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NEITHER A DREAM NOR A NIGHTMARE: EXPLORING PRECARIOUSNESS FROM AN ORGANISATION STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

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A dissertation submitted in satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Submitted: November 2020
Resubmitted after minor revisions: June 2021

This game is rigged, man

(The Wire, S04-E13)

Academics love Michel Foucault's argument that identifies knowledge and power, and insists that brute force is no longer a major factor in social control. They love it because it flatters them: the perfect formula for people who like to think of themselves as political radicals even though all they do is write essays likely to be read by a few dozen other people in an institutional environment.

(Graeber, 2004: 71)

In Brussels no one hears you scream

(Borgen, S02-E02)

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Acknowledgments

The long journey towards this dissertation has been made possible by so many people that it would a far greater enterprise to properly thank everyone than to write an entirely new thesis. I wish to begin with the day I step into my first supervisory meeting. I was both terrified and utterly thrilled by the unknown way ahead. I presented my nebulous ideas to Hugh and Sebastien, worried I might come across as less than bright, so to say. I distinctively remember my amazement when they asked me to explain my project, and even my aloof poststructuralist intuitions, listening with genuine interest and curiosity. I think I can hardly ever express the sense of support, empowerment, and intellectual challenge that from that day on they have offered me. Their human and scholarly support has been nothing short of a blessing. Their patience is immense. They never forced my hand, letting me wander (academically and personally). Yet, they never stopped guiding me. Grazie di cuore.

There is a great symbolism in the fate of the Cass. I have called Cass my home for 5 years, and right when I left, it has changed name. What will not change is the terrific and absolutely brilliant community. I have encountered so much support all across faculties that I can barely express my gratitude. I have learnt so much. I have grown immensely (hopefully!). I have been welcomed as a peer from day one. I was excited to attend seminars, events, tutorial meetings. Of course, there have been bad days, but they are way way way outshined by the amazing ones. Thanks to the whole marvellous ETHOS group, particularly to Jean-Pascal Gond, Andre Spicer and Bobby Banerjee for their mentoring and friendship. And finally, Cass parties: they showed me the best side of academic life. Thanks a lot, to each of you. I am also really grateful for the financial support I have received and for the doors it has opened.

My PhD colleagues have been… how to put it. A gift. An irreplaceable one. I honestly struggle to put into a paragraph the words to make justice to what you have all given me. The PhD office, and I reckon the irony of saying this in a thesis about precariousness and neoliberalism, has been my home for five years. Each of you have enriched my life and made me a better academic. Mislav, Edwin, Varala, Minjie: the countless days and nights in the office, the countless discussions, the countless advice that we have exchanged, have shaped this thesis. The paper ideas, the ontological discussions, the political debates, the personal stories. This thesis would be much worst without you. And it would have been a much much harder and less fun ride. You make me happy and wiser. I want to also thank Mika for all the marvellous discussions. And the rest of cohort. In random order: Saralara, Yousaf, Annette, McKenzie, Johanna, Fabienne, Adi, Szilvia, Daniel, Matilde, Mathias, Bahar, Zaichen, Federico, Chiara, Chris, Felippe. Surely, I am forgetting names: rest assured you do are included. You have made this thesis and my life better.

I also want to thank the broader London organisation studies community. Simon Parker was among the first scholars I met, and he got me into (sweet) trouble spurring me to venture into poststructuralism. Jukka Rintamaki has also been a great source of inspiration and a great beer-advisor. Thank you. Special thanks to Davide Ravasi for all his support, direct and indirect. I also thank the CMS, SIM and OMT communities for all the input, workshops and… fun! But the huge amount of people I have met in London and abroad has helped me to write this. Thanks Stephan, Nethal and Francesca for putting up with me in our nerd house. Sabah for her friendship and help (yes, you are in the references for real!). It is impossible to name you all but know that I sincerely thank you.

I am extremely grateful to all the people that have made the empirical paper possible. I want to thank all my informants for their time and invaluable stories. Belgian beers and interviews, what a mix uh? I hope I made justice to you in this thesis. I want to thank Andrea, Alex, Alice, Charles, Alexandros, Laura, Chris and Simone for opening me many doors and for your friendship: the whole Brussels group has given me incredible support and access to the field. Special thanks to Marta and Bea for the help, insights, food and shelter! And of course Marzo: without you, I would know much less about Brussels and I would have never ventured outside the Eurobubble, seeing only half of the picture.

So many other people have been supporting me into this journey and way before. I want to thank Zack for having pushed me to write that bloody PhD application. Thanks Fede for your life-long… everything? And all my friends in Bologna, Brussels and much further. Thanks for those in Barcelona that have supported me in this time of pandemic and before. You have helped me to write this. These five years have also been marked by some dark personal events, and by a long sequence of global ones that have left a scar, on me and on all of us. It is hard to concentrate on your PhD when you are truly sad or when the world throws a seemingly endless sequence of historical changes that shake the basis of what you hold dear. I am lucky enough to say that the Brexit night has been one of the worst shocks I have ever experienced. Now, I am writing in the midst of a global pandemic. News of climate change and appalling injustices abound. In these years, away from home and in such a precarious state, the warmth and love of those around me has been my safe harbour. Thanks to all of you for having been beside me in the dark days. Many of you have helped me seeing the world from new perspectives, and to change what I meant by being critical. This has shaped this thesis: I am convinced for the better.

And I want to heartfeltly thank my family. How can few lines be ever enough? Mamma, papà, nonna, zio. And nonno. Nothing at all of this would ever exist without a whole life of unconditional support and endless love. Much much more than I could ever ask for. As I write these lines in Barcelona, a very special thank goes to Claudia. Our horizons are boundless, but whatever might ever happen, nothing can erase the stunning beauty of your unfaltering support.

Abstract

This thesis explores the phenomenon of uncertain, unstable, and insecure employment relations. With the explosion of the so-called gig economy, the issue of precariousness has (re)entered public and academic debate. However, it has a much older history and larger implications for organisations and societies. If these forms of work organisation are deemed problematic, how are they reproduced encountering limited overt conflict? To solve this puzzle, I study precariousness both as an epiphenomenon of neoliberalism (Chapter One) and as a self-standing object of inquiry (Chapters Two and Three). I do so from an organisations studies perspective in order to bridge our field with sociology and political theory, expanding our understanding of precariousness. This approach draws attention to the consequences of increasing overlap between the professional and private spheres along with alternative pathways that might address them. It also captures precariousness by acknowledging that it can be perceived both positively (as empowering and emancipating) and negatively (as exploitative and oppressive).

The first chapter theorises radical conflict in the context of gig work. Using a poststructuralist framework, it shows how employment relations nurture grievances and conflict, yet the responses are recurringly reformist. The reason, it argues, is that two main dimensions of neoliberalism – individualisation and hegemonic ideology – 'filter out' radical solutions. This process further destabilises the social order as it neither solves the causes underpinning radical conflict nor allows a radical alternative to prosper.

To study how precariousness reproduces, the second chapter takes up an empirical case of interns in and around European institutions in Brussels, Belgium. This case contributes to the literature on precariousness by revealing the role of (de)politicisation in fostering or undermining radical change. More specifically, depoliticisation undermines conditions that are conducive to the possibility of emancipation among precarious workers. I argue that if politicisation is present, individuals can challenge the regime of precariousness. Yet this seldom happens, and the result is the reproduction of precariousness instead.

The third chapter takes stock of the above reflections by reviewing the literature on precariousness as a grand challenge. It looks at two inter-related dimensions: precariousness of work as the material conditions for employment, and precariousness of lives as the lived experiences of individuals. It spells out the definitions, antecedents, and consequences for precariousness surfaced in literature. I conclude with the concept of 'received precariousness', which ties them together and enables the identification of moderating factors as well as future research avenues for organisation scholars.

Introduction

This doctoral thesis[1] focuses on precariousness and on the ways in which it is normalised and reproduced. Taking stock of the growing evidence that "uncertain, unstable and insecure" (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017) employment have both negative and positive consequences, I aim to clarify both the concept and its implications for our field. To this end, I understand precariousness both as an epiphenomenon of neoliberalism (Chapter One), and as a self-standing object of enquiry (Chapters Two and Three). My overarching research ambition is to disentangle the apparent tension between the largely negative connotations carried by the concept at abstract level, and the mix of positive and negative empirical evidence emerging from lived experiences. Illustratively, two anecdotes from my PhD journey capture this and help setting the tone.

After an interview during data collection, on the tube in Brussels (Belgium), I jotted down a witty remark made by the informant. For her, the precarious situation of interns is akin to 'the pillow problem': if you have a flawed pillow, you realise how uncomfortable it is when you go to bed; and every night you commit to buy a better one. Yet in the morning you no longer feel the discomfort, hence no action is taken even if you could. Similarly, interns experience discomfort, but feel they cannot act to fundamentally alter their situation; however, once they secure better employment and could speak up, they 'forget' how challenging their former condition was. So, nothing substantial is done, and interns' precariousness flourishes.

A few months earlier, I had the chance to meet some black and Latinx activists in Atlanta (USA), thanks to an event part of the Academy of Management Conference. Discussion revolved around how academics can help sustaining grassroot initiatives, while also providing opportunities for activists to voice their stories. One recurring point was that research can be used to persuade policymakers, as the status of researchers lends legitimacy to their policy demands. Yet, when a black woman recounted her daily experiences with racism, she pushed us to confront with a harsh reality: she argued that the real difference between activists and researchers is that the latter see activism and critical research as 'the right thing to do', while the formers see it as way of surviving a hostile environment and reclaiming what is theirs. As researchers, we can decide to switch off and disengage when we have had enough or wish to focus on something else, but the actual subjects of precarity or injustice cannot.

These two very different vignettes offer candid revelations about the challenges of studying critically precariousness. The primary task is to be genuinely reflexive while grappling with the complexities of ascribing responsibilities, power, and ‘consciousness’ to actors living in the dire situations we wish to study. This through line informs my whole thesis. How can we study problematic social and organisational practices without falling into so-called ethical relativism and ostensive ‘neutrality’? How can we avoid imposing structural positions of disempowerment and exploitation onto our ‘subjects’? In other words, how can we retain a critical intent *and* take the lived experiences of (allegedly) exploited or oppressed actors seriously?

Inspired by these queries, this thesis explores precariousness from an organisation studies perspective adopting different lenses. I do so in three papers, each of which corresponds to a chapter. The first is a poststructuralist conceptual paper that looks at how conflict unravels in the gig economy, a prime example of modern precariousness. The second is an inductive empirical study of interns in Brussels, a case taken to advance a theory of how precariousness is reproduced. The third is a literature review that spans different ontologies to capture what we know to date about precariousness – in and for organisation studies, which advances a critical agenda to make sense of the sparse and largely disconnected contributions from several fields.

To prepare and guide the reader through these papers, the remainder of this introduction considers the following topics: I begin by providing a rationale for this work and elucidating the phenomena from which it stems. I then reflect on related ontological and epistemological issues: here, my goal is to show the two main themes of this thesis (human capital theories and poststructuralism) and how they are declined in the different papers. Finally, I provide an overview of the three chapters that compose this thesis.

Research overview

The broader questions introduced above, which are both political and ethical in nature, are reconducted in this work to the specific case of precariousness, understood in this thesis both as an extension of ‘non-standard employment’ and as a state of incertitude and instability – a contemporary form of the human condition (Bourdieu, 1998). I move from the observation that our field, namely in its more mainstream forms, looks at organisations, both private and public, as the place where employment relations take place,

with the shared aim of coordinating human activities so to achieve collective (or presented as such) goals. Specifically, a long-standing assumption of the field has been that these work arrangements are 'standard': they use permanent contracts, work is executed on-premises, and there is direct hierarchical control (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007).

Nonetheless, social, political, economic, and technological factors are progressively invalidating such assumption, as new forms of organising tend to rely on non-permanent contracts, dispersed or remote work, and scrambled hierarchies. A buoying body of literature is trying to keep the pace of real-world changes, from platform organisations redefining 'gig work' (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020), to the wide adoption of casualised and remote contract-work (Cappelli & Keller, 2013), to flat and fluid organisations (Srnicek, 2017). In particular, several critical scholars in sociology and management have quickly surfaced the negative side of these practices, pointing out exploitation, inequality and, crucially, the disruption of welfare protections as well as dwindling solidarity (Bloom, 2015; Fleming, 2014, 2017).

On the other hand, alternative work arrangements, and related new forms of organising, have been heralded as an opportunity for enhanced freedom, better work life balance, and expanded job markets. Chiefly, there are sustained evidence that these disruptive innovations are able to provide Western workers and customers with new opportunities, both employment-wise and as cheap, revolutionary goods and services (Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2019). Thus, we are faced with a conundrum: are these new ways of organising a welcome break from Fordist, rigid, alienating jobs, or are yet another form of exploitation that merely provide a new packaging to problematic neoliberal capitalist employment dynamics?

Based on the research undertaken during my doctoral studies, I reject this dichotomy as the juxtaposition of incompatible alternatives. Indeed, a crucial line of inquiry that I develop in this thesis is to disentangle two intertwined, yet different concepts adopted in literature: *non-standard work* and *precariousness*. If the first refers merely to how work is organised, the second encompasses the lived experiences of Western subjects (and non-Western, yet I focus here on the former), inside and outside the working sphere. As I will argue throughout the three papers, it is necessary to take into consideration the impact that this forms of organising have on the whole life: reducing the analysis to contractual aspect or 'objective' job security obscures both the positive allure of 'freedom-through-work', and the negative consequences at individual (exploitation) and aggregate level (inequality or worsening public health to name just two).

The goal of this thesis is therefore to fill the gap between the abundant literature on non-standard work, and the nascent one (at least in organisation studies, as sociology has been more attentive to this matter) on precariousness as the condition of workers in several 21st Century neoliberal organisations. What is more, I attempt here to show that these dynamics do not take place just in very 'modern' settings, like the gig economy (chapter one), but they are endemic of more classic one, like internships (chapter two) and beyond (chapter three).

To date, it exists a broad literature on the structural conditions that have led here. There is general consensus, both in functionalist and critical studies, that the combined effect of globalisation, privatisations, deregulation, financialisation and technological innovations have led to a decline of standard work (Vosko, 2010) and Fordist organisations (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007). There is also a growing body of work on how workers experience precariousness, from the gig economy to creative industries to freelancers (Chertkovskaya, Watt, Tramer & Spoelstra, 2013). What is missing, and this thesis aims to tackle it, are three crucial elements. First, how lived experiences of precariousness can contribute to the reproduction of these organisational forms, without assuming that subjects are merely exploited or imbued of 'false consciousness'. Second, building on this, which are the conditions of possibility for alternative, more equitable forms of organising to emerge. Third, what kind of ontological approach is best suited for this scholar endeavour.

Synthetising the contents of the three chapters, this thesis makes three arguments. First, lived experiences should be taken seriously, as precariousness can be perceived both positively and negatively, depending on structural and contingent conditions that can equally enhance opportunities for freedom or dark experiences of exploitation. Second, precariousness is reproduced when radical alternatives are not conceived as possible within the ideological boundaries of neoliberalism, and when subjects are depoliticised – that is, when responsibility for one own's condition is internalised, and solidarity is conceived merely as a peer-to-peer support system to be extended to the direct social circle. Third, I argue that, ontologically, poststructuralism can go beyond structuralist critiques of precariousness by rejecting essentialist analysis (without denying *per se* material exploitative conditions) and by showing the conditions of possibility for alternatives to emerge. I do so theorising along the line drawn by the work of Glynos and Howarth (2007; see chapter one for a detailed explanation) – which builds on Laclau and Mouffe (2014) among others. In the conclusions of this

thesis, I discuss the limitations of these three contributions, chiefly the explanatory power of *Logics* (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) vis-à-vis alternative ontological takes. I also reflect on the question of is the subject of precarity, and on the (missing) theme of temporality.

Transversal themes

While this works focuses on the phenomenon of precariousness, it is possible to highlight two main themes that run through the three chapters, and that together serve the purpose of clarifying the issue at hand, as well as problematise its reproduction. The first is my engagement with critiques of human capital theory within neoliberalism. Its centrality to understand precariousness is testified by its role in re-polarising all aspects of personal and professional life as marketable assets to be traded on the job market (Fleming, 2017). Hence, human capital theory plays a key role in transforming non-standard employment into precariousness, as it leads to the transcendence of the division between working and personal life. The second is the adoption in various forms of poststructuralism as an ontological stance. The *Logics* framework has been initially adopted as the backbone of chapter one, but in various forms it has shaped also the other two chapter, albeit not appearing explicitly. This constitute the basis for my efforts to take seriously contextualised self-interpretations, so to provide a critical account of precariousness that it is neither structuralist nor essentialist.

Critiques of human capital theory within neoliberalism

My interest in how precariousness has been understood by sociologists and organisational scholars stems from the rich debate on neoliberalism (Harvey, 2009) and its impact on Western individuals, becoming 'entrepreneurs of themselves' (Read, 2009). Theoretically, a central tenet of these dynamics can be traced back to human capital theory. First developed within economics, it has been used to abandon the assumption that labour is a black box to be studied at macroeconomic level by breaking it down in several forms of capitals that individual trade on the job market (Sweetland, 1996). The chief argument is that employment, productivity, and economic growth can be boosted by maximising human capitals and investing them is the most efficient, profitable way (Bowles & Gintis, 1975). I analyse it in depth in chapter three, yet it informs wholly the other two chapters just as much. In particular, in this thesis I show how quantifying human aspects to marketise them leads to a recontextualization of life into work and work into life. That is to say, at least at theoretical level, what individuals 'put at work' are their various forms of capital; and, as you cannot

really differentiate between personal and professional sphere when talking about capitals, the two dimensions end up overlapping.

Some of these concepts were imported into organisation studied by Fleming (2014, 2017) as ‘radical responsibilisation’ and ‘biocracy’. A crucial point borrowed from previous studies is that, if there are limits to what can be exchanged, there are no limits to what can be optimised or maximised (Christiaens, 2020). Hence, human capital theory optimises ‘the personal’ by recasting it as *the* variable to be optimised in labour market processes. It descends from it that, as work is (re)commodified (Greer, 2016), individuals are inherently precarious as both their working and personal lives shall be reconfigured as skills and capitals to be put *at work*. Thus, the professional sphere cannot be isolated, as no ultimate economic, social or professional stability can be achieved in order to solely focus on the personal. On the contrary, the precarious individual is ontologically and teleologically bound to accumulate, manage and invest capital conjured out of personal connections, interests, passions, location, demographical positioning, and enjoyed entitlements. Refusing, or being unable to act in this ‘play’ (Boland, 2016) lead many into being job-market outcasts or to be relegated to ‘bad jobs’ (Kalleberg, 2013). We shall now see how this theme is approached in the thesis.

The first chapter looks at it by studying its role in social and work conflict, taking the case of the gig economy. Human capital theory manifests itself in a radical responsibilisation of individuals, fuelling demands for radical conflict yet obtaining mostly reformist answers. And this, we argue indirectly, is because human capital theory underpins business models based on (bogus) self-employment. In addition, chapter one argues that individualisation and (neoliberal) hegemonic ideology are both grounded in this idea of human capital, as something that can/should be accumulated, measured, traded. Thus, demands for radical alternatives remain peripherical or are met with violence, both material and symbolic.

The second chapter looks a bit less directly to it, but human capital theory still plays a central role in the reproduction of precariousness. Specifically, my empirical study shows that Brussels is founded on a hectic job market that fully encompasses the personal lives of social actors, both materially and symbolically. Interns, mostly privileged yet vulnerable subjects, are demanded to ‘invest’ and ‘sell’ various forms of capitals, not least social ones. A practical application of this is the narrative of employability, which is espoused by the vast majority of my informants. However, the theme of human capital theory is even more acute in the case of depoliticisation, as young professionals barter collective solidarity and stability for

personal opportunities and self-responsibilisation. After all, capitals are personal and you cannot really invest in the job market either other people's capitals or the collective capitals that cannot be measured or that are not valued by recruiters.

Finally, the third chapter looks extensively into human capital theories and their role in precariousness. The second half of it dedicates a whole section to them. To summarise, in my reading of the literature, human capital theory is one of the antecedents of lived precariousness as it represents the ideological justification and the theoretical lens that enable the (re)commodification of labour, as well the narratives of employability and individualisation. Overall, human capital theory can be seen as the more 'academic' face of the material consequences of neoliberalism on Western individuals, above all in the form of precariousness.

Poststructuralism and contextualised self-interpretations

To approach the consequences of human capital theory for precariousness, most authors have used structuralist approaches, ascribing to neoliberalism and macro-factors its hegemonic tendencies. Others have adopted essentialist ontologies, looking at psychodynamics or adopting Lacanian stances (Musilek, Jamie & McKie, 2020). As neither fully capture the transversal dimension of precariousness, nor seem to adequately take into consideration contextualised self-interpretations without discounting material and historical factors, I adopt in this thesis a poststructuralist approach, widely informed by the work of Glynos and Howarth (2007). So, taking human capital theory and poststructuralism into account, my goal has been to listen, observe and disentangle the discourses and practices that reproduce precariousness. This is just one of the many possible views: my aspiration is being agonistic and not merely antagonistic – which is a chief limitation I have observed in much critical work. Hereafter I reconstruct my journey and how the above has been applied in this thesis.

A matter of ontologies

Scholars in management have historically drawn from other disciplines to make sense of complex phenomena involving organisations. The classical positivist approach borrows 'scientific' methods from economics and psychology, embracing a style of writing and theorising informed by the principle of 'objectivity' (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Interpretivism, instead, introduces non-structuralist, sociological,

and anthropological theories and methods. While departing from many positivist assumptions, interpretivists are nonetheless only partially disenfranchised from the positive enterprise, since they have retained some degree of positional or normative agnosticism (Gehman et al., 2018). In contrast, critical (management) scholarship borrows heavily from critical theory, political philosophy, and critical sociology. This approach rejects any attempt to claim objectivity, in order to embrace and voice a multiplicity of subjectivities (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007). The distinguishing feature of the latter group of management students is its emancipatory intent (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). All of these differences have long marked each research tradition as idiosyncratic in the way they attempt to solve the puzzles presented above, which can be framed as problems of 'levels of analysis', epistemology, and ontology.

Many of the observations from these traditions remain indisputably valid and likely always will. But in the last decade, something has inexorably changed. Mounting social inequalities, disruptive technologies, political and ecological changes, and social movements have pushed the boundaries of what it means to do 'research that matters', shifting aspirations from having a managerial impact (McGahan, 2007) to having a social impact (Brammer, Branicki & Linnenluecke, 2020). Such events have challenged our understandings of what an organisation is, what it is for, and who is for. In doing so, they have rejuvenated the currency of ontological and epistemological debates. Critical takes and theories once confined to minority positions have forced themselves closer to the centre. The very issue analysed in this thesis – precariousness – has swept through even academic institutions in the form of the adoption of short-term or insecure contracts, variable workloads, and eroding work-life balance (e.g., Ashcraft, 2017).

As a consequence, scholars of organisations and related areas face two main issues. On one hand, many positivists and interpretivists now see blatant limitations to 'objectivity' claims, along with the need to take inequality, social injustices, and exploitation seriously (e.g., Bapuji, Ertug & Shaw, 2020). Suddenly, they are no longer able to keep the consequences identified in their research at arm's length. Burgeoning literature on 'grand challenges' or 'wicked problems' is a prime example of this (George et al., 2016), and chapter three dwells in details into this. On the other hand, critical scholars now face the task of going beyond 'antagonism' to embrace 'agonism' in order to propose more compelling theoretical and pragmatic insights (Parker & Parker, 2017). Nonetheless, even if most of the issues advanced by 'critters' are finally gaining recognition, the challenge becomes moving into the next phase and devising alternative ways of organising

that resonate with communities and the wider public. What remains, and what I deem relevant in light of these changes, is the question of how to study 'lived experience'. Being 'agonistic' requires taking the voices of social actors seriously, even when doing so is unsettling or counterintuitive. This thesis has been written within the context of this watershed moment.

From the above, we can distil a number of deeper tensions that have emerged in our field – tensions that have also inspired my PhD and, hopefully, will be at least partially addressed in the thesis. To begin, how can we approach problematic social and organisational issues using critical theories in an agonistic way? This is an ontological problem. Although I address it only briefly here, it is one of the central preoccupations of the first chapter. Next, how do we bring together functionalist accounts of managerial practices, structuralist critiques of social inequalities (e.g., the whole quarrel on neoliberalism, which has in many ways reached a dead end; Springer, 2016), and pockets of positive, individual lived experience? Can we do so in a way that is neither blind to inequalities nor patronising via the imposition of rigid structural positions on social actors? While connected to the above, this is more a problem of epistemology. I dedicate the empirical (Chapter Two) and literature review papers (Chapter Three) to this enterprise.

Being critical: the case for poststructuralism

In 1979, Burrell and Morgan presented their foundational piece on research paradigms to set the tone for organisation studies. They identify four research 'families': functionalism, interpretivism, radical humanism, and radical structuralism. More specifically, their work categorises critical stances as *radical*. It frames functionalism and interpretivism as representative attempts to capture reality without an explicit normative intent, and those rejecting such a position as radical stances. But their work can also be read as relatively short-sighted on the issues of emancipation and reflexivity, which arguably matter to any researcher whether she wishes to actively pursue them or not. It is hard to discount the limitations of this view – even after taking into account the usefulness of the work itself, in addition to the political and cultural context within which it was written. The assumption that functionalist and interpretivist stances are more 'neutral' has arguably slowed development of the field as well as its impact on (and possible relevance for) the study of problematic organisational phenomena. Theories have some degree of performative effect (Ferraro, Pfeffer & Sutton, 2005), so the hidden assumptions underpinning organisational theory can shape or crystallise power relations that exacerbate inequalities (Willmott, 1993b). But they can also blind researchers to the

extent that 'being neutral' tends to be conflated with not using a normative tone rather than removing oneself from a particular standpoint to see social realities from the perspective of other actors, particularly vulnerable or oppressed ones.

Another important consequence of Burrell and Morgan's 1979 categorisation has been the entrenchment of the idea that radical (or critical) theories take a dichotomic form in that they are either structural or hermeneutic. In very reductionist terms, the former can be reduced to Marx and the second to the Frankfurt school. This idea has resonated particularly strongly with Marxist takes on organisation studies, which often discount contextualised self-interpretation as a matter of 'false consciousness' or as pockets of resistance that structural injustices and exploitation have (yet) failed to subjugate, at best. These views are espoused by several critical realist authors (Fleetwood, 2005), although some more accommodating takes have also emerged (Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011).

The binary generalisation has been challenged by the introduction of new streams of interpretivism and poststructuralism departing from pure hermeneutical stances. Regarding the first stream, Guba and Lincoln (1994) distinguish between ontologically hermeneutic interpretivism and ontologically functionalist constructivism. The latter arguably enjoys the highest standing among organisation scholars as it allows for different 'levels of analysis' while also accepting that reality is socially constructed so there is no 'ultimate, objective, universal' truth waiting to be uncovered (Gehman et al., 2018). Regarding the second stream, scholarly interest in poststructuralism was renewed after several related developments. This happened as distance emerged from earlier debates on postmodernism (Harvey, 1989), because before poststructuralism was mostly circumscribed to the idea that 'everything is discourse'.

More recently, poststructuralist scholarship has began to devote more attention to its connection with practice (at least in spelling out political dimensions; for example, see Howarth, 2013). But it has also attracted enough scholarly attention to be broken down into different streams. For instance, Hassard and Cox (2013) advance a taxonomy of poststructuralism divided into structural, anti-structural, and post-structural streams. Each of these can then be classified as normative or critical. Compared to earlier accounts of these ontologies in organisation studies, there is currently some appreciation of complexity.

Central for this thesis, the work of Glynos and Howarth (2007) emerged in this context with their book *Logics of critical explanation*. Chapter One gives a rather detailed overview of their framework. Its main contribution is to synthesise different ontological traditions in the poststructuralist approach, offering an original explanatory framework. This framework creates room for both structural and individual explanations while also accounting for the importance of the political dimension in social relations. More precisely, the two authors borrow an idea that social relations are always politically constituted through the maintenance of hegemonic discourse (see Gramsci 1971; Laclau and Mouffe 2014).

In doing so, they dialogue with structuralists and label this 'the regime'. At the same time, Glynos and Howarth also import two concepts from Lacan. First, there is the idea that social reality is constitutively incomplete. So, social actors continuously de-construct and re-construct their social reality in an endless process. Second, they engage with the idea of fantasies (or what they term 'fantasmatic logics'). These are beatific and horrific imaginaries that act to either unite the political tensions underpinning social relations or accelerate social change. The two authors thus pay attention to contextualised self-interpretations: in their own words,

> *[In] a 'hermeneutic circle', we can only grasp the meaning of an actor's affect or emotion from the inside, 'by getting somehow into their way of life', if only in our imaginations. And in 'reading' an action, practice or event we need to navigate between the particular meanings interpreted and the whole way of life within which it is embedded.* (Glynos & Howarth, 2017, p. 57)

So, the centrality of Glynos and Howarth's *Logics* (2007) in this work derives from the way this understanding of the poststructural ontology allows to elucidate most of the puzzles presented in this introduction. They aim to provide a critical explanation of the social order while rejecting pure structuralist answers. As such, they demand us to take individuals' lived experiences seriously, and to assume that critique can and will be part of the lived experiences of individual actors. They also aim to bring political theory into management through sociology, mixing the empiricism of such discipline with the ethical/ontological demands of political theory.

To achieve so, their understanding of 'radical contingency' is particularly important. On one hand, this means that each social actor makes sense of the social reality around her as a continuous process, which has no 'hard foundations' since no discursive concept has a final, definitive meaning. This 'lack' (Cederström & Spicer, 2014) is continuously filled drawing from ideology, so hegemonic concepts and ideologies can

provide the context for understanding the radically contingent social reality. But it is also an inherent political process, as naturalising, questioning, accepting or refusing hegemonic meanings shapes the political reality of social actors. Glynos and Howarth (2007) use the concept of 'dislocation' to capture this.

On the other hand, it is precisely this political process that matters for organisations studies, and that can reconcile the idiosyncrasies advanced above with the discussion on bridging with political theory. This continuous and radically contingent process is not hermeneutic: it has clear implications on the social structure surrounding actors as it shows that it is not crystallised and immutable but merely continuously naturalised. As such, it can be questioned and overhauled, but it can also be reproduced. Hence, this ontological perspective allows us, I argue, to simultaneously do three things: take stock of structuralist studies; appreciated contextualised-self interpretations, taking lived experiences seriously; and appreciate the political dimension of social relations. Building on this, organisation studies can tackle problematic organisational forms and employment practices, precariousness in particular, with an emancipatory intent that acknowledges research conducted by functionalist studies, the critiques advanced by structuralist critical scholars, and the need of being reflexive when theorising on the basis of qualitative data collected from those living them.

Finally, I believe that the ontology of poststructuralism allows to better study contextualised self-interpretations by accounting for both the conditions of possibility that reproduce and reinforce the status quo (which overlaps with most structuralist accounts), but also for the role of ideology and fantasies that grip subjects (often overlooked in critical realist accounts). Particularly, by embracing an ontology that, through the idea of radical contingency, attempts to overcome the debate 'agency vs structure', I believe we can have a better understanding of precariousness, laying the way forward for research on this phenomenon.

In conclusion, how has this theme been applied in the thesis? The first chapter puts the *Logics* framework at the centre and uses it to present a visual theorisation of reformist and radical conflict. I hope it can help clarifying why and how precariousness in the gig economy is both a social and a political 'process', which transcends mere working arrangements. The first chapter also looks at contextualised self-interpretation in employment relations, and by using such ontological stance it arguably uncovers the role of individualisation and ideology in keeping conflict reformist.

The second chapter does not directly mention the *Logics* framework, but it does analyse contextualised self-interpretation – chiefly in the part discussing 'embracing vs enduring' precariousness. Specifically, by dealing with depoliticisation and the reproduction of precariousness, it links structural elements, lived experiences and the conditions of possibility for emancipation. In this sense, this chapter is poststructuralist as it goes beyond classic 'levels of analysis' (Willmott, 1993a). It also looks at precarious actors by choosing the empirical case of medium/high privilege people. As such, the argument advanced there is that we should neither discount them as all privileged, nor as passive victims, but we should study them as actors playing an active role in the reproduction of precariousness. I further reflect on the subject of precariousness in the conclusion of the thesis.

Finally, the third chapter strays away from a pure poststructuralist analysis, largely because it maps current studies on precariousness, which tends to stem from a functionalist community. Nonetheless, the spirit is retained in the presentation of the concept of 'received precariousness', which takes seriously contextualised self-interpretations. Specifically, it uses the latter to argue that they are the link between precariousness of work and lived precariousness, and it shows how this can dissect precariousness as a grand challenge by avoiding the essentialisation of exploited subjects. To this end, the idea of positively vs negatively received precariousness is advanced. As explained in the introduction, in this thesis poststructuralism is about taking lived experiences seriously and criticising them through contextualised self-interpretations while accounting for structuralist approaches. As Mouffe puts it (2018), post-structuralism is not anti-structuralist or anti-Marxist, and it neither all about discourse: it is about how the continuous reconstruction of reality is a political process.

Overview of the chapters

I end the introduction with a more detailed presentation of the three chapters. Each chapter reports one paper. The first is a conceptual one, titled "Revisiting conflict: individualisation and ideology in neoliberal work". It looks at the relationship between precariousness and conflict in neoliberal employment relations. Despite widespread criticisms towards the gig economy and the precariousness that it entails for workers and for societies, we witness remarkably little overt, radical conflict against this organisation of work. Taking on this idea, the paper proposes a theorisation of conflict declined in *reformist* vs *radical*: if the first type of

accounts try to channel dissent to enhance performance and reproduce the status quo, the second address the very assumptions of a social order, aiming to overhaul it. Hence, this chapter looks at the case of gig economy to show how the idiosyncratic characteristics of neoliberalism lead to reformist solutions even when radical conflict emerges, reinforcing market rationality but also fuelling dissent. This paper builds on the 'Logics' framework of Glynos and Howarth's (2007), explaining why it is the best suited for this endeavour.

This paper has been the backbone of the first half of my PhD. When I decided to submit it to a major journal, my supervisor Hugh Willmott has kindly accepted to co-author with me, to refine it for a high-standing outlet. Therefore, while the bulk of the work is mine and the core ideas have not been altered, his help has been precious is sharping the final piece. This paper has now received two 'revise and resubmit' from *Human Relations* and has been awarded the 'Best Student Paper Award' from the 'Social Issues in Management' division at the 2020 Academy of Management Conference. The version present here is the one re-submitted after the first R&R.

The second chapter reports my empirical paper titled "Turning the wheel? Interns and the reproduction of precariousness". It stems from the observation, particularly during my past experience in a Brussels-based think tank, that the Belgian capital has an outstanding number of interns: young graduates hoping to begin a career there. This case seems an apt to study precariousness, as employment uncertainty is coupled with strong personal, financial, and existential instabilities, but interns have also the option to leave it. Nonetheless, counterintuitively, most interns seem to embrace their status, despite evident drawbacks, sacrifices and frustration. I have therefore conducted a qualitative study, collecting interviews and non-participant observations, along with archival materials.

The paper presents a 'model' of the reproduction of precariousness as a wheel, linking structural conditions, contextualised self-interpretations and the conditions of possibility for emancipation. In particular, I show that the degree of (de)politicisation of social actors plays a crucial role in the determining if grievances are routed towards attempts to either overhaul the status quo or reproduce it. The main contribution of this paper is to add to our understanding of precariousness by moving beyond on one hand structuralist studies, which analyse which legal and material conditions lead to it, and individual-level studies, mostly functionalist, that do not take a critical stance nor account for the role of depoliticisation in

reproducing precariousness. On the contrary, I show here how the three dimensions are connected and create a self-reinforcing circle, and some possible ways to break it. This chapter is single authored and was shortlisted for the 'Best Dissertation Paper Award' by the 'Organisation and Management Theory' division at the 2021 Academy of Management conference.

The third and last chapter is a literature review entitled "Precarious Jobs, Precarious Lives: The Grand Challenge of Precariousness". It concludes the thesis by taking stock of the different debates on precariousness witnessed while crafting the first two papers. This study provides a novel perspective on precariousness by offering a multidisciplinary literature review and a synthesis between multiple streams of research that, while complimentary, seldom if ever communicate. I build on the theorisation of Ferraro, Etzion and Gehman (2015), to unpack the grand challenge of precariousness: to reduce its complexity and to tackle its uncertainty, I categorise current knowledge into studies of 'precariousness of work', theorising precariousness as an extension of non-standard work, and of 'lived precariousness', taking stock of recent work on human capital theory and employability – a stream mostly inspired by Bourdieu and Foucault. To improve its evaluation, I capture how the positive narratives surrounding it can coexist with its dire negative consequences, from public health to inequality, advancing the concept of 'received precariousness': the material and perceived conditions that structure individuals as an employable persona.

My intention is to show that to understand, theorise, and possibly begin to solve the complex puzzle of precariousness, we need to look at the evolution of non-standard employment from a problem of work arrangements to an existential condition. The literature in the former, I argue, falls short to consider the 'political' and social forces structing precariousness, while the latter largely ignores what we already know about it from a functionalist or structuralist perspective. This chapter is single authored, and was submitted to the *International Journal of Management Reviews*.

The remaining of this thesis presents each paper as a chapter, adding an overarching conclusion discussing the results and addressing the most pressing limitations. Each chapter reports the main tables and figures in the body, whereas additional annexes are at the end of the dissertation, along with references and endnotes.

Chapter One.
Revisiting Conflict: Individualisation and ideology in neoliberal work*

Co-authored with Hugh Willmott

Abstract

Contemporary crises, like mounting social inequalities institutionalised in precarious forms of work, can give rise to expressions of grievance and to an intensification of conflicts. Still, radical alternatives have rarely emerged. This paper analyses this puzzle by moving beyond two broad interpretive frames dominating management and organisation studies. 'Reformists' conceptualise conflict as something to be managed through amendments, whereas 'radicals' valorise its potential to precipitate transformative change. If the first appreciate the allure of neoliberal work, the second are needed to capture its problematic dimensions. Our analysis brings them together by incorporating the role of fantasies in impeding, as well as fuelling, the radicalisation of conflict. We address, with specific reference to gig work organised through location-based platforms, how the transformative potential of grievances is routinely domesticated and suppressed by dominant reformist framings, also due to the shortcomings of radical ones. Coining the term "econormativity" to characterise the conditions of such acquiescence, our critical intention is to contribute to a progressive eradication of needlessly insecure and unequal forms of work organisation, prefiguring the conditions of possibility for the emergence of alternatives.

Introduction

In autumn 2016 a group of riders using the platform[2] "Foodora" began a strike in the Italian city of Turin; gig workers contested their designation as independent, self-employed contactors (Tassinari & Maccarrone,

* This version is a resubmission in *Human Relations* following a first round of revisions asked by reviewers.

2017; 2020). Similar actions subsequently took place in Paris, San Francisco, Barcelona, and London (Euronews, 2019; Glover, 2021) [3]. Key to understanding these riders' grievances is a legal distinction between providers of labour as 'contractors' and those designated as 'workers' or 'employees': the formers do not incur the costs associated with entitlements such as holiday pay and payment of a living wage (Gandini, 2019; Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020; Staton, 2020).

Gig labour markets relying upon 'contractors' are characterised by minimal barriers to entry and exit (De Stefano, 2015), with individualised and atomised social connections (Täuscher & Laudien, 2018). The social impact is even broader when we consider that hirers escape employer obligations, like sick pay, national insurance contributions, and VAT (Standing, 2011; Srnicek, 2017). With minimal regulatory intervention, this work returns the capital-labour relation to what Marx characterised as the whip of the market, so that the gig economy 'is seen by many neoliberal policymakers as an ideal form of work' (Crouch, 2019: 2). As contractors, providers of labour are denied a basic benefit that previous generations struggled to establish and protect: to be 'paid not only for the days [or hours] they work, but also for times when they are not working or are investing in their capacity for work' (Bosch, 2004: 619). This hiatus is not solved by the latest court rulings, as in the case of Uber in the UK granting basic rights solely for a fraction of the actual time worked (Butler, 2021).

The actions of the riders in Turin, London and elsewhere are here interpreted as conflict provoked, but also moderated, by a form of work organisation in which neoliberal 'market-based principles and techniques' are elevated to 'state-endorsed norms' (Davies, 2017: xiv). Gig workers become market 'subjects' (Foucault, 1982), managed by online platforms that dis-intermediate relations (Srnicek, 2017). While several authors acknowledge the corrosive and damaging aspect of this shift (Crouch, 2019; Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020; Roger, 2015), neoliberal principles are also manifest in an alluring sense of enhanced identity: the fantasy of being a freewheeling individual released from ties to an employer, whose entrepreneurial spirit is rewarded when instances of agony are compensated by episodes of ecstasy (Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2019).

Fantasies that glorify and enhance the idea of "being one's own boss" and "working when I like" have been considered as 'fictitious freedom' (Shibata, 2020) equivalent to 'false-consciousness'. Fleming argues (2017: 32-3) that 'the sober reality is [often] very different' and that 'collectivisation is crucial for building

and protecting workers' rights'. Yet, the role of ideology and individualisation in reproducing the social order should not be underplayed (Bloom & Cederström, 2009). Neoliberal self-entrepreneurship (Foucault, 2008) has its captivating potential in the idea of apparently escaping the draconian requirements of employment, with its nine-to-five routine subordinated to tedious bureaucracies and to the whims of bosses. Juxtaposed, being a contractor can be sufficiently attractive (Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020). This work focuses on the role of this allure in mediating (radical) conflict.

Critical literature has lengthy observed that contracts within capitalist firms, including those hiring contractors, are asymmetrical, because 'one party undertakes to place herself under the authority and general disposal of the other' (Crouch, 2019:12), even if it is only for the duration of a ride. This generates latent conflict, contained as long as the relationship is coordinated in ways that normalise, dissemble and/or mitigate structural social inequality. Many studies of gig work have, in our assessment, failed to centralise this dynamic. Either they gloss over it (Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2019); or they consider it merely as a problem of organisational performance (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; De Dreu, 2011; Rahim, 2010; Shah, Peterson, Jones & Ferguson, 2020); or, finally, an overarching understanding of conflict as emancipatory struggle is incorporated but inadequate account is taken of the appeal and grip of a neoliberal framing of gig labour (Gandini, 2019; Kelly, 1998).

Congruent with Contu's (2019) call to regenerate radical studies of conflict in management and organisation studies, we respond by developing a dynamic understanding of its presence (or notable absence). Our critical intent is to surface the conditions of possibility for the removal of injustice rather than its perpetuation. Attentive to lived experiences, in addition to structural positioning of social actors, we engage Glynos & Howarth's (2007) Logics of critical explanation (hereafter Logics). Going beyond structuralist accounts, we address the puzzling question of why grievances amongst gig workers are rarely translated into solidaristic action taking the form, for example, of the organised withdrawal of labour.

While we focus on the (alluring) benefits of being a contractor, attributed by those engaged in it, we fully understand that the asymmetry structured into labour contracts in capitalist firms relies upon a significant measure of coercion, underpinned by penalties for refusing to make one's labour available for hire (Springer, 2016). In other words, we recognise that people perform 'gig labour' to avoid such penalties, and not necessarily because they self-identify as freewheeling individuals who will accept precariousness just to

avoid employment hierarchies. Nonetheless, because we believe that neoliberalism is more than an abstract ideology resistant to internalisation, our focus is upon what Foucault (1982: 781) terms ‘the government of individualization’, where ‘particular notions of freedom [that] appear to be natural and universal [actually are] a specific (neoliberal) regime of biopolitical power’ (Newheiser, 2016: 13).

To address this issue of faux, but not fictitious, freedom, we compare and contrast two broad framings of conflict: reformist and radical. When a reformist frame is adopted, neoliberal labour relations are mostly seen in positive terms and fantasies of emancipation-through-markets privileged. Therefore, manifestations of conflict are addressed primarily as a problem of performance management and optimisation, whose (re)solution preserves the business model enabling business-as-usual to be resumed and advanced (Jehn, 2014; Rahim, 2010; Zhao, Thatcher & Jehn, 2009). Conversely, the radical framing questions the social and organisational assumptions of the status quo, such as the designation of labour as contractors, both anticipating its transformation and attending to what impedes it. Neoliberalism is problematised for its exploitative sides, centring on the conditions of possibility for overhauling the established regime.

In this endeavour, Glynos & Howarth’s (2007) Logics is of particular assistance, as its analytic focus is ‘the relationship between social structure, human subjectivity, and power’ (Howarth, 2013: 6-7). Logics enables us to appreciate how the potential for radical expressions of conflict (defined as collective resistance demanding structural transformation rather than adjustments) is impeded or resisted by fantasies, including those of self-empowerment and self-entrepreneurship (see also Bloom & Cederström, 2009). Namely, they confine the significance of conflict within a reformist framing – defusing its potential but, crucially, not attending its underlying causes.

Our own ‘explanation and critique’ of this process hinges on the operation of what we term ‘econormativity’[4] – a phenomenon that, as we conceive of it, comprises elements of “responsibilisation”, “quantification”, “universalism” and “disembeddedness”. It incorporates much of what Çalışkan and Callon (2009: 369) term ‘economization – the assembly and qualification of actions, devices, and analytical/practical descriptions as “economic” by social scientists and market actors’, however extending it to incorporate processes of self-formation. We argue that, in combination, these elements account for how and why social actors are attracted to framings of conflict that accommodate rather than challenge the market rationality of neoliberalism. That, nonetheless, is precarious, not least because it is insidiously antidemocratic

(Brown, 2019), as well as socially divisive. Hence, despite its allure for providers of labour who invest in its imaginaries, the latent potential for denaturalising, problematising, and rejecting the hegemony of neoliberalism remains.

Revisiting Conflict

Reformist framings

Conflict is widely considered endemic of any organisation (De Dreu, 2011), but there is little consensus on how to frame it. Rahim (2010) defines it as 'an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or difference within or between social entities' (2010: 37), such that conflict is conceived as a problem of management and optimisation; a 'dysfunctionality'. In this framing, conflict is interpreted as something to be reconciled or eliminated (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019), including within teams (Shah, Peterson, Jones & Ferguson, 2020). Specifically, Human Resource Management (HRM) literature tends to consider it 'in an entirely negative light: a symptom of managerial failure that needs to be avoided as it detracts from the core goal of creating high-performance organizations' (Currie et al., 2017: 492).

We characterise this understanding of conflict *reformist*, as differences are valorised only for their potential to regenerate the prevailing order in face of contestations (see Table 1). Social actors and scholars adopting it seek to engineer 'disagreements' and even 'incompatibilities' into means of reaffirming and regenerating the status quo (Jehn, 2014; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Rahim, 2010; Zhao et al., 2009). As such, 'questions of values, exploitation and responsibility' are largely absent or marginalised, as it is assumed that 'subjects and their interests, [like] unions, workers, managers, investors and regulators [..] all still benefit from the system itself' (Contu, 2019: 1452). From this perspective, the 'decisive neoliberal turn in the HRM literature [..] assumes that the interests and behaviour of employees are identical to corporate interests' (Currie et al, 2017: 505). Yet the appearance of consensus ostensibly based upon common interests, if it has ever existed, has been displaced or supplanted in gig work by localised and individualised negotiations, where managers 'address problems and disputes [..] within privatized systems of conflict resolution' (Currie et al., 2017: 505) that perpetuate the established business model (see Box 1 in annexes). Thus, reformist framings gloss over several problematic aspects, missing the underlying causes of conflict.

Table 1 - Framings of conflict in different ontologies

Framing of conflict	Description	Analysis of, and solutions to, conflict		
		Functionalism	**Structuralism**	**Poststructuralism**
Reformist	Solutions to grievances that are accommodated within the social order (regime)	Attends to performance problem, need for optimisation	Tends to attributes 'false consciousness' to reformist preferences	Acknowledges appeal and 'truth' self-dis/identifications, grip of ideology and fantasies
Radical	Solutions to grievances that challenge the social order (regime)	Disregards or pathologises radical, emancipatory demands	Attends to emancipation principally through (revolutionary) class struggle	Attends to emancipation as a continuous multidimensional (e.g. intersectional) process, radically contingent

Radical framings

When reformist 'background assumptions' (Gouldner, 1971) are questioned, more *critical* and *radical* framings of conflict can be imagined and may potentially gain traction. Largely absent from HRM conceptions (Currie et al., 2017), this is evident in classic industrial relations texts. Fox (1974), for example, contends that in capitalist enterprises,

> *people do not come together freely and spontaneously. The property-less many are forced [to] access to resources owned or controlled by the few. The few can use this power to [..] promote acceptance of the social institutions, principles and assumptions which embody and generate inequality. (Fox, 1974: 284, emphases added)*

This asymmetry tacitly speaks to the 'systemic violence' (Zizek, 2008) of the contractual relation, that can also become physical when employers or the state are determined to 'lock out' workers or 'break' strike action. From within a radical framing of conflict, 'acceptance' of the contract by labour is understood to express a "forced" and structurally conditioned, rather than spontaneous, consensus. Historically, in post-war Western Europe this was achieved by governments adopting (Keynesian) policies and espousing full employment, social mobility and (some) wealth redistribution. This hegemony was effective in coordinating the capital-labour relationship for almost three decades. As in the late 70s such settlement became increasingly ineffective and discredited, the ensuing disorder and disillusionment created the conditions of possibility for an alternative, neoliberal basis of 'acceptance' to gain interest and support (Harvey, 2007)[5]. Inspired by the ideas of Hayek (1960/2013), Friedman (1962) and Rand (1967), this alternative commended a return to market discipline as a means of promoting individual initiative and entrepreneurial spirit that had allegedly been suffocated by a nannying state (Thatcher, 1993). Privatisations, financialisation and anti-

unionisation (Gamble, 1994) prepared the ground for contemporary 'acceptance' of labour market deregulation, exemplified by British 'zero-hours contracts', German 'mini-jobs', or Italian 'vouchers system' (Bosch, 2004), and eventually the gig economy.

Heery (2016) differentiates radical perspectives on employment relations, emerged in response to these changes, into critical labour studies (CLS) and critical management studies (CMS). In contrast to other approaches, like reformism, they regard 'the employment relationship as exploitative and conflicted' and are attentive to the 'mobilization of workers and other oppressed social groups' (Heery, 2016: 108-109). CLS, typified by Kelly (1998), privileges labour's (economistic) positioning within the structure of capitalism in which other (non-economic) sources our identity and self-esteem are marginalised. Remaining 'firmly within this economistic framework' (Ackers, 1992: 4), CLS is inclined to presume that 'systemic exploitation' will translate into mobilisation of radical, oppositional actions capable of 'shift[ing] the balance of power decisively and finally against capital' (Kelly, 1998: 304).

Much CMS research is, in contrast, 'intersectional' (Alakavuklar, 2020; Contu, 2019), acknowledging the significance of other sources of identity, including gender, ethnicity or age. The most significant difference between CLS and CMS, for our purposes, resides in how their respective critical orientations to the framing of work are governed by structuralist proclivities in CLS, and an incorporation of elements of poststructuralism in CMS. While the latter shares a view of the employment relationship as exploitative and fully acknowledges its 'negative consequences' (Heery, 2016: 108), it concurrently appreciates how capital-labour relations are mediated and reproduced by actors' subjectivities and multiple identifications. These may include the valorisation of hegemonic discourses of flexibility and self-determination ascribed to what observers portray simply as 'bogus self-employment'. Work 'can be degrading, oppressive, and precarious [but] it can also be a source of satisfaction' (Heery, 2016: 108-109). What is considered 'objectively' degrading and characterised as 'precarious' can *simultaneously* be a coveted source of pride and self-worth that is keenly defended, as demonstrated empirically (Burawoy, 1979; Knights & Willmott, 1989; Ravenelle, 2019).

Beyond structural explanations of conflict

Our intention is to counterbalance overly structuralist framings of work organisation by paying closer attention to the issue of the 'acceptance of the social institutions, principles and assumptions which embody and generate inequality' (Fox, 1974: 284). The social construction of 'acceptance' is largely omitted from, or dismissed in, structuralist forms of critical explanation: scant consideration is given to how positions and interests ascribed to 'labour' (or to 'capital') are *in practice* organised, rather than given or simply 'read off' from a structurally assigned positions. A presumption of structuralist analysis is that, *ceteris paribus*, providers of labour are amenable to being 'transformed into collective actors willing and able to create and sustain collective organisation and engage in collective action against their employers' (Kelly, 1998: 38). Findings of studies undertaken in the gig economy and elsewhere largely challenge these assertions (Gandini, 2019; Moisander, Groβ & Eräranta, 2018; Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020).

As we shall see, Glynos and Howarth's *Logics* conceives as contingent any amenability to become mobilised as a collective actor. Its analytical value emerges when we consider that CLS under appreciates how contemporary subjects, including academics, are 'captives' of the neoliberal project of 'enhancing [their] portfolio value in all domains [whether] through social media[,] rankings and ratings for every activity' (Brown, 2015: 33-4). Indeed, it would be sociologically surprising if we were not susceptible to internalising what, arguable, is the dominant, contemporary 'form of power [that] categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth' (Foucault, 1982: 781)[6].

To be clear, this stance is not incompatible with the 'structuralist' conjecture that 'workers in capitalist societies find themselves in relations of exploitation and domination' (Kelly, 1998: 126); nor indeed is it inconsistent with the claim that these relations may induce working class mobilisation and socialist transformation (Kelly, 1998, Chapter 7; see also Mouffe, 2018). However, the idea that the interests of 'labour' are objectively given, or inescapably defined, by their relation to 'capital' is here rejected; as is the associated idea that the 'givenness' of 'real' interests is temporarily obscured (e.g., by 'disorganization', Kelly, 1998: 25) before confirmation by evidence of their pursuit and realisation. Here it is also relevant to

commend Foucault's attentiveness to subjection, in addition to exploitation and domination, in processes of oppression and struggle: '[M]echanisms of subjection [cannot] be studied outside their relation to mechanisms of exploitation and domination' as they 'entertain complex and circular relation with other forms' (1982: 782). And so, 'in "reading" an action, practice or event we need to navigate between the particular meanings interpreted and the whole way of life within which it is embedded' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 57). Hence, the relevance of engaging *Logics* lies in the insights it yields into how and why, in practice, the structuring of labour-capital relations is widely reproduced through a framing of 'reformism', rather than being radically challenged and changed. We aim to illuminate these processes and exposing their limits in what follows.

The 'Logics' Framework

Building on the ideas of Gramsci (1971) and Laclau & Mouffe (2014), *Logics* has been applied to examine organisational phenomena such as contested public choices (Fougère, Segercrantz & Seeck, 2017; Glynos, Klimecki & Willmott, 2012; Griggs & Howarth, 2004), social enterprises (Kenny, Haugh & Fotaki, 2020) and the "neoliberalisation" of work and passions (Hoedemaekers, 2018; Van Bommel & Spicer, 2011). *Logics*, it is worth emphasising, is post-structuralist, not anti-structuralist (Howarth, 2013). And since conflict is understood in *Logics* to be endemic to processes of social reproduction and transformation (see also Laclau & Mouffe, 2014), its conceptual framework is highly relevant for our analysis. More specifically, *Logics* enables the construction of a critical explanation of how structural sources of conflict are articulated, such as those between gig firms and providers of labour. In *Logics*, there is 'a refusal either to completely reject or totally endorse structuralism; instead, it signifies a "both/and" strategy whereby the resources of the structuralist paradigm are liberated from the essentialist strictures of its metaphysical impulses' (Howarth, 2013: 6-10), such as the (structuralist) assignment of positions and associated interests to actors. *Logics* opposes – or, better, deconstructs – the structuralist conception of actors' interests as *readily* or *objectively* discerned from their positioning in the social structures (e.g., class, patriarchy), but without denying their complex and ambivalent conditioning effects. As a conceptual framework, it appreciates how exploitative relations can foster grievance and conflict; but it is also attentive to how these relations may also impede expressions of dissent.

Logics thereby facilitates a grasp of how, for example, structural conditions characterised as exploitative may also be identified as "free-spirited" or "entrepreneurial" (Cederström & Spicer, 2014). Challenging explanations which reduce of expressions of conflict in work organisation(s) to the structuration of class (without adequate regard to other, potentially *more* gripping sources of identification, such as gender and ethnicity[7]), *Logics* provides insights into how, for example, grievances may be symptomatic, or indicative, of multiple, intersectional differences (see also Contu, 2019). By (re)connecting its meaning and significance to broader questions and issues of justice, *Logics* provides a radical alternative to reformist framings of conflict.

Resonant with the radical framing of conflict, *Logics* conceives of social order as the (historical) product of physical and/or symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1979), where consensus and harmony are rarely spontaneous, or unforced; and where, crucially, fantasies are central to its analysis of processes of social reproduction and transformation such that both compliance and resistance are conceived to be induced 'by influencing desires and beliefs*, without being intelligent or intentional*' (Lukes, 2005: 136, emphasis added). Crucially, social relations, identities and structures are understood to be 'constitutively incomplete' (Cederström & Spicer, 2014: 110) but also to be hegemonically sutured: (re)absorbed and (re)naturalised, minimising conflict. Any sense of completeness provided by this suturing is conceived in *Logics* to be contingent and ultimately impossible, rendering social objectivities inescapably vulnerable to disruption and transformation.

Conceptually, the *Logics* framework comprises, in addition to *dislocation,* the interlinked ideas of *Regime, social logics, political logics and fantasmatic logics*. Each of the three logics is analytically separable but they are fused-in-tension in specific practice(s), and so are often relevant analysing the same organised practice(s). Whereas *social logics* 'assist in the process of characterising what a practice is', *political logics* 'show how it is challenged and defended', and *fantasmatic logics* 'generate reasons for why practices are maintained and transformed' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 108).

Five key elements: regime, dislocation, social logics, political logics, fantasmatic logics

Regime refers to practices and discourses that have become sedimented in a particular era (e.g., during the Thatcher administrations; Thatcher, 1993) or in a specific sphere (e.g., the gig economy). *Regime* 'denotes the particular context as well as the new social structure that emerges out of hegemonic political practices'

(Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 125). Such 'practices' are political in the sense that they are established and maintained through exercises of power in which each regime is defined in opposition to a contested one (Burawoy, 1985). Today, we argue, the neoliberal regime structures the gig economy and its labour relations but, as *Logics* would anticipate, the regime is not without its dislocations and critics (Arruda, 2020; Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

Dislocation makes evident the incompleteness of social practices or institutions, appearing when a social actor problematises and denaturalises them. Dislocation may prompt denial or renewed glossing, but it can also potentially ignite radical transformation. To illustrate: a rider hired by *Deliveroo* as an independent contractor may identify with, and take for granted, the flexibility and freedom of self-employment but, lacking social protections, s/he is inherently vulnerable to the shock of dislocation. If s/he is unfortunate to have a serious accident, the contractor may become aware of a liability to which s/he had previously been indifferent or inattentive. We expand on this below.

Social logics maintain the norms and conventions that define and reproduce each regime, ensuring the maintenance of its practices in the face of dislocation. These logics enable discourses and practices, naturalised in a given regime, to be maintained with minimal contestation through established 'contextualized self-interpretations' (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 140). For instance, couriers' self-interpretation as "independent contractors" facilitates their identification with entrepreneurs or even self-employed businesspersons, rather than with employees or workers, and this bestows a substantial measure of legitimacy on the "on demand" capital-labour relation that sustains the gig economy regime.

Political logics are activated when a defence (*suturing* mode) or replacement (*supplanting* mode) is enacted in response to dislocations entailing conflict that cannot be immediately re-naturalised. Political logics either (re)establish and defend practices, institutions, and regimes; or they aspire to challenge and change them. Following a dislocation, *supplanting* (political) logics are expressed, in the case of gig couriers, by advocating a change in the legal designation of couriers as employees, as opposed to self-employed contractors. Conversely, an example of *suturing* forms of political logics is found in Deliveroo's claim to offer 'flexible work, competitive fees' to its contractors, adding that 'you'll be self-employed and free to work to your own availability. The Deliveroo rider app makes it easy to plan ahead' (Deliveroo.co.uk, 2019).

To the extent that riders identify with this narrative, the potential for radical conflict to erupt is contained, but nonetheless remains latent.

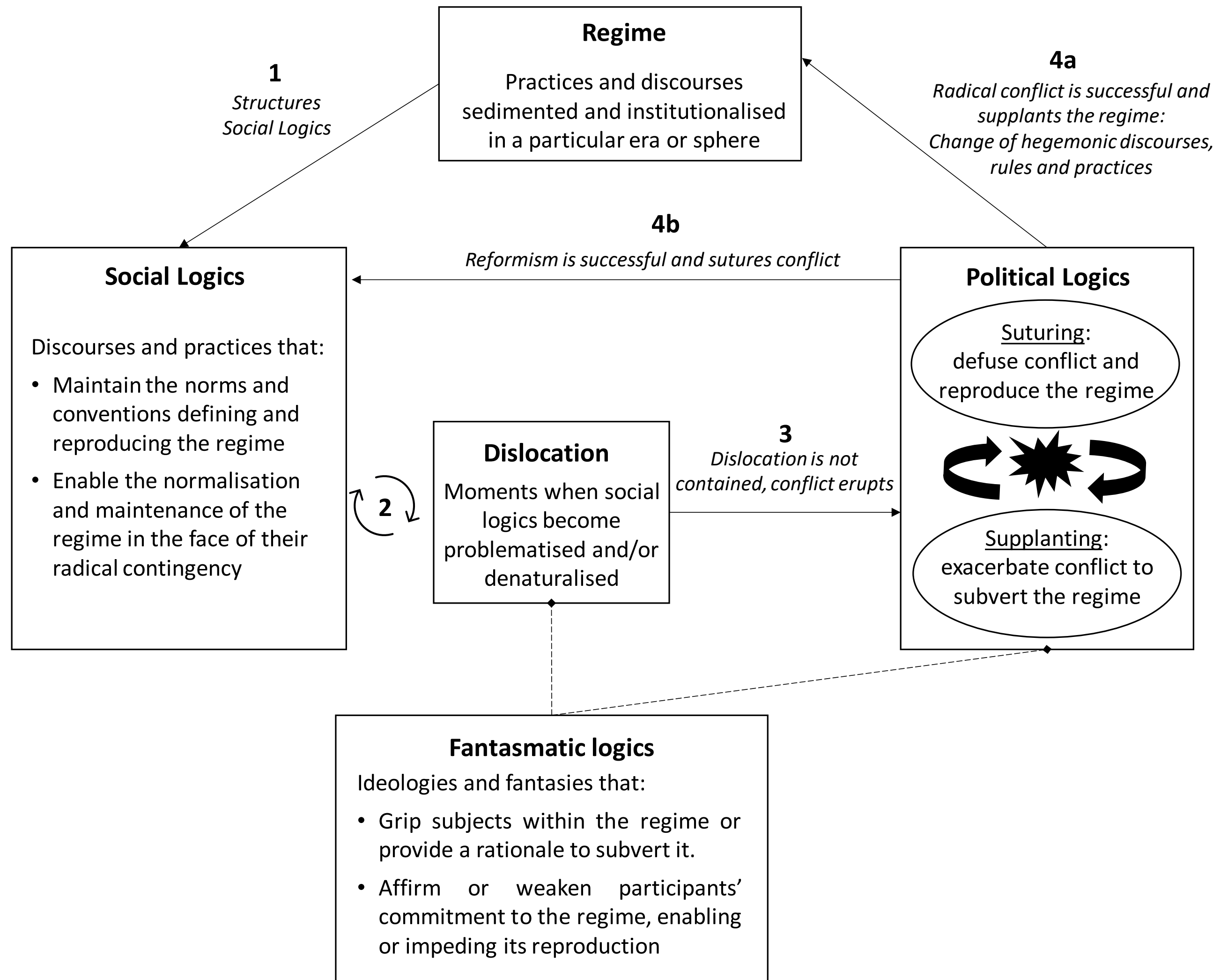
Fantasmatic logics, which are conceived to provide the motivating impetus for either maintaining or challenging established regimes of practices, are perhaps the most distinctive and novel elements of the *Logics* framework (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). They either affirm or weaken participants' acceptance, or at least compliance with, the rules and conventions of the prevailing regime. When hosting *beatific* fantasies, social actors moderate demands as they press for reform; or, conversely, *horrific* fantasies fuel a radicalisation of demands that inspires and energises emancipatory change. The neoliberal regime is adept at recuperating forms of conflict by means of seduction and/or compulsion that suggest, for example, that its benefits are self-evident, or that individualism is endemic to 'human nature'. Horrific fantasmatic logics may contribute to debunking conformist mantras, such as "There Is No (rational) Alternative" (TINA; Fisher, 2009), and thereby initiate or lend momentum to a more radical framing of conflict.

Logics and framings of conflict

The *Logics* framework 'contribut[es] to our understanding of the conflict associated with resistance to change of social practices (the "inertia" of social practices) but also the speed [..] of change when it does happen' (Glynos, Klimecki & Willmott, 2012: 145). We begin by identifying a cycle to help visualising how conflict is understood within the *Logics* framework.

Figure 1 shows a regime emerging out of practices and discourses that establish and sediment *social logics* (step 1). Routinely actors experience *dislocation* (step 2), represented as a small circle to underscore how, as a consequence of the radical contingency of social objectivities, dislocations occur continuously yet are routinely absorbed. In fact, in most cases fantasies impede and contain expressions of grievance and conflict, so dislocation does not lead to any significant questioning, let alone overhauling of the regime.

Figure 1 - The Logics framework of Glynos and Howarth (2007), revisited as a cycle.



Sometimes, however, dislocations provoke some degree of de-naturalisation of practices and discourses, leading actors to question the *status quo* and to potentially bring about radical change by engaging in *supplanting political logics* (step 3). These developments may be disarmed by established political logics of the prevailing regime whose suturing effect is to reassert the grip of hegemonic ideology. When *suturing logics* prevail, conflict is framed as reformist and social order is maintained (step 4b); when *supplanting logics* triumph, conflict is framed as radical (step 4a), and this potentially leads to a change of regime. Imaginaries (*fantasmatic logics)* may either promote radical change or a re-naturalisation of established social logics (dotted lines in both figures 1 and 2).

Acknowledging that both reformist and radical conflict happen in a dynamic process (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; Laclau & Mouffe, 2014), we now take the example of work organisation in the gig economy to illustrate how social, political and fantasmatic logics operate in combination to impede the eruption of radical conflict.

Econormativity: Individualisation and Hegemonic Ideology Dissected

Neoliberalism has been defined as a particular form of capitalism, where the features of the state (e.g., labour regulation or welfare provisions) are redirected *from* a preoccupation with exchange *to* the optimising of competition (Harvey, 2007; Moisander et al., 2018; Read, 2009; Springer, 2016). The supercharging of economic reasoning by neoliberalism has widespread consequences, not least for undermining democratic ways of dealing with conflict (Brown, 2019). Inasmuch that it shrinks the political spectrum, it discredits collective action as a competitively restrictive practice that impedes labour market participation, 'outlawing' radical conflict. 'Econormativity' captures this, conveying how criticisms of, and challenges to, the market-centricism of gig work organisation are considered 'irrational' as they deviate from the ideology of unfettered competitiveness. As a form of biopolitical governmentality (Foucault, 2008), econormativity conceives of neoliberalism not just as an application of economic principles that exert structural effects but also, and less obviously, as a medium of self-formation that invites and incentivises actors to embrace and 'enjoy' the 'self-entrepreneurial' status ascribed to them; and seduction by this fantasy impedes, without ruling out, engagement in radical conflict. Declining to reduce neoliberal subjects to the personification of

economic categories, ‘econormativity’ gives insights into why, for example, contractors’ grievances do not escalate in radical demands for a change of regime.

The masking of coercion and symbolic violence (Gamble, 1994; Springer, 2016), and the formation of a sense of positive empowerment, demands a framework of concepts for characterising and explicating how the complexities of neoliberal governmentality are articulated in gig work. To this end, we identify dimensions of *individualisation* and *hegemonic ideology*, appreciating the potency of fantasies in, for example, lending credibility and grip to the sense that “there is no alternative” (Fisher, 2009). We disaggregate individualisation into “responsibilisation” and “quantification”; and we split hegemonic ideology into the elements of “universalism” and “disembeddedness” whose analytic purchase, we contend, is increased by their combination and interaction (see Figure 2). By bringing several different critiques of neoliberalism into dialogue within the context of gig work to theorise (radical) conflict, these elements of econormativity provide a critical explanation of how conflict is disarmed and de-escalated through reformist framings, even when radical demands are made. Latent discontent and conflict are not eliminated, but radical challenges to the prevailing regime are forestalled.

Individualisation: responsibilisation and quantification

Responsibilisation refers to the legal, social, and managerial adoption of discourses and practices that ascribe responsibility to individuals for their success, wellbeing, and welfare. For Shamir (2008: 8), ‘as a technique of governance, [it is] premised on the construction of moral agency as the necessary ontological condition for ensuring [individuals’] entrepreneurial disposition’. Responsibilisation has therefore two dimensions: practical, as it shifts labour conflict from the collective to the individual; and ethical, as it assumes that each provider of labour is ontologically responsible for its formation and deliver, both present and future.

As such, responsibilisation is a central tenet of the ‘homo economicus [as] an entrepreneur of itself’ (Foucault, 2008: 226), of which the gig economy is an exemplary case. In it, each life is a project devoted to accumulating human capital to be traded on the labour market. It is most penetrating when it substitutes any form of collective solidarity with a (forced) individualised striving for wellbeing, welfare, and work (Fleming, 2017). Everyone is then responsible for him or herself and “entitled to nothing”. As a *social logic*

of neoliberal regimes, responsibilisation hinders collective forms of conflict as grievances are (re)framed as a personal problem, not collective ones; and as responsibility to accumulate human capital, and thereby acquire value, is placed squarely upon individuals who are cast as atomised suppliers of labour.

In this context, gig work may be valued as a way of addressing a 'personal problem' of falling real wages and/or debt by supplementing other sources of income and/or as a way of avoiding the subservience and indignity ascribed to being tied to a single employer with fixed hours (Moisander et al., 2018; Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020; Ravenelle, 2019). It is in this sense that, by privileging and empowering *suturing* logics, responsibilisation displaces and weakens *supplanting* political logics that require concerted political mobilisation (Kelly, 1998).

Quantification. The social logic of responsibilisation is advanced through quantification – that is, the extensive use of technologies-of-self to record, measure and quantify all aspects of life (Moore, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). By deploying a self-referential system of feedback, these technologies displace broader, more structural understandings of grievances (see also Burawoy, 1979a;b). Technologies-of-self (Foucault, 2008) provide seemingly objective information – measures, rankings, and assessments – to track and (self)monitor performance. While not new (Marx, 1867/1976), platform corporations develop and apply tools, namely mobile apps, that escalate data granularity and complexity to a magnitude able to unhinge most forms of collective action (Gandini, 2019; Moisander et al., 2018; Srnicek, 2017). Han (2017) describes it as a 'dictatorship of transparency' involving a form of governmentality that publicises personal life as a means of transforming it into marketable, monetised information.

These technologies (of self) are evident in the use of ratings and prompts, and in the scope for gamification associated with the short-termism of tasks (Moore, 2017). *Social logics* are (re)affirmed when potential dislocation is contained by cues that suggest possibilities for recovering from negative feedback or a drop in performance (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020). Apps are designed to capture the attention of users compulsively, shutting out or devaluing thinking devoted to processing complex issues, underlying causes, or long-term solutions (Williams, 2018). But, as a consequence, unilateral changes may be experienced as a kind of cyber despotism that dislocates users, prompting them to become sceptical about the design and purpose of platforms. This can stimulate forms of subversion and collective resistance that disrupt their operations (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020).

Hegemonic ideology: universalism and disembeddedness

Whereas individualisation points to the social and political logics of neoliberalism, hegemonic ideology incorporates fantasies, including those of universalism and disembeddedness. To repeat, an attentiveness to fantasies does not deny or seek to detract from the material conditions structured by neoliberalism (e.g., the lack of alternative forms of employment for gig worker, Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020) but it acknowledges their role in enabling their reproduction (or transformation).

Universalism. Neoliberalism has an ontological universalist dimension as it draws from assumptions of rationality and boundaryless individual freedom (Hayek, 1960/2013). It differs from ways of organising social relations within social market economies because the latter are constructed in opposition to an acknowledged and legitimate "other" (Gill, 2002; Wallerstein, 2011). Neoliberalism is, in contrast, a comparatively totalising fantasy: 'society's life could be summarised [in] economic categories [..] making up the whole community' (Wolin, 2016: 269), and therefore 'the primacy of economy and its representation [are] the "real" constitution of society' (Wolin, 2016: 564). In this view, what does not respond to economic criterial is simply "unreal", including fantasies of social or workplace justice that can motivate radical conflict.

As a social order governed by universals, neoliberalism more closely resembles the Church and Empires (Hardt & Negri, 2001), where it is assumed that nothing else is legitimate. What they also share is the idea of 'asymmetrical counter-concepts' (Koselleck, 1979/2004): that is, the adoption of an ideology which divides the world in two spheres, beatific and horrific – of progress, prosperity, and civilisation, and its abject 'other'. In the context of neoliberalism, the dichotomy presents itself as beatific "Markets" and horrific "Others". Notably, collective action is demonised for placing illegitimate restrictions upon the unfettered operation of markets and the sovereignty and freedom of its participants (Hayek, 1960/2013; Friedman, 1962). Hence, forms of radical confrontation questioning these ontological assumptions are illegitimate as they hinder individual freedom and its responsibilities.

Disembeddedness. Disembeddedness points to how the political basis for economy is ostensibly removed from all social relations (Polanyi, 1957; Callon, 1998; Ferraro, Pfeffer & Sutton, 2005; Granovetter, 1985). Rand (1967) argues that capitalism requires a universal ideology to establish or cement its legitimacy; and

commends the notion of untamed, and therefore "unbiased", markets for this purpose. And, in the words of Hayek, 'the ultimate basis of the market as a disembedded institution itself is the commodification of human labour' (1960/2013: 345). Since Adam Smith (Cochoy, Giraudeau & McFall, 2010), the price system has been sanctified as the silver bullet or guarantor of an impartial distribution of symbolic and material goods. Integral to the performative fantasies of neoliberalism, it 'disembed[s] capital from the [..] web of social and political constraints' (Harvey, 2007: 11). As neoliberal policies have gained traction, they have tended to become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ferraro, Pfeffer & Sutton, 2005): neoliberal thinking increasingly frames and shapes self-understandings and the enactment of social relations around the dogma of market-rationality. As such, disembeddedness constitutes a *fantasmatic logic* that "prevents" dislocations, arising from social justice concerns, to escalate into political logics that challenge economic thinking.

Econormativity at work

Combined, the four elements of "econormativity" convey ways in which neoliberal practices and institutions frame conflicts in a *reformist* way, thereby empowering suturing political logics that obstruct the ability to imagine or create radical alternatives. In the gig economy, contractors are vulnerable to the grip of the fantasmatic logics of self-entrepreneurship; and *suturing political logics* ignore or disregard how markets 'control when and where [contractors] work, penalise them for declining jobs, and set non-negotiable prices and quality standards' (Silberman, 2017: 17). The despotic platform replaces the despotic boss but in a way that passes largely unnoticed given its depersonalised form (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020).

In (critical) structuralist analysis, typified by CLS, 'ignorance' of how markets, perfected by platforms, institutionalise inequality and mask domination is framed as an illusion of the real exploitative position of sellers of labour in relation to its purchasers (e.g., Kelly, 1998), sometimes characterised as "false-consciousness". In poststructuralist analysis (e.g., variants of CMS), in contrast, there is no assumption of a positive structure from which workers' objective or "real" interests can be inferred. They are understood, instead, as structured yet contingent lived experiences.

"Econormativity" accounts for how resistance to neoliberal gig work organisation is impeded by a hegemonic ideology that frames it as logically absurd, emotive and tout court 'barbaric' (Luhmann, 2008). *Logics* provides a form of analysis that takes seriously how the conception of everyone as equals before the

impersonal operation of the market can be framed alluringly as freeing labour from pre-rational, feudal regimes (Fourcade, Ollion & Algan, 2015) and/or, in the contemporary context, as a release from the yoke and degradation of being an employee (Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020). Such ideas, it is conjectured, operate to forestall, or discredit, expressions of grievance and conflict, anticipating the "end of history" in a society where dissent is pathologised as an expression of individual failure. Routinely, grievances are situated within a reformist framework, and are thereby disarmed in response to the exercise of coercive means (Springer, 2016), or 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu, 1979) resulting in a reinforcement of the normalisation of established relations. However, the appeal and grip of such forms of accountability are contingent; and they are vulnerable to radical critique, rather than reformist accommodation, when fantasies are frustrated. Grievances repeatedly erupt so, while the potential of conflict to be resolved through radical transformation is routinely disarmed or contained by suturing political logics, the possibility of it becoming 'radicalised' is never eliminated.

Dynamics of Neoliberalism and the Case of Gig Work Organisation

Gig work organisation is symptomatic of the regime of neoliberalism, in which corporate governance harnessed to a shareholder maximization model is manifest in increasing precarity that at once reflects and reinforces growing inequalities (Amis, Munir, Lawrence, Hirsch & McGahan, 2018; Bapuji, Ertug, & Shaw, 2020; Cobb, 2016; Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Suddaby, Bruton & Walsh, 2018). In gig work, risks associated with unproductive down time and accidents are transferred from the purchaser to the provider; employer costs (e.g., taxation contributions, national minimum wage, sick leave, etc.) are minimised (Ravenelle, 2019); dislocations attributed to the restrictive practices of organised labour are expunged; and jobs are created, and growth generated, by minimising labour market regulations (Doellgast, Lillie & Pulignano, 2018; Harvey, 2007). These inequities can raise questions of fairness and justice. To date, however, they have been largely masked or normalised; or, indeed, when conceived as offering an escape from the subordination of 'standard' forms of employment, in which labour is seen to be enslaved to managerial prerogative and rigid working hours, the inequities of self-employment are recuperated as a benefit (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 - The Logics framework where neoliberalism is the Regime (TINA: There Is No Alternative)

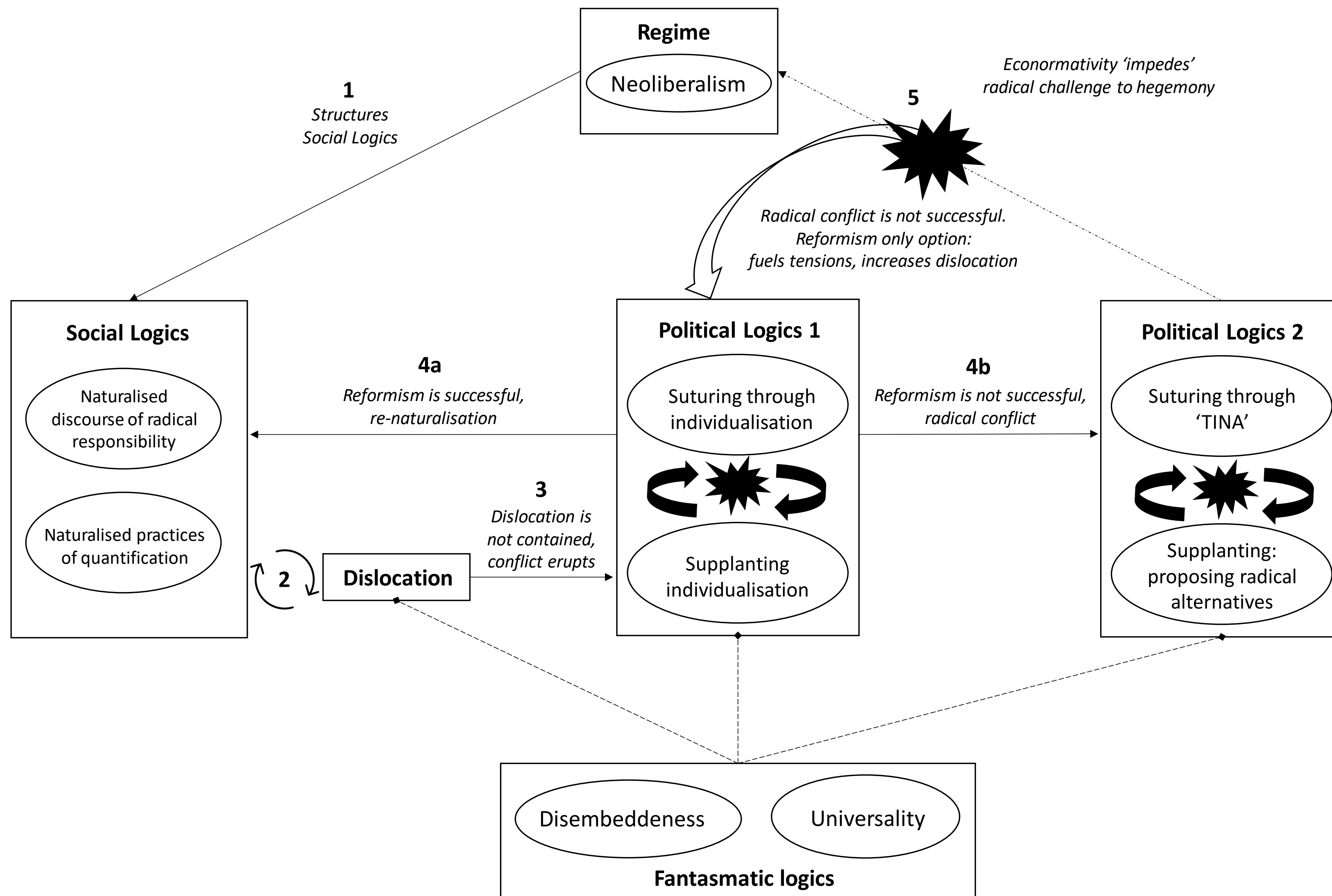


Table 2 - Logics, conflict, and elements of econormativity (see also Figure 2)

Elements of Econormativity	**Naturalised Social Logics**	**Political Logics disrupt Social Logics, phase 1: Neoliberal hegemonic ideology is not contested**		**Political Logics disrupt Social Logics, phase 2: Neoliberal hegemonic ideology is contested**	
	Vulnerability to dislocation	*Suturing (re-naturalise social logics)*	*Supplanting (revise social logics)*	*Suturing (reproduce regime)*	*Supplanting (overhaul regime)*
Radical responsabilisation	Disarm and de-escalate dislocation	Externalises responsibility, discourages unionisation. 'I can be my own Boss!'	Grievances towards firms rise; actors switch to competitors or request fairer algorithms	Attraction of new riders; responsabilisation of customers by allowing tips and compliments	Reject individualisation through unionisation and support from courts; demand for ban or total reform of gig businesses
Quantification		Fragmentation of attention; competition between peers; use of 'objective' measures	Actors contest measurements and request qualitative ones; disconnection from app	Repression: unionising and striking users are disconnected	Collective actions to confuse the algorithm; development of alternative apps
Universality	Render actors receptive to individualisati on and market rationality	Negative aspects are temporary; benefits lie in long-term growth	Mass self-employment is detrimental; demand for limited market regulation	Rebuttal of non-market-based solution or State intervention; TINA (The Is No Alternative)	Proposal of radically alternative, fair, emancipatory social-business models; formation of courier coops; contesting TINA
Disembeddedness		Footloose firms focus on being efficient and competitive; Social issues relegated to legal compliance	Calls for social protections; attempts by courts to revive and impose other contracts of employment (e.g. as 'employees')	Appeal to rationality; use of mathematical language; rejection of social demands as not objective	Calls for re-embedding and solidarity; demands to subject economic rationality to social demands
Conflict	Minimal	Reformist		Radical	

As a rider who had suffered broken bones while working explained, 'Deliveroo don't care [..] because you're an independent contractor'; yet she concedes that 'the work itself is really good, because it is the algorithm that is the boss, [gives a] sense of freedom'. For another rider, it is 'actually like a reasonable shit job because that illusion of freedom is really strong[.] You're not selling yourself so there is no emotional labour in it' (Woodcock & Graham, 2020: 72-4). The implication here is that many, if not all, jobs are 'shit' (at least when compared to leisure) but the sense of freedom is palpable *even if* it is also recognised to be largely illusory.

Beginning with step 1 in Figure 2, the regime of neoliberalism structures social logics: it makes gig work based on quantification and technologies-of-the-self possible. Step 2, represented as a small circle, suggests how dislocations are endemic: for example, covert or latent grievances erupt in demands that include reform of the relationship between gig workers and purchasers of their labour. Contractors may express discontent about their precarious status by, for example, switching to a competitor or by voicing their grievances privately to friends and relatives. Such grievances have the potential to escalate into radical conflict, but they do so only when their resolution is believed to require *radical*, transformative change rather than *reformist* adaptations, and so activates political logics. Routinely, they are disarmed rather than escalated as entrenched social logics (e.g., 'radical responsibility', Fleming, 2017) are recuperated and reproduced with minimal or no reforms (keeping subjects in the loop of step 2). Material concerns, legal impediments, and technologies-of-self intertwine, fragmenting and narrowing attention in respect of, for example, the short-term and casual nature of the contracts between providers and purchasers of labour. They buffer dislocations ("I can quit when I want", "I can always work for another firm", "I need this money now"). Conflict is then minimal, silent, or latent. The grip of the fantasmatic logics of disembeddedness and universality covers over dislocation (dotted lines).

Nonetheless (step 3), there are instances when dislocation cannot be contained, and social relations are not re-naturalised. Changes in an algorithm might unilaterally disconnect contractors from the platform as they fail to meet efficiency goal for reasons beyond their control (Kellogg et al., 2020; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2017;2020). Grudging compliance, routinely compensated by a sense of entrepreneurship and autonomy, may then boil over into confrontation and potential radicalisation as the appeal and grip of previous objects of identification weakens. There is then increased vulnerability and receptiveness to the

allure of 'new objects and discourses [like designations] that [potentially] fill the lack made visible by the dislocatory event' (Howarth, 2013: 162).

In response to mounting conflict, political logics are activated (rectangle *Political Logics 1*). Deliveroo riders, for example, may no longer resign themselves to the inevitability of changes imposed upon them by the company (*supplanting* political logics), whereas other riders, and the gig organisations themselves, may attempt to preserve the *status quo* (activating *suturing* political logics): "it is their problem!", "do not take away my job", "I am happy this way", "they are just moaning". Other stakeholders, like restaurants or customers, may reinforce this *suturing* logic – as when a petition not to ban Uber in London received half million signatures (Guardian, 2017). Those affected may challenge the programming of algorithms, but not necessarily the use of algorithms *per se*, or the absence of riders' input into their design.

Grievances are aired but "econormative" elements may then ensure that they are sutured. When successful, this *reformist* framing of conflict leads to a re-naturalisation of social logics (step 4a). If grievances are not sutured, then *radical* conflict erupts in "impossible" political demands (step 4b). A second wave of *supplanting* political logics then challenges assumptions upon which the relationship between the providers and purchasers of gig labour are based (rectangle *Political Logics 2*), as when providers of labour unrepentantly reject the designation of being self-employed contractors by engaging in collective actions withdrawing labour. As responsibilisation loses its grip contractors may unionise (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), activating radical contesting political logics. In turn, this may provoke a stronger *suturing* political logic taking the form of institutional violence, expulsions from the app, and blacklisting: 'two days after the first protest, two organisers were found guilty of participation in a workers' assembly prior to the strike and lost their jobs' (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2017). See Box 2 in annexes.

It is in this moment, when supplanting political logics have the potential of overhauling the *regime*, that econormativity operates the strongest in reframing conflict as reformist: step 5 refers to the combined effect of all four elements of econormativity in impeding radical conflict to achieve change. Insofar as elements of universalism and disembeddedness remain, fantasmatic logics (dotted line) continue to be activated that bond subjects to the prevailing regime. Consequently, most self-employed contractors do not join unions, let alone participate in strike action, even though there is no legal barrier to doing so; managers do not change the gig business model; and regulators cling to market rationality as the guiding principle of policy making. Residual

faith in the superiority of the market, as a mechanism for allocating all kinds of resources, ensures that economic issues are not mixed up, or conflicted, with social ones as the latter are framed primarily in terms of their economic meaning and value (Harvey, 2007).

Table 3 - Reformist vs Radical conflict in the case of gig work organisation

Framing of conflict	Description	Analysis of, and responses to, conflict		
		Functionalism	Structuralism	Poststructuralism
Reformist	Solutions to grievances affirm individualisation and hegemonic ideology	Individualisation through self-care, wellbeing and increase of human capital. Extensive use of technologies-of-self to mitigate conflict by accommodating grievances (better algorithms, fairer labour conditions)	Marginal improvements dismissed as co-optation, disengagement with reformist attempts.	Appreciates how reformism is congruent with self-identifications and enjoyment of individualisation. Micro-emancipatory practices bring benefits but do not overcome endemic conflict or significantly change the regime
Radical	Solutions to grievances challenge individualisation and hegemonic ideology	Emancipation ignored or reframed; only individual self-empowerment is considered. Demands incompatible with market rationality are disregarded or pathologised	Emancipation through struggle with goal of ending class conflict. 'Interests' determined by structural positionings	Individualisation and hegemonic ideology impede radical change. Yet they do not eliminate, and they may even intensify, pressures for it

Of critical importance, there is a deficit in imagining and devising viable alternatives: the grip of economativity makes it difficult to think, let alone act, beyond the established social logics of neoliberalism (TINA; see Crouch, 2011; Fisher, 2009) so that radical demands are effectively evacuated from the realm of the possible. To date, strikes have achieved mainly reformist results (see Box 1 in annexes) through legal processes, although the most recent ruling on Uber may precipitate pressures to make structural changes so that gig workers are designated as workers rather than independent contractors. However, as we write, Uber is insisting that it will pay only for the actual time worked and will not compensate drivers for any waiting time (Butler, 2021). This successful challenge must therefore be viewed as a significant, but comparatively small, first step in replacing the established 'structure of employment, ownership and control' which, of course, 'implies so much more than fighting to be reorganized as an employee' (Fleming, 2017: 38-9). For this reason, other self-employed contractors may either establish or join alternative, cooperative forms of work organisation[8]. Indeed, it has been suggested that, in a context where there are recurrent legal as well as moral challenges to substitution of contractors for workers and employees, a cooperative basis of ownership (and control) 'may prove to be more sustainable' (Healy, Nicholson & Pekarek, 2017: 241).

Discussion

Neoliberal propositions equate justice with the seemingly disembedded operation of markets, impersonal and unconstrained. Hence, calculations of 'just price' are indifferent to inequality or redistributive concerns, as this 'dispositive' (Foucault, 2008) normatively excludes radical alternatives as irrational, or politically distorted. Social actors in such a regime are subjected to 'responsibilisation' and 'disembeddedness' due to the profound ontological precariousness elicited from disconnecting social and political concerns from economic ones. When contractors naturalise these social logics, they lack what 'one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, even the most intolerable' (Bourdieu, 1998: 82). Problematising this, in combination the four elements of "econormativity" account for a dilution or removal of labour security and rights, as exemplified by the replacement of 'workers' or 'employees' by 'contractors'. Namely, we have addressed the framings of conflict associated with this shift.

We now discuss three main implications of our work. First, we have made sense of conflict by distinguishing between its *reformist* and *radical* framings. Second, we have shown the value of *Logics* for explicating the possible escalation of grievances into radical conflict within the complex dynamics of social reproduction and transformation. Finally, we illuminate some similarities and differences between platform-mediated gig work and other forms of precarious work (Standing, 2011).

Making sense of conflict in work organisation(s): Reformist and radical framings

From a structuralist perspective, the flexibility and autonomy ascribed to (gig) work tends to be viewed as little more than a deceptive façade, invoked to establish and defend gig-based business models. We have suggested that this perspective should be complemented and qualified by appreciating how the flexibility of gig work organisation and sovereignty attributed to its participants may be valorised by providers of labour who also seek to preserve, rather than dismiss, its identity-affirming benefits.

To do so, we have related the expansion of this labour to elements of econormativity. On one hand, established modes of management are replaced by "responsibilisation", enabled by platforms and algorithms (Fleming, 2017; Kellogg et al., 2020; Srnicek, 2017). On the other hand, "disembeddedness" means that labour relations are defined as purely market transactions, so conflict between employers and workers is (formally) defined out of existence (Bloom & Cederström, 2009). The hegemony of neoliberal human capital

theory means, at least in principle, that when 'each person is already their own means of production', so 'the intractable conflict [between labour and its purchaser] at the heart of the capitalist labour process must logically dissolve' (Fleming, 2017: 696).

Neoliberal actors are expected to embody 'market-based values in all of their judgments and practices' (Hamann, 2009: 38). However, to regard the ethos of neoliberalism as totalising is to overlook possible areas of contestation, including the designation of gig workers as self-employed contractors – a flashpoint where firms are vulnerable to *radical* challenge that threatens to imperil the viability of their business models. This sensed injustice prefigures an eruption of conflict that is prototypically *radical*, rather than *reformist* (rectangle *Political Logics 2* in Figure 2). In this framing, grievances cannot be solved by improving the terms and conditions of independent contracting; rather, they require the recognition of these contactors as workers with all the benefits to taxpayers as well as the labour providers, and also the costs to employers entailed by them.

When positioned within a *reformist* framing, grievances may be successfully appeased (e.g., by marginally improving pay and/or conditions), ignored (e.g., by refusing transparency about how algorithms work) or sanctioned (e.g., by disconnecting contractors from the app). When associated with wider issues of inequality and injustice, however, appeasing, ignoring, or sanctioning are resisted, and the resulting conflict then poses a *radical* challenge to the status quo and business-as-usual. Framings and accounts of conflict that presume the legitimacy of the established order are then regarded as problematical: gig workers see no necessity and have no longer sufficient desire to be 'governed like that and at that cost' (Foucault, 1997: 113), prompting a search for more radical remedies in the pursuit of liberty.

Yet, in the regime of neoliberalism, economativity operates through the grip of fantasises, of ontological universality, and of violence, to discredit and undermine radical demands. Radical alternatives are hard to be envisioned and are relegated to marginal, placating solutions, like small cooperatives or accommodating court rulings. Hence, *Logics* provides no 'structural guarantees' of emancipatory change. Instead, emphasising contingency, it invites incorporation of an attentiveness to subjectivity and processes of identification in the reproduction and transformation of structures.

The value of logics and the question of interests

Logics assumes the incompleteness of every social order that, in turn, renders regimes inherently vulnerable to forms of contestation. Any ontic *closure* – like the designation of suppliers of labour as employed vs self-employed – is susceptible to dis-closure of its impossibility, and its potential replacement. Adopting the *Logics* framework has productive consequences for the *critical* study of organisations, including (workplace) conflict, and for what is commonly described as "conflicts of interest" (e.g., between purchasers and providers of labour). Studies of organisations and CLS are undertaken *inter alia* by exponents of varieties of (radical) structuralism (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) or critical realism where, in each case, a 'metaphysics of presence' (Derrida, 1976) is assumed. The negative, post-foundationalist ontology of *Logics* positions its claims in a different space.

Rejecting essentialist analysis, *Logics* illuminates how 'interests' are ascribed and organised in ways that precipitate or mitigate conflicts. For example, grievances about gig work organisation are seen to be animated by positive or negative identifications with notions of flexibility and autonomy. Thus, conditions of actions are ones of possibility – such as creating or entering contracts in which labour is designated as a worker, or as an employer, or as a self-employed contractor; and where grievances may be articulated within *reformist* or *radical* framings of conflict.

Beyond agency work: context and contestation

When considering the rise of gig work organisation, it is instructive to compare it to the emergence of 'temping' (temporary agency work) during the 1980s, when self-regulating market rationality and individualisation were gaining traction (Harvey, 2007). Temping engaged a 'reserve army [..] always ready for exploitation' (Marx, 1867/1976: 784), comprising mainly female labour, enticed into the labour market through a combination of promised wage opportunities and available technologies for disintermediated work (like the telephone). The temp, Burawoy (1985: 264) observes, 'relates to her employer as an individual[.] Unions are barred and fellow employees unknown'. The appeal of temping to, and promotion of, individuals' entrepreneurship and self-determination were in lockstep with the rise of liberal feminism that largely restricted the struggle for women's rights to the opportunity to participate in the labour market.

“Temping”, rather like contemporary gig work, was attractive as it appealed workers both symbolically, in the guise of increased autonomy and self-determination, and materially, in the form of greater financial independence. For women the experience was, Burawoy suggests, of ‘oppressive isolation in the name of enhanced autonomy – greater ‘freedom’ to balance domestic work and low-paid wage labour’ (Burawoy, 1985: 264-5). The parallels with the design and growth of gig work are striking: the platform replaces the telephone; the automobile becomes the rider’s bike. In each case, the provider of labour relates to its purchaser as a (responsible) individual; and technology operates as an ‘instrument of atomization’ (Burawoy, 1985: 265). Moreover, like the gig worker, the temp has ‘no security of contract, receives no fringe benefits’ (Burawoy, 1985: 265).

However, omitted from these analyses is any recognition of how, for many female temps or gig workers, these arrangements compare favourably to unpaid or unfulfilling labour (Peticca-Harris, DeGama, & Ravishankar, 2020). Marginalised in structuralist studies of work organisation, but incorporated into *Logics*, is an appreciation of the attraction and grip of notions such as “greater freedom” and “self-empowerment”. Accordingly, *Logics* engenders an attentiveness to how the mediation of purchaser-provider relationships in platform capitalism can induce and reinforce a sense of sovereignty (see Petriglieri et al., 2019; Ravenelle, 2019) – not least because, in principle, working hours are flexible and jobs can be rejected. There is a complexity to new forms of ‘despotism’ (Burawoy, 1985: 148-152) that includes, but cannot be reduced to, ‘the “rational” tyranny of capital mobility over the *collective* worker’ (Burawoy, 1985: 150). In the case of gig work organisation, as with temping, the business model is based upon a “rational” circumvention or manipulation of legislation introduced to provide a measure of security and stability in the capital-labour relationship. As *Logics* stresses, this stratagem increases precarity and instability (Standing, 2011) and thereby risks fuelling horrific, and not just beatific fantasmatic logics that contest and potentially dispel reformist framings of conflict and radicalise grievances by translating them into demands for transformative change.

Conclusion

Our purpose has been to contribute to a revival of the analysis of conflict in management and organisation studies. Overwhelmingly (Cronin & Bezrukova, 2019; De Dreu, 2011; Rahim, 2010; Shah, Peterson, Jones

& Ferguson, 2020; Zhao et al., 2019), studies in this field are preoccupied with the question of how, by consolidating or enhancing corporate performance, conflict can be recuperated to reform and perpetuate the *status quo* (Contu, 2019). Our focus, in contrast, has been on the potential of conflict to precipitate radical transformation, and the dynamics of its containment. Our analysis therefore resonates with, and contributes to, a growing interest in inequality and precarity, and questions of how new regimes of work organisation may exacerbate, rather than alleviate, social divisions (Amis et al., 2018; Bapuji et al., 2020; Cobb, 2016; Kellogg et al., 2020; Suddaby et al. 2018).

In this context, it is to be expected that probing questions would be asked about the fairness or justice of expanding forms of work organisation, including those based upon a 'gig' business model; and that this problematisation would engender a radicalisation of conflict around their legitimacy. By showing how a barrier, characterised as "econormativity", stands in the way, we have contributed to a more critical assessment of gig work organisation in which we have also indicated where and how the prevailing regime is vulnerable to challenge that is the first step in stirring up radical transformation (Conger & Scheiber, 2019; Butler, 2021). Students of work organisation can assist this process by moving is two directions: away from *reformist* framings of conflict, in which grievances are recuperated (e.g., by reaffirming the virtue of gig work as a liberating innovation that fosters opportunity and enables self-determination); and towards *radical* framings that reject the necessity and sustainability of an on-demand business model in which returns on earned by curbing labour costs (like employers' contributions to benefits).

Our focus has been on how elements of "econormativity" – responsibilisation, quantification, universality and disembeddedness – limit but do not entirely deplete the capacity to imagine and enact radical, transformative change. While the gig economy is an extreme case where all four dimensions of econormativity are quite rampant, how political and fantasmatic logics systematically limit the transformational potential of radical conflict has wide applicability. For instance, the Covid pandemic has forcefully highlighted discontent towards the treatment of staff (as human capital) and students (as income streams) in neoliberal academia. Here, health concerns have been addressed by reformist measures, like "wellness virtual seminars" intended to maintain the human capital and sustain the income streams. Radical demands for rethinking universities as public services, instead, have been marginalised or discredited by preoccupations with securing the status quo. Nonetheless, latent discontent remains.

More broadly, the neoliberal impulse is to let 'markets decide our present and future' by 'abandon[ing] the project of individual or collective mastery of existence' (Brown, 2015: 221); or, better, it identifies markets as the exclusive means of attaining such mastery. "Econormativity" is, however, an imperfect filter; and with each iteration activating political logics (see Figure 2 and Box 2), established practices become less stable, and market solutions less credible and more despotic (Butler, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). As discontent mounts, it can stimulate a demand for different contracts and a quest for alternative organisational forms, such as platform cooperatives (Scholz, 2017), that involve 'more deliberate constructions of existence through democratic discussion, law, policy' (Brown, 2015: 221-222). Whether their emergence will form part of a post-zombie neoliberal regime (Banerjee, 2008; Cederström & Fleming, 2012; Crouch, 2011) capable of supplanting destructive market rationality is, as Fleming (2017) suggests, an open question; and it is one that the exercise of political logics will answer.

Chapter Two.
Turning the wheel? Interns and the reproduction of precariousness

Alessandro Niccolò Tirapani

Abstract

One of the latest developments in Western job markets is the increasing rate of uncertain, unstable, and insecure work arrangements, a phenomenon labelled as precariousness. Here, the extraordinary number of interns working in and around European institutions in Brussels (Belgium) is used as an empirical case study for exploring and theorising how such precariousness is reproduced. I argue that it possible to identify three dimensions that can help to explain this: the regime of practices and discourses, contextualised self-interpretations, and the conditions of possibility for emancipation. I show how these can work together to reproduce precarious employment and precarious life conditions, focusing on the role played by the depoliticisation of social relations. In doing so, this work expands our understanding of precariousness in organisation studies by moving beyond two streams of literature: structuralism, which attributes the main cause to institutions, legislation, and power dynamics; and individual analyses of precariousness, which only look at how individuals experience it. In contrast, I build on these assumptions to focus more on the ambiguous role that lived experiences play in reproducing the regime of precariousness. I reveal how these factors work together, nurturing each other in a cycle, but I also show that there is a point of exit that could change the course of events. To stop 'turning the wheel' it is therefore necessary to re-politicise social relations and to devise better social protections in order to nurture possible breaking points with emancipatory outcomes.

> *You know, there is nothing else to do than work[.] Whatever hour you're in the bar, you will find guys in their suits and ties that will give you their professional cards, you know. And so, it's really made me feel that everything in Brussels, even socially speaking, is related to work and to the European world, like a galaxy or so.* (Jean, Consultancy A)[9]

Introduction

In February 2017, a global strike against 'bad' internships was called in Brussels, Belgium. Participants demanded an overhaul of exploitative practices and for a European ban on unpaid traineeships (Eriksson, 2017). A similar initiative took place in 2013 (Cafebabel.com, 2013), and a group of Brussels interns even produced a short, creative video to voice their concerns.[10] Nonetheless, these efforts were short-lived. Though they did eventually achieve support from the European Parliament (Brzozowski, 2020), throughout my research I have witnessed how they notably failed to resonate with most interns working in Brussels. Despite a spate of media articles on the subject, and the creation of an association for interns' rights, only a handful of people participated in the actions of 2013 and 2017. No further significant strikes were ever called, and the association has largely refocused its efforts on policy-setting.

Moving from these observations, this paper asks why, if there is a consensus around stopping or reforming exploitative practices, we see so little participation by those that would benefit the most? Furthermore, what role do these individuals play in reproducing such practices? These questions echo those posed with regard to other instances of unstable, exploitative, or unfair conditions that are widely deemed unacceptable and yet are eventually reproduced by rather privilege actors, who are simultaneously the 'victims' and the 'perpetrators'. Notable examples would be the endless debate on the end of neoliberalism (Fisher, 2009), the academic discontent in the UK among early-career scholars (Bristow, Robinson & Ratle, 2017), and the recent debate on decolonising Western business schools (Haman et al., 2020). This study aims to highlight how such reproduction(s) occur by examining structural, contingent, and political factors.

Applied specifically to the case of employment relations, this empirical case study presents a conundrum: while there is widespread discontent with precarious and temporary contracts (Standing, 2011), internships included (Perlin, 2012), those directly affected by it seem, overwhelmingly, to shrug off contesting initiatives, and only minor amendments have been introduced to limit the negative impact of such contracts. This puzzle has been framed by scholars and activists as an ontological problem of 'precarity': 'a process of "political subjectification" [that], without ignoring the multitude of movements and individuals, […] goes

beyond workplace organizing – life itself becomes a central concern' (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013, p. 298-299). The fields of organisation studies and sociology have then applied this concept to employment relationships by using the term 'precariousness': the impact on individuals and organisations of the diminishing rate of stable, permanent, and rigid employment relationships. Authors have studied various types of work: flexible (Tomlinson et al., 2018), temporary, agency-mediated, part-time (Kalleberg, 2000), gig (Ashford, Caza & Reid, 2018), and unpaid (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018) to name just the most prominent ones.

Several sociologists and organisation theorists have studied the structural conditions that led to the decline of standard employment and to the rise of casualised, contingent, short-term work arrangements (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017; Standing, 2011). In general, previous work has mostly looked at the structural conditions that have made these arrangements endemic in Western labour markets (Rodgers, 1989), and some studies have looked at how professionals and employees experience precariousness (Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2018; Norbäck, 2021; Cinque, Nyberg and Starkey, 2020). Attention has also been given to an emerging tension between enhanced freedom and deep precariousness, especially as perceived by employees (Spreitzer, Cameron & Garrett, 2017). Crucially, critical scholars in organisation studies have highlighted how precariousness is not to be understood merely as an epiphenomenon of employment relations, but as a broader trend towards a commodification of the private sphere, in a way extending human capital theory to all aspects of human life (Fleming, 2014**;** 2017; Bloom, 2016). These contributions are relevant because of the growing consensus that precariousness worsens inequality, public health, and employment conditions (Benach et al., 2014; Bidwell et al., 2013**,** Hewison, 2016).

However, scholars have increasingly voiced their discontent with these categorisations, as they either focus on 'extreme cases', like informal or unpaid work, or they are entrenched in a view that assumes the 'professional' sphere to be sharply divided from the 'private' one (Ashcraft, 2017). What is more, to date there is a dearth of empirical studies on how precariousness reproduces itself when considered as a social phenomenon. As a result, we know far less about how precariousness is reproduced in the lived experiences of individuals, while also taking into account their interactions with the conditions that serve to structure social and employment relations as precarious. The purpose of this paper is to advance theorisations of

precariousness by framing it as an expanded and more critical understanding of uncertain, unstable, and insecure work arrangements (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017). Therefore, the research question is: how does precariousness reproduce, assuming that the professional and private spheres are not divided?

To answer this question, I consider a specific type of employee which has so far been overlooked: interns in medium and highly skilled professions. Young professionals entering the job market do not fit the functionalist classification advanced, for instance, by Capelli & Keller (2013), as they are neither full time employees nor part-time, casualised, agency, or gig workers. As such, interns represent ideal informants as they are more inclined to embrace precarious work (Bidwell et al., 2013, where it is argued that millennials are the first generation to have fully embraced flexibility), but they are also key agents in reproducing precariousness through their practices. Internships have gradually evolved from being temporary steppingstones into secure job markets to more resemble entry-level positions in both high-skilled and low-skilled jobs (Scheuer & Mills, 2016). This has left large social groups in a limbo of professional, personal, and financial incertitude (Chertkovskaya, Watt, Tramer & Spoelstra, 2013). In recognition of this, the European Parliament has banned unpaid internships inside of its departments (European Youth Forum, 2018), and legal action has been started to halt unpaid internships in all European institutions (EUobserver, 2017). Interns, so far, have received little attention in organisation studies, and have mostly been approached from functionalist stances (Coupland, 2001; D'abate, Youndt & Wenzel, 2009; De Stefano, Bonet & Camuffo, 2018; Scheuer & Mills, 2016).

In this paper, I take the case of interns in Brussels, working in and around European Union institutions, to study how the material conditions of precariousness structure the lived experiences of these employees, and how the latter then feed back into this process. I present a circular model of the reproduction of precariousness showing three conceptual theoretical dimensions that have emerged from this study, each of which are themselves composed of empirical theoretical dimensions. Firstly, I present an overview of the set of institutions, discourses, and regulations of the *regime structuring precariousness*. Specifically, I have identified the 'social, cultural, and employment structure', and the presence of '"policing" of the social order via continuous, informal job interviews'. Secondly, I present the *contextualised self-interpretations* that point to *lived precariousness*, showing that the experiences of individuals point to a sense of 'embracing' or 'enduring' precariousness. Finally, the most original contribution of this study lies in how I have attempted

to understand what happens when precariousness can no longer be endured, and therefore what form the *conditions of possibility for emancipation and contestation of precariousness*. This dimension is underpinned by moments of ‘questioning precariousness’, which can lead to ‘rejection and exit’ or to ‘depoliticisation’. The last represents a turning point: if individuals reject the regime of precariousness and the social relations it structures, they either ‘fight back or leave’; yet this only happens if there is a process of politicisation. Most commonly, individuals are depoliticised, thereby the conditions of possibility for emancipation fade and those involved fall back into enduring or embracing precariousness, and in doing so reproduce the regime.

This paper makes three contributions. It positions precariousness in the broader debate about exploitative or problematic employment relations, providing empirical evidence to the debate on how these employment arrangements affect both the professional and the private lives of individuals, thereby making their whole life precarious, not just work. Namely, functionalist scholarship on precarious work has overlooked interns as a specific category of in-betweenness, so neither fulltime employees nor temporary, part-time, or agency workers. Yet internships, being the steppingstone to higher positions, play a central role in normalising and reproducing precariousness. In addition, this study contributes to our understanding of how precariousness reproduces, filling a gap in current literature which has mostly focused on the causes or consequences of it, but not on its holistic social reproduction. Finally, it proposes a more nuanced understanding of the process of depoliticisation of employment relations, not by looking at unionising or worker’s solidarity, nor assuming that individuals are necessarily uneasy with it – willingly or unwillingly ‘exploited’. Ultimately, I study how a minority of politicised individuals reject or seek an exit from this environment, but also how a majority of high-skilled, highly precarious employees end up reproducing the status quo through an interpretation of solidarity which is individualised and based on personal networks. Borrowing from political science, I label this step as ‘depoliticisation’ and argue that it is a key factor in ‘spinning’ the wheel that serves to reproduce precariousness.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I look at the current debate on precariousness from two different perspectives: the regime of neoliberalism that structures precariousness, and the debates on human capital theory and employability that reveal both the positive and negative experiences of precariousness. Second, I take stock of current debates around the reproduction of precariousness, highlighting its shortcomings. Third,

I present an empirical study and my rationale behind the choice of this setting, with particular attention paid to the case of internships. Fourth, I present my findings. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how the 'model' advanced contributes to our understandings of the reproduction of precariousness.

Literature review

Etymologically, the term 'precariousness' comes from the Latin 'to pray': it indicates something that is obtained out of someone else's favour, that is out of one's control, and as such it can be withdrawn at any time.[11] To study the case of precariousness as a complex social phenomenon that transcends the mere definition of it as an employment relationship based upon unstable contracts, I have divided the overview of literature into three parts. First, I borrow from Glynos & Howarth (2007) the term 'regime', which can be defined as the ensemble of practices, regulations, and discourses that structure social relations in a given setting. Second, I discuss precariousness as a lived experience, therefore dissecting the positive and negative aspects of it. Finally, I tend to the issue of reproduction: how do these approaches interact? I anticipate here categorising my empirical findings to draw out the inductively constructed concept of 'conditions of possibility of emancipation' with the aim of collecting previous studies already hinting in this direction.

There is significant evidence that precariousness is a highly problematic phenomenon, especially from an emancipatory perspective, yet I also aim to show that it can be lived as a positive and empowering experience. This allows us to dig further, and to appreciate how it is more than a matter of employment status: precariousness is at the same time enshrined in institutional settings, a condition of existence and a political phenomenon rooted in individualisation and 'depoliticisation'. With these I aim to lay the groundwork to argue that internships are an illustrative case of a broader change in labour relations, as further explained in the next section.

The regime of precariousness

Precariousness is not an entirely new phenomenon, nor is it unique to Western societies (Munck, 2013). First entering the sociological debate with Bourdieu (Bourdieu, Darbel & Rivet, 1963; see also Bourdieu, 1998), lately 'precariousness' has been used to capture the (Western) dilution of social protections and of secure, unionised labour markets since the 1970s (Alberti, Bessa, Hardy, Trappmann, & Umney, 2018). It has acutely manifested itself in Western countries adopting neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007): an organisation of

social relations based on extreme forms of free-market economy, characterised by a fast pace of change and where the consensus is that employers can better thrive if they are freed from the limitations imposed by strict regulations, which would force them to stick to unproductive labour and to lose flexibility to compete and innovate. The main argument is that strict employment protections were designed for a productive system based on twentieth-century factories and now impede personal freedom (see i.e. Rand, 1967). In fact, since the 1980s, Western organisations and societies have witnessed a significant change in work arrangements, namely the shift from Fordist, standard work arrangements to precarious, non-standard ones (Spreitzer, Cameron & Garrett, 2017). This is illustrated by the fact that, currently, almost one out of every five jobs in Europe is not long-term (Eurostat, 2018). This is problematic as non-standard forms of employment have a significant impact on the social and economic texture of societies and can have lasting effects on inequality (Bidwell et al., 2013), resulting in a lack of welfare protections (Standing, 2011), a higher likelihood to be subject to unpaid work (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018), and even negative effects on health or mental wellbeing (McKee, Reeves, Clair & Stuckler, 2017).

In this regard, precariousness has been identified as 'work that is *uncertain*, *unstable*, *insecure* and in which *employees bear the risks of work* (as opposed to businesses or government) and *receive limited social benefits and statutory protections*' (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017, p. 1 - emphasis in the original). The focus on the shift of risk from the community to the individual is perhaps what makes precariousness most suitable to study these social and organisational dynamics. The trend in employment relationships is moving towards shorter contracts or even contracting out to self-employed people (De Stefano, 2015; Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018), in doing so fostering uncertainty (no fix salaries), instability (the monthly income varies greatly), and insecurity (it cannot be known if the relationship with the employer will continue in the future). Paradoxically, these sort of employment relations do not clearly result in improved financial performances, and organisation scholars have identified mixed benefits for companies (De Stefano, Bonet & Camuffo, 2018).

Several studies have looked at the structural causes of precariousness (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007**,** Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017, Rodgers, 1989). There is a growing consensus that precarious work has proliferated following a combination of weaker unions (individualisation of bargaining labour), globalisation (internationalisation of firms and of job markets), technological advancements (need for higher employment

flexibility), and the shift towards financialisation of the economy (enshrined in the principle of shareholders value maximisation). For Kalleberg and Vallas (2017), precariousness has two structural explanations. On one hand, it is part of the ideological foundations of contemporary social orders, where individuals are to market themselves and their social relations; so, by definition, not just employment relations but the whole life experience should be temporary, fluid, and precarious. Second, they list the macroeconomic factors presented above. The aggregate effect has been a push towards the 'knowledge economy' and services, which demand immaterial and fast-changing skills. Some scholars, mostly in Europe (Bosch, 2004), have looked at institutional and policy responses to this. Countries like Germany (Helfen, 2015; Benassi, 2016) and Italy (Picot & Tassinari, 2015) have rewritten their labour codes to enshrine the 'new reality' of precariousness, in doing so embracing labour flexibility and reproducing precariousness by abandoning the labour protections that were built during the twentieth century. A similar dynamic can be observed in Anglo-Saxon countries, like the UK (Nolan & Slater, 2003), US (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007), and Australia (Markey & McIvor, 2018).

The above is also inscribed and intertwined with the debate about the effects of neoliberal practices on the job market, which tend to increase precariousness and competition as a goal in of itself, regardless of the social consequences of these practices (Harvey, 2007; Fisher, 2009; Cederstrom & Fleming, 2012; Moisander, Groβ & Eräranta, 2017). Long, stable, and costly employment relations, mostly protected by national laws and strong labour unions, have slowly led the way to fragmented and decentralised relationships. A reason for this, Read (2009) argues using Foucault, is that we are now witnessing the latest stages of neoliberalism, which differs from classic liberalism as the latter focuses on exchange whilst the former emphasises competition. If there are material and ideological limits to what can be exchanged, and unions or protective national legislations are a part of this, the same does not apply to competition, which can be adopted – and imposed – as an all-encompassing ideology, bound to constant (self)improvement: 'this entails a massive redefinition of "labour" and the "worker". The worker has become "human capital". Salary or wages become the revenue that is earned on an initial investment, an investment in one's skills or abilities [...] Homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself' (Read, 2009, p. 28). Fleming captures this by also building on Foucault's 'Birth of biopolitics' (2007), proposing the concept of 'biocracy' (Fleming, 2014): an expansion of human capital theory to all aspects of human life so as to make them

valuable for organisations (see also Fleming, 2017). Additionally, Standing (2011) has coined the term ‘precariat’, as a social group that is partly working class and mostly precarious. Summarising,

> *[Precariousness] is more than the return of insecurity into post-Fordist workers’ lives. [It is] the loss of grip over a future that once seemed under control, as more and more areas of life are subordinated to the needs of the economy [...] including in ostensibly privileged strata.* (Alberti et al., 2018, p. 449).

Overall, this section shows that the regime of precariousness is composed of the hegemonic discourses and practices of neoliberalism, from human capital theory to the use of unstable, uncertain, and insecure work arrangements. I will now move on to discuss what we know about how precariousness is structured.

Structuring contextualised self-interpretations of precariousness

Lately, some attention has been devoted to how individuals experience precariousness, by studying flexible work arrangements (Tomlinson et al., 2018) or the gig economy (Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2018; Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020), and finding mixed results. Against this background, we can better understand how individuals shape their career within precarious circumstances when they enter the job market, especially in the case of highly specialised and prestigious career paths (Gunz, Mayrhofer and Tolbert, 2011). However, if the diagnosis above is perhaps clearer when it comes to highly disintermediated employment relationships (like in the gig economy), we know much less about the role of internships as a steppingstone towards professionalisation and stable, high-skilled jobs. The social impact of high rates of precariousness is exemplified by the fact that it leads to higher entry barriers to careers, with negative exclusionary consequences (Heath, 2017). For instance, by de facto limiting the type of people that can access internships that lead to highly specialised jobs, precariousness can keep the ‘elites’ homogenous, as it puts the burden of sustaining the associated costs of ‘training’ on early-career professionals. Lent and others (2002), for example, found that financial constraints and social background were among the most relevant factors holding back college students when choosing their subsequent career paths.

As such, whereas many jobs have increasingly precarious characteristics, it is the personal and human dimension of precariousness that represents something new for the West (at least in its intensity), and the situation of interns in a very specific setting, such as the one studied here, captures this in-betweenness. Flexible (yet precarious) work has been presented as an opportunity for employees to improve themselves,

entrusting them with the freedom to constantly look for more interesting and remunerative jobs, as well as with the potential to achieve work-life balance vis-à-vis decreasing welfare protections and higher mobility (Bloom & Cederstrom, 2009). As such, precariousness has been closely linked with the idea of self-entrepreneurship, accumulation of social capital, and freedom (exemplified in horizontal labour relations). This idea that the risks are born by workers has been the subject of a growing stream of literature examining the gig economy and other forms of self-employment (Moisander, Groβ & Eräranta, 2017), and Fleming has termed it 'radical responsibilization' (2017).

In light of the above, precariousness has been studied both as something that is imposed and suffered, but also as a positive phenomenon that can unleash an individual's potential and enhance their personal freedom. Regarding the former, for Chertkovskaya and colleagues (2013) precariousness is strictly connected with the idea of employability. In the context of neoliberalism, having a job has shifted from being a 'right' to being a 'prize', an individual achievement resulting from previous investments in accumulating personal 'human capital' (Fleming, 2017). This is a direct consequence of the marketisation of all aspects of life, as the duty of individuals is to pursue continuous self-improvement. '[This] protean [rhetoric] articulate[s] a high premium put on individuals to be in a constant stage of development and to revamp their skill set to seamlessly negotiate their perpetual shift from one job or organisation to another' (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013, p. 701). They go on to argue that 'not only are individuals invited to realise themselves by becoming (ever more) employable[:] their realisation as selves has turned into a prerequisite for their employability per se' (2013, p. 702).

Nonetheless, it has also been shown by scholars that individuals can enjoy and thrive in contexts of high flexibility and precariousness. For instance, Petriglieri and colleagues (2018) report how freelancers and gig workers go through cycles of excitement, underpinned by the feeling of freedom and self-realisation, and of pain, most evident in times when their 'human capital accumulation' puts them under stress and they realise they lack welfare support (Fleming, 2014). Individuals can accept precariousness for multiple reasons, even in its extreme forms. It is crucial that the lived conditions of precariousness are taken seriously. For instance, Grant-Smith & McDonald (2018) highlight three rationales behind 'unpaid work': 'volunteering', for ethical reasons and to create positive credentials; to 'supplement education', so as to achieve high levels of education in order to be employable; and, finally, to 'enhance employability', in order to constantly keep

updated and 'marketable', and not to become obsolescent. This is largely true for internships as well, which perhaps represent the most relevant shift in employment relations for young people. Finally, some authors have also shown that creating fictional personas only to market oneself to employers can be both a thrilling and a painful experience (Sharone, 2007; Vallas & Christin, 2018). These insights, however, still do not enable us to fully understand how precariousness reproduces.

Conditions of possibility for the reproduction of precariousness

A small but growing body of research bears witness to a resistance to precariousness, namely through unions (Kretsos, 2011; Murphy & Turner, 2016; Simms et al., 2018; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2019; Yang & Chae, 2020). They show that grassroot movements are more effective in tackling precariousness than classic, highly hierarchical representation bodies, shaped around Fordist employment relations. These studies, though, look more at resistance to precariousness than at its reproductions. Others, in studying how precariousness reproduces, have looked at how individuals come to embrace precariousness, learn to cope with it, and 'abandon' resistance, in doing so legitimising the status quo.

In a recent review of precarious work, Alberti and colleagues (2018) collected a series of notable contributions on the topic; however, their focus is mostly on explaining 'how we got here' and 'how do we move from here' rather than 'why are we still here': 'the contributions to [this] special issue [span] a range of countries and organisational contexts, identifying key drivers, patterns and forms of precarization' (2018, p. 447). Furthermore, Norbäck (2021) shows how freelance journalists try to resist the casualisation of their profession by engaging in acts of micro resistance, although the final result is a solidification of a business model based on outsourcing and high precariousness. Cinque, Nyberg and Starkey (2020) look at how theatre workers embedded in extreme professional and personal precariousness embrace this through religious, political, and therapeutically narratives, assuming the role of 'martyrs' and eventually reproducing precariousness in their profession by embracing the burden of their status. Conversely, organisations reproduce precariousness and inequality by responding to increased labour supplies with liberalisation (so, giving employees 'agency' and freedom of choice) and the outsourcing of their labour force, in doing so shifting responsibility to individuals, cutting costs, and exacerbating the underlying conditions that lead to inequality and exploitation (Hamann & Bertels, 2018).

These contributions highlight forms of structural reproduction of precariousness or individual responses to precariousness, yet they do not account for at least three other key factors. Firstly, the only tangentially study the interaction between structuring conditions and individual experiences of precariousness. Secondly, they discount the idea that precarious workers might embrace their status, which is only partially accounted for by functionalist or noncritical studies (Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2018; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). Thirdly, despite a growing body of studies looking at the processes of individualisation in labour relations, we still do not know how the regime structures precariousness in mundane settings, nor consequently how it reproduces it. Bourdieu characterises precarity this way:

> *[It] destruct[ures] existence[:] by making the whole future uncertain, it prevents [...] the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, even the most intolerable.* (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 82)

This captures the essence of what, borrowing from political science, I define as 'depoliticisation' (which has emerged from my data analysis). First advanced by Carl Schmitt, it is defined as a worldview where 'the individual, his [sic] private property, and his personal freedoms [...] are thought to be prior to the state[.] A [depoliticised] person [...] does not want to leave the apolitical and riskless private sphere' (Frye, 1966, p. 823).

I argue that individualisation, chiefly through the obsession with employability, leads to a 'depoliticisation' of employment relations, which spills over to personal lives. It underpins the reproduction of precarious social relations by disarming unified responses to it, reducing social concerns to individual problems and deficiencies, and interlinking precariousness in professional and personal life. Below, I expand on the specific case of interns and present my empirical study.

Empirical study

> *The actual difference is that here you meet a lot of interns.*
> *There is an ocean of interns.* (Isabella, Consultancy E)

Interns as a specific facet of precariousness

Building on organisation studies and neighbouring fields (Barnett, 2012; D'abate, Youndt & Wenzel, 2009; De Stefano, Bonet & Camuffo, 2018; Scheuer & Mills, 2016), I define interns as individuals working full-time, with a precarious contract (chiefly short-term, unpaid, or low paid and with limited entitlements to

welfare protections), whose final goal is to obtain both the hard and soft skills needed to become a professional in that industry. In the context of this study, I circumscribe the definition to internationally mobile, young, and recently university-graduated individuals, acknowledging that this is a specific, privileged subgroup. The existing literature on figures within this category has mostly concentrated on how interns live and make the most of their experience (Campbell & Price, 2016; Coupland, 2001), or on extreme cases of exploitation (Costea, Watt & Amiridis, 2015), particularly within the creative industries (Figiel, 2018; Frenette, 2013). It also produces some confusion with regards to the thin line between internships and apprenticeships, the latter being more focused on learning 'hard skills' and originally associated with craftmanship (Smith, 2019). In fact, historically, internships have always been designed as a first step in becoming a professional in a given field, shaped after the idea of (medieval) apprenticeship (Fuller & Unwin, 2011; Lane, 2005; Wentz & Ford, 1984). Some key criticalities have been identified, like the degree of uncertainty or the centrality of learning during the process, as having a positive impact on future career paths (Campbell & Price, 2016; Scheuer & Mills, 2016; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017). Yet, in respect to the above discussion concerning precariousness, the role of internships has changed, and they have become more about accruing 'human capital' (Smith, 2010). Overall, though, there is still only a scarce body of literature on the reproduction of precariousness as seen from the perspective of those experiencing it.

I suggest applying an emancipatory lens to this specific stage of career development. My reasoning is twofold and stands in line with the argument that neoliberalism has led to a shift of responsibility in one's employment status (and success) from the social to the individual, fostering a culture of self-entrepreneurship and never-ending self-improvement (Bloom & Cederstrom, 2009; Moisander, Groβ & Eräranta, 2017; Smith, 2010). Firstly, how individuals begin their careers has lasting effects on progression (Chen & Schen, 2012; Gamboa, Paixão, & de Jesus, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial to highlight the consequences of precariousness in relation to career access due to its social consequences. Secondly, we have witnessed an increased pressure in terms of 'employability', framed as a driver for career advancement (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013). Its relevance here is on how it pushes candidates to market themselves not merely in terms of hard skills but also by promoting an image of fully and coherently career-oriented individuals (Smith, 2010). In turn, increased job market pressure in Western countries, especially during times of high unemployment rates, has

led to higher and higher entry requirements (Hamann & Bertels, 2018) and more impoverished material conditions.

This kind of precariousness, so far, has been understudied in management analyses. The plight of precarious young graduates re-entered the public debate after a London-based intern died following several days of non-stop work (Costea, Watt & Amiridis, 2015). Despite representing an extreme case, the authors underlined two main factors. First, they reported the predominance of 'hope', whether it might be for a long-term contract or the ability of having a relevant impact in the world. Second, they analysed how this event had been rationalised by colleagues, relatives, and even most public opinion as the free choice of the intern, who allegedly misunderstood the actual requirements of his position. There was no need to work to death after all: 'what emerged […] was that the culture of long hours [is] not rejected by those who engage in [it], rather [it] often stems from their own initiative' (Costea, Watt & Amiridis, 2015, p. 378). Nonetheless, the authors added to this interpretation, concluding that the deceased intern 'internalised an overpowering culture of performance whose dynamic is much more equivocal than could be deciphered if we allow his drama to remain understood as a mere "industrial accident"' (2015, p. 378). More recently, scholars have considered the case of the 2015 Universal Expo, which took place in Milan, Italy (Leonardi & Chertkovskaya, 2017). Here, looking at how many individuals worked quasi-free and for very long hours, the authors demonstrate how this was successfully framed as a great opportunity for enhancing the future employability of 'volunteers', while making the whole Expo event economically feasible.

These few works help to describe the problem but fall short of providing any convincing analysis of the process of reproduction, attachment to the regime structuring the conditions for precariousness, contingent self-interpretations determined as positive or negative experiences, or the conditions for possible emancipation. I argue that dissecting the latter, to understand how depoliticisation and individualisation function, as opposed to rejection and exit, underpin the dimensions above. Looking at the process as a whole can lead to a thicker description (Cornelissen, 2017) of the reproduction of precariousness, and what might be done to overcome it. To my mind, interns are an appropriate category to consider, as Standing (2011) firmly includes them among the 'precariat': they can be seen as liminal figures, between those 'condemned' to long-term precariousness, comprised of both unsatisfying and short-term jobs, and those who managed to achieve stability, to secure welfare protections, and to create a strong professional identity.

Empirical Setting

This study focuses upon the so-called 'Eurobubble': the private and public organisations revolving around the European institutions based in Brussels, Belgium (Georgakakis, 2011). The Belgian capital is considered to contain the second highest concentration of lobbyists in the world after Washington DC, USA.[12] It is home to the European Parliament, Commission and Council. Many other official bodies are also headquartered there, in addition to private consultancies, think tanks, international NGOs, and a wide array of minor associations. The Eurobubble is the part of town where these organisations are clustered (nicknamed 'the European quarter'), with its squares, bars, and housing. It has one of the highest concentrations of young professionals who are attempting to enter a specific career path. Though official figures are difficult to come by, it is estimated that each year there are 8000 interns working here, half of whom are unpaid (The Telegraph, 2016) - a figure that has been confirmed by at least one informant (Andrea, European Parliament). If true, this would be equal to more than half of all workers aged between 15 and 24 in the Brussels region (Eurostat, 2018).

My choice of this setting stems from a wide range of considerations, which make it an extreme case for studying precariousness, specifically as it relates to interns (Yin, 2013). Firstly, any individual who wishes to develop a career within European institutions is expected to have gained a certain level of experience there. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that, on average, 200 interns per year work unpaid within the European Commission (European Parliament, 2017). Secondly, the Eurobubble gathers high numbers of young, like-minded, university-educated Europeans with the economic means to sustain six to twelve months of unpaid (or underpaid) work. Finally, the Eurobubble represents both an extreme and valuable example because, even though different organisations and institutions work independently and competitively there, the place as a whole is highly interconnected. Indeed, the nickname 'bubble' comes from the overlap and intertwining of personal and professional networks on display there (Busby, 2013).

Several authors have studied Brussels and the European institutions from an anthropological perspective (Abeles et al., 1993; Busby, 2013; Georgakakis, 2011). Abeles et al. (1993) show that the European Commission is the place where European identity is created, and Busby (2013) concurs by defining the Eurobubble as a unique place. Kortelainen and Koeppen (2016) argue that the Eurobubble is a physical space

where lobbying and socialisation have material implications, shaping the city and those spaces inhabited by locals and technocrats. Therefore, the socialisation of newcomers is both crucial and quite complex. This has specific consequences for young professionals: Busby and Belkacem (2013) show that depending on capital, seniority, and competences, workers in the European Parliament range from well-paid assistants to underpaid or even deprived interns. Tellingly, one informant claimed that 'in our WhatsApp group we shared where free food was available at events [inside the European Parliament], since most interns were not paid. You resort to anything, even this' (Andrea, European Parliament).

In his anthropological analysis of the European Union, Shore (2000) shows that the bubble is constructed as a 'ghetto for elites', which both shapes and is shaped by the city around it. Aspiring Eurocrats go through a rite of passage where they are required to strip themselves of their former identity to acquire a new one (2000, p. 166). Arguably this influences precariousness and gives a reason to accept them. Suvarierol and others (2013) have shown that European institutions increasingly use precarious work arrangements. Working for the EU is socialised through the catchphrase 'working for Europe' (2013, p. 909). Therefore, this study is also novel in terms of its setting as previous qualitative studies of the Eurobubble have concentrated upon the European Parliament or the Commission as opposed to its other orbiting institutions (like NGOs and consultancies). Finally, Simola (2018) extends the view of precariousness to the city of Brussels as a whole, in which interns are thoroughly embedded.

However, to date much less has been written from the perspective of entry-level professionals, or on how their view can inform our wider understanding of precariousness. Specifically, for Murdoch (2015), organisation studies lack interest in public institutions, and yet it can learn from the European Union as a specific case of a supranational body with gravitating organisations around it. Here I focus on interns, which (even when EU citizens) are 'migrants' in Belgium, but they do not realise the implications of this until they need to formally register, where the consequences of precariousness are revealed. For example, Simola (2018) reports that precarious contracts often assume that an individual is healthy and will therefore not need to register for a doctor. When the need arises, however, some interns are forced to accept any kind of job in order to formally register as a resident, thereby gaining access to public health and welfare benefits.

Table 4 - List of informants

ID	Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality (main)	Age	Organisation (main)**	Length (min)
1	Marcela	Female	Spanish	34	European Commission	85
2	Alice	Female	Italian	27	European Commission	55
3	Andrea	Male	Italian	26	European Parliament	69
4	Chiara	Female	Italian	23	Consultancy A (medium)	64
5	Alina	Female	Romanian	22	Think Tank A	58
6	Gian	Female	Italian	20	Think Tank A	59
7	Carla	Female	Italian	28	European Commission	46
8	Eloise	Female	French	26	NGO A	70
9	Elena	Female	Cypriot	26	Think Tank A	50
10	Carlotta	Female	Italian	22	Think Tank A	52
11	Jean	Male	French	21	Consultancy A (medium)	82
12	Beatriz	Female	Portuguese	25	Consultancy B (big)	63
13	Michelle	Male	Belgian	21	Consultancy B (big)	58
14	Annette	Female	British	22	NGO B	35
15	Karl	Male	German	28	NGO B	34
16	Marion	Female	Belgian	23	NGO B	33
17	Sonia	Female	Bulgarian	29	Think Tank B	53
18	Filippo	Male	Italian	30	EU Translation Service	45
19	Francesca	Female	Italian	30	European Commission	45
20	Emilia	Female	Italian	29	Consultancy C (small)	21
21	Pedro	Male	Spanish	21	Consultancy D (small)	48
22	Daniele	Male	Italian	31	NGO C	49
23	Guglielmo	Male	Italian	31	European Commission	57
24	Isabella	Female	Spanish	27	Consultancy E (medium)	63
25	Penelope*	Female	Spanish	30	NGO B	32
26	Olivia	Female	British	22	Think Tank A	36
27	Mihaela	Female	Romanian	27	European Commission	58
28	Barbara*	Female	Italian	31	Association for interns' rights A	42
29	Claudia	Female	Italian	32	Consultancy C (small)	54
30	Jazmin	Female	Hungarian	28	Think Tank A	58
31	Klara	Male	Swedish	30	European Commission	48
32	Ana	Female	Portuguese	22	Think Tank A	58
33	Freja	Female	Danish	28	European Commission	30
34	Lola	Female	Spanish	24	Legal firm	61
35	Ugo	Male	Italian	24	Consultancy E (medium)	44
36	Vincenzo	Male	Italian	25	Consultancy E (medium)	70
37	Nora	Female	Belgian	25	Consultancy F (big)	53
38	David*	Male	French	37	Association for interns' rights B	57
39	Thea	Female	Swedish	24	Think Tank C	67

** Experts, not interns*

***Organisation (main): most interns did more than one internship at the time of the interview, so data entry refers to the current or most relevant one. This was assessed based on the informants' judgement, but I always refer to the main internship in Brussels, even if they did others abroad. All interviews were conducted in English, besides those with Italian interns. Letters identify different organisations within the same category*

Table 5 - Data sources and further information on data collection

Phase*	Data type**	Data sources	Organisations***	Use in analysis
First visit to Brussels (March 2017)	Semi-structured interviews with interns	First round of interviews (8)	Think tank (2), EC (3), EP (1), NGO (1), Consultancy (1)	Initial research questions: Do interns work for free? Why do they accept it?
"	Non-participant observations	Notes on organisations and Eurobubble	Think tank, Plux, EU quarter	"
Second visit to Brussels (September 2017)	Semi-structured interviews with interns	Second round of interviews (5)	Think tank (2), Consultancy (3)	Understand how private sectors differs, learn more about working conditions
Third visit to Brussels (March 2018)	Semi-structured interviews with interns	Third round of interviews (13/15)	Think tank (2) EC (3), EU-Other (1) NGO (4), Consultancy (3)	Dig deeper into how interns make sense of their precariousness
"	Semi-structured interviews with experts	Third round of interviews (2/15)	NGO (1), Youth organisation (1)	Understand activities against unpaid internships
"	Non-participant observations	Notes on organisations and Eurobubble	Think tank, Plux, EU quarter	Understand how the environment reflects and rewards precariousness
"	Other data	Informal chat with experts	Think tank (1)	Inquire how organisations see interns
Fourth visit to Brussels (February 2019)	Semi-structured interviews with interns	Fourth round of interviews (6)	Think tank (2), EC (2), Consultancy (1), Legal firm	Understand how the interns make the most of their precariousness
"	Non-participant observations	Notes on organisations and 'Politico European Careers Fair'	Think tank, EU quarter, Career services	Understand how organisations market themselves to young professionals
"	Other data	Informal chat with experts	Think tank (1), Youth organisation (1), EU-Other (1), Consultancy (1)	Hear from insiders of the Eurobubble, learn how they see interns
Fifth visit to Brussels (February 2020)	Semi-structured interviews with interns	Fifth round of interviews (4/5)	Think tank (1), EC	Understand depoliticisation
"	Semi-structured interviews with experts	Fifth round of interviews (1/5)	Organisation for interns' rights (1)	"
"	Non-participant observations	Notes on organisations and Eurobubble	European Commission employees	Hear from insiders of the EU Bubble, learn how they see interns
Additional data collection (2017-2020)	Archival	Newspapers and online discussions	Politico Europe, Facebook groups, Twitter, LinkedIn, EUractive.com, etc.	Gain insights on Eurobubble; what interns talk about and the job offers they apply for
"	"	Webpages of NGOs and associations for interns' rights	Interns Go Pro, BiNGO, European Youth Forum, EP	Insights into activism and associations 'fighting' unpaid internships
"	"	Surveys and informed debates	Eurobarometer, Debating Europe, Fair Internship Initiative	Triangulation: see to which extent precariousness is spread

**Some interviews took place before or after the actual visit as some informants were found through snowballing and contacted online. In these cases, the interview took place via Skype.*

***Non-participant observation took place continuously during the visits to Brussels, with notetaking. Nonetheless, in some instances it was a minor endeavour, so it is not always reported in the table.*

****EC: European Commission; EP: European Parliament. Plux stands for Place du Luxembourg, the square in front of the EP where all Thursday's interns convene for drinks. It is a famous meeting place where people network while having fun.*

I have divided interns into three main categories depending on the nature of their contracts. First, the most precarious are those who are working entirely for free, either without a contract or through an agreement with their home universities. Most informants in this group worked in think tanks and NGOs, but three worked at the Commission through what is known as an 'atypical' contract (an unpaid internship for students). Second, those who have signed the *Convention d'immersion professionnelle*, a kind of apprenticeship contract that is capped to around €1000 per month, lasts six months, and can be renewed only once by the same employer. This was the case for most consultancies and is less precarious. Third, those working for a European institution who went through a highly competitive public selection process and signed a specific temporary contract with a higher salary (€1220 per month as of 2020[13]) but one which cannot be renewed – the so called 'Blue book'.

Method and data

This paper is based on a single, extreme, embedded case study (Yin, 2013), using three types of sources: interviews, non-participant observations (Delzin & Lincoln, 2017), and archival data. Additionally, I partially build on my previous experience as an intern in Brussels, lasted around one year (between 2012 and 2013, in two blocks of six months each)[14]. I have conducted 39 semi-structured interviews. I entered this field using my own past experience working in the city as an intern; as such, the first bulk of informants were identified by using existing personal connections to arrive at a suitable list of names, and then through snowballing. I also contacted a few organisations to which I had no personal link, mostly NGOs, which resulted in interviews with a number of interns currently working within those organisations. Some interviews resulted from using Facebook groups, from spontaneous meetings during events in Brussels, or at relevant social events.

To conduct most of these interviews, and to collect non-participant observations, I have visited Brussels on five separate occasions, totalling almost two months of time spent there (see Table 2). Besides meeting with informants,[15] I had both formal and informal discussions with professionals and experts. I attended private and public events, namely a career fair (the 'Politico's EU Studies and Careers fair',[16] in February 2019) and a policy event ('The future of food and agricultural transformation',[17] in February 2020). I noted down observations, personal impressions, informal conversations, and geographical locations.

Most interviews took place in the European quarter, in bars near offices or in private spaces. When face-to-face meetings were not possible, I set up Skype calls. I have also interviewed three representatives of associations working on interns' rights. The data gathered amounts to more than 35 hours of audio recordings. In addition, I partially built upon my own previous professional experience in the city to interpret the data and decide where to look for more informants. I stopped collecting data when I reached the point of theoretical saturation. This occurred in stages: for instance, after the first round of interviews I moved away from asking about working conditions. Similarly, after the third round, I limited questions about strikes, associations, and unions as no new or relevant information was being surfaced.

As for archival materials, I gained access to a survey conducted by the 'Fair Internship Initiative' (2017, 2018)[18], which collected the experiences of 1000 interns around the world, including Brussels (see Table 2). I have collected all the reports and newspaper articles that informants cited and, following these leads, I have looked at online debates, mostly on Brussels-based websites and magazines (i.e. Politico Europe, EUractive.com, European Youth Forum, etc.). I found and downloaded an online discussion from the website of Debating Europe (a leading European think tank), which asked if unpaid internships should be banned in Europe.[19] This represents a privileged source as commentators have a more informed view on the case of Brussels given the niche target audience of the website. In a similar vein, a group of interns in the European Parliament have created a short documentary about unpaid internships, which I retrieved from YouTube[20] and coded. Finally, I extensively used Twitter and LinkedIn to triangulate data, track public debates, follow informants' careers (both before and after their interviews), as well as identifying and highlighting networking relations.

The data was analysed using an inductive, iterative process. After transcribing all interviews, I coded them in NVivo. After each visit to Brussels, I identified the main emerging themes, and then subsequently adapted my interview protocols, limiting questions on areas for which I thought I had now reached theoretical saturation. I then went back and forth between the NVivo codes, merging similar ones and looking for further insights into any promising yet underdeveloped lines of enquiry. I have aggregated NVivo codes into first order code, and from there created theoretical dimensions. This iterative process also relied on non-participant observations and field notes. I then used archival data to triangulate and help theorise connections between these dimensions. More precisely, I developed my theory in stages: I used the

data collected on my first visit to get a better understanding of the field; I met some former interns who had left the Eurobubble, who provided insight on the idea of 'exit', then I studied the iteration between structural conditions and lived experiences. At this stage I focussed on how precariousness is lived, which is consistent with former accounts. I made a third research trip with the hope of better understanding how precariousness reproduces. I attended events, made observations, and tried to collect external sources to help triangulate the data. Finally, during my fourth and fifth visits, and corresponding rounds of interviews, I developed the idea of depoliticisation in order to explain why I came across so few cases of rejection and exit.[21] I noted how interns did not seem to problematise the situation on a social or collective level, but rather interpreted it as a personal issue. As a concluding step, I set up a few interviews, both formal and informal, with experts to understand how strikes were developed and to what extent they were participated in - and what the experts themselves thought of the whole intern situation.

Findings

In the following section, I present an overarching introduction to the issue of precariousness, which emerged from the data collected, and then go on to present the seven empirical theoretical dimensions. Precariousness is an overarching characteristic of the 'Eurobubble', one which emerges quite straightforwardly from initial non-participant observations and informal discussions. According to Standing's taxonomy (2011, p. 17), interns in the Eurobubble face fairly high 'labour market insecurity', as few positions are stable, well-paid, or offer rewarding tasks. For instance, European institutions recruit only through competitive public selections, and Belgian law does not cover unemployment and health benefits for unemployed foreigners (Shore, 2000; Simola, 2018). 'Employment, job and work securities' are also low, especially for these entry-level positions: employees experience high levels of turnover, switching from one organisation to another, and most are often not (or not entirely) entitled to salaries, sick-leave, or holidays. In addition, interns as a group face high levels of 'representation insecurity', as no union and almost no other associations represent them. What is more, it is striking how precarious the life of an intern can be: given the extensive presence of non-Belgians in the Eurobubble, and their young age, this category of workers tends to live in shared flats and develop social connections quasi exclusively via meetings in the same places (bars, restaurants, clubs, and private homes).

Figure 3 - The 'wheel' reproducing precariousness

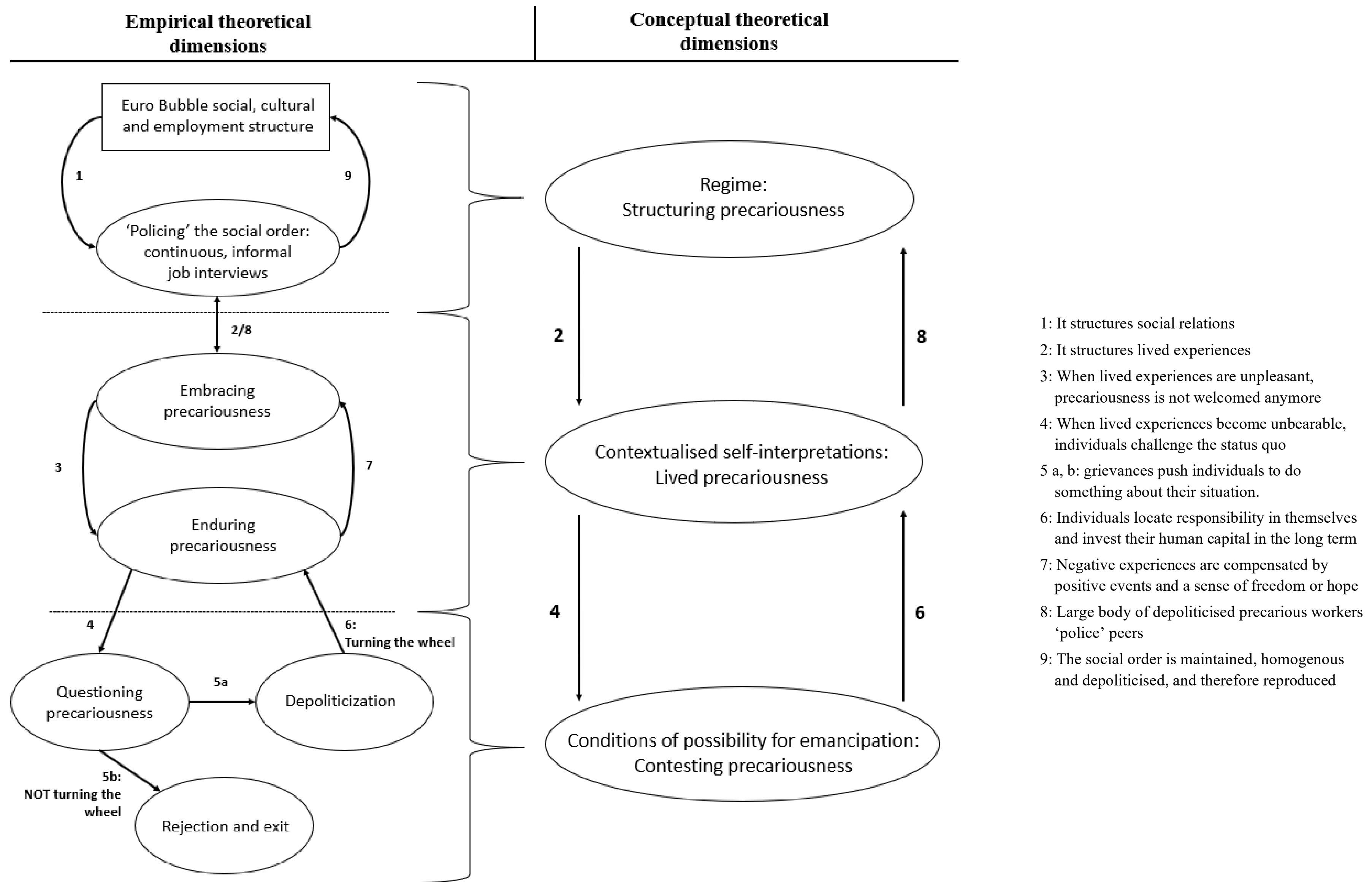


Table 6 - Conceptual and empirical theoretical dimensions

Conceptual dimensions	Second order codes	Description	Effect on 'wheel' (numbers refer to Figure 1)	Exemplary quote
Regime: **Structuring precariousness**	Social, cultural and employment structure	The institutions and regulations that regulate the demand side of employment. The broader discourses and social practices that structure organisations.	1: it structures social relations through institutional, legal, and discursive tools.	*The Eurobubble is a group of people that are in Brussels because their job is in Brussels. They haven't chosen. And that's something that always impacts me a lot: they haven't chosen Brussels because it's Brussels. If the Commission or their job was in Kuala Lumpur, they would be in Kuala Lumpur.* (Isabella, Consultancy E)
	'Policing' the social order via continuous, informal job interviews	The social practices and discourses that reproduce social capital and that control who 'can' stay in the social setting (i.e. gatekeeping, networking)	2: it structures lived experiences through policing newcomers and 'deviants'. 9: The social order is maintained, homogenous and depoliticised, and therefore reproduced.	*You start working with those people all the time, and then you start seeing them in the bars and then on the streets, and then you realise that everyone [..] you know, someone else is working related to their Commission, or to the European affairs and which is most funny and interesting as well as very depressing, because it's a city - to my opinion - that you go to only to work.* (Jean, Consultancy A)
Contextualised self-interpretations: **Lived precariousness**	Embracing precariousness	The positive side of lived experiences. The sense of freedom, excitement and future possibilities experienced by individuals	3: When lived experiences are unpleasant, precariousness is not welcomed anymore, but it is still not questioned. 8: Large body of depoliticised, precarious workers 'policing' peers.	*It makes me super happy the idea of moving from one city to another every three years. Every time I can start from anew, I never get bored. You meet new people and by doing so you know better yourself. [..] This makes me enjoy my time here, I live this a defined period of my life and not like 'that's the job of my life'.* (Carlotta, Think Tank A)
	Enduring precariousness	The negative side of lived experiences. The sense of powerlessness, the dire material conditions, the appeal to resilience to go through tough times to achieve stability in the future	4: When lived experiences become unbearable, individuals challenge the status quo. 7: Negative experiences are compensated by positive events and a sense of freedom or hope.	*Because if I said 'no, these [working] conditions are not acceptable' there was a queue of people behind me. When I started working, I found that 40 people applied for my position. So, the moment you say, 'I cannot accept this', they say 'next!'. [..] We all have a bit this dream of having, one day, a job properly paid, savings, and free time.* (Chiara, Consultancy A)

Conceptual dimensions	Second order codes	Description	Effect on 'wheel' (numbers refer to Figure 1)	Exemplary quote
Conditions of possibility for emancipation: Contesting precariousness	Questioning precariousness	The contestation of injustices or exploitation. The voicing of discontent or the attempts to change the status quo	5 a, b: grievances push individuals to do something about their situation. Either by rejecting or exiting the status quo, or by placing responsibility on individuals	*They always talk about dignity, and human rights, and stuff, and then they basically work with unpaid interns* (Isabella, Consultancy E)
	Rejection and exit	The refusal to accept the conditions. The exit from the social setting, voluntary or mandated by necessity. Possibly, the contestation of the social order – personal or through associations	Not contributing to turning the wheel, yet not necessarily stopping it.	*[Working here] reinforce[d] my... my [rage] about the EU because I worked about all this collusion about the Commission and lobbies. [..] Maybe people, already see themselves 'I am a future employee and I need to prove what I can do it'. Regardless of the price. But I was not considering this world, so I stopped.* (Eloise, NGO A)
	Depoliticisation	The assumption of responsibility for lived conditions; the belief that it is up to the individual to achieve success; the rejection of political activities based on collective, disruptive actions.	6: Individuals locate responsibility in themselves, invest their human capital in the long term, and blame those that cannot make it. Solidarity is confined to personal relations.	*The greatest challenge is to stay motivated. To keep yourself motivated because it is a jungle, you know that after the internship the job market to find another position or even a contract is a jungle. It is up to you to make the most of the situation*. (Andrea, European Parliament)

This experience of existential precariousness spans from those in their early 20s to those in their mid-30s, as the demographics of my informants show (see Table 1). Even though my informants were never formally self-employed, the line between personal and professional life was blurred, as social gatherings acted as a kind of panopticon (Foucault, 2007) in which precarious employees were constantly subject to informal 'job interviews', always hoping to connect with the right person, and always competing for the few good open positions (see '"policing" the social order' below).

But what forms does precariousness take, and what do they tell us about its reproduction? Overall, the inductive model presented below aims to show how belonging to the 'Eurobubble' structures the underlying precarious situation of interns, and the different discursive and material factors underpinning it. Specifically, the reproduction of precariousness is kept together by layers of social 'policing' through constant informal interviews, the discourse of employability, and material conditions of instability that keep out, or expel, outliers. Below I unpack the seven theoretical dimensions that arose from my data analysis (see Figure 3).

First, these actors are immersed in the *Social, cultural, and employment structure*. Second, this regime structures social relations through a constant *'policing' of the social order via continuous, informal job interviews*. Precariousness is then experienced in daily life through *embracing precariousness* (the third dimension) as well as by *enduring precariousness* (fourth). Finally, the tensions created by precariousness both in working and personal life conduct to the fifth dimension, *questioning precariousness*, which can either lead to *rejection and exit* (sixth), thereby 'breaking the wheel', or can be held in check by *depoliticisation* (seventh), thereby 'turning the wheel'.

Social, cultural, and employment structure

This empirical theoretical dimension captures the structuring conditions of precariousness in the Eurobubble in three ways: it demonstrates the role of European institutions as a drawing factor, therefore leading to a high concentration of specialised young professionals for a handful of good positions; it recounts the precariousness enshrined in the contractual arrangements of internships and entry-level positions (often overlapping in practice), such as low security and high uncertainty; and finally, the highly homogenous background of interns and professionals at large in the Eurobubble dictates the degree of precariousness that is acceptable or at least can be endured by interns.

Moving on to consider the data that underpins this dimension, at the centre of the Eurobubble stand the Commission, large consultancy groups that manage most European funds, and think tanks engaged in lobbying and policy making. European institutions control political power, manage funds, and provide job security:

> *For me [...] it's a goal [to] be in the European institutions and to work here. So, I really believe that other people like me want to join the European institutions in the European place here.* (Elena, Think Tank A)

Organisations that manage to stay as close as possible to the Commission[22] enjoy similar benefits: for instance because of their lobbying access or their ability to bid for large tenders (as one informant puts it, those above half of a million euros – Isabella, Consultancy E). Interns, therefore, aim to join consultancies that run for European tenders (managing funds allocated by the Commission to reach its goals), which have the highest income, pay the most, and are among the most competitive places to get into. Others point to positions in the public sector: obtaining an internship at the Commission is highly competitive as you need to go through multiple exams to get hired. In 2020, out of 789 available 6-months, non-renewable, internship positions (the so-called Blue Book), ten thousand people applied. In earlier years it reached more than eighteen thousand[23]. This dimension structures precariousness because of the paucity of 'good' positions, which raises pressure on interns in two ways: high competition, and the spread of a constellation of smaller, gravitating organisations which step in to absorb the demand yet offer more precarious contracts and less valuable experiences.

This applies both at an ideological level, because it represents meaningful jobs that contribute to the European project, and at a practical level, because it is where secure, highly remunerated jobs are situated. For interns and more senior figures in the Eurobubble, those who have secured a position have 'escaped' both working and personal precariousness. An internship at the Commission 'is something that catches the eye, I think, for recruiters, just because they know, because the institutions are famous' (Thea, Think Tank C).

The second structuring force are the contracts themselves. Interns are widely oblivious of their rights before starting (as multiple informants told me when asked if they had gone through employment conditions); however, they seem to acquaint themselves with this knowledge as times goes by. If all internship agreements are short-term by definition, it is common in the Eurobubble to be entitled to either no

salary or merely a daily allowance (slightly above €5 per day was the figure disclosed by Lola, one intern at a legal firm). Informants also said that you are not entitled to holidays (except for bank holidays) for the first year under most contracts drafted under Belgian law. Regardless, the most relevant of the structuring conditions of precariousness coming from contracts is the on-going uncertainty over its renewal or transformation into a permanent one. This is similar to what Leonardi and Chertkovskaya (2017) term 'work as promise': in the short-term interns are required to show their usefulness, their learning, and especially their accumulation of different capital (cultural and social above all). Karl, from NGO B, told me that his '[boss] didn't promise anything but he said that it would make opportunities for future employment potentially easier'. It is only afterwards, in a game of ever moving horizons, that some of these interns can aspire to remain.

> *I mean, the experience is so much more valuable than the money itself. [Interns] would much rather spend three months working for free than going to work in some not-so-good job. People recognise the quality of the internship and that's why companies cannot pay them, because they know that people know how valuable they are.* (Beatriz, Consultancy B)

Organisations in the Eurobubble rely on a range of precarious contracts: university agreements, internship positions, contracts for professional training, self-employment, and in some cases no contract at all. Also, the European institutions use various arrangements: one-off non-renewable contracts, atypical internships (whose conditions are negotiated ad hoc but are often unpaid – as in the case of Ugo and Vincenzo, Consulancy E), situations where members of the Parliament stipulate specific contracts for their interns, and so on. Overall, the vast majority of these arrangements are precarious in most of the areas advanced by Standing (2011), even though some organisations, namely medium and large consultancies, tend to use internship agreement as a steppingstone towards employment (yet with no formal guarantee of being hired and with varying employment conditions). Finally, NGOs and small think tanks are more prone to using extremely precarious contracts with little to no prospect of being employed afterwards, often offering unpaid positions or even resort to volunteering. Most informants attribute this to a lack of funding: 'The budget! [laughs] Yeah, this is what I have heard, that you cannot be paid because of the budget. So probably this is it' (Alina, Think Tank A).

'Policing' the social order: continuous, informal job interviews

The above has a symbiotic relationship with the second dimension: the uniqueness of practices in the Eurobubble (Busby, 2014). Newcomers must be acquainted with the European institutions as they are the 'engine' at the core of the Eurobubble: if you do not know how to navigate them, you are not on the inside. Therefore, the bubble is a place of socialisation, but it is also fragile; newcomers are kept at arm's-length until they learn the ropes (Busby, 2014, p. 109). In this sense, there is a growing consensus (Georgakakis, 2011) that the Eurobubble can be understood as a process of Bourdieusian socialisation (accumulating the necessary capital to gain entry and stay). Those that have achieved senior positions at the core of the Eurobubble are 'gatekeepers', as they sit in hiring committees and to be part of their network is considered a deal-breaker: '[any intern] that did work for [the Commission] will still be better than [other peers]. Because it will be seen as a connection, having there someone you know inside' (Jean, Consultancy A). In particular, this dimension reinforces the idea that you should belong to this environment, you should 'deserve to be there', through a constant call to people to 'market' themselves, inside and outside the workplace. Informants told me that people ask where you work, who you know, what you do, and based on your answers decide if they should continue talking to you:

> *All the conversation, where you are among a group of Eurobubblers [sic], is about work. You are identified through your position, through your post, through your work. 'Where do you work? Which sector? Are you an intern or not?' and 'Oh, I know it. Do you know…?' From there, you socialise, you start connecting.* (Isabella, Consultancy E)

Among the first skills newcomers have to learn is how to network, as this is crucial in all social settings. As the community is small, has its own language, rules and dress codes, young professionals are subject to continuous scrutiny by all other members. Karl, an intern in a smaller and 'critical' NGO, notes:

> *When you are in certain spaces where people obviously work on EU policy, you can hear that they speak almost their own language or discourse. I mean, it is an incredibly complex web of policy procedures, and it requires a lot of specialists. So, you can see that it is very elite, specialised.* (Karl, NGO B)

This is also reflected in the material space occupied and inhabited by the Eurobubble. 'Place du Luxembourg' (commonly referred to as 'Plux') is in front of the European Parliament. In this square each Thursday interns meet (only interns: as you progress, you do not go there anymore, as I witnessed). As such, the social context of the Eurobubble is reproduced through constant 'policing':

> *Many times you're in this stupid bar with guys [sic] that are working with, and someone comes to you because they want to network and you say first I'm working for this company that is working for those DGs that were not the one that's interesting or they don't want to fit in and then you said you're an intern, no one cares.* (Jean, Consultancy A)

So, while drinking a beer in a bar or attending an event on behalf of their organisation, interns meet people that could potentially give them a job, vouch for them, or quickly inform recruiters that they are not to be chosen. It is impossible to see which connections will actually be useful: every connection count, even in intimate or private settings. This is a form of policing in the sense that the spectrum of expectations, behaviours, and places is fairly limited, so there is a tendency towards homogenisation. For instance, command of languages like English, French, Italian, or Spanish can be easily 'tested' when in an email thread or whilst having a beer, conversation switches between them, and some members cannot keep up. As one Italian informant put it:

> *To survive here […] you need to know a lot of languages. No one cares about your pronunciation, but you must be proficient in English, French and a third language. That's the base. Otherwise you are not eligible even for an unpaid internship[.] At times I wrote a long mail in Spanish, just for the sake of testing my [French] peers.* (Claudia, Consultancy C)

The homogeneity of the social setting structures precariousness to the extent that it 'polices' who belongs extremely rigidly, albeit indirectly. The social setting of the Eurobubble is white, middle-class, highly educated, well-travelled, and with a background in European studies or politics (Heath, 2017). For many in this social category, going through a phase of low income and shared housing, as well as being new in town and learning the ropes, is at times hailed as being a positive (see more below in embracing precariousness). But it also turns off prospective interns from less well-off backgrounds, minorities, and more broadly those who do not wish to make such a significant sacrifice:

> *I don't know how you would categorise ethnic minorities, but normally Caucasian is the majority in Europe. It's inevitable, which I can understand. But [I am] the only minority and the only Muslim in the whole room, and normally the people at these networking events are middle-class, middle-aged, male, Caucasian, so I felt very out of place, very self-conscious. It wasn't something that I'd like to do again.* (Olivia, Think Tank A)

Finally, another example is the constant use of acronyms, like the directorates of the Commission (each one is known with one, like DG NEAR). People are expected to know the names of influential think tanks ('Debating Europe', 'Lisbon Council' or 'Friends of Europe') and what their acronyms stand for. During an event, me asking what 'DG HOME' stand for caused generalised humour, and during a non-participant observation at Think Tank A, the office manager distributed a guide to new interns that had to be studied,

with a list of who's who at the European Parliament, a calendar of public meetings, and a list of the main think tanks. He remarked that they had to know it well before attending any networking events. Being connected and knowing who's who in the institutions, consultancies, and think tanks is a must. These conditions structure precariousness to the extent that the daily life of interns becomes a continuous test of the 'human capitals' they have accrued, stretching way beyond that which might be achieved during working hours.

Embracing precariousness

But how do interns experience this type of precariousness in personal terms? It arose quite soon from the data that the lived experiences of precariousness can often be seen as positive and are welcomed. The harsh realities of precariousness and competition find their 'justification' in how individuals embrace them as part of the path to professionalisation (that is, reaching a stable position preferably at the core of the Eurobubble). Interns are wholly invested in the idea of 'employability': they see themselves as responsible for their condition, both for the pauper/absent salaries, and for being a good employee. Gian, who was interning at Think Tank A, put it this way: '[working long hours] happens not because I am pushed to but because I need to finish something by that day, but really nobody pushes me to stay until 19 or 19:30'. Newcomers have to learn to work and prove their usefulness: they offer themselves as interns (at times for free), others rely on university support or bursaries. It is worth noting that the idea of 'employability' is often pushed by universities that require students to do internships (but do not provide much support, let alone financial aid). In fact, internships are seen as a learning process where inevitably some precariousness 'naturally' comes with it.

> *So, I was aware that the chances [after the internship] that they'll offer me a job were not very high. But I wanted to identify [...] what kind of experience they need so that I'll be employable [and able to do] what I need to do […] to be one day offered a job[.] Everybody says that in Brussels, the average person speaks two languages, has two masters degrees [,] but I only have one master's degree. So, I wanted to [...] compare myself. And to become more employable.* (Sonia, Think Tank B)

Interns also enjoy and embrace precariousness as it offers flexibility. They see it as freedom from long-term engagement, the ability to choose what to do afterwards, and the liberty to explore the Eurobubble and beyond. Alina, an unpaid intern, explained that 'this is why I was saying I am grateful[.] Even though I do not get the money I am grateful for the skills and the people I have met, so it is great' (Alina, Think Tank A).

This view is only strengthened by media reports on millennials being flexible and nomadic; by events focussing on employability; by positive narratives about soft, hard, and transferrable 'skills'; and the proliferation of courses on how to build a career that makes a CV look great (which I also witnessed at the 'Politico 2019 Career Fair').

Interns are often gripped by the fantasy of being part of something unique, relevant, and important. Therefore, this dimension captures the widely shared notion of the 'ideal job', where you can develop the ideal connections, and the idealised social status that most interns, perspective and current, admire and hope to achieve. This is the true value of the job, what Suvarierol (2013) labels as 'pride in working for Europe' and of being part of a unique place. According to one trainee at the Commission, 'some people [do all this] to be cool. There is this trend, this fashion, of working for the EU.' (Alice, European Commission). The Eurobubble is the 'cool' place to be:

> *It's funny because in Brussels everybody knows who [Varoufakis, former Greek Minister] is, but outside Brussels he's more like the guy that tried to stand for a Greek rising for five minutes and then he disappeared from the map. But Brussels is always the centre of the debate and it's interesting.* (Karl, NGO B)

Enduring precariousness

Nonetheless, these positive lived experiences clash with a lingering sense of doing a meaningless job, as well as with all the hardships and practical issues faced by most interns. They 'endure precariousness'. First, there are instances where the excitement for working towards grand ideals clashes with the mundanity of European bureaucracy, obscure (offline) social networks, and endless statements of intent that do not clearly translate into actual change. This might beg the question of why bother to endure all the precariousness of such internships if little material change can ever be achieved.

> *The speakers present local and long-term projects, global challenges, and stress the need to act immediately [to secure food supplies in the Global South]. They [...] underline [that] we need to move from 'more food' to 'better food'[.] Overall, there is a clear feeling [in the room] of doing something technical and important, but which will not necessarily have an impact that you can see. A kind of limbo between being on top of what is going on in the world and [...] a feeling of not being able to change urgent things here and now. Therefore, precariousness is not only material, but it is in the scope of your work, all very abstract[.] There is a consciousness that it is hard to explain all this to outsiders, and [of being] entrenched in your bubble/supranational organisation. You are not really a technocrat, but it is difficult to decide what you are as an intern (or what you are training for).* (Field notes, event 'Brussels Briefing 60', February 2020)

Second, the vast majority of my informants told me that they relied on family support to get through their first period in Brussels, which in some cases could be longer than a year. This introduces both a clear barrier

to who can access the Eurobubble and a constraint in the quality of life of young professionals (Heath, 2017). Harsh material conditions are manifold, spanning from bad housing and lack of access to healthcare (see Simola, 2018) to balancing two-jobs (i.e., bartender), accepting breaches of work contract, and at times working over-time or on the weekends. One respondent in the 'Fair Internship Initiative' (2017) stated that 'although I have insurance, I've delayed seeing a doctor because I can't afford the on-the-day payments'.

These issues differ widely depending on the internship (think tanks and NGOs being seen as the worst), yet most interns have to account for periods of inactivity between contracts and all of them have to look for jobs while already doing one (as some informants – Marcela, European Commission; Andrea, European Parliament; Chiara, Consultancy A – put it, as soon as you have an internship, you need to look for the next opportunity). Interns may also be stuck into unpleasant situations that do not lead to actual improvements in their 'employability':

> *You will always have to be the one that brings the modem around. I mean, they actually asked me to bring an internet modem to get fixed, but not for work, the modem from the house of someone senior! It was broken so I had to… Because I was the intern so, 'you go'.* (Andrea, European Parliament)

These insecurities are a source of stress and result in an inability to plan, which creates a material barrier to those who can access or stay in the profession. Yet, these hurdles are mostly downplayed through narratives extolling the virtues of 'embracing precariousness', as well as by the idea of belonging to the Eurobubble, of finally having found a place where everyone is like you, and by becoming a professional in an interesting, if not exciting and meaningful, sector:

> *Chiara (Consultancy A) lives in a 'student' apartment. Clean but small. She has a Polish [...] housemate [.] The kitchen makes a significant contrast to the responsibilities that she lists having, like an adult trapped in the body of a young person. We speak in Italian, but she is fluent in multiple languages. She is [trying] to learn Arabic. Her life is so precarious it shines through. You can see she is detached from her momentary professional role, yet she endures it with the determination of someone that knows that the only way through has to be walked.* (Field notes, March 2017)

Questioning precariousness

Not all these issues go unnoticed, however. It appears from the data that precariousness cannot always be endured without being at least questioned at some point. This dimension and the ones that follow reveal the 'periphery' of the Eurobubble, which is notable for two elements: what is present (few NGOs and associations demanding better internships or cases of atomised solidarity) and what is notably absent

(collective activism). Regarding the former, the hardships faced by interns have led some people to form associations (i.e., 'BiNGO' or 'Interns Go Pro'[24]) demanding better internships and a ban on unpaid ones. There have been three demonstrations and strikes since 2013, as confirmed to by two experts (Barbara and David, respectively from Association of interns' rights A and B) as well as by online materials. The first one, referred to as the 'Sandwich protest', took place in July 2013 in front of the European Parliament. A few dozen people attended during the day where they consumed sandwiches to demonstrate that this all they could afford (see Cafebabel.com, 2013 – other pictures I have retrieved confirm the meagre attendance). In February 2017, the event 'Interns Strike' gathered around 100 people and took place during working hours. It called for a halt of unpaid internships and for the creation of a 'bill of rights' for interns.

These appear to have achieved some results: the EU institutions pledged to no longer support unpaid internships and have also urged all member states to enact a pan-European ban on the practice (Brzozowski, 2020). In addition, some associations have also accepted a 'bills of rights' for interns (for instance, NGO B). Other European institutions have also pledged to no longer use unpaid interns after the campaign was successful (European Youth Forum, 2018). These events, anticipated in the introduction, have received some media attention, as Alina reports (crucially, she did not join any of these):

> *I think [there is this hashtag] for interns to get paid #fairfortheinterns. It's a big deal right now. They had the protest and they had places where the interns went in the streets and said that they want a salary.* (Alina, Think Tank A)

The airing of grievances and demands for change can also be seen in other areas of the media and in various online debates. In a forum on the 'Debating Europe' website, which attracts informed observers on European topics and whose readers are mostly concentrated in the European capital, during a discussion on whether or not unpaid internships should be banned the equivalence to 'slavery' was made 80 times over 720 comments (see Endnote 13). Grievances were also expressed by interns. Some directly compared interns to 'slaves': Claudia (Consultancy C) mentioned that 'there is a Facebook group called "We are interns, we are not slaves"'. Whereas for Alice (European Commission), 'here we choose voluntarily to become slaves'. Other interns, albeit not all, think that something should be done at an institutional level, especially in relation to unpaid or underpaid internships. Marion, an intern at NGO B, offered quite an illustrative example of this:

> *I think it is mostly a change of mindset that should happen. It is really a general thing, because it shouldn't happen only in your organisation but for everyone. As long as you have candidates for free internships, it will continue [not paying interns]. I'm not sure how to resolve it, [maybe through a] specific labour union, but I don't think it's sufficient to reach this goal.* (Marion, NGO B)

Yet these calls tend to exist only on an abstract level: the informants seemed to talk about the situation as something that affected other people, not themselves, even when the very conditions being described applied to them (as in the case of Alina above).

Rejection and exit

The consequences of questioning precariousness can be twofold. They can either lead to a 'break' of the metaphorical wheel that reproduces precariousness, as shown in this empirical dimension, or they can serve to 'turn' it (see next one). This moment is a watershed, which I argue it is largely dependent on the degree of politicisation of the actors involved. Relative to this dimension, 'rejection and exit' can be either 'voluntary' or 'forced'. Interns can actively reject the conditions of the 'game', exiting the Eurobubble to go work for alternative organisations or to change career. Or they might be 'expelled', as it becomes impossible to remain and/or because they are facing unbearable conditions.

The former are interns who are politicised and pursue either a political or ethical agenda. For them, sustaining precarious conditions is not just a negative per se, it is a moral wrong that contributes to social injustice. In some cases, it can also be seen as a poor use of their own time, so they quit in order to join an alternative organisation. Eloise quit her internship at NGO A before it came to an end as she had grown disappointed: 'for me the motivation is [to] participate in actions. That can bring the idea that another politique [sic] is possible and that you have to radically fight against some abuses like collusion'. Similarly, others decide to stay in the Eurobubble but only on the condition of working for NGOs or other critical organisations. Such individuals are often labelled 'altermondialist' ('aspiring to another world', in French). They form what is seen as 'an alter Eurobubble' (Eloise, NGO A). For example, Karl strongly believes that a different Europe and a different Eurobubble can solve actual problems:

> *[The Eurobubble] is like technology[:] it can be used for the good or the bad, but it has incredible potential for good law-making[.] Citizens need to be made more enthusiastic [and] informed more about European policy dynamics, the potential [for] what Europe can be. You get the feeling that when Junker [former President of the Commission] says the Union is worth more than a cup of coffee a day[,] you know, people don't really know why that would be the case.* (Karl, NGO B)

In several instances, however, interns do not reject or try to 'reform' the Eurobubble from the inside, and instead exit from it. For some, there is no point in investing so much effort into such a complex system: 'I am just passing by. I have no intention to do any other internships after this one. I just want to have a real job [sic], so I am not going to look for [interns' associations or unions]' (Emilia, Consultancy C). Others would like to stay, but they are forced out because they face unbearable conditions. For example, Annette was planning to leave NGO B and Brussels due to a lack of resources: 'It's unfortunate that [this internship] doesn't lead me to a job with [NGO B]. [They have no] funding' (Annette, NGO B).

An important distinction here is between those rejecting precariousness and/or deciding to leave the Eurobubble as a 'political' choice and those who are forced out. Whereas the latter has consequences in terms of keeping the Eurobubble homogenous (see discussion below), the former represent an idiosyncratic case: this tiny minority, which exists 'at the margins', has the potential of challenging and possibly even 'breaking' the wheel that reproduces precariousness. Though, of course, their small number and limited bargaining power limits the impact of their actions. Nonetheless, among those who question precariousness, the vast majority neither reject nor seek an exit from the Eurobubble (unless they are forced to do so). To my mind, this is a central point in the process of 'turning the wheel' of precariousness, and the next empirical dimension seeks to explore it.

Depoliticisation

It might be expected from the dimensions outlined above that those grievances result in conflict, demands for change, or at least in a form of resistance. But it is a sense of powerlessness that surfaces from the data, which is closely connected to the idea that associations and even unions cannot do much about the situation. As one informant put it, 'interns approach their situation as you [might] do with an uncomfortable pillow: it bothers you while you use it, but in that moment, there is nothing you can do. The next day, when you could do something about it, you simply forget [about] it as it does not bother you anymore' (Freja, European Commission, field notes).

Notably, interns who arrived in the city after the timing of the strikes seem to be oblivious to any such efforts. For instance, during my second visit to Brussels, multiple interns mentioned the strike of 2017 (but did not attend it); yet in no other round did the interviewees appear to have heard of this action. Resistance, it

seems, fades away. What is more, labour unions do not appear to be engaging with the topic, nor would interns like them to. One informant put it bluntly: 'I just don't think labour unions can help. If they could, I wouldn't be in this situation now' (Andrea, European Parliament).

It seems clear that there is a strong depoliticisation[25] among interns, arguably because of two factors. First, they see themselves as experts on the path to joining the centre of the Eurobubble, so they do not wish to be associated with calls for specific demands or risk being viewed as troublemakers (which goes back to the second dimension and the issue of policing). When I asked how her young colleagues would react if she was to join an interns' strike, an informant commented: 'probably not positive[ly]. Because I am not working that day, it affects the work of the office, but that's also the aim of what I am doing so yeah... [laughs]' (Gian, Think Tank A). Unionisation and formalised forms of solidarity are not seen as viable or appealing (nor do they even exist).

> *But also, and foremost, because failures are seen as an individual's problem, and even embraced as part of this 'rite of passage' (defined this way by Shore, 2000): 'I mean, if you don't want to be an intern forever, don't apply for internships anymore.'* (Marcela, European Commission)

Second, even when they are aware of people leaving the Eurobubble, the narrative used is consistently one of self-responsibility. By framing precariousness as an individual choice, or as an experience forming a key part of success within a competitive environment, interns view stories of 'rejection or exit' as instances of failure, not as a result of wider issues involving injustice or exploitation that should be reformed or overhauled. Claudia and Lars are quite candid in this regard:

> *I have seen people fail[,] people here to stay forever and leaving after less than a year, split between internships and no employment. And this is because [...] they were not able to network, to leave a mark[.] In the end, anyone determined and willing enough to make it, makes it. Bar those that are really dumb.* (Claudia, Consultancy C)

> *I mean, some trainees they come here and they simply realise that this is not for them, they don't like the institutions, they don't like the work, or the structure, or, you know, they don't think it's concrete enough, they want to, you know, do something more hands on, etcetera.* (Lars, European Commission)

This is even though most informants, and interns in general, have a background in politics, and some even come from countries with a long legacy of labour unions and social activism:

> *In my opinion the realistic view is that I don't think [unions] can [...] change many things to be honest [...] I am an intern, I just want a better situation, I just want a better future for me, so if this is the only thing that I can do, yeah, I will do it. But you know, I mean, we are taught how to sacrifice some things. We have alternatives, we might, but it is very difficult.* (Alina, Think Tank A)

This provides a rationale and perpetuates the notion of 'enduring precariousness'. Interestingly, however, this did not appear to be a 'badge of honour' amongst the interviewees, even though in my observations and former experience most senior figures tended to recall their own hardships as interns with pride and nostalgia. In other words, external or peripheral forces challenge the reproduction of precariousness, but neither finds a space to meaningfully impose itself vis-a-vis depoliticisation. Alina concluded:

> *You know, I was talking with someone and I told him that no, I am not getting paid but he said 'what motivates you to get out of the bed and go to work?'. So I thought about it. Yeah definitely, I am not thinking about 'I do not get paid, it is something big', no because that was my sole responsibility, I knew that I am not going to get paid and I kept in mind. I said, 'ok I got to work'. But in my opinion I think that I am doing a good job, a very good job even if I do not get paid, because I do not think about it, but if you think about it I think it might affect you.* (Alina, Think Tank A)

Finally, interns justify, internalise, and reproduce precariousness through a series of narratives and practices. As some informants put it, 'if you do not work like crazy, if you are not something like a workaholic, then it looks like you do not care. I know it is not fair, but we have almost embedded it' (Chiara, Consultancy A). A recurring phrase that appears is the analogy with the state of nature, reminiscent of Thomas Hobbes: 'it is the law of the jungle!' (Pedro, Consultancy D, field notes).

As one expert told me (Association for interns' rights B, 39), as soon as interns break out of the loop of low paid, unstable jobs, and secure a stable position, they seem to buy into this culture of precariousness and do not actively seek to improve the situation for newcomers. This depoliticisation can also be understood by going back to Shore (2000), who also spoke of internships as a 'rite of passage': it can be hard but nevertheless it is commonly perceived as a natural part of the Eurobubble. In conclusion, Daniele captures neatly the relationship between depoliticisation and regime:

> *Problems are felt only until people work for free. You feel them less and less when [you] overcome that phase[.] The issue is that [to do something] you need to be completely external to [the Eurobubble]. I mean, you cannot work [in or with] the institutions and say: 'That and that organisation use unpaid internships, pay little to nothing, etc.'. You just cannot do that, because you are naming and shaming those whom you have or might have business relationships with. It makes no sense [to do it], I mean, for me it is impossible'.* (Daniele, NGO C)

Turning or breaking the wheel? The reproduction of precariousness

The six dimensions above can be grouped into three broader theoretical dimensions, which form the 'wheel' of precariousness' reproduction. The first two, the 'Social, cultural, and employment structure' and

'"policing" the social order: continuous, informal job interviews' pertain to the apical dimension: the *regime structuring precariousness*. The second set, 'embracing precariousness' and 'enduring precariousness', underpin *contextualised self-interpretations of lived precariousness*. Finally, the last three, 'questioning precariousness', 'rejection and exit', and 'depoliticisation' pertain to the *conditions of possibility for emancipation, contesting precariousness*. In the following section, I show how these relate to each other in a circular way, and how this helps in theorising the reproduction of precariousness.

Regime: structuring precariousness

The first theoretical dimension captures the legal and institutional elements that structure precariousness. This is in line with previous literature arguing that non-standard work in general, and precariousness in particular, is enshrined in contracts and organisational forms that rely on a commodification of labour and disposable labour force as much as possible (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017; Spreitzer, Cameron & Garrett, 2017). These structuring conditions are also clearly visible in the material division between stable and well-paid jobs inside, or close to the centre, and the plethora of unstable, insecure ones outside. The regime also structures material space: cities like Brussels become more and more unequal, and more and more divided, between high-end accommodations and neighbourhoods, and low-end, temporary, student-like alternatives (Shore, 2000). This is true even in the case of Silicon Valley, for example.

What is more, this structural uniqueness is maintained through gatekeeping, constant policing, a style of networking that takes the form of continuous informal job interviews, and the development of an 'insiders' language. This is consistent with previous research (Fleming, 2017), but I highlight here the close link between employment precariousness and social precariousness. Precariousness becomes in a sense 'structural' as it is enshrined in the legal, social, and institutional structures of advanced capitalist social systems (Standing, 2011), in this case Brussels (Shore, 2000). This leads to the need for newcomers to adapt and learn, a process which is highly precarious because of the use of short-term contracts, internships, and freelancing. This highly individualised context is, therefore, focused on the accumulation of human capital and to its reproduction in a rigidly defined way.

In summary, the institutions and regulations governing social settings serve to structure social relations, in a manner that ensures the 'policing' of newcomers (Arrow 1, Figure 1), and this process reinforces the former by ensuring homogeneity (Arrow 9).

Contextualised self-interpretations: lived precariousness

This dimension has an impact on subjects prone to precariousness (as in the case of interns, young developers, gig workers). Constant exposure to new experiences, the dream of reaching the top within a field an individual is passionate about, as well as the networking with international peers, leads to a feeling of happiness and enjoyment (Bloom & Cederstrom, 2009; Petriglieri et al., 2018). The exposure to continuous chances to learn something new and, eventually, of becoming employable leads precarious individuals to accept responsibility for their situation and to frame it as a positive challenge to themselves. This is both normalised and amplified by their (oftentimes) privileged background, which can shield these 'insiders' from any immediate negative effects associated with a lack of welfare and security. Precariousness is also embraced by these individuals because they are surrounded by many others who 'made it', both among their peers and especially those whom they see in the local press or holding down official positions.

However, there are many instances where this sense of euphoria is tested. The reality of precariousness 'kicks in' when interns must resort to family support, questioning themselves when confronted with the reality of relatives having to withdraw funds in order to support them. They also endure precariousness when they choose to postpone major life decisions, such as buying property, or when instability reflects poorly upon them within their personal relationships. Yet, these difficulties are alleviated by the positive experiences outlined above, which leads individuals to accept poor conditions and seek to overcome them by working hard and policing others, in doing so exacerbating the level of competition. In summary, individuals move between embracing and enduring precariousness (Arrows 3 and 7, Figure 1) as material and perceived conditions change.

Conditions of possibility for emancipation: contesting precariousness

The material and emotional hurdles stemming from precariousness can, at times, lead individuals to look for alternatives or to make changes. When material conditions become too harsh, when a long sequence of job applications do not result in any job, or when an association fighting for better rights is encountered,

deep grievances arise and push precarious individuals towards the periphery of their social setting (in this case, the Eurobubble). Many disheartened quit, or they are simply unwilling to comply with the status quo. This is particularly true for those in highly specialised settings and coming from privileged backgrounds, as they can rely on good alternatives. Others remain, demanding change and engaging in some form of activism. For instance, by creating small unions, associations, or by voicing their concerns and even starting their own association (Arrow 5b, Figure 1). However, the vast majority do not see any viable alternative; they buy into the notion of individual responsibility and are 'blinded' by depoliticisation (Arrow 5a, Figure 1).

In this way, the 'mechanism' through which precariousness is maintained and reproduced becomes visible. The overarching regime structures social relations based on 'policing' incumbents and imposing precariousness. This in turn structures the lived experience as inherently precarious (Arrow 2, Figure 1). Individuals go through cycles of embracing their status and attempting to enduring it, but grievances can grow so strong as to make it unbearable, which prompts them to seek change (Arrow 4). Some leave, some organise their 'resistance'; however, the conditions necessary to precipitate change are not present, and therefore individuals are forced to rely upon themselves and to focus on becoming more 'employable'. The material effects of policing, the enjoyment of the context, the push towards individualism, the social pressure of peers and families (who have invested in them), but also the homogenous background, leads to a form of depoliticisation that hinders the growth of solidarity and activism (Arrow 6). In turn, precariousness is presented to newcomers as a 'fact of life', which they can either enjoy or endure, and it is socialised through constant policing. This strengthens the status quo, reinforces the hegemonic social structures, and undermines calls for change (Arrow 8).

It is worth underlining the crucial role played by 'depoliticisation' and 'rejection or exit' (Arrows 5a and 5b). As the vast majority of social actors do not ultimately transform their questioning of the lived experience into either rejection of or exit from the Eurobubble, reproduction has the consequence of keeping the social setting even more homogenous (as it is minorities and critical voices that tend to leave). As a result, this reinforces the idea of the Eurobubble as a neoliberal place where market rationality keeps together idiosyncratic views but lacks any self-reflection on its own practices. An example of this is the entrenched belief in the importance of the Single Market (Fougère, Segercrantz & Seeck, 2017). This is the bedrock of

depoliticisation and radical responsibilization (Fleming, 2017). It does not mean there is no pluralism, but there is a lot of self-selection and policing to the extent that very few individuals will want to stick their neck out to espouse critical views - in this case contesting the regime of practices and discourses that structure precariousness.

There and back again: relevance for organisation studies

I began this work by asking why precarious workers seem to both acknowledge the exploitative practices in which they are invested, along with its injustices and inefficiencies (Perlin, 2012; Standing, 2011), and at the same time they shy away from initiatives that could counter them. I have argued that to solve this puzzle it is useful to frame this as a problem of reproduction, focusing specifically on the case of internships as an 'extreme' case of precariousness. I have visualised it as 'wheel': if several management studies have looked at the regime structuring precariousness (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007; Bidwell, Briscoe, Fernandez-Mateo & Sterling, 2013), and others have looked at how precariousness is lived (Cinque, Nyberg, & Starkey, 2020; Fleming, 2017; Moisander, Groß & Eräranta, 2017; Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2019), few have concentrated on politicisation or the conditions of possibility for emancipation (Norbäck, 2021; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2019), and arguably none have proposed an holistic theorisation of the interaction of these together.

This paper makes three contributions. It positions precarious work in the broader debate about precarity beyond employment, providing empirical evidence to the debate on how these arrangements affect both the professional and the private lives of individuals, making their whole life precarious, not just work. Functionalist scholarship on precarious work has overlooked interns as a specific category of in-betweenness, who are neither fulltime employees, nor temporary, part time, or agency workers. Yet internships, being a steppingstone to higher positions, play a central role in 'normalising' and reproducing precariousness. Second, it contributes to our understanding of how precariousness reproduces, filling a gap in current literature which mostly focuses on the causes or on the consequences of precariousness, but not on its holistic social reproduction. In contrast, I show here that expulsions and reproduction are interconnected.

Finally, this paper proposes a more nuanced understanding of the process of depoliticisation of employment relations, not by looking at unionising or worker's solidarity, nor assuming that all individuals

are necessarily uneasy with it – willingly or unwillingly 'exploited'. More precisely, I study how high-skilled, highly precarious employees end up reproducing the status quo through an interpretation of solidarity which is individualised and based on personal networks. Borrowing from political science, I label this step as 'depoliticisation', and I claim that it is a key factor in the 'spin' of the wheel that reproduces precariousness. The actors most likely to 'break the wheel' are those that are politicised, yet material and personal conditions limit the impact of their actions.

Looking at the situation of interns as an extreme case, the 'wheel' shows how precariousness can be justified by a handful of idealised and highly competitive top positions that structure around themselves a self-policing social setting (as in the case of the Eurobubble, Silicon Valley, etc.), which safeguards its own reproduction. Such settings are symbiotic with the presence of precarious work, because the continuous influx of large masses of powerless and eager, as well as qualified, newcomers is justified by the need to become 'employable' and to demonstrate one's usefulness. In this sense, the burden of being qualified for a job is entirely shifted to the intern and employment then becomes a prize that is to be earnt (Bloom & Cederstrom, 2009; Chertkovskaya et al., 2013). Therefore, workers go through cycles of embracing precariousness, as a new and exciting opportunity that offers a pathway to better jobs, and endurance, when they have to locate funds in order to survive or retrain. They rely on hope and personal resources instead of engaging in any forms of solidarity or activism. This finding is in line with Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski (2019), but I expand their view by demonstrating that this phase of enduring precariousness remains hidden, justified, and naturalised.

Thus, I also show that attempts to alter the situation by externals or critical organisations are either ignored or disregarded, as actors are depoliticised. This is crucial for critical and emancipatory understandings of organisation studies, as the consequence is that the process of professionalisation not only remains highly precarious, but it also excludes, or expels, those that do not comply or qualify. In turn, this leads to even more homogenous members and even more hidden processes of endurance. In conclusion, the 'model' aims to show that self-responsibility and the appeal of precariousness, as something that is to be embraced, play just a part in the process of reproducing precariousness, as hope, idealism, constant policing, and material conditions all interact. All this reinforces the existing community and underpins the legitimacy

of the regime, which is defending by those who have survived it - though they do allow for some degree of criticism and calls for reform.

Conclusions

This paper, by studying workers who are in an in-between state (Standing, 2011), examines the case of interns to theorise the reproduction of precariousness. This group present similarities (chiefly, the significant impact on who can and cannot access the profession) but also differs from groups present in creative industries (Siebert & Wilson, 2013) for several reasons. The (aspiring) professionals in European politics, lobbying, and consultancy firms, whom I have looked at, are less likely to be subject to completely unpaid jobs; they aim to work in an industry which has more codified skills, more available job positions, and one that has not been subject to such a pronounced level of casualisation until fairly recently. Their situation is therefore more akin to the case of workers in the likes of Silicon Valley, with the notable differences that IT development is in rapid expansion and that Brussels is more self-contained and less global in terms of its workforce - and of course uses Belgian law, which provides stronger welfare protections for those that eventually escape precariousness.

The conclusions presented above might appear in contrast with the wider European movements that, since the early 2000s, have voiced their concerns about precariousness, have asked for changes, and have re-politicised the debate (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). This shows that interns are a liminal, privileged case, but nonetheless an important one. They are close to policy makers, so their re-politicisation would be important. The case of interns, specifically because they are elite and privileged in some sense, helps to underline how enjoyment and endurance work together in synchrony with structural conditions and the conditions of possibility for change, without focusing on only one of these aspects.

In light of these findings, to imagine ways in which individuals might 'break the wheel' instead of 'turning it', we must look to reintroduce solidarity and unionisation (as exemplified by Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2019), but also look to remove material obstacles to training through subsidies and public policies. The issue might not be flexibility *per se*, but the lack of vision for new and more appropriate forms of social protection. And, certainly, we must seek to limit predatory internships. If this category of precarious

workers were to 're-politicise', were they to begin questioning the basis of precariousness, change could perhaps be introduced on a broader level, alternatives might be envisioned, and fairer formats devised.

The current debate on the implications of precariousness in Western job markets, and of employer-employee relationships in particular, highlight its negative consequences, especially for young individuals with little to no job experience. Despite these issues, these employment forms continue to proliferate, and we struggle to make sense of how they reproduce. In this study I have suggested how precariousness reproduces, with the hope of offering ways to devise fairer alternatives. This work also responds to the call for more studies on international organisations, and on the European Union in particular, by organisational theorists such as Murdoch (2015).

The Eurobubble arguably represents an interesting and extreme case. I acknowledge that a limitation of this study is its focus on the West, whereas a broader view is needed, as highlighted by Munck (2013) in his critique of Standing's 'precariat' (2011). I also acknowledge that further studies should aim to better capture interns at the 'border' of the Eurobubble, or within any problematic social settings. For instance, I have tried to bring together as many voices as possible from interns who have either left or are working in critical NGOs. Future research might focus on these organisations in particular. Finally, it shall be recognised that the Covid-19 pandemic may have significantly changed some of these dynamics, possibly for the better. Certainly, it will be important for scholars to give attention to this in the future.

Chapter Three.

The Grand Challenge of Precariousness: a Review[†]

Alessandro Niccolò Tirapani

Abstract

While research in organisation studies often works under the assumption that labour relations are managed through standard work arrangements, a growing body of evidence shows that this might not be the case. Temporary employment, casualised contracts, and the gig economy are all examples of new types of work organisation. Although many agree that standard work is receding, much less is known about what is substituting it. Responding to this, I argue that precariousness can be understood as a grand challenge. To reduce its complexity, tackle its uncertainty and improve its evaluation, I categorise current knowledge into studies of 'precariousness of work' and of 'lived precariousness'. To capture how the positive narratives surrounding it can coexist with its dire negative consequences, from public health as well as for inequality, I also advance the idea of 'received precariousness': the material and perceived conditions that structure individuals as having an employable *persona*. I explain that precariousness can be both an opportunity to achieve freedom, and as an exploitative threat, depending upon contingent social and personal factors. By problematising multiple bodies of literature, this paper seeks to provide organisational scholarship with the tools to face the complex grand challenge of precariousness, appraising both the positive and negative aspects of these new work arrangements.

[†] This version of the paper was submitted to the *International Journal of Management Reviews.*

Introduction

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have been marked by a series of economic and social 'crises', which have fuelled a widespread sense of social and existential insecurity. 2020 has been no exception, with the pandemic of Covid-19 eliciting debates on inequality, 'essential workers', and public health. Tackling this, scholarly work surrounding the 'Uberisation' of work (Fleming, 2017, Srnicek, 2017) has discussed (Spreitzer, Cameron & Garrett, 2017) both its negative consequences (Bapuji, Ertug & Shaw, 2020; Benach et al., 2014), and its potential as a positive, freedom-enhancing opportunity (Hoedemaekers, 2017; Petriglieri et al., 2019).

Academics have mostly used two overarching labels: 'non-standard' work (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007) and 'precariousness' (Kalleberg, 2009; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017, Standing, 2011). Authors using the former argue that organisations rely less on employment characterised by permanent contracts, work performed on-premises and under direct hierarchical control. Illustratively, 11% of US workforce was nonstandard in 2005 (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007), and, by 2019, more than 10% of all European Union workers had a temporary contract, often shorter than 12 months (European Commission, 2018, Prosser, 2016). Similar trends are visible in Asia (Choi, 2018; Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013) and in the Global South (Lee & Kofman, 2012; Munck, 2013). This has been considered the eclipse of 'standard work', galvanising research on its causes and consequences.

Thus, non-standard work can be incorporated within the broader concept of 'precariousness'. Originally developed in sociology[26], it is a consequence of social orders based on individualisation, uncertainty, insecurity (Giddens, 1991; Lorey, 2015) and unsafety (Bauman, 2000; Butler, 2006). Emerged at the end of Fordism (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Lewchuk, 2017), its ascension has been associated with globalisation, technological innovations (Han, 2017), and the neoliberal ideology (Harvey, 1989) – epitomised as the "commodification of everything" (Wallerstein, 2011).

Precariousness has been translated in organisation studies and sociology of work in multiple, often incoherent ways. As it presents both positive (e.g., flexibility) and negative (e.g., higher morbidity rates among workers) aspects, and as it involves multiple levels (from legislators to organisations to individuals), to date we lack an overarching theorisation able to capture precariousness both as epiphenomenon of labour

relations, and as an existential condition. This work argues they shall be accounted for holistically to fully grasp its antecedents, consequences, and possible solutions.

For these reasons, precariousness can be understood as a grand challenge (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi & Tihanyi, 2016): that is, a global problem involving a wide range of stakeholders, whose solution would alleviate significant social problems while spurring innovations, yet being extremely hard to solve due to high complexity, uncertainty and 'wicked' interdependencies. Formally, precarious work is considered a grand challenge by the United Nation in the 'Sustainable Development Goal' 8.8, which aims to "promote [..] full and productive employment and decent work for all", and to "protect labor rights and promote safe and secure work [for] those in precarious employment" (United Nations, 2021). However, precariousness is a wider phenomenon that goes beyond the mere sphere of work; therefore, it can be here categorised as a 'complex grand challenge' (Brammer et al., 2019), given the focus on a specific region: Western countries[27] (Rodgers, 1989). Consequently, the urgency of this work is underscored both by the sheer amount of workforce in this kind of employment and by the dire negative consequences of precariousness: from widening inequalities (Bapuji, Ertug & Shaw, 2020) to its adverse impact on health (Alberti et al., 2018; Western et al., 2012).

To capture it, I review the literature in organisation studies, sociology, labour relations, and public health, dividing the debate in two 'macro' categories: studies of the 'precariousness of work', and of 'lived precariousness', which looks at recent perspectives on how individuals experience and deal with precariousness. My argument is that only by studying them together we can grasp the full extent of this grand challenge. I then synthetise the two borrowing Ferraro, Etzion and Gehman's understanding of grand challenges (2015), showing how precariousness poses complex, uncertain, and evaluative challenges. In doing so, this review returns an image of precariousness as a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced either to a positive, functionalist opportunity for organisational and personal flexibility, nor to a mere mechanism of exploitation caused by neoliberal governmentality. To capture it, I conclude advancing the concept of 'received precariousness', arguing how it can be both positive and negative depending on structural and contextualised conditions. Hence, this review aims to unpack this grand challenge (1) by clarifying the multiple angles of precariousness, to reduce its complexity; (2) by understanding the conditions that aggravate it via proposing 'received precariousness', to tackle its uncertainty; and (3) by

elucidating different perspectives that lead social actors to receive precariousness sometime positively and sometimes negatively, to improve evaluation.

Table 7 - Dimensions of precariousness

Category	Conceptions	Background	Causes	Consequences	Seminal contributions
Precarity*	An ontological condition of capitalism and neoliberalism	Sociology; Political theory	Globalisation; Neoliberalism	Atomisation of society; Precarity as human condition	Bourdieu (2007); Harvey (2007); Lorey (2015)
Precariousness of work	A way of organising labour and employment relations	Management; Industrial relations; Public health	Destandardisation; End of internal labour markets	Lower income; Socio-economic inequality; Poor public health;	Ashford, George & Blatt (2007); Connelly & Gallagher (2004); Kalleberg & Vallas (2017); Standing (2014)
Lived precariousness	A daily experience of uncertainty and insecurity, where personal and professional life overlap	Sociology of work; Psychoanalysis; Critical management studies	Commodification of labour; Individualisation; Human capital theory	Hegemonic narratives of employability; Radical responsibilization	Chertkovskaya et al. (2013); Bloom (2015); Boland (2016); Fleming (2014, 2017)

** In the conclusions of thesis, I provide a detailed explanation of the concept of precarity.*

Methodology

Responding to the types of knowledge revolving around precariousness and to capture its complexity as a grand challenge, I have adopted a multidisciplinary approach. I review the literature, problematising it (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011) whilst retaining employment as the centre of attention. Methodologically, I have surveyed the literature through an iterative approach, divided in three phases: *exploring*, *assembling*, and *filtering*[28].

The *exploratory* phase started from a primary range of papers revolving around seminal contributions, namely Kalleberg (2009) and Standing (2011), identified as the most referenced primary sources. I explored reviews in the main outlets, like 'Academy of Management Annals', 'International Journal of Management Reviews', and the 'Annual Reviews' series, as I aimed to appraise and document what we already know

about precariousness. At this point, I realised that there seemed to be a consensus around the end of 'standard work arrangements', albeit with serious divergences on what this meant. A plethora of studies using similar labels for different things, or different labels for the same phenomenon, emerged. At this point, around 100 sources were collected, including books, editorials, and reports.

I subsequently *assembled* the puzzle by surveying sources across paradigms (Willmott, 1993a). I have identified four main disciplines: organisation studies; sociology; industrial relations; and public health. The first illuminated what our field has studied; sociology allowed me to extend the view to the relationship between neoliberalism and precariousness; industrial relations returned studies on precariousness as a problem of labour relations; and finally, public health provided key sources and studies on the starkest consequences of precariousness, especially on vulnerable groups. Psychology and anthropology also emerged. I then compiled a list of all the major journals in these fields and systematically searched in 'Web of Science', 'Google Scholar', and the relevant journal webpages for the following keywords: 'precarious/ness'; 'casual/ised'; and 'non-standard', alone or coupled with 'work', 'job(s)' or 'employment'. For the search on public health, I have also consulted an expert to initiate me.[29] In conclusion, 251 sources have been collected and categorised in an Excel database. A full list of results is provided in the annexes.

In the final phase (*filtering*), I narrowed down the literature following multidisciplinary problematisation, selecting the papers to be included based on a set of principles. These encompassed the discipline (organisation studies, industrial relations, sociology, etc. – see graph 1), the term used ("precarious work", "temporary", "causal", "flexible" employment, etc.), the type of analysis, and the ontological stance. I concluded by structuring the different debates in literature coupling together disciplinary differences and ontological stances, with the goal of capturing precariousness as a holistic phenomenon that is neither a mere employment issues nor an abstract sociological concern. The final categorisation offers studies that elucidate precarious work in its different forms and studies of precariousness as a lived experience, including the broader political ontology of 'precarity' (see also endnote A). Following this iterative process, 110 key sources were eventually selected for inclusion in this review. See graph 1 and tables in annexes.

Precariousness of work

Defining and mapping

Standard and nonstandard work

Standard employment arrangements can be defined as permanent work for an organisation that is performed through high physical proximity, high administrative control, long temporal attachment, and with welfare protections (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007). Whilst normally identified with Fordist organisations, a key issue with such a definition is that this ideal type has never been true for a large part of Western and global workforce (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008), chiefly because some social groups were excluded (e.g., by gender, ethnicity, or skills required) and because several of these tenets had already disappeared by the Twentieth century (i.e., with the rise of part-time work, working from home, agency work, etc.).

Owing to this, scholars have tried to collect clearer definitions and taxonomies of non-standard work. Cappelli and Keller (2013) limit their study to only paid, formal work, dividing economic work into two streams: *employment work* and *contract work*, the first assuming direct control of the organisation on the worker, and the second its absence. For them, standard employment arrangements would then be limited to the first category. These two limitations resonate with several sources (Vosko, 2010): they look at non-standard work from an administrative (contractual or hierarchical angle) or employment perspective, and much less so from a purely organisational one (e.g., what do managers or upper echelons consider as non-standard work, or how to implement it). The literature from the latter has mostly considered flexible work from a strategic perspective (Cobb, 2015; Lin, 2016; Meuris & Leana, 2018; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010).

If there is an agreement concerning the 'end' of standard employment arrangements, much less can be said on what has substituted it. Exemplarily, Cappelli and Keller argue that "high-wage IT contractors in nonstandard work have better jobs than low-wage fast-food workers in full-time employment" (2013, p. 575). Additionally, formal arrangements and economic work are insufficient for capturing the complexities of current labour relations, as a major milestone in standard employment relationships consisted in winning all-encompassing labour protections beyond mere wages (Bosch, 2004). This is crucial as it shifts the focus towards power relations, overarching employment conditions, and how secure workers feel. For this reason,

academics in sociology, and recently in management, have increasingly adopted 'precariousness' as a better term for understanding non-standard working arrangements.

From nonstandard work to precariousness

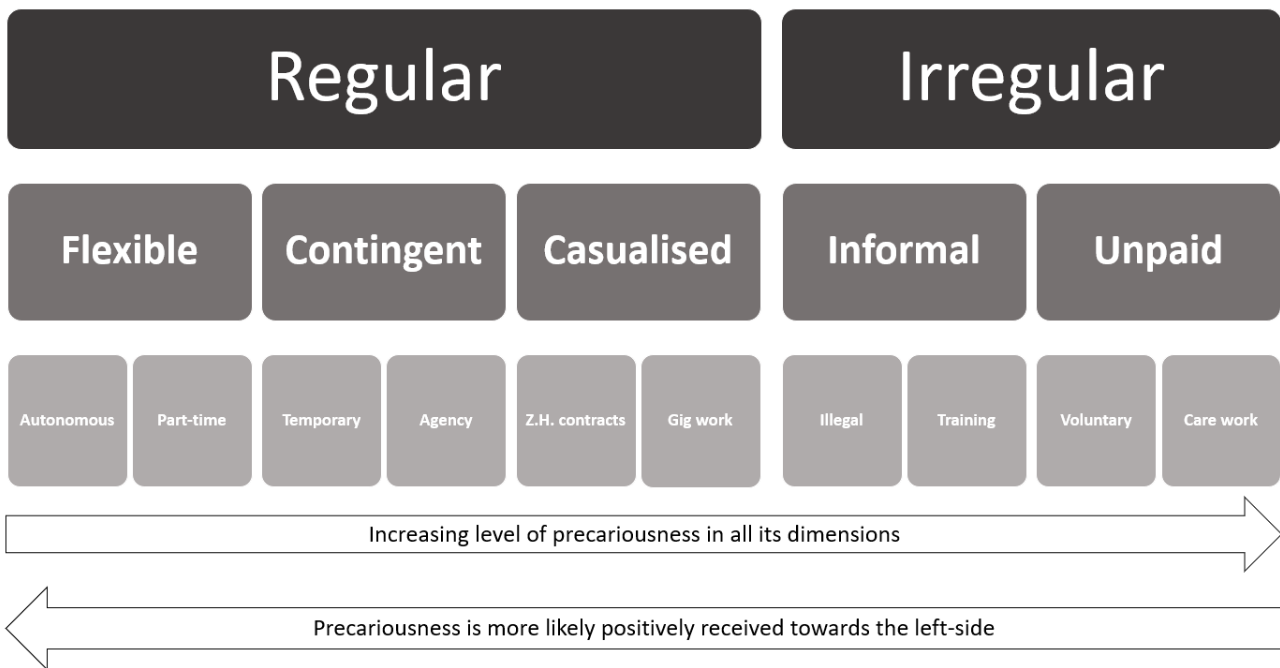
Kalleberg and Vallas define precarious work as "uncertain, unstable, insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections" (2017, p. 1; see also Kalleberg, 2009). This takes into consideration not just the formal or contractual aspects, but also the broader impact of diluting the employment relationship. *Uncertainty* captures the extent of knowing the quality or intensity of the job performed and the relationship with the organisation; *instability* captures how undetermined workloads, schedules, and work-life balance arrangements are; finally, *insecurity* captures how undetermined the renewal of contracts is (or even in the stipulation of one), with material, professional, and economic consequences. In addition, their definition captures to what extent workers are protected by welfare provisions, as well as how much they shall invest in equipment, training, and networking. Work-life balance provisions and care work also fall into this last category. This expands earlier, narrower understandings.

As an example of ideal types based on the literature (e.g., Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020; Prosser, 2016), we can think of a classic full-time, hired middle manager in a Fordist Western European company, versus a (formally) self-employed gig worker for an app in the USA[30]. As I will show, precariousness work constitutes a spectrum; it is more complex and often sits in-between the two putatively 'ideal' types. Completely *un*precarious work arrangements may have never existed, and certainly not for all social categories (Bidwell et al., 2013), whereas even the most extreme cases of precariousness still present some degree of protection and security, not least in gig work (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020).

A taxonomy of precarious work

Assessing the mere contractual arrangement is insufficient for capturing precariousness and to understand how it reproduces inequalities through economic insecurity (Western et al., 2012). Standing (2011) advances the term 'precariat' to argue that precariousness can only be captured by looking both at macro-factors (e.g., legislations), and at meso or micro factors (i.e., quality of jobs, unionisation, training, and income security).

Figure 4 - Types of precarious work



Compounding these insights, I present here a taxonomy of precarious work constructed as forms that it takes in terms of employment relations. I summarise them in three forms of 'regular' employment (*flexible*, *contingent*, and *casualised work*), and two of 'irregular' employment (*informal* and *unpaid*). The former captures work that is within the law, remunerated, and formalised; the latter is outside of the law or performed outside of the 'economic domain'.

Flexible employment can take two forms. Flexible careers define points of exit and entry in the job market by workers (McDonald, 2018; Tomlinson et al., 2018) and affect precariousness, as it is uncertain if it will be possible to re-enter. Flexible work, instead, is defined as "employment-scheduling practices that are designed to give employees greater control over when, where, how much, or how continuously work is done" (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018, p. 5). From a functionalist perspective, it is the least precarious of all, as it is the form that quasi-standard arrangements take when the requirements of physical proximity or administrative control are relaxed (e.g., part-time work and home-office arrangements). Under this label fall high-skilled, high-income, specialised independent consultants or freelancers (Cárdenas & Villanueva, 2020).

Contingent work can be defined (Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Connelly & Gallagher, 2004) as the lack of a long-term contract and by the uncertainty of hours worked. Contingent work is more precarious than flexible

work[31], as workers do retain some job security in the short-term, some certainty in the workload, benefitting from welfare and workplace protection. However, these workers are highly uncertain about their identity: they lack access to training and are not endowed with a longer-time career vision. Examples are (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004) agency work (the use of intermediary organisations to outsource labour needs); independent contractors (stipulating *ad hoc* contracts within the organisation); in-house, direct-hire temporary arrangements; and seasonal hires.

Casualised work is defined as "a precarious [..] form of employment [..] deprived of most standard benefits, rights and forms of protection" (Campbell & Burgess, 1997, p. 5 – see also Campbell, 1996), with "no guarantee of a set number of hours [..] nor any redundancy or termination entitlements" (Mooi-Reci & Wooden, 2017, p. 1066). Casualised work is perhaps the strongest form of precarious work among the 'regular' ones (Lowry, 2001). Workers are seldom even categorised as employees, experiencing high levels of insecurity, instability, and uncertainty: they often rely heavily on family and social support and are the most vulnerable, especially if they are part of a minority. They are the most prone to health issues (Boufkhed, 2019). Prime examples of casualised work are gig work (Curchod et al., 2019; Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020), freelancers with low income, and workers in creative industries.

Regarding 'irregular work', two categories emerge from literature: *informal* and *unpaid*. The first (Muntaner, Solar et al., 2010; Julià, Belvis, et al., 2019) encompasses illegal work (e.g., performed by illegal migrants, illegal or highly stigmatised, such as in the case of sex workers) and training (e.g., internships). The second is a broad category, which includes voluntary and care work (Grant-Smith & McDonald, 2018). In this review, I do not dwell on these categories. They nevertheless represent a significant part of the precarious workforce, suffering acute rates of insecurity, vulnerability, and morbidities (Vives et al., 2013).

In summary, I define 'precarious work' as work that is non-standard and characterised by some degree of uncertainty, instability, insecurity, and vulnerability, even if subjectively perceived. These dimensions are 'moderated' by the quality of social conditions (labour markets and national employment regulations), contingent employment conditions (job, work, and skill reproduction security), how guaranteed income is, and unionisation. Finally, the social and personal backgrounds mitigate or enhance precarious work (Campbell & Price, 2016). These factors chiefly include social ties, family support, one's educational level, ethnicity, citizenship, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and health status.

Antecedents

Systemic

Sociologists argue that the rise of globalisation and neoliberalism (Harvey, 1989, 2007) has led to the privatisation of the commons, which reinforces precariousness given the lack of public resources to fall back on (Sassen, 2008). A manifestation of these has been the deregulation of job markets, global competition and an increase in the power of financial instruments (Bidwell et al., 2013). This process has been labelled the 'commodification of labour' (Carr, 2016; Greer, 2016; Rubery et al., 2018), a break from the previous welfare state: "the essence of [de-commodified labour relations was] its substantive protections against a pure market relationship" (Rubery et al., 2018, p. 510). Flexible labour policies are considered antecedents of precarious work in different economies beyond the US, such as the financialised UK, the manufacturing Germany (Benassi, 2016), or the services-based Spain (Arrizabalo, Pinto & Vincent, 2019). Summarising, there is a consensus behind the argument that liberal labour policies, insecurity, and poverty have been the main drivers of precariousness in the West (Gutierrez-Barbarrusa, 2016)

Organisational

Organisations also contribute to precariousness. The rise of economic views of the firm, based on a need for competitiveness as markets opened up internationally, has led to a hegemony of an American and Anglo-Saxon view of organisations (Willmott, 1993b), prioritising shareholders' value maximisation over workforce and social welfare (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007). Concretely (Bidwell et al., 2013), organisations have endorsed outsourcing, 'agility', flexibility and the 'knowledge economy', focusing on immaterial skills. They adopted shorter contracts and shorter tenure, especially for men, often relying upon contingent work while also adopting performance-linked pay, shrinking fringe benefits, and shifting risks of welfare provisions to workers (i.e., contribution plans).

Unionisation has also declined, thus shifting bargaining power toward organisations (Bidwell et al., 2013). In fact, the 2008 financial crisis has been a trigger which has aggravated precariousness by building on already-weakened labour protections. For Pulignano (2017), the main cause of precariousness can be identified in the shift of European labour policies from a 'social' Europe to a 'market' Europe, therefore

infusing welfare and social protections with market principles (see also Fougère, Segercrantz & Seeck, 2017; Mai, 2017; Prosser, 2016; Vallas & Prener, 2012)

Individual

At individual level, precarious work has been mainly driven by three forces: higher mobility of labour; demand for more meaningful jobs; and demand for work-life balance. Theoretically, Connelly and Gallagher (2004) have surveyed four theories used to explain the causes of precarious work and what perpetuates it. *Social exchange theory* argues that precarious workers assume reciprocity for the commitment and effort put into their work, so precariousness is postponed as an abstract problem mitigated by the belief that efforts will be reciprocated. *Social comparison theory* explains precarious work by suggesting that peer-to-peer pressure and evaluation plays a key role in institutionalising it. *Social capital theory* postulates that precarious workers might find the security they lack on-the-job in their network, which could be personal (i.e., family and friends providing financial and immaterial resources) or professional (i.e., developing a portfolio of clients or relying on networks of solidarity). Finally, *expectancy theory* is future-oriented, and explains precarious work by arguing that workers postpone stability and security on the assumption that they are accumulating capital to be invested in the job market later.

Social & Technological

The social antecedents revolve around two main changes: the 'end' of the traditional family (a breadwinner white male part of a heterosexual married couple) and the connected rise of women's, LGBT+'s and minorities' demands. Since the 30s, non-standard work has moved from being a 'problem' of minorities to one affecting almost any social groups (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007). As these conditions have changed in the 70s and 80s, workers' preferences have changed as well: flexibility and *ad hoc* arrangements accommodate for new family and social forms, as well as for gender 'needs' (e.g., increased female workforce).

Finally, technology has radically changed, altering labour relations and opening the possibility for work to be done remotely and independently, or to be fully automatised. The rise in computational power with internet has called for a faster pace in innovation and fast adaptation. Therefore, nonstandard and precarious work has become feasible and easy to implement (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020).

In conclusion, the sum of these factors has led to *the end of internal labour markets* (Bidwell et al., 2013): entering a company granted a certain level of security and companies internally. Before the waves of liberalisation of the 1980s, job markets were balkanised, companies need less often new skills nor to adapt fast, and there was little 'free market' for labour. There were nonetheless 'dual markets': minorities and non-skilled workers were much more precarious and unable to enter these silos of employment. Yet, the changes listed above mean that internal labour markets are not sustainable anymore (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007).

Consequences

Systemic

The sum of these factors has led to "the collapse of the direct salary, but also the indirect one" (Arrizabalo, Pinto & Vincent, 2019, p. 281), through the limitation of welfare entitlements and the liberalisation of temporary, casualised and self- employment. Yet this has also elicited protective responses (Kalleberg and Vallas, 2017). Some countries (e.g., Scandinavian) have developed what is called *flex security*: allowing organisations to hire and fire more easily, but also devising new forms of welfare. Others have embraced *workfare* – that is, tying welfare and unemployment protections to participation in programs of proactive job search (i.e., Koumenta & Williams, 2019, in the UK; Picot & Tassinari, 2015, for Italy). Responses have also stemmed from *court rulings*, triggered by precarious workers (Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). These solutions, nonetheless, raise the significant issue of limiting action to older legislation which is often not suited to new forms of employment and provides only temporary solace (see also Prosser, 2016).

This is relevant because the consequences of nonstandard and precarious work are rather pressing upon societies, organisations and, above all, workers. As shown, organisations shape inequality because they are the structure within which employment takes place, and the end of internal labour markets has caused a withdrawal of organisational protections not matched by State welfare protections (Amis, Munir, Lawrence, Hirsch & McGahan, 2018; Bapuji, Ertug, & Shaw, 2020; Pfeffer, 2016; Suddaby, Bruton & Walsh, 2018).

Organisational

We can identify four main organisational consequences of precarious work (Bidwell et al, 2013): (1) fading sense of belonging, leading to a crisis of organisational identity (Cappelli & Keller, 2013); (2) use of performance pay to outsource risks, leading to higher economic inequalities; (3) commodification and

outsourcing of work, with negative effects on minorities (Carr, 2016; Rubery et al., 2018); (4) work-life-balance measures, which had mixed effects, negatively influencing minorities and women. These factors lead organisations to contribute to inequality, a crucial grand challenge (Bapuji, Ertug and Shaw, 2020): by lowering wages; by adopting precarious employment practices that hinder opportunities for wealth accumulation; by using philanthropy that diverts funding from the public to private and reinforces existing inequalities; and by doing institutional work to normalise precariousness. Additionally, Scheuer (2015), using the case of Denmark, shows that organisations enhance precariousness by cutting non-salary endowments (e.g., worst retirement conditions), use higher variable work schedules, paid less holidays and grant less access to in-job training. Taken together, non-salary aspects of precariousness matter, because they have a long-lasting impact on employees' financial and human accumulation of capital (which lead to further inequality).

A recent form of precarious work in organisations is the gig economy (Srnicek, 2017). Its high precariousness stems from lack of formal employment, little or no control over workloads, and no access to collective bargaining (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020). Kellogg, Valentine, and Christin (2020) argue that platforms use algorithms to achieve six goals: "to *direct* workers, by restricting and recommending, [to] *evaluate* workers, by recording and rating, and [to] *discipline* workers, by replacing and rewarding" (p. 367, emphasis added). Through processes of quantification, gig work organisations exasperate precariousness by transforming personal and professional information in data, shifting power from individuals to organisations (Han, 2017; Moore, 2017; Williams, 2018; Zuboff, 2019).

These organisational practices enhance both material and perceived precariousness, as workers are depauperated of the classic instruments of control that alleviate uncertainty, instability and insecurity. However, platforms also shift power and control in favour of other stakeholders, who can now afford goods and services at a lower rate and squeeze workers' rights and profits through transparency and market mechanisms (Curchod et al., 2019). In sum, workers end up being loyal to their *job*, not to their *company* (Hassard & Morris, 2018), leading to a problem of 'organisational citizenship' (Cappelli & Keller, 2013).

Individual

The problems of precarious work have lasting consequences at individual level, termed '*scarring effects*' (Mooi-Reci & Wooden, 2017; Vono de Vilhena et al., 2016; Witteveen, 2017). Even workers who manage to leave precarious employment still feel the personal and economic consequences for years: the average 'wage penalty' for casual employment in the US is 15.4% (Mooi-Reci and Wooden, 2017). This effect is biased against employees that are low-skilled, have not graduated, and have worse personal or health conditions (Witteveen, 2017).

How do workers deal with precarious work? Some choose precarious arrangements for personal reasons (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004), such as to learn valuable skills, accumulate experience, build credentials, and to earn additional income. This research shows that choosing part-time or contingent work, as opposed to being forced, is correlated with higher levels of satisfaction and commitment. Others might be resigned to their condition, leading to an institutionalisation of precariousness (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017). For instance, there is a dichotomy in the case of 'bad jobs' (Kalleberg, 2013; Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016) like shop-floor retail employees: higher-class people see it as a CV-enhancing steppingstone, whereas lower-class people choose it out of need, get stuck, and are eventually crowded out from 'good jobs'.

Health

A further consequence of precariousness can be identified in its health effects, mostly negative (Muntaner, Chung et al., 2010; see Boufkhed, 2019, for a comprehensive review). Scholars in public health have studied precarious work looking at the social determinants of all types of morbidities (Benach et al., 2007; Julià, Vanroelen, et al., 2017; Vives et al., 2010). This crucial aspect is at best tangentially studied in organisation theory and sociology, yet it should be acknowledged for its profound impact on individuals and, specifically, on vulnerable social groups. Moreover, this affects precariousness as that the mere use of type and length of contract is an unsuitable measure for precariousness and its consequences, since it obscures hidden (yet correlated) social, economic, and individual factors (Julià, Belvis, et al., 2019).

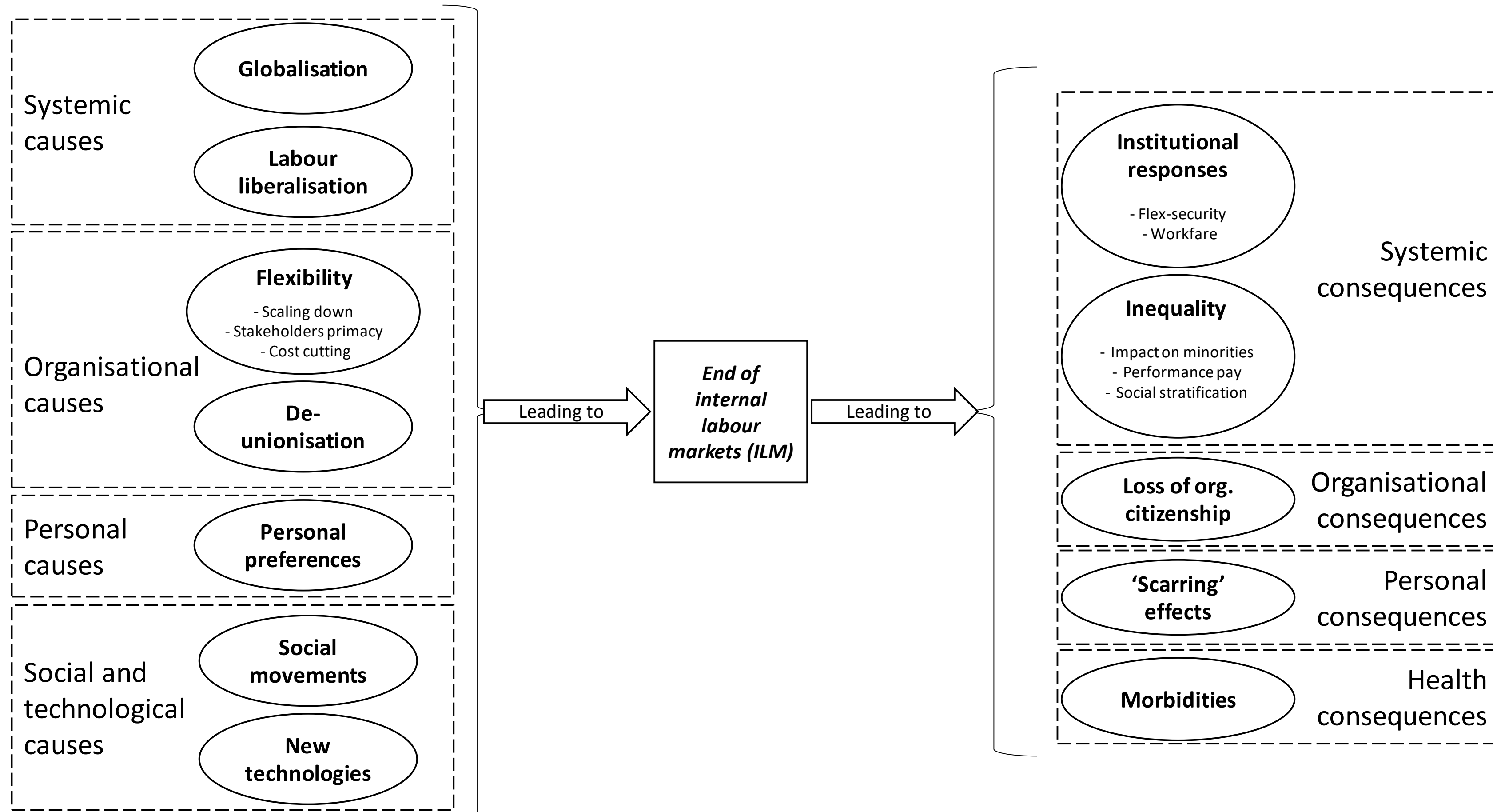
For instance, the fear of not receiving future contracts – induced by refusing current workload proposals – damages freedom and work-life balance among precarious workers, and female contingent ones report the worst perceived health condition (Connelly and Gallagher, 2004; Davis and Hoyt, 2020). The *American*

Journal of Industrial Medicine (Hurtado et al., 2017; Keuskamp et al., 2013) details the negative impact on health of precarious work, including increased rate of physical and psychological aggressions by co-workers and line-managers. In their review of public health and precarious work, Quinlan, Mayhew, and Bohle (2001) claim that "76 studies found precarious employment was associated with a deterioration in occupational health and safety in terms of injury rates, disease risk, hazard exposures" (p. 335). They found downsizing and outsourcing to be the most problematic practices.

Other scholars report that atypical contracts are correlated with poorer self-reported health and with higher incidences of depression and disease (Virtanen et al., 2003) and that permanent workers with poorer mental health are more likely to be in temporary employment in the future (Dawson and colleagues, 2015). These effects are stronger for women and minorities, like migrants (Cayuela et al., 2018; Vives et al., 2013). Precarious work also increases the risk of suicide (both attempts and ideation), an effect stronger for workers with poorer education and lower socio-economic status (Min et al., 2015), and lowers access to hospitals and other medical care, like dentists (Min et al., 2016).

In conclusion, precarious work has been studied as a consequence of non-permanent employment, often performed away from the premises of the organisation and with limited organisational control. Although the organisational literature often considers only 'non-standard' work (focusing on contracts and other formal arrangements), this label is too broad. The adoption of the concept of precariousness, instead, captures the complexity of uncertainty, instability, and insecurity – as well dwindling unionisation and welfare protections. However, this has yet-again proved to be an elusive term: precariousness can be both objective and subjective (the latter being much harder to assess), while multiple forms of labour arrangements can present different forms of precariousness. In the next section, I tend to this limitation.

Figure 5 - Causes and consequences of precariousness of work



Lived Precariousness

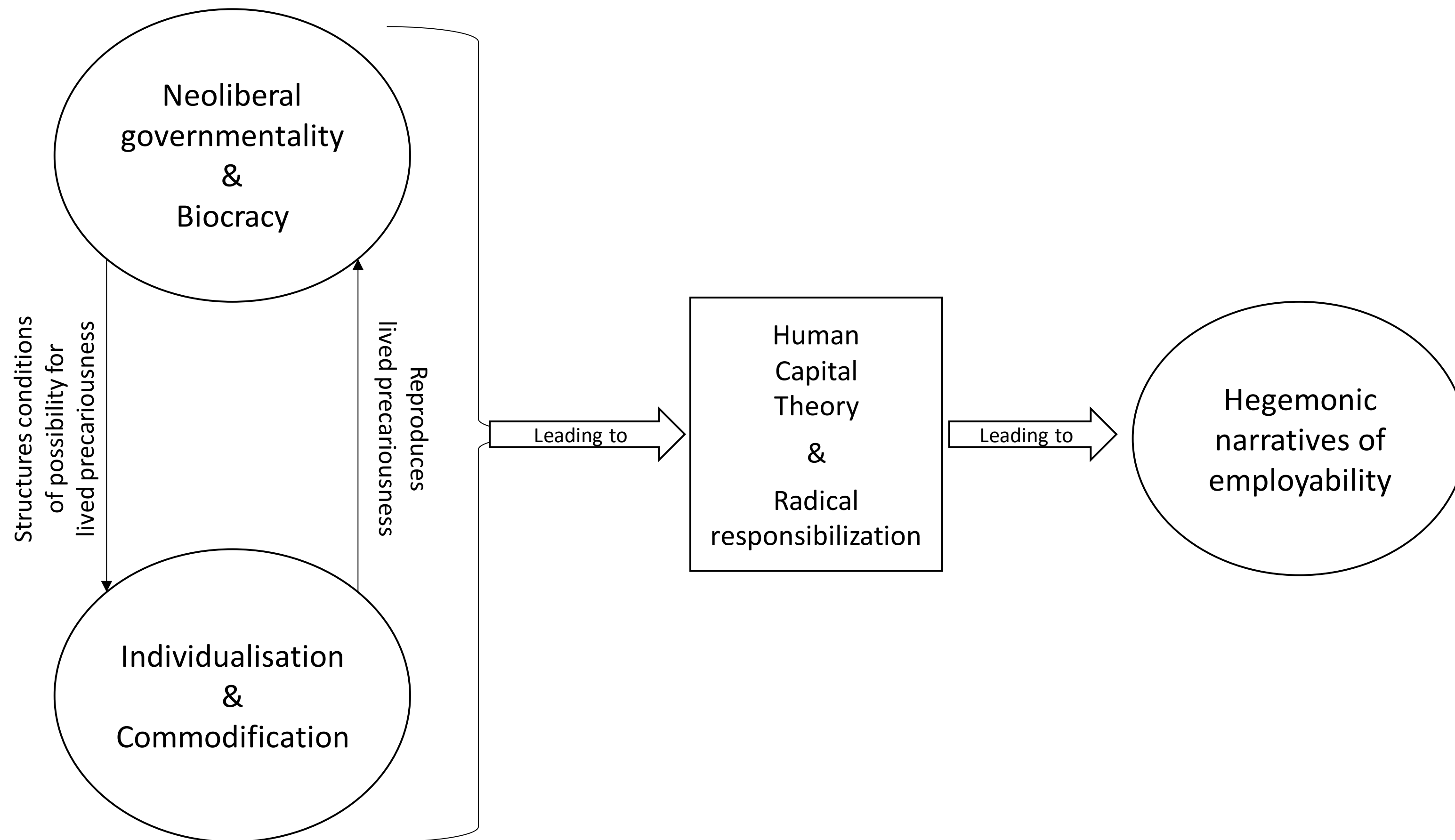
'Glamourised' discourses of non-standard work often conflate it with jobs that pay a premium (e.g., consultants), meaning that the resulting precariousness is somewhat compensated for by economic returns, self-realisation, and prestige (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007). This is arguably not true when we consider the personal sphere as equally important. Theoretically, what I term 'lived precariousness' has mostly been studied through four lenses: "entrepreneurship discourse; biocracy; approaches emphasising desire, lack and affect; and approaches highlighting the normative justifications and ethics of the self" (Musilek, Jamie & McKie, 2020, p. 514). This section dissects these dimensions.

Defining and mapping

Creative workers are a prime example of how precariousness invests individuals beyond work: their passions are marketized (Hoedemaekers, 2017) and emotional labour is used to survive precariousness (Butler & Stoyanova Russell, 2018; Umney & Kretsos, 2015). This category, which represents an extreme case, exemplifies the intertwine between the professional and personal sphere, and why precariousness is a complex grand challenge investing lived experiences. Creative workers see precariousness as a fact of life, a defining dimension of their private lives and a trait of their personality: a way to protect their creative freedom, and the price for doing what they love within market capitalism.

Yet, lived precariousness goes beyond them. For most, the 'professional' and the 'personal' are hybrid not only in their material dimension but also as a form of identity ('I am what I do and I am what I am passionate about'; Smith, 2010), particularly when it comes to leisure time and 'free' work (Murgia and Pulignano, 2019). Regardless of the objective features of the employment conditions, precariousness manifests as a sense of uncertainty about one's future identity (labelled as 'manufactured uncertainty' by Hassard & Morris, 2018) and as the repercussions of instable and insecure working conditions on life (McKeown, 2005). Indeed, Witteveen argues that "precarious[ness] refers to both a static position and [to] highly insecure employment prospects in the long-term" (2017, p. 366).

Figure 6 - Causes and consequences of lived precariousness



How can we capture such an overarching feature? Many scholars build on Foucault's idea of 'governmentality' (2008) as an ensemble of narratives, practices, institutions, and legal arrangements that lead individuals to embed market rationality and put all aspects of life to work. Fleming (2014) advances the idea of 'biocracy' – that is, Foucauldian biopower (2008) applied to organisations as the exploitation and marketisation of what people *do* and *are* in their daily lives. Chiefly, Bloom (2015) uses Lacan to argue that the promise of work-life balance and the ability to be one's 'true self at work' constitute a fantasy that is embraced by several neoliberal workers. For him, the imbalance between work and life is framed not as something to overcome but as a way not to deal with the existential need of a final purpose and with the terror of being trapped in menial mundanities. Neoliberal ideology offers an alluring way out, by feeling 'free' from the chains of standard work arrangements and giving a sense of empowerment and 'agency'. The eternal and existential striving for elusive 'standard work' (that is, achieving ultimate security), is a way to overcome the crushing feeling of precariousness in all its forms: professional, personal, and existential (Masquelier, 2019).

In sum, I define 'lived precariousness' as the consequences of the hybridisation of the personal and working sphere, in terms of material and psychological conditions, when uncertainty, instability, and insecurity spill over the personal sphere. This changes what we mean by precariousness compared to 'precariousness of work', which is confined to work arrangements. Hereafter, I survey the literature focusing on the hegemonic application of human capital theory as a cause, and on employability as its main consequence and empirical application.

Antecedents

Around the mid-1980s, a wave of sociological studies focused on precariousness as a problem of poverty and social inequality (Millar, 2017). In response, Bourdieu advanced a theory of 'depoliticisation' of individuals, suggesting that, as precariousness of life and work became more common, this erosion of basic stabilities would lead to lower unionisation and more broadly to an inability of thinking in future terms. In doing so he substantially equates precarious western 'masses' to the *lumpenproletariat* envisioned by Marx, which lacks class consciousness and the cognitive tools to organise and precipitate emancipatory social change (see also Han, 2018)[32]:

by making the whole future uncertain, [precariousness] prevents all rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, even the most intolerable (Bourdieu, 1998: 82)

Individualisation and commodification of labour

Precariousness can be understood as a lived experience, so something that transcends mere working arrangements, by taking into consideration two factors: commodification of labour, that was the main force shielding the personal sphere from the caprices of the markets, and the consequential individualisation.

'Commodification' is defined as a social process in which labour is considered a good or service to be traded through market mechanisms and not as a 'public' good to be highly regulated and protected (Greer, 2016). As individuals relate to jobs through economic exchanges mechanisms, precariousness of work leaves the mere professional sphere to invest the personal one. There are four elements that historically protected individuals from market forces, thereby lowering precariousness (Rubery et al., 2018): security (i.e., welfare protections and labour-friendly legislations), opportunity (public education and training throughout life), fair treatment (bargaining power vis-à-vis employers), and life beyond work (protection of the private sphere). Granovetter and Polanyi explained commodification (Wood et al., 2019) as a consequence of the centrality of social networks, which partially substitute unions and horizontal solidarity as a way to avoid precariousness. Commodification also means that only measured tasks are paid, while workers are responsible for unpaid jobs-seeking, training, profile building, relationships-building, health coverage, and so on (Wood et al., 2019).

(Re)commodification goes even further, reconfiguring individuals as potential workers always in need to be 'activated'. Particularly, 'self-branding' among jobseekers can be taken as an example of individualisation because it borrows from marketing the idea that the 'self' is a product to be sold to employers (Boland, 2016). Moisander, Groß and Eräranta (2018) configure the causes of this as "a contractual work design that mobilizes the workers as free and active economic subjects" (p. 377). Foucault (2008) summarises this with the concept of the individual within neoliberalism as an 'entrepreneur of itself'. These processes are at the core of human capital theory as a plausible antecedent for lived precariousness.

Human Capital Theory

The main theory mobilised in the surveyed literature to explain the rise of lived precariousness enabled by commodification and individualisation is human capital theory (HCT), which explains how "individuals and society derive economic benefits from investments in people, [namely] in education" (Sweetland, 1996, p. 341). Developed in economics, HCT has the goal of providing a nuanced understanding of labour, overcoming former characterisations of it as a monolithic variable to be studied at an aggregate level. For Bowles and Gintis (1975), HCT is the 'nail in the coffin' of class analysis, as it allows reframing workers as atomised 'assets and investments', ideally circumventing aggregate social dimensions like the 'working class': if you are your own means of production, how can you be exploited (Fleming (2017)? And yet, the social and ethical issues underpinning the birth of the concept of social class have not magically disappeared (Bowles & Gintis, 1975)[33].

In sociology, HCT builds on the work of Bourdieu (1986), which explained social stratification by pointing to the different types of human capital that individuals accumulate during their lifetime: *economic* (wealth), *social* (personal networks) and *cultural* (formal and informal knowledge), to which we can add *symbolic* (honours, status, awards) and *physical* (abilities and health). In HCT, the level of professional precariousness experienced by an individual depends upon how many of these capitals have been accumulated and how relevant they are for the employees. However, lived precariousness becomes an existential condition insofar that there is no optimal nor maximal amount of these that will give security, some of it might become obsolete and worthless (i.e., obsolete skills), and it is immaterial and subjective (what is considered worthy capital is context dependent).

Particularly, HCT has a performative effect on job markets and lived precariousness. Costea, Watt and Amiridis (2015) argue that at the core of HCT lies the 'principle of potentiality' – the socially-embedded idea that individuals need to constantly show their potential and contribute quantifiable value, indefinitely. Responsibility can be considered not only in negative terms but as an opportunity to develop your full potential endlessly, even beyond your 'human' limits and irrespective of who is 'exploiting' this work. In a sense, depoliticization meant a 'Nietzschean', utilitarian use of the world around you for your own greatness. While studying lived precariousness,

> *'positive' themes and motifs – such as 'potentiality', 'self-expression', or 'self-realization' – can become dangerous [...] once they are constituted as ideal measures of an unattainable level of performativity which can then become destabilizing and disorienting for any individual's sense of self.* (Costea, Watt & Amiridis, 2015, pp. 375-385).

Applying this back to organisation studies, Fleming (2017) defines this process as "radical responsibilization", linking it directly to HCT: applying "neoclassical economy[,] people should not be considered citizens, students, patients or employees [but] human capital, a social classification that transcends all others." (p. 692). When life is reframed as a commercial project, quantified and optimised, then expenditures on oneself are investments in human capital, not social costs; and, as with any social cost within neoliberalism, the state should regulate but not interfere with it. Therefore, we reach the "*radical responsibilization* of employment [:] responsibility for all the costs and benefits associated with being an economic actor are solely his or hers" (Fleming, 2017, p. 693). Ultimately, there is a problem of costs, of sustainability and of what is considered valuable capital and how it is 'priced'.

Consequences

Returning to Bourdieu's types of capital (1986), the consequences of HCT on precariousness should not be framed as static but as a long-life process of expanding and contracting personal capitals. As with any type of capital, that which is human is also valorised within neoliberalism, but only to the extent that it can be put to work so that the owner can extract profits from its use. As a consequence, for Fleming (2017), this leads to: lower incomes and an intensification of work (as you are responsible for your working conditions); debt and a dumbed-down economy (people borrow to accumulate capital, and those that cannot or will not are relegated to poorer jobs, if any); and, finally, to more management in the form of more control and use of technologies to quantify and optimise the profitability of the human capital they are buying (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020). The last point is particularly important for a wealth of literature that has assessed the consequences of lived precariousness: the ideology of employability.

Employability

Employability represents the main instrument of governing precariousness for it is the point of contact between accumulating capital and putting it at 'work'. If biocracy captures the abstract dimension of lived precariousness and HCT the 'cause' of lives becoming precarious beyond the professional sphere, then

employability can be seen as the application of these concepts and as the area where most empirical work lies: "employability enable[s] the individual to cope with unpredictable, unstable and more flexible employment relations" (Berntson, Sverke & Marklund, 2006, p. 224).

To put things in perspective, since the 1980s the idea of *employment security* has been supplanted by *employability security* (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013). Therefore, in this narrative 'employment' acts as a temporary status in the 'employable journey' of workers, who 'choose' which work to do through economic exchanges, governed by optimised labour markets. The responsibility for being unemployed rests on the worker, paving the way for precariousness to become a constant lived experience of virtually everyone; self-realisation becomes a prerequisite for being employable (Chertkovskaya et al, 2013). However, employability does not address the structural and long-term causes of unemployment and precariousness: by trying to minimise them, it ends up exacerbating them. This is because the ideal type of self that is employable is extremely narrow: employability focuses on being 'skilled', a 'learner', 'flexible', 'sellable' and 'enterprising'. Employability reframes lived experiences as a life-project to attain security, personal and professional, covering contingent inequalities and precariousness (Leonardi & Chertkovskaya, 2017). Hence, workers might hide sides of them that are not desirable (being shy, poor, or sick), with negative mental consequences. For Fejes (2010), this is true even in social market economies with strong welfare, like Sweden.

Lived precariousness does not pertain only those currently employed, but, as it redefines the boundaries of 'employment' to encompass all life-projects, it manifests itself particularly during the process of job-seeking. The identity of jobseekers is constructed as an acting persona, a script to be interpreted by individuals entering the job market (Boland, 2016). The entirety of the recruiting process—from preparing the profile, to networking and interviews—is framed as a play to be acted as convincingly as possible (Collinson, 2003). Even the most extreme form of lived precariousness, unemployment, should be genuinely reframed in a positive experience and in an opportunity, and job-seeking is cast as a profession (Sharone, 2007; Vallas & Christin, 2018). Jobseekers are framed as "*afflicted* by unemployment yet they overcome it[.] Each application they send presents a different facet of their protean personality[.] They are *disciplined* performers" (Boland, 2016, p. 347, emphasis added). In conclusion, the processes of individualisation which develop in the narrative of employability cover up forms of social Darwinism that disproportionally affect

vulnerable categories: "precariousness [is a] social selection between workers with sufficient resources to handle the transition between one contract/project and the next, and those who do not possess [them]" (Armano & Murgia, 2016, p. 114).

Lived precariousness is therefore a powerful tool to investigate how non-standard employment is much more than a change in labour relations (as demonstrated in the first part). Lived precariousness elides the boundaries between private and professional life beyond the exploitation of employees' passions, relations, and soft skills by organisations. Precariousness spills over into all aspects of personal life when the marketisation of individuals and the commodification of labour demand that the whole life-project of individuals is repolarised toward accumulating human capital to become and remain employable. Since there is no final amount of capital that can be accumulated, no certainty that such capital can be put to profit in the future, and no ultimate status of employability that can grant complete security, the neoliberal individual is floating in a constant state of precariousness. Such status influences identities, desires, family connections, health, and political attachments, as the material needs of economic and professional security potentially curb all other personal elements towards it.

Discussion

Precariousness is a complex grand challenge (Brammer et al., 2019), involving a wide range of social actors: legislators, organisations, and workers. This review shows that it invests both employment relationships, with positive and negative consequences (e.g., deteriorating health), and humans-at-work leading to a precarious existential condition as. As much potential lies in non-standard types of employment (e.g., by widening access to work and enhancing work-life balance), to tackle precariousness as a grand challenge is to disentangle its negative sides without discounting its positive ones.

Hence, I conclude this review adopting the categorisation advanced by Ferraro, Etzion and Gehman (2015), who identify three facets of grand challenges. They are 'complex', as they involve many actors whose interactions evolve in a non-linear; 'uncertain', as actors' preferences evolve and cannot be easily forecast; and 'evaluative', as "there is no one 'correct' label, or categorization that easily defines them", so they "cannot be defined as discrete economic, political, or social problems" (Ferraro, Etzion & Gehman,

2015, p. 366). Building on this, I show how the insights presented so far can achieve three goals: reduce complexity, tackle uncertainty, and improve evaluation.

Reducing Complexity

Reducing complexity helps clarifying which are the components of this grand challenge, and how they relate together. To this end I have proposed a survey of the literature on precariousness, weaving together two streams: precariousness of work and lived precariousness. While the two areas partially acknowledge one another, there is remarkable discord between existing definitions and theories, as well as a lack of acknowledgment of the antecedents and consequences of precariousness for organisations and individuals. The analysis reveals that, while there is consensus regarding the 'end' of standard work employment practices, there is much confusion about what comes next and what it means for individuals, organisations, and societies: standard employment has been replaced by regular flexible, contingent and casualised work, and irregular employment, informal and unpaid, has augmented.

When standard employment and internal labour markets withdraw, the vacuum created has consequences which reach far beyond the work sphere. Specifically, to reduce complexity, we shall disentangle and problematise functionalist studies of precariousness, which seldom discount its negative consequences, from critical studies, which tend to overlook the spaces of freedom and positive lived experiences which precariousness might grant. I here advance three main reasons: first, studies that ask ontological and ideological questions tend not to offer insights on the empirical manifestations of precariousness; second, students of precariousness of work, on the contrary, offer functionalist or structurally critical studies of this phenomenon, yet they limit their view to the professional sphere and either consider precariousness as 'neutral' fact of life, or discount how it is lived or received by individuals, possibly positively; and finally, studies of what I term 'lived precariousness' offer empirical findings and place individuals at the centre but disregard what we already know about precarious work, thus failing to build upon the debate on non-standard work, its antecedents and consequences.

A better conceptualisation of precariousness can reduce complexity by highlighting the positive lived experiences of workers, who might see flexibility and uncertainty as spaces of freedom from rigid organisational structures or as a chance to enter job markets previously off-limits to them (i.e., remote

workers or gig workers preferring the caprices of the algorithms to physically demanding and highly controlled unskilled jobs - Choi, 2018; Peticcia-Harris, deGama & Ravishankar, 2018). Therefore, theories of 'flexible' or 'agile' organisations (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010) built around 'agnostic' assumptions of precariousness should be further problematised. But it would also provide a solution by taking seriously the dire negative consequences of precariousness (i.e., on mental and physical health, see Benach et al., 2014), too often discounted as temporary or residual. In this work I argue that not all precariousness is equally damaging, and there are dangers in either relegating precariousness to 'bad jobs' (Kalleberg, 2013), or, conversely, in ascribing to all precarious workers unpleasant or unbearable conditions (i.e., Bloom, 2015), when in fact instances of positive or empowering lived-experience exist and arguably underpin the proliferation of non-standard employment arrangements.

Tackling Uncertainty

The second facet of this grand challenge is uncertainty: what makes precariousness a 'wicked' problem, which cannot be reduced to a matter of employment arrangements? A key insight emerged is that some factors 'moderate' the impact of non-standard work and of precariousness. Personal circumstances (i.e., the various forms of capital in Bourdieusian sense) play a pivotal role in protecting individuals from the caprices of markets. And precariousness is not just a matter of employment but a fact of life. It is structured though processes of individualisation and commodification of labour. In this scenario, human capital theory becomes the natural theorisation of labour relations where neoliberal subjects become radically responsible for the accumulation and investment of their capitals. The operationalisation of these concepts (which would otherwise remain rather abstract) is employability; as the point of contact between jobseekers and organisations, employability reveals how precariousness becomes, paradoxically, a permanent feature of individuals' lives. The big shift is from a social structure of collective responsibilities and welfare to one rooted in self-realisation and self-responsibilisation of all aspects of one's life, powered by the principle of accumulating 'valuable' capital.

To reduce uncertainty, I also focus on 'the precarious', which is both subject to structural conditions and an active actor. I bring both together in what I term 'received precariousness': the combined effects of precariousness of work and lived precariousness on individuals. It is a set of tools – material and immaterial

– that can either grant freedom or exploit individuals in the 'new world or work' (Ashford, Caza & Reid, 2018). For students of organisational studies, its potential is to understand the antecedent and consequences of 'resituating work in life and life into work', offering a new theoretical ground to tie together ontological debates, functionalist studies of work and lived precariousness.

Received precariousness takes stock of the main theories used to understand precariousness as a social phenomenon centred on labour relations (Connelly & Gallagher, 2004; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017; Musilek, Jamie & McKie, 2020), and reduces uncertainty around the challenge of precariousness on three levels. First, it considers that social actors are subject to the overarching sociological forces of precarisation typical of liquid modernity, ontological insecurity and neoliberalism, which structure the conditions of possibility for individualisation and insecurity. Second, it captures the agential dimensions of precariousness: social exchange theory, social comparison theory, social capital theory and expectancy theory. Finally, it appreciates how individuals experience precariousness, taking stock of the effects on each individual of the social forces of biocracy, human capital theory and employability.

Improving evaluation'

The grand challenge of precariousness also presents the issue of evaluation: which depends on the standpoint. I suggest that how it is received changes its evaluation. Precariousness, in fact, it is not a stable condition, but a combination of factors which can configure both as positive and negative and individuals can move between these two.

Received precariousness can be *positively received* when its potential of unleashing freedom is realised: when received as an open-door of infinite opportunities for self-improvement, or when it leads meaningful jobs free from rigid organisational hierarchies. The evaluation is positive if the socio-economic status shields actors from the lack of social protections. High-skilled professionals, individuals with high accumulated capitals and the tools (material and psychological) to accrue more, can use it to 'liberate' themselves or achieve work-life balance. The evaluation is also positive when minorities, who were previously excluded from internal labour markets reserved for white males, are granted access.

On the contrary, when workers reject or are unable to unlock these (alleged) potentials, when they are stuck in 'bad jobs' or must rely on shrinking welfare provisions, precariousness is *received negatively*. This

is the case when the market mechanisms enhance competition between workers in a race to the bottom, or when they are exposes to health hazards, mental (i.e., perceived precariousness) or physical. Here, precariousness manifestly shows its exploitative side. Low-skilled professionals and those with low-accumulated personal capitals or lacking the tools to accrue more, lose the social and organisational protections of being part of wider social institutions which granted safety nets and income. Their work-life balance worsens, they are stuck in unpleasant or 'bad jobs' (Kalleberg, 2013), and can be trapped by historical limitations imposed upon them for being part of an oppressed social group or even in new ones that emerge (as in the gig economy, see Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020). In sum, precariousness does affect workers in all aspects of their lives, not least widening inequality (Amis et al., 2018). When these conditions are present, the evaluation is negative.

Actors can move between the two, and so does the evaluation: for instance, gig workers can rely on resilience and proactivity (Ashford, Caza & Reid, 2018). Evidently, it is a demanding task that cannot guarantee lasting stability. Petriglieri et al. (2018) illustrate how freelancers endure cycles of agony and ecstasy in an attempt to manage the different emotional and material levers required to stay afloat. Precarious individuals have options: they can leave and stay at the edge; they can join unions, strike, or establish alternative organisations; they can embrace precariousness as blessed flexibility (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017; Hirschman, 1970). Often, though, workers can be resigned (Rusbult, Zembrodt & Gunn, 1982). Hence, the complex grand challenge of precariousness cannot be neither evaluated consistently positively nor negatively; on the contrary, depending upon one's social background, it is a mixed condition deeply rooted in individualisation and the commodification of labour.

Implications for future studies

The disentanglement of the grand challenge of precariousness is relevant for organisation studies scholars for two reasons. First, precariousness of work and lived precariousness are both 'received' by individuals, yet most literature assumes precarious actors either as passive actors subjected to market and social forces, or as players of a game whose rules cannot be altered. Precariousness tends to be evaluated as something that structures societies, and what is left for organisations and individuals is only to adapt or perish. Such limitation of current research impedes to face the problem of evaluation.

Second and connected, considering the complexity of precariousness, the focus for organisation scholars should not be on *either* on work *or* on life, but on work *and also* on life. Received precariousness advances the hypothesis that this is not a tangential issue affecting only overtly precarious workers (as the gig economy), but it is an overarching issue cutting across organisations, social movements, policy makers and individuals. As such, a proper grand challenge. This could potentially render obsolete organisational analysis founded on the assumption of standard work arrangements and non-precarious lives (Musílek, Jamie & McKie, 2020; Peticca-Harris, deGama & Ravishankar, 2020). Precariousness is not a 'necessary evil': this review aims to lay the ground for understanding its grip and rapid expansion.

Conclusion[34]

This work reviews the literature on precariousness framing it as a complex grand challenge. It stems from the observation that while there is consensus over the end on standard work arrangements, much less is known on what is has substituted it. By dividing the literature in precariousness of work and of life, it shows how we can better understand three main characteristics of it: complexity, uncertainty, and evaluation. Specifically, it advances the idea of 'received precariousness', to capture how the positive narratives surrounding it can coexist with its dire negative consequences, from public health as well as for inequality.

Concluding, precariousness has not gone completely unchallenged. New forms of unionising, labour reforms, and social movements have emerged (Picot & Tassinari, 2015; Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020) and the Covid-19 crisis will raise more (Bapuji et al., 2020). Additionally, a pressing limitation is also my focus on the West. Precariousness is certainly a social, global grand challenge, as precariousness is arguably the common in much of the Global South (Lee & Kofman, 2012; Munck, 2013; Kalleberg & Hewison, 2013; Wallerstein, 2011). Future research can expand upon this by considering the impact of precariousness on organisations and as a tool to design alternative, more equitable forms of organising, in which individuals are free to embrace work that fulfils their passions while avoiding the negative, exploitative aspects of precariousness.

Final Conclusions

In the last couple of decades, problematic organisational practices have been at the centre of a wide and heated debate in organisation studies. Alongside inequality, different issues as climate change and right-wing populism have resurged in both prominence and urgency. This has pushed many academic outlets and authors to abandon the language of neutrality, tentatively taking overt political positions and ethical stances (e.g., Smith et al., 2019). Controversies have emerged in some cases, such as when the Academy of Management issued a statement condemning former US President Trump's immigration policies in 2017 (McGahan, 2019). But political and ethical positioning in academia has also been welcomed as a chance to voice long-delayed discussions around 'grand challenges' (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi & Tihanyi, 2016) and existential threats (e.g., Montgomery & Dacin, 2020). There are now opportunities for organisation scholars to once again have an impact on the world outside academia – one that matters (Muzio & Doh, 2020). A prime example is the Covid-19 pandemic (Bapuji et al., 2020). Others include the 'Me too' and 'Black Lives Matter' movements, which address, respectively, racism (Mir & Zanoni, 2020) and gender-related issues (Aumais et al., 2018). There is growing consensus across our field about taking lived experiences and marginalised voices seriously, infusing scholarly work in management with an emancipatory intent (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). The whole debate on precarious work in all its different forms is situated firmly within this scenario, shaping the content of this thesis.

This rather optimistic academic endeavour has developed alongside more critical counter voices. On one hand, there is an ongoing and overwhelming debate in sociology and political theory on the issues of postcolonialism and intersectional politics (regarding precariousness, see i.e., Munck 2013). This debate aims to achieve emancipation by re-signifying our understanding of legitimate knowledge far beyond the purpose of accommodation. On the other hand, critical management scholars within the realm of organisational studies have dissected and problematised the research agenda of 'mainstream' emancipatory intent (see for instance Fleming & Banerjee, 2016). Some of the most radical critiques reject altogether the idea that any meaningful work can be conducted within business schools (Parker, 2018). Still, more reformist positions exist. For instance, Fleming and Spicer (2003) argue that employees can work at 'cynical distance', reproducing social and organisational injustices by materially and ethically detaching from formal power

structures. Based on the question whether 'critical' scholars were doing the same, a nearly twenty-year quarrel has ensued (Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl, 2017).

I argue that, from a critical perspective, there are three trends shaping the state of our field. First, organisation studies is increasingly predisposed to consider topics and theoretical angles previously deemed minoritarian. Second, there is recognition of the importance to move from 'antagonism to agonism' by critical scholars (Parker & Parker, 2017). Third, an overall sense of urgency surrounds the need to address pressing social and organisational issues at global level, challenging many of our assumptions (e.g., algorithms and gig work reframing assumptions about control, power, and exploitation). This is exemplified in the fuzz about 'grand challenges' (see Chapter Three). The work illustrated so far takes stock of all three. As a social phenomenon, precariousness is important for organisation scholars due to its impact on organisational forms, its possible emancipatory potential when (re)signified as an opportunity to gain freedom from oppressive hierarchies, and also due to its real, extremely negative consequences on workers and societies. I have (hopefully) offered an agonistic perspective that avoids reiterating already-documented criticism. In doing so, I hope to have voiced lived experiences while prefiguring alternative ways of organising.

Thus, this thesis aims to better theorise alternative ways of organising by 'breaking' the current tension between different ontological and epistemological perspectives. To achieve it, I have drawn from several of them, albeit from a critical stance, and I have attempted to make them dialogue. From structural critical studies, I have dissected accounts of what the problems are and how many scholars think we can overcome them. From functionalist studies, I have taken the immense amount of research on the topic of precariousness, gathering intelligence on how organisations and individuals experience it. From critical and functionalist studies of lived experiences, I have taken what grips subjects to the status quo, but also what impedes radical change. I have then looked at them holistically from a poststructuralist point of view, deeply influenced by the *Logics* framework, but hopefully not constrained by it (as testified by chapters two and three). Eventually, I argue that poststructuralism, and this thesis with it, could hopefully help to better understand how to bring these different 'levels of analysis' together from a critical perspective (at least in the case of precariousness). In doing so, my aim has been not only to elucidate 'how we got here', but also to provide some tentative tools to decide what can be done in the future. Having clarified this, the remaining of

these conclusions discuss further the main elements and themes of this thesis, and then I address its main limitations.

Discussion

In this section I will discuss three elements that emerged in the thesis and that, albeit in different forms, dialogue with the literature of precariousness. The first topic is the issue of multidisciplinary: to study precariousness from an organisation studies perspective requires to engage with several streams of literature from neighbouring fields (which also involve some further ontological reflections), as the concept originated outside management and only recently has been looked as on organisational 'problem'. The second and connected topic is 'precarity': that is, an ontological and existential understanding of uncertainty, insecurity and instability that comes from sociology and political theory. Finally, the last point of discussion is a debate of who is the subject of precarity (even more so than 'of precariousness'). This discussion aims especially to better qualify and circumscribe the contributions and possible applications of this thesis.

'E pluribus unum'? A multidisciplinary journey

I began this PhD journey curious about the political role of private actors, primarily private organisations, at global level. Coming from an academic background that mixed economics, management, and international relations, I was puzzled and intrigued by how different traditions look at similar phenomena (such as the role of organisations in society and their consequences) while upholding the assumption that professional, public, and private spheres are firmly distinct. Each field seems to focus on one sphere and consider the others black boxes.

Every scholar must inevitably concentrate on a specific facet for study. But for me, this rigidity poses at least three significative challenges – hopefully address throughout the chapters. First, the critical questions posed by political theory should, in my view, inform any sociological understanding of organisation studies. This is both a matter of 'epistemological justice' and theoretical necessity. Failing to do so might obscure relevant social and organisational dynamics that should instead be surfaced if we are to theorise, if not understand, complex phenomena. My first paper (Chapter One) has proposed a way to tackle this shortcoming in organisation studies.

The second challenge involves any scholar attempting to engage with the lived experiences of others. This is crucial if we are to offer 'thick explanations' (Cornelissen, 2017): that is, to adopt a style of scholarship that, when interpreting data, embraces both their contingency and the standpoint of the researcher itself, as such distancing from the idea of 'objective data'. We can and should study social issues at the structural level, but such explanations are incomplete. In a way, this thesis is phenomena-driven in that it also stems from my personal experience a researcher in a think tank in Brussels, first as an intern and then as a casualised worker. There, I faced a conundrum: as an intern, I heard discussions about the unfairness and difficulty of our situation almost daily. But at the same time, neither I nor any of my peers intended to overhaul our situation despite the material hardships. This political aspect was simply absent. As I engaged with extant literature for this work, it dawned on me that something was missing despite the accuracy of structuralist explanations (above all, the recurring and largely true observation that, for instance, interns in Brussels are privileged actors). None of these explanations really captured how precariousness plays out in the real lives of actors. This kindled the flame for the second paper (Chapter Two).

Third, the assumption of a sharp differentiation between personal, professional, and political spheres hinders our understandings of social reality. The three are not merely interconnected and mutually dependent, but most often indistinguishable. We cannot study non-standard forms of employment without taking structural causes into consideration. But at the same time, how can we overlook the contextualised and contingent impact on the private sphere, such as in terms of family planning or personal health? In Chapter Three, I have shown that the term precariousness can mean different things depending on the field studying it, and that the tension between 'the structural' and 'the contingent' runs through most scholarship. This obscurity of meaning poses serious limitations to our theorisations of the phenomenon. With this work, I hope to offer a way forward.

Precarity as an ontological condition

In the chapters of this thesis, I have merely skimmed through a significant piece of the debate: precarity, which can be categorised both as a more widely used term in sociological literature, and as a political concept. This is also relevant as precariousness emerged as a political concept before it was a labour issue. So, what is precarity? Commonly, it is defined as a consequence of social orders based on individualisation,

uncertainty, and insecurity; it emerged at the end of Fordism, which should be seen as a historical exception (Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Before and after, individuals can be described as immersed in a state of uncertainty and lack of control over their future, social condition, and resource accumulation. Some unorthodox economists show scepticism towards the idea that precariousness is an idiosyncratic characteristic of late capitalism: "work under capitalism has never been all that secure for many workers; thus, the current period is not as different from the past" (Lewchuk, 2017, p. 405). Yet, there are marked differences with pre-Fordist times, such as globalisation, technological innovations, and the neoliberal ideology (see chapter three). Specifically, using Harvey (1989), it could be argued that such ontological precariousness is connected with a compression of time and space and the 'commodification of everything' (Wallerstein, 2011). If Fordism sought to structure and optimise time and space, then postmodern political economy is fully centred on their abstraction and optimisation, from just-in-time production to globalisation and instant communication. Precarity is rooted here in the 'loss' of the reference points that former understandings of these universal dimensions had – a process greatly accelerated by the internet revolution of early 2000 (Han, 2017). Other classic critiques gesture toward Western societies embracing consumerism and the atomisation of society (Marcuse, 1964/2013), leading to a problematisation of power and oppression as forms of existential instability, both in the Global North and in the Global South (Munck, 2013). I will go back to the issue of temporality below.

More concretely, around the mid-1980s a wave of sociological studies focused on precarity as poverty and social inequality: that is, those excluded from standard forms of employment and, more generally, those that deviated from any standard of 'normality' (Millar, 2017, p. 3). Recently, Lorey (2015) has built upon Butler and Foucault to analyse 'the precarious' as a political concept. She advances a distinction between three different yet interrelated concepts: *precariousness, precarity* and *precarization*. *Precariousness* is the most abstract one, an ontological condition. It structures social relations as constitutively unstable; consequently, precariousness has existed in different forms all historical times, each declined in a different way. Second, *precarity* is the state of being precarious in a given time and place. She defines it as "symbolic and material insecurities", expressed in the segmentation of precariousness in the society between those humans worthy of protections, and those who are not (Lorey, 2015, p. 22). Precarity is the immanent social situation to be studied as inequality, power, and legal frameworks. It is the structuring of the social

positioning of actors as insecure, naturalised by its subjects. Finally, *precarization*, also defined as 'governmental precarization' is the application of technologies of the self though biopolitics (that is, the management of lives though social and political policies, Foucault, 2008) which affect individuals' daily lives. Two examples widely debated in chapters two and three are subjectification and precarisation through employability. In Foucauldian terms, precarisation is the way in which precariousness and precarity are understood, maintained, and regulated in modern societies (that is, after the nineteenth century); subjects should learn to accept, embrace and even shape their own precariousness as a tool of biopolitical governability.

Slightly changing field by moving to contemporary studies of sociology of work, for Kalleberg and Vallas (2017) precariousness is an epiphenomenon of how we organise society in the neoliberal era. For instance, they remind us that Giddens (1991) talks of ontological insecurity, Bauman (2000) of liquid modernity (declining in insecurity, uncertainty, and unsafety), and finally that Butler (2006) argues that post-9/11 insecurity is a system of social regulation that permeates all areas of Western life – a new doctrine of securitisation based on the assumption that everyone is insecure. Kalleberg and Vallas (2017) also argue that another body of literature can be identified within economic sociology, where scholars have highlighted four main drivers of precariousness in the last three decades: de-unionisation; financialisation (Lin, 2016); globalisation; and digitalisation. I chapter three I have analysed how they have been recognised as the main structural factors driving precariousness.

Additionally, precarity applied to organisations has been studied by Masquelier (2019), for whom "precarity" means both the ontological and ideological changes that put markets at the core of social dynamics, resulting in a push for decentralised organisations and a withdrawal of safety nets, and the consequences thereof, such as loss of control over one's future, begetting a sense of personal and professional ontological insecurity (Bourdieu, 1998). This is linked to the above debates on human capital theory. Construed in those terms, precarity has both an objective and subjective dimension. It is, at once, a term capturing structural transformations, marked by the flexibilization of the workplace and labour market, and one capturing the "deepest sociopsychological impact of flexibility", mainly characterized by a "situation of endemic and permanent uncertainty" (Masquelier, 2019, p. 136).

In organisation studies, precarity as a problem of labour markets has been translated in this field as a facet of precariousness and non-standard employment (see chapter three). It has gained sociological, organisational, and economic relevance during the 1970s and 1980s, both for the academic speculations that it elicited, and especially for its ground-breaking effects on income, political identity and welfare provisions (Ashford, George & Blatt, 2007; Western et al., 2012). For instance, Vallas (2015) argues that the legitimation of 'temp' workers in the US in the 1960s was grounded in showing the potential of such labour arrangements to grant 'emancipation-through-markets', yet even such perks have faded quite fast. Specifically, Vallas mentions the emergence of stakeholders' value maximisation as the core principle guiding corporate governance, which has meant to accept the destruction of productive capacity and worsening workers' lived experiences to achieve it. Hence, standard forms of employment have been changing on a broad scale, and precarity has come to encompass previously protected categories, while in some instances providing opportunities for those formerly excluded. The consequence has been that we cannot discount precariousness as fully negative phenomena if we are to take lived experiences seriously (as exemplified by gig workers or interns embracing and celebrating their status), but we cannot either dismiss as an opportunity for freedom.

In conclusion: on one hand, the sociological tradition has long framed precarity as an encompassing ontological and social problem in which precariousness of lives was not a by-product of otherwise welcome changes, but a central concern. On the other hand, the forces at play in the last decade are not novel: precarity, and precariousness with it, has proliferated, as it was seen as an apt response to unemployment and as a temporary measure. Organisational scholars, in particular, have worked overwhelmingly under the assumption that companies embrace precarious forms of employment as a necessary measure to be competitive on global markets and remain profitable vis-à-vis shareholders.

Who is the subject of precarity?

Having first clarified the interdisciplinary nature of precariousness and then its relationship with precarity, I move now to discuss who is the subject of precarity. Namely, what is its nature, which are its characteristics, and how it is portrayed in this work. In a nutshell, I overview four dimensions: economic,

material, personal and perceived. Descending from the above, all of them move within precarity as an ontological condition (see table 8 below).

Table 8 - Dimensions of the precarious subject

Dimensions	Definition	Factors enhancing freedom or mitigating precarity	Factors aggravating exploitation or worsening precarity
Economic	Monetary and contractual factors affecting the precarious subject	Flexible or contingent contracts. High salary and benefits. Stability or better contracts in the longer run. The 'market' requires the skills of the subject.	Casualised, informal or unpaid contracts. Low or no salary and benefits. No stability and no possibility of better contracts. The 'market' considers the skills of the subject not useful or a commodity.
	Examples:	*High paid consultants or freelances. Executives on flexible contracts*	*Gig economy, outsourced non-specialised workers (i.e., cleaning services)*
Material	Non-monetary and social factors affecting the precarious subject	Job and social context provide safety and good conditions. Legal and social protections. The organisation cares of, nurtures, and protects the workers. Open markets provide international and innovative opportunities.	Job and social context are hostile and dangerous. Lack of legal and social protections, or failure to implement them. Organisation is disengaged at best and exploits at worst workers. Open markets deprive workers of protections and expose forces them to a race-to-the-bottom type of job market.
	Examples:	*Remote, high-skilled work in a safe environment. Progressive organisations operating in a welfare state country. I.e., start-ups in European capitals.*	*Outsourcing organisations requiring physical, taxing work. Jobs non-unionised and states not providing welfare protections. I.e., US Amazon warehouses.*
Personal	Human capitals endowments affecting the precarious subject	High 'human capital'. Belonging to a privilege social group (gender, race, sexual orientation, citizenship, health…). Abundance of alternatives. Subjects can count on additional support (personal and financial) to shelter negative conditions and downturns, or to grasp opportunities.	Low 'human capital'. Belonging to an oppressed social group. Lack of alternatives. Subject cannot count on additional support and might even have to bear the weight of supporting dependent ones. Hence, it is always on the brink of poverty and exhaustion.
	Examples:	*White, cis-hetero males, citizens of the country, healthy, coming from middle- or upper-class families and with university degrees.*	*Women, LGBTQI+, migrants, disabled or unhealthy, coming from underprivileged backgrounds and with no formal education.*
Perceived	Psychological, ideologic and fantasmatic factors affecting the precarious subject	Flexible and contingent job market is compensated by perceived opportunities for freedom, personal growth, independence from hierarchies, and unlimited employment or entrepreneurial opportunities.	Casualised job market is not compensated by perceived opportunities. The job does not let the person grow, do what it enjoys, and barely make ends meet. Entrepreneurial opportunities are perceived as exploitation and a fake narrative, or even as a way to deprive of welfare provisions.
	Examples:	*Subjects invested in their work, willing and happy to be unstable and offset current instability for professional and/or financial growth*	*Subjects stuck in a necessity job, in and out of employment, worn out by market mechanisms, disillusioned with narratives of employability. Or refusing to overlap their personal satisfaction with professional achievements. Finally, subjects willing to focus on family or keen to achieve geographical and economic stability.*

First, the subject of precarity faces *economic* instability due to its employment condition. In chapter three I have presented a taxonomy of precarious work divided in flexible, contingent and casualised, plus informal and unpaid. Thus, depending on the level of working security, the precarious faces either immediate or postponed financial and pragmatic insecurities. Economic factors can either mitigate or precipitate precarity. As shown in chapter two, a precarious contract might prefigure future economic stability if it is enshrined in a broader system of protected jobs, or, as showcased in chapter one, it might instead be a much more permanent condition, as in the case of many in the gig economy. Finally, the precarious subject might be a highly paid freelance/consultant, or an executive fearing corporate restructuring (Hassard & Morris, 2018): in this case, it does not face immediate economic threats, yet it might fear for its future. Therefore, despite sharing a common uncertainty, economic conditions might greatly differ.

Material conditions define the subject of precarity to the extent that they structure how lived experiences are received. For instance, the legal and social protections in place can temper the worst sides of precariousness and can unleash creative and empowering work opportunities. In this case, the subject can be an actor that is 'freed' from the limitations of rigid organisational hierarchies. Here, it is empowered to pursue its dreams and aspiration by making the most of flexible job market, while also relying on welfare protections if these trials and errors fail. Or it can be an exploited subject, forced in a series of bad jobs and daring conditions, which is unable to control or enjoy. Whereas much functionalist studies have looked at the first, critical studies, primary in the Marxist tradition (Kelly, 1998) have looked at the former.

Then, there are several *personal* conditions that affect the subject of precarity. As human capital(s) plays a central role in determining the relationship with, and the experience of, the job market and employment, subjects endowed or able to accumulate more capitals are better positioned. Specifically, as seen in chapters two and three, having high cultural, economic and social capital seems to be a prerequisite to be able to unlock the promise of freedom hidden behind blatant precariousness. Additionally, such capitals allow to shelter from negative material and existential downturns. On the contrary, subjects lacking one or more of such capitals are much more prone to exploitation and exposed to the uglier sides of precarity. On top of that, chapter three has largely shown how women and LGBTQI+ individuals are disproportionately more vulnerable, not only at employment and economic level, but also health-wise. This holds true for other types

of privileges, chiefly citizenship rights, ethnicity, age and disabilities. In other words, personal traits do influence how precarity is lived and received.

Finally, precarity and precariousness are an existential condition, and therefore they influence *perceptions*. This is particularly evident when we look at lived experiences or contextualised self-interpretations. Several authors have recently dug into this (Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2019; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020), highlighting how, independently from the other three dimensions, the subject of precarity is immersed in a state of uncertainty that hampers long-terms projections of itself. I explore more in details below the question of temporality: yet what is central here, connected with the idea of human capital, is how the hegemonic narrative of self-entrepreneurship is perceived. For instance, Christiaens (2020) argues that the Foucauldian conception of 'homo economicus' is based on a misunderstood notion of the entrepreneurial spirit, which was originally not espoused as such by economists and neoliberal theorists. Consequently, precariousness is a gate to freedom and personal enhancement, so perceived positively, only by those that have already a predisposition to embrace it. On the contrary, subjects that do not fit these narrow requirements are 'dragged into' labour relations that demand them to be 'radically responsible' (Fleming, 2017), while not being able or willing to enjoy its benefits, for as residual as these might be. And finally, precarity is perceived negatively as soon as it clear that, by definition, not everyone can be a successful entrepreneur, and any downfall or failure have to be shouldered individually (mostly thanks to positive economic, material and personal factors).

Summarising, precarity structures both social subjects and their surrounding material conditions, yet not all actors receive it (to use the terminology developed in chapter three) in the same way. Hence, they are very diverse, but each can move towards or away from the worst sides of precariousness in different moments of their life. This argument, built on the three chapters, allows to better understand that not only not all precariousness is the same, but also that social actors might feel better in an explicit precarious work arrangement than in more nominally safe ones, depending on a combination of factors. This is also relevant because it leads the professional and personal life to become precarious: an ontological condition alleviated or precipitated by economic, material, personal and perceived factors. As illustrated in chapter two, such ontological condition of precarity leads to a blending of the professional and personal sphere: to be flexible, mobile, and willing to accumulate human capital even in the most private moments becomes a minimum

requirement, at worst to get any job, and at best to do what you love. Here, the whole idea of work-life balance cracks under such weight. Clearly, if the women migrant in informal employment is the archetype in literature of 'the exploited' (Boufkhed, 2020), the white, male, Western citizen with a skilled flexible job is not immune either, albeit of course in a very different position of privilege. What the two extremes have in common is the experience of hybridisation and both being at the receiving hand of an ontological condition that must be, forcefully, espoused.

How the dimensions above intersect is especially relevant to understand who the subject of precarity is. For instance, anyone at a certain point of its life can be subject to positive economic factors, negative material conditions, be reliant on mitigating high personal human capital, and perceive precariousness positively. In this case, even though s/he is 'factually' precarious, s/he can be said to receive precariousness rather positively. Applying these dimensions to the chapters above, for example a gig worker can be subject to exploitative economic and material factors, but s/he might rely on mitigating personal conditions and perceive its precarious status positively. Alternatively, drawing from chapter two, an intern in Brussels landing in a good and well-paid internship can have good economic and material conditions (i.e., because it is a European citizen and it is protected by the Belgian law), it can have a lot of human capital, and yet it can perceive its condition as unbearable due to uncertainty and social pressure (this was the case of one of my informants). In this case, 'objective' positive factors hide strongly negatively received precariousness.

What is different between them is less crucial of what they share: a role in reproducing precariousness. Yet, if the highly exploited subject can be studied as someone that learns how to deal with its condition and make the most of it (even though we should not discount the power of bottom-up emancipatory struggles, see Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020), from a critical ontological position privileged precarious subjects bear more responsibility in such reproductions. As shown in chapter one and two, if gig workers might espouse neoliberal fantasies to offset the lack of alternatives, interns are an example of actors that could play a role in challenging the hegemonic conditions (discursive and material) that structure precariousness. Yet, their depoliticisation hampers most attempts to do so. In sum, in this thesis I have looked at privileged people (especially in chapter two), which represents one specific type of precariousness and precarity. And I did so because if we know more about those that are clearly exploited, much less has been said in an 'antagonistic' (Parker & Parker, 2017) fashion about those that are in between.

In conclusion, the subject of precarity can be defined as an ideal type: someone experiencing troublesome reality and keeping radical contingency together. Borrowing from Bloom (2016), it is someone that abstracts stability as an eventual achievement of a precarious existence, sublimating it as a form of 'cultural' hope. I have also argued that is unfair to assume that the subject of precarity or precariousness is always a victim or always a winner. It is someone who offsets short-term issues thanks to fantasies of freedom and self-entrepreneurship, but it is unable to overcome its status overall. It can be someone that somehow stays just above the poverty line, but precarity invests also upper echelons. Hence, I have advanced the problem of reproduction, and I have argued here that the privileged precarious is also depoliticised. As such, s/he might not be the cause, which is systemic, but with its action it engages in micro-reproductions, allured by its positive sides, unable to fight the system, and a victim of negative material circumstances. By attempting to survive itself, it ends up damaging its 'peers'. Finally, I have also argued that to capture this complexity the poststructuralist stance is highly apt, as it can show the conditions of possibility for radical change, while considering both structural conditions and contextualised self-interpretations.

Limitations and the way forward

To conclude this thesis, here I tend to two major limitations of this work. First, I engage in reflexivity by looking at my standpoint. I also spend few words on non-Western perspectives. Second, I discuss my somewhat acritical approach to the *Logics* framework (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). I likewise reflect on those sections of the thesis that adopted less poststructuralist stances, and on the ensuing ontological inconsistencies that might be perceived by the reader. Third, I discuss the issue of temporality as one under-looked, overarching theme of thesis.

My standpoint: a brief self-reflection

Frequently, while presenting my empirical study (chapter two) to an academic audience, someone pointed out that the story of interns I showcase carries strong resemblance with early-career academics. Chiefly, the privileged background, the passion, the precarious contracts, along with the dynamics of hope and struggle to achieve secure positions, resonate all too well with doctoral students. This represents an apt opportunity to reflect on my standpoint.

Fournier and Grey (2000) deeply influenced the spirit of this thesis. In their seminal piece, the authors underscore how any critical and emancipatory intent should aim to avoid 'performativity', denaturalise social and power relations, and engage in reflexivity. Avoiding performativity means not looking at the phenomenon as a problem of enhancing performance or efficiency. Denaturalising social and power relations involves challenging the idea that social processes are 'natural' and merely the product of historical contingency; instead, their emergence, consequences and solutions should be problematised. Engaging in reflexivity means to state clearly where the author stands in the debate. These principles have infused meaning into my work and guided my research. I thus have attempted to study precariousness from a non-performative, denaturalising, and reflexive angle. I have looked at it as a social problem to be solved rather than an opportunity to enhance organisational performances. I have challenged the assumptions underpinning functionalist and critical literature on the matter, possibly denaturalising it. And, in order to engage reflexively, I have also tried take seriously my own standpoint as well as that of other precarious individuals. I hereafter expand on the latter point.

As I started looking into the empirical study for this thesis, the case of interns came natural to me to the extent that I had been one of them: based on this, I formulated some preliminary research questions (i.e., why do interns work for free? Why the dogma of market forces seems so naturalised in Brussels?), which set in motion my work. Nonetheless, I rarely reflected on the privileges I carry, so the problems I saw were strongly influenced from my standpoint. Hence, I naturalised many social dynamics, and only few phenomena appeared to me worthy of analysis. Several iterations of data collection and readings of sparce literature have broaden my horizons. Yet, going back to the vignette above, this has conversely revealed that many of my blind spots were shared by my informants: what I could not see in first instance myself is also what most interns do not see. Therefore, this exercise of self-reflection has been utterly useful in developing the idea of depoliticisation and to see the bigger picture.

However, this proved insufficient when I dug deeper in the materials for chapter one and three. Regarding the former, the feedback received from one of the reviewers in *Human Relations* pushed me to take more seriously the violence, symbolic and material, that gig workers experience. From my privileged perspective, I excessively discounted the negative experiences of these casualised workers and focused too forcefully on the positives. Regarding chapter three, instead, surveying the literature on public health confronted with the

dismaying conditions of precarious minorities and vulnerable subjects. Accounts of migrant women suffering physical and mental morbidities abound (Cayuela, Martínez, Ronda, Delclos & Conway, 2018). That experience has informed both my relative position and has allowed me to contrast the dry takes of functionalist studies.

In broader terms, I place myself as one of the neoliberal Western subjects studied in this thesis. Thus, non-Western accounts of precarity and precariousness are here largely marginal. On one hand, this was a deliberate choice, as I wanted to circumscribe my work so to avoid 'universal' claims. It also reflects the quasi totality of scholarship in organisation studies. On the other hand, this limitation testifies my limited experience with non-Western views: as Munck (2013) correctly observes, many of the worst sides of precariousness that we deem intolerable in the West are far too common in the global South. Such reality demands at least to be aware of my (our) standpoint, and to take into consideration what many diverse voices have to say on the experience of precariousness, as well as on emancipatory struggles.

Some limitations of *Logics* and poststructuralism

Finally, this thesis advances a plethora of critiques to several ontological and epistemological stances. I hope these have come across as agonistic, yet they do are present. I have challenged critical structuralist and functionalist studies, but I have not really reflected on the limits of poststructuralism in general, and of *Logics* in particular. There are two main issues that should be dissected: first, what are the limitations of the *Logics* framework? And second, are there other frameworks that could equally showcase explanatory power without going down the rabbit hole of poststructuralism?

Regarding the first issue, the main limitations of *Logics*, and of the body of work of Glynos and Howarth in general, are two. First, the framework is rather agnostic in ethical and normative terms. While it is clear that the authors have a 'progressive' position and that they place their work in the post-Marxist tradition, their ontological position is often closer to hermeneutic stances than to critically emancipatory ones. It is true that the framework has been used to study several cases of policy making or local struggles (see for instance Glynos, Klimecki & Willmott, 2012; Griggs & Howarth, 2004); but the overall impression remains of a 'cynical' distance from the material struggles of underprivileged actors. The second concern is the centrality given to the idea of retroduction (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, chapter one). While important and highly

inspirational for this work, it places the debate about epistemology at a very abstract level, clashing with its several applications at empirical level. It is indeed possible to assert that retroduction works as a form of abduction that stays true to the ontological idea that we can only 'critically explain' radically contingent events after they have taken place, and only through the eyes of the subjects. However, in practice it is quite hard not to end up using abductive methods wrapped up in an 'agnostic' or 'hermeneutic' discourse. In other words, while the poststructuralist approach does refuse general laws and positive claims, several empirical works in this line can be easily read as critical interpretivism 'in disguise'. Chapter Two can be an example.

This is even more true when, in my view, strong normative claims on exploitation or emancipation are avoided not to contradict the principle of radical contingency. That is, when normative claims are avoided because 'we cannot really know'. This point clashes quite strongly with the spirit of Laclau & Mouffe (2014). Responding to this, I hope this work made clear that I do not discount material conditions, nor critical structuralist analyses of power. What I have attempted to do is instead to account for the positive lived experiences of social actors, without forcefully position them as powerless exploited subjects, as best stuck in painful routines or at worst captured in 'false consciousness'. On the contrary, I have argued that if we provide critical explanations for the reproduction of precariousness in its various forma, we can propose alternative organisations that take into account the 'good' or 'empowering' sides of the current ones.

Additionally, while the first chapter fully embraces poststructuralism, the second and the third one span across different ontologies, exemplified by the language adopted and the literature mobilised. For instance, the empirical study adopts a methodology that can be more readily identified as interpretivist. Chiefly, the way data are presented and analysed might clash with the idea of 'retroduction', for it presents theory emerging from data as inductive. Whereas this is certainly an issue per se, it also showcases some limitations in combining a poststructuralist mindset with the need to be methodologically rigorous, or, to put it more clearly, to be plausible while conducting qualitative research. As such, if providing a proper 'thick explanation' was not really possible given the nature of data collection (as it fell short of conducting an ethnography), I believe that my goal was more to reach clarity and transparency than epistemological purity. I set to improve myself for the future. A similar conclusion can be drawn reading chapter three, where the first section of the literature review is inspired by functionalist conceptions. This is even more evident in the section relative to public health. While it is obviously a limitation, it also reflects the nature of surveyed

sources, which in hindsight testifies that it would have been hard to force at this stage a poststructuralist approach on the 'data'. Nonetheless, I will explore in the future the possibility of revising chapter three so to address these legitimate concerns.

The second issue of poststructuralism and of *Logics* is its distinctiveness from other critical approaches. Among the many can be easily listed (i.e., Bourdieu), two examples are particularly worth of mentioning as they are closer: the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2014), and the one of Boltaski (2011). I do believe that both these frameworks could be used to analyse precariousness, and they would likely reach similar conclusions. I also believe that both would avoid the two pitfalls of *Logics* presented above. Nonetheless, I think the poststructuralism of Glynos and Howarth is different. It does build on Laclau and Mouffe (explicitly), but it also adds a more operationalisable layer to their theory. In other words, they translate a debate of political theory into social 'sciences', allowing for it to be applied more readily. Furthermore, compared to the other two traditions, *Logics* places more emphasis on the role that fantasies and ideology play in contextualised self-interpretations. I have made the most of this in chapter one. And, by making radical contingency central, it escapes the temptation of drawing grand narratives or universal claims. At least this would be my understanding in light of this thesis, which undoubtedly need further reflections.

The problem of temporality

A critical dimension that has not been sufficiently analysed in this thesis is the problem of temporality. Precariousness invests social actors as it affects conceptions of time, and with it the capability of enacting radical change. This is true both for exploited actors receiving precariousness negatively, and for privileged ones receiving it positively. For instance, in organisation studies time has received significant attention in the past two decades. Already in 2001, Ancona, Goodman, Lawrence and Tushman argued:

> *Using the temporal lens, we [..] think not just about processes and practices but also about how fast they are moving [,] their trajectories over time[,] and the historical positions they take on the continuum of time[.] We think not only about the individual personality but the individual's time urgency and time perspective.* (2001, p. 645)

At the turn of the millennia, scholars in other field demonstrated interest on the topic. A broader approach reveals how the idea that time relates to precariousness is even stronger in political theory and sociology. Exemplarily, a ready answer can be found in the literature on precarity, given that Bourdieu argues:

> *in all these areas [precarity] produces more or less identical effects[:] the de-structuring of existence, which is deprived [...] of its temporal structures, and the ensuing deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time and space. Casualization profoundly affects the person who suffers it: by making the whole future uncertain, it prevents all rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, even the most intolerable* (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 82)

There is also a vast literature arguing that capitalism bends and alters our conceptions of time, fragmenting it and reconducting it to something that should be optimised (Gross, 1985; Miyazaki, 2012). As human capital theory has (re)commodified the personal sphere, it descends from this that the whole lifetime is something to be seen through a market lens. The section on employability in chapter three profusely analysed this aspect.

Thus, for many authors capitalism has redefined time. This can be seen both as an antecedent and as a consequence of precariousness. For instance, Han (2017) dissects the role of technology in altering our conceptions of public and private, given that it bends and fragments time and commodifies the personal sphere through social media and quantification. Williams (2018) goes a step further claiming that attention in the algorithmic time has to be fragmented down to milliseconds so to force optimisation.

These critiques are all widely embraced here, but when looking at precariousness the picture becomes more complex. On one hand, as Bourdieu in the quote above aptly illustrates, this ontological understanding of time limits coalitions that could spur radical social change. But it is also true that it could create new conditions of possibility: see for example the debate around the whole hackers' movements before and after the advent of platform corporations (Milberry, 2014). In other words, how the subject of precarity perceives time affects the conditions of possibility for resistance and radical change.

Attempting to make justice to this missing theme, I argue here that time can take different forms for different actors, depending on contingency. I advance three categories: 'inexistent', stretched, and as capital. In some cases, it *'does not exists'*, because the precarious subject lives in the moment. In this sense, both actors and the analysis of their experiences are properly radically contingent. Namely, this is the case of 'embracing precariousness' advanced in chapter two. In other instances, time is experienced and framed by precarious actors as *stretched*, infinite: it works as a fantasy of having all the time necessary to reach stability, as such offsetting present problems. This is very evident again in chapter two, when I describe 'enduring precariousness', and in chapters one and three when I debate hope and promise (Bloom, 2016;

Leonardi & Chertkovskaya, 2017). When this happens, long-term time stabilises contemporary instability. Finally, neoliberal capitalism frames time as *capital*, to be optimised as an investment. This a-temporal view differs from the other two, as it does not involve perceptions of time but its rationalisation. It is present in all three chapters: for instance, in human capital theory (by definition, capital is connected with time, as investments are time related to allow for accumulation or depletion), in algorithmic optimisation and quantification (Williams, 2018), and in the narrative of employability embraced by interns.

Additionally, a fitting argument derived from this thesis is that the precarious subject does all three things. It lives in the present, as there is no certainty in the future; it stretches time by placing hopes and fantasies in the long term; and it rationally approaches its life as an investment, so it rationalises time. I am confident that these reflections can open future avenues of research.

Concluding remarks

Overall, this doctoral dissertation explores precariousness by placing it firmly in the historical context of neoliberalism. I depart from the observation that, despite a widespread disgruntlement with it to the point that there is little more to be said 'against it' (see for instance the provocative take of the anarchist geographer Springer, 2016), I struggle to agree with the idea that we should simply collectively resign to the idea that 'there is no alternative' (Fisher, 2009). The events unravelled during my doctoral-studies years have shown that there is a discontent with neoliberalism both from the left and from the right, and therefore there is the risk that failing to be agonistic will not result in more of the same or, even less so, in more emancipation, but in a more reactionary social order (Mouffe, 2018). Furthermore, I believe in the necessity of embracing an 'agonistic' perspective to prefigure post-neoliberal ways of organising, if indeed it is true that being simply 'anti-neoliberal' means too often to descend into sterile criticism (see for instance the alternative approach advanced by Mir and Zanoni, 2020).

I have hopefully offered some answers in the chapters above. The first attends to this by showing that the hegemonic market ideology cannot be neither ignored nor exaggerated: it plays a crucial role in naturalising precariousness and problematic forms of organising, but it also fosters grievances and conflicts that prefigure alternative social orders, possibly more equal and sustainable. The importance of taking contextualised self-interpretations and the conditions of possibility for radical alternatives is shared in the empirical findings of

chapter two and through the literature review of chapter three. In the others, I show that we have to date accrued a sufficient body of evidence on the structural and historical conditions of precariousness, as well as on its consequences. What we need to study more and better is how it is lived and reproduced, and I believe that poststructuralism, and radical contingency in particular, can help us doing so because it allows to link structuring regimes with the mundanity of precarity. If we take seriously the poststructural idea that reality is created and recreated constantly, then we need to look at lived experiences as a constant political endeavour (intended as the discourses and practices that denaturalise social relations and reproduce or overhaul the regime), even if they might appear insignificant or ephemeral from functionalist or critical structuralist points of view. To change the regime structuring precariousness, we need to re-politicise the debate and look at how it is reproduced by its actors, at time consciously but much more often in a naturalised fashion. This by no mean implies that all actors have the same power and responsibility, but that grievances can be ignited and transformed into political capital for radical change in a much wider audience, with 'emancipatory' consequences.

As a concluding point, allow me to reflect on the question of how scholars, critical or not, can have an 'actual impact on the world'. Considering the long journey leading to this thesis, I believe there are few things that might help. First, reflexivity shall be taken even more seriously, asking ourselves to which extent our theories have a performative effect, intended or otherwise, and for whom. Second, I strongly believe that the insights on precariousness I have advanced show that we should break with the assumptions that the professional and personal sphere are divided: I believe that if we do so, any emancipatory intent will be easier to carry out, and our work will also better resonate with wider audiences.

Third and final, going back to the opening vignettes in the introduction, I think we need to take much more seriously the lived experiences of precariousness. On one hand, when actors confront us with the ethical dilemma of being outsiders morally detached that cannot really understand what the 'oppressed' are enduring. On the other hand, when we see counterintuitive cases of 'positive' or careless accounts of what appears exploitation and injustices to us, given that they challenge 'emancipatory' intents. I believe we should give voice to the former, but also provide thick explanations for the latter.

Ultimately, this thesis hopefully helps taking seriously the notion that precariousness is neither a dream nor a nightmare, that it is neither a great opportunity for emancipation-through-markets nor an inherently

negative phenomenon. Instead, in the three chapters above I have hopefully shown that it is a complex encounter of social and political dynamics: hence, I believe this work can possibly contribute to (eventually) devise alternative ways of organising that make justice to the lived experiences of all actors.

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Appendix

Chapter One

Box 1 - Deliveroo: An Illustrative Example

Deliveroo transports meals to customers of outlets (e.g., restaurants) that do not have their own delivery staff. Revenues are generated from charging outlets around 30% of the cost of the food, an undeclared percentage of which is passed on to customers. Pressures to expand and reduce unit costs have resulted in changes to the (self-employed) terms and conditions of couriers' work.

In the UK, couriers have questioned these changes and pressed for improvements (e.g., raising payment from around £3 to £5 per drop, payment of £10 per hour waiting time, and £1 per mile travelled) but they have rarely challenged their self-employed status or campaigned for recognition as 'workers' or 'employees'. To manage this issue, Deliveroo incorporated a clause in their contracts that required them not to challenge their self-employed status in court. The clause was subsequently removed by the company, while affirming their self-employed status (see Wood, 2017).

The legality of designating Deliveroo couriers as self-employed was confirmed in November 2017 when the Central Arbitration Committee (CAC), which oversees collective bargaining law, reached the conclusion that riders are contractors because they are no longer required to wear branded kits and could ask a substitute to perform a job for them. The changes made to Deliveroo couriers' contracts were introduced eleven days before the CAC ruling, enabling the company to defeat the case brought by the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB). The CAC ruling stated that couriers "have a right to substitute themselves both before and after they have accepted a particular job – something that would not be permissible if they were 'employees' or 'workers'" (Ainsworth, 2018: p. 11). Subsequently, fifty *Deliveroo* riders made an employment rights claim relating to the period prior to the change of contract. This challenge was parried by *Deliveroo* settling out of court for a six-figure sum - a settlement that the solicitor acting for the couriers interpreted as indicating the anticipation of a horrific scenario, for *Deliveroo,* of losing the case (Butler, 2017) which would have undermined the basis of its business model. By settling out of court, which involved no admission of liability on the part of *Deliveroo,* the potential to mobilise other self-employed contractors to contest their status was lost. As a spokesperson from the company candidly announced, presumably with its major shareholders as well as its couriers as the invisible audience: "this settlement has no impact on *Deliveroo* riders or our model", and elaborated: "[it] allows us to continue to focus on creating the well-paid, flexible work that our riders value" (Butler, 2017).

Box 2 - Courier Work in Focus: Illustrating the Logics Framework

Writing as a *Deliveroo* courier, Shanks (2019) notes that, as self-employed contractor, he had received no protections or benefits during the year he had worked (no paternity leave, pension, cover if a bike is stolen, no rights to collective bargaining, no health and safety, and no minimum wage). He had gradually become disillusioned with the established *social logic* of the gig economy *regime* and its (ab)use of employment law which he interpreted as one in which "the business costs, risks and responsibilities *Deliveroo* would normally bear are entirely transferred on to us" (a prime example of *radical responsabilization*). Unsatisfied with *reformist* remedies to his grievances, this courier took the more *radical* step of organising collective action in response to what we have termed *dislocation* that took the form of *Deliveroo* changing the basis of payment ('fees'). Instead of obtaining a flat rate per order, couriers received variable pay per distance. This resulted in "working longer hours for less money".

On October 4th, 2018, joint action by *Deliveroo* and *UberEATS* couriers in at least 10 UK cities was organized either by couriers or by grass-root unions, thereby mobilising the *fantasmatic* logic of debunking, discrediting, and removing the self-employed designation. One advantage of being designated self-employed is the absence of any legal restriction on enacting the *political logic* of taking industrial action without a postal ballot; and couriers' familiarity with social media has provided a cheap and effective way of informing and mobilizing otherwise atomized contractors (e.g., by using *WhatsApp*) (see also Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2019).

That said, the strike fell short of enacting radical alternatives. The *Deliveroo* business model remained substantially unchallenged and radically different solutions have not seen the light. So, even though the social logics of the gig economy were dislocated and denaturalised, the disruption was temporary, and, at the time of writing, the hegemony remains unchallenged, potentially incubating further grievances and outbreaks of conflict.

Table 9 - Coding structure

Conceptual dimensions	Second order codes	Main first order codes	Representative data
Regime: Structuring precariousness	**A. Social, cultural and employment structure**	A1. European institutions as drawing factor	*A lot of companies ask if you to have experience in dealing with the Commission, knowing how they work.* (Beatriz, Consultancy B). *There is the group, you know - the one that have been through NGOs and these company's company, and you have the one that worked for the commission before. That's-- he might have been doing tons of other things, but at this point, he had worked for the commission, and that's-- it will be that "oh, it is the one that is the one that worked for the commission".* (Jean, Consultancy A)
		A2. Employment conditions precarious by law	*During the first of year of temporary contract ['contract of professional initiation'] you are not entitled to holidays. Never. I mean, not even a day, bar bank holidays. That's crucial.* (Andrea, European Parliament) *It's a Belgian program in which the government pays you. So, the company declares that they have you as an internship, as an intern, and they get some fiscal blah blah, something, advantage, and you get paid. I was paid 700.* (Isabella, Consultancy E)
		A3. Homogenous background, middle class	*In the job description itself they mentioned that they required a good understanding of the EU institutions which is something that you see quite often when you look for jobs in Brussels actually. So, it's something pretty straightforward, the company's demand.* (Beatriz, Consultancy B) *[It is common having] the father from a country and the mother from another, so to speak two languages and perhaps even a third because of having lived abroad[.] I see that to arrive here you need to have a certain background* (Carlotta, Think Tank A)
	B. 'Policing' the social order: continuous, informal job interviews	B1. Job hunting as part of social interactions, continues after work	*[Recruiters] started contacting me since they knew me, because I did many internships and I had experience with European institutions; I have developed a network* (Francesca, European Commission) *I think it helps [to have personal connections], it definitely helps. I cannot tell you which percentage the final decision of my boss was because there was two people inside telling him "he's a good professional and he's is a good person", and how much was it because he liked my CV, or he liked me in the interview. [..] But it certainly plays a role.* (Isabella, Consultancy E)

Conceptual dimensions	Second order codes	Main first order codes	Representative data
		B2. Close-knit community	*A lot [of the internship] is networking, definitely. [Interns at the Commission do] these jobs because they want to work in the Commission or in Parliament. It is also hugely networking, so every Thursday at Plux, there's a huge networking opportunity.* (Annette, NGO B) *Ok, let's be blunt, let's be frank about it. I would say the power of the network is immense. I'm not really sure you can get, that anyone can get an internship at the EU institutions, because of the competition, and because, as in all jobs and in all organizations, you need to know the right people to talk to, in order to secure a certain position.* (Michelle, Consultancy B)
Contextualised self-interpretations: **Lived precariousness**	**C. Embracing precariousness**	C1. Becoming 'employable'	*I realised that [during my studies] I didn't make that much effort, and that I cannot do anything. I [wanted to know] what a political scientist does once graduated. The difference is that here an internship is a learning opportunity* (Carlotta, Think Tank A) *This internship agreement is done through my university because my company demanded it. They explicitly said that the applicant should have the student status so that the agreement can be done by the university.* (Beatriz, Consultancy B)
		C2. Enjoyment	*In Brussels there are no fixed working hours. At least in the private sector this concept does not exists altogether. You can come at 10am and leave at 5pm. It matters only that you deliver, that's the only thing that counts. The problem is that often to do so you need to work much longer than what is written in the contract. If you need to catch a train Friday afternoon to Paris, you can. For instance, I need to deliver this for Monday [..] and in this case it has stolen [sic] my Saturday. Had I finished earlier I could have left at 3pm.* (Andrea, European Parliament) *Some people [does all this] to be cool. There is this trend, this fashion, of working for the EU.* (Alice, European Commission)
		C3. Fantasy of being part of something unique, relevant and important	*But I certainly have noticed, when you're in certain spaces where people who obviously work on EU policy, you can hear that they speak almost their own language or discourse.* (Karl, NGO B) *You don't have to spend time to look for your place in the city because moment one you have it*. (Marcela, European Commission) *I have a friend now, that has moved to Madrid, and he says that when you leave Brussels, that's when you start missing this Eurobubble… because it brings a lot of freshness, and diversity* (Isabella, Consultancy E) *Because you're surrounded by so many different people that are dedicated to the European project, and you're constantly talking about politics all the time, which I think makes you pro-European.* (Annette, NGO B)

Conceptual dimensions	Second order codes	Main first order codes	Representative data
	D. Enduring precariousness	D1. Harsh material conditions	*Chilled isn't the word because we were all working like hell[.] I had no salary in real life, my work was not paid, and so, I was officially doing 38 or 40 hours[,] but not paid. The salary was not for the hours worked. [The] bad thing about it, that actually we had a hell of a work, and we were working every day like one hour more, two hours more, and the term of the contract-- but the truth is that we're supposed to finish at six [and] worked until seven or eight[.] So you basically worked more every week, and for free.* (Jean, Consultancy A) *[Despite of my experience, in some positions I applied for] they proposed me to be hired as a volunteer paid 25€ per day, which I think is offensive. [But] you know how it is. I needed money so I sacrificed my whole summer. That's it* (Francesca, European Commission)
		D2. Offsetting current problems through future rewards	*If it's necessary, you can work longer hours and then at the end that's gonna come back nicely in June normally for promotions and things like that.* (Beatriz, Consultancy B) *I mean, I see it as part of my career already, you know. I mean, the nature of the work that I'm doing is rewarding for me and valuable for me. So as far as I'm concerned, I'm already doing the type of work that I would hope to be doing in the future. I'm already doing it now. But it's just a short-term contract and I get 850 Euros a month. But yeah, in that sense, it's a stepping-stone to hopefully getting paid more and having a longer-term contract.* (Karl, NGO B)
Conditions of possibility for emancipation: Contesting precariousness	**E. Questioning precariousness**	E1. Grievances	*There is a Facebook group called "We are interns, we are not slaves"* (Claudia, Consultancy C) *Here we choose voluntarily to become slaves* (Alice, European Commission) *You will always have to be the one that has to bring the model around. I mean, they actually asked me to bring a modem to get fixed, but not for work, the modem of the house of someone senior! It was broken so I had to… Same with catering. Because I was the intern so 'you go'.* (Andrea, European Parliament)
		E2. Resistance	*I spoke to the employer honestly and I just said that I couldn't, and I didn't want to keep working in an unpaid internship. So, after checking with some people and the budget department and everything, then they told me that they could offer me an extension with a paid internship which I accepted.* (Beatriz, Consultancy B) *I think it is something [..] for the interns to get paid[.] I think it is a hashtag. #fairfortheinterns or something like that. #fairpayfortheinterns. It's a big deal right now. They had the protest and they had places in where the interns went in the streets and said that they want a salary*. (Alina, Think Tank A)

Conceptual dimensions	Second order codes	Main first order codes	Representative data
	F. Rejection and exit	F1. Fighting back	*[Working here] reinforce[d] my... my [rage] about the EU because I worked about all this collusion about the Commission and lobbies. [..] Maybe people, already see themselves 'I am a future employee and I need to prove what I can do'. Regardless of the price. But I was not considering in this world, so I stopped.* (Eloise, NGO A) *I wouldn't go looking for a job in Brussels[.] I am looking for France, and I'm looking for private company: counselling, assistant consultancy probably, but maybe Asia. I'll really love to go back to Asia, but not Brussels.* (Jean, Consultancy A)
		F2. Expulsions	*I mean, people with very low economic resources would not, for instance, be interested in getting one internship after another. And that's also an issue that sometimes I feel that of isn't good at all, but I know a lot of people who have been through a lot that for them it will be literally impossible to stay in Brussels to do one internship after another.* (Marcela, European Commission) *[You need to] stop doing internships when you have maxed what you can take out of them [and look for a stable position]. If you keep on investing, you lose it all. If you keep on doing internships you are out of the market. [They would say] "You did five stages, and you are in your 30s? My dear, you are out of the job market"* (Guglielmo, European Commission)
	G. Depoliticisation	G1. Idiosyncratic national backgrounds	*I had the feeling that in Italy precariousness is not a temporary thing, but it is definitive. I was surrounded by people that at 35, despite being skilled, knowledgeable and so on, finds itself being unable to pay the rent or similar.* (Francesca, European Commission) *I recall a friend studying philosophy [in Italy] that had to do an internship to graduate. It was not important where she did it[:] one of the organisations with a convention was an off-licence, that's why I said it. That's great to be free to choose, but this makes no sense for her professional development. Here instead you have the feeling you are learning for the next step.* (Andrea, European Parliament)
		G2. Fragmentation of young professionals	*I mean on a team of 40 people, roughly almost 10 people quit their job, like you realized, 10 out of 40 just left for…for other firms that were like 20 meters away, but just paying way much more then we-- than they were doing.* (Jean, Consultancy A) *Of course we are tired of this situation, [but] most people stay for 4-5 months. I came to stay, so I suffer much more the idea of hopping from one internship to another.* (Alice, European Commission) *[In] the EU are mainly men in it… so when I was going to conferences, mainly are men and older than me, definitely. So, I do not know, I am confident, I know I am a woman I can do the exact same thing that a man does, but if they are older than me, and I do not have experience, and a… maybe that came to me as a problem.* (Alina, Think Tank A)

Conceptual dimensions	Second order codes	Main first order codes	Representative data
		G3. Lack of collective activism or solidarity	*I assume I have a very good working condition, so I guess I don't think it would be that necessary for me personally [to join a Union].* (Annette, NGO B) *If unions could do something, we wouldn't be in this situation now* (Andrea, European Parliament)
		G4. Naturalisation of precariousness	*Well, for me it's natural. It's human instinct, but I think it's probably exemplified here[.] Because you've got debatably, the best minds. These people have done two Masters, they speak three languages. All their lives, they've been the best. They've always been the best in their class and now they're surrounded by people with equal abilities, and they're not the best anymore.* (Annette, NGO B) *Sometimes I do [work until late]. But it's my choice[.] So it can be because I want to finish up something and then I just start later, the day after, or it can be because I took a long lunch break, or because I have the feeling that I wasn't efficient during the day or something. It always has a kind of reason.* (Marion, NGO B)

Chapter Three

Hereafter, by *surveyed* I mean those included in the exploratory, systematic, consolidating phases. By *used* I mean those included after the final filtering phase. 'CMS' stands for Critical Management Studies.

Figure 7 - Publications and sources surveyed and used by classification

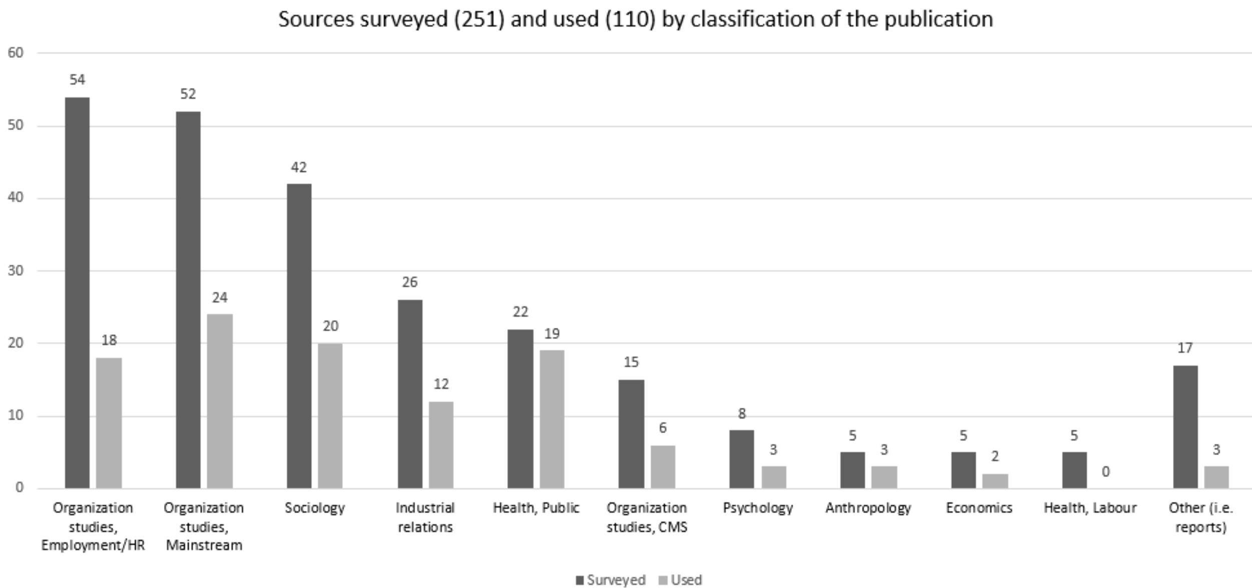

Table 10 - Publications surveyed and used (N=110). In bold are those used at least three times.

Publication (journal name unless specified)	Sources Surveyed	Sources Used
Academy of Management Annals	**7**	**5**
Academy of Management Review	3	1
Administrative Science Quarterly	2	2
American Behavioral Scientist	3	1
American Economic Review	1	1
American Journal of Economics and Sociology	1	1
American Journal of Industrial Medicine	**3**	**3**
American Journal of Public Health	1	1
American Sociological Review	1	1
Annual Review of Anthropology	1	1
Annual Review of Org. Psychology and Organizational Behavior	2	1
Annual Review of Public Health	1	1
Annual Review of Sociology	2	1
Asia Pacific Journal of Human Relations	1	1
Book: Precarious Work (2017)	**6**	**4**
Book: The Precariat (2011)	1	1
British Journal of Industrial Relations	**5**	**3**

Publication (journal name unless specified)	Sources Surveyed	Sources Used
Contemporary Sociology	1	1
Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory	1	1
Economic and Industrial Democracy	2	2
Ephemera	3	1
European Journal of Social Theory	1	1
Human Relations	**13**	**8**
Industrial Relations Journal	2	1
International Journal of Epidemiology	3	1
International Journal of Health Services	8	4
International Journal of Management Reviews	2	1
International Labour Review	2	1
Italian Politics	1	1
Journal of Environmental and Public Health	1	1
Journal of Industrial Relations	7	2
Journal of Management	1	1
Journal of Management and Strategy	1	1
Journal of Public Health	1	1
Journal of Sociology	1	1
Occupational and environmental medicine	1	1
Organization	**8**	**4**
Organization Science	**4**	**4**
Organization Studies	5	1
Preventive Medicine	1	1
Progress in Human Geography	1	1
Public Health	3	2
Qualitative Sociology	1	1
Research in organizational behaviour	1	1
Social Science & Medicine	1	1
Sociologia del lavoro	2	1
Sociology	5	1
Sociology Compass	1	1
South Atlantic Quarterly	1	1
Studies in Continuing Education	1	1
The Economic and Labour Relations Review	3	2
Theory, Culture & Society	2	1
Third World Quarterly	1	1
TripleC	4	1
Work and Occupations	11	4
Work, Employment & Society	**35**	**10**
Other: books	**11**	**6**
Other: working papers, reports and PhD thesis	**25**	**4**

Table 11 - Publications surveyed but not used, detailed (N=31)

Publication (journal name unless specified)	Sources Surveyed
Academy of Management Journal	3
Academy of Management Learning & Education	3
Academy of Management Perspectives	3
Academy of Management Proceedings	2
American Journal of Sociology	1
Cadernos de Saúde Pública	1
Cambridge Journal of Economics	1
Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal	1
Economics, Management, and Financial Markets	1
European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology	1
Foucault Study	1
International Journal of Training and Development	1
Journal of Applied Psychology	1
Journal of Cultural Economy	1
Journal of Management Studies	3
Journal of Youth Studies	1
New Technology, Work and Employment	1
Partecipazione e Conflitto: Open journal of sociopolitical studies	1
Rethinking Marxism	1
Revista Latam de Estudios sobre Cuerpos, Emociones y Sociedad	1
Scandinavian Journal of Management	1
Social Compass	1

Endnotes

Introduction

[1] I am grateful to my examiners, Patrizia Zanoni and Jean Pascal Gond, for their insights provided during the Viva. This version takes stock of such feedback, especially in the introduction and in the conclusions.

Chapter One

[2] Our examples are drawn from location-based gig work carried out by delivery and home service contractors, as contrasted to online platforms that typically involve design, software development, and other services delivered remotely from home (International Labour Office, 2021).

[3] In some jurisdictions, competition low prohibits self-employed workers from engaging in collective bargaining, on the basis that this constitutes a cartel (International Labour Office, 2021). It should also be noted that some big investors, including Aviva and Standard Aberdeen in the UK, announced that they would not be participating in the IPO of Deliveroo in London, citing workers' rights as an issue (Armitage, 2021). In response, Deliveroo challenged the adequacy of the research, notably its small sample size and failure to share the data with Deliveroo. Nonetheless, within a few days, the price of the share offer was revised downwards.

[4] Inspired by the notion of heteronormativity, "econormativity" combines "economic" with "normativity". Presuming all actors to be heterosexual, heteronormativity structures social norms and expectations so that actions and social behaviours follow and reinforce heterosexual principles. Econormativity is a parallel form of normalisation. Its grip limits the extent to which alternative social and economic models and relations can be imagined, let alone enacted.

[5] The evisceration of organised labour is exemplified by the (neoliberal) advice provided by Norman Tebbitt when serving as British Employment Secretary in the Thatcher administration. Addressing the unemployed casualties of his government's policies, Tebbitt recalled that 'I grew up in the 30s with an unemployed father. He didn't riot. He got on his bike and looked for work, and he kept looking till he found it' (Guardian, 2000). Tebbit's admonition was echoed by the Prime Minister when she claimed that: 'there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no governments can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first' (Thatcher, 1993: 626). While Tebbitt's advice exemplifies what we term a *reformist* orientation to conflict, whose prescriptions are framed within the confines of the status quo, a *radical* orientation is expressed in strikes and riots that demand transformative change, such as those provoked by Thatcher's infamous 'Poll Tax'.

[6] It is relevant to note that Foucault's assessment of neoliberalism is complex and contested. Some claim that, for Foucault, neoliberalism does not tie individuals to the truth of their identity (Dean, 2018). However, it is one thing to acknowledge that neoliberalism may increase the space for minorities and

expressions of individual differences; it is quite another to claim that this expansion offers a way out of out of subjectification. For a more nuanced discussion of Foucault's position see Newheiser (2016).

[7] When advocating mobilization theory, Kelly (1998) acknowledges but does not explore, the issue of identity and interest formation. He recognises that identities may be multiple as workers may be lesbian or gay (Kelly, 1998: 122). But he consistently privileges or essentialises the 'worker', discounting that a person's identity – as black and/or consumer and/or lesbian – may be existentially as potent. Of course, as he also argues, it is unsatisfactory to regard multiple identities as 'fragmented' (Hall, 1992) when they may become fused and mutually reinforcing. But it is equally implausible to presume that the identity of 'worker' is most salient as a basis for collective action.

[8] Prime examples are the 'European confederation of industrial and service cooperatives' (*cecop.coop*) and 'CoopCycle', active in several European cities (*coopcycle.org/en*). See also Scholz (2017).

Chapter Two

[9] Throughout the paper, informants are identified with a pseudonym and with the organisation they belonged to at the time of their internship – see table 1. All institutions were based in Brussels, Belgium.

[10] Both accessed on 05/11/2020. Full video available here: *https://youtu.be/j4Y1ArTPjfY*. See also *https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/eu-parliament-event-highlights-issue-of-unpaid-internships*.

[11] See: *https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/precarious-word-history-and-definition*

[12] See: *https://europa.eu/newsroom/events/brussels-new-washington-dc-lobbying-transparency-eu_en*

[13] See: *https://ec.europa.eu/stages/how-to-apply/if-selected_en*

[14] My past experience has been pivotal in deciding to undergo this project, in getting access, and to understanding much of data collected. I further reflect on this in the conclusions of the thesis.

[15] All informants were interns in the 'Eurobubble', either at time of the interview or at maximum in the six preceding months.

[16] See: *https://www.politico.eu/event/politicos-eu-studies-2019/*

[17] See: *http://brusselsbriefings.net/2020/02/10/next-brussels-briefing-n-60-the-future-of-food-and-agricultural-transformation/index.html*

[18] I acknowledge the following with deep gratitude: "this paper uses data from the Fair Internship Initiative. The Fair Internship Initiative is a group of current and former United Nations interns and consultants advocating for higher quality and fairly remunerated internships within the United Nations System. The FII

data collection was collected on a voluntary basis and is gratefully acknowledged (see *https://fairinternshipinitiative.org*)".

[19] See: *https://www.debatingeurope.eu/2015/02/24/unpaid-internships-banned-across-eu/#.XfuH2fx7lPY*

[20] Full video available here: *https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4Y1ArTPjfY*

[21] I acknowledge that interns leaving the Eurobubble might just be, by definition, harder to encounter. I come back to this point in the conclusions.

[22] In this work I refer mostly to the European Commission as it is the most 'open' to externals, with public hiring procedures (although not unique). The European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, and other bodies are also part of the system, yet they are much more linked to national governments; appointments tend to be external and overall they do not manage European funds, which is the main source of income for many central and gravitating institutions. Nonetheless, internships in other EU bodies are no less precarious: despite several reforms, unpaid or underpaid internships are still very common, as is overworking.

[23] See European Commission official statistics:
https://ec.europa.eu/stages/online/cv/application_statistics.cfm?session=95

[24] See *https://www.bingo-brussels.eu/* and *http://www.internsgopro.com/en/home/*

[25] With depoliticisation I mean here the absence of solidarity or of a sense of injustice that would lead a homogenous group of people in similar situations to demand change together, even if (at least some) individual members might not directly or immediately benefit from them.

Chapter Three

[26] I shall acknowledge that scholars in political theory and sociology, use the term 'precarity' to capture the ontological and existential condition of precariousness. I use here the latter term, as precarity would deserve a broad discussion that would exceed the scope of this review. For a broader discussion of the term see the conclusions of the thesis.

[27] The reason is twofold: first, the vast majority of papers surveyed look at this region, so insights are constrained in this assumption; second, Western countries have a more homogenous legislative framework, therefore solutions achievable here are not necessarily applicable elsewhere. Regardless, precariousness remains in essence a 'societal global grand challenge' (Brammer et al., 2019), given its global reach and systemic nature, and the insights presented here can hopefully be extended further.

[28] I have only surveyed sources written in English. This is certainly a limitation, as much work has been produced in other languages, notably French, Italian, Spanish and German.

[29] I am indebted to Sabah Boufkhed for her input and guidance.

[30] The Fordist Western European worker is 'ideally' entirely *unprecarious* if it is perfectly integrated into an organisation where it finds meaning and satisfaction in its job (low uncertainty), has a clear workload, knows exactly how this will be in the future (low instability), has a permanent contract protected by strong legal protections (low insecurity), and can count on welfare protections both inside the company (corporate training, child care, parental leave, paid holidays) and outside (unemployment benefits, public subsidies). The American gig worker, by contrast, is 'ideally' entirely precarious if it is not integrated in the company at all, to the extent that any relationship is mediated by an app (high uncertainty), has aleatory job assignments, hourly-based salary depending upon the obscure decisions of company's technology (high instability), has no employment contract. It is formally self-employed (high insecurity), and cannot count on welfare, neither within the company (no training, no paid leave, and so on), nor by the State (no unemployment benefits, sick leave, parental leave, nor significant public subsidies).

[31] It can be argued that there is a hierarchy here: casualised work is contingent and flexible. Nonetheless, this would create conceptual confusion and it would not cover all cases (i.e., contingent workers who cannot choose the time and place of work, or casualised work in the form of zero-hours contract, which are technically permanent). Finally, flexibility has a positive angle that contingent and casualised do not. Overall, I acknowledge that these are heuristic categories which, in reality, only partially overlap.

[32] The idea that the *lumpenproletariat* cannot be organised (or that it even exists) has been widely criticised, especially by postcolonial authors (see, e.g., Frantz Fanon). However, I think here it is still useful to capture the effect of individualisation and atomisation, regardless of the presence of attempts to unionise, create social movements, or collectively reconstruct political identities.

[33] Therefore, HCT can be seen as a problem of social reproduction because class issues cross through the society and individuals are not endowed with the same opportunities of capital accumulation and valorisation. On top of any overarching critique of market rationality, that is to say that even if such imbalances ceased to exist, some individuals would still lose in the market of human capital due to natural tendencies like monopolies, luck or external shocks.

[34] The full list of surveyed papers, which are not included in this review, is available upon request. See also the section on methodology and Table 3 for more information.