Research Article

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Research scholars: temp workers or lifetime students? The struggle and organization of subjectivities that are 'in between'

Abstract: This article addresses the process of political organization and unionizing among university researchers in Italy which are formally considered to be 'in training'. This condition puts them in a sort of liminal space, between being recognized as fully employed professionals and being instead considered lifetime students. Their effort to organize politically can be seen as one of many ways through which students are fighting against the establishment of the neoliberal university model. The analysis is focused on the Italian movement called CRNS - Coordinamento dei Ricercatori non Strutturati (Non-structured Research Fellows Coordination), which formed to address this defining issue. The CRNS experiment aimed at achieving a sense of unity among the fragmented academic workforce and it can be considered a prototype of a new, grassroots form of union activity and organizing. The empirical data used in the analysis consists of ten in-depth interviews with university researchers, all Italian citizens, equally divided between men and women, who have all had to move around, as a function of their career and who have all been involved, to different degrees, in political and union organizing initiatives, regarding their conditions of 'perpetual students' rather than 'not quite employed'.

Keywords: qualitative methodology; neoliberal university; students; academic precariousness; unionization

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> "The sorcerer's apprentice, who chooses at his own risk to study the local sorcery and fetishes (rather than seek the reassuring exoticness of the far-fetched) should fully expect to see the violence that he has unleashed, turn against him."
> Bourdieu, Homo Academicus (1988)

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, several studies have shown the spread of financialized models of university, in European and North American countries, where the main characteristic is a strong segmentation and precarious nature of labor (Butler, Delaney, Sliwa 2017; Busquet 2008). As university governance evolved, there have been several instances of conflict and strife that challenged the new business-oriented organizational models, shaped around the concepts of *new public management*. It is within this context that the temp researchers' working conditions, as well as their overall existential state, are a paradigm to describe the dynamics that determine the way that the actual experience of working is elaborated by academic subjectivities in general. Given this framework, the path of research fellows, notwithstanding the occasional specificity, can be construed as emblematic in analyzing today's contradictions and new vulnerabilities that characterize contemporary societies (Fumagalli 2016; Marazzi 2002). This paper presents some of the findings from an ongoing project, which is studying processes of political organization and unionizing among university researchers in Italy formally considered to be 'in training'. This condition puts them in a sort of liminal space, between being recognized as fully employed professionals and being instead considered lifetime students. Their effort to organize politically can be seen as one of many ways through which students are fighting against the establishment of the neoliberal university model. The analysis will focus on the Italian movement called CRNS-Coordinamento dei Ricercatori non Strutturati (Non-structured Research Fellows Coordination), which formed

to address this defining issue. The CRNS experiment aimed at achieving a sense of unity among the fragmented academic workforce and it can be considered a prototype of a new, grassroots form of union activity and organizing.

I will first concentrate on the theoretical context; thereafter, I will explain the epistemological approach and the methodology in which the research is located. Finally, the fourth and fifth paragraphs will analyze the CRNS experience by using 10 in-depth interviews with university researchers.

2. Globalization, academic precariousness and neoliberal university

Towards the end of Twentieth Century, a plethora of very complex economic and social transformations has to be considered. The emergence of new paradigms in labor organization and structure, a generalized increased flexibility in labor relations and the new preponderance of the tertiary sector, all define the main characteristics of a new production model (Beck 1992). Within this framework, the precarious conditions that generally characterize the contemporary labor relations has been introduced first of all in the academic sector and afterwards in many others fields of production (Banfi, Bologna 2011) . Following these, the universities have worked as a lab for testing out new forms of governance of work (Sennet 1998; Ciccarelli, Allegri 2013; Murgia, Poggio 2013; Pellegrino 2016; Coin 2017). The paradigm of cognitive precariousness which concerns the work experience of a lot of academic researchers, as we will see, represents an ambivalent system of autonomy and self-exploitation, dealing with personal gratifications and humiliation, uncertain future and difficult present (Chicchi, Leonardi 2011; Armano, Murgia 2017; Coin, Murgia, Giorgi 2017). Quoting Foucault and Deleuze, we could define the precariousness as a dispositive[1] that works on the subjectivity of contemporary actors (Foucault 1976; Deleuze 2002). Given this premise, in this paper we will concentrate on the specific features of academic precariousness (Ciccarelli, Allegri 2013; Pellegrino 2016)

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1 "What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions–in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements." (Foucault 1977)

Stability, a staple of the Fordist era, gives way to precariousness in both employment and in life generally, a dynamic that radically affects and modifies how today's individuals construct and perceive their identity (Sennet 1998; Borghi 2002; Chicchi, Leonardi 2011). Workers in the field of knowledge have become a relevant and growing part of the greater workforce (Fullin 2004; Silver 2003; Armano 2011). Beginning in the Eighties, a few branches of social research have focused on studying these workers and their condition. However, to this day, it is still hard to identify an analytical framework that can describe fully its complexity (Drucker 1994). Considering the different approaches that studied the concept of "knowledge workers", the figure of the university researcher is a professional topos that is not easy to define, since it encompasses different roles and experiences, a vast constellation of contractual relations, and a plethora of professional expectations as well as life trajectories. This figure, in a sense, also incorporates some of the characteristics that belong to knowledge workers in general (Rullani 2004; Armano, Murgia 2017). Being employed in the field of research and scientific knowledge is the result of a long-term process whereby individuals choose to follow a path that is known to be unstable, and whose progression is not linear, in order to satisfy their ambition and their life project (Murgia, Poggio 2013, Bascetta 2015).

It is now possible to understand the relevance of academic and research institutions to the modern economy: if on the one hand they remain central to the elaboration and sharing of knowledge, technology and culture, on the other they are ever-increasingly subject to a transformation that is driven by the pervasiveness of business-oriented organizational models, and shape themselves following the principles of *new public management (NPM)* (Waldby, Cooper 2014). This new paradigm expects the administration of public institutions to organize along the principles and perspectives of a market economy. For academia, this model of governance has determined that each university has gained a larger degree of autonomy in forging its relationship with private companies in the economic sector, partly in an effort to raise funds more effectively; additionally, it fostered a heightened 'self-awareness' in terms of academic institutions' ability to be active parties in a market economy. (Busquet 2008; Ross, Krause, Nolan, Palm 2008; Waldby, Cooper 2014). To elaborate on the first point, the strengthening ties between universities and the private sector has determined, on the one hand, a bias whereby the production of knowledge and culture, and their perceived value, are somehow a function of their ability to turn a profit; on the other, an overall re-elaboration of

the so-called third mission's perceived objective, whereby the cultural and scientific work of academia ceases to be construed as self-evidently indispensable to the growth of the human experience as a whole, but is assessed in terms of its financial bottom line (Bonaccorsi 2015). As to the point of 'self-awareness', the establishment of value-centered methods of assessing the quality of academic institutions, and consequently their entitlement to public and private funding, has transformed radically the organizational layout of universities, globally.

For instance, in 2011, in Italy, has been created the ANVUR, an organization linked with the Ministry of Education that works on the evaluation of university and research. This new Institution involves academic experts, political personal and rectors of the Italian universities. It is an Institution that has the power to take decisions about the ranking of universities, departments, researchers and students based on efficiency and productivity criteria. This ranking establishes how many founds have to be allocated to every single actors (Bonaccorsi 2015; ROARS 2015). This process entrenched the paradigm of radical competition at all levels of academia, pitting against one another not only universities, but also faculty, researches and even the very students (Pinto 2012).

So, these dynamics, combined, have pushed public universities towards private sector-like forms of organization, as they strive to maximize productivity and rationalization, are staples in a neo-liberal economy.

"In order to participate in the competition of 'global excellence', academic institution are increasingly managed and financed in the spirit of an efficient organization (Symon et al. 2008)[2] and therefore increasingly run like corporations (O'Connor 2014[3]; Farnham 1999[4]; Gouthro 2002[5]). This trend has been described in term such as 'McUniversity' (Parker, Jary 1995[6]), 'corporate' university' and 'academic capitalism (Slaughter, Leslie 2001[7])" (SteinÞórsdóttir, Heijstra, Einarsdóttir 2017).

In Italy, every single government of the last twenty years has implemented reforms in compliance with organizational principles put forth by the NPM ideas, and it has impacted the reality of academia radically and in very specific ways (Roggero 2009).

Beginning in 1997, several reforms resulted in a constant defunding and progressive divesting by the State, which had, to that day, been the driving organizational structure of this economic sector. A recent study revealed that the most observable consequence of this transformation is a system that has redefined the role of most post-docs and research fellows as temp workers[8]. The impact on the recruiting of new researchers is stark: in the period from 2008 to 2015, funding was reduced by 22.5%. In the same period, Italian Governments, with the collaborations of a large majority of the universities administrators, were responsible for the reduction of 19% in research fellowship positions available, and of 38% in Southern Italy. Comparing the number of doctoral students to the population at large, Italy (with 0.6 Ph.D. students per 1,000 inhabitants), is third-to-last among European nations, even trailing behind countries that were radically affected by the financial crisis, such as Greece (2.1 Ph.D. students per 1,000), Ireland (1.9 per 1,000), and Portugal (1.8 per 1,000). Things are no better for research grantees: per the data, of the 15,300 recipients of research grants in 2013, more than 86.4% will not continue to do research, and 10.2% anticipate leaving the research field once their term research contract RTDa (Ricercatore a Tempo Determinato di tipo A— A type of temporary research contract that is typically a 3-year commitment with the possibility of only one 2 year extension) expires. Essentially, within the next three years, 96.6% of the current 'temp' population of researchers will be processed out of the university system (Burgio 2014). As we will see, the researchers interviewed has been enrolled before the spread of this dramatic situation and now they see the possibility of leaving their job with a sense of failure, shame and frustration (Chicchi, Simone 2017; Coin 2017).

The Italian "assegnista di ricerca" can be taken as a paradigm to describe the progressive fragmentation of the career paths in academic research. The legal framework for this new kind of contract was defined by Act 240 of 2010, the so-called Gelmini reform (after the name of the then minister of public education). This change, enacted by the Berlusconi government, meant the permanent elimination of the role of the 'tenured' researcher (meaning, a research fellow whose contract has no

2 Symon, R., Buehring, A., Johnson, P., Cassell, C. (2008). *Positioning qualitative research as resistance to the institutionalization of the academic labour process*, Organization Studies, 29(19).

3 O'Connor, P. (2014). *Management and gender in higher education*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

4 Farnham, P. (1999). *Managing academic staff in changing university system: International trends and comparisons*, Mylton Keynes, Open University Press.

5 Gouthro, P. A. (2002). *What counts? Examining academic values and women's life experience from a critical feminist perspective*, CJSAE/RCÉÉA, 16(1).

6 Parker, M., Jary, D. (1995). *The McUniversity: Organization, management and academic subjectivity*, Organization, 2(2).

7 Slaughter, S., Leslie, L.L. (2001). *Expanding and elaborating the concept of academic capitalism*, Organization, 8(2).

8 AA.VV., *Quarta indagine annuale ADI su Dottorato e Post-Doc 2013*, reperibile in http://www.dottorato.it/adi/notizie/658-quarta-indagine-annuale-adi-su-dottorato-e-post-doc

term ending), replacing this position with a plethora of different legal relationships between the university institutions and their research staff. Formally, the Italian "assegnista di Ricerca" is comparable to "research fellow" or "post-doctoral researcher" in Anglo-Saxon institutions. However, the substantial difference is a much higher degree of social vulnerability of the Italian researchers. During a 2015 debate in the House pertaining a new form of unemployment benefit aimed at several classes of precarious workers (DIS-COLL), in discussing how this benefit would not extended to the country's research fellows, it was the ministry itself to state that:

> "Given this context, article 22 of act 240/2010 identifies in 'research grants' a very special relationship between grantor and grantee, where the 'educational' or formative component of the research fellowship is very significant (as an example, let us look at the research proposals submitted by some candidates, who are selected and financed by the institution that distributes the grant). Given the above, this Act does not in any way define how research should be conducted, not even in the abstract to allow for any sort of comparison to other forms of coordinated or continued collaboration." (Ministry of employment and social policies, query N.31/2015).

Their own government's stance on their (in)eligibility to access forms of social safety nets places the Italian research fellows in this liminal space, between being recognized as fully employed professionals and being instead considered lifetime students. Denying them benefits that the State awards other workers, defines the research grant as the last step in an individual's education (rather than the first step in their professional career), even though research grants may be renewed to cover a footprint of as many as six years. As we shall see, this definition is the core issue that is being contested by the organized political activity expressed by the various types of temp workers in academia and the knowledge economy in general, in order to assert their status of workers, therefore entitled to contractual benefits and protections.

Notwithstanding we can understand the revolutionary impact of the NPM within the academic sector, as well as other reforms undertaken nationally, but it would be a mistake to limit any analysis on their impacts on Italian universities only to the economic aspects. One of the most evident changes has been the emergence of a very different population of researchers, who are more skilled at navigating the new social dimensions, and the systems of governance and intricacies of neoliberal institutions. Their frameworks of reference are the ideas of New Public Management and the need to redraw social interactions as a function of this new geography.

3. Epistemology and methodological approach

Researching the social environment that one belongs to inevitably obliges one to reflect upon the impact that this may have on the research itself. Several questions arise concerning the tensions between the observer and the context that is being studied, as well as the very status of the body of knowledge and scientific conclusions within the broader field of social sciences. In these matters, we can look at Feminist and post-colonial studies for guidance, which were hugely important, within social sciences, in the Sixties and Seventies: their approach constituted an important break with tradition, since they challenged the hegemonic paradigm within the field: the assumption that it was possible for an observer to maintain objectivity (Dal Lago, De Biasi 2002; Harding 1993; Bourdieu 1992; Haraway 1991; Jameson 1991; Said 1978).

From a methodological perspective, I conducted 10 in-depth interviews with university researchers, all Italian citizens, equally divided between men and women, who have all had to move around, as a function of their career and who have all been involved, to different degrees, in political and union organizing initiatives, regarding their conditions of 'perpetual students' rather than 'not quite employed'.

The choice to interview academic workers involved in political and union organizing initiatives represents a partial perspective in order to understand the social dynamics within this field given that this subjects are a workforce minority on the field of Italian Higher Education. Nevertheless, this choice permits to identify more clearly some dynamics and processes experienced by the researchers during their working experience and already elaborated from the actors during their political organizing activity. Their point of view is a result of a self-reflection faced during their mobilization. This condition doesn't permit a generalization of the findings of this paper, but, in my opinion, it's important to understand how the political and union initiatives could improve the awareness of the agency of the researchers.

If the objective is to study the world of academic employment and the consequences that its evolutions have entailed, given how central individuals' choices have on today's career paths, it will be necessary to use a qualitative approach together with the more traditional quantitative methodologies. My points of reference in this regard are the narrative approach as well as the life stories approach, through the privileged collection of data by way of in-depth interviews (Olagnero, Saraceno 1993, Guidicini

1995), focusing on those biographical elements that are somehow linked to the world of work and with the kinds of political organization that the subjects have adopted (Chicchi 2001). As far as analyzing the empirical data, the project's approach was developed around Strauss and Corbin's Grounded Theory (Strauss, Corbin 1990), which states that interpretations and theorization should emerge from the data, as the analysis unfolds.

4. Prototypes and experiments: CRNS, Coordinamento dei Ricercatori Non Strutturati (Non-tenured Researchers' Coordination organization)

As academic institutions became increasingly financially driven beginning in the Nineties, important movements formed to protest against research and education being re-organized along *new public management* models, as well as academia becoming just another business. From South Africa to Chile, in the U.S.A, Great Britain and France, these movements contested these changes, and the resulting paradigms of competition and profit as the new pillars sustaining the neoliberal university (Silver 2003; Busquet 2008; Ross et al. 2008; Edufactory 2008; SteinÞórsdóttir et al.2017).

Italy too saw a blossoming of political mobilization by students as well as university staff. The most relevant protest effort developed between 2008 and 2010, as hundreds of thousands of people organized to oppose the approval of Act 240 of 2010, the 'Gelmini Reform', which drastically reduced funding to the university system, while also enacting a plethora of measures to complete the overhaul of the system into what is commonly dubbed the "University Business" (Piazza et al. 2010). The protest movement was evocatively called Onda Anomala (Rogue Wave) and sparked a national debate on the function of knowledge and culture, while also bringing to light the claims of the student population and of academic staff, both permanent and temporary. Despite this massive mobilization, the law passed, though with only a 3 votes majority. Thereafter, the university system changed completely and permanently its statutes and prerogatives (Piazza et al 2010).

One of the interviewee emphasizes how the CRNS experience is a continuation of student mobilizations in other countries in the previous 20 years:

"Well, lets' say that my political activity begins in university student collectives right about the time when the first university reforms begin, starting with the Zecchino Reform in 1998. [...]. As a grown woman, let's say as a researcher, I contributed to the creation of CRNS, which is an independent network of non-permanent researchers, that in a practical sense continued the critique that we had begun with previous reforms. Which was the need to salvage universities' third mission, meaning, the development and distribution of critical thinking pertaining to society, to social needs, to social problems. The fact of the matter is that the entire university progression, from being a student to research, is really now only just training for a future of precariousness, for disciplining." *(K.: independent researcher)*

Tenured researchers and professors also mobilized in the same period; however, the interviews reveal that the non-tenured academic staff felt like they had a lot more in common with the student mobilization. Their tenured colleagues were mostly interested in corporative demands, and failed to look at the complexities and consequences that the neoliberal university reform would entail, in terms of management, epistemology, and of the purpose of knowledge. Their narrowly corporative posture made forming alliances with the army of temp workers in academia, or aligning towards common goals, impossible.

Using the words of a post-doc researcher in a European University:

"I think I did go to some meetings, to some debates when I was a non-permanent researcher. But to be honest, I wasn't really into it because I think that most of the times it's really about, it pains me to say this, about demands that don't have much of a political relevance generally, but are rather in defense of the profession, in a way that I don't really agree with. [...]. And what I am really sorry about, sadly, is to see these dynamics often happening in Italian universities. I mean the people who say these same things, young people too, that people who are effectively privileged say, they are really coming from a negative attitude, they are just fighting to maintain their position, which is really sad". *(C.: postdoctoral researcher in a European university).*

Given this premise, the CRNS experiment, created to "discuss the condition of non-tenured researchers in the world of Italian research" [9], aimed at achieving a sense of unity among the fragmented academic workforce. For the most part, the 'temp' researchers were the spokespersons of the movement. This was, therefore, the first instance of political organizing where the demand wasn't simply to 'belong' to an unspecified world of academia, but rather, to move past a specific condition of precariousness of life. Additionally, since none of them were considered 'employed', but rather, 'in training', this in turn had the major effect that they fell outside the protections

9 http://www.ricercatorinonstrutturati.it/chi-siamo/

of labor law, nor had access to social welfare such as unemployment benefits.

Interestingly, the birth of CRNS, in April 2015, happened at a time when the first generation of 'Gelmini reform' compliant research contracts, were approaching their term limits. At a meeting in Florence these 'temps' announced that, barring changes in the law, roughly 40,000 researchers would be processed out of Italian academia[10]. Thereafter, tens of other meetings were held at various universities all over the country, and at least five more were national events that attracted thousands. As the struggle continued for these figures to stabilize their position, the political organizing grew further to achieve mobilization on several tangential issues, first and foremost among them, access to unemployment benefits.

In December 2015, as previously discussed, the government had argued that research fellows, researchers under contract, and PhD candidates were excluded from access to work-related social welfare (including unemployment benefits). The following month, after a national assembly in Florence, the CRNS implemented a particular form of strike, that was dubbed *Sciopero alla Rovescia,* or 'Inside-out Strike'. This idea, inspired by similar work actions by agricultural labor in the Sixties[11], called for individuals to continue performing their tasks, but made it visually obvious when they were doing work that was underpaid, unpaid or improperly acknowledged. The CRNS decided that untenured researchers would wear a red t-shirt with the lettering #ricercaprecaria (#tempresearch), for any activity conducted within university walls; later, pictures and videos would be posted and shared on social networks. This mobilization lasted for several months, and was quite effective, as we shall see.

"For sure we were taking labor action by calling for a form of strike, the inside-out strike, to show the huge amount of precariousness, of unpaid labor, of invisible labor that non-structured staff perform. So, we organized this inside-out strike which was having people continue doing their unpaid and unacknowledged tasks, but making them visible by wearing those red T-shirts with the CRNS logo and the lettering #ricercaprecaria, and using social networks to spread awareness of the fact that every single department in every Italian university relies on free labor performed by a mass of non-tenured, precarious staff." (*K.: independent researcher*)

The inside-out strike shows quite clearly how untenured researchers created effective forms of opposition. On the one hand, the decision to continue working (as opposed to a full strike) reinforced the image of researchers as employees, rather than students. On the other, the capillary use of social networks was a radical innovation in contemporary political organization (Castells 2015).

The CRNS experiment can be considered a prototype of a new, grassroots form of union activity and organizing. Their ability to communicate effectively and very successfully has redefined the notion of unionizing in Italian universities, and actually often caused significant conflict with the traditional unions, deemed by those I interviewed as incapable of understanding the new forms of labor, and of developing effective tools to protect untenured workers in academia. Relationships with the traditional unions were contentious from the very beginning, as the researchers refused to let the former hegemonize the political space within the CRNS. Similarly, the involvement of the traditional student union groups (who have a historical affiliation with the major labor unions in the Country), was also rejected by the mobilizing researchers, given a deep-seated skepticism that the unions were committed to producing an effort commensurate to the scale of the issues in question.

All the interviewees claim that they do not reserve confidence to the traditional union organization. This quote is just an example of this perception:

> "The FLC-CGIL (a branch of a major Italian labor union), is a traditional type of union that simply cannot have any chance of being embraced in there, given the ways it organizes. Also because, on top of everything else, what they say, and the level of rights that they expect, simply don't belong to that world. I mean, this is a world that, given how it's structured, how it's organized through its rules and the different forms of exploitation, does not align with the templates of organization and opposition that that sort of union could possibly have, that still uses striking as a tool. I mean, this kind of stuff simply doesn't work, it doesn't; so, we introduced a certain kind of anomaly in this system, in this system of representation, ok? Because, finally, these temp employees of the universities had a public voice, that was organized and not mediated by the Union that has traditionally been the one to have the floor in the public arena in Italy. And this is why this pretty significant conflict came to pass." (*S.: postdoctoral researcher in a European university*)

Notwithstanding the tensions between the traditional unions and these new organizations of which CRNS is the prototype, on May 10[th,] 2017, the promulgation of an

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10 AA.VV., *Quarta indagine annuale ADI su Dottorato e Post-Doc 2013*, available in http://www.dottorato.it/adi/notizie/658-quarta-indagine-annuale-adi-su-dottorato-e-post-doc

11 http://www.ricercatorinonstrutturati.it/comunicazione/sciopero-alla-rovescia-ricercaprecaria/danilo-dolci-e-lo-scioperoallarovescia/

executive order that decreed that unemployed researchers have legitimate access to unemployment benefits. This partial victory does not solve the radically existential issue of the precarious nature of their employment contracts; however, it is a hugely transformative step forward, since it recognizes logically that researchers are not a subset of the 'student' category, as the Italian Ministry of Labor had previously argued, but are rather, in every possibly way, workers, who can therefore rightly claim access to all the benefits of labor protection that this implies.

5. 'Temp' researchers: living between passion and merit

The social dynamics related to the world of employment have been developing for quite some time, to the point that, beginning in the period after the Second World War, scholars and experts in social studies have had to adapt several analytical tools to these changes. The complexity and the fractious nature of today's global labor market blurs the borders of traditional categories as analytic tools (career, stable job, the dichotomy of "regular" versus "under the table", paid vs. unpaid, self-employed vs. employed, etc.). For instance: originally the notion of 'temp work' was associated with mostly unskilled work that was also underpaid; once the economic crisis became a driving force in accelerating social, political and economic transformation processes. It amplified the tendency in which 'temps' became ubiquitous in every field, at most every level of skillset and education, across the entire job market (Armano, Murgia 2017, Benasso 2013). Moreover, within the so-called "cognitive bio-capitalism", instability does not describe only the object in question (work), but rather now impacts life choices, family planning, and today's social relations in general. To the point that several scholars have indicated instability as an existential condition in today's society (Beck 1992; Chicchi 2001). Within this framework, the path of research fellows, notwithstanding the occasional specificity, can be construed as emblematic in analyzing today's contradictions and new vulnerabilities that characterize contemporary societies (Marazzi 2002, Fumagalli 2016).

"The precarious status of the researcher is at once a *social fact* in the Durkheimian sense, meaning, a way of behaving, thinking, and perceiving reality that originates outside the individual but is nonetheless able to exert a certain degree of coercion, as well as an

attitude as described by Thomas and Znaniecki[12], because the researcher's objective state is internalized by the individual's conscience, and determines the individual's potential and actual conduct" (Pedroni 2016).

Assuming Italy like reference, another issue affecting researchers is the progressive undoing of contractual benefits and protections that were typical of traditional, stable employment. While it's true that a researcher's workload in terms of hourly commitments has never been defined or consistent, it is also the case that his compensation has progressively been reduced. Moreover, from a practical point of view, none of the contracts that regulate the world of temp academic research allow for any social welfare benefit (including such basic ones such as sick leave, or maternity leave). Lastly, as the relationship between task and retribution (a staple of traditional labor), becomes more flexible, the entire category loses even more leverage and becomes more subject to economic instability (Sylos Labini, Zapperi 2010). This in turn is connected to the end of a traditional notion of career as a linear progression within the organizational hierarchy and its associated increase in wages. The progression in university academia is quite intricate, with vertical and lateral moves, and a structural discontinuity in wages, often with long periods with little or no income. The issue of free labor is one of the major characteristics defining this area of the economy (Murgia, Poggio 2013; Bascetta 2015; Pedroni 2016).

It is also important to go beyond the *New Public Management*'s impact on research fellows in their social relations, to include how it has impacted academic work in a qualitative sense. A new preeminence of productivity is perfectly described by the axiom publish or perish (Dal Lago 2012). Publishing becomes of paramount importance, since ranking determines any chance of stabilizing one's career progression; this in turn impacts directly the researcher's trajectory both in terms of life and academic choices, and redefines epistemologically the role of knowledge and culture. Given this framework, those researchers who aren't established will tend towards acquiring what has been referred to a Neoliberal Self:

"A *Neoliberal Self* is governed by the market mentality of self-promotion, whereby every career choice is an investment that is undertaken after a careful risk analysis [...]. To make the most out of his situation, the researcher must squeeze everything he can out of the data and observation that may have been conduc-

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12 Thomas, W. I., Znaniecki, F. (1996). *The Polish peasant in Europe and America: a classic work in immigration history*, Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

ted, by focusing on copious output, rather than on its quality, which becomes a secondary consideration" (Pedroni 2016).

Similar words were used by my interviewees, a further confirmation that the phenomena described to this point have impacted research fellows' lives and work practices, but also the meaning that they attach to their professional accomplishments:

> "The majority of those who do research in Italy work under the same conditions, meaning they are coopted and taken advantage of, etcetera. However, even if you are in the best possible situation, whether abroad or in Italy, doing research today is inextricably tied to scientific productivity, publishing, and in general tending after one's own resume in the hope of eventually achieving a permanent position. So therefore all this stuff affects how you conduct your research." (*L.: Postdoctoral Researcher in a European university*).

Within this whole gridlock of insufficiencies that define today's university (financial cuts, work instability and very few opportunities for stable employment), in my opinion merit and grading become the paradigms used for governance and hierarchization of the work force within a field of research (Coin et al.2017; Butler, Delaney, Śliwa 2017; Pellegrino 2016; Pinto 2012). These mechanisms determine a sort of hyper-individualism and competition among social actors who are weak, but who perceive in this competition the only way to progress towards stable employment and the social recognition that follows, regardless of the fact that the actual likelihood of this happening is getting and closer to zero.

"... it's a race to the bottom, see? When you see your colleague as the person who could steal your job. This is the reason why I have never been interested in the mechanism, in this approach, I've never even thought about it. That's why I never even attempted a career in Italy, I never tried to look for quick jobs to do for free to enter in this dynamic, where you're just fighting over the scraps that fell off the table—except that maybe a scrap then becomes a whole meal, or even something else. [...]. Which is actually the basis of this entire idea of casual work, meaning flexibility and financial blackmail. And it's not, or it's unlikely that the tension is felt by anyone in a position that is privileged compared to your own, but rather creates these micro-struggles between people who are on the same level, or are even worse off than you are." (*S.: teaching assistant at a university outside of Europe*).

The experience lived by this researcher, talk us about the disillusion of the Italian researcher about the possibility to imagine a future in the Italian university system. If this subject faced a precarious experience also in a other part of the world, his perception is that comparing the two ways, in Italy there are not opportunity to imagine a future. At the same time, during the past years, Italian mainstream medias and Italian administrators have improved the idea that for the Italian academic excellence it is easier to imagine continuing to work in their field abroad that in Italy. This discourse, linked with the idea of "brain drain", with a rhetorical but very influent meaning, is called "Escape of Brains" (Saint Blancat 2017; Nava 2009). The words of the last interviewee appear to be influenced by this kind of discourses.

Some authors have asked why research fellows are willing to go through the trouble, to sacrifice their very existential stability and to accept the chance of being in this limbo, possibly forever, just for a shot at a position adequate to their preparation (Murgia, Poggio 2013; Bascetta 2015; Pedroni 2016; Coin, Murgia, Alberti 2017; Butler et al.2017). Two explanations can shed some light on these social dynamics: the first is defined by Annalisa Murgia and Barbara Poggio (2013) as "the passion trap". The second, first introduced by Marco Bascetta (2015), refers to what the author calls "political economics of the promise".

According to the first, for those who have achieved a higher degree and academic prowess, being a part of a university is not just about the job: rather, they feel that what they do is important for themselves and for society. They persevere despite the challenges associated with their contractual condition and power disadvantage. We found this perception in all the interviews:

> "Doing research means navigating between your passion, studying and knowledge, or if you like, producing knowledge that can have a critical impact on the public sphere, and this dynamic of self-abuse. [...] Intellectual work is a trap, ok? Because it is hyper-exploitative, and at the same time you can actually have a pretty high degree of autonomy in how you work, ok? So there is always this double- ambivalence. Doing research means knowing how to navigate this ambivalence. So your passion for studying, research exploring phenomena that you find interesting on the one hand and on the other being able to sustain these processes of self-exploitation that can be, what's the word, very, very tiring" *(S.: fellow at a European university)*.

The ambivalence showed by this sample of interview between autonomy and hyper-exploitation is something of structural on the working condition of the researcher (Bousquet 2008, Butera 2008, Coin 2017). The opportunity to manage their times and spaces is one of the most diffused motivations that precarious researcher use to explain why they continue to work on the research field even thought their instability and absence of future. At the same time, it seems to be not sufficient to explain the availability to live this condition for a lot of years, potentially forever.

From this point of view, in a recent publication Marco Bascetta attempts to analyze the political, social and economic processes that are allowing for the increasing spread, in most aspects of economic activity, of different forms of free labor. This theory affirm that the process works on the promise of access to a more stable and 'traditional' career in academia, towards which today's research fellows are willing to spend their efforts and sacrifices.

"What we would like to examine now is how that promise, or a bet that is disguised as a promise if you will, are 'spent' on the job market today. Such a massive thing as to amount to a "political economy of promises". Let's begin by making clear the following: the promise in question is the "paycheck", the compensation, that you receive for your free labor. In today's economy free labor, or severely discounted labor, is a fundamental part of the process of value-adding, of increase in profits and of net income figures. And, more in general, of the entire process of wealth production in today's advanced societies (both in an economic sense and beyond). It is this apparent "trading process" that is characteristic of today's 'free labor' and makes it different from any other form of 'voluntary servitude'. It is a complex productivity mechanism, an expression of material and immaterial, logistical and ideological issues of differing natures." (Bascetta 2015)

The interviewees themselves often connect this idea of a "promise" with that of "project", a very important aspect of free academic work. Given the neoliberal framework, where each individual is responsible for their own career progression and therefore must plan their professional growth, acquiring grants and funding for research is inextricably linked to the ability to write proposals to present to as many funding institutions as possible. Therefore, the proposal is one of the more relevant "neoliberal work practices" that untenured research fellows have had to learn to master as they develop their neoliberal Self, described above; the 'new' research fellow is an entrepreneur promoting himself, and 'entrepreneurial risk' in this context is squarely, and only, on his shoulders. The following sample of interview spoke very clearly about this process:

> "Oh well, forget that writing proposals is all unpaid work. I was just thinking, awhile back, as I was wrapping up one of the thousands of projects I am working on, that this entire system of grant proposals is the sublimation of this economy of promises. I mean, I guess you could say that you create this promise yourself, whereas in other fields is produced by the system. And, given that academia has become this new world of meritocracy, obviously, if it doesn't work it's all your fault. It's all on

you whether you win or lose. It is all very self-referential, shall we say." (*K.: independent researcher*).

It is important to note that it is on this subject matter that Italian researchers have begun the process of organizing over the past couple of years and the mobilization is still going.

6. Conclusions

A sociological analysis can never be neutral: the author's relationship to the field of study, as well as the methodology and the theoretical framework adopted are all factors that radically affect the end result, that will always inevitably be partial, subjective, and incomplete. For those who wish to study society and social relations, it is fundamentally important to pay particular attention to the meanings that actors lend to their life trajectories, to their experiences.

Within this context, the issue of self-reflection plays a fundamental role in shaping a research project, especially when a researcher chooses to study a social context that he or she is a part of. I feel that it is important to underscore that the researcher's proximity to the topic, or to the subjects at hand, is not limiting, but rather adds value to a style of inquiry that puts self-reflection at the center of its method. On the one hand, it reassures the research subject that the experiences and struggles put forth are not objectified; on the other, the researcher's familiarity with the social framework allows for a deeper level of understanding and contextualization of the interviewee's experience, a more effective communication process, and a better understanding of which aspects of the story might merit further inquiry. (Bourdieu 2000).

From a methodological point of view, this approach has strengths and limits that should be touched upon. As to the former, the use of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to define, as the field of inquiry, certain aspects and dimension of contemporary social life that would otherwise be difficult to comprehend, by letting the research subjects themselves table autonomously those issues deemed relevant (in the case of academic researchers, thereby letting them identify the meaningful events in their personal and professional biographies.) Furthermore, as it invests the interviewee with the ability to establish the direction of inquiry, it may occasionally reveal new and as yet unforeseen directions along which to proceed in the project (Strauss, Corbin, 1990). Its limits, however, stem from the pragmatic necessity of having a limited pool of interviewees, that therefore does not allow for a very high degree of generalization. Furthermore, the

large number of different contractual agreements within the academic labor market is at odds with the ever present need, in any research project that empirically employs a qualitative methodology, of a homogenous population.

Therefore, I feel that it is possible to arrive to some partial conclusions. First, I feel that it is important to underline that researchers consider their job to be very important for society as a whole; it has a large impact on their own self-perception, in other words, they identify with their profession. The passion for research is why they choose this unstable, arduous and trying career path. This passion, however, is a trap leading to self-exploitation for the sake of a life in academia (Murgia, Poggio 2013). The economic theory of promise shows how it is the researchers themselves, through practices of proposal planning and self-delusion, that keep alive a promise (a tenure in academia), that statistically will only happen to a ridiculously small percentage of them (Bascetta 2015). From this point of view, it seems interesting to develop new research processes to investigate if this categories (trap and promise) work also on the subjects that are entering now on the field of social and human research. For instance, a quantitative and qualitative research on the strategies and on the perception of their professional future focused on the experience of the actual Phd students could be very interesting in order to verify this hypothesis.

It is also true, however, that in my opinion the examples of political organization such as the CRNS experiment, question, by their very existence, these dynamics. They seem to have called into question strongly the choices of a neoliberal university, the traditional forms of union organization and action, and the effectiveness of the latter in communicating and fostering social relations, within the context of a highly segmented work force.

The CRNS victory is just an example of the capacity of a qualified but disadvantaged group, such as temp researchers, to organize politically and achieve important results in the face of a hostile and powerful system. Their victory in the matter of unemployment opens the door for debating the interesting issue of non-tenured researchers' material condition in Italy. It is now possible to state that they are no longer *in between* the world of labor and being students, and can lay claim to several other fundamental rights as workers, such as sick leave, paid vacation, maternity, all of which appeared like a distant mirage to those who have chosen to dedicate their life to the pursuit of knowledge.

So, in conclusion, I consider it important to state that the expressed objective of this article is to explore the field and the social dynamics that intervene in researchers lives, trying to determine, within the state they function in, some effective resistance strategies that might transform their lives and work, the universities' overall attitude, and, importantly, the very epistemological state of knowledge.

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