The shaky social citizenship of young professionals: work transformation, transition to work, career and life planning and unrepresented rights

The paper focuses on young adult professionals in the Milan urban area (Italy) and their difficulties to plan and develop a successful career and satisfying life. The current economic phase seems just to worsen the pre-existing obstacles, due to post-industrial changes affecting labour market, school-work transition, welfare protection. Until 10-15 years ago young professionals, defined as professional at first steps of their career, were normally destined for a satisfying and linear career; the combination of the current long-lasting crisis and the under-qualified Italian labour market – inadequately rewarding qualified jobs in particular at the starting stages of their careers – creates an unprecedented condition of instability, precariousness and risk.

Work contents and professional satisfaction are under pressure: young professionals receive scarce remuneration and acknowledgement of their competences; labour contents within certain professions tend to worsen and autonomy to be reduced. The label ‘professionals’ hides young adult employees in precarious conditions, with low wages and without contracts.

Self-employment is a traditional feature of the Italian social class composition, but many changes have been occurred during the last decades. The post-industrial transitions produced new forms of self-employment, which do not take part in the social integration unlike the traditional middle-class.

The old regulative pattern was based on controlled markets, social homogeneity, traditional habits, social and political representation – professional orders and associations, political parties, relations with local and national institutions. The current Italian social system reveals strong social differentiation within the post-industrial middle-class in regard with income and social representation. Young professionals and a-typical workers in particular experience difficult working conditions, economic hardship and lack of representative organisations aiming at enlarging rights and welfare coverage. In this sense, we argue, the new generation of professionals undergoes a crisis of social citizenship, conceived as a full participation to social life, through labour market inclusion, interest representation, welfare protection, social networks support.

Semi-structured interviews to 72 young-adult professionals were used to understand the relation among biographical project, economic constraints and adaptation to them. Biographies – education and working careers, transition to adulthood – resources and limits, expectations, social needs were analysed, in order to outline professional and biographical patterns and the most...
relevant working and social issues for young adult freelancers. The relation between working conditions, choices and chances reveals young professionals’ life and career planning and related constraints.

In particular, we will verify these hypotheses:

1) Does a ‘culture of risk’ exist among young freelancers or an adaptation to ‘a-day-to-day life’ (Castel, 1997, 2007)?

2) Which resources do they resort to in order to overcome personal, professional and social problems? Do they prefer personal solutions relying on personal skills and professional networks (individualization)? Do they use family’s support and personal networks (‘familism’), which reproduce social inequalities within professionals? Do they resort to forms of collective protection, like professional orders and associations (corporatism) or do they claim social citizenship’s rights and social representation (universalism)?

The qualitative analysis produced a typology, which shows the importance of ascribed social status and family resources, the effects of social inequalities on the weaker professionals, but also the prevalence of individual agency to face professional problems as well as social rights’ weakness.

**Self-employment: tradition and new features**

Self-employment is a traditional feature of the Italian labour market and social class composition (Sylos-Labini 1974), it includes 22.5% of working people in the age class 20-64 (5 millions) against an average level of 14.7% in Europe (EU27)². This figure is extremely heterogeneous, including traditional self-employment (craftsmen; traders), ‘small’ employers, new forms of self-employment and autonomous jobs inside the three economic sectors.

The post-industrial and service-sector transitions in particular produced new forms of self-employment, which do not take part in the social integration process unlike the traditional middle-class (Bagnasco 2008). The old regulative pattern was based on controlled markets, social homogeneity, traditional habits, social and political representation – professional orders and associations, political parties, relations with local and national institutions. The current Italian social system reveals strong market competition and social differentiation within the post-industrial middle-class: high level professionals have increased their income during the last twenty years, whereas a quarter of self-employed people is at risk of poverty³. Self-employed are extremely diversified even considering the most qualified professionals, individualization increased, actual professional autonomy decreased (Ranci 2012). Important issues are at stake, but representation of self-employment interests seems to be weak.

The process of labor market flexibilization – ongoing for more than two decades in Europe, particularly in the continental and Mediterranean countries – has been pursued everywhere through the adoption of “partial and selective” deregulation (Esping-Andersen and Regini, 2000) through the extension of the possibility to use temporary employment, including new forms, while keeping unchanged the system of regulation and guarantees for those already hired on fixed-time

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² Own elaboration on Eurostat data 2012.
³ 27% of self-employed people had incomes under the 75% of equivalent median income, according to Bank of Italy, data referred to 2008 (Ranci 2012: 293).
contracts.\textsuperscript{4} In Italy, however, the period from the mid-nineties to at least the onset of the crisis did not witness an “explosive” growth in temporary employment (Reyneri, 2009). Besides the deregulation of temporary contracts, the ‘Italian path to flexibilization’ exploited the usual preference for self-employed labor as a way to elude the legal regulations and taxation of wage employment (Reyneri, 2011; Ranci, 2012).

More than elsewhere in Europe, Italy has seen the spread of kinds of self-employment based on service contracts and one-off jobs that were once typical of only the traditional professions. This trend has been facilitated by various changes in the nature of work and its organization within the post-industrial order that has modified the structure of employment opportunities. On one side, a model of flexible production has emerged in which firms use on a wide scale externalized production, sub-contracting and outsourcing involving both other firms and single workers; a model that is a long way from the rationale of vertical integration typical of Fordism (Pallini, 2010; Muehlberger, 2012). On the other side, most jobs have been affected by changes in both the kind of work and its organizational context. In the area of skilled work, for example, not only have there been deep-reaching changes in many of the traditional free professions, but also new types of work, new non-regulated professions and new occupational areas have emerged, often cutting across existing sectors. In this working environments it has asserted itself a model of professional work which requires autonomy, flexibility, specific and specialized technical proficiencies integrated in a solid expertise including knowledge, trust, reputation and social abilities (Butera 1998).

Comparative studies on changes in the professional self-employment are few and far between. At European level, where the regulatory picture is very uneven\textsuperscript{5}, the definition of ‘economically dependent self-employed’ has become established to single out a grey (and highly heterogeneous) area in between employment and self-employment. In this area, self-employment does not fully enjoy the advantages of its trait – the job autonomy – and, though it has similar conditions to those of employment, the protection system, the forms of representation, social rights and access to welfare safeguards are very limited, if not lacking altogether (Eiro, 2002).

This research deals with two specific groups: professionals, defined in the strict sense as qualified persons working in registered professions\textsuperscript{6} – traditional ‘liberal professions’ – and self-employed with a high level of education working in the service and innovative sectors, defined knowledge workers (Bologna 2007, Butera et al. 2008), who work in unregulated professions with a freelance or temporary employment position. In particular, we are studying these two categories, excluding low level self-employed, a-typical executive workers and of course small employers, who are often

\textsuperscript{4} This has lead, above all in the Mediterranean countries, which Italy is undoubtedly a typical case of, to a sharper contradiction between working conditions and guarantees applied to ‘insiders’ – generally adults – and those applied to ‘outsiders’ – normally young people more and more systematically hired on a fixed-term basis (Barbieri, 2009).

\textsuperscript{5} While Austria, Italy, Portugal and Spain have brought in legislation to incorporate these form of employment through specific work contracts, most European countries have not provided them with any legal basis. (Eiro, 2002).

\textsuperscript{6} University degree and a public exam are required to be admitted in the professional order.

\textsuperscript{7} University degree is not compulsory but is often requested by as marker of competence. January 2013 these professions were regulated by a framework law (L. 4-2013), strongly demanded by some professionals’ associations (in particular by COLAP, an association of very different professional associations), which introduced the possibility to organize unregulated professionals in specific association recognized and regulated by the State. It is obviously too early to evaluate the its effects, but this law has a strong symbolic meaning.
considered in the autonomous employment. Professionals and self-employed in Italy include 4.6 million people over the age of 15 years old onwards (not considering people working with collaboration contracts who are around 400 thousands) and amount to almost 1.5 millions in the age group 35-44 (collaboration contracts 96 thousands), 20% of working people in that range (Isfol 2013).

In order to move closer to the research target group, we distinguish own-account employment, excluding self-employed with employees, and qualified temporary employment, which include managers and professionals who work with flexible contracts and who normally represent the weaker part of professionals considering their lower remuneration and limited autonomy.

Among people aged 20-64 these two groups amount to 3.6 million and 540 thousand persons respectively and represent 16% and 2.4% of employed people. In the age group 25-49 own-account employed are 2.4 million people, 16% of employed persons, and qualified temporary workers amount to 400 thousands, 2.8% of employed population (Tab. 1).

Our research target, own-account self-employment and qualified temporary employment, includes around 20% of employed persons in Italy, more than at European level. The overall trend in Europe is the decrease of self-employment incidence on the overall employment (Tab. 2) and it seems to contrast with the ‘resilience’ role to the crisis that self-employment have recently shown even if not in all countries (European Commission 2010). But, if we consider the more dynamic knowledge-based sectors, information and technology and professional, scientific and technical activities (Tab. 3), the self-employment drive can be confirmed even in a long lasting recession (Isfol 2013).

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**Tab. 1 Rate of self-employment and temporary employment on total employment 25-49 y.o.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Self-employment</th>
<th>Own-account self-employment</th>
<th>Temporary employment</th>
<th>Qualified temporary employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU27</td>
<td>13,9</td>
<td>14,8</td>
<td>9,9</td>
<td>10,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU15</td>
<td>13,6</td>
<td>14,6</td>
<td>9,4</td>
<td>9,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>8,6</td>
<td>8,9</td>
<td>5,0</td>
<td>4,8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>10,4</td>
<td>10,9</td>
<td>6,1</td>
<td>6,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>12,7</td>
<td>16,8</td>
<td>8,5</td>
<td>10,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>27,4</td>
<td>31,0</td>
<td>21,0</td>
<td>22,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>14,6</td>
<td>18,3</td>
<td>10,2</td>
<td>12,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>10,2</td>
<td>9,8</td>
<td>6,2</td>
<td>5,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>21,8</td>
<td>24,5</td>
<td>16,0</td>
<td>17,7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>14,5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>8,8</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>13,0</td>
<td>12,5</td>
<td>10,7</td>
<td>9,6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eurostat, own elaboration; * data refer to professionals and technicians and associate professionals, data on managers are not available.

Our research target, own-account self-employment and qualified temporary employment, includes around 20% of employed persons in Italy, more than at European level. The overall trend in Europe is the decrease of self-employment incidence on the overall employment (Tab. 2) and it seems to contrast with the ‘resilience’ role to the crisis that self-employment have recently shown even if not in all countries (European Commission 2010). But, if we consider the more dynamic knowledge-based sectors, information and technology and professional, scientific and technical activities (Tab. 3), the self-employment drive can be confirmed even in a long lasting recession (Isfol 2013).

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8 Self-employed without employees.
9 It includes three subgroups: managers, professionals, technicians and associate professionals.
In the Milan Province, which is a little larger than the Milan urban area considered by our research, self-employed were recently estimated around 300,000 (2009), considering the only service sector (Migliavacca 2011). Another interesting figure shows the importance of Knowledge Intensive Based Services (KIBS) in the Milan metropolitan area and the relevant amount of professionals working in this sectors: 150,000 persons, 39% of employed people in these sectors with a strong concentration in some of them. Self-employed professionals represent half or more than half of employed subjects in legal and accounting activities, architecture and engineering studios, technical analysis activities and other professional, scientific and technical professions, like photographers and designers (Compagnucci 2012); they represent exactly our research target.

**Research’s characteristics and methodology**

Within a national project research dedicated to the social representation of weak sectors of Italian society, the Milan local unity worked on “Young people and representation lack: work transformation and new risks in Milan”. The project had two goals: to explore changes of representative supply offered to qualified self-employed and professionals and to verify whether they demand for collective representation and which kind of organization they resort to.

The research group interviewed both representative organizations – traditional unions, new professional associations, professional orders – and young professionals working in different sectors of service economy of the Milan metropolitan area.

In this paper I concentrate on the sample of 72 professionals: young-adult and adult subjects between 32 and 49 years old, working as freelancers (or collaborators) since at least five years (15 at most), still at first stages of their career. Sample’s characteristics fit with the increase of female participation in qualified labour market in the Italian Northern areas and with demographic changes: around half of the interviewees are women; half of them has not children even if they live in cohabitation and one interviewee out of five is single. In particular the interviewees work in traditional liberal professions, technical service for companies, creative sector, ITC sector, financial services and welfare and healthcare service.
The interviews are semi-structured and were used to understand the relation among biographical project, economic constraints and adaptation to them. Biographies – education and working careers, transition to adulthood – resources and limits, expectations, social needs were analysed, in order to outline professional and biographical patterns and the most relevant working and social issues for young adult freelancers. The relation between working conditions, choices and chances reveals young professionals’ life and career planning and related constraints.

**Work contents deterioration and professional satisfaction under pressure**

With regard to working conditions it emerges an extremely heterogeneous situation: successful professionals who work with the full traits of the qualified freelance occupation, also in terms of remuneration; professionals not yet accomplished but with concrete perspectives to consolidate their careers; professionals scarcely or not at all successful who express generic aspirations coexisting with a weak professional project or scarce chances of career development.

Established or not, these professionals share a general delusion about the quality of labour market and in particular, about the lack of acknowledgement of their expertise and qualities and the debasement of job contents. In the cases close to subordinate employment other problems do emerge, like uncertain chances to advance and the lacking job autonomy within economic sectors involved by radical changes and also by the ongoing crisis. The dissatisfaction about economic remuneration and the anxiety about income uncertainty seem to be relatively less important than expected, at least among the ones who have really low wages. A possible explanation for that could be the long-lasting socialization to the professional labour market and the consequent awareness of the specific remuneration dynamics of their economic sectors; another reason could be the informal welfare guarantees coming from families and/or partners.

Some interviewees discern their work conditions and couple them and the ones of the employees who work for the same companies and in the same workplaces – newsroom, professional studios, consultant teams or public administration offices or whatever – identifying the specific inconveniences, in particular when the work relation (self-employment) is imposed. The most part of interviewees identify with professional status and show ambition neither to contract stabilization nor to the employment occupational pattern.

‘*I feel completely like a professional. [...] I do not feel any question of stability*’.

Int. 14, F, 33, translator in publishing, freelance

‘*Before I felt like an employee. Now I feel also like a professional. And in 3-4 years I can imagine myself as freelancer in every respect [...]. If I could choose between these two paths, for sure I would choose to be a professional.*’

Int. 21, F, 32, supervisor of communication projects, freelance

Different factors seem to be involved. The first one, across-the-board but anyway specific in many economic sectors, is connected with the peculiar labour processes of service sector professions, which cannot be adapted to the organizational model of wage employment. On the one side timetables, planning, activities’ sequences, on the other side, individual, intellectual and creative contribution to an abstract work process do not tolerate the standardization of productive

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10 Between brackets: interview number, gender, age, profession and occupational status
processes of many organizations, even if more flexible and innovative compared with some decades ago.

‘I do not certainly believe in the employee status and in a permanent job. I’ve never looked for it and I was happy when they did not offer me it.’
Int. 26, F, 31, architect, freelance

The second factor increasing the identification in the freelance status seem to be the seniority in the professional career. It offered them the chance to adapt themselves to work processes which give them reasonable margins of organizational freedom in spite of intense workload and time flexibility. Some of them in fact say assert that they could not (re-) adjust themselves to the formal discipline of wage employment.

The third factor is the recurring rhetoric contrasting the ‘coercive’ employment to the ‘free and fulfilling’ self-employment, even in the experiences which actually show condition of lacking organizational and professional autonomy. Often the choice to remain in collaboration contracts or as a freelance consultant, in spite of the chance to be stabilized, is described as nonconformist and brave choice, fully consistent with the intimate aspirations to a free personal and work style. It is obviously difficult for the researcher to distinguish between a strategy to give ex post an identity coherence to their paths and a real value orientation leading ex ante their work choices and behaviours. In comparison with flexibility rhetoric identified by some researches in the Nineties and at the beginning of the new century, which appreciated the aspects of freedom, this kind of rhetoric add a certain mythology of the uniqueness of his/her own experience, of a spirit of challenge against conformed behaviours, of the capacity to take on risks. In some professional markets – finance, marketing and communication, on one side, and creative professions, on the other side – wage employment is described with disgust and disdain. In the first circles the rhetoric of risk and entrepreneurship prevails, in the latter sector unruliness is considered a sort of creative myth.

‘So you have two possibilities: to keep on doing what you’re doing in return for a small economic security or you can get back into the game, trying to do something else, which you believe in, maybe without economic certainty but with a true wish to do and to believe in that, with all the mental freedom required by this status, which is like a rebirth […]’
Int. 01, F, 33, journalist, collaboration

‘I feel essentially a creative misfit, I feel better when I find myself not exactly in the guidelines they give me.’
Int. 53, M, 37, communication consultant, freelance

‘[…] and besides there’s a perverse fascination with this lifestyle: you work ‘til late, you go for an aperitif and sometimes you go out with colleagues, solid groups raise. There are really nice aspects in particular for young people, because it is a not so structured reality and you have fun, everyone is free to say what he/she thinks.’
Int. 52, F, 37, strategic planner in advertising sector, freelance

There are also interviewees who declare an ‘employee’ identity, more because of job processes and organizational structure than because of job contents in the strict sense: even where an activity routine prevails, it is still a matter of jobs with a secondary role played by executive aspects.
‘Culture of risk’? ‘Day to day life’? How young professionals look at and plan their life and working career

One of the more dramatic but also interesting effects of the post-industrial flexibility on individuals is how it affects the capacity to plan private life and labour career according to personal preferences.

The theory of Risk Society (Beck 2000) argues that people in post-industrial societies have to face a strong and pervading insecurity due to deep changes in the public and private spheres, as for example in lifestyle, power, institutions, social participation, work and social relations. Individual biographies are more uncertain compared with the ones typical of the industrial phase, when transition to adulthood, entry into labour market, working careers, new family start were all structured in typical and recurrent patterns, even if differentiated by gender and social class.

Young generations in particular are affected by these social changes and among them also young professionals and specialized self-employed are part of this condition. Social scientists usually focus on the weakest part of workers and youngsters, executive employees, low educated and intermittent workers. On the other hand, we look at the weakest part of self-employment, the young professionals, who according to the Risk Society theory are possible victims of uncertainty. Labour market changes, lack of welfare protection and scarce social representation – what we identify as basic elements of a shaky citizenship – clearly reinforce social risks and their consequences on individuals. Given that they are still in the first phase of the freelance careers, these professionals face difficulties to enter into the sectorial labour market, to create and stabilise relations with clients and colleagues and more generally to achieve working continuity and the fulfilment of their professional objectives. Uncertainty regards also their personal life and the capacity to build a family, to purchase an apartment and more in general to peacefully plan their future (Sennett 1999).

Therefore, we analyse the 72 qualitative interviews of young professionals in order to analyse their attitude towards planning of working and personal trajectories. In particular, we are interested in understanding whether young professionals developed a ‘culture of uncertainty or aleatory’ (Castel 2007), referring to the subjective assimilation of the negative features of Risk society. Castel argues that an enduring condition of precariousness produces anxiety of the future and the tendency to live a ‘day by day’ existence. Castel refers explicitly to the effects of transition from ‘salary society’ to post-industrial society and in particular to young people with flexible and bad paid jobs, who often experience also periods of unemployment. We suggest to extend the concept of ‘culture of uncertainty’ also to that part of young professionals, who failed to or could not yet develop a successful career, and to the qualified self-employed who indeed get close to the atypical workers’ condition.

Castel (1997) identified three tendencies of work instability, which hit in particular executive workers and unemployed people but also qualified young people still in transition from the entry and a possible, but not certain, stabilization in the labour market. The first one is the destabilization of stable workers, which involves the working class, some industrial sectors and in particular old workers expelled by production system. In this case we suggest to extend this concept to our young professionals: even if self-employment obviously cannot lose any stability in terms of contracts, they indeed face new criticalities of a labour market characterized by low
remuneration, strong completion within professional sectors, economic fluctuations. The relative stability of professionals in the past situation – in terms of possibilities to develop a coherent, long-lasting, continuous and increasing career – left place to a strong instability and risk to fail.

The second element is the already mentioned permanence in the precariousness, which regards directly young generations and creates the ‘culture of aleatory’, which can transform an exceptional or transitory condition of incertitude into normality. The last tendency is represented by the return of a ‘supernumerary’ population in the labour market after the Fordist period of substantial full employment. It cannot be applied per se to qualified self-employment, but it could suggest in this contest how the crisis of the profession systems, due to strong internal diversification and competition (Sennett 1999), impacted on self-employment and professionals’ life.

As Castel (2004) indicated, the crisis of the salary society drives to a fragmented society where inequalities and risks do not produce a clear-cut separation between in and out positions, but to a more complicated situation of vulnerability and social insecurity, which produce a more extended – even pervasive according to Beck (2000) – risk to personal and professional crisis.

With the analysis of the 72 interviewees it is possible to understand whether and how these young professionals have planned and plan their life and working career.

Three profiles of professionals emerged through this analysis.

First of all, a group of young self-employed who are not capable of making any plan because of their work situation: scarce prospects and bad remuneration; they have narrow leeway to imagine changes, to think of exit strategies and to stay optimistic at least in a short period of time.

‘My partner and I live extremely day by day, as we told us that it is better than to be too distressed or to make ourselves ill over that situation. A couple of years ago we tried to buy an apartment but nobody gave us a mortgage loan because I am precarious in the publishing sector and my partner is a school precarious; they laugh in our face, literally […]’

Int. 41, F, 35, publishing industry, freelance

Economic shortage prevents them to plan their personal life and professional projects.

‘I never allowed myself to dream about making things that I cannot achieve. I’d like to have more holiday, to travel more often or to live in a larger apartment than 20 metres; I’d like to buy more books and things like that. Certainly my precarious working condition have influenced certain decisions and for sure this is the reason why at the age of 35 I could fly to anywhere because fundamentally I do not leave anything.’

Int. 39, M, 35, publishing industry, freelance

Economic and professional difficulties contrast also with personal priorities:

‘[…] luckily I do not have any maternal instinct and I wonder how people who want children can manage it, because they can be blackmailed; moreover many of them can count on economic supports’.

Int. 42, F, 36, publishing industry, unemployed

‘[…] Also in order to decide to bear children you need a discrete dose of imprudence and I am not able to imprudent, I am barely able to feed my self, how can I decide to bear a child?’

Int. 41, F, 35, publishing industry, freelance
In relation with their career these professionals can just imagine the chance to protract their (or their partners’) contracts and achieve a short-time job continuity:

   ‘My view of the future is that things are worsening, to my partner they do not renew the contract at the end of the year and so we have to move to the Marche Region. That would mean that we do not need to pay a rent, I get by but my partner does not find any job opportunity. The perspective I wish for is that my partners’ contract will be renewed.’
   Int. 9, F, 35, architect, freelance

Ultimately, individuals’ aspirations per se risk to be victims of precariousness: it seems to be hard also to elaborate and keep the initial ambitions, therefore some professionals are forced to the day by day construction of their future:

   ‘With regard to aspirations what drive me mad is that I do not have great aspirations: I would like that job supply would increase a bit and that it would be possible to work more in the social research sector.’
   Int. 55, M, 36, social researcher, freelance

A second group of professionals are concentrated on the ‘here and now’, considered not as a constraint but as the essential matter to deal with. Personal and professional life is conceived as a step by step process: each decision and relevant step open new possibilities; therefore a mid or long term project cannot be elaborated with any success. Compared with the first group these professionals do not really suffer the day-by-day perspective, instead they are completely aware of their individual and general condition and prefer to use energies to find solutions to current obstacles or to take decisions for the next period.

Each step or decision, both on personal and professional sides, become the most relevant issues, because they determine the next chances within a sort of unclear chain of events. The selection of an academic degree course or another, the choice to accept a job proposal, to realize a professional project or to find new interesting job relations appear all as ad hoc decisions or events without any substantial link with a mid-term plan.

Even a radical change within the professional career can be a decision which open new experiences and opportunities, but it happen just as a consequence of a free choice following personal desires and aspirations.

   ‘I have a particular history, I have not done a linear path as others in the design sector: I studied as programmer accountant […]. I’ve never been someone who make plans for work career; I’ve always worked with passion for work contents, I’ve always liked to work on good project without dealing with visibility and economic returns. Results did come later on, because if you work well and lucky in some aspects, then things happen, but there are some play rules: you have to be always at the heights […]. […] I wanted to do something important for the society and I had passion for design, so I told to myself ‘I am at home [for health problems], let’s try to do something.’
   Int. 58, F, 43, Designer, freelance

A scarce dynamism on the market, for example with regard to professional networking can determine a strong disadvantage in the long period: professionals, who have never tackled possible market problems or difficulties about their career development, risk to find themselves
entrapped in a professional relation with clients (many times with the unique client) with restricted perspectives.

‘I am very lazy in that kind of things [networking]. Now I am regretful, I should have cultivated more relations but I have never done it, for example I have never insisted upon going to conventions and presentations.’
Int. 57, M, 49, publishing industry, collaboration

It seems to support the idea that social relations are essential for social actors, not only as a useful means for finding job (Granovetter 1973) but also as a more general resource (Sennett 1999, Giddens 1990).

Other professionals attributed to this group are simply happy with their current situation and consider it positively to live ‘day by day’. It is a free choice; in fact, other satisfied professionals try to go forth and to achieve other goals, as we will see soon with regard to the third group. It has probably to do with a sort of absorption of the spirit of job and life flexibility, as its supporter present it, as a quality of being always ready to change oneself and to adapt to variable situations and economic needs (Sennett 1999)

In some (borderline) cases the professional success is so strong that the freelancers do not actually need any planning, as job proposals arrive constantly and the chances to improve their professional career abound.

‘When I started in the earlier Nineties, I’ve been receiving 4-5 calls each day offering collaborations. Moreover, when I went to job interviews, I’ve been asked whether I had friends who could make the same job, as there was a strong demand. Moreover, I had the chance to choose the project to work on. I wrote my first CV after 3 years I started to work, earlier I did not need it, so many proposal were arriving to me.’
Int. 15, M, 44, IT consultant

The third sub-group is represented by professionals who do actually plan their future. These freelancers describe a quite harmonious development of decisions and consequent events: in many cases, if not ever, they succeeded to fulfil their objectives and a strong relation between education, training and working career emerges.

‘I’ve been freelance since I was 23. Insurance producing broker was a good position, I had no problem but I wanted to do something else, to adhere to the cause to 360 degrees. The transition to financial promoter came because I did look for an ad on a newspaper. […] I did the State certification exam because I wanted to achieve a personal goal. I did study a lot, I enjoyed it.’
Int. 5, M, 42, financial promoter, freelance

Some of these professionals have a sort of priority list which leads their decisions. Their careers seem to be the outcome of planning with regard to the relation between education and job contents.

‘My education path is coherent with what I’m doing now. I am less ‘technical and scientific than when I was working at University. After University I have been collaborated for one year with my laboratory, it was preparatory for a Phd I did not want to do and then I started to search for collaborations, I shift to something else and I moved to Milan. […] I did enjoy what I was studying at Environmental Sciences, I was really free to choose the study plan and I could put the more orienting exams into.’
Int. 50, F, 37, consultant for sustainable development, freelance

‘I did this kind of decision [to study Economics in an English university in Milan] because I knew I wanted to do this kind of job. It is my dream since I was 8 years old. Well, I realized over the years how lucky I have been. Talking with youngsters concluding high school or entering the university who did not know what to do I was astonished. [...] I enrolled at the university I considered the best one and which gave me the education I absolutely need [...]. I graduated quickly and the day after I open my company’.

Int. 51, M, 34, filmmaker, freelance and company owner

Among these professionals it emerges a strong dynamism in the labour market with frequent job to job transitions. It seems to be preferable to change client than to be stable when it is perceived the risk not to make progresses in terms of income or more general job satisfaction.

Even risky or apparently inconvenient choice are part of this approach to career plan:

‘After one year in the last agency – the one I am currently collaborating with – I wanted to do something else in my life. I understood that if I had been working 12 hours a day, I had never discovered it. As manager and permanent employee I went to the director and asked for shifting to freelance status. He tried to discourage me very politely, saying that it was not convenient for me. I explained that I wanted to work as freelance, but not as a fake one as many others who actually are employee. I wanted to have X days to work for the agency as consultant, so to be sure of an income to survive, but opening to myself the possibility to work at home and manage my job in complete autonomy, to be there and not to be there…’

Int. 52, F, 37, strategic planner in advertising sector, freelance

Self-employment is a voluntary condition, never imposed by clients and companies as it often happen among other professionals; freelance status is perceived as a chance to be free and to define by oneself perspectives, objectives and the right path to achieve that results. It clearly emerges the pride of self-employment and entrepreneurial attitude.

Self-promotion is obviously very important but not at all costs: proficiency is the best means and a priceless resource; these professionals in fact are not willing to renounce to job quality and its complete acknowledgment by clients.

‘There are kind of circles, there are major league photographers and bush league ones [...]. Now I do not candidate myself to companies in this area [near Milan, less demanding but also not disposed to pay well] as I’ve done before; if they want to, they contact me, but at this point it’s me who dictates the rules.’

Int. 31, M, 33, photographer, freelance

Exactly the professional competences are an important element to invest in, in order to make steps forward and try to stabilize the freelance career.

‘In this working career, the one I am conducting nowadays, [I am] trying to extend as much as possible my competences, without resorting to training courses, unfortunately... and so, to increase my resources towards the word of IPad and Ebooks... because the natural path of events will conduct the publishing sector to that.’

Int. 45, M, 40, publishing sector, freelance
Young Professionals: challenge among individualization, corporatism and universalism

The new generation of professionals in Italy undergoes a crisis of their social citizenship, conceived as a full participation to social life, through labour market inclusion, interest representation, welfare protection, social networks support.

Social citizenship is classically defined as access to civil, political and social rights, with the latters conceived as welfare rights (Marshall 1965) which does not correspond to the collapse of inequality but just to a liberal idea of a complete social participation.

The shaky citizenship of young professionals is due to the process of ‘decomposition of wage earning society’, described by Castell (2007). The uncertainty of unemployment or precarious and fragmented jobs, which certainly hit cruelly dependent workers, can have negative effects also on young people in general and on the ones trying to develop a freelance career. They can belong to both low and middle class, as we noticed in the interview analysis, but they have to face private and professional challenges. We (try to) apply Castell’s approach to young professionals, as it allows to combine in a prolific theoretical model both social relations and working conditions in order to ‘measure’ (observe and understand) how people are socially integrated or at risk of (partial or complete) exclusion.

Social inclusion during the industrial period, or more precisely during the ‘Glorious Thirty’, was based on the strong connection between work and social protection (Castel 2009), embodied by different Welfare patterns inspired to a universalist concept of citizenship. This institutive relation falls into crisis with the transition to post-industrial society and its fragmentation (Mingione 1991). A full social inclusion depends on job stability and social participation (having strong and continuous social ties); vulnerability arises when work and social relations become unstable; the extreme negative condition, disaffiliation, is due to unemployment or occasional jobs and social isolation (Castel 2007).

Here, we look at professionals’ working condition in terms of revenue, continuity and job satisfaction and try to understand which resources young professionals resort to in order to plan their life, to fulfil their projects and also to tackle work and personal problems.

As first step of interviews’ analysis (Mingione et al. 2014a) the research group started to work on profiles of young professionals, based on their attitude to social and labour rights and to collective social representation, identifying how young freelancers think about their social rights, which rights they demand for, how they consider the necessity to be supported and represented in order to solve the problems they face in the labour market and generally as ‘citizens’. Three professionals’ profile did emerge, the ones who:

- prefer personal solutions to professional problems, relying on personal skills and professional networks: individualized professionals;
- resort to forms of professional support, like professional orders and associations: corporatist professionals;
- claim social citizenship’s rights and social representation: disappointed professionals.

In this paper we want to add other levels in the analysis. Not only the issue of social representation is considered, but we also look at the development of personal and working biographies, analysing whether these freelancers did fulfil their objectives. Moreover, the analysis
considers another kind of means that freelancers have been using during their career and still use in order to overcome obstacles: family resources, both economic and relational ones, and social relations (social capital). We aim at understanding whether they have the chance to take advantage of class origins – considered as underlying factor affecting material and relational family resources – and how it influenced their capacity to develop a successful self-employment career. Finally, three freelancers’ profiles were identified, which hailed from the first typology but are empirically wider, because they are based on the two levels of resources which can be considered as basis of social inclusion, work conditions (in terms of stability) and social relations and support. Professionals resort to:

- personal skills and professional networks with recourse neither to family resources, economic, relational ones, nor to organizations: a plain representation of Beck’s individualization;
- lacking personal and family resources – vulnerability – and to social representation, claiming general rights: unfulfilled ‘universalism’;
- family support and personal networks – ‘familism’ – and to forms of collective participation to professional orders or associations – ‘corporatism’ – in order to find specific solutions to work problems.

The first profile includes the ‘individualized’ professionals: people who do not claim any kind of social and labour protection, does not need any representation of their interests, which they defend for themselves. They are maker of their destiny, aware of risks, happy to face the challenge, but also satisfied to have already achieved their professional goals or sure to achieve them in the future. They are illustrative of the winners of the individualization process (Beck 1992) or, for borderline cases and in a bad light, of the ‘individual in excess’, a narcissistic subject exclusively engaged in the self-realization, a subjectivity inflation (Castel 2009). According to the interviews, both with organizations and with professionals, it emerges as a combination of individualism, as the attitude and behaviour of considering mainly one’s own interests without caring of other people, but also as a will to take the personal responsibility of (possible) risks and (expected) results. The individualized professionals neither ignore the right issue, nor the lack of specific rights for their working status, nevertheless they do prefer individual actions to react to problems and conflicts, for example they choose to negotiate individually with clients and employers. They are not at all naïve, as they mostly experimented contrasts and difficulties. Among the individualized professionals three subgroups can be distinguished: the ‘realized’, the ‘confident’ and the ‘ambitious’ self-employed. The first kind of professional can use his/her acknowledged competences and market position as a protection from market difficulties, they choose clients and not vice versa as it happens for many interviewees, they are esteemed in the market and in case of troubles with clients they can easily shift to others. The ‘confident’ self-employed has strong expectations to succeed and to overcome the current unsatisfying working conditions. The ambitious subject works for the full success by means of a sharp competition with colleagues.

The second profile consists of ‘vulnerable’ professionals, who suffer the risk of failure as freelance, to give personal objectives up and a strong isolation in terms of professional relations. Even if they know many colleagues in the same sector and even on the same workplace, these young adults
usually work alone and rarely are motivated or able to aggregate other freelance in order to discuss work conditions, professional problems; in the face of difficulties the vulnerable professionals cannot rely on supporting social networks. In fact, their family ties are not useful in terms of economic support and social capital in the labour market. Their income is quite low and can be compared with bad-job condition even if in service sector. Often they are the so called ‘economically dependent freelancers’, formally self-employed but dependent on a single employer for their income; moreover their job autonomy, the possibility to decide the way to fulfil their tasks, is only a matter of principle, as they work continuously at client’s office, are controlled and directed or supervised, have to respect timetables and tasks decided by clients (employers). They work with a fake freelance status or with collaboration contracts.

They received some support by their family, but in many cases it represented just a first step to leave home (sometimes without becoming economically independent) or the actual or potential last form of welfare in case of economic difficulties. In this group young professionals cannot take advantage of family social origins but can sometimes find a relevant support within the household: partners who benefit of a stable job or a house property represent an economic and psychological guarantee. They do not feel protected by any organization, neither professional association nor unions but would like to receive support from organizations; they demand for new organisation, which they normally call ‘associations’, because they mistrust the available organisations. They are very critical with both professional official orders and associations. Orders are considered conservative organizations, managed by old professionals who defend their privileges, do not support young professionals’ claims and moreover exploit them with low pay and scarce autonomy: ‘The Order protects architects from the age of 50 onwards, who own professional ateliers, instead small freelancers and fake VATs exist but are ignored’ (Int. 9: 35, F, architect, freelance). Some associations are criticized because they include both professionals and studios/companies and they tend first of all to care for controlling the associated for political reasons and not for supporting them.

Then, vulnerable professionals should be closer to new forms of organisations – self-organized professional associations founded by young freelancers – or to across-the-board associations organizing professionals and/or a-typical workers. The first ones grew normally within already regulated professions as alternative to the corresponding Order and can attract obviously only pertaining young freelancers, but also one network in publishing sector does exist; they suffer from the lack of financial resources and staff – they often depend on voluntary activities – and have difficulties to involve new members and to maintain them (Mingione et al. 2014a). The latter organisations have a ‘political’ (in a broad sense) identity and claim a radical reform of Welfare system in order to go beyond the structural limits of the Italian system and to extend new protections to non-standard workers; they also face organizational problems and a scarce access to public discussion and mass-media.

The third profile includes professionals who perceive difficulties to fulfil their work and personal objectives but who experience a decent level of satisfaction and are optimistic about their chances. For that, they feel to need support, both from family and from possible or already
existent professional associations: according to Castel’s approach they are not vulnerable as the second group, they are (or feel) rather stable in terms of career development but in search of a stronger social integration with other professionals. In fact, they give importance not only to family ties but also to interest organizations; therefore they can be defined ‘familistic-corporatist’ professionals.

They take advantage of family and social ties as a form of support for the beginning as well as for the consolidation of their careers. Some of them remained a long time at parents’ home: their strategy was to collect economic resources but also job experiences in order to become independent later but with good chances of success. A strong economic support by families can also come during some specific critical periods, for example of transition between jobs, or can last even for long period, helping young freelancers to pay training courses or other professional costs.

They aim for a corporative protection by self-organized associations or registered professional orders. They require targeted services and some welfare protections, but rule out the intervention of unions or any form of universal/general support. They do or would turn to professional associations (if they consider them suitable), when they encounter specific problems, asking for qualified support in order to overcome their isolation and incompetence to face technical questions and in order to fully develop their career. In fact, they ask for the support of a professional (lawyer or consultant, fiscal expert). Members of associations are obviously concentrated in this subgroup, they are more frequently part of new associations than of cross-sectional associations.

Coming back to the disaffiliation approach taken as reference model, it is possible to insert these professionals’ profiles in Castel’s theoretical scheme.

None of interviewees’ group can be inserted within the Disaffiliation area, even if some individuals among these freelancers seem to get close to this condition at least as transient or future status.
As Fig. 1 shows, whereas the first two groups illustrated can be placed inside a single area – individualized professionals within the Integration area; the vulnerable ones within the Vulnerability area – the familistic-corporatist group is transverse, because these freelancers show to be integrated in relation to work perspectives but vulnerable with regard to social relations, in particular in their professional contexts. In fact, they are mainly interested into finding a network support, as they are perfectly aware of the positive role which relational resources play in creating new job opportunities and in increasing professional proficiency.

Conclusions

Young professionals, conceived as professionals in the first steps of their work career, undergo a crisis of their social citizenship, as a consequence of social, economic and labour market changes, on the one side, and of the lacking representation of their interests and rights, both as workers and individuals.

The analysis presented on the Milan area shows that a ‘culture of aleatory’ does exist also among professionals, who got used to think ‘day by day’ to their personal and work objectives. Some interviewees choose deliberately this attitude, considering life essentially as a step-by-step process; some others are forced by scarce prospects and bad remuneration.

With regard to work conditions and professional satisfaction and also to the resources that freelancers use in order to fulfil their goals, different profiles of young professionals were identified, using the Castel’s theoretical approach on social integration (and disaffiliation). The ‘individualized’ freelancers, fully integrated, use personal skills and build professional networks for their success and require neither family resources nor social representation. The ‘familist-corporatist’ professionals are rather successful or confident to fulfil their work objectives, but feel a relational fragility concerning their professional context, resort to family and personal networks but in particular demand for professional representation supporting them to find solutions to professional problems. The ‘vulnerable’ freelancers suffer social and professional risks: failure as self-employed, strong isolation on work and renunciation to personal objectives. According to an universalistic attitude to work and social questions they demand for general rights and social representation, but do not find a satisfactory answer by the existent representative organizations.

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