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## **Staging Precariousness: the Serpica Naro catwalk during the Milan Fashion Week**

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### **Abstract**

The article illustrates the Italian process of work precarisation and the collective resistance of precarious workers. It interprets them in terms of the birth of a collective identity that conducts a critique against precariousness while developing learning resources. Through discursive analysis of the Serpica Naro catwalk, organised in the area of Milan by the activists of the May Day Parade and the San Precario network, the article illustrates the process of construction of this collective identity that uses irony and playfulness to resist and denounce precarious working conditions. The purpose is to interpret the anti-precariousness movement as a process of critical urban learning that creates the viability of spaces for resistance in metropolitan contexts.

**Key words:** activists, irony, precariousness, San Precario network, self-representation, urban learning

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## **Introduction**

Contemporary transformations in work are connected with expansion of the service industry, the loss of certain characteristics of stability, the growing centrality of relational skills, the diffusion of new technologies and the shift of demand for ‘masculine’ manufacturing full-time jobs to ‘feminine’ service-based part-time ones (Crompton 1999). One witnesses in particular a reconfiguration of productive and social structures (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999; Sennett 2006), in contexts where information and communication technologies have driven the development of new forms of work organisation. Thus very distinct spheres – work-time and life-time, professional spaces and private spaces, production and reproduction – are mingled, and social actors lose any capacity to distinguish among the labour market, self-improvement and social life.

The spread in Europe of temporary jobs, youth unemployment and tensions between generations provoke the increasing exclusion of young people – especially young women – from the opportunities connected with work. According to Grimshaw et al. (2001) all workers – permanent employees and temporary workers – suffer from new employment relations that are based on ‘flexibility’. Workers are increasingly exposed to the logic of cognitive and financial capitalism. This requires them to auto-activate their own resources, empathy and autonomy (Ross 2009) and to put into production a heterogeneous set of informations, imaginations and social relatedness (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). There is then a double level of reading: the emotional investment and sense attributed by individuals to action, and the systemic investment of capitalist valorization, which, in financialization, puts the adherence to processes of subjectivation at the core: the desiring-machine that bends its vital energy to capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari 1990), the speeches that become markets when subjects, as creative and innovative, make available their expressivity for free (Armano and Murgia 2012). Moreover, in this new context, the increasing emphasis on flexibility is sustained by a rhetoric of individualization and rationalization that apparently effaces any form of resistance and social critique.

Our aim in this article is to discuss the processes of collective cultural elaboration against precariousness in a metropolitan area of Northern Italy. To this end, we shall first concentrate on the decline of forms of social protection built around the Fordist model based on the permanent job and today no longer accessible to a large number of citizens. At the same time, we shall point to the viability of spaces for resistance against the dominant discourse about work pursued by the neoliberal model. We shall then explore the process of resistance and cultural elaboration of precariousness that an Italian activist group performed under the label of

San Precario. We therefore propose a discursive analysis of the cultural forms of resistance raised by precarious workers who enact processes of urban learning and collective identity construction in metropolitan areas.

### **1. Precariousness in the Italian context**

The Fordist world, with its characteristics of stability and relatively homogeneous and pre-established life-courses and work careers, has for some time been only a distant memory. This does not signify that monotonous, repetitive or fatiguing jobs have disappeared; but rather that the standardized experiences and social security associated with dependable lifelong employment have largely disappeared, as well as the traditional forms of worker representation (Strangleman 2007; Standing 2011).

In Italy, this process began later than in other European countries, but it has evolved rapidly. The flexibilization and liberalization of contracts and work conditions consequent on the reforms of the past two decades have resulted in the rapid and widespread growth of forms of short-term employment: temporary agency or ‘on call’ work, ‘quasi dependent’ or freelance jobs. The features shared by these various employment arrangements are the risk of precariousness due to job insecurity, the lower pay levels that often characterize them, and the lack of protections typical of work on an open-ended contract. Their increasing diffusion has amplified the segmentation of the labour force into ‘insiders’ and outsiders’, particularly in generational and gender terms. It is in fact especially young people – and all the more so young women – who work on atypical contracts: more than half of all precarious workers in Italy are less than 35 years old (Istat 2010). Initially, this phenomenon was either unforeseen or underestimated by those who instead saw flexibility as the means to favour the inclusion of young people in the labour market. In fact, there is by now a body of empirical evidence which casts doubt on the real capacity of many of these contractual forms to serve as bridges to stable employment, and which highlights the concrete risk of entrapment in precariousness (Berton, Richiardi, and Sacchi 2009; Murgia 2010; Bologna and Banfi 2011; Chicchi and Leonardi 2011; Gallino 2011).

Moreover, whilst in the past precariousness was associated above all with so-called ‘bad jobs’, this connection has been severed. Today, it is no longer possible to identify two clearly opposed labour market components: on the one hand, low-skilled workers with low-grade, precarious and poorly-paid jobs; on the other, highly-qualified workers able to capitalize on their skills by deploying autonomy and micro-entrepreneurship (Brophy and de Peuter 2007; Neilson and Rossiter 2008). In the current labour market, this opposition has progressively faded, and what has emerged instead are the "hybrid experiences" of workers who are very different in qualifications,

biographies and types of occupation but all equally exposed to the risk of unemployment, income loss, and social marginality (Armano 2010; Morini 2010; Murgia et al. 2012).

These economic and social transformations produce a new discursive representation of precariousness much broader than the fact of working on a temporary contract. It extends to include both the self-employed and employees, and it is an existential condition that concerns young people, women and migrants, underserved populations who are only barely protected by a welfare system patterned on a Fordist world (Armano and Murgia 2012).

Indeed the principal problem caused by this transformation of work in Italy has been the growing distance between a rapidly changing and increasingly deregulated labour market, on the one hand, and a welfare state still predicated on the Fordist employment relationship on the other. The progressive flexibilization of employment relationships, therefore, has not been accompanied by complete redefinition of forms of social protection, work-entry support and labour representation. Amid the fragmentation of people's work and lives, the traditional forms of conflict have lost their capacity to represent and give voice to the demands of workers who are increasingly difficult to organize owing to the unstable and sporadic nature of their occupational paths. Although the trade union confederations have sought to change their traditional representation practices (Ballarino 2005; Regalia 2009), none of them has yet been able to devise new and effective forms of mobilization and bargaining able to assert the claims of workers on temporary contracts. The trade unions no longer furnish the social cohesion based on traditional identitarian mechanisms, on full employment and collective synergies; and they find it even more difficult to mobilize and organize workers (Galetto 2010).

But while labour market institutions have achieved disappointing results in regard to protecting the rights of precarious workers, new grassroots organizations have burgeoned. These organizations have been recently established by groups of activists in a number of Italian cities, displaying practices that differ substantially from those of the trade union confederations. Alongside the more traditional forms of worker representation, recent years have seen the advent of numerous new kinds of claimant action based on networks of people and projects, and on bottom-up and horizontal practices. The first and particularly significant one has been the May Day Parade organized by the Rete di San Precario (The St Precarious Network), whose activities will further be analysed below. This movement has recast the symbolic imagery of work because it has consolidated precariousness as a collective subjectivity (Murgia and Selmi 2012). This movement has been capable of self-representation: its activists, most of them resident in the metropolitan area of Milan, describe themselves as:

‘the post-socialist generation, the post-cold war generation, the end of vertical bureaucracies and of information control generation. We are a global (...) movement, which brings forward the democratic revolution started in 1968 and the struggle against the neoliberal dystopia at its peak today. We are eco-activists and media-activists, we are the libertarians of the Net and the metroradicals of urban spaces, we are the transgender mutations of global feminism, we are the hackers of the terrible real. We are the agitators of the precariat and the insurgents of the cognitariat. We are anarcho-unionists and post-socialists. We are all migrants looking for a better life. And we do not recognize ourselves in you, gloomy and tetragon layerings of political classes already defeated in the twentieth century. [Manifesto Bio/Pop del Precariato Metroradicale – Bio/Pop Manifesto of the Metroradical Precariat].

This network originated from a context that is far from those of traditional trade unions and other movements against precariousness. In Italy, in fact, since the mid 1980s the COBAS grassroots unions have worked towards the establishment of a sort of informal union system without official representation (Negri 1996). But the St Precarious Network differs from these two kinds of union organizations at least in two main respects. First, activists and especially young people, women and the “cognitariat” (precarious cognitive/ knowledge workers) have taken precarious self-representation as a precondition for becoming political actors, rejecting the delegation of conflict and promoting instead modes of action based on the organizational form of network, on the sharing of knowledge and on direct representation. They refuse to accept intermediate forms of organization – and particularly trade unions – as ‘interpreters’ of their claims in the political arena. Second, whilst the unions deal primarily with labour rights, demanding more guarantees for their members, and more generally for all workers, this movement puts forward demands for greater rights with full access to the welfare state. These rights should not be connected to the work contract and include: access to training and healthcare; maternity or sickness leave; support for care work; access to credit; efficient and accessible transport; a more flexible housing market; and – above all – a guaranteed minimum income still lacking in Italy. One of the main claims advanced by this group of activists, in fact, concerns the introduction of a new ‘metropolitan welfare’ system able to deal with problems relative to income distribution, the crisis of the welfare state and the increase in poverty rates (Fumagalli 2010). In the next section we introduce the concept of ‘urban learning’ which underpins our theoretical-interpretative framework. With reference to the network constructed around the May Day Parade and the figure of San

Precario in the context of the Milan metropolitan area, we shall show how a collective antagonist actor is born. We shall then analyse one of the best-known protest actions mounted by this group of activists. Finally, we shall conduct discourse analysis on the cultural forms of resistance raised by precarious subjects in metropolitan areas.

## **2. Critical urban learning and collective antagonism: a theoretical framework**

Urban and metropolitan areas comprise the majority of ‘opportunities’ for precarious work but also the largest number of precarious workers and occasions for solidarity in acting collectively. These contextual features enable a learning process which takes place in the urban fabric and which is innovative with respect to traditional forms of solidarity and resistance against capitalism. The phenomenon of urban learning especially concerns the relationships between work and social protections, as well as the new forms of political and institutional representation, as demonstrated by the recent mobilisations in Madrid, Athens or during the Arab Spring. Hence urban learning processes can be read as types of self-organization by the generation today confronting socio-economic reforms – dominated by neoliberal recipes – and as forms of social critique.

As McFarlane (2011b, 374) notes, ‘critical urban learning involves questioning and antagonising existing urban knowledges and formulations, learning alternatives in participatory collectives and alternative proposing formulations. It entails exposing and unlearning existing dominant arrangements that structure urban learning practices and ideologies, whether in relation to gentrification and revanchist neoliberalism, or exclusive pronouncements of the “smart, creative” city’. Amid organisational contexts frenetically traversed by transitory workers, it is perhaps in cities, and particularly in metropolises, that these crucial informal relations are woven together. For it is in urban contexts, socially divided and profoundly marked by new types of poverty, that one witnesses the emergence of a new global class of ICT experts, workers in the cultural and creative industries, and the hyper-qualified technical-scientific personnel essential for metropolises to function (Sassen 1998). This new ‘advanced urban marginality’ emerges from the transformations of the most advanced sectors of the global economy, and among its principal features are precisely fragmentation and precariousness (Wacquant 2006).

Although urban contexts are characterised by a ‘neoliberal ethic of intense possessive individualism [where the] political withdrawal from collective forms of action becomes the template for human socialisation’ (Harvey 2008, 32), there are spaces for creative powers of disagreement and dissent (Amin 2006). In this sense the new groups of activists, and specifically those against precariousness, although they are unable on their own to overthrow the existing system, ‘are nevertheless able to mark out the route to follow in defining alternative forms

of social organisation' (Lyon 2001, 108). Even failed urban learning experiments may be important in the longer term because the process itself can introduce new models, representations and imagery.

Our concern here is to understand and interpret the critical discourse around precariousness that constructs the identity of a collective subject, its capacity to act in the public sphere, its discursive practices and the material and rhetorical resources mobilised for self-organising. The methodology that we use to study the San Precario network of Milan can be broadly defined as organisational discourse analysis applied to a specific 'text', the Serpica Naro catwalk during Milan Fashion Week. The study of organisational discourse endeavours to understand the processes of social construction that underlie the process of urban learning as identity performance and discursive practice.

Organisational discourse analysis highlights the ways in which language constructs social reality, rather than simply reflecting it (Oswick and Richards 2004; Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant 2005). The study of organisational discourse encompasses a range of approaches that share an interest in the role of discourse in the process of organising and constructing collective identities (Phillips and Oswick 2012). A discourse can be conceived of as a structured collection of texts (Parker 1992) with its associated practices of textual production, transmission and reception. Through the production and dissemination of texts, linked together to create a form of discourse, identity elements are brought into being, are modified or disappear. This form of analysis focuses on the study of 'discursive formations' (Deetz 2003), and considers 'how discursive practices constitute both objectivities (social institutions, knowledge) and subjectivities (identities and actions)' (Cunliffe 2008, 81). Cultural approaches pay particular attention to the language and discursive practices that characterize organizational interactions. Discourses and texts, in fact, are treated as 'artefacts', by means of which it is possible to understand and interpret cultures (Czarniawska 1997; Gherardi and Poggio 2001). A text is an institutionalised use of language and of other similar sign systems, and it is within a particular discourse that the position of a subject is constructed as a compound of knowledge and power in a context – in our case a metropolitan context – which ties it to a collective identity.

The Serpica Naro catwalk is the organisational text that we shall analyse. The texts that embody a discourse come in a wide variety of forms, including written documents, speech acts, pictures, symbols or performances (Strati 2012). Texts are 'symbolic forms of representation (e.g. documents, books, media accounts, interviews, speeches, committee reports, etc.) that are inscribed by being spoken, written, or otherwise depicted' (Maguire and Hardy 2009, 150).

Our interpretation is based on the analysis of the paper-based and web-based documents of the Serpica Naro



catwalk and the political action carried out by the activists of the San Precario network. It focuses on: i) the social context in which a collective subject appears; ii) a text that represents the subject; and iii) the rhetoric of its presentation. The aim is to illustrate the ‘who’, the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of the discourse of precariousness in Italy at the beginning of the 2000s.

### **3. The construction of a collective identity: The case of the May Day Parade and its patron saint**

In regard to urban learning in the Italian context, the May Day Parade is the most interesting and best documented case (Tari and Vanni 2005; Bruni and Murgia 2007; Mattoni and Doerr 2007; Gill and Pratt 2008). The May Day Parade was born in Milan on 1 May 2001 and it was inspired by the informal relationships that the movement in Seattle had created. The emergence of precarity as a central political motif of the global movement, in fact, relates not only to labour market conditions, but also to the prevalent moods and conditions within advanced capitalist societies and to the alter-globalization and anti-war movements that have dominated the radical political landscape since the demonstration in Seattle in 1999 (Neilson and Rossiter 2005). In this particular frame, the May Day Parade initially involved various actors, but was mainly organized by the Chainworkers collective of Milan. The formula selected for the first parade of the “social precariat” – and which would characterize subsequent events – was that of the street festival or parade, or a carnival procession with allegorical floats and music. It imitated the style of the Berlin Love Parade and worldwide Gay Pride parades. It soon assumed dimensions that extended beyond national confinements, but it was from 2004 onwards that the European May Day Parade formally began with simultaneous mobilization in twenty European cities.

Moreover, in 2004, the group of political activists from Milan involved in organising the parade created the figure of San Precario, the icon of the Parade, during which he is carried in procession. Born on 29 February 2004 (note the leap year, which highlights the intermittence of the anniversary and therefore symbolises the reduced visibility of precarious workers [Fumagalli 2003]), San Precario soon became the patron saint of precarious workers, knowledge workers, migrant, seasonal and temporary workers, project workers and freelancers. But the precarious saint has not been the only symbol of the movement. In 2005, for example, an album and figurines depicting “The Unbeatables: superheroes and heroines to resist precariousness” were distributed to participants during the May Day Parade. In 2006, instead, the demonstrators were given special “kits to survive precariousness” in the fields of transport, knowledge, affections (friendship, love, family, etc.) and income (Bruni and Murgia 2007). The following year, 2007, the organisation gave out the ‘Tarot cards of

Precariomancy'. As reported on the website, they represented 'desires, ambitions, or needs of our present, of our past, or our future. For this reason drawing the card from the deck is a bit like telling a story. To make your life better tarot cards are not enough: you will need to roll up your sleeves and struggle' (Chainworkers 2007).

As is immediately apparent from the communicative style selected by this network of activists, the May Day Parade has turned the traditional celebration of labour into an occasion for visibility of and resistance to precariousness through ironic and subversive modes of communication. In fact, distinctive features of this urban network include its imagination, playfulness and irony which become resources for the autobiographical construction of self and tools of social critique. Those who participate in this and other events, organized on a national or local scale, conceive of the parade as an instrument of communication and action. They seek to organize themselves into a network in order to construct common spaces in which new political and social relationships can be expressed. This is an attempt by the precariat to give visibility to a new social phenomenon – and actor – which resumes and restructures a variety of political tactics, languages, symbols and practices of action (Exposito 2004). The May Day Parade and the San Precario network are examples of how a process of critical urban learning has been able to create forms of collective antagonism, not (only) within specific workplaces, but within broader geographical areas. Cities and territories are in fact privileged places for networks of informal participation - so-called 'sticky webs' (Sassen 1998) - able to open up spaces for the construction of economic alternatives and political action. In particular, the approach of 'urban learning assemblages' denotes the use of learning as assemblage in the urban setting. The city – and specifically the metropolis, in which precarious workers of the knowledge economy are highly concentrated – evokes innovative practices of learning or exploration. Three processes related to such metropolitan learning can be identified: 'translation, or the relational and comparative distributions through which learning is produced as a sociomaterial epistemology of displacement and change; coordination, or the construction of functional systems that enable learning as a means of coping with complexity, facilitating adaptation and organizing different domains of knowledge; and dwelling, or the education of attention through which learning operates as a way of seeing and inhabiting the world (McFarlane 2001a, 30-31). The San Precario network, in particular, has been able to elaborate a collective identity and political action using irony as a form of postmodern resistance and proposing a new interpretation of work and a new idea of the welfare state – as we shall see through analysis of the Serpica Naro catwalk.

Nonetheless, after a long period of the highly creative production of imagery and actions to protest against precariousness, as well as extremely high levels of participation in the events organized by the network, both in

Italy and across Europe more generally, in recent years the San Precario Network and the promoters of May Day have entered progressive decline. Activist groups against precariousness have been able to create a powerful collective imagery, but they have been unable to affect the policies connected to work and welfare in Italy. In the meantime, protests concerning the situation of migrants and students have become more important in Italy, as well as in the rest of Europe (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). Interestingly, the decline of precariousness as a political concept boosting social movement activity has corresponded to the emergence of precariousness as an object of mainstream academic analysis and institutional policies (Murgia forthcoming).

Although this anti-precariousness movement has declined in recent years – at local, national and European level – we believe that it is nevertheless of great interest to analyse how one of the symbolically most potent antagonists in Italy – and probably Europe – of the past decade was discursively constructed. To analyse the discourse against precariousness and its imaginary, we take as an empirical case one of the best-known actions - and the most successful in terms of media coverage - by this network of activists, which was organised on the occasion of Milan Fashion Week in 2005.

#### **4. Serpica Naro: staging precariousness at Milan Fashion Week**

One of the most distinctive features of San Precario is that he does not belong to any place in particular; rather, he appears in different ones, sometimes simultaneously. Moreover, like the many workers required to switch identities as they shuttle among different jobs, San Precario does not have a fixed identity: rather than ‘being’, San Precario ‘becomes’, according to the needs for which he is invoked (Globalproject 2004). The most evident example is provided by the Serpica Naro catwalk during the 2005 Milan Fashion Week.

The event and the media campaign was created and orchestrated jointly with casualised workers in the fashion industry on 26 February 2005 (Tari and Vanni 2005; Mattoni 2008). Eagerly awaited was the arrival of Serpica Naro, an Anglo-Japanese stylist with a passion for the underground. The biography furnished by the stylist to the Milanese Chamber of Fashion ran as follows (<http://www.serpicanaro.com>):

Resident in Tokyo, Anglo-Japanese Serpica Naro has built her reputation by aggressively extending the boundaries of fashion design. A graduate of Bunka Fashion College, she is internationally known for her use of high-tech fabrics and unusual cutting techniques. Her experimentation in areas outside the mainstream have included the invention of disguise clothing and the pioneering use of reflective fabrics and bandages in fashion
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collections. Her Prit-y-Porter collection included the famous NonConform range, the indispensable work wear of the late 1990s, now revered by collectors. Inspired by the fusion of cultures in urban Tokyo and London with their vibrant nightlife, Serpica continues to be a leader of the fashion industry, alternative and otherwise. Serpica stages numerous fashion and alternative events throughout the world, and she is a celebrity in Japan, Korea and Hong Kong – both for her lifestyle collections, which include underwear and accessories, and her cutting-edge clothing. Serpica was the first stylist to produce work uniforms signed with her own name, and she continues to be involved in such diverse projects as the creation of environment-friendly nappies, and more recently, the introduction of a revolutionary treatment for dry skin, the DropLife System, soon to be launched in Japan.

Note that the stylist's biography comprises all the cultural elements which celebrate Serpica Naro and prove that she exists: from her Anglo-Japanese background to her cosmopolitan training. Her Japanese provenance emphasises geographical and cultural distance, and therefore her novelty as a stylist in Europe. Her designs evoke the allure of traditional orientalism but are also associated with technological and cultural fusion. The blending of genres also gives rise to a style which exalts work clothes, but as an icon to be exhibited at a Milanese fashion show. Finally the text constructs and celebrates the image of integration among product lines including fashionable uniforms, eco-nappies evoking environmental values and signature cosmetics. Globalisation and the expansion of markets are represented as value elements mobilised in order to sustain the plausibility of the curriculum of a successful stylist. It was thus that Naro's credibility and identity were accredited for a community of fashion experts which unreservedly welcomed her in Milan but was not expecting a dramatic turn of events.

There were numerous curious onlookers, journalists and television cameras at the opening of the Naro fashion show. But instead of the stylist, a group of activists entered – all of them with passes – carrying a statue of San Precario in procession. Serpica Naro did not exist: in fact, she was only the anagram of San Precario, a hoax which took in journalists, fashion experts, the security service, blogs and mailing lists.

Serpica Naro was therefore not a stylist but a collective entity. But her clothes were nevertheless shown on the official Milan Moda Donna circuit, accompanied by the slogan: "we are not low class, we are not high class, we are the new class". This slogan encapsulates the imagery that the network of activists has sought to construct during the past decade. The transformations of work, and in general of contemporary societies, have progressively imposed a perspective very distant from when workers felt themselves to be a 'class' with resources for struggle, a clear identity, representation organizations and a workplace where employees could

elaborate common strategies. Today, it is difficult to construct a sense of belonging, and the categories of white and blue collars have become anachronistic. Yet this does not prevent the precariat from identifying itself as a class – but this is a new 'dangerous class' formed of 'urban nomads' who express their identities through contradiction (Standing 2011). While the 'dangerous class' has been represented by vagabond agricultural workers in the era of manufacture, and by blue collar workers in the era of large industry, nowadays the flexible workers, mobile and precarious, who are able to produce cognitive and intellectual surplus, are the new enemy (Negri 2003).

Exhibit 1 shows the images of San Precario and Serpica Naro. In what follows we shall analyse the aspects of precariousness that the movement has identified and turned into a social critique.



Picture 1: the images of San Precario (left) and the stylist Serpica Naro (right)<sup>2</sup>

Eight models alternated on the Serpica Naro catwalk, challenging and mocking aspects of precariousness. The first model, depicted in picture 2, is titled Tutta T job on call and was paraded on the catwalk after the following presentation: Your teddy bear is cheap! Sleep with a clerk, it's *better!*

Picture 2: Tutta T job on call



<http://serpica.tumblr.com/post/2982790709/tutta-t-doubleface-2005-tutta-t-job-on-call>

Beneath the image on the website is a text addressed to a precarious worker and describing the following situation:

‘You’ve finished your second shift and you’re ready to lay your head on the pillow? Ding! It’s the job on call, that exhilarating novelty. But you won’t have any problems with the wonderful TUTTA T reversible garment: one side consists of cheeky pyjamas for your sleepless nights, but the other one is, look! a blue overall, which is never *démodé*.’

In this depiction, the target of criticism and irony is the requirement that precarious workers must be constantly on call, given that work may become available at any time of day or night. The disappearance of the worker’s bargaining autonomy and his/her subordination to market demand is ridiculed. Simultaneously, the title of the model contains an ironic suggestion to precarious workers that they should sleep with ‘regular’ workers, that is, clerks, rather than with teddy bears, which do not bring any advantage. This initiates a comment on sexuality in organisations and sexuality as a bargaining tool also mounted by the third garment exhibited at the fashion show, as we shall see below. Further, in Italian, the expression ‘tutta T’ is a pun which mixes the word ‘tutta’, which means ‘overall’, with the word ‘tuta’, which denotes both blue-collar overalls and pyjamas.

Picture 3 presents the second model, whose title recalls the refrain of a well-known Italian protest song, sung by female workers in the paddy fields in the early 1900s; it became famous in the Two Red Years 1919-20, and was intended to claim 'eight hours' as a maximum daily working time: ‘se otto ore vi sembran poche, provate voi a lavorar’ (if you think that eight hours aren’t much, just try working them). This song called for an eight-hour

working day.

Picture 3: If you think that 60 days aren't much. Contract me! Rape me!



<http://serpica.tumblr.com/post/2982820712/se-60-giorni-vi-sembran-pochi-2005-contract-me>

The caption on the website runs as follows:

'Payment after 30 - 60 - 90 days... ah yes, they pass slowly, but they are only brief instants for short-term contracts. You can now wittily finish every day by shedding the last 24 hours, 30 - 60 - 90 times like a snake changes its skin. If you don't think sixty days are very much'

The criticism made of short-term contracts concerns both their brief duration and the uncertainty of payment, which introduces discontinuity into the sequence of contracts. The irony in the discontinuity of work is represented materially by the sequence of garments, and with each garment depicting work identities reinvented every 30, 60, 90 days. The analogy is between a snake and a precarious worker who sheds their skin on starting each new job. Work discontinuity and biographical discontinuity combine to impede identification with a work role. A second analogy appears in the title given to the garment, which associates a temporary contract with rape. There is perhaps an allusion to the Nirvana song Rape Me!, but in any case the analogy between the contract and rape activates sexual imagery in which the worker is the victim of violence. It therefore states that work discontinuity is experienced as violence to the person's (physical and ethical) integrity.

The worker's defence against harassment, sexual or otherwise, in the workplace also constitutes the theme of the

third model in the show.

Picture 4: Mouse trap: Mata Hari kick ass!



<http://serpica.tumblr.com/post/2982937568/mouse-trap-2005-mata-hari-kick-ass-una-mano>

The text accompanying the image on the website depicts the following situation:

‘A groping hand is only the prêt-à-porter of a deviant sexuality, but you can divert it into a metal vice! This is the style for when the boss’s advances get too heavy... it’s the Mouse Trap model!’

The reference to the sexual harassment which accompanies jobs perceived as unprotected and weak in terms of rights is very clear. Precariousness exposes the worker to sexual exploitation, and defence against it depends on individual astuteness rather than recourse to legal action. This is the message enacted through this representation of precarious work.

Picture 5: Mobbing style: Killer puppets, pink up your stress!





<http://serpica.tumblr.com/post/2982976264/mobbing-style-2005-puppets-killer-pink-up>

The situation described in the text accompanying this multi-pocketed outfit refers to the emotional work necessary to cope with precariousness and performance:

‘Timid butterfly of the photocopier, tender mole of the forgotten files! Sister forgotten by all! Raise your hands and with your glittery fingernails squeeze the anti-stress puppets in their special pouches. Forget precariousness, forget bullying. Thanks to this marvellous garment, exploitation comes with a smile. It’s better than a game of squash. The Mobbing Style Model!’

The irony of this image is directed against the new-age philosophy that claims that objects may help in releasing tensions and thus deviate anger towards channels that are far from the demand for rights. Stress becomes an individual emotion or a pathology, to which the market gives a consumerist response (puppets or anti-stress exercises), rather than being a collective condition. The analogy drawn by the title of the image is between precariousness and mobbing, suggesting that precariousness exposes workers to a sort of moral harassment experienced as bullying. Associated with precariousness is the interiorisation of distress experienced as a problem of the individual and as an objective condition of social malaise (Tsianos and Papadopoulos 2006). To work in a bad environment, characterized by lack of respect from the employer, necessarily leads to feelings of physical and psychological distress, which are somatized expressions associated with social contexts marked by growing disparities in the power relationships in workplaces and with processes that foster social precariousness.

The fifth model depicts the dilemma of maternity for women workers without social protection.

Picture 6: Pregnant lady: A baby is more fashionable than a fox terrier!



<http://serpica.tumblr.com/post/2983022084/pregnant-lady-2005-a-baby-is-more-fashionable>

The text accompanying this model runs as follows:

‘Is your pregnancy a little secret that it’s better to hide? A dirty little secret like that illegal letter of resignation which they made you sign? There’s nothing more comfortable than this elegant hidden girdle. Your intimacy, your visceral womanhood!

Pregnancy becomes a ‘little secret’, something to be kept hidden like that other small secret that ties the employer to the worker: an undated letter of resignation to be signed on starting the job. Widespread in the post-war period, this practice has recently been resumed. In fact, for workers in temporary jobs, exercising the right to maternity leave is difficult in Italy even when it is contractually stipulated, because of the brevity of contracts and the uncertainty of their renewal. Note also how the title criticises the consumerism which equates an animal with a baby because both give companionship. Here, moreover, work precariousness becomes social precariousness. At least in Italy, precariousness affects women much more than men. Also the Eurostat data (2011) show that, although important gender differences in the workplace still persist throughout Europe, female temporary workers have much more serious problems than permanent ones, especially with respect to life-choices: exit from the family of origin, cohabitation, first childbirth, etc.. Pregnancy is therefore a further obstacle to their employability.

The sixth model depicts the job which epitomises precarious work and industrial relations modelled on the McDonaldization of society.

Pictures 7a and 7b: Call Donald/McCenter: Fry the world and connect your fashion attitude!



<http://serpica.tumblr.com/post/2983126589/call-donald-mc-center-2005-fry-the-world-and>

The text describes a situation in which the job, whether at a McDonald's or a call centre, follows the same pattern. It says:

'From nine to five you're a happy call Donald partner. You, the determined girl with enough points to become employee of the month! There's the grease of the fryers, the red-hot griddles; but then you, the protagonist at the

cash desk! And by magic, from five to midnight you become the cool McCenter lady, constantly connected by intercom with the world, courtesy in a human form, even though your life doesn't have a future; you, who puts the client before everything, however low your wages, you, a dragonfly among the endless reeds of the urban network! Nymph of base wage plus commissions!'

By contrasting what is required – courtesy and attention to the customer – with low wages and a lack of future prospects, the text mocks the rhetoric of personnel management at the McCentre. The prospects are those of being named employee of the month, while on the contrary it is widely known that the McCentre's employment rules do not respect the dignity of its employees. The text also suggests the necessity for some precarious workers to have two or more jobs to survive. The new forms of work, in fact, often require from them a greater involvement than that asked of permanent employees, leaving little autonomy for other life spheres. Precariousness leads them to be constantly available in order to respond to the needs of employers because of the fear of possible dismissal or non-renewal of the contract. Such situation generates phenomena such as “super” or “extreme” work (Holmes and Ryan 2008).

The theme of precariousness that erases subjectivity and minimizes the spaces of life outside work continues in the presentation of the seventh model, in which the flexibility of the precarious worker reaches its maximum, and in which even a change of gender identity is provided to the employer when requested.

Picture 8: Bisex tenderness: Pantacollant is over! Your gender is over!



<http://serpica.tumblr.com/post/2983208087/bisex-tendernes-2005-pantacollant-is-over-your>

The text depicts the worker's extreme flexibility:

'A warm fur collar becomes thick vampish hair. Effervescent transformer, play with the head of personnel! Are they looking for a man? Simple: the fur hem of the small pocket becomes a proud set of whiskers! A comfortable coat for when your gender does not match the requirements of the labour market!'

The worker's subjectivity is moulded by the requirements of the market: work precariousness and the worker's malleability are staged with an irony that ridicules one of the primary forms of identity, that of gender. The flexibilization of work (particularly in Italy) has further evidenced the persistence of old gender stereotypes. One of the rhetorics most common at institutional level claims that the various forms of temporary work are 'advantageous' for women. The subtext, though it is not particularly implicit, asserts that – given the instability and discontinuity that have long marked their work – women are readier than men to be 'flexible'. However, if they want to pursue careers, they should embrace the dominant male model as rapidly as possible so that they respond to the requirements of firms, especially Italian ones.

The eighth model paraded on the gangway represents migrant labour and the lack of rights for illegal migrants. It is entitled Wedding dress – Husbands prefer blonde Romanians!



<http://serpica.tumblr.com/post/2983247096/abito-da-sposa-husband-prefer-blond-romenians>

When citizenship rights cannot be obtained through work, alternative strategies are necessary. This is suggested by the text on the website:

‘That little piece of paper is unattainable? That longed-for ‘Stay Permit’ makes your heart throb just like love? Then grab yourself a hubbie with Italian citizenship: it’s one of the last chances that the ultra-libertarian Bossi-Fini Law<sup>3</sup> gives you! Grit your teeth: learning how to make lasagne like mamma is your only chance to get out of irregular employment.’

When the precariousness of work is accompanied by the uncertainty of immigration and the difficulties of obtaining a stay permit, the text suggests the stratagem of seducing an Italian man into marriage and thereby becoming regularised. Here the theme is treated with twofold irony: on the one hand, there is criticism of illegal work as a form of bargaining weakness in the labour market; on the other, there is irony directed at the model of the Latin male. Not only is the Latin male attracted to blonde women, but as a future husband he is both ethnocentric and a mummy’s boy. Hence the future wife must learn how to cook his favourite dish exactly like his mother. To underline the irony, the text states that this is the only way to escape from illegal employment.

In sum, the social critique performed through the Serpica Naro catwalk stages, as well as highlights, the effects of precarious work on the lives and identities of workers. It touches on the following themes to do with working conditions: discontinuity, McDonaldization, the marginalization of migrants and the increased risk of sexual harassment and mobbing at work. The effects of these conditions characterising a contractual relationship where workers are extremely weak in terms of rights are depicted in terms of the following: maximum responsiveness to the requirements of employers, not only day and night, but as far as the cancellation of gender identity, internalization of discomfort as stress and the precarisation of both productive and reproductive life.

This illustrates that the group of activists which has appropriated precariousness to give it a positive stigma, a stigma on which the “new dangerous class” (Standing 2011) is founded, has developed a new lexicon and imagery of work, and has consolidated precarious workers as a collective actor (Fumagalli 2011). Unlike the trade unions, which mainly deal with the rights of workers, the main claims advanced by this network of activists are not exclusively to do with work but with social citizenship rights. It is important to note, in fact, that the discourse carried forward through these forms of cultural elaboration does not take the traditional form of an opposition based on claims, nor does it propose an utopian model of work. Instead, situations in which workers experience situations of forced flexibility and with few or no margins of autonomy are to be challenged and

mocked.

Irony, transgression and subversion of gender codes may be considered as marginal practices undermining the stability of social order and introducing playfulness into work performances. Nevertheless, the meaning of staying at the margins is not only to be critical of the mainstream, but also to be in a liminal position, in a position of transgressing the boundaries, not recognizing the legitimacy of the borders. The staging of precariousness can also be transgressive by flouting dominant models, creating a zone of contestation, a site where a multitude of resistances against hegemony unfolds. In this sense, the mobilisation of irony enables both identity work and the expression of a social critique.

Irony, as a metacommunicative resource, as an instrument of resistance, as a postmodern attitude, has undergone a renaissance in recent years (Rorty 1989). The pragmatics of irony are the destabilisation of taken-for-granted values that ironic discourse can produce. Irony, in fact, insinuates doubt. It suggests that the world can be described in different terms, but it does not propose these other terms as alternative, 'better,' 'more correct' or 'truer.' Irony is a processual invitation; an invitation to consider how things (work relations, for example) can be redefined; how common sense can be problematised. Irony does not offer solutions; instead, it disputes the linguistic games which produce a certain vision of the world.

In staging the Serpica Naro catwalk the activists staged precariousness, and their use of irony thus became a valuable resource when precariousness had to be positioned within discursive practices. If social identities are constructed by subjects across and within the dominant plots and the available cultural repertoires (Lamont 1992), spaces for improvisation and for the construction of alternative scripts can anyhow be (collectively) elaborated. For this reason, we considered it important to analyse how irony contributes to questioning the dominant discourse about work pursued by the neoliberal model.

## **Conclusions**

An interpretation of precariousness conducted solely in economic terms fails to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon in contemporary society. For this reason, we have proposed a cultural interpretation. We have conducted a discursive analysis of the cultural forms of resistance adopted mainly by weaker individuals but

which have given rise to a positive collective identity of precarious workers and to a process of critical urban learning.

In the 2000s, the activist of the May Day parade and the San Precario network staged a collective identity mobilising a discourse of antagonistic self-representation and expressing a capacity for action which involved a great number of activists and workers. Precariousness became, in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, a text of identity. Through the discourse analysis of a performance by the San Precario network (the Serpica Naro catwalk) we have illustrated the contents of the discourse of precariousness:

- The disappearance of the workers' bargaining autonomy and their subordination to market demands;
- The discontinuity of work and the uncertainty of payment that introduce precariousness in work and in life as well;
- The weakness of work contracts which expose workers to moral harassment, which is not a new phenomenon, but which has been exacerbated by greater precariousness and more redundancies and the loss of rights. Moreover, overall for women, the situations of public humiliation, belittling, disdain, blackmailing with respect to the renewal of the contract often have also sexual connotations, as evidenced by the models presented at the Serpica Naro catwalk;
- Associated with precariousness is the interiorisation of distress experienced as an individual pathology to which the market gives a consumerist response (anti-stress gadgets);
- Pregnancy is a threat to women's employability, and precarious workers learn how to hide it or postpone reproductive choices. The intersecting issues of gender and precarity are represented with irony;
- Alienation affects both employees and clients in the McDonaldization of work and society;
- The flexible work organisation enters into the most private dimension of workers' subjectivity: their gender identity. In order to be ready to work, gender can be changed at the employer's command;
- Race and gender are disposable commodities and migrant workers' rights can be bought on the matrimonial market.

This discourse of precariousness is elaborated and performed on the stage. As a communicative device it is highly effective because it works on the analogy between dressing and presenting oneself in public and assuming an identity through the clothes that one wears. The 'who' of the discourse is performed once the particular dress (the 'what') of precariousness is worn.

Finally the form of the critique made of work and of a society based on work is based on playfulness, irony and a



generalised disidentification with traditional work values. Critical urban learning in fact concerns not only the substantive appropriation of an antagonist identity, alternative ways of political participation and cultural elaborations, but also the expression of a style aimed to construct a new representation of precariousness, which wants to challenge the image of precarious workers portrayed only as victims. In our opinion, irony is the rhetorical resource mobilised by the San Precario network. And irony can open up a text/discourse, subvert the knowledge hierarchies present therein, and reveal the aporia that the dominant discourse and its accompanying rhetoric seek to mask. The aspiration of irony is that it will disrupt the dominant discursive structures. It could be argued, however, that irony is a 'gentle' form of subversion. It may be a form that points to the lacunae, inconsistencies and inadequacies of the dominant discourse through deploying its own forms and resources, but this 'pointing out' does not, of itself, alter the discourse or its structures of dominance.

Irony is the opposite of common sense, and an ironic perspective is one which, although sharing information and knowledge, continues critically to raise doubts about their validity (Rorty 1989). It is a resource for identity work under current conditions because it allows the author to keep multiple contradictory meanings in play at the same time. We argue that the ironic dimension of reality construction helps precarious workers simultaneously to handle the different - and often contradictory - realities with which they are confronted. Irony may therefore be a device that facilitates the actual job that workers perform, as well as giving them some space for freedom. In fact, irony can work simultaneously for both processes of liberation/critique and the preservation of existing power structures.

To conclude, we therefore ask what forms of social critique are carried forward by collective movements of this kind. During the era of the industrial society, social critique consisted in denouncing power relations and promoting individual freedom, but in contemporary society conflicts are called into particular question by the crisis of the labour movement and the growth of non-union, low-wage, at-will employment. The analysis by Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) of the post-68 'new movements' interprets their critical spirit as an expressive artistic and libertarian critique centred on the themes of creativity, self-realisation and identity affirmation, rather than on issues concerning redistributive justice. The 'new spirit of capitalism' is able to absorb criticism through consumption, and tame it so that it legitimates precariousness. Nevertheless, resistance and social critique continue, and expressions of an imagery of work rooted in critical urban learning may consolidate a collective movement that will comprise forms alternative to those of industrial society.

## **Notes**

1. The present article is the outcome of joint and indivisible work by the authors; however, if individual

authorship is to be assigned, Silvia Gherardi wrote sections 2, 4 and Conclusions and Annalisa Murgia wrote Introduction and sections 1 and 3.

2. We would like to thank Serpica Naro for the permission to reproduce pictures of her catwalk. All pictures have been produced by Marco Garofalo and released under a creative commons license: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/it/>

3. In July 2002, the Italian Parliament approved the law on immigration, n. 189/2002 (the so-called “Bossi-Fini”). It is a restrictive regulation of entry and residence of migrant workers, which has halved the duration of residence permits and the time of searching for a new job after unemployment, compared to the previous legislation (law 286/1998). The maximum period of unemployment is reduced from one year to six months, which means that the renewal of a residence permit is refused if the migrant has been formally unemployed for more than six months at the time of the renewal request.

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