

Vulnerable Workers in Times of Social Transformations

Discrimination and Participation of Young and Older Workers,
and Social Dialogue Stances

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Vulnerability of Young and Older Workers Across Europe in Times of Crisis

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Abstract The current social and economic developments in Europe provide us with much of the rationale to understand how our contemporary society has reached the current situation of highly polarised social and labour inequalities. In this context, debates on the current labour market are centred on the worldwide economic crisis and emerging inequalities, exploring the underlying causes that stem from labour market transformations, which for decades have weakened the situation of workers in positions of high risk. Emphasis is placed on labour precariat – where both unemployment and employment interact to define vulnerability, particularly of those not fitting within the expected ideal-type worker, in Europe, such as the workers at either end of the labour age spectrum, the older and the younger workers. This volume, adopts a dual lens that incorporates the diversity of social dialogue outlooks, to critically expose the situation of these two vulnerable groups; the younger and the older workers. A context in which trade unions' representation of such workers' interests and rights is fundamental in ensuring opportunities for workers of all ages throughout the lifecycle. Through an analysis grounded on an innovative empirical study conducted across Europe, the volume exposes how beyond these two age groups workers, vulnerability of non-ideal type workers – including migrant workers, women workers and the intersectional range of social constructions that place workers in these high social risk situations, is the core for their enduring vulnerability, particularly in times of crisis in Europe. Moreover, the several contributions included expose how the condition of these non ideal-type workers not only places them in a constantly precarious labour situation, but also renders them invisible to those mechanisms of support, protection and prevention of their working rights and opportunities.

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1 Introduction: Age and the Crisis

The current intersection of long-term economic restructuring and demographic developments across Europe, have been producing significant changes in the patterns of inequality in the labour market. One of the most

Olga Jubany is the author of paragraphs 1, 2, 4; Fabio Perocco is the author of paragraph 3.

distinctive features of the different periods of employment crisis over the course of the last three decades has been its uneven impact on workers, depending on their age. The simultaneous dismissal of older workers together with the blockage to occupational integration of young people has resulted in a dramatic decline of labour market participation rates at both ends of the age spectrum. In the ‘greying’ of the European workforce, we find an increasing amount of older workers not in employment and neither eligible for access to a pension – a phenomenon that has spread in Europe over the past two decades, to a large extent due to the pension reforms in many member states. This trend has become exacerbated in recent years as a consequence of corporate restructurings resulting in massive layoffs affecting senior workers with higher labour costs.

Current attempts aimed at extending the working life of older workers and the concurrent increase in unemployment rates among younger generations risk further entrenching the historical generational imbalances in the labour market. Recent changes affecting entry and exit transitions in the labour market are raising trade unions’ concerns regarding the risk of substitution of senior workers for new (younger) entries with degraded employment conditions in certain sectors and occupations. On the other hand, although the promotion of Active Ageing has become a key priority on the EU’s social agenda and in the context of the 2020 strategy for inclusive growth, pension reform processes are being implemented under strong austerity pressures and will translate into further inequalities in the access to adequate pensions. This calls for increasing awareness of discrimination of older workers, especially those in long term unemployment or in low qualified jobs who may find it increasingly difficult to meet tighter eligibility criteria for pension benefits.

In this context, trade unions’ representation of old and young workers’ interests and rights is fundamental, as it is only through ensuring the access and opportunities for workers of all ages throughout the lifecycle that social dialogue may become stronger as an inclusive institution. Furthermore, taking into account the fact that traditional bargaining strategies are no longer feasible due to the implementation of pension reform, the question raised is to what extent social dialogue and trade unions are actually dealing with the issue of age and vulnerability in a more inclusive way. In this regard, there is a need to avoid ‘zero-sum games’ in the redistribution of employment risks and opportunities between generations.

To this aim, the present book analyses the extent to which trade unions are addressing the interests and needs of young and older workers in the context of changing dynamics in the labour markets of six European countries. In addition, it responds to a need for highlighting policy proposals from the ground, and unravelling innovative strategies and practices for labour market inclusion of vulnerable age groups.

In order to depict the background to the transnational research study¹ on which the book is based, this introductory chapter starts by expounding the study's qualitative approach to age and vulnerability, then delves into the social and economic context of the research – taking a closer look at the recent global economic crisis, as well as the new forms of labour division and work organization and the new inequalities stemming from this – to then continue with a critical examination of the debate on active ageing, while finally briefly describing the structure and chapters of the present volume. The social and economical context is also further explored in the subsequent chapters, in relation to the specific themes of each individual chapter.

2 A Qualitative Approach to Age and Vulnerability

Stemming from the empirical findings of a cross-comparative research project, this book explores to what extent trade unions are representing the interests and needs of workers potentially vulnerable on the labour market due to their age, in a context of economic recession and challenges posed by changing dynamics in declining labour markets and social policies in Europe. It presents an in-depth analysis of the current interactions between unions and the intergenerational dynamics in the labour market to reveal key insights that help us understand young and older workers' experiences and the positions that unions adopt towards age discrimination. By emphasising the impact of the crisis, it exposes the extent to which actors and institutions involved in social dialogue manage major restructuring processes related to the involvement and participation of those age groups most affected and their representatives.

One of the main specific questions dealt with in this volume is to assess the impact of welfare retrenchment policies concerning young and older workers and to what extent a zero-sum approach – by which one person's employment means the unemployment of another – is being applied as a cost-distribution strategy in the labour market across Europe. In this regard we also analyse what measures and strategies are undertaken by unions and employers' representatives to tackle multiple discrimination related to age and gender and to what extent 'active ageing' is recognised and promoted in employment, as well as included in collective bargaining agendas.

Since the nature of the questions is mainly qualitative, findings in this book rely on a range of qualitative methods from an ethnographic perspective, including in-depth interviews with young and older workers, along with trade unions and employers' representatives as the main actors in

1 LinkAge (2014), *Labour Market Integration of Vulnerable Age Groups through Social Dialogue*. LinkAge Project, Final Report for the European Commission, Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.

social dialogue, in order to fully understand the dynamics, experiences and stances towards the phenomenon of age discrimination and intergenerational imbalances in the labour market across Europe.² Hence, the arguments presented here reflect experiences gathered from the ground and have been contrasted with the views of other relevant stakeholders in the field of social dialogue and collective bargaining. This includes the perception of unions on discrimination based on age intersecting with other factors, while also evaluating the extent of the actions unions take to combat this discrimination. The recent economic crisis has been accompanied by a reappraisal on behalf of national governments of their provisions for a range of social goods previously enjoyed by younger and older groups in society. The impact of tightened welfare spending, rising unemployment and new state interventions in the areas of pensions and workfare schemes, however, has received little attention considered the disproportionate impact these are likely to have on these vulnerable age groups.

In this regard, the present book also delves into the specific experiences of younger and older age groups as the likely sufferers of discrimination by different agencies positioned as employers, service providers or advocates of these vulnerable groups. In exploring age discrimination in terms of labour market access for both sets of age groups it raises questions on the different ways that age discrimination interacts with other factors of inequality such as origin and gender: Is age discrimination simply a way of masking these other forms of discrimination or is there something specific we might call age discrimination? If so, can it be understood in the same way for both age groups?

The specificity of female workers' integration into the labour market is recognized to have an impact on their pension's entitlements, as they are being sanctioned for the time they spent out of the labour-market on caring tasks of children or other family members or dependants. Reconciling work and family life is therefore still challenging for women, whatever their age, due to the male-dominated life-cycle model that still rules the European job market. Despite all the progress made, these have not entailed deep changes in the forms of work organization, such as the reorganization of

2 A total of 191 in-depth interviews with social partners' representatives were conducted during 2013, distributed as follows: 79 with relevant social partners' representatives at different levels in the six countries considered (Austria, Belgium, Italy, Poland, Spain and United Kingdom) and also at European level. In a second stage of the research, a total of 112 interviews – between 16 and 20 interviews in each participating country – were conducted with young (under 25) and older persons (over 55).

With regard to the coding of interviews, the first fragment of the code refers to the country (standard EC acronyms, SP = Spain), the second refers to the type of informant (TUR = trade union representative; ER = employers' representative; EXP = Expert; PO = policy officer; YW = young worker; OW = older worker; ST = stakeholder), the number at the end refers to its chronological order within the research.

working time. Moreover, it is a well-known fact that measures aimed at balancing work and family life may aggravate gender inequalities in the labour market, as it is mainly women who 'benefit' from the implementation of such measures (paid leaves, part-time work and flexible working hours, etc.), which tend to put them aside from the standard norm of employment and may harm their future career prospects.

The above observations lead us to the following question: to what extent are social partners able to successfully identify specific issues concerning the vulnerable age groups of workers, to represent the interests of those groups, and to introduce those issues into collective bargaining agendas in particular countries? The labour market position of women and also young workers is also reflected in their membership levels and involvement in trade union activities. As a consequence, vulnerable groups of workers facing discrimination may not be adequately represented in collective arrangements. Therefore, the form taken by labour market programs targeting these groups will depend on their representatives' priorities concerning the different groups of workers competing for scarce employment opportunities and trade-offs in the quality of jobs.

Social dialogue has played an important role in the allocation of labour market risks between different generations of workers through the regulation of age-specific transitions in the labour market. The impact of changes in these institutional settings should not be evaluated only through looking at the employment levels of distinct age groups of workers, but also in relation to their employment prospects from a life-course perspective, as these changes account for long-term effects on the labour market trajectories of different cohorts of workers. As a matter of fact, the introduction of non-standard forms of employment, such as fixed-term and part-time contracts targeting the inclusion of mainly young people and women in the labour market has resulted in the extension of employment precariousness to later stages of their working life. On the other hand, policies for reducing the social exclusion among a particular age group or labour force categories, such as young people, need to be considered against overall patterns of labour market organization and the opportunities for the rest of the groups. A good transition of one group may be achieved at the expense of other groups. In this regard, a crucial question is addressed at the intergenerational imbalances in the labour market as a result of population ageing and economic restructuring. Furthermore, is there a substitution dynamic between generations being fostered by new policies tackling youth unemployment in a general downward spiral of lower wages and deteriorating employment conditions?

A major aim of the present volume is to collect real-life stories from those age groups experiencing discrimination and inequalities on the labour market, or exclusion from the labour market. The focus is to acknowledge how vulnerable age groups experience these situations of disadvantage and

how they perceive themselves in relation to other age groups and the rest of the workforce. We were also interested in their assessment of the action of trade unions and social dialogue institutions regarding such situations and to gain understandings of the role of collective action in their strategies for overcoming these situations. While European institutions recommend placing equal importance on the promotion of mutual cooperation and interchanges between generations, as well as better understanding and new forms of coexistence, this may not always be the case in relation to labour market and social dialogue. Young and older workers may have different understandings of the concept of work and life plans, but they also tend to be segregated on the labour market, that is, they tend to be employed in different sectors and occupations and enjoy different degrees of employment protection on the basis of the action of certain institutions regulating the employment relationship.

The causes of vulnerability of young and older workers are closely related to changes in the structure of the labour market in the last decades, an issue which is further discussed in the next section of this chapter «The social background: economic crisis, transformations of work, new inequalities». This is leading to a shift in unions' perception of age discrimination. Unions have traditionally been concerned with the situation of young people on the labour market, as they account for higher unemployment rates than the general workforce and suffer more precarious and worse employment conditions. In contrast, specific attention to workers over 55 years has not been focused on keeping them in employment, but rather on bargaining the best possible conditions for early retirement. This is the main reason why social partners' proposals concerning working life extension of older workers have much lower intensity than those related to the labour inclusion of the young generations.

This book aims at improving expertise in industrial relations in European and comparative terms and at sharing information and experience among parties actively involved in industrial relations. Based mainly on the experiences of workers, we have gathered a set of illustrations of actions and measures addressing the needs and demands of young and older workers in relation to their active inclusion in the labour market. Thus, this work has a further goal of promoting the development of industrial relations in Europe by putting forward a set of recommendations addressed to different target groups involved in the study. The identification of best practices adopted by trade unions or employers' associations to enhance an active inclusion of vulnerable age groups of workers in the labour market and in the whole society is also an objective of this research in order to recognise and disseminate new approaches and measures that improve work opportunities and working conditions.

Linked to this, in regard to specific policy recommendations that best support labour inclusion of vulnerable age workers and protect their rights,

current union actions and discourses have been assessed towards a range of guiding themes dealt with in each of the sections of the book. These themes include main topics that play a key role in the dynamics between trade unions and vulnerable age groups of workers within the general debate of unions' protection of workers' interests in the new European context.

3 Economic Crisis, Transformations of Work, New Inequalities

A number of social, political and economic events shape the general framework within which vulnerable age group dynamics have developed over time. In this introduction only a selection of these events (intertwined with a cause-effect relation, in a circular retro-action fashion) will be analysed, namely the recent global economic crisis, the new forms of labour division and work organization, new inequalities, and active ageing.

This study on vulnerable age groups, like all studies carried out in recent years, took place in the context of a worldwide economic crisis, a time of enormous social transformations and significant unrest. This economic crisis has its own particular characteristics and has had many consequences, including the worsening of conditions of young workers and older workers.

The current economic crisis is a systemic crisis, a structural crisis of capitalism affecting all aspects of social life and all spheres of social organization.³ It restructures the whole society, as during the great economic crises the capital restructures itself leading to a general social transformation. It is a very deep crisis, affecting acutely the economic, social, political and even cultural structures of many countries. It is a 'big crisis', it is not a 'small crisis' as those occurred in the past years in single countries or in specific geographic areas (Asia, 1997; Argentina, 2002) or limited to a few specific fields (productive, financial, currency). It is also a long-lasting crisis. And the longer it goes on, the more widespread and acute it becomes. But above all it is a crisis of 'two halves': the first one deeply affected the United States (2007-2008), while the second one mostly affected Europe and particularly the Euro (2010-2012).

This crisis is a global and unified process. It is uneven and internally differentiated, it has national peculiarities and differences between countries or areas of the world, however it is an overall global crisis, necessarily global due to the processes of economic globalization occurred in recent decades. At the same time, this crisis is asymmetrical, highly asymmetrical, since it has hit the countries and the regions of the world

3 There is a vast literature on the recent economic crisis. Here: Bauman 2013; Callinicos 2010; Gallino 2011, 2013; OECD 2013a; Roberts 2009; Vaughan-Whitehead 2011.

in a differentiated way. So far some countries have been only ‘partially’ affected, and somehow they managed to cope with it limiting the damages (the BRICS, for example); on the other hand, other countries have faced harsh backlashes: the Southern European countries come out substantially defeated, with serious economic losses and heavy social repercussions.

The crisis has worsened and reshaped the inequalities, both between countries and within countries. In particular, it has accelerated the globalization of internal social polarization existing for at least two decades – with the consequence, in the first instance, of general decline in real wages (ILO 2008). An example of the increase in internal polarization is the United States, where the economic crisis has drastically reduced the incomes of middle-class and working class families, further increasing the wealth concentrated in the hands of the rich families.⁴ Another example is Germany, which has strengthened its position in the European industrial system, in the global market and in the financial system, affirming itself as a powerful export economy: today it presents a marked inequality among social classes (with an urban ‘western’ upper class distancing itself increasingly from the rest of society), among territories (with the presence of a ‘German South’ represented by the Eastern regions), and within the working class itself (with the institutionalized rift between employed and unemployed, between well-paid and low-paid workers) (Bertelsmann Foundation 2011; Sablowski 2011).

The current economic crisis has resulted in a restriction on social rights. Very often the dominant discourse, the policies of governments and multilateral institutions have identified in the guarantees and rights of the workers and in the welfare state the fundamental causes of the crisis, promoting as its solution the narrowing of rights and the wage compression, the narrowing of social citizenship and the amputation of the welfare state;⁵ all of this has produced a further worsening of inequalities, poverty and social difficulties. The causes of the crisis have often been identified and presented as remedies to the crisis itself, to the point where a resurgence and a radicalization of neoliberal policies has occurred on a worldwide scale, worsening the global and the internal inequalities and adding new inequalities to previous ones.

This economic crisis has had multiple effects on the functioning systems of many countries and on people’s lives. If we consider only Europe and its

4 In the 2007-2009 period, the decrease in the wealth of US households was an expansive phenomenon, affecting especially the first four quintiles of the population, and particularly the African-American families. In particular, there was the record of the concentration of wealth in the fifth quintile, came to own the 87.2% of the entire national wealth: the wealth of the 1% of the richest families grew 225 times more than the average (Allegretto 2012).

5 According to Crouch (2011), the recent economic crisis has accentuated the dominance of corporations on the economic and political system, and in general on public life, supporting in this way the process of narrowing of social citizenship.

working environment, apart from the growing unemployment, the reorganization of work aimed at increasing the productivity, following the general principle ‘working more with less workers’ has been accelerated. The precariousness has increased, working conditions have worsened, the unions were required to be accommodating and adhere to the national interest. The most affected by the economic crisis were immigrants (OECD 2013b), but also the young and the older workers, in particular young and older male immigrant workers.

With the arrival of the economic crisis the workers’ vulnerability has been accentuated, but in a specific sense: we moved from growing precariousness to growing unemployment, with a restriction of the margins of precarious employment. We moved from a fixed-term employment to work-vouchers, from precarious work to shortage (not absolute) of work; with the economic crisis we switched to the mass occasional jobs, or rather from precariousness to discontinuous employment. With the arrival of the economic crisis the meaning and the phenomenon of vulnerability has changed.

3.1 Transformations of Work and Consequences on Inequalities

The vulnerability of these age groups is connected first of all to the economic changes, and to the transformations of work occurred in the last two decades, and secondly to the advent of the economic crisis. There are underlying causes that for decades have weakened the situation of young and older workers; these long-term permanent reasons have exposed these two age groups to a higher degree, and later on the economic crisis has exacerbated their situation.

The underlying causes of the vulnerability of young people are represented mainly by the replacement of skilled labour with machines: the third industrial revolution has simplified difficult work, clerical work, the same design and programming. The hardest hits to the qualified work of young people were given in some way by the same information revolution, so that unemployment of qualified youth is a worldwide phenomenon, present also in China for several years now. In recent years there has been a very strong expansion among young people of jobs that have no correlation with their studies.

The main underlying causes behind the growing vulnerability of older workers are also several. A first reason relates to labour productivity: a productivity obsession with speed is already deep-rooted and widespread. In this case it is about an element related to the organization of work, inherent to work, a material element so to speak. A second reason relates to youthfulness, i.e. the exaltation of the physical form, beauty, youth (together the depletion of physical capital that hits older workers). It is about a cultural element; this ideological trend has penetrated deeply into busi-

ness organizations. A third reason is linked to the fact that older workers are 'more expensive' (in terms of contributory benefits and rights), less open to blackmail and less flexible. A fourth reason is related to pension reforms, which have supported the deterioration of these workers' condition. Therefore we are facing a double disadvantage of older workers, which has been exacerbated by the economic crisis.

To grasp fully the centrality and impact of the new forms of work organization, they shall be analysed thoroughly and delved into as the cornerstone of the global social restructuring of the past few decades is precisely the transformation of work and labour market organization (together with changes in finance and politics). Such re-organization is characterized by: production processes shattering, labour relations casualisation, increase in the labour market segmentation, creation of the largest reserve labour army in history with the development of a world labour market, production of mass unemployment and under-employment at international level.

The new forms of labour division and work organisation have further subjugated workers to the needs of private companies and public bodies (which are increasingly working as private companies); in particular, they have intensified labour exploitation, by means of accelerating labour rhythms, increasing working hours, production and employment flexibility, and the de-skilling of several jobs. The increase in exploitation has affected, at first, those workers on the lowest steps of the professional pyramid, yet it has reached, even though in different forms, all organizational levels, even medium-high levels, as this was a global demand no private or public company could escape.⁶

The new forms of labour division and work organization have inevitably modified social stratification, deepening long-time inequalities and creating new ones.⁷ In the restructuring and re-segmentation of the world labour market, from macro to micro,⁸ work transformations have re-allocated and re-designed inequalities, disproving the thesis according to which in today's society labour has lost its centrality: on the contrary, now more than ever inequalities mainly originate, though not only, in the labour sphere.

6 This is due to the fact that the working logic of private and public companies has integrated world market demands, applying them in a top-bottom and bottom-up fashion to their whole employed staff.

7 In the relation between (new) labour market and (new) social stratification, other factors have to be taken into account, such as: salary levels in the North and in the South of the world, the deterioration of labour conditions, both as regards salaries and working time, health and rights.

8 Such restructuring has come about through the reorganization of production activity and labour deregulation, but also through the increase in off-shoring and migrations from the South of the world. Off-shoring and international migrations, and their interaction, are the keystone of a world labour market whose hierarchy follows the line of nationality and gender.

Production flexibility and working (and social) time acceleration, professional deskilling and marked segmentation of the labour market are the pillars of this work transformation process. In this paragraph we will examine these topics and their consequences on social stratification and inequalities, on the wake of works by Antunes, Gallino, and Head. This analysis starts from productive flexibility, articulated by the use of new technologies in automation, information and telecommunications, together with the implementation of lean production.

Lean production is not a new production-organization paradigm in itself, it is rather the application of taylorism in a stricter fashion, so as to reach a maximum saturation of the working time, to intensify its rhythms, to make operations, machines' and workers' movements multifunctional (Head 2003).⁹ According to Head, lean production is an updated version of taylorism, marked by sharper and more pervasive standardization, measuring and control processes, and by acceleration in production processes thanks to the application of new workplace practices such as ERP and re-engineering (made possible by information technologies). Thus, on the production-organization side, 'new economy' sounds like old wine in new bottles, as it is the application of models and methods of the 'old economy', but with a difference: such application is stricter and more controlled, more binding and pressing, with a higher degree of control and speed, also thanks to a certain use of information technologies. An example is the ErgoUas method, a work measurement method breaking down a worker's work hour into 100,000 time units during which the worker has to carry out hundreds of operations lasting a few seconds.

In the wake of Bravermann (1974), Head has highlighted the marked acceleration of the process of industrialization of white-collar and service work, through the transfer, from the industrial sector to the service sector, of management systems, of 'times and methods' already in use in factories, and by means of accelerating work thanks to new information technologies. After experimenting lean production and 're-engineering' in the 'new' car assembly chain, such techniques have been extended to other industrial branches (electronics, chemistry, food processing, metal working) and other functions of industrial companies (sales, administration, storage, transports) and, lastly, to a large part of the service sector, from telephones to health, from advertisement to banks. Such colonization of the service

9 There is not only continuity between fordist industrialism and flexible production, between Taylor's scientific management and Ohno's total quality, but also discontinuity and diversification elements; yet, the basic model of mass production has not been replaced by a new production model, but rather fine-tuned and renewed. Such renewal is allowed by the extreme simplification of work: in assembly lines, work has been reduced to simple tasks and workers have been asked to present suggestions to improve the production process, at best (mainly to accelerate it).

economy by lean production and scientific management has taken place thanks to the specific role carried out by information technologies, which have facilitated the renewal of industrial methods and their transfer to hospitals, medical practices, insurance and phone companies, and which have achieved the continuous flow in the production process of these sectors.

The introduction of these new work organization elements has been matched by a clear portrayal and application of technique and new technologies, according to which technological and organizational innovations would reduce precariousness, improve job qualification, increase salaries, and reduce psycho-physical stress. As a matter of fact, this is not always the case as such social effects depend on the way and the context in which technologies are applied and used; thus, though lean production has extended 'cognitive work', indeed manual work and work intensity have increased.

In traditional and new sectors alike, the achievement of a constant production flow has taken place on computerized assembly lines employing a workforce subdued to factory discipline by means of new automation and control systems provided by information technologies. This 'digital proletariat' includes several skilled workers, who are though called to perform a repeated routine work with a high risk of deskilling (Huws 2003). In this regard, Antunes has highlighted that toyotist flexible production, received and applied in different ways in European countries according to the economic, political and cultural context, was based on multidimensional flexibility (in terms of salaries, time, functions and organization), which, on the organization side, has taken place by means of mechanisms of 'organizational freeze-drying' and 'multifunction de-specialization' (Antunes 2003, 2013).¹⁰

This takes us to the second point: deskilling. The use of scientific management, digital style, and the application to all sectors and production levels of industrial methods has not brought about a large skilled, independent workforce, gratified by their job, such features are (partly) reserved for managers appointed to carry out re-engineering, to control tasks and orders implementation, to monitor work and the production process and to check its results. The change in technology and organization occurred in the workplace has turned out to be, on the contrary, hostile to qualified work, as it has depreciated the experience of blue-collars and white collars, it has decreased their role in industrial and 'immaterial' production. This circumstance is one of the factors which have led to the trend decrease in real wages in the US and Europe over the last few decades and thus is a keystone of today's processes of redefinition and escalation of social inequalities.

10 Mechanisms which have entailed a marked intensification of work rhythms, time and processes, both in the industrial and in service and agricultural sectors.

Customer satisfaction (tailor-made customer-oriented production) for instance, could have introduced an element of variability and de-standardization of work, instead it was carried out by means of a pre-set offer of products (the customer chooses within pre-determined series, possibilities and combinations of products) and a just-in-time approach, which makes sure that car parts or any other product (tangible or intangible) arrive at just the right place at just the right time so as to reduce any variation in the working routine determined by the installation of specific components. As Head highlights, the implementation of lean production, thus, has not taken place through the qualification and professional growth of the workers, but rather through other elements: the acceleration and optimization of each single movement, repeated over and over again, especially with workers' adaptation to the machines or computer, as an attachment of the assembly line and the continuous work flow; the identification of workers with the company; the importance attached to the control function of managers and supervisors.¹¹

The much-acclaimed work revolution in the car sector, or other sectors, was actually the achievement of 'participative taylorism', which had little to do with participation: the increase in production is based on simplification and standardization of workers' activities and movements, distorted by the ideology of total quality, of *kaizen* (continuous improvement to achieve more efficiency), of the company as a community of interests and goals; the organization of tasks and functions converges on the management, while all workers can propose are functional suggestions (ultimately leading to the staff reductions entailed by an increased efficiency in the employment of the workforce). Such new taylorism applied to white-collar jobs, knowledge work and 'intangible' work, has shifted towards today's service economy, a sector in which the above-mentioned features are crystal-clear. Indeed, in this context it is possible to see first-hand the elimination or reduction to minimum levels of the human element, of living labour, in particular of their variability and 'unreliability'. As Head underlines, this has happened, in theory, when taylorism applied to white-collar work (times and methods applied to office management) met re-engineering and toyotism, and took place, in practice, through the marked impact of information technologies on work tasks, work structure, work control and monitoring systems. A

11 As for identification with the company, the passage to continuous production flow (in its features and speed) has taken place based on one of the main new features introduced by toyotism: the involvement of the workers in permanent commitment inside (and outside) the workplace to improve production in quality and quantity. Such constant involvement tension, sought for by new human resources theories based on staff 'enhancement', has implied a sort of horizontal collective mutual control between workers, in favour of production increase. The weakening of trade unions, sometimes mere company trade unions, has been a further element paving the way for the increase in workers' exploitation, with their participation: this is the speed-up. See also Basso 2003; Ohno 1989.

prime example of the multi-dimensional impact of computers and information flow is given, according to Head, by call-centers: here, tasks and duties match and reproduce industrial processes, work is broken down into several small operations split between workers, then clocked and synchronized; the monitoring of the work flow (modes and contents) and output controls by the management are very strict.

The Western countries has long supported the idea that flexibility and technological and organizational innovations would be the means to reduce low-skilled and labour-intensive jobs. In fact, such jobs have not disappeared, on the contrary; furthermore, flexibility is one of the cornerstones of the process of enlargement of the lower layers of the job pyramid. This last feature has seen a marked increase in the years 2000s all over Europe, though in different ways. Gallino (2001, 2007) has highlighted the effects of flexibility on professional paths in different work systems: rationalized work, labour-intensive and medium-low qualifications, semi-independent work with predominant control functions, high-qualification work. In all these sectors, workers are extremely likely to be fired because they are considered too old, to be unemployed because specific roles and functions may be eliminated, to experience a sudden reduction in their wage, to undergo gradual deskilling as highly-educated workers often have to accept low-skilled jobs or as skilled workers are set aside by technological innovation.¹² For such reasons, flexible work (in performance and contracts) is an element which has polarized the mass of workers downwards and upwards, differentiating both wages and professional knowledge, thus creating an 'hourglass-like' situation.

These processes of deskilling are particularly linked to the development and decline of old and new professional sectors: the growth of the IT market, of new communication technologies, of the culture, mass communications and leisure industry, has entailed the increase and growth of professional roles responsible for the research and development, design and production of products (IT experts, specialized technicians, journalists, advertisers, communication experts), and at the same time the downwards shift of the staff responsible for executive functions of distribution, administration and control (staff in parks, fast-food restaurants, call centers, video stores, etc.). In addition to the marked enlargement process of the lower layers, the group of workers excluded from production activity has broadened, and it includes mainly three profiles identified by Gal-

12 Within the low-skilled work layer there has been a gradual worsening of work and wage conditions. It happened mainly in the service sector, which has become the 'poor' tertiary, in which there is a prevalence of workers assigned to low skilled jobs (generic tasks, low wage and poor trade union protection), which are at the moment one of the lower segments of social polarization. In this sector there is a majority of young people, less-educated women and immigrants.

lino (2000, p. 38): workers with a medium-low professional qualification (unskilled workers, day labourers, etc.), who cannot find a job due to the impact of the automation of the majority of production lines; workers with medium-high and high professional qualification who have lost their job and have small chances of finding a similar one, due to the impact of the technological progress or to a sectorial crisis; younger workers with high qualifications, no longer requested by the labour market, who have stopped searching for a job.

The development of the ‘new economy’ (which, as we have seen, is less ‘new’ than what is normally expected) has been led by new management systems and information technologies, which have markedly increased the influence, power and salaries of managers, while having the opposite effect on workers: wages have decreased, power relations have taken an unfavourable turn. In the meantime, as Gallino highlights, the work pyramid has been further segmented, with the result of increasing precariousness and unemployment at its base and thus the ‘excess’ or fluctuation of workforce; at the centre of the pyramid a hybrid zone has come about, which in the past included skilled work but which in this new context is bound to become under-employed or unemployed work. A new current aspect thus arises, with a striking impact on the processes of work and social stratification: flexibility, the focus of policies and public debates for at least the past 20 years.

Work deregulation and the destructuring of the different forms of work protection have set the bases for neoliberal policies, then enlarged to other social contexts. This turn of globalization has determined a new socio-economic framework, country- and social class-specific, characterized by the institutionalization of precariousness in all sectors of social, work and economic, psychological and existential, individual and collective life. Turning precariousness into a keystone in workers’ life has brought about the most important transformation of neoliberal globalization, and it was the main instrument for the intensification of work exploitation. In this regard, Antunes (2003) has observed that the introduction of precarious work forms (part-time, shared, on-call, voluntary, outsourced, subcontracted, false self-employment, false cooperative work) has had a pivotal role in producing more, working more and employing fewer people.

The combination of flexibility and precariousness has turned into an adaptation process of workers’ lives to the needs of production organizations (private or public), which has reduced the direct and indirect cost of work, together with the implicit entrepreneurial risk within the production of global goods chains. The spread of precariousness has had several effects, some strictly economic, others typically social, from the creation of

a dual hypersegmented labour market,¹³ to the enlargement of the reserve labour army, to the scattering of work rights, to the restriction of social citizenship.

To avoid a reductive view of the matter, it is important to underline that even though the need of the companies to make production more flexible and decrease entrepreneurial risks has been satisfied by means of enlarging the layer of workers excluded from production activities, by increasing the degree of precariousness and exploitation of employed people, such actions by public and private companies are deemed objectively inevitable given the processes of globalization and economic competition. Indeed, flexibility and precariousness are not only instruments used by companies to cut down the cost of labour, but also key elements in the process of labour's global loss of value and of resetting the balance of power between companies and workers. Thus, in addition to the main goal of the neoliberal production reorganization (which is to remove as much of the production process as possible from the prevailing conditions in industrialized countries), something deeper and broader has happened: there has been a fully-fledged turning point characterized by the resetting of social relations in the field of production, of the balance of power between social parts.

The resetting of the balance of power can be noticed in the gradual and radical commodification of labour, which has taken place through the spreading and multiplication of atypical and precarious contracts, and is liable to bend the workforce to production needs and the configuration of a society moulded on such needs.¹⁴ On-call, intermittent, shared, in lease contracts and all other forms of job precariousness (with its paradigm: undeclared work, and its extreme form: forced labour) are all ways to fragment and disconnect the workforce, by means of which it finally becomes what (according to neoliberal theories) it should be: a mere commodity at full disposal of market needs. This trend, which has been ongoing for at least three decades, goes beyond commodification: indeed, this is a blunt loss of value for work and workers, their denial within the production process and social life reproduction. This is not simply commodification of

13 The couple 'flexibility/precariousness' has implied not only the transfer of entrepreneurial risk and economic instability to workers, or workforce and workers fragmentation, but also the creation of a specific dualism in the labour market: the presence of a small area of 'decent work' (stable, well-paid, gratifying) and a large area of 'noxious work' (precarious, ill-paid, frustrating), composed by precarious workers 'for life'. According to Antunes, these reorganization processes are the pillars of a fully-fledged 'new morphology of work' whose features and effects are, besides work structural precariousness, the creation of a small group of skilled workers, stable and with plenty of work, and a large layer of under-employed, deskilled, ill-paid workers (employed in the ever-expanding undeclared work sector). Cf. Antunes 2008, 2011.

14 Neoliberal globalization is not a mere economic matter, but rather a discussion on forms of social domination and on the type of future societies (Chesnais 1996).

work; it is a thorough process of annihilation of the worker. They do not, and shall not, have any guarantees, as immigrants in racist portrayals, they shall have no rights. The news is in the extreme feature of the process of commodification of living labour; so much that public speeches often pinpoint the cause of the current global economic crisis in workers' rights (especially when public workers are concerned), in their own presence and in living labour, and often propose as a solution to eliminate all guarantees and living labour itself.

We shall conclude highlighting, as does Antunes (2008), that the alteration and broadening of work exploitation mechanisms and forms, which have taken place within the structural change in production processes, are mirrored in several aspects of workers' social life, entailing both a change in social stratification and redetermination of social relations in terms of production, gender, generation and race. These new mechanisms, which have given important inputs to value creation and profit increase, have had a dramatic impact and several consequences on workers' lives, as they have reduced living labour and broadened dead labour, at the same time they have limited to the utmost the social control on production by workers and social movements.

3.2 Old and New Inequalities

Over the last few decades, the world economy has unified and global wealth has increased. Yet, such events have developed in ways that have deepened the existing inequalities between different areas of the world and within single countries. Today, the world is more unified and polarised, in a more composite way, as 'historical' polarisations have been matched by new polarisations.

As for 'historical' development inequalities between the North and the South of the world (generated by colonialism), economic globalization, based on a marked industrial concentration and an equally marked financial concentration, have increased global wealth. Such increase, though, was concentrated in crucial development centres (i.e. in 'centres' and in 'peripheries' centres), among the leaders of the global economy, in particular in the managing levels of corporations, in the upper strata of Northern and Southern countries that benefited from globalization, in what is widely known as transnational capitalist class (Sklair 2001) - now fully internationalized and global. In the meantime, this round of globalization has worsened the quality of life of the majority of Southern and Eastern world populations, deepening the divide with the North and polarizing the distribution of global wealth: selective actions by the global capital, free trade agreements (from GATT to NAFTA, to WTO), the development of the agroindustrial sector in the country, interventions by multilateral

organizations (WB, IMF), the debt mechanism, have all destabilized whole local economies in the South of the world, dispossessing millions of farmers and craftsmen of their land and production means, producing mass unemployment and poverty, generating the largest reserve army of labour in history - constantly fostering international migration and industrial delocalization (where 'peripheries' work for and on behalf of the 'centres').

Such trending worsening of life and work conditions has started in the South and gradually moved up North, and it lies at the basis of the polarized distribution of national wealth within single countries both in the South and in the North of the world. With respect to new polarisations, two phenomena have deeply modified, at a global level, the inequality scenario:

- 1) The divide between the North and the South is only partially described by the image of the 'upside-down goblet', elaborated by the UN at the end of last century, owing to the growth of a number of countries in the South and East of the world. We are referring to the position obtained by Brazil, China, India and Russia in the world economy, together with the recovery of countries from South-East Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, which has led to a reshaping of global inequalities and their abatement in a number of countries;
- 2) Internal inequalities within each country have sharpened in most parts of the world, from North to South, from East to West, in old rich countries and in new growing countries, in poor countries from the South of the world and in declining Western countries. The increase in internal social polarization is a fully-fledged global phenomenon, both in terms of geographical extension and in terms of connection with the economic globalization process (Therborn 2006), so much so that it is possible to talk about of a globalization of internal social polarization, which on one hand adds up to and combines with the 'historical' polarization North-South, and on the other hand entails the creation of two global social classes corresponding to the upper class and the working class on a global scale (Sassen 2006; Therborn 2011).

This global class bi-polarisation process, together with the previous trends, has modified the inequalities scenario compared to a few decades ago, with what we may define a double twist. On one hand, BRICs and smaller countries that have increased their industrial development, have partially bridged the economic gap that divided them from richer countries, but they have marked internal social and local inequalities originating the largest internal migrations in history: these countries, with China at the forefront, have grown considerably, but are now way more unequal than 30 or 50 years ago. On the other hand, rich countries - including most of Europe, which in its recent past was an example of limited social polarisation - have seen a marked sharpening of social inequalities, whereas

countries like Greece have even experienced a process of striking impoverishment of the society.¹⁵

Based on such conditions, it is possible to state that on a global scale, there has been a convergence both on development levels, as a number of large countries or areas from the South have come closer to rich countries, bridging their gaps, and on the sharpening of internal social polarisation, involving the majority of the planet. These are the overall global social consequences of neo-liberal policies: on the one hand the concentration of wealth in the hands of few people, on the other hand, large-scale spreading of poverty and precarity; on one hand relative reduction of international inequalities (again, this applies to a few countries only), on the other hand general worsening of internal inequalities.

Within such general trends, a number of specific points and phenomena are to be highlighted, though in a concise way. First, the sharpening of global inequalities in income between wealthy and poor social strata is a fully-fledged 'disparity march', which has been going on for at least three decades (Atkinson 2008; IMF 2007; Milanovic 2002; OECD 2008). A telling example of such sharpening is given by the United States: for each dollar of growth of real income taking place between 1976 and 2007, 58 cents went to the 1% richest families (Rajan 2010). Such increasing inequalities find their origin, first and foremost, in the labour market (not only in economic policy choices, as Piketty highlighted in 2002 [Piketty 2002]); they generated a long-standing trend, as observed by Bihr and Pfefferkorn twenty years ago, on the social origins of the reversal of a multi-decadal trend of inequality reduction, taking place more or less gradually in the 20th century:

Ce retournement de tendance ne doit évidemment rien au hasard. Il a été l'œuvre des politiques de plus en plus néolibérales de gestion de la crise économique [...] Politiques récessives, partant de l'idée que la crise serait essentiellement due à une insuffisance de l'offre, à cause d'un coût salarial trop élevé, elles ont pour objectifs: le développement du chômage, de la précarité et de la flexibilité de l'emploi, la baisse des salaires réels, un démantèlement rampant des systèmes publics de protection sociale destiné à en alléger le coût financier; mais elles ont aussi entraîné une évolution du partage de la valeur ajoutée plus favorable

15 A note on the internal social polarization in the West: even though global wealth is higher in Western countries, it is concentrated in the hands of well-off classes, corporations, financial holdings, bank and insurance groups, whereas the processes of impoverishment and precarization of the working class and of a part of the middle class are advancing. The Western working class does benefit somehow, indirectly, of the concentration of global wealth in the North of the world, and in general, Northern workers' life conditions are better in average than those of Southern workers, but it is incorrect to talk about a rich happy Western world in general terms, as in the West, too, social polarisation has increased and there has been a process of downward levelling of life conditions.

au capital, un envol des taux d'intérêt réels, des bénéficiers spéculatifs fabuleux, une déréglementation progressive ou brutale des différents marchés, propice à cet épanouissement de la liberté des plus 'forts' qui a pour contrepartie un asservissement accru des plus 'faibles'. (Bihr, Pfefferkorn 1995, pp. 14-15)

Second, this sharpening of inequalities is characterized by the intertwining of old and new inequalities, which are not mutually exclusive but rather add up to each other. A case in point is provided by the working poor in Europe, a constantly-growing phenomenon: the report *Working poor in the European Union* of 2004 (Eurofound 2004) highlighted a significant presence of working poor in Europe (6% EU15), whereas the report *Working poor in Europe* of 2010 (Eurofound 2010) presented an even more concerning picture, as in 2007 (i.e. right before the burst of the economic crisis) working in poverty was a condition concerning 8% of the EU27 population (with differences according to gender, age, working sector, company size, family structure, geographical area), with significant peaks in Greece (14%), Poland (12%), Spain (11%), Italy, Lithuania and Portugal (10%). In particular, the report highlighted that the risk of being working poor was higher in Southern Europe and in new member countries from Eastern Europe, and this condition affected mainly young and older workers (especially in Southern Europe). Other factors related to the risk of becoming working poor are low levels of education, a part-time or, even worse, a temporary contract, belonging to a single-parent family.

Third, the sharpening of inequalities is characterised by the polarisation between working class and upper class. The radicalisation of inequalities in different countries does not concern primarily differences in income within the working class and middle class (which are present), but rather the chasm between the income of upper classes and lower classes, now symbolized by the ratio 400:1, 500:1, existing between the income of the CEO of a corporation and the salary of a worker. This fact was also highlighted by the annual report *Executive Paywatch 2012*, according to which in 2011 the income of US managers had reached the astronomical amount of 12.9 million dollars, i.e. 380 times that of workers and employees.

Fourth, given the processes of differentiation, segmentation and stratification characterising mature capitalist societies, today's inequalities present a larger set of strongly intertwined dimensions (from employment to market income, from fiscal withdrawals to available income, from consumption to free time, from housing to school conditions, from health to social aid); such dimensions, mingling and assembling, produce different social configurations and categories. Not only is there an increase of inequalities between social classes, there is also a differentiation of inequalities within social classes.

Fifth, notwithstanding the increase in size and variables, in the process

of production and reproduction of social inequalities the importance of social origin is still considerable, especially in countries like Italy or Spain.

Sixth, the increase of inequalities taking place at a global level, in all its forms and dimensions (wealth, income, health, access to culture and information) proves wrong the neo-liberal theory according to which the market, when free to operate, would level the sharpest inequalities and spread welfare at a general level, but also the social theory (from Sorokin to Rostow) according to which contemporary societies (from the most 'advanced' to the most 'underdeveloped') would reach, sooner or later, a low degree of social stratification and a moderate lack of economic equal distribution. These theories had spread the conviction that the contemporary society would become a social structure composed almost exclusively by the middle class, with, at most, a few excluded individuals and very rare extra wealthy people, but it did not happen.

Last, but not least, internal social polarisation is a global process involving emerging countries too (where the middle class has grown in size and functions), not only mature capitalist countries or Third world countries. Asia is an excellent example, in particular China, as it presents a sort of living summary of current inequalities. The important social transformations that have taken place in the country over the past few decades, in particular the privatization of companies and (though still at its beginning) of land, welfare, school, together with the commodification of a number of areas of social life, have created marked economic inequalities between the new well-off urban classes (composed of entrepreneurs, managers, self-employed people, high public functionaries who capitalised on the Chinese economic miracle) on the one hand, and working urban class (that partly improved their level of life, but at the same time endures a higher level of exploitation) and rural class (drenched in poverty) on the other (Anon. 2011). Social inequalities in China are deeper between coastal and internal regions, between town industry workers and farmers: the 80s saw the start of the deepening of disparity in income, as symbolised by the increase in Gini's coefficient, moving from 30 points in 1982 to 45 points in 2002; the income gap between country and city increased, from 1.8 in 1984 to 3.1 in 2009; salaries decreased and their quota in the composition of the national income has considerably reduced, too (Lu, Gao 2011). Such disparities are mirrored in equally deep education (Mok, Lo 2007) and health inequalities (Pavolini 2009).

To conclude these general remarks, we can say that inequalities and their deepening are a pivotal phenomenon in current social transformations within the framework of neo-liberalism, which may thus be defined as a process of enlargement and exacerbation of inequalities among nations,

classes, gender and generations.¹⁶ It is exactly in this general scenario that new inequalities shall be considered, including those relating to age, which now more than ever have specific features, in particular on the labour market, as shall be seen in the following chapters. In the next paragraph, the topic of older workers and active ageing will be considered, from a critical perspective.

3.3 Active Ageing: a Critical Perspective

For over two decades, a number of actors among which important international organizations such as the WHO, have developed an overall reflection on the concept and policies of 'active ageing'. As we know, the WHO defines active ageing as the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age (WHO 2002). This approach supports the realization of people's potential for physical, social, and mental well-being throughout the life course; in particular it supports older workers' participation in society, according to their needs, desires or abilities. In this sense the word 'active' does not refer only to being physically active or participating in the labour market but rather to a full participation in social, cultural and civil life. The concept of 'active ageing', thus, overtakes the concept of 'healthy ageing', as it includes a number of factors that, besides health, determine and affect the life of older workers and the elderly. It abandons a welfare approach based on needs, which portrayed and presented the elderly as passive subjects, privileged beneficiaries of institutional interventions, and embraces instead an emancipating approach, supporting equal opportunities and treatment in all aspects of social life.

Based on these assumptions, the main goal of new social policies is to maintain independence and self-sufficiency, which shall be pursued by means of integration of the concepts of interdependence and intergenerational solidarity. The WHO underlines that maintaining good health, preventing or delaying ageing-related disorders and diseases, also reduces human, social and economic costs weighing down on each individual, family and health system. It also calls for the adoption of policies and programmes in the field of employment, training, health to apply such approach, with positive results. Such approach considers the elderly a pivotal resource for families, communities and economies, as they may collaborate actively with their families, peers, neighbourhood, country; yet, to do so, a stronger institutional and social response is needed for the growing demands of

¹⁶ Helped out by the revival of racism, sexism and ageism, both in terms of ideology and in terms of policies and practices.

acknowledgement of the active, productive contribution of the elderly in formal and informal work, in household activities and voluntary work. Hence, the policies and programmes of active ageing shall encourage personal responsibility and self-activation, acknowledge the contribution of the elderly, consider that learning and training continue also at an older age, and provide for a welcoming, non-discriminating, non-hindering life context. As for this last point, the WHO has required the transformation and adaptation of cities, whose places, services, policies and infrastructures shall support and facilitate active ageing through a number of actions, such as the acknowledgement of skills and resources among the elderly, with flexible responses to their needs, the respect of their choices and lifestyles, the promotion of their inclusion and their contribution to social life.¹⁷ The WHO also presents good economic reasons to spread this approach: the commitment by the elderly in care and homecare activities may be an important aspect for the economic life and for the very GDP of States; the extension of the working life-span, favoured by a good state of health, would reduce the burden on welfare spending; keeping a good state of health would reduce health expenditure. As for policies and cultural processes, the spreading of a new standard is required, in which the image of old age is no longer associated with retirement (as in quitting), sickness and lack of self-sufficiency, but rather to self-sufficiency, active contribution and development.

The concept of active ageing, previously introduced, is an important, useful and shared idea, yet it has a few critical points, some of which are theoretical while others more operational, some within the adopted logic and others connected to general social processes. First, the proposal does not consider neither, in particular, the impoverishment, social polarisation, destructuring and welfare privatization processes, nor, in general, a number of social, economic and political dynamics aiming at the opposite of what is proposed by the WHO. In particular, it is not clear whether the proposals indicated by the WHO contain and represent a sort of criticism and contrast to neo-liberal thought and policies, or whether they are a functional technical method of organic adaptation to leading trends. In the second case, it is hard to imagine their practical application.

Second, the elderly are considered a 'resource', but in a very specific and restricted meaning: an economic resource, a welfare safety net. In times like these, characterised by a new regulation of production relations marked by the increase in the intensity and precarity of work, by general cuts to welfare and by the worsening of the economic situation, the older population is identified as a useful source of productive and reproduc-

17 WHO 2007. A particular attention shall be paid to the sectors of housing, mobility and information.

tive labour, underpaid, free, voluntary, complementary and/or equivalent, functional to the interests and mechanisms of domination of the current historical phase (in which informal work and shadow economy are on the rise). A few examples can shed light on certain ambiguities of the concept of active ageing: the statement according to which active ageing favours the reduction of health spending goes along with neoliberal policies and concepts supporting the dissolving of social protection systems; suggesting work and training policies encouraging active ageing does not consider the actual dynamics of the labour market, in particular those on the management of staff and new forms of work organization (dynamics that tend to exclude from the labour market even middle aged workers as they are considered less productive, stiff, unskilled); the proposal to extend the working life-span has limitations if it does not take into account working time and conditions nowadays, together with managing and organizational practices tending to degrade, exclude, dismiss older workers, as demonstrated by a number of studies (Lain 2012; Karpinska 2013; Marshall 2001; Porcellato 2010; Taylor 1994; Thomson 1991; van Dalen 2014; Walker 1993).

All in all, active ageing, as it is being proposed at international level, seems like a good proposal, but often only on paper, because it is actually feasible only for a few; not only in the countries of the South of the world, but also in the North. Privatizations and liberalizations, with their consequences on the social life of the elderly (from city-planning dynamics to the housing market, from the increase in the cost of life to social inequalities), and the super-selective inclusion dynamics characterizing our era, seem to follow an opposite trend compared to what was previously suggested. This is why active ageing, if it wants to avoid becoming a new social collocation for the elderly marked by the adaptation of neoliberal policies, shall extend its meaning, including the possibility and need for the elderly to keep a stance and active role of resistance against all factors tending to worsen their life, a role of change, in its full meaning, in the final part of their working career and after retiring.

When considering the Italian context and its social policies, a few years ago M. Paci called for forms of active ageing which could be carried out moving from a national welfare based on transfers to a local welfare of services which could «translate into an important occasion of employment growth. This could benefit partly older workers, many of whom show they have the necessary skills to carry out voluntary or civil commitment activities [...] basically we need to start considering our ageing population as a resource» (Paci 2005, p. 43, my translation). The author also called for an increase in the working activity rate of the elderly, which requires, though, an increase in education levels, as the participation in the labour market is increasingly linked to a medium-high education level. This may be agreed upon, but it shall be added that as for active ageing and the increase in activities among the elderly, the main features of the current forms of work

organisation and division shall be taken into account, together with the worsening of the general working conditions, among which the progressive de-qualification of workers has a leading role.

Compared to the traditional social policies for the elderly, over the past few years steps forward have been taken all over Europe (even though to a different extent). There has been a gradual shift from policies based on the idea of a passive and ill older person, a weak subject, to policies based on the idea of the older person as an active subject, a skilled individual, a resource for the community. Yet, there is still a limitation in these new policies, i.e. the lack of connection between the elderly's condition and the global functioning of the society and social relations system. For instance, when considering projects of active ageing especially in Southern Europe, the social workers carrying them out highlighted the poor involvement of elderly women who were «isolated in their homes» or «not very active»: this can but be the outcome if the project is drafted without taking into consideration the actual conditions in which many women live, burdened as they are with care and housework activities and with such little free time. This can but be the outcome if the project is created without taking into account the configuration and dynamics of today's society, in which the elderly are made fragile and passive by economic and political circumstances of a general and systemic kind. The elderly are certainly a differentiated, many-sided, plural social component, yet as a whole they live and suffer from a condition of isolation and degradation. This is a pivotal point to consider when drafting social policies.

As for the working activity, the increase of the elderly component within the total population has taken place exactly when for older workers the job opportunities were decreasing. In Europe, especially in Italy (Morlicchio, Pirrone 2006) and Spain, the average life-span has increased and so has the life expectancy of the elderly, together with a reduction in the age of actual leaving work; in particular, there has been a decrease in the share of active population belonging to older age, in parallel with the ageing of the whole population. This reduction in the age of actual leaving work, which previously affected older workers almost exclusively, has now been involving, directly or indirectly, a number of people in their fifties mainly heading towards the final stage in their work career (at least the 'official' one). Over the past few years, many countries have dealt with this situation by increasing the retirement age, with results that have not always been positive, if not poor, as companies, keeping on their path towards early leaving work, have created a large number of unemployed people without the requirements to have access to retirement (Paci 1996; de Leonardis 1996; Guillemard 1996). This could happen thanks to a new regulation of the labour market marked by precarity and destructuring of the work-retirement path, all processes supported by 'accompanying' policies towards unemployment and the exclusion from the labour market,

such as a large use of pre-retirement plans, disability pensions and many forms of social protection.¹⁸ If social policies today (at international and national level) are largely inspired by the concept of active ageing, as far as companies are concerned, the situation is different: despite the recommendations of the European institutions (Eurofound 1994), often during industrial restructuring, the first to be let go are older workers, and in quite a short time-span, as they believe (and often it is a fact) that they may put more pressure towards productivity on younger workers. During restructurings, pre-retirement is often employed, but it contradicts the very idea of extending active life. More and more often a part of older workers are forced to retire from work under unfavourable financial conditions (which certainly does not encourage a peaceful and active ageing) and they have then to find a new job under worse conditions in irregular activities. This is how, paradoxically, a shadow stretches over the notion of active ageing, the shadow of the use of cheap older workforce.

These processes, particularly hard during recessions and in restructuring phases, have mortified materially and spiritually older workers and the young elderly, resulting in their early leaving of work and increasing their social insecurity. In public representations it is often possible to note an overturn in the cause-effect relationship, so that the elderly seem a burden (it is not by chance that in this sector of studies and social intervention there is a leading role of the falsely neutral notion of 'dependence index'). A social, health, welfare, family burden. A burden not only on the present, but also on the future of society. A burden on younger generations, on children, from whom older workers – as the leading rhetoric goes, scientifically confusing rights with privileges – eat away the present and future welfare. In this sense ageism (Butler 1976) is more than ever the ideology framework supporting and justifying the social de-classification of individuals based on age, which was and is – according to the period – the driving engine for the mobilization or marginalization of older workforce; a social and organizational discrimination which goes hand in hand with other forms of inequalities based on social class, gender, nationality as already highlighted (Graebner 1984; Townsend 1984).

The de-structuring of work relations, the fragmentation of the work-retirement path and the amputation of welfare are processes which, together, affect heavily the whole cycle of life, especially for the elderly and older workers. Specific, local and individual situations may have different characteristics according to the context, yet it is possible to underline a

¹⁸ Italy, for instance, is characterised by the marked leaving of work by workers aged between 55-64, especially as regards the feminine component. Recently, the employment among older people has increased, due to demographic reasons and to the presence of selective mechanisms in the access to retirement; yet there has not been a change in direction as far as the marginalization of older workers is concerned. (Morlicchio, Pirone 2006).

permanent feature, i.e. the larger disadvantage of women, as they are more segregated and discriminated against by men in the 'ordinary' labour market and as there is still an uneven distribution of reproductive, house and care work. Old age is thus different for men and women, as it follows the lead of sexual division of labour and the uneven distribution of work burdens. The more idle and free it is for the former, the more busy and wearing it is for the latter – who often also have to provide for their children's families and/or elderly parents.

4 The Present Volume

The present edited volume depicts contemporary debates of age vulnerability and social dialogue in the current social context and aims at improving expertise in industrial relations in European and comparative terms and at sharing information and experience among parties actively involved in industrial relations. Based mainly on the experiences of workers, we have gathered a set of illustrations of actions and measures addressing the needs and demands of young and older workers in relation to their active inclusion in the labour market. Thus, this work has a further goal of promoting the development of industrial relations in Europe by putting forward a set of recommendations addressed to different target groups involved in the study. The identification of best practices adopted by trade unions or employers' associations to enhance an active inclusion of vulnerable age groups of workers in the labour market and in the whole society is also an objective of this research in order to recognise and disseminate new approaches and measures that improve work opportunities and working conditions. Linked to this, in regard to specific policy recommendations that best support labour inclusion of vulnerable age workers and protect their rights, current union actions and discourses have been assessed towards a range of guiding themes dealt with in each of the sections of the book. These themes include main topics that play a key role in the dynamics between trade unions and vulnerable age groups of workers within the general debate of unions' protection of workers' interests in the new European context, such as the regulation of new forms of work organization, the prevalence of age discrimination, the gender dimension, intergenerational dynamics and age diversity management.

In this regard, chapter two of the present volume deals with the impact of the introduction of new forms of work organisation and its uneven distribution on young and older age groups of workers in the course of the last three decades. In chapter three the focus is on the changing contexts of age discrimination practices and their intersection with other forms of discrimination and labour market inequalities. Meanwhile, chapter four addresses gender equality and the specific problems faced by women in the

vulnerable age groups, while also analysing social partners' awareness of gender and age intersections in the labour market and the activities aimed at improving the situation of younger and older women to reconcile family and working life. Chapter five explores the unionisation trends of vulnerable age groups and to what extent social partners are able to successfully represent their interests in the framework of social dialogue institutions. In chapter six the emerging intergenerational dynamics in the labour market in the context of population ageing and the current economic recession are analysed and discussed. Finally, chapter seven focuses on the implications and applications of the main findings and innovative approaches gathered through case studies, with the aim to contribute to the future design and application of social policies and further development of industrial relations towards a greater inclusion of workers of potentially vulnerable age groups in the labour market.

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