Gender & Precarity in contemporary Italy

LABOR, VALUE, SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

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an audio-visual lecture on Gender and Precarity in Contemporary Italy

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MINI- BIO

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She recently edited a book on precarity and gender in contemporary Europe, and she is working on a project on xenophobia in Italy and displacement of Roma (Gypsies) in Kosovo. Her next book is an analysis of contemporary Asian-American artists in California, through the lens of gender and post-coloniality.
BASIC PREMISES:
Precarity is a constitutive aspect of life and identity not just a type of contract.

It’s an existential condition, different according to gender.

shared especially among young women, migrants & poor people.

Emergence of the discourse & movement regarding precarity one of the newest movements shaping politics in Europe.
Gender and Precarities

Image courtesy of the artist, Mona Caron, originally designed for Processed World magazine
Gender and Precarities:

juggling precarious work, unstable relationships, uncertain future scenarios and conflicting social values
Issues of time and space

la génération précaire lives in economic insecurity works off-hours & needs to be mobile for the “rapidly shifting job markets”

yet the dominant institutions in Italy have not incorporated speed & flexibility in Italy
the imperative of flexibility clashes with particularly persistent elements of ITALIAN society

- Traditional family values
- Strict gender & age roles to be respected
- New forms of family arrangements are feared and rejected
Only recent attention to gender difference given in the political and academic debates on precarity (mainly in Europe).

This allowed to make the connection with affective & reproductive issues Raised in the 1970ies by radical autonomist feminists.

useful angle to address citizenship & social welfare, immigration & de-industrialization
The younger generation faces a lethal mix of temp work & reduction & privatization of social services for children & elderly

Consequently middle-class families are squeezed and respond by mobilizing all human & financial resources to maintain an average living standard.

From the Best of Temp Slave Magazine (Maxine hHoltz, p. 172)
A major effect of precarity is that young adults & elderly members live in the same household

MORE burden for adult Italian women

Especially “the sandwich generation” in their 50ies or 60ies
Different Precarities: Social reproduction for the precarious generation

*temp work*
forces women to juggle material & affective labour with little recognition of such efforts

In the 1970ies, many feminists also struggled to juggle work and care but with a different set of resources, and with more state welfare support, later eroded in the late 1980ies.

Madonna del latte in customer-care center, Italian artist unknown
Different Precarities

2007-2012 old issues re-emerge and sparked new dialogues & alliances across feminist generations especially the double shift/ care work and domestic work

Even if there are obvious differences between the post-war boom & today’s de-industrialization, in terms of

✓ education
✓ autonomy
✓ security

All these aspects present unresolved contradictions in today’s Italy
In the last 10 years, networks of young Feminists have discussed and “appropriated” precarity inverting its negative connotations with humor & provoking images.
Gender and Precarity

Need to network resources and overcome shame and isolation:

- Develop new concepts and theories to express these contradictions

- *shamework* is the sociological category that we wish to point to and break free from today (Borrowed from A. R. Hochschild, *The commercialization of intimate life: notes from home and work*, 2003)

- definition: the amount of efforts, emotional work and time dedicated to hide, or render legible, and acceptable the lack of qualities taken for granted by a group we belong to
Gender and Precarity

contradictory scenarios: Precariety/flexibility means

- marriage
- stable work, retirement
- access to a mortgages
- Buying a house

All sacred steps to adulthood::People younger than 40 in Italy can no longer live

BUT

the social pressure is still there for them

VS

- Perception of increased freedom and independence
  (all options are open)

BUT

increased limitation welfare
more poverty
Dilemmas of Precariety

i.e.: the intellectual, creative work environment is not necessarily more welcoming to women than others

- the economically stable, educated middle-class learns to live by lower standards

REACTIONS AND RESPONSES

- the family and career options lead to saying yes to everything (work and family responsibilities)
RESPONSES TO Precariety/flexibility

*We can’t say no to work,*

*we can’t be choosy.* But our work is de-valued

*Social reproduction is taken for granted:* we are stuck in the “retreat” to the family model

*yet we are able to live with short term plans and a great deal of future uncertainties*
contradictions

saying yes to any job,

not distinguishing anymore work from leisure

means

• constant pressure and instability
• high stress levels & frustration
• persisting sense of shame and isolation
• all with major effects on our health
Gender and Precarities

conclusions/ key political stances:

• Politics of intersectionality::
• considering multiple intergenerational and inter-ethnic exploitation
• multiple political subjectivity
• refusing to engage in single-issue identity politics
• performing both gendered care roles & intellectual labor
• creativity and lifelong learning
• openness vs. stability
• enthusiasm for an unpredictable, precarious life