; Riley et al, 2002). In many roles, particularly those involving cleaning, food service, and little guest interaction, workers encounter limited recognition and hold little bargaining power.

Therefore, tourism work crystallises a long process of transformation, one in which reproductive and servile functions have been gradually reconfigured within commercial and institutional forms. The genealogy of tourism work thus reveals how labour regimes take shape through the rearticulation of older hierarchies and functions.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL MARGINALITY AND SYMBOLIC REMOVAL

For more than three decades – accelerating after the 2008 financial crisis – tourism has occupied a central place in development discourse. Promoted as a vector of growth (UNWTO, 2023), a cure for deindustrialisation, a remedy to labour market inequalities, and a solution to poverty in peripheral regions, tourism has been enveloped in a celebratory narrative of job creation, territorial revitalisation, and modernisation (ILO, 2015; Roe and Urquhart, 2001). However, while tourism is imagined as a generator of opportunity and inclusion, the social relations, material conditions, and hierarchies that underpin its production remain largely unspoken (Britton, 1991; Bianchi, 2018).

This silence is not only rhetorical or political. It is epistemic. It runs through the ways in which tourism, and even more so tourism labour, has been conceptualised and studied. For decades, the work that makes tourism pos-

sible has struggled to gain recognition as a legitimate object of inquiry. Often treated as marginal or self-evident, it has been confined to applied research, technical literature, and business-oriented studies concerned with performance and efficiency (Baum et al., 2016; Ladkin et al., 2023). Rather than being questioned, tourism labour is celebrated in abstract or instrumental terms. Even where present, work and workers tend to appear not infrequently as a secondary variable, something to be optimised, not understood; adjusted, not questioned (Veijola, 2010). Consequently, the dominant analytical frameworks frequently bracket out questions of power, inequality, and resistance, producing a "mosaic" of disconnected case studies, loosely held together by managerial concerns (Baum et al., 2016). Within this landscape, categories such as class, race, gender, and citizenship are either marginalised or absent altogether, not due to lack of relevance, but because the analytical tools and theoretical priorities of tourism studies often struggle to account for the unequal social composition of tourism labour.

Caught between the narrow concerns of mainstream tourism research and the historical blind spots of labour studies, tourism work is rendered illegible. As Gaspani and Mazzaglia (in this issue) demonstrate, even in the academic literature on Italian seasonal tourism, an adaptive and normalising lens prevails, one that overlooks workers' subjectivities and the institutional logics that underpin precariousness. Their systematic review reveals how research in this area has been dominated by descriptive and managerial approaches, often focused on the functional aspects of labour market dynamics. Rather than outcomes of specific institutional configurations, seasonality itself is rarely interrogated as a socio-political construct; more often it is naturalised as a structural feature of the sector, thereby erasing the active role played by migration policies, labour market regulations, and welfare regimes in producing labour precarity. By highlighting these silences and imbalances, Gaspani and Mazzaglia provide a critical foundation for future research that aims to reposition tourism work within broader debates on inequality, regulation, and labour precarity.

At the same time, their contribution prompts a broader reflection on some of the methodological limits of systematic literature reviews. While such instruments are valuable for identifying dominant trends, they risk excluding contributions that circulate outside academic journals, or that take the form of grey literature, activist reports, or interdisciplinary outputs. Given that research on tourism work is frequently conducted within informal circuits—such as activist networks, grassroots initiatives, or trade union observatories—careful attention to this point is essential to avoid methodological bias. When used to argue that certain themes are absent from the literature, they may inadvertently reproduce the very marginalisation they seek to reveal. This special issue takes up that challenge, not only by recognising the value of such reviews, but by situating them within a broader critique of how knowledge on tourism work is categorised, legitimised, and rendered visible or invisible.

Part of the difficulty in developing such a perspective lies in the enduring imaginaries that shape what "counts" as work. Labour sociology, for a long time anchored to the figure of the industrial, male, unionised worker, has struggled to account for fragmented, feminised, and racialised forms of employment like those found in tourism (McDowell, 2009). As Raspadori (2014) compellingly reconstructs in his historical account of the long and tormented process of "becoming workers" in the Italian hospitality and catering sector, workers in these activities were already stigmatised by the trade union movement in the early twentieth century. They were perceived as lacking a spirit of collective struggle, difficult to organise, fragmented by tasks and employment trajectories, and associated with occupations deemed servile or subordinate. This exclusion operated both strategically, due to their limited mobilisation potential, and symbolically, drawing boundaries between what was considered "real" labour and what was not.

This legacy continues to shape the terms through which tourism labour is perceived. Added to this is the representation of tourism as a pacified space, lacking explicit conflict, unionisation, or politicisation. In a disciplinary field historically built around industrial conflict, collective bargaining, and structured antagonism, the absence of such elements has rendered tourism work difficult to analyse through the dominant conceptual frameworks of labour sociology. This is, in part, an understandable omission, but it also exposes the limitations of a tradition that has struggled to recognise less visible – but no less incisive – forms of resistance. Rather than prompting reflection, the lack of open conflict or trade union visibility has often led to the normalisation of absence itself, consolidating the theoretical invisibility of tourism work.

Only recently has international literature begun to reverse this trend, seeking to recognise tourism work as a legitimate domain of critical analysis (Ioannides and Zampoukos, 2018; Veijola, 2010; Ladkin et al., 2023), marked by profound classed, gendered, and racialised inequalities (Alberti and Iannuzzi, 2020). This signals the emergence of approaches that aim to restore analytical dignity to work as an object of study. Despite these efforts, the field remains dominated by functionalist readings, by a tendency to view tourism work as an empirical reference for testing theories, and by a preponderance of single-case studies, largely disconnected from the broader ontological and epistemological debates of the social sciences (Jordhus-Lier and Underthun, 2014; Bramwell, 2015).

A more radical repositioning, however, requires taking tourism work seriously as a theoretical object in its own right. To take tourism work seriously as a theoretical object is not simply to fill a disciplinary gap. It means rethinking the priorities of labour research, widening its legitimate domains, and questioning spaces traditionally considered marginal or residual. Such a shift would enable us to recentre the everyday practices, embodied experiences, and structural conditions of those who make tourism possible: cleaners, waiters, cooks, guides, entertainers, and assistants. Above all, it would allow us to treat tourism work as a privileged critical lens through which to read contemporary capitalist transformations, challenging established distinctions between productive and reproductive, standard and non-standard, visible and invisible labour.

RECENT TRENDS AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

The tourism economy displays a set of distinctive characteristics that must be considered before delving into its work exploitative dynamics. Unlike other sectors, tourism has evolved in a diffuse and complex manner, blurring its boundaries and frequently overlapping with other areas of the economy. For example, the functioning of hotels relies not only on direct services but also on infrastructures such as railway stations, airports, electricity grids, and water systems, as well as on institutions, territorial assets, and social services. These are all foundational elements without which tourism could not operate, highlighting the sector's deep interdependence with broader economic and social systems. As Boltanski and Esquerre (2020) argue, it is only by connecting these seemingly unrelated and autonomous spheres that we can fully grasp the processes underlying the creation of value in the tourism sector.

This interdependence points to what is arguably the most defining feature of tourism development: its pervasiveness. As D'Eramo (2017) notes, the tourism economy, rather than producing new activities, tends to reshape existing ones, restructuring both territorial productive and reproductive spheres to exclusively satisfy the "tourist gaze." This means that when territories undergo touristification, both urban and rural spaces are redesigned to meet the expectations of visitors rather than the needs of residents. Public spaces, housing markets, transportation systems, and even local traditions become commodified, gradually becoming less accessible to the communities who inhabit these areas. It is no surprise, then, that touristification has increasingly sparked social conflicts, influenced local policymaking, and generated academic debate regarding the broader impacts of tourism-led development.

In this context, as Lupoli theoretically argues and empirically explores through the cases of Rimini (Italy) and Durrës (Albania) in this special issue, tourism economies are sustained by structurally undervalued labour – what Moore calls "cheap labour" – which is both economically low-cost and symbolically devalued. Drawing on extensive qualitative fieldwork, including interviews with tourism workers, his study reveals widespread precarious working conditions in both cities: lack of contracts, long hours, inadequate pay, and limited labour protections. Despite contextual differences, the comparative analysis highlights how both cases share a reliance on informal networks, seasonal work, and a family-business ethos that reinforces worker vulnerability and discourages collective resistance. This aptly captures a key dimension of tourism: cheap labour, as well as cheap natural resources, are not mere side effects but rather central components of the sector's accumulation strategies. Therefore, from an ecological perspective, tourism appears as inherently an unsustainable industry, based on the exploitation of labour as much as on the extraction of value from social cooperation, cultural heritage, and natural.

The pervasiveness of tourism leads here to a paradox. While on one hand, adopting a restricted definition, tourism work may appear marginal and ineffective, often resulting as too discontinuous, too playful, and less

rewarding an activity to become "a real job"; on the other hand, adopting a broader definition, it may include different activities, organisations, and employment statuses, becoming too vast and heterogeneous to be analytically tractable. In both cases, the result is the neglect of the study of tourism work, sedimenting false beliefs and feeding stereotypes about the economic structure of this sector.

Yet tourism is arguably the fastest-growing industry of the last century. According to UNWTO (2020; 2025), international tourist arrivals grew from 25 million in 1950 to 1.4 billion in 2024. This is an exponential growth only briefly interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which in terms of tourist flows seems to have been fully overcome. The global tourism market, valued by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC, 2025) at around USD 11 trillion – nearly 10% of global GDP – is expected to surpass USD 16 trillion in the next decade. Similarly, the sector currently supports approximately 350 million jobs worldwide, with projections reaching 450 million over the next ten years. While these figures reveal little about job quality, they underscore that the sector is not characterised by structural poverty, but by poor means of redistribution.

The difficulty in redistributing is also because the tourism economy is predominantly composed of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which account for around 80% of all tourism businesses globally (UNWTO, 2020). In Italy, this figure is even higher. A recent study promoted by the Office for Study, Research and Innovation of BPER Bank (2025) conducted among their clients found that the tourism sector is dominated by sole proprietors (71%) and directly managed enterprises (98%), with 85% of these reporting annual revenues below one million euros. Despite this fragmentation and the structural tendency towards economic dwarfism, the tourism sector is undergoing rapid change. Foreign direct investment (FDI) is growing, with Mediterranean countries like Spain and Greece among the top beneficiaries. Although FDI is still slowly recovering from the pandemic, it peaked in 2019 at USD 59 billion (FDI Intelligence, 2024), reflecting global capital's growing interest in the sector's revenue potential and structural transformation.

One major driver of this transformation is digitalisation. Tourism-related platforms – such as Airbnb and Booking.com – have become hegemonic players, reshaping how tourist experiences are accessed and delivered and increasingly attracting financial investments in this sector. A wide range of platform-based services now exists for booking restaurants, renting bikes, hiring guides, or curating experiences. In many cases, these services were historically part of the urban informal economy, with platforms employing digital tools to disintermediate local provision and establish their monopoly. This concentration process produces two types of consequences. On the one hand, local tourist businesses are often dismissed by the disruptive effects of digital platforms; on the other hand, although platforms have formalised these services, introducing managerial logics and disciplinary practices typical of the industrial labour regime, the digital tourism work often replicates the insecurity and poverty typical of informal employment. These dynamics further complicate the labour landscape of tourism, resulting in a variegated continuum of business models, employment statuses, formal regulations, and informal practices. Nonetheless, it is exactly the variety, complexity, and peculiar dynamism of the tourism sector that makes it a privileged lens through which to examine some of the tendencies currently characterising the global economy.

Despite the many social and environmental challenges, the growth of tourism may also create opportunities for workers, territories, and local institutions by improving infrastructure, local economies, and environmental protection. In this sense, tourism's pervasiveness retains a connection with the sphere of social reproduction, mobilising capital and labour for the care and development of territories. Though not without contradictions, this potential is explored in this issue by Monaco and Berritto through the case of the Vesuvius National Park, where the authors highlight the positive interplay between environmental protection and tourism. This study investigates how tourism professionals in the Vesuvius National Park balance environmental conservation with local development. The authors argue that sustainable practices are incorporated into tourism-related work in a highly anthropised and economically fragile region. Despite these difficulties – or perhaps precisely because of them – a strong sense of resilience and community collaboration emerges, making sustainability a social paradigm orienting conservation and enhancement strategies, territorial networking, technological innovation, and perceptions of ongoing challenges for the local community.

Such virtuous circles are particularly crucial for so-called "left-behind" areas, which simultaneously benefit from tourism's global expansion while remaining highly vulnerable to its negative consequences due to weak institutions and inadequate infrastructure. This ambivalence is effectively explored in the papers by Lupoli, and by Monaco and Berritto, both of which encounter the complex relationship between tourism and the development of these areas. Though seemingly distant in context, together they make emerge one of the distinguishing paradoxes of the tourism economy: where tourism is often promoted precisely in areas lacking the basic infrastructure and institutional capacity necessary to address its development and redistribute its benefits. These areas are often attractive to the tourism industry because of their distance from the main axes of industrial development, and investing in tourism is perceived as an easily accessible development strategy to face structural challenges, institutional weakness, and economic fragility. In such cases, however, tourism frequently turns into a new form of economic monoculture, replacing previous single-sector dependencies while reproducing – if not intensifying – similar patterns of economic dependency and social and environmental strain. What emerges from the debate on sustainable tourism in this special issue is therefore the crucial role of local institutions, communities, and social movements in shaping tourism trajectories. Without their active engagement, the notion of sustainable tourism may easily become little more than a neoliberal buzzword, pushing further processes of commodification and enhancing the vulnerability of the territories it claims to protect.

PRECARIOUSNESS AS A REGIME: EXPLOITATION, RESISTANCE, AND THE CRISIS OF WORKFORCE IN TOURISM

If, as argued in the previous sections, work in the tourism sector has long been shaped by dynamics of marginalisation and devaluation, it is also true that tourism work has historically been precarious, even when other sectors enjoyed relative stability and protection.

An in-depth examination of how this regime is sustained through co-constituted material and symbolic mechanisms emerges from the contributions collected in this special issue. On one side, concrete mechanisms of exploitation are clearly visible: highly fragmented employment structures, intensive use of fixed-term or on-call contracts, widespread informality, wage violations, and excessive workloads. On the other, the revival of both old and new forms of subordination based on race, gender, and age continues to segment and stratify the tourism workforce. Both dynamics are captured in the contributions of Quandamatteo and Vianello, and of Coin, who shed light on the concrete mechanisms underpinning the reproduction of exploitation and segmentation within tourism labour markets.

Quandamatteo and Vianello offer an important contribution focused on the analysis of seasonal work in the Venetian coastal area, showing how corporate cost-cutting strategies translate into the systematic erosion of workers' rights and protections. Here, exploitation does not appear as an exceptional or marginal practice but as a structural component of organisational logic, normalised and embedded in everyday management practices. Analysing the trajectories of seasonal employees, often migrants, they demonstrate that job insecurity is not a by-product of seasonality but a deliberately produced condition, aimed at maintaining low costs and ensuring workforce flexibility. The accumulation of fragmented work experiences, the absence of stabilisation pathways, and the reliance on very short employment periods contribute to the formation of a workforce marked by structural vulnerability and limited bargaining power.

While Quandamatteo and Vianello trace the organisational mechanisms of exploitation from within, Coin complements this perspective by exposing the discursive and ideological operations that legitimate such practices in the public sphere. Focusing on the catering sector, she investigates the relationship between deteriorating working conditions – low wages, unsustainable hours, and toxic environments – and the discursive construction of tourism workforce shortages. Through the analysis of testimonies collected through online platforms, Coin shows how the widespread narrative of 'reluctant workers', disseminated by employers and amplified in public discourse, masks the structural causes behind workers' flight from the sector. These narratives shift responsibility onto individuals

while legitimising the recruitment of a more vulnerable and easily exploitable workforce. In doing so, they not only obscure the deterioration of working conditions but actively reinforce the mechanisms that normalise exploitation.

In addition, both Quandamatteo and Vianello, and Coin offer crucial insights into how processes of segmentation, precariousness, and labour mobility are actively constructed and reproduced within contemporary tourism labour markets. Their analyses illuminate dynamics that, more broadly, can be seen as part of the ongoing construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the social composition of the tourism workforce, within which the prominent role of migrant workers – often women – stands out.

The connection between tourism employment and migrant labour has long been at the centre of scholarly analysis (Baum, 2012; Janta et al., 2011). The very organisation of tourism production can be understood as resting on a dual mobility regime: on the one hand, the mobility of consumption – the need to bring consumers to the place where the commodity is produced; on the other, the mobility of labour – the need to relocate workers to sites of production through various migratory forms, including circular, seasonal, and permanent migration. A key to understanding these dynamics lies in the inextricable link between sites of production and consumption (Urry, 1990), combined with pronounced temporal fluctuations in demand (Lai and Baum, 2005; Duncan et al., 2013). Indeed, sectoral characteristics such as seasonality, high labour turnover, and poor working conditions have thus consistently acted as drivers of migrant employment (Baum, 2012; Janta et al., 2011).

The necessity to adapt workforce availability to shifting consumption patterns fosters highly flexible and precarious employment practices, often structured around short-term and occasional contracts (Matthews and Ruhs, 2007). Yet this functional demand for flexibility does not affect all workers equally. It intersects with pre-existing social hierarchies, such that certain groups – particularly women, migrants, and young people – are systematically positioned at the margins of rights, stability, and recognition. Workforce segmentation thus emerges as a mode of organising insecurity along axes of gender, race, class, and migratory status, and a key mechanism in the production of cheap labour (Iannuzzi, 2021).

Nonetheless, these regimes of control and exploitation do not establish themselves uncontested. Although tourism is often portrayed as a pacified sector, seemingly free from overt conflicts or strong collective mobilisation, this representation tends to obscure widespread yet fragmented and individualised forms of refusal and disaffection. In this regard, both Quandamatteo and Vianello, and Coin emphasise that one of the most common responses to exploitative conditions is exiting the sector, either by abandoning tourism employment altogether or by moving into occupations perceived as less unstable. However, the ability to pursue exit strategies is unevenly distributed. Structural inequalities related to gender, migration status, skill levels, and access to social and cultural capital profoundly shape the degrees of mobility available to different groups of workers, producing differentiated margins of manoeuvre (Alberti, 2014).

At the same time, Coin reveals how this disaffection is also articulated through a shared collective imaginary, conveyed via social media and informal networks, fostering a silent yet pervasive rejection of tourism work. Such trajectories of abandonment and the growing subjective estrangement from tourism work do not appear as isolated phenomena but rather as concrete indicators of a broader crisis in the reproduction of the workforce, progressively undermining the very capacity of the precarious regime to renew and sustain itself.

From these contributions, tourism emerges as a paradigmatic space for observing the contemporary reorganisation of work: a site where the commodification of care, service, and affective labour is intertwined with the erosion of protections and the intensification of structural inequalities. Yet it is also a space where these contradictions are rendered visible, fuelling new questions about labour regulation, the boundaries of recognition, and the political significance of refusal.

SEEN FROM THE MARGINS: RETHINKING LABOUR THROUGH TOURISM WORK

The perspective adopted in this special issue is grounded in the idea that tourism work, precisely because of its simultaneous symbolic and analytical marginalisation, offers a privileged lens through which to interrogate the

reorganisation of labour, the remapping of social and territorial hierarchies, and the articulation of local economies within global circuits of accumulation. Its historical location in the peripheries of both the labour market and the social sciences has long contributed to its invisibility. Yet this very marginality allows tourism work to expose the blind spots of dominant paradigms, bringing into focus forms of labour that challenge mainstream assumptions. Taking tourism seriously, then, means engaging with a form of work that unsettles conventional analytical categories: it is both productive and reproductive labour, visible in consumption but invisible in regulation, rooted in affective and bodily performances, yet subjected to processes of standardisation and commodification. It is precisely this ambivalence that renders tourism a particularly fertile ground for rethinking the categories through which traditional labour is theorised.

This reframing opens up a series of urgent research trajectories. First, tourism work needs to be linked more explicitly to theories of social reproduction. As Ferguson (2019) and Katz (2001) have argued, reproduction is not merely a background process to capitalist accumulation, but a terrain of contestation where labour is made possible, constrained, and governed. Understanding how tourism work draws upon and contributes to infrastructures of social reproduction – childcare, housing, informal support, public services – reveals the deep interdependence between production and care, and between the formal economy and the unpaid or invisible work that sustains it. From this perspective, tourism work offers a particularly distinctive and privileged vantage point. Tourism workers are not only compelled to reproduce themselves under increasingly disadvantaged conditions – due to precariousness, mobility and low wages – but are also structurally involved in the reproduction of others. Their labour enables the rest and restoration of those who consume it, revealing a double burden of reproductive effort, both lived and performed (Zampoukos and Ioannides, 2011; Wolkowitz, 2006). This calls for a research agenda that examines how tourism work participates in the commodification of reproductive functions, while simultaneously relying on informal and unpaid reproductive infrastructures to sustain its own labour force.

A second line of inquiry emerges from the need to interrogate the discourse of sustainability that increasingly frames tourism development. As Bianchi (2018) and Bianchi and de Man (2021) have shown, sustainability often functions as a technical and communicative device, a legitimising language that leaves untouched the structural logics of inequality and exploitation. Under the guise of inclusion, territorial regeneration, and environmental sensitivity, tourism development projects frequently deepen social segmentation, displace local populations, and extract value from communal resources. A renewed research agenda should investigate how sustainability discourses operate as mechanisms of governance, shaping who is included in development processes, who is rendered disposable, and how local economies are restructured in the name of sustainability.

The reorganisation of tourism work must also be read in relation to broader institutional and technological transformations. The digitalisation of services, the platformisation of labour, and the financialisation of tourism assets are not merely operational shifts; they represent new modalities of control, dispossession, and extraction. These transformations reshape not only employment relations but also workers' subjectivities and forms of resistance. Future research should explore how these processes alter the temporality, visibility, and value of labour, and how workers navigate, adapt to, or contest these shifting conditions.

At the same time, closer attention should be paid to the forms of resistance, agency, and collective action that emerge within and against tourism labour regimes. While tourism work is often characterised by fragmentation and informality, workers have developed situated practices of solidarity, mutual support, and mobilisation, from informal networks to unionisation efforts and local and transnational campaigns. These struggles illuminate the contested nature of tourism labour and open up new perspectives on organising in precarious and scarcely regulated contexts.

Finally, rather than treating local contexts as self-contained cases, future research might use them as strategic entry points for analysing the interplay between global forces and territorially embedded labour regimes. Mediterranean regions, in particular, offer a revealing lens through which to explore how tourism is simultaneously promoted as a path to development and experienced as a source of dependency, precarity, and dispossession. Research should focus on how localised regimes of tourism labour articulate with transnational circuits of capital, migration, and regulation, foregrounding the co-constitution of local and global inequalities.

These theoretical advances must be accompanied by a corresponding methodological shift. Studying tourism work as a site of social reproduction and symbolic marginalisation requires more than quantitative indicators or organisational surveys. It calls for ethnographic sensibilities attentive to the everyday negotiations of workers, their work experiences, and the infrastructures that sustain them. Rather than isolating tourism as a discrete field of analysis, research should follow labour across sectors, seasons, and borders, tracing its entanglements with welfare institutions, migration regimes, household economies and labour markets. At the same time, intersectional lenses are needed to grasp how race, gender, class, and legal status shape not only access to employment, but also the meanings attributed to work and the possibilities of refusal, resistance, or mobility. Rethinking tourism work, in this sense, also means rethinking how we observe, document, and represent it.

Approaching tourism work not as an empirical add-on to established frameworks, but as a starting point for critical reflection, invites us to reconsider the foundations of labour research not from the industrial core, but from its alleged margins. Taking tourism labour seriously, then, is not simply a shift of focus. It is a proposition to remake the conceptual and political architecture through which labour, value, and possibility are imagined today.

REFERENCES

Adib, A., & Guerrier, Y. (2003). The interlocking of gender with nationality, race, ethnicity and class: The narratives of women in hotel work. *Gender, Work & Organization, 10*(4), 413–432.

Alberti, G. (2014). Mobility trategies, 'mobility differentials' and transnational exit': the experiences of precarious migrants in London's hospitality jobs. *Work, Employment and Society*, 28(6), 865-881.

Alberti, G., & Iannuzzi, F. E. (2020). Embodied intersectionality and the intersectional management of hotel labour: The everyday experiences of social differentiation in customer-oriented work. *Gender, Work & Organization, 27*(6), 1165–1180.

Baum, T. (2012). Migrant workers in the international hotel industry. *International Migration Paper No. 112*, ILO Working Paper.

Baum, T., Kralj, A., Robinson, R. N. S., & Solnet, D. (2016). Tourism workforce research: A review, taxonomy and agenda. *Annals of Tourism Research, 60*, 1–22.

Bianchi, R. V., & de Man, F. (2021). Tourism, inclusive growth and decent work: A political economy critique. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 29*(2–3), 352–370.

Bianchi, R. V. (2000). Migrant tourist-workers: Exploring the "contact zones" of post-industrial tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism, 3*(2), 107–137.

Bianchi, R. V. (2018). The political economy of tourism development: A critical review. *Tourism Planning & Development, 15*(4), 471–493.

Boltanski, L., & Esquerre, A. (2020). *Enrichment: A critique of commodities*. London: John Wiley & Sons.

BPER Ufficio Studi Ricerche e Innovazione (2025) *Il settore turistico. Un'analisi campionaria delle imprese*. Osservatorio congiunturale GEI 4 Marzo 2025

Bramwell, B. (2015). Theoretical activity in sustainable tourism research. *Annals of Tourism Research, 54*, 204–218.

Britton, S. G. (1991). Tourism, capital, and place: Towards a critical geography of tourism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 9*(4), 451–478.

Büscher, B., & Fletcher, R. (2017). Destructive creation: Capital accumulation and the structural violence of tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 25*(5), 651–667.

Christian, M. (2016). A gendered tourism global value chain: Economic upgrading lessons from Kenya. In C. Staritz & J. G. Reis (Eds.), *Global value chains, economic upgrading, and gender: Case studies of the horticulture, tourism, and call center industries* (pp. 43–71). Washington: World Bank Publications.

Clancy, M. (1998). Commodity chains, services and development: Theory and preliminary evidence from the tourism industry. *Review of International Political Economy, 5*(1), 122–148.

D'Eramo, M. (2017). *Il selfie del mondo. Indagine sull'era del turismo*. Milano: Feltrinelli.

Duncan, T., Scott, D. G., & Baum, T. (2013). The mobilities of hospitality work: An exploration of issues and debates. *Annals of Tourism Research, 41*, 1–19.

FDI Intelligence (2024). Tourism Investment Report 2024. Retrieved from https://www.fdiintelligence.com/special-report/3c5c4180-8c42-526d-a6cc-32b88745a7d4 [Access on May 12, 2025]

Ferguson, S. (2019). *Women and work: Feminism, labour, and social reproduction*. London: Pluto Press.

Iannuzzi, F. (2021). *Assemblare le differenze. Il lavoro nell'industria alberghiera veneziana*. Milano: Guerini Scientifica.

International Labour Organization (ILO). (2015). *Sectoral studies on decent work in global supply chains*. Geneva. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/sector/Resources/publications/WCMS_485367/lang--en/index.htm

Ioannides, D., & Zampoukos, K. (2018). Tourism's labour geographies: Bringing tourism into work and work into tourism. *Tourism Geographies, 20*(1), 1–10.

Janta, H., Ladkin, A., Brown, L., & Lugosi, P. (2011). Employment experiences of Polish migrant workers in the UK hospitality sector. *Tourism Management, 32*(5), 1006–1019.

Jolliffe, L., & Farnsworth, R. (2003). Seasonality in tourism employment: Human resource challenges. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management, 15*(6), 312–316.

Jordhus-Lier, D. C., & Underthun, A. (2015). *A hospitable world? Organising work and workers in hotels and tourist resorts*. London: Routledge.

Katz, C. (2001). Vagabond capitalism and the necessity of social reproduction. *Antipode, 33*(4), 709–728.

Ladkin, A., Mooney, S., Solnet, D., Baum, T., Robinson, R., & Yan, H. (2023). A review of research into tourism work and employment: Launching the *Annals of Tourism Research* curated collection on tourism work and employment. *Annals of Tourism Research, 100*, 1–20.

Lai, P. C., & Baum, T. (2005). Just-in-time labour supply in the hotel sector: The role of agencies. *Employee Relations, 27*(1), 86–102.

Longo, V. (2015). *Lusso low cost*. Milano: Jaca Book.

Matthews, G., & Ruhs, M. (2007). Are you being served? Employer demand for migrant labour in the UK's hospitality sector. *COMPAS Working Paper No. 51*, University of Oxford.

McDowell, L. (2009). *Working bodies: Interactive service employment and workplace identities*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

McNeill, D. (2008). The hotel and the city. *Progress in Human Geography, 32*(3), 383–398.

Nakano Glenn, E. (1992). From servitude to service work: Historical continuities in the racial division of paid reproductive labor. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 18*(1), 1–43.

Niewiadomski, P. (2016). The globalisation of the hotel industry and the variety of emerging capitalisms in Central and Eastern Europe. *European Urban and Regional Studies, 23*(3), 267–288.

Raspadori, P. (2014). *Ospitare servire ristorare*. Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore.

Riley, M., Ladkin, A., & Szivas, E. (2002). *Tourism employment: Analysis and planning*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.

Roe, D., & Urquhart, P. (2001). *Pro-poor tourism: Harnessing the world's largest industry for the world's poor*. Johannesburg: International Institute for Environment and Development.

Sherman, R. (2007). *Class acts: Service and inequality in luxury hotels*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

UNWTO (World Tourism Organization) (2020) Tourism and Covid-19, Retrieved from: https://www.unwto.org/tourism-covid-19coronavirus [Access on May 12, 2025]

UNWTO (World Tourism Organization). (2023). *World tourism barometer and statistical annex, January 2023*. Madrid: UNWTO.

UNWTO (World Tourism Organization). (2025). *World tourism barometer and statistical annex, January 2025*. Madrid: UNWTO

Urry, J. (1990). *The tourist gaze: Leisure and travel in contemporary societies*. London: Sage.

Veijola, S. (2010). Introduction: Tourism as work. *Tourist Studies, 9*(2), 83–87.

Wolkowitz, C. (2006). *Bodies at work*. London: Sage.

WTTC (World Travel and Tourism Council) (2025). 2025 Economic Impact Research (EIR). Retrived from https://wttc.org/news/global-travel-and-tourism-is-strong-despite-economic-headwinds [Access on May 12, 2025]

Zampoukos, K., & Ioannides, D. (2011). The tourism labour conundrum: Agenda for new research in the geography of hospitality workers. *Hospitality & Society, 1*(1), 25–45.