

Is work not working anymore?

Negotiating meaning, boundaries and new practices of work in the ruins of employment

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This paper examines the shifting relationship between subjectivity and work in contemporary post-industrial societies, focusing on the ways in which workers are renegotiating the meaning, boundaries, and practices of employment amid the structural erosion of stable labour. Drawing on the metaphor of "ruins," the introduction argues that the decline of the Standard Employment Relation has not produced a simple collapse of work-centred identities, but rather a layered process of decay and reconfiguration, in which moral expectations surrounding work persist even as their material foundations are progressively undermined. Within these ruins, new interrogatives and a re-imagining of social priorities have led some individuals to rethink the relationship they have with their jobs, opening up spaces of possibility in which the contours of a new world of work are potentially beginning, unevenly, to take shape. Though often fragmented, these spaces of possibility reveal attempts to redefine the meaning, boundaries, and conditions of work, seeking to establish a more sustainable relationship from within the "ruins of stable employment".

Keywords: Work refusal, meaningfulness of work, great resignation, work well-being; futures of work.

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Introduction¹

This Special Issue explores the relationship between subjectivity and work in post-industrial societies, with a particular focus on emerging perspectives on work, on the rebalancing of work-life dynamics, and on the ways in which employment relationships are being challenged both individually and collectively. Rather than interpreting work refusal as a homogeneous or explicitly political phenomenon, the contributions gathered here approach it as a heterogeneous constellation of practices, discourses, and orientations that challenge specific assumptions historically attached to work. While often marginal, fragmented, or confined to relatively small groups, these practices are nevertheless sociologically significant, as they illuminate emerging tensions within contemporary work relations.

Over the past decades, the Western labour markets have undergone profound structural transformations, characterised by increasing flexibilisation, contractual fragmentation, and the erosion of long-term employment security (Castel, 1995; Kalleberg, 2011). These changes have not simply altered working conditions, but have fundamentally reshaped the temporal, economic, and biographical horizons through which individuals relate to work (Sennett, 2000). Stable employment trajectories, once associated with predictable incomes, social protection, and the possibility of long-term planning, have progressively given way to forms of work marked by uncertainty, discontinuity and risk (Beck, 2000; Castel, 1995). Central to this transformation has been the widespread flexibilisation of labour contracts, often justified in the name of competitiveness, efficiency, and adaptability to global markets. Fixed-term contracts, temporary agency work, involuntary part-time employment, freelance or pseudo-self-employed arrangements and periods of worklessness have become structural features of contemporary labour markets rather than marginal exceptions (Choonara, Murgia and

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Carmo, 2022). While flexibility has been presented as an opportunity for individual autonomy and choice, in practice it has often translated into asymmetric forms of risk distribution, in which uncertainty is increasingly borne by workers rather than employers or institutions. For many workers, especially younger generations and immigrants, precarious employment is not a transitional phase preceding stability, but a persistent state that structures entire working lives (Vosko, 2009; Dimitriadis, 2023; Filandri *et al.* 2022). The result is the contradiction highlighted by Fraser (2016), whereby capital is no longer able to provide the social and material conditions for the reproduction of the labour-power upon which its valorisation depends.

The degree to which individuals attribute centrality and meaning to work is still strongly mediated by institutional contexts, as Roma *et al.* demonstrate in this Issue: work remains a central source of identity and social value primarily where it is supported by stable employment conditions, effective welfare regimes, and credible guarantees of economic security and social protection. Where these conditions are weakened, attachment to work may become increasingly ambivalent and contingent, opening space for critique, distancing, and the questioning of work's normative promises (see also Honneth, 1996; Gallie, 2007). In particular, when the capacity to make long-term plans, whether related to housing, family formation, or personal investment, is limited, the future appears as increasingly unpredictable (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2005) and work increasingly appears as a site of uncertainty rather than security, making it difficult for individuals to imagine continuity, accumulation, or stability over time (Woodman, 2011).

The erosion of stable employment has weakened the social contract historically embedded in work, undermining workers' sense of contributing meaningfully to society and calling into question work's role as a foundation of social belonging and collective participation. It is difficult to contest that people's relationship with work is now profoundly shaped by precarity, despite still living in a deeply work-centred society, where waged work is not merely as an economic activity, but as a cultural, moral, and symbolic institution and a primary axis of social integration, recognition, and identity formation (Weeks, 2011). However, it is also true that, within neoliberal configurations of labour, the cultural centrality of work has been further intensified, despite its fragmentation, through discourses that frame employment as a site of self-realisation, passion, and authenticity (Hochschild, 2012; McRobbie, 2013). Individuals have been encouraged to invest emotionally in their work and to understand employment as a personal project through which to achieve fulfillment and social value (Farrugia, 2019). In this context, work has increasingly been presented not only as a means of economic

survival, but as a core component of the self. The promise underpinning this narrative was that commitment, flexibility, and continuous self-improvement could compensate for labour market instability, transforming insecurity into an opportunity for individual advancement, self-realisation and even happiness. However, the credibility of this cultural promise seems to be facing a cultural rediscussion, as the proliferation of debates around phenomena such as burnout, turnover intention and work refusal, alongside requests for alternative working arrangements (Jaffe, 2021; Busso, 2024) gain momentum.

The pandemic constituted a critical juncture in this process, not so much by generating new inequalities as by accelerating and rendering visible pre-existing structural vulnerabilities. The widespread interruption, reorganisation, and intensification of work during this period undermined the idea of employment as a stable source of protection and collective integration. At the same time, the crisis exposed the fragility of moral narratives that had framed sacrifice, resilience, and total dedication to work as meaningful and ultimately rewarded (Coin, 2023; Jaffe, 2021). As a result, work's capacity to function as a reliable source of both economic security and social recognition has increasingly been called into question.

From this perspective, the changing relationship between workers and employment and the new requests relating to work-life balance may be understood as a crisis of trust and recognition, in line with Honneth's theory of recognition (1996). Precarisation erodes the legal, social, and symbolic guarantees historically embedded in employment, weakening the normative framework through which work provided recognition as full membership in society. For precarious workers, employment increasingly fails to deliver recognition across Honneth's three dimensions: legal recognition, in the form of enforceable rights and protections in the labour market; social esteem, through stable occupational identities and socially valued contribution to society through work; and moral recognition, understood as trust and reciprocal expectations between workers, employers, and institutions. Temporary contracts, fragmented careers, and uncertain entitlements undermine confidence in the reciprocity of the employment relationship, producing the widespread perception that work no longer "keeps its promises".

Importantly, this erosion of recognition does not result in the disappearance of work-centred identities, but rather in the risk of a growing detachment from the moral claims historically attached to work. In this context, contemporary practices of distancing, withdrawal, or misbehaviour at work can be interpreted not simply as individual disengagement, but as responses to a structural deficit of recognition within the ruins of stable employment. It is within the tension between enduring moral expectations surrounding

work and the deterioration of its material and institutional conditions that the forms of disillusionment, detachment, and critical re-evaluation explored in this Special Issue take shape: from demands for remote and hybrid working arrangements, to digital cultures of work refusal such as Reddit's *Antiwork* (D'Agnes and Storti, 2025; Gandini and Guazzo 2024), to renewed interest in basic income proposals and experiments with reduced working time. However, this moment of crisis also opens up a space of possibility: as the material and moral foundations of work are progressively eroded, the visible ruins of stable employment coexist with new imaginaries and practices that question the centrality of waged work and invite its reconfiguration.

1. Among the ruins of work

The metamorphosis of labour, which is currently reshaping the ways in which individuals (re)imagine their relationship with work, can be fruitfully understood through the metaphor of 'ruins', a concept borrowed from political ecology and critical social theory. We are increasingly inhabiting the *ruins of work* as we have known it until now, especially if we consider work as a social institution capable not only of valorising individual singularities and talents, but also of providing dignity, protection, and acting as a motor of social mobility. Seen through the lens of ruins, this metamorphosis appears not as a sudden collapse, but as a layered process of decay and reconfiguration, in which past institutional arrangements had largely affected the way we work today. Labour continues to structure identities, aspirations, and moral expectations, yet it does so within an environment marked by instability, uncertainty, and loss of meaning. This transformation, under the sign of the ruins, is now being shaped by several structural and moral shifts, two of which are particularly relevant for understanding the meaning of work today and for framing the analysis that follows: the acceleration of digital innovation and the multiple crises of contemporary capitalism.

The first concerns technical progress and technological change, and the ways in which technology, today as in the past, acts as a powerful driver in redefining how work is organised, imagined, and positioned within society. The digital and AI 'revolution' has simultaneously fuelled imaginaries of future societies liberated from work (Srnicsek and Williams, 2015; Bastani 2018; Hester, Stronge 2025), while also accelerating the inexorable process of commodifying and datafying human (and non-human) life, with a kind of new cycle of primitive accumulation enabled by digitality (Yan, 2024). As

always throughout history, technological acceleration brings with it the paradoxical condition of concretely dreaming of the full automation of human labour while at the same time subjecting ourselves even more forcefully to the processes of accumulation (Mosco, 2004; Terranova, 2000). After all, the dystopian predictions of technological unemployment have, for decades, from the Meadows' (1972) report to Rifkin's books, been regularly disproven by the course of history, since technology in capitalism has been systematically employed to increase surplus value rather than to reduce labour (Fallot, 2024[1966]). Today technology plays a crucial role, for both companies and workers, in imagining new working conditions and organisational forms. At the same time, it has become the locus of a renewed entrepreneurialisation, offering new tools across all economic sectors, foremost among them the informal economy, where social media and digital environments have become spaces for renewed "industrious" experimentation with household economic practices and informal forms of trade, in which, however, the boundaries of what counts as work and as workers is increasingly blurred (Arvidsson *et al.*, 2025; Volpe, in this Issue).

The second shift, closely intertwined with the metaphor of ruins, is the emergence of crisis as a permanent social condition. Rather than being experienced as an exceptional disruption, the crisis has crystallised into a structural condition of social coexistence, functioning as the prism through which people perceive reality and envision their working futures adapting to the "broken promises" of modernity (Rosa, 2010). Climate catastrophes, the collapse of welfare infrastructures, the spectre of permanent global war, the increasing erosion of workers' rights and protections, the rise of inequality and the decline of real wages all compel individuals to reconsider their social priorities in the "ruins of capitalism" (Borghi, 2025). *Ruins* today constitute both an inexorable human realm and a condition of possibility from which social imaginaries can be generated (Tsing, 2015). Looking at all the complex phenomenologies of work in contemporary societies, we should adopt a "*political reading of the ruins*" that allows us to grasp how new forms of life and labour are emerging from within the debris of the old (Borghi, 2025; Centemeri, 2019). In historical terms, the ruins signal also a definitive break with the trap of trajectorism, that is, with the idea that the development of societies and of work follows a single, linear evolutionary path (Chackrabarty, 2000). This rupture points to the empirical evidence of a progressive informalisation (Breman and Van der Linder, 2014), refeudalisation (Neckel, 2019), and 'brazilianisation' (Beck, 2000) of European labour landscape. Yet the ruins do not simply expose the trap of trajectorism by revealing that the West may increasingly follow the Rest. This interpretation, while

illuminating, remains partial. The globalisation of uncertainty, driven above all by the dynamics of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene, produces a synchronisation of crises that exceeds any linear or inverted trajectory of development. What is emerging is not merely a reversal of paths but the *possibilism* of a paradigmatic rupture, a moment in which established coordinates of work, value, and social reproduction are being fundamentally reconfigured (Borghi, 2025). As Gramsci famously wrote, “the old world is dying, and the new one is slow to appear”: it is within these ruins that the contours of that new world of work are potentially beginning, unevenly, to take shape.

Within these ruins, new interrogatives, shifting sensibilities, diverse global urgencies, and a re-imagining of social priorities (as during the global pandemic) have led some individuals to unpack and rethink the relationship they have with their jobs. A statistically not predominant but sociologically relevant part of the working population is seeking forms of work that are less pervasive and less alienating. Various and heterogeneous phenomena, often linked to the introduction and advantages of new technologies, as in the case of remote work arrangements, have proliferated, presenting themselves as opportunities for a better alignment between one’s work-life balance (Gandini and Garavaglia, 2023; Carreri and Dordoni 2023). At the same time, other emerging work forms are addressing not only the conditions of employment but also the substance of work itself, as exemplified by the renewed interest in craft occupations among post-industrial middle classes or by the rise of neo-rural labour practices (Land, 2018; Ocejó, 2017; Orria and Luise, 2017). Wage-based, industrial, corporate, knowledge, and service workers are increasingly seeking out and re-inventing alternative forms of work: neo-craft production, small-scale agriculture, digital nomadism, digital-based activities, and a variety of small businesses and side hustles rooted in the reimagination of work and (sometimes) of its social worth. Meanwhile, social media feeds overflow with wellness gurus and lifestyle-change influencers who promise golden working opportunities (new trades, entrepreneurial pathways, and alternative income streams) while ultimately monetising the hopes and insecurities of their audiences. These seemingly unrelated cases in fact share a common thread; they articulate critiques of specific dimensions of contemporary labour and of conditions of employment that often cut across class distinctions: hierarchies, repetitive tasks, precarity, chronic stress, lack of meaning and of purpose. Simultaneously, we are witnessing a widespread disenchantment with conventional waged jobs fuelled by the deteriorating and uncertain conditions of employment, and a broader and more diffuse reimagination of the substance of work itself. This contestation can

take divergent directions, sometimes reinforcing processes of entrepreneurialisation, neoliberal subjectivation, ‘assetization’ and self-optimisation, or even self-exploitation (De Stavola, 2020; Jarrett, 2022); sometimes adopting more or less hidden forms of resistance, subtraction, or sabotage on the workplace, from resignation to practices of organisational misbehaviour or quite quitting in the workplace (Peterlongo, 2023; Trevisan, in this Issue); at other times manifesting as a more radical contestation of, or refusal toward, work, or simply a search of more *resonant* and fulfilling working experiences (Gandini *et al.*, 2025; Rosa, 2019). Yet, at first sight, all of these seem forms of silent rebellions (Honneth, 2022) and merely individual - and sometimes also functional (Cini, 2025) - responses to a structural issue, unable to affect the roots of the problem of the social recognition of work through a collective mobilisation.

The labour landscape displays a number of both continuities and differences when we shift our gaze toward more peripheral economic areas of global capitalism or toward continents other than Europe and North America. On the one hand, with regard to discontinuities, we have to remember that the metamorphosis of waged labour that has led many workers to become disenchanted with their jobs is a condition that concerns only a relatively small portion of the planet and over a fairly limited period of time. The characteristics we commonly associate with standard employment, such as long-term contracts, fixed working hours, rights and protections, have in fact been an historical exception in capitalism, tied to the European post-World War II economic boom of the so-called *trente glorieuses* (Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Ong, 2009). And actually the same can be said regarding gender and race, since the aforementioned characteristics of work describe mainly male employment, while women work has always mostly been informal and non-standard (Betti, 2016). The full employment society, based on the Standard Employment Relation (SER), as famously argued by Beck (2000, p.2), was only a “short [male, and white] dream of eternal prosperity”, which largely excluded women, whose labor has always been predominantly informal and non-standard. In this context, the post-work vision, as advocated for instance by Hester and Stronge (2025), is not just about rethinking waged labor, but also about addressing the ‘shadow work’ of those that are not “male (and white)” that sustains the economy. This includes the vast, unpaid infrastructure of domestic tasks, caregiving, and emotional labor that remains socially invisible and uncompensated, yet is essential for the reproduction of the formal workforce (see also Fraser 2014). Their approach highlights the need to decouple social recognition from waged employment, to offer a potential pathway to bridge the historical gap between formal and informal spheres,

ensuring that the reduction of labor does not merely reinforce existing inequalities but instead promotes a more equitable distribution of both productive and reproductive activities (Weeks 2011). Moreover, following Tsing's theorisation of ruins (Gan *et al.*, 2017; Tsing, 2015), it can be argued that the SER operates today as a ghost. That is, it persists not as a living social institution, but as a phantasmagoric presence, something that no longer fully exists (if ever had existed), yet continues to haunt social imaginaries and union's agendas in postindustrial European societies.

Therefore, if we consider SER as an historical and geographical exception in capitalist development (Ong, 2009), processes of labour de-standardisation and precarisation, when explained outside Europe or North America, only partially capture the lived realities of work in more peripheral regions of capitalism. On the other hand, with regard to continuities, work has globally reached such a high degree of pervasiveness in human life - also thanks to the same technologies that had previously promised to free us from labour - that campaigns advocating for reduced working hours or shorter working weeks, as well as more general anti-work protests, have re-emerged across all continents, especially among young generations. For example, looking at Latin America (the continent that includes some of the countries with the highest number of working hours globally, such as Colombia and Mexico, according to OECD data³) we find institutional experiments and mobilisations that highlight local forms of resistance to the pervasivity of work⁴. Elsewhere, in many European countries, several experimentations are being implemented to reduce the working week to four days⁵. Meanwhile, numerous companies - carefully selected among the few that can afford it and that enjoy high reputational status, such as Luxottica or Lamborghini (Lupoli *et al.*, in this Issue) - have begun experiments aimed at shortening the working day or week in many countries including Italy. However, the political landscape is

³ OECD data are available at: www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/hours-worked.html

⁴ The “*Fim da Escala 6x1*” campaign in Brazil, for instance, brought national attention to the issue of work-life imbalance in a country where holding two or three jobs simultaneously is common, and where the pervasiveness of work is experienced first and foremost as ‘super-exploitation’ of labour (De Stavola, 2025). The success of these mobilisations convinced the government to open discussions on a bill aimed at reducing the working week to fewer than 40 hours. In the same region, Chile and, more recently, Colombia have enacted laws to reduce the maximum length of the working week. Mexico's president, Claudia Sheinbaum, has recently followed her counterparts as well, proposing a gradual reduction of the working week from 48 to 40 hours by 2030.

⁵ Actually, the Spanish government recently failed in its attempt to pass a bill that would have reduced the working week to 37.5 hours.

more variegated and includes not insignificant instances that run counter to this trend.

This brief excursus illustrates how critiques of work can assume different moral stances and socio-political geographies. At an individual level, work refusal may be rooted in physical exhaustion, overwork, violence, and the intensification of productive rhythms; at other times, it stems from subtler forms of alienation, lack of meaning, or the saturation of personal expectations invested in professional life. Yet these are not opposing phenomena but rather two sides of the same coin. In other words, the material conditions and the cultural dimensions of labour must be understood as interdependent in analyses of the meaningfulness of work and the opportunities for its metamorphosis.

2. The role of younger generations in the reconfiguration of work boundaries

Rising work-related discussions and practices that are the focus of this Special Issue thus emerge within the ruins of stable employment, not as a rejection of work as a social institution, but as a questioning of some of its features. This shift is particularly evident among younger cohorts who entered the labour market after the flexibilisation and precarisation of employment relations. In this sense, younger workers can be understood as having come of age within what Tsing (2015) conceptualises as the *ruins* of a previous socio-economic order: having grown up after the erosion of Fordist stability, they have learned to navigate work through cracks, fragments, and provisional arrangements, developing new ways of making a living and imagining futures from within the debris of stable employment rather than beyond it. For these workers, precariousness has constituted a structural and “native” condition rather than a temporary deviation from stability. Having grown up in contexts marked by labour market volatility, intensified competition, and uncertain returns on educational investment, younger workers tend to relate to work in a more distanced and reflexive way (Bertolini and Goglio, 2023; Roosmaa *et al.*, 2021), although they are not necessarily the group most directly involved in voluntary resignations (De Meulenaere *et al.*, 2023; Roosmaa *et al.*, 2021). Comparative evidence presented in this Issue by Roma *et al.*, drawing on the European Values Study, shows that younger cohorts, particularly Millennials and Gen Z, attribute lower centrality to work than older generations, although with significant variations across national contexts and welfare regimes. Higher levels of education appear to

play an important role in this process, as educational attainment is increasingly decoupled from stable employment and social recognition (Murgia, Poggio 2018).

This dynamic is rooted in the lived experience of precariousness itself, which, on one hand, has progressively exposed the limits of individualised strategies for managing labour market insecurity, anticipating and managing insecurity through continuous self-investment, training, and the mobilisation of personal traits in line with ideals of self-entrepreneurship and individual responsabilisation (Wyn and Woodman, 2015; Rebughini, Colombo and Leonini, 2017). Lived experiences of fragmented careers, underemployment, and overqualification have exposed the structural nature of insecurity and the inadequacy of individualised strategies to overcome it (Jaffe, 2021; Bertolini and Gobbino, 2025).

On the other hand, and more importantly, more frequent and diffuse experiences of underemployment and worklessness have forced many individuals to confront the fragility of the idea of work as the primary foundation of social worth and personal identity. While often accompanied by material hardship and feelings of inadequacy, these experiences have also opened spaces for rethinking the use of time and the organisation of everyday life beyond employment, allowing new horizons of possibility to emerge (Berardi, 2017). Such experiences have not displaced the importance of work altogether, but have probably fostered a reflection on its place within a meaningful life.

The pandemic represented a crucial juncture in this process, intensifying already fragile economic and occupational situations and making the structural nature of precarity particularly visible to younger workers. At the same time, marginal improvements in working conditions, most notably the rapid expansion of remote work, revealed that certain aspects of work organisation were not immutable (Gandini and Garavaglia, 2022). These partial changes made previously normalised forms of exploitation, overwork, and illegitimate demands appear increasingly intolerable. Burnout, chronic stress, and pervasive illegal requests ceased to be perceived as unavoidable costs of labour market participation and became objects of public discussion, contributing to rising turnover intentions and the activation of exit strategies (De Meulenaere, 2024; Gandini *et al.*, 2025). This growing disillusionment among younger workers reflects the erosion of the emotional and moral narratives that sustained total dedication to work for older generations, whose working lives were more often characterised by stable employment trajectories. As the promises of stability and fulfilment associated with full commitment failed to materialise for many, increasing emphasis has been placed on

the need for boundaries: clearer separations between work and private life, greater autonomy over time and tasks, the diffusion of remote work, and demands for working less. These claims can be read as attempts to rebuild a more sustainable relationship with work from within its ruins, by protecting individual energies, reaffirming basic rights, and recovering a sense of agency that prolonged exposure to precarious labour conditions had progressively eroded.

An interesting dimension of this generational shift concerns the changing conceptualisation of personal boundaries and the distinction between work and life. Within workplaces, the vocabulary of “therapeutic culture”, understood as a diffuse psychological outlook circulating well beyond its professional domain (Madsen, 2014), has long been institutionalised as a way of addressing (and individualising) employees’ difficulties. Personal management programmes at universities, mindfulness and individual therapy sessions included in company welfare packages aligned self-care with imperatives of efficiency and competitiveness, obscuring the structural causes of suffering and reframing them as individual problems requiring individual solutions (Frayne, 2015; Rosa, 2010).

However, over time this therapeutic vocabulary has familiarised younger workers with a shared language through which experiences of discomfort, exhaustion, and strain can be named, shared, and discussed: the term burn-out, for example, is a psychological term that has become widespread in discussions about work (Petersen, 2021). Psy discourses have enabled the articulation of needs that previously lacked legitimate outlets, that probably contributed to the wave of discussions around work refusal and disengagement observed in recent years. Over time, a language initially mobilised to promote resilience and adaptability to work has also become a resource for expressing limits, setting boundaries, and questioning work itself. As therapeutic terms circulate in everyday conversations, they make visible experiences that were once lived as private and isolating, allowing individuals to recognise their struggles in those of others. In this sense, the normalisation of therapeutic language has played a role in the cultural rethinking of work, providing tools to contest inherited norms of overwork and to articulate demands for protection, autonomy, and recognition. What was previously framed as a private inadequacy is increasingly being reinterpreted as a shared problem. Among younger workers, it is the public expression of emotional and psychological vulnerability that opened space for discussion about work among peers, online and offline, and for the articulation of alternatives: clearer boundaries between work and life, protection against precarity, and demands

for less work, recalling Butler's interpretation of vulnerability as a potentially political tool (Butler *et al.*, 2016). Vulnerability thus emerges within the ruins of work as both an effect of structural precarisation and a potential resource for change, making visible the limits of a system that has normalised overwork, self-optimisation, and permanent availability. As in the ruins theorised by Tsing (2015), what becomes visible is not only destruction and loss, but also the conditions for rethinking norms, values, and expectations, opening a space in which alternative ideas and practices of work can be tentatively imagined from within the debris of the old work-centred paradigm. Rather than taking the form of explicit collective mobilisation, these practices often emerge as situated attempts to cope with, negotiate, or momentarily escape working arrangements perceived as unsustainable. In this sense, vulnerability does not operate here as an already politicised condition, but as a shared experiential ground from which dispersed and fragmented forms of critique may arise.

3. Between adaptation and contestation: emerging work practices

The contributions in this Special Issue offer a plurality of practices through which workers rethink and contest characteristics of work that have long been naturalised as inevitable and unchangeable. These practices operate at different levels and with varying degrees of visibility and institutionalisation. Even if most take shape as informal, fragmented and often individualised responses to structural problems, rather than as the outcome of explicit collective mobilisation, they are nevertheless significant expressions of new needs. At the individual level, they include forms of misbehaviour, disengagement, turnover and exit strategies enacted in response to working conditions perceived as unsustainable or unjust. At the collective level, they encompass more organised efforts to reshape work, such as struggles for reduced working time, as in the case of the four-day week, or demands for remotisation, which may emerge either as individual accommodations or as collective claims within organisations.

As Manuel Trevisan's contribution in this Issue shows, practices of individual misbehaviour represent a good example of individual reactions of detachment from work. Misbehaviour does not necessarily take the form of open conflict or collective mobilisation, but is often enacted through small, tacit acts aimed at reclaiming autonomy under conditions of intense managerial control. Workers may reappropriate time by slowing down the pace of work, pretending to be busy, or carving out micro-breaks; they may reclaim

products by giving away food, eating during shifts, or engaging in minor, concealed forms of appropriation; or they may resist the standardisation of identity by investing social interactions with colleagues and customers with personal meaning. As Trevisan emphasises, however, the most radical and effective form of misbehaviour remains voluntary resignation: quitting constitutes the strongest expression of reclaiming one's time back and the complete detachment from an employment relationship perceived as unsustainable. Yet, precisely because these practices are largely individual and informal, they also entail significant risks and limitations. Misbehaviour can expose workers to sanctions, reinforce isolation, and ultimately leave intact the structural conditions that generated dissatisfaction in the first place. Exit strategies, in particular, may offer immediate relief while contributing to high turnover regimes that normalise replaceability and undermine collective bargaining power for those who cannot leave.

Another form of individual distancing from work is represented by turnover intention, described by Gargiulo and colleagues in this Issue. Like misbehaviour, turnover intention (and actual turnover) often unfolds as a largely silent, individualised and non-politicised practice, through which workers signal a growing misalignment between their lived experience of work and personal satisfaction. Rather than constituting an immediate act of exit, turnover intention occupies an intermediate and reflexive position: it expresses the subjective threshold at which work ceases to be perceived as meaningful, sustainable or worthy of continued investment. As the contribution by Gargiulo and colleagues shows, turnover intention should not be reduced to a purely managerial indicator of dissatisfaction, but can be read as a symptomatic expression of a deeper disconnection between objective working conditions and subjective expectations of recognition, autonomy and social value.

However, practices such as misbehaviour, voluntary resignations and turnover intention are primarily practices of refusal or withdrawal: they signal a detachment and disenchantment in relation to the motivational bond with work by reducing commitment, reclaiming time or imagining exit. While these practices make visible a crisis of recognition and sustainability, they remain defensive responses, oriented toward distancing oneself from work rather than redefining it.

By contrast, other practices explored in this Special Issue articulate a more explicitly constructive horizon: in particular, demands for remotisation and flexible hybridisation, and requests for the shorter workweek shift the focus from individual strategies of disengagement to proposals that

reimagine work in relation to time, autonomy, well-being, individually or collectively.

In particular, demands for remotisation or hybrid work can take both individualised and collective forms. They may emerge as personal accommodations to work from home once a week or more, negotiated on a case-by-case basis, but they can also crystallise into organised claims and, in some instances, into open workplace conflict. Yet, despite its growing diffusion, remotisation is still frequently framed by employers not as a right, but as a discretionary benefit or a revocable privilege, granted conditionally and often subject to unilateral managerial control (Recchi, Romens and Scalise, 2025). This framing tends to depoliticise the demand, obscuring its broader implications and confining it within the boundaries of organisational flexibility rather than recognising it as a legitimate redefinition of working conditions.

As Gentilini's contribution on remotisation included in this Special Issue shows, however, the demand for remote work cannot be reduced to a mere preference for spatial flexibility or individual convenience. It is deeply connected to a different work-life organisation in everyday life: the experience of widespread remotisation during the pandemic acted as a catalyst, making visible that many tasks could be performed without physical co-presence and that work could be organised in ways less invasive of non-working time (Guazzo *et al.*, 2024). Once experienced, these arrangements recalibrated workers' expectations and thresholds of tolerance, leading many to reassess what counts as an acceptable and meaningful way of working.

Demands for remotisation point to a redefinition of the conditions under which work is considered acceptable and meaningful. They question the normative expectations of physical presence, constant availability, and managerial control; as with misbehaviour and turnover, however, such demands often remain fragmented and unevenly politicised. When framed as individual arrangements or discretionary benefits rather than as collective entitlements, they risk reproducing inequalities and constraining their transformative scope. At the same time, its diffusion indicates a broader reconfiguration of how workers conceive the boundaries between work and life.

A more explicitly collective horizon emerges in the contribution by Lupoli and colleagues on the introduction of the four-day workweek at Lamborghini. Unlike misbehaviour, turnover intention or even individual requests for remotisation, the struggle for working time reduction emerges here as a clearly collective action, rooted in trade union organisation and articulated through formal bargaining. As the authors show, the demand for a four-

day workweek was not framed merely as a compensatory measure or a benefit aimed at alleviating fatigue, but as a deliberate rethinking of the features of work itself: its temporal intensity, its bodily and cognitive demands, and its relationship with life outside the factory. In this sense, the shorter workweek represents not a withdrawal from work, but a collective attempt to reclaim control over time and to re-anchor work within a broader conception of a good life.

Taken together, these practices illustrate how the questioning of work does not unfold along a single trajectory, but rather through a plurality of responses that range from individual and informal strategies to more explicit and collective forms of intervention. While many of these practices remain fragmented and weakly institutionalised, they nonetheless reveal shared experiences of strain, dissatisfaction, and unmet expectations that cut across different work contexts. Rather than interpreting them as coherent expressions of work refusal, this Special Issue explores these dynamics, tracing how workers renegotiate the meanings, boundaries, and conditions of work in diverse organisational settings.

The first contribution of the Special Issue, the article “*The Four-Day Week at Lamborghini: Work–Life Balance, Collective Bargaining and Workforce Expectations*” examines Lamborghini’s 2024 experiment introducing a shorter working week through a collective bargaining process. Using qualitative interviews with workers and union representatives, it reconstructs the negotiation and explores employees’ perceptions, showing that reduced hours are widely seen as improving quality of life, autonomy, and well-being.

The second contribution, by Manuel Trevisan, is a compelling interpretation of resistance as an everyday practice. “*Resisting Fast Food: Practices of Misbehaviour Against Organisational Standardisation*” examines how fast-food workers resist the intense control and standardisation that define their workplaces. Drawing on labour process theory and Karlsson’s concept of misbehaviour, it uses ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews within an Italian fast-food chain to uncover everyday acts of tacit resistance, such as quitting, quiet quitting, petty theft, and reappropriating time, products, or identity, to reclaim autonomy and dignity at work.

The topic of reinterpreting the role of work in the everyday life of remote workers is central to the following article, “*Lost in Remotisation: Aspirations and the Relationship with Work after the Covid-19 Pandemic*” that explores how the sudden shift to remote work during the pandemic reshaped Italian workers’ aspirations, sense of purpose, and relationship with work. Using a Weberian theoretical framework distinguishing between sense, meaning, purpose, and relevance of work, and drawing on semi-structured

interviews, it claims that remote work transformed workers' values towards autonomy, time, and work–life balance.

The article “*Work without workhood and the ambiguities of self-recognition when working on platforms. The case of micro-influencers*” explores how young Italian micro-influencers understand their online activity: whether as work, passion, or something in between. Drawing on one year of digital ethnography and interviews, it shows how these creators constantly negotiate visibility, autonomy, and recognition under algorithmic control, producing what the author calls “work without workhood”.

We delve into the generational differences in the relationship with work in three articles on youth and work. “*Between Recognition and Disenchantment: The Centrality of Work in Europe*” explores how the meaning and importance of work have changed between 1999 and 2021 across five European countries: Denmark, France, Italy, Spain, and the UK. Using data from the European Values Study, it builds a Work Centrality Index to examine how work relates to identity, social recognition, and personal fulfilment within different welfare regimes.

The article “*Profili motivazionali e condizioni oggettive del lavoro*” investigates the interplay between workers' motivational profiles and the structural conditions of contemporary work. Through a mixed-method approach combining survey data and qualitative interviews, it examines how different motivations (intrinsic, extrinsic, and relational) correlate with job quality indicators such as autonomy, security, and work intensity.

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