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NATIONAL REPORT - CATEGORY IV

Unqualified and unemployed youth: 'blaming the victim'

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Foreword

This report presents an outline of youth unemployment in Italy and a study of six biographies of unemployed, unqualified young people; one of them, Sasà, is analysed in depth. None of them went beyond compulsory education; two of them, Sasà and Giovanna, work in the informal market; one of them, Mimmo, was at a reform school on a charge of robbery at the time of the interview; the other three, Michele, Franco and Ginetto, are unemployed. Their ages range between 17 and 24.

Youth unemployment in Italy

The last few decades have been notable for major changes in the structure of employment, but the Italian labour market is still marked by two constants: the first is that Italian unemployment has never fallen below a threshold that might be described as ‘tolerable’; the second is its striking territorial concentration (Pugliese, 1994). Not even the recent changes that have tail-coated the crisis in the Fordist model – and clearly impacted massively on the most heavily industrialised areas in the north – have varied the dual nature of Italian unemployment. Indeed, the north-south gap appears to be widening: during the 1980s, unemployment in the south was about twice as high as it was in the north; by 1997, it was three times as great (22.2 per cent compared with 7.6 per cent).

However, territorial concentration is not the only key factor in what has been described as the Italian unemployment ‘model’ (Pugliese, 1993). The situation in Italy is also characterised by two more constant factors:

- a) gender imbalance: Italy not only has one of the lowest female activity rates in Europe; it is also notable for a considerable disparity between male and female unemployment (9.5 per cent as against 16.8 per cent in 1997), and in the south the gap is widening still further;
- b) the preponderance of young people (Mingione & Pugliese, 1993): unemployment among workers aged 45-49 stands at 4.5 per cent; this climbs to 32.7 per cent for those aged 20-24 and in southern Italy tops 50 per cent. These figures were enough to persuade Therborn to describe Italy as having a model of unemployment that is both excluding (i.e. in comparisons with young people and women) and punitive (Therborn, 1986).

However, no description of unemployment in Italy would be complete without reference to yet another factor: the role played by education and training in labour market integration courses. In the south, where demand in the economy is basically sluggish, educational qualifications give job-seekers a clear competitive edge (Spanò, 1995). The fact that this appears to be contradicted by statistics (average unemployment is higher among those with higher educational qualifications than among the least qualified sectors) simply reflects the fact that the best qualified people have a better chance of remaining in the labour market while they wait for a job that is suitable, or at least acceptable. It follows from these factors of differentiation that a large proportion of unemployed people in Italy

(29 per cent, or almost a third) are first-time job-seekers from the south, and that many of them are women.

Although it is easy to explain the preponderance of young people in the Italian jobless figures, particularly in the south, **in terms both of low demand for labour and of high protection for employees which characterises the Italian welfare system**, the reasons for such high levels of unemployment being effectively ‘tolerated’ in the south have triggered fierce debate. Some blame the role of the family, which encourages young people to stay at home and thereby ensures that they enjoy a reasonable standard of living. Others point to the role played by the informal economy which, against a backdrop of insecurity and precariousness, not only puts money into the family budget, but also gives the young people concerned a chance to acquire a skill. In other words, the **black** economy has the task of making up for shortcomings not only in regular employment but also in the education system.

These ideas are not entirely implausible, but the optimism implied in their interpretation is much less securely based. While families ensure the continued well-being of younger members, we cannot ignore the fact that their decision to carry on living at home comes at a cost. Official statistics indicate that most poor people living below the international standard poverty line in the south are minors (CIPE, 1994); figures also show that they are poor even when living at home and that, to an extent, they are ‘victims’ of the fact that the head of household’s income is insufficient to meet all the family’s needs (see Sgritta (1994) for comments on the ‘familiarisation’ of poverty).

As for the compensation provided by the informal economy, numerous studies conducted in southern Italy have shown how the number and quality of job opportunities in the concealed economy are linked both to vitality in the formal economy (Pugliese, 1986) and to the possession of specific personal, vocational and relationship-based resources (Spanò, 1991). In other words, this research establishes how, far from being an instrument of compensation, the informal economy is fundamentally a ‘multiplier’ of inequality.

If we also add the family-rooted Italian welfare model (Esping-Andersen, 1990) – which is unfairly tilted in favour of men, (male) heads of household and those in secure employment – and the almost total absence in the south of vocational guidance programmes (particularly vocational training focussing on labour market integration), it is easy to understand how low qualification, unemployment and deviance go hand in hand – again particularly in the south.

Reference must naturally be made to steps that have been taken over the last few years to deal with the problem of youth unemployment, if for no other reason than the fact that the situation has become more serious because fathers, too, have now been ejected from the labour market. The Treu Package, named after the Minister of Labour and launched by the last government, provides for a series of measures specifically aimed at integrating young first-time job-seekers; they include apprenticeships, vocational integration packages, loans, work/training contracts and job shops. Although it is too early to assess the effect, we must acknowledge that these measures are most likely to benefit people who have specific skills, the most important of which is access to information, and it is possible that

they could once again leave the most disadvantaged with no protection. We are talking here about unqualified youth who, for worrying reasons connected with the family or their environment, often do not have the necessary educational qualifications. These people urgently need effective training schemes of the type that do not exist – for the time being at least - in the south.

It is no coincidence that none of our interviewees has been ‘contacted’ by the school, social services or institutions specialising in vocational training. This is clear evidence of how the Italian welfare system has neglected young lower-class people with no qualifications.

Sasà’s case story

Biographical Data Analysis

Family and social background

Sasà’s family comes from the ‘Spanish District’, a densely populated area in the old town centre of Naples; the locality is characterised by a well developed underground economy (e.g. handicraft, itinerant peddling and counterfeiting), illegal activities (e.g. smuggling and prostitution) and, more recently, by a close network of criminal and Camorra organisations (involved, for example, in drugs and racketeering).

His father had no education at all and works as a small artisan in the black economy; he has worked on his own as an upholsterer for forty years. His mother comes from the same neighbourhood as her husband; she, too, had no education and is a housewife. Sasà’s parents married in the mid-1960s; their first child, a boy, was born in 1967, and their two daughters came two and four years later. Sasà’s family gained nothing from the ‘economic miracle’ of the 1960s; instead, they entered the developing phase of their life-cycle during the recession period that followed the ‘Autunno caldo’ (Hot Autumn) and the oil crisis. When the twins, Sasà and Patrizia, were born in 1973, the family was already having to make sacrifices to bring up three children aged six, four and two.

How might this background have influenced Sasà’s development? His biographical course re-articulates many characteristic features of his territorial environment and social background: he left school before completing compulsory education, he started work when he was still very

young and had a wide range of jobs, and he passed through a phase of deviance. However, Sasà drew away from the traditional course because he had strong aspirations to achieve social mobility.

1973-1984: Childhood

Sasà's childhood was identical to that of other children in the neighbourhood: he went to school and started work at the age of ten as a bar-boy (in the same establishment where his brother had already been working for several years). When he was 11, after finishing elementary school, he dropped out of school completely. At a very early stage, work rather than school became his reference world. Such an early change stemmed both from his social and cultural environment (under-age employment and dropping out of school are the 'rule' among most of his peers) and from personal experience: Sasà failed the first year of elementary school, and this could have been why he rejected school. He might also have experienced going to school while still quite young (he began at the age of five instead of six) as an attempt on the part of his family to send him away from home.

1985-1989: Adolescence

When Sasà was 12, he left the bar and, at his brother-in-law's suggestion, went to work as a blacksmith's apprentice in a in another part of the city. In this way, Sasà followed a trajectory that is quite common for someone of his social background and environment: working as a bar-boy is a sort of 'initiation' into the world of work, and it is usually followed by a phase of apprenticeship in which the subject seeks to acquire a 'skill'. For example, his brother followed the same trajectory and, after working as a boy in the same bar, went to work for a leather manufacturer. However, apart from wanting a vocational qualification, Sasà tried to detach himself from his family's male, working role-models: he did not go and work in his father's upholsterer's shop and, despite the fact that the leather trade is very well established in the neighbourhood, did not follow his eldest brother into the sector either. Instead, he chose to work in another neighbourhood and in another line of business.

Falling in love with a girl who came from a higher social status and lived in the same neighbourhood (her family was very working-class but they had managed to rise to a good social position) shows that Sasà was on a

trajectory of distancing himself from his family. He started seeing her when he was 16 and left the blacksmith's shortly afterwards.

1989-1991: Late Adolescence

Sasà's encounter with Margaux was a turning-point for him. Through her, he came into contact with a world that attracted him but to which he did not belong. As a result of the distance between the world he belonged to and his reference world, he began to lose his way and fell into deviance. He had three options opened to him: his brothers' world, where people worked following a pre-determined script; what he had himself done hitherto; his girlfriend's world, where young men and women studied – a world that was completely alien to the logic of making a living; and his street mates' world, where they went in for stealing and drugs in preference to exploitation and hard work in innumerable illegal jobs. He wanted to escape from the first and was not ready to enter the second – so he opted for the third. Sasà spent about a year involved in drugs, petty theft and violent episodes in sports stadiums. It was a real moratorium period during which he left all his options open: he committed crimes but never did anything that might compromise his future, and he went around with his girlfriend while continuing to live with his family.

1991-1994: Youth

At the end of his moratorium phase, Sasà confirmed that he aimed to detach himself from his family, and he seemed to take a social upward direction. During his deviant period, he had time to devote to his girlfriend and had enough money to see her without losing face: he showed her that he was not some 'poor devil', but a 'tough guy' who deserved respect. The world he wanted to belong to now looked a bit closer. To bring his transgression period to a close, he succumbed to pressures from a friend who, 'to save him', gave him an opening with a local leather manufacturer. Sasà soon left this job, however, to follow an upward course. He got a job opportunity from his girlfriend's father who introduced him to a clothing agency, the sector in which his father-in-law had made his money. He worked as a storekeeper, but it was a turning-point: it was the first time he had been employed on a regular basis, and the first time he had worked in an office rather than on the street. The distance separating him from his aim (to become a white-collar worker) was at last narrowing. He was sacked two

years later: this, too, was a new experience for him, as it had previously always been him who decided on a change of job.

1994-1997

Dismissal was a traumatic event for Sasà. He was driven back into the world he had yearned so passionately to get away from, but he did not give in. He knew that deviance was not part of his future and that it was not a feasible option, so he took the first job he could get and for a few months worked as a bricklayer with his brother-in-law. That did not mean he was resigning himself to a future of innumerable jobs and abandoning his aspirations. A few months later, through a voluntary work association, a friend managed to find a small workplace for which they did not have to pay; Sasà agreed to share this 'adventure' and decided to pursue the idea even though his friend was unable to stick with it. He threw himself into the work despite the fact that it involved a lot of hard work, little money, and the risk of being closed down without warning as it was completely illegal.

Running a business on his own achieved his aim, albeit partly: he was not yet a white-collar worker, but he was no longer a shop-boy either. This new status did not give him enough to live on, it is true, but it provided him with the means to construct an identity, and gave him the encouragement he needed to seek employment elsewhere. After a while, Sasà enrolled on an association's evening classes, and took his compulsory school certificate and a vocational school-leaving certificate.

At the time of the interview, Sasà was still engaged to Margaux and living with his family, and was still a regular visitor at his parents-in-law's house.

Thematic Field Analysis

Sasà tells his story as if it were one of predestination. He presents his life as a series of projects blocked by external factors: his family's poverty, the country's economic difficulties and unemployment. His story is characterised by an 'I' (active and making plans) alternating with a 'we' (we members of a poor family, we the unemployed, we the boys from the 'Spanish District') that held back and inhibited various plans and actions.

Sasà begins his self-presentation after providing a relatively long setting during which his determination to inform the interviewer of his ability to

confront the required task becomes clear (*I understand... don't worry. I understand. I'm ready... I mean – you know – I'm ready*). He thinks the task is easy (*I can explain it in a tick*). The fact that he has to demonstrate he is up to it is the first sign of his anxiety about performance, and that the interviewer plays the role of a judge to whom he has to answer for his actions. Before starting his main narration, Sasà needs to present his extenuating circumstances, namely his origins, and make sure that the judge will take them into consideration (*I'll tell you all about my life, how it began... I mean... you know... how it began. Can I go on?*), and it is only when he has been reassured (that is to say when the interviewer says 'You can start now') that he begins his story (*Well ...*).

Sasà organises his story in chronological order and focusses on the issue of work. His presentation is a long report interspersed with argumentations. He begins his story with an initial report relating to his experience of under-age employment and school:

I was 11 and I used to work in a bar. I went to school and then I went to work in a bar. I went to school in the morning, I got out of school at half past one, and went off to work in the bar at two. I worked in the bar for three or four years and then jacked it in, and went to work in Piazza Carlo III as a blacksmith.

He cuts short his report when he refers to leaving school; this is explained by an argumentation that is intended to remove responsibility for such a choice from his parents and from himself. Instead, he blames it on his family's financial difficulties:

After the fifth year of elementary school, I didn't go into school any longer and decided to go to work just for – well, my parents wanted me to go – to go to school, I mean – but I couldn't because of money problems. Because of this and that, you see. There were problems in my family because of work – always because of unemployment.

He then summarises his previous jobs, only briefly mentioning a phase when he did not work at all (*I was kind of on holiday for two years. I'd stopped working*), and lingers over his only experience of dismissal, which is also linked to his only experience of a regular job as a white-collar worker. For the first time, when talking about his job in the agency, Sasà describes it in

full, and not just in passing (*I was at the agency for two and a half years. I got paid monthly. I got a proper pay packet*), he values it (*I felt fine*) and he describes how it came to an end (*I was sacked*). His dismissal is explained by an argumentation that blames external factors:

I was sacked not – not because of problems, or because I nicked things, or because I cheated my employer – but because there were too many of us and the firm couldn't keep us all. I was sacked – that's all there was to it.

After dealing with his dismissal, he focuses on his present job and discusses it in a long report. He talks about the shop he set up with a friend, and about the major economic difficulties he has to overcome to cover operational expenses, and intersperses some assessments (*I intend to keep the shop running... I mean it's got going, I'm on the move... I mean, I've sorted myself out*); these reveal how he wants to demonstrate his reliability and his commitment to work. In other words, he uses his tenacity in running the shop as evidence that he was not dismissed because of his shortcomings.

However, Sasà opposes very negative considerations about his job and positive considerations about himself as a worker (*Now I'm working illegally... we can't afford VAT, taxes and things like that*). Once again, Sasà explains the situation he is forced to endure by blaming external factors:

We can't get much done for the moment – what with unemployment and all the economic problems these days. I think we'll have to keep going like this for ten years or so. It's difficult to change.

When Sasà finishes the story of his employment, and just before he concludes his main narration, he hints briefly at his friends and at his free time, and then introduces a new aspect of his life: his engagement. This, too, is presented as a project that has been blocked: once again, the impossibility of realising his marriage project is explained in terms of external factors:

I've been engaged for eight years, and I'd like... well, I mean... I'd like to get married. But with things as they are – unemployment... problems... all sorts of things... I mean. I don't think it's easy to think about marriage.

To sum up what we have analysed so far, there are at least three regular features. Firstly, his shift from 'I' to 'we' when talking about the reasons why something has not worked out (for example, he says *I'm carrying on*

with my shop, but he withdraws behind a ‘we’ when he has to explain why his work is illegal: *We haven’t had an opportunity; we can’t afford it yet...*). Secondly, the shift from report to argumentation when he talks about his failures. And thirdly, the ‘jumps’ in chronology where there are events that he feels are negative; it is significant, for instance, that Sasà momentarily forgets to talk about his only regular job, that is to say the one from which he was sacked: *When I was 20 or 21, I went to work with my brother-in-law – no, when I was 20. I went to work in the agency office.*

By analysing the structure of Sasà’s main narration as a whole, it becomes clear that such regular features are associated with three themes: dropping out of school, dismissal and not getting married. It is reasonable to suppose that they are problematic events for him – in other words, he sees them as ‘mistakes’ or personal failures. Such an interpretation also confirms the reason why Sasà organises his interview as if he were standing accused of a crime or undergoing some test.

Case Reconstruction

Sasà’s problem is that he has aspirations towards social advancement but has not succeeded. These aspirations stem from an extremely contradictory climate marked by two opposing orientation models: the first is represented by his family, above all his father, who, after working for forty years, is still living in virtual poverty; the second is represented by his peers who, by opting for a deviant trajectory, rapidly achieve a high standard of living.

Initially, Sasà follows a course which, like that of his brothers, is quite normal for a boy from his social background: he leaves school and gets a job. Meeting Margaux, a girl from the ‘Spanish District’ but well off just the same, causes him to abandon his family tradition (no one in his family has ever succeeded in ‘making money’ through work) and to experiment with the model employed by his peers (earning ‘easy money’ from petty theft and small-time crime). For Sasà, the deviance period is a real moratorium phase during which he seeks to verify the ‘feasibility’ of such a lifestyle, but he soon finds out that such a model, however ‘desirable’ it may be, is ‘not practicable’ for him because he was born into a family of honest workers.

His girlfriend’s father, a man who has made money through work, suggests a third way; this involves escaping from his family's poverty without slipping

into crime. Sasà first returns to leather manufacture, and later works as a storekeeper in an agency office apparently through an introduction from his father-in-law. Sasà thinks this job is the beginning of a new life; it is not only his first regular job, but also his first ‘respectable’ one. He is a storekeeper in an office, and for the first time he has a job that does not necessarily mean ‘getting his hands dirty’. But he soon realises that he cannot get on in life with such a job. More accurately, he sees that he could remain in the unsatisfactory position of an exploited worker; that explains why, when he mentions this job for the first time, he uses an apparently contradictory expression: *I thought that my life was opening up. In fact, it was grinding to a halt.*

Sasà cannot stand being treated like a slave and made to perform shop-boy duties:

They want you to do this, do that. If you’re a shop assistant, you know, you have to do the cleaning; and if you do the cleaning, you have to clean the toilet as well; and if you clean the toilet, you have to clear all the filth out... Then, when you get to 40, you aren’t a normal person any more. You’re a has-been.

His urgent need for social recognition and higher status means he cannot tolerate a subordinate position like this, so he creates an ongoing conflictual climate with his employers that culminates in his dismissal.

Sasà resumes his previous direction, but he does not jettison his aspirations. For a short while he works as a bricklayer, but as soon as he gets the chance, he decides to go and work on his own. Now he has a ‘shop’, he works as a blacksmith, and is so committed to his job that he decides against giving up despite his partner’s decision to back out, the numerous problems and the minuscule profits. It would appear, therefore, that Sasà sees the shop as a way of discovering how to be ‘independent’ like his father (although not so poor), and to be ‘independent’ like his girlfriend’s father (although not so rich).

But Sasà cannot wait to pursue his project because Margaux’s success heightens his sense of social inferiority. Now he has to compare his permanent economic precariousness not only with his friends in the neighbourhood who, as usual, have money in their pockets, but also with

Margaux who has been employed by her father as a secretary in an agency office after taking her diploma and starting at the bottom of the ladder. For Sasà, the shop is no longer a way of achieving social advancement, but confirmation of a condition of marginality.

Margaux has got everything Sasà has always longed for – a ‘regular’, ‘guaranteed’ job – and the distance between them is now tangible, not only at family level, but also between them as a couple:

My girlfriend works, my girlfriend is a secretary down there in her father's office. She's doing all right, you see. She's better than I am. The office belongs to her dad, not me. I'm always unemployed, and I've got no national insurance contributions. Her father pays her contributions, and pays her overtime as well.

From now on, Sasà sees his life as irreparably marked by his mistakes: dropping out of school, continuously changing jobs, and being to blame for his own dismissal.

Interrupting his studies is now seen as a mistake brought about by his yearning for more and his inability to live in poverty:

When I started work, it was great. I felt good about it. Getting my wages at the end of the week – I mean, I got off on that... I mean, it was exciting and I began to feel important. But gradually you begin to realise your mistakes... because, you see, I already know I'll go the same way as my father.

The fact that he has continuously changed jobs is now evidence of his unreliability and inconsistency:

My brothers are the only ones who have stayed in the same job all these years... They put a lot into their jobs; their managers think highly of them and they like them. But I've always had casual jobs, because I always knew they'd probably try to exploit me after a year or two. So I got fed up and told them to go to hell.

His dismissal is now seen as the outcome of his inability to pass the test his father-in-law set him when he gave him an opening as agency office storekeeper. When Margaux started work, she, too, had to start at the bottom and do all the dirty jobs (*You know, Sasà... they got me to clean the floor*

and to take all the rubbish out!) but, unlike Sasà, she got her head down and was rewarded with a job.

Sasà, however, is not ready to take responsibility for his mistakes, so he needs to create alibis and justifications: he could not do any further study because his family was poor (*I had to. There was no alternative. I had to go out to work*); he changed jobs continuously because his employers exploited him (*All they do is exploit you. They don't even pay you what they're supposed to... because, well, as far as they're concerned, you see...they couldn't care a damn about us*); and he was dismissed because economic problems called for staff cuts:

I got the sack, not because I stole or behaved wrongly towards my employer, but they sort of cut back on staff because there were too many of us and the firm couldn't keep everyone on).

This sort of 'justifying' theory becomes his key to interpreting the world about him: his deviant friends are seen as victims of unemployment (*I don't look down on them – well, I mean, they're out of work and they've never had a proper wage... I think life like that must be hell. They certainly don't like it, but there again, they don't have a choice*); his family is a victim of its own poverty (*They always made sure we had everything. They didn't even agree we should leave school*); and he was not given a job by his girlfriend's father (he already calls him 'my father-in-law') because of his bad character:

My father-in-law told me I'm too aggressive. He's right about that. I couldn't possibly do his job. He's the kind of guy who's always trying to avoid things, and that's why you've got to have respect for him. When he works, he doesn't just do it for himself, but for us as well.

This strategy also allows him to 'deal with' an otherwise intolerable situation. Sasà is now 24 and can only draw bitter conclusions about his life: he has neither followed in the footsteps of his father and brothers, nor fallen into deviance like his friends, but what has he got to show for it? His friends have money while he is still poor:

Sometimes I go out and see some of my friends. They can pull 20,000 lire out of their pockets without turning a hair, but I work like crazy for a whole

week and I still have to be careful... I can spend, say, 5000 or 7000, but they can spend 20,000 – no problem.

His brothers are already married, or are about to get married, and they get more satisfaction from their jobs (*My brother Antonio, he's got a leather factory... working on his own... and he's got my sister who works with him. He's got a partner and a machine operator and they make 80-100 bags a day*), but Sasà finds he is turning out to be just what he had always been afraid of: a small artisan working illegally like his father:

My dad's always been unemployed, and he's always had an upholstery shop, but I've never seen him happy... I'm 24 and I already know he's sad because his life is so up-and-down. I already know that his life – and, you know, the one I'm making for myself too – is pretty chaotic.

Moreover, Sasà is always sad, like his father:

I don't smile any more, you know. It's a long time... because I see myself in a corner, trapped.

If Sasà were truly aware of this reality, and did not mitigate it by means of a 'justifying' vision, he could not avoid confronting an extremely critical situation. In fact, he currently has no alternatives left: neither the deviance that he rejected some years ago, nor the hope for sudden social advancement which he threw away when he got himself sacked, nor the hope of finding a new job, and blaming his unhappiness on a wicked employer because he works on his own. He can only console himself with the thought that he is the sole arbiter of his own days: *I'm not going to take it from employers who want to flaunt it and treat us like slaves... I work – and I work on my own. I'd rather work on my own than let them walk all over me.* He can also try to find substitutes for his aspirations to achieve mobility (*If you only do elementary school, they just ignore you; if you do junior secondary school, you see, you could be sixth; and if you've got a vocational school-leaving certificate, you could be third*) and blame his economic difficulties on the country's economic problems and unemployment.

Other Cases

Michele

Family Background

Michele is 21 years old and is the eldest son; his sister is 19. His father, now 54, is a building worker and, because of the crisis in the building sector, currently works on his own refurbishing flats. He has worked in the same sector since he was a boy and has always managed to keep his family, even when he has been out of work. Michele's mother is a housewife and looks after an elderly sick person to eke out the family income. She got this job through her mother, Michele's grandmother, a vigorous and strong-willed woman who, at the age of 67, still contributes significantly to the family budget. She was left a widow nearly twenty years ago and, after closing down the hairdresser's she had run with her husband, has worked continuously as a manicurist visiting clients in their homes.

Childhood and Adolescence

Michele left school when he was 15, although his parents wanted him to continue studying. He interrupted his studies during his first year of Technical School, did not work very hard at junior secondary school and had to repeat the second year.

His father found him his first job in a butcher's shop, but Michele was unable to stay at it for more than two months; he left because he had to work till late in the evening and did not earn much money. Afterwards, he tried a wide variety of jobs, working under other people as a smith, electrician, car electrician, bricklayer and labourer.

At the time of the interview

Michele is at a stalemate: he cannot find work in the informal market because he is too old, and cannot access the formal market as he has no professional qualifications. He spends his days at home and in the street, trying with difficulty to fill his empty time:

In the morning, I wake up, I open my eyes and I don't even know what to do – go out or stay in – and so I say to myself 'OK, I'll stay in'. Then I think to myself: 'I'm going to go barmy if I'm on my own the whole time.' So then I get a headache, and I go out to take my mind off things. I stay out for a bit, and then I get bored and come home again, and that's what I do all day long.

The problem facing the subject

Michele's problem stems from his family's excessive expectations of social mobility.

At the age of 15, Michele, having just started secondary school and despite pressure from his father, interrupts his studies because he is sure he is not going to get through the course, and begins to work illegally. He has had only intermittent experience of working in the informal sector, and his strategy is not aimed at the acquisition of a skill, but at escaping from jobs that do not match up to what his father wants him to do: *I worked in a butcher's shop for a couple of months, but I couldn't stick it after a bit so I left. Then I worked as a smith, but I couldn't stand that either and I left again.* But after a few years this strategy rebounds on him: he has no skill to offer and can only be employed as a shop-boy or apprentice and, as an 18-year-old, he has to compete with 12- and 13-year-olds whom employers usually prefer for low-status jobs. So when he leaves school, Michele is even outside the underground economy:

*...because I think if I go into a shop and say 'Here I am', they won't even look at me because I'm 21, I'm not a 12-year-old. I mean, these days they want blokes who the boss can get away with paying just 50,000 lire, you see. They're not going to pay **me** 50,000 lire!*

Michele shoulders the burden of this exclusion and sees his life as irreparably marked the early interruption of his studies:

My dad made up his mind and asked me if I wanted to stay on at school. I said yes. Then I realised I wasn't doing well, and I told him so. I made the worst mistake in my life when I left school.

His cultural inadequacy is seen as a genuine shortcoming that prevents him both from realising his present aspirations (*I'd like to have a job. I'd like to be a building surveyor. I'd go out in the morning in my jacket and tie...but I can't because I'm not qualified*) and from feeling socially accepted. His sense of inadequacy is further exacerbated by continual comparisons with his younger sister who is about to take her secondary school diploma: *She's in her fifth year at the vocational school for dental mechanics, and sometimes I think, Look at her! She'll get a job when she's 20 and I... I should be qualified by now – but you can't put the clock back.* He also feels rejected by her: *I've often asked her, 'Would you and your boyfriend like to*

come out with me?’ but she says ‘No, no way.’ She doesn’t seem to want to spend any time with me.

Michele has come to a standstill: he feels that the ‘mission’ of social promotion that his father allocated to him as the first-born is being realised by his younger sister. Deprived of cultural resources and crushed by frustrations, he does not feel that he can take responsibility for his future, and he waits for ‘others’ to find a way out for him: *You see, I’m waiting for my dad to find me a job somewhere. Not today, perhaps tomorrow – who knows? He’s got to find me a job... My only hope is my dad, or my grandma. She’s trying to help me too. I hope she does. It doesn’t matter who gets in first as long as I get a job.*

Franco

Family Background

Franco is 18 years old and is the youngest of six children; there are four daughters and two sons altogether. His family lives in Barra, a neighbourhood in the east of Naples. Until the mid-1970s, this area was one of the city’s main industrial areas with shipyards, oil refineries and mechanical industry, but it is currently undergoing a major crisis: most plants have been closed down or relocated, and no new job opportunities have been created. Franco’s father, who is about to retire, works as a driver for a private transport firm. His mother has been a housewife since she married, but before that she worked for a long time in a factory that made tomato sauce. None of the six brothers has undertaken any further studies; in fact, nearly all of them left school before completing their compulsory education to work illegally in small local factories.

Childhood and Adolescence

Franco went to school until the fifth year of primary school. He enjoyed the first two years and completed them successfully (*In the first and second years, I could write, I was clever. I’ve still got my books at home. They’ve got ‘Well done, Franco. Excellent’ written all over them. But now, if I had a pen in my hand and had to write something, I wouldn’t know what to do*), but as early as the third year he was already ‘bunking off’ school. In fact, he stopped doing any work at all, and only went into school to disrupt the lessons. Following a ten-day suspension for throwing a chair at a teacher, he was finally expelled.

He started working as a boy in a bar taking coffees round to offices, but he left 6-7 months later because his friends made fun of him. He then went to work in a car-repair garage, but did not stay there long because he only earned 20,000 lire a week (*I couldn't buy even a pair of shoes – you need 100,000-200,000 lire for a pair of shoes*). For a while he got back on his feet and packed second-hand clothes that were officially collected for charity but actually sold to markets. Then he started working as a house-painter; he had only been doing this for four months when he was sent to Pisa, but he only stayed there for a couple of weeks because he was paid just 300,000 lire for the whole period, instead of 80,000 lire a day which is what had been agreed. Then, at the age of 16 and taking advantage of the fact that was under-age, he began sell hashish: in other words, he would not go to prison if the police caught him. He got away with it for two years, and stopped when he came of age:

If you're 18, they send you to prison. But once you're there, you come to no good, you know. You always turn out badly, and I don't want that because I've got my mum and dad, who are good people... So I want to find a job. I want to give my mum something to feel good about.

At the time of the interview

Franco is waiting to go into the army. He is looking for small jobs but cannot find anything: potential employers, he claims, turn him down as they prefer 14-15-year-old boys who make fewer demands because they are younger. In the meantime he spends his time between his home and the bar:

I wake up at midday and go to the bar. I always do the same things. Then, at half past two, I go home for lunch. I rest for a bit, then at six I go to the bar and then I go home for dinner. I go out again at half nine, I stand around outside the bar or go off somewhere with my mates. Then, at half past eleven or midnight I go back home. The next day it's the same thing all over again... I'm sick of living, but if I had a job I would enjoy my time more...

The problem facing the subject

Franco's path is typical of that of a boy from a lower-class family living in a setting of urban marginalisation. The fact that education was not valued by his family led him 'naturally' to drop out of school early: *I threw a chair at the teacher and got suspended for ten days, and then I stopped going because I just didn't feel like it*. Financial difficulties and family culture then

drove him into under-age employment (*My mum said either you go to school or you go out to work, and I chose work*), and the proximity of groups of deviant peers brought him into contact with deviance (*I felt ashamed of being a bar-boy with a tray in my hands and carrying coffees here and there. My friends teased me*).

He therefore confronted these stages in his life in a normal way and without any drama: partly because these stages were somehow anticipated (his parents and, like most of his peers, his brothers too had left school early and had started working soon afterwards), and partly because he was always able to decide in complete ‘freedom’. His family did not aspire to achieve social mobility for the children, particularly as far as he was concerned because, as the youngest of six brothers and sisters, in a way he grew up on his own. The absence of any attention, particularly from his father (*My father doesn't say much. He doesn't like talking... he doesn't really like... He gets fed up... and then nothing. When I was a kid I was closer to him. Then he began to distance himself from me. I dunno, he just began to move away... When I was younger, he really cared for me*), could have triggered his deviant period, although it sounds much more like an adolescent rebellion than a phase of existential problems.

In fact, the experience of deviance has become a strategic resource for Franco: on the one hand, the fact that he emerged unscathed is, in his view, proof of his ‘autonomy’; on the other hand, the fact that he experienced it and saw all the risks it involved enables him to see that, all things considered, life has turned out better than he might have expected. Franco tends to value what he has got, and not lament what he has lost. When he talks about his lack of education, for instance, he stresses that he can read, albeit with difficulty, and does not regret the fact he is not skilled: *It isn't that I can't write – I get by – but I can read. Reading's important, isn't it?*

Although he is going through a critical phase (unemployed, not economically independent, and faced with the daily problem of filling up his time), he is not desperate. Once back in a trajectory of normality, Franco expects that, like others (e.g. his brothers and his brothers-in-law), he will eventually find a job that will be the prelude to a ‘normal’ life:

I don't want a billion lire. I don't want half a billion. I just want work – that'll do fine... a good job that I can really get stuck into. That'll do nicely.

And I want to get married and have kids too. Now I have to do military service; after that, I'll have to find a job and a girl who loves me.

Ginetto

Ginetto is 22 years old; he lives in Poggiomarino, a town inland from Naples. He is the youngest of three brothers and has no father. He lives with his mother.

Childhood

When Ginetto was six, his father, a truck driver, developed a tumour. In the course of an illness that lasted six years, his father spent long periods with his wife in northern Italian hospitals that specialised in the treatment of tumours. During that time, the three boys were looked after by their grandmother. After an argument with a teacher in his last year of school (the third year of junior secondary school), Ginetto decided to leave and start working in a tailor's workshop; this would have meant following in the footsteps of his elder brothers who had gone out to work on completion of their compulsory schooling. At that time his mother was away with his father. On her return to Naples, she talked to the Principal of the school and arranged for her son to take the school-leaving examination despite the fact that he had not attended school for some months. In the event, Ginetto decided not to take the examination.

Adolescence

Ginetto carried on working in the tailor's workshop for three or four years. At the age of 18, he went to evening school and took the secondary school diploma. A year later, he changed job and started working as a labourer in a factory producing military uniforms. After six months he had an argument with the owner and left, but subsequently returned. Shortly afterwards, he left the factory once again for another job that he thought paid better, but he was fired and found himself out of work. He has not had a job since.

At the time of the interview

Ginetto is the only unemployed member of his family. After his father died, his mother went out to work as a maid; today she works in a factory. His brothers, too, have been unemployed in the past, but now they are in work: one of them has a job in Florence, and the other is married and works in another city in the north. Ginetto feels weighed down by the situation: he cannot bear to be a burden on his mother, he does not have a girlfriend, and

he is not even trying to find one as he is sure that no girl will be interested in him because he does not have a job. He is planning to move to the north of Italy, and to transfer his registration to the Employment Agency in a northern city, just like his brother who found a job in this way. At the moment, he spends all day long in the bar in his town, and sometimes he helps a friend in his job delivering salami and cold meats to grocer's shops for nothing.

The problem facing the subject

Ginetto's problem is the result of an impediment in growth caused by his experience of abandonment: because of his father's long illness, he spent most of his childhood without his parents. As his parents were not around, Ginetto took his eldest brothers as a reference point:

Unfortunately I had problems in my family: my dad had a serious illness and my mum had to leave us kids behind... I was always on my own – without my mum and dad – it was foul. I got angry sometimes about not seeing my mum and dad, and I lived with my brothers instead. We played and joked, and they sometimes helped me with my homework.

When his brothers began working, Ginetto followed in their footsteps: he dropped out in the third year of junior secondary school and started working in a tailor's: *During the last year, I didn't want to go to school any more because my brothers were out at work, and I decided take the job in a tailor's shop.* He did his apprenticeship there and, a few years later, when he was 18, it provided him with an opportunity to work in a factory making military uniforms where he was employed on a regular basis. However, Ginetto could not cope with the impact of 'regular' work as it meant he had to assume the role of an adult, and he walked out. Ginetto had hitherto thought that working was synonymous with playing, a way of spending time with peers and earning money with which to enjoy oneself with friends: *When I was at the tailor's shop, I worked because I was with young people there, and time passed and I went home, and I was quite happy because there was money to go round.* The job in the factory could have enabled him to enter adulthood officially, and thereby take some responsibility for his mother who, now a widow, was forced to do very tiring jobs to make ends meet. However, Ginetto had always felt he had been deprived of his childhood, and felt that his mother owed it to him: he claimed he had a right to be a care-receiver, and he refused to take on the role of care-giver. His

need to feel 'looked after' was not supported by his mother and brothers; they urged him towards independence:

My mates, if they haven't got a job, they get money from their parents. They don't quarrel with their mums. I'm always having arguments with my mum and brothers. There are always problems at home.

Ginetto feels guilty about not being independent:

My brothers have always been clever. They finished school, they've always been good at getting work, they've always been very hard-working in their jobs, but my head is a bit... because I'd like to find a job that stops at five so that I can spend some time with my friends and have a good time with them.

He also admits that he made a mistake when he walked out on his job (*I'd found something better but I left and went to work somewhere else. After a bit, the work dried up but I couldn't... I couldn't go back into the factory. I've had it now. I left that job to work in other factories, but now I've burned my boats*), but his Peter Pan syndrome prevents him from taking full responsibility for his errors; instead, these are ascribed to his experience of abandonment in childhood.

During the interview, Ginetto made frequent references to his mother's absences when he was a child, and later an adolescent:

I was a bit fed up. I mean I could see my mum and dad weren't there... I could only hear them on the phone. And I remember it was awful, because during the Christmas holidays and the village festivals, we were always on our own because my mum... my aunt, when we went to school, she came every morning and made our breakfast, because my mum wasn't there and my aunt realised the effect it was having.

This absence is felt particularly strongly during the most difficult periods of his adolescence: *One day, I decided not to go to school any longer, and my mum wasn't here so I decided to go to work.*

Today Ginetto relies on his own devices (*I'd like to find a job but I can't ...and I feel lost, really*), he knows what he should be doing (but cannot), and he definitely does not understand why he cannot go back into work. He is reliant on parental figures: on his mother, to whom he turns for

help so that he can work in the military uniform factory; on his brother, who works in the north of Italy and to whom he turns for help in job-hunting; and on a brother-like friend who is ten years older and is the person he goes to when he has a problem of any kind. In the meantime, he spends his days trying to fill up his time:

My usual day, to be honest, is in the morning I get up at nine, sometimes at half past nine, I get dressed and go out, and sometimes I spend time with my mates. We watch people passing up and down... and then I go home and have lunch and after that I go out again. I go to the bar with my mates. Sometimes we have a game of billiards or play cards just to pass the time. But what is there to do in the evening? I go home, I wait for my mum to come back at half past six, I go out at half past eight and come home for dinner. Then I go out again and spend some time with my mates, and then I go back home.

Mimmo

Family Background

Mimmo is 17 years old, he has no father and is an only child; he lives with his mother and grandmother in a middle-class neighbourhood of Naples. He did not complete compulsory school. At the moment, he is in a rehabilitation unit having been arrested for aggravated robbery and contempt of a public official.

Childhood

Mimmo's parents each have a very different story to tell. His mother is the daughter of two honest workers (her father, who separated very early from his wife, still works as a taxi driver); by contrast, Mimmo's father came from a criminal family in Sanità, one of the city's least salubrious districts. When his mother met his father while she was still young, she knew nothing about his family's criminal activities. She found out he was a smuggler only by chance, but she was already in love with him and married him just the same; she had Mimmo when she was 18. His father subsequently became a drug addict and started taking cocaine (some of his father's 13 brothers were involved in dealing it) before turning to heroin. Life for his mother became unbearable: his father was in and out of prison (for drug-pushing and robbery) and he was often ill, so in the early 90s she decided to leave him. During his childhood, Mimmo had very few contacts with his father who

spent 11 years in prison altogether before he died. He has always lived with his mother and grandmother, both of whom have worked honourably as maids and done their best to give him everything and keep him off the streets.

Adolescence

In the final years of his life, his father stopped taking drugs and Mimmo was able to re-construct a relationship with him: he visited him in prison, and spent time with him when he returned to Naples on half-release. Then, during the first year of junior secondary school, Mimmo drifted into deviancy and petty theft (e.g. stealing sunglasses). The following year, during the second year of school, he left and started doing small jobs, alternately working (as a boy in a delicatessen and a greengrocers', as an apprentice pastry-cook, and another job in a bag factory) and engaging in petty theft. Every time his father was not in prison and came back to Naples, he found his son was up to no good and forced him to return to work as he was keen that his son should not end up the same as him. Then, during his last visit to Naples, nearly two years before this interview, his father was stabbed to death in a brawl. After that, Mimmo increased his deviant activities with a group of friends who came from the same neighbourhood as his father. Last February, in the most recent of many robberies, he was caught stealing a watch from a driver. He was charged with aggravated robbery and contempt and was sent to a rehabilitation unit. He ran away a few days later, and as a result was sent to a proper prison where he remained for several days; during this time, he was particularly aware of the isolation. He was then returned to a rehabilitation unit, and is still there awaiting trial.

The problem facing the subject

Mimmo does not have the typical characteristics of a deviant boy: he is an only child who has never had financial problems, and he was brought up in a rather quiet, middle-class neighbourhood by a mother who took a keen interest in his education. She prevented him seeing his father's relatives too often and tried to give him a normal life: for example, despite her lack of education, she took Mimmo to see a psychologist when she realised that her son was refusing to go to school after the death of his father. However, Mimmo's father belonged to one of the most important Camorra families in the 'Sanità District'. His case, therefore, seems to fit into an 'imbalance'

between the parents. Mimmo blames his father for his history as a deviant child:

I went to school until two years ago and I worked hard. Two years after my dad died, I went off the rails and got into trouble, and now I'm here on a charge of aggravated robbery and contempt of a public official. I used to work hard. I went to school up to the third year of junior secondary school, but after my dad died, I stopped. I had a job, too, in a shoe factory – that's what I'm good at – but after my dad died, I got a bit...

Mimmo presents his story with an explanation of his deviance option as an attempt to find his father again:

After my dad died, I was here. Then, after his death, I began to go round where he used to live – after my father's death, I often went where he used to live. All my mates there used to nick things, and so did I.

Unlike his friends, he has none of the typical characteristics of a deviant person: he does not belong to a large family, he has no financial problems, and he is not unloved:

When I get out of here, I won't have to start stealing things again. Most people get into thieving because they're unloved or because they've got no money. I didn't like stealing for the money. I don't have to steal because I need the money. When I get out of here, I'll go back to work... I've got a work certificate too, and anyway I'll have something to do, because I'll have my grandfather's taxi when I'm 20.

However, this version is influenced by Mimmo's relationship with a psychologist at the rehabilitation unit who has guided him towards to a sort of stereotyped, justifying self-diagnosis (that is: my attitude was the result of my father's death; after I lost him, I tried to get to know him by leading a life that was like his). In fact, Mimmo began to commit crimes before his father died, and the trajectory which led him to crime through his father is more complex than he describes it.

Giovanna

Family Background

Giovanna is 21 years old; she has no father and she works illegally in a ceramics factory. She lives with her mother and her sister in Ercolano, a town inland from Naples.

Childhood

Giovanna is the youngest of four children; she has two sisters and a brother. Her father died of cirrhosis of the liver when she was five and her school life was quite hard. She was enrolled at an elementary school with a two-year deferment and, because she was older than her classmates, she always felt like an outsider. She was also behind the rest of the class. On the other hand, she had no problems at junior secondary school, but she says that her teachers were to blame for this as they treated her as if she were backward. They did not teach her anything and did not ask her anything, and allowed her to pass exams even if she did not deserve to.

Adolescence

After she completed her compulsory schooling, Giovanna enrolled at Art School because she was very keen on drawing, but the impact of secondary school was traumatic: her shortcomings became clear, she was very bad at lessons, and so she left. She started doing ironing (illegally) in a laundry. She then changed job and went to work in a ceramics factory, but still on an illegal basis.

At the time of the interview

Giovanna still works at the same factory. She is exploited (for example, she works two hours more than she is supposed to and is not paid extra, and if she is off sick she gets no money), and she feels very bad about it. She is engaged to a young man who works as a bricklayer, but marriage is a long way off. He has a two-year fixed-term employment contract and she does not earn much herself; in fact, she gives most of it to her mother. She lives with her mother, who is a housewife (she worked as a maid for some years after her husband died, but stopped when the children grew up), and with her sister who works in the same factory. Her brother works in the north of Italy and is married to a woman from that area, but he has more or less lost all contact with Naples and his family. The other sister married a few months ago and is expecting a baby. She was fired after she got married (she worked illegally as a salesgirl), and is now in serious financial difficulty. Giovanna, too, seems to have problems: she cannot stand her job; she is morbidly

bound to her mother (she does not go out with her friends and boyfriend very often as she does not want to leave her mother alone); and she has financial problems (her mother has a small pension, and Giovanna and her sister therefore support their married sister). Moreover, she thinks she has something wrong in 'her head' – in other words, she thinks she is a little 'simple'. When she talks about her difficulties at school, she says she still thinks she is a bit slow (*If I read something, two hours later I can't tell you what I've just read*) and frequently bursts into tears. Lastly, she seems to be very traumatised about another problem to which she refers more than once during the interview: the breaking off of any relationship with her father's family. Giovanna has never met her paternal grandparents and aunts – or, to be more accurate, she does not remember them. After her father died, her mother broke off relations with them because they did not give her the help she had been expecting. For their part, they had refused to help as they felt that Giovanna's mother should have gone back to work.

The problem facing the subject

Giovanna was strongly affected by her father's death. Soon after he died, she caught viral hepatitis (her father died of a liver disease), a year later she broke a thighbone, and she has twice injured herself by running into glass; she still bears the marks. Giovanna says she cannot remember anything about her father, but she has been told that, as the last-born, she was her father's favourite and the one who was most 'petted' by him. In her story, evidence of her father's love for her lies in the fact that he disagreed with wife when she decided to have an abortion on the grounds that she already had three sons. In her story, her mother's decision not to have her is demonstrated by an episode in which, unbeknown to her father, she took pills in order to have an abortion. A number of factors suggest that the morbidity that binds her to her mother – it also involves postponing her marriage – conceals a deep grudge: her fear 'of not being normal' (because of the pills perhaps?); a desire, mixed with fear, to re-establish contact with her father's family (Giovanna often thinks of going to see her paternal grandparents, but she is afraid of them, and anyway it was her mother who broke off the links); and the resignation with which Giovanna shoulders all of the family's troubles (she hands her wages over to her mother, who then uses it to pay off the instalments on kitchen fixtures and fittings, bought for the marriage of Giovanna's sister, which cost 10 million lire).

Contrasting cases

In three cases in our sample (Sasà, Michele and Franco), work is the element that structures the biography. By contrast, in Mimmo's case, the structuring principle is represented by his experience of deviance, while for Giovanna and Ginetto the structuring factor is represented by an unresolved relationship of dependence on their mothers.

There are several analogies in the cases of Sasà, Michele and Franco: they come from the same social background (they are all lower-class), they all belong to the same generation cohort (they were all born in the second half of the 1970s), and they have lived in families characterised by high employment insecurity and in which it is customary for all members to contribute to the family budget by doing all kinds of work.

Despite these analogies, there are key differences in the role played by aspirations. While Sasà and Michele are 'victims' of an excess of aspirations, which makes them place too great an emphasis on work in terms of social realisation and proof of their ability, the relative absence of aspirations in Franco's case becomes an 'advantage'. As far as Sasà and Michele are concerned, aspiring to social mobility has different origins: for Sasà, it means breaking off with his family and represents a means of freeing himself from family poverty; for Michele, it feels like a family imposition and is therefore a burden that has to be got rid of.

This different genesis behind aspirations for mobility has different effects on working strategies. Sasà is constantly inclined to minimise his achievements as he thinks they do not match up to his aspirations; he reacts by continuously seeking new outcomes (e.g. he takes the vocational school-leaving certificate when he is over 20, he knows his trade well and he manages to set up his own business, but he is still dissatisfied with what he has achieved). The danger is that, if frustrated over a long period, this continuous quest for social advancement can have destabilising effects. By contrast, Michele realises that everything he does is viewed by other people as unsatisfactory (for example, how can the innumerable jobs he does in the informal market be compared to his sister's diploma?); he reacts by abandoning any strategy to enter the job market, and places his destiny in the hands of his family.

Unlike Sasà and Michele, Franco is not exposed to pressures from his family or other sources to achieve social mobility. As a consequence, he develops an exclusively pragmatic approach which, from a basically instrumental point of view, is seen as vital for earning an income and building a 'normal' life. Franco's case also provides an opportunity for consideration of the meaning of the experience of deviance in the biographies of young lower-class people.

For these young people, lacking cultural resources and living in socially marginalised areas, deviance is always a ready option; in the event, all three of our subjects experience it. Nevertheless, the strategic value of such a choice can mean different things to different people: in Sasà's case, for instance, it represents a moratorium period, while in Franco's it represents a rebellion phase which paradoxically later enables him to value everything he does. For him, the experience of deviance is 'a danger that has been avoided', and compared to which the future will by definition be better. In both cases, however, the fact that they come from families of 'honest workers' protects them from the risk of remaining trapped in deviant activities. By contrast, the fact that Mimmo comes from a criminal family gives deviance a hereditary role that legitimates it to an extent. It follows that there is a considerable risk that Mimmo will embark upon a career of deviancy.

Although Ginetto shares many analogies with Sasà, Michele and Franco, his is a totally different case. The element that structures his biography is the experience of abandonment: it results in a block on growth, and consequently in an inability to think of himself 'as a worker'. Paradoxically, because Ginetto has no interest in his job, he can stay in the same job for a long period, and this gives him an opportunity to acquire a skill. The others, on the other hand, are always looking for better jobs and are continuously on the move, but now they are adults with no specific skills to offer on the labour market; they have to compete with younger men who are more sought after as they make fewer demands. Unlike Sasà, who has been able to set up his own business, Franco and Michele find themselves 'outside' the informal market even though they are only 18. Because Ginetto has an acquired skill, he has a chance to enter the regular job market, but he leaves voluntarily because of a deliberate decision not to grow up.

Ginetto's experience also gives us an opportunity to consider the value of 'guaranteed' work. For young people who have lived in a context of precariousness since early childhood, work stability represents a value in itself. Job vocations do not mature in such a climate; in other words, aspirations are not related to the type or quality of a given job, but to whether or not it is secure. All our interviewees share the 'cathartic' value of regular work, which they see as a way of freeing themselves from precariousness and from the risk of marginality. The only exception is Giovanna, who projects her aspirations for stability onto her boyfriend. This is because of both on the gender group she belongs to (young women from the south with no education seek stability in marriage rather than in work, and social advancement for them is represented by the possibility of being a housewife rather than a working woman), and on her psychological problem that associates a profound sense of inadequacy with an equally profound dependence on her mother.

However, an analysis of our interviewees' biographies shows that not all strategies are consistent with job security. In the case of Sasà, who not only has aspirations for stability but also harbours a genuine desire to achieve social advancement, guaranteed work comes as a great disappointment: he walks out with an ambition to achieve more. For Ginetto, though, a permanent job is an intolerable burden. He is not yet ready to enter adulthood officially; indeed, he runs away and adheres to his strategy of being a permanent care-receiver. Although Michele very much wants to have a permanent job, he thinks it is so beyond him that he is unable to develop any strategies: in fact, he does nothing at all and waits for others to rally round. Of all our subjects, it is only in Franco's case that a permanent job could fully form part of a strategy and finally trigger a trajectory of normality (e.g. work, engagement, house, marriage and children).

Lastly, if we consider our subjects' biographies as a whole, we may draw a few conclusions about the experience of unemployment and how it is interpreted. As for how our subjects experience unemployment, it is important to note that they all find the absence of work difficult to tolerate. Although our interviewees are just 20 years old, they already display intense discomfort with regard to their economic dependence on their family. As is well known, young people in Italy carry on living with their parents for many years (even beyond the age of 30, which is why they are called 'young

adults’), and first confront the problem of independence when they are already relatively old. However, the ‘social calendar’ for unqualified people is completely different because they feel ‘old’ when they are barely 18. There are two reasons for this: firstly, they have had experiences of employment over a period of many years, and they therefore feel they have a right to become independent; and secondly, because of the way the informal market works, they are dumped even though they are only 18. In the matter of only a few years, these young people experience employment, unemployment and early retirement. However absurd a comparison between youth unemployment and early retirement may sound, they undeniably have at least two experiences in common: that of being prematurely rejected by the market (because they are too old and devalued) and that of having to cope with ‘empty’ time. Apart from Sasà and Giovanna, who remain in the informal market anyway, our interviewees find that the use of time represents a major source of existential suffering.

As for how our subjects interpret their condition, it is clear that there is a strong tendency – sometimes latent, sometimes manifest – for them to blame themselves. Dropping out of school and continuously changing jobs are seen as the reasons why they are devalued, and consequently unemployed (their thinking goes like this: if I had a secondary school diploma, I’d be in work now; if I had acquired a skill, I wouldn’t be outside the market). In fact, they have no knowledge of how institutions have shirked their responsibilities and how they have often been the victims. Most of them left school without completing their compulsory education, and without prompting any reactions or corrective measures from others. They have been exploited on the informal market with no protective intervention by the law. They have been dismissed from illegal jobs because of competition from younger workers. They cannot enter the regular job market because they have been devalued, and no specific vocational training schemes have been organised for them. In summary, their lack of cultural resources, the alienation of the institutional dimension, and the total absence of an overall view of the problem are all factors that help, by a process of synergy, to create a perfect situation of ‘blaming the victim’.

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