

Keyword analysis as an ethnographic method: rethinking histories of precarity from Europe's Souths

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Published in: *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa*, 15(3), pp. 399-418, DOI: 10.3240/109424

Abstract

This essay has two intertwined goals. First, it seeks to bring keyword analysis, the «cultural materialist» approach to lexical change pioneered by Raymond Williams, into conversation with ethnographic practice. It argues that the diachronic and synchronic analysis of common concepts can heighten ethnographers' attention to the socio-historical contexts that shape research and challenge assumptions about the meanings of the keywords that they take into the field and encounter therein. Second, the essay examines the consolidation of precarity as a concept and object of academic analysis in Anglophone social sciences over the last two decades and considers the different dimensions and histories that have been elided in the process. In order to demonstrate the possibilities of keyword analysis and to question the ways in which precarity has been appropriated by scholars, it turns its attention to excavating the overlooked and ambiguous meanings and uses of *precarietà* in Italy and in Naples since the 1960s.

Keywords: keyword analysis, precarity, ethnography, Raymond Williams, Italy, Naples

1. Introduction

The first time I went to Italy, it was to live in a small commuter-belt town just outside Milan. It was the autumn of 1990 and I was straight out of school. The following year I was scheduled to start a degree course in Italian at University College London, and so in the meantime, with a few evening classes under my belt and an invitation from a local family, I had decided to move to the country to learn the language. Besides struggling with an array of new vocabulary, I can remember being struck by one word in particular, in part because it translated easily into English and in part because it really annoyed me, for it was not a word that I would have chosen to use back home. It was a word that punctuated everyday conversation, particularly among my peers who I would meet every evening in a little neighbourhood piazza, but also across other age groups. It was used, as I was to later reflect, to articulate and justify claims to social and cultural distinction, with respect to myself as a sort of foreign curiosity, but most commonly in reference to the presumed idiosyncrasies of southern Italians, scores of whom had migrated to the town in the previous forty years. The word in question was

«*mentalità*». This was sometimes deployed to add pseudo-scientific weight to derogatory comments about «*terroni*»: «*hanno una mentalità diversa*» – «they have a different mentality». Indeed, as I soon discovered, my arrival in Italy coincided with the height of brazen anti-southern political rhetoric of the recently formed Northern League, whose foul-mouthed leader, Umberto Bossi, had secured a near permanent place on national television.

Certainly, not everyone used *mentalità* to voice anti-Southern sentiments. Its ubiquity in conversations in provincial Lombardy in the early 1990s was undoubtedly the consequence of a set of overlapping factors that I do not intend to address here. But what subsequently captured my attention and imagination was that over the following years, as I moved back to Italy to live and study and as I switched between geographical and social contexts, I found myself noting the quite rapid decline of this same term. By the time I settled in Naples in the late 1990s, *mentalità* had receded from vernacular and political discourse alike and had been supplanted by words that had been largely absent in everyday speech at the beginning of the decade; words such as *identità* and *cultura*. Today, drawing on my experience of living in a popular but gentrifying neighbourhood in eastern Rome, I can attest to the near total disappearance of *mentalità* from mundane conversation, which is not to say that it might not be present elsewhere or that it might not re-emerge in the future, perhaps with different connotations.

In my ethnographic and archival research in Italy I have been drawn continually to words that appear, at certain moments more than others, to play a performative role in shaping understandings of urban life and social change. I have sought to trace their significance, not just as scientific concepts, but in relation to their shifting and interconnected place in dominant and demotic discourses (Baumann, 1996). My study of the everyday politics of regeneration in Naples (Dines, 2012), for example, explored a series of pivotal terms that emerged in public discussions during the 1990s such as *cittadinanza* (citizenship), *centro storico* (historic centre), *senso civico* (civicness), *patrimonio* (heritage), *identità* (identity) and *degrado* (urban blight). This lexicon is made up of what the Welsh Marxist cultural historian Raymond Williams famously called «keywords»: «deeply familiar words» whose «meanings [are] inextricably bound up with the problems [they are] used to discuss» (Williams, 1983, pp. 14-15).

2. Encountering *precarietà* and precarity

The keyword at the centre of this essay is «precarity» which, for practical reasons, I use here as a short hand for its various adjuncts: precarious, precariousness, precariat, precarisation. Given the Latin root of these words, the equivalent terms in Italian sound quite similar: *precario*, *precarietà*,

preariato, precarizzazione. From the mid-2000s, precarity would increasingly circulate in Anglophone debates in the social sciences and humanities. It has been used to describe and theorise material conditions and ontological experiences, characterised by insecurity and uncertainty, which are seen to have arisen in the wake of the neoliberal restructuring of economic, social and political life. A principal focus is the question of labour – in other words, the expansion and impact of atypical and flexible forms of employment in the face of the dismantling of the welfare state – but the reach of precarity also encompasses other fields such as health, care, human mobility and the environment; situations in which social and biological reproduction – the very sustenance to the existence of life itself – is increasingly in peril.

I first encountered the term *precarietà* when I moved to Naples in the late 1990s as an often politically charged term that expressed a range of problems and responses to the city's chronic dearth of steady employment. In the early 2000s, to a backdrop of increasing political contestation at a global level, the terms *precarietà* and *precario* gained prominence in Italian social movements and were particularly associated with the Milan-based EuroMayDay network, which from 2001 organised annual parades on 1 May around the issue of precarious labour. I was intrigued by the rise of the term in Italy, not only among political activists but also across the mainstream media. Moreover, I found myself in Naples noting the numerous occasions in which the same words cropped up in the textual and audio-visual material of previous decades that I was studying at the time. Precarity, in fact, was not such a new term that some people seemed to suggest.

I should here confess that my initial response to the term was somewhat ambivalent. As someone who was then actively involved in social movements in Naples, I was captivated by the irreverent and creative politics of EuroMayDay and by the way in which *precarietà* was not used solely to critique an insecure present (even if this connotation would become increasingly dominant) but also to imagine a move beyond the current impasse and towards new forms of organisation. At the same time, I was rather irritated by the way in which *precarietà* was rapidly turned into a new shibboleth of Italian movements, and how it was used to explain away phenomena, such as irregular work, that had always existed, especially in Naples. Furthermore, I was convinced that the word would never make sense in political circles in Britain; a country that had a longstanding experience of labour deregulation and a vocabulary apparently already in place to describe it.

A few years later, when I returned temporarily to London to take up an academic post, I remember raising similar objections about the term in discussion with Italian, Greek and Danish colleagues and comrades. It was not long after the 2004 European Social Forum that had been held in London, on which occasion the «Middlesex Declaration of the European Precariat» had introduced the new southern European terminology into British activist repertoires (Foti, 2009). We had met to

consider applying for funding to explore the genealogy of precarity across Europe. While attracted to the project, I was sceptical about the usefulness of applying this term to read the transformations in the UK since the 1970s. The fact that the Middlesex Declaration had been presented at «Beyond the ESF», a parallel initiative in open dispute with the organisation and themes of the official Forum, was testimony to the marginal place of precarity in British leftist politics in the mid-2000s. Of course, I was wrong about the term never taking off. The funding proposal did not progress beyond our initial discussion, but shortly afterwards I observed with interest as precarity first slowly, and later quite rapidly, entered Anglophone social science where it would end up outliving its usefulness as a mobilising term for social movements.

Two preliminary general points should be made here. First, prior to scholarly investment in the concept of precarity, the term was already being used and theorised in non-academic contexts, especially, as I have just noted, in activist spheres. Second, the calques «precarity» and «precariat» entered into English during the period via other languages, especially Italian, but also French and Spanish. However, as precarity has acquired conceptual currency in Anglophone social science, these two cardinal points have not always been acknowledged.

Furthermore, while the English term has become increasingly polysemous and has been the focus of quite vociferous dispute, it has largely remained anchored to two basic premises: first, that precarity is rooted in our current neoliberal age; and, second, that it alludes to an essentially negative condition. This essay instead draws attention to the longer and more contradictory history of the term *precarietà* and to confront its genesis with how the idea of precarity has been introduced into academic debates. The issue is not so much that alternative histories and meanings have been repeatedly overlooked but that there appears to have been little concern to even entertain the possibility that these might exist. It is precisely the disruptive return of the terms of our analysis that illuminates the semantic properties that a keyword, in a given context of use, incorporates and leaves out. Janet Roitman raises a similar point in her book *Anti-Crisis* in which she reflects on how the concept of «crisis» has increasingly framed our understandings of social phenomena. Interrogating the ubiquitous invocation of crisis in the United States since 2008, Roitman argued «when crisis is posited as the very condition of contemporary situations, certain questions become possible while others are foreclosed» (Roitman, 2014, p. 41).

The goal of this essay, therefore, is not to argue for a particular «correct» definition of precarity or to question its appropriateness for social research. On the contrary, I believe it has a powerful analytical role to play in our current uncertain times. Rather, through a focus on Italy and Naples, the aim here is to frame precarity in relation to the evolution of *precarietà* and to thus grapple with two very different premises. First, a key moment in the formulation of *precarietà* – as an

enunciated idea – is not to be found in neoliberalism but in the fissures and tensions exposed by modernisation, austerity and politicisation of the 1960s and 1970s. Second, from the outset precarity held more ambiguous, indeed positive, connotations. Without attending to the historical and socially positioned variations in meaning, however incongruous these may be, precarity risks becoming a concept that is both blunt and, I would contend, decidedly *anti-ethnographic*. In other words, this essay is not just about precarity per se. It is interested to think more broadly about the relationship between the diachronic and synchronic shifts in meaning of commonly used terms, on the one hand, and attempts on the part of social scientists to define and/or prescribe their conceptual boundaries, on the other.

There are, of course, different approaches to thinking about semantic change, from Reinhart Koselleck's conceptual history to Michel Foucault's archaeological method (Koselleck, 2002; Foucault, 2002). For the analytical and practical purposes at hand, I believe there is much to be gained from Raymond Williams' approach to lexical analysis. In order to develop a reflection on precarity, the next section briefly outlines Williams' cultural materialist approach to the study of keywords – which is underpinned by the premise that common shared terms arise from and are transformed by the material conditions in which they are generated – and suggests how this might be brought into conversation with the practice of ethnography.

3. Keyword analysis: a tool and a challenge for ethnography

«Keyword[s]» promis[e] to unlock a wealth of sociological information on culturally mediated and inflected social change, within a cultural materialist paradigm that insists that we should not, in an idealist fashion, understand concepts only in relation to other concepts, but rather, crucially, in relation to the material, practical world of their use. (Moran, 2021, pp. 1027-1028).

My ethnographic fieldwork on Naples has been fundamentally shaped by an engagement with anthropological and sociological texts, many of which contributed to redressing popular and scientific commonplaces about Neapolitan society. This said, I have often found myself frustrated by the lack of attention on the part of both foreign and local researchers on Italy towards the historical context of everyday concepts. Michael Herzfeld's excellent study of evictions in a central popular district of Rome, *Evicted from Eternity*, provides an illustrative example (Herzfeld, 2009). During the course of the book, Herzfeld explores ways in which ideas about the «civic» and «civil» shape local people's responses to urban restructuring and displacement in their neighbourhood. «*Civico*» and «*civile*» were among a number of terms that permeated public and political discourse during the 1990s following the collapse of the First Republic and the reform of local politics (which coincided with Herzfeld's period of fieldwork). Herzfeld, however, appears more inclined to trace the scholarly and analytical

lineage of these two terms. Hence, rather than deliberating on how and why they were differently implicated in the speech of local people *at this particular moment in time*, he seeks guidance in the work of other anthropologists such as Sydel Silverman who had considered the same themes in a small Umbrian town in the 1960s (Herzfeld, 2009, p. 182). This is a pity because we lose sight of potentially rich ethnographic material: namely how and why «*civico*» and «*civile*» were now being used to recodify ways of doing and thinking about things, and to commend or censure the actions of others.

My critical reading of social science texts on Italy has been influenced, to a considerable degree, by my formative years in academia: first as a student of Italian language and history, and later as a doctoral researcher influenced, in part, by Birmingham School cultural studies with its emphasis on the interconnections between ideology, power, culture and language (Hall et al., 1978). It was also shaped by my early encounter with Raymond Williams and his deceptively simplistic book *Keywords* (Williams, 1983). Williams' inquiry into the historical ebb and flow of terms such as «class» and «culture» in British society, left a lasting impact on my approach to empirical research.

Williams contended that we can «best understand the character and thought of an era not through its dominant beliefs, but through the problems and debates inadvertently revealed in its words» (Cuddy-Keane, Hammond and Peat, 2014, p. x). According to Williams, keywords comprise

not the specialized vocabulary of a specialized discipline, though [they] often overlap with several of these, but a general vocabulary ranging from strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage to words which, beginning in particular specialized contexts, have become quite common in descriptions of wider areas of thought and experience. This, significantly, is the vocabulary we share with others, often imperfectly, when we wish to discuss many of the central processes of our common life (Williams, 1983, p.14).

The analysis of such vocabulary over time and across space can unsettle our claims as social scientists to know the world through the meanings we attribute to words. For example, a reflexive deployment of the word «*degrado*», today commonly understood to signify a general state of physical, social and moral decay, would need to grapple with the fact that this same term has only been used systematically in the Italian language since the early 1970s. From its early sporadic use, for instance as a critical expression among progressive town planners and heritage campaigners to denounce links between political neglect and urban disrepair particularly in historic centres of cities, the significance of «*degrado*» has since changed considerably; not in relation to the transformation of an objective situation that comes to be defined as «*degrado*» but because of the shifting material, ideological and cultural conditions that have shaped the ways in which an increasingly wider range of people use this word to define social phenomena. Over the last three decades «*degrado*» has at times had a powerful performative function in everyday discourse across different contexts in Italy.

Its public declaration can lead to the stigmatisation of social groups, activities and forms of behaviour, that previously were not grouped under the same banner.

Keyword analysis clearly raises a set of methodological questions. In order to reconstruct the history of terms, Raymond Williams relied on a close cross-reading of the thirteen volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary, coupled with his deep knowledge of erudite and popular literature. The variety and accessibility of texts have increased vastly with the advent of information technology. Online newspaper archives often come with word searches that allow us to examine the quantitative and qualitative evolution of words in the public sphere, while Google's N-gram search engine based on a massive corpus of printed books since 1500 (<https://books.google.com/ngrams/>) can, with due precautions, provide preliminary indications about changes in word frequencies over time.

Williams, however, noted that most of the social and intellectual issues shaping keywords «persisted within and beyond the linguistic analysis» (Williams, 1983, p. 16). In other words, keyword analysis is alert to the historical and social contexts in which terms are used but also needs to be combined with broader understandings of societal and political change. As such, there is great scope to integrate keyword analysis into wider social research, both as a means to assemble a thick understanding of concepts prior to entering the field and as a research strategy during fieldwork itself, from attending to the contexts in which terms are articulated by selected groups of people to tracking the fortunes of the same terms, for example, on social media.

Keyword analysis ultimately demands a research sensibility that has much in common with ethnographic practice itself: meticulousness; sensitivity to context; long-term commitment and the cultivation of intimacy; and the readiness to embrace serendipitous encounter. Williams stressed that the findings from his lexical investigations were unfinished and generative rather than final glossaries. Moreover, Williams was well attuned to questions of power in the process of defining words. He wrote scathingly, for example, about the semantic quibbles of the British upper middle classes who in their letters to newspapers would often resort to phrases like «I see from my Webster» and «I find from my Oxford Dictionary»:

Usually what was at issue was a difficult term in an argument. But the effective tone of these phrases, with their interesting overtone of possession («my Webster»), was to appropriate a meaning which fitted the argument and to exclude those meanings which were inconvenient to it but which some benighted person had been so foolish as to use [...] [For words] which involve ideas and values, [this] is not only an impossible but an irrelevant procedure (Williams, 1983, p. 17)

Ethnographers, I would argue, often find themselves in not dissimilar positions, poised as they often are between the prerogative to have the last (critical) word and an analytical commitment to the positioned words and voices that emerge in the field.

4. Contemporary precarity in the Anglophone social sciences

In order to marshal the sensibilities and strategies offered by Williams' cultural materialist approach for the purposes of ethnographic research and to explore the possibilities of a multilingual, cross-cultural keyword analysis, I want to return to «precarity» and «*precarietà*» and to reflect further on the former's rise as a popular concept in Anglophone social sciences. Writing a decade ago in *American Anthropologist*, the journal of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), Andrea Muehlebach, whose work primarily focuses on Italy, dedicated her annual review of research to «anthropologists' heightened attunement to precarity» (Muehlebach, 2013, p. 297). At the 2012 AAA annual meeting, the Global North's paramount gathering of anthropologists, «precarious» and «precarity» had started to establish themselves as reference points in discussions, with two sessions and nine papers with the word «precarious» in their titles, two papers with the word «precarity» in their titles, and a further two sessions with «precariat» and «*precaridad*» in their respective titles. The presentations revolved largely around the themes of labour, social life, politics and neoliberalism and their geographical focus spanned from the United States and Japan to Brazil, South Africa and India. Since 2017 «precarity» has been included in the topic index of the conference programme, and in 2018 reached its highest point of frequency when it featured in the titles of 9 sessions and 27 papers.¹ In her 2012 review, Muehlebach describes precarity as «a shorthand for those of us documenting the multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails» (2013, p.298). She commends researchers who

expertly provincialize universalizing claims about precarity by pointing to how the contemporary sensorium is culturally and historically mediated – grounded in local vernaculars of labor, family, society, wealth, desire, and loss. Yet their shared use of the term does point toward our increased attunement to how

¹ The programmes for each AAA annual meeting since 1976 (minus the years 2006, 2007, 2020 and 2021) can be found here: <https://annualmeeting.americananthro.org/general-info/future-past/>. The term «precarity» appeared for the first time at the 2009 annual meeting in a paper entitled «The politics of translation and knitting: methods, knowledges and the European movements against precarity» presented by the Spanish anthropologist Maribel Casas-Cortés who at the time was based in the United States. Significantly, Casa-Cortés is one of the few anthropologists writing in English to pay close attention to the use and theorisation of the term outside academia (Casas-Cortés, 2021). «Precarity» next reappeared in one session and three papers in the 2011 edition and from the 2014 edition it would consistently outnumber «precarious» as the more frequent word of choice.

a set of factors, including increased economic uncertainty [...] have eroded not just labor and the state but also the possibility of life itself. (ibid.)

For anthropology, therefore, the object called «precarity» is a global concern and, at the same time, geographically and historically situated. It is noticeable, however, that in her list of «vernaculars», Muehlebach fails to include precarity itself. Indeed, although she notes how the experience of precarity has insinuated itself into the corridors of anthropology departments in the working lives of untenured scholars, there is no sense about how this concept travels and is articulated by others. As she intimates, it is *our* shorthand for documenting *our* age.

Here is not the place to expand on the ongoing debates around what precarity *is* and *does* in the current era. This essay wants to address an alternative set of questions, namely: given its recent foothold in the social sciences, how have authors introduced «precarity» into their work? Have they reflected on its past and have they considered how non-academics deploy the same term?

It is possible to identify some general trends. First, many researchers simply do not contemplate the provenance of the term at all. It is increasingly (and perhaps inevitably) taken for granted that it has now entered into the conceptual toolbox of social scientists in order to be used for analysing and theorising contemporary social phenomena.

Second, a common tactic is to identify path-setting texts by key intellectuals, for example Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004), or major controversies, such as the heated debate around Guy Standing's 2011 book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Such citations can provide a degree of conceptual ballast, or else they can mark the starting point for developing the idea in a new direction.

Third, scholars have sometimes looked to etymology to endorse the definitions they assign to the term. For example, Alexander Vasudevan's discussion of precarity in relation to squatting points out the word's roots in Latin and its first recorded use in English in the seventeenth century as a legal status of insecure tenancy in order to advance the argument that today «precarity [...] designates a state of insecurity that is not natural but constructed» (Vasudevan, 2014, p. 351). Raymond Williams noted the pitfalls of etymology, namely that «one of the effects [...] is to produce what can best be called a sacral attitude to words [...] The original meanings of words are always interesting. But what is often most interesting is the subsequent variation» (Williams, 1983, pp. 20-21).

Finally, a substantial number of researchers, especially those with an interest in social movements, do in fact ruminate on the extra-academic and non-English meanings of precarity. However, this interest rarely goes back further than the early 2000s. Significantly, this also tends to be the case with social scientists working on the topic in Italy. Princeton-based anthropologist Noelle Molé has addressed precarity in her research on «mobbing» in the city of Padua. For Molé, the rise

of psychological harassment in the workplace needs to be understood in the context of Italy's rapid transition from a highly protectionist state to a market-oriented labour regime, instigated by a raft of legislation between the 1990s and 2000s that introduced a variety of atypical employment relations. The same period also saw the emergence of a new vocabulary: «Italians use the term «precarious» (*precario*) for this new assortment of what social scientists, notably economists, refer to as «flexible» short-term or self-employed job contracts» (Molé, 2012, p. 4). Molé later explicitly historicises the term: «In the period after the passage of the Biagi Laws [in 2003], precarity became a strong Italian and European catchword for economic changes» (p. 24), adding that «precarity is one culturally and historically specific formulation of millennial capitalism» (p. 25).

In contrast, the political sociologist Alice Mattoni has examined the political and media practices of precarious workers in Italy, including EuroMayDay organisers, and is thus more attentive to how precarity has been deployed in activist contexts. Nevertheless, like Molé, Mattoni sees «precarity» as a recent linguistic invention that encapsulates the social and economic fallout caused by the neoliberal deregulation of the labour market: «precarity, as a concept indicating the negative outcomes of flexibility, was not a common term in the Italian context [prior to the 2000s]» (Mattoni, 2016, p.8). Ultimately Mattoni does not probe activists' adopted terminology because she is chiefly interested to make sense of the novelties represented by their political action.

Taking up Andrea Muehlebach's call to provincialise notions of precarity, it is important to note that when Mattoni and Molé speak of the «Italian context» they actually refer to specific geographical areas: the urban conurbations of the North where industrial labour was once a cornerstone of society and where the impact of restructuring has arguably been most marked. The South, with its longstanding experience of informal economies and labour shortages, is conspicuously absent. In any case, from these two key books on precarity in Italy – one by a US anthropologist, the other by an Italian sociologist – we gain little insight into the social history of the term, besides the fact that it has recently become popular and is used to allude to a set of negative processes under neoliberalism.

There are some notable exceptions to the general picture just sketched, particularly in the work of scholars engaging with non-English language texts, and especially since the late 2010s as «precarity» has become integrated into social science research. A number of feminist scholars have insisted that women have long been engaged in types of employment that we would today label precarious. Eloisa Betti (2016) reconstructs this relationship in post-war Italy, and by doing so revisits mainstream economic debates in the 1970s around the language of «*lavoro precario*» (see also Betti, 2018). Others have examined the theorisation of the concept of precarity outside academia, particularly in activist circles in southern Europe (Casas-Cortes, 2021). Meanwhile, Eli Thorkelson

examines the conceptualisation of *précarité* in academic labour struggles in France, indicating how this has operated, inter alia, to occlude social class and race and to universalise a sense of elite disappointment (Thorkelson, 2016, p. 476).

Some isolated attempts have also been made to engage with qualitatively different meanings of precarity. The UK-based sociologist Stephen Shukaitis is among a handful of scholars writing in English to acknowledge an alternative history of the concept. He revives the memory of «beautiful precarity», elaborated in the 1970s by Italian leftists such as Franco Berardi to indicate «a greater sense of flexibility and life arrangements [from the factory regime], and the ability to collectively subtract (at least partially) from capitalism» (Shukaitis, 2009, p. 167). It should be noted that Shukaitis limits his discussion of this heterodox history to radical leftist thought, and to one specific strand (that of *Autonomia Operaia*), which he insinuates to be the progenitor of the term «precarity».

Finally, the sociologist Jean-Claude Barbier has conducted one of the very few pre-2000 conceptual histories of precarity, focusing on the specific national context of France (Barbier, 2022). Barbier notes that, unlike other European languages, the term *précarité* has been long established in French and has been used across different fields. Charting its development since the late 1970s, he makes the somewhat rash claim that the concept originated in France and «was later disseminated to other «Latin» languages» (Barbier, 2022, p.15) in southern European countries, although it was «used only in the context of jobs and employment and not in the context of any wholesale «precarization» of society» that occurred in French (ibid., p.18). As a sort of stamp of legitimacy, he reminds us that Pierre Bourdieu, no less, exclaimed in his 1998 book *Contrefeux* that «*la précarité est aujourd'hui partout*» (today precarity is everywhere) (ibid., p. 15). Barbier is only able to make his claim because he concentrates on sociological and labour organisation research conducted mainly in French and English, he does not possess the same depth of knowledge about research elsewhere and, importantly, he does not entertain the possibility that conducting a similar lexical analysis in another language might produce different, unexpected results. In his eagerness to pinpoint the «locus where usage originally appeared» (ibid., p.15), Barbier disavows the concomitant presence of multiple meanings and histories of «precarity» in Italian and other languages, and provides an implausibly smooth overview of its genesis. Moreover, the concept of precarity ultimately remains within the jurisdiction of scholarly thought.

Despite their various limits, these few studies offer important signposts for further inquiry. As noted, keyword analysis is not about searching for an original moment but building thick understandings of the contingent uses and meanings of words over time. The fact of the matter is that «precarity» and «precariousness» have actually long existed in English albeit without always becoming keywords. For example, Dorothy Day in 1952 wrote an article for the *Catholic Worker*

entitled «Poverty and Precarity» in which she documents the term being used by French and Martinican priests working in homeless shelters and even intimates at the religiously emancipatory dimension of precarity, although hers remained an isolated use even within the world of the Catholic labour movement (Day, 1952; Millar, 2017).

5. Prehistoric traces of *precarietà* in Italy and Naples

The aim of the last part of this essay is not to advocate for a «philologically correct» account of precarity but to bring the concept into conversation with the ambivalent history of the equivalent Italian keywords of *precario* and *precariato*. Just as we should interrogate current interests in precarity, we should also be asking similar questions for previous periods. Hence, the reasons for the increasing *systematic* use of *precario* and *precariato* in Italy during the late 1960s and 1970s needs to be sought in the material, social and political conditions that influenced its deployment. Among the various factors to consider for a keyword analysis, one could single out the following three for special attention: first and foremost, after 1968 there was a conscious search on the part of different social groups for a new vocabulary that was able to articulate the dramatic changes to Italian society; second, the same period saw a massive increase in trade union and militant political activity that not only struggled for better pay and conditions, but now focused on the quality and (non)desirability of labour itself; and, finally, rapid modernisation and urbanisation in the 1960s and the concomitant emergence of new forms of political organisation had a significant impact on the non-industrial working classes, especially in urban areas of the South where many people had long managed everyday survival around unstable and informal sources of income.

Such points contribute to a framework for making better sense of the appearance of precarity in academic, political and public discourse during the period. For example, the economist Paolo Sylos Labini, cited in Eloisa Betti's 2016 study, includes the label «precarious worker» in his influential 1974 study of the transformation of social class in Italy (Sylos Labini, 1974). Drawing on available data, he proposes a breakdown of Italy's «precarious population». Three-and-a-half million people fell into this category: 25 per cent of the working classes were «precarious» (with over two thirds concentrated in the South), as were 10 per cent of the lower middle classes, such as self-employed artisans adversely affected by the rise of mass production in the 1960s. «Precarious workers», in other words, were already being incorporated into statistical information in the early 1970s. During the same decade, radical intellectuals also reflected on the contributions that a «precarious» workforce could make to class struggle. For example, Sergio Bologna wrote in his widely read 1978 essay «The

Tribe of the Moles» of the need «to emphasise the question of precarious labour [and to] reject the «rhetoric of poverty»» (Bologna, 1978).

Regardless of the public reach of these various texts, one should not forget that mainstream economics and revolutionary political theory are quite limited domains for analysing keywords. It is at this point that a more systematic and broader approach across different fields can become productive and, indeed, exciting. One possible option, as suggested above, is to conduct word searches in electronic newspaper archives.

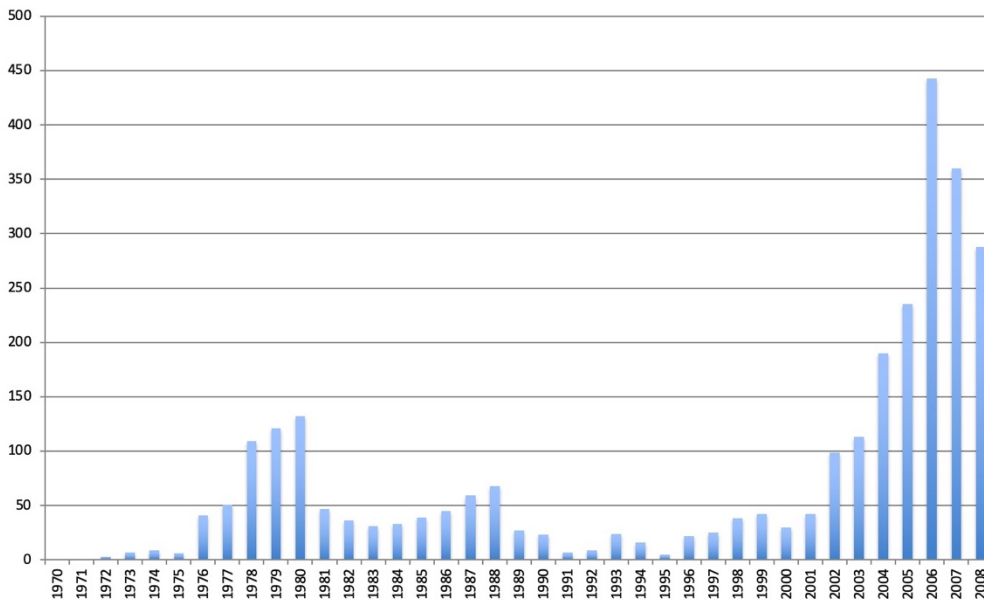


Fig. 1. Number of pages mentioning the word «*precariato*» in *L'Unità* (1970-2008).

Source: <https://archivio.unita.news/search>

Figure 1 shows the number of pages in which the word *precariato* (*precariat*) appeared in *L'Unità*, the former official newspaper of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), between 1970 and 2008.² The graph, based on data produced by the newspaper's online archive, indicates that it was relatively common to read this term in the newspaper in the late 1970s. It then declined in the 1980s, almost went out of use at certain points in the 1990s, only to be resurrected and rapidly increase during the 2000s. A similar pattern is produced by a search for *precarietà*. This word averaged 321 pages a year between 1976 and 1980, after which it declined in use, reaching an all-time low of 29 pages in 1995 (the only year to have a lower count was 1970), before returning to a comparable level in the 2006-

² The historical archive of *L'Unità* is comprised of separate PDF files for each page of every edition published between 1924 and 2014. The numerical results produced by word searches therefore refer to the page rather than the article, which means that potentially the same word can appear in more than one article on a single page.

2010 period when it averaged 300 pages.³ These sets of results immediately challenge some of the arguments cited in the previous section, such as Mattoni and Molé's suggestions that precarity was a «new millennial concept» and Barbier's claim that *précarité* was a French invention that was subsequently exported to other Latin countries. The results also countercheck Shukaitis' accent on the pioneering role of Autonomia intellectuals in forging a more expansive meaning of precarity: not only do *precariato* and *precarietà* appear far more widespread and their meanings more multidimensional than is usually presumed, but they were being peddled in none other than *l'Unità*, the official organ of the PCI that, in the eyes of autonomists, was a symbol of orthodoxy and resistance to change. What is worth underlining from a methodological point of view is that the data presented in the graph only takes a few minutes to retrieve: to get started one simply needs to insert the word of choice and search dates in the open-access archive at the following link: <https://archivio.unita.news/search>.⁴

What did *precariato* and *precarietà* refer to in the late 1970s and why was it relatively common to read about it in daily newspapers during the period? Many of the retrieved articles primarily mention these words in relation to qualified teachers, university lecturers and doctors who were unable to find stable employment in their professions. This was during a period of post-oil crisis austerity, reduced spending on public services and rising unemployment among graduates at a time of expansion of the Italian university education. Precarity is first of all a label used by these workers to denote their predicament, but it also a condition against which these workers mobilise, and ultimately, it is a term that enters officially into legislative measures aimed at resolving the situation (see, for example, Fossi, 1977; Ciconte, 1978). This connection between «*precarietà*» and low-entry-level knowledge workers has remained a major, nationwide dimension of precarity in Italy, that periodically becomes a focus of public and political attention. The longstanding struggles for permanent positions in state schools, however, are not the typical image that social scientists associate with precarity today!

Precarity, as both a word and a set of experiences, was particularly pronounced in the city of Naples. Besides the connotations that existed at national level, the term was closely bound up with the conditions and plight of the urban poor concentrated in the city centre. The low-income inhabitants of the historic neighbourhoods often had strained relationships with other social groups in the city, in particular the middle classes who had abandoned the centre after the war for modern apartment blocks in the periphery, but also with the institutional Left which treated them with

³ It is important to note that the word *precarietà* can be translated as both «precarity» and «precariousness», and so it is also used as a general descriptive term – for example, as in the case of «*precarietà parlamentare*» (parliamentary precariousness) – and therefore does not always possess the sorts of meanings that have been discussed in this essay.

⁴ For a different, more mainstream perspective, one could conduct the same word search on the historical archive of the Turin-based *La Stampa* (although it is somewhat less user-friendly than *l'Unità*): <http://www.archiviolaStampa.it/>.

suspicion on account of their reputed distaste for industrial labour and propensity for spontaneous revolt (Dines, 2014). The 1970s saw a shift in ways of thinking about the Neapolitan «popular classes» by parts of the post-1968 new Left. Political organisations such as Lotta Continua rejected the traditional category of «lumpenproletariat» with its negative connotations, and instead adopted the term «precarious proletariat» so as to underline its strategic role in capitalist relations of production and class struggle:

The spread of this class, its relations with the neighbourhood and its direct experience of the worst possible condition, that of periodically having to struggle for survival, make it a natural link with the most destitute proletariat (Esposito, 1973, p.185).

At the same time, precarity also entered into the vocabulary of the popular classes themselves. Generally deemed by the upper echelons of local society to be politically fickle and unreliable, numerous members of the popular classes became increasingly politicised in the 1970s. One key experience was the Organised Unemployed Movement, which at its peak in 1975 amassed almost 15,000 active members and strove for the provision of regular jobs on the basis of need and commitment to struggle rather than through party-political connections. The following is a passage from one of the life stories of members of the movement collected by Fabrizia Ramondino:

My job is a way like any other of continuing to suffer, but while suffering you can live, as long as there's the hope that one day something might change, and we unemployed stretch ourselves to the limit to change our current situation, from precarious workers (*lavoratori precari*) with short-term precarious contracts (*contratti precari*) into stable and secure workers (Ramondino, 1977, p.13).

Precarity was not confined to the speech of militants in the 1970s, even if there is a considerable distance between the pamphleteering of Sergio Bologna and a middle-aged Neapolitan with a life-long experience of underemployment. The word «*lavoro precario*» was, and still is, a common phrase among low-income Neapolitans that overlaps with local definitions of labour. In Naples the common dialectal word for work is «*fatica*» (fatigue, i.e. toil), not the Italian «*lavoro*». UK-based anthropologist Italo Pardo, who conducted ethnographic research on the popular classes in the historic centre of Naples during the 1980s, has elaborated on this distinction.

The majority of local men and women of *popolino* origins have some direct experience of work in workshops, shops or stalls. They attach unambiguously positive meanings to such dependent employment when it is a source of extra income which allows flexibility and financial welfare under negotiable work

conditions, but they describe it as unfair and precarious *faticà sotto* ' *o padron* ' (toiling under a master) when it is one's only or main way of earning a living (Pardo, 1996, p. 25).

Regardless of whether such distinctions hold true across all of the popular classes, Pardo points to ideas about work and entrepreneurial spirit that jar with the figure of the stable worker under Fordism. Unless unavoidable, there is a tendency towards a refusal of *fatica*, particularly when this is perceived to be, as Pardo notes, «unfair and precarious». Another British-based anthropologist working in Naples during the same period, Victoria Goddard (1997), instead discusses the gendered dimension of «precarious labour» in the popular neighbourhoods, where women, many with husbands in prison, had little choice but to take on low-paid and sporadic outwork in the informal garment industry. At the same time, in doing so, many were able to maintain control over domestic space and retain contact with local kin and extra-kin networks.

It was precisely this precarious *condition* rather than solely precarious *labour* – the insecurity of work vis-à-vis the capacity to defy the constraints of wage labour in order to retain a degree of personal sovereignty in everyday life – that was also seen to be potentially liberating. To be precarious was to be deprived of long-term social and economic security, but it also meant freedom. This is summed up well by Maria Antonietta Macciocchi in her book *Letters from Inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser*, which beautifully describes her experience on the campaign trail as a last-minute PCI candidate in Naples in the 1968 general election and how she becomes beguiled by the frictions and mutual mistrust existing between the industrial working class and the so-called sub-proletariat. Almost heretically she finds herself empathising with the latter:

A sub-proletarian, who «invents» his work every day, has a precarious existence, but he does «enjoy» a form of freedom and independence from all bosses. And in that sense he does feel himself to be as free as a bird. This is why he looks down on the worker, for – as a comrade told me – he thinks: «That bloke shuts himself up in a jail all day long, he turns himself into a slave, he agrees to obey a boss...» (Macciocchi, 1973, p. 184).

The tensions between labour and freedom and between poverty and discipline have persisted in Naples, and indeed were inscribed in the meanings of precarity during my residence in the city between the mid-1990s and mid-2000s. «*Precarietà*» during this period did not simply refer to the deregulation of labour markets, but also spoke to the enduring relationships with informal and illicit economies, to the unresolved dilemma of negotiating everyday risks versus the desire for autonomously devised means of remuneration, and to the auxiliary, albeit often stigmatised, role of social networks that tended to deviate from state-endorsed ways of doing and obtaining things. While

reconfigured by global economic changes and national labour legislation, Naples also repeatedly diverges from routine narratives about a post-Fordist and neoliberal Italy and the images and ideas this conveys – including with regard to precarity (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008).

Conclusion

This essay began with a personal «ethnographic» encounter with precarity and *precarietà*. Incisive ethnography, among many other things, hinges on the capacity of the ethnographer to accurately capture, process and describe the socio-historical contexts in which their research takes place. This extends to the socio-historical contexts shaping the terms and concepts we share with people in the field and whose semantic boundaries we often – perhaps unwittingly – assume to control.

It is important to reflect on why the historically-layered and socially-situated meanings of *precarietà* discussed in this essay continue to be lost on many social-science scholars engaging with the concept of precarity today. Besides perhaps a general lack of interest to excavate past uses, one might argue that the key issue here is one of language. Not everyone, of course, can read Italian. But as we have seen, those working on Italy and who make claims about the origins of precarity, do not look far into the past or askance at other meanings. The fact that there are a number of texts highlighting the non-Anglophone development of the term should be enough reason to be cautious about making claims in its name. The problem is that much of this material tends to be confined to a neoliberal timeframe which has had the effect of foreclosing different reflections on precarity.

There are, I believe, also other issues at play. First, the political ferment of the 1970s that gave rise to discussions about precarity was abruptly followed by a decline in collective action and a retreat into the private sphere. Debates around precarity dissipated during the course of the 1980s, and while the 1990s saw a resurgence of political activism and a revival of past repertoires, by the time precarity resurfaced as a mobilizing term, societal conditions and the subjects of reference had changed dramatically. Second, the more emancipatory implications of precarity that were being articulated during the 1970s, such as social autonomy and freedom from wage labour, were to a certain extent enabled, as Shukaitis himself notes, by relatively strong welfare structures and social and political support networks that have since been scaled back or fallen apart. In other words, the «beautiful precarity» of yesteryear is less plausible today. Finally, while Naples during the post-war era was typically understood as a city that *lacked* – a modern class structure, a Fordist organisation of work, decorous public space, etc. – the language of precarity, instead, was in superabundance. And yet the discourses and struggles around precarity have remained relatively inconspicuous outside the local context. The Organised Unemployed Movement, for instance, was often considered a novel but

isolated experience that ultimately capitulated to factionalism and clientelism. The fact that this alternative history of precarity is largely overlooked in today's debates also attests to the peripheral place of Naples in the production of social and urban theory.

What, then, is the purpose of keyword analysis? Does it make any difference, or is it, rather, a distraction from the proper work that we should be doing? Is it just about putting the record straight, or can it contribute, in this case, to a deeper understanding of the processes and conditions now commonly referred to as precarity? These rhetorical questions aside, I want to reiterate that I find a lot of the scholarship on precarity to be far-reaching in terms of grappling with key dilemmas of the present era. But I also believe that a keyword analysis can serve to reveal and make better sense of the layers of complexity that constitute our current «precarious» times. As a method, it operates as a mnemonic device, reminding us that the uses and meanings of concepts can never be legislated by social scientists alone but are continually reconfigured out there in the field. Years ago, George Marcus and Michael Fischer asserted that the challenge is not to «do away with the synchronic ethnographic frame, but to exploit fully the historical within it» (1999, p. 96). Keyword analysis sits between the synchronic and the historical. Yes, it can be very time-consuming, but so is serious ethnography.

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