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## BETWEEN PRECARIOUSNESS AND FREEDOM: THE AMBIVALENT CONDITION OF INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONALS IN ITALY<sup>i</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

Self-employment is at the core of the current dominant discourses of productivity, profit, knowledge, and success (Fenwick, 2002), which all emphasise the role of entrepreneurs as autonomous, self-sufficient and strategic subjects for innovation, growth, and wealth. In the 1990s Paul du Gay (1996) argued that the ‘enterprising self’ has become the driving identity in the new economy. At the same time, awareness that self-employment is a very heterogeneous category composed of entrepreneurs but also of workers at risk of precariousness (Vosko, Zukewich & Cranford, 2003; Buschoff & Schmidt, 2009) who are subject to ‘constrained choices’ (Gill, 2002; Smeaton, 2003) and have relatively low levels of social security (Spasova et al., 2017) has grown progressively in recent years. Within self-employment, in fact, very diverse individuals share the same work arrangement, despite having extremely different working conditions: from ‘bogus’ (Buschoff & Schmidt, 2009) and ‘dependent’ self-employed workers (Muehlberger, 2007), who are completely or largely dependent from a single company, with low degrees of autonomy (Eichhorst et al., 2013), to freelancers and ‘portfolio workers’

(Cohen & Mallon, 1999; Fraser & Gold, 2001), who have high levels of freedom in managing their professional activity and their own time (Arum & Müller, 2004).

In its last report on self-employment in Europe, Eurofound (2017) made an attempt to capture this heterogeneity in a more detailed way, by providing a nuanced understanding of self-employment based on an analysis of data from the sixth European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS). Five distinct clusters of self-employed workers have been identified: (i) entrepreneurs and (ii) stable own-account workers, who tend to have more favourable characteristics and a high level of autonomy; (iii) small traders and farmers, who have both good and bad working conditions; and the (iv) vulnerable and (v) concealed self-employed, who are economically dependent and have low work autonomy.

In this chapter, the focus is on a category of self-employed workers that transversally crosses the clusters identified by Eurofound: independent professionals. Most independent professionals are included in the group of ‘stable own-account workers’ (32%), but more than 20% feed the ranks of ‘vulnerable’ and ‘concealed’ self-employed workers (Eurofound, 2017). Following the definition provided by Rapelli (2012, p.4), independent professionals are “self-employed workers, without employees, who are engaged in an activity which does not belong to the farming, craft or retail sector. They engage in activities of an intellectual nature and/or which come under service sectors”. The interest in this category of workers derives primarily from their constant increase in the last decade, despite a general decline in self-employment (Borghesi, Mori & Semenza, 2018). Moreover, they embody the ambivalence and contradiction typical of ‘reflexive modernisation’, which combines “first, the democratization of individualization processes and, second (and closely connected), the fact that basic conditions in society favour or enforce individualization (the job market, the need for mobility and training, labour and social legislation, pension provisions etc.)” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.8). Therefore, independent professionals experience what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1996)

defined as a ‘precarious freedom’, which basically means both emancipation and anomie at the same time: the increase in the margins of freedom and the simultaneous greater exposure to the risk of precariousness.

The chapter is structured as follows: firstly, we discuss how self-employment has evolved in Italy along with the legal framework; following from this, we provide a statistical overview of the main changes in self-employment, paying particular attention to the category of independent professionals. To further clarify our decision to restrict our analysis to this specific category of workers, we then offer a review of the key themes and debates connected to how, in the Italian context, ‘precarious freedom’ is experienced by independent professionals, often also defined as ‘freelancers’, and part of the broader group of ‘knowledge workers’. This is a growing area of research, where the main topics under discussion are: the construction of a self-employed career between resources and capabilities; their degree of freedom; their limited access to social protection; and the issue of collective representation. In the conclusion, we discuss the main ambivalences and challenges of self-employment in Italy and the potential for further research in this area.

## **THE THREE GENERATIONS OF SELF-EMPLOYED WORKERS: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

Self-employment has always played an important role in the Italian labour market (Coletto, 2009). During the Fordist period, the ‘first generation of self-employed’ coincided essentially with craftsmen and small retailers along with a restricted group of liberal professionals who were the elite of self-employment. The number of small firms significantly increased, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, while the traditional industries (e.g. metallurgy, chemicals, etc.) started losing their dynamism. This was mainly due to the phenomenon known as the

‘Third Italy’ (Bagnasco, 1977) consisting of specialised industrial districts in the north-eastern regions of the country. The growing number of small firms had specific traits. They were flexible in the introduction of new technologies and effective in the definition of cooperative agreements with other firms and with employees. Moreover, since the majority of the companies had fewer than fifteen employees, they could rely on less restrictive labour legislation (Amin, 1989). During this phase, therefore, in the Italian context the first generation of self-employed workers was functional to the organisational model, based on reticular networks of small enterprises (Fumagalli, 2015). At the same time, this emerging group of workers was also experiencing, albeit in contradictory ways, “the liberation from salaried work, overcoming a mind-set that appeared to be the only possibility in modern capitalist society, and a mentality that viewed subordinate labour as the natural form of work” (Bologna, 2018, p.61).

During the 1980s, the de-industrialisation and tertiarization processes – especially concentrated in the north-west of the country – reshaped what has been defined as the ‘second generation of self-employed workers’, who were not traders or farmers and did not belong to liberal professions (Bologna, 1997, 2014). Technological changes, together with re-organisation of production systems, generated a stronger connection between emerging self-employment and Italian enterprises. The new working environment was shaped by global trends that celebrated the figure of the self-entrepreneur (Foucault, 2004; Dardot & Laval, 2009). On the one hand, outsourcing processes generated new self-employed professionals in the multifaceted environment of small and medium-sized businesses. On the other, self-employment became more and more diffused, both in context of material work (logistics, construction, retail sector) and in the growing service sector, where knowledge-based immaterial production was becoming prevalent. In such a context, self-employed workers were represented as the key drivers of innovation. They were supposed to bring new skills and

knowledge, creatively reacting to rapid market changes, in order to remain always competitive in the labour market (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999).

At the end of the 1990s, the composition of self-employed workers changed again, together with the socio-economic paradigm. On the one side, ‘fake’ or ‘bogus’ self-employment grew apace (Buschoff & Schmidt, 2009; Keune 2013). On the other, the ideology of neoliberal post-Fordism further fostered the myth of the ‘knowledge worker’ (Bologna 2014), based on a contradictory relationship between cooperative work and individual excellence. What distinguishes this group of workers – termed by some scholars as the ‘third generation of self-employment’ (Fumagalli, 2015) – is mainly their relationship with the traditional forms of employment and the level of social protection they are entitled to. Indeed, this new generation of self-employed – in which women are increasingly over-represented (Morini, 2007) – often enter in the labour market with vulnerable positions, experiencing insecurity, low levels of income and fragmented careers. Therefore, in the last decades – alongside a narrow elite of self-employed workers with good career opportunities – a different profile of self-employed has spread across the country, composed of workers with limited bargaining opportunities, low social protection, and little experience of struggles for social rights (Fumagalli, 2015). This category of workers includes not only bogus or dependent self-employed workers, but also workers who are self-employed out of choice, yet increasingly exposed to precariousness and poor working conditions.

In the following sections we introduce the legal framework within which self-employment has evolved in the Italian context. We then outline recent empirical research on independent professionals, in order to show the main characteristics of this category of self-employed workers and the main risks to which they are currently exposed.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND LABOUR MARKET REFORMS

In Italy, self-employment (*lavoro autonomo*) is regulated by the Civil Code (Book V, Title III, art. 2222-2238) introduced in March 1942. Article 2222 establishes that a self-employed worker is a worker who legally commits themselves to performing a service or work upon payment, without being subject to any form of subordination. When a self-employed worker signs a contract, they assume an ‘obligation of result’ agreed with the client and pursued independently through their own work tools. This general legal framework comprises an extremely heterogeneous group of workers: from small business persons, craftsmen, traders, farmers, with and without employees, to professionals (VAT-registered self-employed workers - *partita IVA* - the tax scheme for self-employed) without specific social security funds, and those belonging to liberal professions (such as lawyers, architects, journalists, and accountants). The latter group typically have their own private social security fund and need to pass a state examination and be enrolled on a register of a professional body, which controls the access to the profession, deontology, and service quality.

Since the 1990s this already complex scenario has become even more scattered and fragmented. Indeed, Italy is one of the few countries among European member states that has created a hybrid employment contract between self-employment and dependent employment, the so-called ‘collaborations’ (Samek Lodovici, 2018). These contracts have existed in the Italian legislation since the 1970s, but they were only fully regulated by the labour reform approved in 1997 (the so called *Pacchetto Treu*. See Table 1). Collaborations were also created as an attempt to reduce bogus self-employment, but they have often been misused by the employers and used as a cheap opportunity to hire a flexible and scarcely protected workforce. During this period, the old generation of professionals were able to maintain (at least partially) their dominant position in the changing labour markets, while the younger professionals were experiencing more and more precarious and competitive working conditions. Since the end of

the 1990s, many reforms have changed the regulation of self-employment and the access to social protection. The main reforms are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Labour reforms on self-employment in Italy**

YEAR	REFORM	DESCRIPTION
1995	Act. 335/95 (Art. 2, c. 26) Pension Reform <i>Riforma Dini</i>	Compulsory public pension scheme for non-regulated self-employed and collaborators (co.co.co.)
1997	Act 196/1997 Labour Reform <i>Pacchetto Treu</i>	Fostered the growth of atypical flexible contracts reducing social protection and pension provisions. Private temporary agencies are allowed to operate in the market of placement services. Employers have more discretion in the use of part-time work. Collaborators are entitled of reduced social protection rights (maternity and sickness leave, pension schemes, and unemployment benefits) in comparison with employees.
2003	Act 30/2003 Labour Reform <i>Legge Biagi</i>	Increased the variety of non-standard contracts: job on-call, job-sharing, new temporary agency work contracts, and new forms of apprenticeship. With the declared aim of limiting the increase of bogus self-employment, collaborations ('co.co.co.') are partially replaced with the 'project contracts' (co.co.pro.), which have to relate explicitly to a specific project.
2012	Act 92/2012 Labour Reform <i>Riforma Fornero</i>	Solo self-employed ( <i>partite IVA</i> ) should be automatically employed with a collaboration contract if they meet two of the three following requirements: collaboration for more than eight months within a period of two consecutive years; pay amounting to more than 80% of the yearly total income from the same employer; a fixed work-space/station and the use of the client's working tools.
2013	Act 4/2013 Law on non-regulated professions <i>Disposizioni in materia di professioni non organizzate</i>	For the first time, non-regulated professions are regulated by national law. It assigns new responsibilities to professional organisations in relation to accreditation and certification procedures. Moreover, it introduced some measures aimed at consumer protection.
2015	Act 81/2015 Labour Reform <i>Jobs Act</i>	Eliminates 'project contracts' (co.co.pro.) introduced with Act 30/2003, bringing it back to a dependent employment relationship in case the workplace and schedules are decided by the employer. At the same time, collaborations (co.co.co.) are re-introduced, but only if it is the self-employed worker who decides how, where and when to work.
2017	Act 81/2017 <i>Jobs Act of self-employment</i>	Improves some crucial issues for self-employed workers: intellectual property, parental and maternity leave, sickness leave. It also provides tax relief for training and travel expenses and dedicated support for job orientation. Collaborators (co.co.co.) are entitled to the unemployment benefit (even if limited than employees) whereas self-employed are still excluded.

As summarised in Table 1, in 1995, under the guise of a pension reform, a special fund for self-employed workers was created by the National Institute for Social Security (INPS). For the first time the self-employed of non-regulated professions were compulsorily included in a public

pension scheme. Some years later, in 2003, a new labour reform (Act 30/2003) was approved with the aim of fostering flexibility and, at the same time, limiting bogus self-employment. Nevertheless, in the 2000s, self-employment was extensively used by Italian companies, especially in the tertiary sector, so that it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between a genuine independent employment relation and bogus self-employment used as a low-cost alternative to fixed term and open-ended contracts (Muehlberger, 2007).

Only in 2012, ten years after the Act 30/2003, did the Fornero Reform (Act 92/2012) seek to deal again with the issue of bogus self-employment, albeit through limited measures. The following year, the Italian Parliament approved Act 4/2013, addressing the new independent non-regulated professions (excluding health professions, crafts, commercial and public activities, since they already had specific regulations), mainly through the empowerment of professional associations. Finally, self-employment has been recently tackled by two labour reforms introduced in 2015 and 2017: the so-called ‘Jobs Act’ (Act 81/2015), which focused again on collaborations trying to limit their abuse. However, despite the main aim of the reform, it resulted in an increased flexibility of the workforce accompanied by the reduction of social protection for employees (Pini, 2015). Paradoxically, this trend has made the conditions of self-employed and employees more similar, because of the worsened conditions of the latter and the limited improved working conditions of the former. In 2017, after a long negotiation process, the ‘Jobs Act of self-employment’ (Act 81/2017) was introduced. For the first time a national act systematically addressed crucial aspects of social protection for self-employed workers, only partially granted in the past (Perulli, 2017). This reform represents a step forward, though once again it missed the opportunity to structurally address the gap between regulated and non-regulated professions, between economically dependent and independent self-employed workers, as well as between bogus and genuine self-employment, including the growing area of platform jobs.

## STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

With almost 22% of the entire employed population, self-employment in Italy represents the second largest group after Greece (with around 30%), a percentage much higher than the European average (13.95%; see Tables 2 and 3). In particular, the solo self-employed (self-employed workers without employees), are the largest group among the self-employed, representing more than 15% of the working population, against a Europe average of 10% (Eurostat, 2017).

**Table 2 - EU 28 Total employment (employment and self-employment), self-employed, solo self-employed and I-Pros (thousand and %). Years 2008-2012-2016**

	<b>2008</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2016</b>
<b>Total employment (EU 28)</b>	218,924.1	211,351.1	218,843.2
<b>Self-employed</b>	31,121.8	30,650.6	30,523.5
<b>Self-employed / TE (%)</b>	14.22%	14.50%	13.95%
<b>Solo self-employed</b>	21,436.6	21,837	21,879.5
<b>Solo self-employed / TE (%)</b>	9.79%	10.33%	10.00%
<b>I-Pros</b>	7,251.9	8,318.2	9,113.20
<b>I-Pros / Solo SE (%)</b>	33.83%	38.09%	41.65%

*Source: Our elaboration on Eurostat dataset 2017.*

**Table 3 - IT Total employment (employment and self-employment), self-employed, solo self-employed and I-Pros (thousand and %). Years 2008-2012-2016**

	<b>2008</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2016</b>
<b>Total employment IT</b>	22.698.6	22.149.2	22.241.1
<b>Self-employed</b>	5.188.2	4.982.5	4.764.7
<b>Self-employed / TE (%)</b>	22.86%	22.50%	21.42%
<b>Solo self-employed</b>	3.682.7	3.588.5	3.419.9
<b>Solo self-employed / TE (%)</b>	16.22%	16.20%	15.38%
<b>Solo self-employed / SE (%)</b>	70.98%	72.02%	71.78%
<b>I-PROS</b>	1.540.5	1.604.7	1.566.2
<b>I-PROS / Solo SE (%)</b>	41.83%	44.72%	45.80%

*Source: Our elaboration on Eurostat dataset 2017.*

A brief overview of self-employment in Italy (Table 3) shows that, from 2008 to 2016, Italian self-employment decreased by more than 400,000 units (Eurostat, 2017). In the same period, solo self-employment also declined (around 262,000 units). This trend is in contrast to a moderate growth of solo self-employment in Europe, where this work arrangement has also increased in relation to total employment (from 9.79% in 2008 to 10% in 2016, see Table 2).

Despite the general reduction of self-employment in Europe, and of solo self-employment in Italy, the group of independent professionals<sup>ii</sup> is substantially stable in Italy and is growing significantly in Europe. Moreover, the rate of independent professionals in Italy is constantly increasing in relation to the broader group of solo self-employed (from 41.83% in 2008 to 45.80%, see Table 3). This process might indicate a possible structural change in self-employment. In fact, it might be argued that the labour market reforms introduced between 1995 and 2017 substantially altered the configuration of self-employment, raising new questions about its potentiality and risks. According to the analysis of the Ministry of Labour (2017), the financial crisis has fostered the trends toward staff reduction, transforming part of the self-employed with employees into solo self-employed workers. Moreover, the more valuable segments of self-employment (e.g. services to individuals) have better resisted the impact of the crisis, to the detriment of the more traditional service sectors. These changes have favoured mainly independent professionals, and especially those with high levels of education and high degree of autonomy. However, as shown by the analysis of administrative sources carried out by the Ministry of Labour (2017), almost 40% of their income comes from a single client. These trends then suggest that independent professionals are characterised by relatively high degrees of freedom, but at the same time by economic dependence and financial risks. A research survey conducted at the national level, in fact, estimates that 45% of independent professionals earn less than 15,000 euros per year (Di Nunzio & Toscano, 2015<sup>iii</sup>).

Being aware of the difficulties of assessing the magnitude of such a phenomenon and its modalities by analysing available statistical data (Cieślak, 2015), in what follows we discuss the key elements addressed by both quantitative and qualitative studies focused on independent professionals in Italy. By integrating different perspectives on this object of study, we aim to provide an accurate picture to outline the ambivalences and contradictions of this kaleidoscopic category of workers.

## INDEPENDENT PROFESSIONALS IN ITALY: BETWEEN PRECARIOUSNESS AND FREEDOM

The historical overview and changes in the legal framework described above provide the outlines of a changing landscape of self-employment in Italy. Over the past decade, there has been a decline in self-employment, but a significant increase among independent professionals, as shown in the previous section. Moreover, this growing group of workers is experiencing what has been defined as the ‘paradox of individualisation’ (Honneth, 2004): while on the one hand they enjoy autonomy and freedom, on the other, they are also exposed to multiple risks of precariousness and atomisation.

This ambivalence is at the centre of several studies in Italy that have dealt with framing the growing phenomenon of independent professionals, also called ‘I-Pros’. The main issues addressed in the academic debate aim to understand: (i) the resources and capabilities that allow the self-employed to build a career; (ii) the degree of freedom in managing their work; (iii) social protection gaps; and (iv) the emerging forms of collective representation. While referring to the same group of workers, the studies conducted in recent years in the Italian context do not all use the label of ‘independent professionals’, in some cases preferring other terms, such as freelancers, unregulated professions or knowledge workers. Most of this research does not exclusively focus on independent professionals, but on different groups of the solo self-

employed. In this chapter, we decided to adopt Rapelli's definition (2012) of I-Pros because it can be operationalised by using the European Labour Force Survey. This allows for the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative studies. Below we provide a review of the main empirical research recently carried out on independent professionals in Italy.

### ***Building a self-employed career: Between resources and capabilities***

In recent years, the last generation of independent professionals has faced new and unprecedented conditions, due to a combination of global and national factors. On the one hand, the re-organisation of productive systems, the digital revolution and the development of platform economies have redefined professional opportunities and increased competition among self-employed workers. On the other, the specific role played by self-employment in the national economy (Butera et al., 2008; Ranci, 2012), along with territorial inequalities, has concentrated the opportunities in Northern Italy, especially in the tertiary sector (ISTAT, 2016), while making independent professionals' careers more difficult in the South of the country (Longo & Merico, 2016). Moreover, in similarity with other European countries, the effects of the international economic crisis have contributed to the deterioration of professional trajectories by further increasing the poverty risk rate for the solo self-employed, which is much higher than that of employees (Spasova et al., 2017).

A significant distinctive trait of the new generation of independent professionals, also those with significant professional experience, concerns the risk of prolonged entrapment in weak professional trajectories. Very often, in fact, they experience discontinuity in their working activity, and women's professional careers are significantly more discontinuous than those of men (ADEPP-CENSIS, 2015). Borghi and colleagues (2016) analysed the main factors affecting their career outcomes considering both resources and capabilities. Support from family members continues to represent a strategic resource, as well as involvement in

professional networks, which are useful for career development. At the same time, the ability to select job offers and clients is crucial to avoid a condition of precariousness. In particular, the choice of accepting a low paid job, based on the hope of creating future opportunities, produces in many cases a work engagement that absorbs energy and leaves no room for the development of a professional strategy. To maintain a low, but apparently safe, level of remuneration has a significant effect on the risk of experiencing an entrapped career as well. On the contrary, an investment in self-promotion, by exploiting both online and traditional social networks, plays a relevant role in supporting career strategies. Reputation is an especially determinant element for career success, and independent professionals can leverage their reputational capital to expand their networks and increase their income (Gandini, 2016).

The differences between the risks of precariousness for salaried non-standard workers and independent professionals in building their careers are also discussed by Armano and Murgia (2013), who showed how I-Pros in Italy are characterised by two simultaneous dimensions: a continuous search for independence and freedom to express their creativity, and an experience of misalignment between their aspiration and their professional careers. Therefore, the precariousness of their trajectories is specific to this group of workers because they need to be part of a network, but they also must know how to make choices, because careers and biographies increasingly become a ‘product of individual agency’ (Rodrigues, Guest & Budjanovcanin, 2016). For independent professionals, in fact, the risk of precariousness is correlated with the ability to realise projects successfully (Kalff, 2017). Moreover, they are constantly required to reconcile work resources and capabilities with their aspirations and self-identification, above all in the long term. In the next section we will discuss how the aspiration to enjoy greater autonomy, together with job self-identification, becomes inextricably bound up with the experience of precariousness (Murgia, Maestripietri & Armano, 2017), which is incorporated in the risk of self-exploitation.

### *An ambivalent freedom*

One of the main differences between independent professionals and employees concerns work organisation, and especially their autonomy in organising working activities in space and time (Bologna, 1997). For the independent professionals, the workplace disappears and is reterritorialized in an intermediate space that is neither public nor private. Mobile technology is used to carry out professional activities at home, on public transport, in libraries or cafés. What is important is not where workers are, but whether they are connected and how responsive they are, so that the freedom in terms of mobility is traded for a permanent availability, independent of where the worker is physically located (Turrini & Chicchi, 2013; Borghi & Cavalca, 2016). As well as the spaces, even the times of life and work become more and more blurred. The ‘working day’, in fact, loses its meaning because the activities are mainly task-oriented, organised by projects, and paid by results (Armano, 2010). Structural traits of the service sector are common alongside the variety of contexts in which independent professionals are present, but in some specific professions such common trends are particularly evident. Especially in creative industries and digital work, the boundaries between work and life become more and more nuanced (Gandini, 2016).

To describe the assimilation of work within the set of rules of private life, even when the two spaces – home and work – are kept separate, Sergio Bologna (1997, 2018) coined the term ‘domestication of work’, which is “a condition of modern man, and it is up to him to use it to attain greater freedom or undergo greater slavery” (2018, p.109). A first consequence of this phenomenon is in fact the loss of work measurability (Turrini & Chicchi, 2014), and a second is that self-identification and the pleasure of being involved in a rewarding profession can lead to self-exploitation (Morini et al., 2014), beyond contractual obligations and fixed working hours (Chicchi et al., 2014; Armano et al., 2017). This is an ambivalent process in which

independent professionals experiment with a particular form of ‘free work’, which is autonomous and unpaid at the same time, and is remunerated in terms of identity more so than economically (Armano & Murgia, 2017).

These ambiguities might explain the apparent contradictory results of two recent Italian surveys conducted at national level with independent professionals. The large majority (more than 80%) stated that they were satisfied with their professional activity (ADEPP-CENSIS 2015; Di Nunzio and Toscano 2015). However, at the same time, more than 50% of the sample declared that they had endured excessive workloads, being consequently exposed to significant burnout risks. Therefore, despite work densification and high pressure, a high level of commitment and satisfaction seem to prevail among independent professionals.

Freedom and self-identification, therefore, are common traits of independent professionals across different professions and territories. They make independent professionals functional to both the contingent needs of markets and the ever-increasing need for innovation in production and work organisation. However, the constant pressure to balance different projects and to respect increasingly tight deadlines, on the one hand, and the request of being constantly available on the other, raise urgent issues concerning the quality of the job markets that independent professionals can access in Italy, and about their real opportunities to freely manage their everyday professional and personal lives, especially in a context of limited employment and lack of social protection.

### ***Social protection gaps***

One of the main factors that makes self-employed workers more exposed to precariousness in comparison to employees in Europe is the difference in access to social protection, both legally and *de facto* (Eurofound, 2017). In this frame, Italy is not an exception, and the recent reform of self-employment (Act 81/2017) has not introduced substantial measures to include

independent professionals, and more generally self-employed workers, in the social protection system.

Social protection systems mainly cover healthcare, accidents at work, sickness, family benefits, maternity, unemployment and pension. The Italian public health system, financed by the national tax system, guarantees healthcare for all citizens. The self-employed also have access to accident at work and occupational injury benefits. However, with regard to sickness benefits, there are significant differences between self-employed and employees. Indeed, self-employed are not compulsorily covered by sickness insurance, with the exception of some categories, such as ‘collaborators’, that are included in a specific scheme that also covers some categories of non-standard workers (Spasova et al., 2017). As for the family benefits, the self-employed have very limited access and there is no benefit for the liberal professions. Moreover, self-employed mothers have fewer benefits than employees and several qualitative studies have registered the difficulties for female self-employed workers to meet their desire of maternity, both because of the intense day-to-day demands of their job, and because of the lack of social protection (see Samek Lodovici & Semenza, 2012). The national survey that involved liberal professionals (ADEPP-CENSIS, 2015) pointed out that, in the period between 2010 and 2014, 24.7% of respondents had to stop their activity for health problems, to take care of a family member dealing with health issues, or to manage the birth of a child. The same results are also registered among independent professionals in non-liberal professions (Di Nunzio & Toscano, 2015).

Concerning unemployment protection, Italy is one of the countries where the self-employed are not entitled to unemployment benefits. As already mentioned in the section dedicated to the legal framework, only collaborators (co.co.co) have recently gained access to them, albeit in a limited way. Moreover, no specific forms of credit access for the self-employed are foreseen, and they are usually unable to build up sufficient entitlements for an old-age

pension. As in most European countries, Italy also has a pay-as-you-go statutory public pension scheme (Spasova et al., 2017) that is not able to provide adequate pensions for the self-employed (ADEPP-CENSIS, 2015; Di Nunzio & Toscano, 2015), mainly because of the reduced earning capacity of a significant proportion, and of the reduced capacity of public finance contributions aimed at supporting social security funds.

This situation requires an adaptation of the social protection system that has only recently, and then only partially, addressed these issues. The inclusion of independent professionals proceeds slowly and still varies for different categories of self-employed: liberal professionals have their social security funds, each following a specific system of rules, while non-liberal professionals have their own public special fund, separate to that of employees. Moreover, the attempts of the last reform (Act 81/2017) to improve self-employed workers' rights in terms of sickness and maternity benefits risk being ineffective. In fact, the new reform allows suspension of the contract for a maximum of 150 days per year, *but only in cases where the client agrees*. This last specification clearly undermines the potential positive effects of the norm, since there is nothing that prevents the client from resolving the contract in case of absence. However, there are some improvements with respect to maternity, as it is now possible to replace a pregnant self-employed worker with another self-employed worker with the required professional skills (periods of job sharing are also possible).

Despite a lack of social protection, especially in comparison to salaried workers, it is worth pointing out that several qualitative studies (Samek Lodovici & Semenza, 2012; Mingione et al., 2014) have highlighted that independent professionals in Italy tend not to aspire to become employees, even if this would mean gaining full access to social protection provision. Independent professionals rather claim the right to extend universal social rights, such as maternity and family benefits, and social benefits, like unemployment benefits and pension. Therefore, the key does not seem to be including independent professionals in traditional

employment relations, but rather extending social protection to the emerging hybrid forms of work.

### *Collective representations*

There are differing views on the changing face of collective representation, and specifically on the future of collective bargaining for the solo self-employed (Keune, 2013). One of the main difficulties in organising workers in such a contractual position involves their complex commercial arrangements (Gallagher & Sverke, 2005; Leighton & Wynn, 2010), and the fact that they can either be closer to self-employment with multiple clients or be more similar to dependent employment (Wynn, 2015).

For decades, both trades unions and employer organisations almost ignored this category of workers. Starting from the mid-1990s, in the Italian context, some specific departments of the three main unions (Nidil-CGIL<sup>iv</sup>, UIL-Temp, FELSA-CISL<sup>v</sup>) were focused on atypical workers, including the self-employed (Ambra, 2013). However, they only marginally intercepted the independent professionals. Symbolic events and isolated actions – aimed at raising awareness among the third generation of independent professionals – tended to prevail in this phase, where traditional trade unions were strongly and openly criticised because of their absence in dealing with the growing risks of precariousness among the self-employed. In this phase the spread of the internet opened new, direct and cheap examples of organising among independent professionals (Mingione et al., 2014), but claims-making activities and actions were still highly fragmented (Semenza, Mori & Borghi, 2017) and showed some evident limits.

In the early 2000s, something began to slowly influence change, especially thanks to the effort of emerging independent professionals' associations. New organisations were created (such as ACTA, the national association of independent professionals<sup>vi</sup>, and CoLAP, the national coordination of professional associations<sup>vii</sup>), with the aim of bridging the existing

representation gap between employees and independent professionals, especially those in non-liberal professions. In recent years, other organisations, cooperatives and collective movements have been created both from existing associations and from emerging initiatives such as ‘Confassociazioni’, ‘SMart’, ‘DOC Servizi’, ‘Fifth Estate’ or ‘CLAPs’. As a whole, new and old forms of organising are seeking to meet the needs of collective representation of independent professionals, but they are currently hardly able to reduce their fragmentation and mutual mistrust because co-operative and corporate efforts often hinder each other (Borghi & Cavalca, 2016).

The national panorama of independent professional’s representation has proved to be rather lively in the last decade. Nowadays, trades unions are also finally developing an internal discussion, which is rather intense but quite invisible from the outside (Borghi, forthcoming). The attempt to adapt their strategy of representation through new initiatives is also fostering a change of the organisational culture (for example ‘Consulta delle Professioni – CGIL’<sup>viii</sup> and ‘vIVAce! – CISL’<sup>ix</sup>). At the same time, the rivalry between unions and alternative organisations has also decreased, leaving room for dialogue and common actions. During recent years, in fact, temporary coalitions of trades unions, professional organisations and new forms of organising have been created in order to improve the social protection for the self-employed. The representation of independent professionals is still very limited, but its ability to influence the political decision-makers is progressively increasing, so its evolution calls for constant attention in the near future.

## CONCLUSION: FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR THE I-PROS

Independent professionals show a variety of characteristics, needs and working conditions with respect to professional sectors, territories, and local labour markets. Nonetheless, an accurate

review of the most recent empirical research conducted in Italy on this specific group of workers has allowed us to describe transversal conditions and common traits. Both quantitative and qualitative researchers identify elements of freedom and precariousness as the two contradictory features embodied in their professional experience. On the one side, independent professionals tend to appreciate the flexibility of being self-employed, thereby working autonomously and being able to manage the balance between work and private life. On the other, however, the freedom under which they work as self-employed workers can become deleterious. In fact, apart from a minority of independent professionals that can be considered the elite in their specific professional context, a significant number are exposed to precariousness and encounter obstacles that can seriously threaten the sustainability of their careers.

In this chapter we have shown how career outcomes are connected to available resources, such as family support and professional networks, and to the capability of creating reputational capital and selecting clients and projects. However, this type of career creates subjectivities that emphasise proactivity and self-identification. Therefore, independent professionals can enjoy high degrees of autonomy and can escape from traditional work arrangements, but they are simultaneously forced to take charge of their own career and the connected risks. Very often they can decide where to work and freely manage their working time, but the blurred boundaries between working, social and private lives in many cases generate dynamics of self-exploitation, justified by the need to obtain new jobs, maintain a position in the market and pursue their own aspirations.

These ambivalences and contradictions make independent professionals an emblematic category for understanding the double face of the process of individualisation, defined by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1996) as ‘precarious freedoms’. In the 1990s, in their pioneering work

on individualisation, the two German authors described the combination of emancipation and anomie as an ‘explosive mixture’, especially in a context of limited social protection.

As highlighted by the studies reviewed in our contribution, the limited access to social protection for independent professionals fosters the perception of insecurity with serious negative impacts on life projects, particularly for the weaker segments of this group of workers. Such insecurity worsens when the lack of social protection cannot be compensated for, at least partially, by family and informal welfare mechanisms. The recent legislative changes (Act 81/2017, Jobs Act of self-employment) have been conceived to tackle some unresolved issues concerning the inclusion of independent professionals in the social protection system. Nevertheless, with the exception of collaborators (who are a very small part of the self-employed), they are still excluded from unemployment benefits and only partially entitled to sickness leave. In addition, pension levels are largely insufficient to ensure an acceptable livelihood threshold (especially if we consider the purely contributory calculation method used to determine Italian pensions). Moreover, the absence of an effective labour market regulation that tackles both the emerging economies based on digital platforms and a professional environment that is rapidly evolving (with respect to liberal professions and, in general, to self-employment in the tertiary sector) expose a significant number of self-employed, especially women and young workers, to precarious conditions.

The combination of a growing number of independent professionals experiencing precarious working conditions and the structural change in the internal composition of self-employment is a stimulus for both traditional and emerging organisations that aim to mobilise and represent the self-employed. The public debate on the role, potentialities and fragilities of the self-employed has been fostered since the creation of new organisations and grass-roots groups. More recently, trade unions and some professional associations have also developed new strategies of representation.

In such a frame, the question “How then are processes of individualisation transformed into their opposite, into a quest for new social identities and ties and the development of new ways of living?” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.36) is as relevant as ever. Independent professionals are at the centre of the process of individualisation within a post-traditional society of employees. The answer will be different depending on the new social relations and collective identities that this growing group of workers will be able to create, as well as on the capacity of social protection systems and collective representation to cope with the new risks of precariousness to which unprotected areas of the workforce are exposed.

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ii According to Rapelli's definition, independent professionals are self-employed workers without employees engaging in a service activity and/or intellectual service not in the farming, craft or retail sectors. From a statistical point of view, the author analyses the data of the European Labour Force Survey selecting solo self-employed included in the following NACE categories: Information and communication (NACE key J); Financial and insurance activity (key K); Real estate activities (key L); Professional, scientific and technical activities (key M); Administrative and support services (key N); Education (key P); Human health and social work (key Q); Arts, entertainment and recreation (key R); and Other service activities (key S).

iii The survey was conducted by means of an online questionnaire to which 2,210 professionals responded. The sample design used was non-probabilistic (snowball sampling). The sample was weighted in relation to the reference universe indicated by ISFOL (Institute for the Development of Vocational Training of Workers - National Research Institute supervised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies).

iv NidiL (New Work Identities) is the trade union structure of CGIL, which since 1998 has been the reference structure for workers managed by private agencies for temporary work and atypical workers.

v FeLSA-Cisl (Federation of Self-Employed and Atypical Employees) was created in 2009 within the union CISL to merge ALAI and CLACS, two previous structures devoted to atypical workers, small businesses and shopkeepers.

vi Created in 2004, ACTA is mainly focused on independent professionals without employees in the advanced tertiary sector. It is part of the European network EFIP (European Forum of Independent Professionals).

vii Created in 1999, it gathers more than 200 liberal Professional Associations, with more than 300,000 members.

viii Created in 2009, the Board of Professions is promoted by the largest Italian trade union, CGIL (thanks to the impulse of Davide Imola), historically linked to the Italian Communist Party and then to the left parties that have taken over its legacy. The Board is composed of organisations dealing with independent professionals, umbrella organisations, and individual professional activists in order to develop confrontation on the most relevant issues for independent professionals and lobbying activities in their favour.

ix Created in 2016 by the second largest trade union in Italy, CISL, traditionally tied to Christian parties, vIVAce! is an online community that aims to support the identity of independent professionals by creating networks, delivering services, and lobbying.