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THE REPUTATION ECONOMY

Understanding
Knowledge Work in
Digital Society

Alessandro Gandini



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Introduction: Beyond the ‘Creative Class’ Vision

Abstract The introduction illustrates the scopes and the aims of the book, contextualising the evolution of knowledge work across the decades in the encounter between neoliberal policies fostering flexibility in employment regimes, and the vision of a ‘creative class’ of knowledge workers that is revealed today as an unfulfilled promise. The section shows how these aspects intersect with the rise of digital media and the new forms and models of collaborative work and organisation, allowing to build the argument of reputation as a shared cultural conception of value and a form of individual social capital, that extends over digital and non-digital networks of knowledge workers in an increasingly freelance-based labour market.

This book is concerned with providing a critical understanding of how knowledge work is changing with the integration of digital technologies into processes of production and organisation. It starts from the fundamental assumption that the conditions of existence of today’s knowledge work are the consequence of slightly more than a decade of frenzy around the concepts of ‘creativity’ and ‘creative’, and that these have now completed their delinking from the purely artistic and leisure domain to become fully integrated into a managerial and organisational logic of knowledge production founded on creativity. This now results in a number of processes that are changing existing jobs and forms of professional

work in various contexts of the knowledge economy, particularly—but not exclusively—as these meet with the digital media industries.

Based primarily on a doctoral research that focused on independent and freelance workers in the knowledge economy at various levels of experience, age and skills, undertaken between 2011 and 2013 across two urban international contexts—London and Milan—and a digital marketplace—Eance, now known as Upwork—this book offers an outline of how knowledge work has changed as a result of the ideological valorisation of creativity as a mantra for innovation and professional advancement, and how this combined with the rise of digital and social media—henceforth rendering knowledge work a digital and freelance knowledge economy centred, it is here argued, around a shared, diffused cultural notion of reputation as value.

This book contends that conceiving reputation as a form of value should be seen as the main interpretative paradigm of knowledge work in the digital age, and provides a contextualisation of how this inserts into a broader dynamic of transformation of work alongside technological advancements in the aftermath of the recession. To do so, in addition to the primary empirical data, this book benefits of secondary empirical materials that come from two other projects I have participated with in 2014 in my post-doctoral work—an international study on so called, and the first year activity of an EU-funded project on commons-based peer production (CBPP).

By combining all these sources together in a single contribution, this book provides an unprecedented comprehensive acknowledgement of the role of reputation as a specific form of individual social capital for knowledge workers, that finds empirical visibility and potential measurability across online social media platforms and algorithms. Reputation comes to be shared by participants in these environments as a cultural conception of value that is principled on the fact that knowledge workers have interiorised an ideological celebration of entrepreneurship and creativity, and become the protagonists of a job market characterised by a notion of venture labour.¹ Reputation is an object ‘traded’ by knowledge workers in a labour market where they operate as independent professionals treating their own reputation as an economic asset—a reputational capital that represents an investment in social relations with expectations of economic return, and is decisive for job procurement.

The various empirical sources, which will be discussed in the book from a comprehensively critical perspective, show how knowledge work has been colonised by the logics of creative labour and has simultaneously

integrated digital technologies into a variety of processes, for a digital and freelance workforce that bears the contours of a multi-functional professional category with original features. This, it is here argued, renders the photograph of a socio-cultural and socio-economic professional scene based on the managerialisation of social relations and the multiplication of the channels through which these are pursued, maintained and mediated. This dynamic should be understood within the broader transformation of work that originates in the socio-political affirmation of neoliberalism as an ideology-turned-culture that pursues the reduction of labour costs and the flexibilisation of employment for purposes of increasing accumulation—which now finds workers happily embracing a context which Angela McRobbie has described as a marriage between counterculture and the financial economy.² This is the starting point of the present discussion.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF KNOWLEDGE WORK AND CREATIVITY

In broader socio-economic terms, the last 30 years have been the era of 'posts'. A fordist society based on the industrial mass production of goods in specific places (i.e., factories) and the availability of lifelong full-time jobs—a society where mass media served the aim of fuelling desire for the mass consumption of those goods—has witnessed an evolution towards what came to be defined as a post-industrial society, centred upon a post-fordist mode of production based on financial accumulation and the valorisation of information.³ The comprehensive combination of these instances brought knowledge workers into a central position. The pioneering vision of an information-based and service-driven economy where workers are able to capitalise on their own knowledge and skills, envisaged earlier in the twentieth century by thinkers such as Peter Drucker and Daniel Bell,⁴ became a reality across the 1980s and 1990s, representing the latest evolution of a bourgeois mode of production founded on the rise of the middle class as the main productive subject in society, as described by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*.⁵

Yet, this period in history coincides with the surge of a set of economic policies that we commonly refer to as neoliberalism.⁶ By placing individual entrepreneurial initiative at the centre of an ideological approach to free markets, neoliberalism consisted in practice not only in the loosening of regulatory frameworks for economic and financial activities, but also—and crucially for the purposes of this book—in the liberalisation of employment regimes and regulations, favouring the diffusion of more flexible

forms of work, plotted as a way to liberate entrepreneurship and individual economic action from the constraints of bureaucratic institutions.

The quick rise of neoliberal policies to a hegemonic status across the Western economies rapidly transformed the generalised flexibilisation of employment relations in a mantra that propelled a comprehensive individualisation and entrepreneurialisation of the knowledge workforce. This paired up with—and grew upon—the generalised enthusiasm around a supposedly emerging ‘new economy’ brought by the Internet, in the rise of what Manuel Castells famously defined as a *network society*.⁷ Robert Reich, the former Secretary of Labor of Bill Clinton’s administration, in the book *The Work of Nations*, envisaged a society where new media workers were to become ‘model entrepreneurs’ of a new knowledge economy rushing to embrace with open arms the diffusion of digital technologies.⁸ Similarly, the Blair era in the UK politically marketed with success the cultural notion of ‘cool Britannia’ that celebrated the centrality of the creative and cultural industries as an engine of innovation and economic growth for the country.⁹

A new typology of jobs, based on the valorisation of creativity as a process to add surplus value to products of knowledge, became fashionable and diffused over this so-called new economy. These quickly established as a combination of entrepreneurial activity, individual talent and creativity and broadly colonised a variety of sectors caught in the middle of a momentous frenzy for technological advancement and the diffusion of digital media. This frenzy gave rise to what arguably is the most controversial cultural product that resulted from the hegemonic popularisation of a culture of economic advancement around knowledge professions based on creativity: the myth of the rise of a creative class of knowledge workers.

This grew up across the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s following the publication of Richard Florida’s same name bestseller,¹⁰ which propelled a narrative of individual self-realisation by means that combine social recognition, lifestyle and creative entrepreneurial activity across knowledge and especially media-related professions within the new economy. Florida’s argument is based on the assumption that a widespread diffusion of jobs based on creativity and individual talent was destined to bring a new era of economic development and prosperity through the rise of this new socio-economic subject, the ‘creative class’. The term identifies an undistinguished ensemble of urban, young knowledge workers employed in broadly different jobs, sharing a common ethos for creativity, innovation and individualism.

Despite quickly surging as a popular concept adopted by policy makers and city planners, who soon started to project the development of 'creative cities',¹¹ the idea of a creative class attracted substantial criticism by a number of authors such as Jamie Peck, Mike Storper and Allen Scott in the USA, Andy Pratt, Rosalind Gill and David Hesmondhalgh in the UK, among others. The basic criticism raised by these authors concerns the celebratory framework that characterises the creative class vision, which neglects social inequalities and class divisions diluted within the 'coolness' of the emerging economy, and reduces class categorisation to a mere taxonomy based on lifestyle that conflicts with the notion of class as traditionally conceived in sociological terms.¹² This argument often comes together with the criticism of the idea that the presence of creative talent in a region is functional to economic development, in that it generates growth and jobs. Research has evidenced, on the contrary, how individuals endowed by such human capital are likely to move only where employment opportunities are already available in order to profit on their investment in higher education and professional skills.¹³

The critique to the creative class vision has seen many critical media scholars adopting an Autonomist Marxist approach, to highlight issues related to employment precariousness, job security and flexibility. These authors have been flagging up the many forms of 'flexible exploitation' that are at stake in the world of 'creative labour', basically sustaining that Florida simply ignores many of the critical aspects at stake with creative jobs in the knowledge industry.¹⁴ Particularly, such critique focuses on the role and extent of an individual worker's subjectivity and the way this is put at value through the notion of creativity. This builds on the idea that knowledge work in the new economy is an example of 'immaterial labour', defined by Maurizio Lazzarato as the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of a commodity—that is, the outcome of activities that no longer pertain to the domain of material industrial production but actually to the valorisation of cognitive and cultural features.¹⁵ The essential trait of the 'immaterial worker' is what another Autonomist exponent, Paolo Virno, calls virtuosity—meaning the aproductive, self-referential activity of the post-fordist knowledge worker whose labour shares characteristics with the 'performance' and the 'score' of an artist.¹⁶

Based on this approach, Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt (2008) describe the dynamics of work in the knowledge economy based on creativity, as a 'social factory'—a 'factory without walls' where labour is dispersed, deterritorialised and decentralised, and all traits of social life, subjectivity

and social relations are put at value.¹⁷ On a similar line, Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter describe this context as one of ‘freedom without security’, where autonomy pairs up with precariousness as a response of global financial capital to the rejection of ‘jobs for life’ that the mantra of entrepreneurialism and creativity brandishes.¹⁸ David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker assimilate these jobs to the kind of ‘emotional labour’ evidenced by Arlie Hochschild in her work on airline staff,¹⁹ as creative forms of labour similarly elicit appropriate emotional responses by inducing or repressing feelings, and intertwine with instances of self-realisation, self-exploitation and precariousness.

Today, after more than ten years, it seems reasonable to sustain that Florida’s vision pictured with exaggerated emphasis the coming of an era of economic growth based on the proliferation of communication and media-related occupations. In fact, it may be argued that the movement for which workers employed in the knowledge economy were supposed to live and prosper within successful creative careers went largely off track. This, is here argued, is only partly due to external conditions, such as the recent economic recession, and actually should be seen as the result of a combination of factors that chiefly call into question the rise of social media and platforms, which triggered a process of transformation in the practices and cultures of knowledge work comprehensively taken.

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS, THE RECESSION AND THE ‘NEW ECONOMY’

There is no doubt that the 2007–2008 economic recession and especially its aftermath significantly affected the knowledge sector. Yet, this also contributed to make visible a controversial, and more complex, social context that was already existing before the recession. During the 2000s, a plethora of highly skilled, college-educated professionals in creative disciplines were in fact being promised that a cool job in the arts, media and communication sector was awaiting them soon after finishing their studies. However this scenario, often sustained by families who dipped into lifetime savings or got themselves into debt to pay university fees, with the expectation of a rewarding career that would have repaid the investment, was in fact largely neglected. Not only the number of jobs available substantially diminished over these years, but the actual nature of the work available in the ‘new’ knowledge economy based on creativity was

changing. This is a consequence of the combination of neoliberal policies fostering flexibilisation and entrepreneurialism with the dramatic technological advancement brought along by the boom of the Internet, which on the one hand offered new professional opportunities, and on the other hand shrank the existing demand.

The rise of social network sites and platforms has substantially intervened within the practices and dynamics of employment and recruitment in the industry, to the extent that social media today is the main instrument for job searches. The most common social network sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are increasingly used for professional scopes, and it is of no wonder that one of the most successful social media worldwide, LinkedIn, is an employment-oriented social network. A plethora of websites dedicated to different kinds of work-related matters and niche job markets proliferate on the web. Digital marketplaces such as Upwork, Freelancer, Guru and others grow at a large scale year after year, having as their core business the allocation of workers and the meeting of different kinds of supply and demand on various job markets.

Most importantly, however, digital technologies have significantly been integrated into processes of production and organisation over the last decade, contributing to quickly and dramatically reconfigure the processes of valorisation in the knowledge industry as well as the meeting of demand and supply. The McKinsey report of January 2015²⁰ suggests that online social tools are being used at a very large scale by a variety of businesses and especially those active in communication-related areas of the knowledge industry, such as public relations, marketing and product development, for a plurality of managerial activities. Also, these tools are increasingly utilised by individual workers themselves as instruments for job procurement, for the enactment of practices of self-branding and networking, and to expand the marketability of their professional profile by showcasing their skills, competences and taste. As one's professional networks and connections become visible through Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and similar services, the management of connections and networking becomes therefore ever more required for one's career. The skilful curation of a personal profile on social network sites has become essential for professional advancement, as recruiters often evaluate candidates and assess their recruitability by screening their social media profiles first.

Existing research has extensively evidenced how central is the role played by social capital for job procurement in professional contexts where workers lean on their personal connections to get jobs and the only thing

that matters is ‘who you know’.²¹ However, on the other hand, there is much less research that questioned the nature of the social capital at stake within such professional contexts where digital interaction becomes as important as face-to-face interaction, in an industry where employment regimes based on project work and flexible arrangements, particularly freelancing, are advocated by many as the new standard of work.²²

The combination of these instances brings forward the hypothesis that the role played by one’s personal reputation within the knowledge economy is today a newly determinant element for career success. As the social buttons regulating social activity on digital media platforms—likes, shares, mentions, retweets—account and record one’s entire online activity, measuring it with numbers and figures, the reputation of an individual user/worker becomes publicly visible, tangible, accessible and potentially measurable. This is why reputation comes to be the main object of study at stake within this work and is here framed through the idea of a reputation economy. Reputation, traditionally an intangible asset of the corporate economy, analogous to the role of the brand for the scope and meaning of corporations, seems to regulate the job market of the knowledge economy by operating as a specific form of capital or asset for individuals in a context made of networked and newly mediated social interaction where actors pursue economic outcomes by leveraging on social relations—which are accessed and mobilised by making use of one’s reputational capital.

In an economy characterised by the diffusion of project-based employment and the rise of freelancing—an economy principled on the fact that social interaction intrinsically connects with economic valorisation across networked environments—the acknowledgement of such a central role of reputation seems key to the understanding of how knowledge work has evolved within today’s socio-economic context, where interaction does not necessarily take place face-to-face, but is mediated via various digital tools. The notion of the reputation economy is the one proposed here to describe these dynamics. This book contends that existing research has not sufficiently examined the extent to which reputation, in a digitising labour market, has become the element shared by independent professional actors in the knowledge economy as a cultural conception of value that translates social interaction into economic outcomes.

In the pages that follow, I will give account of this claim and argue that the protagonists of such a digital and freelance knowledge economy based on reputational conceptions of value are a ‘new’ kind of knowledge and creative workers, who operate as independent professionals in this

labour market, making extensive use of social media for various reasons and leveraging on their personal connections and reputational capital to engage in economic behaviour and advance their career, status and jobs, having completely interiorised the entrepreneurial stance of their professional capacity as an ideological form of venture labour.

This argument will be outlined using a variety of theoretical and empirical sources. To begin with, Chap. 2 gives evidence of how today's knowledge economy is largely freelance-based and made of various independent and self-employed professional subjects active across a plurality of digital contexts. Chapter 3 discusses how and why reputation is here conceived as the social capital of a digital and freelance knowledge economy, offering a contextualisation of the definition of 'reputation economy' through a theoretical perspective that aims to establish a link between the academic traditions of critical management, the sociology of culture and media studies.

Subsequently, the book turns to offer evidence of the nature and the functioning of the reputation economy as this emerges from the various studies that represent the empirical basis of this work. Chapter 4 accounts for the role of reputation within two urban networks of freelance and independent professionals, evidencing the interplay of reputation and trust within these contexts. Chapter 5 focuses on the more strictly digital forms of knowledge work, discussing the main findings of an international study on social recruiting and offering an exploratory overview of Elance, now known as Upwork, which is one of the most important and renowned digital marketplaces for knowledge contractors worldwide. Both contexts, we will see, prove how reputation comes to prominence as the element that regulates socio-economic interaction in this particular labour market.

Chapter 6 turns to a socio-cultural interpretation of the 'digital work' that characterises today's knowledge work, intended as a form of venture labour principled on the managerialisation of bohemianism. I will discuss how the broader implications of this transformation challenge existing and new cultures of work and value as they appear to originate from the various sources of analysis, including here some of the preliminary findings that emerge from the first year activity of the EU-FP7 project 'P2Pvalue', where I have participated as a Research Fellow in 2014. Chapter 7, on a similar line, offers a contextualisation of the phenomenon of the rise of coworking spaces, which represent the most relevant organisational novelty of the digital and freelance knowledge economy. The chapter discusses the extent to which coworking spaces may represent the new organisational modality of work for the nomadic digital professions and

critically assesses this in analogy with pre-industrial forms of labour and organisation.

Chapter 8 returns then to reflect on how this relates to the neoliberal framework offered in the introduction, particularly looking at what the Left can learn in order to more adequately interpret today's context of work and employment—which constitutes its founding condition of existence—and how to respond to a transformation that calls very much into question its own foundational principles, particularly the institution of class.

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22. See Chap. 2 for extensive discussion of this topic.

The Rise of a Freelance Economy

Abstract This chapter gives evidence of how freelancing has come to be the new standard in the entrepreneurialised labour market of the knowledge economy. With the help of secondary data, the chapter details the rise of freelancing and illustrates why this goes hand in hand with the integration of the digital infrastructure in the production and organisation of labour. As the managerial and strategic work around social relations and social capital, that historically connotes this labour market, meets with digital and social media, it is argued that a cultural understanding of reputation as value is decisive for independent professionals in the digital and freelance knowledge economy to the aim of job to the aim of job procurement. This now comes to the forefront as a shared notion.

In an article that appeared in *The Economist* in January 2015,¹ the coming of a new kind of job market in the knowledge economy is envisaged. This is based on the supply of unprecedented amounts of freelance workers in an economy of services undertaking a transformation that, if sustained, may come to be as important as Henry Ford's intuition of combining moving assembly lines with mass labour in the early twentieth century. This shift is labelled with the term 'on-demand economy', which describes an extremely flexible job market made of 'workers on tap' who operate independently and individually, becoming available on an as-needed basis to provide services of different sorts to their clients and users. In such

an on-demand economy, workers become businesses themselves, turning into brands that are to be managed as an entrepreneurial venture: *You Inc.* But where have we heard this story before?

BUSINESSES OF ONE

In an essay that appeared in 1998 in the *Harvard Business Review*,² Thomas Malone and Robert Laubacher explain how the Linux operating system was born as a result of a community of individuals who gathered on the Internet to contribute to the writing of the operating code on a per-task basis, fixing bugs and adding new features to the product as the production extended. Malone and Laubacher argue that this endeavour took place thanks to a new and original division of labour where individuals connected to electronic networks to then work individually on a common task in a shared digital space, at a distance, whereby each one contributed to the crafting of a single component of a larger product.

This story allows Malone and Laubacher to envisage the dawn of a new modality of work in the knowledge economy, propelled by the proliferation of such electronic networks. The fundamental ingredient of this transformation, in their view, is the evolution of individual workers into ‘businesses of one’, conceived as electronically connected freelancers who engage in temporary networked collaboration and, when the job is done, dissolve the aggregation and seek a new assignment. This intuition was already being experimented within various segments of the knowledge economy—especially, but not exclusively, in the digitising media industries. Put differently, Malone and Laubacher were among the first to witness how knowledge work as a whole was about to be subsumed by the logics pertaining to creative labour and by some of the organisational routines that most commonly pertained to media and creative industries.

The chance offered by the Internet to develop independent careers anew contributed to the popularisation of a culture of technologically advanced forms of work based on entrepreneurial spirit and innovation pursued via creativity. As knowledge workers came to be more easily inclined to embark in solo careers and independent work, they effectively found fertile terrain particularly in those industries that were more affected by the increasing intermediation of digital technologies in the productive and organisational regimes: the media industries and its changing professions.

This produced the emergence of a largely individualised and entrepreneurialised workforce grown up in the myth of creativity and self-organisation, engaging in networked social relations and production and aiming towards social and symbolic recognition. Daniel Pink³ in the USA describes this movement with the phrase ‘free agent nation’, which epitomises the upcoming diffusion of freelancers, elancers and self-employed workers as the protagonists of the professional innovation brought along by the rapid expansion of digital and electronic networks. Pink sustained that, in such a transforming framework, talented individuals were in need of an organisation to an increasingly lesser extent—and in fact were seeking more autonomy and independence to pursue their career and interests in their own way.

Existing research and especially the works of Shirley Dex,⁴ Helen Blair,⁵ Gillian Ursell,⁶ Valerie Antcliff and colleagues,⁷ Keith Randle and colleagues⁸ on the study of television professionals in the UK; Susan Christopherson on the study of labour markets and the transition between ‘old’ and ‘new media’ in the UK and USA⁹; Arne Baumann on freelancing in the German media industry¹⁰; Chris Benner on the flexible nature of work in Silicon Valley¹¹; Rory Donnelly on contracting across IT professionals¹²; Barbara Fersch on Danish translators¹³; Alice Marwick on the tech scenes in San Francisco¹⁴; all evidence and observe how the variegated and complex workforce of the knowledge industry that more directly had to deal with digitisation converged towards an independent and entrepreneurial, newly professionalised character. According to Susan Christopherson,¹⁵ across the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the overall labour market in the knowledge economy experienced a split between the core and the periphery of the workforce, with tasks being increasingly organised around projects; here, freelance-based work quickly came to be preferred to dependent work and the permanent employment of staff, thanks to its extreme flexibility.

It may be said that the diffusion of top-down neoliberal policies pointing at the flexibilisation of employment regimes actually found correspondence in a simultaneous cultural shift, taking place as a result of knowledge work being ‘contaminated’ by the cultural logic of the creative economy based on the flourishing of digital media in the early 2000s. Project-based organisational arrangements, commonly accounted for in the managerial and sociological literature among the various types of nonstandard employment,¹⁶ surged across the 1990s and the 2000s to

become the new standard form of employment of a knowledge industry that was being reshaped as of the combination of technological specialisation with creativity. Given the nature of the tasks requested to these workers, and the new cultural spirit of the time, freelancers soon emerged as the best equipped workforce for this transformation, evolving from a niche phenomenon that pertains to the search for flexibility in the later worklife¹⁷ to a widely diffused career choice bearing the traits of the ‘new’, across all levels of experience, age and education.

SELF-EMPLOYMENT AND FREELANCING IN CONTEXT

From a historical point of view, freelancing is one among various types of nonstandard employment that go under the definition of ‘contingent work’,¹⁸ a term often associated to low-end service jobs which, however, generally comprises all employment categories based on conditional and transitory arrangements. Freelancers today have evolved from being a relatively secondary segment of the productive workforce and a category often associated to specific kinds of workers, to be commonly advocated as the ‘new standard’ form of employment in the new economy. The recent studies by Debra Osnowitz,¹⁹ Peter Cappelli and JR Keller,²⁰ just to name a few, evidence how contract forms of work are now prevalent and wide ranging. Despite generalised issues of job insecurity and precariousness, a freelance career is increasingly the preferred choice for many who want to maintain control and management of their time and work, and pursue independent professional interests and passions.

In this study, freelancers have been taken as an undistinguished and blurred ensemble made of contractors, consultants, free agents, portfolio workers and startupper—a series of terms that this book will use interchangeably to indicate a workforce where such different definitions substantially overlap. The main principle nevertheless remains that all workers pertaining to this study, and especially those accounted for in Chap. 4, obtain the majority of their income from contract-based, independent and self-organised forms of work, and are not subject to a formally stable and continuous dependent relationship with a single employing entity.

Although, generally speaking, figures concerning self-employment are quite difficult to gather, given that sometimes this kind of work is scarcely accounted for, the historical trend of expansion of this kind of workforce in the last few decades is widely visible in the available data, though with significant context-dependent differences. The book edited by Richard

Arum and Walter Muller (2004) is an invaluable resource to trace this evolution.²¹ Data presented in this book show how non-agricultural self-employment in OECD countries has tended to increase over the decades and particularly between 1979 and the early 1990s, when it showed an average growth rate of 2.3% per year, compared to 1.4% of general employment. This combines with different understandings and cultural conceptions of self-employment that vary from country to country, which sometimes depend on the specific industry context.

For example, in a dedicate chapter in that same book, Nigel Meager and Peter Bates show that in the UK the decade 1979–1989 saw a general growth of self-employment, with an overall percentage rise from 7% to 13.1%. This was mostly due not only to the diffusion of self-employment in the construction and the service sectors, but also to a looser regulatory framework for business startups.²² More recent figures collected at EU level demonstrate how the UK over the decade 2000–2010 maintained an average number of non-employees (13.6%) substantially in line with the EU figures (17%)—however, accounting for 70% of the non-employees being self-employed, which represents a consistently high percentage if compared to other EU countries.²³

The most recent data confirm how self-employment today is an established career path in the UK, both in figures and in terms of social recognition. The Professional Contractors Group (2011) estimates a number of 1.4 million freelancers in the British Economy, a workforce comprehensively worth £21 billion in added value.²⁴ A report published by the Resolution Foundation in 2014²⁵ suggests that the number of self-employed has grown from 650,000 to 4,500,000 since 2009—which stands for one in seven workers in the UK. The reports sustains that this is due to cyclical but also structural factors, only partly attached to new policies that favour individual entrepreneurialism and startups. Yet, despite the workers surveyed there seem comprehensively reluctant to see themselves explicitly as ‘entrepreneurs’, data clearly show how freelancing and independent work has come to represent not only a valuable alternative to the shrinkage of dependent jobs in the post-recession age, but a pursued choice, fully recognised as such in British society.

At a European level, the increasing favourability of self-employment and freelance careers is evidenced by the European Employment Observatory Review (2010).²⁶ Self-employment at that time accounted for nearly 15% of total employment in Europe (again, one job in seven). The report

notes how self-employment demonstrates a degree of resilience to the economic crisis, scoring a limited decrease in figures of only 1% compared to a 2% drop in the number of dependent employees if compared to pre-2007 figures. What is more interesting, however, is the change in perceptions. The survey found that 45% of European citizens would prefer self-employment to dependent jobs; these figures are inverted only in Greece. The preference for self-employment appears to be rooted within a set of specific socio-demographic characteristics; younger workers, more commonly men, with higher levels of education and an entrepreneurial family background are in fact more likely to show a preference towards self-employment compared to other regimes. Its main attractive features appear to be freedom, independence and self-fulfilment. These data are largely confirmed by a recent research report entitled ‘*Technology at Work*’, co-authored by Carl Frey and Michael Osborne.²⁷ However, while hailing self-employment as the standard employment of the new economy, this contribution also warns that the implementation of digital technologies within work processes is speeding up the processes of work automation, therefore putting at risk an estimated 47% of jobs in various sectors.

In the USA, a survey promoted by Upwork (2015), formerly known as Elance-oDesk, a major digital marketplace for contractors and freelancers worldwide, shows how 54 million Americans have been generating some or all of their income earned in 2014 from freelance work, accounting for more than 30% of the entire American workforce. This follows on a similar study conducted by Upwork in partnership with the Freelancers Union in 2014, which celebrated how ‘the way we work is changing’ and ‘gone are the days of the traditional 9-to-5. We’re entering a new era of work—project-based, independent, exciting, potentially risky, and rich with opportunities.’²⁸ A typology of freelance professions is drawn in the 2014 report, distinguishing among:

- (a) independent contractors, who are traditional freelancers working on a contract basis for the entirety of their income;
- (b) ‘moonlighters’, who are professionals with a day job doing freelance work in the evening or spare time;
- (c) diversified workers, who are professionals with multiple sources of income earned from a mix of freelance and dependent, often part-time, work;
- (d) temporary workers, who are individuals in a dependent job with a temporary status, employed as freelancers;

- (e) freelance business owners, who are self-employed entrepreneurs with one to five employees who consider themselves as freelance professional businesses.

In Europe, one particular geographic context that shows significant elements of interest is Italy. A variety of studies at the local level²⁹ demonstrate how the country is historically characterised by high rates of self-employment, especially in the last few decades and with regard to employment in the service sector. Self-employed workers are known in Italy as ‘partite IVA (Imposta Valore Aggiunto)’, which recalls the VAT (value-added tax) number assigned to each self-employed worker for fiscal procedures (IVA is VAT in Italian). The most recent labour reforms have acted on self-employment only at a superficial level, leaving Italian independent workers within a substantially heavy legislative scheme connoted by a complicated taxation regime. However, in contrast with these issues, the number of self-employed in Italy remains significantly higher than the EU average (between 23% and 26% according to various studies³⁰).

This is also partly due to a high number of self-employed employees, meaning workers who are formally employed on a contract basis but actually work as dependent employees. Figures are very difficult to collect on this phenomenon, which historically connotes Italy and which is increasingly diffused also in the UK, popularised with terms like ‘bogus’ or ‘false’ self-employment.³¹ Yet, the EEOR report mentioned above underlines that the widespread diffusion of bogus or false self-employment in Italy can be found in all areas of work, whilst in the UK this seems to be mostly limited to the construction sector. A further element of interest regarding Italy is also given by the fact that the ‘partite IVA’ have been recently at the centre of a public debate that calls for a major legislative intervention in favour of self-employment, with the aim of simplifying the legislative schemes, cutting taxes and introducing a less bureaucratised regime of accounting. The elements here discussed are those that justify the adoption of the UK and Italy in the cases of their most prominent cities for the knowledge industry, London and Milan, as the urban case study of this work discussed in Chap. 4.

To sum up, it seems as though freelancing today happens to be at the centre of that shift in the nature of employment in the knowledge economy described earlier, as it no longer only appeals to those aiming to change their career, nor does it represent an option only for those who have been downsized or made redundant because of budget cuts. Although there

is no doubt that a consistent number of workers have been more or less induced into becoming freelancers in the recent past, not by opportunity or choice, rather as a result of the economic recession and the shrinking of an already fragmented labour market—so much so that a specific name, ‘necessity entrepreneurs’, was even coined for these workers³²—it is also true that freelancing today is increasingly framed in the public debate as an empowering career choice to pursue in a comprehensively entrepreneurialised labour market where knowledge workers represent economic actors who sell their knowledge as a commodity. In a context where workers should behave as small businesses, it becomes essential for them to strategically manage their reputation in order to be successful professionals in a fragmented job market, and put in place consistent practices to pursue this aim. This brings us to one of the key notions that permeate this work: self-branding.

FROM BRAND YOU TO THE STARTUP OF YOU

Professional networking is historically acknowledged as an essential practice in the knowledge economy. Existing research in the sociology of work extensively accounts the ways in which self-employed knowledge professionals operate across the job market by cultivating relationships to create solid and profitable professional networks. This is entertained via recursive networking practices for the acquisition of social capital to keep the flow of work alive in an increasingly individualised environment where, thanks also to digital technologies and social media, work is no longer necessarily undertaken within the organisational boundaries of an office—but increasingly at a distance, with a lesser extent of physical proximity.

The studies by Irina Grugulis and Dimitrinka Stoyanova,³³ Keith Randle and colleagues,³⁴ David Lee,³⁵ among others, all underline how networking practices are essential and positively associated to job procurement, but also potentially detrimental in enabling exclusionary relationships that favour individuals with high levels of social capital over others. Employment cultures in these contexts are principled on the common statement ‘it is all about who you know’, which epitomises the shared notion that workers are to be judged by the industry ‘as good as their last job’, and a successful career largely depends on a worker’s capacity to manage a personal networks of contacts to access opportunities and information. However, the traditional importance of social networks, social capital and personal contacts in the industry, is here argued, comes to be

expanded by the rise of digital technologies and social networking sites, where the dimensions of identity and the self surge to even greater prominence. As social relations come to be integrally intermediated by digital tools, where the self represents a public and social device that enables professional interaction,³⁶ the practices of personal and self-branding become mandatory activities.

The notions of self-branding and self-promotion spread over the late 1990s and the early 2000s as key activities for the career development of knowledge workers in an entrepreneurialised context. As advocated by management guru Tom Peters, the processes of cultivation of a professional image, the packaging and self-promotion for the crafting of a unique and authentic self are essential practice in the new economy, that requires workers to create ‘Brand You’,³⁷ a professional persona whose image is managed as a brand on the labour market for purposes of career advancement. As I have argued elsewhere,³⁸ the emergence and diffusion of social media platforms have ever more enhanced the importance of self-branding practices and the curatorial management of the self across the labour markets of the knowledge economy. It may be said that, in today’s knowledge economy, the idea of Brand You has evolved to the somewhat superior status of *You Inc.* described by *The Economist*—or, else, that workers should treat their own careers as *The Startup Of You*, a term coined by Reid Hoffman, the founder of LinkedIn, in a book co-written with the tech author Ben Casnocha.³⁹ Hoffman and Casnocha argue that every career in today’s knowledge economy is an entrepreneurial venture that must be managed just like a company in its startup phase, thus thinking about one’s profession as a continuous beta version.

It is here, as a consequence of the renewed emphasis on self-branding and its relationship with networking and social capital in the job markets of the knowledge industry, that the notion of *reputation* comes forward to reconcile the socio-cultural and the socio-economic functioning of the knowledge industry. It has been argued that the growth of a freelance workforce may be the consequence of the combination of long-term neoliberal policies for flexible employment with a cultural shift in the subjectivity of workers, who increasingly tend to see themselves as independent and entrepreneurial professional subjects. Yet, the freelance workforce of the knowledge economy essentially appears to be a multitude of individual economic actors who are necessarily called upon to engage in self-branding and reputation management for purposes of job procurement. This is principled on the idea that reputation

is the element that bridges between the offline and the online and represents a shared, cultural conception of value in the industry. The management of social relations across networked environments, be them digital or non-digital, is entertained via the mobilisation of reputation as a capital with the instrumental aim of accessing resources, goods and income. It is now time to discuss how central the role of reputation in this scenario is, and what elements configure the existence of an economy out of the capitalisation of the newly mediated professional social relations that take place across the online world, and beyond.

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Reputation, the Social Capital of a Digital Society

Abstract This chapter discusses how reputation comes to take a prominent position in the job market of the knowledge economy and why it should be considered the form taken by social capital in the digital age. Reputation establishes as the ‘equivalent’ shared by both offline and online domains as an asset that digital knowledge workers must acquire and strategically manage in their network of professional contacts, decisive to get jobs and establish professionally. Reputation links into value as an investment in social relations with the expectation of an economic return, being the source for trust to be established among participant in hybrid contexts of interaction made of digital and non-digital exchanges that do not necessarily imply face-to-face or physical proximity.

The pervasive role of digital technologies and tools, platforms and social networking sites affects many of our daily activities. We commonly ‘google’ words to search for information and meaning; we use Airbnb for holiday accommodation and mobility apps to search for taxis; we use online retailers such as eBay and Amazon to buy goods, whilst the information found on platforms like TripAdvisor or Yelp often influences our choices of hotels and restaurants. What all these examples have in common is the use of reviews and feedback systems that elaborate rankings and reputation scores of various sorts. The domain of knowledge work is experiencing entirely similar dynamics. The idea of a ‘reputation economy’ aims to capture their functioning and rationale.

The role of reputation has been often underestimated or taken for granted in the literature across sociology, critical management and media studies. Arguing about the existence of a reputation economy means to sustain that the digital and freelance labour market of knowledge workers should be seen as a socio-economic system existing around a shared notion of reputation as value. In such a system, reputation functions as a networked asset that intermediates unequal transactions in the allocation of resources, information and goods. Most importantly, it also means that reputation represents the source for the establishment of trust among the actors involved in the system, as it is instrumental in entertaining economic transactions among ‘quasi-strangers’ who interact in newly mediated ways across the offline–online spectrum. In this chapter, I revise the literature and the existing definitions of reputation to place them within the framework of the current knowledge economy, and argue that reputation should be seen as the social capital of a digital society.

WHAT IS REPUTATION?

The concept of reputation has been debated for decades as a notion that makes part of the scholarly tradition of management and economics, but also pertains to economic sociology and the debate on social capital. A number of recent scholarly and non-scholarly works have suggested the rise of a reputation-centred type of society, founded upon the notion that reputation holds a newly central role within increasingly digitised environments and contexts. This is mainly principled on the idea that reputation becomes visible, tangible and, under certain conditions, even measurable for individuals, brands, businesses and various entities through algorithms and metrics that elaborate online reputation scores, or proxies for such a score, which intermediate a number of activities.¹ However, so far these claims have not been articulated in a coherent theoretical framework, given the different readings and approaches attached to the concept. The aim of this chapter is to reconcile the various streams in a comprehensive theoretical construction.

The historical conception of reputation is rooted within economics as an intangible asset of frequently underestimated importance. Back in 1996, one of the most important scholars in reputation studies, Charles Fombrun,² underlined the relevance of intangible assets for the corporate world and, within those, the fundamental centrality of reputation. According to Fombrun, managers have often been reluctant to effectively

develop concrete practices to valorise reputation and other intangibles for economic return, despite admitting their relevance. In the decades that followed Fombrun's claim, the rise of a financial economy based on brand valuation made clear how intangible assets are at the centre of corporate financial business, and how reputation intertwines with the scope and role of the brand as an equally strategic asset for business success.³ As defined by John Dorley and Helio Fred Garcia,⁴ reputation in corporate terms should be intended as a particular form of social capital for firms that corporations develop in order to build relationships and grow their organisations. Corporate reputation is strictly connected to a firm's identity and constitutes a combination of performance, behaviour and communication.

The privacy scholar Daniel J. Solove⁵ has argued that with the diffusion of the Internet, the role played by reputation in society becomes more important since we increasingly depend upon others to engage in transactions to employ us, to befriend us and to listen to us. Thus, he continues, it seems necessary to acknowledge this and disentangle the issues arising in relation to these dynamics. Earlier on, another expert in reputation and law, Robert C. Post,⁶ outlined a taxonomy of reputation based on the US defamation legislation, distinguishing among reputation as property, honour and dignity. Reputation as property is essentially defined as 'reputation in the marketplace', and it is akin to goodwill. It is exemplified by the carpenter who strives to achieve a good name in the quality of workmanship; it is a form of intangible property that can be acquired through labour or talent.

The notion of reputation as honour, on the other hand, is premised upon inequality in individual possession and therefore seems to be close to the sociological notion of prestige, which implies hierarchy and class stratification. Reputation as honour is contingent on the different roles and statuses occupied by individuals in given societal contexts. Finally, reputation as dignity essentially coincides with the nature of reputation as an image or good name that connects with common-sense discourses on privacy and defamation. David Rolph⁷ underlined how the notion of reputation as property implies the presence of a 'market of reputation', which is what provides the value of the property. It may be argued, as we will see in Chaps. 4 and 5, that precisely the logic of the 'market' is the one that may be applied to the labour markets of the knowledge economy, and is particularly at stake within online marketplaces for contractors.

More recently, thanks to the work of Alison Hearn⁸ and Alice Marwick,⁹ the discussion around reputation has entered the scholarly domain of

critical digital media. Marwick and colleagues,¹⁰ elaborating from Solove, define reputation as the collective or shared perception about one another, which is crafted over the judgements made upon the mosaic of information publicly available. This definition appropriately grasps the cultural logic that connects digital activity with reputation on digital media and social networking sites, where information about individuals, brands, businesses and a variety of entities is publicly accessible and available and becomes the object of evaluation, calculation and measurement. In the study of the tech scene of Silicon Valley, Marwick distinguishes her chief notion of ‘status’ from those of reputation and trust. While all these concepts are subjectively constructed and social in nature, Marwick—building on the work of Marvin Washington and Edward Zajac¹¹—sustains that the notion of status is more adequate to indicate social rank, as it reflects fundamental social characteristics that exist independently of the perceived differences. Reputation, on the other hand, refers to a performance metric and should be conceived as an eminently economic concept, that grasps an actual or perceived quality that generates rewards. Trust, in turn, is conceived by Marwick as a public good that in the online world gets translated in the idea of trustworthiness, which is the fundamental assumption behind the existence of Online Reputation Systems (ORS)—those algorithms that calculate a score that works as a proxy for reputation and trustworthiness.

The study by Marwick is pivotal in the capacity to offer an ethnographic account of the promotional logics within the tech scene in San Francisco, and has significant merits in the critical acknowledgement of the processes of celebrity construction that are crafted via techniques of self-branding within the scene. These, she argues, configure processes of micro-celebrity that point towards the acquisition of a ‘status’ and a higher social rank. In this work I offer a somewhat parallel view that stresses out the notions of reputation and trust. While Marwick starts from Web 2.0 to gain an understanding of the cultures of work in the Silicon Valley, I start from the acknowledgement of the founding principles of knowledge work and its relationship with creativity to observe how these are being reframed in the encounter with the cultures of networking that characterise digital media interaction and its integration within processes of production, organisation and valorisation. As such, Marwick’s study and mine come therefore to complementary conclusions.

In fact, if we look at the intersection of knowledge work and creativity, it is precisely the perception of one’s professional skills that comes to represent a social conception of value constructed across various modalities of

social interaction, and translates into economic returns on the basis of it. This occurs since (a) it is precisely through a social logic based on perceptions that evaluations on a worker's performance and success are being conducted in the knowledge industry as a whole—that is, using a shared cultural notion of reputation as value; and, (b) there is a question of trust and trustworthiness that lies at the core of the economic functioning of these scenes as labour markets, and intertwines with the notion of social capital. Workers in the digital and freelance knowledge economy need to find a common principle to build trust among each other in the absence of an institutional or public entity that guarantees for it, and in a context where face-to-face exchanges are increasingly being substituted by digital forms interaction. This is resolved by adopting this notion of reputation as value, and by imitating the logic of trustworthiness that lies behind the functioning of ORS and similar algorithms. This logic is what has seen a number of authors calling for the rise of a 'reputation society'.

A REPUTATION SOCIETY

The idea of a reputation society in contemporary, digital terms is premised on the rationale of the Google PageRank algorithm. The search engine that first, and best, enabled users to find what they were looking for in the syntax-based world of the early Web is principled on an analogy between hyperlinks and academic citations; that is, the idea that the 'citation of the Internet', the link, was as important as a scarcely utilised resource in early search engines of the Web. By approaching the link as a citation, Google founders, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, developed an algorithm, PageRank, that was able to aggregate and efficiently index Web links to produce the most accurate search results. The calculation of the number of links pointing to one page from other pages in the Web operated by PageRank represents de facto the first algorithmic-based reputation metric, as it allows the more relevant websites to appear at the top of the search results on the basis of incoming links—and operates an implicit evaluation of the most relevant webpages for a certain keyword.¹²

Elaborating on the emergence of PageRank, Hassan Masum together with colleague Yi-Cheng Zhang in 2004 produced a *Manifesto for the Reputation Society*, arguing that reputation was to become the standard measure for value, as based on Web calculations. Adopting what is indeed a Marxist framework, they sustained that the logics of online reputation arising from the Web could potentially propel a form of calcu-

lation of use-value, surging to prominence in a dialectic relationship with exchange-value. Reputation, they stated, should be approached as the central element of the emergent network-based market structures that principle on use-value production across the digital infrastructure.¹³

In 2006, in his famous article on the ‘long tail’ business model of online consumer platforms, *Wired* magazine editor and innovation evangelist Chris Anderson sustained the centrality of reputational dynamics in the emerging digital economy, given the capacity of word of mouth and reputation to promote differentiation among online businesses.¹⁴ The American tech writer Rachel Botsman re-elaborates this concept a few years later, applying it to the emergent collaborative forms of production and consumption. Botsman sustains that across collaborative digital environments reputation is essential insofar as algorithms elaborate online ratings and reviews that guarantee for individual activity and the auto-regulation of platforms that offer the consumption of shared services. On Zipcar and Blablacar, which are shared automobile services, but also on platforms such as Angie’s List, which offer contractor services for the house, reputation functions as a form of currency enabling trust among strangers, in a way that is similar to the way users engage in economic transactions on online retail giants eBay and Amazon.¹⁵

The way this digital trust is enabled is premised on the existence of ORS, which are algorithms that aggregate feedback and reviews of individual users on a platform and then elaborate a score expressed through numbers or other means (stars, or points, for instance). The proliferation of these systems brought Hassan Masum, this time with Mark Tovey, to develop an edited book that promotes the idea of a ‘reputation society’.¹⁶ The book hosts contributions by many authors who discuss the implications of the diffusion of ORS, assessing criticalities and tricky aspects. One of these is the reliability of reviews and rankings and of algorithms themselves. ORS have been adopted by many kinds of platforms and their specific design is engineered according to the nature of the interaction. However, the literature also underlines how reputation systems are also subject to potential gaming, and issues of reliability are significantly at stake.

For instance, Chris Dellarocas, Professor of Information Systems at Boston University, argues that reputation across online environments should be seen as the digitisation of word of mouth, and that design choices about the ORS profoundly affect the interaction on the platform.¹⁷ Paul Resnick, Professor at the School of Information at the University of

Michigan, sustains¹⁸ that reputation systems are instrumental to construct socio-technical capital by enabling a common ground of trust among users through persistent interactions. The works by Resnick, and also those led by Gary E. Bolton,¹⁹ show that when economic exchange is at stake, such as with eBay and Amazon, the intermediation of an ORS guarantees that users evaluate whether to trust others when involved in a digitally mediated transaction.²⁰

Yet, the idea of a reputation-based economy or society remains fashionable in the tech literature. Michael Fertik and David Thompson, in a recent non-scholarly contribution particularly characterised by celebratory enthusiasm, accurately describe a number of contexts where the role of reputation is central, or may find application in the future. Some of these are, to be fair, quite dystopian examples, for instance those related to the increasing use of personal health-related data by employment and potential hirers as elements for the evaluation of a candidate—something that poses hugely serious issues of privacy and access to personal information.²¹ Indeed, if the enthusiasm of tech writers is perfectly legitimate and somewhat unsurprising, it is striking to note how most of the scholarly literature on reputation still pertains to the disciplines of technology and information systems that closely relate to computer science. More so, it is quite surprising how it has been quite slow, especially for sociology and critical management studies, to make sense of how these innovations relate to socio-economic interpretations of digital media, and produce critical interpretations.

One exception, as said alongside the already mentioned Alice Marwick, is Alison Hearn²² who, starting from a critical perspective of self-branding and promotionalism on social media, links the rise of online metrics and ranking systems with the potential economic implications attached to their diffusion in various contexts. Hearn sustains the existence of an emergent ‘digital reputation economy’ based on the ‘flexible’ and ‘branded’ forms of self-presentation across offline and online environments. On a similar line, Adam Arvidsson has linked the dynamics of self-branding and reputation to value, arguing that the rise of online metrics and rankings is a measure of affect that develops as a capital itself in the ‘ethical’ economy emerging from the socialisation of value production.²³ In this book, I contend that these two theoretical approaches can be experimented with, and applied together, for the study of labour markets in the knowledge economy, in a theoretical framework that questions the extent and nature of social capital from a sociological perspective, considering digital environments those where reputation, trust and professional networking newly come together.

REPUTATION AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The concept of social capital is one of the most debated in the history of sociology. Alejandro Portes²⁴ sustains that the first ‘modern’ definition of social capital is that given by Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘theory of capitals’,²⁵ which includes human, cultural and economic capital. Social capital is defined by Bourdieu as the institutional relationship of mutual acquaintance or recognition among social actors. Bourdieu’s notion of social capital focuses on the instrumental benefits an individual can achieve by being part of social networks and solidarity groups. The element that characterises Bourdieu’s view of social capital is *mutuality*, considered as an implication of reciprocity among actors that connotes the quality and nature of the given social relationship.

However, as said, there are numerous different interpretations of the concept of social capital in the sociological literature. A first strand, to whom we might also associate Bourdieu’s definition, sees social capital as a group feature.²⁶ One of the key theorists we can ascribe to this approach is Robert Putnam,²⁷ who defines social capital as a form of public good that has positive externalities affecting the wider community. On a similar line, James Coleman²⁸ argues that social capital consists of a variety of entities that contribute to the creation of human capital in relation to the structure of social action that facilitates certain actors over others. On a slightly different position, we can find Ronald Burt²⁹ who sustains that the most important feature for the creation and leverage of social capital is the presence of ‘structural holes’. Burt argues it is not the presence, rather the absence of ties in an actor’s ego network, what he calls ‘structural holes’, to provide mobility and access to resources to the actor.

As noted by Portes, Burt’s and Coleman’s approaches may in fact be considered similar in that both notions of social capital are founded on the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership to social networks. Particularly, Burt highlights the potential of social capital whereby an actor is able to gain opportunities to use financial and human capital by friends, colleagues and contacts.³⁰ This allows to distinguish between ‘bridging’ views, which consider social capital for achieving benefits by connecting between different groups, and ‘bonding’ views, which reinforce the internal structure of a group and the benefits for its members in terms of accessing resources. The ‘bonding’ view looks at social capital, emphasising trust as a resource that generates communitarian relationships

of solidarity among group or network members. ‘Bridging’ views, on the other hand, stress the capacity of brokerage among actors as the form of intermediation that generates resources by connecting different clusters or groups.³¹

A different body of theory looks at the individual perspective of single actors and their attributes, to define social capital as a source for potential benefits that an actor can obtain by leveraging social relations. Views of this kind differ from those above in the sense that social capital is here considered as an essentially individual feature that plays a role within contexts where social interaction is related to economic action. Such an approach dates back to the influential work of Mark Granovetter³² on the importance of weak ties and the implication of social relationships for job procurement, which remains a milestone in the literature on networks and labour markets. This is the approach that seems more equipped to serve as the framework whereby a reputation economy can be theorised.

Comprehensively taken, Granovetter’s argument is simple although somewhat counterintuitive. He argues that individuals looking for a job are more likely to succeed in their task if they leverage on weak ties (essentially friends of friends, mobilised via recommendations and referrals) rather than strong ties (that are close friends and family). Here, weak ties are more likely to create profitable bridges across different networks whilst strong ties, on the other hand, suffer redundancy, which means the amount of information shared within close networks is less differentiated—everyone knows each other—and therefore these kinds of connections are less likely to offer more job opportunities.

Both Granovetter and Burt treat social capital as an explanatory variable to the behaviour of actors, and so does another important sociologist, Nan Lin,³³ who sustains that social capital consists of the possibility to access, and make use of, resources embedded within a social network. Lin defines the nature of social capital as a relational asset that is both an individual and a group feature, which can be mobilised as an investment into social relations with expected economic return that individuals expect by gaining access to networked, socialised resources. In Lin’s account, as well as in many other theorisations of social capital, it is trust that takes a primary role as the most important of the collective assets at stake in the notion of social capital. The building of trust in network terms is instrumental in the pursuit of the embedded resources but is also the element that allows various kinds of transactions to take place.

THE NOTION OF TRUST IN THE REPUTATION ECONOMY

Although debated, the relationship between reputation, trust and social capital is somewhat overlooked in the most relevant sociological literature on social capital. Lin's views on reputation and trust are here taken as the main reference for the conceptualisation of reputation as the source for trust building among actors in the knowledge labour market. Lin sustains that reputation is the aggregate asset of social recognition received in a social network with collective reputation being the effect of both micro and macro dynamics, acting as a complementary element in the relationship between economic transactions and social exchanges in a way that differs from prestige (which implies hierarchy) and esteem (which stands as a purely social process). Lin argues that reputation is an indicator for social gain as the extent of favourable/unfavourable opinions about an individual within a collective.³⁴

However, the fact reputation has a 'good' and a 'bad' degree of differentiation, for which a subject can be connoted with a reputational status both in positive and in negative terms, allows us to isolate reputation in comparison with trust, prestige and other common forms of social recognition. We have seen how Lin sees reputation as different from prestige in that this implies class status and hierarchy, as well as from esteem, which implies a morally infused nuance of meaning. An individual worth of high esteem is generally considered as morally sound; to the contrary, an individual can have a good reputation, without indeed being morally worthy of esteem. It may be added that reputation can be distinguished from celebrity in that being 'famous' does not imply a good reputation or the possession of an intangible resource that can be potentially mobilised to produce outcomes.³⁵

The present work principles upon the idea that the possession of a 'good' reputation is the element that enables the achievement of professional outcomes and income. Conceived as such, reputation becomes a resource that may be mobilised and that remains with the individual, not just as a perceived feature, as per Marwick's account, rather as a capital that is invested, traded or managed in a plurality of contexts. This reputational capital represents the social capital of a digital society where digital and non-digital, offline and online networks of contacts are managed and maintained in newly mediated ways and through multiple means. Thus, the management of one's reputation configures as an investment in social relations with expected economic return, with the aim of achieving economic outcomes—that is, incidentally, Lin's definition of social capital.³⁶

As a consequence, it may be argued that in such a socio-economic dynamic, reputation is different from trust—in fact, it functions as the source for trust to be built across a socio-economic context where actors are quasi-strangers engaging in economic transactions that premise on, and determine value through, the existence of a social relation. Trust appears to be a feature of social interaction connoted by a specific trait of mutuality and reciprocity. Reputation, on the other hand, appears to be disjointed by such dynamics of mutuality in that the existence of a reputation tie may occur independently from the reciprocation of such a connection. When a bond of trust is in place, it is likely that both partners trust each other, whilst when someone has a good opinion of one another, it may well be that the latter does not have the same opinion of the former. More so, trust seems to imply social interaction to a greater extent if compared to reputation, which may not imply social interaction *per se*.

This has implications for economic and labour interactions, where trust is proved to be an essential feature. Differently from trust, reputation does not automatically imply reciprocity, rather more transitory and fleeting, somehow self-oriented mutual expectations. What I argue here, in other words, is that the ‘function’ of trust within professional networks of knowledge workers, is made possible by reputation which is not merely a sanctioning element to ward off trust hackers, as sustained by Granovetter,³⁷ rather it represents the source for the building of trust among quasi-strangers as well as a manageable asset instrumental for its achievement through transitory and mediated forms of social interaction for productive purposes. The degree of trust between the parties required in order to entertain economic transactions is granted by reputation and more or less systematised systems for reputation measurement.

The notion of trust here at stake therefore differs in this sense from most of the literature on social capital to move closer to the ‘functional’ definition given by Niklas Luhmann.³⁸ Luhmann distinguishes trust from familiarity and argues that trust is a device to reduce risk within social systems where familiarity and intimacy are absent. Reputation in this context emerges as a device conducive to trust relationships whereby there is not necessarily direct knowledge or exchanges in person between actors involved in an economic relationship, and essentially operates as a regulatory principle to reduce the risk attached to entertaining economic transactions among non-intimate social actors—those here defined as ‘quasi-strangers’.

We will see how reputation, for instance, operates as a guarantee for the delivery of quality work at a distance across digital marketplaces, as a bad delivery affects the reputation of all actors involved. Yet, trust among quasi-strangers can be established only when, although reciprocity is absent, reputation operates as a mutually recognised valuable asset leveraging market-like interaction. Reputation thus becomes a kind of immaterial currency to spend within connections such that, through reputation, trustworthy behaviour can be expected—not merely out of a sanctioning power, rather as an organisational principle established around a shared cultural conception of reputation as value.

To sum up, reputation is here conceived as a type of capital, an *asset* that is instrumental to entertain economic transactions, is associated to each knowledge worker's market position, and upon which depends the capacity to get jobs across a multi-dimensional personal network of professional contacts. Reputation, once an intangible asset with unquantifiable proxies and valuation, is now increasingly tangible, visible and, to some extent, also measurable via the activity of individual users on social media platforms. This measurability extends its effects over the whole labour market.

REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE

We have seen how reputation is traditionally considered an 'intangible asset', which means it is difficult to measure. However, as suggested, thanks to the emergence of Web 2.0 and the proliferation of social networking sites making use of devices for online social activity such as likes, tweets, shares and mentions, as well as platforms adopting protocols of reviewing and providing feedback on the behaviour of users by other users and elaborating those into metrics and rankings, individual reputation becomes increasingly objective and potentially measurable. An example of such a system-generated reputation can be found in those algorithms that claim to elaborate a coefficient or score for influence across social media platforms.

Influence has become a key notion for digital understandings of fields such as marketing, advertising and public relations, intended as the capacity of an individual to affect other people's behaviour and opinions online and induce them into forms of action in a way that echoes the notion of opinion leadership in traditional mass media theory. The business of influence metrics, especially across 2011 and 2012, has been the golden egg of social media as the instrument that was believed to be able to select

the best ‘influencers’ for brands in promotional campaigns and practices—this, despite huge issues of reliability. The most famous of these influence calculation applications is Klout, which claims to be able to elaborate an individual influence score by measuring each user’s activity on a plurality of social networking sites and blogs. Similar services are performed by Kred, which is essentially a Twitter-based application, and PeerIndex, which claims to ‘understand your online social capital’, just to name a few. As argued by many including myself as well as Jonathan Messias and colleagues,³⁹ the kind of influence calculated by Klout is more a result of intense online activity rather than a proxy for reputation in a field or sector; the point here is that existing algorithms for online influence do not adequately distinguish (nor account for, accordingly) whether the user is a human being or an automated machine, a ‘bot’, which automatically posts content and interacts to alter frequencies and the resulting metrics. Stefano de Paoli⁴⁰ has extensively discussed how bots operate on massive multi-player online video games, and how strong their capacity is to alter system calculations and deceive.

One may question why and how all this relates to knowledge professionals. The diffusion of professional social networking platforms as well as of digital marketplaces such as Upwork, Freelancer and Guru comes together with that of metrics, likes, followers, shares, rankings and feedback systems, which are used on those platforms and beyond, significantly affecting the capacity of an individual to be professionally successful. The well-known stories of Sam Fiorella—a successful marketing professional who was interviewed for the Vice President position at a famous Toronto-based marketing agency and did not get the job because of a low Klout score—and Justine Sacco—a corporate communication manager who was sacked while on a plane for a work trip because of a racist tweet sent before boarding⁴¹—clearly demonstrate how digital technologies play an increasingly crucial role in the knowledge industry when it comes to work and employment.

It may be argued that workers in the digital and freelance knowledge economy are experiencing a transformation in their professional and craft identities as a consequence of technological specialisation and the diffusion of social media. As social media becomes relevant (and somewhat potentially exclusionary) to get jobs, and the practices of self-branding are functional to the establishment of a self-enterprise, digital knowledge workers are required to invest in social relationships using reputation as an asset and a social capital that translates digital and non-digital interaction

into value. Reputation seems to represent the element that links the offline and the online in this productive associated milieu whereby individuals engage in newly mediated forms of interaction that integrate offline and online practices in a continuum.

I have called this practice ‘digital work’⁴²—to purposefully position it close (and somewhat counterposed) to the notion of ‘digital labour’, that comprises an element of exploitation of workers by social media platforms.⁴³ The notion of ‘digital work’ here adopted instead describes the recursive, compulsory and performative practices of sociality entertained by knowledge workers mainly through social networks and various kinds of media with an eminently managerial rationale, strategically pursued to point at the acquisition of a reputation as a capital or asset in the job market. I will describe digital work practices in Chaps. 4 and 5, and elaborate more extensively on the concept and its relation with the idea of ‘digital labour’ later in Chap. 6. What is important at this stage is to maintain that what transforms this centrality of reputation into an ‘economy’ is precisely the performative role reputation enacts as a capital, strategically mobilised by digital and freelance knowledge workers for professional purposes. Reputation not only functions as a regulatory element in the allocation of resources within networked systems of generalised connectivity, but actually relates directly with one’s potential income. We finally come to observe these dynamics more closely in the next two chapters.

NOTES

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Urban Knowledge Work: The Cases of London and Milan

Abstract This chapter gives evidence of the reputational dynamics of social capital and value as these emerge from the study of networks of freelancers in the ‘creative cities’ of London and Milan, dwelling upon what is knowledge work today in these cities and how it is intermediated by digital technologies and social media. The chapter illustrates the network cultures of the urban knowledge economy; the reader meets a variety of knowledge professionals who spend their professional lives constructing networks and engaging in social relations. This gives evidence of the strategic and managerial capitalisation of one’s reputation theorised in the previous section, as it occurs via performative practices of sociality that take place in multiple networked environments.

Despite the centrality of the Internet, the urban context remains central for the knowledge economy. In this chapter, I give an account of the urban dynamics of knowledge work and digital activity within two renowned ‘creative cities’, London and Milan, aiming to look more closely at the networked cultures of professional interaction among digital and freelance knowledge workers and how these interface with social media. The chapter provides evidence on the relationship between reputation and trust and the dynamics of ‘investment’ in social relations with expected economic return discussed in the previous section. It is largely based on an article published in the journal *Marketing Theory*,¹ where I show how the practices of self-branding and networking in these scenes point towards a strategic and managerial capitalisation of one’s

reputation via performative and compulsory practices of sociality that take place across multiple—digital and non-digital—environments.

The empirical material here presented pertains to the data collected for the study of urban networks of freelance knowledge workers in London and Milan. It consists of 80 semi-structured interviews (38 in London, 42 in Milan) with freelancers active in various levels of experience and job specialisations in the knowledge economy. The research was conducted with a networked rationale, as I ‘followed’ the web of relations from each worker to their peers using a snowball sampling approach. The snowballing began with five informants in each city; these acted as gatekeepers and provided names of their own contacts as a response to two relational, ‘name-generator’ questions pointed at knowing more about: (a) those who the interviewee considered most highly in their professional environment, notwithstanding whether they knew them personally or not, to inquire about reputational connections; and, (b) those who the interviewee was most likely to contact with for professional advice to inquire about trust-based connections. Here follows the formulation of such questions to a greater extent:

a. Could you please list a maximum of five names of independent professionals that you consider highly in their job, notwithstanding if (a) you’re a friend with them or not, or (b) you know them personally?

and

b. Could you please list a maximum of five independent professionals like you, that you would get in touch with, if in need of professional advice?

This research design aimed to capture those most highly reputed in a professional context, as well as those most ‘trustworthy’—to observe the nature and quality of the social relations as these emerged from the data collection. This process led to the development of a network of knowledge professionals for each city, which I have analysed using basic network analysis techniques to observe whether the two networks generated from these questions overlapped, differed or were similar, and consequently uncover the relation existing between them and if they fulfil different professional aims.

The sample in London is characterised by a perfect gender balance with 19 males and 19 females, whilst in Milan, there is a slight majority

of men (25) over women (17). In terms of age, the youngest interviewee is 24, whilst the oldest one is 60. It must be noted that the interview setting was particularly instrumental in terms of access to the field in order to gain the trust of my interviewees needed to collect information on their professional contacts—something they commonly consider a ‘trade secret’. This allowed me to inquire in depth about the cultures and the dynamics of interaction within these networks and observe the role of reputation in its relation with trust. I have called this approach that mixes ethnographic principles with social network analysis an ‘extended ethnography’, building on Michael Burawoy’s idea of the ‘extended case method’,² as a qualitative case study approach with a specific network focus. The professionals who participated in the study are a variegated set of freelancers working as independent professionals, freelancers, contractors, startupper in sectors such as communication, media, advertising, journalism, public relations, digital marketing and digital production. Having committed to the anonymity of the workers participating in this study, real names have been omitted and replaced with pseudonyms.

MILAN AND LONDON

Milan and London are both knowledge economy hubs centred on media work where ‘creativity’ and ‘being creative’ is considered a key talent. For the study of knowledge work in an international urban environment, London is an easy choice. Despite the recession, London remains a strong and interesting case study to observe the link between knowledge and creativity given the ‘mythological’ status of the city as the destination for a large number of global economic migrants. London is home to the famous Silicon Roundabout, the traffic junction of Old Street, which hosts the Google Campus and an ecosystem of startups and small and medium enterprises active in the knowledge and tech sector. Milan, the industrial capital of Italy, is home to a flourishing knowledge economy based on sectors like fashion, design and media, and represents an interesting element of comparison for the observation of such dynamics in a more localised, and much less international, context.

Both cities are also at the forefront for what concerns the most recent, and commonly advocated as innovative, models of work. Milan, in particular, is among the cities that more substantially operated at the political level to foster the rise of coworking spaces (which will be discussed in

Chap. 7) and has experienced a rejuvenating set of policies over recent years, which led to build a favourable environment for the diffusion of knowledge and creative work in new and interesting ways. This must also be located in the broader context of the Italian labour market, which was strongly hit by the economic crisis, especially among the younger categories of workers. The two cities, however, still differ in terms of the subjective perceptions and social recognition of freelancing in these industries. Whilst in the UK, an independent career has historically been seen as a desirable option, especially in the later stages of one's career, in Italy, this still remains often a second-best choice from many. Antonello, an Italian journalist in his 30s, describes this state of things defining independent work in Italy as '*the child of a lesser God*'.

Concerning how the urban environment relates to the development of the knowledge economy, the American geographer Enrico Moretti explains³ how important it is for businesses and workers who seek jobs in sectors more subject to technological innovation to gather around certain specific urban areas, despite sometimes high living costs. This finds reason in the necessity to be part of the social space where opportunities are available, and thus being able to intercept information and networks, engage in social relationships, meet people and be part of the scene. The present research gives evidences on how this does not seem to change with the diffusion of digital technologies as new key instruments of socialisation and interaction in these industry. While common routines of exchanges based on physical co-presence and face-to-face meetings seem to become less central, the capacity for a worker to be perceived as integral part of an urban professional network remains fundamental for one's professional success and in order to capture new opportunities.

This is proved by the fact that, despite some interviews conducted via digital media and particularly Skype, the majority of the interviews in both cities were conducted in person whenever possible, often in cafés or shared offices, with workers describing a professional scene whereby both the physical and the digital realms coexist as equally crucial means for networking and social interaction. It may be argued that digital technologies complement common modalities of interaction offering the possibility to engage in contact at a distance without needing constant physical proximity, but do not seem to substitute for, nor replace urban networking—in other words, these are not mutually exclusive modalities but two aspects of a same thing.

DEMOGRAPHICS, SKILLS, EDUCATION AND JOBS

In Milan, all interviewees bar one are Italian, whilst in London, I encountered a more diverse mix, with 21 British participants and 17 participants from Europe, the USA, Australia and China. In both contexts, workers must be considered as highly skilled professionals; almost all possess an academic degree related to their working discipline, obtained in fields such as design, arts, media and communication. In terms of class, although this question was not directly at the centre of the investigation, it should be broadly assumed that workers are of a largely middle-class provenience, with some having a history of entrepreneurship within their family. Alongside traditional freelance jobs, such as graphic designers or marketing consultants, I have encountered a variety of ‘digital’ jobs such as social media managers, content managers, community managers and alike, all branded as the ‘new’ professional forms of the industry.

Despite job titles differing, this body of workers is characterised by a generalised set of common, multi-functional skills—in other words, everyone can potentially do someone else’s job. Thus, skills are to be taken as *flat*—there are no unique skills that can be learned nor any that are specifically defined as such, that can bring a worker in front of others in this labour market. The process of specialisation is not academic or bureaucratic, guaranteed by an external institution, but an ‘on the job’ type of professionalisation whereby workers become expert in one specific activity and acquire a reputation for such expertise in a wider professional network.

In fact, within such a context, what chiefly counts first and foremost in order to construct a professional career is to develop a ‘professional self’ that conveys a unique image and points to the acquisition of a reputation in the professional scene. This pairs up with a compulsory and managerial logic of entertaining social relations, that is central in a context where ‘it is all about who you know’. Workers, despite reclaiming a generalised conception of the importance of skills, are well aware of this dynamic—which indeed suggests a somewhat secondary importance of human and cultural capital as significant elements for employability. In fact, the possession of a degree does not automatically imply neither a specialised professional pathway, nor being better off in such a labour market.

Participants implicitly confirm this by reiterating quite often how CV circulation is useless. The CV as traditionally conceived is generally discarded as something that does not provide significantly rich information

to potential clients in the industry. What *really* makes a difference is one's reputation, as both Clara—a London-based creative manager in her 40s—and Claudio, a young Milanese designer, portray:

[The] creative world works through personal relationships, and to a certain extent it has to do with your CV. But the most of it is what job is this person doing here and now and what they would be interested to do in the other job that's comfortable. In other sectors the whole CV matters. (Creative manager, 45, London, female)

If you are a freelancer your education title does not matter much, whereas if you want to compete for a permanent job it matters more. Some of my colleagues did not even finish university, and they can easily live out of their freelance work. For firms, however, it matters, it is an old requisite for recruitment. (Designer, 27, Milan, male)

Given that one's education title and skills merely represent entry tickets onto the labour market, one's professional success appears to be ultimately related to the capacity to bargain through one's social relations in a professional way. This is a dynamic that specifically and peculiarly aims towards the construction of a reputation and the management of this as an asset across a professional network. This activity is considered part of the work, and in the majority of cases entails a combination of digital and non-digital interaction. Particularly, the former is approached through the logic of the 'shop window', functional to the acquisition of a reputation—in ways that are described below.

SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

The use of digital platforms for professional purposes constitutes an activity that is believed to be very important by the majority of interviewees. Twitter and LinkedIn emerge as the most important social networking sites for professional purposes, while Facebook is largely perceived as private social media. Although the frequency of usage varies significantly, a comprehensively managerial and strategic approach to digital resources may be noted. Social interaction across digital media is key for these workers as social media represents a sort of 'shop window' which can be found by others on a 24/7 basis. If one cannot be found, this represents an issue. Francis, an experienced London-based copywriter, explains how contacts today are consistently managed through social media:

LinkedIn is like the professional Facebook, isn't it? It's Facebook for professional people. I think it's ok, I think it's useful if you look for a full time job, and for looking for information about what people do. That's what I do, if I meet somebody I'll look at their LinkedIn profile. People all the time contact me on LinkedIn for work... People I've never met. (Copywriter, 53, London, male)

From Massimo, a young Italian communication consultant, we learn that this logic functions not simply in an instrumental way, but also as a repository for information that may be accessed at any moment:

Social media is fundamental, not simply for direct advantages, I don't generally get work directly from Facebook or LinkedIn... But it's true that if I have to meet someone, I will look at the social networks. Maybe we are meeting because someone recommended you, or I met you somewhere, but social media is a portfolio and I want to know how you work. Through social media I look for information and I use it as a shop window, also on my side. If I have to work with you and I can't find you, I won't hire you. (Communication consultant, 24, Milan, male)

Most interviewees state that there is no distinction between offline and online contacts; a clear sense of continuity and interdependence seems to exist between offline and online social interaction as both serve to fuel word of mouth and the construction of a professional reputation. The production of a professional self is both *public* and *social*; it is public, as the professional self represents a publicly accessible set of information about one's skills and previous work, but it is also inevitably and decisively social, as this display also involves one's connections and networks and the visibility of existing social relations. Donatello, a digital marketing consultant in Milan, describes how these two aspects reciprocally and osmotically interface:

Using social media well means a lot. Many people find you through these tools, it's an online and an offline word-of-mouth but these two things are correlated and they reciprocally fuel each other. (Digital marketing consultant, 44, Milan, male)

The ultimate outcome of social media use for professional purposes for the participants in this study is the achievement and consolidation of a *reputational capital* that operates as a managerial device within one's network of social relationships and leads to job opportunities and revenue. The accumulation of a reputational capital is pursued via the use of common techniques

of self-branding and self-marketing such as storytelling and digital marketing across social media, for a comprehensive process of self-promotion that represents an act of online performance, as Daniela, a successful communication consultant in her 40s, clearly explains:

What the Web consents to do to a professional with something to tell, is that by simply writing what you know you can reach a visibility and a popularity that is simply impossible otherwise. The blog is useful for more in-depth discourses... it gives you the chance to express what you mean. Twitter is more a copywriter kind of thing, whilst LinkedIn is more enclosed, too serious... Good for 'suit and tie' consultants. (Communication consultant, 43, Milan, female)

This *curatorial* nature of social media activity is associated with the cultural notion of networking leading to jobs and employment opportunities, which extends from the online to the offline. If this, in London, is by and large socially accepted and epitomised, as we have seen, with common-sense statements such as 'it is all about who you know' and 'you are as good as your last job', to the contrary in Milan, there is often a recurrent discourse giving a negative connotation to these concepts, allegedly pointing at *clientelism* and lobbying, as participation in largely non-professional informal networks allowing participants to access otherwise unavailable information and opportunities. Here is Antonello, again, who explains that this kind of information does not necessarily goes through the usual channels:

Non-professional networks matter a lot in the way you can get in touch with people, confidential information, events, opportunities.... (Journalist, 30, Milan, male)

In other words, it may be argued that for freelance knowledge workers, the digital space functions as a primary environment to engage in a 'digital work' that consists in the management and strategic fulfilment of word of mouth for the acquisition of an individual's reputational capital. As we are about to see, this has a direct relationship with their chances to be professionally successful—and therefore to earn more.

INCOME

In London, interviewees declare an average gross annual income of £38,257. In Milan, this stands at an average €32,487. In both cases, there are no significant variations to report in terms of age or gender, although

it may be noted that income in Milan is slightly higher for women in the sample. Despite first impressions, it may be said that these figures are not very high overall, given the associated costs of living in these cities, and particularly in London. More importantly, there seems to be a substantial polarisation, with few interviewees in the top-income categories and many more workers struggling at the lower end of the scale. This is proved by the fact that workers often admit to lean on familial support or previous savings. This ‘familial welfare’ operates in the absence of sufficient forms of sustainment, and occurs especially in Italy, where in some cases it is the help of the family that grants these workers to make ends meet. For a significant number of these workers, the family represents a sort of ‘parachute’ generation that acts as a provider for basic income, especially for younger workers at the beginning of their career.

Notwithstanding so, it must also be noted how income shortage is not always considered a serious issue. Whilst a fair number of workers lament the precariousness of their professional status, as well as of the irregular flow of cash at their disposal due to the unstable number of jobs they can secure, many actually consider economic compensation not a priority. The presence of a strong symbolic element of social recognition that pertains to these networks and is part of their culture of work confirms the strength of that notion of ‘passion’ encountered by Adam Arvidsson and colleagues in the study of fashion workers in Milan, and Andrew Ross in the study of creative economies in the UK, as a cover for sometimes very risky working conditions.⁴ More so, these notions seem to have acquired an ideological status, principled on the capacity by these workers to ‘do what they like’, which stands as a core element at the centre of their subjectivity. The freelance condition makes part of this ethos as it often comes by choice, as an element that liberates from the constraints of standard office work. Sarah, an editorial consultant with a good name and a variety of important clients in Milan, tells me:

You start freelancing because you want to give your life another sense of priority. In Italy there is still this perception of the freelancer as a loser, not one who wants the job to be that way. I also observe a lot of people who are forced to freelance. I see a lot of people who are not able to set up their priorities outside a firm setting, they are not able to find jobs, to maintain their networks. These are not specific competencies. So they find themselves being precarious, that is the B-side of freelancing, you can be a happy independent freelancer or an unhappy precarious freelancer. It's not everyone's condition, but it's what everybody should look at, because there are no permanent jobs anymore (...) But, and

this is fundamental to me, if on a Wednesday morning I don't feel like working, I go to the gym, and nobody tells me what I have to do. (Editorial consultant, Milan, 40, female)

Yet, what clearly emerges from the data on income that participants, sometimes reluctantly, shared with the researcher, is that those with a greater and consolidated reputation are consistently better off in this labour market. In order to fully grasp this concept, it is now necessary to dwell in depth the networked dynamics at stake and especially to look at the kind of sociality promoted by such networking practices. After all, as Sarah tells me in that same interview: *'freelancing is network, at the N-th power!'*

WITHIN THE NETWORK FORMS OF ORGANISATION

The responses to the relational questions on reputation and trust, which represent the methodological spine of this work, did not only consent to snowball through interviews, but were also key to the aim of constructing a social network dataset of the two case studies in point. This was done following basic principles of social network analysis and therefore by inputting each participant's mentions into a matrix, to reconstruct a visualisation of the professional network in which interviewees participate as based on *indegree measures*—that indicate the number of ties pointing to a node.⁵ The networks must be read with solid lines indicating reputation ties and dashed lines indicating trust ties; the presence of both lines together indicates multiplex ties (i.e., the presence of both a reputation and a trust tie). Each node indicates a participant. The size of nodes, where present, indicates higher values scored on the measure of degree centrality associated to each node.

The London network (Fig. 4.1) is made of 38 nodes and 79 ties. There are 43 reputational edges (solid lines) and 36 trust edges (dashed lines). The picture appears to be quite scattered and dispersed. A preliminary analysis of the graph suggests that there are two main clusters, on the centre and bottom left of the picture. These are surrounded by a clique (top left, nodes 3–17–34), a small-size cluster on the top right and a triad on the bottom right (4–18–19). In Milan (Fig. 4.2), the network is made of 42 nodes and 96 ties overall; 43 are reputational ties and 53 are trust ties. The network seems to be quite neatly divided into four clusters, with node 11 being a bridge between the two left clusters, thanks to a reputational

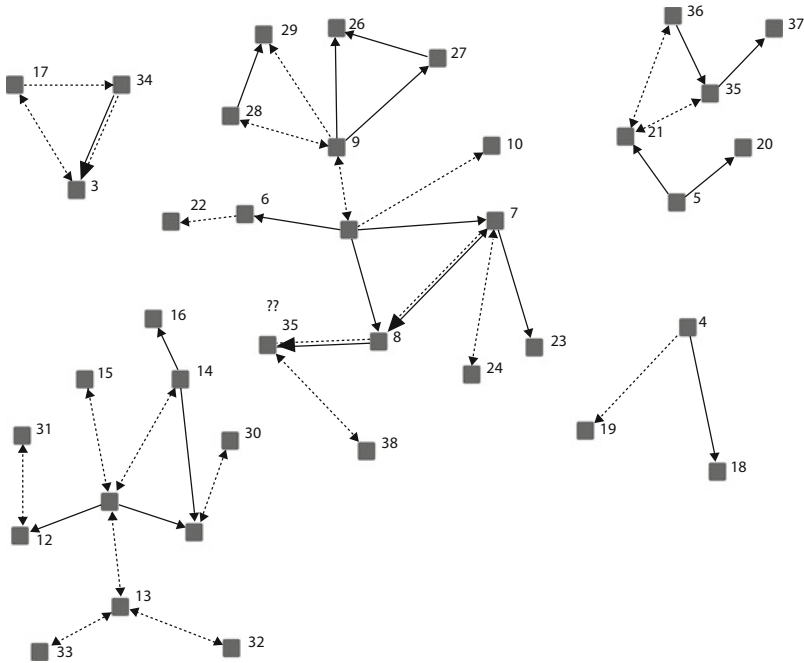


Fig. 4.1 The London network

tie going from 11 to 7. The left aggregations seem to be bigger and more dense than those on the right.

If we look at the networks that originate from the mentions on reputation and trust separately, as they emerge from the indegree measure collected from the name-generator questions on reputation and trust, we see that in both cases the participants with most mentions in the reputation graphs do not substantially coincide with those more central in the trust graphs.

Figure 4.3 shows the London network divided on the basis of reputation-based (Fig. 4.3, left) and trust-based (Fig. 4.3, right) connections. The reputation graph appears to be clustered in four aggregations, plus a dyad (4 connecting to 18, bottom right) and a triad (3–17–34, top left). The size of the nodes indicates a higher indegree score (that reflects the number of mentions for the reputation question). Nodes 11 and 13 seem to be quite important and reputed in the bottom-left cluster, whilst on the bottom-

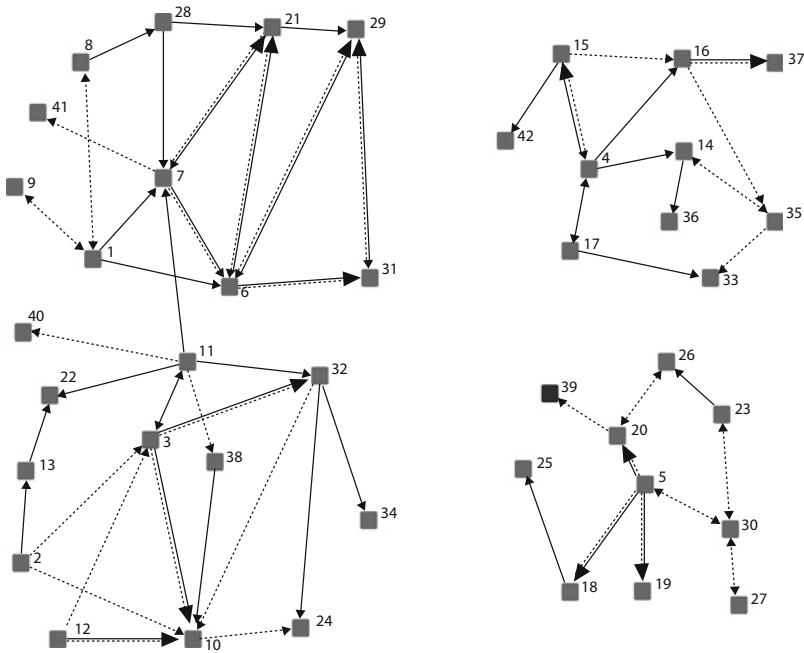


Fig. 4.2 The Milan network

right node, 7 seems to be the more relevant one. The clusters however appear to be neatly separated among each other. Data on the indegree values confirm that nodes 7 and 11 are those that score the highest indegree measure and may be considered to be the most important ones in their own cluster. In the bottom right, node 8 is in a strategically important position in relative terms given its connections; node 35 is the central member in the top-right cluster and also has an important strategic position.

The trust network is significantly scattered among several dyads (4–19/6–22/11–30/12–31) and triads (35–21–36/3–17–34) with only three aggregations having more than three nodes. The most trusted members of this network are nodes 2 and 13. However, they are located in the same cluster, which makes node 9 equally important as the most trusted node of its own aggregation. As concerns the cluster at the top of the graph, nodes 7 and 25 are the most central ones, whilst node 8 has a strategically important position.

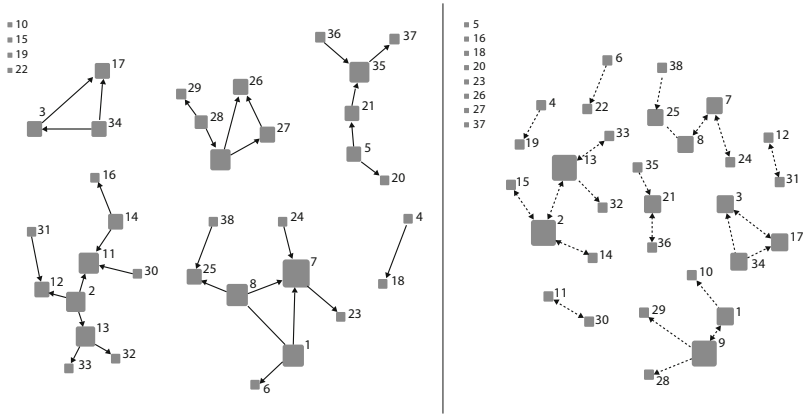


Fig. 4.3 Reputation and trust networks—London

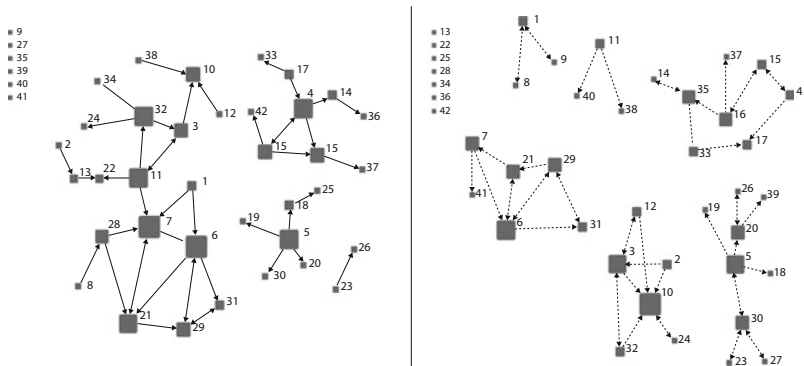


Fig. 4.4 Reputation and trust networks—Milan

Figure 4.4 shows the networks of reputation (Fig. 4.4, left) and trust (Fig. 4.4, right) in Milan. In the reputation graph, there are six isolates with no mentions (top left of the graph). The aggregation on the top right emerges as quite dense, with nodes 4 and 16 in central position. Nodes 6 and 7 have the highest indegree. Also nodes 11, 21 and 32 appear to have a significant position in the network and they are likely to be key players in terms of information control. Significantly, all these ties are located on the far left side of the graph. As concerns the top-right aggregation, the

most important member in relative terms is node 4. Also, an important relative role is played by node 22, whose position is that of a broker and a gatekeeper between nodes 2 and 13 and the rest of the left cluster. Node 32, though having the same size in the graph, does not play a similar role as the connection with 24 and 34 is only outgoing, and not incoming. Overall, both graphs are quite fragmented.

In the trust graph, clusters become even more scattered and two triads (1–8–9 and 11–38–40) remain separate from the rest. By looking at the picture, the most important node in the trust network seems to be node 10, with nodes 3, 5 and 6 also in a key position. The cluster in the top right seems to be quite homogeneous with similar values among the members. The indegree values confirm that node 10 is largely a trust hub, as are nodes 3 and 6 in relative terms. Nodes 21 and 30 have the same indegree score of nodes 3 and 6, and seem to be also in a key position for information control in the network. Node 21 is a broker between 7, 29 and 41 in relation to the top node in the cluster (node 6). Node 30, on the other hand, shows its relative importance as it is in direct connection with node 5, the trust hub in the bottom-right cluster, and is also a gatekeeper for nodes 23 and 27.

Data show that the element of *reciprocity* and *mutuality* is what differentiates trust from reputation. Trust ties emerge to be more reciprocated than reputation ties, whilst reputation ties on the other hand appear to be disjointed by such dynamics of mutuality. The existence of a reputation tie, in other words, may occur independently from the reciprocation of such connection and independently from an existing relationship of trust. The differences emerging here between reputation and trust align with what emerges from the cultural understandings of networked interaction to suggest that the former is not merely an element in the formation of traditional trust-based social capital, rather a social capital with specific features that echo Nan Lin's idea of an investment in social relations with expected economic return. Put differently, reputation and trust in these contexts may be seen as two different kinds of relational assets, with reputation having the primary specific and distinguished function of being the source for the building of trust in contexts where actors do not necessarily know each other or have interacted directly before. As Louise, a London-based art director in her 40s, tells me:

So, the biggest thing of my work is reputation, that's why you work so hard... they don't ever go into 'what degree have you got?' bla bla bla, no, it's more like

'so you've worked in that show? Oh and if you did that, and it looked that good, so you can come in this show' or 'somebody else has said you performed really well and you actually do what you say you gonna do, so I trust you'. The thing is that if somebody calls you at 11pm in the night, they need the trust that you are going to deliver the job done by Sam tomorrow 'cos they can't stop. That's why they go to someone they know. (...) I know I will do it, they know I will know it. And when you do something wrong, is exactly the same. (Designer, 40, London, female)

In other words, it may be argued that reputation and trust within these networks epitomise two very differentiated cultural understandings of social relations. What characterises individual economic-oriented action across these networks is the fact that workers need to mobilise their reputational capital to access resources (information, and therefore jobs) which are embedded in the professional network of the participants—in order to build the necessary trust to engage in economic transactions with subjects who operate on the same labour market as *quasi-strangers*.

This brings to discuss the concept of *embeddedness*, that is a core notion in economic sociology and in the study of social networks. Brian Uzzi⁶ defines embeddedness as the process by which social relations shape economic action. In an influential article, Uzzi sustained that organisational networks of firms that operate in an embedded logic promote economic performance, such that a firm's performance is better off when operating into embedded ties. These for Uzzi have three positive features: they promote trust, facilitate better information transfer and favour joint problem-solving arrangements. These features, in Uzzi's account, derive primarily from the system of third-party referral networks and previous personal relations, that we have seen is institutionalised among creative networks. Embedded networks in Uzzi's account achieve competitive advantages over pure market arrangements whereby impersonal transactions become a concentrated and exclusive market between sets of partners, forming networks of organisation. Embedded ties, Uzzi explains, provide greater access to resources circulating in the network and are more likely to lead to profitable outcomes.

The kind of embeddedness visible in these networks is similar to what Uzzi found in his research on networked firms; the main difference, however, is that it occurs among individuals who substantially behave in this labour market as *ventures*. An example, which adequately seems to evidence how the logics of embeddedness in these network forms of organisation are determined by the necessity of individual workers to

engage in venture forms of labour in this job market, is the frequent creation of semi-temporary aggregations, that I have called *associations of freelancers*, a phenomenon that is similar to what Helen Blair already witnessed by in the study of television networks in the UK in the early 2000s.⁷ Fabrizio, a 45-year-old communication manager in Milan, is a founding member of one of these ventures. I meet him in the shared space where he works with his associates, in a central although not so glamorous area of the city. I came here to interview him purely about his freelance activity, but I soon realise that the two things—his personal work, and the work he undertakes with his associates—are somewhat undistinguishable:

I have opened a small enterprise with other two consultants with different skills. We started up essentially as a graphic design agency. Then, because of the demand and of the world that changes, we have soon become a whole-rounded communication agency where we do everything. We follow our clients for all communication-related issues, product placement, online strategy, stuff like that... We present ourselves as communication agency that is able to deal with all media. (Communication agent, Milan, 45, male)

Like Fabrizio's, many of these collective endeavours are constituted of usually two or three independent professionals who get together to combine different specialisations and skills. They often develop a brand name to market the association, especially via an online presence, but generally remain freelancers and independent professionals simultaneously working on their own—not just on the side, but in a combined manner. This arrangement seems to be mainly diffused in contexts like journalism, communication or design, where these 'shared brands' function as a market device to guarantee for a regular flux of incoming small jobs that are subsequently shared by the associates. This represents a potentially new business model to establish within industries that are deeply in crisis, as of the effects of the recession.

What is most important to note, however, is that independent professionals and freelancers who found these ventures do that essentially in order to raise their market potential and acquire a reputation. Most of these ventures are not to be strictly taken as small firms per se since sometimes they do not even have a legal status—just a brand name. What they do, as said, is to operate as flexible market devices. It is not a fixed aggregation of associates; it is in fact common practice to share portions of work with external peers or fellows including former colleagues, now

freelancers, and also to outsource work to other freelancers recruited on purpose. As Fabrizio goes on explaining:

It's the 3 of us associates, and then we lean on a network of external freelancers. You know, digital technologies have changed the way we work. Up until 4 or 5 years ago you had to be in the office, now you can work at-a-distance, so we lean on collaborators that develop things externally. We speak with them on Skype or via email. For instance, when we have to design a new logo, we call up the freelancers we like the most within our network, and who's available gets the job. The system works quite well, these are young guys that are very good and very much used to these new technologies, they do not need to meet us in person. (Communication agent, 45, Milan, male)

The way this happens is again exemplary of the reputation-based logics of recruitment that pertain to these scenes, as these are based on recommendations, referrals and word of mouth. The mobilisation of resources takes place via the activation of a reputational capital that workers *invest* in, mobilising social relations via their reputations so that they can expect some sort of return and capitalisation from this activity. Claudio, an Italian communication designer I met in a central bar where we had an 'aperitivo', tells me a story that exemplifies these dynamics:

A friend of mine had a friend who needed to check over the webmasters of his website, because he thought they were pinching on him, charging him more than what was due. So he put me in touch with this guy, I met him, I solved his problem, and I told him that a few things could be done better, technically speaking (...) We got along so well that he recommended me to a colleague, who hired me to design a website, and then again he recommended me to another colleague for another job. All this, in less than 50 days. (Communication designer, 29, Milan, male)

Examples like this and those discussed earlier suggest the existence of a generalised cultural conception of reputation as a capital or asset that represents the cultural conception of value of the industry. Digital and freelance knowledge workers invest in social relations with expected economic return through a variety of digital and non-digital means, using their reputation across these professional networks as social capital that represents the source for the building of economic trust in newly managerialised ways. The definition of 'reputation economy' outlined in this book catches this dynamic by identifying the mobilisation of reputational capital

in a network as the *trait d'union* between business transactions (where money is the core asset) and social relations (where trust is the core asset).

The reason why I argue that the dynamics here seen represent newly managerialised ways of building economic trust is principled upon the evidence that the role of reputation within such professional networks is a *performative* one—that is, it makes the individual able to access embedded resources and expect certain outcomes otherwise unavailable. This is made possible by the existence of very specific forms of sociality that pertain to these networks, which delink from a communitarian rationale—where individuals share values and norms—and move closer to the idea of the ‘network sociality’ theorised by Andreas Wittel,⁸ where social interaction is more ephemeral, based on publicity and affect and characterised by a looser and weaker intensity of social engagement.

A COMPULSORY AND PERFORMATIVE SOCIALITY

Professional social interaction in these contexts may be synthesised as comprehensively being characterised by a *compulsory* and *performative* sociality. By ‘following’ the logics of social relations and immersing in the professional networks in the cases here observed, I have encountered a networking attitude that principles on the acknowledgement that, in order to pursue an individual perspective that points to external individual outcomes (jobs and consequently income), it is necessary to entertain a specific kind of sociality which is instrumental for the engineering of a reputational capital and the management of relational resources across different offline and online contexts.

The first characteristic of this kind of sociality is its *compulsory* nature. Networking practices are perceived as fundamental aspects in the marketability of a worker for the acquisition of a reputational capital. This occurs both offline and online, with no distinction or difference, in a multiple dynamic of interaction that is substantially taken for granted as necessary and mandatory by most participants. Therefore, it has to be frequent and recurrent, without significant gaps, breaks or interruptions. This brings visibility and recognition and connects directly to offline interaction. Both Burrell, a 40-year-old London-based designer, and Dario, a same-aged Milanese-based communication professional, tell me a quite similar story:

I do use social media to sort of make people aware that you are there, you are working, you are active (...) Sometimes people see I'm at (X) by checking in on

location, and then phone me to have lunch, and I might get a job from that.
(Designer, 43, London, male)

I have a LinkedIn profile very well curated and updated, I have been on LinkedIn for a long time. Through this profile and the contacts I have generated, and numerous endorsements, I have often been contacted by head hunters for job proposals, this is why they have trusted what is on my profile and what people say about me. For instance X has got to me to deal with online content, a permanent job, and they have contacted me on LinkedIn through an agency.
(Communication professional, Milan, 40, male)

The second core aspect of this form of sociality is its *performative* nature. As a consequence of what has just been said, the networking activity of an individual has to be performative since it is not merely an act that communicates, but also one that defines a social and relational identity of a professional that shares contiguities with that of an artist. Steven, a well-experienced copywriter and art director in London, tells me how this dynamic works in practice:

Professionally I tend to use LinkedIn a lot, I usually write a lot of editorials on the creative industries and post them on LinkedIn to give them a better audience. I am on Facebook because I have a couple of clients who insisted contacting me on Facebook but it hasn't really done that much for me. And I use Twitter a lot, not under my own name, but under the name of the website I run. I don't have particular time or chance to tweet under my own name as well. Social media pay back in terms of awareness to people that you're out there, visibility, credibility and people having an understanding of what is it that you're doing. (...) I mean, people have found me on the Internet, looked at my profile on LinkedIn and then phone me and ask to do something. There has been no work 'flooding' in, but it's a good way to let people know you're out there really.
(Copywriter/Art director, 47, London, male)

Both these traits of sociality act as a process of self-construction that points to an acquisition of a reputation. Digital media are instrumental for this process insofar as they offer this kind of sociality a milieu to exist, that is not mutually exclusive with the offline-based social relations. Renée, an editorial consultant in London, tells me how having a blog and joining Twitter were functional to their professional success as a freelancer:

It was my blog that got me recognised, if you like. You know, as a freelancer you have to have something to offer, you have to be good enough, you know? There's a lot of people who aren't, and there's a lot of people who are. First of all, you

have to have something to offer that is at the right standard, of the right quality. And then you have to let people know, that you've got it, that you're out there. So my blog was a very big thing, it got me noticed, but the thing that was the actual key was joining Twitter. I think without Twitter it would have taken me longer and I'm not sure if it would have worked (to move freelance, ndr). Twitter allowed me to get my blog out there, it allowed me to publicise my blog to the exact client group who I wanted to read it, who were in the position to give me work. So I used Twitter to market myself and I still use it as a professional tool. I don't use it as a kind of casual personal kind of game, or fun. I see it very much as part of my professional persona and I'm very conscious about what I tweet about. (Editorial consultant, 45, London, female)

This connects to a peculiarly problematic aspect that centrally pertains to these scenes. This activity of reputation construction that is mandatory and performative as a self-branding routine, and functions as the 'grammar' of these scenes, is to be considered a significant work activity for these professionals. However, it represents an unremunerated activity. This brings us to the idea of *free labour*, that in various accounts is highlighted as a controversial aspect of creative industries⁹ and which here acquire the specific meaning of 'investment'.

FREE LABOUR AS INVESTMENT

In my experience, it was always the case (of being noticed, ndr) only because of someone who knew me for things I had done in the past, as of word-of-mouth. So I would suggest everyone to do something wonderful, for free, immediately. That's the best investment. (Editorial consultant/Journalist, 36, Milan, female)

Carla, quoted above, is a journalist working in Milan as a freelancer and editorial consultant for many important clients. Among the various interviewees who often make reference to free labour in various ways, some neutral, some significantly negative, she is one who explicitly puts down the logic behind the commitment to unpaid forms of work in these contexts: the logic of the *investment*. The idea of embarking into free and unpaid commissions appears to be instrumental to start the loop of reputation construction and functions as a gate to other employment. As a result, most participants do not perceive this practice as exploitative—rather, a natural part of the process of achieving a

market position. Scott, a consultant in the arts world, while we enjoy a walk in central London, tells me that this is ‘strategic’ to position oneself in the scene:

I did some jobs for free because I think strategically it was a good idea to do. It was a strategic job. (Arts consultant, 35, London, male)

This notion of free labour as an investment is believed by participants to be functional to the acquisition of a reputation in a professional context where interaction that is increasingly mediated by digital means of communication, and the possibility of meeting in person and engaging in face-to-face interaction is strongly reduced. This coincides with what is a common necessity for a freelance worker; that is, to have a portfolio of work that proves one’s skills and talent. In this idea of investment, the logic of the shop window meets with that of free labour: Daniela, for instance, is strongly convinced that the capacity to share one’s work online is beneficial to the state of the labour market, and is something everybody should embrace:

At the beginning I worked a lot for free. It is difficult to show you can do something, without doing it. Now you can publish your own work, you can demonstrate this capacity to all those who may be interested. It’s like living a public portfolio. (Communication consultant, 43, Milan, female)

Despite the enthusiasm promoted by some of these interviewees, there are significant criticalities attached to this phenomenon beyond the unfair and unpaid nature of such free labour. The logic of the investment that penetrates these environments is one that outsources insecurity and risk on individual workers—and this is why reputation works as a source of trust, as it reduces the risk of working with quasi-strangers. Some participants are well aware of the controversies that lie behind this dynamic. Bruno, a London-based videographer, is the most critical:

People think that you will be paid by status, they say ‘I’m working in London’, for free, and I say no, you are a slave in London, let’s be honest. They’re not working in the strict sense. I’m not here to make money, but I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t making money. If you have to work six months for free, better you work six months for free for you and not for someone else, if you have ideas... This is the new working class, you see what I mean? (Videographer, 38, London, male)

We can see how risk and trust come to be so strictly related within these scenes; analogously, the issue of competition among workers comes to be interlinked with the idea of collaboration. It is striking to note how digital and freelance knowledge workers do not perceive themselves in competition among each other as much as they brandish an ideological notion of collaboration as a key element to successful careers. This, on the one hand, is attached to current fashionable ideas of innovation and sharing—but, on the other hand, points back again to the idea of reputation as the conception of value in force within these scenes. As the professional scene is a ‘small world’ where everyone knows each other, a competitive attitude per se is counterproductive since work comes on one’s way only through the wise management of social connections and reputations. As we explore the green fields of Clissold Park and discuss the irony of the hipster scene of North East London, Lincoln—a quite well-known graphic designer and branding consultant—explains to me that collaboration and competition are in fact two sides of the same thing, and the element that intermediates between them is, once again, one’s reputation:

Because it’s so competitive, it’s also down to your reputation, and the people you’ve worked with. The circuit is so small: in design everyone knows each other, of course you have the top 10 per cent, the top 5 per cent, they all know each other. The people you’ve worked with form more established companies. Your portfolio is the most important thing, getting your work seen, and your reputation as a person to actually work with, are you a good person to work with? Aren’t you a good person to work with? You might be very good, but if you’re lacking social skills, it’s your problem. If you’re selfish it’s your problem. Reputation spreads quite fast. (Graphic designer, 38, London, male)

This chapter has unveiled how urban networks of freelance knowledge professionals are deeply intertwined with the digital scene and how the notions of value and trust are, in both contexts, principled on a notion of reputation as the element that regulates this labour market as well as the dynamics of professional interaction within these scenes. This configures a context characterised by a socialisation of value production across newly mediated social networks that is interlinked with the specific culture of digital and freelance knowledge work as venture labour. I will expand on this point in the discussion on value in Chap. 6. Before that, it is necessary to observe how these insights are significantly analogous, *mutatis mutandis*, to those that connote entirely digital contexts of knowledge work, and especially digital marketplaces, which are discussed in the next chapter.

NOTES

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Working Online: An Exploration of Social Recruiting and Digital Marketplaces

Abstract This chapter evidences how the practices of job search and recruitment within and beyond the networked knowledge economy are being partially or entirely reterritorialised as a result of the intermediation of online resources, and how these are principled on an analogous notion of reputation as value. This is illustrated via the discussion of empirical data from an international study on social recruiting, and a case study exploration of a digital marketplace for contractors, Elance. These examples evidence how the broad knowledge labour market is founded on the logic of the reputation economy and envisages how this promises to remain central in the next decades, simultaneously warning against the risks of an ‘algorocracy’ based on the fetishism for algorithms and online rankings.

Social media are vastly used for work-related practices in various ways—and increasingly so. A plethora of ‘social’ tools now forms part of an array of instruments used by recruiters, human resource (HR) managers and professionals at all levels, not only to create and maintain professional and personal networks and ties, but specifically for hiring and headhunting, that is the search of suitable candidates for jobs and positions. Today, the recruitment process is largely intermediated by the Web and various kinds of social media. It is not by chance that one of the most famous platforms, LinkedIn (est. 2003), is a specifically professional social networking site which reached 225 million users in ten years and today accounts for 332 million members worldwide.¹ In 2014, LinkedIn purchased Bright (\$120m), an algorithm-base startup that matches job seekers’ CVs with

recruiters' job openings and implemented this within its services, to offer what is the most advanced integration of digital technologies for work purposes worldwide.² A variety of platforms that offer similar hiring-related services, such as Viadeo, Careerbuilder and Jobvite, exist online alongside industry-specific aggregators of job offers, such as Dezeen or It's Nice That for the design world, and Talenthouse for media production.

These represent the 'social' evolution of those job boards whereby recruiters and businesses used to advertise jobs—which have been very common in the pre-digital era, especially in newspapers. These seem to have experienced a substantial transposition to the digital world. A well-known online job board is Monster, a US-based global employment service that gathers job postings and candidate profiles on its website with the aim of matching the demand and supply of workers worldwide in a variety of areas. Also, as described in an article that appeared in *Forbes* in 2011,³ there are plenty of even more specific digital tools that address the needs of companies and brands when it comes to searching for talent, of which an example is Jazz, formerly known as The Resumator, a social networking application that offers recruiters and HR managers a variety of social tools to post jobs, evaluate candidates and search for prospective employees across various social databases, and proves to be particularly useful for startups.

All this constitutes the foundation of a broader and bigger phenomenon: social recruiting. This term identifies the practice of job seeking and recruiting that takes place via the intermediation of social network sites. Despite an existing academic literature that looks at the role of digital technologies for recruiting and HR management on the Web, it is only recently that this term has made its way into the specialist jargon of the discipline to identify the use of specific social media tools and the spreading of a 'social' rationale to the hiring process.⁴ Thus, the specific academic literature on social recruiting is still quite underdeveloped. It is striking, however, to note that the most relevant journals in the area of work and employment still host relatively few publications on this topic.

The existing contributions comprehensively focus on Internet job search and evidence how advantageous this search is for both recruiters and job seekers, as it is relatively inexpensive and time savvy. Yet, Internet job searching is often not an alternative, but a complementary recruitment strategy that pairs up traditional methods. On the side of job seekers, it must be noted how the simple addition of the Web as a place to search does not automatically increase the chances of a successful job seeking activity.

The literature provides also few disadvantages, which mostly concern the number and the type of people utilising these instruments, but also the quality of the search. With a vast number of ads published substantially for free, the quality of the information advertised is often poor, and it may be difficult for both sides to make their way through this ‘noise’.⁵

Nevertheless, as a matter of fact, the proliferation of Internet tools and platforms that allow the publication of job ads and the reach of various potential employees, workers and contractors in different industrial sectors and business areas is critically affecting the way in which candidates search for jobs, recruiters search for candidates and supply comprehensively meets demand. The discontinuity operated by the diffusion of Web 2.0-based applications of social networking for professional practice has effectively enabled a process of disintermediation and re-automation of job search processes. A few of the consequences of this process are illustrated in the following section.

SOCIAL RECRUITING: AN INTERNATIONAL STUDY

This section is based on evidence collected from the ‘International Study on Social Recruiting’ promoted and financed by Adecco International between 2014 and 2015, and led by Prof. Ivana Pais at the Catholic University of Milan—a project which I had the opportunity to participate in as part of my post-doctoral work. The data that follow here are taken from the 2014 edition of the study.⁶ This research casts a unique light on the use of digital technologies for purposes of recruitment, thanks to an unprecedented set of data.⁷

The study consists of a survey distributed across 24 countries in June 2014, addressed to both job seekers and recruiters subscribed to Adecco. It collected responses from 1500 recruiters and more than 17,000 job seekers at various levels of experience and age and in a variety of sectors. The majority of responses by job seekers came from the industrial and service sectors (15%), technology (13%), media (6%), utilities (6%) and telecommunications (5%), whilst those from the recruiters’ sample largely came from employees of recruiting agencies. Although the sample does not include solely sectors and workers that pertain directly to the knowledge economy, data are highly indicative of how the role of digital technologies and social media in the intermediation of the supply and demand of workers is increasingly central and determinant, and particularly casts light on how—in coherence with the framework proposed in

this book—one's perceived reputation, assessed via the observation of the social media presence of the candidates and the content posted on their profiles, significantly affects the evaluations made by recruiters of a candidate's reliability and professional capacity.

In detail, results account that on average the 55% of job seekers and the 73% of recruiters utilise social media for job search-related activities or purposes of recruiting and HR management. The use of social media on the job seeking side seems to be slightly higher for women (62%) over men (59%), and younger candidates (born after 1981) with University-level education. In terms of geographic areas, however, there seem to be quite significant differences. The Western European countries, which include the UK, the Netherlands and Switzerland (63% of the sample), score the best results together with the Southern European countries, which include Italy, Spain and France (57%), whilst, somewhat surprisingly, the US rate sits at a mere 52%, which is a comparatively lower value than the European area.

In terms of the use of digital technologies by recruiters, despite the high number of candidates active in online job searching through social media, the Southern European area shows a significant delay in the adoption of social recruiting practices (34% vs an average of 66%) by recruiting companies (57% vs an average of 73%). High scores are reported instead by Eastern European and MENA⁸ (Middle East and North Africa) countries (74%), despite presenting lower rates of adoption by candidates. More than half of the companies recruiters participating in the study work for, have at least one active account on a social networking site, with an equal presence on LinkedIn and Facebook (53%). Comprehensively, more than half of the overall recruitment broadly involved the Internet in some form—including, but not limited to, social media platforms. Recruiters believe social media use in their professional world has a significant potential to grow. The positions more often searched for via online means are not necessarily managerial, but largely include also non-managerial jobs.

The study provides clear evidence on how LinkedIn is the main social networking site for professional online activity (by 35% of job seekers and 58% of recruiters). LinkedIn emerges as the most effective platform in terms of its capacity to actually enable the match between supply and demand in the various industries and sectors. The index of effectiveness for LinkedIn, calculated in the research as a pondered value ranging between -1, lowest effectiveness, and 1, highest effectiveness, shows the highest result of all social media platforms. In terms of professional activities, the

second most utilised platform is Facebook, which is used by an overall 17% of job seekers and 28% of recruiters.

As concerns job seekers, two elements seem to greatly affect the dynamics of social recruiting. First, candidates with greater sets of skills and a higher education title are more likely to use social media to search for jobs. The activities for which social media and digital tools are more frequently used for are browsing ads (63%) and researching potential employers' pages (55%) followed by professional networking (53%). In terms of the specific national contexts observed in this book, in the UK the diffusion of social media among job seekers is reported at a percentage of 61% and shows a slight prevalence of male usage (68% vs 61%) and older candidates born after 1965. Italy, on the other hand, scores somewhat unexpectedly well, given that the rate of usage of social tools for job seeking purposes is higher than the average value reported (67%). Overall, 29% of job seekers have been contacted by a recruiter via digital means.

Second, alongside the pervasiveness of social media use, it must be noted how recruiters devote significant attention to the evaluation of a candidate's reputation as this emerges through social media platforms—and how job seekers perceive this with much lesser intensity. Although LinkedIn largely remains the resource that recruiters use the most in order to assess the reputation of a candidate (68%), recruiters use a variety of tools, including also Facebook—which, as seen, is a social networking site that job seekers mainly use for private communication and much less for professional activity—together with basic Google search tools for general information purposes. The elements that are more likely to affect one's reputation are the presence of content on social media that demonstrates a violation of workplace regulations or codes of conduct, and also the display of anti-social behaviour such as drug use. The study shows that approximately one third of recruiters have discarded a candidate due to the information publicly found online and on social media sites.

As it may be easily noted, the diffusion of reputation-based logics of action and valuation goes beyond social media per se and seems to be a generalised trait of today's labour market. These data provide further evidence of how the availability of a variety of proxies for the assessment of one's reputation across social networking sites and digital environments is pulling alongside traditional means of recruitment and assessment of a candidate, such as the CV, previous professional experience, recommendations and referrals, to be a central aspect in the meeting of supply and demand. This is true also on the side of job seekers, as specific platforms for

reputation checking such as Glassdoor allow users to access information on potential employers based on reviews of existing or former employees. The growth in such practices does not seem to cease—and poses also critical concerns. One of the practices that most directly involves knowledge workers and closely knits with the rise of freelancing described in Chap. 2 is the diffusion of ‘digital marketplaces’ specifically dedicated to contractors and independent professionals. In the section below, I offer an in-depth exploration of one of these: Elance, currently known as Upwork.

DIGITAL MARKETPLACES

The centrality of reputation as a key element for the assessment of the professional status of a candidate, operated by recruiters and HR managers on the basis of the availability and the ‘publicness’ of individual information on social media, coherently goes hand in hand with the popularisation of digital marketplaces generally addressed to freelancers and independent professionals. On digital marketplaces, reputation is the centre of a dynamic of interaction among users that is generally intermediated by an ORS, which generates an algorithm-based score on the basis of a worker’s feedbacks and reviews. Such metrics functions as a proxy for the trustworthiness of a user on the marketplace, explicitly linking social interaction with economic exchange.

Before looking more in depth at the case study of this section, it is worth noting that despite the current popularisation of digital marketplaces, their founding idea goes back to the time of the first frenzy around freelancing as ‘businesses of one’ discussed earlier. Business scholar Richard Freeman in 2002⁹ forecast how the diffusion of the Internet would soon eliminate co-location as a decisive element to the enactment of certain working activities—a process he labelled as the ‘death of distance’. Freeman thus envisaged a forthcoming rise in what he called ‘e-work’—that is, the institutionalisation of digital-based market intermediaries that prove able to bring together supply and demand on a contract work basis. This would become real, thanks to digital platforms where the matching of supply and demand is assured on the basis of a ‘reputation capital’ that ensures neither the contractor, nor the client, is ripped off by anti-social and self-ish behaviour.

The diffusion of such digital market intermediaries regulated by reputational algorithms over the past decade, thanks to international and local platforms like Elance, oDesk, Freelancer, Guru and many similar others,

has actually involved to a significant extent those sectors that relate to the creative and media industries, technology and IT, as envisaged by Richard Freeman. The relevance and the centrality of the algorithm that calculates a reputation score out of a user's activity and feedback on such platforms is exemplified by the fact that this is directly linked to the employability of a freelancer. In an article appeared in the *American Sociological Review* in 2014, Ming Leung¹⁰ shows that clients over digital marketplaces prefer to hire candidates with coherent career trajectories and tend to penalise 'erraticism', and that candidates who move between more (conceptually) distant jobs are less likely to garner subsequent employment. All this information is provided by the feedback and reviews obtained by a contractor on the platform, and summed up in one's reputation score.

In other words, it may be argued the activity of a user-worker on a digital marketplace seems to follow rules and logics similar to those witnessed in Chap. 4 within urban-based labour markets. We are about to see how the role of the ORS over one of these platforms, Elance, is analogous to the role of reputation across urban-based professional networks evidenced in the previous chapter, being directly associated to higher revenues and 'fetishised' by users as a sort of regulatory entity.

A CASE STUDY: ELANCE

This section is based on evidence collected within an exploratory, digital ethnographic study of Elance, currently known as Upwork, which is one of the most important international online marketplaces addressed to contractors and freelancers in various professional categories and sectors. Upwork is the result of the merge in 2014 of two previously separated digital marketplaces, Elance and oDesk. As declared by Elance Vice President Kjetil J. Olsen in an interview that appeared on the online version of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*,¹¹ the merge aimed to expand the number of users of the platform and equip two previously small startups with the size, the skills and the capacity of an international company.

The core business of the platform is to intermediate supply and demand in a contractor-based labour market where clients browse for professional figures to contract on an as-needed basis. Upwork operates as a two-way market intermediary; clients browse for contractors and post job ads, whilst at the same time contractors fill their profile on the platform with personal and professional information, usually including a professional portfolio and a brief self-presentation. The professional sectors that can be

found on Upwork include IT and Programming, Design and Multimedia, Writing and Translation, Sales and Marketing, and Admin Support.

Upwork accounts for a rising volume of jobs posted as well as freelancers and businesses working via the platform. At the time of publication, figures stood at 9 million registered freelancers and 4 million registered clients, with 3 million jobs posted every year. The cumulative value of jobs posted on the platform has reached 1 billion dollars in work done annually.¹² On Upwork, clients and contractors engage in economic exchanges (i.e., commission-based work) via the intermediation of the platform, that charges a fee based on the value of each transaction—intended as a payment made by a client to a contractor for a piece of work.

This intermediation is regulated by an ORS that displays feedback and reviews of each user and offers precious indications to both parties (the client and the contractor) about the quality of previous work, the trustworthiness of the other actor, one's reliability concerning working at a distance and payments. This is, however, an imbalanced dynamic; the ORS is significantly more important and relevant to contractors, since clients offering jobs generally take decisions according to the reputation score they witness on each contractor's profile. This is visible in the form of an allocated box on each contractor's profile and systematised with the name Level. The Level represents effectively a reputation proxy that is elaborated by the platform on the basis of feedback, recommendations and reviews received by each contractor.

With a methodological approach that is analogous to the study of the urban networks of freelancers in Milan and London, in 2013 I have conducted an 'extended ethnographic' observation of Elance, currently known as Upwork, following basic digital ethnographic principles—with the aim of understanding the functioning of the platform and enquire whether the same cultural conception of reputation as value would apply also to an example of these new forms of labour markets for freelancers. 'Digital ethnography'¹³ is here intended as a qualitative approach to the study of digital activity that principles on the school of 'digital methods' developed by Richard Rogers at the University of Amsterdam¹⁴ and is founded upon the idea of 'following the medium' and the flow of information natively present on the platform, to observe qualitatively the networked cultures of interaction in a specific digital environment.¹⁵

The digital ethnographic observation of Elance/Upwork mapped 59 profiles in the Design and Multimedia section of the marketplace, sampled on the basis of those that displayed visible information regarding their

earnings on the platform. The first phase of the study consisted in the collection of individual data from members' profiles about their Level, their earnings and the other information available on display on their profiles, and the treatment of these data anonymously. The second phase consisted of five in-depth interviews to Elance/Upwork members, conducted via Skype (with one exception, conducted via email), which sought a further and deeper exploration of attitudes and opinions regarding work routines on the platform. These aimed at complementing the data collection with an exploratory set of information obtained directly from platform users, otherwise unavailable.

The sample of profiles observed is composed of 34 males and 25 females. The geographical distribution of participants shows a consistent majority of US-based contractors (35 over 59), followed by Europe and South East Asia (8 contractors each), South Africa (3), Oceania (4) and South America (1). The profiles on Elance/Upwork display data on the average number of jobs for each client in the last 12 months (46 in the sample) and the average number of clients for each contractor in the same period (28 in the sample). The average earnings made on the platform by the contractors in the sample in the previous 12 months are as high as US\$16,095. In terms of skills, contractors present themselves through pseudo-biographic outlines that are substantially similar to each other. The display of generalised digital skills and the capacity to work with certain computer programs pair up with more specific job specialisations, such as graphic designer, illustrator or branding consultant, which is the only significant element that differentiates the various profiles. No data on individual age are available.

It must be noted that there is no instrument that allows for social networking and interaction between clients and contractors, nor among contractors, and this is confirmed by elancers themselves in the interviews. Thus, the structure of Elance/Upwork is that of a two-mode network (Fig. 5.1) whereby clients and contractors are two rigidly separated groups and the only form of intermediation takes place through the ORS.

As regards the education title, the majority of the contractors included in the study did not show any information on their profile, which suggests they might consider it irrelevant and not meaningful for the purpose of being hired. The Level, which ranges from 0 to 20, is reported in the sample with a maximum score of 12 and a minimum score of 7 (being 8 on average), fairly equally distributed in terms of gender. As said, this is the score that aggregates all feedback and reviews that have been collected

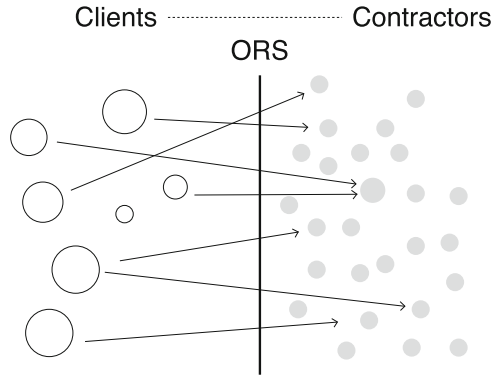


Fig. 5.1 Upwork—two-mode network

by a contractor after delivering a job. Despite the limited set of data, it seems clear that those with higher Level scores in the sample are also those who earn more on the platform.

The ORS can be considered the focal point of the organisational arrangements that take place on Elance. It regulates the functioning of the whole marketplace, enabling social interaction and economic transactions to take place among the quasi-strangers who participate in this environment. Clients and contractors only know the opinions and feedbacks of others from the ORS and utilise these as criteria of evaluation to select the most reliable business partners on occasion. In other words, the ORS functions in analogy with the ‘reputational capital’ encountered in London and Milan as it represents the source for the establishment of trust between a client and a contractor.

It is crucial for contractors to achieve a high Level since it is effectively the most important information when it comes to bargaining or getting a job, essentially the only information a client will look at. Contractors see the Level as the most valuable asset on the platform and the one that defines their market position. Thus, the ORS score is ‘fetishised’ by many as it is retained to be the only thing to care about and the only element each counterpart will look at, and make evaluations accordingly, when it comes to giving out a job. Also, the ORS is the element upon which the whole search algorithm on the platform is based—which means that having a high score enhances the prospects of appearing in the first position in relation to specific job titles when searched. Those who have high

scores and rankings on Elance/Upwork generally do not compete for jobs. Rather, they are called up by clients who have searched for them on the site. Sabrina, a South African branding consultant, explains:

I think that it's a very good system of ranking that Elance has got going. As a client when you get onto Elance you want to find the best for your project. Obviously they want to find the best... it's like the Google search: they will search for the first two or three pages, to find the best. And nowadays I never go and send proposals, I always get invited, that's how I shifted in my business. Of course at the beginning I was sending proposals, now clients find me very easily, cos I'm rated quite high at the moment, I think I'm number 6... I'm rated quite high considering I'm just one person. (...) It's really important, clients will look at my portfolio, see how professional I am, see the feedback... and also they will look at my previous work as well, so they can make a decision on what people have said about them as well... So I think it tells for the security on both sides, having to work with someone without meeting them, cos this is a brand new way of working. When I started I was going out to meet clients and finally get emailed, but now it's completely through Skype or email. (Branding consultant/Graphic designer, SA, 43, female)

Unless called by a client directly, the most common mechanism for getting jobs on the platform is known as 'bidding'. This essentially consists of responding to a job call and investing a certain amount of 'virtual money' to access the proposal and compete for the assignment. The client who posted the call selects the most suitable freelancer to hire and assigns the job. This mechanism works well especially for those who can leverage on an existing reputation on the site. Entry-level freelancers generally struggle to get their first jobs, often being required to charge lower fees; sometimes, they decide to compete in less crowded calls to get jobs in quickly and start the feedback loop that fuels the ORS. Serena, an Italian editorial professional, explains how it works:

I never work on a single project. I have to make an exaggerate number of bids to get a few projects. My percentage of winning bids is around 5 and 10 per cent. The client looks at the portfolio and the feedback score, that on Elance is a weighted mean of the reviews of previous works: if I have 5 over 5 in a work that is worth 10000 dollars, and a 4 over 5 in a work worth 4000, my mean will not be 4.5 rather 4.8. Also, having the revenues publicly visible I think is important: for instance if I ask for 130 dollars for a job, on average, I want this to be visible so I don't waste time in refusing 30-dollar piecework. (Designer, Italy, 42, female)

The professional dynamics at stake on Elance/Upwork are strongly perceived by members as the ‘new’ modality of work in the knowledge industry, destined to become a standard arrangement in the near future. Sabrina goes on to explain this with enthusiasm and tells me she also acts as a mentor for colleagues and friends who want to join the ‘elance revolution’:

I think it's absolutely vital (the existence of digital marketplaces, nda) because thanks to that I haven't been touched by the recession, it has never affected me. And I feel so strongly about it that I set up a programme, an online training programme for people on how to get onto Elance and do what I have done. I've got a formula that's really working. Because I'm always busy all the time I'm clearly doing something right so I would like to train either school leavers, staying-at-home mums, or people who want to get retrained (people that have might been retrenched). Because I don't think people get taught that, and people are not able to work and look after children, get out of college or art schools and then get a job because no one's employing people anymore... I believe the way of the future as a designer or in these kind of industries is that you gotta work for yourself, you got to be a business owner. And the young people today aren't being taught that, there's a huge gap. Since I've reached some amazing results with Elance, I wanna share them with other people. (Branding consultant/Graphic designer, SA, 43, female)

For some, such as Martin, a US-based illustrator in his 50s, the decision of joining Elance came after a redundancy or as a consequence of the shrinking of revenues caused by the recession:

My career had been into local advertising in Ohio. In 2007 I was downsized and I was looking for something to do. What I was doing was art direction, more design, I didn't get to do the illustration and more creative work. So I started looking around for something different to do, and found online work. Directly, perhaps 75 per cent of my work comes from Elance. (Illustrator, USA, 50, male)

To conclude, the functioning of the Level on Elance/Upwork visibly renders the dynamics of trust building among quasi-strangers who only interact through the intermediation of the platform. Clients and contractors who do not know each other and do not meet in person are able to entertain economic transactions, bargain for jobs and fees since both parties share the understanding of the Level as a regulatory entity that is able to guarantee for the necessary trust. The brokerage function played by the ORS regulates the internal organisation of the platform.

Thus, there seems to be an element of continuity and commonality throughout the patterns of interaction across the urban networks of London and Milan and the online marketplace of Elance/Upwork, exactly in the mechanism by which the reputation achieved via the ORS enables trust to be established among business partners. However, as earlier suggested, this does not prevent the existence of critical aspects—for instance, in the extent to which algorithms come to be perceived as independent and reliable regulatory entities for economic-oriented social activity—and be reified as such.

TOWARDS AN ALGOCRACY?

I want to conclude this chapter on a critical note. The broad empirical evidence discussed in the last two chapters comprehensively highlights the centrality of reputational logics as cultural conceptions of value that affect the chances of getting jobs in a digital and freelance knowledge economy dominated by various kinds of professional networking routines. Here, the fact that social network sites and digital platforms make all relations and networked connections, feedback and rankings, visible and publicly accessible in the form of an approximated measurement effectively renders these features as marketable assets in the form of services—like the already mentioned Klout—which are connoted with significant shortcomings given mostly by the secrecy of the algorithms of calculation. The fetishism for reputation acquisition that broadly emerges in the various examples here discussed should alert us on the risks of what may be labelled a potential ‘algocracy’.¹⁶

This term identifies the potentially dystopian consequence of what I have also called elsewhere¹⁷ a ‘Klout culture’—that is, the principle for which online algorithms and especially reputation metrics are uncritically approached as objective sources of information upon which to found supposedly unbiased evaluation of brands, individuals and activities of various sorts. As devices for reputation measurement proliferate, a culture that promotes an uncritical approach to metrics seems on the rise and conflicts with the risky aspects that these practices possess—first and foremost, the generally undisclosed criteria upon which these algorithms base their calculations. In the already mentioned interview with the Vice President of Upwork, Olsen himself reveals that the exact formulation and criteria of the algorithm regulating its own platform are unknown even to him—it is a trade secret that allows no revelation. The criticism here offered sits in line with recent accounts that criticise the growing movement of the ‘quantified self’, and its application in the

workplace for means of control and surveillance.¹⁸ We should maintain a critical eye on these innovations, especially as these come to the forefront as a supposed ‘democratisation’ of a certain dynamic or context.

For instance, it may be argued that the frenzy around the concept of reputation that tech authors have promoted might locate this notion at the heart of the currently fashionable dynamics that propel ideas of a ‘collaborative’ and ‘sharing’ economy, which reify collaboration as a mode of production and organisation, poses a broader question of how reputational mechanisms and what does digital work mean today within them. This topic is explored in the next two chapters.

NOTES

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Understanding Digital Work as Venture Labour

Abstract This chapter discusses how the proposed notion of ‘digital work’ can interpret the way knowledge workers today seem to put aside the unresolved tensions between precariousness, insecurity and the instability of work, to pursue an ideological approach to entrepreneurialism, professionalism and independence as ‘the new way of working’. This narrative, is argued, has surged as hegemonic in the form of a powerful rhetoric of ‘new professionalism’ that conceives knowledge work as a form of venture labour, and envisages freelance knowledge workers as ‘digital professionals’. This is discussed in a broader critical perspective that looks at conceptions of value in various contexts, and especially those more contaminated by collaborative logics of work.

In October 2012, at the Conference celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the journal *Work, Employment and Society* in London, Professor Arne Kalleberg delivered a speech on job quality and illustrated his conceptual model¹ for the assessment of whether a job holds good or bad features. Prof. Kalleberg sustained that job quality assessments should depart from job satisfaction-biased self-reports to embrace a more comprehensive perspective that takes into account a broader set of elements that include economic compensation, macro-structural issues in the labour market and the relative importance placed by workers on these different factors. At that moment, I was well into my research on freelance professionals in the digital knowledge economy, building on the theoretical assumption that digital and freelance knowledge work in urban environments

was essentially a form of ‘passionate work’, whereby job satisfaction and symbolic recognition are achieved from the participation in ‘cool’ creative environments despite low-paid or unpaid jobs, unfair working conditions, long hours and free labour.

Indeed, Prof. Kalleberg’s talk offered a different angle of interpretation—which I was substantially overlooking. Below the contradictions attached to the concept of job quality, and those which pertain specifically to nonstandard work in the knowledge economy, it seemed to me that the intersection of ‘passion’ and ‘precariousness’ that is well documented in the literature was evolving in nature and somewhat coming to be embodied and subsumed in a changing culture of work, coming alongside the changing employment regime. Beyond what described in Chap. 2, this evolution effectively seemed to be characterised by a repackaging of these notions through ideas of newness and innovation, inducing a number of productive subjects in the knowledge economy to develop an approach to knowledge work that combines independence and professionalism in a hyperpositive, ideological stance.

As seen in the last two chapters, self-employed, digital-based knowledge workers seem to be more rather than less voluntarily embarking into freelance careers, putting aside the unresolved tensions between precariousness, insecurity and the instability of work to pursue what is in fact an ideological approach to entrepreneurialism, professionalism and independence as ‘the new way of working’. As the well-known narrative of precariousness and passion that connotes knowledge workers in the media and creative scenes have come to be institutionalised in professional practice, a narrative of liberation and independence has simultaneously surged as hegemonic, diluted within a strongly entrepreneurial attitude that substantially anaesthetises the negative traits—and recodes them in a purposeful and powerful rhetoric of ‘new professionalism’ that conceives knowledge work as a form of venture labour,² and envisages freelance knowledge workers as ‘digital professionals’.

DIGITAL PROFESSIONALS: THE ‘BOURGEOIS BOHEMIANS’ TURNED ‘WORKERS ON TAP’

In 2013, in the January–February issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, Tammy Johns and Lynda Gratton argue that we are witnessing a ‘third wave of virtual work’ in the increasingly untethered world of the knowledge economy. This ‘third wave’ is based on the assumption that

knowledge workers are now able to perform tasks anywhere, at any time, thanks to the diffusion of digital technologies. As a result, employment regimes now adapt to this transformation, allowing a more flexible organisation of labour and more fluid career patterns that build on remote work and a culture of connectivity to foster a new frenzy of ‘nonstandard’ work. In order to prove this true, the authors tell the story of Heidi McCulloch, a communication consultant who switched in and out of agency work to finally become an independent worker—an entrepreneur who runs a ‘boutique collaborative space’ in downtown Toronto. The story of Miss McCulloch, in Johns and Gratton’s view, is exemplary of a new wave of freelancing that comes after the ‘first wave’ of mobile and tele-work that occurred in the early 1980s, and the ‘second wave’ of project-based work that may be chronologically located in the early 2000s. Now, they argue, we are confronted with a ‘third wave’, the logic of which is to ignite independent entrepreneurship and enact connectivity and collaboration among freelance professionals who ‘co-work’ in flexible, shared spaces.³

Although the rise of ‘coworking spaces’ is arguably a significant manifestation of this day and age that needs unpacking and interpretation (and will be discussed in greater extent in the next chapter), it must be noted how these ‘waves’ quite unsurprisingly coincide in chronological terms with the highlights of the neoliberal ideology. The fact freelancing costs less to employers and firms than ‘standard’ employment pairs up today with fashionable discourses around innovation and ‘sharing’ that explicitly envisage the rise of a ‘new’ kind of workforce, sometimes epitomised through labels and characters like ‘startuppers’, coworkers, social entrepreneurs, ‘makers’ and ‘changemakers’, all advocated as the protagonists of an incoming ‘third industrial revolution’.⁴ Indeed, a lot remains to be learned about who these supposedly ‘new workers’ of the knowledge economy are, what is specifically new in these distributed models of work and, particularly, the working conditions that lie beneath the glittering rhetoric of innovation that is attached to these workers.

The use of the term ‘digital professionals’ finds reason in the fact that the kind of work that connotes these working subjects is principled on a self-proclaimed idea of ‘professionalism’ that is not regulated by education titles or particular specific skills. This, is here argued, should be seen as the evolution of those ‘bourgeois bohemian’ approaches to work that were fashionable across the 1990s and the early 2000s⁵ in coincidence with the rise of the creative class, and which have now come to be fully integrated in a neoliberal culture of entrepreneurial labour that combines the

lexicon and the ethos of professions with the subjectivity of creative work. The kind of professionalism here at stake delinks from current definitions based on regulatory bodies and memberships, and is principled on a looser idea of independent expertise which comes to be applied in various ways in their digital work, often through the use of original job titles like community managers, social media managers, social media marketers, content managers, among others.⁶

An example of these is offered by a booklet from one of the Silicon Milkroundabout events in London in Spring 2015. Silicon Milkroundabout is a job fair that takes place twice a year in the area of Shoreditch, which aims to connect supply and demand of workers in various sectors from IT and tech communities, to marketing and design. All participants receive a booklet that lists a number of companies and their current vacancies. Here, alongside tech-specific software engineer and developer jobs, we often find examples of these new and original professional figures being sought, such as ‘engagement manager’, ‘data business analyst’, ‘data scientist’ and ‘digital designer’. These job specialisations have a professional connotation built integrally into them; despite not all of them being freelance-based in terms of employment form, these are advertised with the implicit requirement that workers should act on the job as professionals and self-entrepreneurs in a continuous startup phase. One may wonder why, and how to interpret this narrative—which sits in line with the idea of the ‘startup of you’ described earlier.

The idea of ‘venture labour’ devised by Gina Neff⁷ seems to be the best equipped concept to describe the type of professional work that today’s digital and freelance independent workers are confronted. Neff sustains that, in the ‘new’ informational, cultural and technological economy driven by flexible and highly individualised work, labour becomes an entrepreneurial venture that is directly at friction with the notion of risk—that is, venture labour becomes a cultural and organisational means to outsource the risk of managing networked interaction and economic exchange upon individuals in a fragmented labour market. The professionalised, digital and freelance knowledge workers outlined in this book seem to be a typical example of venture labour. Their work is eminently connoted by a peculiar notion of risk that is premised upon their frequent interaction as quasi-strangers. The risk of interacting in the absence of pre-existing or institutional trust brings workers to consider reputation as the element that reduces this risk, and rebuilds the conditions of trustworthy behaviour among actors.

Here, the self-proclaimed professional status retained by such workers supports their venture labour in the movement that takes them away from a condition of perceived precariousness and instability, to embrace one of entrepreneurship and professionalism. Put differently, after a decade of exploitation, low-paid or unpaid jobs, devaluation of work and free labour, it seems as though workers have fabricated themselves a new ethos around the idea of doing ‘what they like’, having internalised the neoliberal culture of this labour market to the extent that digital and freelance professionalism appears to them with the traits of the ‘new’, being the most efficient option to ‘justify’ or even ‘escape’ their precarious conditions. Marta, a 28-year-old project manager in London, whom I meet in the East of the city together with her associate in a building full of startups, tells me that this is a common and basic stance for workers of her age:

We generally do things, I wouldn't say for free, but in exchange, with projects that we like: it's not always about money, the less of the cases until now. It should be something that really has a value for us, creative or cultural or business side, expanding technology, etc. We have other jobs that pay us, and we sustain our small enterprise with this. (Project manager, London, 28, female)

In such a context, where the role of human capital, skills and education title is replaced with reputational logics of action, and the culture of independence and professionalism is hegemonic, it seems as though a number of things we are accustomed to seem to significantly change—not necessarily for the better.

WITHIN VENTURE LABOUR MARKETS: CVs AND UNIONS

We have seen how most of the digital, freelance and independent knowledge workers met in this book are highly skilled professionals with multi-functional sets of competences. The unproductive meeting of demand and supply in the knowledge economy across the recession, together with the quick turn to digital media for the seeking of an institutionalisation of a value culture around reputation, actually outlines a fragmented job market whereby the possession of human capital—a higher education qualification, specific skills or learned expertise—is a mere entry ticket and becomes valuable only as a consequence of the acquisition of a reputation, as extensively described in these pages. Considering this in terms of labour process, we might be tempted to update the historical reading of the progressive

degradation of work given by Braverman⁸ to the current realm and interpret it as a process of ‘deskilling via upskilling’.

The dynamics of specialisation and learning, that in the knowledge economy once pertained to the ‘communities of practice’,⁹ have in fact seemingly expanded to pertain now to digital and non-digital ‘networks of practice’¹⁰ intended as looser aggregations where human and cultural capital are subsumed under a comprehensive activity of personal branding. If we combine this with the fact that ORS on digital marketplaces seem to operate as authoritative intermediaries in labour markets in a way that is similar to how Amazon or eBay work with the purchase of goods, making the processes of socialised value production within these environments visible and perceived as objective, it seems that we are confronted to a call for ‘the end of the CV’ as the document that is able to collate one’s professional qualifications and experiences in a single place. We have seen how the CV is already considered a somewhat secondary device in social recruiting practice—being primary to have ‘done the homework’ of reputation work and play by the rules of an industry where HR managers use the content found online as an element to evaluate candidates.

Another aspect that loses prominence in such a context is unionisation. Despite the knowledge economy is a highly individualised and precarious labour market principled on nonstandard forms of employment, it is striking to note how traditional unions have reacted quite slowly to this state of things, and still struggle to interpret this evolution. There are, indeed, a few exceptions, such as the case of the Freelancers Union in the USA, which locates itself as the most prominent ‘new union’—although, indeed, without possessing the formal status of a union—having been able to establish as a reference for US-based freelancers in terms of reclaiming welfare and health insurance. This visibility has been granted by the public status of its founding member Sara Horowitz, and is also fulfilled via an intensive online activity on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Examples similar to the Freelancers Union exist in other countries and, incidentally, Italy is at the forefront of this movement, with the Associazione Consulenti Terziario Avanzato (ACTA) quickly establishing as the ‘Italian sister’ of the Freelancers Union.

Nevertheless, these remain exceptions and the reason why unions are disappearing or being reframed in such a context should still be sought after in the entrepreneurial and ‘venturial’ ethos that pertains to digital work. The idea of ‘joining a union’ reminds us of a very specific politics and class positioning that does not necessarily fit with that of these workers—

who are inclined to see themselves as an innovative workforce and seem to be comprehensively reluctant to be seen as the ‘precarious working class’ that must ‘unite’ to fight against exploitation.¹¹ I will discuss this claim in the final section. Before this, it must be said that the fact reputation becomes a criterion for the evaluation of such workers, and labour becomes a venture, brings about a question on the relationship between labour and value, which needs to be unpacked and addressed in greater detail.

LABOUR AND VALUE

The relationships between labour and value can be traced to Karl Marx and his ‘Labour Theory of Value’ (LTV). For the purposes of the present book, there seem to be essentially two elements worth noting in relation to this discussion. A first one is the idea of digital work in relation to the notion of ‘digital labour’. As seen, the latter has acquired popularity in the recent Marxist literature on work to describe an individual’s activity across online platforms and social media and how that may represent a dynamic of exploitation of the abstract labour of the users who contribute to the platform and therefore ‘work’ for it in an indirect way, with no economic reward received for this contribution.¹² This issue is very much debated in the literature and is opposed by those who sustain that, from an economic perspective, this may be proved wrong since the value of what digital labourers may get back from this activity is so minimal that this activity cannot be called ‘work’.¹³ Although the issue of free labour discussed in the previous chapter and framed as a non-remunerated activity of online promotion and self-branding seems closer to the idea of digital labour as exploitation, what I want to offer here is a reading that aims to reconcile these opposing views.

The reason I have avoided the term ‘digital labour’ links in fact with the interpretation I have given of free labour as investment and the logic of valorisation principled on reputation that this book evidences. Those I have labelled here as digital professionals are not just ‘workers’ or ‘users’, but should be seen as entrepreneurial subjects who engage in ‘digital work’—intended as a practice and an activity itself that cannot be seen as distinguished by the ‘venture labour’ it requires. Put it differently, despite their freelance and independent status, these professional subjects do not generally see themselves as workers who expect to be paid for a job they do for someone else; on the contrary, these are workers who ‘work for themselves’ and invest—in labour time, money, social

relations and reputation—without simply aiming to get a salary, but pointing instead towards an ‘economic return’ that is a capitalisation on the investment made. In short, they look more like shareholders of their own self-enterprise, rather than labourers—which is in line with their frequent reluctance at being seen as ‘working class’ or ‘precarious’.

This relates to the second aspect, which is directly associated to the LTV elaborated by Marx himself.¹⁴ The LTV seems to be partially challenged by the practices and cultures of work here outlined. Due to the nature of job tasks and duties, it may be argued that the equation for which the value of a commodity depends on the duration and intensity of the labour performed by a worker is not a valid paradigm for the valuation of digital work, since value is not directly relatable to the time spent working. As Stefano, an experienced Milanese copywriter, explains:

There is no hours-labour reference. You have creative references, which are completely different. I treat this as a mixture, as some of it was a labour cost and some other part a ‘creative cost’ which may go up to 80 or 100 % depending on the job. The hours-labour reference applies when a job is more technical and less creative. We should never consider an hour-labour fee, such a quantification for our jobs is impossible, you never know if a job takes you twenty minutes or an hour. (Copywriter, 42, Milan, male)¹⁵

The contexts here observed actually seem to point towards the idea of a progressive socialisation of value production based on reputational mechanisms that represent a resurgence of use-value over exchange-value. The quote above is exemplary of the relationship between exchange- and use-value in a networked information economy mediated by digital media. Here, digital work develops as a practice within a context made of increasingly socialised forms of value production that resemble the logics of open source and peer-to-peer (P2P) organisations,¹⁶ and adapts them to a pure market system, in an economy where network formations function as economic structures and production is increasingly founded on common resources—in this case, skills and social relations.

The EU-FP7 project ‘P2Pvalue’, which I participated in as a post-doctoral researcher in 2014,¹⁷ has precisely the aim of offering an empirical mapping and a theoretical framing of the relationship between CBPP and value in various contexts. In its first year, the empirical work developed at the Centre for Digital Ethnography at the University of Milan consisted in an exploratory, large-scale mapping of the Twitter-based activity around

some well-known and also less-known examples of CBPP activity, including crowdfunding and car sharing, among others. The research, directed by Adam Arvidsson and Alessandro Caliandro, deployed a quanti-qualitative analysis of 11 CBPP cases (extracted from an initial set of 20) and sampled 112,412 tweets that consented to observe the activity and the cultures of interaction around these communities.¹⁸ The analysis of the data was conducted in two ways. First, the study of the network structure allowed to measure: (a) the number of tweets per user; and (b) the number of retweets produced and received by each user, to reconstruct the networked patterns of interaction that exist among the most active and influential users. Subsequently, a more qualitative, semantic analysis was conducted with the aim of studying the discursive cultures that emerged from the use of specific hashtags across such patterns of interaction.

The results seem to indicate that each CBPP community attracts a specific social formation that is composed by a set of heterogeneous actors who co-produce a particular cultural imaginary via a collective discourse articulated through various orders of worth—a contextual, a technical, an ethical and a social one. These are kept together by a generalised recognition of reputation as a means of evaluation of the individual contribution to, and rewarding for, individual activity in this context. This articulates through various implicit and explicit dimensions, both internally within each community at the micro level and externally in the broader CBPP scene, mimicking some of the conceptions of social capital discussed in Chap. 4 as a public good or individual capacity.

This confirms the intuition of reputation as the conception of value that emerges to prominence when digitally mediated interaction is involved, and brings to question how this relates to the forms of social capital at stake within CBPP contexts—which is among the aims of the ethnographic analysis undertaken in the subsequent phases of the project. These insights portray an interesting element of similarity with the contexts more directly at stake within this book, and sit in coherence with the evidence here discussed on digital and freelance knowledge work. The independent and venturial forms of labour as well as the digitised forms of work that are emerging as a result of the integration of digital processes of social interaction into the mechanisms of value production within knowledge work seem to be subsumed within a comprehensive market logic that nevertheless shares traits with the P2P logic of value, precisely in the shared cultural recognition and understanding of reputation.

This chapter has shown how the venturial trait that characterises the digital and freelance knowledge workers represents the evolution of the sensibility of the creative class into a digital professional workforce engaging in highly individualised forms of work in which the role of reputation as value locates at the boundaries between firm-like and collaborative logics, as a consequence of work dynamics that are increasingly nomadic and entertained at a distance. This culture of work that embodies collaboration and sharing within market arrangements is what peculiarly connotes the phenomenon of coworking spaces, that host independent workers by offering them a desk and a wifi connection in exchange for a fee, and which are emerging in various global, urban contexts as a powerful and strong actor of the knowledge economy. This is the topic of the next chapters.

NOTES

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Coworking: The Freelance Mode of Organisation?

Abstract This chapter discusses how digital and freelance knowledge workers within coworking spaces may experiment a potentially new mode of organisation and reterritorialisation for their nomadic forms and models of work. The chapter discusses the notion of coworking spaces as the environments that can rebuild a para-institutional or post-bureaucratic notion of trust among economic actors, that is currently absent in the fragmented and individualised socio-economic context of the knowledge economy. Along this line, coworking spaces are discussed as specific forms of collaborative environments that delink from current sociological understandings of communitarian interaction, to represent the collective manifestation of a network sociality based on publicity and reputation-based notions of trust.

The digital media artist and researcher Michelle O'Brien¹ argued in 2011 that the increased use of digital and mobile media, together with the redefinition of the dialectic between identity and work, evidences the necessity for workers to find physical, techno-social spaces where new forms of social interaction and professional engagement can foster and proliferate. This function, she argues, is absolved by those new kinds of places we commonly define as 'coworking spaces', which now represent a vastly popular choice for independent and freelance workers in the knowledge economy as it responds to the material needs of having an office space, with a desk and a stable wifi connection, as well as the instrumental and managerial needs of interaction described in this book.

On this topic, I wrote a piece for the journal *Ephemera*² where I have revised the literature on coworking spaces with a critical eye, and raised the argument that many of the critical aspects that pertain to the rise of coworking spaces have been substantially overlooked. This is the result of a hegemonic discourse that celebrates fashionable and innovative experiences of shared workspaces, leading to the advocacy of coworking practices as phenomena that are charged with a ‘promise’ of egalitarianism and the reconstitution of a collective subject out of an individualised labour market. This chapter builds on that article to raise a different point and discuss whether coworking spaces may be the manifestation of a new organisational logic pertaining specifically to the digital and freelance knowledge workers—and what implications may arise from this assumption. In order to do so, it seems useful to briefly recap first what coworking is, and where this practice comes from.

WHAT IS COWORKING?

Coworking spaces ‘as we know them’ represent a phenomenon initiated in 2005 in San Francisco and conceived as a new way of working within shared office spaces accessed by a plurality of subjects, mostly independent and freelance professionals in the knowledge economy. These grew as a response to the increasingly flexible working conditions in the knowledge economy with the aim of fulfilling the need of many workers of an office space and a physical work environment, something that was largely being prevented by their nomadic professional condition and the diffusion of new models of distributed work in organisations. The practice of coworking soon became a global phenomenon with a growing presence not only in ‘creative cities’ of the West but also in Asia, South America, Australia and East Europe. Coworkers comprehensively see themselves as a ‘movement’ based on a specific philosophy or approach, often described as a ‘third way of working’ and an ‘open source approach to work’. The status of ‘movement’ is further propelled by the popularised imaginary conveyed by *Deskmag*, an online magazine specifically addressed to the coworking scene, and comes together as a somewhat idealised and ideological approach that see coworking as the most efficient modality of work for the knowledge industry overall.³

Despite a common rationale, there are many types of coworking spaces and these may substantially differ from each other on the basis of the specific sector of the knowledge economy to which they specialise. Some,

such as Impact Hub, a worldwide franchise, are focused on very specific sectors of work—in this case, social enterprises. Others have a more business-oriented focus and a more generalised body of attendees, mostly professionals in communication and related areas. Some others are more cooperatively oriented, and do not apply fees. The most recent research on coworking practices in various areas of the world⁴ demonstrates how digital and freelance knowledge workers, beyond the material, physical and spatial needs, have the necessity to access a coworking space as a peculiarly instrumental and economic-oriented form of engagement in social relations. In other words, beyond a freelancer's need of a desk lies a primary and instrumental necessity to socialise, with the aim of establishing collaborations and seeking opportunities. This is in line with the networked and venture culture explored in this book, and combines with a very specific ethos that is attached to coworking practice and the sharing of skills and knowledge with other coworkers. Some of the freelance professionals I met during my research work in Milan and London had experience of a coworking space. One is the host of a coworking space in Milan; below, he explains how there is a peculiar ethos embedded within the philosophy of the space itself:

The idea of setting up a coworking space came as a possibility for a small community and a network of people to form, and is now made of around 200 people. I don't like being mundane, but there is a sort of ethics that constitutes the foundations of coworking as a practice, an ethics built upon a simple idea: getting knowledge and skills together, to share them. (Coworking host, Milan, 42, male)

Similarly, Karen—a 29-year-old, London-based branding consultant and coworker who receives me for our interview in the shared space where she works, tells me that collaboration is at the centre of the ethos of her work as well as in that of a coworking space:

We have been receiving and giving help to a lot of friends, that's part of the ethos of what we do. (Branding consultant, 29, Coworker in London, female)

Elanor Colleoni and Adam Arvidsson, who have researched coworking spaces in the area of Milan, suggest that access to coworking spaces is functional to the acquisition of social capital and a reputation inasmuch as it provides a solution for professional contexts where newcomers do not have access to more traditional resources of social capital to access jobs,

such as family ties. As a result, the argument they bring along is that by accessing coworking spaces, workers learn not just the skills of the job, but actually the professional ‘habitus’ that pertains to a creative community.⁵ This is coherent with similar findings by Carolina Bandinelli on the ‘changemaking ethos’ that connotes social entrepreneurs at Impact Hub in the changemaking scene in Italy and London.⁶

This view of coworking practices as producers of a specific ethos also seems to be aligned to the physical and geographic distribution of coworking spaces within cities. If we look at the urban contexts here observed, London and Milan, for instance, despite a dispersed geographic distribution, it may be noted how the most popular ones have actually arisen in once semi-peripheral areas in the East of both cities, recently subject to gentrification processes. In Milan, a number of spaces tend to coalesce in or around the district of Ventura Lambrate, once a deeply industrial area, which has undergone a process of soft gentrification in the past few decades and now hosts every year a crowded section of the Design Week exhibition. In London, similarly, the central-east side of the city with the popular districts of Shoreditch and Hoxton appears to be the area where a large number of coworking and shared spaces principled on innovation and collaboration have been established. Shoreditch, once at the heart of the UK indie rock ‘n’ roll scene, is now the centre of the city’s hipster culture as well as the epitome of the most recent controversies around the gentrification processes that involved the British capital, which also brought a rise in renting costs and a shortage of affordable housing in the area. The location is the same of the already mentioned Silicon Roundabout and comprises also the presence of the Google Campus, a huge coworking space powered by Google.

Overall, these instances seem to indicate that freelancers, taken as the twenty-first-century knowledge and creative workers, move to work, cowork and often to live within areas where the instances of creativity, independence and lifestyle come together as the main elements of a lively socio-cultural and socio-economic urban scene. It may be argued that the generation of laptop workers that began its nomadism by ‘occupying’ cafés and Starbucks to use the available Internet connection is now seemingly pointing at coworking spaces as the most efficient option for the reorganisation of their dispersed, individualised, fragmented and venturial labour. If coworking is a manifestation of a new model of work, then it seems reasonable to enquire whether coworking spaces may bring about and foster the existence of a specific ‘freelance mode of organisation’.

COWORKING AS THE PROPELLER OF A ‘FREELANCE MODE OF ORGANISATION’?

Since the publication of *The Rise of the Network Society* by Manuel Castells (1996),⁷ the term ‘network’ has acquired a fashionable status and relevance in many contexts. The diffusion of digital media and the emergence of alternative forms of production based on collaboration and a socialised production of value have contaminated many spheres of society. As freelancing, digital work and venture labour shape the essence of the ‘new’ knowledge economy, existing research on coworking spaces suggests that these enable the spatial accomplishment of networked exchanges through newly standardised spaces where socialised value production reconstitutes the condition of trust building behaviour among actors. I contend this logic outlines the traits of what may potentially be seen as the contours of a peculiarly freelance mode of organisation.

In the area of organisation studies, Charles Heckscher and Paul Adler have discussed the idea that firm cooperation models are evolving towards a form of collaborative community (2006)⁸ conceived as the next stage in social organisation after hierarchy and market. The collaborative community is postulated by Heckscher and Adler as the dominant organising principle for the establishment of trust within and between firms, and maintains the purpose of creating shared value in a context of socialised production where knowledge has become central. The study discusses different cases of networks of firms that operate in a framework where these networked social entities operate in interdependent relationship with each other to construct shared and mutual relationships of trust. The context of digital knowledge work and venture labour here studied seems to resemble that of the collaborative community, yet with some substantial differences.

For instance, the study of coworking spaces in Barcelona by Ignasi Capdevila⁹ suggests that coworking spaces should be intended as ‘micro-clusters’ that mimic the functioning of localised industrial clusters, whereby firms entertain collaborative network relations among themselves with the purpose of building trust relations—a notion that echoes Adler and Heckscher’s idea of the collaborative community. Capdevila’s work suggests that coworking spaces are territories where freelancers-firms operate as microbusinesses coexisting in a shared environment and engaging in collaboration with others on a variety of actions and tasks—pointing at the establishment of communitarian relationships of trust.

However, we have seen that digital and freelance knowledge work does not seem to be connoted with a communitarian kind of interaction, but with ephemeral aggregations and forms of sociality that are compulsory and performative in nature. The idea of a freelance mode of organisation precisely delinks from the assumption of the existence of communitarian relationships among actors, and focuses on the aims of this natively network-based interaction, either digital or non-digital, based on relationships and connections that are entertained for reputational purposes. Within coworking spaces, networked forms of highly socialised production of value that are similar to collaborative communities become established organisational arrangements across knowledge-intensive, increasingly freelance-based and digitally mediated scenarios. However, these are principled on the shared role of reputation as the source for establishing trust across quasi-strangers that has been discussed in this book, and which is actually overlooked in the idea of the collaborative community behind the dominant communitarian logic that the authors bring about.

Put differently, whilst providing relief from the alienation of an isolated worklife thanks to the sharing of spaces and technology, coworking spaces more importantly offer an environment that enables the socialisation of value and ultimately emerge as an organisational entity that reproduces the conditions of trust building behaviour out of those institutions—corporations and firms—which once used to guarantee for it on behalf of workers. In other words, coworking spaces may be seen as the places where the element of risk of interacting with quasi-strangers is reduced ‘institutionally’ as of interactions taking place in a space where the presence of a shared ethos reproduces a fictitious institutionalisation of trust, that translates into the perception of communitarian relations.

Also, the fact coworking spaces seems to be peculiarly connoted by a distinct ethic or value orientation on the part of exchange partners, based on social and reputational exchanges, echoes the founding principle of the ‘network modes of organisation’ described by Joel Podolny and Karen Page.¹⁰ These seem to find renewed application here through the role of reputation as a capital and shared conception of value. In contrast to Heckscher’s and Adler’s account whereby the main element at stake is trust, which guarantees the establishment of community relationships among firms and enables collaboration on the common ground of shared values and organisational principles, here the overall communitarian framework that binds together digital freelancers is merely perceived. As said, these operate according to the already discussed logic of a network

sociality that is based on publicity and performative notions of the professional self (Chap. 4). Following this logic, coworking spaces may be seen as organisational entities that ultimately deploy no shared values among their members, nor institutionalised (formalised) organisation principles that can assimilate them to communitarian forms of interaction—just a common ethos. Yet this ethos is shared through non-communitarian interaction among market subjects, thus conveying the idea of coworking spaces as an organisational device for the market establishing of the freelancer-firm.

Although trust remains a crucial element at stake in the set of relationships among the actors considered, digital and freelance work scenes where actors are quasi-strangers bear limitations where it is not possible to establish a bond of trust with someone you do not know. Thus, trust needs to be guaranteed externally, via an element of intermediation that functions as the shared source for such trust to be built—reputation. In the absence of an institutional and public trust, it is up to a para-institutional entity—coworking spaces—to guarantee for the presence (or at least the perception) of those ‘shared values’—the common ethos—that permeate the notion of trust within the collaborative community. This is completely in line with the Luhmanian notion of trust adopted in this book, principled on the idea of trust as a social mechanism that reduces the risk of entertaining non-intimate social relations—as well as with the idea of venture labour, which highlights how this risk is outsourced to the individual worker. Coworking spaces provide a para-institutional, post-bureaucratic environment for this dynamic.

Nevertheless, an important element that coworking spaces and collaborative communities have in common is the fact that both are envisaged as intermediary or ‘third’ forms between hierarchical and purely market-based arrangements. As witnessed earlier with the preliminary findings on CBPP cases, it could be argued that economic transactions and employment relations taking place within networked environments such as those in point are a function of the direct and indirect connections actors have, and that are used as ‘conduits’ for reputation and peer control.¹¹ This naturally has consequences at the broader level of the interdependent relationships between social structures and production processes, posing new and important questions.

A first one, for instance, concerns the possibility of a restructuring of usual understandings of class relationships. The dissolution of the middle class, which generally knowledge workers are believed to be part of, has

seemingly evolved through the rise of a new entrepreneurial and professional subject that current research has still been unable to interpret with standard class schemes. A variety of authors have envisaged the possibility of a new class re-composition out of the rise of freelancing and particularly argued that coworking spaces, which reposition workers in a newly collective location, may favour this re-composition by allowing workers to recognise themselves as a new ‘class’ of knowledge professionals sharing the same economic interests, as the former middle class.¹²

This is, to my personal interpretation, an over-optimistic account since the nature of the restructuring of the labour market that we are witnessing with this research, combined with the large body of scholarly work that has described the condition of the knowledge economy over the past decades, seems to actually point to an idea of work that goes back to pre-market societies in the pre-industrial era of the late nineteenth century. There, economic behaviour was totally subsumed within social relationships and work was essentially organised in the form of a ‘cottage industry’ principled on putting-out systems of production and organisation, where the means of production were possessed by individuals working from home—as it used to be, prior to the growth of large corporations—and market relationships were developed on the basis of individual-based forms of proto-entrepreneurship.¹³ The various kinds of interaction among digital freelancers evidenced in this study offer, in this analogy, a digital version of the cottage industry—or, else, show the traits of a forthcoming ‘new’ great transformation in society. I will discuss the implications of this claim in greater detail in the concluding chapter.

NOTES

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Conclusion: The Aftermath of Neoliberalism and the Future of the Left

Abstract This conclusive chapter returns to reflect on how the various instances discussed insert in the broader neoliberal labour market of the knowledge economy and how these impact a number of aspects—first and foremost, the notion of class. The chapter discusses further implications of this study and particularly looks at what political insights can be taken from the Left in order to interpret how work is evolving within such a changing scenario.

This book has proposed an exploration of the digital and freelance evolution of the knowledge economy as it comes out of a long process of integration of digital technologies into processes of production and organisation of work and valorisation of creativity as the main element that constitutes knowledge capitalism in its latest advancements. It has done so, through a multi-disciplinary research approach that comprehensively rendered a context whereby workers have internalised and embodied the characteristics of the market to become entrepreneurial subjects who use their reputation as an individual capital and behave according to a logic that recognises reputation as a cultural conception of value conducive to the building of trust among actors in this scene. These are quasi-strangers who interact indistinguishably offline and online in an ideal continuum and use reputation as a conception of value since it has the unique feature of participating in both the offline and the online contexts, and being translatable from one into another. This is the ‘reputation economy’ of the

title, which describes a socio-economic system where digital and freelance knowledge workers are neo-professional subjects who engage in venture labour by investing into social relations with expected economic return, and making use of a number of socio-technical devices pointing at the accumulation of a *reputational capital* upon which depends their professional success.

This brings today to consider freelancers among the main economic protagonists of digital-based knowledge work and locate them in the broader context of capitalism and its latest advancements, especially after the 2007–2008 economic crisis. The entrepreneurial logic principled on venture labour, individualism and flexibility that the neo-professional scene of the digital knowledge economy is infused of, represents not only its present condition, but also the founding premise of that economy of collaboration and sharing currently advocated by many as the mode of production of the coming future. This, however, seemingly comes about as a consequence of a social and economic scene that is still deeply rooted in the neoliberal vision. In these concluding remarks, I will reflect in broader terms on the socio-economic and socio-cultural scenario that is materialising in this time and age, discussing its implications in terms of neoliberalism, class, inequality and precariousness and offering some reflections on what the Left can learn as it tries to understand the latest advancements of capitalism while some of its most central institutions are being pulled down.

DIGITAL WORKERS AS A FREELANCE CLASS?

The most attentive reader will have noticed how the issue of class was not placed at the centre of this work. Whilst the scenario here presented is assumed to be the outcome of a long-term process of casualisation and precarisation of middle-class full-time employment, it is not my intention to underestimate how important class origins are in this context, especially to get jobs and gain access to those weak ties that constitute the core of Mark Granovetter's work.¹ The mere assumption of a broad middle-class background, in fact, does not explain whether any class difference may apply in determining a discrepancy in the processes of reputation construction. Thus, one contribution this book makes is to pave the way for future research that may question the acquisition of reputational capital from a class perspective, to see whether class and reputation are indeed related. Yet, a much bigger and stronger question seems to emerge here:

what class are these workers from? Can the existing definitions of class describe them adequately?

Beyond the sociologically unsound notion of a ‘creative class’, actually the existence of a ‘freelancers class’ is a widely debated issue of today. This idea comprehensively principles on the assumption that freelancers have much in common with the working class of the early twentieth century, which was a declining rural middle class turning to factories and moving to cities to earn a living in the changing industrial world. A number of recent accounts of different sorts² have sustained the potential rise of a new social class around precarious, freelance and ‘elance’ work. The precariousness and instability of freelancing, the many cases of forced conditions of self-employment and the exploitative nature of digital labour are the elements that substantiate this interpretation, to render a class vision that described elancers as a knowledge working class of the underpaid—who should ‘unite’ to rebel against the unfair working conditions which they are subjected to.

As I earlier suggested, I contend that these interpretations are over-optimistic and potentially inapplicable as they are unable to grasp some of the actual contradictions that pertain to the subjectivity of freelance knowledge workers. The transition from the acknowledgement of an unfair professional condition to the construction of a collectively conscious political subject is a significantly problematic process. This idea actually seems to build on the same incorrect assumption of a sociologically meaningful juxtaposition between class and lifestyle committed by Florida—here translated into political positioning and class consciousness. At present, there is not enough recognition of how many digital freelancers are particularly reluctant to be associated with precariousness and actually tend to see themselves as a powerful force among the more innovative professional figures of the new knowledge economy of the digital—be them entrepreneurs, startupper or even changemakers. In a context where individual identity and cultural conceptions of work are so related and interlinked, it seems difficult, although perhaps desirable, to see these singularities coalesce around a critical stance in the near future.

Freelance knowledge workers today represent the current condition of a middle class in pieces, that lost the front-running position it had in the industrial and early post-industrial society. Despite sometimes explicitly opposing to its latest advancements, digital and freelance knowledge workers see themselves as protagonists of the change and newness of capitalism, often without noticing they are actually reproducing the same

criticalities in a new version of that ‘Californian ideology’³ described by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron in the early days of the Internet.

This book began with the acknowledgement that the counterculture of the early Internet age has married with the financialisation of the cultural economy, as argued by Angela McRobbie. Here is the inevitable result of this marriage; the rise of a classless workforce made of pure market subjects who transform exploitation in investment, and false consciousness in self-branding. Thence, the aftermath of neoliberalism, as argued among others by Colin Crouch and Evgeni Morozov,⁴ paradoxically resembles ‘neoliberalism on steroids’. How can the Left react, in such a scenario?

BEYOND PRECARIOUSNESS: WHAT CAN THE LEFT LEARN?

The latest version of neoliberal capitalism has managed to assimilate the condition of the ‘precarious’ working class of low-paid, piece-wage labourers with that of the upper middle class of ‘entrepreneurial’ subjects who own the means of production and operate in the market as service businesses. What we are confronted with is a blurred scenario where the ideology of professionalism that pertains to digital work produces hybrid figures swinging between different statuses and roles according to the work activity and the reputational capital they are able to secure in this networked scene, favouring the development of a ‘precarieur’ attitude which proves difficult to be reduced to an actual category of the past—as epitomised by Andrew Ross’ idea of ‘no collar’ workers.⁵ Knowledge professionals who crowd coworking spaces and digital marketplaces are individuals often unwilling, sometimes incapable, of seeing themselves in a class structure that contemplates the possibility of a collective political subject, and experiment their political capacity in a sort of individualised, post-bohemian collectivity—Paolo Virno called it a ‘multitude’⁶—in which the plurality of individualities comes together via the ethos of newness, innovation and independence, and no longer aims to converge into a One.

Thus, the first question is, how has this happened? The key term in this discussion is ‘*lifestyle*’. The capacity of the neoliberal discourse to move the individual political consciousness away from a question of inequality and class, sociologically conceived as an ascribed condition that principles on unequal access to resources,⁷ to a question of coolness and lifestyle, an achieved condition that can also be manufactured in order to be a perceived one, put the Left in a troublesome place, as it needs to contrast

a kind of false consciousness that is integrally part of the subjectivity of these workers.

A textbook example is the notion of precariousness. The state of exception caused by the recent economic crisis has normalised precariousness as a condition that is virtually unchallengeable. The restoration of jobs for life, once rejected and now newly wished for, appears to be not only impossible for historical and economic reasons but also increasingly a difficult idea to market from a political perspective, as those who should buy into this idea have come to completely refuse it, and ask for independence. Especially the new workers, often defined as Millennials, look at independent work with favour as a career option—and this is likely to increase.⁸ Although romantically attractive, therefore, the calls for a freelance class of workers to unite are destined to remain unheard, if the Left stagnates in its inability to identify its represented subjects and become intelligible to them. The Left has to take the neoliberal grammar of work and subvert it, to communicate through a grammar that proves understandable for the multitude of subjects it wants to mobilise.

The subsequent question then becomes, how can the Left survive, in such a scenario? First, it may be potentially more productive to move beyond the idea of the ‘precariousness’ of work to raise discourses and cases towards the more general condition of access to work and the forms of marginalisation that connote all kinds of lifestyle-based conceptions of labour in the knowledge economy based on creativity, notwithstanding their employment status. In other words, it seems necessary to move away from the contractual form of labour as the territory of struggle and chase neoliberalism more seriously on the actual nature, quality and conditions of work, via instruments such as basic income. More elaborated practices of resistance to the neoliberal labour market, before being campaigned, have to become *as cool as* the bad jobs they fight, *as attractive as* the issues they challenge.

Then, there is aggregation. The fragmentation between precarious and non-precarious subjects is an element of strength for the neoliberal approach inasmuch as such divisions foster further fragmentation and individualism, to the detriment of collective consciousness and mutual recognition of unfair conditions. We have seen how some argue that coworking spaces, for instance, may function as laboratories for the re-composition of workers in a collective subject; a number of initiatives around the rise of coworking spaces are actually being witnessed in this sense—the most successful of which, so far, seems to be Trebor Scholz’s idea of *platform*

cooperativism,⁹ that points at introducing a cooperativist logic into the dynamics of platform work and digital labour. Yet, although interesting and hopeful, these instances still measure up *against* what seems to be the hegemonic form of entrepreneurial subjectivity of digital knowledge workers, that is nomadic and transnational, escapes identification and structure and ultimately remains attractive to workers. In this sense, it seems wise for the Left to stop fighting digital work as exploitative per se, but actually learning how to represent those that are most negatively affected by the existence of a labour market that makes cheap and unfair labour convenient—and start thinking about ways to create the conditions for making it inconvenient. In broader terms, it may be a case of acknowledging that we are confronted with a ‘new’ great transformation that echoes the one described by Karl Polanyi in his seminal book on the transition from pre-industrial labour to industrial work in the first half of the twentieth century,¹⁰ and make sense of it, with an updated language and adequate instruments.

A NEW GREAT TRANSFORMATION? REPUTATION AS A FICTITIOUS COMMODITY

As advocated in the final remarks of the previous chapter, the Industrial Revolution initiated a process of separation of work from the home that is now seemingly reverting back to its original status. Digital technologies allow to conduct various forms of work, and especially knowledge work, out of traditional workplaces, factories and offices, allowing alternative work routines and practices to become conventional. If we combine this instance with the fact that industrial revolutions historically start from the movement of workers from one place to another, we are possibly witnessing the traits of a big transformation taking place behind the implementation of digital production into new paradigms of accumulation.

In his influential book, Polanyi sustained that modern capitalism is embedded in structures whereby capital is a relation that can be understood in contradiction between material and abstract value. In this context, he argues, money—together with labour and land—represents a ‘fictitious commodity’, meaning a convention that serves to translate social relations and render them into forms of value.¹¹ Yet, as Polanyi sustained that market relations depend on societal relations, it may be argued that the current state of the knowledge economy exemplifies the overturn of this

situation—that is, society today *is itself* the market. The way reputation functions in the context considered by this book allows to substantially assimilate it to a form of immaterial currency and a new kind of fictitious commodity that is traded to translate social relations into value.

Back to the present, it should therefore come as no surprise that piece-wage freelancing and independent work seem to be the strongest candidates for the new standard employment regime of the digital economy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Already in 1867, Karl Marx argued that piece-wage is the employment regime most in harmony with capitalist production and envisaged that ‘piece-wage’ employment could represent the natural progression in capitalist employment regimes as a modality that consents to increase labour intensity and move towards a system where it is in the interest of workers to work more.¹² Today’s integration of the digital infrastructure in the productive and organisational regimes of accumulation combines with the shared cultural understanding of reputation as value to fully realise this harmony.

The contemporary frenzy around economic paradigms based on collaboration and sharing certifies the latest attempt to institutionalise the functional relationship between social relations and economic outcomes in newly manageable and profitable—but not necessarily more equal and fair—ways. This has been translated in the idea of *Ubercapitalism*,¹³ a term that describes this evolution as a new and harsher version of neoliberal capitalism arising from the current state of things, based on a contradictory blend of social innovation and hard-core entrepreneurialism. This is exemplified in this analogy by the business model of a startup-turned-giant like Uber, based on drivers who are not contracted as employees but as piece-waged freelancers, earning on the basis of algorithmic-principled intelligence that calculates the value of their rides out of a number of parameters that are virtually unknown to both the driver and the user/client.¹⁴ Such a model further individualises the working subjects, who experience new forms of inequality and outsourcing of risk in an economy that seems to be newly centred on the piece-based putting-out of products and the socialisation of value processes, pursued via the perpetration of entrepreneurial models that find a socio-economic structure made of networks, ties and connections as their natural environment.

The role of reputation, advocated in this book as the central asset for digital and freelance knowledge workers, together with its recognition in various contexts, seems to be one among the many manifestations of the latest, controversial evolution of the relationship between neoliberal

capitalism and work. The understanding of these controversies, especially from the Left, cannot be effective if the Left fails to acknowledge the nature of this evolution and to locate it within a narration that successfully subverts the currently hegemonic, cultural conceptions of work based on lifestyle and coolness, which ultimately represent the conditions of existence of the neoliberal labour market.

NOTES

1. Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *American Journal of Sociology*, 78.6 (1973): 1360- 1380; Mark Granovetter, "Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology*, 91.3 (1985): 481-510.
2. For recent studies on a potential freelance class, cf. Note 155. For more comprehensive recent research on class, see Guy Standing, "*The precariat: The new dangerous class*" (A&C Black, 2011) ; Mike Savage, et al., "A new model of social class: Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey experiment," *Sociology* 47 (2014): 219-250.
3. Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," *Science as Culture*, 6.1 (1996): 44-72.
4. Colin Crouch, *The strange non-death of neo-liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011); Evgeni Morozov, "The 'sharing economy' undermines workers' rights," *Financial Times*, October 2013, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/92c3021c-34c2-11e3-8148-00144feab7de.html#axzz3q9kSLNnY>.
5. Andrew Ross, *No-collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).
6. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (New York/Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004).
7. Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters, *The Death of Class* (London: Sage, 1996).
8. On millennials' attitudes to work, see Sarah Horowitz and Fabio Rosati, *Freelancing in America: A National Survey of the New Workforce* (2014), accessed July 29, 2015, http://fu-web-storage-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/content/filer_public/c2/06/c2065a8a-7f00-46db-915a-2122965df7d9/fu_freelancinginamericareport_v3-rgb.pdf.
9. Trebor Scholz, Platform Cooperativism vs. the Sharing Economy, *Medium*, December 2014, accessed October 28, 2015, <https://medium.com/@trebors/platform-cooperativism-vs-the-sharing-economy-2ea737f1b5ad#.ollangetd>.
10. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Beacon Press, 2001, first edition 1944).

11. Bob Jessop, "Knowledge as a fictitious commodity: insights and limits of a Polanyian perspective," in *Reading Karl Polanyi for the Twenty-First Century: Market Economy as a Political Project*, ed. Ayse Bugra and Kaan Agartan (Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 115–134.
12. Marx, *Capital*, 606–607.
13. Gary Hall, *Ubercapitalism: Neoliberalism, the Sharing Economy, and the Microentrepreneur of the Self* (Minnesota University Press, forthcoming).
14. Alex Hern, "Uber driver declared employee as the company loses another ruling," *The Guardian*, September 2015, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/sep/11/uber-driver-employee-ruling>.

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