A Glance at Work

Educational Perspectives

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Diverse Jobs: Atypical Work and Formation to Support an Unstable Balance

Maria Rita Mancaniello

1. The social scenario and the world of work

The entrance of *atypical work* in Italy in 1997 with the 'Treu Package' and the successive law no. 30 from 14 February 2003 entitled*Delegation to the Government on the Subject of Employment and the Labour Market*272, the so-called 'Biagi Law', have led to profound changes in the labour market, both in economic terms and regarding the relationship between workers' identity and their work experiences 273.

Part-times, apprenticeships, temporary contracts, work/training contracts, project work, occasional collaboration and employer-coordinated freelance contracts (*collaborazione coordinata e continuativa*) are the forms of work that may have introduced a radical transformation to the labour market, but have become sources of concern, not just for the young. These are 'atypical' forms of work, insofar as they are not customary, different from the traditional open-ended employment contracts and forms of self-employment, and they have led to an important transformation in the social fabric and personal make-up of the present-day subject. Without doubt, one of the most significant transformations is that the worker's personality has become involved in the working process, so much so that when we refer to the 'labour market' today, we are talking about a real and proper *market of lives*. Namely, we are looking at that working dimension in which not only does a person exchange *any one* working capacity, that is, acquired professional skills, but his whole personality, with all its distinctive characteristics 274.

It is clear that the widespread presence of atypical forms of work in our society is not only causing a change in the possible kinds of work, but is also emptying the same work of its social function275. There are multiple psychological variables at risk since, whether we are talking job instability linked to a personal perception of losing one's job, or an actual contractual condition, forms of problems are arising with repercussions on the construction of people's professional identity, on the interaction between subject and work organisation, and on satisfaction levels and quality of life, including private lives.

At this point I shall leave aside the political and ethical aspect of the legislator's choice to introduce these types of contract with the goal of reducing the rate of unemployment and cash-in-hand work276, albeit underlining that today this choice needs to be reviewed on account of the complex needs expressed by the human subject, a subject who cannot be boiled down to a mere "producer of goods and services" to the detriment of his serenity and well-being. Instead, I shall place my attention on the meaning that this way of working takes on from the psychological point of view, in order to attempt to promote a formative process that can offer the subject the potentials for resilience and creative resources to react to the burdensome stress that these types of work involve. For the world of education and training this attention is becoming increasingly urgent. To date the aim has perhaps been more to build basic and specific knowledge and skills, without taking this distinctive aspect of the worker's identity and his internal stability into account.

A certain interest in the problems connected to atypical work is found in occupational psychology studies, but its entry in the socio-political debate, ten years ago and mainly centred around social data and economic success rather than the psychological upshots of this situation, was definitely late277. The data relating to the diffusion of forms of precarious work, nevertheless, shows that it is a greatly increasing phenomenon. However, it does not enable us to make forecasts as to what will happen over the next few years. In particular, we cannot foresee if, and to what extent, precarious occupations will also affect the stronger segments of the labour force in the future, or if they will remain a prerogative of young people and women. All the same, it is no excuse for us not to centre the attention of all the human sciences – and pedagogy first of all – on the problems that atypical work and instability involve for those who have to live with them today.

2. The concept of atypical and precarious work

The analysis that I am about to make is prevalently centred around forms of atypical work not caused by free choice, but by labour market supply. The possibility of entering a world of precarious work triggers a series of difficulties at various levels of existence, starting from the psychological sphere. This is due to the fragmentation of work, having to continually adapt to new organisational contexts and relationships and the frustration caused by the necessity to direct expectations towards the possibilities offered without being able to choose according to one's desires and aspirations, or even one's formation.

Ongoing uncertainty about the future, lack of protection for illness, maternity and injuries, discontinuity and precarious economic conditions, low wages and continuous changes in workplaces and locations, short-term relationships, the feeling of being constantly under observation and at risk of losing one's job, and the perception of an outside rule over one's life are all sources of remarkable stress and intense suffering, above all for those upon whose work other subjects depend, such as those with a family to maintain. An internal

condition that is difficult to express except through forms of body language, the somatisation of painful emotions, or problematic and destructive ways of behaviour278.
The reaction to stress develops at several levels: at the more immediately *emotional* level, with the emergence of anxiety, tension and dissatisfaction; at the *physiological* level, with increases in the heart rate, the secretion of catecholamines, reductions in the production of endorphins and dopamine; and at the more behavioural level, manifested through the use of drugs and alcohol, forms of absenteeism, lack of concentration, etc. This first reaction can be followed by a more long-term situation, expressed in the form of real and proper mental and physical health problems279.
An interesting theory allowing us to interpret the reason why there has been such a widespread diffusion of unstable occupations can be found in the reflection of Polanyi280. In his opinion, the market tends to expand with destructive effects on society, but, at the same time, defensive and protective mechanisms are implemented in the social fabric to restrict this expansion. Therefore, it becomes fundamental to know what individual and social potentials are activated in reaction to processes of suffering, and which mechanisms can lessen the deriving problems.
Not having a contract that guarantees stability puts the subject in a condition of continual risk owing to the highly uncertain market situation. As a consequence, work becomes greatly commodified, in a process which, as Polanyi asserts, activates protective reactions outside the market. The mechanisms that defend society from market expansion and act in favour of the de-commodification of work are found in the family and in welfare281, defined by Esping Andersen as the main spheres that restrict these phenomena. In the case of Italy, where state intervention for precarious workers is low, it is precisely in the family that the main support mechanisms are implemented and, as we will see, in a series of social relations that show great potential for offering support.
In the present crisis, felt at all economic and social levels owing to the progressive, endless reduction in public expenditure, the family has taken on the role as a pillar of 'alternative welfare' to replace the state. In the demographical field these families are described as 'bunches' (*la famiglia-grappolo*)282, and within them people find help for problems; the family-bunches devote time, economic resources and services and satisfy many primary and social needs, as well as providing affection and unconditioned dedication. As well as being the main support for old people, even more the family is the main back-up for young people who are now remaining in the home way beyond the age of thirty. Young people who are always in motion, between studies, temporary jobs, internships, vocational courses and experiences abroad, show that they are very dynamic but also very needy in terms of security and stability, something which they can only find in the home. The young people lean on the generations that created them to solve every problem, procrastinating at length, with no agenda to untie themselves from their parental figures or older members of the family, a release that is necessary both in terms of autonomy and gaining a sense of responsibility pertaining to adulthood283 and feeling an active and significant part in the development of a society.
The family, therefore, becomes the first of the social shock absorbers and an important domain for absorption of the uncertainty, by lessening the hardships caused to workers by the instability of employment. In many research projects it has emerged that unstable workers put all their trust in their parents or partners, both when they need economic support and for any other choices concerning various types of desires and needs, from buying goods to cultural interests or investing in their free time. As a result, they remain in a condition of dependency that is not easy to deal with284.

3. Instability vs. stability or two potential sides of the same coin?

Alongside those who entrust the family to find that stability and certainty which they cannot find in a long-term job, there are subjects who channel their energies into the potential offered by a fragmented and segmented work situation, which could, however, become stable. Despite having to be in a continual situation of seeking and changing work, of brisk offers and temporary opportunities, through a series of networks of relationships and contacts with employers and agencies that operate in the various economic sectors, many subjects with a specific professional role work with temporary contracts, almost always with no long-term solution.
This 'ongoing state of instability' can come to pass in two main ways. The first is when there is a single work provider that hires on short-term contracts but offers the security of continual renewal; the second is when there are working relationships with a set of subjects who offer work, giving a range of opportunities. They are two ways of working that differ substantially owing to the workers' perception of their stability: in the first case there is a continuity that is unstable but guaranteed by a privileged relationship, while in the second the worker has a different role, as his own guarantor for the whole network of relationships that he manages to build up both with operators in a particular sector and with other collaborators, proving to be much more active,

dynamic and flexible. In both cases, nevertheless, the lack of formal guarantees results in a type of adaptation to job uncertainty. This lowers the thresholds of fear that instability brings about and makes the necessity to experience this new form of worker identity cause less anxiety.
The problem remains that the forms of work with unconventional contracts are often subject to low and discontinuous salaries, with the consequent economic insecurity and higher risk of being at the mercy of the employer's rule. However, this aspect is linked to a situation that requires more attention from those who have to guarantee the worker's rights and is difficult to deal with in the formative context.
An additional problem that definitely must not be undervalued is having an instable, presumed but not predictable income. This is the characteristic shared by all those with the various forms of atypical, short-term contract. It has an immediate effect on time management, since an uncertain income leads to the inability to say no to any opportunity, and anxiety about possible periods of inactivity leads to overlapping different jobs, resulting in the need to work many hours a day, with the consequent outfall on all the other aspects of a person's life. While on one hand, the possibility of a high level of autonomy in organising one's work has the characteristics of freedom, on the other it can lead to frantically seeking work to do in order to protect oneself against possible periods in which there might be fewer opportunities. It is a sort of insecurity that can lead people to gobble up every opportunity without assessing the quantity, quality and real possibilities that they can do them without running the risk of being suffocated by all their other day-to-day needs285.
Without doubt we have to account for a possible 'catch' in this analysis, namely a 'subsequent justification' of a change underway at the social level, a change that is not wanted or planned, but undergone and in this approach even considered as positive. For those who aim to guarantee stable working conditions for all, this analysis could be considered the legitimation of a *defect* of our society, which should guarantee security and well-being to its citizens but, on the contrary, is not even able to offer the basis for stability. However, it is important for the purpose of reflection on the psychological consequences of atypical work and on the possible formative responses, because at the centre it places the*subject's needs* which can be given a more suitable and more significant response in the manner in which the formative paths are structured, in the various dimensions in which they unfold. Reliability, elasticity, willingness, constancy, risk management skills, concreteness and interpersonal skills are all aspects around which the formative process must be planned and the work methods developed.
Introduced as 'atypical' work, that is, 'different from normal', the concept needs to be regarded as it is evolving: indeed, in truth, it is becoming a very widespread and progressively growing work model. It emerges from many research projects that forms of unstable work, which today mainly concern young people and women, not only seem to be increasing, but, it is hyopthesised, are set to affect wider and wider brackets of workers. It must not be undervalued that, with the growth of separations and divorces, a large part of subjects also risk losing that support given today by the family. This is a change that needs backing and to be dealt with suitably because it concerns a large part of society which risks succumbing under this pressure.
The situation that at this point has been created between labour market demand, the social support system and family structures shows how the social bond is progressively weakening. Yet it also demonstrates how the reaction of single people is to implement strategies that can contrast the loss of job security, by activating their own considerable resources and multiple energies to live their lives and professional identities well all the same.

4. Living in instability: a restriction or a resource?

The increase in subjects who live in a state of instability and in precarious living conditions is taking place in a period in history when insecurity is increasing at all levels, since all systems are being fully transformed and redefined. While it may be true that this process is associated with a very high risk of the subject experiencing existential difficulties, it is also true that it leads to the development of high levels of freedom.
Job instability is complex in that it involves concern for that which is not secure, but also the pleasure of not being bound. It is that potential inherent in the vision of Ulrich Beck, for whom the uncertainty leads man to focus his attention more on himself, resulting in a progressive increase in individualisation and consequent inclination towards action286.
In his theory on 'reflexive modernisation', Beck upholds that in the passage from industrial to postmodern society we have gone from the domination of the logic in which the production of wealth overshadowed the production of risk, to a society in which this relationship has been overturned. From analysis of the behaviour of instable workers and their decisions in relation to job opportunities, one can see that, while it is true that the market conditions and type of demand define the opportunities and affect the action strategies of people in work or looking for work, it is also true that people draw up their own paths, and strengthen their own professional experiences, creating autonomous routes to reaching the desired professional position.

For some, therefore, employment instability can be a *tie*, a 'restriction', to which one has to adapt in order to live in this society, while for others it is perceived as a *resource*, as a 'guarantee of freedom' since it enables people not to be recognised by the job they do and it always leaves the possibility open to change job, to move on several fronts, and overcome the risk of being blocked in a job they find unsatisfying.

As many scholars underline, in recent decades a progressive de-institutionalisation has taken place in life paths and today there are no more precise stages and pre-set moments that mark the contemporary subject's shifts in status. For young people today there is no precise definition of the beginning of adult life, and what were considered fundamental stages along the path to adulthood, such as starting work and leaving the family home, can no longer be used to analyse the growth processes287. Starting from the conviction that the subject's identity is also built thanks to his choice of work, there is no doubt that the individualisation process and new forms of structuring the life path are inseparably connected to the transformations that have taken place in the labour market. Contrary to what happened in Fordist society, where work in itself was sufficient to develop a stable identity and ensure social integration, in our society, characterised by precarious and transitory jobs, the sense of one's identity and perception of stability, as well as the definition of a particular social status, are always changing. This is happening in a historical context in which uncertainty and transformation are recurrent in all the subject's standards of reference, with the result that no one any longer seems to be able to make long-term plans and everyone always tends to keep all the alternative possibilities open, continually looking to new directions in which to head and remaining in a condition in which the present takes centre stage.

In this dimension, job instability amplifies the sense of insecurity, fuelling the need to make short-term strategies. It does not impose the necessity to make life plans, but enables people to live the definition of their identity with a strong sense of freedom. Those who do not have a stable job can always hope to find a better one, or those who do not manage to find the job that they want can temporarily use their time in other activities without having to give up on their plans, while waiting for the right opportunity to come along: on one hand this might risk reducing the sense of responsibility, but, on the other, it always leaves open the possibility to live different experiences, which always go to enrich the identity.

The risk that is inherent in this process made up of small, always uncertain steps, in pursuit of short-term goals and only focussing on the immediate effects of one's actions, is to lose the taste for and value of investing in one's formation. By implementing what Laffi defines as a 'non-stop search', lacking direction and with a minimum time span, many young people risk seeing a weakening in their capacity to link their personal choices together and not managing to organise their work experiences in a coherent manner288. Openness towards all opportunities, putting off choices that require the assumption of responsibility, remaining on hold while awaiting a better job opportunity, lowering the judgement threshold in order not to be too selective towards the various opportunities, are all aspects that, in the long term, can end up weakening the capacity to self-determine one's own existence and limit the definition of a meaningful life plan.

Richard Sennett also underlines how the lives of flexible workers are a collage of fragments, to which the subject cannot always manage to give a sense of planning289.

In a context characterised by unstable work, the subject is faced with an ever-changing reality which leaves him a lot of freedom but can result in a weakening of the capacity to draw up strategies and outline intentional processes of self-development. While some may manage to use the instability as a resource in order to independently define their professional career, knowing how to deal with the risk deriving from uncertainty, for others – lacking training in specific skills – it remains very difficult to manage to combine the resources available in order to achieve a secure and gratifying position in the job market. This means that in the present-day subject there is a potential for adaptation290 which, if also backed by a well-structured formative process, organised to welcome and limit life's uncertainty and precariousness, despite it all, levels of well-being or satisfaction can be achieved that are suited to the requirements of the present day and world.

5. Complexity and development of the contemporary subject

I would like to dwell, however briefly, on analysing what is happening in our epoch, immersed in complexity and dependent on a future constructed at a planetary level. It can be defined as a time that is leading man's consciousness to reflect more on what he learns, on everything proposed to him. It is increasingly becoming a categorical must not just to learn, but to *learn* to learn, in order to manage to control the cognitive and motivational processes but also to be able to adapt them to each new problem that arises291. Technological developments have enormously extended – and continue to extend – our symbolic possibilities, self-reflection, the capacity to depict reality using the most diverse languages, so much so that the imaginary reality itself seems to be real.

We find ourselves belonging to different sets, owing to the multiplication of positions, social relationships, groups and associations that we come into contact with. It is much quicker to enter and exit these systems than it was in the past and we have to approach a set of languages, roles and rules which we need to adapt to each time. All this pushes the individual to continually change, seek another way of being in each situation, with new codes and new forms of relationship, with constant pressure to respond in a suitable manner each time. The myriad of information produced by equally as many transmitters approaches each subject like an 'avalanche', in the face of which we need to find the necessary tools and shelter so that it does not bury us. This means learning to find our way in the information, looking for methods to analyse it, select it, then memorise it, and finally prepare effective and pertinent feedback for each of the different communicative sources of provenance.

It is extraordinary the speed at which the whole of society is changing292.

In this perspective, made of many – perhaps at times it seems too many – opportunities, possibilities and alternatives that appear in everyday life, the most engaging challenge becomes having to choose: «in the face of the possible that seduces and threatens, the risk of decision-making cannot be avoided»293. Choice is inevitable and by no means simple, so much so that every time we try out a method of action, we realise that it is not possible to transfer experience gained previously in another field. In every context, in every relationship we realise that it is impossible to use the languages, rules, and procedures that we are familiar with, and that we need to remodel our ways of thinking each time. Speed and variability are two characteristics of the complex systems which, however, at this moment in time have achieved a frequency and intensity without precedent. As a result, in the face of the great quantity of fields of action against which we can measure ourselves, we realise that the capacities at our disposal are insufficient. A profound sense of uncertainty accompanies the decisions and the analysis of the various possible alternatives that must be made every day, so much so that the capacity to choose becomes one of the primary goals to pursue, not least because not choosing is nevertheless always a possible alternative and, therefore, a choice.

Every experience of change brings with it a positive component, which projects towards the new and the unexplored, but also a fear of what we do not know, of what we cannot foretell. Change becomes an objective to aspire towards, an ambition, but at the same time it is limited by *fear*and *uncertainty*. The choice that continually places itself before us therefore fluctuates between launching oneself into the unknown and anchoring oneself to the certainties of what is already known; but choosing between the endless possibilities is an arduous task, especially because that which is discarded is always more than what is chosen. The resulting difficulty can lead the subject towards a situation of depression, but also lead him to try to keep all the various opportunities together. The deriving fragmentation of the self denies him the partiality intrinsic to a choice, through a split in the internal reality, or through a maniacal syndrome ending up in an infinite vortex. While mental suffering is the extreme response to this difficulty, there are various stages of problems in this transformation process. During the process the self becomes multiple, and does so with the intent of underlining the various identities that the self can assume in time and the discontinuity in identifications due to the rapid changes we are subject to. There is also another factor that we must not forget, namely that in the self of each one of us there reside several parts and our profound experience of uncertainty arises precisely from the conflict between the difficulty to identify ourselves with a single one of these and, at the same time, the need to do so294.

This mobility to which the self is subjected then leads one to reflect on the dynamic aspects of the identity and to centre on the variety of identification processes. Furthermore, the multiplication of the self also highlights a new viewpoint from which to read the relationship between the individual and society, with a subject who is seen as the protagonist of his action, and no longer subjugated by entities such as divinities or nature or society itself, since he is able to give meaning to his own action and act in an autonomous manner. We have gone from the metaphysically conceived subject to the *individual-subject*, a process in which the multiple self finds his unity and individuality295.

Therefore, the self's identity can be conceived as a dynamic system defined by limits and possibilities, appearing as a 'field', assuming the characteristic of being at once a system and a process, since the field contains a set of relations, but also the possibility to intervene on oneself and redefine oneself each time. In this sense, two problems arise, which stem from outlining the concepts of *continuity* and *boundaries of the self*. Starting from the idea that the identity is a field of possibilities and limits, we can read the boundaries as recognition of the limit to which the identity is subject and as dynamicity between the open- and closedness of these limits. In addition, continuity can be seen as a *change of form*, not so much because of the passage between different metaphysical states, but because of the organisation of several systems of relations into processes296.

In this perspective, the topic of responsibility takes on a role and a particular meaning, in its acceptation as the *capacity to respond*, both as recognition of ourselves and of what we feel we are, and as recognition of the other and our way of dealing with relationships.
In this game of responsibilities between the self's capacities to respond, the identity becomes a process of constant negotiation between different parts and times of the self – who I am and who I am with respect to yesterday and tomorrow – and the ambits and systems of relationships of which the subject is part. This leads to the capacity – or incapacity – to respond to the multiple and contradictory elements constantly present in the subject who, while he acts, is not always conscious of his action, or unconsciously favours specific parts of himself. The type of identity that one will have also depends on how this negotiation takes place. Indeed, in the negotiation process the identity – depending on the single person's choices – has an unstable tendency that leads the self to experience openness in a provisional and reversible way. By shifting further and further towards the individual, social action becomes increasingly subjective and individualised, and the identity manages to find spaces to barter with other subjects who are no longer rigidly defined from the outside, but aware of and responsible for the sense of their actions297.
From the paradox described before, according to which the subject may open up without limit, but at the same time, has no possible exit (one cannot *not* choose), we can deduce the importance taken on by the need for unity, the need to find elements of stability in the change. This is no longer found in identification with a single model, belonging to a single group or fully recognising oneself in a culture. Instead, there is the need to *change form*, to be able to redefine oneself in the face of what is new, to make choices and decisions reversible and renewable.
That typical characteristic of *metamorphosis* – which the subject used to experience primarily during adolescence – has now become something that we have to constantly face up to in our own ego298. Our epoch is characterised by this obligation to multiply ways of being, languages and relationships. And it intrinsically requires a great humanity, a strong inclination towards the other and to seek correlation between the differences, an injection of humility so we can always scale down our boundaries to welcome, carry and support those who are not immediately in unison. Without this willingness, it is not possible to change form: at most one can change 'appearance'.
More and more complex networks of relationships, and increasingly broad messages and information risk breaking up the individual. We need to learn to *open* and *close* our world: participation and renunciation, response and silence, bonds and detachments become fundamental for the vitality of the *man-system*, which must find its own rhythm in this non-stop trend. The capacity to live in discontinuous and heterogeneous times and spaces also requires a unity of experience, which must come from qualities of immediate perception, intuition and imagination, all aspects which belong to traditional cultures. Roots in the present cannot forgo roots in the past, so that the acting and action do not merely become an end. But roots in the present are fundamental in order to face up to the transformations and go through the metamorphosis coming to the fore during one's lifespan299.
In our society all those forms of ritualised passage that allowed us to change how we looked at ourselves and discover our limits and possibilities, by passing or failing certain tests, have been lost (suffice it to think of the meaning traditionally given to the first day at work). Therefore, we have to seek a contact with the inner world, which processes the various passages, since while the input and the signals from the outside world may change, we then have to reckon with the sensations, depictions and perceptions that remain constant within man. Body, mind and spirit have to achieve a vital integration in the awareness that a lack of harmony becomes a more or less profound form of unease300.
The critical point between inside and outside, between subject and surrounding environment, is what each person must understand and overcome in order to find where to place himself with respect to the change and the reality. Changing form is a necessity which requires these passages to be elastic, the capacity to preserve and leave behind, to risk and be prudent. In order to pass into the various forms to which we are called without *disintegrating*, to face up to the possible fragmentations given by the unforeseen, a great capacity of intuition and imagination is required, safe in the knowledge that there is no metamorphosis without loss or without a least a bit of novelty.
To feel at the centre of one's *operari*, of the definition of one's ways through life and of the risk inherent in choice itself leads to two different horizons: the first is that of a strong subjective dimension in which the uncertainty of the context leads to a projectuality increasingly concerned with one's own needs and desires, fuelling increasingly intricate and complex choices with a large amount of the *hypothetical* in order to not mentally anticipate the result of our decision; the second is that, in this never-ending movement, the spaces for *freedom of action* and*autonomous decision-making* are expanding. It is a process made of experiences and

alternatives, experiments and increasingly conscious trials; a path through which the uncertainty gradually leads to the conquest of ever wider degrees of freedom.

6. The role of formation: a look at the possible responses

Following on from the establishment of this model of the labour market and worker's role, at this point structural for Italian society, the question that spontaneously arises is if and how has and is education and training changing in this scenario301 characterised by discontinuity and unpredictability? What formation can be given to a subject who needs to learn to manage and sustain the uncertainty?

The problem of change is closely linked to the topic of formation, which contains elements of dynamicity and plasticity, and is characterised by transformation, openness and variation302. It is absolutely necessary to define a formative model which specifically takes into account the period in which we are living in order to respond to the problems that young people, as well as many other categories, are experiencing today. In recent decades, there has been a renewal in pedagogical thought, which has become more attentive to the 'complexity' that lies behind the cognitive processes, and this has given rise to «a *new idea of formation* that is more dynamic, dramatic even, dysmorphic (and conflictual), as well as a *concept of form* that is less hypostatic, less rigid and abstract, less generalising and modelling, in order to instead come to a "living" vision of form, which is built in the process, which is never completed»303, which is always subjected to *re*– organisations, revolutions and redefinition.

Indeed, from the pedagogical point of view, formation cannot allow itself to reduce to a unit an extremely complex reality such as that embodied by man, articulated at different levels which cannot be put into a hierarchy, comprising social, affective, cultural and psychic dimensions, each with its own importance. In the other human sciences it is conceivable to separate man into his different components and study their specific characteristics, fragment him and 'section' him in order isolate his various aspects. However, this is something that pedagogy cannot do. It cannot allow itself to break the original unity: this would dissolve its specific characteristic as a discipline which thinks of how to act *on* – and *with* – man, of what type of formation to offer to his entire being, of which single form to «move him to»304.

This takes knowledge and formative practice to a level of extreme complexity, since they have to bear in mind and give answers to the most radical problems, in the awareness that no human formation can avoid thinking of a subject, that specific subject, with all his distinctive features, to enable the subject to understand *what it means to him/her to be a man/woman*.

The necessity to continually change work places and times requires an outstanding ability to develop planning strategies and problem-solving skills and an inclination towards innovative models305. The work entry system is increasingly requesting *ever greater* skill levels for all professional categories, both of a more strictly technical and transversal nature, above all in terms of the capacity to react to change, to work in a team, to be self-entrepreneurs, to recognise the motivations behind our own personal action. If not, we risk exclusion from a labour market process and our particular social context. The necessity is becoming more accentuated to be able to autonomously plan our careers and life paths, while learning how to choose our goals for professional growth and, linked to these, to plan out our formative experiences and action in order to make our professional profiles marketable. This means that both the school and university education sector and vocational training need to come up with an attentive and conscious response, which can accommodate the subject's needs and respond to the trends in the world of work. The increasingly evident request for specialised professionals and workers requires the worker to acquire more and more new knowledge and competences, an objective that requires continual refresher and formative activities on his part306. These courses of learning are often followed autonomously, which makes it crucial to be able to establish our educational objectives and choose the most suitable experiences, hence very often workers turn to individualised forms of career and personal growth guidance307. Associated with this type of process – as Delors also clearly highlights308 – is the private life outside of work, from which the subject obtains skills and informal learning, which becomes fundamental in the professional world.

In such a situation, formation has the task of filling the sense of emptiness and inadequacy and facilitating the rapid renewal of our way of looking at the world309. In order to try to keep check on this sense of breakage, a response has been to structure a formative system that can be a tool supporting ongoing learning. Another has been to boost the motivation to learn autonomously, enabling the person to remould all the know-how acquired informally over time, which otherwise would risk being ejected from paths with an extreme focus on the acquisition of knowledge, into formally recognised forms.

More recently, the theories that have arisen from the postmodern and critical approaches have mainly placed attention on the processes of 'social knowledge-building'. They are processes to which the subject attributes a different meaning on the basis of how he interiorises it, rather than being an acquisition defined from the

outside, by an outside reality. From this viewpoint, the emphasis is placed on the dimension of power and the acquisition of power, one of the key processes in self-formation and self-orientation. For a better understanding of this postmodern and critical approach to learning, we must read the knowledge- and self-building process by first of all receiving and creating messages or 'points of view' on the world, created together within communicative contexts. According to the critical approach, we learn through *critical reflection* and by developing our awareness of the knowledge-building processes at the social level, while, according to the postmodern approach, learning is the result of a process of deconstruction and eclecticism. Adult education, self-directed learning, transformative learning, the postmodern perspective and the critical paradigm, attention to the use of narrative methods and the creation of destructured paths, the return to the subject, and emphasis on the individual experience and the social dimension are the fundamental references of the interactions and dynamics existing between contexts of formation, self-formation, orientation and *self*-orientation310.

The necessity to *prepare to learn*, to valorise individual experiences, as well as the need to stimulate reasoning skills and to develop autonomous problem-solving and information-seeking skills, force the world of education and training to progressively destructure previously adopted solutions in favour of a growing contextualisation, upheld by flexible formative approaches which are rich in operational capacities and highly heuristic. It becomes fundamental to be able to recognise and understand the contexts in which we move in a perspective that restores the logic of action research as a pivot and guide311. To think in a logic of action research – even more so in a more specific logic of participatory action research – is to guarantee an effective contextualisation of the formative operation312: with a criterion of action that deeply transforms the internal dimensions of the formative process, a process that becomes increasingly open, participatory and adaptable, based on the flow of events, whose sense and coherence can only be reconstructed after the end of the experience; with a change that modifies the vision of the formative process at all the key points along the way. It does so:

- − *at the level of logic* by moving from that linear, sequential, rational logic and preset goals towards the law of formation as 'opening', as the flow of events. A perspective based precisely on a process built on the relational dynamic and subjective dimension, in which 'ownership' of the formation process is shared equally between the person providing the formation and the person benefiting from it, in a circular manner which, during the course of the path, feeds on the work experience gained in order to reprocess it and bring it back to the formative source. This leads to a shared construction, a systemic point of view, a rationality in harmony with the emotions experienced and the sensations felt, a vision made of intuitive ideas through which one's gaze can be cast on a future with a broad horizon, comprising multiple hues. This logic has immediate effects on the method, since it legitimises the use of techniques and tools aimed at recuperating experiences and interpreting them, in terms of both their subjective and interpersonal effects;
- − *at the level of needs analysis*, since, with the assertion of the new logic, where the attention of formation shifts to meaning-building and world-interpretation processes, as well as to the role and value of the emotions in knowledge, needs analysis focuses on informal contents and spontaneous actions, so that the single person's experience may become a wealth and heritage of collective reflection and a solution to the problems of the many313. This means that the needs analysis must not be separated or untied from the formative process but, on the contrary, must also be a central part of organisational analysis or action research paths, in all the different forms that these can take, without prejudice to the principle that it is necessary to have a knowledge of the context that one is building by acting on its concrete problems;
- − *at the planning level*, since the reflections on the difficulty to make forecasts resulting from the rate of transformations and the emergence of the awareness that subjects are dominated more by the emotional than the rational levels leads not so much phases or goals but development for hypothetical work to be placed at the centre. Today time is a *complexified* variable that has taken on a dynamic conception which increasingly tends to follow the various lines of the reflexive and narrative process, while totally lacking the linearity followed by the rational model. Therefore, the formation project assumes an *open sequence of hypotheses*, ideas and concepts that become "*briccole*" or markers314 along the formative path, which direct and mark the *navigational path of learning*, but only assume a definite form through the elaboration processes implemented as the formative work progresses;
- − *at the assessment level*, since by breaking the logic of linearity and the domination of objectives we have to pass from an engineering-like conception of assessment, to one that is focussed on the learning path and process, based on the collection of qualitative rather than quantitative data, and giving central importance to the dynamic created between the components present in the action, between the context relationships and the webs created there.

The moment in which *individual needs* become *the starting blocks* since they are recognised as fundamental in accompanying a subject to live, manage and master the flexibility and uncertainty dictated by current

society, and *the context* assumes the role of central variable, education and training can but prepare by thinking of very destructured action processes, hypotheses rather than projects, methodologies, methods and tools that can change as the relationship between the subjects involved in the formative process varies, very much centring on self-formation.

The subject whom today education and training have to look towards and give answers that can produce well-being and security is a subject who has undergone a loss of sense, who is disoriented with respect to the categories of time and space (with no boundaries or limits, except the certainty of death, something which, however, is often hidden even to ourselves). He is fragmented, but also restless and anxious to know what the aspects and the dynamics are that are created in his own formative history, and wanting to rediscover the 'coordinates' of the horizon and direct his path in search of his own *sense*. A pedagogical and formative approach that requires the subject to constantly overlap between *being formed* and *forming himself*, in which, through the *relationship with the context* and through the *representation of his own existential experience*, the subject de-constructs and re-composes himself, giving rise to a dimension of collective growth, in which we can also grasp the universal meaning of our own *acting* and *being*. A formative process in which the subject is the leading player, also in 'unveiling' and clarifying his *future*, by learning to re-organise and re-define his existence on the basis of a profound knowledge of himself and the surrounding reality.

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272 See <http://www.camera.it/parlam/leggi/03030l.htm> (20 April 2011).

273 See P. Andreoni, *Tempo e lavoro. Storia, psicologia e nuove problematiche*, Mondadori, Milan, 2005.

274 As Emilio Reyneri underlines, «until now, in the Italian context at least, it was the case that workers could have a period – their youth – when by law and/or fact the level of precariousness was high. But then, at a certain age, by fact or by law they achieved some stability. But what will happen in the future? What should worry us is not so much the precarious situation of twenty year olds, who still have a whole personal and family life ahead of them and can also deal with it well at the emotional level. The big question is what will happen later during their lives, when they head into their thirties and need more and more security at both the economic and emotional level». E. Reyneri,*Sociologia del mercato del lavoro. Le forme dell'occupazione*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2005, p. 127, own translation.

275 See L. Gallino, *Il costo umano della flessibilità*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2001; L. Gallino, *Il lavoro non è una merce. Contro la flessibilità*, Laterza, Rome-Bari, 2007.

276 Numerous multidisciplinary studies have come up with contrasting results as to the efficacy of this law; so much so that, while institutional data strongly underscores a reduction in the rate of unemployment, other authors equally as strongly highlight an increase. As Gallino maintains, the only certain piece of data is that there is no certain relationship between flexibility and employability. For the ongoing debate see: Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000; T. Boeri, P. Garibaldi, *Un nuovo contratto per tutti*, Chiarelettere, Milan, 2008; L. Gallino, *Il costo umano della* flessibilità, cit.

277 It is only recently that atypical work has become a subject of research in the psychological sphere too. In particular, in the essay by Ferrari and Veglio one finds many of the variables correlated to atypical work, such as: training, gender differences, worker identity, job satisfaction and career guidance. See L. Ferrari, O. Veglio, *Donne e uomini nel mercato del lavoro atipico. La dimensione psicologica e di genere del lavoro precario e flessibile*, FrancoAngeli, Milan, 2006.

278 See I. Corradini, P. Lambertucci, *Lo stress nei luoghi di lavoro. Profili psicologici, giuridici e metodologie di valutazione*, Themis, Rome, 2011.

279 A study by László and partners used a self-assessment method to investigate the effects of temporary work on the health of workers aged between 45 and 70 in 16 European countries: Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Austria, France, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and Sweden. The interviewees were all people with precarious jobs and from the data it emerged that they had a reasonable risk of illness in most of the countries included in the analysis. The countries varied in terms of the capacity of labour market regulations, health care and trade union strength. These factors can potentially act as a buffer or further increase the risk of illness owing to the precariousness of work. There was a significant correlation between precarious work and negative health conditions in various countries, including those with a well-developed welfare system, a factor that seems to indicate the negative consequences of precarious work on the subject not just in economic terms, but also in terms of self-perception. A summary of the research work can be consulted on the site: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2845821/> (15 June 2011). The end product of the research is: K.D. László, H. Pikhart, M.S. Kopp, M. Bobak, A. Pajak, S. Malyutina, G. Salavecz, M. Marmot, *Job Insecurity and Health: A Study of 16 European Countries*, «Social Science and Medicine», 70, 6-3, 2010, pp. 867-74.

280 See K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, Rinehart, New York, 1944.

281 See G. Esping Andersen, *Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999.

282 See F. Billari, G. Dalla Zuanna, *La rivoluzione nella culla. Il declino che non c'è*, Edizioni Bocconi, Milan, 2008.

283 See D. Demetrio, *In età adulta. Le mutevoli fisionomie*, Guerini, Milan, 2005.

284 Another factor that could jeopardise the family's capacity to amortise the hardships of unstable employment is the progressive weakening of family ties themselves. With the growth in divorces and separations, an increasingly large number of people could find themselves lacking the protection – i.e. the family – against the hardships caused by job instability. For example, the women who perform interim jobs today to make up their husband's wage and have their own independence could find themselves in difficulty in the event of a divorce because at that point the need to have a stable income would become more pressing. At the same time, for these

same reasons, the increase in the instability of marriages should lead to an increase in the labour force willing to carry out unstable jobs. Women who did not work and who, following a separation from their husbands, look for employment in fact very rarely manage to find a permanent job; therefore, in order to work, they are willing to accept contracts that give no guarantee of ongoing work. Even though these considerations concern a hypothetical future rather than the current situation, nonetheless they should highlight how complex and fragile the balance created between current job market phenomena, the welfare system and family structures are. Within this balance, the destructive effects linked to the spread of unstable jobs end up being greatly reduced. Hence, for many subjects moving on the market, this same job instability actually becomes a genuine resource for strategy building. See Various Authors, *Instabilità del lavoro ed esposizione al mercato: le strategie dei lavoratori e il ruolo della famiglia come protezione contro i rischi*. Paper published at the Social Studies Department of Brescia University, *DSS Papers SOC* 7, 01 (June 2001).

285 See S. Bologna, D. Banfi, *Vita da freelance. I lavoratori della conoscenza e il loro futuro*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 2011.

286 H.R. Maturana, F.J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*, D. Reidel Publishing, Boston, 1980, p. 124.

287 For a further look at this topic see: M. Farina, *La famiglia lunga del giovane adulto*, in E. Scabini, P. Donati (edited by), *Nuovo lessico familiare*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan, 1995, pp. 117-133; G. Rossi, *Quando i giovani restano a lungo nella famiglia di origine: il caso italiano*, in E. Scabini, G. Rossi (edited by), *Giovani in famiglia tra autonomia e nuove dipendenze*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan, 1997, pp. 45-68; C. Buzzi, A. Cavalli, A. De Lillo, *Rapporto giovani. Sesta indagine dell'Istituto Iard sulla condizione giovanile in Italia*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2007.

288 See S. Laffi, *Il furto mercificazione dell'età giovanile*, L'ancora del Mediterraneo, Naples, 2000.

289 See R. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, Norton, New York, 1998.

290 In Morin's complexity theory, the human subject is indissolubly linked to the environment in which he is placed, reintegrated in a natural and biological sense in the physical, as well as the social and cultural worlds. Knowledge is a process activated by the living subject and human knowledge, which pertains to the cultural, is such if it is understood as self-knowledge, the subject himself becoming responsible for his own action. See S. Manghi, *Il soggetto ecologico di Edgar Morin*, Erickson, Trento, 2009.

291 This reflection is a constant in Edgar Morin's studies, which often underline that in order to read the *complexity of the real* in a *complex society*, the subject needs new cognitive tools, but in particular how he has to acquire a *forma mentis* that enables him to read history, society and its time in its *inter-polis-trans*-disciplinarity. See further: E. Morin, *La Méthode 1. La nature de la nature*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1977; E. Morin, *La Méthode II. La vie de la Vie*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1980 and *Le Méthode 3. La connaissance de la connaissance*, Le Seuil, Paris, 1986. Only the first of the three volumes has been translated into English: *Method: Towards a Study of Humankind. 1. The Nature of Nature*, Peter Lang, New York, 1992 (orig. ed.). Furthermore see: *La tête bien faite: repenser la réforme, réformer la pensée*, Seuil, Paris, 1999.

292 See S. Burgalassi, *Uno spiraglio sul futuro. Interpretazione sociologica del cambiamento sociale in atto*, Giardini Editori, Pisa, 1980.

293 A. Melucci, *Il gioco dell'io. Il cambiamento di sé in una società globale*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1992, p. 51, own translation.

294 See R. Bodei, *Scomposizioni. Forme dell'individuo moderno*, Einaudi, Turin, 1987.

295 See J. Elster (edited by), *The Multiple Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.

296 See A. Melucci, *Il gioco dell'io,* cit.

297 On the issue of the subject, for a view that enables one to see how this process has developed over a period of time, beginning at the start of the 1980s and achieving consolidation in our times, see: A. Bruno (edited by), *La crisi del soggetto nel pensiero contemporaneo*, FrancoAngeli, Milan, 1988; F. Cambi (edited by), *Soggetto come persona. Statuti formativi e modelli attuali*, Carocci, Rome, 2003; A. Porcheddu, *La crisi del soggetto nella modernità liquida. Una nuova sfida per l'educazione*, Unicopli, Milan, 2007.

298 See M.R. Mancaniello, *Adolescenza come catastrofe. Modelli d'interpretazione psicopedagogica*, ETS, Pisa, 2002.

299 See A. Melucci, *L'invenzione del presente*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1991.

300 See M. Waddell, *Inside Lives. Psychoanalysis and the Growth of the Personality*, Routledge, New York, 1998.

301 See M. Callari Gallari, M. Ceruti, F. Cambi, *Formare alla complessità. Prospettive di educazione nelle società globali*, Carocci, Rome, 2003.

302 See R. Fadda, *Forma, formazione, mutamento*, in F. Cambi, E. Frauenfelder (edited by), *La Formazione. Studi di pedagogia critica*, Unicopli, Milan, 1995.

303 F. Cambi (edited by), *Nel conflitto delle emozioni, Prospettive pedagogiche*, Armando, Rome, 1998, p. 10, own translation.

304 See R. Fadda, *La cura, la forma, il rischio*, Unicopli, Milan, 1997.

305 See G.P. Quaglino, *Orientamento, autoformazione e aut-orientamento*, ISFOL, Rome, 2003.

306 See M.R. Mancaniello, *La risposta ai nuovi bisogni educativi: il ruolo dell'educazione e della formazione*, in P. Orefice, A. Carullo, S. Calaprice (edited by), *Le professioni educative e formative: dalla domanda sociale alla risposta legislativa*, Cedam, Padua, 2011.

307 See S. Soresi, *Interessi e scelte. Come si evolvono e si rilevano le preferenze professionali*, Giunti, Florence, 2000.

308 See J. Delors (edited by), *Learning: The Treasure Within. Report to UNESCO of the International on Education for the Twenty-First Century*, UNESCO, Paris, 1996.

309 See F. Cambi, *Abitare il disincanto. Una pedagogia per il post-moderno*, Utet, Turin, 2006.

310 A. Grimaldi, G.P. Quaglino (edited by), *Tra orientamento e auto-orientamento, tra formazione e autoformazione*, ISFOL, Rome, 2004, p. 23.

311 See D. Lipari, *Logiche di azione formativa nelle organizzazioni*, Guerini, Milan, 2002.

312 See P. Orefice, *La ricerca azione partecipativa. La creazione dei saperi nell'educazione di comunità per lo sviluppo locale*, Liguori, Naples, 2006.

313 See C. Argyris, D.A. Schön, *Organizational Learning II. Theory, Method and Practice*, Addison-Wesley, Reading (MA), 1996; D.A. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* Basic Books, New York, 1983.

314 «"*Briccole*" are big poles planted in lagoons and they are used to mark safe shipping lanes for sailors. Those who leave the way indicated by these poles will surely end up running aground in shallow waters. And in the lives of each one of us there exist the navigation poles of education which offer us security as reference points for every decision we make». L. Trisciuzzi, *Elogio dell'educazione*, ETS, Pisa, 2001, p. 11, own translation.