

# “I certainly wouldn’t call it work anymore”

## The Reconfiguration of Work in Italy during the 1970s from a Historical Semantics Perspective

*Abstract:* Using an onomasiological, document-centred historical semantic approach, this paper focuses on the reconfiguration of labour in Italian society during the 1970s and 1980s. This is analysed both at the level of discourse and at the level of the performative changes that the development of a new semantics of labour, coercion, and freedom entailed. At the end of the 1970s, with the onset of the post-boom crisis, the rejection of regulated labour and the theorisation of its liberation through precarisation and flexibilisation became part of a cultural and social semantics for the young generation of workers entering the wage labour system. Their motto was “freeing labour to free life from labour”. Through both a quantitative and qualitative historical semantic analysis of the sources, this contribution examines the medium- and long-term impacts of this reconfiguration on the practices of regulated and controlled wage labour. It also aims to offer an initial reflection on the use of the historical semantic approach for contemporary history and its possible – or rather, necessary – differentiation from other forms of discourse analysis.

*Keywords:* Italy 1970s, historical semantical approach, labour reconfiguration, flexibilisation of work, post-operaismus, historical trend research, Italian social movements

### 1. Introduction

Until the end of the 1960s in Italy, the concept of *lavoro* – which includes both work and labour, with the latter defined as paid and continuous employment – was con-

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/oezg-2023-34-2-9>



Accepted for publication after external peer review (double blind)

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sidered one of the central defining elements of the Republic and effectively the only legitimising one in social life (*cittadinanza sociale*), as it ensured full access to the state's welfare policies. Italian welfare from the postwar period onward was strongly characterised by a personalistic rather than a universalistic principle, which in turn was linked to a close correlation between social protection and employment status. Access to social rights and social citizenship was almost an exclusive prerogative of workers, whereas unemployed and incomeless people were mostly the object of individual, quasi-charitable assistance measures.<sup>1</sup> This correlation was certainly owed to the spread of Fordism, which created a kind of overlap between social and productive reality. Until its crisis in the 1970s, the Fordist factory and its workers were a distinct and ubiquitous element of Italian society. And surrounding this element emerged what Maria Turchetto has called the "ideology of labour": a "transversal, interclassist way of thinking, supported by secular and religious ethics, which has been widely infused into our society".<sup>2</sup> In Marxist political culture, work was seen as the theatre of both capitalist exploitation and workers' emancipation. The conservative camp, on the other hand, viewed it as the way to earn an honest wage and support the family. As a result, those who did not work or did not want to work were regarded with suspicion or even contempt.

In general, the period from the late 1960s to the 1980s represents a time during which Italy experienced a late and very rapid modernisation, having previously been characterised – if not structurally, then at least culturally – by industrial backwardness and a general low level of education. In some cases, this made adaptation to the standards of the other G6 countries difficult. The country's industrial and cultural modernisation was also late in the sense that it occurred as the idea of modernity was entering (or already in the midst of) a crisis everywhere in the Western world as a consequence of the first oil crisis in 1973. This trend was subsequently confirmed and exacerbated by the second crisis of 1979. On a more empirical note, this meant that not only the idea of work but also the contexts and practices of labour underwent a transformation: Industrial decentralisation, computerisation, the fragmentation of production, and the rise in unemployment among youths and academics became central aspects.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 Massimiliano Livi, Das italienische Welfare und die Krise eines regulativen und machtpolitischen Instruments, in: Christoph Lorke/Rüdiger Schmidt (eds.), *Der Zusammenbruch der alten Ordnung? Die Krise der Sozialen Marktwirtschaft und der neue Kapitalismus in Deutschland und Europa 2019*, 315–336, 325.
  - 2 Marta Turchetto, Il lavoro senza fine. Riflessioni su "biopotere" e ideologia del lavoro tra XVII e XX secolo, in: *Zapruder 4* (2003), 9–26.
  - 3 Alessio Gagliardi, Nella crisi della società del lavoro, in: Monica Galfrè/Simone Neri Serneri (eds.), *Il Movimento del '77. Radici, snodi, luoghi*, Roma 2019, 97–114.

As a result, the participation of young people in overall employment was increasingly marked by elements of marginality, if not by outright marginalisation.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary analyses by sociologists Paolo Bassi and Antonio Pilati highlight how the need for the middle class to recompose its productive form, along with the reorganisation process of the industrial sector, resulted in a redefinition of the entire social structure after 1975.<sup>5</sup>

It was therefore the generation of men and women who had been formed and socialised within the new basic processes of individualisation and pluralisation of lifestyles and were now entering the changed world of work that was most affected by what was becoming known as the ‘new youth question’. These people often developed a general detachment from the prospect of living a life centred and oriented around work alone – not least because their lives were massively overwhelmed by precariousness and flexibilisation.<sup>6</sup> The mass of frustrated and angry students, precariously employed workers and moonlighters, and young people from the urban peripheries was defined by Alberto Asor Rosa as the “second society” of the excluded, while the “first society” was that of workers in permanent employment.<sup>7</sup> This “second society” consequently became the agent of a wave of mistrust directed towards the industrial society and its atomising organisation, as well as towards the institutions and politics it felt marginalised and betrayed by.<sup>8</sup>

The “second society” consisted mostly of students, young workers in small and very small enterprises and workshops, and in general of young people experimenting with forms of undeclared and precarious work who felt far removed from the working class of the large factories and their union representation. A new type of

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4 See the statistical data in: ISFOL-CENSIS, *Atteggiamenti dei giovani nei confronti del lavoro* indagine ISFOL-CENSIS su un campione di giovani tra i 15 e i 24 anni, 38–39 (1977): Quaderni di formazione ISFOL/Istituto per lo sviluppo della formazione professionale dei lavoratori, Roma 1977, 37.

5 Paolo Bassi/Antonio Pilati, *I giovani e la crisi degli anni Settanta*, Roma 1978, 150.

6 For a transnational perspective on this social phenomenon, see the volume on the alternative milieu of the 1970s edited by Sven Reichardt and Detlef Siegfried, and in particular the contribution by Dieter Rucht, who defines the “alternative milieu” as a historically specific phenomenon that emerged in the late 1960s and reached its peak in Western European countries in the early 1980s. Unlike the new social movements emerging during the same period that operated with specific political objectives, the alternative milieu was characterised by the development of new lifestyles and a fluid transition between different groups and networks. The range of activities associated with the alternative milieu is broad and includes alternative tourism, pop culture, consumer criticism, alternative media, commercial activities, pornography, drug use, debates on gender relations, environmental protection, solidarity with Third World liberation movements, and even house occupations. Dieter Rucht, *Das alternative Milieu in der Bundesrepublik. Ursprünge, Infrastruktur und Nachwirkungen*, in: Sven Reichardt/Detlef Siegfried (eds.), *Das Alternative Milieu. Antibürgerlicher Lebensstil und linke Politik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Europa 1968–1983*, Göttingen 2010, 61–86.

7 Alberto Asor Rosa, *Le due società. Ipotesi sulla crisi italiana*, Torino 1977.

8 See Gianfranco Bottazzi, *Dai figli dei fiori all'autonomia i giovani nella crisi fra marginalità ed estremo*, Bari 1978.

individualised worker thus emerged, replacing the mass workers who had previously shaped the culture of labour in Italy. The members of this group called themselves “nuovo proletariato giovanile” (new youth proletariat) and condensed their action into the so-called *Movimento del Settantasette* (Movement of 1977)<sup>9</sup> as well as the *Autonomia* (Worker’s Autonomy Movement). They embodied the “social worker” (*operaio sociale*) whose identity was no longer oriented around the factory but instead around the urban environment and the various activities characterising it.<sup>10</sup> They called for a transformation of work in order to free up time for personal relationships, study, and cultural and political commitment.<sup>11</sup> They also demanded that the identification of the working class in terms of its “place in the production process” be abandoned and redefined according to “the form of its political, social, and cultural nature”.<sup>12</sup>

In general, the working class – formerly considered the benchmark for the modernisation of the country – began to lose its centrality. This was not only a consequence of post-Fordist transformations: As noted in *Rosso. Giornale dentro il movimento*, a magazine of the *Autonomia*, “the working class has changed [...] because it has modified as a whole its relationship with labour and defined it [...] in new terms”.<sup>13</sup>

After 1968 at the latest, the so-called ‘homogeneity’ of the working class – which had always been more idealised than real anyway – was increasingly undermined by the workers themselves. They began to address issues like the tolerability of working conditions, the recognition of the legitimacy of profit, and the new and individualised ways of finding satisfaction beyond the unions. The new multiplicity of viewpoints within the working class was also a direct consequence of the emergence of a modern consumer mentality in otherwise still rural Italy.

Like everywhere else in Western Europe, this was accompanied by an erosion of traditional cultural reference frameworks (including the workerist one as well as the Catholic and Marxist ones, among many others) and a fundamental shift in the relationship between individuals – especially young people – and work. Led by

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9 See Luca Falciola, I dibattiti degli intellettuali italiani nel 1977. Segnali di una svolta culturale?, in: *Mondo Contemporaneo* 1 (2014), 57–74; Alessio Gagliardi, Il ’77 tra storia e memoria, Roma 2017; Galfrè/Neri Serneri (eds.), *Il Movimento del ’77*, 2019.

10 Stefano Musso, *Storia del lavoro in Italia. Dall’unità a oggi*, Venezia 2011, 240–241. A key influence on the youth culture of the time, which was criticised by the revolutionary left even though it could not entirely eschew its appeal, was the film *Saturday Night Fever* and its atmosphere characterised by the motto “tonight is the future”, see Anna Tonelli, Feste, balli, letture. L’altra faccia del ’77, in: Galfrè/Neri Serneri (eds.), *Il Movimento del ’77*, 2019, 115–126; Paolo Morando, *Dancing days. 1978–1979, i due anni che hanno cambiato l’Italia*, Roma/Bari 2009.

11 ISFOL-CENSIS, *Atteggiamenti*, 1977.

12 Leaflet by the Collective A/traverso, September 1975.

13 *Liberare la vita dal lavoro*, in: *Rosso. Giornale dentro il movimento*, 9 October 1975, 12.

the *Movimento del Settantasette*<sup>14</sup> and the *Autonomia*,<sup>15</sup> which lent a voice to the changed class composition during the 1970s, this shift was part of a political, social, and cultural trend that would continue to evolve through the 1980s and 1990s from a (sub-)cultural niche into the mainstream of Italian society.<sup>16</sup>

It seems apposite to emphasise here that the years between 1973 and 1977 can also rightly be considered the years of a certain awareness of the crisis, of the new social conflicts and transformations associated with it, whose effects were evident not only in northern Italy but throughout the country. It is important to recognize that the Mezzogiorno reached the peak of its industrialization around 1977 thanks to the second and more substantial wave of investments between 1968 and 1973 that led to the highest level of industrial employment. Despite this progress, however, there remained the significant issue of very high unemployment, which resulted in a state of development without employment.<sup>17</sup> The period between 1973 and 1977 was a time of crisis and transformation for Italy as a whole despite the unique characteristics of the South. During this time, both the northern and southern areas of the country experienced shared elements of change. The South also came to the realization that it was not feasible to replicate the struggles used to express needs in the North in a stereotypical way. This nevertheless did not prevent people in the South from utilizing some of the most prominent forms of action that emerged in 1977, such as boycotts and sabotage.<sup>18</sup> The historiographical production of the past two decades has predominantly investigated the structural changes in the world of work since the first oil crisis in 1973 and the end of the economic boom.<sup>19</sup> Among

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14 Alessio Gagliardi, *Sacrifici e desideri. Il movimento del '77 nell'Italia che cambia*, in: *Mondo Contemporaneo* 1 (2014), 75–94, 86; CENSIS, *XII rapporto/1978 sulla situazione sociale del paese*, vol. 4: *Censis ricerca*, Roma 1978, 56 and 86.

15 See Paolo Virno, *Do You Remember Counterrevolution?*, in: Paolo Virno/Michael Hardt (eds.), *Radical Thought in Italy. A Potential Politics*, Minneapolis/London 1996, 639–657. For a comprehensive treatment of the social, cultural, and geographic dimensions of the *Movimento del Settantasette* and the *Autonomia*, see the special issue of *Mondo Contemporaneo*, edited by Guido Panvini and Giovanni-Mario Ceci, as well as the collected volume by Monica Galfré and Simone Neri Serneri: *Giovanni-Mario Ceci/Guido Panvini (eds.), Italia 1977. Ambivalenze di una modernità*, Special Issue of *Mondo Contemporaneo. Rivista di storia* 1 (2014); Galfré/Neri Serneri (eds.), *Il Movimento del '77*, 2019.

16 See Jacopo Ciammariconi's current PhD project at the University of Trier entitled "Die Rekonzeptualisierung der Arbeit in Italien seit den 1970er Jahren. Neue Arbeitskulturen, Praktiken und Konflikte", <https://tribes.hypotheses.org/projects-2/jc-phd>.

17 Which especially in the previous two decades led to massive internal migrations to the industrialised poles of northern Italy, see Olga Sparschuh, *Fremde Heimat, fremde Ferne. Italienische Arbeitsmigration in Turin und München 1950–1975*, Göttingen 2021.

18 See Luigi Ambrosi, *L'anno della consapevolezza. Il 1977 nell'Italia meridionale, tra nuovi conflitti e trasformazioni sociali*, in: *Mondo Contemporaneo* 1 (2014), 23–38.

19 Anselm Doering Manteuffel/Lutz Raphael, *Nach dem Boom. Perspektiven auf die Zeitgeschichte seit 1970*, second edition, Göttingen 2010; Lutz Raphael, *Jenseits von Kohle und Stahl. Eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte Westeuropas nach dem Boom*, Berlin 2019.

the most-studied implications are undoubtedly the restructuring of large enterprises,<sup>20</sup> the changes in organisations and management<sup>21</sup> and the introduction of new work processes,<sup>22</sup> the flexibilisation and precarisation of work,<sup>23</sup> subjectification processes,<sup>24</sup> and the relationship between work and consumption.<sup>25</sup> Beyond the purely historical studies of Stefano Musso,<sup>26</sup> however, it has thus far primarily been political scientists and sociologists of labour<sup>27</sup> who have dealt with the cultural implications of the post-Fordist transformation since the 1970s with regard to the specifics of the Italian case. Among these, credit for introducing the topic into the sociological and political debate in Italy is certainly due to Sergio Bologna.<sup>28</sup> Subsequent contributions have taken up the theme, arguing from the perspective of post-*operaismo*.<sup>29</sup> They include works by leading post-workerist theorists such as Toni Negri, Michael Hardt, Paolo Virno, and Maurizio Lazzarato that point out how the new forms of labour have redefined the balance of power in favour of capital and how the new

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- 20 Ignazio Masulli, *Welfare state e patto sociale in Europa. Gran Bretagna, Germania, Francia, Italia, 1945–1985*, Bologna 2003.
- 21 Christian Marx, *Die Manager und McKinsey. Der Aufstieg externer Beratung und die Vermarktlichung des Unternehmens am Beispiel Glanzstoff*, in: Morten Reitmayer/Thomas Schlemmer (eds.), *Die Anfänge der Gegenwart. Umbrüche in Westeuropa nach dem Boom*, München 2014, 65–78; Christian Marx, *Vom nationalen Interesse zum Shareholder Value? Wertewandel in den Führungsetagen westdeutscher Großunternehmen in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren*, in: Bernhard Dietz/Jörg Neuheiser (eds.), *Wertewandel in der Wirtschaft und Arbeitswelt. Arbeit, Leistung und Führung in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Berlin 2016, 151–176.
- 22 Reinhold Bauer, *Ölpreiskrisen und Industrieroboter. Die siebziger Jahre als Umbruchphase für die Automobilindustrie in beiden deutschen Staaten*, in: Konrad Jarausch (ed.), *Das Ende der Zuversicht? Die siebziger Jahre als Geschichte*, Göttingen 2008, 68–83; Fabrizio Pirro, *Dopo il taylorfordismo. Il lavoro per la qualità*, in: Stefano Musso (ed.), *Il Novecento, 1945–2000. La ricostruzione, il miracolo economico, la globalizzazione. Storia del lavoro in Italia* Fabbri, Roma 2015, 569–598.
- 23 Eloisa Betti, *Precari e precarie. Una storia dell'Italia repubblicana*, Roma 2019.
- 24 Wiebke Wiede, *Von Zetteln und Apparaten. Subjektivierung in bundesdeutschen und britischen Arbeitsämtern der 1970er und 1980er Jahre*, in: *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, online edition, 3 (2016), 466–487.
- 25 Peter-Paul Bänziger, *Die Moderne als Erlebnis. Eine Geschichte der Konsum- und Arbeitsgesellschaft 1840–1940*, Göttingen 2020; Andreas Wirsching, *Konsum statt Arbeit? Zum Wandel von Individualität in der modernen Massengesellschaft*, in: *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 57/2 (2009), 171–199, doi: 10.1524/vfzg.2009.0040.
- 26 Musso, *Storia del lavoro*, 2011.
- 27 Domenico de Masi, *Il Lavoratore post-industriale. La condizione e l'azione dei lavoratori nell'industria italiana*, Milano 1985; Aris Accornero, *Cultura e senso del lavoro*, in: Bruno Bottiglieri/Paolo Ceri (eds.), *Le culture del lavoro. L'esperienza di Torino nel quadro europeo*, Bologna 1987, 301–307; Luciano Gallino, *Culture emergenti del lavoro e decisioni manageriali*, in: *ibid.*, 185–201; Carlo Carloni, *Lavoro e culture del lavoro*, Roma 1991.
- 28 Sergio Bologna/Andrea Fumagalli (eds.), *Il lavoro autonomo di seconda generazione. Scenari del postfordismo in Italia*, second edition, Milano 1997.
- 29 Guido Borio/Francesca Pozzi/Gigi Roggero, *Futuro anteriore. Dai Quaderni rossi ai movimenti globali. Ricchezze e limiti dell'operaismo italiano*, Roma 2002; Martin Birkner/Robert Foltin, *(Post-) Operaismus. Von der Arbeiterautonomie zur Multitude. Geschichte und Gegenwart, Theorie und Praxis*, Stuttgart 2006.

professions in the production of knowledge experience the problems and contradictions of capitalism.<sup>30</sup> Despite the fact that the past two decades have seen a great deal of research on labour transformations since the 1970s as part of a general resurgence of interest in labour history in Europe, relatively little work has been done from a historiographical perspective in terms of focusing on this shift and the development of a new semantics of work, coercion, and freedom.

Moving on from this context, this paper addresses changes in the conceptualisation of work through an onomasiological (concept-focused), document-centred historical semantics approach.<sup>31</sup> The corpus of employed sources comprises texts produced in the circles of the *Autonomia* between 1974 and 1979. In particular, we will focus exemplarily on two types of 'discursive' sources, namely a series of contributions<sup>32</sup> published in several magazines and referring (to varying degrees) to workers' autonomy, the *Movimento del Settantasette*, or left-wing extra-parliamentarism<sup>33</sup> as well as – to avoid possible source bias – a number of interviews with young workers and unemployed persons collected and later published in survey volumes.<sup>34</sup> This is naturally a partial corpus and inevitably provides an unrepresentative empirical basis. However, it does afford a view onto a differentiated conjugation of communication. Although the language used in both formats is strongly influenced by that of philosophical-anthropological studies and the theories disseminated in the milieu by Toni Negri, Franco Berardi, Franco Piperno and others, it is representative of the way in which the notion of work was approached linguistically at the time, not least by non-intellectual and non-academic actors.

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30 Michael Hardt/Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA/London 2001.

31 See the *vade mecum* in this volume.

32 Il rifiuto del lavoro. Assemblea autonoma di Marghera, in: Rosso. Giornale dentro il movimento 10 (1974), 12–14; Il lavoro di vivere, in: Lavoro Zero 3 (1 October 1975), 8; Liberare la vita dal lavoro, in: Rosso. Giornale dentro il movimento, 9 October 1975, 12; Disoccupazione un nuovo modo di lavorare, in: Lavoro Zero 1 (1976), 15; Criminalità e repressione, in: *ibid.*, 21; Per voi giovani, in: *ibid.*, 28; Franco Berardi, La trama che tesse il soggetto, in: A/traverso 4 (1976), 7; Mai più senza salario, in: Lavoro Zero 1 (1976), 5–6; Le macchine della tortura – uno, in: A/traverso, September 1976, s.p.; Gabriele Martignoni/Sergio Morandini (eds.), Il diritto all'odio dentro, fuori, ai bordi dell'area dell'autonomia, Verona 1977, 43–78; Franco Piperno, Autonomia possibile, valore d'uso, lavoro non-operaio, in: Pre-Print, supplemento di Metropoli 0 (1978), s.p.; Puntini di sospensione, in: Lavoro Zero 7/8 (1978), 8–9; Lucio Castellano, Potenza del tempo libero. Tavola rotonda, in: Metropoli III/3 (1981), 58–61.

33 The most important magazines consulted for this study were: A/traverso (Bologna 1975–1988), Zut (Roma 1976–1977), Rosso (Milan 1975–1979), Metropoli (Rome 1979–1981), Pre-Print (Rome 1978–1980), Lavoro Zero (Mestre 1973–1979).

34 AA.VV. (ed.), *Settanta7. Disoccupate le strade dai sogni!*, Torino 1977; *Convegno dei Circoli del Proletariato Giovanile*, Milano dicembre 1976, in: Martignoni/Morandini (eds.), *Il diritto all'odio dentro*, 1977, 393–423; Lucia Annunziata (ed.), *Lavorare stanca Movimento giovanile, lavoro, non lavoro*, Roma 1978; Giulio Girardi, *Coscienza operaia oggi i nuovi comportamenti operai in una ricerca gestita dai lavoratori*, Bari 1980.



Historical semantic analysis relating to periods such as the 1970s as proposed here clearly has a very different function and dynamic compared to its application to earlier periods such as Antiquity or the Middle Ages. This is true for at least two reasons. Firstly, the number of available sources is enormous, and any kind of analysis to be performed therefore has to be partial and limited to a specific case study. This raises the issue of the representativeness of what is being analysed. The second and even more relevant reason has to do with periodisation: The timespan of contemporary history in general (and thus the one used in this contribution) does not allow us to observe a semantic reconfiguration of a term as radical as the ones mentioned in the *vade mecum*.<sup>35</sup>

The visual level is presented in this article through a word cloud (figure 1) and several different network graphics (figures 2 to 6). From a methodological point of view, the word cloud presented in figure 1 is composed of terms taken from the entirety of all utilised sources indicated in footnotes 28 and 30. The size of each word in the cloud indicates its frequency according to the *n*-gram occurrence analysis method, i.e. sequences of *n* elements in a text, net of stop words typical of Italian.<sup>36</sup> The network graphics presented in figures 2 to 6 represent the semantic network within the source corpus. They were created using the method described in Levallois et al. and implemented using the online software *Nocode Functions* created by Clement Levallois.<sup>37</sup> Graphic rendering was realised with the *VOSviewer* software provided by the Centre for Science and Technology Studies at Leiden University.<sup>38</sup> Levallois' software analyses the text line by line and determines words and expressions that tend to co-occur, forming a network. Specifically, it identifies pairs of terms in the text which are then aggregated according to their frequency to construct the network. The software performs the following steps: flattening of the text to ASCII, removal of URLs, removal of punctuation signs; lemmatisation; decomposition of the text into *n*-grams up to four-grams; removal of less relevant *n*-grams; counting of co-occurrences to create a network of the most frequent *n*-grams, connected if they co-occur often. The strength of the connections within the network is corrected using a procedure called Pointwise Mutual Information (PMI).<sup>39</sup>

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35 See the *vade mecum* in this volume.

36 The subsequent analysis was conducted as indicated in Carmel McNaught/Paul Lam, Using Wordle as a Supplementary Research Tool, in: *The Qualitative Report* (2014), doi: 10.46743/2160-3715/2010.1167.

37 Clement Levallois et al., Translating Upwards. Linking the Neural and Social Sciences via Neuroeconomics, in: *Nature Reviews. Neuroscience* 13/11 (2012), 789–797.

38 <https://www.vosviewer.com>.

39 See Mohamed Benabdelkrim et al., Opening Fields: A Methodological Contribution to the Identification of Heterogeneous Actors in Unbounded Relational Orders, in: *M@n@gement* (2020), 4–18.



## 2. Analysis



Figure 1: Word Cloud from the primary sources showing the frequency of each word according to the n-gram occurrence analysis method.

Source: author's own calculation

From a strictly quantitative analytical perspective, ‘work’ – understood both as a concept and as a factual element – is undoubtedly the main semantic focus in the selected corpus of sources.

Already at the level of quantitative occurrences (figure 1), we can observe that the main sphere of semantic relation in which the key term “*lavoro*” appears is that of criticism (*problema*; *lotta*) of the system of power relations (*padroni*; *mercato*) existing in relation to the “*fabbrica*” (factory) and to “*produzione*” (production).

If the opposite object is therefore “non-industrial work” (*lavoro non-operaio*), the new bearer of this criticism is the “proletariato giovanile” (*disoccupati*; *giovani*; *studenti*) respectively the “*Movimento*” of 1977. Against the (old) arguments of the class struggle and violence (tragically topical at the time), it contrasts a new vocabulary focused on the social and creative dimension of work and its rejection as a system of coercion and control.

This schematisation is confirmed and substantiated at the quantitative level by the graphic representation of the network (figure 2) formed by the most frequently recurring 20 key terms in the corpus. Four semantic clusters emerge: The first (red) obviously focuses on work, the second (green) and third (blue) on the youth’s (working-class) identity and subjectivity respectively, and the fourth (yellow) on sociality and life outside of work.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> It should be noted here that “free time” is argued in distinction to “work” and “working time” (cluster 1) in the sources, and therefore not as a coherent component of cluster 4 concerning sociability and life outside of work. For a further explanation, see figures 5 and 6.

*Table 1: Table of the most frequently recurring 20 key terms within the source corpus divided in cluster*

Label	Cluster	Links	Total Link Strength	Occurrences
<i>Lavoro</i> (work)	1	18	51	85
<i>Fabbrica</i> (factory)	1	14	30	38
<i>Tempo</i> (time)	1	12	23	21
<i>Produzione</i> (production)	1	10	19	21
<i>Capitale</i> (capital)	1	7	11	17
<i>Società</i> (society)	1	8	10	14
<i>Lavorare</i> (to work)	1	3	6	26
<i>Tempo libero</i> (free time)	1	4	5	10
<i>Scuola</i> (education)	2	9	14	11
<i>Lotta</i> (struggle)	2	8	9	35
<i>Classe operaia</i> (working class)	2	4	5	13
<i>Movimento</i> (Movement of 1977)	2	4	5	10
<i>Disoccupati</i> (unemployed)	3	8	15	12
<i>Giovani</i> (youth)	3	11	15	21
<i>Studenti</i> (students)	3	9	15	12
<i>Operai</i> (workers)	3	5	9	20
<i>Vita</i> (life)	4	9	16	20
<i>Compagni</i> (comrades)	4	9	10	42
<i>Bisogni</i> (needs)	4	9	9	12
<i>Morte</i> (death)	4	7	8	7

Source: author's own work

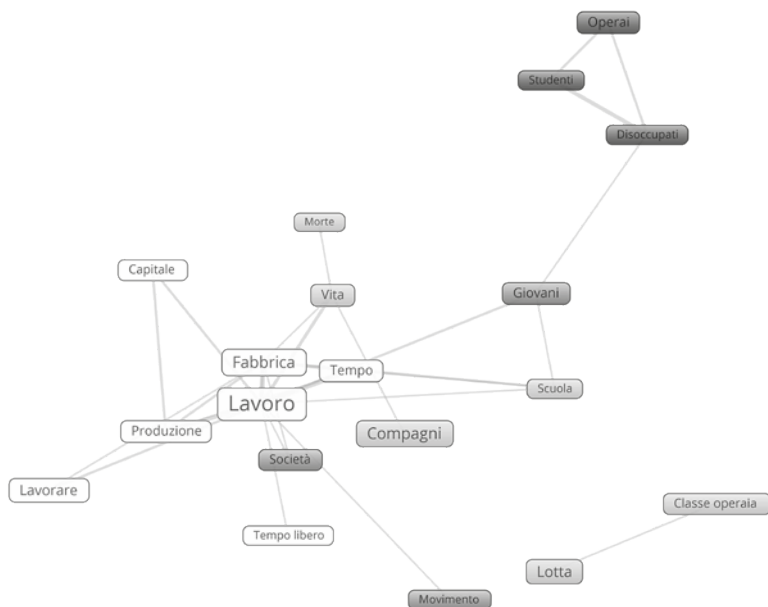


Figure 2: Network of the most frequently recurring 20 key terms within the source corpus  
 Source: author's own work

The concept of work and its value in society constitute the pivot of the critical argumentation in the corpus. “Work” is inseparably and critically related to the “factory” as the privileged place of “production”. The latter is in turn semantically and relationally linked to “capital” (figure 3). This undoubtedly reflects the definition of ‘work as ideology’ that the *Autonomia* challenged, and consequently of the power relations derived from it.

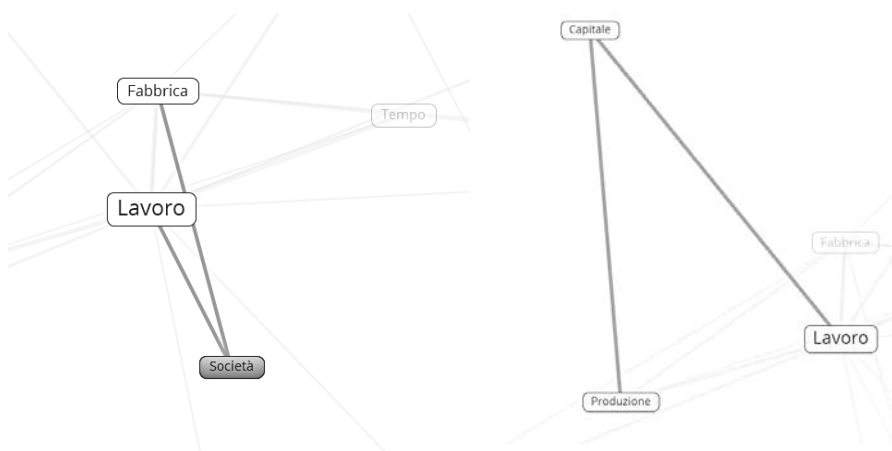


Figure 3: Detail of the semantic network of “Lavoro” within the source corpus  
 Source: author's own work

In fact, the reconfiguration of the concept of work during the period in question originated precisely in criticism of the factory and the dominant working-class culture. According to the *Autonomia* movement, the traditional working class did not sufficiently address – or rather, it indifferently accepted – the mechanisms of labour coercion.

With regard to the subjectivity and identity of “young people” (*giovani*) constructed and constructable in relation to work, the network shows a strong semantic opposition between “work” and (the time of) “life” (*vita*) as well as “needs” (*bisogni*). Identified in the triad of “students”, “workers”, and “unemployed”, the young people of the “Movement” thus also semantically manifested an emphatic alterity to the “working class” and its models of “struggle”, which are graphically distant as well (see figure 4).

As mentioned above, these young people (who largely lived in the industrial cities in the north of Italy) formed a societal stratum they called the “new youth proletariat” (*nuovo proletariato giovanile*), which encompassed students, women, and anyone who refused to consider work the very centre of their existence. Toni Negri would later refer to this group as “Social Workers”.<sup>41</sup> What they expressed through their subjectivity was a kind of extraneity or otherness in relation to the world of wage labour and its coercive mechanisms.

In a survey conducted among young Fiat workers in 1977–1978, philosopher and theologian Giulio Girardi observed the formation of a new “worker’s conscience” based on a “completely new mentality” as well as formerly “unknown ways of thinking and aspirations”.<sup>42</sup> This is what the magazine *Rosso* defined as the “young worker” – that is, “the new antagonistic worker figure, present in the diffused factory”. This young worker “wants to take possession [...] of the ongoing restructuring processes in order to reduce working hours to a minimum” because “in the time he takes away from the constraints of the factory, he gradually rediscovers his creativity, which he cannot express at work.”<sup>43</sup>

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41 Adelino Zanini, Sui “fondamenti filosofici” dell’operaismo italiano, in: Riccardo Bellofiore (ed.), *Da Marx a Marx? Un bilancio dei marxismi italiani del Novecento*, Roma 2007, 77–82; Giuseppe Trotta/Fabio Milana, *L’operaismo degli anni Sessanta*. Da “Quaderni rossi” a “Classe operaia”, Biblioteca dell’operaismo, Roma 2008; Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven. Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, London/Sterling, VA 2002; Marta Turchetto, From “Mass Worker” to “Empire”. The Disconcerting Trajectory of Italian Operaismo, in: Jacques Bidet/Stathis Kouvelakis (eds.), *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, Leiden/Boston 2008, 285–308; Cristina Corradi, Panzieri, Tronti, Negri. Le diverse eredità dell’operaismo italiano, in: Pier Paolo Poggio (ed.), *Il sistema e i movimenti (Europa: 1945–1989)*, Milano 2011, 223–247; Federico Tomasello, *Le stagioni dell’operaismo italiano*, in: *Cosmopolis. Rivista semestrale di cultura* 1 (2011), 79–90; Dario Gentili, *Italian theory. Dall’operaismo alla biopolitica*, Studi/Istituto italiano di scienze umane, Bologna 2012.

42 Girardi, *Coscienza operaia*, 1980, 78.

43 *Liberare la vita dal lavoro*, in: *Rosso. Giornale dentro il movimento*, 9 October 1975, 12.

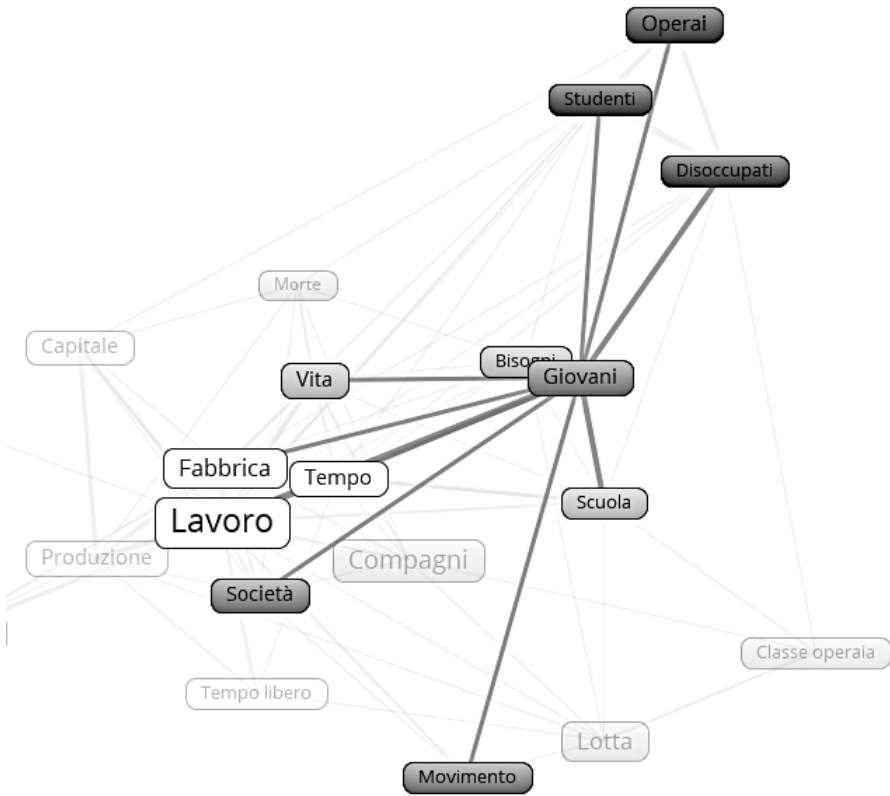


Figure 4: semantic network of “Giovani” within the source corpus  
 Source: author’s own work

This extraneity was often incorrectly confused and conceptualised together with marginalisation. In fact, as the magazine *Metropoli* pointed out:

“To say that they are all marginalised is the folly of a power arrogance: They have the capacity for political expression as well as cultural elaboration, they manage a significant slice of social resources and direct their allocation according to needs that they know how to express and weigh.”<sup>44</sup>

Rather, the “young workers” represented a framework of social relations whose code contradicted the one underlying the wage labour relationship. The mistake arose precisely from this contradiction. In an interview in 1977, 21-year-old student Francesco argued that

<sup>44</sup> Castellano, *Potenza del tempo libero*, 1981, 61.

*Table 2: Table of properties and actions referring to the concept of work within the source corpus*

<b>General Properties</b>	<b>Actions: Coercion/Oppression</b>	<b>Actions: Liberation from Work and Labour</b>
Ragione dell'esistenza umana (Bibbia)	Accettare la schiavitù del lavoro	Sottrarsi alla costrizione della fabbrica
Ideologia	Obbligo di vendersi per vivere	Sottrarsi al controllo del padrone
Perno fisso della vita	Meccanismo	Ridurre al minimo le ore di lavoro
Alienante	Dominio del principio produttivo	Rifiutare il lavoro
Fa schifo	brucia energie fisiche e mentali	Fuga dalla fabbrica
Non c'entra niente con la vita		Ricercare un lavoro gratificante
Incompatibile con il resto della vita	<b>Actions: Self-Realisation</b>	Cercarvi una realizzazione
Ricattatore	Combattere tutte le strutture borghesi	
Condiziona tutto	Costruire una dimensione personale	<b>Actions: Precarity</b>
Necessario	Diminuire sempre più gli effetti stessi della fabbrica sulla vita	Guardare fuori dalla fabbrica alle occasioni più fluide e meno rigide di reddito
Nocivo	Sprigionare la propria creatività	Costruirsi una dimensione
Produttivo vs creativo		Rovesciarne il significato
<b>Actors</b>	<b>Actions: Freeing Work and Labour</b>	<b>Actions: Unemployment</b>
Ideologi del lavoro produttivo	Trasferire l'azione dalla fabbrica al territorio	Condizione che difetta nella regolarità e continuità della prestazione lavorativa
Figura operaia antagonista	Separare tra il lavoro come possibilità di vivere ed i desideri	«Tempo di lavoro» autoregolato, saltuario, non irrigidito.
Operaio giovane	Lavorare in modo nuovo	
Forza-Lavoro giovanile	Ridurre il lavoro attraverso le macchine	
Disoccupato giovane	Realizzarsi, anche nel lavoro	
Movimento del lavoro non-operaio (autonomia)	Riprendersi la vita	
Forza-lavoro bacata (per i padroni)		

*Source: author's own work*

“If you ‘discredit’ the labour market and its coercive mechanisms, you are already creating a different possibility: In fact, today you are already a stranger to this market. You are an outcast. Of course, you eat, consume, and take money which to a large extent comes from this market, but you are an outsider from a ‘cultural’ point of view.”<sup>45</sup>

As Girardi noted in 1980, the “young workers” saw their identity as the antithesis to the traditional worker identity – they felt themselves belonging first and foremost to the “youth” social group rather than to the category of workers. As such, they rejected the entire dynamic reproducing the rotation of roles as oppressed and oppressor.

How did these young people define work? How did they semantically describe the new relationship between work and the individual? How did their perception of freedom and coercion change?

In addition to the links highlighted by the quantitative analysis presented above (figures 1–4), qualitative analysis reveals a set of properties and actions referring to the concept of work and revolving around the two pivotal concepts of coercion and freedom. This helps us find answers to these specific questions (table 2).<sup>46</sup>

The first observation concerns the fact that while the set of properties associated with work in the texts emphasises its coercive nature as a mechanism of ineluctable power, the verbs linked to “*lavoro*” are mostly about liberation from work or, as we shall see later, the liberation *of* work and labour.

For the *Autonomia*, the “ideology of work” was that of work as a “reason for existence” as stated in the Bible, a “fixed centrepiece” conditioning everything in everyone’s life.<sup>47</sup> In this sense, the *Autonomia* considered it both necessary and harmful at the same time: necessary for survival, but harmful because it was tiring and alienating. Indeed, one of the most frequently recurring comments is that “work, apart from giving you a headache and a bellyache, gives you absolutely nothing.”<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, according to one of the interviews recorded by Girardi, work was thought to turn humans into robots because

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45 Gad Lerner/Diego Benecchi (eds.), *I non garantiti*, Roma 1977, 29.

46 Refer to the table in the appendix for this part.

47 *Il rifiuto del lavoro*, 1974. Work in the Judeo-Christian discourse is both punishment and redemption, while in Catholic cultures such as the Italian one was and is, it is both a fundamental right and a duty for every person. This definition originating in the “social doctrine” of the Catholic Church maintains a key importance for and influence on all Italian political cultures to this day. In the encyclical “*Rerum Novarum*” (1891) and the later pastoral constitution “*Gaudium et Spes*” (1965), work is considered a central human task essential for covering the needs of one’s own life and simultaneously sustaining the life of the community. In the “Code of Camaldoli” (1943), work and labour were defined as the main pillars of social cohesion – and in fact as “the means of attaining the perfection of the human person willed by God”.

48 Silvia Belforte/Martino Ciatti, *Il fondo del barile. Riorganizzazione del ciclo produttivo e composizione operaia alla Fiat dopo le nuove assunzioni*, Milano 1980, 93.



“In the factory, whether you work or don’t work, you feel bad either way, there’s no difference; after eight hours, even if you don’t do anything, when you come out you are destroyed. In the factory, apart from the struggles, you don’t live; you do things that really reduce you to schizophrenia, you go crazy. I would work if I found satisfaction at work, but factory work does not provide satisfaction, also because you create things that you didn’t decide.”<sup>49</sup>

Factory work was viewed by the *Autonomia* not only as the venue of capitalist exploitation; it was also considered “expropriation” and “sacrifice and performance”. Many other interviews confirm the physical effects of the intense psychological pressure caused by factory work:

“At 7:30 in the morning, I always had to throw up, then I got in my car and drove off. [...] And that meant that the moment had come when you could no longer bear the work in the factory [...] doing an alienating job, a job that had nothing to do with your life. You were in there for eight hours. You couldn’t figure out why it had to be like that.”<sup>50</sup>

In the end, work was primarily seen as an obstacle to happiness.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, emotions themselves became political practices: Melancholy and depression, for example, ceased to be considered mere expressions of unhappiness, instead becoming signs of an awareness of the exploitative conditions imposed by the social organisation.<sup>52</sup>

“The jobs that affect us the most are so alienating that they destroy us physically and above all mentally, they suck your brain dry, and so in order not to die of mental starvation you have to create, fantasise, play, play games with the machine.”<sup>53</sup>

On a semantic level, work was thus seen as generating a range of actions in which constraint and oppression were substantiated. It was viewed as a form of “slavery” that one was forced to accept, an “obligation to sell oneself in order to live”.<sup>54</sup> Elsewhere, it was described as “the stratagem by which the repressive society manages to delay the general transition to a classless society free from the slavery of labour.”<sup>55</sup>

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49 Interview with a worker of Mirafiori A on 6 February 1978, in: Girardi, *Coscienza operaia*, 1980, 156. All translations are by the author.

50 Interview in: AA.VV., *Settanta7*. *Disoccupate*, 1977, s.p.

51 *Scuola e famiglia contro il movimento*, in: *A/traverso* (April 1972), 3.

52 In Germany, for example, this idea was well represented in the 1968 film *Zur Sache, Schätzchen!*.

53 *Convegno dei Circoli del Proletariato Giovanile*, 1977.

54 *Il rifiuto del lavoro*, 1974. The factory as slavery can easily be linked to modern understandings of the ‘slave’ as someone without power, respectively as a status destructive towards the self.

55 Martignoni/Morandini, *Il diritto all’odio dentro*, 1977, 93.

For Franco Berardi, one of the most influential theorists of cultural post-*operaismo*, the coercive aspect is directly linked in a Foucauldian manner to the factory as the paradigmatic place of discipline and control “on which all society is based, and to which all society is functionalised (the barracks, the school, the prison, the asylum, the family).”<sup>56</sup> The controversial aim of the movement was thus also to break free from the “constraints of the factory” and the “control of the master” in order to dismantle the “culture of work” and regain possession of everything that capitalism exploited in the name of profit (even that which is “superfluous” to life), to be experienced in one’s free time. Moreover, the oppressive nature of factory work is embodied in the sources not only in fatigue but above all in the structuration of working time and its repetitiveness. Another series of interviews conducted at Fiat in Turin in 1980 reveals that

“A widespread sense of tedium, of indifference, characterises the behaviour of the new workers towards permanent employment work; of annoyance regarding the organisation of production, its times, its rhythms, the schedules, the endlessly repeated tasks; of resentment towards the bureaucratic-fiscal language of bosses and foremen, panderers and delegates.”<sup>57</sup>

From being the privileged place of formation and definition of the “values” constituting the “class consciousness”, factory work had devolved in the perception of the “young workers” into a source of destruction of physical and mental health as well as of expropriation of their time and freedom.<sup>58</sup>

It is in this context that a recurring set of verbs and actions expressing the critical distance from structured labour (for example in the factory) and the desire to “take one’s life back” by liberating it from work, as one of the movement’s slogans put it, emerges from the sources: The three most-used verbs relating to work are to “withdraw” (oneself from control), to “reduce” (working time), and to “refuse” work.

This schematisation makes it easier to understand why the semantic clusters of “life” (outside the factory) and “school” (formation) are found in the diagram in

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56 Berardi, *La trama*, 1976, 7.

57 Belforte/Ciatti, *Il fondo del barile*, 1980, 93.

58 In the South, the health issue takes on a particular specificity. Since the early 1960s, the main sectors of the Cassa del Mezzogiorno’s industrial development strategy for the South were steel and petrochemicals, which contributed to high pollution. Given this particular industrial structure with severe impact on the environment in Campania, Apulia, and Sicily, and following a long series of environmental disasters, the opposition to the factory through the topic of ‘health’ expressed by groups significantly distant from the environmentalist movements has indicated the considerable diffusion of an ecological consciousness articulated on different levels: the impact on workers of the most innovative automation processes, the impact on the surrounding territory of industrial production, and the repercussions in daily life, particularly in the food cycle, of risky technological applications. See Ambrosi, *L’anno della consapevolezza*, 2014, 24–27.

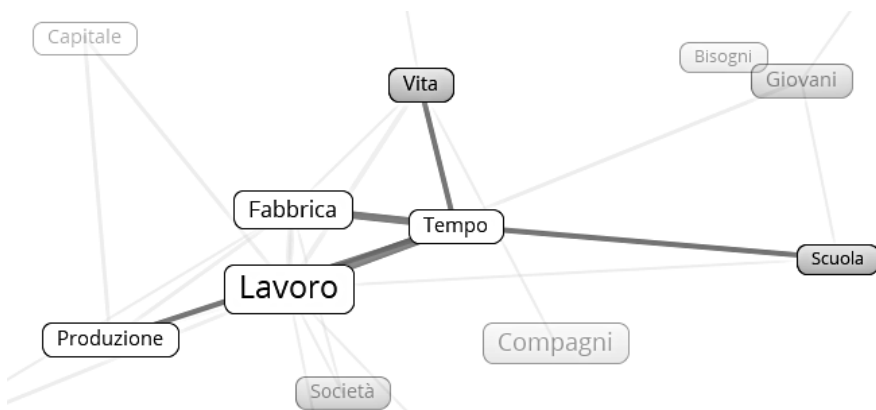


Figure 5: Semantic network of “Tempo” within the source corpus  
 Source: author’s own work

clear opposition to “factory” and “work” (figure 5). “Work is all a dangerous occupational disease,” the magazine *A/traverso* declared in typical hyperbolic style in 1976:

“Working forty hours is not necessary to reproduce the world of things required to live, only to guarantee to the owner class its political domination over proletarian life. Breaking the forty-hour wall, working all but very little: That is the end of the status quo and that is what we want.”<sup>59</sup>

Indeed, the central position in this dialectic relationship is undoubtedly occupied by the semantic node of “time”, as shown in the diagram. In fact, the contradiction between “life time” (also labelled as “formation time”) and “work time” was becoming the foundation on which a new generation of workers proposed to redefine their relationship with work. Starting from the factory and trying to overcome its centrality to – and perhaps normative effect on – society and the working class led, as we will see below, to experimentation with new types of activities in which individuals could express their creativity and freedom on the one hand, as well as to practices such as absenteeism, supplementing one’s primary wage with an informal or undeclared second job, sabotaging production, or following a self-declared work schedule on the other.

This centrality of time is more evident when it is configured as “free time” or creative time, although in the graph both “(work) time” and “free time” are part of the same semantic cluster as “work”. In the sources, however, “free time” is placed at a clear dialogic distance from “work” (figure 6). In the perception of the *Autonomia*, free time was controlled by capital to drive the reproduction time of the labour force.

59 Le macchine, 1976.



Figure 6: Detail of the semantic network of “Lavoro” within the source corpus  
Source: author’s own work

Free time also contrasted with the logic of “capitalist domination, [which] establishes and makes possible its very existence by structuring everyday life in such a way as to reaffirm the dominance of the productive principle at all times.”<sup>60</sup>

This is why the reduction of working time, one of the most common and debated demands of the *Autonomia* movement, was considered misleading by some:

“Sure, it’s good that everyone is working in the factory, and [that] everyone is [working] a little less; but in terms of work, I don’t think it’s a step forward. [...] If the solution is to reduce working time, nothing has been done to change work. We have only shortened it.”<sup>61</sup>

The aim to be achieved, as we shall see, was an increase in free time through creation of a self-regulated, occasional, non-rigid “working time”. This proposal was articulated on two levels. On the first level, the argument went against work itself and included not just its refusal but, in a far more radical understanding, a total rejection of the system of pre-established values for which labour was the symbol and pivot, as well as of productive activity in its entirety – that is, of the obligation to produce surplus value. From this perspective, the workers continued to carry out their function in the “project of capital” by working; they valorised themselves as a workforce

60 Berardi, *La trama*, 1976.

61 Annunziata (ed.), *Lavorare stanca*, 1978, 51.

commodity, making it impossible to overthrow the system that produced and reproduced them as a subordinate class.<sup>62</sup>

This is where the practice of absenteeism and sabotage came in, which also marked the growing divide between the young and the old guard of the working class. Since “working time” was not considered part of “life time”, but rather as time taken away from life, it seemed logical for workers to organise their existence in the factory as a form of anti-work defence. Sabotage acquired systemic significance throughout Italy during the period in question, especially among the younger workers.<sup>63</sup> In order to reduce working hours to a minimum and unshackle their creativity as much as possible, they frequently reduced their working rhythms. But sabotage was not merely a “revolt against the clock” that regularly resulted in acts of violence against staff members controlling the pace of production. It was also a voluntary and conscious subtraction of forces and intelligence from work through mass absenteeism and frequent breaks for playing cards, reading, or smoking. In these spaces of unproductive freedom, the factory “conceived as an inhuman camp” began to become a place “of study, of discussion, of freedom and love”.<sup>64</sup> An equally central phenomenon was the practice of “putting oneself on sick leave” as a means of reclaiming one’s life time.

The second level, a more general one, concerned the expressed need to not make work the only reason for living – that is, to structure the spaces and possibilities of free time to pursue projects and paths of self-realisation. In the post-workerist vision, capitalism constituted an inhibiting factor with regard to the total expression of the individual, which in itself was much richer in its material, “relational, emotional, and also economic” expression.<sup>65</sup>

On this second level, as shown in Table 2, two other groups of actions and verbs appear in the sources. They characterise the rethinking of work in relation to the self and to life. On a semantic level, work itself thus becomes the object to be freed in order to make it part of a personal dimension of self-realisation.

As a result, from 1977 onward, more and more young people began to experiment with casual or alternative jobs and to prefer them over steady employment. In this sense, unemployment was also (re-)defined to a certain extent as self-determined, occasional, unregulated “working time”.

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62 Liberare la vita dal lavoro, in: Rosso. *Giornale dentro il movimento*, 9 October 1975, 12.

63 Statistical data in Pietro Ichino, *Malattia, assenteismo, e giustificato motivo di licenziamento*, in: *Rivista giuridica del lavoro e della previdenza sociale* 17/3 (1976), 259–281.

64 Nanni Balestrini/Primo Moroni, *L'orda d'oro. 1968–1977: La grande ondata rivoluzionaria e creativa, politica ed esistenziale*, nuova edition, Milano 1997, 426–434.

65 Ottonio Ovidi, *Il rifiuto del lavoro. Teorie e pratiche nell'autonomia operaia*, Roma 2015, 72.

“After 1977, when I started working, I began to get the idea that it was necessary to make work a moment in which one could also do pleasant things. The fact of not being guaranteed [i.e. through permanent employment, author’s note] could be experienced in different ways; one thing was to be forced to accept any kind of work in order to have an income, and this is certainly the negative side. But there could also be a need to look for a rewarding job that was not secure but fulfilled other needs.”<sup>66</sup>

As stated by *Rosso*, the young workers looked “outside the factory to more fluid and less rigid opportunities for income”<sup>67</sup> because, as they argued, precariousness itself could be overturned in its meaning and thus obtain a new dimension.

The “freeing of labour” was thus to occur through new forms of work. And indeed, the Italian statistical institute CENSIS registered a growing tendency toward self-employment among young people in its 1979 survey. The two main reasons identified were that self-employment allowed a modularisation of actual employment to accommodate other obligations and needs, and that it enabled a more personalised professional commitment outside of rigid schemes and frameworks.<sup>68</sup> This led many young factory workers to abandon the fight to “protect jobs” and move toward (self-)flexibilisation by consciously integrating into a model of irregular work. According to contemporary observers, this was closely related to the increased level of education in society that had now become evident among young people:

“Precisely because I studied, I was in a state of precariousness until an advanced age. [...] In this precariousness I built my own life, my own relationships, my own values, my own daily life. I did it through school and without having work as a fixed pivot to rotate around. And that is something valuable and important. So I am looking for a job that is as short as possible, that does not interrupt this life which is already established.”<sup>69</sup>

Undoubtedly, this trend was first of all an immediate, creative, and unexpected generational response to the precariousness and flexibility imposed by the ongoing restructuring process of the industrial production and employment sector, which at the time was even supported by the Communist Party.<sup>70</sup> For many people, the idea

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66 AA.VV., *Settanta7*. Disoccupate, 1977, s.p.

67 *Liberare la vita dal lavoro*, in: *Rosso*. *Giornale dentro il movimento*, 9 October 1975, 12.

68 CENSIS, *XIII rapporto/1979 sulla situazione sociale del paese*, vol. 5: *Censis ricerca*, Roma 1979.

69 In 1977, Lucia Annunziata conducted a series of interviews with four young people who shared the same political activism and precarious situation. The result was a debate that was subsequently transcribed in her book-length survey. This and the following quotations are my translations of passages from this text. Silvio interviewed in: Annunziata (ed.), *Lavorare stanca*, 1978, 50.

70 La VII conferenza operaia del PCI, in: *L'Unità*, 5 March 1978, 7.

of “working as an occasional circumstance” represented a way of self-liberation from traditional forms of work dependence and coercion.

This was initially made explicit in the revaluing of self-employed and creative craft work, which became part of the horizon of possible sources for flexible income in the late 1970s: “I do things myself, I set my own work schedule. I can work more or less in the morning and, if I’m lucky, I earn about ten thousand lire a day, but it’s unstable.”<sup>71</sup>

In many cases, however, this same flexibility and precariousness made it painfully evident that while providing some measure of personal satisfaction, these types of jobs were not by themselves capable of changing the production relations:

“It’s a job I do more to fulfil myself with this kind of activity that makes my hands move rather than to make money. This job has changed my life in part because it is one of the few things I have, that I do. [...] Now this project is going ahead, even if – I repeat – I think it’s only an attempt, because trying to change the meaning of work with craftsmanship is very difficult.”<sup>72</sup>

The need to change the relationship towards work and labour, and therefore also their definition and perception, in a holistic fashion is expressed in relation to the search for gratification and personal fulfilment even *through* work. Further reflections on this issue in connection with the problem of time, however, reveal that all this did not prevent the risk of continuing to reproduce the same “old” mechanism of coercion:

“I did not accept the separation between the work you do and the work that gives you the possibility to live, and then the things you would like to do. [...] In fact one looks for fulfilment in the things one does, and therefore also in work. [If there were the possibility of doing such a job and it took you twelve hours ...] I certainly wouldn’t call it work anymore. That is, I would no longer consider it work, because it would be like being an artist: Expressing yourself would be more important than the effort.”<sup>73</sup>

For this reason, particularly in the early 1980s, a considerable number of young people in Italy experimented with casual or alternative jobs to engage in the political questioning of both the factory as a battlefield and the worker as the central subject of the revolution.

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71 Dick interviewed in: Annunziata (ed.), *Lavorare stanca*, 1978, 38f.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 44.



Among other things, the practice of rejecting controlled and regulated permanent employment caused a shift in political and social reflection – away from the criticising of capitalism and towards a postmodern political claim to the satisfaction of needs and desires. Instead of the factory, the focus was increasingly placed on the city and its various spaces, possibilities, and communities. There was also a significant trend among young men and women during this time “to organise themselves in cooperatives because they want to realise themselves amongst themselves and give stability to their work.”<sup>74</sup> Following the same concept, however, cooperatives soon moved from handicrafts to increasingly specialised applications, including technological services. In the long run, these experiments helped – at least in Italy – to lay the cultural foundations for the new creative and intellectual professions relating to immaterial and hypothetical works that developed and established themselves in the 1980s and 1990s, often in conjunction with computerisation: copywriters, designers, desktop publishers, consultants, and the like. As a result, these very same tendencies paradoxically caused a further shift in the search for autonomy, self-realisation, and creativity during the late 1990s – into the neoliberal “myth of independence and self-entrepreneurship”.

As we have seen, this trend originated from certain basic social processes like individualisation and pluralisation as well as from the subsequent new awareness they created regarding life, the self, and consumerism. Until this time, ‘work’ and ‘life’ had been two closely related elements that essentially formed a semantic unit. The radical deconstruction of work as an instance of life hierarchisation – that is, its definition by the *Autonomia* movement as slavery and a mechanism of coercion – evidently contributed to a fundamental, though not immediate, development of a new semantic concerning work, coercion, and freedom. And as we have seen in this article, this in turn led to a shift in the relationship between individuals (especially young people) and work.

### 3. Conclusions

It is precisely in this twofold short-term and long-term perspective that historical semantics reveals itself as a useful analytical tool for conducting historical-hermeneutic analyses of cultural phenomena and processes (trends) that are otherwise difficult to measure empirically due to their (at least initial) marginality.<sup>75</sup> As

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<sup>74</sup> Pierluigi and Dick interviewed in: *ibid.*, 51.

<sup>75</sup> For an introduction to the epistemological status of historical trend research, see the weblog “TriBES – Trends, Identities and New Belongings in the Ephemeral Society – Historische Trendforschung” at <https://tribes.hypotheses.org/>.

demonstrated by this case study, historical semantics makes a decisive contribution to enabling a new way of looking at niche cultural phenomena, and thus of “taking a snapshot” of the moment in which (and above all, where) new cultural and social trends are formed, for example in the world of work. Since such trends often gain relevance only once they have already reached the mainstream, historical semantics is useful for historical trend research to make the medium and long term visible as well – in other words, to foreground the performative capacity of individual semantic elements in the formation of new cultural patterns and standards of orientation for society, both at the level of discourse and of practices. This is why – at least for the so-called history of the present – historical semantics methodologically results in a mix between network analysis, other forms of discourse analysis, and a “classical” critical reading of the selected sources. But while discourse analysis permits a comprehensive theoretical interpretation of social macro-discourse over time (in our example, the discourse on work and labour),<sup>76</sup> historical semantics provides scholars of contemporary history with the tools to empirically perceive and reconstruct specific areas of such complex and highly differentiated macro-discourses, making visible both the different narrative structures and the generated social practice. In this paper specifically, through a network visualisation among other things, historical semantic analysis has allowed us to understand the interaction between political, social, and philosophical changes in the conceptualisation of work; in the first place across space – that is, in different social and geographical contexts – and then over time through analysis of the performative changes this reconceptualisation brought with it.

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76 Reiner Keller, *Analysing Discourse. An Approach from the Sociology of Knowledge*, in: *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung* 6/3 (2005), 223–242.