

Precarity and Processes of Classification: Conflictual Concepts of Class, Labour-Power and Caring

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ABSTRACT: This article presents exploratory research on precarity and aims to contribute to the debate around class and precarity. The social conditions of people in precarious employment are interpreted as conditions of daily struggles, which are conceptually linked to a broader and conflictual concept of class. Conflicts and daily struggles within precarity are then central for the approach of this research. The concept of labour-power is centralised to understand how the precarisation of employment is connected to social processes around class. For participants, being in paid employment is crucial in order to attain decent standards of living, that is: they have to be able to sell their labour-power as a commodity. I conclude that being in precarious employment tends to reduce workers to simple owners of labour-power and tends to destabilise the material basis for caring.

KEYWORDS: Precarity; Class; Classification; Insecure Jobs; Labour-Power

Introduction

This article presents a study on precarious workers in order to make a contribution to the debate around precarity and class analysis. Much of the sociological literature on precarity is concerned with issues of class (Paugam, 2000; Standing, 2011; Palmer 2014; Wright, 2016). However, in analysing precarious employment and class, this article argues for a critical and conflictual concept of class, which is often at the margins of sociological research (Bonefeld, 2002; Dinerstein & Neary, 2002; Holloway 2004; Tischler, 2009). This conflictual understanding of class is mobilised because it allows the taking into consideration of social conditions, it focuses on diffuse daily struggles (also understood as ‘class struggles’) and it avoids altogether issues of ‘class identity’. Indeed, from this perspective, to be part of the working class is a ‘misfortune’ (Holloway, 2005) in the same way as for our participants there is nothing normal in being precarious.

This study wants to take the specific case of people in precarious employment and with caring responsibilities (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020) to show that, despite the fact that it may be possible to classify them in conventional class categories, the overarching idea of a general working class who need to rely on wage relations and care work to sustain decent standards of life is critically valid (Bhattacharya, 2017). Importantly, aligning the analysis with conflictual concepts of class avoids classifying and pigeon-holing individuals into neat categories and avoids giving them an ‘identity’, while respecting their narratives as counter-stories vis-à-vis degrading material conditions and the stigma that in some cases follows precarity. There are not many theoretically driven empirical studies addressing how precarious employment may be inscribed in processes of class and this research aims to fill this gap.

The empirical research is set in Italy. Italy is a country where academic and public interest on precarity traverses at least its whole republican history and it is also where endemic resistance against the precarisation of employment is very diffuse (Giannini, 2019). Moreover, Italy has always been considered an important social ‘laboratory’ (Bouffartigue et al., 2017), where the social conditions of employment, labour-capital conflicts and social struggles often assume a European relevance.

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As this empirical research is theoretically driven, the next section explains key ideas: precarity and precarisation as key elements to reflect on issues of class and classification. The concept of labour-power is mobilised to establish a link between the two social processes. The methodology section is dedicated to explaining how this exploratory study was conducted, why restricted indicators of class are used to support a critical idea of class and the relevance of an alternative approach to data analysis. There are then three empirical sections: the first is about how some of the participants in insecure jobs can be seen as part of a middle-class in crisis and how their conflictual relations with employment may be a sign of a broader working class struggling with the valorisation of their labour-power (or ‘capacity to work’, that is: skills, qualifications etc).

The other two sections are focused on the ‘typical’ precarious workers who have to sustain daily struggles to get by and support their families. It is a class of people that has always been in crisis. In this case, being able to successfully sell their labour-power as a commodity emerges more clearly than in the other group. The conclusion proposes that, while there is not a homogeneous ‘precariat’, through precarisation participants are constantly reduced to their labour-power, to individuals who need to find paid employment and able to successfully stay in the labour market. I suggest that this is also the material condition characterising a broader working class.

Precariat as a Class? Conventional and Conflictual Concepts of Class

A conflictual concept of social class is crucial to understanding the daily struggles of people in precarity, thus this article deploys alternative concepts around class (Adorno, 2019; Bonefeld, 2002; Dinnerstein & Neary, 2002; Radice, 2015; Tischler, 2009) so as to articulate them in the contemporary scenario of precarious employment. Precarity is here understood as a social phenomenon mainly characterised by the temporal insecurity and casualisation of employment relations (Vosko, 2010; Doerre, 2014), including bogus self-employment (European Parliament, 2016). Arne Kalleberg (2018) characterises as precarious employment those jobs that, as well as insecure in terms of temporal continuity, also offer only low wages. Vosko (2010) takes issue with ‘residual’ definitions of precarious employment. According to these, the Standard Employment Relationship (SER) as the typical model of employment for advanced economies (during the post-World War II period) should provide the criteria for precarity: types of employment which are *not* standard. This standardised working time of continuous employment, often associated with post-World War II period and its regime of welfare state social protection was never universal but was accessible mainly to adult male citizens at the exclusion of women and migrants to the extent that this period can be said to be a historical anomaly (Bernards 2018; Evans, Fanelli & McDowell 2021; Ivancheva & Keating, 2020; Vosko, 2010).

This contribution is important because it focuses the analysis on the margins, that is, on gendered, unpaid care work, often performed by migrant labour. Following these studies, care work needs to be considered in the study of precarity in the same way Bhattacharya (2017) asks to centralise reproductive work when theorising about class. In the literature above, precarity is linked to precarisation as the general erosion of the SER model (Castel, 2003; Cingolani, 2005; Doerre, 2014; Giannini, 2019). These definitions allow a frame for precarisation which is not simply ‘economic’ or narrowly relative to industrial relations, but crucially involves ongoing social processes that lead to ‘precarious living conditions and a decline in subjective well-being or even a “destructuring of existence”’ (Kalleberg, 2018, 90).

The sociological study of precarity, in the sense of casualisation of employment linked to general social insecurity, has been connected with issues of social class almost from the outset (Paugam, 2000; Castel, 2003; Toscano, 2007; Standing, 2011). Continental European framing of this connection highlights the relational concept of precarity (Castel, 2003; Doerre,

2014). The centralisation of relational and conflictual understandings of precarity represents an approach that privileges the dynamic aspects of social forces (Castel, 2003; Doerre, 2014; Giannini, 2019; Vosko, 2010). Thus, the relation of labour-capital represents a conceptual reference point for framing precarity and class at the same time (Hann & Parry, 2018; Palmer, 2014). For this study, dynamic concepts of class, which involve social processes of ‘classification’ are preferred to static concepts of class, so as to highlight the active part of ‘struggle’ from the part of ‘classified’ groups (Bonefeld, 2014; Holloway, 2005; Radice, 2015). Indeed: ‘[t]he notion of classes as pigeonholes or locations to which the sociologist must assign individuals ultimately invokes static and struggle-disconnected structures’ (Holloway, 2005, 143).

These conflictual concepts of class then allow the construction of a different frame for understanding class: conflictual relations between labour and capital are not immediately about working class versus capitalist class but refer to labour producing capital. That is to say, the working-class producing value and ‘richness’ but only through the subordination to capital, through the subordination to the wage system (Dinerstein & Neary, 2002; Holloway, 2005). For this understanding, the general working class reproduces capital as well as its social life and does so through daily struggles (Bonefeld, 2014; Radice, 2015; Tischler, 2009). Understood this way, the aim is to capture the daily struggles of people in precarious employment.

Kalleberg’s (2018) primary focus is on job insecurity, with economic insecurity described as one of its consequences, but the approach is the reverse: it is the ‘original’ economic insecurity (Bonefeld, 2014, 79), the fact that the working class is ‘wage dependent’ (i.e., they have nothing to sell but their labour power) that should conceptually come first. This is the condition of a general working class, struggling to get the means of subsistence. Hence, the thesis formulated here to analyse precarity and social class is that precarisation of employment means the reduction of classes of people to their simplest status of bearers of ‘labour-power’ (Dinerstein & Neary, 2002) and the reduction of labour-power to its fundamental constituent: its capacity to produce value.

Labour-power is a concept first formulated by Marx (Heinrich, 2004) but, used here, it can be translated as the capability of people in insecure jobs to be able to keep ‘knocking’ at employers’ doors. The flow of people knocking at employers’ doors looking for a job turns their labour-power into a specific commodity. If the practice of entering wage relations is considered normal in many sectors of economically advanced nations, for people in precarious employment it is exactly this continuous attempt at constructing stable wage relations that more clearly marks them as commodities for the labour market (Ba’, 2019). This reference to labour-power distinguishes this approach to that of Wright (2016), who, in his analysis of precarity and class, does not mention labour power or class struggle.

Palmer (2014) and Smith and Pun (2018) in their intervention on class and precarity maintain that conflictual capital-labour relations are central. It is the relation between labour and capital that reflects the conceptual side of the processes of classification and class struggle. Here, everyday class struggle refers to the uninterrupted efforts within the given circumstances to create better living conditions. Classification means processes of class struggle around very concrete issues, mainly about standards of life (Bonefeld, 2014), or the stabilisation of employment contracts (Ba’, 2019). Struggles around standards of life are seldom the efforts of isolated single individuals: women and mothers experience precariousness more than men (Bernards, 2014), precarious employment is the historical feature of women’s engagement with the formal labour market (Vosko, 2010) and it is for this reason that research on precarity and class necessitates a focus on care, informal and unpaid work (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020).

Within this frame, the concept of class is linked to antagonistic social processes around paid work and it is conceptually relational (labour and capital, or human activities and money)

as well as linked to marginalised care work as it is performed within families (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020). While Campbell and Price (2016, 326) invite us to resist ‘the temptation to leap freely from precarious work to precarious workers’ (and therefore to issues of class), precisely because of the concept of class that is mobilised here this link should be thematised. As Marx (1997 [1844], 75) explains, ‘the worker exists as a worker only when he (*sic*) exists for himself as capital; and he exists as capital only when some capital exists for him’. The working class exists for itself because labour-power is their capital to be exchanged as a commodity with wages, while the single isolated worker can only materially exist insofar as an employer is interested in buying their labour-power, permanently or temporarily.

Conversely, conventional theories of class aim at descriptions, and they define class through ‘stratification’ approaches, which aim to classify the total sum of the individual adult population (Tyler, 2015, 499) and for most of sociological class analysis the descriptive approach can be quite overt (Gane, 2020). Mainstream concepts of class are usually non-relational (Sayer, 2016) in the sense that rather than classes formed through social relations, they describe ‘strata’ of population. Hugo Radice (2015) provides an analysis of the conventional descriptors of classification, which rely on non-relational approaches, describing the constitution of the middle-classes in their various historical determinations. The analysis of the middle-classes allegedly complicates the class relational approach on the basis that if there is a class in the ‘middle’, then the antagonism capital-labour cannot be central. However, the fragmentation of the working class as a class has always been an aspect considered by critical approaches (Radice, 2015, 278). The relational concept of class relies on the critical concept of wage relations (Bonfeld, 2002, 75): the divide between those who need a wage to get the ‘means of subsistence’ and those who own capital becomes decisive only when class struggle to ‘get by’ concretely emerges in the everyday life (Tischler, 2009). This emergence is much clearer in the case of workers who are in precarious employment and who perform unpaid reproductive work (Ba’, 2019; Bhattacharya, 2017).

It so follows that the social conditions of people in precarious employment can be interpreted as conditions of daily struggles, which are conceptually linked to a broader and conflictual concept of class. In exploring the themes of precarity, social class and daily struggles, the focus is placed on precarisation as including not only matters around insecure employment, but also care work and parental obligations.

Methodology and Counter-Storytelling

This exploratory research was devised to capture the narratives of individuals and their families struggling through precarity. The research was conducted in Central Italy (Umbria) using qualitative methods: semi-structured, in-depth interviews were devised to obtain from participants narratives regarding their life stories and their employment history. The interview themes were designed to cover their daily struggles through precarious employment and accounts over their parental responsibilities. The aim was to collect narratives that are personal, but also detailed enough to allow links with broader trends individuated by theoretical work.

When recruiting participants who would fit the description of ‘precarious worker’, we approached state-owned job centres whose workers are in temporary contracts, local primary and middle schools that routinely use substitute teachers, a local charity that provides support to care and domestic workers with no employment contract, and the local trade union, which supports factory and agricultural workers in casual employment. Umbria, a marginal economic reality of Italy, experienced a long period of stagnation following the 2008 financial crisis, which shook traditionally stable sectors, casualising many lines of employment (Fumagalli, 2014).

Twenty-six mothers and thirteen fathers took part in this research. The criteria for taking part were twofold: i) Having a non-standard, fixed term or seasonal contract; ii) Having caring responsibilities for at least one child. The second point commits to following Vosko's (2010) recommendation of moving from the 'margins' and including unpaid caring work in the frame of precarity. Among the female participants, eight of them were single parents. All the other participants were married, a smaller proportion cohabiting. The age of their children varied from a few months to late adolescence. Each of the participants was interviewed at home for approximately one hour. Pseudonyms are used in this article.

This article strives to empirically articulate a critical concept of class, while using conventional class indicators for immediate comparative purposes. To collect information about conventional markers of class, there were questions on: family background, qualifications, employment history, description of work tasks, general information about assets and general data on wages and contractual terms (ISTAT, 2017; Rose & Harrison, 2007). Two groups were identified, A and B, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' demographic characteristics

	Occupation	Gender	Nationality	Education
Group A	Substitute Teachers; Job Centres Advisors; Telemarketing operators; Socio-cultural operators	17 Female 7 Male Tot. = 24	24 Italian	16 with university degrees 8 'College' educated
Group B	Factory Workers, Care Assistants, Cleaning personnel	9 Female 6 Male Tot. = 15	7 Italian 8 North African	4 with university degrees 11 with middle-school leaving certificate
Total		39 Participants (26 Female + 13 Male)	31 Italian and 8 North African	20 with university degrees

Taking into account the proposed European socio-economic classification (Rose & Harrison, 2007), Group A overlaps with class 3 of intermediate occupations of 'white collar' and class 6 of 'lower technician occupations'. These occupations would include: 'most clerical occupations and administrative assistants, occupations which involve working (...) in ancillary roles' (Rose & Harrison, 2007, 467). For the admission of some of the participants classified in group A, they experience a certain degree of stability while still being precarious workers. Following that classification scheme, Group B can be collocated between class 8 and 9: 'lower technical occupations and routine occupations' (Rose & Harrison, 2007, 469), although some of the participants have university degrees or are specialised factory workers.

Citizenship status is also relevant for the classification of this group, given that the majority of them are immigrants from outside the European Union (ISTAT, 2017). It is, however, important to note that it is the very process of class identification that remains the target of critique. Thus, even if participants in group A can be described in terms of a middle-class in crisis, the aim is to understand general processes of classification on the basis of the 'antagonistic' nature of class society (Bonefeld, 2014).

Following the insights of Critical Race Methodology (CRM), what was key was the interpretation of participants' narratives as 'counter-stories' (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Following CRM, the subjective reflections of the participants can and should be taken as reflections of personal and collective practices of people trapped by precarisation and in antagonism with the needs of valorisation of their 'asset' as 'human capital' (Rose & Harrison, 2007, 462). The 'counter-storytelling' approach strives to tap a historical antagonism between the power of classes of people (their labour-power) against their subordination (Tischler, 2009).

Thus, for this exploratory qualitative research, the narratives of participants are considered linguistic creations capable of offering meaningful representations of their social conditions (Tischler, 2009). Methodologically, CRM allows the use of Benjamin's (1981 [1955]) micrological gaze: an accurate description of the social fragment – in this case, a social fragment that can be reconstructed through participants' narratives – can shed light on the way the social totality assumes meaning in the lives of people (see also: Bannerji, 2005).

Conventional Class Through Precarity: Precarity or Crisis of Class?

In the following sections, the analysis of participants' narratives will take a twofold approach. Although aspects of these narratives may fit conventional class categories, the analysis of the social conditions to which they refer to points to broader, critical ideas on class formation. The starting point is outlining how some of the participants' narratives fit certain conventional traits of the middle-classes (albeit in a precarious position) and how others fit the features of working-classes. However, in doing so, the analysis is pushed forward to the point that these narratives suggest a broader understanding of class. This procedure may seem logically contradictory, but if the focus is the process of classification, rather than a static concept of class, then individual accounts will gain a sociological sense. Participants narrate personal lives shaped or even formed by these categories while revealing struggles to resist these economic forces which confine their existence to the margins.

The analysis is developed through the contrast of the accounts of two sets of participants whose interviews are particularly well positioned to address the aims stated above. So, the accounts of participants from Group A are contrasted with that of Group B. In reporting their accounts, the aim is to present a general picture of their stories and their situations. Their 'counter-stories' are as much statements depicting an anonymous economic system confronting them as they are personal reflections on their private struggles. The analysis begins with Group A before moving to Group B.

Marcus is employed as a technical advisor at a job centre and Barbara is a substitute teacher. These two participants narrated a series of circumstances that are relatively common for participants in Group A, among them: both of their partners are in full-time secure employment, they have home ownership, they own two cars (one for each partner) and a network of relatives who routinely provide support for the care of their children. They are both highly qualified for their jobs and, in the case of Barbara, even over-qualified (Oliver, 2012).

Marcus has been working at the job centre for three years and he feels 'stuck'. He is married and the father of a nine-month-old child. His wife is the manager of a small nursery cooperative. He has a first-class degree in economics and also has other side activities: he is a dance teacher and owner of a small dog-breeding centre. Since his graduation, he had a number of fixed-term jobs, however the restructuring of the Italian public sector meant that most careers paths are blocked for employees in fixed-term contracts (Bagnasco, 2016). As Marcus explains: '[My job] is not at all gratifying or rewarding...considering my studies and...my training... All of that is not considered at all!' Marcus feels overqualified for the job of technical advisor and, given that he is in possession of a university degree, according to Italian law means he is qualified as an 'expert', as opposed to technical responsibilities. Other technical advisors narrated similar stories, and many feel overqualified. These elements of higher levels of education, qualifications, training, and promotion through career are historically constitutive parts of the Italian middle class (Bagnasco, 2016; for similarities in the EU, see: Courtois and O'Keeffe, 2015; Oliver, 2012).

Barbara is married and has two children, eight and five years old. Barbara shares with Marcus the frustration of having to accept a job beneath her qualifications. She has a PhD in biochemistry and twelve years' experience between doctoral work and a series of fixed-term research contracts in a university lab. Both participants enjoy the support of their relatives. Their grandparents help look after the grandchildren and allow the parents to have relative freedom to meet work schedules. Marcus and Barbara narrate a 'revolution' in their lives since the arrival of children, however Barbara is more involved as she is the one that organises family life according to a series of routines, such as having dinner together. Barbara states that 'research is my job' but because of job insecurity once she got married and had children, there were few choices other than to abandon research for teaching. It was "hard" and it led to her "not feeling great" about, but the financial difficulty of continuing as a precarious researcher was not an option as two salaries were "essential" to cover the family's budget (Ivancheva & Keating, 2020 for similar findings).

The erosion of traditional middle-class jobs and careers reproduces gendered roles inside the family (Giannini, 2019; Cavazza, 2017; Ranci, 2017), creating resentment in Marcus and resignation in Barbara. In both cases, participants feel exploited over their qualifications and skills. At the end of the interview, Marcus vents his frustration about his employment conditions: he states a "desire for revenge" regarding his career's perspectives. Barbara's attitude is more reflexive: 'As a precarious worker, I do not know if in the future I will be able to send my children to university... my parents did manage that: they worked hard and managed to send me to university'. Indeed, job insecurity is preventing them from making long term plans and precarity becomes something that 'stays inside' them, something that 'you do not forget about' and that is a 'destabilising factor' for their personal lives (see Ba', 2019 for similar findings). Barbara reluctantly stated how bitter she was: 'You can do one, two... three months of lab work without being paid, but after that? Let's say the truth, after that it becomes exploitation, lack of respect... not only for me... but also towards others, because it did not happen only to me!' This counter-story points to the objectifying conditions of precarious employment in that it negates that these conditions are simply a personal matter. Precarisation renders unstable the content of work, while confirming the subordination to wage relations. Yet this insecure context does not appear to be as harsh as for those in group B.

The Precarious Middle and Working Class

From Group B, Roberta, Raffaella, Omar and Marika (these last two, a couple interviewed together) are struggling to find permanent jobs and are forced to resort to the informal market and sometimes *ad hoc* support from the local charity. They also lack a network of relatives or friends for extra support when looking after their children: the two women are single mothers, while Omar and Marika moved to Italy from Morocco, where they left their relatives.

Rapid economic changes and the Great Recession undermined the viability of their sectors in general and of their skills in particular (Miceli, 2011). Roberta and Raffaella were two artisans, small business owners in the sector of costume jewellery and of ice cream makers, respectively. Roberta is a widow with two adolescent daughters and Raffaella divorced with a five-year-old daughter. Roberta's husband committed suicide following the collapse of his artisanal activity. Omar moved to Italy from Morocco thirty years ago, he worked regularly in building construction until the Great Recession and since then he has worked irregularly in construction and seasonally in agriculture. He is married to Marika, who came to Italy from Morocco roughly 15 years ago. They have three children. Marika was mainly a housewife when their children were younger, but now she has irregular, informal jobs as domestic worker.

As the aim of this article is to stretch conventional class belonging in order to frame class formation and struggle, it is important to see how their employment stories reveal the ‘hidden injuries of class’. For them, selling trinkets at market stalls (Roberta), finding an informal job as a cleaner (Raffaella) or as a bricklayer (Omar) is a matter of finding the necessary financial means to get by. However, it is Raffaella who is particularly distressed during the interview as she describes the degradation of her material conditions: she has a degree in economics and she has managed a small business of artisanal ice-cream for ten years. The failure of her business, the arrival of her daughter and the divorce pushed her into major financial difficulties. She finds life very difficult and at one point during the interview she pauses to wipe away her tears as she discusses the significant loss of living standards.

Through the descriptions of their conditions and trajectories, it becomes apparent that these participants are adjusted to underutilised qualifications and skills, unusable work experience and ultimately to simple labour-power. Their capability to work, their labour-power as qualified by education and skills, is not deemed economically worthy as it does not produce monetary valorisation. Raffaella’s narrative about her employment history is particularly bitter and full of recriminations, so her narrative can be interpreted as a counter-story because she feels there is nothing ‘normal’ in being in precarious conditions. Conversely, Omar displays a sort of impassibility when he replies to a question about family life and financial difficulties: ‘We have always been in crisis, we were not born as millionaires, we have felt the crisis since our birth (...) [however] I am happy because I have a family of 5 people (...) even happy with a glass of water and a small piece of bread’. There has always been precarity for the dispossessed classes.

Omar and his wife managed to ensure a fairly comfortable lifestyle for their daughters until the Great Recession, but since the further precarisation of his working conditions, they need to be more careful about their finances and at times they have to rely on the solidarity of *caritas* [Catholic charity]. They find it difficult to send their daughters to extra-curricular activities or school trips. Particularly painful was their recent decision about a school trip to Florence for their older daughter: Marika: ‘She (daughter) went into a meltdown when we told her that we couldn’t... For the school trip (...) we could not send her...’. Omar: ‘She went mad... two or three days of anger and resentment... I could not do anything about it... then she calmed down...’. Marika was particularly upset about this episode, her Italian is not that fluent, so to express the complex emotions around this event, she reported her daughter’s words, who angrily told them: “You never have [the money] to allow me doing anything [that I like]” These four participants lack the support from grandparents or relatives in general: Roberta and Raffaella because they moved to Umbria from another region, Omar and Marika because they are migrants from abroad.

Without any siblings, Raffaella was orphaned at a relatively young age. Lack of familial support is a well-recognised obstacle for parents in precarious employment (Giannini, 2019). Roberta has older children, one of them at university. Her job is seasonal, she makes trinkets but her business peaks in the summer, where she can have a stall in the various local town markets. She notes: ‘last winter was extremely tough’ and she routinely has to rely on the help of *caritas*. She has done other jobs in the recent past that were ‘very precarious and very exploitative’. Roberta has regrets: ‘I would have liked giving [my daughters] something more... not luxuries... but at least more serenity’. She is from Rome and has been living in a medium-sized town in Umbria for a very long time, however she feels that they never integrated in the local community (‘we are not from here’). The ‘horrible’ story of her husband’s suicide made them stand out, acquiring a sort of stigma.

Priced out by the tumultuous developments of international capital, flooding even marginal markets with cheap items (Miceli, 2011), her husband committed suicide: his labour-power is extinguished. Roberta is reduced to pure labour-power and left 'free' to deal with the care of the children on her own. She is then perceived by the local people as the outsider who had no luck, so acquiring a stigma, which meant that she and her daughters were socially avoided, presumably on superstitious grounds. From a strictly neoliberal, free market point of view, they as a family became the bearers of unfruitful (or even failed) labour-power. In Roberta's case, the essence of wage-labour as the means for getting subsistence generates enormous pressure because it is based on the assumption of an abstract subject able to compete in the market (Holloway, 2005), while at the same time the capacity to work is essential to get by for her (and for the vast majority of people, especially for those in insecure jobs). Within these conditions, labour-power is almost 'the thing in itself' (Adorno, 2005 [1951]).

Within this fetishised essence of labour, the person becomes an allegory of labour as a commodity for the free market in the same way that, at the opposite end of the social hierarchy, the persona of the King in the German *Trauerspiell* was used to represent the allegory of social cohesion (Benjamin, 2009). Using Benjamin's critical frame to understand her story, the stigma indicates cracks in the cohesion of the market society, a cohesion made up by money and wage relations (Bonefeld, 2014; Holloway, 2005). Roberta struggles to get into stable wage relations, Roberta and her family are not capable of transmitting the sense of the 'sacred' functions of the free market society (money as the god of freedom), as in Benjamin's analysis of the Baroque society the fallen King indicates the cracks of the cosmic and social order. The fetishised world of labour-power is irrational and real at the same time: real because wage relations for those who need to sell their labour-power are considered normal; irrational because, despite the 'socially constructed' world of wage relations can be seen as objective and objectifying, personal responsibility (that of Roberta and her husband) is still taken to be valid, even after death, hence the superstition.

Precarity and Caring

This section takes into consideration how our mothers in precarious employment refer to their caring activities. Narratives around parenting show how precarious employment makes it difficult to care as it destabilises the material basis of participants' lives. Nonetheless, it emerges that 'care work is never precarious'; their counter-stories indicate both dignity and the destabilisation of feelings about care.

Roberta narrates financial difficulties in affording even the train tickets to university for her daughter. When the interviewer observed that, given the financial difficulties and lack of support from partner and relatives, Roberta should take some credit for having raised two daughters and sending one of them to university (agricultural sciences), she replied: 'I think the credit goes to them... because it is no use saying to them "do not do that... do not do this", in the end it is them who decide [over their life]'. This answer can be interpreted as a counter-story insofar as it tacitly refers to an ideal of dignity (Ba', 2021). As the participant rejects cheap credit for her moral actions, it is possible to see that this counter-story hints at an 'impassibility' of her family vis-à-vis unfavourable economic conditions. The term impassibility is here suggested both from the narrative of the participant and from Benjamin's (1981) ideas around 'class struggle' as characterised by exactly this type of working-class stance.

Parents living through precarious employment may not have the 'mental' space to connect at a deeper level with children and to accomplish caring at their desired level. Raffaella says that 'the most difficult thing is to reconcile the serenity that a child needs with your lack of serenity, because you do not have a stable economic basis'. When asked about daily routines with her daughter, she replies that she does spend time arranging leisure time but does not think

it is quality time because she is always worried: ‘Well, there are these problems that do not let you live in peace. So, let’s say yes: I may play with her, but I cannot focus on the game, I struggle to be present with my mind, do you understand?’ Silvia Federici (2012) rightly observes that care work is never precarious, it is always there; however, this observation must be understood in a critical sense: mothers in insecure jobs struggle to provide constant care for their families (Ba’, 2019).

This is not a positive fact, as the precarious world where it takes place is a place of suffering, as Marika says: ‘It’s just...when you find out that your child wants something... and you cannot... you then feel bad.’ For mothers in our participant group, the overlap of precarity and caring produce contradictions in their everyday lives and it is met by daily struggles. When asked about the most pleasant thing about being a parent, Raffaella narrates the following: ‘Yesterday I watched them [her child and her friends] play with each other...they are like brothers and sisters, they play with everybody, so... Perhaps the best thing about being a parent is that you see how you were and say: but where did I end up? I mean, I think you get flashbacks of what you were like. Perhaps if we were all children, the world would be better.’ It is an answer which does not seem to directly address the question. Instead, she offers three ‘images’: the peaceful image of children playing together; the image of herself in a distant past, now unrecognisable; the image of the possibility of a better world. The links are the unrecognisable image of herself as a parent, as a person whose place in the world is determined by precarity exactly in a moment of her life when she needed to act as a responsible adult. The responsibility of caring and giving her child a serene space for growing is revealed as unbearable.

Taken as counter-story, it is possible to see that there is a reference to unstable economic conditions, due to her precarious employment, which directly destabilises her potential to care and to produce adequate feelings for her daughter. Precarity is then revealed as an object that silently takes over the possible experience of a normal life. This last image of the object intruding in someone’s experience, is similar to that of Barbara (from group A), though obviously more dramatic. Thus, care work is never precarious but the social compulsion for its accomplishment leaves scars on mothers. This social compulsion is the result of the pressure on these participants to be reduced to labour-power, they are compelled to find a market to place their capability-to-work as a commodity in exchange for wages, income needed to care and to make their social circumstances ‘better’.

Conclusion

Precarity is a buzz word and can hide fundamental class dynamics. However, dismissing appearances is not always a sound sociological strategy; here, precarity as framed theoretically through critical theory’s lenses and narrated by participants shows the need for a broader, critical concept of class. Through precarisation, participants are constantly reduced to their labour-power, to individuals who need to find paid employment and to successfully stay in the labour market. This research indicates that this material condition is also the general condition for the formation of a broader working class (Bonefeld, 2014). The destabilised material conditions of participants, reflected in accounts that narrate strength and suffering at the same time, point to a broader concept of class and to the fundamental social conflicts around labour as labour-power and its antagonism with capital. While including care work in the considerations around precarity, this article presents the pressing concerns of parents who are in precarious employment. These concerns are about daily material needs as well as dignified standards of life, such as affording school trips for their children.

This research shows that even participants who may conventionally be classified as belonging to the “middle-class” are stuck in insecure, low-paid jobs, with few prospects for career advancement. Even those who can enjoy the support of grandparents find it difficult to combine employment and care. From their counter-stories, it appears that precarisation renders

unstable the content of their work, while they become ever more subordinated to wage relations. This qualitative research shows that there are artisans and parts of the ‘traditional’ working class who lapsed into precarious employment and now face financial difficulties and the degradation of their material conditions of life. Their counter-stories tell that while there is nothing normal about being precarious, their social life is polarised between being characterised by a dignified stance vis-à-vis precarity and being marked by stigma, which is likely the result of economic insecurity.

Finally, narratives around parenting show how precarious employment makes it difficult for mothers to care as it destabilises the material basis of participants’ lives. Although ‘care work is never precarious’ (Federici, 2012), mothers who are in precarious employment narrate the destabilisation of feelings about care but also reject credit for making care possible. Rather, participants narrate their precarious social conditions as struggles to find paid employment, thereby struggling to sell their labour-power. Precarity is considered a misfortune, something that in their words ‘is not normal’. Although there are considerable differences between them, to the point that it would be correct to state that the precariat is not a homogenous class, this research tries to highlight how the fundamental antagonism of capital and labour that undermines employment, while framing social processes around class. Even as the precariat is not a homogeneous class apart from others, the people in precarious employment represent a case through which it is possible to observe the same tendencies of a broader working class whose only means of subsistence is to sell their labour-power. These tendencies are revealing material conditions of social life, and social relations of subordination, against which participants struggle in their daily lives.

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