

# Artistic Work in Pandemic Times

## *Editors' Foreword*

While we are closing this special issue of *Sociologia del lavoro* dedicated to artistic work, the whole arts and entertainment sector is experiencing a major turmoil, linked to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic. Encouraged by the journal's editorial board, we offer our readers some first reflections, informally shared with scholars and professionals, on the challenges brought by the pandemic at two levels of analysis, both discussed in this issue: the rules and mechanisms regulating artistic work; the models and concepts offered by sociology to its study.

Concerning the first level of analysis, we notice how lockdown measures following the pandemic - prohibiting concerts, shows and events with all other activities implying social gathering - have led to the prominent emergence in the public debate of the arts and entertainment sector, claiming its role as a productive industry and asking full recognition and protection to its members as workers. Those claims have taken a variety of forms, depending on the different impact of the restrictions according to areas and status of organizations or workers, and have led to different arrangements, defined within the institutional settings of each national context.

The subfield which has been mostly affected by the restrictions is that of the performing arts, where the multisensorial and emotional dimensions involved in the interaction among artists, audiences and settings appear to be fundamental aspects of performances, irreproducible through the mediation of digital technologies - more or less "smartly" converting other types of activities. Moreover, health prescription foreseen to carefully face the phases following the lockdown - recommending social distancing and protective measures - seem difficult to suit the specific needs of artistic performance (as in the limiting case of prescribing medical face masks to theatre actors or choir singers). In the European countries where we have conducted our research the situation varies according to the regulative framework defining the artistic labour market and the arrangements achieved by its actors from governments, faced with the current emergency.

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In Italy the main issues at stake concern existing disparities regulating the artistic labour market according to the type of organization or contract, further discussed in this issue. The emergency measures set by the government to support the sector during the Covid-19 lockdown initially reiterated those disparities, mainly protecting workers and firms holding a more stable and strong position in the national labour market. Immediate protests from the main associations in the sector - particularly from the musical field - have raised the issue of the significant numbers of workers not covered by those measures and led the government to devise for the first time specific measures for the most vulnerable categories of the sector and to start conceiving its relaunching within a more comprehensive perspective. Besides additional resources allocated for the National Fund for Entertainment (FUS) - half of which finances the largest symphonic orchestras and opera houses - and for local events and *ensembles* (festivals, choirs, bands), two funds have been set for the sector - one in current, the other in capital expenditure - for the total amount of 130 million Euros for 2020 by the law-decree “Cure Italy” (17/03/20), also protecting jobs and salaries of stable workers in the sector<sup>1</sup>. A monthly 600 Euros allowance is foreseen - as for other sectors - for registered freelance professionals, while for other workers of the sector excluded from those types of subsidies a last-resort income is eventually approved. The government is currently working at devising additional measures for the relaunching of the sector, among which: further resources for intermittent workers; support for small firms in the music business; assistance for teaching activities in arts academies; a public Strategic Plan for Culture, integrating public investments with a participation of private resources.

In France the special unemployment insurance system for intermittent employees, artists and technicians of the performing arts and audio-visual sector is based on the working hours declared during a year - the minimum being 507 hours - allowing them to access welfare benefits for each unemployed day of the next year. Due to the pandemic, with the whole world of the stages and the studios cancelling its activities (concerts, plays, shows, shootings) from mid-March till September 2020, it became obvious that most of professional workers in the sector would have lost both the revenues they should have earned in this period and the declared working hours needed to access unemployment compensation for the following year. After weeks of indecision and dramatic concerns, they came to the fore with public calls and

1. Camera dei Deputati, *Interventi per lo spettacolo*, XVIII legislatura, 08/05/20 ([www.camera.it/temiap/documentazione/temi/pdf/1104568.pdf?\\_1587132785389](http://www.camera.it/temiap/documentazione/temi/pdf/1104568.pdf?_1587132785389), last visit: 15/5/20).

manifestos asking the government a one-year extension in the working hours declared, eventually granted by the President of the Republic.

A similar unemployment welfare system for artists is that of Switzerland, where most of dancers and comedians may hope to achieve an arrangement analogous to that offered to their French colleagues (although nothing is defined at the time of writing). However, the situation is quite different for musicians: as the Swiss system is not based on the count of hours - as in France - but of weeks of registered work, musicians are *de facto* excluded from artists' unemployment benefit scheme. Indeed, musicians' work is typically much more fragmented than that of other stage artists: they are accustomed to long home rehearsals or to one night gigs, rather than to the protracted time on stage typical of dance or theatre, where professionals are often hired for the longer periods needed to arrange "residencies" or "creations". The consequences of this apparently small detail is huge, since almost all Swiss musicians are independent workers, rather than intermittent wage earners: if additional measures will not be set in place, for them the effects of the pandemic will be dreadful.

In Belgium the *Smart* wage portage cooperative - founded in 1998 by people working in the arts sector to provide tools to support continuity in artistic careers - is a central institution of the institutional landscape, with nearly 100.000 workers registered in 2018. To counter the potentially dramatic consequences of the crisis, the cooperative has carried out political lobbying and implemented a "Corona Plan"<sup>2</sup> offering its members normative and financial support and solidarity measures (short-time working schemes, access to interest-free loans, etc.). Based on a double recognition of the individual and collective nature of artistic work, cooperatives appear to be flexible forms of organizations, yet capable of guaranteeing and defending the rights of artistic workers, particularly in times of crisis.

The next years will offer a better view to empirically assess the effects of the current changes to the sector after the pandemic emergency and the challenges posed to sociologists in the reframing of models and concepts developed to date within academic debates. This cautionary approach is recommended by the American sociologist Howard Becker - one of the main reference points in the debate on artistic work -, whom we involved in our discussion on this second level of analysis. «Speculations about the future don't raise theoretical questions to be answered with reasoning from general propositions. They are questions of fact that can only be answered by observing what is actually happening» tells us Becker, following his

2. Details can be found at the following address: <https://kronik.smart.coop/a-joint-declaration-on-the-corona-plan-by-smart-in-europe/?lang=en> (last visit: 15/05/20).

distinctive unconventional and pragmatic approach. «All of which just means - he concludes - that, insofar as I can speak about the implications of the idea of an art world for such a specific situation can't be discovered by reasoning, but only by looking at the details of specific cases». While agreeing on the reduced forecasting abilities of sociology and on its need to be based on grounded empirical investigations, the Italian sociologist Marco Santoro - known for his contributions in the field of sociology of cultural production and consumption - finds that the pandemic «opens our sociological eyes to a number of issues, questions and even revisions potentially relevant to the sociology of the arts». Those issues include, in the case of artistic work, the emergence of adaptation and coping mechanisms in face of an exposition to the risks of an uncertain labour market that - as seen in the aforesaid examples - varies according to multiple dimensions, including the degree of social protection, reputation mechanisms, technological changeover. «Changes in audiences' fruition of cultural goods - he adds - will also be an interesting dimension to be explored».

Those preliminary notes on artistic work in pandemic times lead us to share three general considerations: first, the concept of artistic production is confirmed as fundamentally based on a web of social relations and thus inevitably linked to the ways in which the latter become shaped and configured; second, restrictions imposed to the arts and entertainment sector shed the light on its understated economic relevance and calls for a full recognition of its members as workers, both from societies and sociological debates; third, the role of the state, in its institutional variations, still appears to be fundamental in the regulation of (also) artistic labour markets and the protection of its workers. Those conclusions can be retrospectively considered as starting points for our special issue on artistic work.

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