RESEARCH ARTICLE

NOT ONLY RIDERS
The Uncertain Boundaries of Digital Creative Work as a Frontier for Emerging Actors in Interest Representation

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ABSTRACT: Platform work rarely is an exclusive job. On the contrary, it often coexists with various types of self-employment, usually offline, as a secondary activity and source of additional income. This is the case with many creative workers that are exposed to job and income discontinuity, to which they frequently respond by holding multiple jobs. Several studies have shown how work fragmentation acts as a barrier to collective action. On the other hand, a few innovative trajectories are being shaped among trade unions and 'bottom-up' organisations. This article explores emerging forms of interest representation, focusing on mutual-aid cooperatives and professional associations of graphic and web designers, working off and on platform, in Italy and the Netherlands. It analyses their logics of action and strategies. To do so, it presents the findings of two research projects conducted between 2016 and 2018.

KEYWORDS: Creative work, Platform work, Interest representation, Mutual-aid cooperatives, Professional associations

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1. Introduction

The host of technological change known as 'digitalisation' has arisen and developed as a disruptive phenomenon, pervading all domains of social life. It is a constitutive set of processes occurring in the sphere of production, at the heart of what is conventionally referred to as the Fourth Industrial Revolution. As such, it has changed the character of work (Kalleberg 2009) while posing challenges to regulatory institutions and economic democracy itself (Atkinson 2015).

In this context, digital work platforms have created new market environments combining old and new forms of work, environments that scholars have started to investigate in recent years.

Platform work, in turn, is associated with polarised issues. On the one hand, a great deal of emphasis is put on work fragmentation and standardisation and on disadvantageous working conditions linked to a lack of transparency in the algorithms that govern work processes, an issue that can be framed in terms of exploitation (Huws 2014). On the other hand, some authors stress the platforms' proven capacity to facilitate the match-up between labour demand and supply and to enhance workers' skills (Kenney and Zysman 2016; Srnicek 2017).

The rapid expansion and pervasiveness of this segment of the digital economy have raised concerns all around the world. The challenging working conditions of particular types of workers, such as *riders* and *drivers*, have caught the attention of many observers, including academics, policymakers and representatives of civil society. A public discourse has, thus, developed, promptly followed by pressing demands for regulation.

Driven by the need to know more about this phenomenon, there has been an effort to launch seminal studies. These pioneering works have made a significant contribution to outlining the contours of a seemingly shapeless field of activity and to identifying the challenges involved in implementing a 'high road' to the platform economy (Degryse 2016; Frey and Osborne 2013; OECD 2015).

In the same period, the European Parliament has made its first foray into analysing the *Social Protection of Workers in the Platform Economy* (IP/A/EMPL/2016-11). This project has brought to light the weakness of employment in this field. It has also revealed the difficulty of collecting information on both the demand and supply sides. A few years later, attempts were pursued by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (Current Population Survey Staff 2018) and Eurofound (2018)[1].

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[1] For a complete review of the studies conducted on this topic, their methodological issues and research implications, see Pais (2019).

Aiming to go beyond this line of investigation, this article presents selected findings from two research projects carried out between 2016 and 2018. Both were centred on *creative workers* that sell their labour *off* and/or *on* platform and had the dual aim of assessing workers' needs and demands and examine the related responses in terms of interest representation. The analysis in the following pages focuses on the case studies of *graphic and web designers* conducted in two countries, Italy and the Netherlands.

The general hypothesis, based on Olson's (1965) theory, is that *shared interests do not necessarily generate collective action* unless there are 'incentives' that discourage opportunistic behaviours and make it convenient to join interest organisations. The two studies have taken a specific category of creative workers as a case in point to show that, for some occupational groups, composed of high-skilled workers operating in narrow sectoral labour markets, *shared interests are being transformed into something different from traditional forms of collective action*.

The emerging 'model of integration', *à la* Durkheim (1897), includes new or relatively new forms of communitarian and associative regulation, such as those represented by *mutual-aid cooperatives* and *professional associations*. These organisations play a crucial role in building 'collective narratives'. Indeed, they generate an embryonic basis for the definition of shared needs but also serve to foster *collaborative* strategies in the place of *competitive* behaviours that are typical of self-employed workers. Not 'rivals' but 'allies', then, as Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2017) wished for in their analysis of the forces driving non-standard workers to engage in competition.

In this sense, both workers' strategies and organisations' logics of action are critical factors to be investigated in depth. Contextual factors should also be considered if we are to comprehend the value systems to which actors – either individual or collective – refer (Lowery, Baumgartner, Berkhout, Berry, Halpin, Hojnacki, Klüver, Kohler-Koch, Richardson, and Schlozman 2015).

The article is divided into three main sections. In the next section, we briefly outline the diversity of employment patterns in the platform economy and the way it affects interest representation (§ 2). In the subsequent section, we provide a literature review to frame the inherent problems of creative work in light of digitalisation and, again, the implications of these problems for interest representation (§ 3). In the central section, we present the research findings, focusing on examples of mutual-aid cooperatives and professional associations (§ 4). The analysis has a strong focus on the 'meso' level, as it concentrates on the logics of action and strategies pursued by organisations that contribute to reconfiguring the arena of interest representation in digital labour markets. As such, these actors should be seen, first and foremost, as 'potential' sources of representation, with the current demand – either manifest or latent – exceeding supply. In

this regard, workers' views are also taken into consideration. There follows a discussion of the complementarities – and possible alliances – among different actors in this field (§ 5). In the conclusions, we develop a general reflection on the changes occurring in employment relations, drawing a parallel with the 19th century when workers found support in different forms of mutual aid as a response to the rising individualism of a developing liberal society.
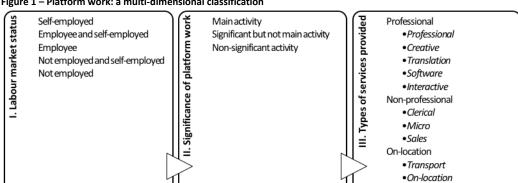
2. Heterogeneity of platform work and its influence on interest representation

Platform work is rarely an exclusive job (Huws, Spencer, and Coates 2019). On the contrary, it is characterised by a wide range of employment patterns. Several studies have been carried out to 'map' it. One of them, the COLLEEM[2] Survey, based on a sample of 32,500 workers in 14 countries, has developed a well-structured taxonomy (see Pesole, Urzi Brancati, Fernández Macías, Biagi, and González Vázquez 2018).

Within the framework of COLLEEM, workers are first classified on the basis of their *labour market status*, identifying five combinations between salaried employment, self-employment and inactivity (see Figure 1, rectangle I, below). Here, particular attention is granted to mixed situations such as the cases of people who are, at the same time, 'employees and self-employed' (seeing themselves as employees in their main activity, and self-employed in their secondary activity), and individuals who are 'not employed and self-employed' (not participating in the labour market with a formal status, although working as self-employed). Workers, then, are sub-divided into three groups, depending on the *significance of platform work*, measured as the percentage of income earned and the number of hours worked on platform (rectangle II). Platform work is performed as 'a main activity' when workers obtain 50 per cent or more of their earned income from it, working more than 20 hours per week; it is 'a significant but not main activity' when they earn at least 25 per cent of their income, working at least 10 hours per week; it is, instead, 'a non-significant activity', when they earn less than 25 per cent of their income, working less than 10 hours per week. Finally, workers are distributed into three macro-categories based on the *types of services provided*, namely 'professional', 'non-professional' and 'on-location' services (rectangle III).

Overall, 45 combinations can be identified. Still, given that platform workers can simultaneously provide different types of services, this number can even rise to 90.

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[2] *Collaborative Economy and Employment*.

Figure 1 – Platform work: a multi-dimensional classification

I. Labour market status	II. Significance of platform work	III. Types of services provided
Self-employed Employee and self-employed Employee Not employed and self-employed Not employed	Main activity Significant but not main activity Non-significant activity	Professional • *Professional* • *Creative* • *Translation* • *Software* • *Interactive* Non-professional • *Clerical* • *Micro* • *Sales* On-location • *Transport* • *On-location* • *Ancillary*

Source: authors' processing of COLLEEM data

The complexity emerging from this classification can be easily traced to the difficulty of designing a system of rights and protections for platform workers. Moreover, it affects interest representation for several reasons. First, the heterogeneity of platform work translates into a diversity of *work identities*, which may refer to different *types of organisations*, each following its logic of action. Second, the differential significance of platform work as a source of income also influences the formation of work identities, so that it cannot be assumed that all those who work on platform declare themselves to be platform workers. Third, the combination of different work identities and labour market statuses creates 'grey zones' (on this concept, see Bureau and Dieuaide 2018), not easy to codify in terms of collective interests. Fourth, platform work includes mixes of creative-professional and self-employed work, inherently resistant to collective action. These factors make it difficult for collective actors to define shared strategies.

Indeed, the low degree of unionisation – or, generally, associative membership – of workers is not only an element of weakness in itself but also a factor of inequality in relation to those operating in traditional labour markets. This brings with it a condition of relative vulnerability due to a gap in the protections provided (Grimshaw, Johnson, Keizer, and Rubery 2016). This gap applies to skilled and unskilled workers alike. As a matter of fact, the comparative advantage given by high skills is offset by digitalisation, as a set of changes taking place in the sphere of production (Eurofound 2015).

Creative workers are an example of this new form of labour market segmentation. In fact, they are high-skilled workers and provide services with creative content, but many of them operate in labour markets that have long been affected by digitalisation and are sensitive to technological change. Moreover, they are exposed to competition and frequently have a weak status, with self-employment weighing on them heavily. As

such, they are vulnerable to work and income discontinuity. Freelancers, in particular, tend to combine off- and on-platform work (Pesole *et al.* 2018).

3. Creative work facing 'platformisation': challenges for collective action

Creative work, too, is characterised by a high degree of complexity. The creative industries, in fact, are heterogeneous and fragmented in terms of company size, product type, target market, organisational models, employment relations and workers' skills. This diversity affects the character of work itself. Salaried employment prevails in sectors such as printing and publishing, while discontinuous work characterises cinema, television, live performance and the visual arts; self-employment and professional work, instead, are typical of architecture, design and communication. Work discontinuity and self-employment represent an area of vulnerability formed of workers who are exposed to competitive pressures such as those deriving from technological change.

Creative and platform work combine in ways that make the picture more complicated. In the previous section, we identified the provision of 'creative' services as part of the set of activities carried out by those who have been labelled 'professional' platform workers. To fully understand the dynamics of interest representation in this field, thus, it is essential to account for the inherent problems of creative work and interpret them in light of the changes borne by digitalisation.

The literature on creative work has identified a series of common features that are marked by ambiguity (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011). Very briefly, employment and working conditions are reported to be problematic. To begin with, jobs are insecure and precarious (Ross 2003). Freelancing is one of the dominant employment patterns, following the tendency to outsource creative services and the resulting reorganisation of work on a 'project-by-project' basis (Murdock 2003), a trend that has led scholars to talk about the 'projectification of work' (Maylor, Brady, Cooke-Davies, and Hodgson 2006). In this context, workers are pushed to acquire self-entrepreneurial attitudes and pursue 'self-branding' strategies, putting a great deal of effort into the construction of their reputations and portfolios (Gandini2016a, 2016b), also engaging in intense social networking (McRobbie 2002; Antcliff, Saundry, and Stuart 2007). They, therefore, have strong incentives to work longer in exchange for little money. Indeed, working hours are long and unpredictable, with extended periods of overtime. Earnings, instead, are low, with a segment of workers, especially younger ones, willing to work for free (Ursell 2000; Umney and Kretsos 2014). For this reason, such workers often hold multiple jobs, even outside the creative field, to cover their living expenses (Throsby 2012).

At this point, some remarks must be made concerning the factors that are likely to influence creative workers' choice to work – in whole or in part – on platform. The diffusion of self-employment and the exposure to work discontinuity may operate as facilitating forces, but they do not seem to play a decisive role. As the classification in the previous section has shown, platform work can be performed in various ways, either as a main or secondary activity and to different extents of significance, a fact that allows workers to combine off- and on-platform work with either employee or self-employed status. More importantly, platform work represents an opportunity, especially for young people in early career stages when they need to build their portfolios to find a job or attract clients (Bellini, Burroni, Dorigatti, Gherardini, and Manzo 2018). As has been demonstrated, then, earnings are positively correlated with online reputation scores (Gandini, Pais, and Beraldo 2016), a fact that implies that workers are obliged to engage in continuous self-promotion. The significance of unpaid or low-paid work is another reason why creative-sector people choose to work on platform. In this case, however, it is likely that platform work is performed as a secondary activity and might even involve supplying low-skilled (on-location) services since it is intended to be a source of additional income aimed at ensuring workers' livelihood.

There are three reasons commonly put forward to explain why creative workers – either off or on platform – accept disadvantageous working conditions (see Bellini *et al.* 2018). These factors are also key to comprehending workers' attitudes towards collective action. First, several studies stress the fact that creatives are pushed by 'intrinsic' motivations (Ursell 2000; Umney and Kretsos 2014), so much so that scholars often use expressions like 'passionate work' (McRobbie 2002) or 'labour of love' (Gill and Pratt 2008). Their basic argument, nevertheless, is that passion feeds 'self-exploitation' (Ross 2003). Second, a common belief among workers is that tomorrow's success depends on today's sacrifices (Bergvall-Kareborn and Howcroft 2013). Third, scholars argue that the absence or weakness of trade unions in this field is the cause of the workers' lack of awareness about their rights, a condition that leads them to accept their situations uncritically (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011).

The point worth noting, here, is that the issue of exploitation lies at the heart of the debate on platform work as well (see, for instance, Armano, Murgia, and Teli 2017). In the opinion of Fisher (2012), though, the dimensions of 'exacerbating exploitation' and 'enabling de-alienation' coexist in online labour. To quote the same author, "immaterial labour, in comparison with material labour, has a greater potential to be enjoyable, involve personal, idiosyncratic components, carried out during leisure time or even be perceived as a form of leisure activity, playful, emotional and communicative" (Fisher 2012, 181).

That being said, platform work also displays traits of specificity in respect to interest representation (Kilhoffer, Lenaerts, and Beblavý 2017; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018). This specificity is due to the 'tripartite' character of digital work platforms, an arrangement that means that labour disputes are more often with clients rather than with platforms. Another challenge to collective action derives from the absence of a 'workplace' in a strict sense, a space where workers can meet and organise. It is not surprising that the only cases of protests have been those of food delivery workers, who have the same working conditions and physical places to meet; moreover, these episodes of mobilisation have been mostly spontaneous and self-organised (Pais 2019). The relative absence of collective action may also stem from the difficulties traditional trade unions experience in adapting their strategies to those who work on platform.

Nevertheless, to deal with the demand for protection arising from non-standard labour markets such as those related to the creative industries, traditional trade unions have occasionally developed innovative strategies and forms of organisation (Bellini *et al.* 2018). In addition, new or relatively new actors have emerged to demand an extension of welfare rights and put together forms of self-protection (Ciarini, Di Nunzio, and Pratelli 2013; Ciarini 2014; Mingione, Andreotti, Benassi, Borghi, Cavalca, and Fellini 2014). The latter type of organisation, also referred to as 'quasi-unions' (Heckscher and Carre 2006), 'pre-unions' (Fine 2006) or 'proto-unions' (Sullivan 2010), have been found among both low-skilled service workers and high-skilled white-collar workers. Similar patterns are also emerging among platform workers (Vandaele 2018). Still, they do not seem to be an alternative to trade unions. In this sense, an 'alliance' between the two may represent a promising way to help workers to defend their interests (see Heckscher and Carre 2006, in relation to this point as well).

In light of the above premises, this article aims to contribute to the academic debate on platform work in two ways. Empirically, it offers an insight into an unexplored, or little-explored, labour market segment, that of 'creative professionals', i.e. high-skilled, mostly self-employed workers who work on platform as a secondary activity and, as such, are inherently reluctant to join in collective action. Theoretically, it reframes the issue of *individualism* – as a principle driving the competitive behaviours of creative platform workers – arguing that this trend is not inconsistent with the rise of collective narratives. The added value of the article lies in its attempt to hybridise the discourses on creative labour, platform work and interest representation. Furthermore, it aspires to widen the debate by focusing on 'non-union' organisations as sources of representation for 'unorganised' workers with the potential to generate new forms of solidarity.

4. Emerging actors in interest representation: evidence from two studies

4.1. Brief notes on research methods and empirical contexts

Assembling two projects is not an easy task. It poses thematic, methodological and analytical challenges. If possible, however, it brings some advantages. In this case, the assembling operation was facilitated by the fact that the projects focused on the same subject, *creative work*, and had the same purpose, *studying interest representation in creative labour markets*. There were also analogies in the research methods, as both studies prioritised *qualitative methods* for data collection. From an analytical point of view, they relied on *country studies* conducted at the 'meso' (associative) and 'micro' (individual) levels. That said, the advantages lie in the possibility of enlarging the basis of empirical materials and benefiting from the kind of cumulative knowledge deriving from exchanging ideas among research groups.

In detail, the first project, denominated IR-CREA, was conducted by the University of Florence in partnership with the Universities of Amsterdam and Copenhagen within the framework of an EU programme[3]. The second one was carried out by the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' on behalf of Unipol, as a third-party project.

Specifically, the article presents data collected from two studies, both focused on the sectoral case of *graphic and web design*, conducted in *Italy* (as part of the IR-CREA project) and *the Netherlands* (as part of the Sapienza project).

The analysis is based on a total of 42 semi-structured interviews with different kinds of informants (see Table 1, below): i) representatives of social partner organisations (i.e. employers' associations and trade unions); ii) delegates of non-union organisations (mutual-aid cooperatives, associations of professionals and freelancers); iii) exponents of other organisations (public institutions, education institutes and web communities); iv) workers (employers, employees and freelancers). At the level of individual actors, the interviewees were selected taking into account the diversity of socio-occupational profiles and organisational environments in which they were embedded. Different sources were used to identify them: preliminary explorations with the associations gave rise to the first contacts, after which word of mouth, in keeping with a snowball procedure, allowed researchers to compose a larger sample.

Table 1 -Summary of interviews

Type of actor	Number of interviews	Country		Gender		Age	
		Italy	Netherlands	Male	Female	<35	≥35
Actors of industrial relations	*11*	*7*	*4*				
• Employers' associations	4	2	2				
• Trade unions	7	5	2				
Non-union actors	*6*	*3*	*3*				
• Mutual-aid cooperatives	2	1	1				
• Professional associations	3	1	2				
• Associations of freelancers	1	1	0				
Other actors	*4*	*3*	*1*				
• Public institutions	2	1	1				
• Higher education institutes	1	1	0				
• Web communities	1	1	0				
Individuals	*21*	*9*	*12*	*14*	*7*	*16*	*5*
• Employers	2	1	1	2	0	2	0
• Employees	4	2	2	4	0	4	0
• Freelancers	15	6	9	8	7	10	5
Total	*42*	*22*	*20*				

As for the two countries, several elements make them suitable for comparison. In fact, they display similar features in terms of employment and welfare regimes, since both have segmented labour markets (Visser 2009) and high shares of self-employment (Eurofound 2017a, 2017b), but belong to different industrial relations regimes. To use Visser's categories (2009), Italy is a paradigmatic case of a 'Southern' regime, whereas the Netherlands is an example of a 'Central-Western' regime. This implies significant differences in the *quality* of industrial relations, which tend to be more unbalanced, unstable and conflict-oriented in Italy than in the Netherlands. Moreover, different strategies have been pursued to represent the interests of atypical and self-employed workers. In Italy, trade unions have set up special bodies for atypical workers, while the self-employed are 'scattered' among a plethora of organisations, including associations of employers, professionals and freelancers. In the Netherlands, instead, non-standard workers mostly find representation in the field of industrial relations and, within the main trade unions, they are members alongside salaried workers (Eurofound 2017b).

The picture that emerges is a patchwork in terms of labour market conditions and welfare provisions as well as the strategies pursued by collective actors. On the one hand, the state provides for self-employed workers not through a system of coherent measures but through the selective extension of existing provisions targeting salaried workers. On the other hand, the actors of industrial relations, particularly trade unions, provide advocacy through two logics of action: first, they exercise political influence on public actors in a universal way; second, they have carved out room to manoeuvre with

private companies and public institutions to represent their members, sector by sector (Vandaele 2018). More rarely, they have developed new representation strategies and innovative forms of organisation.

As noted, however, there are also non-union actors. These bodies pursue support or promotional purposes, not necessarily as alternatives to traditional channels. In some cases, they even give rise or are built around professional communities.

In the next sub-sections, the analysis focuses on two types of organisations: mutual-aid cooperatives and professional associations.

4.2. Seizing opportunities: the role of mutual-aid cooperatives

In the last decade, the trend of de-collectivising employment relations has led scholars to reassess the capacity of organised actors to represent collective interests (Bohle, Keune, and Marginson 2016). While some studies have indicated work fragmentation and de-standardisation as forces that undermine collective action (see, for instance, Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2017), it is worth stressing that these processes have not taken place in an institutional vacuum. A debate has arisen around the process of redefining the boundaries between salaried employment and self-employment and the urgent need to redesign welfare systems to cover unprotected workers. Several actors, both traditional and untraditional, have contributed to feeding it. As a matter of fact, new actors have emerged to play the role of intermediaries between citizens/workers, the market and the state. Their strategies have yet to be extensively studied.

Here, the analysis focuses on two aspects. As some authors influenced by Sen's work have shown, the logics unfolding around two collective spheres are crucial, namely the spheres of 'collective capabilities' and 'collective solidarities' (Westerveld 2012). The former indicate the ability of new organisations to identify aggregating factors among workers who do not belong to the same profession, industry or workplace. The latter denote the set of goods that these actors supply for the dual purpose of redistributing resources among their members and accumulating assets to ensure their protection. These spheres are examined with respect to the case of Smart[4] in the two countries.

Smart is a mutual-aid cooperative that was established in Belgium in 1998 to help freelancers, mostly artists, with the management of their activities. Its philosophy is to 'hire' freelancers so as to give them the same protection as salaried workers, ensuring them full organisational and artistic/creative autonomy. As such, Smart is the formal employer and verifies that clients comply with contractual agreements.

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[4] *Société Mutuelle pour Artistes*.

Later, branches were set up in eight countries in the form of independent, not-for-profit organisations. At the time of writing, they have a total of almost 90,000 working members. Although it was originally an organisation of artists, Smart-BE has extended its coverage to include workers such as artists, creative-sector professionals, trainers, consultants and, last but not least, riders (such as those working for Foodora, Deliveroo and Take Eat Easy).

This move to extend membership and include platform workers was made because many artists were in the habit of taking on a second job to earn additional income. A key informant helped to reconstruct events:

> In the beginning, [at Smart-BE] they didn't realise that they were working with riders. Do you know why? Because workers such as actors used to join Smart, indeed, as actors. […] What Smart did was to stabilise workers and try to meet their needs, like a trade union in the 20th century would have done. That is, it negotiated better conditions for its members. [Mutual-aid cooperative, manager, Italy]

Two remarks can be made about this case. First, Smart-BE has taken advantage of a 'window of opportunity' – the demand for protection put forward by artists who were performing platform work as a secondary activity, mostly as food deliverers – and, thus, extended its range of action. To do so, it has broken through the 'uncertain boundaries' of digital creative labour markets, at the intersection between creative and platform work, and has taken this occasion to enlarge its social basis. Second, in doing so, its activity has come to partly overlap that of trade unions, since it has engaged in negotiations with employers. To borrow from Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick (2017), the key question is whether these actors – mutual-aid cooperatives and trade unions – are necessarily 'rivals' or they can be 'allies'.

The action of Smart-BE was legitimised by Deliveroo's decision to employ workers hired by the mutual-aid cooperative. As some authors have shown, this arrangement was facilitated by specific features of the Belgian tax system (Drahokoupil and Piasna 2019). Despite the economic advantages, nevertheless, Deliveroo has abandoned the Smart system, officially to offer the riders a 'desirable' flexibility. On the contrary, the main effects were that of reducing the riders' autonomy and increasing the platforms' control over their work.

The Italian branch, Smart-IT, has been active since 2014 while the Dutch one, Smart-NL, was set up in 2016. For them, too, besides usual off-platform work experiences, a rapid increase in the number of 'mixed' ones, combining off- an on-platform work, has been reported.

Delving more deeply into the two cases, the mutual aid-cooperative system in both countries rests on three axes: (i) an 'organisational system' based on the cooperation between the association and its members; (ii) a 'mutual-aid relationship', financed partly through members' contributions, partly by the Belgian parent company; (iii) the promotion of a 'social enterprise system' based on the sharing of projects, *horizontally*, among fellow members, and *vertically*, under the coordination of the management.

In the narratives collected through the research works, mutual-aid cooperatives in the two countries seem to have developed encouraging *collective capabilities*, but with each one relying on different, 'nationally-driven' justification systems.

In the Dutch case, this has to do with rhetoric about the *dignity of work*. Thanks to the support of public institutions, Smart-NL has been able to advocate a cultural shift to obtain recognition for the professionalism of platform workers and ensure them fair pay. This is why Smart-NL has introduced a selection process for incoming members, in 2017: only those who are willing to adhere to a basic social insurance scheme are allowed to join the organisation. The logic is that of inducing a 'skimming' effect, which works to exclude 'occasional' freelancers. As a manager of Smart-NL explained:

> Smart-NL aims to organise professionals. On platform, though, there are essentially young workers, who need to develop their skills but are not interested in the professionalisation of the community. [Mutual-aid cooperative, manager, Netherlands]

Then, a worker further clarified:

> On platform, you can find small and low-paid tasks. It can be useful in a slow period, but it doesn't allow you to stabilise or specialise. [Mutual-aid cooperative, employee, Netherlands]

The main effect of this strategy has been to exclude young freelancers while retaining mature workers who have proven keener to pursue strategies of inclusion and stability.

In the Italian case, instead, the prevailing rhetoric stresses the necessity of *bringing freelance platform work in line with standard employment*. In this context, Smart-IT aims to fill the gap in social security, on the one hand, and counteract the trends towards work atomisation, on the other. To pursue these ends, as an interviewee reported, Smart-IT has recently engaged in a dialogue with public institutions:

> Now, a lot of attention is being paid to the necessity of regulating platform work. We've been listened to on this topic. At the local level, too, there's interest in what we do. We've had the possibility to make some proposals. [Mutual-aid cooperative, manager, Italy]

At the same time, Smart-IT argues that the conventional system of work organisation designed for wage-earners does not apply to the activities of creative-sector workers. The latter, in fact, develop differently from the typical circadian rhythms of salaried work. Following a logic of 'restoration', Smart-IT 'hires' discontinuous creative workers, thereby giving them access to standard forms of employment protection.

> In our view, platforms' impersonality doesn't make it possible to build quality networks [of relationships]. And they pay little. We promote work, but also standards that platforms rarely comply with. [Mutual-aid cooperative, manager, Italy]

While the strategies based on collective capabilities differ significantly between the two countries, *collective solidarities* have developed along two common axes: i) an axis 'internal' to the organisation, which includes the provision of personalised support, shared projects and initiatives, other services such as tax assistance and consultancy, and the guarantee of being paid through a mutual fund; and ii) an 'external' axis, based on the ability to dialogue with public institutions, that is to say, to exert political influence in order to change the regulatory system that governs welfare provisions for self-employed workers.

Generally speaking, organisations such as Smart are likely to play a growing role in representing the interests of creative-sector and platform workers. The key to success is their proclivity for adopting pragmatic strategies targeting workers' basic needs. This has given Smart visibility and popularity among workers throughout Europe and made the organisation suitable for alliances with key actors such as the Italian organisation ACTA[5], representing freelancers: "We know Smart very well. We're allies" [Association of freelancers, manager, Italy]. On the other hand, Smart does not have any relationships with trade unions, which are still seen as culturally distant despite their attempts to experiment with new forms of representation (Bellini *et al.* 2018).

4.3. Professional associations and the resilience of professional cultures

In contrast to mutual-aid cooperatives such as Smart, professional associations are not so new in the associational scenario; rather, they have a long history. Nevertheless, their role has evolved. Moreover, there are multiple types of organisation, which are 'stratified' by the relative degree to which the professions are institutionalised. Some of these can be seen as emerging actors in the arenas of interest representation and labour regulation.

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[5] *Associazione Consulenti del Terziario Avanzato*.

A high degree of stratification, it must be noticed, is a specific characteristic of the Italian system of professions, which reflects the diversity among and within the sectors that make up the creative industries. In fact, Italy has both *protected* and *unprotected* professions. The former are characterised by dual-channel representation: on the one hand, there are public bodies established by law and known as 'professional orders' or 'colleges', namely bodies that mandatorily organise all practitioners of a profession in a given geographical area; on the other hand, there are private associations relying on voluntary membership, which do not exercise any formal regulation. Examples of creative professions that are protected in Italy include journalism and architecture. Unprotected sectors, then, are those that do not rely on orders, colleges or registers. This category encompasses *regulated* and *unregulated* professions. The former are those that can only be accessed by individuals possessed of specific professional qualifications, defined on a legal or administrative basis. The latter, instead, are subject to a further distinction: some of them are *acknowledged* professions operating under special legislation, Law No. 4/2013. This law has established a register of recognised associations and has assigned them 'regulatory' power, although this is a case of 'weak', that is to say, 'not binding' regulation, since no educational degrees or professional qualifications are required, nor is associative membership a necessary condition for practising the profession.

The Netherlands, conversely, is closer to the 'market-oriented' Anglo-Saxon model. Besides a few *protected* professions such as law and accountancy, there are *regulated study programmes*, defined by law, the completion of which is necessary and sufficient to be entitled to practise the profession. In the latter case, private associations with voluntary membership perform functions of weak regulation, as in Italy.

That being said, almost everywhere in Europe, the design professions fall into the class of unprotected and unregulated professions. Hence, the main collective actors in this sector are professional associations in the form of private associations relying on voluntary membership.

There are relevant dissimilarities between Italy and the Netherlands, however. The Italian AIAP[6] and Dutch BNO[7], in fact, differ in terms of degree of institutionalisation (AIAP is recognised by Law 4) and role (Law 4 gives AIAP weak regulatory power while BNO exercises a regulatory function informally). On the other hand, they have some critical features in common. First, despite having different profiles (AIAP is specialised in the segment of graphic design whereas BNO is across-the-board, covering the design industry as a whole), they both have low representativeness (AIAP has approximately

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[6] *Associazione Italiana Design della Comunicazione Visiva*.
[7] *Beroepsorganisatie Nederlandse Ontwerpers*.

800 members in graphic design, BNO 1,700 including other market segments). Member recruitment, thus, is a priority for the dual purpose of guaranteeing the organisations' survival and enhancing their influence capacity. Indeed, the limits of these associations stem from their intrinsic lack of both financial and human resources, since they rely on membership fees as a primary source of financing and on members' voluntary work to carry out their activities. In the case of AIAP, this fact was confirmed by a member who also held elective office within the association:

> AIAP has always been active in cultural promotion, despite the limited possibilities of a free association that is financed by membership fees and relies on voluntary work. […] We do what we can. Our resources are scarce. We also try to dialogue with public institutions. We put a great deal of effort into it, but it doesn't only depend on us. [Professional association, delegate, Italy]

Second, both associations organise 'professionals', irrespective of whether they are employers, employees or freelancers. This is a specific feature of these associations, which might be seen as inherently related to the 'creative-professional' character of work in this sector, making it impossible to distinguish between different labour market statuses clearly. An Italian freelancer, who was also an active member of AIAP, shed light on the role of this association as the only actor advocating for the graphic design profession:

> I believe in knowledge, in circulating knowledge. And, in my opinion, AIAP is the only solution to let people understand that graphic design is a profession with a long-standing cultural background. [Freelancer, male, adult, Italy]

A Dutch freelancer, member of BNO, expressed a similar opinion:

> BNO can count on a broad network of design agencies and is responsible for the organisation of important cultural and promotional events. So, if you are or want to be a designer, you can't do without it. [Freelancer, male, adult, Netherlands]

What is worth underlining is that, despite having different statuses and powers, and performing representation roles mostly through lobbying activities, both associations have maintained their original focuses on cultural promotion and community building as their core businesses. This means that they act – more or less implicitly – as sources of professional identity by granting visibility and social legitimisation to their members. This function is even more important in a profession such as design, characterised by

competition and individualism. Two delegates, from AIAP and BNO respectively, clarified this point:

> AIAP is a professional association, but it can't represent workers' interests like a trade union would. We try to meet our members' needs as much as we can. It's important to feel part of a community. This is a sector in which you're forced to focus on yourself because the competition is severe. We're competitive by nature. You have to be, in creative labour. So, it's difficult to make potential members understand the importance of joining an association. […] We're people who do the same job… we need to build a community, a network. This is what an association does. [Professional association, delegate, Italy]

> By joining an association, you redefine the boundaries and working conditions as well. The time of exasperated individual competition is over because it's not good for the profession, nor for professionals. [Professional association, delegate, Netherlands]

In addition, they carry out activities of service provision, which are primarily aimed at strengthening individuals' capacity to remain in the market (Bellini and Dorigatti 2019). The market itself remains the dominant regulatory principle, however, as the following interview excerpt proves:

> AIAP provides its members with legal assistance through a lawyer who is specialised in this field of activity. Concerning fiscal assistance, professionals usually refer to accountants with established experience in the sector. For everything else, they do what they can, referring to the market. [Professional association, delegate, Italy]

On the other hand, some interviews brought to light the perception among workers that, although associative membership is seen as the only way to contribute to the promotion of a 'professional culture', professional associations are struggling to understand and react to the changes occurring in the sector:

> AIAP doesn't seem to be in line with the changes occurring in everyday life. So, I don't think that being a member would bring me concrete advantages. [Freelancer, female, adult, Italy]

> Sometimes, [AIAP] it looks like it's still in the 1970s. [Employee, male, adult, Italy]

> BNO has a well-defined idea of design. It's difficult for a young person to bolster [his/her own] creative ideas; for an established professional, it's much easier. [Freelancer, female, young, Netherlands]

Graphic and web design, in fact, have been hit hard by technological changes such as those borne by digitalisation; indeed, this process has entailed not only a paradigm shift in the ways of working but also a further segmentation of target markets and the necessity to rethink the relationships with clients. A clear example can be found in school publishing, where the 'virtual' has replaced the 'paper'. In that market segment, those who did not have the capacity to adapt to such changes lost market shares or were forced out.

Platform work, therefore, represents a rising phenomenon in the sector. Examples of platforms that offer such services include 99designs, Freelancer and Upwork. These are mostly multinationals that operate on a global scale. A major segment, then, is *online freelancing* in which "clients contract professional services to distributed third-party workers" (Kuek, Paradi-Guilford, Fayomi, Imaizumi, Ipeirotis, Pina, and Singh 2015, 7).

Despite the scope of the phenomenon, nevertheless, the approach of professional associations to platform work in the sector is characterised by 'suspicion'. The idea expressed by the key informants is that the type of work performed on platform consists of simple tasks in response to small clients who demand low-budget services. As such, platform work gives young professionals in early career stages the chance to build their portfolios, but it poses a problem of sustainable competition by virtue of generating lower-value market segments. The extract from the interview with a delegate of AIAP, again, expresses concern about the degrading effect that platforms have on several aspects of the quality of work:

> I joined a platform myself to understand how platforms work. Perhaps, they work well for a certain kind of task. But I don't think this can happen for a complex task, such as the design of a visual identity. When I accepted some requests, I suddenly understood, looking at the budgets, that they were asking simple things. They had very low budgets… What kind of job can you expect with such a low budget? It was under real market value… The market is not regulated; hence, anything can happen. Someone might even be paid 5 euro an hour. […] If you call a technician to repair your computer, you have to pay 100 euro for the call and one hour of work. And you don't say anything. If I provide expert advice… I must study the problem and find a solution. It will take 5 hours. In theory, I should be paid 150 euro, but people don't understand this. And it's me… imagine a 24-year-old person, newly graduated… This is the point. [Professional association, delegate, Italy]

Two further excerpts confirm that there is a deeply rooted idea among many actors, including workers, that platform work brings down the quality of work and damages the reputation of the profession.

I've had some experiences with platforms. They can be a good solution. [...] Freelancers have many job opportunities. […] But it's a question of quality of work. […] People try to lower prices. At a certain point, I felt like a fruit seller. [Web community, manager, Italy]

Well, this… 'stuff' is a dumbing down. I don't believe in that, at all. Because, in our job, you need to go deep into clients' reality. […] It's not something you can do mechanically. Clients, usually, don't know what they really want. They say they need a logo; then, you talk to them, and you soon realise that they need something else… [Platform work] relies on a mechanistic concept of work, in which you ask for something, and you get what you want… But things are more complicated than this. […] We are not selling design by weight. [Freelancer, female, adult, Italy]

All things considered, professional associations play a fundamental role, as they are the only actors in the sector to produce identity resources. In this sense, they are – at least, hypothetically – privileged interlocutors for creative platform workers such as designers. Unlike mutual-aid cooperatives, however, they face a typical organisational dilemma. Given that they are called on to deal with digitalisation, it would make sense to reframe interest representation strategies in an 'inclusive' manner. This would be coherent with the need to increase *membership* by enlarging the social basis in order to include platform workers. On the other hand, such an approach seems to clash with the function of promoting a *professional culture*, which, in practice, means adopting 'selective' criteria to elevate the quality of professional services.

5. Discussion

This analysis set off from a consideration of the evidence of the complexity of platform work and, thus, developed through an examination of the ways such complexity affects interest representation. The basic idea was that the diversity of employment patterns and the high incidence of 'grey zones' (see Armano and Murgia 2017) make it difficult for collective actors to identify shared interests and define effective strategies. This holds even more true in the case of platform work being performed as a mix of creative-professional and self-employed work, due to the reluctance on the part of self-employed creative professionals to join in collective action. This segment of digital labour markets, in fact, is highly exposed to competition and characterised by inherent individualism. In this case more than others, indeed, the existence of shared interests has turned out to be insufficient to generate collective action (Kilhoffer *et al.* 2017). The fieldwork has, nevertheless, uncovered forms of communitarian and associative

regulation that are coming to play a crucial role in building collective narratives. Two types of actors, in particular, are emerging as *potential* sources of representation for unorganised workers, namely mutual-aid cooperatives and professional associations.

These actors represent different paths towards the construction of a professional 'in-group' that transcends heterogeneity (Noordergraaf 2011). Furthermore, they identify 'collectivities' that require representation and protection.

Mutual-aid cooperatives have proven to be successful in reaching these populations because, by acknowledging the specificity of (digital) creative work, they attempt to go beyond the adaptive strategies pursued by trade unions. The latter, in fact, aim to bring creative workers in line with those in traditional sectors but fail to meet their specific needs. For this reason, Smart is likely to play a growing role in the two countries, Italy and the Netherlands, despite contextual differences. In Italy, the role it plays has been recognised by other actors such as ACTA, and the two organisations engage in cooperation. In contrast, neither mutual-aid cooperatives nor professional associations have relationships with trade unions, which tend to pursue their own strategies in this field.

That being said, non-union actors complain about the fact that creative freelancers lack protection and union representation, a situation that leads them to feel isolated. As we have observed above, they do not have the resources or the geographical coverage trade unions have; hence, they cannot offer representation in the ways trade unions do. Workers themselves appear to be accustomed to not being protected.

Old and new actors, therefore, seem to be affected by opposite problems, giving rise to a paradox. Trade unions suffer from the persistence of both structural and cultural constraints that impede them from finding effective ways to represent the interests of creative workers, especially when working on platform (Vandaele 2018). On the other hand, those actors that are free from such constraints and have the cognitive resources to interpret change have to deal with limits deriving from an inadequate structure and a lack of resources. This paradox may be overcome if we consider old and new actors as complementary, an arrangement that would also pave the way for new alliances.

6. Conclusions

It has been said that history can be understood through its tendency to repeat itself. This article has outlined historical occurrences that, in some respects, might remind observers of the developments that took place in the proto-industrial era when various types of actors (e.g. guilds and the Church) acted as intermediaries between workers and the market. They were responses to the rising individualism of a developing liberal

society. As the leading figures of the Oxford School of industrial relations pointed out, however, workers in that period were naturally inclined to engage in collective action because of their socio-occupational homogeneity and spatial concentration. Nowadays, instead, a large segment of the working population cannot count on class unity, nor on geographical proximity. What is more, digitalisation has brought with it a process of 'de-spatialisation' of employment relations, which has made it difficult for trade unions to reach workers.

As the analysis has shown, this situation has made room for non-union actors, which contribute to reconfiguring the arena of interest representation. Although the context has radically changed, their action is similar to the processes that occurred in the 19th century as they are responding to the increasing individualisation of employment relations. The difference as compared to the past has to do with the altered semantic value of the term 'liberalism', signified by the use of the prefix 'neo' to generate the expression 'neoliberalism'. An in-depth discussion of this shift would be outside the scope of this article, but the point worth making for the purposes of this analysis is that neoliberalism has established itself as a successful – and aggressive – political project, reinvigorating capitalism and reconfiguring power relations to the benefit of capital, now represented by powerful global actors such as multinationals. Neoliberalisation, thus, has interwoven with pervasive processes such as globalisation and digitalisation. Indeed, the de-collectivisation of employment relations, associated with the flexibilisation of labour market regulations, has been a fundamental pillar of the neoliberal project. In this sense, digital work platforms seem to be functional to neoliberalism in that they increase the margins for a flexible use of the labour force and make it much more difficult for workers to develop an awareness of their shared interests and translate it into collective action.

Just as in the 19th century, these actors are: i) organisations with a 'mutual' character, which have the purpose of counterbalancing welfare states' deficiencies (today's mutual-aid cooperatives, similar to yesterday's friendly societies); ii) occupation-based associations with a 'corporatist' orientation, aiming to regulate the activities of a given profession (today's professional associations, resembling yesterday's guilds). Now as then, workers can count on various types of organisations, which contribute to building collective narratives. This occurs in a country with long-standing, albeit declining, corporatist traditions in industrial relations, like the Netherlands, as well as in a country characterised by conflict-oriented pluralism, like Italy.

Whether these organisations will continue to represent their members following a genuinely corporatist model, build alliances with more powerful actors such as trade unions or evolve towards a union-like model remains to be seen. In the case of creative

workers, matters are made more complicated by the strong rhetoric framing creativity as a driver of economic growth and social mobility, which, in turn, incites workers to inter-individual competition and self-exploitation. The impact of platforms in this field is problematic, therefore, since it further reduces the density of social relationships in an individualistic environment. Even in this case, nevertheless, civil society has proven to be able to react by promoting new forms of solidarity.

Acknowledgements

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