Freelance Creatives: Good Jobs, or Bad Jobs?

Introduction

The international crisis and the economic recession have particularly affected creative and cultural industries in western economies. The downsizing of firms and the increasing number of redundancies among staff employees have caused a renewed diffusion of freelance work, meaning individuals who establish their own business and become independent professionals in a fragmented labour market. Freelancing shows a degree of resilience to the economic crisis (EEO, 2010) and is increasingly becoming common practice in most creative environments in terms of organization of labour (Christopherson 2002, 2008, 2009; Dex et al. 2000).

Nevertheless, being a creative freelancer is a very particular kind of job. Creative independent professionals embody contradictory characteristics made of a mixture of entrepreneurship, individualization, self realization and 'californian ideology' (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) combined with high levels of anxiety, stress and precarity (McRobbie 2002, 2005; Gill and Pratt 2008).

This article will focus on creative freelancing in relation to job quality with the purpose of questioning whether creative freelancing is a good or a bad job, having in mind its own specific contradictory nature. This will be done by using Kalleberg's conceptual model of job quality (2011) that draws a quite accurate typology of the characteristics by which jobs can be defined good or bad. If we apply this model to creative freelancing, some features emerge as inherently conflicting. The professional practices brought along by creative freelancers offer a special point of observation for job quality in terms of hybridisation of skills. More so, freelance creatives seem to blur the traditional limits of job satisfaction, working with high levels of pressure and stress, often low paid and sometimes even for free, indeed showing high levels of happiness.

The present contribution is based on a doctoral research conducted between Milan and London consisting in 75 interviews to freelance creatives and resulting in an 'extended ethnography' of creative urban networks able to provide both quantitative and qualitative evidence. This is completed by a third study consisting of an ethnography of an online platform functioning as a marketplace for freelancers. This article will discuss the main insights emerging from the research regarding creative freelancing and job quality. A final remark will be dedicated to a larger discussion attempting to frame this contradictory nature within the somehow similarly controversial relationship between creative labour and neoliberalism.

Framing Job Quality

In order to define job quality, this article has taken as main reference the work of Arne Kalleberg (2011) that finds roots in previous accounts of nonstandard forms of employment in the US (Kalleberg, Reskin and Hudson 2000; Kalleberg 2003; Atkinson 1987). Job quality is a multi-dimensional issue that can be addressed from different perspectives. Economists put emphasis on earnings; sociologists associate job quality with desirability. Psychologists, indeed, look at control and autonomy on the job, pointing at the 'affective' element that is at stake in the more general notion of 'job satisfaction' – which, as we will see, is crucial to this discussion. On top of that,
assessments on job quality through job satisfaction indicators are often highly context-specific, reflecting a singular, strongly individual evaluation which essentially concerns the uniqueness of each case (Kalleberg 1:4-5).

However, it might be argued there are certain characteristics that allow a more objective assessment on job quality. Kalleberg (2011) develops a 'conceptual model' including:

1) workers' evaluation of overall job quality, which is made of a) assessment of the rewards provided by their job, and b) work values, i.e., the importance workers place on these rewards;
2) macro-factors, the stability or change in work structures at the organizational level;
3) demographic factors (gender, race, education) which affect the kind of jobs people choose (Kalleberg 2011:3).

The key point which Kalleberg puts more emphasis on is the issue of rewards (Point 1 above). These consist in:

1) the workers' degree of control and autonomy, especially over tasks and schedules;
2) economic compensation (wages, earnings);
3) non-economic compensation, meaning a) job security and b) opportunities for advancement in the career (Kalleberg 2011:3).

This model and its features, in Kalleberg's view, should serve as guidelines for empirical assessment. However, many of these aspects are hardly measurable because data are collected through self-reports on job satisfaction (Kalleberg 2011: 3). Job satisfaction is a concept that despite several different applications in the literature, is affected by many acknowledged response biases. This occurs since the majority of job satisfaction indicators originates from the question 'All in all, how satisfied would you say you are in your job?' whose results are essentially subjective and context-specific (Kalleberg 2011:10).

Nevertheless, according to Kalleberg (2011) job quality can be assessed using job satisfaction as the main indicator, bearing in mind potential shortcomings. The concept of job satisfaction is to be taken as an important, though partial, aspect of job quality which is conceived as a more objective and rounded account on good and bad jobs. The benefit of looking at job quality through Kalleberg's model lies in the possibility for an evaluation able to include the different dimensions which pertain to this issue and which may not be part of a self-reported job satisfaction assessment, thus leading to more reliable conclusions. In the following paragraphs I will try and apply Kalleberg's model of job quality to freelance creatives.

The case of freelance creatives

The present work is part of the author's doctoral thesis on the Reputation Economy across freelance creative networks. The concept of Reputation Economy (Anderson 2006; Botsman 2010, 2012; Hearn 2010; Pratt 2009; Arvidsson 2009; Masum and Tovey 2012; Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013) means in this context that reputation plays a crucial role as the determinant element around which creative freelancers create job opportunities and sustain their income. Evidence shows that freelance creatives are independent professionals whose reputation is the crucial factor for recruitment and professional success. Networks represent the structural form of this kind of jobs since networking is acknowledged as the main source for job opportunities and marketability (Granovetter 1973, 1995; Blair 2001, 2009)
The professional figures here considered are mostly media and communication-related ones, whose common feature is being hired as contractors for the delivery of a professional service. The main variables at stake in the research overall are reputation and income, supported by social capital operationalized as trust (Lin 2001) and demographics including education title, professional skills, age, gender and familial background. Following the research hypothesis, income is taken as the dependent variable and reputation as the independent variable, whilst the other factors considered are taken as control variables. The present discussion originates from fieldwork data concerning this work.

**Research methods.** The main context of the research is that of the 'creative city' (Landry 2000; Pratt 2008). Two creative cities, Milan and London, have been selected as the location to operate an 'extended ethnography' of a network of creative freelancers (one for each city) using multiple techniques of data collection. The networks are taken as complex units made of individual nodes – more specifically, creative workers who act into the network both as single actors within a structure as well as, especially, in relation and in association with other nodes. Given their professional trait, these are to be treated as 'communities of practice' (Abbott 1988; Bijker et al. 1987, Latour and Callon 1981) as well as 'knowledge networks' (Podolny and Page 1998; Uzzi 1996).

The term 'extended ethnography' draws from Burawoy's 'extended method' (1998) and refers to the overall methodology of data collection. Fieldwork was conducted through an ethnographic approach able to entail multiple research techniques in a complex research design pointing at a deeper understanding of the functioning of 'creative networks'. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the form of personal biographies starting from 5 gatekeepers. Interviewees were granted anonymity in data collection and asked to nominate working peers (up to a maximum of three) on the basis of reputation and social capital attributes. This resulted into two small-size networks obtained through snowball sampling. 'Name generator' questions allowed to snowball up to two degrees, when sampling stopped in order to maintain a manageable sample size. The choice of using snowball is mainly due on the one hand to the purpose of sampling a population of unknown size with a reliable degree of randomness, and on the other hand to the absence of formal 'creative networks' suitable for the scope of the research, especially in Milan.

**Network 1 – Milan – Specificities**

- 5 gatekeepers / 3 males, 2 females
- A network of 93 potential participants contacted
- 47 accepted to participate for a response rate of 50.5 %
- 5 were excluded because they did not belong to the population considered
- 42 nodes were included in the final sample size (network size: 42)
- Overall: 25 males, 17 females

**Network 2 – London – Specificities**

- 5 gatekeepers / 2 males, 3 females
- A network of 70 potential participants contacted
- 38 accepted to participate for a response rate of 54.2% (network size: 38)
- Overall: 19 males, 19 females

Through the technique of the 'conversational survey' (Gobo 2006, 2011; Gobo and Mauceri 2013), data collected in the interviews were then anonymised and aggregated into a network dataset. A number of quantitative analyses were then performed in order to provide a larger number of insights using available data, though having in mind the shortcomings such an operation possesses.
Among these, a major issue may concern the validity of quantitative analysis given the limited amount of observations due to the sample size. The legitimacy of such an operation is given by snowball sampling, which configures a non-probabilistic approach able to operate inference in hard-to-reach hidden populations with an acceptable degree of reliability. In a 'network analysis' context where the independence of the sample is naturally violated, snowball offers a suitable alternative to provide a certain degree of randomness, considering also that the interviewees were kept free to provide names that are not suggested in advance by the researcher (Biemacki and Waldorf 1981).

To a certain extent, issues of potential endogeneity and homophily may also arise. As concerns endogeneity, networks are assumed to be exogenous, which means they neither originate from the dependent variable (in this case, income) nor they are correlated with unobserved attributes of actors that could affect it (Stuart and Sorenson, 2007). This was made possible thanks to an overall research design constructed on the independent variables, reputation and social capital as trust. The interview setting, in addition, allowed the researcher to enquire for unobserved attributes and also to establish a bond with the interviewee, that helped in reducing the risk of missing data. As concerns homophily, research on social networks demonstrates how actors frequently tend to entertain relationships with 'similar' peers. Nevertheless, as Stuart and Sorenson suggest (2007), this drawback can be reduced by knowing as much as possible of the dimensions along which actors prefer to match in the networks considered. The overall ethnographic approach and the use of qualitative interviews provides also a significant reduction of this potential bias.

The overall ethnographic approach made possible to collect both quantitative data on the intensity and attributes of the relationship among interviewees, as well as evidence on the quality of relationships and the functioning of the mechanisms in place across the informal networks taken into consideration. This occurred within a satisfying degree of reliability, considering also that the response rate can be located around a satisfying 50% of the 163 people contacted. The quantitative insights provided significant elements which contribute to have a more rounded understanding of the multi-dimensional object of study and can hopefully serve as potential inputs for further research.

Finally, the third case focuses on digital marketplaces where freelancers and clients entertain business relationships on a non-permanent, non-dependent basis. The platform chosen for data collection is Elance (www.elance.com), world leader in the service provided. Elance was preferred to its main competitors, Freelancer (www.freelancer.com) and Guru (www.guru.com) due to a larger amount of available data. The study of this 'online case' was developed through a 'digital ethnography' approach that draws from the emerging stream of research known as 'digital methods'. Developed at the University of Amsterdam, Digital Methods can be summed up in the motto 'follow the medium' (Rogers 2009) meaning that the collection of natively digital data should take place following the flow of information, without the superimposition of traditional 'offline' techniques that could affect the quality of the information collected. Data concerning user profiles with creative professional status were extracted from the website, then anonymised and aggregated into a dataset. A set of interviews was then conducted with a small number of participants according to the principle of saturation of information, in order to complete the study with information that could not be collected elsewhere.

**Online Network – Elance**

54 profiles / 33 males, 21 females
5 interviews

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1 For an extensive bibliography on digital methods and Dmi please see [https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/PapersPublications](https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/PapersPublications)
Milan and London. For the purposes of this paper, following Kalleberg’s model (2011) the variables observed and discussed in this section are: a) overall job satisfaction; b) control and autonomy on the job; c) income; d) job security; e) opportunities for advancement; f) macro-factors (employment structural change); g) demographic factors.

a) Job satisfaction. The variable 'job satisfaction' was constructed in both cases starting from the traditional question 'All in all, how satisfied would you say you are in your job?'. To support and complete this answer, the interviewee was requested to position across a basic Likert-scale ranging from: 1 (totally unsatisfied); 2 (unsatisfied); 3 (average); 4 (satisfied); 5 (totally satisfied).

Table 1. Milan – Overall job satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAT_MIL</th>
<th>N Valdi</th>
<th>37</th>
<th>Mancanti</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>3.9459</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valida</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valida</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>46.1</td>
<td>45.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valida</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totale</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>88.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mancanti</td>
<td>Mancanti</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totale</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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Table 1 (Milan) shows an average job satisfaction value of 3.9, therefore considerably high. It is interesting to note that, among the other possible values, the lowest options 1 and 2 were not selected by any interviewee, whilst a slight majority chose 3 (average) over 5 (totally satisfied). 4 is the mostly selected value.

Data on the London network (Table 2 below) show a substantially similar situation.

Table 2. London – Overall job satisfaction.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAT_LON</th>
<th>N Valdi</th>
<th>31</th>
<th>Mancanti</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Media</th>
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<tr>
<td>Valida</td>
<td>2.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valida</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>24.2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valida</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>59.0</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>41.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valida</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>18.2</td>
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<td>Totale</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>86.8</td>
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<td>Mancanti</td>
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<td>Totale</td>
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We could argue there is a quite high level of satisfaction overall among creatives both in Milan and London. The affective element attached to creative jobs emerges in line with the recent contribution on 'passionate work' in Milan fashion industry (Naro et al., 2010). The elements of 'passion' and high desirability for the sake of social recognition or 'coolness' fulfil symbolic needs notwithstanding the conditions in which these jobs usually take place. Actually, these figures hide a more complicated picture. The qualitative interviews gave the researcher the opportunity to go more in depth in the participants’ professional stories and to dwell upon the working conditions hiding behind the overall high level of satisfaction, as we will see in the following sections.
b) control and autonomy on the job

Control and autonomy on the job are distinctive elements for creative freelancers in both contexts. They are independent professionals working with a high degree of autonomy and a moderate system of control based on job delivery according to deadlines and job-by-job agreements with the client, rather than office presence and other traditional 'fordist' systems of control. Numerous participants underlined the importance of what we might call 'a reappropriation of time', especially when the interviewee switched to freelancing after working as staff. This is usually counterbalanced by long hours of work and long series of working days without a day off.

"The great advantage is that you work whenever you want to, maybe on a Sunday afternoon, or very early in the morning. The possibility to work in reverse trend in relation to office hours is fundamental. You can work at lunch breaks, or going to the gym when all others are closed in their offices. The disadvantage is that sometimes you may work for 12 hours a day. But the key is that you have to decide when and how" (D., communication consultant, Milan)

It might be argued in other words that a freelancer's autonomy on the job is framed into a narrative of 'liberation' that puts emphasis on a sort of release from the restrictions and the harsh control typical of office work. This is often paired with a perceived decay of day-by-day quality living, as many interviewees highlighted, especially in Milan where a much stronger feeling of a precarious lifestyle connoted by high levels of stress and pressure emerges. However, the element of reappropriation and liberation largely seems to be more important than the rest. As shown by the two quotes below, in a similar context (PR and journalism) the perception of instability and precarity varies a lot.

"As a freelancer you can earn a lot, but it is the quality of life that is affected. You can decide to stay home for a day and work in pijamas, no problem, you often work from home. The problem is that even if you earn a lot, payments are late, no less than 70 days later, and as freelancer you are never safe. If the editor changes, or the deputy editor, or the one you know and who receives your work proposals, and you're out" (C., journalist, Milan)

"Freelance work gives me the variety to work the things that I like most, and sort of choosing among them. Sometimes the balance's a bit tricky, but as a freelancer you take on the work that you want and doing it. I'm not living out of being a freelancer, I know people who do, but for me it's a way to make it in the future. I can get paid more money by being a freelancer... everything like PR, movies, etc. not journalism, with journalism you can't really be paid" (R., 37, freelance PR and journalist, London)

The issue of control for freelancers concerns essentially the reliability and trustworthiness for the delivery of a high-quality job on time, given that a freelancer does not usually works 'on site'. As data clearly show, control on the job is granted by a freelancer's reputation. The integrity of a freelancer's reputation is the way through which a client can safely trust a contractor, often recommended by a colleague or peer the client trusts. The element of reputation and its importance is strongly perceived especially among London participants concerning their job record and portfolio, as shown by the common saying: “You are as good as your last job” (Baumann 2002; Blair 2001; Ursell 2000). The quote below shows how this kind of reputation economy functions.

"The thing is that if somebody calls you at 11pm in the night, they need to trust that you are going to deliver the job done by 8am tomorrow, cos they can't stop shooting. That's why they go to someone they know. (…) I know I will do it, they know I will know it. And when you do something wrong, is exactly the same. (…) So, the biggest thing of my work is reputation, that's why you work so hard...they don't ever go into “what degree have you got?” bla bla bla, no, it's more like “so you've worked in that show? Oh, and if you did that, and it looked that good, so you can come in this show” or “somebody else has said you performed really well and if you actually do what you say you gonna do, so I trust you. Therefore recommendation is my biggest thing, being a director or producer who gets you into your next job.” (L., visual designer, London)

A freelancer is usually required to deliver a job the client is not able to accomplish via internal resources or personal competences. The degree of autonomy on the job depends on the specific agreements taken with the client. The delivery of a creative job (whatever creative job) is a mixture
of a number of tasks provided by the client, who wants the job to be in such a manner, combined with the aesthetic choices of the freelancer. The contractor needs to be in line with the client's requirements and also to deliver a job that is able to maintain the reputation. The importance of this reputation economy is increasingly perceived also in Milan.

"By the end of last month I was called up by a freelancer who was director of an important PR agency here in Milan. She called me because she knew me, though I have never directly worked with her before. It happened we met once, actually, when I called her up to do agency work while I was working PR for other people. I believe the reputation you have in the sector is very important nowadays." (L., PR Manager, Milan)

To sum up, creative freelancers show high levels of autonomy over tasks, whose performance results in an explicit narrative of liberation from 'office slavery'. At the same time, this is paired with stressful schedules, instability and uncertainty for what the next job will be (see job security, below). More so, the fact that a freelancer's reputation is the invisible element around which labour relations take place leads to pressure and strong concern over this issue. Features of a good job seem to inherently combine with features of a bad job within high levels of job satisfaction. The big quote below shows this contradiction as well as those which pertain more specifically to the context of Milan.

"You start freelancing because you want to give your life another sense of priority. In Italy there is still this perception of the freelancer as a loser, not one who wants the job to be that way. I also observe a lot of people who are forced to do this (to freelance). I see a lot of people that are not able to set up their priorities out of a firm setting, they are not able to find jobs, to maintain their networks. These are not specific competencies. So they find themselves being precarious, that is the B-side of freelancing, you can be a happy independent freelancer of an unhappy precarious freelancer. It's not everyone's condition, but it's what everybody should look at, because there are no permanent jobs anymore, not to mention the editorial and creative sector, the Web... I mean, you have to work really hard at the beginning; when I left my editorial job I had to reconstruct myself professionally, and I'm not ashamed to say that in the first six months I haven't earned enough despite my 15 years experience and a good network. Nevertheless I have made a big effort to reconstruct a decent network and a professional dignity not to be seen as the loser precarious. You have to be very flexible because sometimes you work 'piecework'; in an office you can hide let's say, you can pass some work to your teammates. If you are alone, you only deliver, you are a work-machine, so forget about weekends or night-outs. But, and this is fundamental to me, if on a wednesday morning I don't feel like working I go to the gym, and nobody tells me what I have do to” (S., journalist and communication consultant, Milan)

c) income

Table 3. General statistics on income in the sample - Milan

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<td>Valdi</td>
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<td>Media</td>
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Data on gross earnings per year among freelance creatives in Milan (Table 3) show an average income of 32,487 (euros). If we operate a regression between income as independent variable and job satisfaction as dependent variable in the sample considered (Table 4) we can observe a positive correlation. Income can be considered as an important factor for freelancers in Milan. However, since the coefficient is not so high (0,525) we can also say that income is not able to explain job satisfaction in its entirety. It is likely that other factors affect job satisfaction in the sample considered.
Data on gross earnings in London (Table 5) show that the average income is notably higher than in Milan (38257 pounds). This can be explained by a higher cost of living in London over Milan and also by a much stronger tradition in freelance work that characterizes the UK over Italy (Stanworth and Stanworth, 1997; Fraser and Gold, 2001; Heery et al., 2004; Pratt et al., 2007; Antcliff et al., 2007). If we operate a regression (Table 6) data seem to confirm Kalleberg’s claim (2011) that limiting job quality to job satisfaction via economic compensation does not allow to have a more complex understanding on job quality.

Table 5. General statistics on income in the sample - London
To sum up, we could argue that economic compensation does not seem to be a distinctive priority for freelancers, rather a basic claim. To a larger extent, the issue on income concerns a plurality of aspects. One is the difficulty of being regularly paid. This happens, quite unexpectedly, not only in Milan, but also in London.

“We generally do things, I wouldn't say for free, but in exchange, with projects that we like: it's not always about money, the less of the cases until now. It should be something that really has a value for us, creative or cultural or business side, expanding technology, etc. We have other jobs that pay us, and we sustain our small enterprise with this, and we fear we might go into full time job at some point and go back to this sometime. (…) Especially for communication and marketing, not all people is keen on paying for your work. They pay for the venue, if it is an event, they will pay artists, but your work, you know... There is the false perception of everybody can do it, and second, it is not a tangible thing, it's not quantifiable” (M., project manager, London)

A second and more complex issue concerns the value of creative labour. There are no fixed tariffs and prices for creative jobs; each evaluation is left to the bargaining between the contractor and the client. What a contractor can demand derives, once more, from the contractor's reputation. A good reputation can guarantee the power of bargaining a higher fee as well as more autonomy on the job. In addition, especially for younger professionals, the reputation economy demands for a certain amount of free labour to be performed in order to demonstrate job competence and to construct a profitable professional network. This is perceived as a sort of gift-economy (Barbrook 1998) with self branding purposes that, however, becomes increasingly unacceptable the more one proceeds with the career.

“Income kind of varies a lot... the really difficult thing which I think a lot of freelancers find themselves in... is how much to charge for your own time. What do I charge? I mean I want to be respected in the field, I think I'm a professional in the field... and you can get free jobs like a gate to have other jobs in in the future”

(S., arts professional, London)

d) job security

Income and regularity in payments leads to instances concerning job security. This seems to be a crucial junction to understand job quality across freelance creatives. Freelancing is inherently unstable and insecure; the problematic of payments intertwines with the necessity to entertain relationships profitably in order to maintain a regular flux of incoming jobs. Both in Milan and in London, interviewees put a significant importance on this matter, although articulated in different ways.
However, it can be argued there is a quite sharp division between two groups, that is visible in both cities. On the one hand there are those who feel extremely enthusiastic about their job and emphasize its positive features. On the other hand we can find those who strongly feel precarious and substantially assimilate their working conditions to those with short term contracts in agencies. This is not to be taken as a distinction in terms of seniority; there are young interviewees in the first group, as well as senior creatives in the second group. We could call the first type, 'the enthusiast', and the second type, 'the frustrated'.

The enthusiast

“(working freelance means) getting back your time, and looking for a balance between personal and professional life. I would never go back, I got a second life” (S., communication consultant, Milan)

“It's not a matter of money, it's the need of autonomy, I couldn't go into a “sausage factory”, data in data out” and do the same process, on the same file, all the time” (L., marketing consultant, London)

The frustrated

“We seem supercool but nobody upholds us. It's just a way for employers to pay less their employees. How come tax offices do not see that thousands of people like me send invoices to one client only? If you have the Partita IV A, 60% of your revenues go into taxes and expenses. The rest is for a living.” (G, PR agent, Milan)

“People think that you will be paid by status, they say “I'm working in London” (for free) and I say no, you are a slave in London, let's be honest. They're not working in the strict sense. I'm not here to make money, but I won't be here if I wasn't making money. If you have to work six months for free, it's better you work six months for free for you and not for someone else, if you have ideas...the new working class, you see what I mean? Guys who struggle to live in London doing their own work: artists, actors, writers, and so on” (P., videomaker, London)

There seem to be few strategies available to overcome the issue of job security and the pressure pressure deriving from a 'naturally' unstable job. As suggested above, the main response to prevent job insecurity is the necessity to cultivate one's professional network. The element of networking stands in practice as the main source for stability; having a good network of contacts is perceived as a form of job security, the one which can guarantee a regular amount of jobs coming in (McKinlay and Smith 2009). The quote below shows a practical example of the idea of the Long Tail, 'selling less of more' (Anderson 2006) applied to network-based creative job markets as a strategy to overcome job security.

“Make sure you have as many people that hire you as possible. If you have only two clients and one of those goes bust, or stops using freelancers, you're more o less redundant. If you have 15 clients and one or two go quiet for a year or two, you still have 13 that can make you work. It's better to have more people that use you less, than a few people that use you a lot” (S., copywriter, London)

e) opportunities for advancement

Inextricably related to job security there is also the issue of career advancement. This generally occurs through recommendations. These are common practice both among clients that recommend each other reputable contractors, as well as among freelancers who can not take a job that usually recommend colleagues to their clients. Interviews show a strong perception that in creative industries is 'all about who you know'. Data seem to confirm Randle and Culkin's insight that 'doing the work is fun, finding the work is the job' (Randle and Culkin, 2009).

Networking and recommendations stand as crucial elements for career advancement, though with different degrees of awareness and different interpretations. In London, 'who you know' means that the freelancer is required to do strategic networking in order to construct a reputation in the field and solid network of contacts whose activation guarantees the system of recommendations – and, as
a result, incoming jobs. In Milan, conversely, there is a recurrent discourse giving to the 'who you know' a negative connotation in terms of a form of recruitment that tends to favour friends or relatives, thus being detrimental to professional skills.

“Non-professional networks matter a lot in the way you can get in touch with people, confidential information, events, opportunities...” (B., media professional, Milan)

f) macro-factors (employment structural change)

Structural changes at the level of employment are quite a major factor affecting work in the creative industries. In terms of organizational model, creative industries have been experiencing a radical flexibilization leading to an increasing use of freelance workforce and non-standard forms of employment (Christopherson 2002, 2008; Grugulis and Stoyanova 2011, 2012). The lasting recession has enhanced the number of firms that have cut internal creative divisions and begun to lean on outsourced freelancers or small 'freelance agencies'. The latter are an interestingly new phenomenon consisting in the association of a small number of independent creative professionals with different skills, strategically working to build up network relationships with other agencies as well as with single freelancers, operating at the periphery of giant creative firms.

“I began with a famous advertising agency here in Milan, active nationwide. Then in the early 2000s I opened a small agency together with other two colleagues, we were born as a graphic design agency then we opened up to communication services overall, from strategy to positioning, branding, etc... We are three associates, and we lean on a network of external freelancers. It's the digital technology that has changed the working practices: up until 4-5 years ago you had to be in an office, now you can work on the Web, so our collaborators develop their jobs externally, we talk with them through emails or skype. Let's say there is a logo to be designed. We go to our network, call those we consider more suitable for the job, and who's available gets the work. These young guys are used to work at a distance, with digital technologies. Of course, costs and reductions in revenues have forced us to take this way. Our sector is what firms cut first off their budgets. This new organizational system works, anyway.” (F., creative project manager, Milan)

The quote above introduces another important element in this context. The use of digital forms of intermediation, i.e., social media, for professional purposes has become common practice and reshaped the practices of networking, traditionally a peculiar feature for creatives (Blair 2001, 2009). Freelancers instrumentally use digital resources for recruitment purposes to an unprecedented extent. This represents an element of novelty which deserves a specific reflection. Generalist social media like Twitter and Facebook; professional social network sites such as LinkedIn but also, to a certain extent, a personal website; these are all widely perceived as very important tools to use. Almost all interviewees in both cities declared to use strategically Twitter and LinkedIn for professional purposes; a large number of interviewees received work proposals or created job opportunities by using Twitter and/or LinkedIn, whilst only a tight minority have declared to use Facebook similarly. Almost all participants have acknowledged the importance of these tools for self branding and self marketing (Aunschild and Eikhof 2009; Hearn 2010; Schaefer 2012).

The use of social network sites for professional purposes can be considered a macro-factor since it configures a major shift in employment structural change. Combined with the diffusion of mobile technologies, this has in fact made feasible to work whenever and wherever is possible, simply having a wi-fi connection at disposal. As McRobbie forecast (2002, 2005) there is no longer a material need of a fixed location for the execution of work duties in cultural economies, as shown by a large number of interviewees in both cities who declared to work from home. Homeworking is also an essentially contradictory characteristic for freelancers; though economically convenient as it limits travel expenses and office rentings, it may also be an element of alienation and frustration since it emphasizes the individualization of freelance work. It also stresses the impossibility to knock off work, blurring boundaries between professional and personal spaces and making the freelancer potentially available 24/7 thanks to mobile technologies.
"I've been working from home for some time, but I hated it. It's boring, and you end up working from 8 am to 3 in the morning." (K., event manager, London)

g) demographic factors

Table 7. Data on gender - Milan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER MI</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Deviazione std</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>26956.5217</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16578.3523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>37562.5000</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>27057.3528</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totale</td>
<td>32487.4795</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>21896.7335</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Data on gender - London

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENDER LON</th>
<th>Media</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Deviazione std</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>41562.5000</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>35181.4811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>35147.0588</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17094.0015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totale</td>
<td>38257.5758</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27141.9381</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quantitative data on gender confronted to income and job satisfaction in Milan (Table 7) show an average figure of earnings that is higher for females (value 2). Differently from Milan, demographic data concerning gender in London (Table 8) show a higher average income for men (value 1), whilst in terms of job satisfaction there is an almost perfect equality. Female freelancers in Milan earn significantly more on average than men, but show a slightly inferior average value for job satisfaction. This is likely to be linked to the narrative of liberation, whereby female freelancing allows a more favourable personal life in terms, for instance, of a more difficult balance between work duties and family tasks.

"You can easily find more women than men because freelancing is a dimension which allows to live family and maternity in a different way" (S., communication consultant, Milan)

Table 9. Data on age - Milan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modules</th>
<th>Coefficient non standardizzato</th>
<th>Coefficient standardizzato</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Costa)</td>
<td>-1.3272.610</td>
<td>.1456.360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE_MI</td>
<td>1024.735</td>
<td>377.325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. variable dipendente: INCOME_MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modules</th>
<th>Coefficient non standardizzato</th>
<th>Coefficient standardizzato</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Costa)</td>
<td>2.044</td>
<td>.547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE_MI</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. variable dipendente: SAT_MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coefficient²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modules</th>
<th>Coefficient non standardizzato</th>
<th>Coefficient standardizzato</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Costa)</td>
<td>3.044</td>
<td>.457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE_MI</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INCOME_MI</td>
<td>1.553</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. variable dipendente: SAT_MI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data on age (Table 9 and 10) show that the variable 'age' is not a relevant factor in the assessment on income and job satisfaction in both the samples considered.

Table 10. Data on age - London

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Coefficient (standardized)</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (Constant)</td>
<td>1,122</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.016</td>
<td>.084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUC</td>
<td>12.454</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.584</td>
<td>.094</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Concerning the relevance of the education title, Table 11 (Milan) and Table 12 (London) show that a vast majority of interviewees has an academic degree. Among them, a large number has a degree that is related to the creative environment, obtained from arts academies, design or media and communication courses (centre; 1=related; 2=unrelated). Similarly, it might be argued that possessing a higher education title does not consist in a significative advantage for earnings, nor it leads to more satisfactory jobs. As concerns London (Table 12), despite the small number of cases it can be observed that there is at least a tendency by which having a Ph.D. consists into a significantly higher income and job satisfaction.

However, taken as a whole we should conclude that education title is a variable which does not play a major role in this context. Conversely, creative degrees give students a general and broad preparation for creative professions, that results in a significant hybridization of skills. Specialization and recruitability are not given by educational background, rather by professional practice and fruitful networking. Qualitative insights confirm more explicitly this trait.

“If you are a freelancer your education title does not matters much, whereas if you want to compete for a permanent job it matters more. Some of my colleagues did not even finish university, and they can easily live out of their freelance work. For firms, however, it matters, it is an old requisite for recruitment” (C., designer, Milan)
“Creative world works through personal relationships, and to a certain extent it has to do with your CV. But the most of it is what job is this person doing here and now and what they would be interested to do in the other job that's comfortable. In other sectors the whole CV matters.” (L., creative manager, London)

Table 12. Data on education title - London

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EDU_TITLE</th>
<th>Report</th>
<th>INCOME&gt;Lorem&lt;/p&gt;</th>
<th>Report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Levels</td>
<td>4.0000</td>
<td>35600.0000</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BA</td>
<td>3.7000</td>
<td>39332.5000</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phd</td>
<td>4.0667</td>
<td>41550.0000</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostGrad</td>
<td>4.0000</td>
<td>32236.6423</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Course</td>
<td>3.0000</td>
<td>37550.0000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totale</td>
<td>3.9091</td>
<td>38257.5758</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Online case: Elance.

Elance is a digital marketplace that connects clients and independent contractors across many different professional sectors. The sample considered is made of 54 contractors (33 males, 21 females) who are active on the platform and have a complete profile. A complete profile is one where all data are shown, including the revenues obtained from interactions on the website (that many users hide). Most of the mapped users come from the US (50%); the rest is dispersed mainly among English-speaking countries such as South Africa, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In this section I will try to assess job quality using Kalleberg's guidelines.

No data on job satisfaction are directly available on the platform. The evidence on this issue comes from the interviews conducted to Elance users who accepted to participate to the research. All interviewees present high levels of satisfaction and put remarkable emphasis on the same 'liberating' narrative shown by participants in Milan and London, especially in terms of job autonomy and the release from office duties. In many cases, the decision of joining Elance often came after a redundancy or in the backlash of the recession. Differently from the other contexts considered, the positive characteristics of the job seem to be more important than the negative ones. Participants do not display a similar emphasis on the traits of insecurity and pressure that pertain to the other cases.

“I started my own business when I was 23 years old, and I was of course living in South Africa, my work was going very well when three or four years ago the recession in SA was quite bad, so I lost a lot of my business. At the time I was only working for clients in SA. So I had to look to other ways through which I could earn money from graphic design, or else I would, you know, I would have failed. In that moment I went onto Elance. I think it was three or 4 years, I went online and gave it my best shot.” (H., graphic designer, SA)

“My career had been into local advertising in Ohio. In 2007 I was downsized and I was looking for something to do. What I was doing was art direction, more design, I didn't get to do the illustration and the more creative work. So I started looking around for something different to do, and found online work“Directly, perhaps 75% of my work comes from Elance. (M., illustrator, US)

Average income, here operationalized as earnings obtained from the activity on the platform, is quite low (13332 dollars) and is slightly higher for women over men (Table 13). As in the case of London and Milan, demographics (education title, gender and age) do not play a relevant role in this environment.
In terms of job security, though the same features of inherent freelance instability should apply, there are significant differences in the practices brought along for job continuity. Networking is diminished in its potential, since interaction is limited to the possibility of competing for a job call through the fixed structure provided by the website. The competition among different contractors occurs essentially on the ranking assigned to each user on the basis of precedent works. Feedbacks and reviews are aggregated into a reputation system that is visible on each profile through a box that sums up data on a contractor's reliability. The ranking is widely perceived as the most important element for Elance users.

“I think that it's a very very good system of ranking that Elance has got going. As a client when you get onto Elance they want to find the best for their project. Obviously they want to find the best... it's like the Google search: they will search for the first two or three pages, to find the best. And nowadays I never go and send proposals, I always get invited, that's how I shifted in my business. Of course at the beginning I was sending proposals, now clients find me very easily, cos I'm rated quite high at the moment, I think I'm number 6... I'm rated quite high considering I'm just one person. It's really important, clients will look at my portfolio, see how professional I am, see the feedback... and also they will look at my previous work as well, so they can make a decision on what people have said about them as well... So I think it tells for the security on both sides, having to work with someone without meeting them, cos this is a brand new way of working. (H., graphic designer, SA)”

The reputation system aggregates data on the quality and intensity of feedback and reviews, and develops a score that is the landmark for employability. The overall fieldwork data on the Elance case confirms that having a good reputation on the website significantly affects the revenues of users (Table 14).

"Level" in Table 14 (left) refers to the name of the ranking on Elance.
Data confirm a substantially contradictory scenario. Taken as a whole, the first element that meets the eye is a high level of job satisfaction overall. The 'passion' for the creative job, that for many participants is sometimes not even perceived as a job, significantly affects satisfaction assessments to the extent that it often hides unfriendly, context-specific working conditions that inhabit their daily lives. Economic compensation, here operationalized through gross annual income, though being relevant especially in Milan, does not affect this evaluation decisively. Other elements seem to apply, particularly the role of reputation is to be analyzed in greater detail.

Reputation is revealing to be a cornerstone in creative environments. It operates at three different levels: a) it is the element around which recruitment occurs through the means of networking and recommendations, that function as the usual sources for supply and demand to meet Blair (2001, 2009); b) it is the element that guarantees control in a context where office presence is not required and the freelancer has a good degree of autonomy to organize working time. Achieving and preserving a good reputation is the reason a client can trust a contractor to deliver quality services on time. The delivery of a bad performance would significantly affect the contractor's good name and, consequently, the possibility to remain competitive on the job market, following the common saying 'you are as good as your last job' (Gill and Pratt 2008); c) it is a strong symbolic machine operating in creative 'scenes'. A successful participation to creative environments brings social recognition among peers that translates into job satisfaction, to the extent that creative workers seem to embody a mechanism of 'labour consumption' that defines their lifestyle through their professional choices.

Concerning job quality as here conceived, the 'good' features of creative freelancing include, above all, a substantial degree of autonomy. This results into what was called 'a narrative of liberation' from those typically fordist elements which connote the lives of 'material workers' in terms of time, place and control. The 'bad' features of freelancing are an inherent job insecurity, the uncertainty on what job is going to be next, the stressfulness of schedules, the dependence to sometimes compulsive networking, the pressure towards reputation management concerning image construction and self-branding practices for marketability. In the samples considered there is also a neutral sentiment towards homeworking, that is associated with alienation and isolation as much as it is felt as a favourable option to manage the blurred boundaries between personal and professional life that connotes creative workers. Demographics (age, gender, education) do not seem to be major factors in this picture, according to available data.

This results into two completely different, and to a certain extent seemingly incompatible, approaches. The narrative of 'liberation' and independence, often articulated alongside a strongly entrepreneurial attitude (Ross 2004) strikingly copes with that of precariousness not only in the same job market, but sometimes even in the same interviewee. The presence of anxiety and insecurity is endemic in a labour market where 'you are only good as your last job', and these are not incidental rather structural features of creative labour (Gill and Pratt 2008; Blair 2001). The perception of job quality via job satisfaction is nevertheless highly affected by the 'liberating' and symbolic instances to the extent that, at least for the majority of participants here accounted, the overview on creative freelancing configures the traits of a bad job enthusiastically perceived and lived.

Macro-factors attached to this picture play a big role. The recession and the necessity to reduce labour cost has brought to an extensive use of nonstandard forms of employment and especially freelancing for economic reasons. This combines with the fact that demand and supply do not productively meet, whereby the creative job market is unable to efficiently allocate the ever increasing number of creative graduates. In terms of organizational model it appears as though a transition is in place from a mode of production leaning on dependent work towards a 'freelance' mode of production based on project work (Christopherson 2002, 2008) enhanced by a new wave of
independent professionalism. It seems as though we are confronted to a scenario where Castells's notion of the 'distributed firm' (Castells 1996) combines with the idea of the 'collaborative communities' (Adler and Heckscher 2006) giving way to a distributed reality of networked immaterial production based on highly socialized structures, commonality of skills and affective identification.

This picture of creative employment fruitfully marries with the use of digital technologies. The case of Elance allows to open up a reflection on the potential of social network sites and online marketplaces to become services that are able to operate as authoritative intermediaries in professional relationships, in the same way as Amazon or eBay already do with the purchase of goods or benefits. More so, digital media put affective features at the very heart of their activity. In order to progress on with their career, creatives (especially if self-employed) need to construct a network and build up a good reputation among their contacts. They have to be visible and recognized as active and trustworthy professionals towards their "peers", who can act both as hirers or as "recommenders". Not surprisingly, the element that online social networks and 'offline' creative freelance networks share is the role of reputation.

Online reputation systems across SNSs seem to function as mechanisms able to guarantee for trust and, to a certain extent, as a sort of immaterial currency (Arvidsson and Peitersen 2013). This takes place for instance through the feedback and ranking systems as well as through the social 'buttons' (likes, retweets, etc.) available across the main SNSs (Gerlitz and Helmond 2011). Similarly, the algorithms of Klout (www.klout.com) and Kred (www.kred.com) claim the capacity to assess one's capacity to be influential across the Web (Schaefer 2012), showing also highly controversial traits in terms of the quality of measurement (Gandini, forthcoming).

Elance fieldwork data demonstrate that freelancers need to have a crystal-clear reputation in order to get jobs. On websites like Elance, digital reputation is no longer an intangible asset, rather it becomes visible and measurable. All these instances show the increasing importance of reputation and ranking systems and the necessity of a larger debate on the implications of such a diffusion.

Conclusions. The Creative Class and neoliberalism

Kalleberg's work shows that the growth in inequality between good and bad jobs is related to US labour policies in the 1980s and 1990s contributing to what is now understood as a crisis for the middle class in the United States (Kalleberg 2011:11). Similar reasonings, not quite unexpectedly, apply also to Milan (Bologna 2007). Not surprisingly, the decades mentioned are those where neoliberalism was implemented as a political and economic model favouring entrepreneurial activity (Harvey 2005, 2010).

The relationship between nonstandard forms of employment and neoliberalism across creative labour markets outlines a controversial picture. A decade after Richard Florida's creative class manifesto (2002) we are now confronted to creative labour markets where professionals are required to be increasingly independent and networked. Leaving aside the numerous accounts that criticize Florida's statement (Peck 2005; Pratt 2008) a common element that creative professionals largely seem to share is a middle class background (Grugulis and Stoyanova 2011, 2012). The emphasis on ideological entrepreneurhip and independence that is very much at stake in the creative world, what Andrew Ross called 'the industrialization of Bohemia' (Ross 2004), is deeply connected to neoliberalism and intersect the heart of the crisis of middle class in western economies. The Bohemian industrials appear to be the kids of an upper-middle class that played the role of a 'familial welfare' supplementing for academic training, unpaid internships and free labour (Randle and Culkin 2009).
The implementation of neoliberal policies that shrank labour value and developed freelance work models to manage cost cutting and downsizing intertwines with the emergence of a 'neoliberal culture' that emphasizes entrepreneurial success and competition in highly socialized environments. The narrative on self-employment and culture professionals as new economic pioneers (McRobbie 2005) meets the narrative of precarious work and exploitation in a seemingly inextricable contradiction that is visible in the conflicting attitudes of the freelancers studied in this work. As seen, it appears as though creative freelancing consists of a set of professions which embody the traits of bad jobs enthusiastically lived. The interiorization of these 'neoliberal values' has occurred to the extent that 'the precarious side' finds itself invisible, given the highly attractive symbolic element at stake in this kind of jobs.

However, the economic crisis suggests that the evolution of creative industries towards a 'freelance' mode of production will take place in the aftermath of neoliberalism. In this context reputation, thanks to digital technologies that now make it 'visible' and potentially measurable, can and should be taken into consideration as a major factor in the transition to an economic regime able to allocate resources more efficiently than in the recent past.

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