Precariousness meets passion – Fields of conflict in editorial and social work

Kristin Carls

This article deals with everyday work experiences in the two sectors of social and editorial work. It stems from two processes of co-research, involving a group of eleven editorial workers and journalists in Milan in 2011, and another group of 19 social workers in Turin in 2012. In both cases, co-research was understood as a tool by which to learn about conflicts and contradictions in everyday work, analyse one's own coping practices, understand the reasons for the absence of collective conflict capacities, and increase mobilisation.
Both social and editorial work are traditionally associated with high workforce involvement, strong levels of identification with one's work, and intrinsic motivations related to personal interaction with the recipients of social services or the creative act of producing texts. This article explores how processes of precarisation affect such cognitive and emotional labour, and vice versa. This is done in two steps. First, current changes in work organisation and labour control are described, and a comparison is drawn between the sectors of editorial and social work. Second, workers' daily experiences with management's control strategies are analysed. Emerging areas of conflict and workers' daily coping practices are identified. The focus is on how professional identities are impacted by experiences of precarisation and by the losses in autonomy and work quality that result from changing patterns of work organisation. Two questions are raised. First, how does the evident destabilisation of professional identities affect workplace consent and workers' readiness to engage in emotional, creative, and/or social labour? Second, what are the consequences for workers' involvement in collective action, their conflict capacities, and strategies?

Key words: precarisation, professional identities, everyday experiences, coping practices, labour struggles

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Introduction

What is the link between passion and precariousness? What are the effects of the growing and continuous experiences of precarisation on workers' commitment to work and on their professional identities? And, vice versa, what role do professional identities and passionate relations with work play for workers' reactions to precarisation? Does precarisation destroy passion or is passion a trap, as it fosters acceptance for precarious working conditions? These are some of the questions at the heart of two co-research projects carried out in 2011 and 2012 with two groups of eleven editorial and 19 social workers in Milan and Turin. The social workers involved are employed by co-operatives that are financed by the municipality of Turin and carry out various social services such as elder and childcare, and support for disabled, ill, homeless, or drug-addicted persons. They are either members of the co-operatives (with a stable employment situation but variable working hours and incomes) or employed on a fixed-term basis. The editorial workers are employed by two large Milanese book and magazine publishers, some on open-ended, others on fixed-term contracts or as (bogus) self-employed workers. They are journalists, commissioning editors, and copy editors.

For both these co-research processes, one of the driving forces was the contradiction, experienced daily, between deteriorating working and employment conditions on the one hand, and, on the other, high levels of intrinsic work motivation as resulting from the content of social and editorial work. In both sectors, this intrinsic motivation is put into question by processes of marketisation. In workers' experience, these processes translate not only into precarisation, but also into a degradation of both service and product quality. This is experienced as a loss of work quality and professionalism. At the same time, however, workers' intrinsic motivation, particularly their passionate relation to their work and the associated social meaning, continue to play a crucial role for both editorial and social workers' professional identities, for their individual capacities to support and resist experiences of precarisation and dequalification, and for their collective mobilisations. In the case of the social workers investigated, passion stems from the social value and relevance of their work. Their professional identities are strongly based on their subjective ability and dedication to helping others resolve problems (created

by society) and gain increased autonomy. In the case of the editorial workers, the creative process of writing and elaborating texts, but also of producing socially relevant information and meaning, is at the centre of their professional identities, and it is perceived as requiring a passionate relationship to one's work. Obviously, professional identities can in neither case be explained in terms of passion alone, being related, instead, to a variety of professional, technical, and procedural standards. However, passionate (that is, strongly emotional, dedicated, and committed) involvement in one's work emerges as a recurrent concern in the co-research processes; it is also an important aspect of workers' self-definition as professionals. Of course, social and editorial work are not the only types of work for which such subjective, passionate work commitment is important. It could even be argued that passion and, more generally speaking, subjectivity matter in all work processes. Yet in the cases of editorial and social work, two examples of cognitive and relational labour, surplus production is especially strongly based on the valorisation of workers' subjective and emotional commitment.

In the case of social workers, the initiative for engaging in a collective inquiry came from a round of mobilisations in which workers occupied the square in front of the town hall once a week for six months; the workers engaged in these occupations to claim unpaid wages, as well as to protest worsening working and service conditions. The co-research was carried out by the network of social workers that also coordinated the protests, called "*operati sociali nondormienti*"[1] ("sleepless social workers"). In the case of the editorial workers, the co-research was initiated by a group of workers in a single publishing house; these workers had engaged in collective action against their employer (as well as against the largest trade union) some years earlier, and they intended to reflect upon the reasons for their decreased collective conflict capacities. The "network of precarious editorial workers"[2] ("*rete dei redattori precari*") was also involved in the inquiry and helped extend it to other workplaces.

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1 http://nondormienti.blogspot.de/; https://www.facebook.com/operatori.nondormienti

2 www.rerepre.org

Taking a closer look at the participants of the two co-research processes, one can distinguish different groups, particularly with regard to employment position and age. Among the journalists and editorial workers, there is a first group of four colleagues aged over 40 (three women and one man) who work for various magazines produced by one of the largest Italian publishing houses. They have stable employment contracts and long-term work experiences in mid-tier positions (department heads, journalists, and commissioning editors) within the same publishing house. A second group consists of five editorial workers (four women and one man) aged between 30 and 40, working on the basis of project contracts or as bogus self-employed workers. They have relevant, albeit less extensive employment experience in the field (approximately five years) and work for different book publishing houses. Officially, they are copy editors, but their de facto responsibilities are sometimes more far-ranging, and they have in some cases been responsible for coordinating the production of entire books. The third sub-group consists of the two youngest colleagues, two women aged 28. They are on changing temporary, internship, or project contracts, and they work as copy editors in the same magazine publishing house as their colleagues from the oldest group.

As for the social workers, they belong for the most part to a middle generation, aged between 30 and 40, and have begun work within the last ten years, although there are also some younger and more recently employed colleagues. The social workers are employed by three co-operatives that provide various social services, particularly childcare, family assistance, and the care of ill or disabled persons. The majority of the workers are members of the co-operatives. As such, they have stable employment positions, although their working hours and remuneration vary. A minority of the workers have temporary contracts. The workers' formal qualification profiles are very heterogeneous, ranging from on-the-job training (without any official diplomas) to university degrees in education and educational theory, via various professional school diplomas for specific types of care and social work.

The author of this article has participated in these two co-research projects as both a researcher and an activist. As the projects were interrupted at the time of writing, this article can only reflect the point of view of the author. However, co-research is essentially a collective process, and the ideas and

analyses presented here have without exception been developed on the basis of collective discussion and reflection, involving a number of other people.[3]

Co-research as a political approach

According to Romano Alquati (1993; Chicchi & Cominu, 2013), co-research seeks to create a collective space in which individual work experiences can be socialised. The aim is to produce a collective knowledge that allows workers to increase their capacity for conflict, shape their working conditions, and fight for their rights and interests. That is, co-research starts from an explicit political standpoint and is itself a tool for political action. In a word, it is about enhancing positions of collective power within social struggles against oppression. The strategy proposed to achieve this is to begin from the subject level and ask "how resistance is constituted on a subjective level" (Becksteiner, 2011, p. 1) and how it can be recomposed on a collective level, that is, how class recomposition[4] can take place as a continuous and contingent process. Co-research tries to create a space of collective reflection in order to analyse those daily practices by which subjects position themselves within society and its various relations of domination. Such collective reflection can reveal practices of subordinated subject constitution, but also their inherent contradictions and possible points of rupture, as well as subjects' self-willed, recusant action and thought.

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[3] For further analysis of these two co-research projects see Morini, Carls, and Armano (2014) and Carls and Cominu (2014).

[4] Class (re-)composition is a term from workerist (*operaista*) theory, which developed in close relation to the Italian labour struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and which has also been central to the development of the concept of co-research. Technical class composition refers to the positioning of workers within the production process as it results from changing forms of work organisation and labour control. By contrast, political class composition refers to the way workers constitute themselves as subjects and collective actors. Both processes are perceived as closely interrelated and historically contingent. Social change is seen as a result of class struggles, with workers' collective action and the restructuring of work processes and exploitation strategies by capital constantly boosting and influencing each other. On this approach, co-research is not simply an analytic tool but above all a strategy of political intervention and collective empowerment (Cominu, 2014).

Behind this subject-oriented approach to research lies an attempt to radically reconsider the relationship between theory and practice, questioning the very idea of scientific objectivity. The aim is to abolish every hierarchical distinction between the researcher and the researched, as well as between theoretical and practical knowledge. Critical collective reflection on everyday practices and common sense is seen as the core of co-research, and the keystone of its political strategy. It constitutes a way to assess subjects' entanglement in power relations, but also to access their experiential knowledge and recusant everyday practices, which may serve as resources for the development of collective strategies in social conflicts. Ultimately, critical collective reflection also serves as a basis for enhancing class recomposition, that is, as a precondition for increasing conflict capacities. In other words, theory is developed only in relation to practice, as an act of rendering common sense critical and situating it within its social context.

By virtue of this focus on practical knowledge, subjectivity, and collective reflection, co-research shares important characteristics with action research, although it emphasises social conflict and power relations over democratic dialogue (Fricke, 2014). With regard to labour struggles, co-research's central field of intervention, such a subject and power-oriented approach implies (at least) the following levels of analysis. First, it presupposes an analysis of management strategies of work organisation and labour control, that is, of the operations by which management attempts to transform diverse subjective labour capacities into the specific labour power required for the production process in question. Second, the contribution workers make to this process through their subjectivities also needs to be analysed, i.e. the ways in which workers contribute to the establishment and maintenance of workplace consent by their everyday coping practices. Next, attention needs to be paid to how and where conflicts and contradictions emerge. And finally, workers' conflict capacities and the conditions, problems, and strategies of collective action and organising must be assessed. This is what the following sections attempt to do for the specific contexts investigated, those of social and editorial work.

In order to analyse workers' everyday experiences of conflict and contradiction as foregrounded by co-research, this article refers to the German

school of critical sociology. Everyday practices and common sense are analysed as practices of coping (Krauss, 1996), used to face (sometimes contradictory and conflicting) social requirements on the one hand, and one's own needs and interests on the other. The central question is what role such coping practices play for workers' agency potentials (Holzkamp, 1985) within daily workplace conflicts, i.e. for workers' capacity to influence and change their working and employment conditions. How do coping practices contribute to the individualisation of labour relations and/or the production of collective imaginaries and capacities? And what could strategies of collective resistance to marketisation, deprofessionalisation, and precarisation consist in? Focusing its analysis on workers' professional identities, this article addresses only one of many aspects associated with such conflicts and coping practices, albeit one that seems crucial to understanding the cognitive and relational type of labour required in the two sectors examined, as well as to discussion of the potentials and limits of collective agency there. In concrete terms, each of the two co-research processes presented here consisted of a series of self-organised group discussions among colleagues: three such discussions were held in the case of the editorial workers, and four in the case of the social workers. The quotations in this article are taken from these group discussions; all names have been altered to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Changes within social and editorial work

In recent years, editorial and social work have undergone profound changes with regard to the organisation of work and production processes. In both sectors, processes of marketisation have occurred, with economic efficiency being prioritised over service or product content and quality.[5] With regard to the work process, marketisation translates into pressures to reduce labour costs. Consequently, work tasks become increasingly standardised and frag-

[5] From the point of view of the publishing houses and co-operatives, these processes may have contradictory results, particularly with regard to the link between product/service quality and marketability. In what follows, such management-specific contradictions are not explored further, the focus being on workers' experiences.

mented, and they are (in part) externalised, while the flexibilisation and precarisation of employment are augmented. Margins of autonomy, formerly quite extensive in social and editorial work (and an important tool by which to tap the subjective labour potentials of workers), are reduced, and stricter mechanisms of control introduced.

Social services in Italy are predominantly carried out by non-profit social co-operatives which receive project-linked financing from the federal or regional government, or, as is most often the case, from the local municipality. The history of social co-operatives in Italy is closely linked to workers' struggle for greater autonomy and participation in the organisation of work and the development of services, as well as for a different understanding and practice of social work, one that is more self-empowering and emancipatory for the users. The spread of social co-operatives during the 1970s was, among other things, an expression of workers' desire to escape from direct public employment and services, which were considered too rigid and authoritarian. Working as a cooperative member was seen as an alternative, since co-operatives seemed to offer more participatory and collectively managed work environments. From the point of view of the state, externalising social services to cooperatives also presented itself, from the outset, as a way of reducing costs while simultaneously benefiting from co-operative workers' high levels of flexibility and commitment. Today however, and as a result of marketisation, the idea of co-operation is being seriously questioned, including from within the co-operatives themselves (Pedersini, 2009; Revelli, 1997).

Marketisation results from changing models of financing and project allocation on the part of the local and regional public authorities, but also from the co-operatives' attempts to reduce their dependence on inadequate public funding by entering emerging welfare markets, especially in the fields of health services and elder care. In a break with earlier, project-based financing models, public social services such as those provided by the co-operatives are now financed in the form of lump sum payments.[6] These payments rarely

[6] An important prelude to this recent shift in contracting models, indeed the starting point for marketisation, was the municipality of Turin's introduction of a new, accredi-

reflect real costs; moreover, they reduce the co-operatives' margins of autonomy with regard to the development and design of services. The management of the social co-operatives is thus driven to reduce costs. The cost reductions are mostly implemented at the expense of workers, be it in the form of reduced (or delayed) wages, more precarious and flexible forms of employment, or the intensification of work through a reduction of individual working hours and staff numbers per service and shift. As a result, most services operate under conditions of constant understaffing (Carls & Cominu, 2014).

Meanwhile, larger and economically stronger co-operatives have started to invest in the infrastructure of services by buying the buildings within which they operate. This development is particularly evident in the sectors of health and elder care. The co-operatives seek to enhance their capacity to operate on private markets, as well as to acquire some degree of autonomy vis-à-vis public funding. Concentration processes and the appearance of financial market actors are also evident in this sector, as the larger co-operatives take out loans, both to finance their real-estate investments and in an attempt to broaden their range of operations. In contrast, the smaller co-operatives are particularly strongly affected by austerity measures and the associated public funding cuts, leading to layoffs, a reduction in services, and the closure of co-operatives.

Aside from understaffing, precarisation, and work intensification, these developments also entail a standardisation of work processes. Technical and quantitative evaluation criteria are introduced for the purpose of gauging social workers' performance, social interventions are increasingly "medical-

tation-based system. In order to be considered for public contracts, co-operatives now have to successfully apply for accreditation first. Services are then contracted on a more long-term basis than under the former project-based system. This has created strong competition between co-operatives and eroded the informal solidarity that formerly precluded co-operatives from accepting contracts that failed to meet certain basic standards. The current lump sum payments also promote a race to reduce labour costs, as they drastically reduce the co-operatives' margins of autonomy with regard to project development and resource allocation. Moreover, the new system of accreditation has fostered concentration. It was the smaller co-operatives that tended not to satisfy the accreditation criteria. The larger co-operatives took the lead with regard to cost-cutting, and those who succeeded in obtaining the largest long-term contracts were thereby placed in a favourable position with regard to their possibilities for further expansion.

ised," and internal regulations, sanctions, and disciplinary forms of labour control are tightened. Technification and increasing control are closely related, as the following quotation illustrates. Along with the introduction of lump sum payments, they reduce both workers' autonomy and the levels of co-operation involved in the (collective) development and delivery of services.

> "The problem is the same in all co-operatives. Today [we] are asked to fulfil single, pre-established work tasks only. This is a clear break with the former methods of social co-operation. Once it wasn't the single social worker who took care of a user; he or she did so as a member of a working team […]. But today there is a strong disaggregation of work. The team counts very little nowadays. Workers might take care of users, but they do so in a way decided by others, […] by officials from the health administration or by doctors, for example. […] Consequently, there is less professional autonomy, there are binding conditions imposed by the employer, to whom the worker presents himself as a provider of services whose nature is decided by others" (Laura, social worker, co-operative member).

Formal hierarchies have also been reintroduced and extended in editorial offices. There too, recent years have seen the standardisation of work increasing as a result of marketisation (Morini, Armano, & Carls, 2014). Two processes in particular have characterised the transformation of editorial work in Italy during the past ten to fifteen years: the growing concentration of market power among a small number of major publishing houses,[7] and the priority given to marketing and advertising. The predominance of marketing criteria has a decisive impact on product development. Politically and culturally informative content is given less and less importance, with newspapers and magazines in particular now increasingly functioning as mere platforms for advertising and publicity. But books are also increasingly being thought of first and foremost as marketable products, and the media in general have turned into an investment area for financial actors (Morini, 2010). These

[7] The Italian book market, for example, is dominated by four large publishing houses: Mondadori, Rizzoli, De Agostini, and Messaggerie Italiane. Along with 50 medium-sized editors, they produce 90 percent of the sector's turnover (Rete dei redattori precari, 2011).

processes result in a standardisation of editorial and journalist work. There is less demand for creative work, original ideas, and authentic texts. What is now mainly called for is the ability to constantly repackage familiar content, content that attracts the interest of potential consumers while corresponding to their common sense. This requires a standardised and neutral language, devoid of any critical or otherwise disruptive potential (Carls & gruppo inchiesta redattori precari, 2013).

At the same time, work tasks become more and more fragmented, one important reason for this development being the attempt to cut costs and implement stricter control. The work of in-house editors and journalists is increasingly limited to the correction of texts written elsewhere, and correction procedures have become more extensive and regulated. In addition to this, the in-house staff has fewer opportunities to leave the editorial offices in order to engage in investigative work or write an article; these tasks are outsourced to external, self-employed workers. Another symptom of the tightening of hierarchies and control is the disappearance of editorial meetings, as witnessed in at least one of the publishing houses examined. This means that collective discussions and decisions about the content and timing of publications yield to top-down decisions. As a consequence, workers' margins of autonomy with regard to work content, working hours, and places of work are drastically reduced. Workers experience this increased control as reflecting a management strategy, rather than inherent requirements of the production process. As they see it, this management strategy is intended to subordinate a formerly highly autonomous and self-confident category of workers to the imperatives of marketisation, marketing rules, and economic efficiency.

Direct control is, however, only one side of the coin. The other side consists of management attempts to stimulate workers' identification with the publishing house, in hopes of thereby compensating for growing frustration over reduced autonomy and work quality. These transformation processes play out differently in each publishing house. To begin with, book publishing differs from newspaper and magazine publishing. Those editorial workers from the co-research group who are employed in the field of book publishing still enjoy a somewhat greater autonomy with regard to working times and places of work, although even in their case, the margins for creativity and

content design are extremely narrow. Moreover, while some workplaces have seen a drastic reduction in workers' margins of autonomy and creativity, others have been characterised by a veritable "creativity stress," with workers constantly being called upon to help improve products and sales by producing "creative" ideas. However, this sort of quality management occurs within a strictly delimited framework and does not involve workers being granted genuine decision-making power; it tends also to involve a deliberately created context of competition among colleagues. The following quotation provides an example of the contradictions inherent in such participatory management strategies.

> "All that is of interest here is a top-down type of management. In this context, creativity or original ideas become a challenge that involves a threat, an implicit negative judgement, like: 'Don't bother us!' This ranges from them [the management] being annoyed over you opening your mouth and saying something to a clearly expressed 'We don't give a shit about your opinion.' […] As a result, you get used to censoring yourself. Even though you still get challenged: 'Hey, don't you have anything to propose? Come on, where are your ideas?' I have to say that, in my position, the mechanism that sets in is one of filtering and rejecting ideas. It's risky to try to introduce ideas from outside, from the bottom, and to formulate them as proposals to the top, to the core of the magazine […], because then they can easily accuse you of not doing your job, of not filtering sufficiently" (Luca, chief editor, open-ended contract).

In summary, comparison of the transformations evident within the fields of social and editorial work shows strong similarities, especially with regard to the effects of marketisation on the process and content of work. In editorial work, the subordination of product development to market imperatives appears more direct, whereas in social work it is mediated by the organisation of public funding. The effects, however, are similar: pressures to adapt the process and content of work to the requirements of economic efficiency and marketability result in the reduced quality of services and products, in a standardisation and intensification of work, and in increased direct control and supervision. A further shared effect consists in the precarisation of employment. In editorial work and journalism, employment categories are proliferating, and temporary contracts, bogus self-employment, and intern-

ships are on the rise (Rete dei redattori precari, 2011). Within the social cooperatives, given the particular status of workers as co-operative members, precarisation mainly takes the form of a reduction in and flexible readjustment of working hours (and, consequently, wages). However, temporary and bogus self-employment are also on the rise, as is unremunerated voluntary work. Besides the insecurity of income and career prospects, low wages are also a characteristic of precarious employment in the two sectors.

Fields of conflict in workers' everyday experience

Social and editorial workers experience these changes in their work processes as a devaluation of their profession and an attack on both the quality of their work and their social function. Within the group of editorial workers and journalists, this experience appears strongest among the older colleagues with stable employment contracts and a longer history of employment in their publishing house. The professional identities of these workers were formerly based on the creative capacity to produce or process texts and meanings; they were associated with the possibility of self-realisation, as well as with the social relevance of conveying information and elaborating interpretations of the world. However, this self-perception as creative professionals has been seriously put into question by reduced margins of autonomy, increased standardisation, and a vanishing sense of the work and its content. In the following statements, journalists and editorial workers describe their work as that of "proletarian knowledge workers" (Bologna & Banfi, 2011), whose professional and creative capacities are required and acknowledged less and less. At best, creativity is redefined as the capacity to efficiently recompose given resources according to pre-determined objectives and time frames.

> "I reject the way that today magazines are called 'products.' I don't like this, but it's very common and accepted by now. When I think of pure production, I think about something schematic, following pre-established rhythms, something linked to efficiency, precise measurable performances and outcomes: these are all aspects that have by now become relevant to my profession as well" (Giulia, journalist/commissioning editor, open-ended contract).

> "The difference between today and some years ago is that, when I'm asked to cover a story, say 'children in jail,' once I could choose for myself which stories to collect, which people to talk to, and which experts to interview. Today […] I'm in a situation where actually, I can only choose very little by myself. That is, I'm told whom to talk to. […] There is too little delegation of responsibility and also a lack of confidence in our work now. Certainly, under these conditions, you feel even more restricted in your creativity. […] You're not recognised as a specialist anymore. I'm just treated as an instrument. They put me in front of some topics that sell, and I simply have to write about them, even if I don't know anything about these issues" (Marta, journalist/commissioning editor, open-ended contract).

Because they render professional identities more fragile, these changes in the organisation of work prompt a growing sense of insecurity among professional journalists. While the journalists continue to perceive themselves as privileged by comparison to their younger colleagues, who have temporary contracts or are self-employed, they nevertheless fear for their future, not only with regard to job satisfaction and the maintenance of a certain social status, but also with regard to working conditions and employment security. Above all, professional devaluation makes them feel more easily substituted and more exposed to volatile, market-induced shifts in management strategy. In other words, a general sense of precarisation stems, here, from what could be called a precarisation of professional identities.

By comparison, their younger colleagues on precarious contracts attribute less importance to the questions of professional identity, work content, and work quality, at least *prima facie*. For them, the most pressing problems are precarious employment, the insecurity of immediate subsistence, and the impossibility of future planning it entails. At the same time, their position as precarious workers prompts a constant sense of exclusion from the workplace community. For example, these workers often do not have their own desk; they have no company email address or telephone number, no access to editorial meetings, bonuses or freely distributed publications, and so on. This exclusion is also reflected in professional identities, as the young(er) and precariously employed editorial workers do not identify with any professional

category, even distancing themselves from the older "professional journalists," about whom they speak in the third person.

> "The journalists? They seem to me an overly privileged group. […] I see a lot of conservatism among them, that's all very closed up. And change seems to frighten them" (Simona, press office staff, fixed term/internship).

This sense of non-belonging is further reinforced by negative experiences with trade unions and shop stewards.

> "Often, I feel I'm treated as an anomaly, as a problem for everyone else, because I'm neither a regular employee nor an intern who can continue to be justified as such. I'm somebody that everyone tries not to see. And that's not all, I also feel completely ignored by the works council, as if I don't exist, sometimes I even feel a certain hostility." (Roberta, copy editor, fixed-term/project contract).

However, there appears to be a relevant difference between the two age groups of precarious editorial workers. The youngest colleagues, those with shorter employment histories and temporary contracts, are especially preoccupied with their precarious employment position. In contrast, workers from the middle group: those aged between 30 and 40, with several years of job experience, mostly as (bogus) self-employed workers, experience the devaluation of their profession, the lack of recognition, and the dwindling meaning of their work as a related and equally important field of conflict.

> "You're treated like rubbish. You're paid little, but you have enormous responsibilities, and all this based on a ridiculous employment contract. You publish the books practically by yourself, dealing with all the suppliers and everything else. […] But in the end, the only thing that matters is that the book comes out. What's in it doesn't matter to anybody. […] You publish bullshit, you publish school books that you really can't identify with, because personally you would never publish something so low-quality" (Barbara, copy editor, self-employed).

As far as social workers are concerned, their professional identity appears to be at least as strongly affected by the process of marketisation as that of the older editorial workers and journalists. Most of the social workers in the co-research group perceive their work as socially relevant. To do a good job as a social worker is considered a social responsibility, and many are proud of

their role as "social benefactors". What is more, in many cases the definition of good social work is closely linked to an emancipatory political attitude, reflected in the ideals of social co-operation. According to these ideals, a good social service not only combats social exclusion, discrimination, and inequality; it also aims to increase the autonomy and independence of the users. At the same time, it allows for co-operation and self-determination within the work team, with regard to both work processes and service design.

> "What I like best about my work is [that you try to increase] the self-determination of the people you're in charge of. Obviously, this isn't something that happens every day, it's something that grows slowly. To make that person recognise his self-determination, so that he can make his own decisions. […] What I like least about my work is that you have to make too many compromises and that you have to stay within a given framework, often without much autonomy when it comes to deciding on your work. In the sense that the service is not designed by the team of social workers, but from above, by the commissioning public institution. Consequently, as a social worker, […] you don't have much opportunity to adapt your work to the specific needs of the person you're in charge of" (Sara, social worker, co-operative member)

However, there are some relevant differences within this group as well, especially between different generations of workers. The idea that social co-operation is a distinguishing feature of their professional activity (one that sets it apart from both public and private services, and one that concerns both the orientation of social services and the organisation of work) is especially strong among the older workers in the group, who have participated in at least some of the history of social co-operation, and whose professional biographies also differ from those of their younger colleagues. Since the 1980s, in fact, social work has undergone a process of professionalisation that has seen social workers struggling for recognition both of their public function (as agents of collective interests) and of their distinctive knowledge. Since then, there has been a proliferation of diverse professional profiles, with an emphasis on the technical and specialist aspects of social work. As a result of this process of diversification, workers' senses of belonging to a common professional category have diminished (Minardi, 2009). The younger generation of social workers seems to have developed a more individual-

ised sense of professional identity, based on individual, officially certified training programmes and recognised professional capacities. In contrast, the older generation places more emphasis on the practical knowledge acquired through direct work experience and co-operation in a team. That is, for the older generation, professionalism stems from the collective practice of a working group, rather than from individual educational backgrounds, and it is perceived in terms of social, relational capacities, rather than as a matter of technical knowledge (Carls & Cominu, 2014).

Notwithstanding these differences, the professional identities of both generations of social workers are heavily put to the test by the current process of marketisation. This process calls into question the social relevance of their work, demanding that it be evaluated according to criteria of economic efficiency and technical or medical adequacy. The intensification of work that results from the application of such criteria causes stress for the workers. Growing employment and wage insecurity[8] add to this stress, leading in the long run to a widespread experience of precarisation. The entire situation negatively affects social workers' health, as well as their ability to provide good services.

> "In our group, we're very tired, because we have to maintain an exhausting work pace. We work twelve hours, even on the weekends, we're always called in when we're on standby duty. […] But to them [the management], it doesn't matter at all. They only say: 'You have to think about saving money.' […] There is no more time to develop any projects with a client, or to reflect for a moment on what is happening to the client at that moment, to reflect on the next step, because you're always on the run" (Simona, social worker, co-operative member).

[8] Workers that are members of a co-operative have the equivalent of an open-ended contract, since their status as members of the co-operative cannot easily be revoked. Their employment position is nevertheless precarious, as their regular working hours, and thus their wages, can be reduced at any time. Moreover, the number of temporary, self-employed, and voluntary workers in the field of social services is on the rise. Regardless of their contractual status, many workers do not receive the wage payments due to them (or are forced to accept wage arrears of several months), as the municipality of Turin often does not pay the co-operatives in a timely fashion. One reasons for this is the municipality's precarious financial situation (Turin is one of the most indebted cities in Italy); another reason consists in the national government's austerity measures, which involve a marked reduction of funding at the local level.

Frustration over the deteriorating quality of services is strongly felt by all social workers in the group, whereas dissatisfaction with declining margins of autonomy and collective self-management within the work process is more pronounced among older colleagues, in keeping with the trend outlined above. The following statement shows how the experiences of deteriorating working conditions and a lack of recognition are closely linked.

> "Austerity and compulsory saving no doubt have an impact, for example with regard to external counselling. Consequently, social workers have to take on new roles and improvise. Moreover, workers are no longer replaced. This means we're constantly understaffed. And I think there is so much weariness, also because there is less appreciation of people. The time we can spend per user is shortening, but that's not all, […] it's also paid as a lump sum now. That is, work is assigned to a social worker on the basis of the hours a user is entitled to. All the time spent for a user is packed into that lump sum: the time for service design, training, supervision, networking with other services, documentation, everything. This means that these elements of professional social work receive less recognition. But they are indispensable; a social worker can't just act and that's it. And then, there is the fact that you cannot regenerate, re-elaborate, re-motivate the resources you have. That's why there is that weariness in the end. […] When the time to restore your instruments, ideas, and projects is continuously shortening, then your resources are really getting exhausted" (Laura, social worker, co-operative member).

Individual coping practices ...

How then do workers cope with these experiences of professional devaluation and precarisation? A first, preliminary analysis reveals four key coping practices.

A first pattern combines disinvestment from work with what could be considered a privatised, identitarian compensation strategy. Some of the older journalists are particularly prone to transform their growing frustration over deteriorating working conditions and diminished quality into an individualised withdrawal from their work. Their strategy is to reduce their commitment and efforts at the workplace, either by limiting their performance at

their present job or by looking for another, less demanding employment situation. In this way, they attempt to create emotional distance and reduce the impact of wage labour on their life, and especially on their self-perception. The energy thereby set free is then invested in alternative strategies of self-realisation. However, these strategies of self-realisation often remain closely linked to their profession, i.e. many start to publish texts or books outside their workplace, thus trying to restore meaning to their work as writers. The following statements from one of the group discussions describes this desire and the associated escape strategy.

> "In my opinion, however, many people have tried, during this period, to escape certain mechanisms. The diaspora that has emerged is also a consequence of this internalised conflict: the desire to turn this into a sort of infidelity. So you decide to go away from that place, and you retrieve yourself somewhere else [...]. This has become a way of saying: 'No, I don't want to be part of this mechanism, I don't want to stay in this dimension.' But I also need some money, an income, so I try to find a different position" (Laura, journalist/commissioning editor, open-ended contract)

> "It's not that I don't do the things I have to do here, or that I do them badly, but […] the question is how to escape, how we escape […], how to economise on mental and physical energies, obviously to use them outside of here, to have other projects. […] I have to try to suffer as little as possible during the day at work. Doing only the indispensable minimum must be enough in order to reach the evening as fresh as possible and then write other things, those things that keep me alive, or to do sport. This is alienation, too, this obligation to be forced to express oneself outside of here. […] How many of us publish books? Books about the things we would like to write about within the newspapers […], but which aren't published there any more. It's really impressive: you can find whole editorial departments on the shelves of the book shops, all with their stories, analyses, comments" (Luca, chief editor, open-ended contract).

For obvious reasons, such a withdrawal is much more difficult to accomplish for the younger editorial workers in precarious employment positions. Driven by the fear of losing their jobs, the youngest colleagues on temporary contracts are particularly prone to demonstrate their individual availability.

Such demonstrations constitute the basis of the second coping pattern identified here; they entail intensified work performance and work commitment, rather than withdrawal. In this way, workers attempt to achieve better employment and career prospects, or at least to maintain hope in a better future.

> "The only thing that makes you go on is this sentence that you keep repeating to yourself constantly: 'Maybe, if I don't give up now, maybe one day I'll succeed and really be part of this editorial department or this workplace. […] And then you live with this hope that once you have a stable contract you'll be less vulnerable to blackmail, and you'll be able to say 'No' more easily, you'll have to endure less and be less available" (Simona, press office staff, fixed term/internship).

It is here that professional performances, though not necessarily established professional identities, come into play for this group of workers as well. As the following quotation shows, insisting on individual performance and an appealing work content serves to compensate the persistent sense of precariousness.

> "No, the fact that there is not much space here for autonomy and creativity is no big deal. In the sense that I try to create some space for myself and to express my creativity elsewhere. But this magazine offers me other possibilities: the pleasure of doing the type of research work that is required here, work I have a penchant for, and I also have the impression of learning something. That's why I won't say there's frustration, for me. […] But this kind of reasoning that we've engaged in now, in our discussion, to me, at this moment, it only represents a later level, it's really quite far from me now […]. In the sense that I'm much too preoccupied with how to pay my rent to ask myself whether this work gratifies me or not, or how much" (Roberta, copy editor, fixed term/project contract).

These young editorial workers frequently insist on their professional performance, and particularly on their ability to adapt and learn, but also on their willingness to meet the management's demands regarding flexibility and commitment. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a strategy for maintaining individual work motivation and performance, in spite of poor working and employment conditions, thereby adjusting to a rising rate of exploitation. On the other hand, it also constitutes a strategy by which to defend the mean-

ing of one's work, albeit an individualised one. Such coping strategies are further supported by practices of naturalisation, whereby one's precarious situation is described as a generalised social condition, as something normal in contemporary society. Finding oneself in a precarious position is thus not to be taken as a sign of individual failure; nor is it something to be scandalised by (or even to revolt against). While this can be considered a defence strategy against the neoliberal imperatives of self-responsibility and justice of performance, such naturalisation also has the effect of downplaying work-related demands and expectations by making them seem unrealistic, of secondary importance, etc.

For some of the older self-employed editorial workers, such an individualised, performance-based coping strategy assumes a different form, one that indicates a third pattern of coping. They do not rely only on performance and demonstrations of availability, to which management may or may not react. Instead, given their particular employment status and their longer work experience, they also engage in direct, individual negotiations on working and contract conditions with their superiors. The outcomes of such negotiations are perceived as highly dependent on their work performance, their experience, and their position within the workplace hierarchy. Negotiations are in fact seen as a means of obtaining recognition for individual professionalism. However, some of these editorial workers regard their power position vis-à-vis management as determined not only by their individual performance, but also by them being recognised as serious, insistent negotiation partners who clearly articulate their demands for individual rights. The following quotation provides an example of such a confrontational negotiation strategy.

> "At the beginning I only had a service contract. As soon as I earned more than 5,000 euro, they wanted to force me to formally register as a freelancer ['*partita IVA*']. But I didn't want to do that [as it implies high tax and social contribution payments]. I engaged in passive resistance; I just refused to do it. And for another year, we continued, illegally, with the service contracts. Then, I finally registered as a freelancer. But I've negotiated the conditions. In practical terms, I've obtained a part-time job and they have to pay me overtime. And I always work overtime, so it's a good deal for me. […] And if they want to fire me, they have to pay me for an-

> other two months, just as it's required in the collective contract for our sector. I think I caught them off guard with these demands, they weren't prepared, but I was, and I knew what to ask for" (Mario, copy editor, self-employed).

A fourth coping pattern is put into practice especially by social workers. Withdrawing and reducing their work performance is also difficult for many of the social workers in the co-research group. In contrast to the young editorial workers, they do not, in the main, cite as the reason their precarious position (as precarious as that of the editorial workers), or the need to constantly demonstrate that they are willing to perform. The main reason for them lies in their strong professional identity and sense of responsibility (toward society in general and toward the recipients of social services in particular). Given this sense of social responsibility, it is difficult for them to view a reduction of work performance as a form of infidelity towards a firm or an employer, or as a way to defend one's individual professional identity by creating an alternative space for its realisation outside the workplace, as the older journalists do. Instead, professional identities are claimed, and defended against the pressures of marketisation, by trying to maintain service quality. Thus, it is a widespread practice to increase work efforts in order to close the gaps left by understaffing and cost-cutting measures. It is also common for the social workers to circumvent the new formal rules for service delivery and reporting (rules based on economic efficiency, technisation, and medicalisation) by resorting to informal practices and co-operation within the team.

> "People try to keep their professional roles intact, first of all on a personal, ethical level. One strategy is to keep silent, to leave things unsaid. For example: 'Do we really have to tell the psychiatrist the person we're caring for has had a crisis?' Maybe we won't tell her, because we know it would lead to a lot of formalities. […] Sometimes the working groups don't even share any reports during shift changes, especially when they know the information would only create problems for their colleagues. […] Another thing is how to obtain a service for a user the public administration doesn't want to pay for. It's easy, all you have to do is write in your report that the person feels really down and might harm himself, and then you get it. Even if it's not true. But these are all strategies to defend your role as a

> social worker. Like saying: 'I won't transform myself into an agent of control. And I don't want to become an accomplice to a purely pharmacological treatment'" (Luigi, social worker, co-operative member).

In other words, insisting on professional identities, on the social value and responsibility of social work, and to a lesser extent, on its cooperative character is what social workers do to cope with the changes in their work environment, thus buffering the negative effects of marketisation on service quality, individual levels of job satisfaction, and work quality.

… and their limits

In the case of all the coping practices described, defending professional identities and insisting on an individual, emotional, and passionate relationship to one's work, or at least to the meaning individually attributed to it, is crucial for enduring and resisting the experiences of professional devaluation and of the precarisation of working and employment conditions. Yet the efficacy of these coping practices is limited. The disinvestment in work and the privatised, identitarian compensation resorted to by the older journalists do not succeed in banishing the sense of alienation. In his statement on escape strategies, quoted above, Luca already hints at this when he says:

> "This is alienation, too, this obligation to be forced to express oneself outside of here" (Luca, chief editor, open-ended contract).

In fact, the degree to which work performance can genuinely be reduced remains limited, so that the compensation strategy of individually producing additional texts outside the workplace leads to a double burden. Moreover, as one of the journalists states, it is difficult to distance oneself emotionally from a type of cognitive work that requires subjective commitment.

> "I've tried to switch to a less stressful job, a job that requires less commitment. […] But it's really difficult. Now I spend eight hours a day doing work I'm not interested in. The point is that you like writing and that you have to work with your head. And you can't just take your head off at some moment, you always carry it with you" (Laura, journalist/commissioning editor, open-ended contract).

The situation is in some respects similar to that of the young, precariously employed editorial workers. Claiming individual professionalism and high performance levels in the hope of a better future may work for a while, but ongoing precariousness, coupled with a lack of recognition and pay, render these constructions of meaning precarious in their own right. In addition, adaptation to precarious employment and unsatisfactory work goes hand in hand with a downsizing of one's own desires, needs and interests, both in work and in life. Even limited margins of autonomy and creativity are then highlighted as positive aspects of one's work, and even uncertain hopes for the future are used to render present working and living conditions endurable, when in fact crucial capacities for future planning are being lost. The following statements reflect the frustration workers feel over this situation.

> "We're definitely not in a comfortable position. We're not just precarious but also young. This means we always have to keep our heads down; we must never talk back, because we still have to learn. Yet you never find anybody who teaches you anything. […] Under these conditions, it becomes difficult to show any passion for your work. […] In the sense that I really am young, I don't have a family yet, so I could give a lot, because I still have enthusiasm, time, desire, I still have the desire to do things" (Roberta, copy editor, fixed term/project contract)

> "Yes, and then they say: 'You're doing a great job, so don't complain about earning just 800 euro a month. Your university colleagues probably work in a call centre and not as journalists. […] But you, you even work for a real newspaper! So, you really should be grateful and kiss the earth for being so lucky with your job'" (Simona, press office staff, fixed-term/internship).

These constraints might be less immediate for those precarious workers with a longer employment history who have managed to negotiate some of their contract terms and conditions. Such negotiation strategies, however, are heavily dependent on the individual's position within the firm hierarchy, and thus prove successful only for particular workers. Moreover, these strategies are also precarious, as they do not lead to any stable status with fixed rights, but are always contingent on future renegotiation. Finally, the gap-closing strategy of social workers appears unsustainable, as it produces overwork and endangers the workers' mental and physical health. Moreover, it constantly

renews the sense of frustration over the absence of recognition and the ongoing decline in the conditions of work and services.

What is more, and as described above, the professional identities that sustain these coping strategies are themselves put to the test by the ongoing processes of marketisation and the resulting degradation of working conditions and service or product quality. These individualised coping practices thus do not solve the underlying problems; they merely attenuate the workers' daily experience of conflicts and contradictions. In many of the group discussions conducted during co-research, this ambiguous character of identity-based coping strategies emerged as a central issue. On the one hand, defending professional identities, and using them to resist the ongoing experiences of precarisation and degrading working and employment conditions, is seen as a necessary form of self-defence and as a way of re-appropriating the meaning of work. On the other hand, however, pleasure and passion for work are revealed to be powerful instruments of self-exploitation, as they foster the internalisation of labour control.

> "Hold on, my point is not to throw it [passion] away. I'm just saying we've really fooled ourselves when it comes to the issue of passion. In the sense that it's a cage. It becomes a form of self-control and self-exploitation. […] Our passion for our work is the real starting-point for blackmail. It's a trap" (Laura, journalist/commissioning editor, open-ended contract)

> "Well, as far as this blackmail that comes from passion is concerned, it applies to me entirely. In the sense that I am absolutely a kamikaze of passion, I'm completely into it, I'm just not able not to get involved. […] Even if I'm told to write something about blue celery, I'll still have fun with it, even if the story is driven by marketing aims, because I'll always find something interesting even in such a story" (Marta, journalist/commissioning editor, open-ended contract)

The following passage from a group discussion conducted by the self-employed editorial workers also points to the ambiguous character of passion, as well as to the difficulty of escaping this "trap," since it constitutes a part of the worker's professional identities and thus of their subjectivities.

> "But that passion also has limits! For a while you can do it that way, but at some point it just gets annoying. I've really had enough. I've done that work for ten years. I've put all of myself into it, my passion, my skills. But in the last years I've recognized that quality […] doesn't count for shit here. […] You're treated like rubbish. […] But, anyway, you put something of yourself into your books. When I flip through them I can see I was the one who made them" (Barbara, copy editor, self-employed/project contract).

> "In my opinion, the positive aspect of this work is that it contributes to your identity. Sure, that's what makes you accept all these conditions, but you can feel like a thinking being, you do a job that demands and engages your skills. But the moment these possibilities begin to be restricted, you feel that your identity is being threatened. […] It makes you feel guilty. Because if they take your skills away from you, this work you did for years, then you believe it must be your fault, because you aren't able to do anything else. You experience this work as something that belongs to you. […] That's why I'm going through quite a crisis at the moment" (Chiara, copy editor, project contract).

However, admitting the limitations of (or even changing) the individual coping strategies one practices is not easy, as it means surrendering the agency (however limited) those strategies provide, i.e. the capacity to respond cognitively and practically to a given work context, and thus to live with it (Krauss, 1996). Workers do not simply choose certain coping practices out of convenience or ignorance, but due to a lack of alternatives and adverse power positions. To overcome the limits of these coping practices, it is necessary to develop alternative ways of acting and thinking that can substitute for them in practice and not just in theory, thereby offering a way out of the traps of passion and social responsibility, of privatised self-realisation, and/or of individual demonstrations of availability. Part of the problem with the coping practices analysed thus far is their individual character, which limits their capacity to impact the power relations that structure labour processes and relations. Therefore, our analysis will turn now to editorial and social workers' collective ways of acting and thinking, and to possible alternative strategies of coping.

Difficulties of collective coping

Professional identities have emerged as central to the coping practices of social and editorial workers, so our analysis of collective practices will start there. Roughly speaking, professional identities are collective issues, since they refer to collective imaginaries and establish a sense of affiliation to a certain professional category. Yet as described above, this collective character of social and editorial workers' professional identity is also currently being put under strain, as professional identities are becoming more individualised and/or are perceived by younger colleagues as being too exclusive. The associated collective imaginaries are thereby atrophying. But this is only one of several reasons why thinking and acting collectively seems difficult to many of the workers in the two co-research groups.

Another challenge related to professional identities is the "passion trap" described above. The ambiguous character of passionate professional identities concerns not just the individual level of work performance and self-exploitation, but also the diminution of the collective capacity for conflict. The lost potential for collective agency is obvious in the case of the older journalists, who actually initiated the co-research process in order to understand why and how their former collective capacities and strengths have disappeared. For them, there are two sides to this loss. On the one hand, they distance themselves from trade unions as institutionalised collective actors. These workers no longer feel that trade unions represent their interests; this is due to a number of disappointing experiences that saw the unions participating in the management's game of playing different groups of workers off against one another. On the other hand, the willingness of individuals to invest in a collective struggle has diminished; this is due to the discouraging experience of lost struggles, but also to the individualised coping practices of withdrawal from work and the social relations associated with it. The privatised strategies of self-realisation by which these workers have reacted to growing frustration over the continuous degradation of working conditions come at the cost of relinquishing further struggles for collective rights and interests. The following quotations clearly express this difficulty and the preoccupation it causes among this particular group of workers, with its strong collective heritage.

> "Years ago, there was still more participation. The dramatic thing is: it's no coincidence that today we find ourselves talking more about the individual, subjective issue of passion and emotions; you're more alone in this situation today. […] Before, more or less, we were a group, although we had few resources. There was also a conflict with the trade union, which we still recognised somehow. Because if we got angry with the union, that means we still attributed some role to it" (Laura, journalist/commissioning editor, open-ended contract).

> "Frankly, today I do feel more alienated, more distanced from the trade union than from my journalistic work. Sure, this whole situation worries me" (Giulia, journalist/commissioning editor, open-ended contract).

Their younger colleagues face an even greater obstacle to engaging in a collective defence of their interests, as emerges from the group discussions. The younger colleagues speak less of a loss of former capacities and relations than of an original absence. Their precarious employment positions make all collective action difficult, given their high vulnerability to management pressures, disciplinary sanctions, and blackmail. But absent collective capacities are also the counterpart to the individualised coping practices that workers develop within such a context of precariousness and vulnerability; more specifically, they are the counterpart to the internalised logic of individual performance such coping practices are based on. The absence of identification with any collective professional identity and the sense of non-belonging and exclusion also play an important role.

By contrast, among social workers, it is not the absence of a professional identity qua collective point of reference that renders collective mobilisation and struggle difficult, but (once again) the strength of such an identity. While a strong sense of social responsibility already renders difficult individual strategies of withdrawal and performance reduction, collective capacities for conflict are, in the view of many workers, affected even more adversely. After all, collective conflict has negative effects on the recipients of services, as when a service is temporarily closed during a strike. The following quotation expresses frustration over the widespread reluctance to engage in conflict.

> "It's difficult to say today what the prospects [for collective mobilisation] are, because a significant number [of colleagues] believes one should,

> above all, maintain one's [service] work, even if it means compromising over some aspects of work quality and working hours, and on all the difficulties associated with this work. But I think the crisis has imposed a reflection on how our former certainties have disappeared. […] We have to be able to decide what prospects we want, what prospects there are and whether they're acceptable to us or not. That is, deteriorating working conditions, declining wages, growing labour flexibility, and so on" (Laura, social worker, co-operative member).

In contrast with this call for a more active defence of working and employment conditions, in some cases, a strong sense of social responsibility prompts workers to distinguish between sound and less sound reasons for engaging in protest and conflict.

> "It's really a bad thing when social workers take to the streets only when their own income is at stake. […] Because as a social worker, you should be interested in the whole of society, not just in your money. […] I think we really have to redefine our professional identity as social workers. […] Sometimes we reproduce the stereotype of those who don't work seriously, for example by the way we present ourselves in public. […] The problems of deteriorating service quality are so much older than that of wage arrears today, but for the longest time, we didn't react at all. If people start protesting only when they personally find themselves in a desperate situation, that's not a good sign" (Chiara, social worker, co-operative member).

This statement points to the difficulty of defending one's own rights and interests as workers for as long as providing a good social service is given absolute priority. Yet such dualist thinking is itself problematic, as in fact the two issues are closely related. First, the degradation of both working and service conditions results from the same policies of austerity and marketisation. Second, poor working conditions and wage arrears have a negative effect on the ability of workers to provide a good social service. As another social worker put it during a public meeting, closing down a service for a strike causes less harm to users than the constant deterioration of that service during its day-to-day operation. And without strong protests, possibly joint protests by workers and users, service quality will continue to deteriorate further and more services will be shut down, with even more dramatic effects for users. To insist on the impossibility of strikes or other conflictual work-

place action and discuss conflict and social responsibility as polar opposites is to risk perpetuating one's own vulnerability and lack of power: a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, this issue remained highly controversial among the social workers participating in the co-research.

A further obstacle lies in the fact that frustration over deteriorating service quality is often articulated only as moral indignation, e.g. over antisocial policies and social work's lack of recognition. Such indignation expresses itself primarily in a sense of injustice; underlying conflicts of interest and power relations are not necessarily addressed. This risks having passivating rather than activating effects. Sometimes, the issue of deteriorating service conditions is even turned from a political into a cultural question, that of a putative "typically Italian" disregard for social work that is ascribed to the cultural strength of a familiaristic welfare model or to strongly self-interested individual attitudes, as in the following quotation.

> "In my opinion, it's a cultural problem. In Italy, social work is seen as no more than a form of assistance. It's never been given enough importance. When you tell somebody you work as a social worker, he'll think you're not doing any serious kind of work at all. It's really this cultural blockade that is at the origin of these problems. […] We, the workers, are responsible ourselves for deteriorating service and working conditions, because there isn't any revolutionary spirit, we never raise our heads. It's always alright as it is, we keep our head down and what happens, happens, because an Italian only cares for his own backyard. As long as nobody disturbs his little backyard, he'll never get angry about anything" (Gianluca, social worker, c-ooperative member)

Again, an overly egoistic attitude and a lack of social responsibility are presented as the key problem and main reason for high levels of passivity and the absence of conflict. But to declare this a cultural factor, something almost naturally given, is to leave little room for any prospect of change. Finally, collective action at the workplace appears difficult to many social workers not just because they feel responsible for their users, but also because of their culture of social cooperation. The self-perception as a co-operative member, rather than a worker, makes it difficult to perceive the cooperative as an employer and as an opponent in a conflict of interests; co-operative members

are seen as having social responsibilities to their cooperative, which represents a collective undertaking.

Once again, the differences between different groups and generations of workers need to be emphasised. As indicated above, younger social workers appear much less attached to the co-operative character of social work and to the co-operatives themselves. Further differences can be expected to emerge between various contractual and professional profiles. For example, the number of so-called OSS workers is currently rising; these are lower-paid care assistants who are employed mainly in the field of elder care, with lower professional profiles and a shorter training period of only one year. While these differences still require further investigation, what can already be seen is the fragmentation they produce. It concerns interests and professional identities, but also causes language and communication problems, making it a significant obstacle to collective mobilisation. The following quotations show that older colleagues, for example, are distrustful of their younger colleagues and disappointed by what they perceive as a lack of political awareness and collective experience.

> "Differences in vocational training have a strong influence. There is a lot of rigidity among younger colleagues. Like: 'These are the conditions, and I accept them.' They have difficulty being constructive or critical towards the service. They're trained to obey every order, but they're nevertheless very, very motivated. […] I think an older social worker is more aware of the social policies of the past 20 years. He doesn't have a work attitude that is oriented so strongly to the concrete, daily functioning of the service" (Laura, social worker, co-operative member).

> "I've tried everything, but there really is a rubber wall. […] This also concerns the young colleagues that work with me. Maybe it also depends on their personal history, on what they may not have experienced […], moments of conflict, struggles for rights" (Sara, social worker, co-operative member).

Aside from leading to fragmentation into different professional categories, the highly dispersed character of the work processes also discourages collective action. In his/her daily work, a social worker is often alone with the person s/he is caring for. Even if s/he works in a team, increases in the workload and flexible shift patterns rarely leave much time for interaction and

communication with colleagues. But the worker is also alone in another sense: social co-operatives are almost completely non-unionised, so that there are no institutionalised support structures to fall back on in case of conflict. Finally, vulnerability to sanctions is also an issue for social workers. While they cannot be sacked easily if they are members of a co-operative, they are at risk of de facto unemployment, as their working hours can be flexibly reduced to zero, resulting in zero wages.

Experiences and challenges of collective struggle

So far, emphasis has been placed on the difficulties associated with collective action and reflection, and on how these difficulties are linked to the professional identities of social and editorial workers. In both cases, however, these identities have also been important catalysts of conflict and collective mobilisation. In fact, participants from both co-research groups have been involved in collective struggles. In what follows, some reflections are proposed with regard to mobilisations in Milan and Turin, mobilisations closely linked to the co-research projects discussed.

As far as social workers are concerned, and as argued in the section on coping strategies, reclaiming professional identities and standards based on social responsibility can be seen as a strategy by which to oppose marketisation and its negative effects on both service and working conditions. In fact, demands for the maintenance of professional and social standards have been central to recent collective mobilisations. Considering the passivity of workers during the past years (a passivity frequently criticised by the social workers themselves in our group discussions), these demands can be seen as finally broaching a key conflict that has so far been experienced daily, but endured passively or confronted in a purely individual manner.

In Turin, social workers initiated a lengthy round of protests in the winter of 2011/2012.[9] It mainly took the form of weekly demonstrations in front of the town hall. These continued without interruption for more than half a year;

[9] During the same period, public protests and labour struggles occurred in other Italian regions and cities as well, e.g. in Naples and Milan, and a self-organised national network was created to link them (http://retenazionaleoperatorisociali.noblogs.org/).

a second bout of such protests, lasting several months, occurred in the winter and spring of 2013. This mobilisation was mainly the work of a self-organised network of social workers called "*non-dormienti*"[10] ("sleepless," in the sense of not ignoring or dozing through the present transformations and conflicts). The protests were triggered by wage arrears affecting social workers from various cooperatives. In most cases, the co-operatives did not pay workers because they themselves did not receive the promised funding from the municipality of Turin, one of the most indebted local authorities in Italy. But this was only the "final straw" that triggered the mobilisations. From the outset, the protests were also directed against severe cuts in social spending at the local and regional levels, cuts resulting from the austerity measures adopted in the context of the current economic crisis. As stressed in the following quotation, the issues of working conditions and service quality were addressed simultaneously.

> "The new thing about the '*non-dormienti*' was that even during the first meeting, which had been called by word of mouth and via Facebook, there were at least 60 participants. This was a surprise for a category of workers that had never been very active before, and which is also very fragmented and dispersed. And then, right from the beginning, there was a political dimension to it. It was not just about money, even though it was about that too, because not receiving your wages has got to put you under pressure. But it was also a question of professionalism, because our profession is being taken apart. […] And it was also about the system of co-operatives, which is in crisis: a criticism of that system and the logic of price competition that governs the bid for public contracts. […] And this political dimension annoyed Conf Coop and Lega Coop [two umbrella organisations of co-operatives]. […] We've taken the problem to the social level that seemed most appropriate to us, because the whole conflict is not just about Turin, but about the welfare system in general: a welfare system they don't want anymore; there is a political intent to stop supporting it" (Luigi, social worker, co-operative member).

Such awareness of the conflict's political dimension has the potential to link different struggles, as it allows one to carry conflicts beyond single work-

[10] See http://nondormienti.blogspot.de/; https://www.facebook.com/operatori.nondormienti.

places and particularistic interests. It sets the ground for building larger protest networks (involving users, but also, for example, movements struggling over public goods). In accordance with this political focus, the main area of intervention was the political level. Demands were addressed to the local authorities, rather than to the co-operatives qua direct employers; it was the local authorities who were seen to be principally responsible for the growing problems at the workplace. Though the public demonstrations were combined with some one-day strikes, the conflict was only occasionally taken directly to the workplace. There was disagreement within the co-ordinating network concerning the relevance and feasibility of collective action at the workplace.[11]

Yet as suggested in the above quotation, the co-operatives are far from being only passive victims of poorly conceived policies and public administration practices. Instead, the management of the co-operatives, and especially of the larger ones, is often heavily involved in the marketisation of social services. Over the years, strong ties have developed between management and the public administration. In contrast, the gap between management and workers has widened as the cooperative character of decision-making and work organisation has diminished. Rather than attempting to collectively oppose the ongoing transformations and cuts, the co-operatives are competing with one another over service and labour costs. In an attempt to improve their position both as bidders for public contracts and on the emerging private welfare market, the co-operatives have passed costs on to workers and clients. Thus management practices often resemble those of a conventional private enterprise far more than the ideals of social co-operation.

Moreover, because they pursued a predominantly political strategy, without engaging in concrete workplace struggles, the protesting workers found it

[11] The opposite situation has been evident in the city and region of Milan, where the same period saw social workers engaging in labour struggles within some co-operatives but encountering major difficulties when it came to operating on the political level and formulating claims that go beyond the specific conditions at single workplaces.

difficult to achieve effective power positions[12] from which to advance their demands for a different welfare model and better service and working conditions. At one point, the public demonstrations led to negotiations with the local authorities, but these yielded no significant results, while the protests gradually ebbed.

As regards participation in these protests, the older and middle generations of social workers seem to have constituted the majority of protesters, while less workers from the younger generations and less care assistants (OSS workers) seem to have taken part. This reflects the generational, contractual, and professional fragmentation mentioned above. It raises the question of how more inclusive forms of collective agency might be achieved, bridging the gap between different professional identities, contractual statuses, and the associated interests. Such an inclusive strategy would also take into account the recipients of social services, who were partially involved in the mobilisations, but whose effective participation, especially as regards protest design, could still be increased.

As regards editorial workers, at the time of the co-research, several participants were engaged in the network of precarious editorial workers ("*rete dei redattori precari*", www.rerepre.org). This network has two main fields of activity. On the one hand, it organises symbolic actions in order to increase the public visibility of precariously employed editorial workers and their working conditions. On the other hand, it works to co-ordinate the otherwise dispersed collective struggles that these precariously employed workers conduct at their workplaces. One example of the public actions that took place during the co-research was a series of creative protests at Italy's largest

[12] See Beverly Silver (2003) for an elaborate model of workers' power resources in labour struggles. Silver distinguishes between structural and associational power. The former results from workers' labour market position (i.e. from the degree of labour market saturation, specific skills, and so on), as well as from workers' more or less strategic position within the production process (and their resulting capacity to block production). Associational power, in turn, refers to the capacity to organise collectively, both at the workplace and beyond.

annual book fair, in Turin in 2011.[13] These action days succeeded in generating some public attention in the (local) media; they also succeeded in drawing new precariously employed editorial workers into the network, many of whom had never participated in any kind of protest before. As in the case of Turin's social workers, it proved difficult to transfer these collective experiences of protest to workplaces and link them to daily conflicts.

However, there were some attempts by precariously employed workers to organise themselves, particularly at two workplaces (workers from which participated in the co-research). For example, assemblies of precariously employed workers were held and demands were collectively addressed to the management. A key problem activists faced was that of low and inconsistent participation in these collective activities. The group discussions indicate the marked absence of a collective, conflict-oriented imaginary. While this absence is certainly not unique to the context of editorial work, it is strongly promoted by the workers' position as (bogus) self-employed professionals; and by their identification with this position. As indicated above, a central strategy for influencing work and employment conditions in this context is that of negotiating individually with management. In such negotiations, the focus is on individual performance and dialogue, rather than on (collective) conflicts of interest and demands for the implementation of workers' rights.

In this case as well, the workforce's high degree of fragmentation constitutes another obstacle to collective struggle, as multiple contractual categories exist within each editorial department. These different groups of workers develop divergent interests that reflect their specific positions within the workplace hierarchy. For example, it is mainly older self-employed workers who have an interest in individually negotiating their work and employment conditions, as they have had the time to achieve some degree of (informal) employment stability, as well as economic recognition of their acquired skills. By contrast, their younger colleagues, with shorter employment histories and lower positions in the workplace hierarchy, rarely have a chance to

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[13] For more information on these protests see the video "San Precario al Salone del Libro", www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oLVrA4GTnU, or http://nariocapress.gnumerica.org/.

negotiate effectively; contractual conditions tend to simply be imposed on them. In this context, it is difficult to create a common ground for collective struggles, and thus to effectively oppose the management strategy of "divide and rule."

Finally, editorial workers experience traditional strategies of collective action as being of little use to them in their position as precariously (and often bogus) self-employed workers. For them, strikes or other forms of performance reduction are difficult to imagine as conflict strategies. This is not only due to their precarious employment positions and the associated high levels of vulnerability. Such types of performance reduction are also seen as inefficient insofar as editorial workers typically work on a project basis, with deadlines but no fixed working hours. Thus to strike one day is simply to have to work longer the next. Consequently, the workers in the co-research group insist on the need to develop new collective conflict strategies that reflect their specific situation. More solidarity-based forms of struggle that move beyond the single workplace: blockading it from outside, for example, are proposed to counter the problem of individual vulnerability. But stronger collective conflict capacities are also perceived to be necessary at the workplace, as a means to collectively negotiate and enforce better working and employment conditions, e.g. by collectively disregarding deadlines. Such ideas also imply a critical questioning of individual coping practices that are based on passionate professional identities, individual performance, and demonstrations of availability; instead, a situation is envisioned in which professional performance is made conditional on recognition of workers' rights, interests, and needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, professional identities play an important role in the fields of both social and editorial work, not just with regard to workers' individual, daily coping practices, but also with regard to their collective struggles. As shown by the high degree of workforce fragmentation, new collective imaginaries are needed to sustain any such collective action and possible processes of class recomposition. Professional identities can constitute an important

basis for such collective imaginaries, if they are rearticulated and reappropriated in a way that opposes current trends toward individualisation and fragmentation. That is, professional identities need to be linked to collective positions, rights, and interests, rather than to individual performance and/or strategies of self-realisation. And they need to become an object of collective discussion about professional standards and demands, as well as about the social conditions for the implementation of those standards and demands across different categories of workers, instead of being perceived in terms of a given social responsibility, to be fulfilled individually, and/or as a means to social distinction. Thus rearticulated, professional identities can not only express the individual and social meaning of work, but also become a catalyst for participatory demands; such demands have proven central to the significance both social and editorial workers attribute to their work. Yet in order to become a means by which to promote collective conflict capacities, such demands for participation and meaning must be understood as positioned within social conflicts of interest, instead of being expressed in the form of moral indignation over refused recognition.

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About the author

Kristin Carls received her Ph.D. in labour sociology at the University of Bremen and the State University of Milan. While living for several years in Italy, she was a member of the San Precario Network. She currently works as a research assistant at the University of Hamburg's Department of Socio-Economics.

Author's address

Dr. Kristin Carls
Department of Socio-Economics
University of Hamburg
Welckerstr. 8
20354 Hamburg, Germany
E-mail: Kristin.Carls@wiso.uni-hamburg.de