RESEARCH ARTICLE

Time, discipline and subjectivity: Performing arts worker mobilisations in Italy during the pandemic

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ABSTRACT: Based on the results of a qualitative study, this article aims to contribute to the debate on collective mobilisations, using the example of the labour struggles of Italian artists during the Covid-19 pandemic. The conditions typical to performing arts workers, such as precariousness, self-employment, individualisation, self-exploitation, social fragmentation, and geographical dispersion, have long been associated with low probabilities of collective mobilisation. In Italy, however, in the context of the numerous labour-related conflicts that emerged during the pandemic, mobilisations by performing arts workers were some of the most intense, widespread, and sustained. Addressing this counterintuitive finding and drawing on mobilisation theory, this article aims to identify the sources of conflict and antagonism of this mobilisation, and to investigate the factors and circumstances underlying it. We argue that the collective action of artists was motivated by a number of factors: a simultaneous mass experience of economic vulnerability and social insecurity; the breakdown of disciplinary mechanisms in artistic work; and the greater availability of "free time". The findings shed new light on the mobilisation of precarious workers in work contexts characterised by disciplinary regimes based on subjective participation, self-exploitation and consensus.

KEYWORDS: *mobilisation, pandemic, performing arts workers, subjectivisation, time, worker solidarity*

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1. Introduction

In Italy, Covid-19 has brought the fragility of the performing arts sector to light, throwing it into a major crisis. However, the pandemic's effects did not come completely out of the blue, but happened within a context already characterised by weakness and fragility, which included advanced processes of precarity, the paring back of social protection and welfare systems, and increased occupational fragmentation (Turrini and Chicchi 2013; Corsani 2012).

Given their conditions of precarity, individualisation, contractual fragmentation, and spatial dispersion, and the high proportion of them who are self-employed, it should come as no surprise that performing arts workers have historically experienced obstacles to the development of solidarity processes and involvement in collective organisations (Umney and Kretsos, 2014). However, among the various labour conflicts in Italy during the pandemic, the mobilisation of performing arts workers, most of which emerged outside the intervention of traditional unions, were among the most widespread, durable, and systematic. How was this possible?

Through theoretical engagement both with mobilisation theory (Kelly 1998) - an analytical framework that emerged in the field of industrial relations in the 1990s - and with the concept of "opportunity" (Tilly 1978), this study seeks to analyse and identify the conditions that made these collective actions by artists possible. Mobilisation theory postulates a sequence of steps and conditions that actors must go through in conjunction with having access to certain resources in order to initiate collective mobilisation processes. Crucial to Kelly's (1998) argument are the actors' (workers') perception of an injustice that is to their disadvantage and the existence of leaders who can provisionally work through this injustice by attributing responsibility to particular actors (employers, institutions, etc.).

Although the claim that mobilisation theory can provide a holistic interpretive framework that can be applied to all forms of collective action has been largely debunked because it does not provide useful tools for explaining, for example, the emergence of spontaneous mobilisations (see Atzeni, 2009), certain specific conditions make Kelly's (1998) insights particularly useful for an analysis of the mobilisations of performing arts workers in Italy. Many approaches, such as Labour Process Theory (LPT), in attempting to identify the conditions for mobilisation emphasise the role of class relations in building solidarity and the centrality of the workplace as a prominent arena of structural conflict between capital and labour. However, in the context of performing arts, there is often no workplace or, where there is one, it is purely contingent (Umney and Kretsos, 2014), while non-binary social and legal forms of employment often render employer/employee relation transient. Moreover, in contrast to other highly precarious employment relationships, which are often characterised by despotic labour control regimes , disciplinary measures in the performing arts are based both on the exploitation of certain expressive features of artistic labour (autonomy, creativity, passion, etc.) and on the consensual participation of workers, which end up creating a subject that tends towards self-exploitation (Corsani and Lazzarato 2008; Corsani 2012; Turrini and Chicchi 2013).

The literature already provides numerous empirical accounts and theoretical insights into workers' struggles in contexts characterised by high levels of precarity and geographically dispersed workplaces (see Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). However, a gap remains in our understanding of conflicts in contexts in which the disciplinary regime draws from consensual and subjective worker participation and induced self-exploitation, and where workplaces are less central in the development of bonds of solidarity. In an attempt to help fill this gap, this study highlights the factors and conditions underlying the development and consolidation of collective organisations and solidarity processes among performing arts workers.

While the material consequences of the pandemic are identified as the primary condition, this research emphasises the important role played by "opportunities" in the triggering of mobilisation, including: simultaneous mass experimentation with a condition of economic fragility and social insecurity; the implosion

of the disciplinary mechanisms of workers' subjugation; and an increase in crucial mobilisation resources such as "free time". The latter is a consequence of both the disruption of work activity and the implosion of disciplinary instruments based largely on the colonisation and valorisation of workers' reproductive and leisure time.

The article is organised as follows: in Section 2.1, the social and occupational characteristics of artistic labour and the disciplinary regimes operating within it will be analysed, followed by an outline of the theoretical framework of mobilisation theory (2.2); Sections 3 and 4 will lay out the research method and context; Sections 5 to 7 will present and discuss the results; and the conclusion will paint a general picture of the results and suggest some possible future research avenues.

2. Mobilisation in precarious "hostile" contexts

2.1 Autonomy for precarity: Discipline and control in performing arts labour

Work in the performing arts, both in Italy and abroad, is not only fully in line with the holistic transformations of the labour market in recent decades (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011; Loacker 2013) but is paradigmatic of these transformations (Turrini and Chic-chi 2013; Menger 2017, 2001). Indeed, for many decades, the literature discussed how the organisational and normative forms of labour in the performing arts were an exception to the norms and wages typical of industrial capitalism (Ducret et al., 2017; Turrini and Chicchi 2013).

This exceptionalism has also affected economic citizenship rights with significant implications for industrial relations and access to trade unions and social welfare institutions. It has been argued that the 'traditional' models of trade unionism that emerged during industrial capitalism are unlikely to meet the needs of these workers. For example, in a study on the unionisation patterns of contingent and freelance workers, Heery and colleagues (2004) noted that in six different dimensions of union behaviour the practices of contingent workers' unions differed significantly from the practices of unions representing those in more traditional work. As Umney and Kretsos (2014) point out, contingent workers' representation usually takes the form of welfare assistance, supporting members' positions in external labour markets rather than acting in relations with employers (see also Heery et al., 2004).

Moreover, contingent workers' organizations are often characterised by the use of tools with more fluid boundaries and less clearly defined tasks than those of traditional industrial unionism, engaging in hybrid tasks ranging from labour and market intermediation to tax assistance, and from cultural promotion to union representation and protection (Lizé et al., 2022).

Although the literature provides a rich account of these experiences of self-organisation and unionisation - showing how, even in a fragmented context of precariousness and income intermittency, it is possible to engage in conflictual actions - research has shown that performing arts workers continue to face multiple difficulties in embarking on collective mobilisations and developing solidarity processes (Heery et al., 2004; O' Sullivan and Turner 2013; Umney and Kretsos, 2014).

There are a number of factors underlying these difficulties. The 'artistic' labour market relies on high levels of occupational fragmentation, and the individualisation of workers (Menger 2017; Percival and Hesmondhalgh 2014). Performing arts workers are a very large and heterogeneous category, characterised by a high level of diversity in terms of contracts (employees, self-employed, project workers, temporary workers, etc.) and by a wide range of artistic content (music acting, dance, design, etc.) and professions (technicians, administrators, crafts people, etc.). Putting on a performance usually requires the involvement and cooperation

of many different workers (Istat, 2019). The extreme diversity of organisational, occupational and socio-biographical circumstances acts as the backdrop for an equally pronounced individualisation of labour relations. The fragmentation resulting from the technical and social division of artistic work affects the likelihood of these workers building solidarity and thus of creating processes of social recomposition.

The propensity for 'multiple job holding' (Istat, 2019; Throsby and Zednik, 2011) - the combination of different work activities which are often carried out under various contractual and social security schemes - also profoundly shapes the careers of these workers. It is not uncommon for them to couple their artistic, creative, and technical activities (the development of ideas, training, rehearsals, performances) with other work activities both within the same sector (such as teaching their artform) and outside it (Thorsby and Zednik 2011). Furthermore, frequently performing art workers constantly move between subordinate, para-subordinate and autonomous-entrepreneurial work, and even to combine them by having multiple jobs with different kinds of contracts and conditions, as in the paradoxical case of so-called 'subordinate self-employed workers' (Corsani and Lazzarato 2008; Turrini and Chicchi 2013).

The contingency of workplaces and the volatility of employment contracts, coupled with the often informal nature of employment and high reliance on networking to access job opportunities, removes the conditions for developing solidarity related to sharing a workplace, making it difficult to develop a 'workplace politics' (McRobbie, 2002:521). Contractual and social vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the problems of income discontinuity and low wages that characterise technical and artistic work in the performing arts world. It is widely recognised that performing arts professionals often work for much lower salaries than those guaranteed to workers in other professions that require the same social and cultural capital in terms of skills, experience, training, and creativity (Throsby 1992).

The spread of low wages results from the employment system typical of performing arts work, which is often intermittent. However, the employment system for performing arts workers is more accurately described as income interruption than work interruption: what is interrupted is not work activity, but compensation for some of those activities. Their work, in the sense of the use of their labour power, extends beyond what they are paid for, and includes activities such as experimentation, the management of creative work, training, rehearsing, updating, auditioning, and so on, or other more bureaucratic activities such as drafting projects for job competitions and the constant search for opportunities for funding and collaboration. Thus it is the remuneration of work and not work activities tout court that are ontologically discontinuous (Busacca 2018).

Another element that undermines the ability of workers in the performing arts to collectively struggle for better labour, contractual and wage terms comes from the competitive dynamics of the labour market. As Umney and Kretsos (2014) have argued, the attractiveness of these sectors to young people produces a perpetual labour surplus that increases competitive pressure, threatening the power of workers in the labour market.

The peculiarities of creative, artistic and cultural work and the subjective relationships workers form with their occupation are crucial to hindering their mobilisation. The competitive pressure, flexible specialisation and pervasive contingencies of the work intersect with individual and entrepreneurial ideals such as personal fulfilment, innovation, freedom, and autonomy (Naclerio, 2023; Merger 2017). As highlighted in various studies (Ursell 2017; Umney and Kretsos, 2015; Turrini and Chicchi 2013), the focus of performing arts workers on certain expressive values associated with their activities, such as the meaning of their work, their passion, artistic expression and commitment to what they are making, as well as their expectations of autonomy, and the erosion of boundaries between work and play often end up supporting self-exploitation processes (Gill and Pratt, 2008, p. 33) thus constituting barriers to disputes over working conditions.

The association of artistic work with freedom, expressivity, and autonomy (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010) leads to attitudes such as taking "pleasure in work" (Donzelot 1991; Nixon and Crewe 2004) and "working for love" (Friedson, 1990), promoting the aspirations of workers and their sense of their work as a vocation. Thus

artistic performance spaces come to be seen as opportunities for self-realisation (Gill and Pratt 2008), and this emotional connection between creative workers and work performance in turn fosters high levels of self-exploitation (Nixon and Crewe, 2004;), blurring the distinctions between working and non-working time (Lazzarato, 2012). The disciplinary regime of artistic work leverages the exchange between satisfying work content, mobilising dimensions such as passion, self-recognition, and engagement with process of self-exploitation characterised by bulimic work patterns, long hours, low wages and free labour, oppressive deadlines and social insecurity (Gill and Pratt 2008).

Profound ambiguity and tension thus characterise the biographical trajectories of performing artists. On the one hand, uncertainty is created by the wage gaps that interrupt paid work periods (Dex et al., 2000 p. 283), which are a specific consequence of the instability of paid employment (Corsani 2012) and often lead workers to constantly search for new jobs, new artistic ideas, and new educational and career paths, even while in paid employment (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010). On the other hand, creative work is seen as "truly free work" (Huws 2019), in which public recognition, self-identification with work content and artistic autonomy should compensate for low pay.

Above all, the disciplinary regime of performing arts workers creates a peculiar relationship with time, leading artistic labour to be described as "the work of hope" (Mackenzie and McKinlay 2021; Bascetta 2015), in which working for free, precarity, and low wages - along with devotion - are seen as an asset for the future, which will ultimately be repaid in symbolic and material terms. One's future timeline thus becomes internalised, filled with productive meaning and a promise of self-fulfilment, and sustained by passion and commitment. The disciplinary regime of performing art work relies on the saturation of time with productive work, often transforming free time into free labour (Gill and Pratt 2010). Any alternative use of free time is subjectively experienced as unproductive and unrecoverable 'wasted time', and also considered incompatible with the intrinsic rules of the labour market and competition.

The subjective dimension that characterises the experiences and occupational profiles of these workers is thus composed of two phases: a process of subjectification in which the desire for work autonomy, artistic expression, subjective participation and freedom from the constraints of subordination constantly conflicts with a process of submission to the iron discipline of time which makes labour disproportionate (Turrini and Chicchi 2013), allowing it to seep into all aspects of existence.

2.2 Workers' mobilisations and solidarity processes

Despite a number of factors that are understood to inhibit mobilisations and solidarity processes and despite a disciplinary regime based on profound processes of subjugation, performing arts workers in Italy were engaged in an extensive process of collective mobilisation during the pandemic. We draw on mobilisation theory to identify the factors underlying workers' mobilisation (Kelly,1998), as it is particularly well suited to analysing the emergence of forms of conflict and solidarity in contexts characterised by the absence of specific workplaces (Percival and Lee 2022), by heterogeneity in workers' occupational and contractual profiles, by very short term jobs, and by the fact that the relationship between capital and workers is often less crucial than the role of institutional regulation by the state.

The interpretative framework of mobilisation theory (Kelly 1998; McAdam 1988; Tilly 1978), when applied to the context of industrial relations (Kelly 1998), assumes that conflict between social partners is not mechanical, i.e., it is not the deterministic result of productive contradictions, although they do exist and feed the conflict. In contrast, the awareness of common interests among workers as opposed to those of employers becomes fundamental (Kelly 1998). Thus, the theoretical focus shifts to the formation of collective interests

and collective organisation, as well as the obstacles and opportunities that help or hinder mobilisation and the different forms it can take. According to Kelly (1998), five basic conditions underlie mobilisation processes:

1. The perception of injustice
2. The construction of a collective identity and the definition of the community's interests
3. The definition of an enemy with interests opposed to the community of reference, against which to mobilise
4. The attribution of responsibility for the perceived injustice
5. The role of leadership in facilitating the mobilisation process

These five dimensions are seen as stepping stones in a gradual process leading to mobilisation. The perception of injustice (the first dimension) is the sine qua non for collective action and is understood as the belief that an event, action or situation is illegitimate (Gamson 1995:90- 94; Kelly 1998; Klandermans 1992:85-86; Snow et al., 1986:466). For Kelly (1998), the conditions that lead to the perception of unfairness may be that management violates established rules and that the employer's actions conflict with the shared beliefs of the employees.

McAdam (1998, p. 132) argued that the perception of injustice takes the form of cognitive liberation from stereotypes and social conventions that confuse group interests. According to McAdam (1998, p.134), however, it is not enough to believe that one has been wronged in order to move to collective action, one must also believe that one's demands are legitimate, and that collective action can be effective. Kelly (1998, p.23), in line with Snow and Benford (1992), points to ideological frameworks as tools to help explain one's own condition that provide the fundamental elements for defining the legitimacy of claims, helping to convey the efficacy of collective action and certain models of mobilisation. The conception of injustice, therefore, is rooted in the interpretative framing of workers' conditions.

The second dimension indicates how the definition of a common interest deemed to be damaging contributes to group development by restricting the social boundaries of the group to those who share that injustice, thus fostering a process of community identification. However, the third dimension indicates that the initial form of community building is negative, i.e., based on the identification of the enemy, who is understood as one or more actors to whom the responsibility for one's condition can be attributed. Subsequently, a broader identification phase develops in which workers elaborate a sense of themselves as a distinct group, a collective us as opposed to the them being blamed for the injustice. Finally, the last two dimensions are conceptually different but closely related. The fourth dimension points out how the development of the mobilisation process favours a clearer definition of the enemy. The fifth dimension, on the other hand, shows how the processes of attribution and identification are enabled and fostered by activists (Fantasia 1988; Gamson 1995; Klandermans 1997: 38-44) and organisational networks that act as vectors of symbolic reproduction from which emerge individual and collective leaderships that facilitate protest.

While the conditions listed above refer exclusively to the mobilising actors, Kelly (1998) adopts Tilly's (1978) concept of opportunity to show how other factors, such as the policies and actions of employers and the state, on the one hand, and the balance of power, on the other, also play a role in collective action. Both excessive levels of control and oppression and an unequal distribution of power among actors can affect collective action due to perceived high costs and ineffective outcomes (Tilly 1988: 106-115). In this context, leadership promotes organisational and communicative processes and fosters mobilisation and the construction of effective frames to strengthen the identity process and self-representation.

Mobilisation theory has not been spared criticism. In particular, there have been significant revisions to its perception of injustice as a prerequisite for mobilisation. For example, Atzeni (2009) argues that the concept of injustice indicates an individual and not a collective dimension. When it takes on a collective dimension, it

is through the action of mobilisation itself. In other words, the perception of injustice is the product, not the prerequisite, of mobilisation. For Atzeni (2009), the trigger for processes of collective action and solidarity lies in the inherent antagonistic tension between capital and labour. Atzeni shows that mobilization processes can be much more complex and dialectical than a schematic approach is able to account for. However, in terms of the danger of individualism, it is worth noting that Kelly (1998), following McAdam (1988), highlights that mobilisation phases are usually preceded by 'micro-mobilisation' which is nurtured by the role of existing networks, leaders and organisations. Micro-mobilization allows workers to determine the costs and benefits of mobilisation and thus to discover opportunities and existing operating spaces. McAdam (1988) argues that existing organisations take the form of small groups that combine processes of identification and early mobilisation, fostered by the role of leadership. In these groups, participants form relationships with other potential participants with whom they share the initial sense of injustice and define spaces for mobilisation. Perceptions of injustice, as well as other dimensions, thus appear to be the product of networks and leadership that form a context of "micro-mobilisation". Instead of an individual process, the feeling of injustice is the product of the primary sedimentation of organisational, discursive and solidarity-related elements through which ideologies and frames useful for subsequent mobilisation are transmitted.

3. Method

The article draws on a study conducted in Italy with performing arts workers using a variety of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and non-participatory ethnographic observations.

From July 2020 to December 2021, 41 semi-structured interviews (including 4 union representatives) were conducted with workers from different performing arts sectors (theatre, music, and dance), mainly belonging either to artistic disciplines (dancers, actors, musicians, singers) or technical and craft professions (audio and visual technicians and stage dressmakers) usually employed under different contractual regimes (employees, self-employed, intermittent, etc.). Eighteen women were interviewed, who were mainly actresses, dancers, set designers and musicians. Three trade union representatives (including one woman) belonged to one of the major Italian unions and one to a grassroots union. All respondents were Italian, except for one worker from another European country who had lived in Italy for many years.

The age groups of the respondents were very diverse, with a larger number between 35 and 45 years old. They were workers with very high educational qualifications. Many not only had diplomas from art or technical academies but also had university degrees in other fields.

The interviewees were selected using the snowball sampling method, starting first with the researchers' personal contacts and later with contacts from the various workers' organisations, associations, and unions. Given restrictions on physical mobility to contain the coronavirus, only four interviews were conducted in person at times when restrictive measures were relaxed. As a result, most interviews (37) were conducted remotely via platforms such as Zoom and Skype. Although they often worked away from home, most of these workers lived in medium-sized provincial capitals. Only seven workers (two trade unionists) lived in major metropolitan areas (Rome, Milan, and Naples).

The interviews, which lasted an average of 1 hour and 20 minutes, were videotaped and fully transcribed with the consent of the participants.

The interviews covered aspects such as workers' biographical and professional experience, their working conditions, the impact of the pandemic and their participation in mobilisations before and during the pandemic.

Although not done systematically, the research process also included non-participatory observation activities through the researchers' observation of various workers' initiatives, such as meetings, demonstrations, workplace occupations (all in theatres), public debates, and sit-ins. In some of these activities, researchers responded directly to invitations from workers. Again, most of the initiatives took place online (with the exception of some events, sit-ins and theatre occupations).

Finally, two focus groups were conducted. The first, held in December 2020, lasted about 3 hours, included seven workers plus the two researchers, and was conducted remotely via Skype. The group of workers was homogeneous in terms of their place (they all were in the same medium-sized provincial capital city in the north of Italy), but diversified in terms of gender (3 women and 4 men), age (from 22 to 55 years), and profession (musician, dancers, technician, actors, and stage designer). The topics discussed related to experiences of precarity in the performing arts professions.

The second focus group took place in April 2021 in the context of workers occupying a theatre. In addition to a researcher, the focus group included four women and one man who all worked in the theatre industry (they were all actors and set designers) and were fairly similar in terms of age (between 33 and 45 years old). Also in this case, the participants had a common regional origin (they were all from one large city in northern Italy). The issues discussed in the focus group mainly revolved around the mobilisation of workers.

4. Performing arts workers in the Italian context

The creative and entertainment industries have experienced steady growth in recent decades (Federcultura 2019; Chicchi et al., 2013). Studies show that in European countries before the pandemic, these activities generated an income of about $650 billion and contributed 4.4% to EU GDP (FCSD 2021). A similar situation can be observed in Italy. In 2019, the creative industries accounted for 3.4% of Italian GDP (FCSD 2021). However, these are often imprecise estimates, as economic and financial quantifications often reflect the difficulty of defining the sector, tending to contract or expand depending on the classifications adopted.

This paper focuses on some specific subsectors (music, dance, and theatre) that make up the live performing arts industry (Istat 2019). According to the most reliable estimates (Fondazione Symbola 2021), it is an industry that created a total of 1% of Italian GDP before the pandemic.

According to the National Institute of Social Security (Inps 2020), in Italy in 2019 there were almost 270,000 people working in the performing arts sector who had at least one working day (either as employees or self-employed). Again, this data should be taken with caution, as it includes those who are occasionally employed in the performing arts and may exclude others who are systematically employed in artistic activities but may be classified under other different contracts. The condition of multiple employment therefore makes it very complicated to capture those working in the performing arts (Istat 2019).

As shown in Table 1, performing arts workers are a very heterogeneous category that varies by occupation and artistic discipline. Istat (2019) classifies 40 occupations that, although not exclusively, fall within the performing arts, which in turn are divided into core occupations with high artistic content (25) and supporting occupations (15).

Among the workers surveyed by Inps (2020), the largest group was that of actors and actresses. However, it is also that with the lowest number of working days, as it includes those who work in the performing arts as figurants and extras.

Performing arts workers earn extremely low wages (see Table 1). Many workers, especially in professions with high artistic content, do not reach the minimum number of working days required to access social protection schemes such as maternity, unemployment, and sickness benefits (see below). About 80% of employment relationships are temporary (of which 81% are full-time). 78% of employment relationships are of low intensity, i.e., with less than 90 working days during the year (Istat 2019).

On average these workers are quite young and have educational qualifications that are above the Italian average (Istat 2019). According to Inps data (2020), the main age groups are 25 to 29 years (14%), 20 to 24 years (13%) and 30 to 34 years (12%).

About 54% of the entertainment workforce is male, but there are significant differences within the different sub-sectors. Indeed, strong vertical and horizontal occupational segregation between female and male workers and a significant gender pay gap can be observed across all sub-sectors (Inps 2020; Istat 2020). Although the average number of working days is almost the same for men and women (100 for men and 99 for women), the average wage for men is about 2,500 euros higher than for women (11,750 euros and 9,200 euros respectively).

The social protection of workers is probably the most critical dimension in examining the outcomes of the linkage between the consequences of the pandemic and the threat to the employment of workers in the performing arts. From the very first measures taken by the Italian government to combat the social consequences of the pandemic, it became clear that both normal and emergency social assistance were unable to guarantee adequate protection to workers in the performing arts, leaving many of them without financial support for some time. The main allocation criteria for the initial emergency assistance were quantitative (a minimum number of days of paid work in the previous year), which could not accommodate the intermittent nature of performing arts work. Only a small proportion of performing arts workers had had enough workdays to meet these requirements. Only after the first mobilisations of workers did central and local administrations introduce measures with increasingly less restrictive access criteria.

The same exclusionary logic is reflected in traditional social protection systems (for example, unemployment benefits). Although since the 1940s Italian legislators had recognised the specificities of the employment of entertainment workers, when an autonomous 'enhanced protection' social security and insurance fund (ENPALS) was set up for them, the neo-liberal reforms of the 1990s and 2000s tightened the conditions for accessing social protection. In 1996, the number of paid days required to reach the full annual contribution for pension purposes was doubled (It was required 120 working days during the year instead of 60), while access to sickness benefits was conditional on having done 100 days of work in the previous year until the onset of sickness. In 2011, the autonomous ENPALS fund was taken over by INPS (and became the Pension Fund for Performing Arts Workers), and, in 2014, the employment law implemented by the centre-left government aligned unemployment access requirements for performing arts workers with those required of all other workers.

In January 2022, a new unemployment benefit for self-employed workers in the entertainment sector came into effect, as did new requirements for maternity and paternity benefits (also for self-employed workers), access to sickness benefits (40 paid days instead of 100 are now required to access the benefit), and contribution days for pension purposes (90 instead of 120). A more comprehensive reform of the sector is currently being considered by the Italian parliament.

Table 1: Workers, occupations, wage, and number of working days. Source: INPS (2020)

Professional group	Numbers of workers per year	Average salary per year	Average working days per year
Singers	9351	11,847€	64
Actors and actresses	83390	2818€	15
Entertainers	22249	6090€	55
Directors and Screenwriters	7675	2,473€	133
Film, audio-visual, and entertainment producers	8995	17,151€	129
Stage directors and film editing	647	22,609€	126
Orchestral conductors	1058	17,699€	70
Concert and orchestral musicians	30997	5537€	43
Dancers and fashion figurants	15522	3150€	41
Administrators	1668	17,247€	181
Technicians	14584	13,015€	120
Scenographers, decorators, and costume designers	4291	16,383€	106
Make-up artists and hairdressers	2031	10,373€	69
Clerk workers	36029	27,092€	226
Self-employed performing music activities	1697	5267€	32
Other entertainment workers (*maestranze*)	17464	12,995€	111
Others	9808	5912 €	108
Total	267,456	13,098€	96

5. From individualisation to mobilisation

During the pandemic, worker mobilisation reached surprising levels in terms of frequency, intensity, participation and diffusion. The disruption caused by the virus meant that paid work could not continue and that planned activities had to be cancelled. Moreover, the total disruption of work activity was associated with the inadequacy of existing social security systems and, for a large proportion of workers, even with the impossibility of accessing emergency measures.

Paradoxically, the pandemic seems to have reduced the fragmentation of the sector by helping to level out different individual experiences. Workers' experiences of job insecurity and lack of adequate benefits prior to the pandemic remained heterogeneous over time at the individual level. With the pandemic these experiences were not only widespread but also occurred simultaneously; they affected everyone in the same way at the same time. There was a transition from this social

condition being widespread but experienced as an individual problem to be dealt with personally, to it being seen as a united and collective fate. Workers were surprised by the results of the pandemic:

> Anyway, without this pandemic, there would have been no awareness. Our group would not have existed, getting to know so many colleagues: actors, technicians, all the things that we didn't know about before. So I learnt a lot in recent months, sharing with others and going through this common struggle with them. We certainly have greater awareness now of who we are as workers in the performing arts. [stage dressmaker]

But in addition to the material dimension, the pandemic has also led to a break in the romantic portrayal of the profession by workers themselves. The discrepancy between the symbolic capital of workers in terms of public recognition contrasts with the lack of institutional recognition that workers experienced during the first period of the pandemic. Among the workers interviewed, the emergence of the discrepancy between public recognition and institutional recognition (and thus the non-recognition of art workers as a category requiring social protection) fostered the emergence of the first dimension elaborated by Kelly (1998), namely the perception of injustice.

> At the beginning, there was a very strong identity crisis and at the same time a very strong consciousness. When President Conte [the former prime minister] didn't mention us at all and we didn't appear in his speeches, I wondered why I had decided to become a dancer and what I could have done so that one day my nephew could have the same profession as me without feeling guilty. [dancer]

While previously the subjective characteristics of these workers made it difficult to demonstrate a widespread and shared "sense of injustice" (Kelly 1998), with the pandemic, this became visible and perceived in both material and symbolic dimensions, i.e., the simultaneous absence of the basic conditions of survival (an income) and the lack of institutional recognition of their activities as work. According to workers, these were the main factors that led to the creation of the first bonds of solidarity. Confusion about the procedures and difficulties of accessing benefits led to intense interaction and communication between workers, which included exchanging experiences. At the same time, this strengthened the role of certain collectives, trade union organisations and networks that workers turned to for support. The transition from a personal and existential crisis to mobilisation, as indicated in the interview just quoted, was apparently also facilitated by certain leaders who emerged in the first workers' collectives during the pandemic. These were often workers with union or mobilisation experience, mostly acquired outside of their jobs, who helped to frame the crisis in terms of the non-recognition of the labour dimension and of the most basic rights, a framing that fostered workers' politicisation. Within a short time, they become the most important contact points for requests, assistance and support from their colleagues. The websites and social media pages of various collectives and trade unions became places, albeit virtual ones, in which mutual aid, solidarity and organisation could take place, and through which emergency government aid could be accessed. This resulted in 'micro-mobilisations' (McAdam 1988) that contributed to building up an understanding of injustice as a starting point for moving onto broader and more significant mobilisations:

I had to understand the minimum number of working days required to access these benefits and to ask around. I saw that collectives and organisations had been formed, and that there were lots of discussions about what was happening. I came to the union through some of my colleagues, fascinated and impressed by some of the meetings we had with a trade unionist who was a key figure for me, which convinced me to join the union because I felt they were competent, and were able to listen. I couldn't believe that this man could understand our issues without needing further explanation. [Dancer]

Existing or newly created social networks were proven to be essential resources for mobilisation. In particular, the creation of a "free space" relied extensively on the internet as an effective space for "connecting" geographically dispersed workers. Websites and social networks were thus able to partially overcome worker fragmentation. At the same time, the web was also an important resource for building networks (Castells 2012) among those workers. Its virtual spaces allowed the workers to receive information, support each other, organise mobilisation strategies or discuss. But they also served a material purpose, such as helping workers to apply for emergency aid or to access union or tax assistance services. This provision of services fostered the establishment of the first bonds of solidarity and strengthened possibilities for mobilisation. The workers describe how previously small assemblies and initiatives grew rapidly and how some of the actors most involved in the mobilisations started to become the main 'entrepreneurs of protest', playing the role of leadership identified by Kelly (1998) in the fifth dimension of his conceptualization.

We had the first assembly in which there were at least fifty of us, where there were a lot of male and female workers. Because at that time everyone was a bit out of place, a lot of people came ... It started with a small core that already existed, made up of people who worked and knew each other, not people who were activists, because in this work, there was always the problematic issue of employment conditions. [Grassroots union official]

Those who mobilised described their experience as a revelation of the working dimension of their profession, previously relegated almost entirely to the status of a vocation, suggesting a process of interest definition that fostered the second shift toward a collective dimension of identity and community (Kelly 2009). According to workers, mobilisation increased their self-awareness of their condition. It is in this shift that the second dimension of mobilisation identified by Kelly emerges, namely the construction of a collective identity expressing particular interests.

Acquiring the consciousness of having rights helps to identify another element reported by Kelly (1998), in the form of recognising the legitimacy of their demands and the unfair denial of their rights. This corresponds to the third dimension of his theory, in which an enemy is defined with interests opposed to the community of reference and against which to mobilise. By discovering that they are workers with rights, elements of a common position are created among different occupations, sectors, and workers previously unable to engage in a shared mobilisation.

In our sector there has been a unity that never existed before, a dramatic event has brought us together even though we are very different, which is a positive thing. More than anything, it has raised awareness! [Stage dressmaker]

Within this partial recomposition another dimension emerges, described by mobilisation scholars as the establishment of clear interests to be claimed. From the outset, the demand for structural and

emergency measures aimed primarily at promoting recognition of the instability of performing arts work was linked to the demand for the thoroughgoing reform of the sector and a new welfare system.

6. Time to work, time to create, time to struggle

As we have seen, the organisation of artistic work leads to an almost complete overlap in working and non-working hours, with moments of non-employment also configured as unpaid work. Working and non-working time are inextricably intertwined, the boundaries between them blurred, resulting in constant subjugation of workers to the disciplinary regime, while the temporal saturation of the future, through the promise of self-realisation, harnesses subjectivity through the promise of symbolic and material recognition, fostering a tendency toward self-exploitation. This temporal density makes it unlikely that spaces and times of mobilisation will be able to emerge. However, the pandemic changed this. In the words of the interviewees, it was a temporary drain of the subjugation mechanism. The pandemic triggered the implosion of performing artists' disciplinary regime - based on subjective participation of workers to their exploitation and the colonisation of time - which had at least two immediate consequences. The first, which was purely material, was the creation of 'free space and time' due to the inability to work (or engage in other activities in preparation for work) and the uncertainty of getting back to work. Respondents described this state through discursive constructions such as 'everything has stopped', and 'it's as if you woke up one morning and no longer knew what to do with your life'. The second consequence was that disciplinary control had been weakened, thus opening up 'opportunities' (Tilly,1978).

By breaking the promises that had sustained workers' consensual participation in the performing arts, by freeing up their time, and by forcing them to disengage from disciplinary measures, the crisis facilitated an accumulation of resources such as time, that allowed them to reflect on their situation. Indeed, workers described how the absence of the chaotic and hectic rhythms of their working lives created space for self-reflection. In answer to our questions about what enabled the mobilisation, this unionist stressed:

> The answer is the time workers have to reflect. The work is extremely chaotic, you reach a point where you can't take a break. Whereas now that activities have completely stopped, you have been able to take a break and to understand. There is an immediate problem: bringing home money to survive. Then you stop, turn around for a moment and look: but what are my working conditions? What is going on? What is wrong? And during this time, you started to think. [Former performing arts worker and union official]

> Stopping everything has allowed us to take the time to think about ourselves, to educate ourselves, and to come to terms with our condition. [Dancer, focus group n°1]

It becomes clear, then, that the availability of time is seen as an indispensable prerequisite for consciousness raising. In the time freed up, spaces are created for encounters and reflection, which in this case has led to a qualitative leap in mobilisation. This leap has enabled workers (but also some unions) to have new experiences of mobilisation:

> But I can tell you exactly why this experience was born: because we had the time to do it, because it takes time to do something like that. And before we had neither the possibility, nor the space, nor the geographical closeness to do it. Of course this changed when the world stopped, and we found a way to talk about something we had never had the time to talk about before. [Actress]

Thus the availability of time facilitated the development of mobilisations to obtain social protection. However, there was a widespread fear, partially confirmed by the first reopening after Covid's initial phase, that the resumption of activities would once again push workers toward individualistic behaviour:

> When my colleagues return to work, there will be no more time for collective action, no time for this and that. [Stage dressmaker].

7. Mobilisation contents

The mobilisations of performing arts workers start from concrete, material and symbolic demands, but soon acquire political value. They are conflicts that, by and large, aim to make the un-recognised and unpaid part of their work visible at the institutional level. The fourth dimension of Kelly's (1998) theory addresses the state and not the employer. Faced with the impossibility of their unpaid and invisible activities being fully recognised in the multiple labour relations they enter into with contractors, employers, or autonomously, workers assume that the state should take care of the issue. By identifying the state as the counterparty, i.e., the entity responsible for the injustice committed against them, workers identify the current welfare regime as the main battleground for their action and a new welfare pattern as the main goal. Although some demands based on their immediate status and interests remain strong, the demand for a new welfare regime shifts the conflict from the realm of sectoral corporatism onto universalist ground.

In this context, the demand for a "quarantine income" is part of a broader structural demand for a new social protection system adapted to the "intermittent income" typical to precarious work, but, more specifically, to artistic work. It is a unique condition that is missing from the public representation of the world of art work, but which is gradually being socially recognised thanks to the mobilisation of workers:

> What has happened is that everyone has recognised that we are intermittent workers, and no one recognised that before. We produce continuously. We have incubation periods to create a show. There are gestation periods that do not show up anywhere. You don't get paid. [Musician]

As far as these needs are concerned, explicit reference was made to laws and concrete models. Some workers have called for the implementation of the law on artistic work that the Italian legislature adopted in 2007 following a European directive, but which has not yet come into force, and for the introduction of an 'intermittency' regime based on the Belgian or French model:

> If you work in France and stay for six months, you have access to services that support your work. Here, you have no way to provide for your needs. [Singer]

This model would also allow for the simplification of the employment system and would limit the multitude of atypical contractual forms that characterise the sector and make it difficult to develop effective regulations. Mobilisation thus seems to have set in motion the social recomposition of the sector thanks to the creation of transversal coordination and platforms capable of holding together both the technical and artistic aspects of the sector. According to the workers themselves, this process has triggered a positive (and partly institutional) public recognition of the problems in the sector and in the process of workers' unification:

> All these things came to the surface and served in creating mutual recognition. The most interesting thing that happened in Italy was how the different sectors realised that we had to work together and that we had to put forward proposals together. So, from the last stagehand to the most famous singer, they all promoted the increased recognition of the specificity of the world of culture and performing arts [Sound technician]

The crisis thus favoured the resurgence of conflicts among workers and fuelled new processes of recomposition, also driven by the awareness of the need for unity among the different working groups that populate the performing arts world. This is also the reason why, at the national level and in some regional contexts, performing arts workers' organisations have become laboratories for proposals for institutional reforms to the sector

8. Discussion and conclusion

Although performing arts workers have professional and subjective characteristics that are considered to be obstacles to the construction of solidarity and mobilisation, in Italy, during the coronavirus lockdown phase and in the period that followed, these workers managed to initiate labour mobilisations, which, were very intense and geographically widespread. Public declarations in the form of sit-ins, demonstrations, and occupations of emblematic cultural sites (e.g., theatres) were only the tip of the iceberg of a multifaceted, cross-cutting movement composed of pre-existing associations and organisations as well as new, spontaneous organisations that had sprung up during the pandemic. Crucial to these diverse experiences were both the lack of effective measures to mitigate the crisis and the general inability of the Italian legislature to create a regulatory framework that could address the specificities of the sector.

This article therefore contributes to broadening the debate on the mobilisation processes of workers in contexts characterised by high precariousness, social fragmentation, geographical dispersion, the absence of permanent jobs, the blurring of the relationship between capital and labour, and disciplinary systems based on subjective participation, as in the case of workers in the performing arts in Italy. Incorporating Kelly's (1998) theory of mobilisation and Tilly's (1978) concept of 'opportunity', this article first identifies the role of the pandemic in widening 'political opportunity structures' for mobilisation by creating a set of circumstances favourable to collective action. The opportunity for collective action in this particular case is represented by the collapse of the disciplinary dimension of time, collective experimentation with a condition characterised by the impossibility of accessing work and income and the greater availability of certain resources such as free time. The initiation of institutional negotiations between workers and Governments and Parliament and the obtaining of certain results (such as the lowering of criteria for access to emergency social benefits and the welfare reform of the sector that came into force in 2022, although still deemed unsatisfactory) reinforced the idea of the usefulness of mobilisation.

Although this article does not claim that mobilisation theory explains all forms of collective mobilisation (Atzeni 2009), it demonstrates the validity of its theoretical framework (Kelly 1998; McAdam 1988; Tilly 1978) for interpreting the processes of solidarity and mobilisation in organisational contexts populated by workers without a specific workplace, with hybrid and highly temporary contractual relationships, and in which the relationship between capital and workers is less clear than in other contexts. Drawing on Kelly's insights (1998 and 2018), the article shows how the mobilisation process is triggered by the creation of a shared sense of injustice fostered by the particular conditions of the pandemic and the new framework spread further through formal and informal micro-mobilisations. The different dimensions of mobilisation are not mechanistic but dialectical, with action and structure in constant interaction with one another, creating a process that leads to a dynamic of identity and community building. By focusing on the possibilities and micro-mobilisations that anticipate mobilisation, this article highlights the collective dimension of the sense of injustice felt by workers, thus addressing the critique of individualism that has been raised against Kelly's theories.

While the factors identified by Kelly (2008) turn out to be the social consequences of a dialectical process between structure (understood as material and symbolic conditions) and action, rather than mere preconditions for mobilisation, one category in particular proves to be both an enabling factor and a mobilisation resource: time freed from work activities. The shock of the pandemic and the interruption of work activity provided the time needed for mobilisation. In other words, the pandemic determined and subsequently expanded the political and material opportunities that enabled the various steps described in Kelly's (1998) mobilisation conditions to be taken. In this sense, it was the opportunities that enabled mobilisation. However, in order to avoid any mechanical generalisation between the availability of time and mobilisation possibilities, it is important to clarify that in the context of the performing arts, free time is not only a material resource, but also a consequence of the interruption of a specific disciplinary regime based precisely on the colonisation of (working and non-working) time (both paid and unpaid). By suspending work and work-related activities, the pandemic disrupted the mechanisms that underpin the "discipline of time". This immediately highlighted the specific condition of these workers and helped to increase their perception of injustice and the subjectively experienced need to mobilise. This free time was focused on self-reflection, self-organisation, and the request for recognition that are their wages to be intermittent and not their working activities. In fact, the narratives of those who mobilised show how reconquering time is a decisive condition for thinking about one's own condition, and demonstrates the emerging fear that a possible return to the 'normal' working situation could hinder the newly won collective defence of workers' interests by leading them back to their private and individualized domains, as had happened before the pandemic.

Finally, workers' demands are both symbolic and material. In terms of the symbolic dimension, the mobilisation favoured the construction of a common identity among the performing arts workers, who demanded greater unity in the sector and public recognition of the profession. In material terms, workers' mobilisations, even if they were accompanied by efforts to improve aspects of employment directly linked to employers, were mainly characterised by the demand for a reform of the sector aimed at redefining the welfare system. These results are fairly consistent with what Umney and Kretsos (2014) and Heery et al. (2004) have shown, in which specific organisational relations drive workers' mobilisations and their organisations to engage in welfare assistance, defending welfare rights and their members' positions in the external labour market, rather than in action against employers.

The request for welfare models that consider the intermittent nature of artistic work has the character of both a material and a political demand, insofar as it can facilitate the creation of free time and spaces that are indispensable to workers' organisations. However, whereas the workers' demands (quarantine income and welfare reform) were universalist from the outset, moving away from corporatism, there is still a risk of obscuring the responsibility of the employer for working conditions.

This article shows that even in work contexts characterised by the simultaneous presence of objective and subjective obstacles, collective mobilisation processes can be triggered under certain conditions.

The main limitations of this article relate to the fact that the pandemic was an exceptional event. Thus the conditions that it created for mobilisation might not be found again outside of the pandemic. It will be interesting to investigate whether the post-Covid return to ordinariness and the saturation of working time are compatible with the new forms of the organisation and self-organisation of workers. Secondly, the article's empirical base has not allowed for a detailed analysis of the different organisational structures and tendencies of the performing arts workers' movement, where lines of division and fragmentation persist, or for an examination of how the process of mobilization has interacted with institutions at the local and national levels. A third limitation concerns the lack of analyses of the trade unions' role. The function of the trade union - or of individual members within political socialisation networks - in exercising a leadership role in mobilisations and in fostering a transformation of the trade union itself that adapts organisationally to the peculiarities of the sector should be explored. Future research could attempt to address these limitations.

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