

87 | precarious changes: gender and generational politics in contemporary Italy

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abstract

The issue of a generational exchange in Italian feminism has been crucial over the last decade. Current struggles over precariousness have revived issues previously raised by feminists of the 1970s, recalling how old forms of instability and precarious employment are still present in Italy. This essay starts from the assumption that precariousness is a constitutive aspect of many young Italian women's lives. Young Italian feminist scholars have been discussing the effects of such precarity on their generation. This article analyses the literature produced by political groups of young scholars interested in gender and feminism connected to debates on labour and power in contemporary Italy. One of the most successful strategies that younger feminists have used to gain visibility has involved entering current debates on precariousness, thus forcing a connection with the larger Italian labour movement. In doing so, this new wave of feminism has destabilized the universalism assumed by the 1970s generation. By pointing to a necessary generational change, younger feminists have been able to mark their own specificity and point to exploitative power dynamics within feminist groups, as well as in the family and in the workplace without being dismissed. In such a layered context, many *young* feminists argue that precariousness is a life condition, not just the effect of job market flexibility and not solely negative. The literature produced by young feminists addresses the current strategies engineered to make 'their' precarious life more sustainable. This essay analyses such strategies in the light of contemporary Italian politics. The main conclusion is that younger Italian women's experience requires new strategies and tools for struggle, considering that the visibility of women as political subjects is still quite minimal. Female precariousness can be seen as a fruitful starting point for a dialogue across differences, addressing gender and reproduction, immigration, work and social welfare at the same time.

keywords

Italy; precariousness; generations of feminism; creative work; care

introduction: the precarious generation

In the 1980s and 1990s, philosophers and sociologists debated the emergence of both a 'risk society' and an information society in the context of the rise of neo-liberalism, arguing that such societal shifts would require a fundamental change in people's perceptions, an adjustment to short-term time frames and the continuous updating of knowledge in order to address the complexity of everyday life. Today, for the 'precarious generation', as Bourdieu (1999) called it in the late 1990s, uncertainty is a given and risk is taken for granted, since those below 40 years of age have experienced nothing but insecurity and short-term planning. The neo-liberal offensive in Italy, specifically the decline of the Italian economic 'miracle' that started in the 1950s and boomed again in the 1980s, has led, in recent years, to a sharp reduction in real wages, benefits, social services and, generally speaking, career expectations among the youth. In contemporary Italy, precariousness clearly means lack of future prospects for a generation.

If the *generation précaire* (Bourdieu, 1999) lives in economic insecurity, works off-hours and needs to be mobile in order to follow rapidly shifting job markets, it is difficult to do so when social policies, social welfare and public services do not function accordingly, or where, like in Italy, the predominant societal logic is the antithesis of speed, innovation and flexibility (Berselli, 2003). The privatization of state institutions has dramatically reduced public services by posing inconvenient schedules, rationalizing scarcity and increasing bureaucratization to an absolutely inflexible model (as argued in the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions research documents, 2000–2006).

Precariousness does not just impact on the living and material conditions of a generation, it also changes the quality of work and life, as well as the boundaries separating these spheres. A clear example is the intrinsic aspect of flexible work in the service sector: its emphasis on relational and communication skills, the peculiar way in which professional and personal knowledge overlap, as do work and leisure times (Holz and Michaelson, 1990). If work can be done in non-standard hours, it becomes difficult to stop working at all. Moreover, the spaces dedicated to work dangerously blur the boundaries between the office and the home, so that it is possible to work both inside and outside of the office space (Florida, 2003). Ultimately, all these elements create a fluid border between life and work, private and public spaces, so that a precarious worker loses any capability to distinguish between the labour market, self-improvement and social life (Mitropoulos, 2005: 91). Coupled with the withering of public funding, these trends have certainly been responsible for the ongoing 'brain-drain' in all fields of research as well as in the corporate world (Gallino, 2006). Many professionals in their 40s have abandoned the most cutting-edge sectors of the Italian economy, exasperated by their lack of status, inflexible bureaucracies and low income.

Not surprisingly, the above shifts have been largely discussed only at the moment when the western, male worker began feeling the negative effects of the new, post-industrial, flexible job market. As is often the case, the opportunities and negative consequences of precariousness vary according to a gendered model, not often reflected in mainstream discourse. Today, for example, the effects of inflexible schedules on the management of everyday life and care work in Italian families are less widely discussed from the point of view of women than of men even though the issue disproportionately affects working adult women.

While it may have been crucial to describe precariousness as an umbrella concept in order to give voice to a variety of new life conditions, there are many ambiguous consequences of doing so. For example, young Italian women are dealing with uncertainty in the job market, while at the same time being subject to social constraints and a good deal of pressure to get married, have children and devote themselves to other activities necessary to ensure social reproduction. Alternatively, precarity is generally blamed in the media for ruining the dreams of independence and affirmation of an entire generation, while at the same time, it is praised as the new opportunity for many 'weak' social subjects (students, immigrants, mothers, retired elderly) to work part-time, or to choose freely when and how to work. The different ways in which precarity is evoked in Italian debates carries a number of contradictions. At the very least, it is a paradoxical term, capable of hiding old inequalities and new forms of exploitation. The reality of precariousness, in its manifold aspects, is addressed here through a generational and gendered analysis, as it redefines the basic notions of work and labour for Italian men and women.

articulating precariousness through gender and generations

It is important here to illustrate how the term precarity has shifted over time, to the point it has actually become humorous, even trendy, and perhaps too difficult to use today. In the 1990s, it was used in a derogatory sense to identify substitute school teachers. In the public sector, the term was always considered negative, lacking the main advantage of a lifetime security. The job in the public service: progressive spread of the term *precario* has gradually eroded the stigma associated with it. In the late 1990s, political activists reclaimed it in an attempt to raise consciousness and dissent over increasing temporary work contracts. The use of the word *precario* became common, and was used with increasing pride by the year 2000. This change was inspired by the similar successes of reclaiming words like 'gay' and 'queer', based on a strategic use of political irony and *detournement*, borrowed from situationism and other politically savvy forms of communication (see the *san precario* images published in this issue, created to mimic Catholic devotees' habit of carrying a card with their favourite saint,

supposedly protecting them). This initial use of the term *precario* was promoted by the Milan-based Euro Mayday group (Tiddi, 2002; Foti, 2004). At the same time, some young feminists were discussing their own precarious work conditions. They soon developed a critique not only of precariousness in relation to a flexible job market but also of other less flexible societal structures affecting their lives, such as heterosexual marriage, maternity, care-work and corporate brand loyalty.

From a situated, contemporary Italian post-feminist perspective, precarity has become a useful term to disrupt assumptions of traditional gender roles and with which to enter political debates of flexible work in contemporary Italy. Recently, four networks of young feminists (*Sconvegno*, *Prec@s*, *A/matrix* and *Sexyshock*) have specifically addressed and appropriated precariousness, sometimes inverting its connotations and looking at it positively, or, in discursive movements inspired by queer theory, applying a touch of female provocation to the term. All these groups, composed of a couple of hundred women, are part of what could be defined as the third (or post-feminist) wave of Italian feminism.¹ *Sconvegno* is a small group of graduate students based in Milan who produce collective publications and research about intergenerational feminist issues. *A/matrix* is a group of post-feminists based in Rome, connected to local and nationwide activism around issues of reproductive rights, precarity and knowledge production. *Sexyshock* is a group of media and gender activists loosely based in Bologna, working on a wide range of local and nationwide campaigns. *Prec@s* is a nationwide network of researchers interested in gender and feminism, mainly affiliated with various universities and other institutions (Naples, Padua, Milan, Bologna, Cosenza, Bari). Through a mailing list, meetings, workshops and a blog, *Prec@s* discusses and produces material around precariousness, power (and lack thereof) and intergenerational differences from the specific point of view of a generation of young female scholars. Many of these networks and groups cross paths and communicate about emerging issues and campaigns, supporting each other.²

Much of the literature produced by these groups critiques the failures of state institutions and societal values to provide young women with practical ways to piece together meaningful and decent lives. They often evoke some of the 'second-wave' feminist arguments such as the contradictory experience called 'double presence' (Balbo, 1979) of women working both in the family and in the workplace.³ They identify the re-emergence of this theme in the contemporary global context in forms corresponding to different personal experiences and frustrations lived by younger generations. For them, precariousness means income instability, not solely associated with women pursuing unskilled, low-pay, temp or part-time work but also for women pursuing higher paid professional jobs.

The gender and generational differences expressed by these networks borrow from previous generations of Italian feminism, while giving visibility to issues

1 Because the author of this essay is a part of these networks, this analysis is infused with a strong element of self-reflexivity, typical of feminist research, producing mostly *situated knowledge* (Harding, 1997; Haraway, 2000), without any pretense of neutrality or generalizability. It should be clear, however, that using a situated approach does not mean avoiding fruitful exchange of strategies and solidarity with other feminist groups. On the contrary, starting from one's own experience is useful to specify a group's location in the large global scale of current social movements, appreciating differences and being open to unpredictability. Transnational feminism and its approach based on the recognition of different struggles and diverse voices is useful here to

remind European women that none of us represents the revolutionary vanguard, nor can we hold the solution that will work for every place and every woman (Mohanti and Russo, 1991).

2 Members of *Prec@s*, *Sconvegno*, *A/matrix* and *Sexyshock* are also close to and in constant dialogue with other important networks where issues of precarity and feminism have emerged (i.e. *Fiorelle*, based in Prato, promoting intergenerational debates through summer schools and other national events, or *Nextgenderation*, an international third-wave virtual network promoted throughout the EU). Furthermore, members of the above-mentioned groups are also active in the Italian national network of university researchers – *Ricercatori Precari*, lobbying to give voice to the specific needs of women researchers (such as paid maternity, sick leave and affirmative action).

3 This term was used by Laura Balbo, an Italian sociologist who described how women in the 1970s typically worked full time and still had many long hours to work at home, having retained much of the domestic responsibilities while also having entered the job market (Balbo, 1979).

often dismissed by many politically active groups of men and women. Their critiques of precarity challenge both neoliberal models of globalization, the *precari* labour movement itself and its supposed universalism (Mitropoulos, 2005). The 'cutting edge' drivers of the *precari* movement, based in Milan, Spain and Paris, initially developed a discourse and created slogans whose appeal was based on an ideal-typical temp-worker. This subject generally corresponded to a young man living in a northern Italian urban area, employed in the service sector, specifically in chain stores, customer care phone services or large distribution warehouses, and performing repetitive tasks (Zanini and Fadini, 2001; Tiddi, 2002). Such a view was based on a politically imaginary subject: the single, male, urban artist or creative worker, idealized as the vanguard of the *precariat*, juxtaposed with the stereotyped ageing housewife, living in the suburbs, engaged in social reproduction, shopping and taking care of her family.

Over time and after considerable dialogue with other political groups (especially with women), the Euro Mayday *precari* movement paid closer attention to gender differences in their language, and gave space to discussions of affective and reproductive labour in defining precariousness. In the last few years, the *precari* movement has started discussing issues concerning not only the young male chain-store worker but also female-specific rights, such as paid maternity leave (Euro Mayday 2005 literature and Foti, 2004). Nevertheless, the previous idealized imaginary subject still serves as the mainstream image of precarity in Italy and is based on the supposed homogeneity of a model worker employed by multinational corporations (as the recurrent expression 'mc-job' clearly evokes). As Saskia Sassen has pointed out, there are other forms of gender and ethnically different precariousities worth analysing, even if less visible:

If we look at the geography behind globalization we may find the workers, the communities and the labor cultures specific to a place, and not just those of multinational corporations. [...] By looking at the global city, we can study specific local organizations of global processes, such as central wealthy neighbourhoods in which the transnational professional class live together with 'their' immigrant maids and nannies [...]. In the global cities, informal economy cuts the costs of some activities which are in high demand locally. Such costs are mainly paid by immigrant women.

(Sassen cited in Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002: 236)

Sassen's mention of migrant female care-workers reveals the limits within which the *precari* movement has built a new subjectivity contained by specific historical boundaries, euro-centrism and andro-centrism. For these reasons, it is extremely important for the precariousness movement to look at gender and precarity together in order to move beyond the goal of unifying a supposed 'new' post-industrial European working-class. Perhaps it is time to shift to a more complex political analysis of precariousness that can address gender and

reproduction, citizenship and social welfare, immigration and de-industrialization at the same time.

different precarities

Undoubtedly, immigrants have always been precarious and are continuously under conditions of risk and insecurity, together with other marginal subjects. As Mitropoulos argues:

Precariousness has been the standard experience of work in capitalism [...] impoverishment and war had been familiar to many generations before of western workers. The experience of regular, full-time long term employment which characterized the most visible aspects of fordism is an exception in capitalist history [...] that presupposed vast amounts of unpaid domestic labor by women and hyper-exploited labor in the colonies. (2005: 92)

It is useful here to expand Mitropoulos's argument further, by keeping in mind that today Italian domestic workers are mostly poorly paid women from previously colonized areas, such as the Philippines, Somalia and, more recently, Poland or Romania (Parrenas, 2001). This consideration invites gender, racist and classist exploitation to the centre of a feminist reading of precariousness. Mitropoulos' point is also useful here to connect contemporary precarity to its historical precedents.

Today, it is important to recall how old forms of instability and precarious employment are still present in Italy and have always impacted on female populations. While it is impossible to address here the long and complex history of regional and class differences in the Italian economy with respect to women's participation in the workforce, it is important to keep in mind the fundamental presence of older and long-established forms of precariousness. This is especially important in the south, where old precarities intersect with new precarities introduced by flexible work contracts. Simply put, precarity has been a permanent and traditional feature of life in southern Italy for many generations of women, taking the form of submerged labour with no contract, black markets and illegal economies (where there is no safety or rights), family self-exploitation, characterized by no clear division between work and house chores, and informal hiring practices through familial connections that have no long-term guarantees.

These aspects have contributed in various ways to the consolidation of a very precarious idea of life and work widespread throughout Italy, to the extent that the experience of lifetime work contracts and economic security can be historically located as a recent exception in Italian capitalism. Thus, a Fordist model of employment, as Mitropoulos calls it, was limited to a couple of generations: the 'grandparents', who lived through the second world war and the

baby-boomers, who enjoyed the postwar economic development. Furthermore, it is important to remember that this economic boom was also geographically limited, so that within the two generations, only those living in north and central Italy perceived that they had attained a stable social status and economic security. Not surprisingly, there were stunned reactions to the 'new' forms of precariousness, which presented to these relatively wealthy sectors of the population an unexpected loss of their recently acquired middle-class privileges.

Important geographic, class and racial differences, however, do not erase the possibility for a feminist critique of precariousness. Rather, female precarity can be seen as a fruitful starting point for a dialogue across differences, where strategies can be compared while the different 'relative power' positions of precarious subjects in European societies, as well as in the north or south of Italy, are kept in mind. The younger Italian feminist groups, mentioned above, who experience a new precariousness, are aware of different racial, generational and class terms in which they live, as compared to southern Italian peasants or migrant women's experience of precarity. Any attempt to articulate different precarities must also necessarily address the often-overlooked issue of class difference within the same generations of precarious workers. To be specific, income differences and the availability of family support, which impact on the lifestyles of people employed in precarious conditions, should be taken seriously. For many young working-class women growing up in the suburbs or provincial towns, there is no alternative to precarious work or a 'McJob'. By contrast, for middle-class, educated women, living in urban areas, precarity can become a life choice, a reclaimed space of temporary freedom from family ties and a boring job in the local service sector. Given these developments, it is interesting to note that the movement against precarity started mainly in urban centres in north-central Italy, where there is a low percentage of unemployment and a large middle-class population (Blim, 2001). Indeed, the critique of precariousness has been used to challenge the rigidity of Italian society, particularly the ways in which it is family oriented and socially and geographically immobile. For the *Prec@s* network in particular, precarity means rethinking their political subjectivity as multiple complex articulations of contradictory roles for young women: subject, on the one hand, to traditional expectations and low economic status, and on the other, being relatively privileged immaterial workers, enjoying higher-education and middle-class backgrounds.

gender, precariousness and creativity

In the last two centuries, a number of feminist struggles refused the victims' role for women by drawing attention to the long historic patterns of resistance to domestic, colonial and class-based exploitation. It has been argued that

'disposable labor, service and domestic labor ... has always been indispensable to the free movement of capital' (Vishmidt, 2004: 94). Drawing on the traditions of internationalist Marxist and anarchist solidarity, feminists still struggled together with male industrial workers and slaves (Federici, 2004). During the last three decades, since the 1960s, capital has benefited from the struggle of post-war feminists by taking advantage of their disruptions to the 'traditional' family and its division of labour. In these contexts, gender roles have always forced women to juggle material and affective labour, often with little recognition in both fields (Dalla Costa and James, 1973). These social changes have created new 'needs', such as fast-food and waged 'care' industries, which were previously outside of the market (Hochschild, 1997). In the current post-Fordist system, traditionally female relational skills (i.e. being professional and affectionate, docile and versatile, willing to travel, work and still take care of the housework) have become highly valued by capital as it has moved into the service economy, facilitating new forms of exploitation (Florida, 2003: 35). This kind of feminization of labour has not coincided with an increased monetary or social value attributed to typically female skills, but has instead led to a proletarianization of all the sectors in which such skills are required – such as care giving, housework, customer care, desire and reproductive economies (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002).

The brief summary above provides a context for looking at the strategies developed in previous feminist movements, which have influenced the younger generation of *precarie*. This is especially relevant when female precarious workers are being offered the choice between immaterial labour, often proletarianized, and social reproductive labour in the exploitative context of family, characterized by traditional and secure gender roles. This dualism is generally accepted today, even if it relies on a false dichotomy, one that denies the consolidated female capacity to navigate contradictions and differences, clearly claimed by 1970s feminism. In an essay published a decade ago, the Italian sociologist Laura Balbo specifically described female ways of managing everyday-life, care work and paid work through the metaphor of a 'crazy quilt' (Balbo, 1998). In the case of the *precarie* generation, the fact that life and work, education, age and economic independence often contradict each other, certainly resonates with the idea that the various pieces of one's life can become difficult to patch together. Crazy quilts, in their weird creativity, can also be useful to describe the common experience of those who may be both cultural or information workers and housewives or sex workers, not having chosen either creative work or reproductive labour, both of which are usually presented as irreconcilable choices. These situations require mobile notions of different identities and political subjects, ranging from migrant caregivers to sex-workers, all of whom certainly know about precarity, instability, risk and creative forms of connecting personal and professional life.

working with creativity

A key issue emerging in the precariousness debate, not surprisingly, is the female ability to shift roles and hybridize professional and private life, reclaimed as a positive value especially by precarious creative workers and migrant women. The 'third-wave' Italian feminist groups mentioned here (*Sexyshock*, *A/Matrix*, *Sconvegno*, *Prec@s*) have analysed their precariousness as a complex, ambivalent experience through which they develop some useful strategies to face associated constraints and challenges. Their literatures offer different ways of looking at precarity as inherently contradictory and creative, not simply as a forced condition. In a time when the production of immaterial objects through creative work still carries a higher value than social reproduction, feminist movements instead attribute creativity to the sphere of everyday life (a strategy adopted since the 1970s as well, Passerini, 1991). A particularly successful feminist argument proposed by Italian women's movements in the 1980s was simply stating an obvious fact: that domestic and care work are not simply reproduction and repetition, but involve creativity and complexity (Vishmidt, 2004: 94). In this strategic reclaiming, creativity in everyday life allowed women to actively piece together an invented, patchwork identity, by cutting and pasting various roles and inconsistent parts of their lives (Balbo, 1987; Leccardi, 2005).

Today, creativity is also a highly valued currency in cultural work, even if it is less recognized and visible in its female forms, as highlighted by networks of feminist cultural workers (*A/matrix*, *Sexyshock*). It therefore requires a new critique. Drawing on previous feminist currents and movements, *Prec@s* has engaged in a dialogue about precariousness with previous generations of feminists in an attempt to question generational differences and everyday practices. Starting from the groups' values and experiences, the *Prec@s*, *Sconvegno* and *Sexyshock* networks have also been discussing precarity with the aim of proposing political campaigns that make the condition 'liveable'. The arguments developed by these '30 something' feminist groups have made many Italian women realize the need to address simultaneously some fundamental issues of everyday life, such as income, life choices and the manifold problems derived from entering a flexible, sexist and youth-discriminating job market. The issue of an intergenerational exchange on feminism in Italy has recurrently emerged in the last decade taking various directions. If any attempt to summarize it is limiting, it is still worth doing here.

same place, different times: generations of Italian feminism

In the last decade, the issue of inter-generational communication within Italian feminism has been crucial and difficult. The appearance of a new

(third) wave of women interested in feminism has destabilized the universalism assumed by some of the '1970s generation' feminists. The latter group was largely unaware and uninterested in the younger generation, to the point that there continues to be an ongoing tension, characterized by cycles of denial, acceptance and refusals to engage with the 'third' wave (Di Cori and Barazzetti, 2001). On specific occasions, over the last decade, the needs and views expressed by young feminists were greeted defensively, if not altogether dismissed, by feminists of the 1970s. This has been most evident for instance in Rome 2005 during a feminist summer school, and during meetings arranged by the women historians' association, since the year 2000.

By pointing to generational changes, younger feminists have been able to mark their own specificity and the effects of exploitative power dynamics within feminist groups, without being dismissed, or accused of matricidal behaviour. One of the most successful strategies that the post-feminist groups have used to gain visibility and express their needs has involved entering the current debates on precariousness, thus forcing a connection between the larger Italian labour movement and the feminists' tense intergenerational debates. A frank confrontation across generations on these topics has forced the different groups of feminists to think diachronically, to look at Italian women's lifecycles during two major shifts in the Italian economy: the post-war boom of the 1950s and 1960s, and today's de-industrialization, which started in the late 1980s. In the best cases (in Bologna, at the 3rd Feminist Research Conference, in Milan in many occasions, or in Prato, at the *Fiorelle* Summer school), discussions among generations of feminists revolved around life chances and responsibilities, and produced reciprocal empathy and solidarity, especially with regard to autonomy, security and education, three issues presenting unresolved contradictions in Italian women's lives.⁴

security?

Growing up in a precarious context has made third-wave feminists acutely aware of the fact that they will never live an adulthood characterized by stability, social welfare and lifetime jobs, as their mothers did. In this sense, when in the public sphere, precarity is mostly 'rendered in negative terms, as opposed to security' (Mitropoulos, 2005: 90). One must also explore, however, what security actually means for young female workers and citizens. Many *Sconvegno* and *Prec@s* members have come to the conclusion that they do not necessarily want the 'security' that their mothers had, as it implied a stable life of marriage, family and a number of responsibilities both in the house and in the workplace that came with little recognition (Piazza, 1999). The following

4 The oral history work carried out by Passerini in 1991, summarizing and comparing accounts of the varieties of voices in Italian feminism and its different generations, is extremely useful to understand the recurrent issues with which many generations of Italian women struggled in the last fifty years (see Passerini, 1991).

quotation should give a sense of the younger feminists' critique of precariousness in relation to the family:

If we (younger female precarious) are asked to be flexible, creative, ready to change and avoid planning anything in the long-term, why should everyone or everything else in society impose on us heavy pressures to maintain stable families, stable jobs and reproduce gender divisions of labor? (excerpt from *Prec@s* mailing list, 2005).

5 Even in the private sector, which should be more open to flexibility, Italian corporate culture is so sexist that it does not encourage women to pursue risky or high-profile careers, as argued in many recent studies (see in particular Gherardi and Poggio, 2003).

The above question highlights a fundamental contradiction in the contemporary condition of precariousness. It also shows how much Italian society and its institutions are engaged in reinforcing a woman's role in reproduction, partly because of the ageing population and the low fertility rate, and partly due to the fact that the previous generation of women entered the job market *en masse* (Paoli and Merllié, 2001; Parrenas Salazar, 2001).⁵ Hence, a fundamental criticism of the family structure as a crucial site impacted by precariousness brings together different generations of feminist critique to the family.

Today, everyday life activities such as shopping, care giving, cooking and cleaning are far from being divided equally between men and women in post-industrial Italy (Hochschild, 1997). Not surprisingly, the presence of young adults and elderly members in the same family, an effect of old and new forms of precarity, ends up becoming a burden mostly for adult Italian women, who have to provide the everyday housework and food for multiple generational households, on top of dedicating most of their day to paid work (Piazza, 2006). Instead of enjoying an easy retirement after their full-time working lives, the post-war generation of female baby boomers are forced to work again in care-giving activities, to help younger and older people living in the same family. When the women within the same family are not available for self-exploitation, it is usually another woman, possibly an immigrant, who is hired to carry on the burden of house and care work. In the same way, the *precarie* generation also fears the likelihood of having to provide care and assistance for their elderly relatives (Piazza, 2003), especially given the increasingly ageing Italian population and their own material dependence on their family of birth. The recent data showing that many young women are reluctant to get married or have children until they turn 30 are not surprising. It is a sign of the impossibility of piecing together professional and family desires (ISTAT, 2005). Traditionally, Italian families have always assigned to women social and cultural reproductive labour. This was true in the past, when multigenerational large families were common, as well as today in double-income nuclear families (Bettio, 1988). Faced with the diminished availability of childcare and other social services, which only started in the 1980s (Del Re, 1996; Blim, 2001), the family has responded to the increased need for care work by using the time and skills of retired women. Similarly, it has adjusted to accommodate a prolonged presence of young adults in the nuclear family, when

youth could not find jobs and economic independence, in post-industrial Italy (CENSIS, 1999).

It is important to note the resilience of the Italian family unit in facing social and economic shifts as seen in the traditional and persistent presence of younger and elderly members in the same family as well as in the new economic support given to its younger members.⁶ In the last decade, the Italian family has shifted rapidly to a mix of old and new strategies to face precariousness (Piazza, 2006), proving once again that it is a resilient structure, capable of adapting to various economic shifts, and dysfunctional public institutions in the new scenario of precarity. Thus, the family has again been reconfigured in the last decade to respond to a new precarity, as documented by extensive sociological literature (Bruning and Plantenga, 1999; CENSIS, 1999; and ENAIP, 2003). These intertwined processes explain why, for precarious young feminists, a critique of the family and the need for independence from it are vital (as *Sexyshock*, *A/matrix* and other on-line literatures assert).

6 Reflecting the lack of opportunities of precarious lifestyles is the fact that the majority of young people live within 30 km of their parents, see them at least twice a week and receive material help from their family of origin (ISTAT report on Italian families, 2005).

the value of an education

Another key issue is the current role of education, usually sparking huge discussions in Italian feminist intergenerational debates. The main realization for *precarie* feminists was that for young Italian women, adequate training does not make a huge difference in career prospects (Barazzetti and Leccardi, 1995; Allegrini, 2004). If precariousness and the feminization of labour often end up negatively impacting upon young Italian women, their access to higher education also comes without social and economic advantages previously related to education. Certainly, the *precarie* will not enjoy an increased social status acquired by studying (unlike the previous generation of women). They will certainly not attain through education the status their mothers hoped for their daughters.⁷ Today, nevertheless, young women comprise the majority of university students in Italy and generally do better in school than their male colleagues. These young women realize that access to school is also a planned measure to keep them from entering a scarce, flexible job market (*Sconvegno* 2003, *Prec@s* online publications). Statistical data gathered by temp-work agencies show that a young woman with a college degree, age 24 or older, is the least likely candidate to be hired for any position on offer, as the majority of jobs available are mainly technical or clerical work in small firms (OECD, 2001; CGIL, 2005). A college degree often only adds the label 'overqualified' to a young women's file. While Italian culture still spreads the illusion that a college education will give access to a stable – if not highly paid – state job, such as teacher, librarian, hospital worker or university researcher, the job market has evolved so rapidly that today, even the public sector largely hires temp-workers, leaving young women few viable options apart from precarity.

7 It is important here to distinguish between the baby boomers generation, which are called here 'the parents' – born in the late 1940s, which could be realistically the mothers of the third-wave feminists involved in precariousness –, and the following generation, born in the 1950s. The latter accessed higher education in the early 1970s, in a period of economic crisis and much lower expectations

than the previous decade. While it is impossible to summarize here the differences among these two groups, both living in such a complex moment in Italian history, it would be interesting to develop a comparison between contemporary precarity and the experience of uncertainty for young people in the 1970s. The way in which the *generation precarie* criticizes precarity today could be compared especially with the way in which the 1970s generation related to the radical social movements of the time, challenging the dogmas of work and stable income (arguing for the refusal of work and guaranteed income), and expressed their critique of the university system. Access to education had no effect of opening job opportunities; it simply posed an alternative to unemployment, keeping the youth busy for a few years (university was indeed criticized for being 'a parking lot' for the youth with no future prospect) (see Di Cori, 2006). If the role of the university is very different today, it is certainly true that it still does not provide access to better jobs, leaving graduates in a still precarious position. I thank the reviewer for pointing to this intriguing comparison, which I hope to be able to research and develop on a different occasion.

new needs, ancient obstacles

In this complex scenario, the 'third-wave' Italian feminist groups mentioned here, *Sexyshock*, *Sconvegno*, *Prec@s* and *A/Matrix*, have been recently discussing possible measures and political campaigns to make precariousness 'liveable', starting from their groups' experiences. Fundamentally, their demands revolve around four issues: economic independence (*Sconvegno*), affordable access to childcare and education, freedom from family responsibilities (*Precas* and *A/matrix*) and the related need for legal recognition of temporary living arrangements typical of precarious lives (*Sexyshock*). A few examples taken from the literature produced by these networks are cited below:

A room of one's own is still a cornerstone to escape family ties and housework. Beyond the issue of income, we are also demanding time freed from affective and social labor (from *Prec@s* mailing list, 2004).

Because of the privatization of social services, Italian women need help for childcare. Public services should be provided to all women, especially those who do not have a continuous income, no time, no family or sickness leaves (*Euro May Day*).

Knowledge is too expensive as is private childcare. As a generation of feminists producing immaterial labor, we refuse to become private contractors of the 'education sector', or simply to be considered by research and educational institutions disembodied content providers or designers (*A/Matrix*).

These proposals show both an original approach to precariousness developed by these feminists' networks, and a certain knowledge and inheritance of earlier feminist thought and action. In this sense, current precarity struggles do revive issues and strategies previously raised by 1970s feminists, challenging both the state and traditional household family structure as sites of complicity in the new and old forms of erosion of gendered rights.

conclusion

This article outlines a gendered generationally specific view of precariousness, developed recently by a few groups of young Italian feminists. Forced precarity is certainly a negative effect of job market flexibilization, eroding labour and social rights. Precariousness, though, when analysed in relation to gender, class and everyday life, can give different, more nuanced readings of this phenomenon. The gendered critique of precarity proposed here involves understanding the manifold contradictions, as well as tapping into the more complicated issue of a precarious life, and its impacts on social reproduction and the family. Looking at work, education and family simultaneously allows for a reading of precarity not limited to the mainstream labour rights struggles against temp-work, and gives space to women's creativity. In this sense, the approach of young Italian feminists to precariousness offers an insight into its different effects on a

generation of women, while showing the limits of an emerging political discourse, often too universalistic and eurocentric. Forms of labour and welfare policies ought to be redesigned keeping in mind not just the young (male) European service worker, but also an intergenerational analysis of the family and care work increasingly outsourced to migrants and retired women. In the examples of young feminist networks analysed here, it is clear that struggles over precarity are deeply tied to a critique of current family structure, where the negative effects of precariousness are absorbed at the cost of reinforcing traditional female exploitation.

Some Italian feminist networks like *Prec@s*, *A/Matrix* or *Sconvegno* claim that precariousness, when defined according to gender, can be transformed and retooled to oppose traditional values that Italian society still imposes on young women. A precarious existence is not solely a negative phenomenon for the generation of women in their twenties and thirties who chose to do creative work, to teach or to emigrate. In these cases, a different sense of precariousness is starting to emerge, and with it, new strategies and networking across genders, generations and ethnicities take shape.

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400357