

# Precarious Subjects: Anticipating Neoliberalism in Northern Italy's Workplace

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**ABSTRACT** In Italy, the term *precarizzazione* (precarious-ization) refers to the process of implementing neoliberal policies to transition toward a semipermanent and privatized labor regime but also to the normalization of psychic uncertainty and hypervigilance of worker-citizens. In this article, I examine “precarious workers” and a psychological harassment called “mobbing,” specifically, and suggest that these practices of labor exclusion of a transitional work regime produce emergent subjectivities through an analytics of anticipation. I illustrate the social, political, and psychic effects of imagining neoliberalism, as Italians do in this context, not as complete but, rather, as a metadiscursive object of emotionally charged apprehension and anticipation.

*Keywords:* neoliberalism, subjectivity, affect, labor, Italy

In a world of turmoil, who doesn't fear precariousness?

—*La Stampa*, Italian newspaper

Endemic uncertainty is what will mark the lifeworld and the basic existence of most people.

—Ulrich Beck, *World Risk Society*

In Italy, the utterance “I am a precarious one” (*Sono un precario*) articulates with two intersecting cultural apparatuses: on the one hand, it refers colloquially to one's employment with a particular kind of semipermanent work contract, and, on the other hand, it implicitly indexes psychological doubt and uncertainty, a subject fraught with acute anxiety and nagging hypervigilance. Furthermore, it conveys the citizen's understanding of what Italians call “precariousness” (*precarietà*) and the process of “precarious-ization” (*precarizzazione*). Both terms are related to a Europe-wide social movement, synonyms for processes of neoliberalization: deregulation and casualization of the labor market, specifically, and waning welfare state protections and individualization, more broadly (Gilbert 2007; Martin and Ross 1999).<sup>1</sup> That neoliberal capitalism makes long-term, protected labor scarce is well-trodden territory (Beck 1992; Ong 2006; Sassen 1998; Sennett 1998). What is distinctive, however, is the extent to which in Italy precariousness serves as a publicly circulating term to critique neoliberal labor regimes and as a subject-position with which individuals identify—and, as I show below, quite deeply so. The notion of being a *precariat* (precarious worker) thus raises an important and largely unexplored question for theories of subjectivity and neoliberalism: How does the explicit

recognition of neoliberalization shape subjectivity and psychic interiority?

For many Italians, the discourse of precariousness criticizes the effects and implications of neoliberal economic strategies and employment regimes (Procoli 2004; Rodgers and Rodgers 1989). In opposition to the flexible worker (Freeman 2000, 2007; Harvey 1989; Sassen 1998), the subject suiting market and employer demands, the precariat emphasizes workers' subject positions, their endless series of short-term contracts, and the fact that life for them has become uncertain and risky (Balibar 2004; Bergstrom and Storrie 2003; Mudu 2004). Precariousness is one culturally and historically specific formulation of what Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have notably dubbed “millennial capitalism,” underscoring the near totalizing risk that motors its expansion and taking the “legacy of irregular piecework, of menial ‘workfare,’ of relatively insecure, transient, gainless occupation” (2001:5) as its starting point. Precarity emerges from conditions of late-capitalist labor regimes in which workers “are dependent on contract work” (Bodnar 2006:678), yet it also hinges on the emergence of immaterial labor, production that is affective (Muehlebach n.d.) and service oriented (Bodnar 2001; Lazzarato 1996).

Just as the subject-position of “flexible workers” evokes psychological characteristics such as docility (Freeman 2000) and even bodily strength (Martin 1994), so too for Italians being a precariat is an ontological claim that exceeds economic typology and becomes a way of identifying subjects' classed



FIGURE 1. *Graffiti: Stop precariousness.* (Courtesy of Noelle Molé)

position and psychic interiorities. Avowing oneself as a precariat signals a classed political subjectivity: a worker at the mercy of risk, marginality, anxiety, even paranoia (De Sario 2007; Fantone 2007; Lazzarato 1996; see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the emergence of the precariat subject is intimately intertwined with the inchoate psychological grit of “capitalism in its messianic, salvific, even magical manifestations” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:293). As I show below, suspicion and doubt pervade late-millennial workplace practices such that, at times, the worksite, employers, and coworkers seem endowed with unusual powers. Yet precariousness depends on certain assumptions and the historical conditions of an extraordinarily rapid-fire neoliberalizing program in the 1990s (Molina and Rhodes 2008:147). Built within the semantic architecture of precarious-ization is a formation of neoliberalism not as having arrived but, rather, as still underway, unfinished, in progress. What is at stake, then, in the making and unmaking of worker-citizens if we consider, as Italians do in this context, neoliberalism not as complete but as an object of emotionally charged apprehension and anticipation?

Understanding neoliberalism as an object of apprehension enables a more nuanced reading of the political and economic transformation of labor regimes and their attendant psychic and affective dysfunctions and disruptions. It was my examination of the latter in the northeastern city of Padua, in fact, that brought me to reflect more deeply on precariousness. Disordered labor relations constitute the

central area of my research in Padua: namely, mobbing (*il mobbing*), a form of psychological work harassment that has been a mass and highly visible phenomenon in Italy since the mid-1990s (ANSA Notiziario Generale 2005; Ege 1996; Molé 2007b). In its broadest and most generalized definition, *mobbing* translates to work harassment in Italy and some parts of Europe (Ege 2002; Leymann 1990).<sup>3</sup> A common definition in Italian courts suggests:

From the English *to mob* (group assault) and from the Latin *mobile vulgus* (riotous crowd), aggression or violence or persecution in the workplace perpetuated with a certain systematic and repetitious manner by one’s manager or . . . colleagues, using behaviors able to harm, discriminate, or progressively marginalize a determined worker in order to estrange him, marginalize him, and eventually induce him to resign [. . . and] in extreme cases, [to cause a] propensity for suicide from the absence of self-realization in work and the lack of normal gratification in social relationships at work. [Meucci 2006:39]

Mobbing is immediately salient on two interconnected planes: estrangement from labor and deep psychic turmoil. Mobbing experts distinguish between types: one dubbed “vertical” (*verticale*), between management and employee, and the other “horizontal” (*orizzontale*), among same-level employees. The distinction leads to another conundrum related to the new economy: If, at least in part, cost reduction may shape the former, how can we explain why employees mob one another? Delving into the significance

of “precariousness” will prove especially useful in understanding the rise of mobbing claims among worker cohorts.

Despite its ambiguous definitions, mobbing has had an ever-deepening entrenchment in public and legal institutions since the mid-1990s: clinics and hotlines dedicated to helping victims of mobbing number in the many hundreds, Italy’s state health institutions codified a work-related illness caused by mobbing (Istituto Nazionale per l’Assicurazione contro gli Infortuni sul Lavoro [INAIL] 2003; Molé 2008), and so numerous professionals, from lawyers to psychologists, have specialized in the subject that there are associations for mobbing experts and a vast scholarly literature on the topic (e.g., Paolillo 2000; Pasquini 2002)—enough, in fact, to merit a master’s degree exclusively in mobbing.<sup>4</sup> But, and importantly, many mobbing experts view it as a foreign intruder: the pathological outgrowth of Italy’s neoliberalizing economy (Fiorii 2006; Molé 2007b; Recupero and Carettin 2001).

We might, therefore, be tempted to understand mobbing and precariousness as shaped exclusively by neoliberal capitalism and its accompanying moral orders. But precariousness, the political discourse about the anticipated entrenchment of neoliberal capitalism, should temper and complicate such a claim. Only with the awareness of an economic process underway, which significantly shifts the affective and psychic negotiation of stable work and its demise, can Italians recognize labor exclusion and work conflict as forms of acute suffering and alienation. Holding salient anticipation unearths the cultural values and psychic expectations established prior to, and in opposition to, market-oriented policies. Mobbing emerged when stable work was lived, or remembered, as a self-evident right of citizenship and neoliberalism, as the precarious movement often proclaims, within a set of practices and values yet to be normalized. As such, the discourse and subject-forming practices surrounding precariousness play a supremely crucial role in how market-orienting labor regimes are lived and, therefore, shape the profound affective turmoil and the ontological distinctiveness of mobbing. That is to say, the mobbee and precariat are not necessarily “neoliberal subjects” but, rather, subjects formed in anticipation of neoliberalism: the transition between a welfarist and market-oriented economy and, more specifically, within collective imaginaries of what neoliberalism portends to worker-citizens. Conceived broadly, my analysis of Italian labor exclusion and alienation will strengthen our understanding of the psychic processes underlying nearly neoliberal sites as they produce an affectively drenched regime of anxiety, paranoia, and suspicion.

#### ANTICIPATING NEOLIBERALISM: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

A central theme in the literature on neoliberalism and economic globalization is the issue of “heightened uncertainty,” both on the global scale (Harvey 2005, 2006; Sassen 1988, 2003; Tsing 2004; Verdery 2000) and within Europe (Berend 2006; Bermeo 2001; Holmes 2001; Jessop 2003;

Overbeek 2003). Uncertainty stems, in part, from neoliberal policy demands that workers bear risk in exchange for labor-market entrance (Beck 2000; Gledhill 1995, 2005). At the same time, neoliberal ideologies promote ideals of freedom and choice, in tandem with the idea that autonomous individuals have a moral responsibility to manage risk (Beck 1992, 1999, 2000; Castel 2003). Such changes refigure the citizen-subject who was once able to rely on state institutions and social services but who must now self-manage and singularly garner capital, resources, and information (Ong 2006; Petryna 2004). Citizens are thus refashioned as more responsible for and capable of providing for their own welfare, a concept bolstered by ideologies that view political subjects as rational and calculating (Rose 2007).

But these understandings of neoliberalism do not fully take into account the idea that economic processes and ideologies can be understood, especially within circulating cultural idioms, as incomplete—that is, as things that subjects perceive as approaching material realities and moral orders. My contention is that neoliberalism’s arrival becomes something worker-citizens anticipate and even dread: the sensory and experiential apprehension of neoliberal change acts as a unique force, which, in turn, shapes practices, knowledge claims, and moral orders. Anticipation, increasingly the object of anthropological inquiry, necessarily implicates and crosscuts psychological interiority and future-oriented temporality, insofar as it is the meeting point of foreknowledge and expectation. Summerson Carr (2009:319), for instance, suggests that visitors to social-service agencies are often the objects of “anticipatory interpellation,” whereby social characteristics frame preliminary interactions between counselors and client representatives. Tara Schwegler (2008:683) mobilizes the concept of “anticipatory knowledge” in her analysis of Mexican technocrats’ interpretations of neoliberalism and highlights how groups anticipate competitors’ knowledge claims. Anticipation’s related term, *apprehension*, signals a similar process, but one laden with anxiety and fear, in addition to explicit awareness: of “becoming conscious of through the emotions or the senses” (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language n.d.).

Indeed, how subjectivity articulates with particular affective processes and techniques has become a vital consideration in interrogating forms of governance and labor regimes (Ahmed 2004; Muehlebach 2007; Richard and Rudnyckij 2009). For some, the fantasy of the risk-bearing flexible worker fails to capture the psychic trauma lived within unpredictable political regimes. As a theoretical corrective, Engin Isin’s (2004:219) proposes the “neurotic citizen,” a subject governed by insecurities and volatilities. For Isin, the neoliberal subject, rational and self-managing, becomes the “bionic subject,” whereas the subject of what he dubs “neuropolitics” is one who “governs itself through responses to anxieties and uncertainties” (2004:223). In other words, the subject is indexed as capable of both managing and yet exacerbating one’s own uncertainty (2004:226). Finally, Andrea Muehlebach has recently examined the role of

“post-Fordist affect” in Italy’s volunteer-labor movement, suggesting that “the unemployed and unemployable youth as well as the elderly are asked to bear the burden of providing publicly valuable emotional labor” (n.d.:7). Unifying Italy’s diversely positioned laborers, Muehlebach theorizes, is an idea that they should “direct their mourning towards a classic Fordist object—the stable work regime” (n.d.:10). By highlighting diverse affective registers—nostalgia and grief, anxiety and compassion, together with a temporal sense of expectation—we achieve a fuller picture of late-modern subjectivity and psychological interiority.

### VISUALIZING WORKING FIGURES

Although precariousness dominates public discourse today, Italy bears a deeper historical print, long concerned with labor’s vulnerability in terms of workers’ occupational safety (Cafruny and Ryner 2003; Horn 1994) and exploitation and abuse (Ferrera and Gualmini 2004; Koff and Koff 2002) in both industrial and agrarian sectors (Holmes 1989; Molina and Rhodes 2008). Not surprisingly, working-class imaginaries have populated Italian films from industrialization to neoliberalization (Bedani 1995:2). In this section, I briefly trace forms of two such iconic characters before examining the mobbee’s screen arrival. As part of Italy’s neorealism tradition, Vittorio De Sica’s *The Bicycle Thief* (*Ladri biciclette*, 1948) tells the story of an unemployed man, Antonio Ricci, who, on finally being hired to post bills around the city, requires a bicycle to fulfill the new position; once obtained, the bicycle is then stolen.<sup>5</sup> The film focuses on Antonio and his son’s search for the missing bicycle as well as on Antonio’s attempt to steal another bicycle to continue working. The plight of the unemployed, as symbolized in Antonio’s bicycle, represents “the breakdown in civic values,” and Italy’s postwar labor regime is here portrayed as eroding the connections between those most exposed and vulnerable (Ben-Ghiat 2001:42). Antonio’s alienation from both employment agency workers and similarly impoverished citizens reveals “an implicit denunciation of a particular socioeconomic system,” while the depiction of “solitude and loneliness” became the psychic trademark of Italy’s Fordist worker (Bondanella 2001:59).

The 1960s and 1970s economic modernization produced a figure of literature and film epitomizing the most absurd aspects of postindustrial labor: Fantozzi, protagonist of the self-titled film, the first in the 1971–99 series (Salce 1975). Various moments of the film attest to Fantozzi’s desperate and hilarious debacles: his unnoticed entrapment in the office bathrooms for 18 days, his infelicitous attempts to clock in punctually, his daughter’s humiliation in the company’s poetry contest, and his role as target for countless food and drink spills at the company party. In the 20 years of Fantozzi films, he epitomizes the white-collar clown and the pointless endeavors of postindustrial labor regimes become his juggling act. Fantozzi’s everyday yet tragic abjection has given him the notorious title of “the father of mobbing,” both

colloquially and within court rulings on mobbing (Antonietta 2007).

Unlike the still-playful Fantozzi, Anna, played by Nicoletta Braschi, the accountant protagonist of *Mobbing: I Like Working* (Comencini 2004), becomes the haunted face of casualized labor regimes and mobbing. She is subjected to a series of humiliating acts at the hands of her manager and colleagues: her ledger stolen to undermine her credibility; her colleague appropriates her desk, leaving her to wander the halls; and her manager has her meticulously monitor every transaction at the photocopier. Anna begins to doubt all of her colleagues, many of whom begin avoiding and isolating her. The film solicits workers to become wary of trusted colleagues’ betrayal and informs them of persecution by what is seen as neoliberalism’s imminent arrival and preternatural capacity for destruction. In one scene, a union representative warns:

The company has brought us has a very precise philosophy, total flexibility: the complete availability of all employees. They’re not interested in your personal problems, family loads, everyday fatigue: they count for nothing. Total flexibility. It means availability 24 hours of 24 hours [...] People are fragile things, they break easily, the harassment they will carry out against you might be extremely violent. Remember that violence doesn’t mean they physically assault you. It’s enough that they leave you with nothing to do. They can take away the dignity of any one of you. Any one of you. [Comencini 2004]

The company becomes a microcosm of the Italian economy and the new management is neoliberalism’s embodiment: new labor policies have been “brought” and are henceforth trackable by employees. Here the psychic destruction unleashed is understood as dehumanizing, indiscriminate, and debilitating, and thereby capable of striking the human core by destroying one’s inherent self-worth. Combating the arrival, then, requires acute social surveillance. Early on, Anna says to a colleague: “It seems as if everyone’s against me, everyone, seriously everyone” (Comencini 2004). The film beckons worker-citizens into preemptive vigilance by illustrating Anna’s apprehension and her resulting mental breakdown: it is here that paranoia is fastened to the mobbee. Unlike Antonio’s bleak loneliness or Fantozzi’s futility, Anna’s dejected disorientation is the harbinger of late capitalist transition.

### A HISTORY OF PRECARIOUSNESS

Today’s precariousness derives from an interaction between labor safeguards and their slow demise, culminating in a structural divide between permanent and semipermanent workers. Historically, labor policies have favored the protection of the already employed (Cafruny and Ryner 2003). The 1970 Charter of Workers’ Rights, a workers’ movement milestone, regulated entry and exit into employment relations, base salary and remuneration, firm mobility, and workers’ health and safety (Bertola and Garibaldi 2006:303). Article 18 of the charter regulates the dismissal of workers with lifelong contracts, and, in the event of an unjust

dismissal, workers are entitled to their positions and back wages (Bertola and Garibaldi 2006:303). Subsequently both Article 18 and the lifelong contract have become symbols of employment security. Although the dismissal laws have been made more lax, labor courts uphold prior standards for unjust dismissal (Bedani 1995).

Italy's labor market has also been characterized by its structural unemployment (Koff and Koff 2002; LaPalombara 1957; Neufeld 1961) and, as of the mid-2000s, a relatively low employment rate of 55.8 percent (Bertola and Garibaldi 2006:313). Its unemployment rate, 9.1 percent in 2001, has also been characterized by marked differences in region, gender, and age, with as high as an eight-percent disparity between the north and south, five percent between men and women, and 40 percent between first-time and seasoned job applicants (Bertola and Garibaldi 2006:295–297). The precariat movement in Italy is largely led by 20- and 30-somethings as generational unemployment typifies the labor regime: 65 percent of the absolute increase in unemployment is accounted for by the increase in 20- to 29-year-olds (Bertola and Garibaldi 2006:300).

Although worker training and entrance into the labor market has been challenging in the past, the limited number of contracts and protected dismissal and pension policies provided great security to the fully employed (Molina and Rhodes 2008:157).<sup>6</sup> Thus, neoliberal labor policies in the 1990s and 2000s eroded a core aspect of Italian life: full and protected labor (Cherubini 1977; Holmes 1989; Horn 1994).<sup>7</sup> Neoliberal policies installed a new contract regime: the wage-indexation system was abolished in 1992, the 1997 Treu policy extended temporary contracts (Molina and Rhodes 2008:149), and the 2003 Biagi Laws legalized over 40 different kinds of atypical or temporary contracts (Cafruny and Ryner 2003; Ferrera and Gualmini 2004:160; Reyneri 2005a; Veneto Lavoro 2004).<sup>8</sup> In a relatively short period of time, the in-between landscape consisted of Italians workers with secure, long-term contracts becoming scarce while semipermanent workers were becoming abundant.<sup>9</sup> What was produced, in effect, was a two-tiered workforce: long-term workers with safeguarded contracts and short-term workers with atypical or semipermanent contracts. In fact, the percentage of workers with short-term contracts doubled between 1996 and 2004 (Molina and Rhodes 2008:165).<sup>10</sup> Overall, short-term contract holders tend to earn approximately 20 percent less than lifelong contract holders, to not be unionized, and to share reduced or no access to pension, maternity leave, unemployment, and paid vacations (Molina and Rhodes 2008:166). The effect of neoliberal policies has produced a unique psychosocial condition: a two-tier workforce allowed for spatial proximity between these groups, some embodying uncertainty while others kept salient internal longings for still-tenable protected employment.

In other words, this structure provided the material conditions in which both long-term and short-term workers might be apprehensive about employment because, in part,

structural changes were visible as underway yet incomplete. What I am suggesting is that such conditions contributed to a rising sense of apprehension and fear for Italian workers, evident in both the private and public sector, because the deregulation of labor was understood as fraught with unforeseeable outcomes (Ferrera and Gualmini 2004). Moreover, as I discovered at two private firms in Padua, contracts fast became a measure of personhood. Individuals would usually be referred to by their contract title, as in saying, Giuseppe's a "lifelong" (*indeterminato*), Clara's a "short-term" (*determinato*), and Nina's a *cococo*, the latter being an acronym for an internship contract (*contratto di collaborazione coordinata e continuativa*; lit., "contract of coordinated and continued collaboration").

Davide Toreglia, a project manager at a company I call DataGisco, a midsized service-industry firm in Padua, helped me understand the social dynamics of this two-tiered workforce and the salience of precariousness.<sup>11</sup> During fieldwork, I would often shadow Davide, reading company materials to occupy myself when he was at the computer but being present for the critical moments of meetings, lunchtimes, coffeekes, desk-to-desk dialogue, and visits to sites to manage temporary workers—even, on occasion, to dismiss them. In one discussion, I asked him about his relationship with new workers, and Davide responded:

It's obvious that the relationships are different. It's not like I treat a precarious one differently. [...] In a very dynamic job, I don't concentrate much on relationships. I don't have very human relationships (*rapporti tanti umani*). Sometimes maybe we exaggerate in expecting the new generation to have experience for themselves. It's not out of spite: I've worked and you have to work, too. But I mean, damn, you've never worked before or you're trying to work. I say this during the interview: This job is for two or three months now, but you may have a new opportunity, the company is big. And so if you're smart, then you work. You have to plant yourself in there, be available (*disponibile*). It's not as if I'm asking you to come to work for free, but if I ask you, 'Tuesday I'm starting a job, can you stay an hour?' And you respond: 'Well, are you paying me?' I'm not saying that's not a worker's right, but it makes me fume. [interview, July 22, 2005]

Davide's narrative relies on the figure of the "available" (*disponibile*) worker to propel a moral and social reconfiguration of labor. Propelled by an emergent ethic valuing workers' desire for genuine toil, workers' individual "smarts" could be rewarded by corporations with long-term contracts or more work. This type of logic, only salient in the context of a two-tiered labor regime, fortifies the difference between short- and long-term workers because the latter group, according to these logics, has successfully merited their positions. Inquiring about payment transgresses implicit rules of the labor regime by avowing their identity as workers with rights, a subject-position largely shaped by labor ideologies of the welfare state (Blim 1990; Reyneri 2005b). Davide, despite enjoying a lifelong contract, admits his lack of "deep relationships" with colleagues, carving out a new gendered and classed position ruled by disaffected and distant work relationships and disavowing Italian labor

histories of close ties at work (Yanagisako 2002). For the precariat, the promise of work summons a sense of expectation and hopeful possibility that they can acquire such positions as well—if they submit to seeing labor as naturally unstable. But Fordist stability, as Davide himself represents, remains within one's reach, materially and psychically, something that the specter of job security keeps in place.

I also encountered precarious workers at mobbing clinics in and close to Padua. In February of 2005, Nora Daretin, a middle-aged woman of somber demeanor, arrived at Fiore Montiglio's door with a problem about work. Fiore, about whom I share another case below, held a public office, present in every province of Italy, and was responsible for managing a multitude of women's employment issues—but, in practice, they largely dealt with mobbing cases. Employed as a check-in operator at an airport, Nora had come after her three-month contract was not renewed: "They told me that I wasn't good. I wasn't fast" (interview, February 8, 2005). The letter Nora received from her boss said explicitly she was not offered another contract because she was "slow." Nora told us angrily: "We're in an airport. We're not on a production line!" (interview, February 8, 2005). Nora aligned herself with neoliberal ideologies by invoking the distinction between material and immaterial products and her role in the service industry. What struck me in this context was not only that Nora was severely depressed and anxious but also the way in which her precarious employment was considered, and rather self-evidently, as a serious and profound problem with consequences for Nora's mental health and quality of life.

In March, Fiore had finally been able to speak to the supervising manager at the airport and requested her reinstatement. Later that day, Nora returned to the office to discuss what had transpired. Fiore reported: "He said you were unable to adapt to the environment. He said, 'I don't want to hire her precariously. She's very capable for other types of environments, but not the airport'" (interview, March 8, 2005). According to Fiore, he manipulatively refused the position as if he too recognized the harshness of precarious employment. Nora, visibly annoyed, reminded us that her training had been inadequate and her employers corrupt. For example, she noted, they had hired the boss's sister with a long-term contract even though she'd been incompetent: "She left a line of people just because she has a lifelong contract. I said, 'Look if you need ten minute break I'll come in for you.' Basically, this company is pitting the poor against the poor!" (interview, March 8, 2005). Fiore put this into perspective: "Most people with precarious jobs try to hide their errors; meanwhile she's beginning to advertise hers. In a precarious environment, everyone hides everything, they deny the evidence. But, then again, so do the non-precarious ones" (interview, March 8, 2005). The logic here was that Nora's coworker failed to be an attentive and vigilant worker precisely because she had job security, revealing yet another increasingly self-evident truth: one's contract typology becomes an interpretive framework for

one's interiority. Fiore also reveals a particular orientation and sensibility toward the new practice of "hiding": in such a context, everyone must be doubted, and truths become, by definition, deceptions.

Articulating multiple available cultural ideologies of work and, in this sense, feeling ontologically divided, Nora at once identified as a neoliberalized subject, with her attention to the superiority of immaterial labor, her refined ability to navigate substate circuits like Fiore's office, and her desire to independently acquire economic and social resources. Yet she also revealed her Fordist class consciousness, her moral positioning of employers versus workers, and her powerful longing for stable work. In the two-tier structure, social practices might have unstable interpretations and meanings: Nora is neither part of the normative protectionist work force nor fully inhabiting a new neoliberal order.

### THE WORK OF ANTIPRECARIOUSNESS

The precariousness movement—although similarly strong in Europe and France in particular (Bodnar 2006)—emerges as one of numerous indicators of turmoil in Italy such as follows: having one of the lowest birthrates in the world and related social panics (Krause 2001), xenophobic public sentiment (Colatrella 2001; Shore 2002; Yanagisako 2002), the rise of political rhetoric favoring anti-immigration (Cole 1997; Holmes 1989), and a generalized sense of social unrest (Migliavacca 2005). Propelled by a history—partially Marxist and partially Catholic—of prolabor political engagement in Italy (Ginsborg 2003; Hardt and Negri 2000; Virno and Hardt 2006), the left-wing movement has become a powerful site of negotiation about the meaning of work and welfare-state duties, founded on the hopeful proposition that neoliberal policies were yet-to-be fully entrenched. But there is something more critical being negotiated here: one of the important underlying assertions of precariousness discourse is to tether the impermanence of labor to social alienation and deep affective undoing. For instance, the "Stop Precariousness Now" (*Stop Precarietà Ora!*) signs held by workers, students, and union leaders at a July 2006 protest in Rome provide a lens to examine how these ideas are visually and symbolically linked.<sup>12</sup> The image representing this campaign is a headless white body, amorphously gendered, teetering perilously on a fragile and narrow stand. Antiprecariousness resonates with the scarcity of lifelong job positions, yet its visual rendering evokes profound insecurity, danger, and anonymity.

We find similar themes reiterated in a Communist Party (RC) campaign called "When do you expire?" (*Quando Scadi?*). The campaign deploys the images of young Italians raising handheld chalkboards that say, "I expire on" followed by a particular date (see Figure 2). On one level, the date suggests the end of one's formal labor contract. More subtly, however, the term *expire* plays with and invokes death, thereby suturing vitality to full employment. This symbolic expiration relies on a collapse between, on the one hand, labor and life and, on the other hand, capitalist productivity



FIGURE 2. Precariousness campaign: “... e tu quando scadi?” [lit., “... And when do you expire?”]. (Courtesy of Gianluca de Angelis)

and social viability.<sup>13</sup> The explicit recognition of the human effects and costs of neoliberal labor regimes valorizes the rights of the jobless yet, ironically, makes it possible for citizens to imagine and fear work loss as social death. Put simply, it is within the context of precarity that the absence of stable work becomes both socially and symbolically charged; thus, it remains part of the existing employment regime that being forced out of work, as in mobbing, might be recognized as a deeply harmful and inhumane act. Solidifying a newly recognizable subject, the *Quando Scadi* campaign summons

precarious workers to rally against labor policies and heralds them, performatively, to identify as vulnerable, threatened, and unpredictable. Evidenced by the salience of the precariat, leftist parties and institutions like the *Refondazione Comunista* (RC) resurge as subject-shaping assemblages in Italian society.

#### YOUR DEATH, MY LIFE

How precariousness discourse frames mobbing was illuminated to me in dialogue about the origins of mobbing. Many political actors have formulated their own theories on mobbing that, as in the following case, expose an ongoing reformulation of a disturbed worker-citizenship and an emergent theory of human baseness. In September of 2004, I interviewed trade-union activist, RC leader, and regional-government labor official Carlo Grattini, who reflected on Italian citizenship:

The fact is that they are no longer citizens; people are goods—they are objects. We live in a working society (*società lavorativa*); if you lose work, or when work becomes precarious, then we enter into a precarious society of uncertainty and insecurity. There is no longer global citizenship. You are alone, you are autonomous. [...] Depriving me of work means depriving me of citizenship. [interview, September 28, 2004]

Reiterating widely circulating left-wing discourse within the antiprecariousness movement, Carlo imagines that the welfare and well-being of the national collective hinge on the position of the labor. At the same time, he recognizes how precariousness furthers processes of individualization and isolation. During our conversation, Carlo spoke reflectively about distinctions between same-level worker and different-level worker mobbing:

Mobbing’s a phenomenon in expansion. . . . The precariousness of labor, above all “bossing” (*bossing*), or mobbing by your boss, has always existed. What is particularly evident now is mobbing between colleagues, horizontal mobbing—this aspect is the culmination of precariousness. I can think about saving myself if I isolate you—*mors tua, vita mea* (your death, my life). If the pack isolates you, then we’ve found the first subject that will have to go. [interview, September 28, 2004]

Here Carlo refers to the distinction between vertical mobbing, also known as bossing, a situation when one worker holds a superior position to the other, and horizontal mobbing, with two same-level workers. His formulation points to how this interworker hostility comes from the precipitous loss of class consciousness: in-class hostility is the brutal outgrowth of the labor market’s uncertainty.

Carlo’s assertion of “*mors tua vita mea*” has precedents in the discourse of mobbing. In their legal history of mobbing, Giorgio Ghezzi and Daniele Ranieri portray a similar scene: “Behind the mobbee’s back the pack advances and, like vultures, this ‘mob’ of pseudo colleagues lives on the other’s disgraces [...] driven by the old saying ‘*mors tua vita mea*’” (2006:54). Within this rhetoric, mobbing is an act of self-defense and rests on the idea of a person’s uncontained egotistical core. It arises not as some sort of

circumvention of labor safeguards but, rather, from a preemptive and self-saving strike on the part of the worker. The violence is achieved at the moment when the individual, in competition with a group, becomes the quintessential neoliberal subject: individualized, risk managing, and fearful (Beck 1992; Ong 2006). But the “*mors tua vita mea*” narrative closes the action with a corrective finale: the same subject, seemingly enviable, executes fear-induced aggression yet fails to achieve the desired stability. It is within this failure, I contend, that we recognize these subjects as ones of neoliberal transition. The potent and still salient hope for long-term job security reflects the legacy of protectionist labor regimes, while the preemptive attack is indicative of apprehensive anxiety: a form of affect potently stirred within mobbing and precariousness discourse. Indeed, it is between the desire for safeguards and the fear of precariousness that almost neoliberal subjects emerge—to some extent individualized and risk-bearing yet still seeking safeguards as something psychically and politically within one’s grasp. When compared to one another, the mobbees are more individualized than precariats: they hold a Hobbesian vision of the world, and, amid their acute disorientation, neoliberalism becomes the catalyst of their suffering. Meanwhile the precariat, articulated with a collective, simultaneously summons a hopeful collaboration with others and the defeat of neoliberal policies.

The two subjectivities, in this sense, are fully separate: indeed, they must be distinct in Italian political imaginaries, as was made fully clear to me in a chance meeting. In May of 2005, I came upon a flyer for a new mobbing clinic recently opened and operated by a local trade union in another city. When I met the local organizer, Toni, I sensed some suspicion on his part when I introduced my project as one on mobbing and precarious labor. Toni’s eyes narrowed, “But they are two completely separate things!” (interview, May 14, 2005). I offered an oversimplified explanation, clarifying that they were intertwined insofar as mobbing eliminated a pool of long-term workers, while precarious contracts prevented workers from ever becoming permanent workers. “Well,” he shrugged, “this is one relationship” (interview, May 14, 2005). Toni then went on to explain that the clinic would focus primarily on union-mediated resolutions, juridical intervention, and psychological support. “Work culture,” Toni reminisced, “was once more solidaristic, aimed at the group; now it’s more individualistic” (interview, May 14, 2005). Mobbing, he explained, was an outgrowth of this “excessive individualism” and the “culmination of precariousness” (interview, May 14, 2005). Echoing Carlo, Toni asserted that precarity ignited the psychic and social conditions to grow mobbing: it is, in effect, the aftermath of labor’s demise. According to alternative logics, one might understand mobbing as coercive downsizing, a circumvention of labor laws, as caused by labor protectionism not precariousness. But by holding mobbing separate, precariousness becomes a primary and unifying ill for workers and a solvable problem, not a totalized new labor regime, and

mobbing is shown to be evidence of the moral failure of neoliberal labor policies. Thus, the precariat and the mobbee retain their ontological distance: the precariat is engendered as classed resistance while the mobbee is fashioned as the de facto victim of neoliberal policy’s ever-tightening grasp.<sup>14</sup>

### APPREHENSION AND FEAR IN THE MOBBIING INDUSTRY

The case of Fiore Montiglio shows how practices of labor exclusion are tightly woven through with suspicion, doubt, and distrust and deeply implanted within a transitional employment regime. Beginning in September of 2004, Fiore, discussed above in Nora’s case, handled cases of gender discrimination and, for the most part, managed cases of mobbing against women. Fiore, like many professionals I met working in the mobbing field, was employed with a short-term contract. Problems began in early October of 2004 when Fiore received an anonymous letter from a worker within the provincial government headquarters. The writer complained of poor working relationships among the employees, rigid schedules, and constant employee surveillance as well as financial mismanagement and corruption. Fiore’s office generally catered to workers outside of her own public office, but she was eager to help this anonymous colleague. She scheduled a meeting with human resources personnel, demanding less scrutiny on employee entry times. She then composed an update for her website and asked the technical manager to post it. When this task was delayed, Fiore concluded that it was done maliciously—in fact, she suspected it was delayed under explicit instruction from her administrators. From there, things intensified, and Fiore regularly scrutinized quotidian events for malice. Fiore explained that “they”—the province-level officials—were keeping “a close eye” on her and admitted to me, “I think I’m being mobbed” (interview, October 8, 2004). To my surprise, the very woman whose responsibility it was to resolve mobbing problems felt that she was a target.

Fiore reflected on recent occurrences that might have contributed to her being mobbed: she had taken up the in-house complaint, had made inquiries about office finances, and was “hard-working and honest.” In the next weeks, I witnessed how and which everyday events became evidence of mobbing. When a file was lost, Fiore believed that someone was stealing materials from her office closet. She theorized that photocopies were being made of her correspondences and cases on a nightly basis. A few weeks later, an estimate on the publishing cost of a manual had disappeared and then “miraculously reappeared” a week later. I inquired whether the document was confidential. “They’re just watching us,” she responded (interview, November 11, 2005). Fiore demanded that the office replace the locks on her office cabinet: her materials, she stated firmly to the office manager, related to sensitive matters. “Make only one copy of the new key,” ordered Fiore (interview, November 11, 2005). In the months that followed, Fiore still reported



things missing, leading her to wonder how many copies of that key were made.

In Fiore's view, the administration was able to conduct extensive and elaborate practices to alienate her and keep her on guard. Seemingly happenstance events in the office were reenvisioned as highly skilled intentional action—from moving her office to the third floor to problems with the heating and air conditioning. On one early summer day, the air conditioner in her office was turned high and Fiore interpreted this not only as mobbing but also as a deliberate attempt to impair her health.<sup>15</sup> Even actions in my life were interpreted as circuitous techniques of attack and sabotage. One day, I passed our mail clerk, and she did not greet me with her usual morning hello. Fiore was convinced the clerk was "instructed" to demean everyone around Fiore and her friends. On another occasion, I mentioned to Fiore that I had received such vague directions from counselors at another mobbing clinic, one cofunded by Fiore's office, that I missed the appointment entirely. Fiore believed that one of her superiors had convinced them to isolate me as a way to oust her: "Noelle, they are mobbing you to mob me" (interview, January 20, 2005). I was bewildered, and my own sense of trust in others began to unravel. During this time, Fiore served in tandem with another official who had been on leave. In September of 2005, after my departure, she returned to work full time and no longer wanted Fiore to handle cases—although Fiore, by law, could continue to fulfill her duties. By December of 2005, Fiore cut back on her work time and left entirely within six months but continued to send letters requesting due pay. When I saw Fiore in July of 2008, she was still owed income and travel expenses.

Fiore's experience represents how mobbing, as a cultural category and practice, emerges as intricately part of the broader context of not just economic but also affective and psychological precariousness wrought within a semi-neoliberal regime. Although Fiore's case bears some classic characteristics of mobbing cases, it is nonetheless rather exceptional given her professional role.<sup>16</sup> Fiore believed that her managers and colleagues were capable of purposefully infiltrating the mundane practices and events of her life. Because her experience rested, in part, on her beliefs rather than documented actions, her case raises further questions. Medical anthropologist Byron Good (1994) has famously pointed out what he calls the "problem of belief." He recognized a tendency to describe practices falling outside of medical knowledge as a "belief," ghettoizing certain knowledges and remedies in ways that problematically reproduced dichotomies like real versus fake, rational versus irrational, and objective versus subjective. In investigating mobbing in Italy, I have sought to avoid attributing what blurs these categories as merely an individual's "belief" and, instead, recognized that mobbing lives in the vexed threshold between these very dichotomies. Indeed, to say mobbing is not real would be empirically false. In Fiore's case, her sensory experiences, her interpretations of everyday life, and her sense of personhood were articulated with mobbing and the broader context of a precarious workforce, in pro-

foundly real ways. A site of liminality, mobbing articulates with various forms of precariousness: economic, psychological, medical, emotional, and existential. In my view, both hostile practices of persecution and the heightened sense of being persecuted are produced in this historical moment of uncertainty, apprehension, and flux.

The case also raises the following question: How does a uniquely Italian experience of mobbing emerge from not only the two-tiered labor force and neoliberal discourse but also a sensibility rooted in Italian notions of suspicion? For Comaroff and Comaroff, neoliberalism coincides with "the rise of new forms of enchantment" (2001:293) and, specifically, the rise of "occult economies." In Europe, these include rumors of cults, organ theft, and kidnapping (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:312), which derive from a more pervasive trend: suspicion surrounding forms of capital accumulation and circulation. Applied to Italy, coworkers might arouse suspicion insofar as they embody an intangible fear: the snatching away of workers' stability and economic resources.

Still, notions of the occult have deeper far more historical significance in Italy than the rise of neoliberal discourse. Work on magic and witchcraft (de Martino 1959; Galt 1991; Hauschild 2002; Pandolfi 1990) and the evil eye (Ankarloo and Clarke 1999; Migliore 1997) in Italy or in the context of Mediterranean anthropology (Dundes 1992; Pitt-Rivers 1954), in fact, would support a deeper genealogy for beliefs in the supernatural, immaterial realms, and malign intentionality. Also unique to Italy is what Alessandro Cavalli characterizes as "a markedly higher level of distrust in institutions" (2001:122). Cavalli suggests vigilance is often oriented toward underhanded practices, fraught with "the presumption that anyone holding a position of power has achieved this in a shady way" (2001:132). A historically grounded cynicism about national leaders, the state, employers, and institutions, moreover, may exacerbate the contemporary forms of hypervigilance that have resulted from neoliberal labor policies. I am not suggesting such modes of awareness are homogeneously diffuse across Italian workers. Rather, I am calling attention to how suspicion and sometimes paranoia—particularly within institutional frameworks—are and have been available affective techniques. There is also evidence, as Michael Herzfeld suggests, that uncertainty underlies hierarchical relationships in a Mediterranean context:

Trust turns on a questionable but necessary capacity for predicting and anticipating the actions of others and thus represents attempts to control present time. The continual suspicion that marks everyday experience is corrosive [. . .] In such situations actors [. . .] strive for a temporary suspension of temporality. [Herzfeld 2005:174–175]

Mobbing, as both a cultural narrative and an embodied practice, allows for navigation of a labor regime that fundamentally undermines fixed temporality. In this sense, Fiore is precarious, as Nancy Ettlenger suggests, in that she lives in "a condition of vulnerability relative to contingency and the inability to predict" (2007:320). Here, the concept



FIGURE 3. *Precariousness march.* (Courtesy of Marta Pieroni)

of “precariousness” extends well beyond the employment regime and hinges on basic notions of human life (Butler 2004; Levinas 1996)—such that it becomes an existential condition.

#### OBJECTS OF PSYCHIC PERCEPTION

At a mobbing clinic in April of 2005, undergraduate volunteer Chiara Galino told me, “I always thought mobbing was an English word because it arrived with the Anglo-Saxon economy” (interview, April 1, 2005). Linked to the new labor regime, Chiara’s understanding situates mobbing as something that was recognized as a foreign other to the known safeguards of Italy’s existing employment regime. Mobbing, invoked as an intruding evil, allows Italians to make this form of moral abuse external rather than internal to Italy. As Herzfeld suggests, “the ‘idea that these things were sent to test us’ . . . offers reassurance about the general predictability of the world” (2006:201). Broadly conceived, articulations of economic practices as Other allows for a moral negotiation as well as a psychic mediation on objects of anticipation.

Building on work that examines the link between capitalism and subjectivity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Dunn 1998; Ho 2005; Maurer 1999) and rethinking labor regimes in terms of affect and embodiment (Martin 1994; Ong 1987, 1999; Rose 2007; Rudnyckyj 2009; Slavishak 2008), I extend the analytics of anticipation to consider economic and social regimes as necessarily incomplete and, therefore, as sites of psychological fears, projections, and anxieties (see Figure 3). During the 1990s and 2000s, Italy was in a precarious climate: the state stripped labor safeguards and reduced workers’ likelihood of gaining lifelong job positions, while the understanding of stable labor as a vital aspect of personhood remained salient. Friction between these axes allowed citizens to retain some of their profound desires for work and stability, and thus their slowgoing elimination, as in the case of mobbing, became a most wretched exclusion and in-class

betrayal. The embodied volatility of labor-regime transition affects this first generation of two-tiered workers possibly more than future cohorts. Mobbing, I suspect, will lose its salience only when ideologies of semipermanent work become normalized and the desire for employment stability is no longer feasible.

That neoliberal capitalism creates an individualized workforce has been well documented (Mills 2003; Rifkin 1995; Rothstein and Blim 1991; Sennett 1998; Thrift 2000). We are cognizant of the manifold moral, social, and economic costs of the capitalist global economy (Gill 2000; Sassen 1998) and how the critique of neoliberalism redefines citizenship (Blim 2002; Mathers 2007). And although debates illustrate the rise of anxiety (Dunant and Porter 1996) globally and within Europe (Fantone 2007; Herzfeld 2005), the analytics of anticipation hone in on the psychic and embodied experiences produced within labor conditions. In unraveling Italy’s paradoxical socioeconomic terrain (McCann 2007; Muehlebach 2007; Stacul 2007), the costs and effects to which I call attention occur when capitalist relations are partially transformed—with neither neoliberal forms nor state safeguards exerting a totalizing force over the labor regime. And, in the ongoing anthropological project of studying subjectivity (Luhrmann 2006; Ortner 2005) and “[relating] psychological constructs to analyses of political subjectivity” (Biehl et al. 2007:16), I mobilize the cultural process of anticipation as a psychological process at the nexus of expectation, affect, and temporal imaginings. Like studies that interrogate the future, human expectation, and prediction as objects of inquiry (Miyazaki 2006; Zaloom 2006), the salience of the mobbee and the precariat depend on particular imaginings of the future of capital: exclusion, meaningless work relationships, and endless instability, although they differ in the intensity and scope of their visions.

An ethically charged workplace imagined as “your death, my life”—a stark imaginary in which stand alone actors

fighting to the death for social inclusion—materializes in relation to individualization and risk but also, and necessarily, in relation to the sensory and psychic proximity of welfare protections and stability (Molé 2007a). Italy's late-modern worker-subjects refocus our gaze on neoliberalism's most neurotic internal paradoxes: individualization yet dehumanization, and uncertainty notwithstanding desires for safeguards.

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## NOTES

**Acknowledgments.** I am thankful to audiences at the Princeton University and the University of Chicago for their incredibly helpful feedback. I am also indebted to the *AA* Editor-in-Chief and the anonymous reviewers' sharp comments and suggestions. I owe great thanks to the following colleagues and friends: Mona Bhan, Doug Goldstein, George Laufenberg, Andrea Muehlebach, and Mark Robinson. And finally I am thankful to grants supporting this research from Fulbright IIE, the German Marshall Fund, and Rutgers University.

1. The discourse of precariousness has been studied in various European contexts (Bermeo 2001; Hammer 2003; Procoli 2004).
2. I deploy the term *paranoia* to highlight the ways in which subjects are prone to suspicion and distrust of others, coupled with projections of others' inner hostility and aggression. I do not wish, however, to suggest that this sort of psychic personhood is therefore irrational or delusional, as some definitions of paranoia might connote. Doing so would discredit subjects' experience as false belief. Rather, I aim to delve into paranoia as an inhabitable subject position and a culturally situated knowledge practice.
3. Various European states have recognized the phenomenon of mobbing: in particular, Germany, France, Austria, and the United Kingdom (Ege 2001).
4. University of Verona and La Sapienza of Rome offer such master's degree programs.
5. The neorealism movement in Italian film in the 1940s focused on labor unrest and widespread poverty (Bondanella 2001:74) as well as depictions of the daily hardship of Italy's working classes in both rural and urban sites.
6. Molina and Rhodes suggest that these services protecting the employed serve as a "de facto welfare safety net in the absence of a more fully developed alternative covering the risks of social exclusion and unemployment among mature workers" (2008:157), making the working population particularly vulnerable to greater social exclusion.
7. The Italian protectionist labor market has been measured with an extremely high RPI (regime of labor protection), a quantitative measure of state labor protections (Boeri and Garibaldi 2005:46). Italy had an RPI rate of 3.5 for the late 1990s compared with a 0.7 for the United States and 2.6 for Japan (Boeri and Garibaldi 2005:46).
8. Employers, however, cannot simply convert to short-term contracts, as Italian and European law proscribes that a single employee will default to an undetermined time contract after two or more progressive short-term contracts with the same employer (Cirioli 2006).
9. In fact, the rate of new issue for lifelong contracts dropped a staggering 33.7 percent in the northeast by 2003 (Schiattarella and Piacentini 2003:90).
10. The two-tier phenomenon is shaped by what Saskia Sassen has called "bipolarity" in employment regimes: "a demand for highly specialized and educated workers alongside a demand for basically unskilled workers" (1998:146).
11. All names used are pseudonyms.
12. Demonstrators demanded the abrogation of two laws in addition to the Biagi Laws: the Moratti Laws and the Bossi-Fini Laws (ANSA Notiziario Generale 2006).
13. Similarly, Andrea Bajani, author of *I Can Break but I Can't Bend* (2006), writes that working precariously is like living "with an expiration, without a way out from a state of permanent precariousness" (*Il Sole 24 Ore* 2006).
14. This does not mean workers cannot occupy both positions simultaneously, but the symbolic distinction that has circulated publicly would not collapse. Fiore, for instance, is employed in her office with a part-time contract and is a mobbee but also holds a lifelong contract as a public servant.
15. Influenced by humoral traditions, many Italians believe cold air causes illness (Whitaker 2003).
16. Mobbing is widely understood as something "gender neutral," despite evidence that it affects more women than men (Ghezzi and Ranieri 2006; Gilioli and Gilioli 2001). Moreover, I found that many women also deploy the term *mobbing* to prosecute cases of sexual harassment (Molé 2007b; Zippel 2006).

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