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Valentina Cuzzocrea

Flexi-jobs or Flexi-lives?

Starting a professional career in Italy and England

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Indice

Preface

In what sense are young graduates able to 'make' their own careers rather than simply following paths pre-ordained by their education or determined by the employment environment they encounter? Do such opportunities vary in different countries, and if so, why? How do flexibility of the labour market and the ever-increasing density of global employment networks affect young graduates' prospects for and experiences of work?

Valentina Cuzzocrea's book provides a novel, sophisticated and culturally sensitive analysis that goes a long way to answering such questions. By choosing to empirically compare two very different national contexts (Southern Italy and England) and three professions found in each (human resources, engineering and accountancy) she set herself an ambitious and complex task. But her in-depth interviews with sixty recent graduates provide a wealth of data that she succeeds in distilling into a complex analysis. By listening very carefully to what her respondents say, interpreting their understandings of the social and economic environment of work that they inhabit, and contrasting the testimonies from Italy and England, she reveals to us not only the divergences between working lives but also why 'careers' have such different meanings for young graduates in the two countries.

Although work organisations and the professions operate very differently in England and Southern Italy, a purely 'intra-work' approach does not get us very far. Indeed, the author argues that the notion of 'flexi-job' is in itself incapable of making sense of the national differences, restricted as it is to the employment and organisational structures. Instead she proposes the concept of '*flexi-lives*', and the necessity of taking into account the many non-work aspects of life: social, familial, professional or educational, that impinge on work and shape peoples' orientations and aspirations. Broadening the analysis of flexible working to other dimensions of life to which it is related draws attention to cultural and organizational aspects of making a career that are not usually brought to light. And here, in this connection, the value of the comparative nature of the research becomes even clearer. Had the research been limited to one country, these aspects would not even have been problematised, but rather taken as given. Thus, another benefit of the comparative approach is to reveal the divergent characteristics of flexi-lives in the two countries, and the place of flexi-jobs within them.

Valentina Cuzzocrea develops a further original and insightful means of distinguishing between the different kinds of work orientation displayed by her interviewees. Her distinction between individualism, individualisation and self-entrepreneurship provides a fruitful lens through which to explore their career strategies. While individualism, in the sense of

personal self interest, is self-evident, the other two are not so obvious. Individualisation refers to growth of 'freedom' and awareness of the self, and the necessity to find one's own route as a 'unique solution' through paths encountered and obstacles on the way to establishing a career. Individualism and individualisation co-exist with a third form of self-promotion: self-entrepreneurship. Management science and the sociology of work have in different ways both documented the emergence in late twentieth century managerial discourse of 'the entrepreneurial' and the success with this rhetoric has eclipsed the previously dominant focus on 'the bureaucratic'. Companies seek to employ and to cultivate 'enterprising subjects' who possess individual capacities of self-motivation, enterprise, energy, initiative, self-reliance, personal responsibility and so on. The individual is encouraged to constantly work on him /herself in order to self-improve, and to acquire a personal portfolio of competencies that can be presented and sold to prospective employers. The diagram in the concluding chapter of the book graphically portrays the contrasting perceptions of the English graduates and their Southern Italian counterparts. While the former are more focused on opportunities lying along the route ahead of them and more self-confident in knowing how to navigate their way through towards them, the latter are more centred on the difficulties and the problems of both knowing and overcoming whatever obstacles might obstruct their path.

The research for this book was completed before the current economic downturn, and the increased difficulties now encountered by English graduates may dent their confidence and positive outlook. However, my hunch is that this change of fortune, far from undermining their commitment to present themselves as enterprising subjects, has only reinforced this endeavour, even if the competition is now far greater. Valentina Cuzzocrea's analysis points to a deep-seated national-cultural variations in orientation to economic context.

In making her case, the author deploys a wide range of sociological theories, explaining the role and relevance of each with crystal clarity, and fine-tuning them to great effect in the construction of her conceptual framework. In summary, this book is a model of both theoretically informed empirical analysis and of substantively based theoretical development. There cannot be greater praise than this.

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Introduction

In Sociology, many pieces of work originate from reflections on something that the author has him/herself experienced as either revealing, or shocking, or unfair, or significant under one perspective or another. In the process of making sense of such aspects one is captured by the specificity of the sociological approach, which provocatively seeks to reveal the strange in the familiar (Berger 1963), the general in the particular (C.Wright Mills 1959, also authoritatively re-proposed by Bauman, 1990). In other words, to de-familiarise the familiar (Bauman 1990), by establishing a relation between history and one's biography (again Wright Mills 1959). In the case of this book, the personal perspective is present in a twofold sense: the first is substantial, while the second is theoretical.

In recent years, Italian youth has been denied many of the benefits that only few years before were taken for granted: a reasonably secure job, a TFR[1], a pension which does not need private contributions, for example. Most of those born in the seventies and in the eighties are unlikely to experience any of these. In a study conducted by Schizzerotto (2002), it was found that such a cohort of Italians is the first that sociologists have recorded to experience more difficult conditions than their parents. Despite a much higher educational level, they have to deal with dead-end jobs, low salaries, no benefits and no access to credit. In late 1990s, when this counterintuitive scenario started to emerge clearly in Italy, Richard Sennett published his well-known book *The Corrosion of Character* (1998). When the book arrived in my hands, I was captured by the urgency to study 'work' in depth, convinced that something crucial had changed in the way we looked at work.

That one's process of career construction does matter regardless of what 'level' it is at, was clear to me after some early research work (Cuzzocrea 2003, 2004, 2006), simply by reflecting on how emotional the interviews on work were that I had conducted. After overcoming the embarrassment of the first contact, respondents seemed willing to discuss work issues by opening up to his/her own experience. I was so used to the intensity of these interviews that I assumed it was due to the interview experience. Yet, when I afterwards had the chance to conduct interviews on issues other than work, I realised that it was probably the laborious self-analysis regarding the work experience that made them so intense and revealing.

I suppose it is everyone's concern to demonstrate helpfulness and skill in doing one's job. However, it seems that the challenges that the world of work has posed recently suggest

[1] TFR stands for 'Trattamento di Fine Rapporto', and traditionally consisted in a substantial lump sum of money, paid at the interruption of the contractual relation.

that a redefinition of what work is for young adults, what it means to settle down, to get established, to launch oneself in the world of adults is very much needed. My head often echoed with interviewees' accounts, as well as many stories that I have simply heard from friends and acquaintances, and alarming titles of books such as *The Jobless Future* by Aronowitz and Difazio (1994), and *The End of Work?* by Rifkin (1995), which have stayed on my desk for a long time. This urges me to think that we are in such troubled times that new conceptualisations should be devised, unrevealed aspects brought to light, and, looking ahead, new policies introduced.

Reflecting on these challenges, and relating them in particular to young adults, I started to place at the centre of my reflection the very basic question of the interplay between agency and structure. That is, if agents are, as I do believe, reflexive and able to 'act otherwise', how do they *use* structure to build a professional path? If a number of aspects of the world of work are turning to be disadvantageous, what other things can be obtained that are not otherwise available? How does the transformative power of agent explicate itself?

These seem to be very important questions because we witness the lack of strong suggestions on how to engage with the world of employment, so that new work identities are being negotiated. If an identity is constructed, as I suggest, by an individuation component (what I see in others that I want to adopt) and a differentiation component (what I see in others that I do not want to embrace), we would be very much at a loss, as the contents of these two are being renegotiated, and are so far undefined, especially for graduates who have had some years of experience in the labour market, and therefore start to know it, but still have career options open. Thus, I propose to look at the modulations of individualism, individualisation and self-entrepreneurship to explore the basis of what it may eventually develop as a work identity in the subsequent years of employment.

Following these dilemmas, the broad research question that I have tried to unpack in this book is 'how does the increasing flexibility of the labour market affect the way in which young, educated workers build their career paths?' To operationalise this broad question, the research project was constructed to compare a context in which the appeal of the job-for-life is still a point of reference (Southern Italy) and one in which it is conversely profoundly challenged (England), as I was convinced that the specificities of the first could be revealing of the mechanisms of the second, and vice versa. The fact that the fieldwork was conducted before the coming of the global economic crises, which involved both countries and reached its most dramatic phase in 2008, offers now an interesting insight on the meaning of comparison, and especially on the positive attitude of professionals based in England interviewed discussed throughout the book. Ultimately, the analysis done here captures a moment in which the groups compared were in exceptionally different situations: this enhances the heuristic validity of the comparative analysis, whilst simultaneously offering the grounds for a follow up study.

The sample studied specifically refers to recent graduates in certain professions, which I have identified as human resources, engineering and accountancy. By using qualitative data such as 60 in-depth interviews, I have reconstructed and compared how the two groups of professionals working in the above mentioned professions build their own careers.

Typical ways of interplay between agency and structure emerge in the strategies used by professionals for interacting with the resources found in their contexts (for instance, a spe-

cific organisational structure), shaping specific ways of performing their own working and professional self. Agents have to establish a dialogue with a number of institutions. I have focused particularly on professions, organisation and the position in the age structure, which provide very different resources in the two contexts, and give place to two different repertoires of justification. This analysis is then completed by looking at what concept of work is most referred to in interviewees' accounts, and how this is interwoven differently with the dimension of security.

In chapter 1, I outline the characteristics defining the social changes in the globalised work arena. Since these trends are very much under control, they constrain the workers of post-industrialised countries, comprising in this sense both Italy and England. Flexibility is here intended as a inescapable fact, which is nonetheless transformed either in good tales or pessimistic stories. I then define flexi-jobs and how they come to catalyse the attention of most academic production. After defining them, I also propose an alternative focus on flexi-lives as more able to capture the *Zeitgeist* of graduate professionals recently entered into the labour market. To achieve this aim, I look at the modulations of individualism, individualisation and self-entrepreneurship in the two groups of professionals interviewed, and I provide here a sketch of the three categories.

In chapter 2, I introduce some selected notions of career to make the point that newly established forms of careers, such as the Protean career, are interestingly related to the issue of Agency and Structure as how they have been basically defined by Giddens in *The Constitution of Society* (1984). These categories seem more appropriate to a comparative analysis if enriched by cultural understandings of the contexts in which they are applied. In the same group, agents tend not only to use similar resources, but also to give reason of these uses according to specific orders of worth. In this way, the strategies of actions result more embedded in their own contexts. In presenting these issues, this chapter reiterates why a focus on flexi-lives should be preferred.

Chapter 3 is a methodological one in that it seeks to describe the challenges encountered in doing the research and how they have been overcome. Particular emphasis is put on discussing the double comparative dimension, which contrasts in the first place groups of professionals based in two contexts, Italy and England, and secondly professionals in three fields, i.e. accountancy, engineering and human resources.

Chapters 4 to 6 are devoted to the analyses of institutions that are at professionals' disposal in their own contexts. Chapter 4 specifically focuses on professions, looking at what sort of resources they are in the two contexts. I also describe typical careers in the three professional fields. It is found that professions constitute a safe niche in the agitated sea of employment only if they provide substantial guidance and support. The opportunity to reuse skills acquired in a flexible way is also very important.

Chapter 5 tests the neo-liberal ideology of the entrepreneurial self within the organizational discourse. If organizations are increasingly boundaryless, they also have to provide measures such as appraisals to promote awareness of what one is able to do and in what timescale achievements can be obtained. Consistently following chapter 4, it is found that the conditions offered by the structured organizations in England are more favourable to building one's career path when compared with the cauldron of unsystematic but nonetheless patronising rules that govern Italian work settings.

Chapter 6 discusses the impact of one's position in the life cycle. In doing this discussion, it emerges that the family is a positive resource for professionals based in Italy. Interestingly, it is the only one that is indicated as such by them, as the previous chapters describe, a scenario that is more favourable for professionals based in England.

Chapter 7 concentrates on the meanings given by professionals to their experience. Representations of work, the good job, and ultimately the concept of achievement are investigated. Professionals based in Italy appear attached to the employment sphere rather than on the content of the job that starts and finishes, again, by contrast with their counterparts based in England.

A concluding section assesses the approach used and the results emerged, bringing together the configurations of individualism, individualisation and self-entrepreneurship in a way that characterises the group of professionals based in England as strong supporters of the first and the last, but weakly individualised. Professionals based in Italy, instead, suffer from the fact of being forced to be individualised and self motivated, possibly because they have never fully accepted the individualist spirit. As a result, the career path of the professionals based in England is constructed by enacting the resources found in their own contexts, building in such a way a conformist path. Conversely, professionals based in Italy interviewed find themselves acting in a profoundly non-standardised arena, where it is difficult to identify positive resources to enact. Strategies are therefore built by avoiding identified difficulties and constraints. Directions for possible further research are suggested.

1. Flexi-jobs and flexi-lives: what perspectives?

1.1 Changing global scenario

In this chapter I provide an overview of what changes are entailed in increasingly globalised labour markets and how they have been mostly represented. I then summarise by arguing that most attention in literature has been paid to flexi-jobs, which I consider a very partial outlook on work issues. Following these preliminary specifications, I introduce my proposal to enlarge the perspective on flexi-lives instead, clarifying what I mean by this expression. The chapter continues by defining three aspects that I look at in this book – and that I would like to propose for further research - to capture the different ways in which flexi-lives are modulated in the groups of professionals studied. These are: individualism, individualisation and self entrepreneurship. In a way, chapter 2 is to be seen as a straightforward continuation of the present, in that I clarify how new careers are portrayed in the literature and how they are an appropriate angle from which to analyse flexi-lives. The purpose is twofold: I propose careers as a fruitful perspective from which to discuss the dynamic agent-structure and I argue that the role played by culture in the shaping of careers is of paramount importance.

Which changes affect the global scenario in unknown and problematic directions? This book is constructed in a way to give evidence to the different ways in which early career professionals based in Italy and England construct their working paths. The rationale for comparing and contrasting the 'orders of worth' which take place in these contexts, described in their essential characteristics in chapter 3, is that they are different enough for what concerns attitudes to work and employment, for now only broadly defined. In the first part of this chapter, however, I outline the few aspects of the larger socio-economic context to which both England and Italy belong. This introduction serves to point out that Italy and England are not two worlds apart, and do have certain aspects in common.

In particular, both contexts are immersed in the 'new world order' called globalisation. This is a 'global system of interconnected communication and transportation networks, economic markets, and persons' (Silbey 2006: 245). According to this author, there are three accounts of globalisation. Among the most important ones, the scientific technological account puts emphasis on deterritorialisation, i.e. on the fact that 'boundaries that once had been created by time and space have been eroded by scientific and technological developments, especially in communication and transport' (Silbey 2006: 245). However, in a politico-economic perspective, it becomes more important to stress the success of the market economy, that is, how the market is worldwide, now no longer confined within national and regional bounda-

ries (Silbey 2006). This second meaning is more relevant to the present book. The global markets create both dispersion and integration. In globalisation, capital and culture circulate, while the previously movements of these were characterised only by the direction centre to peripheries. For these reasons, for some the globalisation trend incorporates the foundations for a possible democratic transformation' (Silbey 2006).

Globalisation stimulates an extensive restructuring of firms and organisations, implying a shift in the bargaining power between capital and labour, and therefore a reconsideration of employment relations. Global conditions of flexible labour are aspects such as the international oil crisis in the seventies, the rising unemployment rates in the eighties, the instability of Keynesianism, the neo-liberal offensive strategies against unions, the re-emergence of microeconomic theories and the increase in female employment, as summarised by Castells (1996). This world order is increasingly described in terms of growing competitiveness and increasing interconnectedness of flows of information. The global interconnectedness in various domains of activity encompasses the social, economical and political spheres.

Together with globalisation and internationalisation of markets there has been growing importance of financial activities and more generally of the whole advanced third sector. We witness the developments of new jobs, new activities, new professions and modification of those already in existence as well as the massive introduction of new technologies. Technology is an important factor. Rifkin discusses it directly, addressing its potential to replace human labour (1995). The redefinition of a company's structure often implies the externalisation of services in which communicative skills assume more and more importance (La Rosa 2005).

Networks of firms strengthen the economic interdependence, so that it can be argued that globalisation has speeded up the process of de-industrialisation. Such sociological approaches insist on the shortening of distances within a worldwide perspective. The 'risk society' (Beck 1992), would be considered as a phenomenon which has been affecting us all, and not simply a selected part of the world, this also being a consequence of a 'runaway world' (Giddens 2002), proceeding towards the 'brasilianisation' of the western countries (Beck 2000), thus characterised by a 'brave new world of work' (Beck 2000). Such considerations must be taken into account when considering two different cases, in geographic, economic and cultural terms.

It has been especially with the decline of Fordism that the reshaping of organisation of work was intensified and that forms of employment that were otherwise considered exceptional became consolidated. More specifically, Jessop (2006 b) defines Fordism as characterised by the exhaustion of the regime of national accumulation that comported a virtuous cycle of mass production and mass consumption; the production of standardised goods based on the assembly line and a generic workforce. As a mode of regulation, it was based on the institutionalised compromise between factory and workers and monopolistic competition, via state intervention. During the seventies, however, the potential of mass production started to decline, and this has determined a crisis of the virtual cycle 'high production / high consumption'. Equally, the ability of the state to control economic activities has fallen down. At the same time, the willingness to escape from the standardisation started to grow. Stable employment used to define lifetime schedule, with its linear dimension education-

employment - retirement no longer reproducible. A reconceptualisation of work as the axis of social life is suggested.

Next to the redefinition of the context of work, which is increasingly more immaterial, the important changes in the sphere of employment have meant a cultural revolution in the organisation of life. It is also interesting to consider that the term Fordism, as Bauman notes in *Liquid Modernity* (2000), was first invented by Antonio Gramsci and Henri de Man, but only when it started to dismantle did the name became popular. Comments such as this one suggest that certain assets have particular evocative power.

In countries with a highly unionised tradition, such as in Italy, being in a condition of full employment has meant for decades to be able to organise one's life fully around that condition. The decline of Fordism has meant a crisis of the model of the male breadwinner, who earned a single wage on which the whole family lived.

And in fact, in the last years, Italian sociologists of work have invented many word-plays to critically describe such a situation. To name but few, one of the most influential work by Aris Accornero is called *Era il secolo del lavoro* (first edition in 1997), which subtly means 'this should have been a century based on work (full employment), but as we all know, it hasn't been like that'. Others have substituted the expression 'società del lavoro' (work-based society) with the more provocative 'società dei lavori' (jobs-based society).

1.2 Good stories, bad stories

At the triennial conference of the Journal Work, Employment and Society (Aberdeen, September 2007), Arnie Kalleberg, then president in charge of the American Sociological Association, gave a plenary speech which succeeded in condensing the wide variety of interests of the participants. The speech was developed around the acknowledgement that people tend to construct and represent their work around ideas of good and bad, thus creating good stories and bad stories. One idea is that current conditions of work are affected by recent macro-economic changes such as technologies, globalisation and tough competition - all aspects that Kalleberg puts forwards. Another is to shift attention to the creation of narratives around these, and to pay attention to the fact that people may want to pursue different careers - since they may want to obtain different things from work. Among the wide variety of narratives on work and labour, Kalleberg's is an especially bright way to snapshot work issues, and in fact, others have followed this dichotomy (Dore 1998).

On the one hand, we have stories of degradation of work, deskilling processes, dissatisfaction, mcjobs, working poor, that is, workers who have (multiple) jobs, but do not earn a decent 'total' wage. Bad stories put emphasis on increasing insecurity. Good stories, on the other hand, emphasise the fact that the new world of work gives fuller opportunities to individuals, who can choose among a wider spectrum of work occasions, who are ultimately freer to do *what* he/she wants, *how* he/she wants. This way of looking at the issue can be expanded until being framed in the so called 'discourses of excellence' (Du Gay 1996: 59), which support the idea that excellent companies seek to cultivate 'enterprising subjects' (1996: 60) and that embodying entrepreneurialism can be advantageous not only for the firm,

but also for the individual. The new world of work is for self-motivated people, who show energy, initiative, self-reliance and personal responsibility. Du Gay continues:

> 'Within the discourse of excellence, work is characterised not as a painful obligation imposed upon individuals, nor as an activity only undertaken by people for the fulfilment of instrumental needs and satisfactions. Work is itself a means for self-fulfilment, and the road to company profit is also the path to individual self-development and growth. In this way, the worker is made 'subject'' (Du Gay 1996: 63).

Therefore, the employee is not only in search of material means, but also 'of meaning and fulfilment' (Du Gay 1996: 65). In this view, the current reshaping of employment would give justice to the frustrations that characterised Fordist assets.

I think we truly need to acknowledge the existence of these polarised accounts and then proceed beyond this opposition that often goes along with the discourses on North and South differences. Within the Italian borders, this means that not necessarily if one works in southern areas must one develop a low tone, non-aggressive career. On the contrary, in England this normally takes opposite forms, in that South-East England, being a richer and more economically dynamic area of England, is characterised as offering better job opportunities than the rest of the country. The order of preference that is implicit in this model should be deconstructed. The social imagination finds validation in a normative construction. More specifically, it is clear that careers in England are seen as more positive than in Italy, where they tend to assume a negative characterisation. What this book seeks to acknowledge is that such dualism must be dismantled and the construction of notion of achievement and success must be broken into pieces, i.e. deconstructed and reconstructed to give evidence of the value dimension of work normally implicit. La Rosa argues that 'people tend to transform the significance and reality of work from pure instrumental service to activity which is significant per se and for the society' (2005: 199). In other words, agents tend to give new significance to the act of work in a way that makes 'personal and sympathetic realisation' assume more importance. Work is undergoing a radical transformation (Baldry et al. 2007, Breslow 1981, Borghi 2000) exactly in the ways in which it is experienced by people.

1.3 Flexi-jobs

Having outlined the general global transformations in work and employment, I describe here what I call the flexi-jobs approach. In recent years, we have had to acknowledge that employment is not necessarily long-term and full-time. Since then, many scholars have studied different aspects of flexi-jobs, which can be grouped along three dimensions: flexible, atypical and precarious.

For what concerns the first dimension, the term flexibility can, in the first place, be referred to as firms' production. As such, Jessop (2006 a) clarifies, it started to become a reality in the eighties as a response to the problems of Fordism, and refers to 'the use of flexible machinery by skilled or craft labour to produce a wide range of products to exploit economies of scope' (Jessop 2006 a: 210), sometimes with a revival of craft production, very much in contrast with Fordist mass production. It is with reference to this dimension, Jessop fur-

ther suggests, that the influential *The Second Industrial Divide* was written (Piore and Sabel 1984). Jessop also argues that important variants of flexible specialisation can be identified with the Third Italy model, in which small, craft-based firms have defined the success of industrial districts, and with the West German model based on internal decentralisation of large firms. There is a last version of it based in Japan, where just-in-time production relies on large firms' support in multilayered subcontracting networks.

In general, flexibility finds application in different contexts, in different schools of thought within academia and in different institutional contexts. In fact, a given job might be flexible under different perspectives. Salmieri (2006) identifies a temporal flexibility, with regards to the possibility of change in the work schedule according to the demand needs, and concerns not only in the distribution of worked hours on a yearly and monthly basis, but also on a weekly and daily basis. Then, pay flexibility indicates that the wage varies in relation to how much and how well one has worked. Functional flexibility concerns the ability of the workers to adapt to different duties as they occur, by using skills and competences acquired. Numerical flexibility relates to the termination of the employment relation. Finally, by territorial flexibility one means that employees are encouraged to be aware that the geographical area in which work will be done is not static, rather that it changes in relation to the different ramifications of the mother-firm.

Such dimensions, therefore, identify these issues in slightly technical terms. Under different terminologies, their contents are not too dissimilar to the 'atypical' approach. Strictly speaking, with the term 'atypical', one indicates the forms of employment that are not typical, namely, that are not long term and on a full-time basis. This is the approach of Italian written law (as in Codice Civile, titolo II). According to the Atkinson model (1984), since each firm is allowed to employ under a variety of contractual conditions, two separate types of workforce take shape. The core is composed of typical employees, who enjoy long-term and full-time contracts, and fixed working hours. The periphery is populated by atypical workers, whose contractual conditions differ in various ways from typical ones (part time, short term contract, subcontractors and many others).

For Handy (1989), the flexible organisation takes the shape of a shamrock with three leaves. The first leaf consists of a core staff of managers, technicians and professionals. The second consists of contractors - specialised people whose work is more expensive than that of internal members of the firms. The third includes contingent labour force. Elger also talks about dual labour market, in which employers obtain 'labour flexibility by constructing multifunctional teams for core workers, and extending various forms of disposability among peripheral workers' (2006: 319). This approach refers to inequality issues: 'even early segmented labour market models were primarily designed to understand enduring divisions and inequalities' (Elger 2006: 319).

What I call the flexi-jobs approach focuses on the changing shapes of such areas of the firms, on how many workers shift from the core to the periphery of the firm, how this happens, and how this defines workers' progressions. The most immediate aspects are considered. Many of these studies tend to focus on the employment sphere and give it importance of its own. They raise problems and issues mostly related to fairness, but do not succeed in portraying the lives of those involved in that kind of employment.

These aspects seem in fact very much related only to the level of single firms. However, the organisation of employment itself is the result of interconnections among laws, collective bargaining systems, training/educational systems, family/household organisation, gender relations and other elements. The transformation of all these aspects as a whole is so pervasive as to make economists argue that there has been a shift from paradigms, in particular from the 'old economy' to the 'new economy', which is also designated as a new 'era' based on saving on labour costs.

The dimension of precarious work is also widespread. This term is less technical and expresses better the existential condition in which the worker is left, starting from a condition of atypical employment. The expression precarious work / precarious labour is not as neutral as atypical employment; it is, on the contrary, negatively connotated. The conditions of those working under precarious employment are problematised, sometimes leaving too narrow a space for the analytical level of analysis. For instance, there is poor attention given to the fact that such trends are inextricably linked to globalisation flows, and as such are at least partially inevitable.

There is, especially in Italian Sociological literature which falls into this third dimension, an underlying strong opposition towards the recent trends of flexible labour. What seems to emerge, in the cauldron of the dramatic difficulties in which contemporary workers find themselves, is a sense of nostalgia for the security and predictability of Fordism, which now seems to represent a golden age, at least if considering the social equilibrium it was able to maintain and justify. This attitude appears to be sustained by the jeopardisation of few hidden compromises, which would hold together the whole societal system. These constituted, in the first place, a way of keeping conflict down by referring the reasons of discomfort to the *organised* system of employment and within that, the system of factory. The first was able to ensure clarity in the system of accreditation of rights, on the basis of being, or rather not being, in employment. Political discourses have often referred to efforts to decrease the rate of unemployment, as if one can either be employed or unemployed: the grey area of underemployment, for instance, has become an issue only later on. The system of the factory, on the other hand, had the effect of encompassing the life of the worker, and that of his family, and forms of discontent expressed solely through the unions. Fordism was in fact characterised by high salaries, with which the household could support a high demand for goods; welfare systems were generally able to absorb weaknesses. Many were therefore excluded by the advantages of the Fordist compromise, which Accornero describes as:

> 'a sort of social pact between capital and labour, non-subscribed but well in existence and rationalised ex-post by the scholars. It generated a relationship based on a trade-off between the full subordination to labour and full job stability, i.e. between the needs of the great mass reproduction and the mass of non-qualified workers' (Accornero 2005: 10).

Today, the anxieties do not come from the firm or from technologies as in the past but from the market, which becomes the fundamental source of stress. Focus has changed in the area of expertise. In the past, sociologists used to study fatigue, oppression, monotony, alienation; today they study discontinuity, instability, insecurity, precariousness (Accornero 2005: 16). At least in Italy, though, the coming of post-Fordism has very much complicated the scenery of class divisions, making a polarisation between, on the one hand, the knowledge

workers, supposedly well paid; on the other, a bigger percentage of workers who would take part in the 'ceto medio', but since their abilities are not so easily renewed they are relegated to poorly paid jobs, bad jobs (Farinella 2004). I would like to include this third dimension of work under the label 'flexi-jobs', since it also concentrates on one specific aspect at a time, and in doing so risks isolating it too much from the rich interconnectedness of effects, coping strategies and reactions with other, more or less related, aspects of life. Specifically, this dimension does not recognise that new opportunities are offered in increasingly globalised labour markets.

There is, nonetheless, another side of the arguments introduced so far in this section. In fact, the idea that the contemporary labour market is in constant flux and chaos is not shared by all scholars. The assumption that jobs and labour markets are flexible is highly contested indeed. The importance of acknowledging such counter arguments to what seems to be the hegemonic narrative of today's workplaces is twofold. The first reason is of epistemological nature: for some, we are brought to experience the labour market as increasingly flexible, while empirical studies seem to go toward a different direction. The second reason is that, on the basis on the above argument, the flexi-jobs approach comes to be further criticised.

Strangleman (2007) demonstrates that the supposed decline in work and employment has to be critically assessed when studying the transformations of capitalism and its implication for the world of work. Partially drawing on his own research on railway employment, Strangleman provides a critical assessment of seminal work such as Bauman's *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (1998), Beck's *The Brave New World of Work* (2000), Gorz's *Reclaiming Work* (1999) and Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), putting them in historical perspective and specifically looking at the British context.

Strangleman specifically refers to the 'end of work' debate, named after Rifkin's book (1995), which highlighted the role of new technologies and global markets on job loss, and is amongst those who criticise this book. The end of work debate is characterised by a 'sense of loss', 'lamentation for lost certainties, of intelligibility in the past versus the confusion of the present' (2007: 82). In many accounts, a 'golden age' is opposed to current 'degradation of work and the erosion of craft skill, pride and identification with vocation' (2007: 90).

Yet, Strangleman finds that in general 'at virtually any point in history one could find examples of commentators criticising current workers for supposed deficiencies when compared to workers in the past' (2007: 89). A sort of nostalgia seems thus to emerge, accompanied by a sense of irrationality towards the past, as partial 'attempt to make sense of the fragmentary present by its juxtaposition with a seemingly stable, intelligent past' (Strangleman 2007: 94). The claim for 'a *juxtaposition*[2] of the predictability of the past with the instability of the present' (2007: 86) is especially interesting. The additional element implied in such an idea is revealing and fruitful for this book, in that it problematises the alternation of modes of work which happens mostly by absorbing old forms next to new ones and not by the gradual transformation of existent structures. In other words, one cannot have the advantages of old work balance together with those of new ones. Strangleman proposes 'permanence at work' as the object of nostalgia. This was certainly constitutive of modernity, derived from the stability and growth of the post war boom.

[2] The italic is mine.

Strangleman argues that work is often invested with highly ideological meanings. In such views, those who necessarily connect the actual changes in the world of work to short term employment, such as Sennett (1998) and Gorz (1999) may easily tend to overgeneralise. Commenting on Sennett's work, Strangleman argues that:

> 'At the heart of Sennett's critique is an understanding of capital as increasingly short term in its outlook and expectations, and of social relation as increasingly fugitive and ephemeral. To be a 'good' or successful worker now is to avoid commitment, to be mobile and flexible' (2007: 85).

Yet in the frame of the neoliberal discourse, Strangleman argues that the actual debate underestimates the creative power of agency, which is not always accounted for. Moreover, it is appropriate to understand continuities as well as change, and to do so is important to integrate more empirical data in theoretical speculations. Strangleman also stresses the importance of considering the current changes in the employment sphere as one part of the more comprehensive societal changes, such as the 'social, cultural, geographical and historical' (2007: 92). This would constitute an argument to both re-read flexi-jobs, and consider them as not completely satisfactory in looking at the world of work transformation.

The attack on such 'nostalgic' overstatements continues in Fevre's contribution (2007), along with a specific critique of Giddens (1998), Sennett (1998) and Beck's (1992) work. Fevre's article is significantly entitled 'employment security and social theory: the power of nightmares'. Fevre's point is specifically that employment insecurity is not widespread especially in the countries which inspired these authors. Whilst the pessimistic accounts these authors offer can possibly be seen to refer to other countries, there does not seem to be enough evidence for most European countries, such as Britain and Germany. Some of the texts dealing with the increase of flexi-jobs have been very influential. Fevre specifically comments on Atkinson's model (1984), saying that although the pessimistic scenario it described was meant to be speculative, it ended up being taken as a diagnosis. Similarly, according to the author, many other studies (such as Handy's and Scase's) are in fact only predicting and describing possible scenarios.

Fevre suggests that one problem that contributes to such misconceptions is the difficulty in measuring insecurity. Next to the many datasets available[3], then, it is important to look also at quantitative data on the perception of these transformations[4]. For these latter studies, Fevre notes, one possible strategy is to ask people whether they fear losing their job over a certain period of time. The LFS reports a discrepancy between the contract situation and the perception of security, i.e. workers tend to think of themselves as non permanent even in those cases in which they are in a reasonably stable situation[5] (Fevre 2007). For instance, Labour Market trends 2004 showed that 'the share of total UK employment accounted for by temporaries was no higher in 2003 than in 1993' (Fevre 2007: 519).

[3] Out of the datasets available, Fevre mentions the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS); Labour Force Survey (LFS); Labour Market Trends; US Bureau of Labour Statistics; OECD, Workplace employment relations Survey (WERS).

[4] For instance, the British Households Panel Survey (BHPS) deals with perceived employment insecurity.

[5] This conclusion is drawn from the 2002 Regulatory Impact Assessment on fix term contract, LFS data.

To support the argument that there is a lack of evidence for growing flexibility, Fevre draws on a number of other scholars' piece of work. For instance, Green's analysis from a comparative dataset (2006) shows that there is 'a rise from the 1970s to the 1980s but no statistically significant change in perceptions of job insecurity in Britain between 1986 and 1997 and a reduced perception of insecurity between 1997 and 2001' (2007: 527). Again, the OECD notes that 'the evidence for European countries suggest that the majority of temporary workers have considerable continuity in employment' (2002: 131, quoted in Fevre 2007: 521). According to the UK Labour Force Survey, Fevre reports,

> 'the period of significant growth in non-permanent workers was short lived. A high of 1,787,000 was reached in 1997, from which point the numbers began to slowly decline. […] Numbers in the second quarter of 2006 had risen by 14,000 since the previous but remained 334,000 below the 1997 level. […] A more rapid increase in temporary work has taken place in Spain, Portugal and Poland (Fevre 2007: 523-524).

Such comments suggest that interesting differences may be found in the specific case of Italy and England, with regard to both 'objective' and 'perceived' stability.

The question of whether we really are living in new, harder times also leads the discussion in Doogan's work (2001). He in turn provides rich sources of data to argue that Britain has actually experienced a rise in long term employment over the 1990s. Yet, the fact that perceived insecurity has simultaneously risen suggests that it is necessary to look at what he calls 'the institutional and ideological context' (2001: 419). Those who support the view that some deep changes have occurred in the world of work –the transition theorists- informed the notion that pervades the media: everything has become short term, and the new industries are necessarily precarious.

Doogan reports that the perception of insecurity is investigated in OECD (which uses data from Eurobarometer), MORI, and ESRC skill surveys. According to the 'insecure book', formulated by Heery and Salomon (1999), insecurity is defined along the three dimensions of property of jobs; properties of the environment in which jobs exist; and properties of the subjective experience of workers in terms of cognitive and affective attitudes towards security. A Joseph Rowntree Study on job security distinguishes between job instability and employment insecurity. In other words, insecurity may or may not be 'workplace dependent' (Doogan 2001: 436), and it encompasses more general anxieties and fears.

The issue is described in terms of paradox by Doogan. In fact, he says that

> 'the rise in long term employment in the UK in the 1990s has been dramatic and challenges many of the assumptions that underpin the 'insecure worker hypobook' […]. For instance, total (male and female) long term employment rose from 28.6% in 1992, to 33.0% in 1999 (2001: 423).

The increase has been particularly significant for females. In fact,

> 'women made up 33 % of the long –term, workforce in 1992 and 39 % by 1999. Moreover, the rate of job loss and long term employment in different industries, and increases in the rate of long term employment are evident in both shrinking and expanding industry' (2001: 428).

Part time work assumes a great importance in the UK. It is usually associated with de-standardisation and is often counted as numerical flexibility. It is also notable that the composition of the workforce for short term and part time employment is very different in terms of gender and age. There is an increase in the level of long-term employment among the part time workforce (Doogan 2001: 431). More specifically, the 'rate of long term employment among professionals was 34.6% in 1992 and 38% in 1999' (2001: 432).

The symbolic significance of the decline of traditional industries is therefore quite high. People normally assume that permanent jobs have disappeared, and job insecurity pervades most accounts of contemporary social developments in the UK, but this is 'a misnomer to a large extent, as it presumes an individualised, job specific anxiety, whereas economic insecurity is better understood at a societal level, rooted in the greater penetration and expression of market forces' (Doogan 2001: 438). However, in a Joseph Rowntree study 'professionals were among the most insecure groups' (Doogan 2001: 438). Therefore it is extremely important to differentiate among sectors and groups. Doogan, similarly to Strangleman and Fevre, concludes that:

> 'in the extreme positions marked out by reflexive modernity or informational society, the collapse of labour market structures and the freeing of their captive agency is predicted, yet the *evidence*[6] points with conviction in the opposite direction' (2001: 434). All in all, thus, 'critical analysis should not deny the existence of social insecurity but it should not embrace it as a cause to be fought, as one would seek to combat discrimination, injustice or oppression' (Doogan 2001: 440).

1.4 Flexi-lives

In this book, I argue that it is insufficient to try to explain the real impact of flexi-jobs on people's lives unless they are contextualised in the complicated mechanisms of life that embrace those who have not chosen, but rather find themselves, in a flexible labour market. These are days in which the role that work assumes in everyone's life is at stake (Freyssenet 1999, Gorz 1999, Holmer and Karlsson 1997)[7]. It is also invested by a lot of normative demands. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt provides an insightful historical overview of the transformation of the dignity of work through the centuries in Western countries. At a different level, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says that 'everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work, and to protect against unemployment' (Article 3, Par.1).

However, one can sadly note that formal statements are often intrinsically ambiguous, and render the fruition of such rights very uncertain. For instance, the first article of the (written) Italian Constitution says that Italy is a 'Democratic Republic founded on work'. The significance of these quotations should be understood in the post-war framework. On the

[6] Mine italics.

[7] These are only few names that have inspired the so called 'end of work debatee, as Strangleman summarises (2007).

other hand, the same document shows an internal clear ambivalence about what this right actually entails, and in what context it should be framed. Such ambiguity concerns, among other aspects, the role and importance of employment within wider gender roles. For instance, articles 36 and 37 outline the principles around which employment should be defined. While article 36[8] is addressed to a generic (but indeed male) worker, article 37 is addressed to female workers, and states that 'their job should guarantee the execution of the essential familiar function', and in so doing it identifies what is of primary and secondary importance for female workers (while such a distinction is not assumed for male workers). The Italian constitution is an example of how work results embedded in specific contexts. The Italian constitution, for instance, is the result of post-war negotiations and visions of life. It should be acknowledged once more that employment is not part of goods to be exchanged but a specifically, contextually, culturally defined phenomenon which has to be framed in specific contexts in order to be truly understood.

The modalities in which work is organised are paramount in understanding the changing life patterns of young, educated workers. This notwithstanding, we should cease looking at work as if it was a fact of 'pure' employment, and as introductory Sociology of work warns, we should start considering seriously a number of cultural factors that deeply affect the shape of one's flexi-life. By looking at how professionals in their early careers construct their paths through the lenses of a flexi-life perspective, their strategies of actions should be analysed in a very open way, looking at what resources they use, how and in what ways their choices are reasoned. This implies assessing what *effective* resources they have, not only with regard to employment conditions, but with reference to the work practices of the organisations in which they work, for instance, as well as 'private' resources such as family support, and professional associations. They all effectively impact on the work situation.

In recent years, there have been few sociological pieces of work which have opened up the way for a wider understanding of work processes, by unpacking the unsolved boundaries between work and non work. Some of these pieces of work have took inspiration from the TSOL (Glucksmann 2009, 2000, 1995, Pettinger et al. 2006), which helps capturing 'a wider system of labour', and have conceptually developed the approaches to certain areas of work, such as care work (Lyon 2010), and voluntary work (Taylor 2004). The present book seeks to find its identity in the path opened by these previous work and aims, more specifically, to find a way to take into consideration spheres of life other than work, when it comes to analyse the changes occurring in culturally shaped ways of constructing a career. The way I have chosen to describe the interaction between individuals and institutions and, in the last part of the book, the meanings attributed to work, is through an analysis of the empirical data collected through the lenses of individualism, individualisation and self-entrepreneurship, which I shall define here.

[8] Art. 36: 'Workers have the right to a remuneration commensurate to the quantity and quality of their work and in all cases to an adequate remuneration ensuring them and their families a free and dignified existence'. Art. 37: 'Working women have the same rights and are entitled to equal pay for equal work. Working conditions must allow women to fulfil their essential role in the family and ensure special appropriate protection for the mother and child'. An accredited English translation of the Italian Constitution can be found at http://www.camera.it/cost_reg_funz/345/copertina.asp, from which these sentences derive.

1.4.1 Individualism

The concept of individualism has enormously attracted, and continues to attract, a number of sociologists and scholars from cognate disciplines. By individualism we generally refer to the primacy of an individual's interests, in which the value attached to individual freedom and individual choice is stressed the most (Marshall 1998). Individualism inspires the 'belief that the individual is a primary reality whereas society is second-order, derived or artificially constructed' - what Bellah et al. call 'ontological individualism' (1985: 334). However, what tends to remain more implicit is that individualism is based in particular on the myth of agency and self control, according to which individuals would be owners of themselves and responsible for their own career paths. Individualism may correspond to 'a particular type of culture associated with private property rights, personal consumption and individual autonomy' (Turner 2006: 282). From the political standpoint, individualism is a 'doctrine associated with liberalism that emphasises the autonomy, importance, and freedom of the individual in relation to the state' (Turner 2006).

Individualism does not necessarily have a clear beginning in history, and it can simply be defined as 'human orientation *ab origine',* an 'archetypal and inter-temporal phenomenon, which is present *in nuce* since the dawn of civilisation' (Paci 2005: 58). Despite this, its historical roots have been identified in different contexts, which generally tend to connote the 'Western culture as a whole, in contrast to the emphasis on the family and the collectivity in Eastern cultures', as Turner argues bearing specifically in mind as a contrast the Indian caste society and collectivism in general (2006: 282). We can then trace individualism back to Greco-Roman antiquity, the Christian religion (Turner 2006), the Renaissance, the Protestant Reform (Paci 2005).

The link of individualism to the advent of modernity is especially strong: individualism is supposed to be at the basis of capitalism, American Declarations of sacred and inviolable citizens' rights, the French revolution and the Enlightenment (Turner 2006, Paci 2005). From Bell to Putnam, a rampant individualism is seen to threat the morality of modern society. In fact, looking back at fathers of Sociology such as Spencer, Burke, Durkheim and indeed most of the nineteenth century sociologists, Paci reminds of their worries on the increase of individualism. Max Weber was clear in establishing the link with modernity, looking at the long process of disenchantment of the western world. Durkheim distinguished the historical factors that have facilitated the development of the individual. The diversification of social roles is seen as strengthening the self-awareness on their own specificities. In general, with its emphasis on the uniqueness of the person, individualism has therefore played a pivotal role in the history of sociological thought since the birth of the discipline (Bellah et al. 1985).

Looking at more recent realities, individualism is mostly associated with the US - and by extension one can also talk about an Anglo-American reality. Bellah *et al.* argue that 'anything that would violate our [Americans'] right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious' (1985: 143). The roots of this can be retraced to *Democracy in America,* in which Tocqueville noted how the absence of a centralised bureaucratic government stimulated individual initiative a well as voluntary associations (1848). Other key texts linking the US and individualism are

Lonely Crowd (Riesman 1950) and *The Organization Man* (1956), in which Whyte described company executives, who are mobile, disconnected from the local communities and families, and dedicated to personal achievement within the organisation. The individualistic self has been seen as an expression of egoistic competition and marketization (Paci 2005: 12).

According to the notion of 'expressive' individualism, 'each person has a unique core of feeling and intuition that should unfold or be expressed if individuality is to be realized' (Bellah et al. 1985: 334). This core, though unique, is not necessarily alien to other persons or to nature. 'Under certain conditions, the expressive individualist may find it possible through intuitive feeling to 'merge' with other persons, with nature, or with the cosmos as a whole' (Bellah et al. 1985: 334). Affinities can therefore be found not only in Romanticism and American culture, but also in Psychotherapy. According to the notion of 'utilitarian' individualism, by contrast, society arises from a contract that individuals enter into only in order to pursue their self-interest.

1.4.2 Individualisation

Individualism has to be distinguished from individualisation, although the two are often confused. Similar to individualism, the process of individualisation refers to the growth of freedom and awareness of the self, and is also associated with Western modernisation. However, it is a much more clearly defined phenomenon. In *Individualisation*, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim contend that enlightenment individualism concerns *being* individual rather than *becoming* individual (2002). Individualism refers to first modernity and to its logic of structure: societies were conceived as linear systems, with points of equilibrium, altered from time to time by external forces. Durkheim is also quoted by these authors for his concept of anomic individualism, which indicates those period of unsettling between a social arrangements and another. On the contrary, individualisation would mostly refer to the 'second' or 'reflexive' modernity, and correspondingly to its logic of flows and lack of linearity. Coming back to the issue of origin, Beck argues that:

> 'Individualisation' is neither a phenomenon nor an invention of the second half of the twentieth century. Corresponding individualised 'lifestyles' and life situations are found in the Renaissance (Burckhardt), in the courtly culture of the Middle Ages (Elias), in the inward ascetism of Protestantism (Weber), in the emancipation of the peasants from feudal bondage (Marx), and during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the loosening of intergenerational family ties (Imhof), as well as in the mobility processes […]. In this general sense individualisation refers to certain subjective–biographical aspects of the civilisation process' (1992: 127).

In the foreword of *Individualisation* (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), Scott Lasch points out that the thesis itself of individualisation, as formulated by Beck in *Risk Society*, has not received, for a long time, the attention it would actually deserve in Anglo-Saxon contexts, being effectively obscured by the Risk society. Individualisation consists in transforming human identity into a task – and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side effects) of their performance. Stevenson similarly defines it as 'the conversion of identity into a task to be achieved' (2006: 284).

According to Beck (1992), the individualisation process has a triple life: a characteristic of disembedding, in which there is a 'removal from historically prescribed social forms and commitments'. The second element is a 'loss of traditional security with respect to practical knowledge, faith and guiding norms', while the third element is re-embedding, a new type of social commitment'. Altogether, they constitute a 'general, a-historical model of individualisation' (Beck 1992: 128). While it is important to retrace such origins, however, we are more interested here in identifying the specifics of the individualisation process in the contemporary societal settings.

Beck (1992) continues by suggesting that in the process of becoming reflexive of the biographies, there would be a decreasing relevance of classical sociological categories such as class and family position, while the individual must face new dependencies, as the institutionalisation of the individualisation process contains inherent contradiction. On the one hand, the first part of this position has received many critics, and it is perhaps not founded empirically. On the other, the latter part of the proposition has indeed found many supporters. Taking the two aspects together then, there would not be many reasons to welcome these new societal arrangements. Are we really sure each of us is in the position to act in an individualised way, without suffering new conditions of discrimination? Beck argues that 'individualisation should not be confused with neo-liberal individualism but with the 'disembedding' of individuals from social structures. Individual identities are no longer defined by the secure structures of social class, status, family and neighbourhood' (Turner 2006: 33).

No more are human beings 'born into' their identities; as Jean-Paul Sartre famously put it: 'it is not enough to be born a bourgeois, one must live one's life as a bourgeois' (Bauman 2002: xv). Life is increasingly lived as an individual project, is a life 'of one's own' (*Eigenes Leben*). 'Individualised individuals' live for the moment, having to find 'biographic solutions to systemic contradictions' (Beck 1992: 137). Second modernity individuals do not have sufficient reflexive distance from themselves to construct linear and narrative biographies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Not only work, but biographies also cease to follow standard patterns, and become chosen and elective. Fixed images of the self are no longer possible.

Bauman (2001) notes that the 'non-linear individual' has to develop the skill to put together networks, construct alliances, makes deals. He/she is condemned to live in an atmosphere of risk in which knowledge and life-changes are instable. He also notes that no 'beds' are left to 're-embed'. There are instead 'musical chairs' of various sizes and styles as well as of changing numbers and positions, forcing men and women to be constantly on the move. There is no promise of rest and satisfaction 'on arrival', no comfort on reaching the destination where one can disarm, relax and stop worrying. There is no 're-embeddedment' prospect at the end of the road' (Bauman 2001: xvi). Agents have an 'unprecedented freedom of experimenting […] and an unprecedented task of coping with the consequences' (Bauman 2001: xix).

Then, what can put people together? Beck argues that 'everything that appears separated in the perspective of system theory, becomes an integral component of the individual biography' (1992: 136). Individualisation has structural characteristics of highly differentiated societies and does not endanger integration but makes it possible. The individual creativity that it releases is seen as creating space for the renewal of society under conditions of radical change. Beck develops the sense of institutionalised individualism, which is becoming the

social structure of social modernity. Individualised individuals can be altruistic (rather than egoistic such as individualistic individuals). This notion of the individual sharply differs from the possessive and egoistic individualism that is more attached to political characters such as Thatcher, Reagan and George W. Bush and phenomenon such as free markets liberalism (Beck 1992).

Individualisation corresponds to the necessity to find one's own path as a 'unique solution', regardless of the suggestions given by existent trajectories. To become authors of one's own life is a condemnation, because life is increasingly lived as an individual project. The decline of class loyalty and bonds means that individuals are increasingly 'thrown back on their own biographies, with human relations increasingly becoming susceptible to individual choice' (Stevenson 2006: 284).

What is increasingly significant is 'how individuals create identities, the cultural forms through which people symbolise individual expression and desire, and perhaps, above all, the speed with which identities can be invented and instantly transformed' (Elliott and Lemert 2006: 53). Instead of institutions such as classes, 'the individuality is the reproductive unity of social life' (Beck 2000: 185-186). In this way, one loses the traditional security with reference to practical knowledge and guide norms. As more areas of social life are less defined by tradition, our biographies require more agency and planning, and the *homo optionis* is created.

Another way to look at the process of individualisation is to conceive of it as a 'more perfect individualism' (Paci 2005). Formal civil and social rights are not enough any more since new needs are at stake; people want to gain control of their lives, realize a substantial freedom, which causes inevitable tensions (Paci 2005).

A very relevant characteristic of individualisation, in the view of how this book develops, is described by Beck, who argues that the new patterns of one's own life make us completely dependent upon institutions. In place of binding traditions, institutions now offer the guidance to set up one's own life. The qualitative difference between traditional and modern life stories is not, as many assume, as in older corporate and agrarian societies where various suffocating controls and guidelines restricted the individual's say in his or her own life to a minimum (whereas today hardly any such restrictions are left). It is, in fact, in the bureaucratic jungle of modernity that life is most securely bound into networks of guidelines and regulations. The crucial difference is that 'modern guidelines actually compel the self-organisation and self-thematization of people's biographies' (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2001: 24). In this respect Beck mentions the market in particular, but points in general to 'external control and standardization' (1992: 132). To summarise,

> 'Individualisation thus means precisely institutionalization, institutional shaping and hence the ability to structure biographies and life situations politically. Institutions act in legally determined categories of standard biographies, to which reality conforms less and less' (Beck 1992: 134).

Individualisation is inextricably linked to late modernity. Nowadays, 'sustaining a consistent identity and having an overall work career depend much more upon the individual than they did previously' (Giddens and Hutton 2001). Personal identities involve a life-narrative rather than a fixed image of the self. We witness the death of meta-narratives, of one, big truth, creates insecurity, uncertainty, lack of trust, and therefore the inability to organise and plan coherent life trajectories. The postmodern individual is 'minimal' (Lasch 1980, 1984),

has developed the attitude for living for the moment, to readapt constantly. We are bombarded by a variety of narratives and belief systems, while there are neither universal criteria nor justifications. Life is fragmented, diverse, contingent, ambivalent and discontinuous. If narratives are valid at all, it is only within small boundaries. It emerges that there is a need to reconceptualise the responsibility of the states towards individuals' needs and of the individuals' against each others' (Bauman wonders 'Am I my brother's keeper?' 2001), in a context in which sociability is structured on liquid relations (Bauman 2005, 2003, 2000, Giddens 1991). Work relations are not necessarily liquid, but reflecting on them is useful to work out new coping strategies in restructured workplaces. *Unsicherheit* means that everyone is potentially redundant, replaceable, that there is a non-class of non-workers (Gorz, 1982), and that everything flexible is also 'fluxible' (Morawska 1996).

A link that some literature contains, and that this work refers to, is the decline of Fordism. For instance, Paci argues that in Italy this was centre on the model of the male breadwinner, to whom was granted security. This was repaid by the restrictions in his realisation of attitudes and talent, and by the illiberty of the rest of the family, which was excluded from any decisional process. As in Enrico's and Rico's stories (Sennett 1998), it was believed that the fathers' renunciations would be redeemed by their better educated sons (Paci 2005). According to Paci, what is implied in the historical process of individualisation is to be considered among the factors and not among the consequences of the transformation now taking place. To do this, by the way, one needs to 'take individualisation seriously' (Paci 2005: 12-13).

Individualisation is both a risk and an opportunity. Old risks were eventual and circumscribed in their nature. Now they are diffuse threats, and when they occur, they tend to last for a long time and are difficult to dispose of (Paci 2005). It also becomes crucial to look at the role of individualisation within the family, for instance women's roles have become much more individualised exactly at the moment when they have started to become emancipated from the role of the housewife and oriented towards a professional life outside the family sphere (Paci 2005).

It will now be clearer why individualisation is a recent process. In fact, private property, on which many rights were based, has worked as a discriminatory factor in that only those who retained it could exercise certain rights - in other words were in conditions of empowerment - while the rest were substantially excluded. Therefore for the period of the industrial society the process of individualisation has concerned only the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, nobody is excluded from the new risks of individualisation (Paci 2005), and in particular from new difficulties in planning his/her life.

1.4.3 Self-entrepreneurship

Both individualism and individualisation, however, seem to co-exist well with another form of strong promotion of the self which can be called self-entrepreneurship. The enterprise culture involves, to quote Du Gay, 'the reconstruction of a wide range of institutions and activities along the lines of the commercial business organisation' (1996: 56). What is more important, is that 'the market has also come to define the sort of relation an individual should have with himself or herself' (Du Gay 1996: 56). It is on this second definition that I am particularly concentrating. The idea that self-expressive labour is increasingly mediated by a self

entrepreneurial ideology is now widely recognised. McRobbie (2001) suggests that Sennett uses this concept for the US (1998), Beck for Brazil (2000), Leadbeater for the Silicon Valley (1997). Handy's work on *New Alchemists* (1999) is also very interesting. Alchemists are in fact entrepreneurs - he considers that the French word has been degraded in Europe. Handy reports a series of stories told by twenty-nine individuals, who have made 'something out of nothing'. Handy's standpoint is that in and around London there are special individuals, whose success is not measured in terms of money, who have been able to interpret a general need in an especially original and competitive way.

Management has particularly been invested in the rhetorical discourse of shifting from the bureaucratic to the entrepreneurial, as if the cultural change programme, entering all aspects of daily life, could resolve any problems. Excellent companies seek to cultivate 'enterprising subjects' (Du Gay 1996: 60). The individual's capacities sought after are: self-motivation, enterprise, energy, initiative, self-reliance, personal responsibility. There is a constant work of calculation of the individual on him / herself in order to reach a self-improvement.

In this way the entrepreneur is not simply the founder of business. The 'entrepreneurial revolution provides the possibility for every member of an organisation to express individual initiative and to develop fully the potential in the service of the corporation' (Du Gay 1996: 62). The role of work in the total project of self-realisation is invasive. For the New Right, 'becoming a better worker is represented as the same thing as becoming a more virtuous person, a better self' (Du Gay 1996: 64). The new revolution contemplates a shift from the dependency mentality to the entrepreneurial spirit (Du Gay 1996).

Culture is paramount because it is seen to structure the way people think, make decisions and act in organisations. Culture is represented as an answer to the problems thrown up by the increasingly dislocated ground upon which globalised capitalism operates (Du Gay 1996: 57). The 'employee', just as much as the 'sovereign consumer', is represented as an individual in search of meaning and fulfilment, one looking to 'add value' in every sphere of existence. In this view, 'paid work and consumption are just different playing grounds for the same activity' (Du Gay 1996: 65).

1.5 Conclusions

This chapter outlines what changes are taking place in the global labour market. Wide transformations, such as the decline of Fordism, produce not only a variety of working situations, but also a dichotomy of stories told: stories of success on the one hand, and of deep deprivation on the other. By presenting the terms in which these issues have been dealt with so far, I shall critically assess these and I propose to focus on flexi-lives rather than on flexi-jobs.

This chapter also introduces a few conceptual devices enabling understanding of how careers in the flexible labour market are experiencing differently the contexts examined. These concepts are individualism, individualisation and self-entrepreneurship. Individualism is mostly associated with first modernity, western realities and contemporary US, and refers to the primacy of the individual and the individual's interest over community demands. Indi-

vidualisation consists of the necessity, for the individual, to find his/her own path as a unique solution, differentiating from given trajectories (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). Self- entrepreneurship indicates that workers increasingly have to construct their careers – and ultimately themselves - as an enterprise, consistently playing an active role. The present chapter is structured with a close connection to the following one, where the introductory framework is completed by discussing the evolution of career structure and its interrelation with the interplay of agency and structure, in a way that further enhances the perspective on flexi-lives.

2. The interplay of agency and structure in the making of protean careers

2.1 Career-paths: an introduction

In this chapter I develop the argument that looking at flexi- lives, rather than at flexi-jobs, constitutes a fruitful perspective for understanding the dynamics into which recent graduates fall when building their professional career paths. This overarching theme is here approached by proposing 'career' as a focus of this research. Career is preferred, as opposed to either 'job' or 'labour market' firstly because it offers a more comprehensive outlook, secondly because it overcomes the separation between the job seeker / early career worker on the one hand and an 'objective' labour market and / or employment situation on the other. On the contrary, it establishes a link between the agent, who actively researches and activates the resources seemingly available, and the institutions themselves, that are in turn shaped by agent's action. Such a dynamic interplay embeds agents in their own material and cultural contexts and renders visible their orders of worth in choosing to activate a given resource rather than another. Therefore, this chapter not only reviews most relevant literature on careers, but also locates the book in a specific theoretical tradition.

Such issues become more relevant within a historical juncture in which the place of career in one's life has changed. Also, a focus on 'careers' offers a perspective on the temporal dimension of development that a focus on 'jobs' alone will not be able to show. Since careers are not central anymore in the traditional sense, they have to reconfigure themselves to find or define a new centrality and negotiate new meanings. What is the sense of its new centrality? What are the meanings that are still being attached to one's path?

The concept of a career has already known periods of great popularity. In structural terms, a career is a 'succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, though which a person moves in an ordered and (more-or-less) predictable sequence' (Wilensky 1961: 523). According to this author's view, careers are 'orderly progressions of jobs that represent change in responsibility, status, and authority', then 'ordered sequence of development extending over a period of years and involving progressively more responsible roles within an occupation' (1961: 523). In what Arthur and Rousseau call 'the old meaning', career is a 'course of professional advancement, whose usage is restricted to occupational groups with formal hierarchical progression, such as managers and professionals' (Arthur and Rousseau 1989: 372). This would rule out, for example, blue collars workers. In fact, the term career has mostly been reserved for those who expect to progress in a predictable order within a respectable profession, in terms of increasing responsibility, prestige and salary.

Although it was 'once viewed mainly as a synonym for initial job choice, it is now widely accepted as a central feature in employment arrangements' (Arthur et al. 1989). Traditional issues in career theory have concerned: social class determinants of career outcomes; static dispositional differences and their occupational implications; career stages that surround occupational choice and development; adult life course and the relationship of the career to other major life activities (Arthur et al. 1989: 9). Similarly, topical examples of social sciences viewpoints on the career concept can be identified as: career as social mobility, i.e. seeing a person's title as an indicator of social position; career as indicative of status passages, i.e. how rites and ceremony maintain a society or culture over time; career as the unfolding of social roles, which put emphasis on individual's reciprocal contribution to the social order; career as a component of the individual life structure: eras and transitions throughout the career are predictable and are accommodated in the work arrangements made (Arthur at al. 1989).

These traditions of studies consider upward mobility as a normative model. Therefore, comments are suggested on how to eliminate barriers, to proceed sooner, or to changes that can be made evident through job grades, promotion, plateauing, or increasing salary levels. In sum, by career we refer to the 'progression of an individual through an occupation via a series of predefined institutional gateways which secure standing in the community, increasing levels of seniority within the occupation, and increasing level of pay', an 'ongoing sequences of change of social status over time' (White 2006: 54). These steps are usually considered positive. Early ethnographic studies typically focused on aspects such as how to gain entrance to certain occupations, how to change jobs, and how to get promoted.

The concept of career I intend to promote in this book follows the Chicago school's position, where the subjective dimension is very important. Hughes says:

> 'Subjectively, a career is the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things that happen to him…Careers in our society are thought very much in terms of jobs, for these are the characteristic and crucial connections of the individual with the institutional structure…but the careers is by no means exhausted in a series of business and professional achievements. There are other points at which one's life touches the social order…it is possible to have a career in an avocation as well as in vocation (Hughes 1937: 409-410).

In working on these principles, the Chicago school did not necessarily consider the focus on the succession of jobs, vertical mobility, or other formally organised contexts as the most revealing insight on careers. Instead, careers were viewed as social constructions woven together by four themes: a) status passages; b) the objective and subjective; c) properties of collectives; d) social structures (Arthur et al. 1989: 5). Most of all, career is here the 'evolving sequence of a person's work experience over time (Arthur et al. 1989: 8), all that work can mean 'for the ways in which we see and experience other people, organisations and society' (Arthur et al. 1989: 8). In this sense, being in a career is not the same thing as being a careerist[9], which seemed implicit in the structural version. It is considered that with their distinctive approach, Chicago school scholars posed the basis for considering structure as a 'grammar

[9] The term 'careerist' is deemed to hold negative connotations. Raymond Williams notes that this expression should directly remind one of the idea of the rat-race, and that in this sense it is 'held carefully separate from the positive implication of career' (1976 : 53).

composed of rules that can vary across time and from situation to situation', rather than as social forms that constrain life (Barley 1989:42).

The metaphor of the career as a journey has also been suggested. Journeys have beginnings and ends, 'with purposes connecting them- a reassuring image' (Nicholson and West 1989: 181). These authors also stress the linguistic remark that the use of the term career to mean 'course' is a fairly recent linguistic re-adoption from several Romance languages, where its semantic root denoted a 'carriage way' or road (Onions 1966). In comparison, the term 'work histories' is more neutral, and would denote sequences of job experiences, where career is the sense that people make of work histories. How people explain their past work histories is part of the process by which they form the purposes and cognition that may help shape their futures. So, in a sense, if work histories are lifetime journeys, then careers are the tales that are told about them (Nicholson and West 1989: 182), and after all, for these authors everyone who works has a career.

Evetts (1996) uses the term 'subjective career' to describe how individual actors influence and develop their own social frameworks and social world in formal organisations. For Hughes (1937), subjective careers consist of individuals' own changing perspectives towards their careers: how employee experience 'having a career'. This approach suggests that a variety of career outputs could be regarded as success.

The Chicago school enlarged very much the concept of 'career' until making it applicable to a wide range of situations (Barley 1989). Concepts such as 'role, self, identity and institution were created 'tentatively', and proposed as 'heuristic' (Barley 1989: 46). According to this author, main perspectives were: career contingencies (Becker, 1953); career timetable (Roth 1963); and career lines (Hughes 1958, 1937). Vertical mobility is thus important in certain occupations to formulate a meaningful career and status passages, but this is not exhaustive of all possible careers (Glaser and Strauss 1971). Longitudinal passages, for instance, must also be considered. Also, transitions are important, as are chains of transitional cycles. People adjust by adapting themselves to their jobs. We would expect individuals 'to modify their interpretations of objects, events, and people in systematic ways as they move from one position to another' (Barley 1989: 57): but a 'series of status can be said to have syntactical properties only when it influences how people interpret their biographies' (Barley 1989: 57). The conception of the subjective career offers interesting insights in analysing the flexi-lives' accounts within the present work, which considers in a very open way the strategies of actions.

2.2 Protean careers

I have so far offered a few elements to suggest that traditional careers and work are increasingly being challenged in post industrial societies. The sort of career one is able to have is more and more crucial in an increasingly interconnected world. The arena in which graduates are called to operate is characterised by the coexistence of new opportunities on the one hand, and insecurity and uncertainty on the other (Arthur and Rousseau 1996). However, although 'effective careers would benefit individuals, organizations, and society' (Miles and Snow 1996: 97), the challenge is mostly on agents' shoulders, and consists in balancing one's personal needs with one's professional demands. Careers in the so called third wave (or net-

work) organization[10] are affected by firms' strategy 'do only what you do best, and then outsource non-core operations to other specialist firms' (Miles 1996: 103). The fourth wave organization is characterised by cellular firms, in which 'the organization functions not as an employer, but as a facilitating mechanism to promote the application and enhancement of the professional skills of its membership (Miles 1996: 111). As Sennett warns:

> 'Career' in its English origins meant a road for carriages, and as eventually applied to labour meant a lifelong channel for one's economic pursuits. Flexible capitalism has blocked the straight roadway of career, diverting employees suddenly from one kind of work to another. The word "job" in English of the fourteenth century meant a lump or piece of something which could be carried around. Flexibility today bring back the arcane sense of the job, as people do lumps of labour, pieces of work, during the course of a lifetime' (Sennett 1998: 9).

The expression 'protean career' has been suggested by Hall (1976, 1996), who took inspiration from the Greek god Proteus, who 'could change shape at will'. It is 'a process which the person, not the organisation is managing. It consists of all the 'person's varied experiences in education, training, work in several organisations, changes in occupational fields etc.' (Hall 1976: 201). Labour is tackled in projects, and since not every task is continuous, once the task is achieved, single individuals move to another group work. Subsequent job might, or might not, be internal to the same agency, and is not necessarily more difficult, more complex, more rewarding, better paid, or involving higher recognition. Workers are supposed to develop a portfolio of skills, which implies the ability to reconvert quickly skills already possessed depending on the working environment and tasks. Such skills define the condition of 'employability', which is also supported by the educational system, which asks students to develop problem-solving skills. In this exact sense, the term 'portfolio career' has also been used (Handy 1994). This system does not allow for a sharp definition of the parts involved in the bargaining relations, while mutual interests are represented and defended through pressure group activities. Some of the most dynamic workers 'use' fragmentary employment to gain the experience necessary to start their own business at a later date. Under extreme turnover, companies offer incentives to the best employees to persuade them not to quit the company. Thinking of careers as open offers new ways of thinking about work over time. In the medium term, the significance of peaks and valleys is encompassed (Mirvis and Hall 1996). New meanings underline the unfolding sequence of any person's work experience over time. People create meanings out of life experiences to build a sense of psychological success (Mirvis and Hall 1996).

2.3 Boundaryless careers

Another way to look at new careers is to conceive of them as 'boundaryless'. This term refers to 'a range of possible forms that defies traditional employment assumptions' (Arthur and Rousseau 1996: 3), and it takes shape moving across the boundaries of separate employ-

[10] New organisational frontiers and the negotiations through which early career professionals operate with them are discussed in chapter 5.

ers. The boundaryless career is independent from traditional organizational career arrangements, i.e. from the logic of vertical coordination, while relying more on the role of networking, learning and enterprise. The concept of boundaryless is primarily thought in contrast to bounded or organisational arrangements, where 'getting along meant doing what the firm wanted, getting ahead meant being grateful for opportunities the firm brought your way' (Arthur and Rousseau 1996: 3-4). In these organisational assets boundaries could limit and confine people to linear career paths in order to reach a functional focus. The boundaryless career is a 'disorderly' career, to use Wilensky's words (1961), whereas traditional organisational careers are 'orderly'.

Robinson and Miner argue that 'boundaryless organisations will not produce atomistic careers similar to those of independents agents', rather they 'will increase the number of job transitions created by organisation seeking to discover new knowledge' (1996: 76). They insist that the boundaryless organisation is an organisation whose membership rules, departmental identity rules, and job-responsibility rules are ambiguous. In this context, 'careers unfold unconstrained by clear boundaries around job activities, by fixed sequences of such activities, or by attachment to one organization' (Robinson and Miner 1996: 79). Boundaryless careers therefore pose new challenges.

In general, there is emphasis on the fact that traditional organisational boundaries are broken: this may be when a person rejects existing career opportunities for personal or family reasons or in general the career actor may interpret his / her career in a way that may perceive a boundaryless future regardless of structural constraints. For an academic or a carpenter the career draws validation and marketability from outside the present employer; the real-estate agent's career is sustained by external networks of information. In these representations of the career, it is more acceptable to talk about the different shapes that careers may take. In conclusion, the emergence of boundaryless careers invites one to consider organisations as 'processes' rather than statically (Arthur and Rousseau 1996: 9). The encouragement is that people should take responsibility for their own career futures. To do so, one should cultivate networks and gain access to other people's knowledge and resources. Therefore, entrepreneurship is fundamental for 'people pursuing modern –day, network sensitive careers' (Kanter 1989), next to the old assumption that jobs involving greater learning may not be guaranteed.

Boundaryless and protean careers are two sides of the same coin, but differ in their focus. While the first stresses the lack of boundaries among firms, the latter takes into more direct consideration the absence of boundaries in one's career. Thus, the latter is more appropriate for this study, as it is more useful to capture the continuous negotiation that agents incur into in building their paths. Nonetheless, I will introduce the most powerful representation of extreme boundaryless and protean careers, that is, Silicon Valley's career.

2.4 Silicon Valley's careers

According to Mirvis and Hall (1996), restructuring in the United States and elsewhere stems from the globalisation of the economy and the movement to information driven, increasingly service-based lines of business. The future projection is that large firms, through multiple divisions as well as joint venture, regional alliances, and private- public partnership,

will dominate major markets, while entrepreneurs, franchises, and small businesses will provide raw materials and technologies; handle support services; distribute goods; and at the same time, reach niches with their own products and services. This will see companies routinely reshaping and resizing themselves, regularly buying and selling off businesses, and periodically partnering with other institutions. These flexible firms, 'whether flying the flag of federalism or operating as virtual corporations, are coming to be called boundaryless organisations' (Mirvis and Hall 1996: 238). In this scenario, 'stable attachments become a rarity' (Mirvis and Hall 1996: 239).

However, 'the blurring of boundaries between firms provides a regional advantage for Silicon Valley. Open labour markets allow individuals and firms to experiment and to learn by continually recombining local knowledge, skills, and technology' (Saxenian 1996: 36). For career success, individuals in Silicon Valley rely on 'bars, health clubs, hobbyists' club, technical and professional associations, training programs, community colleges, universities, and a variety of other networks that cross company lines' (Saxenian 1996: 37). In this view, people like Weick celebrate the triumph of adaptation; the experiment; negotiations; responsibility. As a result, boundaryless careers shape firms at least as much as boundayless firms shape careers' (Weick 1996: 42). As external conditions become increasingly fragmented, one wonders what happens to the internal, to one's sense of self and continuity (Sennett 1998). From this, suggestions such as Hirsch' 'pack your own parachute' are derived (1987).

The Silicon Valley career is an extreme case of boundaryless careers, which tend to take shape in the special context of Silicon Valley. It is defined by the 'ability of an individual or a team to define new markets, technologies, products, and applications' (Saxenian 1996: 23). Archetypal Silicon Valley careers rely very much on the start up phase: it is formed by a group friends and/or former colleagues with an idea for a new product or application (Saxenian 1996: 30). Social and professional relationships remain intact, even moving from one firm to another, therefore there is virtually no sense of alienation in this (Saxenian 1996: 30). They can be easily referred to 'early stages of an industrial life cycle, when firms are small and technologies fluid' (Saxenian 1996: 32). In these careers, 'it can no longer be said that everyone knows everyone' (Saxenian 1996: 31). This is due to the fact that 'commitments are durable only when both the employer and the employee perceive a mutual interest in a continued association, and either part remains free to terminate the employment contract when mutual interests no longer prevail' (Defillippi and Arthur 1996: 125). Work relations are no longer comparable to marriages, rather more increasingly similar to 'just sex' relationships (Mirvis and Hall 1994).

2.5 Linking the making of a career to structure and agency

Sections 2.1 to 2.4 suggest that the transformation of one's career may have changed the perceived capacity to establish one's own route, at least according to traditional arrangements. This urges us to reconsider what aspects are involved in one's affirmation in the labour market. Building a (protean) career in such flexible general conditions may involve aspects of life which used to remain separate from work. For instance, I will show in chapter 6 that the professionals based in Italy interviewed 'use' their families to build a career. There-

fore, in the context of the reorganisation of careers we are urged to shift attention to how flexi-lives take place. Focusing on flexi-lives is also a way of doing 'open research', being sympathetic to all emerging aspects that may arise in the analysis of resources used to build a career. To suggest the sort of links that tie careers and the interplay to structure and agency, I will start by quoting Barley:

> 'If, as the Chicago sociologists suggested, careers are abstract of an individual's history of participation in a social collective, if career paths can be constructed as plans for participating in a collective, and if careers entails dynamics that link individuals to institutions, then their role in the structuration process can be readily conceived.[…] Careers can be thought of as temporally 'extended scripts that mediate between institutions and interactions. Like all scripts, careers should therefore offers actors interpretative schemes, resources, and norms for fashioning a course through some social world' (Barley 1989: 53).

Structuration theory extends career theory's scope beyond the contours of occupation and organisations. Arthur at al. suggest that 'careers reflect the relationships between people and the providers of official positions, namely, institutions or organisations, and how these relationships fluctuate over time' (1989: 9). They continue that, if seen in this way, the study of careers is the study of both individual and organisational change -as also Van Maanen argues (1977)- as well as of societal change (view suggested in turn by Kanter 1989). This is still true even accepting the thesis that individuals are generally embedded in several institutions simultaneously, as emphasised by Schein (1978). In this case, 'belonging to multiple, competing social systems, facilitates the possibility that sub-cultural forces for institutional change will arise' (Barley 1989: 57). For Barley, in this view, 'researchers need to identify that differently structured careers, in fact, sustain differently ordered institutions' (1989: 57).

A scholar who has linked careers to the debate on structure and agency is Julia Evetts (1996). In discussing the careers of women in science and engineering, she proceeds by making a distinction between agency and structural elements. More specifically, she makes a distinction between occupational careers, in which employees move from employers to employer in developing a career, and organisational careers, in which advancements are achieved within a single employing organisation.

In considering the dynamic agency structure, there is, on the one hand, the consideration of identity as 'how a person sees him or herself and incorporates how work is viewed by the person as performer' (Arthur et al. 1989: 12), and, on the other, of the fact that if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences, to mention the famous self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968), development of the Thomas Theorem. It will be clearer at this point why focusing on careers is an encouragement to study *both* individuals and institutions in their interconnections. While most literature tries to identify how jobs (out there) fit with the person who accomplishes it, or their suitability for climbing a subsequent career, a career is actually the result of continuous negotiations between the agent and what he/she identifies as resources to be used. In this view, the researcher must be ready to identify any factor that can be thought of as a resource. A holistic view of the person was present in the work of early career theorists such as Argyris (1957) and McGregor (1960), as Arthur at al. suggest (1989). Therein this view was less present and more fragmented, in favour of variables and process and not people. The concept of career promotes consideration of 'both the whole

person and the organisation, or institution, for which the work is being performed' (Arthur et al. 1989: 11).

Theoretically, it can be said that some basic elements of Giddens' Structuration Theory (1984) may help to reveal the mechanisms through which recent graduates (agents) interact with the opportunities available in the respective labour markets (structure). Intended as a basic ontological tool, it allows one to study the strategies behind the actions of individuals embedded in two different settings and coping with a limited array of opportunities available within their own contexts. This approach seems fruitful in looking at the genesis of motivation of action and career actions. Action and agency are typically contrasted with social structures that are seen as constraining and / or enabling social conditions in which action takes place. Much debate revolves around this relationship. I will introduce the most important aspects of this discussion; in particular, the categories of 'knowledgeability' and 'reflexivity' - and clarify what is meant in this book by agency, structure and cultural repertoires.

2.5.1 Agency

'Agency refers to doing' (Giddens 1984: 10). Agents have the ability to grasp what it is going on 'out there', to make sense of theirs and others peoples' actions, and to act with competence. The interconnection and interplay between agency and structure, characterised in terms of duality, first appears in *The Constitution of Society* (Giddens, 1984); since then, the issue has fuelled one of the most classical debates in sociology. Giddens develops the main concepts in the following order: agent, structure, reflexivity. For the stratification model of the agent he refers to: a) the reflexive monitoring of action; b) rationalisation of action; c) motivation of action. According to this perspective, agents are not only 'always rooted in a structural context', but also 'always and inevitably drawing upon their knowledge of that structural context when they engage in any sort of purposeful action' (Stones 2005: 17): this is called agent's capability. Discursive consciousness and practical consciousness are not distinguished in a 'rigid and impermeable' way (Giddens 1984: 7). The fact that agents are able to 'act otherwise' means that they can intervene in the world, or else they can *refrain* from such intervention, and this has also the effect of influencing external conditions. Actions depend upon the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events (Giddens 1984: 14). In this view, what it means 'to have no choice' is questioned (Giddens 1984: 15).

The expressions 'agency' and 'structure' began to be used in the seventies with reference to the 'relationship between the enactment of social practises on the one hand, and large scale enduring social phenomena on the other' (Cohen 2006: 16). The individual is no longer a counterpoint to structure. Instead, the counterpoint to structure is the enactment of forms of behaviour. For Cohen, individuals may want to direct their actions in certain ways in order to achieve their goals. Yet, this notwithstanding, they may lack the competences or the resources to do so. In other words, individuals in a given settings may not be able to enact certain practises, even if motivated to do so. Conversely, 'actors may generate aspects of social reality though they are unaware they exercise agency in this regard' (Cohen 2006: 16).

Thus, the themes '*old*' and '*new*' considered in terms of both organisation of labour, mental attitudes, transfiguration of workplaces, are paramount. Agents tend to identify what and

who is changing, the direction of the changes and locate themselves in this scenario, mostly giving themselves an active voice. In other words, there is a passage which may be personally shaped. A crucial role is played in the ability of the individual to plan his/her future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) as a basic feature of one's personality.

External conditions such as the increasing flexibility of labour markets, a certain organisation of professions etc 'enter' the agents, in the sense that they affect their general attitudes, but actions are 'reflexively monitored'. When they choose and implement counteractions to the adverse characteristics of the structure, agents act differently amongst one other. This implies that they are competent agents in that they have developed their own meanings and strategies. In particular, my sample is supposed to be aware of how both labour market and society work. This is due to the high level of education achieved, and to a sufficiently long direct experience of the labour market: both of these factors are likely to motivate their consequent professional decisions in a conscious way. The first characteristic should provide 'discursive knowledge', the second 'practical knowledge'. Therefore, the fact that the sample is made up of graduates makes the research more interesting, not only because graduates are more disposed to experience professional disillusion, but also because their choices should be more reasoned and taken more carefully. Such aspects can be well highlighted by using the structuration approach, since graduates rationally negotiate their career choices as a dynamic and recursive interaction with the structure (i.e. the labour market and general economic conditions).

Moreover, some of the elements that might have a discriminating impact when directing a given career path, may be identified as a general set of attitudes. This may be approached by Bourdieu's *habitus*. The mere fact of being educated, and more than this, the fact of having similar professions 'suggested' during university, as is the case for people with the same degree, does still suggest general social attitudes, a habitus[11], which is the manifestation of a given cultural capital. In extremely broad terms, one could think of a 'class' made up of graduates. In Marx's terminology, a unique 'consciousness' may be identified, showing a similar set of background knowledge and skills, a feeling of belonging to the same environment, even when economic origins differ.

2.5.2 Structure

Agents are recursively affected by the transformations of structural conditions of action. In extreme negative terms, society can be seen as the 'walls of our imprisonment', as Berger famously put it (1963: 109). The notion that society is prevalently made of rules is prevalent amongst functionalists and then to structuralists. On the contrary, for Giddens it is 'a recursively organised set of rules and resources' (1984: 25). As such, the dualism immanent in the notion that structure is like a skeleton is avoided, since structure is both constraining and enabling (1984). Sewell underlines that it is very difficult to define structure as existing 'apart from human agency'(1992: 82). There is an ongoing reciprocal relationship between structure and agency. Structural circumstances 'provide the means to reproduce social practises, but

[11] The habitus is intended by Bourdieu as an internalisation of the objective structure.

when social practises are reproduced they perpetuate the structure, making it 'a social reality in a new historical moment' (Cohen 2006: 16).

How can agency and structure be combined? Giddens's term 'structuration' aims at underlying the process of interconnectedness between the two elements, which is never given once and for all. Social actions in which agents are engaged create structures and both are recursively considered. Structures are not external to human action. According to Stones, it is exactly in the duality of structure that lies the distinctiveness of Structuration Theory; that is, the contextual emphasis on both structure and agency. Structure enters into the constitution of the agent, and from here into the practises that this agent produces. Structure is thus a significant medium, but also the outcome of the practises of agents (Giddens 1984). For example, knowledge is produced 'by reading books, the reproduction of a living language is made through speech [..], building of a house, the institution of a national tax system' (Stones 2005: 5).

I sympathise with two of Sewell's aims (1992): the recognition of the agency of social actors and the possibility of change immanent in the concept of structure. In Giddens' view, human agency and structure presuppose each other - the relationship is that of a process. Structures are not the patterned social practises that make up social system, but the 'principles that pattern these practises' (1992: 6). Thus, in this view, 'structures may empower agents differentially' (1992: 20); then 'not only are they schemas, but also resources' (1992: 23).

In this book, structure is identified in a few institutions, (for a definition of institutions see chapter 3) and discussed mainly from chapter 4 to 6. Despite being very influential, Structuration Theory has received much criticism since it first come out in 1984. There is no space in this book to explore all the points which have been made against it. Nonetheless, I wish to report here some main points which are most closely related to the reference I make to the theory. Firstly, according to Stones, Giddens never specifies 'which structure' and 'which agent', thus leaving the researcher unclear as to how to proceed with implementing the theory. To say it with Stones, Giddens wants to find a way of 'avoiding the voluntarism involved in subjectivism and the reification involved in subjectivism' (2005: 14). Yet, the original formulation of Structuration Theory needs further specification in order to be useful for empirical studies, although it has already been applied elsewhere (Boucaut 2001, Stones 2002, 2005, Morawska 1996, Kouroubali 2002).

2.6 Agents and structure in their culture

The concept of agency drives the notion of worldviews. But how do agents come to know and act in their world? It is necessary to substantiate the basic notions offered by Structuration Theory and find a way to embed the agents we want to consider - early career path professionals based in England and Italy. The question is thus, what constitutes a cultural context. Moving from Giddens theory, one can ask what culture is, as in fact different conceptions of culture exist. Culture is made by those meanings that any groups or society uses to interpret and evaluate itself and its situation (Bellah et al. 1985). Therefore, it is a 'constitutive dimension of all human action', not only an epiphenomenon to be explained by economic of political factors. An important contribution is for Swidler (1986) the concept of

cultural repertoires. She argues that 'a strategy of action involves characteristic way of solving problems and a characteristic set of problems to be solved' (2001: 86).

In this sense, 'strategies of action necessarily depend on culture' (2001: 83), and realize the attempt to link agency and structure. Cultural repertoires, in particular, mobilize culture for practical use. I will show throughout the following chapters what reasoning, and what factors, are put forward in the telling of a career narrative. For Swidler, the problem is that:

> 'whether they define culture as public symbols, entire ways of life, or individual knowledge, conventional views leave us very much at a loss when it comes to studying how culture is actually put to use by social actors' (2001: 12).

It is therefore necessary to investigate how cultural repertoires shape and are shaped by human action. For Swidler, institutional constraints can give coherence to individuals' life strategies and thus to the cultural narratives, practises, or capacities. Institutions also create cultural consistency by providing the basis for a shared culture (2001: 176). The point is, therefore, to understand how specific institutions draw the very sustenance from the patterning of people's lives. A social institution can be fully understood only if we do not limit ourselves to the abstract study of its formal organisation, but analyse the way in which it appears in the personal experience of various members of the group and follow the influence it has upon their lives (Thomas and Znaniecki 1948, or. ed. 1918). It is in this way that the institutions chosen (chapter 3) will be discussed in chapters 4 to 6.

It is important to fuse the objectives, to establish a link between individual and social structure. There is a recursion by which 'institutions jointly 'constitute' and are 'constituted by' the actions of individuals living their daily lives' (Barley 1989: 52). The pieces of research put together by Hughes and his students, for instance, were in fact portraying a whole society rather than certain occupations. Career scripts provide 'resources, interpretative schemes, and norms that shape people's actions and how their actions, in turn, modify career scripts' (Barley 1989: 54). How do actors draw on these scripts to compose meaningful biographies whose patterns are consistent with institutional forms?

In the traditional Geertzian view (1973), cultural materials were assumed to form a unified 'cultural system', and the question of how particular pieces of culture could actually become meaningful for people could hardly be raised (Swidler 2001). Swidler wonders 'what difference it makes for someone to participate in a particular culture' (Swidler 2001: 13). In fact, we always '*select* among cultural competitors for our engagement. In this way our cultural universe is 'much wider and more diverse than the culture we make fully our own' (2001: 15).

To describe how culture works, Swidler proposes a new metaphor. She argues that we must think of culture 'less as a great stream in which we are all immersed, and more as a bag of tricks or an oddly assorted tool kit containing implements of varying shapes that fit the hand more or less well, are not always easy to use, and only sometimes do the job' (2001: 24). This is to underline that 'people are often 'used by' their culture as much as they use it' (2001: 24), and therefore agents are far from being only passive actors (2001) - something that also Structuration Theory puts forward. Nonetheless, for Sewell culture *has* a constitutive role, so that it constitutes simultaneously 'multiple selves, worlds, and modes of action' (1992: 24). And in fact people maintain 'conflicting cultural capacities and worldviews' (Sewell 1992: 13). An advantage of thinking of culture as repertoire is that it 'emphasises the

way culture looks like a set of skills, which one can learn more or less thoroughly, enact with more or less grace and conviction', as Swidler (2001: 25) argues referring to Sudnow (1978). It is also true that 'cultural symbols, rules, or rituals only sometimes 'work' for people' (Swidler 2001: 25). In this book, one should wonder whether there is a mainstream British / Italian working culture, and how resources are enacted. There is a 'fluidity and logic with which persons mobilize different parts of their cultural repertoires' (Swidler 2001: 25).

Thinking of culture as wide repertoire allows us to make use of it as a useful tool kit in understanding how culture is actually brought to bear on experience. Social structure is itself constituted by culture and that 'culture exists only when it is enacted in concrete forms'. While much has been written on the coherence of culture departing from Geertz, Swidler points out that not equal attention has been paid to 'the capacity of culture for creating *multiple* possible meanings' (2001: 40). For Swidler, people vary greatly in how much culture they 'apply' to their own lives (2001: 46), and also in the ways they 'integrate culture and experience' (2001: 53), or indeed 'employ' it (2001: 69).

Culture drives contemporary social change, but not in the way the conventional sociological models suggest. For instance, 'culture shapes societies, not through values but by furnishing a repertoires of capacities for action that can be mobilised to achieve new objectives' (Swidler 2001: 81). To exemplify how people use culture, one can look at the process of 'becom[ing] a certain kind of self; […] learn[ing] styles, skills, and habits; and […] support[ing] these with a larger worldview (2001: 79). These comments are potentially very revealing in looking at early career orientations.

Both individuals and groups attempt to maintain diverse repertoires of strategies of action, within the constraints set by investments and commitment search of these strategies demand (Swidler 2001: 83). To what extent is a young professional willing to diversify from given working paths? Strategies of action are tied to culture, and 'cultural experiences shape the sense of self, the styles and habits of acting, and the larger beliefs about the world that allow individuals and groups to construct and enact particular life strategies' (Swidler 2001: 83). Swidler continues that culture influences social action because it supports or limits the strategies of action people can pursue. Strategies of action are also inherently social. It is also important to specify that 'individuals maintain cultural capacities for varied strategies of action which they mobilise differently in different situations' (2001: 84). Therefore the cultural influences on individuals and groups 'form their capacities for action, not their ends or goals' (Swidler 2001: 84).

Another important point that Swidler produces is the distinction between the settled and unsettled situation. In some cases people demonstrate cultural lag: the reluctance to abandon established strategies of action. It is normal if:

> 'people do not readily take advantage of new structural opportunities that would require them to abandon established ways of life. […] They are reluctant to discard familiar strategies of action for which they already have the cultural equipment' (Swidler 2001: 105).

On the contrary, in unsettled situations 'new strategies of action are being developed and tried out' (Swidler 2001: 89). In the latter case there seems to be 'more culture', and this is visible because 'people actively use culture to learn new ways of being' (Swidler 2001: 89). In

my work, such a distinction is relevant as it is underlined that the phenomenon of flexibility is more 'settled' for the groups of professionals based in England, and thus it is interesting to study what different reactions are involved. The recent transformation of work outlined in chapter 1 would suggest an unsettled situation, with possibilities for nostalgia.

Also Boltanski and Thévenot move in a similar direction (1999). In a following work, Lamont and Thévenot have extended the analysis across space, proving that the concept of orders of justification also have lot to say in relation to contexts other than France.

Following these authors, investigations could therefore be done in terms of 'orders of worth'. Boltanski and Thévenot have shown how actors can switch between different frameworks and principles of justification within the very same social settings, depending upon how a given situation is defined, offering in this way interesting bases for comments on the graduate career propaganda (Cuzzocrea 2009 b). Agency refers to a person's particular social milieu, on which there is a creative work. Regardless of the effectiveness of personal transformative power, everyone exercises some measure of agency.

Repertoires of evaluation (Lamont and Thévenot 2000), are a 'theoretical approach for comparative cultural sociology to analyse national cultural differences while avoiding the pitfalls of culturalism'. The aim is to develop the concept of national cultural repertoires of evaluation to point to cultural tools that are unevenly available across situations and national contexts'. By focusing on contemporary US and France, the research group also has an empirical aim. That is, to document the 'extent to which different criteria of evaluation are salient in the French and American national cultural repertoires and the rules that people follow in justify their use' (2000: 1).

Therefore, the contexts in which individuals draw boundaries become culturally understood, allowing us to depart from the idea that cultures are only 'unproblematised black boxes' (Lamont and Thévenot 2000: 7). For Lamont, there are relatively stable schemas of evaluation that are used in different proportions across national contexts. For the purpose of this project, the work directed by Lamont and Thévenot is quite interesting and relevant firstly because the logic of cultural repertoires and orders of worth is used to specifically look at professional elites. Secondly, they address theoretical questions that are generally similar to mine. These are, in relation to two contexts, what constitutes what, i.e. what constitutes a precarious working situation for the groups of professionals based in Italy and for those based in England. And, for the same groups of people, what constitutes a fairly reasonable secure and / or fulfilling work situation. More generally, what makes a successful graduate in career in accountancy, engineering and HR. Finally, in the context of these three professions, or cultural institutions, which factors prevail. Which are used more often to justify a certain strategy of action or conception of work life?

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that a 'definition of structure as made up of both schemas and resources avoids both the material determinism of traditional Marxism and the ideal determinism of traditional French structuralism' (1998: 13). In their view, agents are empowered to act with and against others by structure: they have 'knowledge of the schemas that inform social life and have access to some measures of human and non human resources' (1998: 20). One way to solve the fact that repertoires have been largely conceived as unstructured entities is 'to demonstrate a systematic interest in their internal contexts and structures' (Silber 2003: 428). This entails systematic exploration of 'principles of evaluation

that are mobilised within local, detailed and contingent situations, and also transcend them' (Silber 2003: 429). 'Repertoires of justification' implies that individuals are never completely free and flexible, 'they can only choose from the ultimately limited pools of regimes of criticism and justification that happen to have been made available historically to them' (Silber 2003: 430). In general, we should remember that structure is both enabling and constraining, as Giddens argues, but never 'static or closed' (Silber 2003: 431), and therefore a lot depends on how it is used.

The 2001 meeting of the Comparative-Historical and Cultural Sociology section of the American Sociological Association has produced interesting comments on such issues. In this event, scholars like Ann Swidler, Michele Lamont, Ewa Morawska, Andrew McLean, and Sewell discussed the role of cultural repertoires in their own fields of enquiry. There seems to emerge a series of topical questions, such as 'what are the tools available for each group?'(Swidler). And once acknowledged that there is a variety of resources, 'what tools groups are more likely to use given the structural situation in which they find themselves?' (Lamont): these are also my questions and these will be examined throughout the interpretative chapters. Certain tools are 'more readily available in some contexts rather than in others'. The metaphor of cultural repertoires, argues Silber, has successfully substitutes others such as cultural systems and cultural codes: 'structure is both enabling and constraining; limiting but also flexible; relatively stable yet never utterly static or close. Each regime of justification has its own distinctive internal logic'. For Morawska, it is paramount to conceive of cultural repertoires as processes rather than static entities. She argues that in general, there is space for contradiction, since social systems are not unified, nor deterministic. Culture is always changing, contradictory, in flux. Following this, it would be interesting to see if time, and maybe a stronger pressure of globalisation, will reduce the gap in contrasting attitudes of professionals based in England and Italy found in the interviews conducted for this book.

On the whole, though, Structuration Theory is useful to the extents that it forces us to think of the nature of the interaction between agency and structure. A further element to take into account in this book is the comparative nature of this piece of research. Cultural and values differences between the two countries are in fact crucial in understanding coping strategies. Culture, politics and economy, not to mention labour market strictly speaking, define two microcosms with their own values, code of behaviour, hierarchies etc. How do these universes, with their own values, codes of behaviour, hierarchies, and so on, look at each other? And represent themselves? If we find it acceptable to consider labour markets not only as productive organizations, with a economic valued input and output, but as complex cultural system, we should renounce the consideration of agents only as abstract puppets directed by someone else's hands. We need, instead, a more comprehensive set of tools being able to consider together heterogeneous characteristics and hopefully to discern among them depending on necessity. This is about internal logic and internal contradiction: different groups have different ways of looking at their careers, the opportunities that could be taken, and the constraints that should be avoided. Certain orientations and value goals are valid for professionals in England but not for those based in Italy, each of these ultimately 'construct' their flexible lives with their own meanings.

2.7 Conclusions

This chapter contains a literature review from both a substantive and theoretical standpoint: I have explored the concept of career and how it has changed in recent years: therefore from the organisational and vertical career to the protean career. I have also mentioned the various sorts of extreme forms of careers that are taking shape in particularly extreme conditions of boundarylessness, such as in Silicon Valley. The leading motives of this sort of career is the accent put on the individual responsibility in constructing a working path. The identification of this crucial concept leads us to an investigation of the interplay of agency and structure, typical of the Structuration Theory debate, in which this book wants to enter. Looking at the issue from a more specific angle, we can push further the argument that flexi-lives are a better focus than flexi jobs, as initially put in chapter 1.

3. Methods: the axes of a multi - dimensional comparison

3.1 The comparative perspective adopted

This chapter explores the reasons why the present research project has been conceived as comparative and offers an overview of other methodological issues encountered. The comparative perspective adopted concerns mostly the axis professionals early in their careers based in England versus professionals early in their careers based in Italy, and seeks to compare how these two groups construct their own professional paths, highlighting what specific orders of worth are involved in the strategies of the two groups. The book also contains a second axis of comparison which seeks to contrast the experiences of professionals in the fields of engineering, human resources and accountancy, although this is a less relevant dimension. Each chapter integrates a comparison within itself, that is, it considers both professionals working in Italy and England.

As underlined in chapter 1, the main research questions can be summarised as follows: how does the increasing flexibility of the labour market affect the way in which young professionals build their career paths? This very broad question is operationalised in sub-questions that seek to isolate the various elements that compose what I refer to as culturally affected strategies. Sub-questions were conceived to put emphasis on the resources effectively used and the cultural elements employed to explain an eventual different attitude, and therefore can be formulated as: What resources do graduates have to build their careers and how do they activate them? What cultural repertoires are enacted and how do they explain the various strategies used in building a professional career?

Being immersed in our own *Zeitgeist*, we often underestimate the pressure that various agents of socialisation pose on achievements and notions of success. This brings us to behave in a conformist way, neglecting our ability to 'act otherwise', to use structuration theory terminology. By comparing young professionals embedded in different cultural, social and economic contexts of tradition, we see much more clearly the cultural repertoires and the sort of negotiations that characterises the relationship enacted by agents with respect to institutions.

The focus on professionals early in their careers rather than on the broader group of recent graduates allows, in the first place, for a reduction of the variety of the diverse figures in the labour markets. In the second place, the specific features of the professional institutions enriches the study, considering directly some of the possible elements of social closure playing a key role in the effort to get established. The element in common, which holds the two groups together, is primarily their position at a specific moment in the course of their lives;

at which they have concluded their studies, have had some experience of the labour market and professional work and are still investing a lot in this, but on the other hand keeping their perspective open, as their career is still open to substantial development. This perspective is investigated mainly in chapter 5. As already made clear in chapter 1, these young professionals are observed in a period of particularly interesting conjuncture of the institutionalisation of flexible work and flexible careers in both contexts. Chapter 3 specifies the characteristics of the two contexts.

Therefore what is more specifically compared is the way in which the contexts in which the professionals are embedded in Italy and England are conceptualised and used for the agents (professionals) to act in the world and construct their career paths. In this view, of particular interest are the reasonings that interviewees give for choices taken and to be taken. Agents need to maintain consistency of self and identity, and to boost their self esteem. Accounts (as well as narratives) 'reconstruct past events and thereby confer meanings on those events' (Maines 2006: 113). I will seek to reconstruct the orders of worth around which interviewees' accounts take shape.

3.2 Tensions in comparative research

Isin (2006) recalls a famous passage from *The Rules of Sociological Methods* (1895), in which Durkheim argues that 'comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts'. A number of scholars assume similar positions. Smelser declares that the meaning he gives to Durkheim's statement is that 'all social sciences involve accounting for variation among human beings and social arrangements'(2003: 644). As such, he concludes that it is difficult to accept the arguments of scholars *against* comparative research. Comparative analysis, Smelser continues, 'has come to mean the description and explanation of similarities and differences (mainly differences) of conditions or outcomes among large-scale social units, usually regions, nations, societies and cultures' (2003: 645).

Generally, comparative research deals with observable differences in a systematic way. Models of comparative approaches vary according to the standpoint of the difference. The most basic model of comparative research, called by Smelser descriptive-valutative (1996), sees as crucial that the simple fact that the context observed is different from that of the author, like in More's Utopia (1516). Generally, one should be aware of the relativity of a system of culture – what Smelser calls the descriptive specific model (1996): in order to understand different ways of life, the researcher can isolate and control possible explicative factors. In this study, this is done by bracketing economic factors *tout court* and putting emphasis instead on the cultural aspects of work emerging around the institutionalisation of flexibility in two different contexts: England and southern Italy. In this broad sense the projects takes inspiration from Tocqueville's famous study on the institutionalisation of equality in America (1848).

However, things are more complicated than so far described. There are a number of challenges that characterise comparative research. One of the main pitfalls of the literature on comparative research is that one is tempted to conceive of the contexts under examination as

equally relevant, as on the same level, as if they did not look at each other, as if their differences matter only in the mind of the researchers but certainly not for those who are being studied. My position is that European realities become increasingly closer and interconnected to each other, partly as a result of the effects of globalisation on economic assets. On the other hand, by no means can it be said that graduate careers in Italy and England are equally appealing to lay people: the latter is certainly generally seen and represented as more successful. The stereotypical image of a 'career in England' is seen as fast, hectic, characterised by gender and race equality[12]. Similarly, it could be said that among the various professions some are more able to attract school leavers and graduates. We could also look at how the Italian family is perceived by the English (see chapter 5). Such a view would include: reciprocal support among its members (sometimes seen as intrusiveness), patriarchal organisation, particular closeness between the mother and the sons/daughters, the habit of meeting up in big groups of relatives. Dramatic changes in the demographic structure, and the drop in the birth rate suggests that such a view is outdated and that the stereotype has been challenged. By adopting a comparative perspective, my aim is to disclose the stereotypes, which are in their own right interesting, to bring to life communalities and divergences, and to propose a thesis of why it is so, that is, on which cultural grounds the differences are to be found.

I was seduced by the interviewees' accounts - some of whom were quite good at telling their experiences, their stories - and it took me some time to shake off the emotional part and step back to gain enough reflexivity to analyse their accounts. 'Distancing' is a crucial, yet neglected topic in methodological debates (Ybema and Kamsteeg 2009).

3.3 Comparing professionals based in England with professionals based in Italy

In this book I seek to investigate the dynamic agent-structure of what I will call from here on 'professionals *based* in England and/or Italy'. This formulation manages to distract attention from the contexts *per se*, and at the same time introduces the characterisation of the agent as embedded in a given context, where he/she has mainly experienced his/her (secondary) working socialisation.

The choice of Italy and England contexts originated in the acknowledgement that different extents and forms of flexibility characterise them, and therefore the existence of different resources to be implemented and different conceptions of work achievement are to be expected. It is therefore with regard to flexibility that I am interested in the two contexts. Italy and England share a common trend towards flexible patterns of employment, the very nature of this trend being dynamic in its nature. In this sense, and following the description given in chapter 1, Italy and England are assimilated into each other. However, if we look critically at the functions of the labour market, the normative framework and values of work, it is interesting to consider that in the two contexts they evolve differently, each at its own speed. These aspects should therefore be taken into account in questioning an eventual 'con-

[12] There is massive evidence that is not so, as not only academic literature underlines, but also books with a wider readership, such as *The Idler Book of Crap Jobs* (Kieran 2004, also translated into Italian in 2007).

vergence' of the two contexts. I shall here underline more specifically the ways in which Italy and England are characterised differently, dealing with Italy first, then with England.

3.3.1 Italy

To some extent, and despite the expansion in recent years, Italian flexibility is a 'proto' flexibility, because it basically remains an employment phenomenon, while in the organisation of work some aspects of the Fordist system and a general patriarchal asset are still predominant, as many still think of the sequence education/work/retirement as 'the' rhythm of life (see chapters 1 and 5). In recent years governmental policies have offered the possibility to reduce the responsibilities of employers towards their employees, and this has opened the way to precarious work, as flexibility is mostly seen by public opinion. The education system is based on general knowledge and lacks a vocational approach, which of course makes entry unemployment even worse. Interestingly, this is linked to a traditional high level of entry unemployment (see chapter 6).

One way to look at the context is to frame it in the development of law governing flexible employment. In the last century, Italians traditionally experienced very secure employment due to the involvement of the state in ensuring this kind of stability, as employment was also considered a basic citizen's right. This situation was on the other hand counterbalanced by long exclusions for those out of employment, configuring in such a way either in or out situations. It can be said that the overall condition for those in the market was better than that in the rest of Europe, for instance (Degiuli and Kollmeyer 2007).

In recent years, much violent debate prevented the abrogation of article 18 of the Charter of Workers' Rights Status, that since 1970 has avoided the dismissal of workers without just reason ('giusta causa' or 'giustificato motivo'). Since that article refers only to firms with at least fifteen employees, and the Italian economy is largely based on micro-firms, the debate has been notable for principle rather than substance. In the light of the rampant entry flexibility that legislation has nonetheless introduced, this article radically preventing exit flexibility seems a way to exacerbate the phenomenon, on which public opinion is ambiguous. For instance, a book recently written by the authoritative economist Pietro Ichino on the irremovability of workers in the public sector, *I Nullafacenti* (2006)[13], has received less attention than it deserves.

In the meantime the 'legge 196/97'[14], known as 'Pacchetto Treu', has greatly modified the existing legislation. One of the most important forms of contract that has been approved, and has now obtained a certain degree of success, is agency working, that for cultural reasons has been very difficult for Italians to accept, though very common in other western countries. One of the reasons for this is that Italy has suffered from the phenomenon of 'caporalato'[15] for a long time, and seen workers as commodities to be hired on demand, is seen as a dangerous way to reintroduce that exploitative form of work and legalise it. In substance, in Italy atypical employment is certainly seen as 'inferior', only slightly better than black work. The proliferation of legislation on the matter is tied to the necessity of distin-

[13] It can be translated as 'the idlers'.
[14] The laws, in Italian, can be found at: http://www.parlamento.it/leggi/97196l.htm.
[15] Illegal hiring of poorly paid farm labourers through intermediaries.

guishing and producing norms on the difference between dependent employment and autonomous employment, with the result that such traditional dualism within sociology of work[16] are exacerbated. The 'legge delega n. 30'[17] and 'decreto legislativo 276/2003'[18] have again redesigned Labour Law, increasing arrangements different from standard form until twenty-one. These, in turn, can be applied in twenty-one forms and forty-eight modalities, giving shape to different rights and benefits (Rapporto ISTAT 2004). Cesare Damiano, recently Minister of Work, has produced various publications in order to explain this complicated legislative scene (2004a, 2004 b, Damiano et al. 2005), but the general situation has certainly remained chaotic.

Another specific point that needs to be made is that, on the whole, Italian flexibility has been experiencing difficulties becoming accepted as a 'normal' and pervasive reality. Flexibility clashes with the overall picture of what society would propose as the best economic balance, and that is why it is misunderstood and unappreciated. As Valenti suggests (2004), institutions make an extensive use of flexibility, but do not understand the very nature of flexible work, and conceive of it as a mere employment fact.

As far as Italy is concerned, the term flexibility is associated with the industrial districts of northern Italy, in which niches of specialisation and collaboration among small firms have succeeded in establishing a fruitful network among the various sectors of production. This is usually portrayed in literature as a successful case, but flexible specialisation is not the focus of this book. Nor is northern Italy.

The fieldwork was conducted in Cagliari and Naples. These two were chosen as significant for southern Italy, where the rhetoric of the job-for-life as a preferable option is still being negotiated[19]. It is known that where economic conditions are worst, workers are more attached to job security than to searching for aspects such as realisation etc. However, such a view would presuppose that jobs for life are still available, when in fact they no longer are, at least not for the younger generation. This aspect calls into play the agency of young professionals, who need to negotiate priority with regard to what is currently available.

Both Cagliari and Naples have their own peculiarities. They are both on the sea, but Cagliari, the main city of Sardinia, is a small city, with approximately 160,000 inhabitants. One fifth of Sardinians are concentrated in Cagliari and its limited hinterland from where they commute daily. This is an interesting feature, in the sense that to work outside the area one must either embrace a career that does not involve one's physical presence or otherwise emigrate. In the last decade, the area has seen the development of scientific and highly technological campuses (Cuzzocrea 2009 a), that have suggested the image of Sardinia as a Mediterraneum 'Silicon Valley' (Ferrucci and Porcheddu 2004). This development would go in parallel to more traditional specialised areas of production, such as the agro-pastoral activities of the inner island and tourism developed mainly on the coast. Growth related to tourism is particularly relevant because it relies not only on natural but also on historic sites, and

[16] Dependent work is characterised by hetero-direction, while in autonomous work the worker is permanently in the market. See also Semenza (2000) and Barbieri (1999).
[17] Official link: http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/03030l.htm
[18] Official link: http://www.parlamento.it/leggi/deleghe/03276dl.htm
[19] In this way the contrast with England is made sharper than if I had focused on other areas of the countries, such as northern Italy.

is reflected in seasonal peaks in employment rates. Sardinia is also characterised by a concentration of economic activity in the capital city.

A further interesting insight that completes the scene is a cultural trait normally associated with Sardinians, i.e. the difficulty in constituting associations and other formal groups to defend particular interests. This feature made the Sardinian-born Antonio Gramsci say that 'if Sardinia is an island, every Sardinian is an island on that island'[20], as Baratta extensively comments (2007). Interestingly, Arlacchi (2007) describes very well a presupposed egalitarianism of Sardinians, which is interestingly linked to the point I further develop in the book, i.e. that young professionals interviewed in Italy find it difficult to act as 'individuals', therefore urging me to revisit and discuss the notion of individualism[21]. The traditional Sardinian culture was based on a strong communitarian feeling that on the one hand has slowed down the historical process of modernisation of the island, which is known to be related to individualism. On the other, it also justifies that '*balentes*', the most admired men of traditional Sardinia, are '*primi inter pares*', i.e. feature the very values of their people without defining any distance from the rest of population. This traditional attitude, which stems from the absence, originally, of a strong land-owning 'class', is not present in the logic of the rest of southern Italy, and is itself interesting in that it suggests insights into how success is defined in traditional conservative contexts, as well as in contemporary professional arenas, especially with regard to the specific modulation of individualism that seems to characterise this context.

For these characteristics Cagliari is an interesting case, though I enlarged the spectrum to another city in the south of Italy with the intention of eliminating the insularity issue: Rome, for instance, is reachable in two hours by train. I chose Naples because it is the most important city in southern Italy, third only to Milan and Rome at a national level, with the highest density of population in Italy[22]. Naples is an important university city. Naples is also known as the centre of the organised crime '*camorra'*, the local name for the Mafia. It must be said that the time of my fieldwork coincided with a period of re-flourishing of the *camorra*, and in fact the city was visibly closed to strangers and attempting self protection. Police were very visible in the tourist centre, although their presence was more debatable in ghetto areas. However, none of the interviewees ever mentioned the '*camorra'* explicitly. Many, indeed, made reference to 'how things work here', but in very generic terms. Recently, it has been pointed out (Saviano, 2006)[23] that what has always been portrayed as a delimited wild west is actually a very well developed organisation that has connections with the richest areas of the country in a much clearer way that one is normally ready to accept[24].

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[20] The argument of the lack of individualism is used by Arlacchi (2007) to explain why mafia of any sort could ever eradicate in the Island.

[21] See chapter 1 for a definition of the concepts and chapters 4 to 8 for its interpretation.

[22] This is very peculiar to Naples and indeed of the region of Campania. Naples has a density of 8,566 inhabitants per Km2, approximately 1,000,000 citizens, and this makes the territory around Naples (i.e. 4,5% of Italian territory)- comprising around 10% of the Italian population. Since the rate of emigration is the highest in the whole country, this seems possibly due to a significantly higher birth rate.

[23] *Gomorra*, Saviano's book, is a recent bestseller, which is neither a romance, nor a documentary book, nor a sociological text, although it has few characteristics of all these genres.

[24] In the eye of today visitors, Naples appears a chaotic and complex city, animated by 'spiritelli' (as Dario Fo says in a revisitation of Gramsci), an intrinsic blend of old and new. To give an idea of what a working space may look like, in Naples, when I had occasion to discuss my fieldwork experience I often showed some images of a futuris-

3.3.2 England

The reality of work as embedded in the contexts described so far, Cagliari and Naples in southern Italy, is interesting to explore since it is traditionally very inflexible, yet it is becoming very flexible. The flexibility is very immature, but notwithstanding it is clearly growing. The reasons why the job-for-life model was the favourite one should be clear at this point. However, it is more crucial and more problematic to understand why young, educated people who have chosen- or find themselves in - professions should still refer to that model, and if so, how they specifically do it. In my opinion, the best way to grasp this is to see it in contrast to professionals moving in a profoundly different context: not only as a productive, economically shaped context, but also as a context in which the sort of cultural revolution that has started recently in Italy is already established, and already taken for granted. In other words, the context in which the second groups of professionals live and work, which can be broadly found in south-east England, experiences a more radical flexibility, in the sense that it is already established, and involves not only the entry level, as in Italy, but also the exit one, since it is easier for an employer to dismiss employees.

The roots of flexibility in England can be traced back to the eighties. In an attempt to dismantle all sense of community, the task of creating an enterprise culture was pursued, characterised by 'the reconstruction of a wide range of institutions and activities along the lines of commercial business organisation, with attention focused, in particular, on its orientation towards 'the sovereign consumer' (1996: 56). It is very interesting that Du Gay underlines that 'the market has come to define the sort of relation an individual should have with him or herself, and the 'habits of action' that exhibits 'enterprising' qualities or characteristics on the part of individuals or groups. In this latter sense an enterprise culture is one in which 'certain enterprising qualities – such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness and a willingness to take risks in the pursuit of goals – are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such' (Du Gay 1996: 56).

Interviews with professionals based in England were conducted in south east England. This allowed the inclusion in the analyses of professionals based in London as well as small villages outside the capital's employment basin. In fact, the choice of a few sites as the basis of professional development proved difficult to make, as cities such as London and Manchester have a powerful draw on an extensive hinterland. This is closely related to another feature of the English labour force, its readiness to commute significant distances daily. This lessens the significance of the adjacent geographical context of reference. Mobility - in the various grades it can occur - is such a normal fact of life that the locations of a workplace is perceived as scarcely relevant, to the point that some show particular reluctance to define 'where exactly' they work. And indeed, the direction in which the world of work is changing tends to presuppose mobility. And in fact many of the professionals interviewed had experienced many moves, some in their childhood and over a considerable distance. The issue of mobility is central because the greater it is, the weaker are the constraints on elaborating strategies of action.

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tic Centro Direzionale, designed by the Japanese Kenzo Tange in 1987, completed in 1995, and interestingly erected in one of the poorest area of the city.

Secondly, considering a wide area allows different degrees of prosperity to be seen. For instance, the 2004 Bulletin of the EU indicates Surrey as one of the European areas with the lowest rate of female unemployment, estimated at 3.1%[25]. On the one hand one has London, which is seen as a lure and temptation from many perspectives. Given the willingness of many to commute even long distances, the positive effect of London as a source of potentially infinite employment opportunities has been difficult to avoid completely. On the other hand there are adjacent less prosperous areas such as the county of Essex. Considering this area has allowed the inclusion in the analysis not only of professionals working in huge multinational companies based in the City, where the varied ethnicities bring a variety of view on working routines, but also professionals working in small or micro-practices. Also, England has a strong tradition of continuing education, and this may offer a wide range of choice for those willing to improve their skills even when a career is already launched.

3.4 Comparing professionals in the fields of HR, engineering and accountancy

A second dimension of comparison, also in order of importance, is that between professionals in the fields of HR, engineering and accountancy. While the choice of looking at highly skilled workers was taken in the early phase of the research project since it provides insights into those who are expected to have high expectations, and who are most likely to be disillusioned by what they manage to obtain, the decision to concentrate on graduate in professional paths came subsequently. The graduate labour markets in Italy and England seem to be contexts too wide to enable one to express focussed comments. On the other hand, focusing on only one specific sector or profession would have run the risk of placing too much stress on it, diverting the focus from my broad research question.

The criteria according to which I chose the professions of HR, engineering and accountancy are in the first place the need to be able to investigate the effects and experiences of flexibility within areas of expertise highly affected by current economic trends. Some of the higher professions which have traditionally been studied in sociology, such as medicine[26], do have institutionalised routes and a number of formal restrictions, especially in Italy, which would have made it difficult to study their career paths in relation to the increasing flexibility of the respective markets, which is my primary interest. Engineering, accountancy and human resources are professions *in* the market, and while the professionals end up applying values in their everyday work, their jobs do not necessarily presuppose a high degree of identification, which could justify a high degree of tolerance towards increasing flexibility.

In the second place, I wanted to select professions for which a university degree is necessary, and within these, different levels of institutionalisation with regard to the necessity of holding a graduate degree. Following this, accountancy is in both countries a graduate and a non-graduate profession; HR is a new graduate profession, although in this regard it is more institutionalised in England; as far as engineering is concerned, in Italy this is traditionally a

[25] The same source indicates Campania as on the opposite side with 28% female unemployment.
[26] See the masterpiece *Boys in White* (Becker et al. 1961).

high level graduate profession, while in England it seems to be trying at present to institutionalise itself.

In the third place, the three professions chosen are able to capture a certain degree of variability in relation to the predictability of the professional paths after graduation: in both countries the profession of engineering presupposes a degree in engineering; in contrast, access to the HR profession is not restricted to any university degree, while a professional qualification is more important. Accountancy is balanced in this respect, since a degree in economics in required in Italy, while there are no further qualifications are specified in England. This is important as it affects the process of building expectations.

In the fourth place, I wanted to focus on work paths which all presuppose the acquisition of formal credentials such as professional examinations, in order to study the dynamics by which such credentials are used. In relation to this, the various branches of engineering and accountancy have their own charter (see chapter 4), which are sought after in both countries only to work in organisations. Therefore it becomes interesting to see when and how this sort of vocational professionalisation is sought after. Professionals in HR, being in a younger field, are starting to negotiate professional qualifications, which are less institutionalised in Italy.

In the fifth place, I wanted to consider fields which, operating autonomously, presuppose different kinds of competences: soft skills are mostly required in HR; numeracy skills in engineering; a combination of both in accountancy. This choice is also linked to the gender issue, which follows.

Last but not least, I intended to capture a mixture of gender predominance among the three professions, deliberately avoiding a situation in which all three would only represent either male or female dominated professions. From this perspective the sample works really well since HR is predominantly a women profession, engineering is mainly male-dominated and accountancy prevalently gender neutral. It was important not to restrict to any one gender predominance since my research questions were broad enough to raise a number of issues without leaving enough space to a proper analysis of gender issues.

3.5 Operationalising research questions

Many comparative studies are based on quantitative methods. In the sociology of work domain, this is even more common. In this book the motivation to maintain a qualitative approach is linked to the intention of looking at flexi-lives rather than flexi-jobs. Scholars such as Schein (1996) have identified factors around which a career may be built, calling them 'career anchors'[27]. In order to keep a broad focus without losing the possibility of operationalising my research questions, I will refer to the functioning of a few typical institutions in relation to the structural contexts in which young professionals operate. In everyday language we refer to institutions as 'the social bridges between human beings and their natural environment' which allows coherence and meaningfulness to social life (Turner 2006: 300). Institu-

[27] According to this author, eight themes are normally prioritized in building a career path: technical/functional competence; general/managerial competence; autonomy/independence; security/stability; entrepreneurial creativity; service/dedication to a cause; pure challenge; lifestyle.

tions provide people with the definitions of situations that allow them to identify the roles that they may adopt in the particular situations that they encounter (Scott 2006: 92). Others (Cavalli and Douglas) refer more specifically to apparatus offering functions concerning the public interest' (1994). Scott defines institutions as 'systems of interrelated norms that are rooted in shared values and are generalised across a particular society or social group as its common ways of acting, thinking and feeling' (2006: 90). They are 'social phenomena in which the form of collective behaviour is relatively established and permanent' (Hughes 1971: 6).

And in fact in sociological terms the emphasis is more on the cogent normative element of behaviour. Being profoundly embedded in social life and generating recurrent social practices, as Scott says, 'institutions are built from norms or social expectations that are widely regarded as obligatory and are sustained by strong sanctions that ensure people's conformity to them' (2006: 90). These institutions establish themselves 'in terms of a heterogeneous array of concrete social forms' (Turner 2006: 300), even if not necessarily from apparatuses and organisations, remaining from time to time at the level of models of behaviour.

Scott argues that 'institutions are clusters of associated norms that define social roles and the relationships among them' (2006:91). The example suggested is the role of the doctor, which is defined through the institution of 'professional responsibility', with its norms of trust, honesty and liability. And in fact among the examples quoted directly by Scott with reference to the macro level, there is patriarchy, private property, and at least one that is directly considered in this book, i.e. professionalism. More specifically, 'when people take on and enact the roles associated with these particular institutional structures they generate particular sets of relations and social organisations (Scott 2006: 91).

Turner (2006) reminds that while a number of sociologists, such as Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, have argued that 'de-traditionalization' and the 'reflexive modernization', predominant trends of late modernity, have undermined the role of institutions, valid counterarguments could be found to suggest that people in their everyday lives need a stable social structure. And in fact institutionalization, de-institutionalization, and re-institutionalization often occur in sequences. However, the attempt is to avoid looking at institutions 'as if they were things', namely as reified objects, but rather to consider them social processes, or at least as 'maps by which to read social processes' (Turner 2006: 301-02).

Talking about the repulsion of Thatcherism against any sort of institutions, which were seen as opposed to the market, Harris (1989) distinguishes between: a) state apparatus institutions, generally welfare state and civil service; b) institutions that are clients of government, such as education; c) institutions that are not clients of the government, such as professional associations. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this book are devoted to exploring the different modulations of these institutions for the groups interviewed. More specifically, in chapter 4 I will discuss the role of the professions, professional institutions and professional membership; in chapter 5 organisations, and in chapter 6 the position they occupy in the life course. The focus on these institutions rather than others is a result that emerged from the fieldwork: they are those around which most reasonings take shape in the interviewees' accounts.

These aspects were not directly considered in my research questions but emerged clearly during the collection of data and pertain firstly to how the dominant representation of the graduate career propaganda affects young professionals' self perceptions. In the second

place, the sort of reasonings that the interviewees give in telling their work histories reveal how professionals interpret the graduate career propaganda, and ultimately work, certainty and achievement.

The interview guide included a short general introduction of the interviewee, and was constructed to describe in the first place the actual work situation: job requirements and duties, work environment, work values, work-life balance, and then ambitions. I then proceed to question how a 'good job' can be defined, career expectations (as a whole), expectations of job development, ending with an assessment of the profession. In a second phase of the interview, when the most significant details of the current situation were elucidated, I went on to ask the interviewees to take a step back and reconstruct how that specific path was accessed. I did so by asking them to tell me their feelings at the beginning of the job search, what job search methods had been used and how their initial career plans had been adjusted, as well as how their choice of a profession was made in the first place and what major difficulties and constraints were encountered. In this way, I sought to assess the course of professional development, including eventual work experience before graduation. Questions were asked to explore how education received, in academic and professional environments, effectively sustain one's career in order to evaluate critically the skills acquired and those possibly missing. The movement between present and past served to make the interviewees feel at ease and to reveal possible inconsistencies and tensions of the path followed.

3.6 Fieldwork

The research focus has resulted in a partial redefinition due to the challenges of the fieldwork. In fact few emerging issues came up in a clear and definite way and therefore needed to be included in the analysis. The fieldwork turned out to be a one-year-long challenging experience, during which I had to learn to find the right balance in negotiating between the original intentions and what is found in the field, balancing problems of access with consistency with the original research plan.

The easiest phase of research took place in Cagliari, where I could use a number of informal resources in order to establish the first contact with potential interviewees and from there proceeding by 'snowballing'. I started off by contacting thirty–something acquaintances, the age group in which professionals with the identified characteristics were more likely to be found. I was often suspected of working for someone else, whom interviewees wanted to identify. For instance, assuring them that I had no employment link with local universities helped them to relax and feel at ease in telling their narratives that by their nature can be very emotional. I was then often invited to conduct the interviews in the interviewees' homes: most of these interviews were held over the summer, when the workload is usually lighter.

I also tried out a formal channel by emailing those who had recently enrolled in chartered accountants' lists, assuming that the enrolment is done as soon as the minimum requirements are met. Interestingly, of the two who replied, one was not a cold contact, as he was working with someone I had already interviewed. Giulio (this is his fictitious name, 5) gave me a provocative interview, and it can therefore be presumed that he took advantage of the interview as a chance to specifically criticize his profession. Also the second person who replied represents

a peculiar case. His reply was based on the misunderstanding that I could be interested, as a student, in a vocational course he was organising, while he only summarised his working experience in a few sentences via email. In this case, we are at the opposite end of the hierarchy from the previous interview, as this person belongs to a very well-known family, and it can be inferred that if he enrolled in the association only recently, this is due to the fact that he did not *need* to do so earlier. In general, I can now state that the attempt to contact formally potential interviewees among accountants in Cagliari failed completely.

The problems of access proved to be of a different kind in Naples. I started to go in person to the Centro Direzionale, a business area in the centre of the old city which contains the major firms and administrative centre of the Campania region. Since firms in the Centro Direzionale were likely to employ, or be formed, by professionals in the chosen fields had been identified, I introduced myself and my research, and asked for appointments. I tried to appear reliable and professional, leaving my business card and wearing formal clothes. In autumn 2004, Naples was experiencing a dramatic increase of organised crime, and as a result the general atmosphere was very critical and in fact the most difficult phase of the fieldwork was to win their initial trust. My different accent suggested I was a 'foreigner', and this sounded suspicious. Most interviews were conducted in the bars of the Centro Direzionale, thus in a public space, having a drink. Overall, presenting oneself as enough of an insider to understand what is being said and outsider enough not to report the data indiscreetly in one's own group is crucial.

The fieldwork took quite a different shape in England, where the problem of getting access was exacerbated by a cultural resistance to talking about the personal experience of work: I felt it was appropriate to make clear from the beginning my intention of looking at how careers were experienced, rather than looking at the policies of single firms, as potential interviewees were inclined to think. I soon realised that this was perceived as an unpleasant intrusion and I believe that, added to their lack of free time, many declined my invitation on the basis of such a consideration. To this substantial cultural barrier other negative aspects were added. The first of these is the fact that I had a smaller number of people integrated in the territory to rely on to start the 'snowballing'. As a result, I had to revert to formal channels, which had proved unsuccessful in Italy[28]. I sent a large number of letters to specialised recruitment agencies and firms, which remained mostly unanswered. Those who did reply mostly worked for small or micro firms and declared they did not employ anyone of the specification I required. I therefore followed up with phone calls. This was a particularly critical phase as it required quite good interpersonal skills, a good level of self confidence and perfect use of language. I also contacted professional associations, attended their meetings, all experiences that have made the fieldwork a lengthy process, but on the other hand that provided unplanned data that ultimately supported my analysis of the interview material.

[28] Among those based at the University of Essex, I contacted the Job Shop, the Alumni Section, the Alumni Journal, the Personnel Section and the Student Career Service. Only one of these agencies provided me with a few contacts, and it was precisely the one to which I was introduced by a more senior member of staff. This proves the superior effectiveness of personal contacts, even in England, over other sorts of resources. I also contacted some other key people working at the University, identified through the departmental websites, and placed letters in the pigeonholes as well as sending out emails

Lastly, I wrote a letter to an e-column of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* headed *Italians*, describing the situation I was in and considering the cultural differences between the Italians and the English with regard to openness to others, and at the end of the letter asking for help. I was well aware, when writing the letter, that the column's readership is made up mainly of young to middle-aged Italians, mostly living abroad, occupying high level occupations and with a high level of education. Feeling sympathetic to such a readership, my first intention was to introduce myself and seek advice, although I was explicitly asking for contacts as well. The replies from Italians living in England were incredibly numerous: many offered to put me in contact with friends and acquaintances, and although most of these would not correspond to my profiles, the human support that I received was a great encouragement to me, since I realised that being explicit on what was the problem, i.e. cultural communication, I could press the right button, cause a reaction, and ultimately be heard, in contrast to those times when, following up with phone calls to those firms I had already contacted via emails, I was connected to an anonymous answer machine and then left all alone with my frustration. By using the e-column as a means of introduction, I confirmed to myself that formal channels are to be at least partially used in an informal way to be really effective.

The fieldwork was characterised by two aspects: the problem of getting access without losing consistency. Getting access has been much more problematic than conducting the interviews themselves, and much more frustrating than planning the research[29]. A number of negotiations occurred in the field, mainly with respect to the characteristics that were thought of in planning the research. Each time a notice of availability is received, it is a matter of defining the criteria of eligibility, which end up being continuously negotiated. Very significantly, I was often asked what I intended by 'professional', that is, when is one considered to be *in* the profession? This helps in drawing the line between university and professional credentials and to identify compatible criteria.

Access is a practical issue, while consistency is seemingly theoretical. In my experience, they are both more practical that it may seem initially. There is a sort of grey area in which decisions must be taken, and in which the individual researcher has to find out each time by himself/herself if that person's experience is relevant to the research questions. The fieldwork conducted in England could then be successfully completed only by making the formal channels slightly more informal. In my project, due to the difficulties of finding interviewees, I had to renounce looking exclusively at professionals in flexible employment conditions. This did not have a substantial impact on my original interests, as it soon became clear that each of the interviewees is deeply embedded, and rather consciously so, in a labour market which is increasingly flexible. Recognising that grey area, which lacks guidelines, gave me the confidence to be flexible myself and continue to look for an answer to my research questions. In short, access and consistency are immanently interrelated: the first is defined by the

[29] This was sometimes reflected in increased difficulties in conducting the interviews themselves. This emerges clearly in such cases as Simon, an HR professional. Contacted by 'snowballing', he reluctantly agreed to an interview, which was organised at his workplace. He arrived late, stating that he could only devote half an hour to the interview, which suggested to me I should shorten the warm-up and go directly to the key questions. Yet, Simon must have enjoyed the interview because at a certain point he revealed that he could actually stay longer, and invited me to pose other questions, which intuitively made it more difficult for me to continue conducting the interview. He even concluded by inviting me to give a talk about the results of the study.

extent to which the researcher is flexible about sample' requirements and vice-versa. These aspects are emphasised by the very nature of comparative research, although they apply to all kind of research.

Between June 2004 and June 2005, I have interviewed in depth sixty young professionals, divided equally between the two countries and among professionals, i.e. approximately ten per country per profession. Most interviewees lasted about one hour and an half with few exceptional ones that lasted until three hours and an half. They have been fully transcribed. I include in appendix A the basic interviewees' profiles, and in appendix B I say something more about eight of these, which I view as the most significant. All names have been changed for confidentiality, and are associated to an identification number. Not all interviewees are native of either Italy and England. I considered 'based' in any one context those who have spent most of their time as university students and / or workers in that context.

3.7 Conclusions

This chapter has explored the methodological issues tackled in the book. Particular attention is paid to the axes of the comparison: in the first place on the decision to focus on high level workers in Italy and England; in the second, on the choice of the professions of HR, accountancy and engineering as the fields of expertise. In this work, the challenge is to look at the orders of worth and repertoires of justification displayed by the two groups of professionals based in Italy and England in building their own career paths. The emphasis is on the interconnections between the individual and the institutions of that specific context. Institutions that should provide similar resources, such as professions, actually offer very different means of constructing a career. In order to understand what meanings are given to each of these, and ultimately to work and achievement, I look at the different modulations of individualism, individualisation and self- entrepreneurship.

4. Becoming professionals: professions as resources

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore the first of the structural elements identified in chapter 3: i.e. the institution of profession. I engage with the dimensions in which professions, professional associations and professional memberships work as either obstacles or facilitators, with regard to the fulfilment of the career aspirations of early-career professionals based in England and in Italy, and therefore constitute different cultural grounds on which they can act and build their individual career paths.

These interconnected aspects are such that young professionals interviewed working in England tend to think that they are in control of their careers, since they can identify specific career anchors on which to hold, basing their plans on this possession - whether it is really sustaining them or not. Vice versa, the young professionals interviewed working in Italy do not seem to rely on the opportunities offered by such institutions, while the flow of their narratives focuses on the attempt to avoid the constraints of such institutions, rather than using the opportunities offered. These results suggest that the way in which professions, professional associations and professional memberships are organised in Italy makes it difficult to find 'real' anchors around which to build a career. If we infer by career 'a reasonably meaningful sequence of jobs' (see chapter 2), or more generally one towards which agents have at least minimum control, many of those interviewed in this latter group can be said to have a job, or a sequence of jobs, but not a proper career.

The role of professions has been of great interest to Sociology, comprising a number of issues; which are, according to Dent and Whiteheads' summary (2002): the professional project (Larson 1977); Autonomy (Freidson 1970); Legitimacy (Clarke and Newman 1997); Control (Witz 1992); and Inclusion / Exclusion (Crompton 1987). In an attempt at systematization of these issues, the first point to clarify is why they are portrayed as deserving higher social status and rewards. I will also look at the main characteristics of accountancy, HR and engineering that emerged during the fieldwork, paying particular attention to the emergence of unexpected aspects. This chapter will deal with these questions, looking in particular at how recent changes in the labour market have affected the typical careers of the average professional in the mentioned fields and the nature of the support professions potentially provide to the construction of a graduate career in Italy and England. More specifically, I discuss how inclusiveness and exclusiveness are claimed in different cultural uses of these institutions.

4.2 What does it mean to be in a profession?

Occupations are a wide social group from which professions derive, and are legitimised by an 'implied and explicit license that some people claim, and is given to carry out certain services, rather different from those of other people, and to do so in exchange for money, goods, or services' (Hughes 1994: 25). In the context of solidarity and identity, occupational roles provide the basis for a social hierarchy, with some groups being positively valued over others, especially with regard to status. As White reports:

> 'the Registrar general in the United Kingdom explicitly recognised this hierarchy, providing a list of social classes based on occupation. There are: I. professionals, II. Managerial, IIIN skilled non-manual occupation; IIIM skilled manual occupation; IV partly-skilled occupation; V unskilled occupation; VI the armed forces. […] Occupations themselves are structured by gender and ethnicity (2006: 421).

Professionals are socialised into occupations where the key values are autonomy, peer control and vocation (Rubery 2005). In defining the birth of professions, Hughes goes back to the fact that the 'earlier and more restricted usage referred to a very few occupations of high learning and prestige, whose practitioners did things for others' (1994: 52). He indicates Law and Medicine as prototypes. Emphasis is put on the fact that professionals retain 'an esoteric body of knowledge', accessible only to the autonomous work of the professional (White 2006: 474). Putting it simply, professions have something more than occupations, since professionals 'profess' to know better (Hughes 1994: 389). Members of professions have special expertise: 'they can perform actions and deliver services that the lay-person cannot' (Hughes 1958). At the end of the day, who wouldn't want to be a professional?

Apart from assets of particular knowledge, professionals also share an ideology and various cultural forms. In fact, codes of ethics (together with the characteristics already mentioned) guide professional behaviour and define values that professionals should share. The taxonomy of professions also includes that the corpus of knowledge shared is based on theory, acquired in a formalised way, and requiring long training periods. Tasks then accomplished are inherently valuable to society, and this is tied to the fact that the practitioners commit long-term to their profession. Following these presuppositions, among the different sociological approaches studying professions, functionalism has had a great impact. For this approach, professions embrace a systematic, theoretical *corpus* of knowledge, which is confirmed by the registration to a charter for certain profession.

For Wilensky, this is the result of the fact that 'any occupations wishing to exercise professional authority must find a technical basis for it, assert an exclusive jurisdiction to standards of training, and convince the public that its services are uniquely trustworthy' (1964: 138). The knowledge professed is considered strictly related to pivotal values with reference to the existence of society itself (Polato 1998). In status terms, professionals occupy top occupational positions. They provide certification, objectivity, disinterestedness and a service orientation - in other words, they put others' interests first (Leicht and Fennel 2001). We could expect the established insiders of the professions to adhere to this way of conceiving professions. However, this logic is very much challenged by my findings, discussed through-

out the chapter, which suggest that professions guarantee advantages to their members over other graduates in the labour market only provided that they meet substantial requisite.

Another way to analyse profession is through the lens of the Chicago School of Sociology, which instead emphasises the everyday performance of being a professional and the ways in which professional communities function. The most famous studies in this tradition have looked at the socialisation of any one profession (Becker et al. 1961) and interactions among professional groups (Strauss 1963). In their approach, 'the true professional, according to the traditional ideology of profession, is never hired. He is retained, engaged, consulted etc., by someone who has need of his/her tender. The identity of a professional is constructed around the so-called 'professional projects', namely an 'attempt to enhance the autonomy and freedom of action for occupational incumbents under a set of well-defined professional norms'.

By professional culture, we indicate a 'set of values that encompasses peer reference, vocation, public service, self regulation, autonomy' (Rubery 2005: 405). The culture of a profession is manifested among members by a feeling of community and by common identity (Helmreich and Merritt 1998). In exchange, the professional is supposed to consent to be controlled by peers (Helmreich and Merritt 1998). These authors also recall Greenwood view (1957), according to which in this framework professionalism is an ideology: one has to behave according to a given work-ethic in order to effectively exercise control over society. Symbols are thus used to differentiate the professional from the lay person. Professional membership may supply much stronger ties than company loyalty or, on another level, national identity (Helmreich and Merritt 1998). Leicht and Fennell (2001) suggest that the rise of professions as prestigious occupations is certainly linked to the actions of organised professionals themselves. Sometimes, professional groups have not been able to organize or rationalise professional identities. However, almost all professional groups now have significant committees within their professional associations that monitor 'the state of the profession', including 'working conditions, compensation, organisational oversight, and competition from other occupational groups' (Leicht and Fennell 2001: 96-97).

Since the status of the expert is based on the professional's control over a formal knowledge system (Freidson 1970), knowledge entails power, which then confers social power to those who produce knowledge (especially science) and use it (in technology). The professionals based in England interviewed appear quite aware of what 'performance' they are supposed to embody, and in this respect the Chicago School's seminal work does offer a precious contribution to this research.

Taking inspiration from the weberian concept of social closure, during the seventies, power theories insisted that the focus of these studies should be precisely on the prerogatives and status accruing to professionals, which is and was indeed considerable. Power theories are on the other hand sceptical that professional status and prerogative flow from the mere possession of expert knowledge. Instead, the rewards of professional life are a product of conscious attempts by professionals or their patrons to extract economic and social 'rents' from consumers or to exercise social control (Leicht and Fennell 2001: 92). Control is usually exercised through a system of credentials that certifies that only certain groups of people with specific sets of educational experiences are qualified to practise a profession (Leicht and Fennel 2001: 108). Even if control over professional work is increasingly in the hands of

corporate and bureaucratic control (Leicht and Fennell 2001: 14), according to Abbott, the system of the profession is exactly made up of 'interrelations and competitions between and within professions over jurisdictional boundaries and the control of work' (Evetts 1996: 29).

From this perspective, it is pivotal to look at new forms of pressure the professionals face today to assess whether those in professions can still keep themselves above the market. A self-interest in social closure is increasingly suspected. Recent changes in the labour markets have meant that professions, which were formerly embraced because they guaranteed privileges, have become anchorage in an agitated sea, and thus merely ways of surviving. Belonging to a profession, being a professional, may suggest a niche of secure employment that otherwise would be put at risk. 'There will always be jobs for accountants', interviewees in the accountancy sector say. But prerogatives are no longer assured and increasingly put at risk. Given these premises, whether professional knowledge still guarantees a superior understanding is at stake.

Leicht and Fennel (2001) report Larsen's doubt (1977) whether the control and prerogatives of professional work have shifted away from professionals towards organisations that, as such, in the first place defend their own interests rather than representing those of professionals themselves. However, they suggest it is doubtful, in fact, whether 'professionals actually adhere to a professional code of ethics', while possibly 'the mere existence of the code itself constitutes sufficient justification in the eyes of consumers' (2001: 26). By certifying their own professional knowledge, professionals create a credential system. The new question regards the identification of the advantages in an increasingly flexible labour market: how is power declined in this system? To what extent is a profession able to protect the individual who represents it? Are professions sub-categories of classes? Even assuming that professional charters involve protection, this still remains an open issue.

The professional is someone who is respected, trusted, supposed to follow a code of practice. Yet, the instrumental logic of the global markets is at risk. For instance, increasingly personalised business and professional networks 'tie people to significant professional contacts not only in their home communities, but (increasingly) around the world as well. These contacts will become increasingly important and the growing use of computers and internet technologies will make experts of various kinds accessible from anywhere' (Leicht and Fennell 2001: 221).

In short, the knowledge retained by professionals, obscure to lay people, is not seen as secure as it used to be. Do they still deserve to be treated differently? In particular, do they still deserve a special status, honour and respectability? Given the scenery described in chapter 1, it follows that no group can claim immunity from market laws any more. Not only are professions in the market: they are increasingly so. Rather, their work is increasingly being put at risk, whether there is a weberian *Beruf* behind it or not. From this perspective, I embrace Beck's Risk Society perspective on an increasing vulnerability of a wider part of the population, regardless of the social class of provenance (1992, 2000).

Professions encourage young recruits to 'play the game', build networks in their own special way, and thus 'internalise a distinct 'career ethos' (Savage 1998: 66). Savage departs from the Weberian notion of the modern career as 'quintessentially modern' (1998: 66), a 'by-product of bureaucratic expansion' (1998: 67). In this approach, the career was seen as imbued by rational authority to 'ensure that those individuals in position of power would not

be inclined to use such position for self-aggrandizement (Savage 1998: 66). Savage wants to show instead that 'the elaboration of the notions of the career was critically tied up with issue of discipline and control' (Savage 1998: 70). To do so he introduces a Foucauldian notion of surveillance and power relationships. By taking as an example the railways in Britain, he studies the development of internal labour markets and career ladders.

Thus, two questions emerge. The first is a general one: why is the concept of profession as necessary to society no longer acceptable? To sum up, this is partly due to the expansion of higher education; partly to the fact that careers are less and less smooth, less unilinear, less often involving promotion and higher responsibility (chapter 2). My suggestion is to focus on the understanding of what sort of career anchor professions may be, and if it is still convenient to be in a profession in order to build a meaningful career path.

The second question is more specific and more strictly related to this book: why are professions necessary to address my research questions? In planning this research project, the topic of profession did not come up as an issue until I started to consider how I could realistically carry out my intention of studying young, skilled graduates coming to terms with a career to build within a flexible labour market. In fact, as I have discussed in chapter 3, the general group of graduates seemed to me too broad to look at the issue, and I could have incurred the risk of navigating in too much diversity. Therefore within the more general axis of comparison between professionals based in two countries, I decided to narrow the focus to professionals in three different fields. It was only at that point that I started to read extensively on the literature regarding professions, while my initial background reading was on flexibility, labour markets and the experience of new careers. I found that the sociological literature on profession is very extensive, although I have outlined only very partially its substantial traits.

There are various reasons for drawing only partially from such corpus of literature. In general, the literature on sociology of professions has flourished especially in the decades between the 30s and the 70s, and as such it does not deal directly with flexibility, which I maintain as a leading interest and inspiration for this work. Some of the most notable pieces of the sociology of profession tradition, such as the impressive *Boys in White* (Becker et al. 1961), do offer great insights in regard to a single profession. However, my intention was to draw only very carefully and selectively from such traditions, in the first instance because the present study is not conceived to be a case study on any of the three professions selected. Second, because the chosen professions are not 'classical ones' within mainstream sociology of professions, and therefore have not been extensively studied so far. Third, because the findings from the interviews, which I will discuss in the rest of this chapter, partially diverge from the traditional issues discussed in the sociology of profession. Fourth, because most of the existent literature on professions primarily deals with how professionals 'make a career' in the traditional sense, i.e. how they aim to climb the ladder by obtaining better jobs, and this is only one of the perspective I wish to embrace. Fifth, because it is very easy, once one concentrate on one single aspect of a single professions, to become increasingly specific on it, and this, again, is not my intention in here. For instance, many studies currently investigate professions from the perspective of labour process theory. This has revealed to be fruitful and could be used to look at engineers, but again I feel that such as approach can easily restrict very much the focus rather than enlarging the perspective to flexi-lives. By using this

strategy I want to avoid limiting this study to a sub-discipline whilst showing instead, through leading a discussion along the lines of individualism, individualisation and self-entrepreneurialship, that general theorists contributions can offer interesting tools for understanding the sociology of work and vice versa.

4.3 Typical paths in accountancy, engineering and HR

Having preliminarily highlighted the most relevant literature on professions, I shall now turn to the 'professional' characterisation of the groups interviewed. I wish to discuss here the role that being in a profession plays for them: what sort of distance or proximity they claim in orienting their working identity as a professional identity. Given the traits introduced, one should be rationally inclined, in looking for the protection of a profession, to be more concerned with security than with being simply in whatsoever employment position. This might be more important than the conditions of employment, and makes general values of work and life emerge. The potential protective function of the profession is also put into question.

'Every profession has a range of typical careers' Evetts says (1996: 36). In this section, I describe the most common features of the professional paths in engineering, HR, and accountancy as emerging from fieldwork. To my knowledge, these professions have not been studied previously in comparison to each other, and even more significantly, they have not been considered with respect to the increasing flexibility of those labour markets. In this section, I will describe them taking into consideration: what academic background is required; what are considered the best credentials; what sorts of skills are required in the recruiting process; whether the professional paths are gender biased or not; what sort of status accompanies the professions. As well as these characteristics, I will discuss the rest of the peculiarities emerging in the fieldwork. In the following part of the chapter, I will look in more detail at the significance of professions. I firstly introduce the typical engineering path, since it is characterised by an interesting, opposite development tin the two contexts considered. Secondly, I describe the HR paths, which seem to experience a similar progression in Italy and England. Thirdly, I describe the conventional professional paths in accountancy which, despite recent changes in the structures of the respective labour markets, is differentiated by only modest changes, at least if compared to the other two professional paths.

4.3.1 Engineers

In Italy, engineers must hold a higher degree in Engineering. Since the interviews I conducted occurred very soon after the Reform, my interviewees have a pre-Reform five-year degree. This qualification is a prerequisite, while the very requirement to exercise the profession is the enrolment in the professional association. However, there seems not to be a great attention paid to it, and I suspect that this is really required only for those graduates seeking a solo career. Due to the focus that in past years has been put on the importance of a career in engineering, it is intuitive that much emphasis is on the typical engineering skills: that is, numerical and analytical skills – also known as 'hard' skills.

As expected, looking at engineers was a revealing choice, primarily due to the fact that the profession has progressed in opposite directions in the two countries as for what concerns status, power and visibility. This profession derives from very different traditions in the two countries and could not have been compared thirty or forty years ago. In Italy, engineering has been very influential in the past few decades: the highest level of management of big firms was likely to be in the hands of engineers. This certainly denotes the power they used to have, and also indicates a legitimisation to occupy the highest levels in the organisational hierarchy. It is evident that the crisis of Fordism has also meant a decrease in the number of jobs available in medium/big size companies for Italian engineers if compared to the previous generation. This has been translated as less opportunities for climbing the ladder, an issue emerging clearly from the interviews:

> 'All those who enrolled in an Engineering degree...[…] did it because they had seen in their parents, adult people, the previous generation, people who were in executive positions, people who occupied high positions […]. Now, on the one hand the economy stagnates, on the other there are many more engineers that are required in the market, therefore you find many engineers who work as technicians, designers, or engineers not working at all, because maybe they continue to have great expectations. […] The Age of Plentifulness has gone.' (Claudio, eng., 23)

Moreover, Italian engineers remark that they have discovered a work reality in which the involvement of direct contacts with machines and buildings rather than with pure intellectual work is much starker than they had thought. It seems to be changed likewise also from the standpoint of the content itself of the work. Consistently with the previous line of change, today engineers are up to 'dirty work': they are in contact with mechanisms, and not only with 'noble' paperwork. Many of the Italian interviewees agree on this point, some of them, whose fathers pursued a career in engineering as well, are even able to draw direct comparison.

A physical sign of the change for engineers, a very significant one for representing [the profession's] nature, is that today's engineer always wears overalls, has dirty gloves and wears a helmet, and uses 'you' with his/her foreman, the person who next to him turns the pump's handgrips or a fuse. In the past, nothing like that would have happened.

> 'The engineer was 's'Ingegneri'[30], when from time to time he visited the machines, he stayed in his clothes and only worn a helmet, used the third person to the operators and asked to be addressed in the same way […]. Therefore, this means that he is much closer to people, he realised that he shouldn't be given cold dispositions, based solely on elaborations and calculation: on the contrary he lives together, let's say, with his men, and the reality of the machines, he physically knows smells, rumours, colours … and therefore he is much more operative, even when the nature of the work is not operative itself, this is the kind of approach and nature now'. (Andrea, eng., 24)

The profession seems very much gender biased, although in recent years many more females have enrolled in engineering studies. In general, the engineering path is constructed moving from one job to another, from one company to another. These companies may be of

[30] Formal and very respectful Sardinian expression.

various sizes and indeed, many of the young engineers interviewed do have multiple working commitments, whether they collaborate with an academic department or with an engineering practice. As a result, although jobs are broadly speaking coherent among each other, it is difficult to identify a typical engineering path: most careers appear erratic, unpredictable and very much built in a haphazard manner.

The contrast with the characteristics of paths of engineers based in England is stark. Here, Engineering is not a traditional graduate profession, and is even more tied to technical abilities. Nonetheless, it seems to be developing very fast, especially in certain sectors (such as Civil Engineering), and among people in the sector there is wide-spread excitement about the opportunities that are being offered; quite opposite to the Italian situation. As a result, engineers based in England are very much concerned with attributing a new, professional image to engineering, and are very resentful of being treated differently from other middle-class professionals, such as lawyers, in terms of prestige, social recognition and also salary levels.

Occupational groups may be interested in institutionalising career paths, for example by recruiting from certain schools, although not all professional groups have been successful in rationalising themselves in this sense (Leicht and Fennel 2001): it is a process we are currently looking at. Geena (54), a young engineer I interviewed at a site where she was testing the reliance of the soil, has a typical attitude in this sense. On her arrival from the site, she apologises for her informal clothes and the strange blue shoe covers she uses to protect shoes from the mud, and clarifies that 'she would otherwise wear a suit'. She also focuses on the difficulties involved in making her work recognised as intellectual: her orders to other labourers on site are based on calculations and abstract knowledge, but she finds it difficult to be trusted. Intuitively, such a disrespect may be supported by the fact that she is young, a woman and olive-skinned, but she points out that the major problem is that the work, better, the profession is not recognised, her calculation not trusted, and the engineer seen as an unqualified site worker. She seems willing to demonstrate the importance of her role and so 'will not lift heavy stuff since [she] is not supposed to'. Very clear on these issues is also Kimberly (58), an active and self-conscious engineer:

> 'It frustrates me that I don't think that most people are conscious of what we do. When I say to people that I am a civil engineer I don't think that most understand what that is. And I found that really annoying, because I know what I do and I think it is great! But most people don't understand that. […] I think engineers have this bad reputation of people who fix washing machines or cars. […] It frustrates me that people like doctors are so respected, and there is no reason why we shouldn't be respected, because it takes an equal amount of work to do both, to get to a professional level, so it kind of frustrates me'. (Kimberly, eng., 58)

The similarities in the two countries are that both are gender biased –engineering is traditionally male dominated; both are rigid in the academic requirement: that is, both require a degree in Engineering; both have a professional certification, although this is considered much more important in England. The main differences are that engineers in England tend to work for only one company, which is normally a good sized one. A good number of them do not disguise their interest in pursuing a managerial career after reaching a full expertise in technical matters. There are of course, differences within each country with respect to which

branch of engineering has been chosen: this aspect has nonetheless been put apart, due to the necessity to privilege commonalities and differences between the groups based in the two countries.

4.3.2 Human Resources

In Italy, there seems to be a preconception of HR people being non-vocational graduates, typically unsure of which path to take and, as a result, open to experiment all sort of possible routes. Since such a preconception is often added to the fact that the profession is new as a graduate profession, it is easy to infer that it is not invested with a high level of respect. While a background in Labour Psychology seems consistent with this path, a degree in Law or Political Science may be less relevant, but the gap in knowledge is often covered by some sort of vocational, postgraduate qualification. Interestingly, the appropriateness of getting a postgraduate-vocational qualification as a way to enter the path of HR is a central issue in many accounts. It is important to stress that, due to the lack of centralised coordination, it is very difficult to monitor the process of specialisation and professionalisation. In fact, most courses do not comply with any standard or officially recognised requirements, and the impression is that it is very difficult to select universities. HR is an especially young area of expertise, and the attempts at making it established emerge in many ways. It is particularly relevant that there is no official body or charter. As a result, many careers lack focus and are chaotically built, relying on whatever opportunities arise. From this, there is a certain difficulty in defining the profession. For instance Roberto, who has a consistent path in the HR field, argues:

> 'I think my mother still hasn't got what I do. […] When I started this path, I was labelled as an '*educatore'* [teacher of vocational courses], and I went to the city council to renew my I.D., and when they asked me 'what is your profession?' I wasn't quick enough to say either 'professional', or, 'generic', or 'administrative'. I said '*formatore*' [teacher], and the guy looked at me strangely, then he gave me my new I.D., and when I opened it I saw he had written '*informatore*' [informer]'. Like … medical informer [scientist who promotes new medicine to doctors], police informer… (Roberto, HR, 12).

HR professionals based in England may have a different background and as such the enrolment to a professional body plays a pivotal role in the unification under the same area of expertise. For HR, the professional body of reference is almost uniquely the CIPD (The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development), which is very active and organises a number of local events around which the professional social life of HR gravitates and the networks take shape. Invariably, those who enter this path show a personal interest in understanding people, and in mediating efficiently amongst groups and individuals, whether the duties are managerial, administrative-oriented or related to the development of the firm's policies. People with such attitudes are often labelled 'a people person', and in the actual analysis it can be said that they are required to have 'soft' skills. Moreover, it is reaffirmed by the fieldwork that HR is a female profession, although everyone recognises that the highest positions are still predominantly male.

Most of the professionals in HR based in England interviewed believe it appropriate to share the firms' values, and adhere to this strongly. In a few cases, they are the ones responsible for either creating or ensuring those values and they are normally very proud of this. This binds the professional with his/her firm and is likely to create a long-lasting loyalty. These elements put together contribute to define a specific area of expertise. This has the function of reinforcing those individuals within HR as 'professional', an attribute which is very much appreciated by young affiliates. From one perspective, in fact, they have to face the same difficulty as their colleagues based in Italy: their profession is not established as such, and even less as a graduate profession. For instance, Avril (49) holds a PhD in a poorly marketable field of research. Having acknowledged that academia is not 'her kind of thing', she has found herself in an HR position. Now she claims to be totally satisfied with the path taken, in which she has identified concrete possibilities for future development. On the other hand, she is very much aware of others' disillusionment directed towards her career attainment. By reporting her PhD supervisor's cynical comments about her current job, Avril expresses the sense of failure that others are attaching to her and to what is seen as an unstable position.

However, the growth of HR is undeniable in the UK, in part because HR becomes crucial whenever mergers and acquisitions take place (and they are increasingly likely), in part because they are related to an increased general complexity of the firm and the crucial part that communications play in it (CIPD 2007). On the other hand, there no longer seems to be any obstacle to its growth. The CIPD itself reported that the profession has known a period of conflict with the State, coinciding with the involvement of the Thatcher government to constrain and reduce the role of Unions, to which 'Personnel' - the old name of HR - was particularly close. At that point, the profession already showed today's main feature in terms of duties involved. It is with the arrival from the US in the late eighties of the term HRM (Human Resources Management) that the difficult link with the Unions started to be pulled apart, until the election of the Labour Party in 1997, when the profession has started to lose its political significance and has become more and more business oriented, reaching the Chartered status in 2000. The influence of CIPD members is steadily growing. In a survey carried out in 2003, 72% of respondents said that they felt themselves to be more influential in relation to senior colleagues than compared to three years before (CIPD 2003), and underline their proactive role. Also, whilst internal services become increasingly outsourced, HR are strategic in establishing corporate social responsibility and work in cooperation with other sorts of businesses.

4.3.3 Accountancy

Almost by definition, accountancy seems to be regarded as a secure profession to get into, typically leading towards a traditional, well-established path. Such a characteristic emerged to my partial surprise, as one of the reason why I have chosen the three professions is that they are all professions *in* the market, that is, characterised first by being subject to market fluctuations rather than to value orientations such as those which presumably motivate and inspire doctors or social workers, for instance. 'There will always be jobs for accountants': this was a popular sentence, heard many times through my fieldwork. One that needs a lot of fur-

ther investigation and deepening, but which is still very popular in talking about the motivations that first pushed them to the profession.

In Italy, after three years of 'registered' work experience, graduates are entitled to register for the examination to become chartered, and then most become self-employed. Most of my interviewees have already reached that stage and have established their own business, sometimes in association with friends and/or colleagues. It is very likely that this path will be pursued consistently. For instance, Giulio (5) synthesizes very efficiently the average accounting career:

> 'I continue to collaborate with the practice in which I did the three years of compulsory training and the exam ['esame di stato']. Most of my time I continue to devote to that collaboration, but from January 2004 I joined this practice with some colleagues, who are also friends of mine. We share the expenses and each of us has his own clients.' (Giulio, acc., 5).

For them, climbing the ladder means becoming more established as professionals, making their names recognised in the field, getting more and more clients, although the size of these kinds of firms remains very little. It must be highlighted, however, that not everybody on this path seem overly concerned about becoming chartered, and in fact a number of them do practise without having the formal qualification (which, they say, is only a formality as experience is enough).

On the contrary, looking at the education received, accountants in England differ very much amongst themselves, primarily because there is no obligation to have an accountancy or numeracy skills background. Amongst my interviewees, a wide range of degree is represented: not only management and accountancy, but also prehistory and art, amongst others. In this profession, they said, it is more important having managerial and 'people' skills than sophisticated numeracy skills, the basics of which can be learnt easily on the job. In fact, a significant amount of work has to be done around dealing with clients and encountering people's needs. This attitude becomes an issue in so far as some of them identify themselves as in contrast with the stereotypical image of the accountant, only devoted to numbers and calculations. The start of an accountancy career is impressively straightforward for most interviewees. Phil (35) has joined an accountancy practice in Essex right after a degree in management. He describes his progressions as very natural:

> 'I started off by doing some very basic work, and I went out for jobs with clients with other members of staff, who supervised me, which is very … I supervise other people now. And… I would do other bits of jobs to help other people, and then someone else who maybe finished the [side of] accounts, for which I [was] doing the ground work. And sort of putting together and finishing the work off. And then gradually you are taught to do more and more, and you start doing smaller jobs on your own, and then bigger and bigger jobs on your own.'(Phil, acc., 35)

So the path looks very straightforward if one looks at development within a practice. According to Rubery (2005), approximately half of those who started a career in accountancy work continue working within practices, while the others proceed in their path by joining business. Accountants in England belong to either ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants), which is a worldwide fast-growing accountancy body; or ICAEW (Insti-

tute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales). On the other hand, Scotland has its own tradition in accountancy, being one of the very first professions to associate. This separation is today visible in the constitution of their own body, ICAS (Institute of Chartered Accountants of Scotland). Belonging to a charter entitles the professional to write next to their name the qualifications obtained, which are different for each of the charters (for instance, being a member of the Association of the Chartered Certified Accountants is designated as ACCA, but there also is FCCA). Members can therefore conduct work such as audit, insolvency and investment business, which are legally restricted.

In general, becoming chartered is a fundamental requirement to a successful exercise of the profession, to the point that the greatest fear of trainees is that they will be asked to leave the firm if they fail or do not reach that goal according to a reasonable timetable. But becoming chartered is a turning point also because it defines a ridge developing in two directions: one will be taken by those who will continue to work in accountancy firms, with the likely aim to become a partner in the future. The second will be chosen by those who want to measure the competences acquired in the business worlds, by entering private firms. When I ask Abhinay (37), an accountant who is now employed in a major company, whether the firm where he did his apprenticeship was upset when he left after getting qualified, he argues that it's normal to finally launch yourself in the *real* world of work once you have the ability to do it - and accountancy firms are well aware of this. Last but not least, becoming chartered is the most important channel through which to increase salary levels. In this paragraph I have highlighted the main characteristics of the professions of engineering, accountancy and HR for how they emerged during my fieldwork. I shall now turn to the analysis of professions considered as resources around which to build a career.

Yet, for the time being, different constructions of professions are at stake in Italy and England, and therefore the grounds on which professional affiliations are constructed are substantially different. This offers a good base for the substantiation of the argument I will make further on: that is, that different conceptions of work are in place in Italy and England, forged by two universes of meanings of work. In this chapter I will demonstrate that certain aspects of professional belonging are specifically used as resources on which one can substantiate his or her own career decisions. As such, professions can also be intended as sources of the self.

4.4 Joining a professional association

During my fieldwork in Naples, I interviewed an HR professional, whom I will call Maia (16). Differently from her colleagues who I had initially contacted, she showed no interest in talking to me. To all my questions, she replied politely but exceedingly concisely, continued looking at the screen, or taking phone calls. The suspicion that she was taking my in-depth interview as if was a questionnaire was soon confirmed by her replies, short and assertive and with no space for following up. Substantially, she declared herself to enjoy very much the path chosen. Despite the fact that at some points she reveals that she has travelled across Italy for two years working as an actress, she argues that working for a temporary agency has been her aim ever since, and that her strategy has been very clear and straightforward: she

decided that she was going to send her CV for a year to firms in Naples. Hadn't she succeed, she would have looked at the whole country. That was it. Her statements were remarkably simplistic. She seemed to be sympathetic to my question of whether she compares herself to the workers whose working life she organises. But her interpretation is very different from the one I had in mind in planning my work and deciding which professions to study (see chapter 3). She was only referring to the mere economic fact that her wage is pretty low, in many cases lower than the temp workers she runs. Maia does not show any emotions to what she is doing, neither in positive nor negative terms. She does not reveal any sense of belonging to a profession, and leaves one with the feeling that she covers an HR position merely by coincidence. She remains very obscure about how she matured the decision to embrace HR, for example. One is not informed of how she uses the profession as an actual resource to activate in order to become a professional.

All in all, the interview with Maia is unsuccessful as I left her without knowing on which basis she has built her profession. I suggest the consideration of professions as potential instruments to which to hold on to, visible and touchable anchors that once identified, can be activated and used to one's advantage. When focusing on professions, the main finding which emerged from the interviews I conducted is that graduates based in England benefit a great deal from professional belonging, whilst the professions' roles for Italian graduates are negligible, in some cases they even become an obstacle. To demonstrate this point, I wish to introduce Antonietta's testimony (2).

Antonietta originally comes from a disadvantaged area of Sardinia, and she has moved to Cagliari to attend university. After a short period of reflection, she has embraced the profession of accountancy, which she loves very much. She enjoys going to work, doing the calculations to find out the better solutions for the companies and entrepreneurs she is taking care of. By accomplishing the duties of her job she feels satisfied, and she also has the perception that she is considered useful. Nonetheless, she feels rather disappointed by the development of her career path. After six years from graduation, she has realised how difficult it is to set up your own business, a plan that seems now abandoned. After work experiences in different accountancy practices, she still doesn't have a permanent role, and in particular is not yet 'allowed' to have her own private clients. Especially considering how weak and unstable her earning power is, she feels very much at stake. Being chartered is not a help, since it does not provide any protection or positive support. On the contrary, along with other credentials she may get, getting chartered blocks her in relationships with other colleagues, because it entitles her to work on her own. This makes her a rival, because she could potentially 'steal' their clients.

> 'Where I used to work, for instance, participating in a conference was not easy, if I wanted to participate I had to ask for a permit, and asking for a permit wasn't good, and in that occasion, you see, I was seen as a potential rival, especially after enrolling the charter. I did it without mentioning a word to where I worked…'. (Antonietta, acc., 2)

The idea that colleagues can 'steal' one's clients, thereby undermining one's position, presupposes that resources are finite and that success derives from cutting for yourself the biggest slice possible from the cake. In this frame, Antonietta believes that if colleagues perceive her as less qualified than she really is, she can maybe work in a more relaxed way. She feels in the position of having to hide her qualifications, that do not have an immediate posi-

tive impact on her career. Antonietta is aware that becoming chartered could improve her future prospects and earnings, but not on the basis of the mere possession of it. It is not advisable to flaunt credentials. For Antonietta, as well as for other interviewees from Italy, no professional identity emerges. Indeed, these narratives do not suggest any elements supporting why the institution of profession, as it is portrayed, should lead to an identification with a professional identity. Professions are just something you have to pass by and an open hearted involvement may be better avoided if you are in your own corner with no established link with the core.

It remains to be said that in Italy professional codes and rules have recently been at the centre of public debates. The discussion on what aspects should be reformed has looked to a reduction of the existent charters ('ordini' and 'albi'). To this end, proposal have been made to associate in private forms, therefore getting very close to British association, although they will continue to be controlled at a centralised level. Also, the 'ordini' will be simplified and homogeneous professional groups reunited. One of the possible enlarged groups would consist of both graduate and non graduate accountants, which are at the moment separated. Some advise to abolish minimum fees and institute SpA (società per azioni) between professionals of different disciplines. This will promote stronger free competition, including the possibility to freely advertise and publicly inform on fees and services offered. Special attention starts to be paid also with regard to the age group considered in this book: in fact, their entrance may be encouraged by being required to get only one-year work experience (rather than three), paid by a fund granted by 'albi' themselves. These lines of development suggest that in future years the core principles of the Italian and the Anglo-American systems of professions may become indeed much more similar than it is now. Though, it is yet to be seen to what cost or to what extent this will be done and if the implementation of these principles will be sensitive or not.

Currently, in the Italian system, professionals are entitled to act as solo practitioners in a given field only provided that they are in the charter. Furthermore, they establish names in the field, and this is not always based on formal standards. As a recent trend, professions have been providing increasing sets of rules and norms which are experienced as a process of increasing bureaucracy. This latter is seen mostly as a further problem which a professional has to deal with, next and beside what are usually put as the normal problems related to belonging to a disadvantaged environment. As a last remark, it should be said that the costs related to professions (attendance to vocational courses, exams to enter the profession, registration fees and so on) may vary a lot among the three professions and within professions themselves, due to the non-unification of the system.

For Prandstraller (2003), a different genesis of the professions has to be recognised. In Italy, professions as such do not have recognition as institutions, unless the state emanates a law which specifically recognises the usefulness of a specific profession. In this way, the profession has the right to institute its own *albo* (equivalent to charter), in which all those who have a certain background and have completed certain examinations can enrol. Since it is a law to institute a profession, Prandstraller carries on, it can be said that professions are instituted from the top. It is precisely this nature that in the first place distinguishes the profession in Italy from those in the UK. As belonging more strictly to liberalism, in the UK professionals with similar interests and skills can freely decide to associate themselves. This is

done to define a code of practice, a certain recognition, to mark the 'territory', to defend interest, to promote professionalism in the field, and to have the opportunity to conceptualise that particular form of professionalism. In this way, professions receive recognition from the bottom, and in fact participation is not compulsory.

In England, the higher degree of institutionalisation of the professions make of them much richer resources. Belonging to a profession is far more fruitful. The issue of professions arise spontaneously during the interviews as many directly refer to them as very resourceful and important institutions. They do provide the maintenance of high standards in the practices of work; the institution and conservation of a sense of belonging; professional recognition. More practically: the maintenance of salary levels; the dissemination of job opportunities through vacancy announcements; the organisation of meetings organised locally and nationally; activities and gateways for less senior members; identification of standardised goals to achieve. This latter function is extremely important in constructing a career-path. Kimberly (58), in highlighting the reasons why it is convenient to participate in her professional association's activities, shows me a document, formally elaborated by a professional committee, which lists the skills and capacities that junior members are expected to acquire in the three years of practise leading to chartership. Every candidate is provided with a copy so that everyone is able to monitor his/her ability to follow the path as standardised, by ticking what one has to achieve and in which time frame. This constitutes a powerful way to integrate potential members, even before they are entitled to the full membership. To conclude, one must be warned that professionals based in England incur much higher monetary costs. Yet, these appear justified by the many services that associations provide and, indeed, only one among the interviewees raised this as an issue.

In the UK, qualifications obtained can be used flexibly. Shifting from one professional career to another is possible, as in the case of a young woman who shifts from being an accountant to being a HR professional in the same huge accountancy firm. However, this evolution seems possible even leaving the protectorate of one firm. Passages from one profession to another are basically fluid because they are allowed. The fact that professionals' identities are allowed to be in flux is a useful and desirable aspect. On the contrary, in Italy different professions' career paths appear separated, with no possibility to immerse oneself in another career if one is not starting from the very beginning. Every shift is a new career, and therefore a new start. In the material I have gathered, only Gianni (3) plans to switch career, but his case was peculiar as the fluid career was the academic one, which to some extent has a different nature from other professional or average careers.

4.5 The liquidity of professional boundaries

In general terms, I found out that when professional boundaries are 'liquid', in the sense that Bauman gives to this expression (2000, 2001, 2005), professions do not act as a trap for young newcomers but rather offer particularly precious tools not to sink in the agitated sea of flexible employment. By talking to these early career professionals, I was convinced that when the feeling of getting stuck in a certain network or in a given role is predominant, professionals tend to feel demotivated and the esteem and faith once given to professional be-

longing fade away. From this standpoint the interview with Abhinay provides exceptionally clear evidence. Abhinay (37) is a certified accountant, whose working identity does not seem to lie entirely in the field of accountancy. At the moment of the interview, he manages a small group specialised in auditing for a fast-growing company. Clearly, the fast pace of changes which characterise his company, urges him to realise how volatile is the corpus of knowledge at the basis of his profession. He has already made significant changes, leaving a big accountancy firm to join a small accountancy practice, to then leave for an accountancy role in a non-accountancy firm. Furthermore, he does not see his working future necessarily in accountancy. He is fascinated by the idea of joining a property business: he has seen from relatives in the field that it would satisfy his eagerness to organise more freely his workload without undermining earning power. Therefore, the sense of belonging to accountancy in itself is not particularly strong. It would be fair to say that it is more tied up with contingent choices and admits inversions of paths. This is how he concludes the interview:

> 'I thought I was gonna be an accountant, from when I was…whatever, sixteen. Now, I don't think I would be, even if I already am. Sounds very funny, but…I qualified in this, but I don't think it's what I wanna do any more. Maybe this is good for your research (laughing), maybe you do change your mind as you go along, and you find, maybe you made the wrong decision, although I don't think I made the wrong decision, I made the right decision, to get the security, and to get a good job, otherwise I couldn't have done any of this, but I think that in the long term, it's not where I wanna go anymore.' (Abhinay, acc., 37)

Introducing this quotation here can be useful to understand how professional status, acquired by means of charter, is used as a durable resource. In fact, the positiveness that Abhinay attaches to being a professional accountant derives from the fact that writing the professional title on his business card gives him a credibility that distinguishes him from other graduates around. This possibility is defined similarly in other interviews. Samir (52), for instance, is at the end of the process to become a chartered engineer. His path, which I shall describe in more details in chapter 8, is definitely a successful one. This notwithstanding, he mentions the possibility to quit engineering, once in a higher position, to embrace a more business-based job. The passage is perceived as reasonably natural, and this is because exams to become chartered certify confidence with a range of skills which only broadly comprise engineering: how to conduct and organise a general business is very much part of the engineering business. Paradoxically, being thus part of the established engineer groups contextually testifies to the ability of success outside of engineering. Getting certified has a twofold outcome: it allows successful entrance to the community and similarly, a sufficient level of success to leave it. Professional qualifications promote in this way embeddedness in, and fluidity between, cognate areas of expertise. For these reasons, getting qualified is worth the efforts, even in those cases in which the current company does not offer substantial incentives in terms of money rewards or organisational support.

A shift towards business is also suggested by Conrad (60), a promising engineer who acts as a president of the graduate branch of its area of work. Similarly to Samir (52), his professional path is clearly a successful one: still a student, he has been invited by a large engineering corporation to join a company-funded doctoral program, which he has spent pursues based at the company. His enthusiasm for contact with the profession is visible in each of

the arguments he puts forwards, and goes along with a strict focus. Furthermore, he looks at the charter in a pragmatic way, which encompasses also the possible uses of it after the achievement of what is defined as a goal. Well aware of the potential uses of the qualification, he does not rule out a shift to management as well. In this view, he is carefully thinking to enrol in an MBA program. Nonetheless, the MBA is considered as eventual and possible, but does not have the same importance of the professional qualification. Contrary to it in fact, it would limit the possible direction of his carer route to the business side, while getting the charter would only open up possibilities:

> 'At this stage in our career we're very much focused on becoming chartered. […] That's the next goal and it's very easy just to focus on that and not think at all about the next step in your career. It has always traditionally made a difference in companies like this that the chartership is a recognized standard and you're increasing your grade in the membership… sorry in your company position, and I think it's one of those things that is very good to have. I don't think it's necessarily fundamental, you can, if you're a good engineer I think you can make it without that but I think chartership is a good program of getting a lot of experience quickly and then demonstrating your ability to then sort of go further up the chain in the career. I would like to start an MBA as well and I've actually got one to do as well, I won one in a competition, so I've got a free MBA to do which is quite lucky […]. It's by distance learning. It would be with [name of the school], so I have friends who are doing MBAs now and who are thinking about it and the fact that I have one free, which is very lucky, I think maybe I should do it, and I think it would be a good thing. […] I think actually having that qualification would be good but it's not everything, if I choose not to… I'm sure it's not necessarily gonna be bad for me, it shows extra commitment and things like that, and it's in an area…to get into management and project management those are the skills you need, so I would look at sort of doing that, for the next few years. I'd like to sort of get chartered, have some more responsibility here, hopefully get involved in some fairly big projects and maybe raise my profile within the company, or win some competitions or whatever'. (Conrad, eng., 60)

From interviews such as Conrad's, we are suggested that getting chartered and doing an MBA are not put on the same level, with preference going to the more professional qualification, which would give not only credentials, but also flexibility. Conrad's experience is very significant in that it reminds one of another important issue related to the career of professionals. In fact, in most literature a clear divide emerges between those professionals who continue to profess their area of expertise and those who, within the boundaries of the same organisation, shift into management. This issue also has gender implication as women tend to follow the first path, which is in general less prestigious. In fact, it has been noted with reference to the profession that gender equality, at least in England, has been almost reached as a matter of entering the profession. However, discrimination are still present if one looks at the career progression (Evetts 1996). Evetts says that Savage in particular, 'has demonstrated that women have actually entered the organizational profession. However, they remain at the bottom of the career ladder, tending to develop 'occupational' careers, usually within subordinate professional niches'. As such, they have 'high expertise', but not 'high authority' (Evetts 1996: 147). This phenomenon has to do with internal labour markets, that is, with the distribution of career opportunities (Evetts 1996).

A lot of debates taking place today concern the transformation of the technocrat into managerialist. This is intended to be the natural output of a career development. And in fact, many of my interviews are eager to pursue an MBA – or at least find it perfectly acceptable to consider it. Entering managerial paths brings along money incentives, respectability and honour, simply the fact that you are managing someone means to have climbed up the ladder. Especially in a context of protean (or boundariless) careers, it is very uncertain how a career structure will evolve and the increasing role of the managerial over technical is a crucial one in that it forces us to abandon a known area of expertise to break the glass ceilings.

Through the discussion of the possibility of using professional qualifications in a flexible manner, entering and exiting from an area of work without having to start from the beginning each time, I showed that professionals based in England have a precious tool around which to build a career. The situation is very different for professionals based in Italy, where professions do not come with structured organisations. What is more, the charter tends to be used to delimitate boundaries within which to work, rather than establishing a professional status to be used in possible different directions. With reference to the dichotomy inclusiveness/exclusiveness, it can be said that in Italy one is able to make only an exclusive use of professional belonging. Although it would be fair to say that good social networks in one field can be extremely useful in another field as well, the formal qualifications obtained in another area of expertise are not considered of virtue in the transferability of skills that is so popular nowadays. Gabriele (17), a young HR professional from Naples, provides a detailed account of his professional history, which is based on the decision to leave a legal practice to join a contact centre, a younger and riskier business set up by a friend. In his account, the emphasis is entirely on human contacts (whom I have met when and where, and what everyone meant to me). Formalised credentials would be inconsistent with such a style of self-narration, and even if present, would fall behind his strong character.

Among all the professionals based in Italy interviewed, there is only one exception with respect to the possibility to use flexibly professional affiliations. It's the case of Gianni (3), a young academic in the field of accountancy and economics. At the moment of the interview, his work is entirely in academia, although he has acquired the right to enrol in the 'albo' (i.e. becoming 'chartered'), having passed all examinations. He really enjoys researching and teaching, but his plans are to exercise the profession of accountancy as well, once his academic status becomes more established. His conception of the possible uses of that belonging is rather flexible, and he seems to regard it exactly how a professional based in England would. To explain this, I want to suggest that we need to look at the very nature of the subsidiary job, which takes place in this case in academia. As Gianni himself points out, doing research does not depend on job market conditions as much as 'normal' jobs. It is on such supposed inherent difference, therefore, that we can justify Gianni's atypical position towards the profession of accountancy as a source to sustain his career.

In the UK, membership is a good escape from the insecurity of the market. If this may be considered as a denaturalization of the professions, still it constitutes a way to reinvent and recycle oneself. Doing things the other way round, staying at the technocratic level implies giving less commitment to the company, and therefore it looks more appropriate to female careers, which often still remain at a lower level. On the contrary, professionals based in Italy could barely see any career progression, which remain to them completely obscured.

The lack of any structure in career paths make them remain ineffectual with regards to the possibility of identifying what comes next. As a result, the emphasis is very much on the '*hic et nunc*', their reasoning is confined to the short future.

4.6 The process of professionalisation

It is often argued (for example, D'Cruz and Noroha 2006) that organisations make efforts in the direction of aiming at reaching a more established professionanalism to ensure a certain degree of compliance among their employees. As a result, there is often an internalisation of the principles of professionalism. Indeed, many of the interviewees display considerable efforts in representing their work as professionalised. But what this means (in general, for each profession and for the two contexts considered), and in what ways this can be intended as a resource are doubtful. There are two meanings of professionalisation: it either means as increasing levels of formal credentials required or suggested to practise; or the increasing level of complexity of the work itself. Only the second applies to both groups interviewed.

Professional associations, especially in England, thrive on the increasing necessity to certify one's professional competences. Although many efforts are made to differentiate professional qualifications from more general academic standards, we are still left alone with the questions of whether professional qualifications themselves are part of the inflation of titles. This would seem to support Wilensky's claim (1964), 'professionalisation of everyone'.

Nonetheless, a huge corpus of literature, mostly of post-marxist matrix, points out that we are witnessing a de-skilling process of the supposed skilled labour. Proletarisation refers to the loss of earnings power and prestige that accompany the loss of professional prerogatives (Leicht and Fennel 2001). The prerogatives and prestige that used to follow automatically with managerial and professional jobs are no longer assured. The increasing availability and decision-making capabilities of computers threatens to standardise professional decision making and (more importantly) make some types of professional knowledge routinely available to non-professionals (Leicht and Fennel 2001: 107). For instance, many of what used to be professions are now designated as semi-professions. According to this view, the worker finds himself/herself deprived of the control on his/her labour, and this will be true, in a relative manner, for workers of all levels in the social scale (see, in particular, Braverman's seminal work, 1974). For some scholars, professionalisation is being increasingly imbued with characteristics of management (Muzio 2004). To become more business-like rather than profession orientated means to put apart the privileges characterising the enclosure of professions at the beginning of their history, to be reactive to market fluctuations. This fact is extremely interesting because it leads us to further comments on the positive potential that can be activated by agents.

In England, the professional associations I have studied manifested an important role in underlying the sense of pride deriving from professionalisation. As a result, the stronger they are, the better it will be for young graduates who are just starting to define their working identity. To exemplify, we can consider again engineering in the UK. Despite the bad name, and the dramatic increase in marketisation, young engineers are especially keen to demon-

strate that they are respectable professionals. If we consider once more Kimberly's quotes (58)**,** 'it takes an equal amount of time to get to the professional level' we can infer that this builds her confidence, and the fact that she can prove her professional ability constitutes a great anchor, which is not subject to everyone's judgement. Therefore, despite her professional association remaining 'an old-boys' club', as she likes defining it, it nonetheless provides useful tools since it invests her with a certain professional working identity.

On the other hand, professionalism remains much more unstructured and immature in Italy. If we consider the profession of accountancy, since most work is done in small practices, where it is likely to find less formalised (structured) ways of working, the process of professionalisation is very much in doubt and would need much more work to really understand the state of art of the discipline under this perspective. A significant part is left to individuals. This is paradoxical since they all complained about the increasing formalisation (which is indeed bureaucratization) that they have to comply with. What further complicates the situation is the impression claimed by many interviewees, that despite everyone's efforts towards more professional standards, the level remains mediocre. Andrea argues about his area of engineering:

> '[To my previous colleagues], to be competitive meant…to fix a machine, for example. It wasn't about process, it was about content, ok? One is good if he/she knows how an engine works, not if he/she knows how to run properly the various stages of fixing the engine. There were no written procedures. This is another problem of the Italian industry. Procedures are in the head of people. People earn others' esteem because he/she has the knowledge, not because he is able to share it. Now we've got the drama of the retirement of those engineers. Those who have set up the Italian industry are retiring, and they are going away with their knowledge. Now who can succeed? Only those who have systematised the knowledge in standard procedures.' (Andrea, eng., 24)

Aspects such as this contribute to a sense of loss because of the lack of models to which to refer. Also, they feed a sense of being left behind in a world of work which is becoming more and more globalised.

4.7 Discussion and conclusions

I have argued that the organisation of professions, professional memberships and professional associations are different in Italy and England. In fact, in England holding professional qualifications in a specific area is a long-lasting resource which is valued whatever the direction one's career takes. On the contrary, belonging to a profession in Italy is more rigid, because the system legitimises to a minor extent any recycling of professional qualifications. Therefore, the potential function of anchorage of professional associations vary greatly depending on the culture of the professions themselves.

What this all means in practice is ambiguous and varies greatly from profession to profession. For instance, the engineer is considered the lower cast of British educational system. Nonetheless, it is becoming more and more a middle-class profession. Concurrently, very good opportunities seem to be opening for many recent graduates who are, nevertheless, still

struggling in getting themselves recognised as real professionals. So it can be said that they enjoy the money but not the status for doing it. Interestingly, an opposite movement is taking place among engineers based in Italy, who are traditionally power people, but are now becoming more and more technocrats although they enjoy very high levels of abstract knowledge.

It can be generally said that while professions used to ensure privileges, now they seem to ensure employment, and therefore can be considered useful means by which to keep safe from the uncertainties of the labour markets. Professions accompany the single professional, who in this sense is more likely to have a career than just a sequence of jobs. In Italy, instead, professions are bureaucratic apparatus, which delimit clearly the boundaries among each other. Professions are not safe boats on which to navigate the agitated sea of increasingly flexible labour markets.

The definition of professions as *corpora clausa* is especially close to the Italian situation, especially in the way that Italian professions defend themselves by remaining unchanged throughout time. Preliminary results from ILFI research (as summarised by Di Vico 2003), had demonstrated a high rate of heredity of traditional graduate professions such as medicine, law and engineering. This trend is mainly interpreted as the willingness to reduce as much as possible the risks implied in a career in the flexible labour market. Though, due to the restructuring of the production system towards a major differentiation, professions themselves are changing. According to Prandstraller (1994: 2003), 'new' professional types are being created by an internal process of transformation of traditional professions, due in particular to the need to develop more and more specific and vocational skills. Prandstraller, borrowing an expression from botanic, calls such a trend 'internal gemmation', and believes that it does not imply a weakening of existent, traditional professions, which on the contrary in so doing reaffirm themselves and their surviving ability. He also stresses a gradual modification of professions, which has been taking place within traditional boundaries.

In Italy, on the other hand, professional membership is bureaucratic, not valued by the company, in solo careers you are treated as enemy, with suspicion. Passive formal, but also active membership is not enough to enter the club. Also, it is not necessarily universally recognised. For instance, in HR many qualifications exist, and it becomes very difficult to discern which is the best. Graduates based in England and Italy face different professional conditions when entering professional paths. These differences pertain to the different organisations of professional associations in the two countries and prepare the grounds on which to elaborate culturally embedded concepts of professional belonging. Professions are therefore identified as a structural resource, a substratum that agent can then absorb and interpret. Some have a career, while some others only have jobs. In the actual research, the first are mostly the professionals based in England, while the second those based in Italy.

The results so far illustrated start to indicate what I propose as general result of this book. Professionals based in England take all the steps that are suggested or that are available. They claim to build a career based on their own needs and aspirations, but then they take very similar shapes to each other. They are individualist but not so much individualised. On the contrary, professionals based in Italy seem to avoid the difficulties that arise step by step in order to achieve a general scope, career wise. Careers are really erratic, and very much

individualised. Beck would argue for the necessity to have some extent of standardization in order to proceed in one's career (1992).

In conclusion, joining a profession is quite a different experience for the two groups of young professionals interviewed. For the latter group, professions may help in launching themselves in the world of adults, to have a taste of the old boys' club, thus disrupting the isolation of the newcomer, who rarely knows what salary level is appropriate for him/her and how to benefit from the right networks. In these aspects, there is a huge potential not only for tracing one's career path in individualistic terms, but also for starting a real portfolio, an entrepreneurial career, taking profit from whatever advantageous side of the profession is available at any given moment. The interview material collected in Italy suggests instead that this group of professionals is not encouraged to enjoy the benefits of the professions, which remain bureaucratic institutions from which one has to pass by, but their inconsistent organisation implies that one has really to substantially rely on other aspects to launch a career.

5. Organising work: working practices as resources

5.1 Introduction

By discussing some aspects of the ways in which organisations work in Italy and England, this chapter looks at the role of another institution as potential resources on which a career can be built. In this way, this chapter has a selective focus as it refers the general research question on how young graduates construct their career paths at an organisational level, i.e. specifically looking at what sort of support the organisations are able to offer. Of the three key concepts introduced in chapter 1, individualism, individualization and self-entrepreneurship, the third is particularly relevant for this chapter, whereas the other two, still logically linked, remain in the background.

5.2 Changing workplaces

Recently, the public debate has focussed its attention on the reconfiguration of organisations. An important issue has been the process of debureaucratization, which is being followed by an emphasis on the entrepreneurial self, inside as well as outside of the workplace. The interest recently shown in boundaryless careers and protean workers / professionals (see chapter 2) does not deny, but rather reconfirms, that settings in which labour is explicated are crucial in understanding the meanings and significance of it.

Reed reminds us that Weber's bureaucracy becomes the 'cultural icon' and 'institutional embodiment' of 'the age of organization' (2005). For Weber [1968], modern bureaucracy exhibited certain structural, political and cultural features that set it apart from other forms of administrative coordination and control. First, it established an administrative structure and system that was functionally indispensable to the operation of the modern capitalist state and enterprise. Second, it provided an institutional mechanism for generating, concentrating and distributing power that facilitated the continuous monitoring and control of social action in all spheres of social, economic, political and cultural life. Third, it elevated and legitimated instrumental or functional rationality as *the* cognitive mode and cultural framework through which a 'means-ends' decision-making calculus to be ruthlessly and systematically imposed in all walks of modern life.

Taken together, the combination of these three core elements created a powerful mechanism that informed modernity with the willingness to control all aspects of human environ-

ment, emotional side included (Du Gay 2000). The reasons for the success of bureaucratic organisation in modern societies were ultimately strategic: its technical superiority, its cultural power and its capacity of integrating different sorts of power under one entity. Weber's discussion of the bureaucratic organisation appeared to conflate two very different sources of authority - one of which is based on the possession of expert knowledge in a particular substantive area (see chapter 4); the other, based on an individual's position in an organisational hierarchy (Du Gay 1996: 340).

However, this scenario seems to have been challenged substantially. Certainly, it is not the one described by interviewees, either in Italy or the UK. The tendency to hire temporary workers, the normalisation of subcontracting and the affirmation of outsourcing are now widespread practices that have eroded the supremacy of traditional organisations. Workplaces have *de facto* adopted as normal increasingly flattened organisational hierarchies. Moreover, with the substitution of part of the workforce by machines, the power of unions has also generally decreased.

In particular, organisations whose core activities are carried out by professionals used a different form of control from traditional bureaucracies. As a result, different models for embedding professionals in organisations are at stake:

> 'a) autonomous, where professionals retain authority to control and evaluate themselves as a group […] b) heteronomous, where professionals are subject to more line-authority control […] c) conjoint, where professionals and administrators recognise their separate domains of expertise and power, but also their shared benefits and need for collaborations' (Leicht and Fennell 2001: 28).

This configures an especially unstable organisational asset, which is also accompanied by the decline of the importance of internal labour markets (Leicht and Fennell 2001). Networks become increasingly important to start and maintain a professional development, as Castells (1996) and, in another sense, Granovetter (1973, 1974) argue, and networks are increasingly distant from union protectorates.

5.3 The challenges of self-enterpreunership

It is in relation to this specific organisational scenario that the contours of the protean and boundaryless careers described in chapter 2 take shape. Being immersed in the mobile world of the network organisation, workplaces are essentially 'structureless' and 'boundaryless' units or processes, therefore 'network organising is dependent on a highly complex circuitry of informational codes and flows in which a 'variable geometry' of constant movement and fluctuation defies the 'fixed geometry' of division, standardization and formalisation characteristics of bureaucratic coordination and control' (Reed 2005: 128-129). It is in this context that 'enterprise as a rationality of government promotes a conception of the individual person as an 'entrepreneur of the self' (Gordon 1987: 300, quoted in Du Gay 1994: 660).

We are therefore being told that organisational identities will be less and less attached to one firm, as they used to be for the organisation man, a character described very well in its monolithic and British traits by Roper (1994). The bureaucratic governance of organisational

life -in both the public and the private sectors- is identified as a serious obstacle to the 'efficient and effective' provision of goods and services, and in fact contemporary managerial discourse stresses the importance of individuals acquiring more 'market-oriented', 'proactive' and 'entrepreneurial' predispositions and capacities (Du Gay 1994: 656). Also, 'bureaucratic norms are 'deemed to be inimical to individual self-realisation; bureaucracy is represented as fundamentally 'unethical' (Du Gay 1994: 656).

Enterprise occupies an absolutely crucial position in this new managerial discourse[31]. They criticise bureaucratic culture and propose instead 'enterprising qualities' as the key to the success of the organisation and the individual alike. These would come with 'initiative, self-reliance, risk-taking and the ability to accept responsibility for oneself and one's actions' (Du Gay 1994: 659). Neo-entrepreneurialism is an 'organizational form that encompasses the aspirations of the managerial projects, the increasing diversity of professional work settings, the convergence of control structures among professionals, and the diversification of interests among professional workers' (Leicht and Fennell 2001: 216).

The individual is therefore encouraged to be an 'entrepreneur of the self'. The idea of an individual human life as an enterprise of the self suggests that the person remains continuously engaged as 'part of the continuous business of living to make adequate provision for the preservation, reproduction and reconstruction of one's own human capital' (Gordon 1991: 44). As Rose (1990) has suggested, an 'enterprising self' is a calculating self, a self that calculates about itself and works upon itself in order to better itself. As a logical result, governing organisational life in an 'enterprising' manner involves the reconstruction of a wide range of institutions and activities along the lines of the commercial firm' (Du Gay 1994: 659).

The first challenge encountered by my interviewees in this regard is the fact that organisations are claimed to absorb their employees. Answering my question on how she feels in her workplace, Federica (14), an HR assistant in a new economy firm, says:

> 'How do I feel in the firm? On average fine…. It depends on the periods… For instance, this is a period of great stress, and you find them cyclically…. […] Work is…. interesting, stimulating, always new, let's say we don't get bored. The problem is that we have to deal with aims that are not related to the organisational reality we have in Cagliari, we depend on Milan for a lot of things. Both for the communication side with Milan, and between Cagliari and Milan, or within Cagliari. Then, last but not least the aspect of the incentives and professional development, because in these last three years I have received many promises but nothing concrete, and this is surely a very negative aspect'. (Federica, HR, 14)

From Federica's testimony there emerges a sense of frustration, albeit in a generally satisfying situation, due to the difficulty of distance herself from the company. The firm dictates the pace and the direction of professional development, with very little space for taking one's own direction. In fact, in another point of the interview she delineates how the fortune of her

[31] In recent years, a rich debate has flourished around the distinction between managerial and professional routes. A reading which starts tackling with the issue can be Savage (2000). However, the professionals interviewed are at an initial stage of their career, and therefore the issue of 'ceasing' to be a professional to become a manager is only vaguely prefigured.

previous firm, which has at a certain point merged with another, has substantially changed her role with no possibility for her to influence it in any way:

> 'Since we have S. [new employer], many things have changed, for sure. The fact of having new management, has changed… everything. We used to belong to the HR section, which was supposed to deal with HR, but… like a joke of destiny, we almost exclusively deal with vocational training, whereas since we now work under another department, which is client management, we deal… with HR. You know, it sometimes happens with companies'. (Federica, HR, 14)

Companies have their own rules with which even professionals have to comply. Michele is an engineer from Naples who has considered both a career in academia and/or research and a solo professional route. He has also had some research experience working for the consultancy side of big companies. From that period, he recalls the constraint of having to adhere to their work model. The individual worker is here completely crushed under the rhythms, goals and objectives of the company and its needs. Certainly, there is no space to negotiate at an individual level:

> 'If you want to try a career in a company, you must let yourself be absorbed completely by the company, that is, if they ask for long hours you've got to devote long hours, if they ask you to stay eight hours per day, ten hours per day, twelve hours per day, you've got to stay, if you want a career there… otherwise you do your normal eight hours required by contract, but burning the fields around and the bridges behind[32]'. (Michele, eng., 27)

These testimonies suggest how difficult it may be to implement the 'self-entrepreneurship' dictates. Although I do believe that both groups of professionals may be experiencing difficulties in this sense, it is to be observed that professionals based in England do not use this argument, except in two cases. The first is Christy (51), a researcher in the engineering field, who has used similar arguments to motivate her choice of doing research in academia rather than working for the industry – as most who hold that sort of qualification do. Companies 'own you', she says, describing the fate of friends she made as a student at University as in contrast to her own freedom. The second case is Stacey (45), a part-time doctoral student and part-time HR officer. Stacey has previously worked in her capacity of HR professional in the police and in a traditional company, and has left to escape what she describes as a patronising and macho organisational culture in which she felt she did not fit. Thus both cases refer to the concept in describing either someone else or a past and overcome experience.

The arguments I put forward in this chapter depart from the basic idea that organisations, far from operating according *in toto* to market rules, are in fact culturalized entities. Specifically, cultural modulations of organisation can result in very different forms of support for graduates seeking to build professional careers. It reflects on the process of debureacratization that we reaffirm that organisations are culturalized entities. Work ethics and work practices are culturally affected, and involve values, beliefs, assumptions, rituals, symbols and be-

[32] These idiomatic expressions, which I translated literally from Italian here, both mean to cut once and for all trustful relationships.

haviours. Culture is constituted by layers: the surface structure, or visible, outer layer of culture consists of observable behaviours and recognisable physical manifestations such as members' uniform, symbols and logos, organisational routines and rituals, and printed documents. Inner structure, or the inner layer of culture, consists of the values (what is important to us and what is not), the beliefs and the often subconscious assumptions which underlie the surface structure and provide the logic which guides the members' behaviour (Schein 1996).

Professional groups know that they are defining, defending and broadening their work domains, interviewees claim. Italy, for instance, suffers from the lack of a social legitimation of the provision of services to customers, called a service culture. This is true especially for the public administration, but it can be expanded to the private sector as well: great emphasis is put on the norm and the juridical level, while at the practical level the administration is left to clientelism and politics (Farinella 2004). This prevents strong work identities being formed and brings about the institutionalisation of the public sector. The little revolutions they cause do not 'happen in the air' but in culturalized organisations. Organisations both *have* and *are* cultures.

The agent is by nature directed toward the future, as well as having a past and a present dimension (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Now that we have outlined some major changes in current organisation, we can turn to the agent side. What is agency without the possibility of constructing a personal future path according to one's own wishes and desires? This is a general concern that has become increasingly urgent due to the direction towards which organisations are changing. It therefore becomes important to look at the dynamics put into actions by agents who need to activate resources in order to see their career advancing in any one way. As recalled in chapter 2, career is not to be seen exclusively in structural terms – as an orderly progression of jobs - but rather as 'meanings given to action, attributes and things'. In this chapter, after having pointed out the decline of the vertical, predictable way of 'making a career', I discuss what anchors can be found in the boundaryless professional organisation.

5.4 Stepping on and off the roundabouts

In the light of the future perspective, one of the elements which is often portrayed as very useful by interviewees based in England is the institution of appraisal. It is practised in English workplaces, as a regular relationship between an employee and the superior, to meet regularly, mostly once or twice per year, to discuss what has been achieved (in comparison to what should have been achieved), to adjust unsuccessful ways of working, to discuss career prospects (often in the very practical terms of coming promotions), and in general to verify whether the work has been done in line with the company's values and directions. As such, appraisals are of great importance because they offer an occasion to have a pause from the day-to-day activities, to distance oneself from the mere practicalities of work and to give either an approval or a reprimand. When reflecting on one's achievements, appraisals become an occasion on which employer and employee see if their goals fit together, are compatible, and even more importantly, if the relationship can work in future. Peer review and appraisal schemes encourage individual responsibility (Du Gay 1994). This seems consistent with Leicht and Fennel argument that in almost any professional setting, 'hooking up with the

right mentor can make a big difference in terms of having an inside source of information on how the system works and how to increase the odds of promotion' (2001: 86).

Due to the presence of appraisals, but also of other formal instruments, it is clear that professionals in England are provided with a number of occasions that help them to figure out their position in the firm, what they can do, what level they can get to and so on. Stacey (45) has made her way up through an intense process of reconsideration of her professional role and aims. After a humanistic degree and various gap years, she has started off her career as an accountant for a major accountancy company. Having realised she didn't have a vocation for that path, she has taken control of her working situation with her firm's tangible support. This has been possible not only because she has been good enough at 'stepping off the roundabout', but also because her company has accepted the vocational crisis in which she finds herself, so that she can follow any directions she may want to take. She takes the opportunity to improve her professional life precisely due to her crises, and a sense of not fitting into what she was doing:

> 'I was striving that for the first nine years my career…. I was getting on this roundabout, and the roundabout just gets faster and faster and faster, and it just gets harder and harder to jump off, and it was scary, and I didn't have the time to jump off, you know, or stop, and I just wanted to stop the roundabout. So I was persuaded to put off taking a partnership and the time it was deferred when I got the opportunity to go to A [business school] for one month, and that gave me the opportunity to step off the roundabout and just stop, you know, life. And it gave me time to think what I was doing, why I was doing it, what could I do. I suppose the big thing for me was that I didn't know what to do, so I just thought I would do what I have to do, I don't know what else I could do, but I came back from there knowing more about what I wanted to do, having the courage to say 'I don't wanna do it, I don't wanna be an audit partner'. I still didn't know quite what I wanted to do but I wanted to go in a different direction and it was around people, and it was around coaching, to some extent, I wanted to… feel that I was adding …., making a difference to people. […] I just spoke to the manager… the managing partner took me out for lunch after I came back from A and asked me, you know, what I think of A, but I think that he ultimately knew that audit partner wasn't for me, and I think he also had this values project in mind for me, but he just told me to go ahead and think broadly what it was I wanted to do, almost giving me permission to create my own …he was kind of saying 'we want you to stay at [this firm], just think broadly about what you'd like to do here". (Stacey, HR, 45)

In Stacey's account much space is devoted to emphasising that the accountancy firm she works for has been able to listen to her and to be flexible, in a positive way, towards her needs. She seems very grateful for this, and on the whole she seems a very passionate worker: from the limited shadowing that I could do, following her inside the firm on the occasion of the interview, she clearly showed a very sympathetic disposition to whoever she met. It is quite likely that the same attention and care she has perceived on her, she is willing to give back in doing her job: she feels she belongs to the firm, she completely shares its values (which she actually writes herself as her duty). However, it is clear that the scenario defined by Stacey also implies, on the other hand, rather sympathetic superiors and quite a good workplace, and on the other a powerful position within the firm: all these elements make the

situations she describes quite unlikely. However, it is important to reflect on how she conceives and represents the trust relationship of employer/employee.

The professionals based in Italy I have interviewed tend to centre their accounts on a tense relationship with their employers. Sonia (46), an HR professional originally from Italy, has lived in England for the last twelve years. At the time of the interview, she has an interesting job which is about to leave to spend a sabbatical in a developing country on a voluntary program. She does not know whether at the end of the sabbatical her company, a multinational firm, will integrate her in the same office or will either choose to dislocate somewhere else. She takes this risk, but she is ultimately very grateful for the receptiveness of his superiors, and well aware of the discomfort she may be causing. In particular, she is very conscious that her decision could have never been proposed in Italy. She points out:

> 'You could never have done this in Italy, I mean, can you imagine an Italian company giving you a sabbatical? To do charity work?? Here is very common, very very common. In universities as well, everywhere. You get gap years, sabbaticals, you do other things, you come back…' (Sonia, HR, 46)

Amongst interviewees based in Italy, nobody mentioned occasions for monitoring achievement, discussing a project and solving misunderstandings at work, at least not in a formalised (and therefore cogent) occasion such as an appraisal. Appraisals are not mentioned by any of the interviewees, and their existence is very much in doubt. Intuitively, there are many ways to monitor one's work, but professionals based in Italy do not have formalised occasions to discuss their future perspectives. Considering appraisals as constitutive elements of the structure, it can be said that the agency potential of professionals is compressed, because of the immaturity of the organisations. As a result, the conceptualisation of the future is also sacrificed. After some experience as a consultant vocational trainer, Roberto now works for a new economy firm, dealing with HR issues. At one point in the interview, attempting to find a leitmotiv in his arguments, I point out that his path, taken overall, looks consistent. Yet, he disagrees and rather points out casualty elements, defining a situation in which there are very few guidelines:

> 'Let's say I entered this path by chance, but just after that I realised it was a path I enjoyed. Then, you know, in the vocational training area its all a matter of getting in, because it happens that you… Unfortunately at the moment…. well, unfortunately or fortunately, since I work for a company I obviously lack many of those contacts. But if you enter the field of vocational training, and do project work, you have the possibility to work very well, because every job opens possibilities, those around are always the same, and they will call you again.' (Roberto, HR, 12).

The story of his career–path then goes on in a way that is affected by the changing shape of the labour market. In fact, the company he manages to join faces a process of restructuring and the specific HR sector which he belongs to is first subsumed under general HR and then separated again. Roberto follows the destiny decided for him by the company, and there seems not to be much space for what he wants within the company. In a context in which 'there are no great professionals with great experience and great capacities', as he says, a

change of role is sometimes a formality rather than a real change of direction. More dramatically, other interviewees have experienced a total deprivation of control over their career. It is very common, Andrea argues (24), to become 'like a pawn in somebody's else hands'. In the past it occurred to him to be on a two-year contract. What happened was:

> 'Prior [to the termination of the contract] I was told I was gonna be confirmed. This is very smart of them. In my present company they don't do that. Where I work now, you are confirmed without them letting you know'. (Andrea, eng., 24)

This acknowledgment is seen by Andrea as 'very fair'. By this comment, he underlines what is normally unexpected or expected. The unstructuredness of working practices becomes a trap for many professionals based in Italy. In some cases, the advantages of working to poorly formalised patterns are in fact much weaker if compared to the potentialities that go unnoticed and, as such, wasted. From this perspective it is worthwhile to mention Pietro's story (18). Pietro graduated from a prestigious university in Northern Italy. After graduation and the birth of his first son, Pietro moved from the Milan branch of a multinational company for which he dealt with HR issues, to a Naples secondary branch, motivated by the 'new family' needs to be closer to his family of origin. Despite what he describes as overall satisfaction, Pietro acknowledges that his achievements must be framed within a low profile – at least if compared to his student peers at university, and at a much lower salary level. Last but not least, the new position in Naples implies exhausting travel commitments: he is required to visit Rome two days a week, Milan at least twice a month, and this seems considerable trouble if added to the fact that he lives on an island in the Bay of Naples, from which he normally has to travel to the city centre everyday. He describes in the following words what is specifically difficult about his job:

> 'Naples is a reality where you've got to demonstrate every day to those over you that they did it right in investing here, that they will gain something, that it makes sense to have this branch in Naples. That is, we do have to constantly earn our bread because in Naples we do not have clients, we work for clients from Rome and Milan, and every time we have to turn a somersault to convince the company that for the clients it is convenient to shift the work here, from Milan and Rome to Naples'. (Pietro, HR, 18)

In this way, the branch specificities and its precariousness seem to absorb most energies and the organisation's needs take precedence over personal inclinations. It is clear that the direction into which he puts his efforts is different from the group of professionals based in England. In this framework, status is negotiated again and again through every day practices, but in a fairly implicit form, so that it is very difficult for Pietro to conceptualise his position, to understand what he can and cannot do, what he can and cannot achieve, and in which timeframe:

> 'Variations depend on management, on top management, and are not tied to the profession. That is, at times the managing director saw my role in a certain way and therefore I played it in that way. Other times different managing directors asked me for another kind of intervention,

and I adopted it. But in the end it did not depend on the specific concept of HR, but on the standpoint of the one who ruled the company. (Pietro, HR, 18)

These words testify that it is not on predictable processes and steps that a career is built, but rather on volatile personal characteristics of whoever is leading the game. The undefined structure of these new organisations makes it increasingly difficult to predict role games and the structure of paths. Asked how he thinks the future will be, embarrassment prevails. There seem not to be any guiding principles:

'Everything is… cloudy, complex, because what I have seen in these years is that your future depends a lot on those who run you. At this point, I could be filling a managerial role, had I continued with the first managing director I worked with, while for the current one the role I have now is more than enough. Therefore the managerial level is still far off! (laughing). But someone else may arrive tomorrow morning and fall in love with me! (Pietro, HR, 18)

In the first place, the dimension of future planning is affected, which is so important for feeding and supporting the effectiveness of the dynamic agent-structure, as Emirbayer and Mische suggest (1998). This statement is even stronger when it is taken into consideration that I am referring here to standard conditions of work. While the 'somebody' to whom 'everybody has to report' guarantees an impersonal authority in many accounts of professionals based in England, in Italy promotions are deemed to depend on specific persons and personalities, and personal talent incurs the risk of not being recognised. In some cases not only the occasion to make the point on what needs to be done is missing. More seriously, for some what is missing is any recognition whatsoever. Nino (28) recalls one of his first job experiences as lacking any sense:

'I was getting good at what I was doing, I approached the boss and asked him: when will I see some money? And he said: 'this request annoys me'. It was then that I realised what to do next'. (Nino, eng., 28)

In other extreme cases (such as Antonietta's, 2), it was reported to me that some inexperienced graduates - who by regulation only receive a reimbursement of daily expenses - were even asked for money to get a place as trainee. On the other hand, for professionals based in England this would not be a issue. They assume that each hour worked corresponds to a wage and that is it. Aware of that, they also show no distress about the student debt (often increased by an overdraft) which they feel is 'naturally' deducted from their wages, as if it was 'a bill'.

In Italy, money issues also arise when young professionals work in close connection with clients. Carlo (6) has recently opened his own business in accountancy, and he is facing all the difficulties of the newcomer. He is disappointed by the attitudes that clients have towards his job. He argues that accountants are used as 'a wailing wall', because they make entrepreneurs pay taxes, and this is money that they would prefer not to be deprived of. On top of that, when it comes to paying the honorarium, they often complain again. Behind these attitudes Carlo sees a poor recognition of his work and the professional effort he puts into it.

Clearly, these negative sides of unstructured work are to be distinguished from the outcomes of the restructuring of labour markets. In fact, the latter can effectively bring along new enthusiasm, as in the case of Valentino (13). He covers a senior HR position in a new economy company in Sardinia, a position he took after leaving the public sector:

> 'I come from a previous experience in a structured company… this is a completely destructured company, that lives very much on its own unstructuredness. It's got major difficulties in the passage from a pioneering phase to a mature phase, in reorganising itself, in entering canons and clichés typical of a structured company, there is a great deal of difficulty in this passage. I believe it is extremely stimulating because there are a lot of high level professionals with all the expertise, ehm… and you see many young people with lots of determination, ambition, energy…' (Valentino, HR, 13).

This excerpt demonstrates that professionals based in Italy are currently facing a double-sided difficulty: in a context of poorly organised working practices, they must deal with the introduction of flexibility policies. This further complicates the confusing situation they have to deal with when first accessing an organization. Many, in fact, complain that it is difficult to understand what are the duties of the job. This may be seen as reflecting the styles in recruiting. For instance, if one looks at adverts of vacancies in Italy, even for high level jobs, it is often difficult to grasp what the job will be like, while most description is devoted to defining the 'level' of the job, and the 'level' of education. Conversely, it is easier to infer from English vacancy adverts, not only to whom one will be responsible, but also for what one will be in charge of.

5.5 Family-friendly flexibility?

The term flexibility has come to dominate public discourse and debate around work. As I have indicated in ch.1, the phenomenon may be viewed from different perspectives and can certainly display different dimensions. However, I was struck by the fact that the group of professionals based in England I interviewed employed the term flexibility even before I asked them to comment on it, and most surprisingly used it to describe a positive connotation of their current job. For instance, Stacey (45) describes her job as good in the sense that 'whether she is given it or not, she takes a lot of flexibility', meaning by this that she has conquered her space to do the job her own way, albeit in a huge multinational company based in London. Also, Samir (52), a civil engineer, is particularly enthusiastic about his profession and industry. He likes to underline that in this job he can have a good social life as well, just because he can be flexible:

> 'In this country, the culture of work is not stressful. It's easy-going, very very easy-going. So the working hours, standard working hours, are 7 and half hours a day. […] In general it's very very flexible, laid-back. You now, sometimes you wanna come to…you wanna come to work later than nine, you can, you can stay a little bit longer afterwards to make up the hours, as long as you work, as long as you do your job, you know? So they don't tell you 'you have to be here

at this time and you have to leave at this time', they don't watch what time you go, what time you come. It's very flexible as long as you do your job. (Samir, eng., 52)

Those who use the term flexibility in this way were ultimately willing to underline the agency potential in their position: namely, that they could run their everyday work routine and the duties of their job as they wish. Notably, such individual room to manoeuvre was often referred to as a concrete way to implement gender equality. In this sense flexibility is not, as in the original legislative intention, a policy introduced to favour firms' production needs, nor a measure to allow weak workers to access the labour market. The focus changes, and it becomes instead a policy associated with the promotion of family needs. From this perspective, it is used in a very different way in comparison with the Italian context, and it therefore can be said that flexibility can now cover different contents, hiding different shapes and functions. Interestingly, the kind of flexibility professionals based in England refer to is thus a positive one, and it is inextricably linked to a supposed gender equality. As a result, in the narratives of graduates based in England, flexibility is actually sought after, since it is perceived as family–friendly.

To a large extent, Kimberly (58) is planning her career on gender specificities: as a woman in a male-dominated field of work, she counts on the fact that colleagues and superiors will be curious to know what she will ever have to say in a meeting. She has also recently undergone important changes in her life: recently married, she has moved home and now she is planning the whole life-work thing. Her career planning is based on a more or less silent mutual agreement. She said 'I try to give a bit of loyalty to the company, because at some point I'm gonna have kids, and I hope they're gonna be as loyal to me as I am to them'. It is interesting to listen to her unpacking the elements of the exchange: in few words, she is trying to achieve as much as possible career-wise until becoming chartered. After having in such a way compressed her personal life, she expects to compress work and then travel and have children:

'I've got straight goals in my head, what I want to achieve, at the moment my goal is to get as much training as I can as a graduate, at the moment, in terms of what they charge me, and to get my chartership […], *with four or five years' experience, I can pretty much, pretty much do what I want*, I am planning to say to the company 'I'm gonna have one year sabbatical and go travelling', say, I'm gonna have a year, I don't know, building schools in Africa somewhere, and then… you know, possibly still come back to this company, if I'm still happy with it, and have children, and I expect, and yeah… I do expect to be able to work two or three days per week, and look after kids, because it's in their interest, they trained me, they put a lot of money into our training, and they invested a lot, and it's in their interest to try and keep me, there are always laws coming up about discrimination, and they can't discriminate against me. At the moment parents who work in this company can put the kids in a crèche, for free, for a minimum charge.' (Kimberly, eng., 58)

Anne-Marie (41), an HR professional working for a multinational company, is another example of someone who believes it is not only possible but also worthwhile to go part-time once children arrive. She reiterates this concept by portraying as a real possibility that when she has childcare responsibilities she may remain in full employment while her husband takes

time off to be the primary carer. Generally speaking, flexibility is associated by most of this group with the possibility of modifying standard working hours to suit personal and family needs: being able, say, to start working earlier in order to be able to pick up children from school *is* a flexible practice that has only recently come into effect, and contextually *is* women-friendly because women remain the main carers of dependents.

By contrast, the professionals based in Italy I interviewed never associate flexible working practices with an advantage to employees. On the contrary, it seems that the process of debureacratization that with its global assets also regards Italian organisations, has actually worsened relations between the genders. In fact, while female employment is now socially acceptable for the younger generation, young organisations are so involved in fighting for survival in increasingly complex markets that organisations' consideration of gender equality is restricted to those specific normative interventions that cannot be avoided. However, such organisations fail to portray themselves as family-friendly, as underlined by my interviewees. The logic reported by interviewees based in Italy is very different from the implementation of the gender mainstreaming advocated by European institutions. Therefore, the difficulties of pursuing a traditional vertical career in favour of a boundaryless path may even be exacerbated by a diffuse unpredictability.

In the light of the scenario described in the previous chapter, workplaces in general do not assume friendly connotations. Claudio efficiently claims (23):

> 'In Italy employers try to cheat on employees, employees try to cheat on employers. There is a severe social conflict. Now, let's say, employers have control of the knife.' (Claudio, eng., 23)

In this sentence, it emerges that attention to power relations within any one firm, can be diverted to a strongly unionised tradition. By saying 'now', Claudio refers exactly to the scenario described in ch.1. In such a situation, there are many difficulties in implementing flexibility as well as women-friendly policies, despite the considerable attention that has been given in recent years to gender equality at an institutional level.

The main differences in the structure of female employment in the two countries are the following: while in England women enjoy a high rate of participation, but tend to leave the market when they have children and until they reach school age, in Italy gender discrimination is much more visible, first and foremost because the total female participation in employment is traditionally low, especially in the south of the country. However, in the context of this book, it should be noted that the recent feminization process has particularly invested young females with high levels of education attainment. It can be therefore said that the young professionals interviewed are experiencing a sort of revolution themselves, just because they are entering fields which were not 'women's work' only a few decades ago. Now that the exclusion from employment seems to decline, some sort of galvanisation would be justified, but not to the point of not recognising barriers in pursuing a career. Letizia (15) is talking about the direction her career could take if she decided to climb up the ladder as an HR professional. Asked why she does not consider HR a woman's job, she claims:

> 'What? This particular one, it is, but companies remain *men's*. […] There is a lot of mistrust, since if women have children, they…. *have* children'. (Letizia, HR, 15)

Having children is therefore an ineluctable career barrier, one that favourable policies cannot eliminate. Letizia has chosen to go part-time, a decision that should allow her to 'close everything and go away' in time to pick up her daughters from kindergarten. But the reality she faces is that she squeezes everything into reduced working hours to be able to collect the children. This demonstrates the impossibility of finding a substitute to cover the hours Letizia prefers not to work in her current situation. Again, this may be due to the fact that the branch she is working for employs very few people, and therefore there is little chance of replacing human resources from among existing employees.

Yet, despite the high level of self-confidence that interviewees such Kimberly (58) show, gender discrimination does exist in England too. On the positive side, a sign of this is the fact that women may get extraordinary publicity just because they are women. It was totally accidental that, when I was on fieldwork, I happened to find on the internet a picture of young women engineers who had recently joined a graduate programme with an engineering company which was trying to increase the proportion of female employees. In that picture, two of my interviewees, Kimberly (58) and Geena (54), appear[33]. Interestingly, neither of them mentioned during the interviews such a privileged exposure. Furthermore, neither of them mentioned gender discrimination as an issue. For instance, Kimberly describes her first work experience as follows:

> 'As a woman, it was tough, because they weren't used to having a woman around. They put teabags in my boots, and my [fake] nails were on the ground when I left them there, and I had my female toilet. There was just one female toilet, and they all use it, and make a mess, and I had to come in and it was awful; it was tough as an environment for a woman to be in because they were testing me, and… but then as a place to learn it was great'. (Kimberly, eng., 58)

However, the way in which she frames such episodes leads us to think that she underestimates the gender discrimination embedded in this experience. Many studies have shown how much agency on the one hand, and how much social constraints on the other, arise from female horizontal and vertical segregation in the labour market. In this respect, very famous - since much discussed - is the preference theory elaborated by Catherine Hakim in different instances (1996, 2000). She argues that women's nature is heterogeneous, so that it is possible to divide women into three macro-groups: those who are career-oriented, the drifters and those who prefer, are more willing to work as housewives. Such an interpretation has met much resistance on the theoretical level, nor has it found strong empirical substance.

Also, Mingione and Andreotti (2005) remind Lewis' proposal (2002) to explain gender differences in employment by using the idea of 'one and a half', suggesting that even when both members of a couple have a career, it is very likely that there is a leading wage earner, while the other supports the income and is eventually considered less vital to the economy of the family. Such a division remains highly gendered. Notably, there is only one interviewee who seriously recognises gender discrimination in the workplace. I am here referring to Rose, who used to be an HR professional, first in retail, and then in the police:

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[33] The photo was a few years old, and that explained why Geena and Kimberly, who worked in the same sector but for different companies at the time of my interviews, were in fact direct colleagues at that point.

> [The experience for the police was] really, really tough. […] I spent three years at XY, but retail, retail personnel tends to be really operational day to day stuff, so making sure that there is enough people on the till, I got to the police and all of a sudden it was really a senior job, […] it is a really macho culture, it's very much like… funny enough it is similar to XY in a different sort of way, they are all the same, they are all very mucho. They have built in discrimination against women and everyone who is not a policeman, really. I think they tend to just… they don't intend to discriminate against you, but they just have this… impression in their head of what women are like, and… and on that basis they treat you differently, and that was really frustrating. Really really frustrating. […] Some policemen […] because you are a women, they give you a hard time, not listening to you, not listening to what you are saying, dismissing what you are saying very quickly. And it's always a battle to get them to do what they need to do. (Rose, HR, 48)

It is interesting to note that at the time of the interview Rose is both a part-time HR officer and a part-time PhD student, doing research on gender issues. Such choice reveals her particular sensibility on the issue or, at least, her very willingness to discuss them with me during the interview.

Thus, the emerging question is why professionals based in England do not recognise gender segregation. Although I am not able to answer this question fully, I am convinced that some reasons can be found in an uncritical absorption of a specific career propaganda (Cuzzocrea 2009b), and to the particular phase of life in which these young professionals are caught up in at the moment of the interview (see chapter 6). The fact that diverse and sometimes opposite solutions are accorded equal value is certainly an element that assures women of their potential to break the glass ceiling.

5.6 Conclusions

In this chapter I discuss the construction of a professional career in England and Italy, taking the angle of the organisational settings, i.e. looking at the effect of the process of unstructuredness of the organisation on one's effort to find career anchors. Clearly, two very different universes are involved. In England, well structured work practices do suggest to graduates that there are many opportunities to be taken. By taking such (positive) resources, a career is built. The agent will climb up the ladder by taking advantage of the structural resources, i.e. once it has been identified that flexible solutions are in existence if a woman wants both a career and children, the strategy will be adopted by choosing to adhere to that policy. The strategy works at its best if a plurality of positive resources are identified and then made use of. Therefore a woman can decide fully to join her professional association in view of what are perceived as advantages, as illustrated in chapter 4.

Conversely, the poorly structured organisation of work of Italian organisations leaves agents alone to work out strategies that can only conceived in negative terms. While professionals based in England centre their accounts on the positive resources available, which they state they have taken advantage of (or at least identified), professionals based in Italy focus their accounts on the difficulties encountered in building their professional path. In the ab-

sence of structured anchors that can work as effective support, Italians tend then to build their path by avoiding difficulties. For instance, if there is no way to have their expertise recognised by a unique association, they must build their good name in other ways, for instance by intensifying social life in order to get to know more people and thus to acquire more potential clients, if they have their own practice. The importance of networking is not a new phenomenon, neither is it necessarily negative (see Granovetter 1973, 1974). However, the careers we are examining here are particularly erratic because contacts do not just serve to make someone enter a system which is governed by its own rules. The system, in fact, does not exist as such: responsibilities and duties are left to individuals, are unpredictable and therefore difficult to control. If we were to test a new flexible policy, we could probably verify that England has the necessary disposition to propose it and to launch it, while Italy lacks the minimum requirements for its implementation: the inspirational motives will be misguided and the spirit will be misinterpreted. This interpretation is strengthened if one is looking at the effects of the position of professionals' early careers upon the life cycle in the two contexts, as I shall discuss in the following chapter.

6. Positioning early career professionals in the life course

6.1 Introduction

I have so far shown how the arenas in which recent graduates based in Italy and England differ with respect to the sort of resources that professions, professional associations, and professional membership offer (chapter 4). In a similar way, I also looked at how the functioning of organisations, considered as cultural entities, meet and merge with the efforts of the young professionals interviewed in their attempt to become an active and valuable part of the firm for which they work (chapter 5). In this chapter I assume a third perspective from which it can be said that the two groups of professionals act and build their careers in different institutional contexts, constituted by the assumptions made on them as occupying a peculiar position in the life course. Again, this brings to light that different opportunities and constraints arise in the two contexts examined. Scholars such as Leicht and Fennel have already argued that understanding the course and development of careers requires framing these within the specific stage of the life course of the actors, as this aspect implies specific normative demands (2001). In other words, what one is required to do varies greatly depending on the stage one is in not only within, but also outside of work.

The general finding from the interviews conducted is that being young, as happens to early career people, is seen as an advantage for professionals based in England, while it is not for their counterparts based in Italy. In trying to cope with this situation, the latter group identifies in the family a crucial form of support, while the former do not speak of family in terms of a resource. Therefore, a non- work aspect is identified here as a resource, i.e. the position in the life course. Within this discussion, it is interesting to put emphasis on the role of the family as marginal entity for professionals based in England, and as significant, both supportive and constraining, for professionals based in Italy. More generally, in this chapter I discuss the tensions caught in these mechanisms.

When they conceive of themselves as workers, early career professionals find themselves incorporating in their views the fact that they are young, at least if compared to the average of workers in the market. Those for which they work, to whom they report to, are likely to be older. Age is not a neutral characteristic, it brings with it preconceptions and assumptions, advantages and disadvantages. Comparative research becomes really interested here because, as Bolin notes (2004):

> 'The view on youth has changed culturally. There are, in Western culture, many conceptions of 'youth', and what it means to be young. These notions are not only created and maintained by young people themselves. Youth has also become an object of knowledge production and rhetorical projections initiated by the state, marker, social movements and science' (2004:240).

Recently, there has been a rich debate on the usefulness of the concept of generation, which departs from Mannheim's work. A generation is formed when 'a group of individuals born at the same time are influenced by shared experiences, gain a common history, develop a collective identity, and have the opportunity to participate actively together in reflection over intellectual (political) issues' (Närvänen and Näsman 2004 :77). Närvänen and Näsman (2004) discuss the multiple meanings of this concept contrasting it to both 'life phase' within life course research, and 'age category'. They suggest a focus in the 'construction of […] relationships and how the people in those positions relate to one another, and in their agency towards one another reshape, question, negotiate, and change their own and the other's position' (2004: 72). Life phases are socially constructed and change over time in their meanings and functions. Of particular interest is the relation among those involved in different life stages.

Besen-Cassino (2008) argues that an understanding of youth labour from the perspective of young people has been so far neglected, whilst most studies have explored 'the perspectives of parents, educators, policy-makers, and employers' (2008: 359). Following this line, my aim in this chapter is to show that the condition of youth has to be taken more systematically into account in studying one's career, as a constitutive element of a flexi-life approach, which this book launches.

6.2 Discriminating by age

There is a concern, at the European level, that the youth might be discriminated against just because it occupies a specific position in the life cycle. At the level of European recommendations, this is implicit even in such documents as the Youth Pact- Declaration of Vienna and Bad Ische (2006), which put emphasis on diversity (Hoikkala 2009). This scholar argues that youth 'need space, a place, a proper social status and the corresponding rights' (Hoikkala 2009: 19). The risk, he continues, is that 'young people are not sovereign members of the community because they are still practising the skills to grant their entrance into adulthood' (2009:10). Karen Evans (2002) notes that 'the apparent differences in orientations to 'life project planning' may be explained in part by interactions between the generations, and the extent to which parents are able to secure the prospects of 'better lives and opportunities' for their children' (2002:514).

It is recognised that the two countries in consideration in this book are characterised by different social models. Social models are 'specific configurations of social, work and industrial relations policies, which in turn presuppose specific configurations of those actors who are relevant for these policies and relations' (Colombo and Regini 2009: 236). These authors warn that the challenges faced to enter the EU and then to maintain the standard set by the members states have been particularly critical for Italy, due to a welfare system relying on

opposing principles: a corporative principle for what concerns retirement and unemployment, based on the belonging to professional categories, and a universalistic criteria for what concerns the educational and sanitary system, based on citizenship rights. Added to this, the dualism insider/outsiders have played a major role in discriminating the youth.

The UK seems, at least, a more coherent system. Leccardi (2005) talks about the UK in terms of a polar model to Italy, since it is characterised by early conclusion of studies, early entry to the labour market, early departure from parental home and marriage. In all these fields, Italians do embrace the 'late' option. Yet, there are different interpretations of the UK system –Leccardi, for instance, quotes Maria Iacovou's work, in which this opposition is contested.

Within specific characteristics of a liberal transition regime, in terms of welfare provision, England has launched the New Deal for young People. According to this, those between 18 an 24 of age, after a short orientation phase, if still looking for a job, are obliged to opt for (subsidised) employment, training, voluntary work or environmental work (Walther 2005). In fact, they are entitled to benefits from 18 years old onward, regardless of family conditions, but these are reduced or suspended if New Deal recommendations are not respected. This is done in view of contrasting the so-called 'culture of dependency'.

To sum up, Evans states that in England 'policies have been over-concentrated on the 'deficities and lacks' of young people in the most precarious positions' (2002:516), attention which is completely lacking in Italy, as we will discuss. While the UK system, following EU directions, relies on a logic of 'putting' young people into institutionalised positions, this is more difficult to accomplish in Italy, where it is possible (and likely) to study for longer than the minimum duration of the course (although this has been disincentived recently); the vocational system is poorly institutionalised and mainly embraced by those who have failed another route; a certain range of benefits, such as unemployment ones, are tied to the employment situation: i.e., a young person who is looking for his/her first job, is not entitled to any state support.

To this balance, it seems to corresponds a specific response in my interview material. Making the first steps in the professionals' labour market is a very different experience for professionals based in England and Italy. In this chapter I shall argue that the position in a given, specific moment of the life course then becomes a source of normative demands which young professionals have to deal with in order to build their own career path.

My data shows that there is rampant age discrimination in both countries which, interestingly, goes in opposite directions.

Professionals based in England interviewed show a confident, if not arrogant, attitude, conscious of the many possibilities they have to climb the ladder. They show to be part of an aggressive world of work, and to act accordingly. Kimberly, a young engineer, shows how much bargaining power she has, just after graduation:

> 'I graduated in June, but in February I got this job, I've always worked with XY since I finished my degree, they said to me 'can you start in July?', and I said, 'no, I don't really want to, I want to go travelling, can I come in November?', 'ok, then', because it is so difficult to get women in […] engineering, they were like 'ok'. So I graduated in June, and I didn't actually started work until the 28 of October, I started at the end, and then they gave me a relocation, so I went

travelling for the whole summer, and because I knew I had a good job waiting for me, I was confident, yeah, because there are a lot of jobs that you can get as an […] engineer, so…yeah.' (Kimberly, Eng., 58).

The impression one gets from such accounts is that thy have the feeling that the world of work is waiting for them. Talking about a shift in her career, an HR professional said:

'They say: which one do you want to do, HR or Recruitment?' I say 'I don't know!'. There are lots of sales in recruitment, I say, I don't want to sale, really. And they say: 'Look, if you can pick up that phone now and call 10 people you don't know, you could do recruitment'. And I was like 'I could do that'! And I started finding out a little bit more about recruitment and consultancy, and the kind of excitement of the competition, that was…instead HR is […] quite a passive career, while recruitment is very active. You really have to get on and get them. Yeah, maybe recruitment. And I applied to... and I thought, [name of the town] because it's the nearest town to where I was gonna move to, and applied to some, had some meetings, and here I am! And…I loved it! I still love it'.(Sylvie, 40, HR).

It is easy to infer the encouragement in taking an active and responsible position that interviewees based in England have, even at a very early stage in their career. An important career shift is here represented by an employers as easy and smooth, as if being fresh, young and enthusiastic is enough to enter a path and learn quickly what it is necessary to know. Bill (34) is a young accountant working for a small accountancy practise, though he defines himself as a non-stereotypical accountant, as he distances himself from colleagues who are solely interested, in his opinion, in making profits and going to the pub after work. He observes:

'The people that own the businesses, that run the businesses, they…you see them trying to get as much money as they can. And it doesn't matter how that happens, if they annoy the people that they work with, or if they leave or if they get somebody else in. Or, it doesn't matter if they offend their clients, they go, "that's fine, we've got the money off them, we'll go get somebody else". And they'll know their value so they will put their extra time into it. It doesn't seem to occur like that anymore in England […]. So it seems that you have to leave your job in order to get what you want rather than someone saying "Well, we know you work well. We'll keep you here." ' (Bill, acc., 34)

It would seem that the workplace described by Bill is one for young, energetic and enthusiastic people, who can afford to move from one workplace to another as if they did not have any commitments, and as if they were not eradicated anywhere, as if they were pure free-floating individuals. There is a dehumanising aspect in this attitude of employers and prospicient employers, but normally it has not emerged as an issue in the interviews. Bill talks about the importance that his colleagues put on conventional success, often measured by high earnings. The widespread naivety and lack of critical awareness and, most of all, the inability to grasp the consequences that such a way of working is likely to produce for the self in the medium/long term is also typical. This way of portraying the successful *habitus* of a young worker goes along with Strangleman's remarks on the work culture of the railway industry:

'While there may be a rhetorical claim that younger workers are more dynamic and entrepreneurial, it seems that what is really valued amongst this group is docility or passivity in the face of management demands and dictates. The logic of such an approach is that what is desired in the ideal new worker is a kind of adolescence-willingness, enthusiasm and commitment without experience' (2004: 137).

Such comments do not conflict with what is said in the present and other chapters: rather, they underline the ingenuity of young qualified workers in England, who appear very ready to get absorbed in an enthusiastic rhetoric that seems to be very appealing for them. They perceive their current situation as exciting and this convinces them to emphasise what they are in that specific moment, possibly ignoring what they will become subsequently[34]. Moreover, the labour market is approached for what it seems to be at the moment, no considerations emerge in relation to historical developments and a wider picture. Early career professionals based in England seem to know where to go and how, but ignore why the system is taking a certain direction. In this sense, they are perfect representations of young workers, resembling in a way the characters of Coupland' s novel *Generation X* (1991), where contemporary American youth was seen as materialistic and cynical. This novel has received so much attention that the psychologist Arnett (2000) used it to offer an interpretative key of a group, which he defined as 'emergent adulthood'.

Such a rhetorical emphasis on the endless possibilities of a supposedly all-winning generation is completely lacking in the accounts given by the professionals based in Italy who were interviewed; there the scenario is quite the opposite. It should be recalled that the Italian employment system has come to be considered flexible although the flexibility only applies to the entry level, as a result of a long and violent debate which I have outlined in its essential lines in chapter 3. There is no possibility to program in the first instance, not until a long –term position is reached. The young professionals interviewed in Italy extensively talks about aspects of work which delay their proper adult entry into the labour markets, so that they experience their condition of being young as a useless 'waithood'. The account given by Carlo (6), a young accountant working in Naples who collaborates with an established practice and at the same time tries to create his own, shows the slowness of the steps to emerge under a regime where only the length of experience seems to count, and to how frustrating this pace can be. It is suggested that only after many years of experience one can avoid being Mr Nobody, no matter how capable one is. Who is Mr Nobody? Mr Nobody is how Carlo calls himself after ten years of working experience. A similar feeling of social transparency is shared by his Italian colleagues, who struggle in making their role and work socially recognised. Then, being a new entrant involves to be denied social recognition, as well as professional status, regardless of how good (or passionate, or enthusiastic) one is. An HR professional from Naples, Letizia (15), defines 'tragical' the first search for a job after graduation:

'After graduation, not to remain without things to do, I had a relative who organised training courses, so I said to her 'from Monday I will follow you, let's do it *as if* I was doing a stage, then I started to followed what she did, the aim was to produce these training courses, voca-

[34] This aspect would render a longitudinal follow up very interesting, as I point out in my conclusions.

tional courses, and then I started to teach myself, and to get paid from time to time, but I was paid very little, and it was all without a contract' (Letizia, HR, 15).

She concludes by saying that one needs to be lucky, and to do a bit of everything, and not to exclude possibilities. When a second occasion is offered to Letizia, she puts her efforts in overcoming the 'protected familiar context', and starts relating to colleagues rather than relatives. It would sounds as if Letizia needed to grow up to the eyes of her prospicient employers, who seems to treat her as an half worker, as if workers without long term experience are just useless resources. Also, the protected and patronising social contact that characterises these first approaches to the labour market is indicative of the poor level of professionalism that early career professionals are able to establish, just because of the fact of being new entrants and therefore young.

6.3 With or without you: individuals and their families

So with whom do early career professionals construct their paths? Acknowledging the importance of intergenerational relations is a first, strong suggestion to be incorporated in a flexible approach to the study of careers. Saraceno and Keck (2010) attempt to recognise specific European patterns of institutionally regulated intergenerational obligations, with the intention to describe how countries allocate intergenerational responsibilities between families and the state through emanation of policies. In their conceptualisation, familialism and de-familialisation are not necessarily in contrast to each other. Along a continuum between the two, Italy and the UK would be located in different position. The first is in fact characterised by low public support, for both young children and the elderly. Care is thus provided by the family (phenomenon which they call familialism by default). In the UK, the state provides for a medium coverage in some forms for children under the age of three. Cash for care allowances is paid directly to the family carer. These characteristics allow the authors to identify country-specific intergenerational policy regimes in Europe. However, they identify such responsibilities downwards (towards the children) and upwards (towards the old). The authors have written an interesting contribution, but 'grown-up' children have not so far received the attention they deserve in the study of such mechanisms.

In Italy, the role of the family is very strong in all the first stages of the construction of a career. Family is very much an all-solving institution in which the young are phagocytised. Even once married, Italians tend to reside very close to their parents. In this way, due to the low percentage of working women from the previous generation, a cheap and trustworthy source of childcare is made available. In contexts of low social and cultural capital this belief may prove to be a disincentive for young women to enter paid employment in the first place. In situations in which participation in paid employment is essentially due to economic needs, the grandparents' childcare can help mitigating the sense of guilt. This situation, however, does not apply to the women interviewed. They are high self-investors, having already made a big effort in completing their education. Yet, what the women interviewed have in common with the rest is the lack of services to cover them during working hours. Therefore, help with childcare from the family remains an important resource.

Leccardi's focus on gender issues in looking at youth and time, suggests that the real cultural revolution is not that these mechanisms have ceased to exist, but that in the Italian scenario women's identities have acquired a value which they did not have before. In other words, she argues that young women have conquered the right to self-expression and experimentation as socially justified (Leccardi 2005). These aspect is in fact found among my female interviewees based in Italy, at least partially as an effect of recent socialization in higher education. On the other hand, it seems an uncontested notion of female interviewees based in England. According to Da Roit and Sabatinelli (2005), the familistic model in Italy can be described simply as limited offer of public service, accompanied by the attribution of responsibilities to the family. It could be argued that the state bases its policies on a model of the traditional family in which youth are only a part of the whole. In fact, they receive very little specific attention at least not until they themselves form a nuclear family of their own. This conception seems pretty much sustained by the familistic view of the Catholic church. A precarious equilibrium is made possible by a system of mutual protection allowing young adults to consume and live on their little earnings because they can count on domestic production and eventually on retirement/disability pensions of their elders, and this coexists with the impulse to buy typical products of consumer culture.

An important inconsistency of this model is that rarely young Italians are ready to continue living on low budget, as if they were still students, maybe exactly because they do not see possibilities for career development. In this way, they realize the phenomenology of a youthful way of living, which is nowadays investing the early adulthood phase, sadly without possessing the concrete means to sustain it. Talking about 'the choice' of living with her parents, Giulia says:

> 'It is obvious that this is due to me being insecure, and then to an opportunistic reason, in the sense that I am not willing to renounce to many things to reach this aim. There is a double aspect. (Giulia, 20, eng.).

In contrast, the independence of professionals based in England is also due to easy access to forms of credits for various needs, including financing higher education and buying properties for example.

Secondly, interviewees based in England do not seem obsessed by youth lifestyles and the high level of consume which is often associated with it –weekends, or expensive dinners out- often working as identification in the process of identity construction. This is counterbalanced by a use of the money which is more oriented towards the which presupposes some sort of forward and positive thinking, as well as some pragmatism. The different styles in buying and consuming goods that the two groups have shown refer to differently connoted youth to adulthood transitions.

Let's try to embed this cultural repertoire with contextual conditions. In 1958, Edward C. Banfield coined the term 'amoral familism' to interpret the lack of reaction to a diffuse backwardness in southern Italy. He referred to the incapacity to act together for the greater community or for any other ends which go beyond the immediate, material needs of closer family members. Families observed by Banfield maximised the immediate advantage of the family, contextually taking for granted that all the others would follow the same rule (see also

Signorelli 2000). In a recent Italian edition of the original book (2006), Bagnasco quotes Gribaudi, according to which it seems that 'the category of amoral familism is among the ones that have contributed most to the image of the southern family and its role in social relationships'(1999: 87). She also specifies that 'what exactly [this category] represents outside of the analytical context in which it was applied is not clear at all' (Gribaudi 1999: 87).

Such categories, in my opinion, have reinforced distorted stereotypes around the Southern Italian family. However, if we look at the family as a resource that early career professionals may choose to activate, it cannot be denied that the category of familism - we can leave apart the issue of morality- explains the willingness and readiness of families in supporting their grown up children as much as they can.

In contrast, these significant elements gravitating around the family are not present in the accounts of professionals based in England. The family is mentioned from time to time, but first of all its members are more disembodied by their gender connotations. For instance, Anne-Marie (41) contemplates the possibility that her fiancée 'maybe will want to stay at home' when they decide to have children. In such a way, he concisely subverts the traditional gender organisation of the family. And in fact, other male interviewees have done what Anne-Marie is contemplating.

In particular, the different vicissitudes of the model of the male breadwinner, on the basis of the social regulation in which male employment is highly intensive and continuous, sources of income and welfare benefits (mostly pensions, healthcare and education) are to be considered. If we look at the other side of the coin, namely the role of working women in Italy, it underlines the fact that Fordism required the relegation of women into unpaid housework. Mingione and Andreotti (2005) note that women have been transformed from 'a generation of peasants and peasant's daughters into full time housewives or workers in the informal sector' (2005: 101). Nonetheless, the economic crisis in the seventies forced women to question themselves again about their role in the productive system, or better, in the world of paid employment. This inheritance is still difficult to extirpate: the process of defamiliarisation, i.e. the tendency to provide by themselves or by the market the various family needs, has never completely taken place in Italy (Esping-Andersen 1999).

The responses of Great Britain and Italy on female participation in the labour market are quite different. Great Britain has experienced higher levels of female participation, with high participation until the early twenties, significant rates of drop out for childcare reasons and then high participation once again when their children enter school. This movement has been dubbed the 'M curve' reflecting it's high-low-high pattern. These aspects are worth keeping in mind as different female participation in the labour market entails different amounts of informal work that women can devote to the family and particularly to accommodate 'grown up' children.

The socio-economic and historical patterns in which my interviewees based in Italy are raised make it likely that their mothers have played none or little part in employment, and still do. As such, they are still willing to take care of their 'grown-up children In this way, the Italian family offers, through its mere existence, a mean to solve young people's problems, while at the same time refusing to change its out of date function and perpetuating a traditional model which does not correspond to any other in Europe. The familism by de-

fault mentioned by Saraceno and Keck (2010) permeates very well this stage of life and not only those groups for which support it is morally justified.

These aspects are simply lacking in the cultural contexts in which professionals based in England are embedded. For instance, Amanda (50), a young HR professional working in Essex, asked to introduce her family defines her mother as a 'lady of leisure'. While she explains that by saying this she means that the mother is an housewife, the cynical smile I still remember on her face was clearly meant to criticise and distance herself from the role of her mother.

6.4 Time to grow up: coming back to the life course

In discussing some family and gender issues, a constitutive element of the life cycle emerges, namely, the fact that cultural expectations and the educational system seem to prompt graduates based in England to concentrate solely on their career for at least a few years; from the beginning of university until some sort of establishment in a given professional path is achieved. In this period of time, they tend to think solely of themselves.

Very interestingly, early career professionals based in Italy who were interviewed never appear detached from their families. This can be understood in two senses; they either tend to live in the parental house for very long, most of the time well after the completion of university studies and vocational apprenticeship, in which case it is easy to see how the family can influence choices and directions to be taken (even for those who clearly state that 'they are free to do what they want') or the other likely case is in which they have already started their own family, and even in this case it is easy to grasp how this can intervene in one's choice of career[35].

This leads us to direct our attention to the issue of how adulthood is approached and reached. International literature agrees in identifying a series of thresholds which have to be overcome in order for a young person to considered him/herself (and to be considered) an adult (Walther 2006). These thresholds are conventionally recognised in: completion of educational path; stable working situation; emancipation form the family of origin; stable partnership; birth of children. The approach based on thresholds, on which there seems to be international agreement (even though some longitudinal surveys, such as IARD in Italy, have played a major part in establishing such links, Lucchini and Schizzerotto 2001), suggests that one finally becomes an adult when the majority of these thresholds, or at least the most important ones, are reached. Of course obtaining a stable position in employment is one of the most important as the discussion in this chapter has mostly substantiated. The international debate has departed from describing each of such thresholds and conceptualising their role in reaching adulthood.

These considerations have to be kept in mind. As Cavalli and Galland (1996), amongst others, observe almost everywhere in Europe the entrance to adulthood is postponed, due to crucial factors such as the expansion of higher education and the diffusion of birth control

[35] It should be reminded here that since the sample was chosen according to the length of work experience after graduation (approximately between five and ten years), the interviewees based in Italy were older than their English counterparts. This is because the educational process requires a longer time to qualify for employment.

devices, to name but a few. However, even in this framework, Italian youth have been deeply criticised. In the past, the category of moratoria, originally elaborated by Erikson in 1968, could be legitimately used, whereas now the situation seems to have become too serious. In recent years, even the national and international press has heavily attacked the Italian youth with the accusation that it has lost its freshness, but also its potential in public life. Particularly relevant to this debate has been Diamanti's 'La generazione invisibile' (1999), Israeli's article (Times Europe, 2006) entitled 'The faded future of Italy's young', or Padoa Schioppa[36]'s declaration that Italy's youth is nothing but 'bamboccioni'(i.e. grown up babies). Many popular texts have been published recently on youth and its ambiguous place in Italian workplaces; some of these have achieved some success[37].

However, the approach of the threshold is, in my opinion, a rather conservative one[38]. It is limited to identifying reasons for not reaching the thresholds when it is 'supposedly' the time, uncritically focusing on the structural factors for which one cannot, or is not willing, to become adult. The nature of thresholds themselves must be questioned and how one may feel in being trapped in an inadequate stage of life. To overcome this, 'yo-yo' modalities have been identified (Stauber and Walther 2002; Walther 2006) that give justice to a transition which is not only prolonged and destandardised, but also uncertain and irreversible. For instance, the approach does not explain why some Italian youth do not leave their parents' house even when they are financially independent, or on the other hand, why some British youth embark on leaving on their own even when they have not a firm basis on which to live. Yet, these could all be understood as 'cultural' aspects that only partially pertain to the dynamicity of the respective labour markets and which have to be taken into account in reconstructing the strategies of building a career, given the adoption of a flexilive perspective.

The approach of the threshold, which is quite unsympathetic with the notion of liquid modernity, implies two orders of inconveniences, each of which may result in an *impasse*: one is theoretical-empirical in nature and related to the point that if a stable position in employment eventually arrives really late, scholars should be conceiving of a more delayed point at which people enter adulthood. The second regards young people themselves, who in an unstable employment condition risk being 'forever young', trapped in a representation that do not belong to them anymore. Furthermore, denying them the entrance to adulthood also excludes them from a long series of 'accessorial' rights.

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[36] Former minister of Economy and Finance.

[37] See for instance Cugusi (2005); Chaincrew (2001); Nove (2006); Dezio (2004); Falco (2004); Piantadosi and Nobile (2003), which echoes with *Lavorare stronca* the famous *Lavorare stanca*, by Cesare Pavese, a classic of Italian literature; Valteri Rizzo (2002); Tiddi (2002); Soglia (1998); Murgia (2006); Other books focus or reflect a similar scenario in France (Mabrouki 2004, Merlo and Sciotto 2006), where violent demonstrations took place in Spring 2006, and in Spain, where the terms 'milleuristas' (earning 1000 euros per month, young people are considered new poor) has been invented (Incorvaia Rimassa 2006). Films are also recently been focused on precarious workers, such as *Tutta la Vita davanti* (2008), directed by the popular director Paolo Virzì, and *Riprendimi* (2008) by the sophisticated Anna Negri. There is also a huge number of books that can be located between the popular and the academic, that are becoming really popular and that assume a very sarcastic tone: see for instance Bajani (2006) and Accornero (2006).

[38] This view is further developed in Cuzzocrea and Magaraggia (2010).

In particular, professionals based in Italy have difficulties in conceiving of work as something apart from the occupational status and employment sphere: in this sense the fact of not achieving the status of 'stable worker' can really impede the possibility of reaching the threshold, and therefore, of being considered an adult. In contrast, professionals based in England do not necessarily tie their adulthood to employment, but rather to a professional growth, which of course is also *tied* to employment, but can equally encompass moments of 'stop and go' such as additional courses for qualifications, sabbaticals etc. These 'fragments of careers' receive a high degree of acceptance and allow young professionals to plan their course within a more comprehensive project.

6.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I have discussed the fact that in planning their own career paths, early career professionals must come to terms with the position they occupy in the life cycle. In so doing, my interviewees deal with an apparently similar, buy substantially different, resource. These aspects reconfirm my understanding of professionals based in England as 'more' individual than those based in Italy. In fact, the first group legitimises more directly actions and decisions taken on the sole basis of individual needs and wills, regardless of how they are considered by the community. On the contrary, their counterparts in Italy feel more strongly that they need to belong to the 'straight' group of typical, normal workers in order to really become active in society, and for them the pressure of societal expectations is stronger – and more normative.

However, the ways employed in actual strategies in order to make it are more individualised for the Italians: they are embedded each time in some sort of small groups, and these govern the expected norms of behaviour. This would also be consistent with the association commonly made in existing literature between prolonged transitions and individualisation (Schwartz et al. 2005). On the other hand, families are not able to effectively support their paths towards adulthood: they can only absorb and temporarily solve some of the problems. For the rest, they are ultimately left on their own by the State, by associations, by various institutional agents all of which do not offer structured paths on which one can embark and plan a successful route, as Beck would suggest (1992). As a result, the strategies implemented are by their own nature short term and not organic -thus very much individualised. Another interesting aspect of such strategies is that they seem to be a development of what was usually identified as the 'art to get by' ('arte di arrangiarsi'), which has always played an important part in Italian culture. However, this traditionally referred mainly to those who did not have the means to build a meaningful path: which is not the case with the sample studied in this project. On the other hand, these issues are not considered as such by professionals based in England, who claim to take career decisions independently from their families and other agencies. But in this respect, one must not overlook the fact that in claiming such a freedom, they mostly end up paradoxically following very conventional routes: paths are already prepared and organised leaving the young professional to simply jump into them with their own capacities. Thus, the individualisation is not so strong.

7. Work, uncertainty and success

7.1 The culturalisation of careers

I have so far shown that the data collected among early career professionals in Italy and England suggest different articulations of individualism, individualisation, and self-entrepreneurship for the two groups. These result in the first place from the discussion of how professions, the boundaryless structure of organisations and the position in the life course operates as institutions in the interaction with young professionals' efforts to construct their own meaningful career path. Similar conclusions are suggested in the second place by a different angle, that emphasises the agent's construction of meanings.

I argue that such a divergence can only be partially explained in relation to the different availability of jobs in the two countries. It is advisable here to look at some of the cultural economy postulates (Du Gay 1996; Du Gay and Pryke 2002), according to which even in economic phenomena such as work, jobs and careers, much can be explained by assessing how culture is shaped in different contexts. For Du Gay, this process goes under the name of the 'culturalisation' of economic life (1996; Du Gay and Pryke 2002).

Traditionally, culture and economy were conceived in dichotomous terms. Economy is a culturally built concept, a representation installed though heterogeneous elements, practices, and different technologies. However, culture and economy are not distinct, and 'doing economics means acting on the assumption of determinate nature waiting to be described and calculated about by a neutral observation language; doing 'cultural economy' means acting on the assumption that economics are performed and enacted by the very discourse of which they are supposedly the cause' (Du Gay and Pryke 2002: 6). Job-seekers can be intended as culturalized entities. With the term 'production of culture' we refer to culture being seen as a product of the economy. Professionals based in England seem to have accepted, and naturally perform, the logic of the 'entrepreneurial revolution' installed by Thatcherism; whereas those based in Italy struggle to find an alternative and meaningful route to that of predictability and security typical of the Fordist Age.

As part of this cultural framework, I have elsewhere looked in some depth at the different ways in which the graduate career propaganda is represented and negotiated in Italy and England (Cuzzocrea 2009 b). In these works, I have discussed how two stereotypical images of graduate careers are often given in graduate career booklets. Interviewees based in England reveal highly captivating ways of relating to success, constantly pointing out the reasons why some sort of success at work was obtained. They are in the 'Rat Race', and display an 'I-

Know-How-To-Get-There' attitude. Careers in England are seen as aggressive, fast, potentially limitless, and hectic. In fact, whilst the latter appears to accept the rhetoric of flexibility and portfolio careers, Italians still show some resistance and continue to refer to the job-for-life model. In Italy, careers are represented as slow, security-seeking, and bureaucratic.

In contrast, few of the above-mentioned aspects were revealed by interviewees based in Italy, and their accounts tended to contain more negative elements. Generally speaking, professionals based in Italy build their careers *ex novo*, that is, in the absence of a preconceived path, and their careers are the results of an effort to avoid difficulties (many elements of the structure are considered obstacles to the individual's plans rather than positive resources). Nonetheless, they use and activate different factors as resources on which to substantiate their path. In particular, interpersonal relations appear very strong. This is why even in the absence of real graduate career propaganda, individuals are never left alone in their decisional process and are therefore very far from considering themselves as nomadic monads, as do their counterparts based in England.

It is vital to stress that underlying these differences there is a very contrasting adherence to the notion of individualism and individualization. In other words, professionals based in Italy seem not to be able to think of themselves in terms of individuals who can act and interact with the labour market without putting other factors at stake. This aspect deserves to be investigated in much more depth than it has to date, since it potentially offers grounds for explanations of different attitudes towards an individualised career. This is very much an eminent political phenomenon and presupposes an entrepreneurial self. It is interesting to note that, counter-intuitively, the strategies involved in facing such a situation are very much individualised, since these young professionals lack models on which to construct their routes and therefore do so relying on unstructured resources.

On the contrary, professionals based in England clearly profess their intention to act as free-floating individuals and are tough self-entrepreneurs. Interestingly, in order to adhere to such a successful image they are obliged to set aside some criticism about what actually happens around them. In fact, the career routes they refer to are very much part of a conformist project and surprisingly are not really individualised according to the meanings described in chapter 2. It is therefore evident why the cultural economy approach suggests interesting insights in the process of grasping how careers take shape following specific career propaganda, which can be ultimately considered as a cultural phenomenon. On the basis of this, the stereotyped assumption that career paths differ between the two countries solely because the respective labour markets are structured differently has to be reconsidered and reformulated: on a first level to better understand the phenomenon, and on a second to identify proper policy orientations, for which this book may constitute a first step.

7.2 Certainty at work

Continuing on this path, this chapter discusses firstly the perception of certainty and uncertainty at work, and secondly, how work and achievement are conceived of, at a more general level, among the two groups interviewed. The meanings given to such concepts cover a broad spectrum. In fact, in looking at interviewees' responses, there emerges a great variety

of conceptualisations around work that deserves closer attention and demonstrates that an *ex abrupto* separation between the two stereotypical ideas of career – one that sees the leadership of the job-for-life model, or one that glorifies the protean career - is utterly simplistic. Meanings given to work and career are much more multidimensional and multifaceted. In leading to conclusions, this chapter reiterates that the different attitudes to building a career path for the groups of professionals interviewed in Italy and England reflect different cultural configurations of career and ultimately of work.

Work uncertainty is one of the leading issues of this book, is the origin of its inspiration and of its main research questions, and there is a lot more to it than the fact that only a few of the professionals interviewed are actually in one form or another of flexible employment: this notwithstanding, they live, operate and work in a context which is unquestionably flexible. Therefore, tackling more directly than has been done so far the issue of uncertainty is a good way to conclude the analysis of the arguments of this book. The main point is to differentiate between the sort of uncertainty that young professionals are currently facing and the more generic difficulties that existed also in other contexts and points in history. Even in some current literature there is sometimes a confusion of a well known 'art to get by', typically associated with low skilled workers in southern Italy, and what is now called, for instance in Italy and Spain, the 'Generazione Mille Euro' (Thousand Euro Generation, in Italian) or 'Milleuristas'(in Spanish).

What sorts of testimonies does the interview material bring to life of how the sense of certainty at work is changing? In some cases the accent is on the effects of global market transformations. One example for all is Abhinay (37), an accountant who works for a big company. His work is particularly hectic and demanding, and he copes badly with the low-cost philosophy of the company, which is consistently applied to employees as well as customers. For instance, he dislikes the frequent business trips after which he is required to come back to his base rather than sleeping in loco at the expense of the firm; he says that the group he manages is too small to accomplish the duties expected of it; he directs another accountant himself who is more up to date than him on accountancy, since the managerial training he has to follow makes it impossible for him to cope with the fast changes of the job technicalities. Despite all these factors, he is thrilled by the fast growth of the company, which he estimates at approximately 600-700% per year. Abhinay is very conscious that this means that he cannot really predict how his job will look in a year's time. Yet, he feels excited, as if surfing a big wave, and knows really well what opportunities are offered in his field.

If in Abhinay's case it is the exponential growth of the company for which he works that challenges his preconceived notion of what it is like to work in accountancy, for Chiara (26) it is another kind of systemic factor that makes the difference: the contractual barriers tied to a vulnerable project. Chiara is an Italian engineer with six years' work experience since graduation, who worked in three cities in the deep south of Italy. Her experience is also interesting because it encompasses different forms of employment and work experience: she has collaborated in a research project at the university, has been an (independent) consultant and now co-operates with a task force of an Italian Ministry which is in charge of founding an office required by law in all regions of Italy, and that in the region of Sardinia had not been fully implemented at the time of the interview. Chiara's job contract terminates within two years, and is not renewable. The rationale of this lies in the underlying concept that the group

of employees she belongs to, will be absorbed into the agency once it has been set up. In other words, if the task force does not succeed in establishing the agency, the team will become jobless.

What is specifically new about situations such as Abhinay's and Chiara's? In Abhinay's story, it is essential to recognise that the high speed of transformation of the content of the job itself is not able to crowd out Abhinay's strategic thinking: he can only think in terms of small steps to be achieved, but nonetheless these steps are used to follow a path. Abhinay's is not untroubled. Yet, he feels like a winning warrior in a fight arena, and he believes he can take it all, if he wants. As far as Chiara is concerned, the new part of her situation is a diffuse precariousness. In past decades, she could have been 'utilised' for a task, and if the task had not been accomplished, she could have been moved to another sector, at least in the Italian system. Such a procedure is now unthinkable. If the task is not accomplished, there is no guaranteed transfer to the new agency for Chiara and her colleagues. Furthermore, the skills she has acquired are presumably very specialised, and therefore re-usable only in a similar context. All in all, Chiara's situation compels her to be as effective as possible: if she does not perform well enough with her colleagues, she is out of work. The present situation is utterly destabilising and, although Chiara endures her situation with overall serenity, this does not mean that it is not an alienating event: it brings her out of a known universe of meanings and practices. In these and others ways, it can be said that interviewees operate in what is being provocatively called the 'jobless economy', and the rise of the jobs-based society, namely not a society without work but without the certainty of a job. In facing the changes in the historical, social and economic conditions, it is therefore desirable to rethink the nature of work itself.

7.3 The role of employability

In this chapter, my focus is selective in the sense that it aims at analysing perceptions of certainty by looking only at one specific aspect at the basis of it, thus putting other factors in brackets. One's sense of security is very personal and built on a plurality of factors that mostly touch upon one's individual responsibility. As a result, in a scenario of increasing flexibility such as that we are talking about, it is very important to investigate the multifaceted dimensions of work. It is interesting to highlight what logical relation connects employability, security and certainty. In *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Bauman differentiates between security and certainty: the first indicates the security of positions and titles[39], and the second the security of one's own continuation and future stability. Thus I suggest that one way to approach the

[39] In order to give an alterative definition of security, seven forms of security are described by Standing (1999), that can be configured as labour market security if we refer to state support; as employment security with reference to the legal system protection; job security with reference to the a niche offered by occupations or professions; work security with reference to protection against accidents and illness at work, through safety and health regulations, limits on working time, unsociable hours, nights work for women, ect; skill reproduction security with reference to the opportunities to gain and retain skills, through apprentships, employment training ect.; income security with reference to protection of income through 'minimum wage' systems; representation security with reference to protection of collective voice in the labour market, through independent trade unions and employer associations incorporated economically and politically into the state, with the right to strike, ect.

issue is to conceive of employment as substantiating security, which in turn creates the conditions for certainty:

employability ⟶ security ⟶ certainty

To see how this schema works for the data gathered, it is useful to make a further distinction between two 'components' of employability. The first is structural and can be identified in the condition of the labour market. For instance, the fact that the civil engineering market in England was at the time of conducting this research expanding and therefore offering many opportunities to the graduates who seek a career in this field, made this group of job seekers feel particularly confident in regard to the opportunities available. The second aspect emphasises the agent level. The higher the skills, the higher the probability of ensuring employment for themselves. The concept of employability has received much attention in the sociology of work, and not only from the very academic part of it, but also from sociologists who have themselves confronted with the world of work more directly, and who stand between management studies and more theoretical approaches, such as Scase (2002) and Handy (1995, 1994, 1989). They efficiently underline how the changes in the structure of organisations have been determining the almost total crowding out of the pyramidal organisation, characterised by predefined tasks for everybody, to be substituted by work organised as projects (lavori a progetto). In the new scenario, work is organised around the project: the project has a beginning, a development, and a conclusion. When one project is completed, another will follow. The competences required to accomplish the second project are not necessarily higher than the ones required for the previous one. One's career is defined by the ability to recycle competences, i.e. the ability to use them in different solutions and circumstances: it is defined around a portfolio.

My proposal is to focus here only on the subjective perception of one's employability. This is not meant, however, to embrace interesting positions such as Jean Le Sur's, who argues that 'the labour market does not exist' (2000). As I mentioned, I borrow Bauman's definitions of security and certainty. In a way, with the latter we are referring to a sort of ontological security (Giddens 1984, 1991), a 'stable mental state derived from a sense of continuity and order in events' (Bilton et al., 1996: 665). Reference should be made also to the Italian sociology of *vita quotidiana*[40], which, within a framework of paying particular attention to everyday life as a fundamental experience of individuals, describes it primarily as a feeling of being at home wherever one is in the world. According to Jedlowski, everyday life can be thought of either as sectors (or aspects, or things) of the material life or alternatively as an attitude, or way to look at life, that takes some aspects of the world for granted (1986: 134). It is this second definition that I wish to embrace. Jedlowski stems from Berger's definition, who in turn, recalling Schutz, argues that 'everyday life is the fabric of familiar habits within which we act and to which we think for the majority of our time, which is also the most real for us, as a usual or ordinary habitat'.

Why is it fruitful to employ the concepts of security and everyday life? The link between employability, security and certainty is defined by the following relations: if I consider myself

[40] This is a branch of Italian sociology, called the 'sociology of everyday life'.

employable, that is, if I have got a qualification and vocational portfolio which is flexible enough to adapt itself to a variety of available projects, then I will perceive myself as secure. Secure, in other words, of occupying a certain position. If having occupied a certain position I feel secure, I will therefore also feel certain, that is, comfortable in the continuation of my activity and with regard to my total situation of life. If, on the contrary, in a society which is increasingly organised around projects, I feel unable to adapt my knowledge and competences to a variety of work solutions, I will achieve security – and therefore certainty- only in minimum terms. And as a result, I will feel uncomfortable with my surroundings.

I aim to show that the centrality of the perception of employability to one's sense of security holds true whether such a perception is high and positive or the opposite: if this is poor, it is very likely to affect negatively security (and therefore certainty) in all its manifestations. Kimberly (58), for instance, is a young engineer who embodies in many ways the stereotype of the successful professional that I have described in the previous chapter. Her sense of security, which is accompanied by a strong sense of self-confidence, is founded on both objective factors (the fact that the specific labour market in which she operates is currently experiencing a very positive trend), and on more personal characteristics, that is, she thinks she possesses all the requisites for aiming high in her field. Yet, it is not mere credentialism that she is referring to, she is in fact deeply conscious of the values that each of the specific titles can bring to her career progression:

> 'Do you think you are employable?
>
> Uhm….I think it sounds arrogant but it is the civil engineering industry! I certainly thought I was then, because I've done a lot of stuff outside university […]
>
> Can you give me an example…?
>
> I got my…Duke of Edinburgh award, which is (…), it's like a young people award; there's various things you have to achieve; one is a 50-mile walk carrying your kit, (…) in six months, so I got that, and… and…(…) at school, and…my grades at GCSE, I don't know what I was doing at GCSE but I've done very well at GCSE, I've got 10 As, so it all kind of helps. I did voluntary work in Holland, with street kids, and… I [planted] the trees in Ghana when I was in my second year at University, (...), so all kind of…I think they were looking for something a bit extra from academic, and I think that that was something that made me… employable. And then, and then I suppose last year I won the graduate of the year award, and…among all the graduates who graduated, I entered a competition and won that, so…makes me marketable!' (Kimberly, eng., 58)

The interesting thing about Kimberly's interview is that such a positive attitude is very consistent with her approach to life in general: it is clear that she is very confident with whatever opportunity she may get in the future. Therefore, in her case it can certainly be said that there is a link between her perception of employability, the fact that this will lead to certain titles and positions (therefore to security according to Bauman's definition), and as a result to the prefiguration of being able to continue her own path in the way she has started, therefore with some sort of stability. Such a situation allows one to feel at ease, at home in the world. Similar patterns are found in Rose's case (48). At the time of the interview she had just re-

signed from a HR position. She was also planning to intermit for one year from a graduate programme, which she was doing part-time, after six years in her HR career, to go travelling. She explains why she feels so confident with her (brave) choice by mentioning the possibility of being supported by her family in the first place. Nonetheless, immediately after having done that, she uses the argument of her employability as an HR professional, a gentle parachute with which she can land virtually anywhere:

> 'When I took this job, initially it was for one year, and then I may go permanent, so…I didn't care that it was only for one year. The job that I was saying was my ideal job, that's only two years, so, again, you know. But I'm really lucky because I'm from a very secure background, my parents have money, I wouldn't be destitute, you know, if I need money tomorrow, my dad would definitely pay the mortgage, it wouldn't be a case of … I need... I don't… I need the job to pay the bills, but I wouldn't go under if I lost the job, I have enough time to find the job, yeah. So, although I don't have a husband or a partner that would support me, you know, my family would stump up and that would be fine. So I don't find the need to worry at all about security, in fact again for South America, I do think 'if I give up my job what does it mean?' And, you know, all the rest. And actually I did worry about that a bit, 'how will I cope when I get back, what if I don't find another job?' But not overwhelmingly, 'cause the other thing about being a personnel officer, which I think is really useful, especially being a woman, is that you can come out, and come back in, 'cause I can go and get my personnel job, my CV is good enough, so if I apply for a personnel job most of them will make me an offer, and I think this is a really safe position to be in. (…) I can go and temp, and that will be fine. And I always have enough money, so… yeah, very lucky.' (Rose, HR, 48)

It is clear that this opportunity is a great support for a general condition that transcends the mere fact of employment. In a similar way, but with opposite results, the perception of employability is affecting Giulia's self-confidence (20) and the general harmony of her everyday life as well as future perspectives, which in turn, as a catch-22, affects her current situation. Giulia collaborates with a research centre as a consultant on projects, the ultimate responsibility for which rests with more established colleagues. Under various contractual arrangements, she has worked continuously for the university since she graduated, six years ago. Her poor satisfaction arises from many aspects: she does not particularly dislike what she does; she is not passionate about it either. Her enrolment in engineering was due to the association, very often done in Italy in past decades, with excellent job prospects, and her brothers did the same. The disillusion with what has been achieved seems to be infecting the whole family, as none of them reached the sort of positions they felt had been promised to them. Giulia and her brothers have been the first in their extended family to be awarded a university degree, and despite this they have failed to achieve their aim. Regarding what concerns her employability more directly, she says that all the projects she has been involved in required the development of very sectorial skills, not necessarily in strict relation to one another, and each time her confidence was tied to those specific projects, following which her route has moved only horizontally. All in all, she suffers from the fact that her career 'is not taking any direction', an expression that she uses to mean that it is not giving shape to any defined path.

'The main problem is programmability, the problem is in relation to future possibilities, to be able to have a minimum of certainty for the future, which does not necessarily mean having a salary at the end of the month, but being sure that in the next six months, in the next year, there will be some money which guarantees the payment of rent, eventually of a mortgage'. (Giulia, eng., 20)

Not knowing what position she will take afterwards, one is seen as a huge problem in addition to the fact that she does not perceive herself as employable. Again, not being secure makes her utterly uncertain about her situation in life as a whole. One of the signs that her work situation is having adverse effects outside work is her compromise of living with her parental family. This is due to two reasons: first, she points out that she cannot cope emotionally with the possibility of not being able to earn a decent salary for some months, from time to time. Secondly, this compromise enables her to increase her level of expenditure. She tells that her family had to live on a low budget to allow Giulia and her brothers to go to university, and now she does not want to renounce her dinners out or holidays: she consciously compensates for her dissatisfaction in this way. While she is struggling with a number of factors limiting her employability, such as being a woman in a male-dominated profession (especially in the sector in which she is qualified, which has a long tradition in Sardinia) and not being included in the networks of those who share the professional resources, she doesn't see any solution to this and can only wait for something to happen. Clearly, Giulia cannot transform her situation by herself, and is in need of something changing in her environment.

Although Kimberly (58) and Rose (48), on the one hand, and Giulia (20) on the other, provide an exceptionally clear explication of what I mean by saying that the perception of one's employability plays a crucial role in affecting one's security and then certainty, I maintain that virtually all the interviews can be read according to the scheme employability/ security/ certainty. As we have seen, while the employability dimension can be seen as both objective and subjective (and in the present chapter I focus on the second), the second pertains to specific work positions in which one find oneself. Of the three, the third is probably the one which is most affected by one's individuality, as we all define our sense of being in the world in our own way.

7.4 What is work?

My aim is to discuss here how the concepts of working certainty (or uncertainty) and the experience of this can be better understood if greater attention is paid to the meanings applied to 'work'. In fact, if the logical link employability/ security/ certainty is accepted, there is still an unresolved issue one has to come to terms with. The question is: what does it stand at the very basis of our perceptions of employability, the first ring of our chain? What aims does a young graduate professional refer to if he/she is to perceive him/herself as employable? The issue is highly insidious, because it involves unpacking a number of cultural meanings, some of which are visible and others less so. Furthermore, it involves coming back to some linguistic analysis of the terms related to employment.

In doing this analysis, I argue firstly that the variety of meanings attached to 'work' and related words is extremely rich and articulate. Work and its associated concepts emerge with

infinite nuances in the interviewees' accounts, in a way that suggests a radical redefinition of the terms used in everyday language. Secondly, I suggest that the different attitudes of the interviewees based in Italy and in England towards the construction of their career paths relate consistently to such linguistic and conceptual differences: there is something inexplicable embedded in them. At a more general level, I point out that the systemic changes in the labour market often go faster than changes in the ways people use language, in a way they are not necessarily conscious of. More specifically, the fact that the Italian language is less expressive than English complicates the overcoming of the Italian model of the job-for-life.

According to the Oxford Dictionary (2007), 'work' is 'an activity involving mental and physical effort done in order to achieve a result'. This first definition is very similar to the Italian dictionary Devoto-Oli, except that, as a second definition, Devoto-Oli indicates 'source of individual or communitarian income'. As an extension, work is the place where one works for the period of time spent in employment. There is, nonetheless, a further dimension which is not contemplated in the Italian source: 'a task or tasks to be undertaken, the material for a task, thing or things done or made, where 'task' is a piece of work to be done or undertaken'. This missing part in the Italian source is well reflected in the interviews. But the whole set of nuances and dimensions around the realities of work is even more complicated than this. For Standing (1999), work is an 'ideal of labour, an aspect of human development'. It is clear if we think of the expressivity of phrases such as 'going to work' (which is, I am accessing another sphere of life) or 'I am leaving work' (that is, I make myself free from work).

Also, by work we refer to a broad group of activities, sometimes less formalised, not necessarily accompanied by remuneration. Classic examples are domestic work and informal care work. It is clear that the problematic point is to state the motivation underlying that action, that is, the reason behind I do such and such. In this respect, the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology is very cautious, although not particularly helpful, in stating that '*productive work* falls into three main categories: economic activity of employment, unpaid domestic and leisure activities, and volunteer community service'. But by using the expression 'productive work' the issue is not resolved, because it would not be clear what the remainder is, i.e., what unproductive work would be. Work also defines most contractual forms: 'job on call' in English, for instance, is 'lavoro a chiamata' in Italian. The same for 'job sharing', which would be translated as 'lavoro ripartito or 'lavoro in coppia' (although these definitions are quite unusual and it is often preferred to use the English expression). Therefore, the Italian language is not clear in distinguishing between work and job either. The question 'Che lavoro fai?', would translate 'what's your job?', and it is recognized as one of the most significant questions we ask when we meet a stranger, which has the ultimate meaning: 'who are you?' Again, in Italian 'lavoro' is used rather than 'job'. 'Job' defines for Standing (1999) 'what one does'.

Clearly, the word work is invested with huge explicative power, and it is the most widely used word. Much more restricted is the term employment, by which we refer to the fact of regulation by contract, one which implies an agreement between the parties, and from which responsibilities and rights derive. Again, in Italian there is a synonym of employment, 'impiego', but its use is very uncommon. It is important to remember that the phenomenon of employment is rather recent in history: men and women have always worked in history, but it is only recently that they have been protected by a contract, unions etc. To be more precise,

Standing (1999) argues that employment defines a dependent status, and is a middle-class based term. As a result, it is highly necessary to differentiate the concept of 'posto' (stable job), that still has so much importance in the Italian working tradition, from other manifestations and dimensions of work.

Then, with the term labour I refer to activity, production. Again, the English language is comparatively more efficient than Italian, that cannot express, for instance, the difference between work and labour, where labour is often in English 'the physical part of work', 'work at unskilled manual occupation'(Oxford Dictionary, 2003). For Standing (1999), it is the capacity to labour through contract that is to be sold in the labour market, which also makes it legal. The reason I wanted to give these preliminary definitions around the concept of work was first to underline that these words have many meanings that are not widely used in everyday language. Secondly, that there seems to be discordance in the way in which professionals based in Italy and England refer to work, and this is inextricably related to linguistic and cultural issues. In fact, for many of the interviewees based in England, work is something that has a beginning and an end, something that can be finished, and once finished is 'out there', a result, something visible. The prevalent meaning is task, a 'piece of work to be done or undertaken', something that when successfully accomplished makes the boss say 'well done'. It can be otherwise called duty, i.e. 'a task or action that one is required to perform as part of one's job'(Oxford Dictionary). In the Italian language, a very similar concept would be expressed by the word *compito*, that is, a work or specific behaviour that someone proposes him/herself or others to do within the framework of an activity (it is, therefore, circumscribed to an aim). For instance, *compito* is the expression used for students' homework. Compito has a beginning and an end. Going to work is not a *compito* in this sense, because when one is at work one always has new duties coming in, and it never finishes. Compito defines an aim. Unlike the previous definition, to work can be a *compito* in one's life (although probably not the only one).

It should now be understandable why the interviewees based in Italy found it so difficult to refer to these sub-concepts of work. For them, work is 'going to work', there is no significant reference to the task they have started or to the task they have finished, or have to finish. To work is *tout court* to be in employment, and this is regarded as – hopefully - a long-lasting situation. In the common usage of the Italian language, the rest of the terms related to work are not widely used. This, added to the limited expressive power of the language on these issues, makes it difficult to distinguish between different dimensions of work: if I don't know how to name various similar (but distinguished) phenomena, it will be difficult to distinguish those phenomena from one another. Therefore, the representation in my own eyes of the new dimensions of work will be very conservative, more attached to the old concepts than to recent developments. This makes it intuitively difficult to overcome the model of jobs-for-life. These aspects do not always receive the attention they deserve. For instance, speculating on the representations of security, Du Gay suggests that:

> 'The identity of both labour and capital is invariably represented as stable and unchanging, while lived history is reduced to a series of 'empirical variations' on a constant theme. Labour and capital are conceived as having an 'essential', 'real' identity that precedes or evades their dominant discursive articulation in any historical or cultural context' (Du Gay 1996: 50).

Pushing further in this direction, it is useful to unpack the notion of 'good job' as well as work. Again, various dimensions emerge clearly from interviewees' responses, and questions such as 'what is a good job?', or 'what makes a job good'? gave rise to very interesting responses. This question was planned to draw out the values around work, and at the same time to avoid the too direct question 'what is work?' In particular, the dimension of task is almost the opposite of 'posto'. Whilst the latter is primarily associated with tranquillity, the former refers first and foremost to a challenge. Despite the fact that both languages, English and Italian, contain the same ambiguity, with the expression ultimately capable of being interpreted either way, there is then a very interesting difference in the way they respond, which, opportunely developed in the right direction, explains the different conceptions of career. There are inevitably, in these and other experiences, intersections in the experiences and prefigurations of the different nuances of work, which create a rich variety of experiences in which one departs from the perception of employability to attain security and then certainty. Also, there is an ambiguity among different spheres, to the point that there is a question deriving from it, and that is whether the focus should be on lives (more precisely, flexi-lives), rather than on jobs (or flexi-jobs).

7.5 What is a good job?

In this section I intend to give evidence of the different ways of looking at work and at the same time push my analysis further by introducing another difference between the two groups of interviewees' accounts. The two arguments inevitably have to remain rather undistinguished because the second merged into the first. I will now explain what I mean by this interrelation. For instance, this is a typical response of an English professional when asked to define the 'good job':

> 'In terms of delivering a project or you mean why is this a good job? Why do I personally enjoy my job, do you mean? (Simon, HR, 42)

These words were pronounced by Simon, an HR professional working for a multinational company. Initially trained as in sport science (and this well recall a competitive background), Simon is very good at identifying tasks and sub-tasks within his job, and is used to looking at the results to be achieved in the short or middle term. At times, the 'good job' identifies for professionals based in England a good result achieved, one of those aims that provokes compliment. For Anne-Marie (41), a colleague of Simon's, a good job is 'one that's challenging but you also *feel that you know you can do a good job'*. The fact that one's working life can be divided into different portions of job is expressed very well by Sonia (46), an Italian who left home at the age of eighteen to learn English in London. She finds herself, twelve years later, occupying an important role in the HR sector of a multinational company outside London. At the time of the interview, she is preparing for her imminent sabbatical, which she will spend as a volunteer on a project in a developing country. At the end of such experience, she will be reallocated to one of the worldwide locations of her company - she does not know which. Sonia conceives of work and career in a very disenchanted way:

'Nothing is secure and safe in life, is it? Security is like being… I feel that if you have competences and skills and if you are geographically mobile it's not a problem. And anyway, why would you want to do the same job for forty years? My lord, I would die! (laughing) If I had to do the same job for forty years, like… I would die! And especially, I don't know, you cannot be secure of anything in life, why would you want to be secure in jobs? I mean, I understand that … you need to have, you know, sometimes I worried that they can fire me tomorrow, but then you think, ok, if they fire me, I can go and get another job, I can do this, I can do that, my CV is like this, you know, I can work in France, in Spain, in Germany, in Italy… maybe I can go back to Sardinia and start my own B&B, I mean, it's not… do you see what I mean?'(Sonia, HR, 46)

Her testimony also further reaffirms the links made in the previous section between employability/ security/ certainty. She continues:

'Do you think you are employable?

'I think so, yeah. Yeah. […] First of all I've been a waitress, so the worst thing that can happen, I can work in an Italian restaurant, or a Turkish restaurant. So I know how to be a waitress. This is a very practical thing. And I know how to look after children, because I've done it. So… that's another practical thing. And then I am very mobile, I know languages, and I have what they call experience, so I think I am quite employable, you never know in life, that's another thing! The labour market is very very… it changes very quickly, so you never know!' (Sonia, HR, 46)

Sonia is one of the clearest supporters of the disposable working life where nothing is supposed to last forever. By using these words, she does not leave space for doubtful interpretations: work is organised into pieces and her security is founded on the possibility of being able to organise those pieces, to exploit circumstances, to play one's cards well. Such an awareness is much weaker among the interviewees based in Italy. The good job is associated in most cases with the position in the labour market, with the employment situation, and much less with the results and the pieces of work. It is conceived of as a long line, rather than as a line with many interruptions.

7.6 What I can give and what I can get

There is a further distinction that can be made between the two groups of professionals, and it is an interesting one as it recalls the key concepts I have used in the previous chapter, that is, individualism, individualisation and self-entrepreneurship. It seems that professionals based in England are very keen to underline, in their definition of the 'good job', the personal contribution that they can make. It is possible to retrace a certain positive touch, generated by the ambition to be able to make a difference at the workplace. Conversely, Italians prefer to stress what they would like to get from work, whether stability and certainty are at stake or not. Amanda (50), an HR professional working for a university department, defines the good job as:

'One that is challenging, one that I wake up every morning and not... and think "I'm really looking forward to going to work" (laughs) and not, I think "Oh God I've got another day of

doing that "(laughs), *one where you probably get noticed, recognised*, one that's going to be good for my career-path, I suppose.' (Amanda, HR)

The other factor that is part of the desire to give something back is the possibility of being effective, i.e. to work for something tangible. This can be the physical product of work (as engineers like saying, it's nice to see the airport terminal you have planned standing in front of you), or a more general possibility of being heard, and therefore not to waste energy and time doing something that is not useful. Abhinay (37) defines the 'good job' as follows:

'A job is good when you think that you're learning, I think. That you think that *your opinions have been listened to, and actions made,* perhaps that you, maybe, so you're leading like a flexible working pattern, you've got people to manage, you delegate tasks, so you don't have to do everything yourself, and you have a good relationship with your manager I guess. I got an appraisal this afternoon, so…'(Abhinay, acc., 37)

The possibility of seeing results to whose creation you have contributed is generally something looked at with extreme favour. Kimberly argues (58), 'is *all tied with the sense of pride in what you are doing*, you can have all those things with people working in a shop, they are proud of what they do'. For Stacey (45), a senior HR professional working for a major firm in London, the 'good job' is where she feels that '*by being herself she is being effective'*. Gareth (36) works as an accountant for an accountancy firm in an English town. Challenging the stereotype of his profession, which is normally seen as pure dedication to numbers with very poor attention to human beings, he instead underlines what he would like to give back precisely by doing his job:

'Um, for me, a perfect job would be… Something, something stable but also something where you contribute something to the community. I mean, I do feel a little bit of that in accountancy. I mean, every so often I wish I was doing with… slightly more obvious social worth, but, um, something like medicine, or some charity work. But, I've got a mortgage to pay, so I can't do charity work (laughing). Maybe (pause) Maybe in a few years time. That's my, that's a long-term plan, is to be in a position, in maybe ten years' time, where I'm able to work part-time for charity and then part-time as an accountant and all that'. (Gareth, acc., 36)

On the other hand, professionals based in Italy stress the 'good job' more in terms of what they would like to obtain. Yet, this is not to say that they just want the salary that comes from employment, or the security of it *tout court*. The main difference is the assumption that work has to provide certain conditions, that allow one to do other things. These words are pronounced by Claudio (23), an engineer from Cagliari who has recently quit a job -which is normally considered very good- to join a multinational company based in London. This is how he describes his choice:

'Many said: 'You crazy guy! You have a stable job (posto fisso) and you want to go!' and I said 'absolutely!'. I took the risk, I did that - I could have not been employed again, and that was definitely a risk! But having a stable job here means being a stable slave, in a way. And since I covered a managerial role, I wasn't paid for the extra hours, I wasn't paid from 6.00pm until 11 pm, no extra money. And yes, I had a bonus at the end of the year, a slap on the back, whatever, but…' (Claudio, eng., 23)

Claudio's account is focused on the fact that his previous job did not give him enough, and therefore it was not worth doing. Along the same lines, what these professionals expect is something coming to them rather than their own contribution, whether it is meant to improve a productive system or a more spiritual community. Work is less an end itself, is more something that allows you to do something else, in a flexible perspective of life. Michele (27), an engineer from Naples who has had various work experiences, defines the good job as 'the one in which you realise you can get economic and career-wise satisfaction, on the basis of what you produce.' His way of looking at work and career is pretty traditional, and consequently defines career in organisational terms. Career 'is to cover positions which require increasing responsibility'. Even more instrumental-oriented, Giulio (5), an accountant living in Cagliari, refers to the good job as:

> 'The one *allowing* you to live, to earn a living, by doing something that you really like, whatever job it is. In other words, to be able to use your passions to live on… not necessarily to get rich, because that's not an aim for me, but to live properly… simply that. (Giulio, acc., 5).

The most important word is 'to allow'. To the question whether he has a good job, he declares:

> 'Not as an accountant. Luckily, I managed to separate aspects of my private life from my working life, and this allows me to say that I still have a decent life'. (Giulio, acc., 5)

The interview with Giulio was very peculiar. Contacted by e-mail, he promised me an interview to demonstrate that there are not too many words to be spent on the issue. Accountancy has not given him what seemed to have been promised and his whole path has been permeated by dissatisfaction and frustration. He expresses this, though, so forcefully that at the very beginning I was not sure whether he was just being cynical. The interview then confirms his seriousness. Even clearer than Giulio's testimony, Alessio (1) further confirms the focus of Italians on the importance of work as a *source* for something else. He is also an accountant, working together with Giulio and defines the 'good job' like this:

> 'There are various possible definitions. A good job can be the one that *gives you* satisfaction on the personal side, because it can be a good job, I don't know, to be a notary, because it *gives you* prestige; it can be a good job that *gives* you economic satisfaction; it can be a pizza-maker who manages to sell 50000 pizzas per day; this is a good job economically speaking. A good job is the one which *gives you* the possibility to devote time to your family, your hobbies, your friends, a job that can be managed nicely in terms of hours. It depends on what one is referring to.' (Alessio, acc., 1)

However, by tracing a line between professionals based in Italy and England according to the accent either on what one can get out of work or what one can put into it, I do not intend to be particularly severe. There are, in fact, some interviews that can be considered as a bridge between the two positions. I consider Federica's position very clear on this point. Federica (14) trained as a psychologist and has oriented her career consistently towards HR. She now covers a role in a new economy firm, where she is responsible for taking care of the young employees. According to her, the 'good job' is one:

> 'that is worth getting up for in the morning, something that satisfies you in terms of internal well-being, in which you can put… your desire to grow up, be properly paid, that enables you to grow as a person and as a professional. And this… *is probably a result of my studies… that maybe can benefit someone.* (Federica, HR, 14)

In this way, she directly addresses what is probably the source of her proximity to her colleagues based in England: a definite professional socialisation. Investigating the definitions given to work and the 'good job' ultimately brings us back to the issues touched upon in the previous chapter. It is true that the variety of responses given is much broader than could have been anticipated. This part of my findings was very exciting to analyse as it was not predicted, nor could it have ever been. It also emerged that linguistically and culturally it is difficult for Italians to conceptualise 'pieces of work' and therefore to accept the eventuality of discontinuous work.

7.7 Conclusions

In this chapter I looked at the conceptions of work which emerged from the interview material, and what interviewees seem to be wanting to get out of it: in other words, what kind of achievement they wish to have in their careers. I have attempted to show that there are many cultural differences in these processes, which are in many ways affected by external suggestions and then reinterpreted on a personal level. Firstly, one's sense of security derives first and foremost from the perceptions of one's employability, which in themselves vary greatly according to the context we are focusing on. It is this perception that defines our sense of certainty - feeling at home in the world.

Secondly, it emerges clearly that the conceptions of work themselves are culturally influenced. The English language seems to be more expressive in defining a range of working situations that depart from the conventional forms of work - this being a potential obstacle to the comprehension of new forms of work by Italians, at least in contrast to the English. In particular, the English vocabulary is a richer source with which to indicate all those intermediate stages of work, such as the various tasks involved in the work process, that can be recognised as having their own intermediate results.

Thirdly, when examining what a 'good job' is, English professionals are keen to underline the factors that allow their individuality to emerge, while Italians are much more likely to emphasise what they would like to get from it. These results confirm a high level of individualism and self-entrepreneurship and a search for happiness at work for professionals based in England interviewed, while once again reinforce the ideas of a poor level of both of them for Italians, which are in turn forced more violently to find 'biographic solutions to systemic contradictions', as Beck (1992) would put it, to cope with a difficult situation. This would reveal the weakness of young Italians faced with an individualisation process which, it should be remembered, is defined first and foremost as coerced, not chosen.

Conclusions

This book originates from the interest on effects of labour market flexibilisation on young educated people seeking to build a professional career. I chose to compare how a group of early career professionals based in Italy and one based in England construct their own routes. Sixty professionals in the fields of human resources, engineering and accountancy have been interviewed in-depth. The ways in which careers are enacted in each of the contexts, by using different strategies of action, reveal specific orders of worth, and this is especially significant in a global scenario in which upward, structured career routes are disappearing. Where they still exist, they are increasingly challenged by the logic of flow of boundary-less organisations – and therefore become boundary-less careers of some sort.

The first achievement of this book has been to demonstrate that a perspective on flexi-lives, rather than the more common one on flexi-jobs, is able to reveal aspects of the ways in which these careers are represented, sought after, enacted and built, that would have otherwise remained too implicit. In fact, looking at how flexi-jobs may explain how good (or bad) a given job is in terms of climbing the ladder, of exiting from a precarious situation, or increasing salary level, to name a few topics. It may also provide an assessment of job satisfaction, which in turn, can increase or decrease.

However, by looking at flexi–lives instead, this book suggests that a variety of elements are considered in enacting career strategies, that by definition a focus on flexi-jobs does not take into consideration. In the first place, the empirical data suggests that the careers of early career professionals in Italy and England differ sharply, but not only on the basis of a different availability of jobs, or alternatively, a different level of economic prosperity. The interview data suggests that graduate careers in the two countries would continue to be different even if there were a closer rate of (un)employment, that would allow the same promptness in changing one's job. Therefore, flexi-lives testify the primary importance of avoiding economic reductionism.

Flexibility in one's life derives from agents' capability to interact with institutions such as the professions, which have a different 'working order' in different contexts. For instance, the fact that professional qualifications in England are perceived as valuable not only in their own field of immediate reference, but also in other fields (should the professional decide to change career), not only makes obtaining those titles more desirable, but also renders the eventual change of career less traumatic; one does not have to start from the very beginning. Professionals based in England who have such a perception, therefore, will be encouraged to

go and negotiate with the employer, and will be confident enough to 'use' their qualification for the power it holds in the market.

By contrast, professionals based in Italy perceive the professional organisations as formal entities in which they have no space to make a difference and, moreover, do not provide them with any substantial provision to make a career. Therefore, they enrol in the association when there is a specific case that requires them to do it, but they know that they cannot count on that in substance, and that their strategies have to be directed towards other areas. To get established in one field, working on the weekend as sail instructor, for example, can be more effective, because one is exposed to people 'who count', even though they may not be in the same field. This does not mean that networking is not an English practice. It is, indeed, a very common way to end a working day, having a drink together in the pub at least once a week, but this practice is in turn a very institutionalised part of the job itself, often organised by someone in the office itself, and in any case it is accompanied by other 'more official' networking occasions. Again, these aspects seem to depend only very loosely on the type of employment contract.

In chapter 4 I conclude that the organisation of profession is a substantial instrument for the professional based in England interviewed, not only owing to the sense of belonging to a group, but also, much more instrumentally, as a means to channel one's professional route in a predictable series of steps, thus reducing anxieties and uncertainties. Moreover, the steps taken (for instance obtaining a charter) are perceived as reusable in a potentially infinite number of career routes. Such 'use' of the professional apparatus results, in England, from an early emancipation of professions from the state; professions only received legitimacy from below. What has survived out of professions has to be marketable, or will perish. The situation is sharply different for the professional based in Italy: the professional apparatus is nominal, bureaucratic, 'derived' from the state, and has not succeeded in renewing itself yet, though negotiations are in progress. As a result, the groups of professionals interviewed are not able to turn the institutions of professions to their own advantage: communication fails. Therefore, the role of social closure – in neo-Weberian terms - is to direct to different institutions. The organisation of a profession as a cultural fact does matter in orienting oneself and also in enacting strategies of action.

Similarly, the organisations in which professionals interviewed work do have rules, some of which are negotiable, some others more difficult to change to the employee's advantage. For instance, the neo-liberal ideology of the entrepreneurial self, which should govern boundary-less careers, presupposes that the employees are given certain instruments to work with independently. Organisations in England, while not presupposing that their employee will stay there for their whole lifetime, are perceived as containing structured paths in which one can step on, and on occasions step off, interrupting a path that can be taken somewhere else. By contrast, careers in Italian organisations are portrayed as lacking any direction, as if external conditions could affect one's career at any time, in any way, and most of all without any capacity of control from the employee, who is asked to commit to the organisation, without having in turn any advantage independently from occasional personal trust and a relationship. The lack of a standardised route makes very difficult any sort of negotiation with the employer. Again, these aspects are independent from the contractual situations. In comparing the English and Italian contexts, a much stronger standardisation of processes and

routes emerges in the first, which is increasingly important in conditions of flexibility - as Beck argues in *Risk Society* (1992). By contrast, professionals based in Italy seem to act in a sort of Durkheimian 'anomie', lacking anchors to hold on to. The institutions discussed in chapters 4 and 5 are substantial obstacle for professionals based in Italy.

A third route by which I reiterate the necessity to look at careers from a wider perspective is the position in the life course of young adults. In fact, job seekers and workers are not neutrally equal in the labour market from the standpoint of the employer. In principle, 'real' boundary-less organisations should profit from young, graduate, and vocationally oriented workers, who are often eager to demonstrate their abilities and learn how to do real work. However, learning is not to be taken for granted, nor is it being valued for the quality of work that one can offer. Professionals' accounts are very clear in defining the sense of welcoming newcomers (among professionals based in England) and, on the other hand, a sort of hostility (among graduates based in Italy). In solving these issues, and in dealing with the long low-paid training required in the professional arena, professionals based in Italy look at their family as a tangible resource for survival. On the other hand, for professionals based in England the support of the family for such a long time would not be justified, not even for middle-class professionals. Being accepted in an adult work environment and feeling established within it are important aspects to consider oneself fully adult, and this has also to be taken into account when looking at one's career.

It is evident from the interview material that aspects not related to market and employment play a pivotal role in constructing a career, which is flexible in the very broadest sense, i.e. it involves many aspects of life in general. This analysis is then completed by looking at what concept of work is most referred to in interviewees' accounts, and how this is interwoven differently with the dimension of security. In fact, chapters 7 concentrates on the meanings produced by professionals on an aspect such as achievement and success. Professionals based in Italy appear attached to the employment sphere rather than on the content of the job that starts and finishes, by contrast again to their counterparts in England.

Studying how professionals interact with the institutions available in their own contexts reveals ways of interplay between agency and structure that are typical of each context examined. Following Ann Swidler's suggestion to conceive of how people think as 'repertoires of actions', drawn from an 'array of cultural resources' (2001) allows one to see what constitutes the fluidity and logic from which agents 'mobilise' their resources. Not too dissimilarly, Lamont and Thevenot (2000) have developed an analytical interpretative apparatus more specifically addressed to comparative research, based on the consideration of 'order of worth', and 'repertoires of evaluation'. These analytical devices are ultimately much more apt to analyse the data gathered than the basic conceptualisation of agent and structure that I had initially considered as a theoretical starting point for my work, in that they explain better why and how strategies of actions take the shapes that I have translated in the graph below.

The French convention school[41], mostly known in France (Jagd 2004 a) and in parts of the US, especially after the book co-authored by Lamont and Thévenot in 2000, directly addresses economic action from the sociological perspective. The analysis focuses on the 'char-

[41] The expressions 'économies de la grandeur' (economies of worth) and 'économie des conventions' are both used by scholars such as Boltanski and Thévenot, who keep on redefining them in their work. This approach has been influential in the so-called 'Pragmatic turn'.

acterization of the agent and his/her reason for acting; the modalities of coordination of actions; the role of values and common goods' (Jagd 2004 a: 6). Jagd (2004 a) considers that the starting point is that different disciplines have concentred on different specifications for coordination. Classical economics and sociology assume institutions such as the market and the community to be exogenous, universal and stable. Scholars of the French convention school are instead eager to maintain a pluralistic model, recognising that there can be various modes of coordination. This makes it possible to recognize the theoretical specificity of each type of institutional device.

Individuals-agents are not either *homini oeconomici* or purely irrational and sentimental. However, the extent to which either of these aspects enter into day-to-day activities and decisions for any given individual is instead a cultural factor in itself. 'Someone or something is 'worth it' when it is sufficiently good and significant to justify a specified action' (Thévenot 2006: 37). Thévenot suggests that worth 'is put to the reality test of effective coordination' (2006: 37). It should be paid attention to the fact that 'the arrangement of the situation (*dispositifs*) induces certain evaluative forms of coordination, and persons and communities have to shift from one to the other, and make compromises among them, depending on the situation'[42] (Thévenot 2006: 37). For this path, the dualism of values versus economy is abandoned.

Interviewed by Jagd (2004 b), Thévenot said that this model characterises itself as in partial contrast with some elements of Bourdieu's thought. This is not a coincidence, as some of its exponents were, in fact, Bourdieu's students. They end up criticizing Bourdieu's assumption that 'the disposition is rooted and incorporated within the person for all his life' (2004 b: 11). This would mean that dispositions would be static, whereas these approaches are in fact saying that they are dynamic, and potentially change with the situation. This also corresponds to Swidler's suggestion (2001) of leaving the notion of repertoires quite open.

Another aspect upon which these authors' productions diverge from Bourdieu is the element of power (Jagd 2004: a). While the relational approach elaborated by the French scholar contemplates the power relation in each behaviour and attitude, the conventional school argue that it is not necessarily so. In my research this is also verified. While there certainly are some power elements, in building a career, these cannot explain all dynamics. For instance, the analysis of the institution of profession conducted in chapter 4 reveals that many graduates embrace a profession purely because it looks convenient and easy to them. This simple fact explains the high inheritance of professions in Italy as a survival strategy, and rules out a significant part of the traditional literature on professions, as I have pointed out chapter 4.

The key suggestion of Boltanski, Lamont and Thévenot is to investigate the notion of coordination. In my own work, this can be seen and found in the articulation of various

[42] In short, the broad interest in analysing the 'most legitimate' repertoires of evaluation governing political, economic and social relationships in any one context brings these scholars to the study of conventions, which are in turn established by co-ordination. In *On Justification* (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), for instance, the authors identify six 'regimes of justification', i.e. systematic and coherent principles of evaluation, which coexist in the same social space. It is in fact implied that modern societies contain an interweaving of multiple orders. It is in such a framework that the pivotal role of co-ordination 'between humans being and between human beings and things' (Thévenot 2006: 36), can be better understood. However, it is not to exclude that the concept may refer to one actor's co-ordination of their various actions.

strategies of orientation towards one career or another, in embracing certain notions of success or in establishing certain orders of value. For instance, belonging to a certain geographical territory is very important in the eyes of the professionals interviewed in Italy, even though it clearly limits the opportunities available. On the other hand, for professionals based in England it is considered normal, not only to commute longer distances every day, but also to leave what they consider a decent job for another one which is better, but in another region. Again, why young Italians in need of money approach their parents first, rather than taking out a loan from a bank, as their English counterparts would do, cannot be explained here, but certainly contributes to understanding the relatively dependent relationship that young professionals based in Italy tend to have with their family (or, on the contrary, the independent nature of the relationship English professionals have with their own family). Such traits are widely recognised well beyond the analysis of interviews conducted for this book. However, conceiving of them as part of the overall context for these professionals - rather than as given for granted but unrelated aspects of their culture- helps in understanding why career decisions may either be preferred or disregarded.

Another reason why this approach seems useful is that it is not too far from themes around work and professions: Boltanski has explored the rise of the French management profession (1987) and Thévenot has studied organizations (2001). In analysing my interviews, I found that it was particularly useful to keep in mind one of the article contained in the Lamont and Thévenot 2000 collection, written by Cyril Lemieux and John Schmalzbauer. In this piece, the authors investigate on what it means to be or not to be a 'real' professional for American and French journalists, respectively, attacking the 'conventional juxtaposition of objectivity oriented Americans and ideological Europeans' as overly 'simplistic' (2000: 149). To unpack this specific view, the authors have asked interviewees not to comment specifically on this; yet they approached the issue through broader questions on how French and American reporters 'talk about the boundary between the *public* world of professional journalism and the *private* worlds of their personal lives' (2000: 149). The examination then explored the boundaries between involvement and detachment within both private and public investigations. Such ways of approaching an issue seems to be successful in grasping from a different angle what is more or less known, without the phenomenon ever being fully understood. In this case, the French and American reporters have developed different attitudes in doing their work, and this can be explained in terms of the relationship between the private and public spheres. In the case of my own work, the focus shifts from a comparative analysis of how young professionals based in Italy and England pursue their careers, into an exploration along the lines of individualism, individualisation and self entrepreneurialism as a prerequisite to understanding the relative career strategies for these two groups.

A further reason why this approach can be fruitful for my work is that the tools it offers seem compatible with comparative research, and Lemieux and Schmalzbauer's chapter is an example of this. This certainly contrasts with the generality of Giddens' approach, which was initially chosen because the agency / structure duality are bought to light in the mechanisms involved in constructing a career.

On the contrary, Structuration Theory in its basic understanding is too abstract and too 'disembedded' from a closer discussion of the cultural aspects that I wanted to explore (but the same would be valid for other aspects, such as economic ones), that serve to anchor

agents to their real constraints, opportunities and therefore lives. While the aspect of recursiveness of agency and structure, paramount in the notion of duality of structure that is at the core of structuration, is to be reaffirmed in the logics of the interviewees, it does not offer enough help as a cognitive and interpretative device and ends up rather confusing.

On the whole, the first three chapters serve to locate the interviewees in their worlds, show that their embeddedness in a given context may work to their advantage or disadvantage. Secondly, and more importantly, these chapters bring to light a set of implied meanings that are not normally taken into consideration. The same sort of resource, when used to plan and build a career, offers distinct potentials, and therefore works differently in the two contexts.

Professionals based in Italy seem to have absorbed media messages, without being able to distance themselves. They underline the increasing difficulties for graduates, mostly blaming recent changes in legislation, and on the whole feeling that what had been promised in previous years has been reneged upon. For these young professionals it is difficult to conceive of work as a whatsoever good. Work, for them, has a different dignity – supposedly higher, at least partly because they have been used to conceiving of work as a starting factor to enjoying a full citizenship, mostly as a mere employment fact from which the rights derive. Work-employment is much more than a life style: it entails the conditions of life itself, it is immanent to one's existence. Thus, the whole emotional apparatus that surrounds work and that seeks to pursue 'typical jobs for ever and for all' appears justified with its colourful presence of demonstration, trade unions and political parties' involvement in the new era crusade.

If the desperation shown by professionals based in Italy seems disproportional, it is on the other hand evident that the position of young, self-confident professionals based in England appears exceptionally naïve in the light of recent changes in the labour market. How ready they are to portray themselves as omnipotent, indispensable professionals; how easy it is for them to misunderstand the bigger game in which they find themselves, unable to grasp new global threats. The game appears to have quite cynical rules, and in this light it would be extremely interesting to follow up this book with a longitudinal approach - i.e. interviewing them again in ten-fifteen years' time.

In chapter 7 I continue the analysis of representation of achievements through interviewees' definitions of the 'good job', namely what they are supposed to get as high level workers. The ways in which the good job is conceived interestingly refer to two different work dimensions and meanings. For professionals based in England, work situations are naturally the result of an assembly of tasks and projects, and from this standpoint the 'good job' is the one, by doing which one can express oneself better, can contribute substance, and by virtue of one's own personal characteristics, to the wider success of the project. The 'good job' is one in which one is put in the position of producing something that results in a 'well done'. Departing from such results, it would be interesting to investigate further the dimension of future and projectability, that, as underline by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), are essential elements of agency.

Instead, professionals based in Italy are very much attached to the employment dimension of work. This does not mean that they necessarily claim a job-for-life, which has clearly vanished for their generation; nor that they are necessarily poorly ambitious. More precisely, such an orientation strongly entails the right to receive general guarantees from the working situation (what one can get from it) rather than putting emphasis on the ability to make a dif-

ference in doing the job (what one can give to it). These aspects are again quite understandable in the view of the political history of Italy, outlined in chapter 3.

The intention of concentrating on cultural factors has been pursued by looking at different modulations of individualism, individualisation and self-entrepreneurship in the accounts of the two groups interviewed. Through such lenses, what emerges is partly expected and partly unexpected, and in so doing displays an extremely interesting scenario - and conceptual device. The first, expected result is that professionals based in England are rather individualistic workers, while professionals based in Italy hardly conceive of themselves as free-floating in the graduate labour market. The images of graduate career propaganda gathered in England symbolise very well the fact that these professionals are inclined to look at their careers as if anything may be interposed between them and their professional aim. They consider themselves without any doubt the principle agent responsible for their careers. For their counterparts in Italy, instead, this relation is much more complicated, and many elements seem to interpose, as if a permanent fog impedes these professionals from seeing clearly what they may or may want to incur, to anticipate the steps to be taken. The group of professionals based in Italy and the one based in England differ in the ways in which they rely, on the one hand, on their own capacities and responsibilities, and on the other on institutional support. As a result they differ in the extent to which they believe they can overcome difficulties by themselves.

In accordance with this, professionals based in England prove to be better self-entrepreneurs than those based in Italy. The first group show more self-confidence, and as a result they are better at advertising and selling themselves; they analyse lucidly the opportunities available and are more independent, because they are less biased and prejudiced. Last, but not least, in their accounts they tend to put forward positive factors rather than negative ones and this affects the representation of the self. Their logic is to identify opportunities and then take them as promptly as possible.

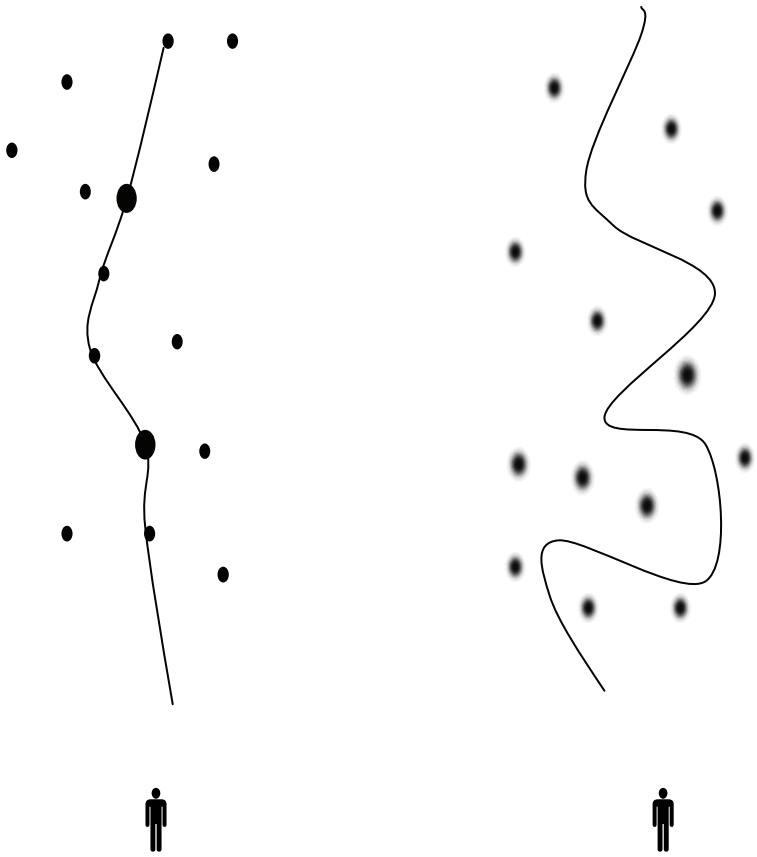
On the contrary, professionals based in Italy show more awareness of the subtle level of the wider presuppositions and implications for their actions, being more reflexive, more inclined to ponder and speculate rather than to act, cautious, less independent and autonomous through being less willing to move out in search of better opportunities, and ultimately worst to take up quickly new chances as they arise. Their approach to opportunities is seen in negative terms; they prefer to identify what does not work, the problems, and their strategies are built in terms of avoiding them.

While the first two results go well in accordance with an ascertained way of conceiving young professionals in Italy and England, and at least partly depend on the fact that the two countries' educational systems produce different strengths and weaknesses (as they seek to provide different skills), the third result may look counter-intuitive at first sight: professionals based in Italy are more individualised than those based in England. This aspect relates to the second result, i.e. that professionals based in England construct their professional working path by turning to their advantage the positive opportunities available, while the second mostly act by avoiding what they identify as the difficulties in reaching their professional aim. In fact, in doing so, the former end up constructing conformist and already put on a trial paths, although at the same time they insist in affirming the importance of agency. On the other hand, the latter end up being very creative about which strategies to put into action.

Indeed, such result brings about a lot of difficulties for the second group, not only because their career routes differ sharply from the predictable model of the job-for-life, which was certainly introduced as preferable in the past decades and throughout the time they spent in education. More significantly, in fact, they find themselves forced to be individualised, while agencies and institutions through which working practises must take place are seldom standardised enough to provide individuals with the essential toolkit for constructing their path. This argument, originally put forward by Beck in *Risk Society* (1992), assumes particular importance in giving shape to the reasons why the two groups assume such different attitudes in building their career path. As results from chapters 4, 5 and 6 show, professionals based in Italy mostly have informal anchors to hold on to, and informal anchors are by their nature instable and unpredictable. This means they have to add unpredictability to unpredictability, while for their colleagues structured paths already exist, and ultimately it is a matter of embracing one of them and directing it to one's tastes; it is a way to reduce the unpredictability of an ever-unsecure labour market. For the first group, to say it with Mills (1959), public issues become personal troubles without ever coming back to the public again; they become stuck in the personal, with agents forced to absorb the systematic contradictions and, what is more, lacking the cultural attitudes (results 1 and 2) to overcome such a difficulty. Very interestingly, professionals based in Italy put into place a series of remedies, within their more general strategies of actions, that can be assimilated into what used to be referred to the lower classes, the so called 'art to get by' (arte di arrangiarsi). This is exacerbated by the unwillingness to move out from their geographical area. The new fact is that this time it encompasses intellectuals', educationally informed, ways of acting.

Therefore, the strategies of the two groups can be represented in the graph below; the sort of career goals that professionals based in England (on the left) and based in Italy (on the right) seemingly wish to pursue. The two career trajectories are put into place at the individual, agent level, which does not assume gender connotations in this book - although this perspective may be fruitfully adopted in a further study.

On the left of the graph, the path represents the career route of a professional based in England, where the clearly defined black bullet points symbolise the opportunities of the labour markets as identified by the agents, who choose some among them and then select those routes, in order to get to their professional goal. On the right of the graph, the black bullet points are not clearly defined, and in fact represent not the (positive) opportunities, but the difficulties; one's career is built by avoiding what are identified as difficulties. In this second scenario, the professional goal is still present, but of course the path to reach it is more troubled and tortuous.



Graph.1 : Professionals' careers paths in England and Italy.

The conceptualisation suggested by Swidler (2001) and Lamont and Thévenot (2000) can be used to explain the diagrams I have constructed, in the sense that focuses on those strategies of actions that 'involve a characteristic way of solving problems and characteristic sets of problems to be solved' (2001: 86). And in fact, as a result of the interplay of agency and structure, such worldviews constructed in the same way are experienced and interpreted in very different ways, which opens up the possibility for different behaviour to be conducted. Thus, working cultures do have constitutive power, despite the fact that agents differ in how much culture they employ, as Swidler warns. Especially if we keep the notion of culture very open and dynamic, rather than close and static, it can be said that a specific working culture which suggests ideas about careers are to be produced and reproduced, and the working culture lies in the intersection of structures and agents.

The ultimate conclusion I want to put forward is one that brings together the previous ones and contextually encompasses them. It is not possible to understand the attitude towards the flexibilisation of career-paths by exclusively looking at the contractual fact. On the contrary, it is advisable to enlarge the overview to the more general strategies around which strategies of career - and indeed of life, are constructed. Flexi-lives- rather than flexi-jobs are the very issue to focus on in further research.

My conclusions go in the direction of urging a re-conceptualisation of work, not only in order to achieve a fuller empowerment of individuals as citizens, regardless of the employment position that one occupies in the labour market. Also, further research is needed in reaffirming the dignity of a variety of ideas, concepts and experiences of work, that are culturally forged and deserve equal respect in a way that transcends the hegemonic, market-lead ideas of success and achievements. More qualitative research on these issues is needed.

There also emerges a need to discuss the interrelation between culture and economy. Careers can be planned, lived, consumed and eventually disposed of, similarly to other goods. To paraphrase Lash and Urry (1994), there is a lot of culture in the economy, as well as, of course, a lot of economy in the culture. At first the assimilation of one's career to a whatsoever good may sound provocative, due to the strong significance of the work component within careers, and related social meanings which it brings about. Yet, it seems to be also Giddens's view, when he argues that 'not just lifestyles, but self-actualisation is packaged and distributed according to market criteria' (1991: 198).

On the whole, the book reaffirms the fruitfulness of approaching comparatively the complicated mechanisms which discipline and orient young graduates in the construction of a career path in ever increasingly flexible labour markets. Taking an extremely broad perspective it can be said that cultural attitudes, legislation and economic spheres develop at different speeds, not only if we compare the two contexts, but also in any one context, and that this fact is one of the principal causes of attrition, discomfort and discontent. Italian legislation, for instance, has adopted a flexible direction without having institutions that can support flexible careers. However, the comparative dimension among the three chosen professions has not been equally interesting *per se*, although the three professions have been chosen as professions *in* the market, and therefore work very well in addressing the broad research question.

In relation to each context, I can see interesting directions for further research. For instance, the strong confidence shown by professionals based in England suggests that a longitudinal study could reveal interesting developments in the professionals' insights on work. On the other hand, the strong discomfort with individualistic values in Italy, and especially in Sardinia, indicates that a study on how successful locals have emerged could be very interesting in looking at how secondary socialisation is eventually negotiated by the community. Sociology of celebrities is an already established branch of the discipline and could offer guidance on how to proceed methodologically and theoretically in shifting the focus from 'average' to 'exceptional' success.

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Going back to all the times I have had in mind Pasolini's *Poesia della Tradizione* in conducting this research (*Transumanar e Organizzar* 1971), I wish to dedicate this book to friends in Italy, because they are 'an unlucky generation', maybe a 'spoiled' one, but which 'feels obliged not to give up'; to friends in England, because 'they saw at hands a beautiful victory', wishing them not to loose sight of its meaning.

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Appendix A
Mini-profiles of interviewees

Accountants based in Italy

Alessio (1), Economics, works in an Accountancy practice with two friends, before that run a pub.
M. Antonietta (2), Economics, works in an accountancy practice, has a difficult situation, also due to her husband being unemployed.
Gianni (3), Economics, works in research, hopes to combine consultancy with research in the future.
Rachele(4), Economics, works in an accountancy practice, wants a quiet life style.
Giulio (5), Economics, works in an accountancy practice with two friends, he is overall very disappointed by accountancy.
Carlo (6), Economics, works in an accountancy practice, he has grown up 'seeing' business
Sara (7), Economics, works in a consultancy/Accountancy practice founded by her husband.
Raffaele (8), Economics, works in a Accountancy/legal practice which offers diverse and alternative services.
Marianna (9), Economics, works in Consultancy/commerce, runs a small consortium.

HR professionals based in Italy

Giovanna (10), Psychology, is a senior HR in a multinational company, and suffers from company's rules.
Elena (11), Politics, is specialised in HR. She works in the administrative sector/HR and does a comparison between northern and southern Italy.
Roberto (12), Politics, HR in a call centre, adapts his skills very flexibly.
Valentino (13), Law, is a senior HR in a 'new economy' company. He compares old and new firms.
Federica (14), Psychology, specialised in HR; HR in a call centre, is eager to spread the Psychology ethos.
Letizia (15), Politics, HR in a temp agency, has takena a very feminised route.
Maia (16), Psychology, HR in a tempo agency, has a very typical path in HR.
Gabriele (17), Law, HR in a call centre, comes form a Law practice.
Pietro (18), Economics, HR in a multinational company, has renounced to a career in Milan for family reasons.
Anna (19), Economics, HR In a tempo agency, promotes temps agencies.

Engineers based in Italy

Giulia (20), Engineering, works in the research sector, suffers form a very unstable situation.
Francesco (21), Engineering, works in a engineering company, works in an engineering company, is at the very beginning of his career.
Giovanni (22), Engineering, is a sistant worker in a multinational company, is getting married with Chiara (26).
Claudio (23), Engineering, has recently left Sardinia for a multinational company, is eager to follow the international development of engineering

Andrea (24), Engineering, works in a multinational company, His partner is an engineer to and has recently moved to the mainland for a better job.
Franco (25), Engineering, works in construction, very late entry in employment
Chiara (26), Engineering, works in the environmental field, for a multidisciplinary task force.
Michele (27), Engineering, has set up his solo engineering practice, after having interrupted a doctorate for 'real life'.
Nino (28), Engineering, works for the public sector, finds in the catholic community strong support.
Vincenzo (29), Engineering, a doctoral candidate, has set up a 'family' practice

Accountants based in England

Eamonn (30), Philosophy, works in audit, is a very mobile person.
Freddie (31), Economics, works in business. After some experience in accountancy practices, he sells his skills for a major company.
Pierre (32), Economics, a solo practitioner, works from home in a very small country village.
Rosemary (33), Economics, works in an accountancy practice, comes from Africa.
Bill (34), Economics, works in an accountancy practice, self defines himself as an 'anti-accountant'.
Phil (35), Economics, works in an accountancy practice, very typical path.
Gareth (36), Economics, works in an accountancy practice, has a typical accountancy path, with evasion dreams.
Abhinay (37), Economics, audit for fast growing company, has decided
Join business after working for a practice.
Rob (38), Economics, works in an accountancy practise, has a typical accountancy career.
Jane (39), Economics, works in an accountancy practise, comes from Africa.

HR professionals based in England

Sylvie (40), Acting and Drama, HR in a temp agency. A former actress, a future coach.
Anne-Marie (41), HR, HR in a multinational company, has a standard experience of HR.
Simon (42), Sport Science, HR in a multinational company, is a very competitive person
Clara (43), Chemistry, HR in education, has a wide experience in the field of education.
Heather (44), HR, HR in a multinational company, Typical HR path
Stacey (45), Prehistory, broadly covers HR functions for a multinational company after being at the top of accountancy.
Sonia (46), European Studies, Senior HR in multinational company, let Italy at the age of 18.
Alice (47), HR, HR position in education, happy to have joined an ethical work. Environment.
Rose (48), Sociology, HR in education, PhD student, plans a year off in south America.
Avril (49), Education, HR in education, plans to move to north England.
Amanda (50) Art, HR in Education, is very focused on her profession.

Engineers based in England

Christy (51), Physics, conducts research, started a career after raising her child.
Samir (52), Engineering, works in a multinational company, he is very enthusiastic of engineering as a profession.
Jesus (53), Engineering, works in a research department.
Geena (54) Geology, works for a multinational company, is eager to 'restyle' engineering.
Martin (55), Engineering, works for a multinational company and is very ambitious.
John (56), Engineering, works for a university department, engineering is his second career.
Ken (57), Engineering, works for a multinational company, is very ambitious.
Kimberly (58), Engineering, works for a multinational company, plans to quit for childcare and then come back.
Thomas (59), Engineering, is an experienced researcher.
Conrad (60), Engineering, works for a multinational company, and is very ambitious.

Appendix B
Some interviewees' profiles in more depth

Kimberly (58). Kimberly is a female engineer whom I met at a reunion of young engineers in London. Kimberly is married and plans to have children in the coming years. Every decision that she will have to make appears carefully calculated: for instance, how many years of devotion to the firm are necessary before asking for something back- something like working part-time with no reduction pay, 'good' flexibility and so on. Although she only has three years of working experience since graduation, and at the time of the interview she was still preparing for her professional qualifications, I believe that her account is extremely interesting in describing the scenario in which a young, female engineer in a male dominated industry may find herself in, and how this situation can be represented. Kimberly introduces herself as a successful, self-made young woman: she has collected a series of qualifications and various awards that she can remember, since early teenage years, and performs an active role in the professional association where I met her: she seems a promise of her field in the eyes of the small community. It is also interesting that she knows exactly how to play on her 'weaknesses': for instance, the fact of being a young, blonde woman with a feminine image provokes the others to see 'what she may have to say' on a given matter.

Abhinay (37). Abhinay had been a qualified accountant for seven years at the time of the interview. He describes his career as a very typical one in accountancy. In fact, after gaining the professional qualification required, Abhinay left the accountancy firm, in which he had learnt the basics of the profession, to join another accountancy firm. At the time of the interview, Abhinay was working for a major company within the internal audit functions. He was in charge to direct another accountant himself who is more up to date than he on accountancy, since the managerial training he has to follow makes it impossible for him to cope with the fast changes of the job technicalities. His work is particularly hectic and demanding he is thrilled by the fast growth of the company, which he estimates at approximately 600-700% per year. This means that nobody is able to predict how everybody's work is going to be even after a short period of time: as a result he feels excited, as if surfing a big wave.

At the same time, Abhinay seems to suffer from the low-cost philosophy of the company, that is applied not only to customers but also to employees: he declares that he intends to ask for an enlargement of the group he leads, otherwise he may wish to leave. Abhinay is married to another accountant. Having already left London for a more relaxed place to live, Abhinay seems attracted by a slower pace of work, and in fact he is considering one day establishing his own company, possibly buying houses to let - or else in which he can somehow uses the competences acquired as an accountant.

Stacey (45). 'I don't know what to put in the profession these days, 'cause I used to be an accountant, but…. Marital status: cohabiting, or living in sin, some people call it'. These are the first words of Stacey's interview, recorded while she was trying to fill in the form, where I asked a few basic demographic questions, as well as asking for consent for the use of data. Stacey soon portrays herself as a difficult case to classify. A mediocre student, graduated at twenty-six years of age having taken various gap- years around the world. She is obviously friendly as a general rule, and in her interview she is quite intense and open. She seems at ease in her current position, which is probably the highest amongst my interviewees. With a

humanities background, she joined a large accountancy firm in London and from there has taken the route of an accountancy career, simply because an accountancy job was an 'easy thing'. Yet, after climbing the ladder, she feels that she is not happy in the role. Stacey therefore tells me, in detail, the decision- making process that brought her to shift, inside the same firm, from a high position in accountancy to cover a key HR role. This not only puts her in the condition of being in constant contact with people –her passion - but even to elaborate on the company's strategies in terms of values. Ending up in this position of corporate social responsibility – how the firm connects to the territory it is in - makes her fully satisfied with her job.

Samir (52). Samir is the only interviewee based in England who agreed to conduct the interview outside of working hours, and over the weekend. We met on a sunny spring day in London, and the interview, conducted on the grass around the London eye, was very natural. Of course it contained many observations of the profession Samir is in – engineer - but overall it can be considered an attempt to convince me that his life style is really enjoyable. Originally from Lebanon, Samir came to London at the age of eighteen to enrol in an engineering course, from which he went directly onto a postgraduate qualification. Clearly, Samir is from an advantageous background that allowed him to sustain the expensive costs of living in London ('not a place where you can save money', to use his words) with no special restrictions. For instance, he spent all the long vacations from university travelling, rather than working, as most students do. His numerous family is made up of many brothers and sisters, who are living all around the world, and like to reunite once a year back in Lebanon, where the parents still live. At the time of the interview, Samir is thirty two years-old, already a chartered engineer and works on an exciting, large scale, engineering project. To allow him to travel easily from central London, the company has provided him with a car: this is one of the benefits that he enjoys the most. Samir loves his job, which he finds very challenging (life progresses, and demands change, advances, and expectations change. And engineering tries to keep up on that', he says). He also loves living in London for the variety of experiences that one may get. Since his job is seen as leaving him with enough free time, the engineering profession and the London experience are, in his account, two- sides of the same coin. The only aspect he complains about is the fact that engineers do not get paid as much as other middle- class professionals, probably because they are less recognised.

Giulia (20). Giulia is a 34-year-old engineer collaborating with a research centre. She has worked there continuously since she graduated, six years ago. Her account is very clear in putting emphasis on different aspects of her dissatisfaction: she doesn't particularly dislike what she does, she is not passionate about it either. Her enrolment in engineering was due to the association, very often done in Italy in past decades, with excellent job prospects, and her brothers did the same. The disillusion about what has actually been achieved seems to be infecting the whole family, as none of them reached the sort of positions they felt had been promised to them. Giulia and her brothers are the first in their extended family to be awarded a university degree and, despite this, they have failed in their aims. All the projects she has been involved in required the development of very sectorial skills, not necessarily in a strict relation to one another, and each time her confidence was tied to those specific pro-

jects, following which she has progressed only horizontally. She suffers from the fact that her career 'is not taking any direction', an expression that she uses to mean that it is not following any defined path. Not knowing what position she will take after the present one is seen as a huge problem when added to the fact that she does not perceive herself as employable. Again, not being secure makes her utterly uncertain about her situation in life as a whole. One of the signs that she is suffering of the work situation outside of work is her compromise to live with the family of origin.

M. Antonietta (2). Antonietta is 35-year-old accountant, whose husband is temporarily unemployed. She has recently joined a small practice as a dependent worker, with the ambition to establish her own. She loves her job, tries to do it, but often incurs difficulties which she is eager to tell me about in a three and a half hour-long interview. She tells me how difficult it is to start your own business because your clients will not pay on time, and you will not be able to pay your expenses. In her experience, once you are officially registered as an accountant, your boss will start to be suspicious, and will stop you from being in contact with clients, due to the possibility you can 'steal' clients. There are also other possible exploitations: she has been asked for money in order to be accepted as a trainee, and after finished the training (in another place) she was asked to keep working underpaid. All her decisions are based on money constraints, even the one to enter the profession in the first place: in fact, she could not afford a good MA which would have led to a career in a big firm. She clearly wants to show me that she is good at her job, and that her career has gone much better than some of her colleagues'. Nonetheless, she regularly dreams of moving to northern Italy, where her career 'would have been completely different'. Northern Italy is obviously seen in mythical terms.

Elena (11). I conducted with Elena a two and a half hour- long interview, during which she was eager to tell me her vicissitudes into the world of employment. Elena's professional biography appears connoted by strong emotions and passions, although she also analyses the pros and cons of all the steps taken very carefully. Elena holds a non-vocational degree. Not knowing which direction to take, she finds herself in a postgraduate course in Human Resources, in which she decided to enrol following the examples and suggestion of friends. She defines it as a place where parents who have money send their sons, but where a bit of everything is taught without really communicating useful expertise. However, such courses provide opportunities to introduce you to firms where you are supposed to work as a trainee; you also familiarise yourself with colleagues with similar ambitions and interests, and in such a way you can build a small network of people on which your subsequent career will depend. Self confident, energetic, active, Elena likes finding alternative ways to do things and keep always options open. At the time of the interview she worked on a part time basis as secretary / HR officer in a small branch based in north-west Italy, and occasionally as teacher in vocational courses. She ended up in there to follow her partner, but she also worked in Sardinia. Her account also testifies of the different 'way of thinking' and the support of these two contexts. In particular, from this contrast it emerges that southern Italy (Sardinia in particular) is a place where you are not really valued for what you bring to work and you are conversely asked to 'stay in your place'.

Vincenzo (29). Vincenzo is a young engineer who is starting his own business in engineering, together with his sister and a friend just outside Naples. Vincenzo has an interesting work history because after his studies, which he considers very tough, he found a placement in a well- known group that does highly qualified work in exactly his area of engineering, in his loved Naples, which offered real possibilities of being stabilised soon. However, Vincenzo feels that he did not fit in the company: he suffered from the lack of organization of work; he did not understand what he had to do and felts that the learning curve was falling down. Nor did he understand the mechanism of a career inside it, which would lead him to advance with the others at the same speed, in the same direction, and with no meritocracy. Therefore at a certain point he takes the brave decision to leave, contrary to expectations, however supported by his family. He knows his decision was a counterintuitive one, and therefore takes a long time to explain it to me. After leaving, Vincenzo prepares for a PhD position in Naples. At the time of the interview he is finishing his PhD, which he considers as a basis not for a career in academia -very badly paid- but for a career in the newly established practise. From a middle class family, it is not the 'job for life' he looks for, but a position in which he can learn and improve. Vincenzo is an open, athletic and good looking person and spends his weekend as a teacher of sailing in the gulf of Naples. In this way, he not only practises his passion but also continues his engineering work: under the sun, relaxed, sailing. He considers this a very effective way of networking with wealthy people who could commission work.

Abstract

Increasingly flexible labour markets have caused a revolution in established career patterns. Young, educated and skilled workers find themselves in protean careers in which strategies of action, cultural meanings and objectives are being profoundly challenged. Indeed, no longer are traditional, upward career paths unquestionably available for those who are young and qualified. Plus, a severe perception of instability affects the ways of conceiving careers, and goes along with a deep organizational restructuring. As a result, starting a professional career path implies new challenges and an intense work of re-conceptualization of one's environment as made up of what is seen as an available resource. Furthermore, the emphasis on the power of global markets risks to mystify national differences and suggests the naïve idea that we are all equally caught up in a big cauldron of increasing flexibility and insecurity, as if we all had the same ambitions and aspirations in relation to our own working path.

In order to problematise these passages and go deeper in the identification of specificities that this trend may take, this book reconstructs how two groups of early career professionals based in England and Italy and working in the fields of human resources, engineering and accountancy, construct their professional careers. The broad research question addressed is 'how does the increasing flexibility of the labour market affect the way in which young, educated workers build their career paths?' Sixty informants were chosen among those having between five to ten years work experience after graduation, in order to capture that specific phase in which one has had some real and direct knowledge of the labour market, but still has options of development very open ahead.

The analysis is sociologically informed by an interpretation of the sixty in-depth interviews conducted with the above mentioned early career professionals. The interview guide focused on the understanding of career of informants, as well as on a reconstruction of past work and educational trajectory and plans for the future. In the same group, agents tend not only to use similar resources, but also to give reason of these uses according to specific orders of worth. In this way, the strategies of actions result more embedded in their own contexts.

In chapter 1, the characteristics defining the social changes in the globalised work arena are outlined. Flexibility is here intended as a inescapable fact, which is nonetheless transformed either in good tales or pessimistic stories. The perspective of flexi-jobs is introduced, as well as the reasons why they came to catalyse the attention of most academic production. In chapter 2, some selected notions of career are introduced, to make the point that newly established forms of careers, such as the Protean career, are interestingly related to the issue of agency and atructure, as well as other categories which seem more appropriate to a compara-

tive analysis if enriched by cultural understandings of the contexts in which they are applied. The analysis tries in fact to embed agents in their own cultural contexts by using open categories such as 'repertoires of evaluation' and 'cultural repertoires'. In this view, the ways in which professionals interact with the institutions available in their contexts, turning them to their own advantage, constitute strategies of action typical of each context.

In giving their accounts, informants have focused on three institutions, meaning by this systems of interrelated norms that are rooted in shared values. These were identified in: the professions, the organizational assets, and the position they occupy in the life cycle. Chapter 4 specifically focuses on professions, looking at what sort of resources they are in the two contexts. Typical careers in the three professional fields are described. In considering the specificities of the three fileds, which are also experiencing different sorts in the two countries, allows us to broaden the spectrum and identify orders of worth which can be considered specific of each country, at least for the early career professional level. More specifically, it is found that professions constitute a safe niche in the agitated sea of employment only if they provide substantial guidance and support. The opportunity to reuse skills acquired in a flexible way is also very important.

Chapter 5 tests the neo-liberal ideology of the entrepreneurial self within the organizational discourse. If organizations are increasingly boundaryless, they also have to provide measures such as appraisals to promote awareness of what one is able to do and in what timescale achievements can be obtained. Consistently following chapter 4, it is found that the conditions offered by the structured organizations in England are more favourable to building one's career path when compared with the cauldron of unsystematic but nonetheless patronising rules that govern Italian work settings.

Chapter 6 discusses the impact of one's position in the life cycle on building a professional career. In doing this discussion, it emerges the role of family as a further resource that can be 'used'. Attention is then devoted to the meanings given by professionals to their experience. Representations of work, the good job, and ultimately the concept of achievement are investigated. Professionals based in Italy appear attached to the employment sphere rather than on the content of the job that starts and finishes, again, by contrast with their counterparts based in England. The definitions of work, certainty and the concept of a good job among interviewees' responses are critically assessed in comparison to each other.

A concluding section assesses the approach used and the results emerged, bringing together the configurations of individualism, individualisation and self-entrepreneurship in a way that characterises the group of professionals based in England as strong supporters of the first and the last, but weakly individualised. Also, they tend to follow institutional routes in a poorly individualised manner, simply by *taking* opportunities available. As a result, their career path is constructed by enacting the resources found in their own contexts, building in such a way a conformist path.

Conversely, professionals based in Italy interviewed find themselves acting in a profoundly non-standardised arena, where it is difficult to identify positive resources to enact. Strategies are therefore built by avoiding identified difficulties and constraints. They suffer from the fact of being forced to be individualised and self motivated, possibly because they have never fully accepted the individualist spirit. Yet the lack of standardised work practices forces them to engage in extremely individualised strategies, mostly by *avoiding* identified constraints. In

this way, a partially unexpected scenario is depicted, which the comparative dimension has revealed with a clarity that a non comparative research would have not contained.
Ultimately, the adoption of a flexi-live perspective is suggested in an attempt to understand the wider framework in which strategies of action are taken and the reasoning behind these. By considering the functioning of institutions which not necessarily pertain to the work sphere, the understating of a career construction is very much enhanced and pushed further, in a way which contrasts the reductionism that this concept has assumed in recent literature. .
The fact that the fieldwork was conducted before the coming of the global economic crises, which involved both countries and reached its most dramatic phase in 2008, offers now an interesting insight on the meaning of comparison, and especially on the positive attitude of professionals based in England interviewed discussed throughout the book. The analysis done here captures a moment in which the groups compared were in exceptionally different situations: this enhances the heuristic validity of the comparative analysis, whilst simultaneously offering the grounds for a follow up study.

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