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Quand passion et précarité se rencontrent dans les métiers du savoir

What's Love Got to Do with it? Precarious Academic Labour Forces and the Role of Passion in Italian Universities

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Abstract

This article examines the role of passion among precarious labour force in the Italian academia. By relying on C. Wright Mill's distinction between "passion as a reason" of action and "passion as a motive" to represent and discuss one's employment condition, the article concludes that the symbolic strength of passion is correlated to its applicability both as a tool to govern recruitment in neo-liberal academia and as a strategy to fit recruitment criteria and "become employable". The article is based on more than four-year long documentation and participant observation in political initiatives and campaigns organised by precarious, non-tenured research staff in Italian universities.

Index terms

Index by keyword : precariousness, neo-liberalism, academia, Italy, labour, passion

Full text

I. Introduction

- ¹ Passion has always been central to debates about labour and has shaped its definition for millennia. Across history, passion and pleasure have often marked the distinction between labour intended as a noble activity or as a degrading one. Such a contrast was already present in the IVth century B. C., when Aristotle argued that «all paid jobs absorb and degrade the mind» (Mirowski, 2011 :74) whereas, as Mirowski (2011) remarked pleasure raises labour to perfection. In many cultures, positive and "moral" functions are attached to

passion and commitment, and love for one's professional activity is usually considered opposed to, and nobler than, the exclusive pursuit of self-interest. The rise of capitalism marked an apparent discontinuity in this representation, since it originates in the belief that personal interest is crucial in motivating excellence in labour and that it «would activate benign human proclivities at the expense of some malignant ones» (Sen, 1997 :XI). However, representations of workers performing labour-related activities out of passion, not merely out of self-interest, are resilient even in the capitalist era. As described by Weber, labour is something «performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling» (Weber, 2005 :25), an attitude resulting from «a long and arduous process of education» (*Ibid.*), whose legacy is still visible today and whose reward cannot consist of mere material earnings. Following on from this, a number of scholars have highlighted the institutionalisation of passion as a tool of self-exploitation and governance of the neoliberal labour market (Ross, 2008 ; Couldry/Littler, 2011). Passion for work cannot therefore be considered simply as an individual or micro-feature of single workers' relationship to their own careers. Its social desirability turns passion into a macro-feature of the labour market of capitalistic societies.

- 2 The normative value of passion is central to this article, which examines its role in the case of precarious academic workforces employed by Italian universities as temporary research staff, adjunct professors or teaching fellows. In order to do this, our examination builds on the distinction between “reasons” and “motives” of action as outlined by Wright Mills in an article published in 1940 and as also suggested by Kenneth Burke (1954). Burke and Mills urged sociologists to see “motives” as rhetorical constructs that frame social interactions. They argue that “motives” are not inner springs of action, which are better defined as “reasons,” but normative vocabularies by which actors define situations (Hopper, 1993).
- 3 Deploying this distinction as an analytical instrument, the article reflects on passion as both (1) the actual reason motivating actions and professional choices and (2) a rhetorical genre, a motif or “motive” that social actors deploy to build consistent and socially acceptable narratives about their jobs. We argue that passion as a motive becomes particularly effective in a context where workers cannot really come up with exit strategies nor threaten to implement them (Hirschman, 1977) due to the macro-structural conditions they live in, as happens in a European country suffering greatly from public cuts to education and widespread unemployment across all sectors of the labour market.
- 4 Two conclusions are reached. Firstly, scholars need to broaden their perspectives in moving beyond a micro-level analysis. Indeed passion plays an important role as an explanatory factor at a macro-level of analysis, well beyond the individual sphere of self-exploitation. The second conclusion this article reaches relates to the symbolic strength of passion as the result of both the neoliberal evolution of the labour market and changing representations of research and the public university among the general public. Such symbolic strength, we will argue, increases the legitimacy of “passion as motive”, thus making “passion as reason” less poignant and boosting the relevance of passion as a macro characteristic of labour.
- 5 The article is composed of four sections. The first and second sections examine the extant rhetoric of passion and the functions attached to it, highlighting the role passion plays in academia, shifting between its rewarding and entrapping nature for precarious staff. The third and fourth sections expose our main contention, namely that debilitating working conditions, structural constraints and the strong legitimacy passion enjoys in the academic milieu transform passion as reason into passion as motive, following Mill's terminology.

II. Methodology and Case Description

- 6 This paper focuses on precarious workforces in Italian universities with the goal of dissecting the role of passion in academia. The focus on precarious staff is motivated by the belief, resulting from fieldwork, that this particular category is more receptive and reactive to it as a consequence of uncertainty about the future related to precariousness. Some further details are necessary for a thorough understanding of the object of this research. In the Italian system, precarious academic workforces are highly diversified in the domains of research and teaching-related activities. We will focus on the most common categories, namely post-doc fellows and adjuncts (*docenti a contratto*). Because of shrinking funds for

public universities, post-doc positions have been diversified to increase opportunities of employment and different types of post-doc fellows have been created. Part of them fall in the *assegnisti di ricerca* category (1 or 2 to 4 years), which is the most protected and well-off; other types of fellows have very precarious contracts, usually thanks to external funding resources temporarily available to Departments. Similar contracts are external scholarships or research training scholarships (*contratti parasubordinati* and *addestramento alla ricerca*), whose duration does not usually exceed one year. Adjuncts are hired to teach one or more modules. They do not receive a monthly salary but one single payment for the module(s) they teach. The maximum duration for modules is 60 hours (10 ECT credits), for which an adjunct usually receives around 2,500 Euros (the payment however varies across universities and faculties). This means that adjuncts are in a very precarious condition as they are obliged to find additional sources of income.

7 As to the size of precarious workforces employed by the national system, latest official data highlight their constant growth between 2008 and 2013. Precarious researchers and teachers went from 18,000 to 27,000 out of the total number of staff employed by universities in Italy, against 53,000 permanent staff members¹. However, these data do not include precarious researchers whose salary is paid by external funding or grants, thus underestimating the total size of precarious workforces.

8 Despite being a recurring problem in Italy's higher education system, the decrease in public funding has had a stronger impact since the mid-2000s (Capano, 2008). In particular, the 2008 budget law issued by the Minister of Finance Tremonti and the 2010 reform of higher education, the much contested "Gelmini reform", have been crucial in creating a real emergency situation for universities. Extensive cuts in public funding coupled with the restructuring of overall governance and career systems² (Comisso, 2013; Busso/Rivetti, 2012) have had the long-term effect of reducing the number of employed staff (permanent staff, in particular) due to the downsizing of the system as a whole. In fact, between 2008 and 2013, the overall number of permanent staff (professors and researchers) decreased from 62,753 to 53,459, with an overall reduction of 14.8%³. The result of this process has been the "aging" of the precarious workforces that were already employed but had no or very few opportunities to get a permanent or tenured position, as the university budgets were curtailed and left with no capacity for absorbing new employees⁴. As a consequence, possible exit strategies enacted by precarious staff members do not really threaten universities. In addition, data and empirical research show that emigration does not seem to be a viable solution for PhD holders. As our observations from the field and the FGC-CGIL report "Ricercaersi" suggest, those who leave the university after obtaining a PhD usually remain in Italy and are unemployed because of the general crisis in the labour market⁵.

9 This article is based on documentation and observation the authors have been carrying out for more than four years, while taking part in political initiatives and campaigns organised by precarious, non-tenured research staff. The empirical documentation is composed of "fieldwork notes" about public events and careers developments completed by the authors⁶, official documents, mailing-lists set up by precarious researchers' groups at the national and local level, videos and interviews realised during public events. In the last four to five years, we have been carrying out everyday observations in university departments, given the fact that we both were or still are employed by the Italian university system. Our angle of access has allowed us to grasp a number of characteristics common to both precarious researchers' professional trajectories and reactions to the uncertainty connected to precariousness. Without overlooking internal differences, we will try to generalise our findings beyond the disciplinary divide (Fusulier/del Río Carral, 2013). Finally, although we are fully aware of the possible distortions caused by our proximity to the research object, as we have been personally engaged in initiatives and campaigns for the improvement of our working conditions, we agree with Hodkinson in that this closeness

may offer significant potential benefits in terms of practical issues such as access and rapport, while at the same time constituting an additional resource that may be utilised to enhance the quality of the eventual understandings produced (2005:146).

III. Dissecting Passion : What Are we Talking about when we Refer to Passion ?

10 Since 2006, the EU has been sponsoring a public event called “The researchers’ night”, aimed at promoting scientific research and contacts between researchers and the general public. Beyond this, the initiative has also wanted help the public discover what researchers actually do, who they are and why their work is important. The 2013 edition was held in over 300 European cities, where a multitude of events were organised, among which was an initiative called “FACES : Fostering Advanced Communication to Enrich Science & Society” consisting of researchers’ short video-portraits. When asked to describe their research activity in three words, the wide majority of participants included “passion” among those selected⁷. Passion was thus accorded a surprising degree of relevance by individuals.

11 This engenders two major questions revolving around the functions of passion, which we aim to address in this section : the first question asks why passion is so important, while the second question investigates what lies beneath the evocative yet abstract idea of passion. As for the first question, our empirical research suggests that the relevance of passion is connected to two different functions relating to it. The first one deals with improving the quality of the researchers’ work-related activities, while the second function deals with the researchers’ individual well-being and satisfaction. Both functions have already been highlighted in the scholarship, although the difference between them has not yet been clearly identified. In this section, we will try to discuss them consistently, highlighting their theoretical underpinning and effects on precarious researchers.

12 Passion as a way of pursuing excellence echoes the Aristotelian notion of pleasure as a “stairway to heaven”. Today this notion is continuously renovated in public discourse about knowledge and creative professions, which are described as characterised by striving for excellence. As showed by scholars (Hesmondhalgh/Baker, 2011 ; Andriopoulos/Lewis, 2009 ; Gill/Pratt, 2008), this characterisation promotes a personal identification of the worker with his or her job, a process considered necessary in liberating creativity. Thus, passion as a way of pursuing happiness is closely related to this approach. A committed, passionate and enthusiastic approach to work is the key not only to good performance, but also to personal satisfaction and well-being, especially in neoliberal economies where competition is a crucial characteristic of the labour market (Couldry/Littler, 2011). These remarks fit knowledge and creative labour in particular because in these areas, workers’ «packaging of mental challenges and sensuous self-immersion is perceived as delivering a surplus of pleasure and satisfaction» (Ross, 2008 :34) and labour is linked to the romantic idea of art (Von Osten, 2007).

13 Creativity and passion have similar functions in the case of precarious academic workforces. Passion is described by researchers as a powerful motivational trigger to improve performance. It boosts curiosity and the desire to discover, as well as strengthening discipline. Such qualities are strongly desirable as academic labour is characterised by flexible working schedule. These elements are present in the researchers’ self-representations, as they describe themselves almost as artists :

Research is... coffee. [...] Everyone knows that none of the most important discoveries have been made before midnight (MB, man, mathematician, video-interview, Sept 2013)⁸.

14 Passion is described as a requirement for excellence :

When I opted for a career in research I knew that success was a difficult task. But you need a job you love to give it a serious try, it is the pre-condition to achieving excellence in what you do (AT, woman, medical school, video-interview, Jan 2014)⁹.

15 Following on from this, passion can even be considered as an alternative to getting paid :

If anyone of us gave up a permanent position for a post-doc fellowship, she/he would merit my highest esteem and deepest admiration. That would mean that there is still someone actually passionate for and in love with research [and not motivated by personal economic gain] (DB, man, mailing-list excerpt, Jan 2012).

16 While excellence is a crucial trait of academic labour, the researchers’ pursuit of well-being is another key-element in understanding the role of passion in research. Whereas striving after excellence and well-being are two interconnected dimensions, they are distinct. Indeed well-being is not always dependent on excellence since passion can cause personal satisfaction regardless of the quality of the performance or career progression¹⁰. Satisfaction, researchers say, can derive from the «joy of discovery and experiment» (GG, woman, video-interview, Sept 2013)¹¹ but also from the awareness of creating something useful for society as a whole. As stated by a researcher : «research is passion : you discover something new

and you can share it with the entire world» (EU, woman, video-interview, Sept 2013)¹².

- 17 Love for and commitment to research and the university is often more central to young and precarious staff, as they need moral strength in resisting precariousness, heavy workloads, low and uncertain wages. When material rewards are lacking, passion may be the only moral justification for their sacrifice :

[...] our workload is even heavier [...] beyond in-class teaching, we have exams periods (10 exam periods a year), office hours for students, administrative work, thesis supervision and marking, emails... Considering how low our pay is, passion is necessary (and it's free!) (RV, woman, mailing-list excerpt, Sept 2013).

- 18 In such harsh working conditions, fulfilling one's expectations helps to raise self-esteem. It is not uncommon for adjuncts, teaching fellows and precarious staff to take comfort from the fact that «at least I am doing something I like» (CM, man, fieldwork note, Apr 2013). Moreover, a strong affection and enthusiasm for research helps researchers in coping with long working hours and the consequent overlap with private life. Passion is considered necessary when «work comes home with you» (EG, woman, video-interview, Sept 2013)¹³. For all of these reasons, precarious researchers and adjuncts benefit in being passionate about their work, since passion can improve not only their performance but also their well-being and satisfaction.

- 19 In addition, in order to examine the function of "passion" consistently, we have to distinguish the different forms it can take and the objects it addresses. What are researchers passionate for or enthusiastic about, or committed to ? The focus on the object of researchers' passion reveals the existence of three different types.

- 20 The first type is cultural or creative passion : researchers simply love what they do and the very nature of working in research can engender enthusiasm, similar to the one driving so-called creative workers. Researchers seem to be passionate about discovering, creating or inventing something new. A similar emotion may derive from the commitment to the very object of the research (e.g. the joy of the discovery of ancient cities or documents). As articulated by a researcher :

[...] we cannot compare working in research with, for instance, working in a call centre. Academic labour is not a regular job. It is not a job at all ! It is no coincidence that we keep on working even after dinner. If we were employed in a call centre, we would not do that ; we would stop after our working hours. We cannot explain our work through economy, nor can we assimilate it to 'standard jobs' because research is about love (GA, man, mailing-list excerpt, Jan 2013).

- 21 The second type of passion is not related to the "practice" of research, but arises from the social dimension of it, which gives researchers the opportunity of being "public intellectuals". This type of passion may be called social passion. It is motivated by the fact that research may have a positive impact on the society, physically and spiritually enhancing the quality of life of many people. This kind of passion is often central to the representation (and stereotype) of the passionate researcher (Fusulier/del Río Carral, 2012), driven by an ardent desire to defeat cancer or eradicate poverty. Although strictly related to creative passion, this model does not necessarily equate with love for the everyday practice of research. On the contrary, it has more to do with the idea of sharing knowledge with the whole society rather than producing it.

- 22 The third type of passion is organisational or relational passion. Indeed researchers are not only committed to their jobs, but also to their workplace. It is however possible to distinguish some sub-objects of this type of passion. On the one hand, researchers can have strong affective attachment to the goals and values of universities or departments, as the model of organisational commitment demonstrates (Meyer/Allen, 1991). In the case of public universities, organisational commitment is usually determined by their public nature, thus overlapping with what we can define as social passion. Or else, passion can arise from affective attachment to colleagues, regardless of the difference in hierarchical levels. This affective commitment to organisations and workplaces is partly linked to a more general transformation of work-personal life relations. Indeed, the overlap between working hours and the time of leisure or social relations can be stronger for professions with no fixed timetables. As noted by Mc Robbie :

Work comes to mean much more than just earning a living ; it incorporates and overtakes everyday life. In exacting new resources of self-reliance on the part of the working population, work appears to supplant, indeed hijack, the realm of the social, re-adjusting the division between work and leisure, creating new modes of self-disciplining, producing new forms of identity (Mc Robbie, 2002 :99).

- 23 In the case of academia, relational passion seems to have a particular value, as universities are usually characterised by strong internal cohesion and by the presence of “strong ties” (Cancian, 1993)¹⁴. These are particularly relevant as related to early stage researchers obtaining their first appointment. As Granovetter acknowledged¹⁵, the relevance of strong ties in contrast to weak ties is determined by a

situation of considerable insecurity for new PhDs who have few useful contacts in their discipline as yet and typically rely on mentors and dissertation advisers who know them and their work well (1983 :211).

- 24 This kind of emotional involvement with mentors is familiar to precarious staff in Italy, and is somehow taken for granted¹⁶.

IV. When Love is over and Passion Turns into a Trap : Limits to Agency

- 25 Passion has many positive meanings and, as outlined above, it motivates researchers to deliver better results and a degree of satisfaction. However, these positive implications often conceal a darker side. Precarious researchers, like many other precarious knowledge workers, run the risk of being “trapped” by passion : «While they have jobs that are springs of passion and pleasure, they experience passion – in all spheres of their lives – in the most literal sense : pain, suffering and fatigue» (Armano/Murgia, 2013 :9) because of the uncertainties and stress associated with their precarious employment conditions. Following on from this, “passion as a trap” can both emerge both as the result of unintended and unpleasant consequences of something desirable, as well as something that imprisons workers, depriving them of their freedom of choice.

- 26 Although distinct in analytical terms, “positive” and “entrapping”¹⁷ passions are closely related in practice, since they interact in many ways. While harmonious or positive passion contributes to satisfaction and therefore prevents workers’ burnout (Vallerand/Paquet/Charest, 2010), emotional commitment can raise high expectations that, if frustrated, may turn into obsession (Melandez/De Guzman, 1983). Thus, the balance between positive and negative outcomes of passion is often determined by the context. As Sennet noticed, the neoliberal evolution of the economic system leaves almost no space for positive passions such as those related to craftsmanship, which «sits uneasily in the institutions of flexible capitalism» (2006 :105). For passion to be rewarding and positive, workers need time and guarantees about their future – an unusual condition in academia. Indeed, the reduction of public funding and the need to find alternative resources have made universities resemble corporations more and more (Newfield, 2008 ; Raunig, 2013), where flexibility (and the ability to cope with it) is one of the most important features improving researchers’ career chances (Richardson, 2009 ; Archer, 2008). Furthermore, as Burawoy noticed, the introduction of what he defines as “commodification model” universities has meant that

Markets have invaded every dimension of the university, and its ‘autonomy’ now means only that it can choose the way to tackle budgets deficit, whether through restructuring its faculties, employing temporary instructors, outsourcing service work, raising student fees (Burawoy, 2011 :29).

- 27 In such a situation,

universities increasingly used two-tiered employment systems in which the status, salaries, and working conditions of tenure-track faculty were of a different order than those of temporary instructors (Newfield, 2008 :20).

- 28 Given this transformation of the academic environment, the risk for passion to become “entrapping” seems to increase for researchers. But how do these traps work in the case of researchers ?

- 29 The most well-known risk is self-exploitation. Like many other precarious workers without strictly scheduled working hours, researchers often incur in «self-exploitation in response to the gift of autonomy» (Ross, 2009 :18). Workers may also impose themselves unbearable working rhythms on themselves for strategic reasons, namely to show off to the employer how committed they are. During times of austerity, however, a lessening of resources reduces the chance of concrete rewarding of self-exploitation, resulting in the

strengthening of passion as the emotional drive for remaining in those jobs despite harmful conditions. This is quite evident in the self-description and self-perception of these precarious research staff and adjuncts :

Why did I opt for this career then, despite not being rich (I wish I were !) or motivated by the promise of an appointment ? The answer is easy : because research is my life, it is my passion and I just can't give it up (BI, woman, mailing-list excerpt, March 2012).

Among our precarious colleagues, we know that, there are brilliant people, committed, passionate people, who work like mad, self-exploiting with no economic or career reward... they do so because they need to pour out, to give vent of their unhealthy passion... Research, the most beautiful job ever, exploring the unknown field of human knowledge for the progress of society... and not to the benefit of some private corporation or businessman (AF, man, mailing-list excerpt, 11 November 2010).

You accept a teaching contract, 60-hour workload, plus 8 examination periods, thesis supervision and grading, office hours for students... this is for less than 100 Euro a month... You do that because you're masochist and you cannot forget or leave behind your passion and hopes (AG, woman, mailing-list excerpt, 12 December 2012).

- 30 Beyond self-exploitation, a second trap is linked to inter-personal relations and in particular to personal ties with mentors or supervisors. There is with no doubt a widespread recognition of the rewarding nature of such relations, especially if the mentor is a powerful scholar. However, these relationships are hardly merely instrumental, as they involve emotions and affective attachment. For this reason, it is difficult to break them off, even in those cases where such relations may be detrimental to juniors on a personal or professional level, with the result of becoming entrapping. In some cases, precarious workforces “get free” thanks to external help. This usually comes from another senior colleague or appointments abroad or outside academia¹⁸. Nevertheless, even if the struggle for freedom and autonomy is successful, feelings are often uncertain :

I have been waiting for his debacle for such a long time... But now I feel so sorry for him. I am just thinking of all the emotional attachment I had for him... My heart just breaks down to see him brought down so badly¹⁹.

- 31 Generally speaking, the common characteristic of “passion as a trap” is the lack of agency, in particular when it comes to the ability of achieving one's personal or professional goals²⁰. Moreover, passion can also deprive workers of their ability to impact on their professional environment, as passion can replace rebellion with acceptance of exploitation. This is very similar to what Illouz (2007) defined as “emotional capitalism”, where passion replaces rationality in economic relations and becomes an instrument of control. Indeed workers are often blamed for lacking adequate motivations, with the «accusing assumption that you are probably not yet doing your best» (Pusey, 2003 :63) causing stress and burnout. As Couldry and Littler state :

The inevitable gap between unceasing demand and the finite resources that each worker has to supply must be filled, notionally, by something – ‘passion’. ‘Passion’ by definition allows no room for the articulation of values that might challenge the values of the employer, because it expresses the absolute internalization of those corporate values (2011 :270-271).

- 32 The disempowerment of any form of rebellion or protest takes place not only in private corporations, but also in public universities²¹. In addition, given the diversified set of emotional relations precarious research staff establish with colleagues and the “practice” of research, the function of passion as a tool for control is enhanced. Moreover, precarious staff is likely to remain in academia for a long time because of the general crisis of the labour market, thus reinforcing bonds. As Newfield put it, temporary instructors usually become “permatemps”, highlighting the paradoxical condition of temporary staff who has worked for long periods on short-term contracts (2008 :20).

V. From Micro to Macro : a Different Perspective on Passion in Academia

- 33 In previous sections, we examined how passion can motivate individual actions and choices and also how it can be a positive or entrapping element for precarious researchers. While the role played by passion is determined by actors' attitude and abilities,

organisational constraints and structural elements have an even more relevant role. The evolution of universities toward a commodification model (Buroway, 2011) and the lessening of resources and public investments have deeply affected the characteristics of jobs in academia.

34 The functions of passion are therefore determined by the complex interaction between micro (individual) and macro (structural) factors, which may have unintended outcomes. For instance, the “managerialization” of public universities and chronic lack of funding – which increases competition among precarious staff – can not only turn passion into a trap, but can also have a different impact. The argument we advance in this section is that structural constraints can cause disaffection and challenge the love for research that individuals experiment. However we contend that such changes do not make passion disappear, but transform it from “reason” into “motive” in Mill’s terms.

35 Passion for research is neither a necessary nor an unchangeable characteristic for researchers in doing their job. Indeed they can act as rational actors in order to achieve their goal, without emotional involvement. Moreover, even in the case of those who are actually in love with research and public universities, passion can be seriously challenged by enduring precariousness, harsh working conditions and lack of opportunities.

36 The evolution of the higher education system towards a flexible and neoliberal model plays an important role in mitigating the relevance of passion as a reason for action. As Parker and Jary (1995) suggest in their article about the “McUniversity”²² in the UK, academics are becoming more instrumental in their attitude towards work. This is mainly due to the increasing power of managers and executive officials in institutions where the «language of ‘line managers’, ‘customers’ and ‘products’ has begun to displace the academic language of deans, students and courses» (Parker/Jary, 1995 :324-325), resulting in new forms of identity and self-perception among academics. Critics underlined that Parker and Jary considered individuals too passive and underestimate the practices of resistance (Prichard/Wilmott, 1997). However, whatever the level of resistance might be, this general trend is acknowledged by many scholars when it comes to evaluation, performance and even publications (Holmwood, 2011).

37 In Italy, public universities have always shown a very strong resistance to change and to the development of new managerial practices (Moscato, 2001 ; Regini, 2009). However, despite this, the pressure towards instrumental behaviour is enhanced in the case of precarious research staffs because of the lack of resources and career perspectives. In this very competitive labour market then, there is very little room for the stereotyped representation of the passionate and disinterested researcher, because they need to act strategically and rationally. Additionally, the general conditions of the Italian academic milieu weaken the thrill of passion, which is growingly replaced by frustration or even anger :

Unfortunately, there is only sadness now [...] around us and inside us (LB, woman, mailing-list excerpt, Nov 2013).

Decaying buildings, no permanent positions offered, precarious contracts, enhancement of managerial logics, strengthening of the power of old and full professors... whoever works has no rights and loses passion, and even those who are still studying learn ‘the art’ of being exploited (AB, woman, mailing-list excerpt, Sept 2010).

38 Beyond the disempowering effect of personal frustration, researchers are often caught up in another trap, namely the lack of exit strategies. Indeed Italy’s skyrocketing unemployment rate, hyper-specialisation and the consequent difficulty in finding a job outside academia are elements that viciously interact. As stated by a researcher :

Come on ! Here [in Italy] if you do not enter [meaning getting a permanent position in] academia, what else can you do ? (DB, man, mailing-list excerpt, Nov 2013).

39 In Italy, beyond high unemployment rates, the lack of exit strategies is enhanced by the low value of the PhD title outside of academia, which is almost ignored by private employers and the public sector. Then, “once-upon-a-time” passionate researchers experience a further loss of agency, which is worsened by the lack of exit strategies possibly resulting in “passive acquiescence” rather than resistance (Prichard/Wilmott, 1997 :312). In such a context, passion is either the initial lure attracting researchers into the trap or a distant memory because

when you are paid one thousand euros [a year] for teaching one module, it is very hard for the

employer to demand passion (GG, woman, mailing-list excerpt, Sept 2013).

40 Nevertheless, although no longer driven by an emotional commitment, precarious researchers continue to face the issue of passion.

41 Indeed passion has more than a micro dimension and “being a passionate researcher” is not only an individual characteristic. Passion has a macro dimension too, because it is an element of the culture shared by academics as a whole. Received wisdom considers passion a fundamental aspect of research. Throughout history, universities developed their own institutional logic and discourse specificity (Townley, 1997). Like many other organisational fields, academia developed its own myths (Meyer/Rowan, 1973 ; Powel/Di Maggio, 1983) which have deeply influenced its structure and practices, as well as the social representation of academic work. Such myths enjoy broad consensus, becoming “providers of legitimacy”. It follows that individuals operating in the field are often obliged to incorporate those “myths,” even if they might not agree with them, in order to avoid accusations of being irrational, inconsistent or negligent.

42 Therefore passion, commitment, autonomy, freedom of judgement and love for knowledge are key elements in the institutionalisation of research as a profession. These symbols and expressions permeate self-representations of academics and academia, which have historically made

strong reference to a distinct and highly valued organizational identity ; particularly resisted comparisons with private-sector organizations ; and rejected the formal, rational business model of organizations associated with judgemental appraisals and a corporate bureaucracy (Townley, 1997 :274).

43 Such a representation has allowed academia to «constitute a repertoire that was available to individuals and organizations to employ in resisting change» and external pressures (Townley, 1997 :275).

44 The legitimacy of academia and academics, therefore, is dependent on compliance with this institutionalised representation, which – as in any other institution – acquired a strong normative nature and became a “social programme” (Jepperson, 1991). The evidence of the relevance of passion for Italian academia is clearly seen in this excerpt from a public speech delivered by the President of the Republic in 2013 :

Those who choose research show the highest degree of personal passion. Such a passion does not consist uniquely in the expectation of big results, but in everyday attempts to get closer and closer to them²³.

45 Thus, the cultural and social pressure to show passion and commitment grows as a consequence of such public rhetoric, setting an “emotional standard” that marks the threshold of researchers’ legitimacy. Researchers are thus “forced” to show passion and enthusiasm, especially during early stages of their career or when under continuous threat of being drop-outs on the labour market. Passion should therefore not only be seen as the actual cause for action, but also as a socially accepted explanation for it. In this sense, it can be defined as a “motive” in Mills’ terms :

Motives are words. Generically, to what do they refer ? They do not denote any elements “in” individuals. They stand for anticipated situational consequences of questioned conduct. Intention or purpose (stated as a “program”) is awareness of anticipated consequence ; motives are names for consequential situations, and surrogates for actions leading to them (Mills, 1940 :905).

46 As Mills puts it «the differing reasons men give for their actions are not themselves without reasons» (*Ibid.* :904), thus meaning that the rhetoric of passion offers justifications to young researchers, precarious staff and senior professors alike.

VI. Passion as “Motive” and its Functions

47 Following Mill’s distinction, “passion” can also be a “motive” of action, whereby specific rhetoric may justify individual positions thanks to the very strong legitimacy they enjoy. Passion is not only what helps precarious researchers cope with instability and dissatisfaction caused by low wages and poor career perspectives. Passion is also what sustains and legitimizes precarious researchers’ self-representations. In particular, passion as rhetoric, and therefore as “motive” or genre, has two different sets of functions.

48 The first set relates to the process of identity-construction precarious researchers undertake. More specifically, passion empowers researchers to come up with acceptable accounts of their working conditions. It helps them reduce the cognitive dissonance about what their job actually is and what it should look like ideally. By referring to passion, then, researchers produce accounts about what they do that are acceptable both individually («after all, I am accepting all this because it's my dream job. I'm not doing that because I am my supervisor's slave»²⁴) and socially («my friend S. is not a loser... she does what she really wants to do, or at least she is struggling for that... which is better than working in a factory»²⁵). In addition, passion as a “motive” produces accounts about the working conditions of precarious research staff that are acceptable to the employer or, in our case, to full professors and senior staff. Indeed, accounts of passionate researchers absolve them from moral accusations of perpetrating poor working conditions and exploitation. Additionally, senior or permanent staff do not have full control on recruitment policies, as they are set by public law.

49 The second set of functions relates to the use of “passion” as a means to an end. In this case, “passion” is utilised as a rhetorical instrument to strengthen actions and positions with specific goals. This can be done by both senior permanent staff as well as precarious staff. When it comes to senior permanent staff, passion is often used as a dispositive for exploitation or, more specifically, as an immaterial reward, which often replaces economic earnings. In particular, this was the case of a full professor who had an extensive network of young and motivated researchers (MA students, PhDs, post-docs) with whom he collaborated on a number of projects. Anyway, only a few of his collaborators had scholarships or some monthly form of salary. On a number of occasions, he theorised the necessity of getting rid of all forms of paid jobs, since they risked to distract his collaborators from common research projects and initiatives :

This is what research requires, namely commitment and passion. This is what matters, as any passionate researcher is worth hundreds of salary-seeking pseudo-researchers... (Fieldwork note).

50 Nevertheless, sometimes collaborators voiced their need to get paid, to no avail :

This is not what he is apt at-paying us. He said that what he can do is ‘satisfy’ our lust for knowledge (GS, woman, fieldwork note. Currently employed as secretary in a private company, she obtained her PhD with success in 2009).

51 Despite being the weaker side in the relationship with their employers, precarious researchers may also appropriate the rhetoric of passion with the instrumental goal of advancing their own agenda. Passion, as a strongly legitimising rhetoric in academia, can effectively mystify behaviours otherwise sanctioned, such as for instance rivalry and competitiveness. It can enhance self-promotion and requests for professional recognition. In 2009, some temporary adjuncts launched the campaign “Teaching with dignity” to oppose the widespread practice among faculty deans of offering unpaid teaching contracts to post-doc fellows (Busso/Rivetti, 2012). While many precarious researchers took active part in the campaign and rejected those offers, others accepted teaching for free and justified their choice by appealing to the public universities’ need to offer as many and as diversified taught modules as possible to contrast with private universities. «The passion for the public nature of our university system drives me on» said a precarious researcher (RS, man, fieldwork note, Dec 2009), while another added that

It's not in our interest to teach for free, but it is in the interest of the department to be able to maintain the number of taught modules unchanged despite financial restrictions (AG, man, fieldwork note, Jan 2010).

52 Moreover, “passion” as motive can be utilized for advancing political requests and claiming professional or career development. Passion can justify claims of moral superiority, because it demonstrates that workers are genuinely committed to their workplace or to the mission of their job. In the case of academia and precarious researchers, this function is enhanced because it allows claiming “justice” for those who are really “fond of” research and have proved this by the numerous sacrifices they have made. In 2009, an open letter by the National Organisation of Precarious Researchers to the then-Minister of Higher Education Maria Stella Gelmini reads :

We have fiercely opposed your reform and thousands of researchers, precarious and temporary, mobilised against it. We mobilised because we feel responsibility for the future. We are moved by our

self-esteem and our love for knowledge. We discussed your reform and understood that we can change things for the better. We now know that universities can be reformed without being mutilated. To contain expenses and cost, one need only decrease the number of full professors while increasing the number lecturers and appointing new assistant professors with decent contracts. To protect meritocracy, one need only increase internal democracy (DB, man, mailing-list excerpt, Jan 2012).

- 53 Similarly, a precarious researcher discussing the recruitment rules introduced by the “Gelmini reform” in 2010 expressed her disillusion because the reform did not introduce “meritocracy”:

I thought that things would have changed with the new recruitment plan, but that was not the case. Selections are still ad personam, as the call for applications identifies a specific research profile. The truth is that we are all doomed to accept teaching contracts with awful conditions in the hope that someone will notice us. We accept non-humane conditions because we do not want to give up our passion for research and teaching. But someone is just using us to fill a gap in the semester... If you give up, there will be someone else replacing you... I did it for three years, I have taught for 1 Euro, because I believe in meritocracy and sacrifice. But the system goes on ignoring me and those who are like me... destroying meritocracy and shattering our hope. We know how it works : there are those who will be promoted and will get appointments by any means necessary (visiting full professors in their bedrooms, as it happens). So long, meritocracy, there is no room for you in Italy (AG, woman, mailing-list excerpt, Dec 2012).

- 54 The excerpts show that passion and commitment to university can be used as a motive to reclaim rights at individual and collective levels. However, this also exposes the ambiguity of the rhetoric of passion : rights are not related to work in itself, but are transformed into a reward for passion, and they depend on the individual approach to work, no matter what its conditions are.

VII. Conclusions

- 55 The examination of passion as a multi-dimensional object in the context of Italy’s higher education system stimulates some conclusive remarks. First of all, our case-study demonstrates that the relevance of “passion as motive” is independent from the actual factors motivating individual action. For this reason, a macro perspective of analysis is necessary, as passion obtains legitimacy from the macro-context in which it is deployed. Focus on the macro-dimension enhances the potential of the Italian case as an example, since it is characterised by very high levels of precariousness among young (or less young) researchers, and worsened by a lack of recognition of PhD qualification on the non-academic labour market. We suggest that passion should not only be seen as an individual lever for action, but as a cultural characteristic of a whole organisational field. As such, passion has an impact on the individual behaviour of all actors, even those who do not perceive themselves as passionate. The cultural relevance given to the emotional commitment to research thus defines a socially acceptable profile for researchers, influencing both individual and collective actions and self-representations. It follows that precarious researchers are exposed to traps not only when intimately passionate about their work, but also because they need to show passion off. For this reason, the relevance of passion in typifying self-representations and in determining precarious researchers’ choices is enhanced.

- 56 The second point this article makes deals with the balance between “passion as reason” and “passion as motive” as analytical tools. We argue that in those contexts where passion enjoys a strong cultural and institutionalised legitimacy, “passion as motive” increases its relevance as an analytical instrument whereas “passion as reason” is weakened. Indeed, as our research shows, referring to passion becomes a sort of compelling linguistic expedient to obtain legitimacy. In those workplaces where passion enjoys strong legitimacy and is thus interiorised by workers, it becomes very difficult for the observer – and also for the workers themselves – to distinguish if a certain course of action is motivated by commitment or by the will to adhere to a socially accepted model. Ironically, it follows that the normative strength of the rhetoric of passion eventually brings about the impossibility of distinguishing between passionate and non-passionate researchers, both in terms of their actions and rhetoric.

- 57 Finally, a conclusive remark involves the origin of the relevance of passion to the culture of academic labour. In the neoliberal era, passion seems to be the result of the interaction of two opposite trends. On the one hand the “commodification model” has made universities

similar to corporations, thus ideally assimilating knowledge and creative workers to academic research staff. On the other hand, however, the rhetoric adopted to resist such assimilation is also centred on passion, which is seen as opposed to market-oriented representations of the university. The paradox is that these two arguments, despite originating from opposite standpoints, have the effect of further legitimising passion and its functions alike, as examined in the article.

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Annex

Structured summary

This article focuses on precarious workforces in Italian universities with the goal of dissecting the role of passion in academia. The focus on precarious staff is motivated by the belief, resulting from fieldwork, that this particular category is more receptive and reactive to "passion" as a consequence of uncertainty about the future related to precariousness.

The article builds on participant observation and documentation the two authors have been carrying out for more than four years in Italian universities, taking active part into political initiatives and campaigns organised by precarious, non-tenured research staff.

The normative value of passion is central to this article, which builds on the distinction between "reasons" and "motives" of action as outlined by Wright Mills and Kenneth Burke. Burke and Mills urged sociologists to see "motives" as rhetorical constructs that frame social interactions. They argue that "motives" are not inner springs of action, which are better defined as "reasons," but normative vocabularies by which actors define situations.

Deploying this distinction as an analytical instrument, the article reflects on passion as both the actual reason motivating actions and professional choices ; and a rhetorical genre, a motif or "motive" that social actors deploy to build consistent and socially acceptable narratives about their jobs. We argue that passion as a motive becomes particularly effective in a context where workers cannot really come up with exit strategies nor threaten to implement them due to the macro-structural conditions they live in, as happens in Italy which is greatly suffering from public cuts to education and widespread unemployment. Referring also to more recent scholarship on precariousness and "passionate, creative" workers, we suggest that passion should not only be seen as an individual lever for action, but as a cultural characteristic of a whole organisational field.

As such, passion has an impact on the individual behaviour of all actors, even those who do not perceive themselves as passionate. The cultural relevance given to the emotional commitment to research thus defines a socially acceptable profile for researchers, influencing both individual and collective actions and self-representations. It follows that precarious researchers are exposed to traps not only when intimately passionate about their work, but also because they need to show passion off. For this reason, the relevance of passion in typifying self-representations and in determining precarious researchers' choices is enhanced.

Notes

1 See ANVUR (National Agency for Evaluation of University and Research), *Rapporto sullo stato dell'università e della ricerca*, 2013 (http://www.anvur.org/attachments/article/644/Rapporto%20ANVUR%202013_UNIVERSITA%20e%20RICERCA_integrale.pdf accessed Oct 10, 2014) and

ITALIAN MINISTRY OF EDUCATION – MIUR (<http://statistica.miur.it/scripts/PERS/vPERS01.asp>, accessed Oct 10, 2014).

2 For an overview of the reform : *La finanziaria modello Tremonti : tagli e incursioni nei comparti della conoscenza*, FGC-CGIL communiqué, June 19, 2008 (<http://www.flcgil.it/attualita/sindacato/la-finanziaria-modello-tremonti-tagli-e-incursioni-nei-comparti-della-conoscenza.flc>, accessed Oct 6, 2014).

3

http://www.anvur.org/attachments/article/644/Rapporto%20ANVUR%202013_UNIVERSITA%20e%20RICERCA_integrale.pdf, accessed Oct 10, 2014.

4 First results of the FLC-CGIL research "Ricerca" highlights that in 10 years, only 6,7% of over 65,000 precarious researchers reached a permanent position (<http://www.roars.it/online/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Presentazione-FLC-Ricerca-ROARS.pdf>, accessed Oct 10, 2014).

5 While brain drain is a problem in Italy (see SIRONI Fr., "Fermate l'esodo dei laureati migliori", *L'Espresso*, March 3, 2014, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/inchieste/2014/02/27/news/fermate-l-esodo-dei-laureati-migliori-1.155235>, accessed Oct 6, 2014), it mainly refers to MA holders'

emigration. When it comes to PhD holders, the phenomenon exists but is contained. See “Ricercaresi” report available at : <http://www.flcgil.it/attualita/ricercaresi-infografica-indagine-sui-percorsi-di-vita-e-lavoro-nel-precariato-universitario.flc> and <http://www.corriereuniv.it/cms/2014/07/i-ricercatori-italiani-nel-rapporto-flc-cgil-appassionati-super-specializzati-destinati-precariato/> (accessed Oct 5, 2014).

6 Observation has been carried out mainly in the universities of Turin and Milan, and during the meetings of national networks of precarious researchers.

7 Self-portraits are available at this link : <http://piemonte.nottedeiricercatori.it/index.php/73-edizione-2013/links-2013/249-faces-2013> (accessed Oct 5, 2014). Out of 18 self-portraits, in 16 videos “passion” was mentioned as one of the traits characterising research as a job.

8 Available at : <http://piemonte.nottedeiricercatori.it/index.php/73-edizione-2013/links-2013/249-faces-2013> (accessed Oct 6, 2014).

9 Available at : <http://piemonte.nottedeiricercatori.it/index.php/faces> (accessed Oct 6, 2014).

10 Sennet (2006, 2008) captures this dimension in the concept of craftsmanship, which he defines as «doing something well for its own sake» (SENNET R., 2006, p.104). The concept of craftsmanship is not a novelty, as Sennett himself noticed. In 1951, Mills introduced the idea of craftsmen as workers «engaged in the work in and for itself ; the satisfactions of working are their own reward» (MILLS C. W., 1951, p.220).

11 Available at : <http://piemonte.nottedeiricercatori.it/index.php/73-edizione-2013/links-2013/249-faces-2013> (accessed Oct 6, 2014).

12 Available at : <http://piemonte.nottedeiricercatori.it/index.php/73-edizione-2013/links-2013/249-faces-2013> (accessed Oct 6, 2014).

13 Available at : <http://piemonte.nottedeiricercatori.it/index.php/73-edizione-2013/links-2013/249-faces-2013> (accessed Oct 6, 2014).

14 Following Granovetter’s definition, the strength of a tie is determined by «the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie» (GRANOVETTER M., 1973, p.1361).

15 In response to the critiques of Murray, Rankin and Magill (1981). It is worth noting that the argument Granovetter himself advances in this article partially contradicts his thesis about the strength of weak ties.

16 This is particularly true of recruitment selection, whereby personal connections between candidates and members of the selection committee are very relevant to the final outcome of the *concorso* (public selection procedure).

17 As Vallerand and Houliort (2003) noticed, there are two different types of passion. The first type implies suffering and loss of control, with workers becoming «slaves to their passions» (VALLERAND R., HOULFORT N., p.176) ; the second type, on the contrary, emphasises positive aspects of passion and acts as a «necessary ingredient in high-profile achievements» (*Ibid.*, p.177). Vallerand and Houliort significantly call these two models respectively obsessive and harmonious passion. They differ not only in terms of well-being, but also in terms of the individuals’ capability to control decisions, maintain rationality and agency.

18 This is the case of two precarious researchers, FA (woman, 43) and PR (woman, 33). FA refers to the newly established relationship with a senior professor as something that “saved” her from her previous mentor, who she refers to as “a dog”. PR got an appointment abroad, and refers to this event as “redeeming” her from her mentor and senior colleagues, at whose behest she would have otherwise “bagged any kind of filthy job”.

19 SC, woman, email excerpt, Dec. 2012, referring to her former mentor who was involved in a scandal connected to an appointment procedure.

20 We also observed a third type of trap, strongly connected to what we defined as “social passion” in the previous section. Indeed, activities considered as socially relevant may not be rewarding in terms of career. In the Italian context, this is particularly true for teaching-related activities (dissertation supervision, labs, extra-curricular activities) and administration, which are poorly recognised if compared to research, and for which reason they often are given to precarious and early stage researchers. However, this type of passion targets all staff members, regardless of their position (tenured or not tenured), and is considered a “risk” by all staff members.

21 NS (man, 50, professor) argues that this dynamic pre-existed the actual evolution of universities toward a corporate model. Remembering the early stage of his career, he notices that «every time we asked for money, they reminded us that research is, first of all, passion and commitment» (interview, April 2014).

22 The notion is linked to Ritzer’s (1993) concept of the McDonaldization of society, centred on the idea of extreme rationalisation.

23 Speech delivered on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Italian National Research Institute (CNR), available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFdYpj5oZiE> (accessed Oct 6, 2014).

24 This is the conclusion a young researcher reached when, during her Ph D, she was asked by her supervisor to accomplish an ethically problematic task. Despite being aware of the unethical aspects of it, she accepted. She justified her decision by appealing to a lack of agency : according to her, this is what that career requires her to be ready to do (fieldwork note, Sept 2010).

25 Comments made by a precarious researcher about another colleague (fieldwork note).

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