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# Traces of solidarity: performing artists' efforts against individualisation and isolation during Covid-19 pandemic

Emanuela Naclerio

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## Introduction

- 1 During the last decades, young people have increasingly experienced conditions of precariousness that exceed revenues and working conditions, investing environmental, social and political imagination (Colombo & Rebughini, 2019). Amidst the spread of generalised future uncertainties (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992), self-entrepreneurial attitudes appear to have been normalised in younger generations alongside with the tendency to elaborate individual solutions to systemic problems (Rebughini, 2019; Farrugia, 2021). Furthermore, scholars in the Foucauldian tradition have pointed at the disciplinary power of contemporary individualised logics of competition (Foucault, 1978; Rose, 2005), underlining how their desocialising and depoliticising effects are especially manifested in workplace environments (Du Gay, 1996; Ross, 2004; McNay, 2009).
- 2 Literature's contribution in the field of cultural sociology has regarded workers in the creative and cultural sector as ideal entrepreneurial subjects (Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2016), devoting their efforts to increase chances of success in a precarious and unpredictable working environment. Furthermore, the narrative emphasis on passion and commitment that surround creative environments has been considered a driver towards the acritical acceptance of neoliberal conditions and a limit to collectivisation process at work (Du Gay, 1996; Sennett, 1998; McRobbie, 2002). However, scholars have warned from reducing the interpretation of creative work to a self-exploiting activity conducted in the optimistic illusion of a future recognition and

have instead urged for a more iridescent interpretation of creative workers experiences (Banks, 2006; Alacovska, 2020). In this framework, creative and cultural workers' possibilities to elaborate and promote alternatives to individualised culture through collective mobilisation (Mattoni & Doerr, 2007; Maddanu, 2018) and cooperative instruments (Murgia & de Heusch, 2020) have been considered.

- 3 The outbreak of Covid-19 in February 2020 has led to an increase in the vulnerability of already precarious workers and to an exacerbation of previously existing inequalities (Saraceno, 2021; Yavorsky *et al.*, 2021; Ravenelle *et al.*, 2021). The creative and cultural economies have been among the areas mostly hit by the consequences of the pandemic, shedding light on workers' poor access to social protections and highlighting the longstanding dysfunctions affecting the sector (Comunian & England, 2020; Pulignano *et al.*, 2021; Cicerchia & Montalto, 2021). During the last two years, artists and workers in the performing arts have been alternating forced unemployment with the possibility to work in access-reduced shows, two conditions that have led to a stagnation of the labour market and to a loss of employment opportunities (Gemini *et al.*, 2020).
- 4 Considering the relevance of processes of individualisation and entrepreneurialisation in contemporary creative environments, this paper looks at emerging experiences of solidarity and intersubjective exchange that developed in the Italian performing arts' field during 2020. Artists' collective responses to the conditions of enhanced insecurity brought by Covid-19 consequences are analysed in the case of the actors' community "Attrici e attori uniti - A2U" with the aim of shedding light on how experiences of precariousness and isolation during pandemic emergency are confronted and contrasted.
- 5 The results presented are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between March and June 2020 in both digital spaces of interaction and face-to-face events organised by A2U activist group. Focusing on the development of new forms of collective solidarity and cooperation, the analysis points at the recomposition of a critical language to engage with inequality on the workplace and at the role of emotions in transforming individualised experiences into collective ones (Melucci, 1996a; Rebughini & Scribano, 2018).

## Cultural workers between individualised and collective instances

- 6 In contemporary times, notions of self-realisation and passionate labour at work have been regarded as increasingly central in contemporary subjectivation processes (Farrugia, 2021; Colombo *et al.*, 2022). Contemporary values' focus on performance and autonomy have led workers to engage in self-monitoring activities aimed at enhancing their potential of success (Bröckling, 2015). In a context where competition is considered the legitimate way of allocating rewards, investing in personal capital (Feher, 2009) and assuming individual responsibility for personal conditions (Sennett, 1998) are central terms of contemporary working experiences. The tight relation between artistic work and self-expression as well as the precariousness of employment in the sector, has configured cultural work as a privileged point of analysis for the study of entrepreneurial dynamics (Gill, 2014; Naudin, 2017). Considering the case of young female workers in the classical music sector, Christina Scharff (2016) pointed at

research participants' efforts to improve and manage themselves as a business and delineated the emergence of an "entrepreneurial subjectivity" (p. 3). The imperatives of creatively fulfilling one's potential and the promise of future rewards gave birth to an individualised understanding of failure and success that can lead workers to experience victimisation, isolation and anxiety (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2016). Scholars have often pointed at the difficulties in developing collective identities and alternative working configurations in a context where professional networks are celebrated as novel forms of sociality and support, underlying that the search for socially oriented projects is often part of an instrumental ethics and oriented to increase professional networks and social capital (Wittel, 2001; Antcliff *et al.*, 2007; Lee, 2011). Picturing a context where dominant discourses of entrepreneurialism seem to only allow for the pursuit of individualised logics of professional growth, even when present, workers agency appears unable to reach a systemic level that could trigger social change (Du Gay, 1996).

- 7 However, Foucauldian-inspired analysis of cultural work have been accused of overlooking actors' agency when directed towards noninstrumental factors (Banks, 2006) and scholars have advocated for a novel consideration of communitarian and anti-economic instances embedded in cultural work (Banks, 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2017). During the past ten years, a growing number of studies has considered the broad range of collaborative practices that characterise the working environment of cultural and creative industries (Graham and Gandini, 2017). In her study on South-eastern European artists, Ana Alacovska highlights the relevance of socially engaged arts practices of care and community in a context that lacks welfare provisions for workers, underlying how "in precarious conditions, creative workers go about their work relationally rather than strictly calculably or economically" (Alacovska, 2018, p. 3). The case of cultural cooperatives has been regarded in relation with entrepreneurial and individualised instances as the base for the construction of a shared sense of belonging (Coulson, 2012). Encouraging solidarity practices and enhancing collective representation, cultural cooperatives have been considered a valuable workers' instrument to challenge individualisation in cultural work (Sandoval, 2018; Murgia & de Heusch, 2020).
- 8 Cultural workers' communitarian experiences of confronting exploitation and insecurity have also characterised last decades' generational struggles against precarity across Europe (de Peuter, 2014; Armano *et al.*, 2017). In France, workers in the performance sector mobilised to protect the welfare allowance of "intermittence" from deregulatory interventions (Sinigaglia, 2007; Corsani & Lazzarato, 2008). In the Italian context, artists and creators were among the promoters of the San Precario network (Vanni & Tari, 2005; Murgia, 2014) where informal creative collectives experimented new ways of practising art, culture and politics (De Sario, 2007; Mattoni & Doerr, 2007).

## Research context and methodology

- 9 In the past twenty years, a growing number of aspirants and a decrease in average wages has brought scholars' attention to the Italian labour market and careers in the performing arts (Bertolini & Luciano, 2011; Casula, 2019; Serino, 2020). The contraction of public cultural expenditure that followed the 2008-2009 financial crisis and the increasing relevance of market demands in cultural offers, have configured an

environment where young people and unconventional cultural proposals often struggle to emerge (Gallina, 2013). Compared to what happens in other European countries, performing artists in Italy are a scarcely unionised category of workers in a deregulated labour market whose condition has been defined as “post-wage” (Chicchi *et al.* 2014, p. 47). In this framework, young workers often occupy a particularly vulnerable position. According to the survey “Vita da artista” (Di Nunzio *et al.*, 2017), irregular working arrangements are more likely to be experienced by young people and by women. In addition, INPS - National Social Welfare - Observatory’s data on performing artists occupation collected in 2019, delineates a sector where young people, aged from less than 19 years old to 29 years old are the 42.3% of the total number of actors but earn 15.3% of the retributions registered in the year. In terms of employment opportunities, economic compensation and social security measures, young workers’ positions in the Italian performing arts’ sector have already been critical before the outbreak of Covid-19.

- 10 Starting from the end of February 2020, the closure of all show venues and most television and cinema production sets led many workers to experience a condition of forced unemployment where the absence of social protection and the lack of a clear future perspective emphasised the weaknesses of the category. During the first month of the pandemic, workers experienced the effects and consequences of the sector’s employment fragmentation and its diffuse informal practices that resulted in the impossibility for some workers to access social benefits. Zero hours contracts and workers with fewer than 30 days of recognisable work in 2019 resulted to be excluded from March 2020’s extraordinary measures for the cultural sector. Considering that it is often young people and women who work with non-standard contracts (Di Nunzio *et al.*, 2017, 2020), it appears that they have been mostly exposed to Covid-19 emergency’s consequences on the sector.
- 11 The findings are drawn from a traditional and digital ethnographic fieldwork conducted between March 2020 and May 2020 in virtual space of interaction, such as Facebook groups and Telegram chats, and in Milan’s city. During this period, we attended online meetings between activists, collected interviews with actors, actresses and union members involved in the sectors’ mobilisation and participated in live demonstrations that took place in Milan at the end of May 2020. Following an initial, open fieldwork, the research had focused on the actors’ group “Attrici e attori uniti” because of its connection with Milan’s theatrical environment. Thus, the researcher’s access to the field was negotiated with some of the groups’ funders. The analysis considered workers’ accounts of pandemic experiences and their motivations and aims in getting involved in online community building. My positioning as a white middle-class young adult involved in precarious work and living in Milan facilitated my access to the field and allowed the research and the participants to share some everyday life (Riessman, 1987).

## Research results

### The role of emotional ties

- 12 During socially distanced times and forced unemployment, collective activities emerge as a way out of social isolation, especially for younger professionals who had not yet

been able to construct their own networks. Personal and professional relations are the ways through which actors and actresses firstly accessed online community spaces.

I entered the chat through a friend, he told me about this group. Several friends of mine from City were already part of the group and I decided to join as well.  
(Interview with activist, B.)

13 Creating a series of daily online encounters allowed artists not only to share experiences of discrimination and violence in the workplace but also to create a sense of community and emotional support during the pandemic. Research participants reported feelings of well-being and empowerment in finding the occasion to share personal experiences of work with other colleagues and in the discovery of being part of a professional community. In this process, the contingencies related with the Covid-19 emergency lockdown appear to play an important part in fostering sentiments of communitarian belonging among performing arts' workers. Emotional ties emerge as central not only in the decision to join online groups of discussion but also in generating positive experiences of mobilisation among the activists.

14 Digital technologies are the medium that allow for the very existence of those community instances and that provide the opportunity to reach people beyond the everyday circles of acquaintances.

The fact the people were at home, the fact that they were losing money. This digital media, platforms for meeting, it has helped a lot, we had never seen as actors in the last years a similar assembly with 300 people. (Interview with group funder, P.)

15 In the pandemic environment, social media and communication networks have been configured as digital space that not only facilitate the organisation of collective actions but also allows for the practice of care.

It was a moment in my life where I felt lonely, especially in the professional field, without guidance [...] I've now met many women, many sisters, many professionals that I admire so much [...] This kind of path helps me to feel less lonely. (Philippa)

16 While some participants already knew each other, for others, as it happened to Philippa, being involved in the group's activities was a way not only of emerging out of isolation, but also of moving from an individual understanding of the profession towards a collective one. In this process, emotional ties are the core around which commitment to the group is constructed and reinforced through everyday online encounters.

17 From the fieldwork conducted, it emerges a shared idea that something out of the ordinary is happening in the working category which is underlined by research participants' emotional lexicon.

I had the feeling that from something truly negative something positive could be born. [...] It was a joy for me seeing that we were organising (P.)

I'd never been active from a political point of view, I always feel a bit unease with those topics, I do not have competencies but when there was this sort of call to the arts to question their sector, I felt deeply moved and I tried to be of use somehow (G.)

This time there is the occasion, everyone seems ready to participate, to be responsible for what is their work, their job, because they see it taken away, this is simple [...] but on this occasion, it seems to me that it has to be used to our advantage, to create an awareness in the working category. (Interview with founder, M.)

18 The consequences of Covid-19 lockdown appear to question the ordinary individualised disaffection towards political and collective engagements and, instead, to be able of

effectively drive workers toward action. The context is perceived as exceptional, out of the ordinary, therefore requiring responses that are outside of everyday individualised practices. Actors' impossibility to work and the availability of a digital infrastructure both allowed for the awakening of instances of solidarity and social justice. However, not only the material constraints but also the emotional consequences of Covid-19 emergency, on the environment of cultural work and on society broadly, have had a central role in fostering performing artists' intersubjective exchanges.

### Emerging experiences of cooperation

- 19 The need to face unexpected administrative and bureaucratic practices regarding shows' suspension, subsidies and working contracts led to the opening of new spaces of interaction between artists. In this framework, participants shared their experiences of unlawful dismissals or virtuous behaviour of production's enterprises in Telegram channels and Facebook. They collect and share documentation on the National Contract of Live Show Workers (CCNLS), along with journal articles talking about the conditions of their occupational category in a general attempt to spread awareness of material working conditions. With the same aims, two online encounters were organised with unionists to explain to workers about their rights and answer their questions. The emergency rules established by the National Contract and the difficulties in tackling the needs of self-employed and project-based workers – who were at this point excluded from social benefits were the focus of March 2020 meetings and a large part of the various new-born communities was aimed at diffusing informational contents regarding labour rights.

Sadly, I have to admit that I am discovering some rights and matters of my category only now [...] I had done gigs where I could have spoken out more, let my voice be heard, but I wasn't able to do it, I was ashamed, I didn't know my rights. During this quarantine I am discovering those rights; it could sound funny because I am 30 years old. (Fulvio)

- 20 The condition of forced unemployment and the birth of informal groups that shared both workers' experiences and practical information about workers' rights appear to have had a strong impact on subjects' awareness and self-perception.

Our system can be described as in a gaseous state. Each one of us is a gas particle that moves inside a container [...] Even if the whole system was in crisis before Covid-19, everyone had their individual career, now all careers are blocked, those of who was just starting, of the ones that were already famous, of the ones in the middle and this has led to a condition similar to equality that has been a great fuel towards the need to talk and make bonds (Interview with P.)

- 21 Despite being used to experience work in an individualised and entrepreneurial way, as P. explains, performing artists began to feel the need to go beyond their differences. The extreme material conditions brought by Covid-19 emergency push workers to look at the shared part of their experiences in order to develop cooperative actions.

- 22 This growing motivation towards workers' aggregation had a repercussion on traditional forms of mobilisation and collective association, resulting in a general rediscovery of trade unions and consortium.

We have a lot of subscriptions, on the national territory but especially in Milan, it gives us a huge responsibility. On the other hand, it is a signal, if from this difficult situation we have to extract something positive, it is that eventually everyone



acknowledged that in sticking together it is less probable to be crushed. (Ariel, unionist)

- 23 Not only had the number of members seemingly grown in the sectors' traditional equilibrium but so too had the relevance of the unions' work in the workers' perception.

I become a union member in these months, my position has always been sceptical towards the unions, I'd never felt them close, but then I have also questioned myself because unions are made by people and I said, "Well, it is time to enter in the union and maybe change or help the union to represent us". (Sybilla)

- 24 During the online meetings, participants often stressed the necessity not only of rethinking their working environment but also of birthing an imaginative effort to construct a more ethical and fairer environment. A generalised need for change emerged, variously approached by activists either through a critique of economic logics governing the cultural sector, or from an ethical and philosophical point of view. The following note was taken during an online meeting in the last days of March 2020:

Besides speaking of money, this situation invites us to let emerge deep and hidden matters, to ask us what our purpose as human beings is and to question the 'normality' that we were used to before this emergency, because it was exactly that normality that was the problem.

- 25 The need to think from a political perspective able to overcome current neoliberal trends was remarked by activists, alongside with the refusal of applying logics of productivity to artistic fields. Starting from April 2020, the activities conducted intended to go beyond the emergency situation, working towards a generalised restructuring of the entertainment sector, considered unequal and exploitative. A part of this critique targets individualised practices of work that are criticised in their desocialising and precarising effects.

This work needs an ethic; we can't exclude it, or it becomes a jungle where everyone tries to obtain their small result, but this is what allowed the system to prosper on this individualism that is part of the actors. [...] Now things are changing, and we must give ourselves a rule for the future, this is the occasion to reflect and concretely pose questions in order to change things. (Interview with group funder, P.)

This feeling of isolation, of fragmentation, that everyone works for themselves, and the others are potentially enemies, or they aren't at your side, it does not help to create community, the intention to create community. (Interview with activist, V.)

- 26 Despite recognising their radically subjective and individualised experience of work, in evocating "the need of an ethics", performers express the necessity to adopt logics oriented towards cooperation and solidarity. With this aim, activists implemented horizontal decision-making processes and collective writing practices in their daily political activity. Notwithstanding the fragmentation of the sector, self-presenting as an actor was enough to be admitted to working tables and to participate in the group's activities. The participatory values resulted in the absence of formal criteria for membership.

- 27 Well, last time there was this very funny thing... there was \*\*\* [Famous Actress] talking with a guy that does circus on the road. I find it something remarkable, I thought that it is something that I will tell posterity because there has never been seen such heterogeneity, but it is a good thing. (Interview with funder, D.)

- 28 As D. points, choosing inclusivity led to a various composition of participants in terms of career age, notoriety, background. On the one hand, participatory oriented practices,

collective writing and horizontal decision can be regarded as a way to take a distance from the competitive and individualised instances that characterise entrepreneurial working environments. On the other hand, developing an inclusive approach shows an attempt to value workers' experiences without erasing their differences in the construction of a cooperative space.

## Discussion

- 29 Despite the normalisation of entrepreneurialism and individualisation in contemporary experiences of work (Bröckling, 2015; Farrugia, 2021), the analysis points at novel possibilities of cooperation and socialisation that emerged during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. In this context, emotions have a central role in moving individualised workers towards intersubjective exchange. The sudden changes in social conditions brought on by the pandemic fosters solidarity and emotional attachment to the professional community. On top of forced unemployment and the impossibility to foresee a return to work, feelings of loneliness, isolation and fear have also been fostered by the pandemic and by social distancing measures enacted. In such a context, community help and practices of informational activism have pushed individualised experiences towards the necessity to exist in collective and shared terms. These processes have been pushing workers out of isolation and emotional involvement is, once again, central to the mobilisation (Melucci, 1995) and to recruit and involve new members (Castells, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2016). If, according to Richard Sennett (1998; 2000), contemporary fragmented workers have difficulties in seeing and narrating the commonality of their condition, it is possible to state that the Covid-19 pandemic – at least in the performing arts – has been a common narrative point for workers that allowed them to recognise themselves as part of the same history. Furthermore, the analysis conducted underlines the relevance of personal and professional ties and positive emotional experiences for mobilising processes (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). Thus, emotions are configured as resources both for mobilisation and for subjectivation processes, connecting private and collective everyday experiences (Melucci, 1996b; Rebughini & Scribano, 2018). In joining the mobilisation, actors experienced cooperation and community and realised to be part of a professional category. Apart from the possibility of deepening their knowledge of the legislative framework regulating their working activities, workers had the opportunity to distance themselves from individual responsibility and competition at the workplace. Peer discussions emerge as a key element not only for the development of collective action but also for enhancing practices of solidarity (Hirsch, 1990).
- 30 The group's reflections questioned the whole system of the entertainment industry and its mechanisms of exploitation. Both acts of collective resistance such as the demand for a pandemic basic income and micro-practices of reconciliation with the unions, have been employed with the intent to challenge the current individualised and neoliberal working environment. The analysis shows the role of democratic and horizontal practices as a method of community building that becomes a constitutive part of political and social action. Recent studies have underlined the role of horizontal decision-making in relation to workers' cooperatives (Mondon-Navazo *et al.*, 2022; Murgia & de Heusch, 2020) and in activists' practices in Italy (Cossu, 2018; Maddanu, 2018) and abroad (Flesher Fominaya, 2007), emphasising the organisational limitations of such approaches. To the extent that a certain degree of conflict and contrast seem to

be accepted, the experience of A2U resonates with scholars' reflection on collective identity as a network of immanent relations with loose entrance barriers (Melucci, 1995). The fieldwork delineates a collective framework of action where individualised subjects perform together without losing their specificity, and, in turn, individuals' identities are being affected by intersubjective exchange (Farro *et al.*, 2014). In this sense, during their time in the collective spaces, activists result to be transformed in their way of acting and interpreting the world (Zhelnina, 2021), letting emerge the complementarity and the centrality, as Flesher Fominaya pointed out (2010), of both latent and visible moments of collective action in elaborating alternative subjectivities and social change. To conclude, the Covid-19 pandemic creates the premises of a collective reflection in which workers and activists can frame individualisation outside of individualistic terms but towards an integration with community and solidarity practices (Colombo *et al.*, 2021).

## Conclusions

- 31 This study considers experiences of community and intersubjective exchange that took place in the Italian performing arts environment during Covid-19 emergency. While the exploitative and precarising mechanisms of work were well known but often unspoken, workers started to reconstruct a collective space to engage with workplace inequalities. The aura of exceptionality surrounding the first months of mobilisation generates an affective and emotional power shaking workers from ordinary estrangement towards political and collective action. Challenging the desocialized effects of individualised and neoliberal practices of work, activists developed a system of cooperative and horizontal decision-making and work towards a reconciliation of artists' movements with traditional unions. Covid-19 mobilisation emerges as a common narrative point for the biographical experiences of fragmented and individualised workers (Sennet, 2000), transforming both activists' points of view and collective solidarity in the group (Hirsch, 1990; Zhelnina, 2021). Despite the uncertainties regarding the course and the outcomes of the protest, workers in the performing arts have been able to discuss individualisation processes at the workplace, letting emerge a collective sense of responsibility able to question the structural conditions that created insecurity and precarity. If scholars' analysis underline the centrality of entrepreneurial and individualised instances in subjective experiences of work (Bröckling, 2015; Scharff, 2016; Farrugia, 2021), the performing arts' movement that followed Covid-19 outburst hints at the fact that individualisation is not a monodirectional process towards private individualism but that work can – still – be the arena for cooperative and collective subjectivities (Colombo *et al.*, 2022).

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## ABSTRACTS

This work adds to contemporary debates on individualisation and emerging form of cooperation in precarious and pandemic times by considering the case of Italian performing artists during Spring 2020. Drawing on both traditional and digital ethnography, the analysis considers workers collaborative and intersubjective efforts to challenge exploitative and individualised practices of work. The results show that, despite dominant interpretations of cultural work as an entrepreneurial and solitary project, in a context of extended crisis, fragmented experiences of work can be recomposed, and cooperation can be enacted. In the months that followed Covid-19 outbreak, performing artists' emotional and affective ties result to be central in exiting social isolation and to project solitary experiences of work into a collective understanding.

En partant de l'étude des intermittent.es du spectacle italien.nes pendant la crise sanitaire en avril 2020, ce travail contribue aux recherches contemporaines sur l'individualisation et sur les formes émergentes de coopération. En s'appuyant sur une approche ethnographique, à la fois numérique et traditionnelle, l'article analyse les stratégies collectives et intersubjectives adoptées par les travailleurs.euses afin de questionner les pratiques de travail exploitantes et individualisées. En dépit de l'interprétation dominante du travail créatif en tant que projet solitaire et entrepreneurial, l'étude de cas montre comment dans le cadre d'une crise radicale,

des expériences de travail fragmentées peuvent être recomposées en sollicitant ainsi la mise en œuvre de stratégies de coopération. L'analyse proposée démontre comment, dans les mois qui ont suivi la crise pandémique, les liens affectifs et émotionnels des intermittent.es se sont avérés cruciaux pour faire face au contexte d'isolement social ainsi que pour transformer les vécus subjectifs du travail dans une forme de prise de conscience collective.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** arts vivants, intermittents du spectacle, individualisation, coopération, Covid-19 pandémie, Italie

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