



## *Call for Papers*

# Seminar Day: Is work not working anymore?

## Meaningfulness and refusal of work in the post-pandemic scenario

*University of Milan, 5th March 2024*

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Keynote speakers: Francesca Coin (SUPSI), David Frayne (University of Manchester Salford)

This workshop aims at exploring the manifold ways in which work is experienced and discussed by workers, particularly looking at relation between identity and work in post-industrial societies. It questions the re-emergence of forms of detachment, resignation, and refusal of work, in a context characterized by novel and hybrid forms of work and employment, seeking to answer the question: “is work not working anymore?”.

By raising this question, we seek to gather contributions on changing social imaginaries and values of work, and on forms of reflexivity and recalibration of the role of work in life, especially with regard to the role played by the Covid pandemic (Coin 2022). Work and employment relations are called into question in our societies, both at an individual and collective level, as the exogenous event of the pandemic has shaken the foundations of our affective relationship with work, especially for those that were expected to face fatal risks in order to continue working during the coronavirus waves, but also for the workers that experienced a new way of working from home (Jaffe 2021), showing the dissonance between the mythical sanctity of work on the one hand, and the troubling realities of people’s actual experiences on the other (Frayne 2017: 228). We could then interpret phenomena linked to the reassessment of priorities in life, such as the unexpected wave of voluntary resignations and online trends such as the Quiet Quitters and Chinese Lying Flat movement as outcomes of this cultural shift. The pandemic, by showing that the health of the workers and the goals of the employers are not always in tune, seems to have started to challenge the widespread neoliberal notion that work should represent the realisation of the self and an arena for authenticity, creativity and happiness (McRobbie 2012; Farrugia 2019); that personal success may be found when the worker finds their true passion and makes it profitable. The linear connection between emotional wellbeing and productivity cracked as some workers discovered that it was possible to search for happiness in the present, despite, and not through, work.

Also, the labour landscape has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, driven by technological advancements, economic shifts, and evolving societal values. The more social research captures these changes, the more these must be addressed by focusing on the cultural dimensions that profoundly affect the way we perceive and experience work. In other words, if we arguably have a solid

knowledge about the conditions, trajectories and phenomenology of the neoliberalisation of labour in the last century, less clear is its impact on personal meanings, values, biographies and professional lives of individuals today, particularly for those work may not be experienced as a stable organisational dimension of life anymore.

Waged work should fulfil many functions: the attainment of economic independence, the possibility to plan the future, status and social recognition, the sharing of norms and values, social cohesion, social mobility, etc. (Cholbi 2022; Honneth 1996). But informalisation, flexibilisation and work deregulation have altered the labour markets and increased the prevalence of precarious work, which often causes uncertainty about the duration of job positions and the impossibility to plan long-term (Beck 2000; Breman & Van Der Linden 2008; Boltanski & Chiapello 2011). Furthermore, precarious workers frequently experience salary penalisation, as temporary contracts are used by businesses as a cost-cutting measure, more than a port of entrance for new employees, and both under- and hyper-employment, particularly more fragile actors such as non-white, immigrant, gendered, disabled or younger people (Murgia, Poggio & Torchio 2012). The relationship with work, in particular for younger generations, is now widely mediated by limited expectations both in terms of economic stability, of future planning and of recognition and status. Younger workers, in fact, seem to relate to work more strategically, as the phenomenon of job hopping and the challenges of youth retention well represent.

Also, the diffusion of various form of non-waged work in the labour market calls into question the gendered definitions of what is work for our society (Federici 2014), and the meaning of the concept of work-life balance beyond the separation of waged and unwaged work as some activities seem to be considered as natural resources and not worthy to be paid for, while morally requested to some more than others (Jaffe 2021: 36).

The workshop aims to establish a dialogue with different but intertwined streams of literature, focusing specifically (but not exclusively) at the following areas of research: the workers' perception of the meaningfulness of work; the new forms of work containing expression of 'exit' from traditional forms of employment, such as neo-craft, digital nomads, creative work; the refusal of work and related phenomena like the great resignation, quiet quitting, forms of misbehaviour and role-distancing on the workplace; collective on- and off-line forms of voice and protests emerged after the pandemic wave; the relationship between work and existential precarity for younger generations.

We seek original theoretical and/or empirical, quantitative and/or qualitative contributions, in English, that will deepen the understanding of the trajectories of the metamorphosis of labour in contemporary societies, focusing especially - but not exclusively - on post-industrial Western societies. The aim of this special issue is to advance the knowledge on any of the following, or related, topics:

- *Refusal of work, voluntary resignations, quiet quitting, misbehaviour on the workplace.*
- *Meaningfulness of waged and unwaged work in post-industrial societies.*
- *On- and off-line forms of workers' collective voice.*
- *Work-life balance, workers' health & the psychological impacts of work.*
- *New forms of work.*

Abstracts (300 words max) should be sent to the workshop organizers by **2 February 2024** via **this form**:

<https://bit.ly/workrefusal>

Notifications of acceptance will be sent out by 9 February 2024. Accepted contributions will be part of the roundtable event of the Seminar, in the afternoon of the 5th March 2024, at the University of Milan. Further information will be disclosed soon.

Accepted contributions will be considered for inclusion in the Special Issue 174(1)/2026 *Sociologia del Lavoro*, the main Italian Journal that addresses the problems of work adopting a sociological approach, for those who might be interested.

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