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Precarious pathways to the populist left?

Precarity, moral economy, and the politics of social disintegration in Spain and Italy

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Abstract

Spain and Italy are two Southern European countries historically marked by segmented labour markets and welfare states, producing comparatively high levels of employment and financial precarity. While this condition has been compounded by successive socio-economic crises, the Eurozone crisis of the 2010s and the Covid-19 crisis of the early 2020s, precarity is a structural and durable feature of Southern European societies. Over the last two decades, both countries have witnessed profound political transformations, including the rise of left-wing and right-wing populist parties. Yet, whether and how precarious workers have responded politically remains poorly understood. Against this background, this thesis asks: what is, if any, the politics of precarity in Spain and Italy? This general question opens onto the political orientations of precarious workers in a broad sense, and is pursued along three lines: How do precarious workers align politically? How does precarity stratify workers' experiences and shape their political orientations? And under what conditions can precarity be mobilized politically?

Bridging sociology, political science, and political economy, this thesis develops a theory of the politics of precarity as social disintegration. Precarity is conceptualized as the experience of falling short, materially and symbolically, of normative standards linking work, housing, and social citizenship. While common standards are widely shared, they are also partly qualified by social class: different social locations entail partly specific expectations, and precarity acquires classing effects as it differentially blocks access to these standards of security and recognition. The gap between expectations and reality becomes the terrain of moral work: precarious workers must make sense of their condition, negotiate their social position, and attribute responsibility for their situation. In doing so, they draw on moral economies linking work to security (labourism) and effort, in education and work, to reward (meritocracy). The configuration of violated moral economy and attribution of responsibility shapes how precarity is politically translated. Political actors, in turn, can exploit and mould these violations for mobilization.

Empirically, the dissertation adopts a mixed-methods research design. The quantitative component employs recent ESS data to map the political alignments of precarious workers in Spain and Italy, examining patterns of demobilization and partial alignment towards left-wing populist parties: *(Unidas) Podemos* in Spain and the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* in Italy. The qualitative component, based

on in-depth narrative biographical interviews with precarious workers in both countries (~25 per country), explores the mechanisms behind these patterns, identifying configurations of social position, moral economy, and political orientation. Four main ideal types emerge: the *declassed aspiring middle class*, the *declassed precarious working class*, the *striving precarious working class*, and *the enduring and gracing subproletariat*, distinguished by their social position and normative expectations, the moral economies they mobilize, and the political orientations that result. The demand-side analysis is complemented by a supply-side examination of the labour discourse and policies of left-wing populist parties during their periods in government, aimed at broadly outlining the logics of political mobilization and situating the interviews in context.

The study contributes to ongoing debates on the social and political consequences of precarity, the socio-political development of Southern Europe, and the nature of left-wing populist projects. A central argument is that pathways to the populist left have emerged, in the plural, but they are themselves precarious: fragile, conditional, and far from guaranteed.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary political sociology, the most influential framework for explaining the socio-political development of Western democracies is centred on a new cultural cleavage: organised by the conflict between the radical right and the new left, encapsulated in cosmopolitan vs nativist outlooks, and based in the opposition between relatively affluent educated progressive socio-cultural professionals and low-educated manufacturing workers under strain and small business owners. This framework explains a great deal of what has unfolded in Europe over the last decades, including in Southern Europe, but at the same time something felt missing, especially in Southern Europe. In a way, this very feeling of this not being exhaustive sparked the foundational questioning from which this thesis came to life.

In Spain and Italy, the socio-cultural professionals who populate the cosmopolitan pole of this model are indeed frequently not in comfortable positions at all, nor exclusively (or primarily) vested into culturalist outlooks of the world. Teachers, journalists, social workers: a substantial proportion are precarious in the most elementary sense, temporary contracts or no contracts, insufficient income, no access to secure housing through their work. It is ordinary and commonsense, in Southern Europe, to speak of these people as *precari or precarious*. The category the literature treats as the post-materialist, relatively affluent pole of the new cleavage is traversed by material insecurity. And this was not the only anomaly. In the years following the Eurozone crisis, Southern Europe witnessed its most intense wave of social mobilisation and the rise of left-wing populist parties, whose discourse was organized not around cultural conflict, but around material conflicts: work, housing, dignity, along with the denunciation of the political establishment. The narrative went that precarious workers were at the heart of those political projects.

The initial question was then whether the two anomalies were connected, whether the material insecurity that traversed the class structure in Spain and Italy had something to do with the political restructuration that had been unfolding, and if so, exactly how. Verifying this, however, proved far more difficult than intuiting it, because it ran into a set of problems that are at once conceptual and empirical, and that this thesis attempts to resolve.

The most elementary issue was the question of who the precarious workers actually are. The political economy of labour market dualization had a clear answer: those on temporary contracts, the unemployed, involuntary part-timers, located at the bottom of the labour market and tendentially

politically demobilised. Public discourse spoke of precarity in broader terms, as the condition of graduates cycling through internships, of a generation unable to buy a house. But these, it was objected, are not *really* precarious: they are children of the middle class whose difficulties are a delay, not a condition. The discourse on precarity was, moreover, entangled with the question of class in ways that confused and complicated waters even more: precarious workers were either elevated into a new class, or the label was dismissed as obscuring the real class positions beneath, or precarity was treated as a contractual attribute without sociological depth. The working-class precarious were archived as a structural fact without subjectivity; the educated precarious were suspected of exaggeration; the category as a whole was either inflated into a class it could not sustain or deflated into a label which emptied it.

Even setting aside this impasse, there remained the question of how precarity translates into politics. The "same" structural condition seemed to produce divergent outcomes: precarious workers appeared among supporters of the populist left, but also among abstainers and, increasingly, among supporters of the radical right. What was missing was the intermediate step, how precarious workers make sense of their condition, whom they blame, on what moral grounds they evaluate the world around them. Without this step, they remained grey figures in the data, and the divergence of their political orientations remained opaque. The question that had motivated the inquiry in the first place, the actual relationship between precarity and left-wing populism, could only be addressed by traversing those "problems". Against this background, this thesis asks: what is, if any, the politics of precarity in Spain and Italy?

This general question is pursued along three lines: how do precarious workers align politically? How does precarity stratify workers' experiences and shape their political orientations? And under what conditions can precarity be mobilised politically? To answer them, the thesis proposes a theory of the politics of precarity as social disintegration, grounded in a mixed-methods design. Precarity is conceptualised as a process of social disintegration. The norm against which disintegration is measured is what the thesis calls the *work-housing nexus*: the configurational standard, specific to Southern European societies, in which secure work and secure housing are materially and normatively linked. The nexus is shared but internally stratified, admitting of different levels oriented by different biographical scripts, educational-meritocratic for the aspiring middle class, labourist for the working class. Disintegration from different levels, with different failed scripts, produces different class positions: this is why graduates and non-graduates can both be precarious, but in structurally distinct ways. Precarity, in this sense, is not a contractual attribute or a new class: it is a

classing process, one that cuts across the class structure and produces new positions defined by the specific trajectory of disintegration.

Precarity is used here as a unitary concept, at once material and symbolic, unlike the prevailing anglophone usage, which distinguishes it from precariousness (e.g. Lorey 2015). This is coherent with the theoretical approach of the thesis, but it also does justice to the Romance languages in which the word has a unitary meaning - *precarietà*, *précarité*, *precariedad* - and to the scholars who first elaborated the notion in those languages (Betti 2018; Bourdieu 1977; Ferrarotti 1970): it is, in this sense, a matter of epistemic justice. While the two terms are at times used interchangeably, I tend to use precarity as a strong, positional concept, and insecurity, more loosely, to refer to single dimensions of that condition (employment, financial, economic).

The question of how disintegration translates into politics is addressed through the concept of moral negotiation. This thesis adapts an analytical architecture that systematically connects social positions, moral outlooks, and political orientations, extending it to a population for which the social structure itself is in disintegration. When their position fractures, individuals must reconstruct a sense of who they are and why they have worth, drawing moral and class boundaries that are under these conditions, a single operation. These boundaries encapsulate moral economies, normative expectations of reciprocity between contribution and reward, and two in particular: labourism, the expectation that work entitles to security, and educational meritocracy, the expectation that study and effort will be met with a corresponding position. Their form of violation and direction of blame - upward, downward or inward - constitutes the hinge between disintegration and political orientation.

Four ideal types of precarious workers emerge from the empirical investigation, each condensing a specific configuration of social position, moral economy, and political orientation. The first two get to a populist left orientation, the third and fourth do not. The *declassed aspiring middle class* arrive at the populist left through the cracking of an educational-meritocratic frame. The *declassed precarious working class* arrive through violated labourism from below. The *striving precarious working class* and the *enduring and gracing subproletariat* do not arrive there at all: the redoubling of the work effort script forecloses systemic critique and produces demobilised conservatism, or crushes the subject altogether. I call these differentiated trajectories, from structural disintegration through moral elaboration to political orientation, *precarious pathways*: multiple pathways of politicizing precarity, multiple pathways towards the populist left specifically, and pathways that have remained nonetheless precarious themselves, that is fragile and retractable, as in the populist left case. As such, the framework, *a theory of the politics*

of social disintegration, is deliberately broader than the empirical focus on left-wing populism, because the focus is intelligible only within the broader space of divergent outcomes that the same process generates.

The thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on precarity and politics across two traditions, the political economy of labour market dualization and the cultural and labour sociology of precarity, and argues for a configurational approach that connects structural position, moral elaboration, and political orientation. Chapter 3 develops the theoretical framework: the norms of social integration through the work-housing nexus, the moral negotiation of disintegration through moral economies and the direction of blame, and the space of divergent political orientations that disintegration can produce. Chapter 4 presents the research design: the selection of Spain and Italy, the mixed-methods approach combining logistic regressions on ESS data, life-history interviews with precarious workers in both countries, and a supplementary supply-side analysis of left-wing populist party discourse and policy. Chapter 5 maps the political alignment of precarious workers in Spain and Italy, documenting widespread demobilisation and partial mobilisation toward the populist left, and showing that these alignments to some extent fracture along educational lines, a finding that opens to the qualitative investigation. Subsequent chapters present and analyse in-depth the constructed ideal-types: the declassed aspiring middle class (Chapter 6), the declassed precarious working class (Chapter 7), and the striving precarious working class (Chapter 8), plus the enduring and gracing subproletariat as a shadow type (Chapter 9). Chapter 10 analyses the socio-economic discourse and policies of the Movimento Cinque Stelle and Podemos as a political project of undoing precarity and restoring dignity, tracing the trajectory from the crucible of social mobilisation through the exercise of governmental power. Chapter 11 draws together findings and contributions.

2. Perspectives on precarity and politics

2.1 The insider-outsider approach and beyond

The political consequences of labour market insecurity have been studied, for the past two decades, mainly within a framework that owes its basic architecture to Rueda's (2005, 2007) influential formulation of the insider-outsider divide. Drawing on the dual labour market theory of Doeringer and Piore (1971) and the economic model of insider-outsider relations developed by Lindbeck and Snower (1989), Rueda translated a structural feature of post-industrial labour markets into a question of political representation. The central cleavage of contemporary political economies, he argued, runs not between capital and labour as such, but between workers who enjoy stable employment and social protection, insiders, and those who bear the brunt of labour market flexibility, outsiders. Insiders are shielded by employment protection legislation, collective agreements and insurance-based welfare provisions. Outsiders face unemployment, temporary contracts, involuntary part-time work, and the residual tiers of social assistance. Rueda's provocation was that social democratic parties, historically the political voice of labour, are structurally captured by insider-dominated trade unions and therefore prioritise the interests of their core constituency at the expense of those most exposed to market risks.

The proposition generated a productive research programme. A growing body of comparative scholarship has investigated whether and how different forms of labour market vulnerability translate into political preferences, electoral behaviour and policy attitudes. Emmenegger et al. (2012) systematised the argument in *The Age of Dualization*, casting the insider-outsider divide as the product of institutional complementarities between employment protection and welfare state design, particularly in the coordinated market economies of continental Europe. Since then, the field has expanded considerably, with studies differing in how they conceptualise and measure insecurity, in the political outcomes they examine, and in the causal mechanisms they propose. This section reviews the accumulated evidence along three dimensions: the operationalisations of insecurity and the implicit conceptualisations they carry (2.1.1), the empirical findings on political preferences and voting behaviour (2.1.2), and the conceptual limits that emerge from the body of work taken as a whole (2.1.3).

2.1.1 Operationalisations and their implicit conceptual assumptions

Each way of measuring labour market insecurity carries with it, often tacitly, an idea of what precarity is and how it relates to the social structure. The evolution of operationalisations in the field reveals a progressive complexification, from binary and objective indicators to multidimensional ones that increasingly incorporate subjective perceptions and dimensions of insecurity beyond the employment relationship. This is a genuine gain. Yet the conceptual architecture of the approach has not kept pace with the sophistication of its measures: the question remains, throughout, which indicator or combination of indicators best predicts a given political outcome, rather than what kind of social condition is being captured.

Rueda's (2005) original operationalisation was deliberately parsimonious: outsiders were defined as the unemployed, workers on temporary contracts and involuntary part-time workers; insiders as everyone else in employment. The measure was binary, objective and unidimensional, identifying "outsiderness" with a single observable characteristic of the employment relationship. Its appeal lays in its clarity and in the availability of comparable data across countries and waves of the European Social Survey. A subsequent variant, proposed by Emmenegger et al. (2015), disaggregated employment status into finer categories, distinguishing between permanent, temporary, part-time, self-employed and unemployed workers. This broke the binary insider-outsider divide, allowing for more granular comparisons across employment types, but it remained within the same logic: outsiderness was identified with an observable, objective characteristic of the employment contract. The limitation of this approach became apparent as evidence accumulated. The assumption that a temporary contract or a spell of unemployment constitutes a uniform condition, irrespective of occupation, education, household composition and national context, proved increasingly difficult to sustain. Häusermann et al. (2015) showed that educated outsiders are cross-pressured: their redistribution preferences fall between those of educated workers in stable employment and those of the low-skilled working class, suggesting that the category 'outsider' subsumes subgroups with distinct preference profiles that the binary measure cannot distinguish.

A second generation of studies, initiated by Rehm (2009) and developed systematically by Schwander and Häusermann (2013), reconceptualised outsiderness as a probabilistic risk. Rather than classifying individuals by their current employment status, they assigned to each worker the unemployment and atypical employment risk of the occupational group to which they belonged, stratified by gender and age. The measure was group-based and continuous, capturing not the individual's actual situation but the statistical risk profile of their demographic-occupational cell.

The approach had the merit of connecting labour market vulnerability to the occupational structure, thereby providing a bridge, at least in principle, between the insider-outsider framework and class analysis. Yet it introduced problems of its own. By attributing the group's average risk to each of its members regardless of individual employment status, the measure conflated outsiderness with the sociodemographic characteristics that defined the group. It became impossible to isolate an 'outsider effect' from the effects of class, age and gender (Marx and Picot 2019), and the measure mixed actual outsiders with securely employed individuals who happened to belong to high-risk occupational cells. Moreover, the measure was relative to the national mean: occupational groups were classified as outsiders if their risk exceeded the country average. This presumed that the statistical mean corresponded to a social norm, an assumption that is sociologically questionable, since the normative standards against which individuals evaluate their condition are shaped by class-specific and generationally specific expectations, not by national averages.

A more recent wave of studies has moved the field beyond the employment-centred framework that characterised both the classical and risk-based approaches. The shift was motivated by a growing recognition that employment status, whether measured objectively or probabilistically, does not capture the full range, or indeed the most consequential forms, of insecurity that workers experience. Antonucci et al. (2021) proposed a genuinely sociological reconceptualisation of precarity, distinguishing two subjective dimensions, "precarity of tenure" and "precarity at work", and arguing that the insider-outsider tradition had remained too narrowly focused on the employment contract as such (the objective correlate of "precarity of tenure"). The contribution represented a meaningful step beyond the original framework, while remaining in productive dialogue with its cumulative findings: Antonucci and colleagues did not reject the insider-outsider research programme but sought to enrich it by attending to the subjective experience of insecurity in its workplace-specific manifestations.

Zhirnov et al. (2023) pushed further in the same direction, introducing financial precarity as a third dimension alongside employment and workplace insecurity. Their ten-country study demonstrated that financial insecurity - the inability to make ends meet, to absorb unexpected expenses, or to maintain a stable standard of living - constituted a distinct source of insecurity that was not reducible to employment status. The finding was consequential: if the most politically relevant insecurity is not (only) about whether one has a job, or what kind of job one has, but about whether one can sustain a livelihood, then the entire insider-outsider framework, built on the primacy of the employment relationship, captures only one component of a broader condition.

Other contributions extended the frontier of relevant dimensions. Marinova (2022) drew attention to working poverty, a condition in which workers are employed, often on standard contracts, but earn wages insufficient to avoid poverty, a dimension that falls entirely outside the employment-centred framework. Azzollini and Macmillan (2023), in the most ambitious cross-national design to date, constructed a cumulative index incorporating five distinct indicators of precariousness, including financial vulnerability and gaps in employment history, across 32 countries. Their finding that the dimensions with spillover effects beyond the workplace, particularly financial insecurity, had the strongest political consequences, suggested that what matters politically is not insecurity in the job as such, but insecurity in the conditions of life that the job is supposed to secure.

The progress within this evolving paradigm has been substantial. The field has moved from a single binary indicator of employment status to a differentiated landscape of multiple, partly subjective indicators that reach beyond the employment relationship into the economic conditions of everyday life. Yet the underlying logic of the approach has not changed. The question remains which measure or combination of measures best predicts a given political outcome. The precarious are still defined by what they lack, security, stability, protection, not by who they are as social groups with specific trajectories, expectations and social positions.

2.1.2 Political alignment: abstention, exit from the mainstream, and radicalisation

The empirical literature on the political consequences of labour market insecurity has grown rapidly since Rueda's initial contribution. By the late 2010s, sufficient evidence had accumulated for several review articles and comparative assessments. This subsection reconstructs the findings in two steps: first, the cross-national pattern that emerged from the first wave of studies and its subsequent refinements; second, the specific evidence on Italy and Spain, which constitutes the empirical focus of this thesis.

Schwander (2019), in her comprehensive review of the field, identified abstention as the most robust and consistent political consequence of "outsiderness". Across countries, operationalisations and research designs, labour market insecurity was associated with lower electoral participation. The finding was confirmed cross-nationally by Rovny and Rovny (2017), who showed that outsiders were significantly less likely to vote across operationalisations, and reinforced by Azzollini and Macmillan (2023), whose multidimensional index, tested across 32 countries, yielded the same result: the cumulative experience of precariousness reduced electoral participation substantially, even after

controlling for income, education and other sociodemographic characteristics. Mayer (2014; Mayer 2018), working on the French case, documented the pattern in granular detail, showing that social insecurity was associated above all with withdrawal from electoral politics. The finding is consistent with Bourdieu's (1977, 1998) observation that precarity destroys "futurity", the capacity of people for rational anticipation and biographical projection in the future, which is, among other things,a precondition for (collective) political engagement. Whatever the precise mechanism, the pattern is clear: the primary political consequence of labour market insecurity is not radicalisation but demobilisation.

Beyond abstention, the first wave of studies yielded a second finding: among those who do vote, labour market insecurity tends to reduce support for mainstream parties of both centre-right and centre-left. The precarious are expelled from the political mainstream. The direction of this exit, however, proved to be highly sensitive to the operationalisation used. Studies employing the classical objective measure of employment status, when they found a significant effect at all, tended to report a very small association with the radical or alternative left (Marx and Picot 2013; Rovny and Rovny 2017). This was broadly consistent with an interest-based account: workers in precarious employment positions have material reasons to demand stronger social protection and redistribution, policies historically associated with the left. Studies employing the risk-based measure of Schwander and Häusermann, by contrast, sometimes found associations with radical right preferences, particularly in contexts where welfare chauvinism was salient (Im 2021).

The overall pattern that emerged from the first wave was thus: abstention as the dominant outcome, a small effect on radical left support measured through objective employment indicators, and a conditional effect on radical right support mediated by pre-existing attitudes. Notably, no study in this first wave disaggregated the political effects of outsiderness by educational or occupational subgroup, even though Häusermann, Kurer and Schwander (2015) had already shown that educated outsiders occupy an intermediate, cross-pressured position between educated stables and the low-skilled working class in their welfare state preferences, hinting that different fractions of outsiders might follow different political trajectories altogether. Schwander (2018) noted that the evidence left open the fundamental question of whether outsiders would ever be politically mobilised in a sustained way, or whether their structural characteristics - heterogeneity, weak organisational ties, high turnover - would permanently consign them to political marginality. Häusermann (2020) framed the question in similar terms, observing that the insider-outsider divide had produced a change of political constituencies without, so far, a corresponding mobilization of political supply: outsiders

had disaffiliated from mainstream parties, but it remained unclear whether any political force could durably mobilize them.

It was against this backdrop that a parallel narrative began to take shape, focused on the experience of Southern Europe after the Great Recession. Several scholars argued that the anti-austerity movements and left-populist parties that emerged in Spain, Italy and Greece represented a partial answer to the mobilisation puzzle. Della Porta (2015) analysed the movements of the Indignados and their party-political successors as expressions of a precarious generation entering politics through non-institutional channels. Several authors (Gerbaudo 2018; Hopkin 2020; Roberts 2019; Schwander 2018) then made the theoretical argument that the new emerging left-wing populist parties were linked to precarity and mobilizing precarious workers as their characterizing electoral constituency. The theoretical expectation was, in sum, that the political consequences of precarity in Southern Europe might differ from the Northern European pattern, producing not only overall abstention but also a distinctive form of political alignment toward the populist left.

Spain and Italy

The empirical evidence on Italy and Spain partially supports this expectation, while also qualifying it in important ways. The available studies, which have increased since the mid-2010s and employ operationalisations and data sources, converge on a set of findings on the political preferences associated to objective employment insecurity, subjective employment insecurity, and financial precarity.

The earliest and most influential claim for Spain was advanced by Fernández-Albertos (2015), who traced the social base of Podemos through the transition from the Indignados movement to the electoral arena. His analysis from 2014 to the January 2015 general elections suggested that Podemos was evolving from the *partido de los indignados*, an expression of middle-class anger at corruption and democratic deficit, to the *partido de los excluidos*, a political vehicle for those most exposed to economic hardship and labour market precarity. The hypothesis captured a tension that would run through much of the subsequent literature: were the left-populist parties of Southern Europe mobilising the "actually precarious" as such, or were they channelling a broader anti-establishment sentiment embodied in the "unsatisfied middle-classes"? Ramiro and Gomez (2017), also analysing support for Podemos in its first year, found that employment insecurity (being unemployed, on a temporary contract or at risk of losing one's job, which they term economic insecurity) increased the likelihood of supporting the party, and did so more strongly among university graduates, which they interpreted

as frustration towards unmet expectations. Padoan (2020) reached a convergent conclusion for Spain, as he found that Unidas Podemos was overrepresented among downwardly mobile middle classes rather than among the most precarious workers, while in Italy unemployed and temporary workers tended toward the M5S. Corbetta and Gilbert (2017), analysing vote intentions in 2016, found the same pattern among labour market outsiders in Italy. Bloise et al. (2020), working at the regional level, confirmed the association between unemployment rates, part-time employment and M5S support. Liu, Kuo and Fernández-Albertos (2022), in an innovative contribution, showed that exposure to financial precarity in its own social network, not that of the individual respondent alone, predicted support for Podemos in 2015, suggesting that the politically relevant condition was not individual hardship but a diffuse experience of insecurity in the immediate social environment.

A second wave of studies, employing subjective and multidimensional operationalisations of insecurity, has refined the picture considerably. These contributions are cross-national in design, but they provide specific findings on Italy and Spain that can be read alongside the earlier evidence, and their general findings bear directly on the Southern European pattern. Zhirnov et al. (2023), extending Antonucci et al. (2021), in a ten-country study that distinguished financial precarity, precarity at work and precarity of tenure, found that the strongest and most consistent associations with populist attitudes came from financial precarity and from insecurity in working conditions, while precarity of tenure, the dimension closest to the classical insider-outsider measure, yielded mixed results. In terms of vote choice, financial precarity and precarity of work conditions were positively associated with populist party support in eight of ten countries: in Italy the association for both dimensions was significant for the M5S, but not for the populist right. For Spain, financial precarity and precarity of work conditions similarly predicted Podemos support, with no significant effect on Vox.

Gomez et al. (2024), using data from 2019, complicated the picture for Spain in two ways. On the one hand, they found that the unemployed were more likely to support the radical left (Podemos), a finding consistent with the broader pattern. On the other hand, workers on fixed-term contracts were found to be significantly more likely to support the radical right (Vox), suggesting that the political direction of objective employment insecurity is not uniform even within a single country. Moreover, perceived job insecurity was not significantly associated with Unidas Podemos support in Spain, in contrast to the pattern found in other countries (France, Germany and Greece).

Girardi (2023), analysing the 2018 Italian elections, found that perceived employment precarity was positively associated with M5S support, a finding that constituted a notable exception to the general

pattern of demobilisation of precarious workers: the M5S appeared to function as a vehicle for the political mobilisation of precarious voters, at least in the specific context of the 2018 elections. Azzollini and Baldassarri (2023), analysing the 2022 elections, corroborated the pattern by showing that local rates of citizenship income recipients predicted M5S support, extending the association between financial precarity and M5S voting beyond the party's phase of government participation.

Lopes (2025) added a further dimension by focusing on frustrated upward mobility. He showed that the gap between educational attainment and occupational position, a structural feature of Southern European labour markets, predicted radical left support in Western Europe, and the effect is the strongest among first-generation graduates who either remain in working-class occupations or experience financial insecurity despite having a professional occupation. The finding can be read as the electoral counterpart of Häusermann et al (2015) earlier demonstration that educated outsiders are cross-pressured in their welfare preferences, occupying an intermediate position between educated stables and the working class: Lopes showed that these cross-pressured preferences translate into actual radical left vote choice. Whereas Häusermann et al. (2015) explored the potential for a cross-class coalition between educated outsiders and the working class in support of redistributive welfare, Lopes examined only the first group, thus leaving the coalitional question open.

Taken together, the evidence on Italy and Spain points to a recurrent association between various forms of insecurity and support for the left-populist parties that emerged from the post-crisis period. The association is not settled: it varies across elections, it is sensitive to the operationalisation used, and it appears stronger for the M5S than for Podemos. But evidence is recurring enough, across different studies, data sources and electoral contexts, to suggest that something more than noise is at work. The existing studies can identify statistical associations between measures of insecurity and vote choice, but they cannot answer the questions that ground this thesis: which precarious workers align with these parties, through which processes, and how some precarious voters turn to the populist left while others abstain or disperse across the political spectrum. These are questions about precarious pathways to politics, and they require a different kind of analysis than the one this literature provides.

2.1.3 Limits: conceptualisation, mechanisms

The accumulated evidence reveals a productive research programme that nonetheless faces a set of limits. These are not only empirical gaps, to be filled by further studies with better data or larger samples, but also conceptual ones, concerning how the object is defined and how its measurement feeds back into that definition.

Each operationalisation carries with it an implicit theory of what precarity is and how it relates to the social structure. The problem is not that the operationalisations are imperfect, all operationalisations are, but how they relate to the theory behind them. In some approaches, the conceptual theory of precarious groups is underdetermined; in others, the theory tends to identifiable groups, but the operationalisation feeds back into it ambiguously.

In the classical insider-outsider framework, outsiderness is a labour market position defined by employment status. The concept, as Rueda formulated it, oscillates between two unresolved poles. On one reading, outsiderness is a condition that cuts across the class structure: anyone can become an outsider, regardless of education, occupation or social origin, which makes the category analytically universal but sociologically empty. On another reading, outsiderness is effectively a fraction of the occupational working class, the lower segment of a dual labour market, which gives it sociological specificity but confines it to a single class position. The difficulty is that neither reading holds. Precarity is not cross-class in the sense that it affects all social groups in the same way; it is profoundly stratified by education, occupation, gender, age and national context. But nor is it reducible to a single occupational class; it traverses different class positions, producing different conditions, different experiences and, as the literature itself has shown, different political responses in each. The insider-outsider framework seems lacks the conceptual resources to accommodate this stratified heterogeneity.

In the risk-based approach of Schwander and Häusermann (2013), the oscillation changes form but does not resolve. Outsiderness becomes a statistical attribute ascribed to predefined occupational-demographic groups: it is neither an individual status nor a class position, but a probabilistic property of a cell in a classification matrix. The measure connects labour market vulnerability to the occupational structure, which is a step toward class analysis, but it does so through a statistical operation that attributes the group's average risk to each of its members, regardless of their actual situation. The result is that insiders and outsiders are mixed within the same cell, the measure cannot

be disentangled from the sociodemographic characteristics that define it, and the normative reference point, the national average, has no sociological grounding as a standard of expectation.

In the multidimensional approach that has emerged more recently (Antonucci et al. 2021; Zhirnov et al. 2023; Azzollini and Macmillan 2023), the concept of precarity is enriched by the addition of new dimensions: financial insecurity, insecurity at work, employment gaps, working poverty. The empirical gain is substantial, and the move beyond the employment contract represents a genuine advance. Here, the theory tends towards identifiable groups (Antonucci et al. 2017; Antonucci 2018). In the multidimensional analyses of political behaviour, however, the operationalisation feeds back into this theory ambiguously: the precarious tend to be identified as individuals scoring above a threshold on one or more indicators of insecurity, rather than as social groups with shared trajectories, common expectations and recognisable positions in the social structure.

A second, related limit concerns the mechanisms proposed to link insecurity to political behaviour. Marx (2015) combined an instrumental economic motive, the demand for redistribution and social protection, with an expressive protest motive, the frustration toward elites perceived as unresponsive to the condition of insecure workers. Zhirnov et al. (2023) distinguished a symbolic component from an instrumental one. Drawing on Gidron and Hall's (2017) notion that a symbolic process linked to perceived relative position pushes voters toward populist options, they proposed that workers experiencing perceived work and financial insecurity are attracted to populist views because populism offers a narrative of shared precarity against secure elites. At the instrumental level, they sketched a stylised differentiation between left and right: radical populist left parties typically propose an expansionary labour market protection agenda, while radical populist right parties offer a chauvinistic labour market protection for native citizens. The distinction remained at a high level of generality, but it pointed to the political supply as a necessary mediating factor. Im (2021) specified and tested one side of this differentiation. His analysis showed that employment insecurity does not generate welfare chauvinist attitudes, but that among individuals who already hold chauvinist views, the experience of insecurity activates these attitudes and makes them electorally salient: insecure welfare chauvinists are significantly more likely to vote for the radical right than secure ones holding the same views.

These mechanisms are suggestive but remain at a high level of abstraction. The instrumental mechanism assumes that insecure workers demand redistribution, but does not ask which insecure workers, in which social position, facing which specific form of material deprivation, articulate a demand for which kind of protection. The protest mechanism assumes that insecurity generates

frustration toward elites, but does not specify whose frustration, directed at which institutions, and shaped by which experience of failed expectations. The symbolic mechanism gestures toward collective identity but does not specify how insecure workers come to recognise themselves in the populist narrative, or why the same condition of insecurity might produce recognition in one group and indifference or alienation in another.

I believe that this underspecification is not an accidental shortcoming that could be remedied by adding a few more variables to the model. It follows from the limits identified above: where the theory of precarious groups is underdetermined, or where its operationalisation turns groups back into scores on indicators, the mechanisms that link precarity to political behaviour cannot be specified for groups with specific positions, trajectories and expectations. The approach can thus show that insecurity is associated with certain political outcomes, but it can say less about why, for whom, and through which processes the association operates.

To summarise: the insider-outsider literature and its extensions have produced cumulative knowledge and shown that a pattern exists, although the evidence is not always consistent: precarity is associated with abstention and, in Southern Europe, with a partial alignment toward the populist left. The progress in measurement has been genuine. Two problems, however, remain open. The first is the lack of a stable theory of who the precarious are as social groups. The second is the question of mechanisms: through which processes does the experience of precarity translate into political orientation? I believe that the two problems are connected: answering the second requires answering the first. The following section turns to the sociological literature on precarity, which first approaches the phenomenon not as a predictor of political behaviour but as a condition to be understood in its own right.

2.2 The sociological approach to precarity

The starting point for the contemporary sociological debate on precarity is probably Pierre Bourdieu's intervention at a meeting of striking workers in Grenoble in December 1997, subsequently published in *Contre-feux* (1998). The opening sentence, *"La précarité est aujourd'hui partout,"* marked a conceptual rupture. Bourdieu was not describing merely a segment of the labour market. He was describing a process that traversed the entire social structure, from the private sector to the public, from industry to culture, from manual workers to holders of educational credentials. Precarity divided those who work from those who do not, but also, and more insidiously, those who work in

security from those who work under the permanent threat of dispossession. It stratified and it disciplined: the objective insecurity of some founded a generalised subjective insecurity that affected even those not (yet) directly touched. As such, this was denounced not as a market failure, but as a mode of domination, what Bourdieu called *flexploitation*, the rational management of insecurity to obtain submission.

The political implications were central to Bourdieu's argument, not a secondary application. Precarity, he argued, renders the future uncertain, and the capacity to project oneself into the future is the precondition of all 'rational' conduct, including collective political action, an intuition which came from his first work on Algeria (Bourdieu 1977). As he put it, to conceive a project of transforming the present, one needs a minimum grip on the present itself: the *sous-prolétaire* lacks it entirely, while the *prolétaire* possesses it, but also has something to lose, and many of his apparently conservative conducts stem from the fear of falling further. Those condemned to precarity cannot conceive anything other than a disenchanted image of themselves and their group, a demoralisation that expresses itself either in the crisis of militancy or in a desperate rallying to extremism.

Bourdieu's contribution represented a qualitative leap in the conceptualisation of precarity. He moved the concept out of the labour market and into the social structure, defining it as a process that divides, stratifies and blocks politically. The political concern was explicit and foundational: precarity was not simply a social condition with possible political consequences, but a condition whose political consequences, demoralisation, withdrawal, susceptibility to extremism, were constitutive of its nature as a mode of domination. Yet this intuitions did not evolve in a systematic theory and the relationship between precarity and political orientations was posed, but not systematically studied, although some observations populate his latest works (Bourdieu and Accardo 1999). What followed, in the two decades after *Contre-feux*, were the attempts to systematise what Bourdieu had opened.. These attempts are the subject of the following subsections. Without claiming exhaustiveness, it traces some of the main lines along which the sociological study of precarity has developed: first, the identification of its multiple dimensions and the emerging recognition that they form configurations rather than independent variables (2.2.1); second, the relational re-conceptualisation of precarity as a form of social disintegration, in the work of Castel and Dörre (2.2.2); and third, the debate on how precarity relates to the class structure (2.2.3).

2.2.1 Multidimensionality and configuration

The sociological literature that followed Bourdieu's intervention did not converge on a single theoretical framework. It produced, rather, a plurality of conceptualisations, sometimes overlapping, sometimes in tension, each foregrounding a different aspect of the condition. Precariousness, precarious work, precarity, job insecurity, financial insecurity, vulnerability: the terms proliferated across languages and disciplinary traditions without settling into a shared vocabulary. Maestripieri et al. (2025), in a recent contribution that serves as a useful map of the field, reconstructs the conceptual landscape and identifies multidimensionality as the common ground beneath the terminological proliferation: whatever the disagreements about boundaries and definitions, the literature converges on the recognition that precarity extends beyond the employment relationship and encompasses at least several distinct, analytically separable dimensions.

The first is *employment insecurity*: the dimension of the employment relationship in the strict sense. Non-standard contracts, temporariness, involuntary part-time, agency work, lack of protection against dismissal. This is the dominant dimension in labour economics and comparative political economy, the one that the insider-outsider framework was built to capture (Rueda 2005; Patrick Emmenegger et al. 2012; Vosko, MacDonald, and Campbell 2009). Seo (2021), using latent class analysis on the European Working Conditions Survey, demonstrates empirically that even within this single dimension, the segmentation of the labour market is not dual but multiple: she identifies four segments rather than two (insiders, typical outsiders, dead-end insiders, subjective outsiders), each defined by a different combination of indicators. The finding that holding a standard contract does not guarantee security, that some workers with permanent employment nonetheless experience low income, subjective insecurity and lack of prospects, the group Seo calls 'dead-end insiders,' confirms that employment status alone is an insufficient basis for mapping the landscape of precarity.

The second dimension is *insecurity at work*, sometimes called *precarity at work*: the quality of the employment experience beyond contractual status. Low autonomy, work intensification, poor work-life balance, lack of career prospects, vulnerability to arbitrary treatment. This dimension was identified in the European sociology of work (Gallie 2017; Gallie et al. 2017) and operationalised for the study of political behaviour by Antonucci et al. (2021) and Zhirnov et al. (2023), who distinguished it from precarity of tenure.

The third dimension is *financial insecurity*: the economic dimension beyond the employment relationship. Low wages, income volatility, the inability to absorb unexpected expenses, indebtedness.

This dimension was identified early and has been developed in the more recent literature by Antonucci (2018) and Maestripieri et al. (2025). Antonucci (2018) argued that precarity implies a transfer of risk to the individual that extends well beyond the workplace and encompasses the inability to maintain a decent standard of living, the exposure to financial shocks, the absence of the buffers that stable employment and social insurance once provided.

The fourth dimension, less developed but increasingly recognised, is *housing precarity*. The housing literature has developed largely in parallel with the precarity debate, but the two have begun to converge. Gielens, Seo and Dewilde (2025) identified three degrees of housing precariousness, quality, cost and security, that tend to accumulate among disadvantaged households and are more prevalent in Southern and Eastern Europe. Arundel and Lennartz (2020) made the connection to the insider-outsider framework explicit, showing that employment outsiders are substantially more likely to be housing outsiders as well: employment precarity and housing precarity are structurally linked outcomes of the same process of dualization. Filandri, Pasqua and Tucci (2025) showed that housing tenure is associated with subjective poverty among young European adults even after controlling for income and housing costs. The dimension is analytically separable from employment insecurity but empirically entangled with it: the same employment insecurity produces radically different life experiences depending on whether the worker owns a home, rents at market rates, or depends on the parental household. As argued below (Chapter 3), this is of particular relevance for Southern European societies, where access to home ownership has historically functioned as a substitute for the social protections that other welfare regimes provide through public programmes.

The studies reviewed in the previous section represent the most systematic attempts to operationalise multiple dimensions of insecurity for the study of political behaviour: Antonucci et al. (2021) captured subjective employment insecurity and insecurity at work, Zhirnov et al. (2023) added financial precarity as a third dimension, and Azzollini and Macmillan (2023) constructed a cumulative index incorporating five indicators across 32 countries. The finding, common to these studies, that the dimensions extending beyond the employment contract, financial vulnerability in particular, showed the most consistent political effects, is itself evidence that the employment-centred framework captures only part of the relevant condition.

Maestripieri et al. (2025) go further. Investigating empirically the relationship between the different dimensions of objective and subjective, work and economic insecurity among young workers in Spain, they find that the dimensions are 'mutually constituted': intertwined and irreducible in the experience of those who live them. That the dualities, objective versus subjective, work versus

economic, do not hold as categories in the social world is by itself symptomatic, a point to which section 2.2.2 will return. But it also points toward a configurational reading: the dimensions do not operate additively, as independent variables whose effects can be estimated separately. They form distinct combinations that correspond to distinct social positions.

The idea is not new. In a Bourdieusian approach to class analysis, as Flemmen (2013) reconstructs it, social positions are defined not by single indicators but by configurations of capitals: the overall volume, the composition (the relative weight of economic and cultural capital), and the trajectory (whether one is ascending, stable, or descending). The analysis of any single dimension in isolation, be it income, or education, or employment status, misses the structure of the position, which is always a configuration. The same logic applies, in principle, to precarity: a precarious employment contract means something very different depending on the financial resources, the family support, the housing situation and the biographical trajectory of the person who holds it.

Antonucci (2018) provided the most explicit empirical demonstration of this configurational logic applied to precarity. Studying young workers in England, Italy and Sweden, she showed that precarious work does not automatically produce precarity. What determines whether a precarious job becomes a precarious condition is the welfare mix available to the individual: the combination of resources from the labour market, from the family and from the state. Only when a precarious job is coupled with insufficient family support and inadequate state provision does employment insecurity translate into the lived experience of precarity. The implication is that precarity is inherently stratified by social origin: whether one's family can absorb the shock of a temporary contract, whether the state provides adequate income support, whether one has accumulated savings or can access parental housing, all of this mediates the relationship between employment insecurity and existential insecurity. The welfare mix, in this reading, is a configuration, and the class of origin determines which configuration is available.

Ayala-Hurtado and Lamont (2021), in their programmatic critique of Kalleberg's (2018) *Precarious Lives*, articulated the configurational point in broader terms. They argued that most of the risks associated with employment precarity are realised in conjunction with the rest of the economic conditions that unstable work produces: the inability to afford basic goods, the cost of living, housing, debt. They proposed to compare systematically employment precarity, low wages, indebtedness and cost of living, including housing, because it is this configuration, not any single dimension, that corresponds to the experience of precarious workers. Their intent, however, remained primarily horizontal: comparing the relative weight of different dimensions across countries, rather than asking

how the same configuration is experienced differently by different social groups within the same country. Ayala-Hurtado's (2025) subsequent empirical study confirmed this orientation, comparing how insecure graduates in Spain and the United States perceive the insecurity in their respective contexts, but without developing on how national configurations stratify the people who inhabit them.

Ayala-Hurtado and Lamont raised a second point alongside the configurational one, one that bears on the question of political orientations. The sociology of work, they argued, suffers from a cultural blind spot. Following the Weberian tradition as developed by Bourdieu and by Lamont herself, they contended that explaining behaviour and outcomes requires attending to the meanings that operate in social situations: how meaning contributes to social processes, and how it explains why the same objective situation produces different outcomes in different contexts (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014). Ayala-Hurtado's (Ayala-Hurtado 2022, 2024) subsequent work on precarious university graduates in the United States and Spain partially realised this programme, showing how a specific group makes sense of its condition, redefines its identities, and imagines possible futures. If meaning mediates the relationship between objective conditions and subjective responses, it should also mediate the relationship between material insecurity and political orientations. Yet this connection has not been drawn: the cultural programme, attentive as it is to how people make sense of their condition, does not arrive at the question of how that sense-making connects to electoral behaviour and party-political alignment.

The literature on precarity reviewed in this subsection converges, then, on two recognitions: that precarity extends well beyond employment insecurity, and that the dimensions tend to intertwine in the experience of those who live them. The configurational idea, that distinct combinations of dimensions correspond to distinct, class-stratified social positions, is present in the Bourdieusian tradition and partially realised in Antonucci's welfare mix, but it has not been fully developed or connected to the study of political orientations.

2.2.2 Relationality: precarity as (dis)integration

The limitations of the objective/subjective dualism that organises much of the literature on the dimensions of precarity point toward a different kind of theorisation: one in which precarity is understood not as a set of measurable attributes of individuals but as a relational condition, defined

by its distance from a social norm of integration. The two bodies of work that have developed this relational approach most systematically are those of Robert Castel and Klaus Dörre.

Castel: social property, zones of integration, and the process of disaffiliation

Castel's project, developed in a vast research program (Castel 2000, 2003) is a historical sociology of integration through what he calls *propriété sociale*, social property. The foundational insight is that wage labour is not merely a source of income. It is the vehicle through which workers in industrial societies obtained material security and a projectable future, attributes that had previously been the exclusive prerogative of private property. Through collective bargaining, social insurance and employment protection legislation, the wage relationship was progressively embedded in a structure of rights and protections that Castel calls social property: not ownership of the means of production, but access to a set of collectively guaranteed securities attached to the status of the wage earner. The unequal distribution of social property is what the political economy literature actually describes under the concept of dualization (Palier and Thelen 2010; Patrick Emmenegger et al. 2012; Busemeyer and Kemmerling 2020).

The foundational move of Castel's approach is to reject the logic of categorisation, describing who the poor or the excluded are, in favour of a processual logic: reconstructing the dynamic through which they are produced. He deliberately argues that the question is not 'who are the disaffiliated?' but 'through which process does disaffiliation occur'. The model he thus proposes to this purpose is built on two axes. The first is the axis of integration or non-integration through work: the relationship to the means by which individuals reproduce their existence on an economic level. The second is the axis of integration or non-integration into a social and family network: the involvement in, or breakdown of, a system of relationships within which individuals reproduce their existence on an emotional and social level. The intersection of these two axes defines four zones: integration (stable work, solid relational ties), vulnerability (precarious work, fragile relational ties), assistance (non-work due to recognised incapacity, strong relational integration), and disaffiliation (absence of work, social isolation). The boundaries between zones are porous as disaffiliation is a cumulative process, not a state. And a principle of compensation operates across the two axes: a strong score on one can partially offset a weak score on the other. Those who cannot work but are strongly integrated relationally, the disabled, the elderly within a community, belong to the zone of assistance, not of disaffiliation.

From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers (Castel 2003) further develops two relevant concepts. The first is that of the *surnuméraires*, the supernumeraries: not simply the unemployed, but those for whom no occupiable position exists in the social structure, if 'position' is understood as a place associated with social utility and public recognition. Ageing workers, young people drifting from internship to internship, the long-term unemployed: they exist in society without belonging to it, occupying a kind of social no-man's-land. This is consequential for political action. Castel indeed identifies three conditions for the formation of a capacity for collective contestation: a system structured around a shared condition, an alternative vision of society, and the feeling of being indispensable to the functioning of the social machinery. The workers' movement, historically, achieved the synthesis of all three. The supernumeraries have none: they are atomised, they harbour no ambitions beyond being slightly less badly situated, and they are socially useless. What they produce is not organised protest but anomie. The second concept is the *déstabilisation des stables*: the penetration of insecurity into previously stable zones of employment. Precariousness does not affect only a marginal periphery, but arises from the heart of the productive system. Just as the pauperism of the nineteenth century emerged from the dynamics of early industrialisation, the precariousness of the late twentieth century emerges from a central process of economic restructuring. This argument is very similar to the one moved by Bourdieu in his intervention presented above.

Finally, Castel develops a substitution thesis concerning the historical relationship between proximate protections and state protections. Pre-industrial societies possessed strong traditional systems of regulation: extended family bonds, local networks of mutual aid, what Castel calls *protections rapprochées*. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these Gemeinschaft-like protections were progressively eroded, and the social state was substituted for them. To dismantle the social state would therefore be catastrophic, because there is nothing underneath: the informal solidarities have been exhausted, and the protections currently in place were created by the very social institutions that are now under threat. As such the work axis of integration came to be the dominant and overdetermining one in modern societies. But this substitution thesis presupposes a specific historical trajectory, from Gemeinschaft to state, that does not describe the experience of Southern Europe, where the family was never fully replaced by the state and continues to function as an active functional substitute.

Castel provides, then, a powerful framework: precarity is a process of disaffiliation relative to a normative order, the *société salariale*, along two axes. However the framework also has identifiable

limitations. The zones are described without systematically linking them with social stratification, an endeavour Castel explicitly refuses, and are not linked to political orientations.

Dörre: precarity as disintegration from a norm

Dörre's work (2014) takes Castel's zone model as its point of departure and performs two operations that move it toward a more precise theory of social disintegration.

The first operation is normative. Dörre argues that Castel's zones are not merely positions in a social structure; they are positions relative to a norm: to be integrated is to achieve a normative standard of good work and secure social membership. Precarity, accordingly, is defined as the failure to achieve that norm. It is a relational category: it acquires meaning only in relation to the standards of protection and integration that are commonly accepted in a given society, at a given time. This moves the concept decisively beyond the dualism of both the objective indicators of the insider-outsider tradition and the subjective perceptions of the multidimensional approach: precarity is neither an objective attribute of the employment relationship nor a subjective feeling of the individual, but a material social condition defined by its normative distance from a collectively shared standard. What the earlier literature calls 'subjective' is not the idiosyncratic perception of the individual but the socially constituted meaning of a position: the evaluation of one's condition relative to normative expectations that are themselves socially produced. The objective/subjective dualism that organises much of the literature reviewed in section 2.2.1 is thereby to some extent resolved, or at least reframed: what appeared as two separate registers, objective conditions and subjective perceptions, turns out to be one condition evaluated against a social norm.

What remains of the subjective in the proper sense, that is, the individual variation in how people elaborate and respond to their condition, is the object of Dörre's second operation. He argues that individuals in different positions of precarity elaborate their condition differently, not only as a function of the zone they currently occupy but also as a function of the trajectory from which they arrive. The subjective experience of precarity is shaped by biographical direction: whether one is descending from a previously secure position, stagnating in a condition inherited from one's family of origin, or aspiring to an integration that has not yet been achieved. This opens the possibility of a differentiated analysis of orientations, one in which the same objective condition, say a temporary contract, is experienced and evaluated differently depending on whether it represents a fall from stability or a frustrated aspiration. Dörre's empirical work on the German case (2014, 2023) further suggests that every class produces its own internal zone of exclusion, characterised by a below-

average endowment of the social capital normative for that class, and that an underclass falls below the threshold of social respectability altogether. The implications of this class-differentiated analysis are developed in the following section (2.2.3).

Dörre establishes, then, that precarity is relational, defined by its distance from social norms, and that the subjective elaboration of the condition depends on biographical trajectory. The contribution is seminal: it provides the conceptual architecture for thinking precarity as something other than a variable. Its connection to social stratification, which Dörre's later empirical work develops for the German case (2023), is the subject of the following section. What remains to be deepened is the specification of the norms of integration for contexts other than the German one, a fuller account of what social disintegration means as a process and in relation to class, and a more systematic understanding of how people negotiate their position beyond what Dörre captures under the heading of 'subjective orientations.'

2.2.3. The precarity and class debate

The preceding sections established that precarity is multidimensional, configurational, and relational, defined by its distance from the norms of social integration that prevail in a given society. The question that the sociological literature has confronted most directly concerns the relationship between precarity and the class structure. The polemical reception of Standing's concept of the *precariat* made this question urgent, forcing the sociology of work and exclusion to take a position.

Standing (2009, 2011, 2014) popularised the term and placed the question of class squarely at the centre of the precarity debate. His account does not, however, provide a clear and systematic definition of the condition. Various attributes are enumerated without being hierarchically ordered. As reconstructed by Wright (2016), the foundational core of Standing's concept lies in the combination of two dimensions: *employment instability* (the 'relations of production': insecure jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment) and *income vulnerability* (the 'relations of distribution': material standard of living entirely dependent on money wages, with no social safety net, enterprise benefits, or community support). To these Standing adds distinctive relations to the state, characterised by the erosion of citizenship rights, and three internal segments ('atavists' 'nostalgics', and 'progressives') differentiated by class origin and by the nature of the expectations that have been frustrated. The segments capture real differences but remain descriptive, disconnected from a theory of social stratification and of the elaboration of frustrated expectations.

Wright (2016) subjects Standing's proposal to a systematic critique, concluding that the precariat is not a class, not even one in the making: it is too internally heterogeneous. Through a metaphor of capitalism as a game played at three levels, Wright shows that the precariat fails at each. At the level of the game itself, whether capitalism or some alternative, precariat and working class share the same fundamental material interests. At the level of the rules of the game, what kind of capitalism, the twenty-nine proposals of the *Precariat Charter* do not oppose working-class interests. At the level of the moves within the game, the optimal strategies available to individuals given the existing rules, the precariat fragments internally: the best course of action for an undocumented migrant and for an unemployed graduate diverge radically. The precariat is either part of the working class or an aggregation of distinct positions. In any case, it is not a class in its own right.

Braga (2016, 2018) proposes a third position. The precariat is a fraction of the working class, a *precarious proletariat*. Against Standing, it is not an autonomous class. Against those who refuse any internal differentiation of the working class, it is a fraction with specific social characteristics that require study in their specificity. The decisive theoretical move is that precarity is not the product of the neoliberal disintegration of a previously integrated wage relation. It is *constitutive* of the wage relation: it is its very condition of existence. Castel and Standing, Braga argues, share the sociological assumption that precarity is a condition located *outside* the wage relationship, its antipode (and repressed 'bastard'), but the Fordist compromise merely protected specific fractions of the working class, at the expense of others. This fact has been common sense in peripheral capitalism and its extension to the advanced countries reveals the combined and unequal character of capitalist development.

Starting from this premise, Braga defines the precarious proletariat as that part of the working class in constant transit between the deepening of economic exploitation and the possibility of socioeconomic exclusion: exploited to the maximum when employed and useless when expelled. In falling into pauperism, these workers cease to fulfil any relevant function with respect to class exploitation. Braga therefore distinguishes analytically the precarious proletariat from the pauperised population and from the lumpenproletariat, and signals that the relationship between the latter two deserves further interrogation. In a sense, Braga's move brings the precariat onto the terrain of Wright's 'second level' game, linking situated varieties of capitalism to working class divisions and sees precarity as constitutive of them.

Dörre (2023) takes the relational principle established in the preceding section, precarity as distance from the norm of integration, and draws out its consequences for the class structure. In doing so, he

recomposes the debate between Standing and his critics on different terrain. The precariat is not a class (contra Standing), but precarity is not simply a condition of the working class either (contra a reductive reading of Braga). It is a process that operates *through* the class structure, producing differentiated positions. The class heuristic that Dörre proposes distinguishes six classes, each with its own *zone of exclusion*: an internal band defined by atypical contract and precarious wage, characterised by an endowment of social property below the average of the class of belonging. Between permanent and precarious workers a regime of reciprocal discipline takes hold: temporary workers dream of permanent positions, permanent workers fear falling into temporary ones and both fear the underclass.

Read through the logic of social disintegration developed in the preceding section, the zones of exclusion are the site where the process of disintegration from the norm meets the class structure. For each class, disintegration from the norm of integration produces an internal band that is, de facto, a precarious fraction of the class itself. Dörre does not categorise them in this way: he remains within the language of zones and avoids defining the precarious working class explicitly as a fraction within the zone of exclusion. But the conceptual step is implicit in his framework: if precarity is distance from the norm, and each class has its own norm of integration, then each class produces its own specific form of precarity. Yet, Dörre does not develop which different norms are violated in the different zones of exclusion, and how this differentiated violation translates into different experiences and social positionings.

The framework becomes more explicit when Dörre descends below the level of the zones of exclusion, toward the threshold of respectability. Drawing on Bourdieu's early work on Algeria (Bourdieu 1977:71), Dörre (2023) specifies three thresholds: a *threshold of calculability* (having high incomes which eliminate subsistence concerns and allow the calculability of life conduct), a *threshold of security* (stable employment and regular income, allowing the routinary organisation of life conduct and an implicit *threshold of respectability* (lacking autonomous social reproduction without social support, as marked by institutionalised welfare status). The third is the boundary below which precarity produces not a zone of exclusion within an existing class, but a socially distinct position: the 'underclass'. If the zones of exclusion reveal class fractions produced by disintegration, the underclass is the case in which disintegration from the norm is so extreme as to produce a class formation in its own right, defined by a structural deficit of social property and by the symbolic devaluation that accompanies it. This formation is politically constructed through state policies of precarisation and institutionally produced symbolic devaluation (embodied in Germany by the Hartz

IV reform and status). Those who find themselves below the threshold of respectability are part of the labour force, they want to work, they often have a working past; but they are stigmatised and, in the German context, kept afloat by the state in a condition of institutional dependence with no exit trajectory.

All the authors discussed so far start from a concept of class grounded in production within a Marxist class framework. Braga distinguishes fractions within the working class, distinguishing a precarious proletariat from a secure proletariat, Dörre adds to it respectability as a supplementary criterion of stratification, drawn from Bourdieu and the sociology of social exclusion. This reconstruction brings the sociology of precarity to its most advanced point: precarity is multidimensional, relational, and operates through the class structure, producing differentiated positions below the norm of integration. Dörre goes further than any other author in showing that each class generates its own zone of exclusion and that below the threshold of respectability a distinct, politically constructed class formation emerges. However two issues remain unsolved across this literature as a whole. The first is whether and how these positions are further stratified with respect to different norms, that is, whether disintegration happens from different levels of the norm of integration. The second, broader, is how the people who inhabit these positions elaborate their condition: through which categories they make sense of the gap between expectation and reality, and whether and how such elaboration translates into orientations toward society and politics.

2.3 Towards a political sociology of precarity

The two bodies of literature reviewed in this chapter approach the same object from different angles and arrive at 'complementary impasses'. The insider-outsider literature and its extensions have accumulated substantial evidence on the political consequences of labour market insecurity, but the precarious remain, in their framework, a statistical aggregate, not social groups with recognisable trajectories, shared expectations, and identifiable positions in the social structure. The sociological literature on precarity has instead produced a far richer account of the condition itself - as multidimensional, configurational, relational to norms of social integration, and stratifying classes - but stops short of politics in a full sense.

That being said, the separation between these two traditions and their limits is to some extent an analytical simplification, and must not be read dualistically, insofar as it obscures a foundational convergent tension across approaches. The insider-outsider approach was born, with Rueda (2005), from the ambition to identify a new social group with distinctive political interests - outsiders - that the established categories of class politics could allegedly not capture. The sociology of precarity was launched, with Bourdieu (1998), as an intervention in which the political consequences of insecurity were not a secondary application but the very reason for conceptualising the condition. The political question has thus been constitutive of both traditions from the outset, even as their disciplinary trajectories pulled them apart. Over the past decade, several strands of research have attempted, with varying degrees of explicitness, to weave the two back together.

The most sustained and recent effort has come from the research programme that Antonucci and colleagues have been building since the late 2010s. Antonucci (2018) elaborated a configurational and sociologically informed conception of precarity, distinguishing its multiple dimensions and insisting on their irreducibility to employment status alone. This conception was then applied to voting behaviour through a series of multidimensional analyses (Antonucci et al. 2021; Zhirnov et al. 2023), which showed that the dimensions of employment, work, and financial precarity predicts populist attitudes and party preferences across European democracies. The step towards identifying different precarious social groups, and their logic of political orientation is yet to be fully developed. However, the programme is now expanding into a broader agenda, with a book forthcoming (Antonucci 2026), that link this sociology-informed multidimensional analysis of the political effects of precarity, with institutions, and theoretical openings toward the cultural sociology of meaning-making and moral evaluation (Ayala-Hurtado and Lamont 2021). This strand has been leading the research agenda, with the ambition to structure a new cross-disciplinary field[1], which is much in line with the ambition of this thesis.

A distinct body of work has already developed a useful analytical framework, that the present study adapts: the systematic connection of classed social positions, moral outlooks, and political orientations within specific populations. Emerging from the turn toward cultural sociology in class analysis (Lamont 1994; Skeggs 1997; Lamont 2000; Savage 2012; Savage et al. 2013; Flemmen 2013), this body of work has extended the neo-Bourdieusian programme beyond the analysis of cultural

[1]The forthcoming special issue of the *British Journal of Sociology*, 'The precarity of work and life: how insecurity equalizes and stratifies people's experiences' (guest-edited by Antonucci and Ayala-Hurtado), and the associated *SASE mini-conference* 'Social and Political Dynamics of Insecurity' confirm that this is a field in active construction.

tastes and lifestyles to the study of how structure, moral interpretation, and political orientation are linked: in effect, a political, moral, and cultural class analysis. I refer to this, for brevity, as *political cultural class analysis* (Damhuis 2020; Westheuser 2021). Several contributions within this tradition are directly relevant, though none takes precarity as its central object, and all have been mostly deployed for the analysis populations that occupy, or are treated as occupying, relatively stable positions in the social structure.

Damhuis (2020) developed a tripartite architecture of social bases, moral outlooks, and political positionings to analyse the differentiated roads to radical right support in France and the Netherlands. His type of *hard-done-byness* constitutes a thick description of intragenerationally declassed, financially vulnerable voters and their politicisation moral economy violations, but precarity is not fully theorised and is not the centre of the study. Westheuser (2021), producing a typology of moral outlooks and political habituses among the manufacturing working class and sociocultural professionals in Germany, addresses precarity with theoretical interest and refinement in the empirical cases in which it emerges, but his analytical framework is built for socially integrated positions, and precarity appears as a theme observed within a broader architecture rather than what the theory is specifically designed to explain. Adjacent to this tradition, Wagner (2022, 2023), analysing the moral visions of the political economy held by the blue-collar working class in Germany and Austria, concentrates on labour market insiders whose institutional integration deteriorates through changing workplace relations and welfare retrenchment; still his treatment of outsider workers is an extension of a unifying theory of the manufacturing working class instead of an independent inquiry into precarity as a condition. That said, his political sociology of social integration through work comes closest to the concerns of the present study, but with divergences that are important and will be discussed in chapter 3. Close to this tradition, though not strictly within it, Braconnier and Mayer (2015), working within the French tradition of electoral political sociology - influenced by the works of Castel and Bourdieu - connected experiences of precarity, to political orientations and behaviour, in a mixed-methods design. However, it concentrated on a very specific population of precarious workers - attendants to public charitable canteens - and while very rich empirically, it feels short to theorize distinct types and mechanisms of politicization.

Other contributions have pursued comparable connections in different contexts, and especially in Southern America. Braga (2016, 2018) developed a theory of precariat politics as collective action within Brazilian peripheral capitalism, but his object was collective mobilisation, not the individual moral elaboration that mediates between condition and political orientation. Auyero (2001) produced

an ethnographic study of extreme precarity and support for Peronism in Argentina, analysing the social populist grammar through which clientelistic networks shaped political orientations. For Southern Europe, instead, no comparable literature exists. The social movements tradition offers relevant insights on the moral economy of the anti-austerity mobilisations, on precarity as a mobilising frame, and on the precarious condition of participants (Della Porta 2015; Della Porta et al. 2017; Narotzky 2016), but does not constitute a systematic study of precarity as a class-differentiated condition, of its moral elaboration, and of the political orientations that follow beyond the specific moment of movement participation.

The brewing political sociology of precarity field is fragmented among different literatures, which need to be connected. The insider-outsider literature has shown that precarity has political consequences but cannot clearly identify the social groups that bear them or the processes through which they are produced. The sociological literature has established that precarity is a multidimensional, relational, and stratifying process but, despite some relevant contributions (e.g. Dörre 2020), has not investigated its political consequences as systematically. Political cultural class analysis has demonstrated that structure, moral interpretation, and political orientation can be held together within a single framework, but has applied this framework mostly to populations in relatively stable social positions, not to precarious ones.

To this theoretical gap corresponds a geographical one. The contributions reviewed above have produced significant results for France (Braconnier and Mayer 2015; Damhuis 2020), the Netherlands (Damhuis 2020), Germany (Westheuser 2021; Wagner 2023), and Austria (Wagner 2023), but have no equivalent for Southern Europe, despite the magnitude of the socio-political transformations these countries have undergone over the past fifteen years. The gap that the present study occupies lies at the intersection of these limits: theoretical, in the absence of a framework that connects precarity as a stratified condition to its political consequences through an analysis of moral elaboration; and geographical, in the absence of any such inquiry for Spain and Italy.

Against this background, this thesis revolves around one broad question: what is, if any, the politics of precarity in Spain and Italy? This general question opens onto the political orientations of precarious workers in a broad sense, and is pursued along three lines: how do precarious workers align politically? How does precarity stratify workers' experiences and shape their political orientations? And under what conditions can precarity be mobilised politically? The thesis proposes to address these questions by connecting what the two traditions reviewed in this chapter have developed in a relatively separated way: the structural condition of precarity, the moral elaboration

of that condition, and the political orientation that follows from it. What it seeks to trace are what it calls *precarious pathways*: the differentiated trajectories through which individuals fall into precarity from specific class standards, elaborate their condition through meaning-moral work involving moral economies, and orient themselves politically. The term precarious pathways is deliberately polysemic. 'Pathways' because the object of inquiry is a sequence, from structural disintegration through moral elaboration to political orientation, not a single association between a condition and an outcome. Pathways in the plural because precarity does not produce a single political trajectory but multiple ones, whose direction depends on the classing standard from which one falls, the moral economy that is violated, and the direction in which responsibility is attributed. 'Precarious' because those trajectories, are themselves fragile, conditional and far from granted, specifically for what concerns the activation and translation of a political orientation in stable political mobilization. This is precisely the case of the precarious pathways towards the populist left, which constitute the main - but not the only - pathways emerged and outlined this thesis: while majoritarian among precarious workers, they show to be *precarious*, insofar they seem not to have produced stable political mobilisation.

To trace these pathways, the thesis builds on and develops two convergent foundations. The first is Dörre's (2014; 2023) proposition that precarity constitutes a relational form of social disintegration within labour-based societies, one that operates through the class structure, producing differentiated social positions rather than a uniform condition. The second is the tradition of political cultural class analysis reviewed above, which has demonstrated that structure, moral interpretation, and political orientation can be held together within a single fruitful analytical movement. This thesis proposes to bring these two foundations together: to take the concept of social disintegration and the differentiated social positions it produces, and to apply to them the analytical architecture of political cultural class analysis.

In a sense, this operation inolves displacing political cultural class analysis from the canonical 'Bourdieu of social reproduction' (Bourdieu 1984), and shifting it back to the foundational 'Bourdieu of crisis' (Bourdieu 1977). Bourdieu's early Algerian sociology, the same on which Dörre builds, was a sociology of social disintegration: the study of an uprooted subproletariat suspended and strained between two different economic and normative worlds. While its systematic recovery exceeds the scope of the present work, the thesis draws on this Bourdieu of crisis (Burawoy 2018: 61–66) to reorient political cultural class analysis toward the study of disintegration. The result is, in its ambition at least, a theory of the *politics of social disintegration*: a framework that traces the passage from the structural dimension of disintegration, through its moral dimension, to its political dimension. In

doing so, the thesis engages with, but departs in important ways from, the emerging literature on social integration and politics (Gidron and Hall 2020; Wagner 2023). The following chapter develops the theoretical framework behind this project, which guides the analysis of the empirical chapters.

3. Precarity as social disintegration: norms of integration, moral economies, and political orientations

The previous chapter traced the evolution of the scholarly debate on precarity and its political effects across several literatures, from the political economy (and political behaviour) of labour market dualization to the cultural and labour sociology of precarity and insecurity. It argued for a configurational and relational approach that understands precarity as a process of *social disintegration*, building on the work of Bourdieu, Castel, and Dörre. This concept serves as the foundation for examining the politics of precarity in Spain and Italy, the central concern of this thesis. Yet what social disintegration *means*, both as a process at the societal level and as an experience at the individual level, remains undefined in the tradition that invokes it[2]. This chapter proposes a working definition which envelops the theoretical framework that structures the empirical analysis.

As discussed above, Castel's (2003) historical sociology shows how, in modern wage-based societies, social integration was progressively achieved through the transformation of wage labour into social citizenship through *social property*: the ensemble of rights, protections, and entitlements that gave wage earners a secure social position and the capacity to project their lives into the future. The notion of social *property* is not generic, as it gave workers what before was exclusive attribute of capital owners: material security and long-term futurity as granted by the ownership of private property. Attached to the new material security and sense of futurity, came also a new sense of respectability, of being part of society, making the ground for socio-political participation. Disintegration, in this account, is the unravelling of this protective shell, operating along the main axis of work and secondarily the density of embeddedness in protective social relations. Castel conceptualizes this unravelling in gradational terms, tracing a continuum from a zone of integration, to a zone of vulnerability, to zone of to *désaffiliation*, where exclusion from the wage relation and social isolation combine and converge.

Dörre (Dörre 2014) takes Castel's framework and reframes the process de-structuring of the wage relation as social disintegration. He also links Castel with the 'precarity debate', defining precarity as a relational category which acquires its meaning against the (work) standards of protection and integration commonly accepted in a given society, which in contemporary societies correspond to

[2] This statement is limited, to my best knowledge, to the scientific production of Klaus Dörre in English. It is well possible that a precise notion of social disintegration is developed and discussed in his rich production in German, also forthcoming (Dörre 2026).

the wage relation with social property. Dörre further operationalises Castel's continuous zones into a spectrum typology of precarious positions, marked by different segmented levels of precarity and subjective orientations toward the norm. This serves as the basis for an emerging theory on the relationship between class and precarity, arguing that each class produces its own internal zone of exclusion (Dörre 2023) and that the state has engineered new subproletariat – which I prefer as a term to 'underclass' (Wacquant 2022) - marked by its societal confinement below the socially-defined threshold of respectability (Bourdieu 1977; Dörre 2023), which serves to discipline the entire class structure with the threat of extreme precarity as exclusion (Bourdieu 1998; Dörre 2022). Both authors describe *what* disintegrates, the protective institutional shell of wage labour, and *where* people are situated when it does. Neither, however, defines what social disintegration *is* as a process: what it means, *structurally* and *normatively*, for a society and its members to go trough disintegration.

An early and still productive formulation of this problem can be found in Merton's analysis of anomie (Merton 1938). Writing about the United States in the interwar period, Merton sought to explain why responses to social strain, from resignation to rebellion, were not randomly distributed across the social structure but systematically concentrated in particular class positions. His structural answer was that American society, exalted a set of common success symbols - above all monetary wealth and social ascent - for the entire population, while its social organisation restricted access to the legitimate means of achieving them to a fraction of that same population. The egalitarian ideology presented society as open, denying the reality of durable structural barriers along class, racial, and ethnic lines; everyone was told they could rise, yet the actual social structure made rising systematically more difficult for those at the bottom. The result was a structural dissociation between culturally prescribed "goals" and institutionally available "means". When both operated jointly, and satisfactions accrued from both the achieving the outcome and the going through the normative process, the social order was integrated. When the goals were maintained while the means were insufficient or unsuited to reach the goals, integration broke down and *anomie* ensued: the norms remained in force but no longer functioned as practical guides for action, because the means they prescribed did not produce the ends they promised. Merton's key insight was that this dissociation was a property of the social structure - not of individuals - and that it generated systematic pressure toward divergent responses depending on how individuals related to the failing goals and means.

Merton's original concern was to explain what he called deviant behaviour, but the analytical structure of his argument reaches well beyond that specific application. What he in fact describes is the general process by which a social order loses its capacity to coordinate the aspirations of its members with

the pathways it provides to pursue them, and the divergent ways in which individuals respond when this coordination fails. It is this general structure of thinking - not his specific issue and vocabulary of deviance - that is useful for the present study.

The framework proposed here takes Merton's logical structure and combines it with the "normative goals and institutional means" of European labour-based societies, as defined by Castel and Dörre. Against this background, I define *social disintegration* as the societal process whereby the correspondence between the *normatively shared goals* of integration (i) and the *morally laden institutional means* (ii) to achieve them breaks down, producing both a fall from the expected normative social position (a) and a rupture in the scripts that were supposed to guide individuals toward that position (b). At the individual level, this is experienced as a *dislocation* of the expected life course: the discovery that one has done what the norm prescribes without obtaining what the norm promises. In European labour-based societies, secure work constitutes a shared goal, while work (effort) and education pathways to achieve it. As we shall see (see section 3.1.2), the normative goals of social integration in Southern Europe include but exceed the goal of secure work.

As such, social disintegration is a process that operates along two interrelated dimensions. The first is *structural-positional*: individuals fall from, or fail to reach, the social position that is normatively expected given the prevailing standards of integration. The fall is relational, defined not by absolute deprivation but by the distance between what is attained and what the shared norm prescribes (Dörre 2014; Castel 2003). The second dimension is *normative-moral*: the institutional means through which individuals pursue integration - and the morally charged scripts attached to them - do not produce the goals they are supposed to produce. At the systemic level, this dissociation constitutes a structural condition.

Three specifications follow from this definition. First, sustained social disintegration produces, at the societal level, *anomie* as a systemic resultant (Merton 1938): the dissociation between goals and means becomes a durable structural property of the social order, in which norms of integration remain culturally in force while the institutional capacity to realise them is withdrawn. Anomie is a condition of the system, not a subjective state. Whether and how individuals perceive it depends on their position, resources, and biographical trajectory. Social disintegration is primarily defined at the systemic level: it is the social structure that fails to coordinate aspirations with conditions. At the individual level, the positional dimension, falling from an expected position, is in principle observable. The normative dimension, however, is activated for the subject only in the moment of recognition, when the gap between what the script promised and what the world delivered becomes

perceptible. This moment, which I call dislocation (see below), is when anomie, as a systemic condition, becomes individually experienced.

Second, the reference in the definition to "*morally laden* institutional means" is an addendum to both Merton and Castel-Dörre, which needs to be qualified. The means through which individuals pursue integration - studying, working, making an effort - are not merely instrumental pathways. They are fused with cognitive scripts that provide expected shortcuts linking a given conduct to the norm ("if you study, you will get a good job"; "if you work, you will be able to afford a house"), and infused with moral connotations that frame these linkages as matters of justice and reciprocity ("if you behave properly, you will get what you deserve"). These scripts constitute, in other terms, *moral economies*: normative expectations of reciprocity between contribution and reward, embedded in socio-economic relations, infusing institutional means, and internalised as dispositions (Mau 2003; Sayer 2005; Thompson 1971). This is why social disintegration is not merely a material deprivation but an experience of meaning and moral rupture: the means do not produce what the script says they should, thus breaking the moral promise it carried. The specific moral economies that operate in the context of this study, *labourism* and *educational meritocracy*, are developed in section 3.2.

Third, the concept of *dislocation* has two meanings that must be kept analytically linked. In the structural sense, dislocation refers to a *déclassement*: the displacement of individuals from the social position they expected to occupy, given the norms and scripts of their society. In the normative-moral sense, freely borrowing from Laclau (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1990), dislocation refers to the disruption of a discursive cognitive-moral order: the moment in which previously established meaning-moral scripts stop functioning, the subject becomes aware of it and needs to understand 'what happened', that is negotiating old scripts with the current reality and possibly developing new ones. The two meanings of social dislocation coexist in the individual experience of social disintegration: the structural displacement from an expected social position comes through - an at least partial - disruption of a system of moral meaning making, because the social position was held in place by scripts and moral economies that gave life its expected course. Dislocation, thus understood, triggers a process of moral renegotiation in which individuals must work out who they are in light of their changed position ("keep them together") what went wrong and who is to blame, and what can be done. This renegotiation, which involves the construction of symbolic boundaries, the attribution of blame, and the reorientation of moral and practical commitments, constitutes the hinge between structural disintegration and political orientation. It is particularly consequential because what is at stake is not a preference or an opinion but the fundamental question of how one

holds oneself together when the expected course of life has broken down, and what, if anything, can be done to remedy it. The moral renegotiation of dislocation can produce divergent outcomes: a recognition that the social order has failed, opening a pathway toward political critique and demand; a redoubling of adherence to the failing scripts, foreclosing such recognition; or a condition of endurance without horizon, in which the resources for moral renegotiation are themselves exhausted. These divergent outcomes, and the conditions that produce them, are what the empirical chapters of this study trace.

The concept of social disintegration proposed here can be situated in relation to other recent approaches that connect social integration to political outcomes (Gidron and Hall 2020; Wagner 2023) as discussed in the previous chapter. The differences are worth specifying, because they illuminate what is distinctive about the present framework. Gidron and Hall's account remains at the level of general norms: social integration is shared values, sociability, and mutual respect whose erosion manifests in declining subjective social status. It does not theorise the gap between what a society normatively prescribes and the institutional means it makes available - the structural process that Merton (1938) described as anomie - nor does it engage with work, housing, or the material infrastructure of integration.

The relationship with Wagner requires more careful discussion, as both approaches build some version of Castel and Merton. However, the two frameworks crucially differ in the Merton they draw on. Wagner builds on Merton's (1957) to develop a structural-functionalist and interactionist theory of social roles: integration is the functioning of reciprocal expectations within role-sets, practised in institutional settings, and disintegration is the tension or rupture of those expectations. The concept proposed here builds on Merton's (1938) normative-structuralist theory of anomie: integration is the coordination between culturally prescribed goals and institutionally available means, and disintegration is their dissociation. Second, and consequently, the two frameworks differ in analytical focus. Wagner's disintegration is located primarily at the meso-level, in the quality of institutional relationships, even if these generate micro-level experiences. The disintegration theorised here is located at the micro-normative level, in the gap between what individuals were led to expect and what their trajectories deliver, even if meso-level institutions provide the context in which that gap opens. Third, Wagner's concept is more general and, in a sense, softer: it captures a wide range of situations in which institutional relationships are under strain, from a difficult rapport with a line manager to a humiliating encounter at the welfare office. The concept proposed here is more specific and more radical: it designates the condition in which the normative promises that were supposed to

organise a life course cannot be redeemed, so that the individual is dislocated not merely from a role but from the social position that was meant to anchor it.

As a result, the two approaches to social disintegration through work can, but need not, be read as complementary. If they are, the relationship is sequential: a secure social position, aligned with prevailing norms and consonant with one's expectations, constitutes a precondition for the stable practice of social roles. When that precondition holds, Wagner's analysis applies: integration or disintegration plays out within the role-relationships that the position makes available. When it does not, as is the case for the precarious workers studied here, the problem is prior - and more fundamental - to role malfunction: the position itself has not materialised. Wagner's framework describes the disintegration of insiders under institutional pressure; the present framework describes the disintegration of those for whom the institutional promise itself has failed to materialize in the first place.

The three sections that follow develop the dimensions of social disintegration defined above. Section 3.1 identifies the specific norms of integration against which disintegration is measured in Southern European societies - work and housing, jointly configurating the work-housing nexus - and articulates their relationship to precarity and class. Section 3.2 examines the moral dimension: how individuals who experience disintegration negotiate their identity, interpret their condition through moral economies, and orient themselves toward blame and possible responses. Section 3.3 traces how these moral orientations translate into relationships with the political sphere and into substantive political orientations. Together, they construct the analytical framework through which this thesis examines how precarity, as an experience of social disintegration, shapes the modalities with which precarious workers in Spain and Italy orient themselves politically.

3.1 Norms of integration: the work-housing nexus

3.1.1 Secure work as a standard

The first component of the standard of social integration, as established in the preceding section through the combined framework of Castel, Dörre and Merton, is *secure work*. Not any form of employment qualifies: what functions as secure is work that enables calculability, planning and autonomous social reproduction. In Castel's account of the wage-based society (*société salariale*), work occupies a peculiar double position. It is both the culturally prescribed goal of social integration, the condition whose fulfilment marks belonging to society, and the principal legitimate means to achieve

it. Work, in Castel's formulation, functions as 'the great integrator' (Castel 2003:390) a catalytic principle that crosses and organises all other fields of social life. Beyond merely providing income, it structures the conditions under which all other dimensions of social membership become accessible, from housing to family formation, from sociability to political participation. In a nutshell, it is work sustained by social property[3]: secure employment, some degree of financial security and social citizenship attached to it. The question that the present section addresses is how this norm configures, and how it differentiates, in the Southern European context.

One first difference is the actual coverage of the wage relations in Southern Europe. In Continental European societies, France and Germany, about which Castel and Dörre write, the wage relation sustained by social property at is apex covered the large majority of the population. The institutional settlement of the post-war decades generalised employment-based social protection - certainly also through patriarchal family structures - to a point where secure work could plausibly function as a nearly universal norm. In Southern Europe, this generalisation never fully obtained. The wage relation with social property has historically coexisted with a large secondary labour market, characterised by extensive informality, seasonal and irregular employment, and structural unemployment rates substantially above those of Continental and Northern Europe (Ferrera 1996; Betti 2018). This employment structure sprang from economic structure, whose dualism is due to late industrialisation and a semi-peripherical position within the world-economy (Arrighi 1985; Rueda, Wibbels, and Altamirano 2015). Moreover, such a dualism, was compounded by the provision of weak non-contributory safety net, most clearly embodied in the historical absence of minimum guaranteed income schemes (Jessoula and Natili 2020; Natili 2019; Soler-Buades 2025), and disability pensions repurposed as surrogate of those (Ferrera 1996). As such, although a considerable part of the population was covered by the wage relation, Southern European countries never achieved its near universalisation in any conceivable form.

Historical economic dualism was further compounded from the 1980s (Spain) and 1990s (Italy) onward, by successive waves of labour market liberalisation at the margins. This process was common across Europe, strong in Continental Europe (Palier and Thelen 2010; Patrick Emmenegger et al. 2012) and even more extreme in Southern Europe. Spain, in particular, ranked consistently as the country with the highest rate of both unemployment and temporary employment, with Italy not

[3]Dörre (2022: 25) defines social property, following Castel, as 'a form of ownership which, in the form of social rights, collective bargaining standards and opportunities for co-determination, gives wage earners something that was previously exclusively linked to private property: the chance to plan their lives for the longer term.'

too far behind (Bentolila, Dolado, and Jimeno 2012; Polavieja 2003, 2006). More recently, the crisis of 2008-2012 eroded even the relative security of core workers with the liberalization of open-ended contracts - although not to the level of temporary ones - indicating a further degree of erosion of the wage relations in Southern Europe (Picot and Tassinari 2017; Bulfone and Tassinari 2021; Alvariño et al. 2025).

One second difference - to some degree a byproduct of the first one - is the role of family (and community) support. As the state does not extend social property to the entire workforce and provide weak social floor, family and community keep playing an important role in traditional forms of welfare provision (Saraceno 1994; Esping-Andersen 1999; Naldini 2004). While Castel though of community welfare provision of something of the past, (to be) positively substituted by social citizenship through work, in Southern Europe family welfare and social property coexisted in a chasm: *Gemeinschaft* structurally intersected with *Gesellschaft*. Family compensated where the state did not reach - of course as long as the family had resources and in a very classed way - and buffered where the state did not get in time, in a functional response to the 'segmentation of social property' and the absence of a credible state social floor. This is not to say that secure work was not important, but that secure work held by one member of the family may well likely shield unsecure work positions held by others.

This latter dynamic might serve also to highlight what is an apparent paradox and a core statement. The fact that a significant portion of the population in Southern Europe is not historically covered by the wage relation with social property does not weaken secure work as a norm of integration: on the contrary, it reinforces it. Secure work *is* integration, precisely because a substantial share of the population experiences its contrary, and people holding secure positions extend integration to their family network. It is traditionally considered the basis for forming a family, for achieving residential emancipation from the parental household, for sustaining the stability of the domestic unit, and, in many cases, for supporting the precarity of other household members who lack access to stable employment. The norm is not weakened by the exception, as it is confirmed by the distance that the exception measures from it.

Secure work, then, remains the first and most fundamental component of the norm of social integration in Southern Europe, as it does elsewhere. But it is not sufficient to define the norm in its entirety. There is a second normative component of social integration, whose relationship with work is not merely derivative in the way that Castel's analysis of France - and Continental Europe - at large seem to assume: *secure housing*. Where the state does not automatically guarantee housing as social

property - by the means of public housing provision or as second-best regulation of the housing market for tenants - housing must be treated as a partially autonomous dimension of the standard of integration. Secure housing indeed constitutes a distinctive feature of Southern European political economy and, next to and with work, core norm of social integration. The reasons for this, and the institutional configuration that sustains it, are the subject of the following section.

3.1.2 Secure housing, through secure work

The preceding section concluded that the standard of integration in Southern Europe cannot be specified by reference to work alone, and that it must include housing as a second, partially autonomous component. This section develops the argument. It examines the connection between work and housing, establishes the concept of a *work-housing nexus* as the configurational standard of social integration in these societies, and traces the historical and institutional conditions under which the nexus was sustained and is now unravelling.

The starting point is Castel's own framework. In his account of social property, Castel identifies mandatory insurance as a central mechanism through which non-owners gain access to a patrimony that is collective in origin but susceptible to private enjoyment: an inheritance whose rules of operation are social but whose function is that of private property (Castel 2003:282). In a footnote, however, he acknowledges that insurance is not the only such mechanism. Social housing, he writes, represents the 'other modality' of collective property available for individual use, and the analogy between the two - social insurance and social housing as the two great forms of making social property available to overcome vulnerability - 'should be looked into deeper.'[4] Castel signals the lacuna but does not fill it. In the French context, where social housing developed in parallel with social insurance, making housing part of social property could remain implicit in the framework. In Southern Europe, where this second modality was never developed to a comparable degree, the lacuna becomes a structural gap that requires explicit attention.

Comparative housing research helps to specify the nature of this gap. Housing, as Aalbers and Christophers (2014) have argued, constitutes a dimension of social inequality that is not fully derivable from one's position in the labour market. The dynamics of property prices,

[4]Castel (2003: 282, note) writes: 'Insurance benefits are, nonetheless, not the only form of social property appropriable by individuals. Social housing represents the other modality of collective disposable property, under certain regulating conditions, for private use. This analogy – between social insurance and social housing as two great forms of making available to the "people" social property to overcome their vulnerability – should be looked into deeper.'

intergenerational wealth transmission, and access to mortgage credit introduce a logic of stratification that intersects with, but is not reducible to, the employment relation. Two workers with the same income may find themselves in radically different housing situations depending on whether they have inherited property, bought before or after a price boom, or live in a metropolitan centre or a provincial town. This partial autonomy of the housing dimension is present across all market economies, but it acquires structural weight in contexts where public provision does not bridge the distance between wage income and housing access.

In Southern Europe, that distance is wide and largely unbridged. Social housing accounts for approximately 4 per cent of total housing stock in Italy and roughly 2 per cent in Spain, figures that contrast sharply with the 17 per cent of France or the more than 30 per cent of the Netherlands (Castles and Ferrera 1996; Poggio and Boreiko 2017; Flynn and Montalbano 2024). The private rental market, while expanding in recent years, has historically been small, poorly regulated, and stigmatised as a tenure of last resort rather than a viable long-term path (Baldini and Poggio 2014; Fuster, Arundel, and Susino 2019). In the absence of both social housing and a functional rental sector, the only route to secure housing has been, and largely remains, ownership. Secure housing, in this institutional context, *is* owned housing: the two are practically synonymous, not because of cultural preference but because of the absence of alternatives that would make other tenures comparably stable and protected.

The point, moreover, is not only material. Qualitative research confirms that in these societies the owned home is normatively constitutive of social integration: not a commodity one happens to possess, but the marker that sanctions full social membership. In interviews with lower-middle-class families in Rome, Gentili and Hoekstra (2021:10) found that the inability to achieve home ownership was experienced as a 'loss of status,' a failure to attain full adulthood and class belonging. One young interviewee captured the ambiguity with precision: "My family is middle-class but I am not… or not yet… or not completely?". Research on Spain reaches convergent conclusions: even after the devastating housing crisis of 2008, the aspiration to ownership persists across social groups, albeit increasingly detached from the practical transition to independent living (Fuster, Arundel and Susino 2019).

Housing must therefore be treated as a second axis of the standard of integration, not as a derivative of the first. Castel himself, while not developing the point, acknowledged it conceptually. And even in France, where social housing does form part of social property, his empirical work on disaffiliation implicitly confirms the connection: among recipients of the *Revenu Minimum d'Insertion*, housing

deprivation was pervasive, with nearly half of all claimants lacking what Castel called 'a home in the real meaning of the word' (Castel 2000:532).[5] If housing insecurity accompanies disaffiliation even where social housing provision is substantial, in societies where it is residual the connection can only be tighter. The question, then, is how work and housing have been historically articulated, and through what mechanisms their relationship is now unravelling.

The historical answer, in both Spain and Italy, was the engineering of mass private property. The promotion of mass home ownership was a deliberate political project, the construction of a 'society of small proprietors,' pursued with remarkable consistency across different regimes and decades. In Spain, the Franco regime made the disciplinary logic explicit: the country was to be one of proprietors, not proletarians, because those who own a home do not make revolutions (Ochotorena 2019; Carmona Pascual 2022).[6] In Italy, housing policy similary emerged in the early twentieth century with the parallel aim of subtracting housing from the political agenda of the labour movement and building a society of petty proprietors (Poggio and Boreiko 2017: 114). The political genealogy is shared: authoritarian conservatism in Spain and Christian-democratic anti-communism in Italy both promoting small ownership as social control. In both countries, moreover, the early mechanisms of publicly financed housing for workers were structured along contributory lines similar to those of social insurance, what could have been, in Castel's terms, a second modality of social property. But in both cases, this embryonic social property was progressively converted into private property through right-to-buy schemes, privatisation, and the defunding of public provision, until what remained was a residual stock and a dominant ideology of ownership (Poggio and Boreiko 2017; Vidal and García-Duch 2024).

For the ownership formula to function as a mechanism of social integration, ownership had to be reachable through work. The model that sustained mass home ownership during the post-war decades rested on a historically contingent combination of conditions: growing real wages that made mortgage payments manageable, inflation that eroded debt over time, loose regulation that tolerated self-construction, and family networks that provided supplementary capital in the form of down payments, land, or unpaid labour (Castles and Ferrera 1996; Carmona Pascual 2022; Gritti and Cutuli

[5]On the profile of RMI claimants in France, Castel (2000: 532) observes that 'lack of proper housing, that is to say, of a home in the real meaning of the word' affects almost half of all claimants and 74 per cent of single men, who are 'in emergency housing or are being accommodated free of charge, either by the family or here, there and everywhere.'

[6]Spain's housing minister José Luis Arrese declared: 'No queremos un país de proletarios, sino de propietarios' (quoted in Ochotorena 2019; see also Vidal and García-Duch 2024: 676). On the parallel Italian trajectory, see Poggio and Boreiko (2017: 114), who document the explicit aim of early twentieth-century housing policy to 'subtract housing as an area of consensus for the labour movement' and promote a 'petty proprietors society.'

2021; Vidal and García-Duch 2024). The normative script that emerged was sequential and rigid: stable work first, then a flat through a state-backed or family-supported mortgage, then marriage and family formation. Ochotorena (2019) observes that the segmentation between stable industrial employment and precarious informal work translated directly into a housing divide that became a marker of social identity: workers who had secured factory jobs but still lived in precarious housing concealed their situation for fear of stigmatisation.[7] The same dynamic is described by Ferrarotti (1970: 150) in his study of Rome shantytowns in the late 1960s, where lack of decent housing prevented the access to stable job[8]. The norm was not merely that one should work, but that work should produce a specific material result, a secure home, without which it social integration remained incomplete.

In this configuration, work was both the normative centre and the practical engine. Family provided supplementary means, not an alternative channel. Nobody aspired to depend on family transfers as a permanent substitute for autonomous housing access; the expectation was that work, with some initial family help, would suffice. And for several decades, under the specific macroeconomic conditions of the post-war settlement, it did. It emerged was a work-housing nexus: secure work producing secure housing, the two forming together a configurational and relational standard of social integration, where each component reinforces the other and neither alone is sufficient.

The relationship between work and housing, however, is not only the one just described. The standard account runs from work to housing: secure employment generates the income and the institutional standing, mortgage eligibility, stable contributions, creditworthiness, that give access to a secure home. But in the Southern European configuration there is also an inverse relationship, less often made explicit. Precisely because the welfare state offers no housing alternatives and work is fragile, ownership becomes *more* necessary as a buffer, not less. The need for a secure home of one's own is proportional to the insecurity of work. Where unemployment protection is meagre, where social housing is residual, where the rental market is expensive and uncertain, the owned home is the only durable shield against volatility. The owned home performs in these societies what social insurance performs in Continental ones: a buffer against the uncertainties of the life cycle.

This produces a double bind. Ownership is the response to the fragility of work, but the fragility of work is what makes ownership unreachable. The conditions that make a secure home most necessary,

[7]In the original: "Esta segmentación [between precarious informal work and formal stable work in manufacturing] se convertiría en un factor de identidad con repercusión directa al problema de la vivienda" (Ochotorena 2019: 194).

[8] " 'Quando sanno dove abitiamo, non ci assumono' è una frase che si sente ripetere" (Ferrarotti 1970: 150)" [' "When they know from where we come from, they don't hire you", is a sentence that you often hear"].

weak welfare, insecure employment, absence of rental alternatives, are the same conditions that make it hardest to achieve. This is not a temporary market imbalance; it is a structural tension inscribed in the Southern European model of integration, temporarily masked during the post-war decades by favourable macroeconomic conditions, but never eliminated. Vidal and García-Duch (2024) bring this contradiction into sharp focus by showing that the very processes that have historically expanded working-class access to property, in particular the privatisation of public stock and the financialisation of mortgage credit, simultaneously erode the wage base on which that access depends. The mechanisms that extend ownership are the same mechanisms that undermine the capacity to sustain it: a short circuit between the expansion of property and the precarisation of work.

Empirical research on the relationship between employment and housing outcomes confirms the tightness of the nexus and the consequences of its breakdown. Arundel and Lennartz (2020), applying the concept of labour market dualisation to housing, show that being an outsider on the labour market vastly increases the probability of being an outsider on the housing market, across the dimensions of housing equity, tenure security, and wealth accumulation. In their Dutch case study, households experiencing outsider status across all three labour market dimensions are 7.7 times more likely to experience outsider status across all three housing dimensions. The two forms of dualisation run along similar socio-demographic lines, affecting younger, less educated, and less wealthy households disproportionately. After the Global Financial Crisis, moreover, the share of housing outsiders grew even among labour market insiders, indicating that a secure position in the labour market no longer guaranteed secure housing outcomes.

The crisis of the ownership model did not begin with the financial crash of 2008, but the crash made its structural character visible. During the long expansion of the 1990s and 2000s, the relaxation of mortgage lending standards temporarily substituted for what stable wages had previously provided. Credit became the bridge between work and ownership, allowing households with insecure or insufficient employment to access a secure home through rising debt rather than rising income. This was, as Arundel and Lennartz (2020: 1393) describe it, a 'hollow homeownership' sustained by high levels of debt and financial risk, in which marginal borrowers were precisely those most exposed to deteriorating labour market conditions. The expansion of credit masked the growing divides on the labour market; its contraction, after 2008, exposed them.

In Spain, where the housing bubble had been the most intense in Europe, the rupture was correspondingly severe. As Gil (2025) has shown, the crisis was not resolved through a market correction but was converted, through deliberate state intervention coordinated with the European

Union, into a new cycle of accumulation centred on rental extraction rather than mass ownership. Through regulatory, fiscal, and financial reforms, the Spanish state created the conditions for global asset managers to enter the housing market on favourable terms (Gil García and Martínez López 2023) . The result was an accumulation regime in which housing prices and rents exceeded their pre-crisis peaks, but in which access to ownership for broad segments of the population was structurally foreclosed. The 'society of owners' decomposed from above and from below simultaneously: upper-income sectors became multi-property owners and landlords, while lower-income households were expelled from the ownership path. Between 2007 and 2023, the share of Spanish households renting rose from 13.5 to 18.7 per cent, with the increase concentrated among the young, the urban, and the foreign-born. Gil (2025, 2026) proposes the concept of "generation rent [*generación inquilina*]" to designate the shift of a generational cohort whose residential trajectories are structurally shaped by the impossibility of accessing ownership: rental, in this reading, is not a transitional phase but a prolonged or even permanent condition. Italy has undergone a parallel, if less dramatic, transformation. The country did not experience the same magnitude of housing bubble and crash, but the post-crisis decade brought a similar combination of stagnant wages, tightened mortgage credit, and declining homeownership rates among younger cohorts (Gritti and Cutuli 2021; Poggio and Boreiko 2017). The expansion of short-term rental platforms and the growing role of property as a financial asset have reproduced, in attenuated form, the same rentier dynamics visible in Spain.

The structural mechanisms through which this unravelling operates - institutional closure of credit markets and rent extraction in financialised housing markets - have been generally theorized in recent class analysis around housing (Waitkus, Savage, and Toft 2025). What concerns the present analysis is rather the normative sediment those mechanisms produce: a standard that, once formed, operates with a force largely independent of its structural origin. In both countries, the Mertonian dissociation is now fully operative: the norm persists, stable work should give access to a secure home; the means have withdrawn, neither wages, nor credit, nor family resources suffice, for a growing share of the population, to bridge the gap; and the economic structure itself has shifted, housing functions less as a good accessible through labour income and more as a site of financial accumulation and rent extraction. The norms of integration remain thus anchored to work, while the economy has moved from production to rentierism.

Family support, in this context, is a complementary means, activated when the path through work fails or proves insufficient, and a deeply stratified one. Gritti and Cutuli (2021), analysing cohort data from the Bank of Italy, show that the intergenerational wealth transmission through which Italian families have historically sustained home ownership is itself class-differentiated: lower-class families

tend to transfer housing wealth directly at the moment of nest-leaving, while upper-class families provide an extended stream of financial transfers over time, adapting their support to the evolving needs of their children. Gentili and Hoekstra (2021) confirm this pattern qualitatively for the lower-middle class in Rome, where families at the threshold of housing security must increasingly pool resources from multiple generations and multiple family lines, often without success. Family does not correct the stratification produced by the breakdown of the work-housing nexus; it reproduces and deepens it, because the compensatory means are themselves distributed along the same class lines as the primary means.

Despite the material deterioration of the work-housing nexus, the aspiration to home ownership remains alive in both countries. As Fuster, Arundel and Susino (2019) have shown for Spain, the 'culture of homeownership' persists in the collective imaginary even after the devastating crisis of 2008, although it has become increasingly detached from the practical transition to independent living. Gentili and Hoekstra (2021) report convergent findings for Italy: even when ownership is clearly out of reach, both parents and young adults continue to orient their strategies and expectations toward it, investing considerable time and sacrifice in the attempt. The study also documents a telling shift in parental attitudes: where intergenerational help was once framed as a natural step in a well-functioning system, parents now express a sense of moral obligation, even guilt, toward their children, a sentiment that reads less as a private family matter than as a symptom of the failure of the collective arrangements, the social property that was never built or has been dismantled. The norm has not been abandoned; it has been rendered unreachable for many while remaining the horizon against which they measure their social position.

Work and housing, then, are the two components of the standard of integration in the Southern European configuration. Together they form a work-housing nexus: a configurational and relational standard in which secure work and secure housing are materially and normatively linked, each reinforcing and enabling the other. Work is the expected, legitimate, and morally sanctioned principal means to attain secure housing, and the owned home is the material foundation upon which the social consequences of work, planning, family formation, social respectability, can be built. The nexus is not merely a material arrangement; it is a morally laden script, a shared understanding of what a working life should produce. When the script is honoured, work and housing together constitute the condition of social integration. When it is broken, when work no longer produces housing security, the result is not simply material hardship but a process of social disintegration. It is to this process, and to the way it positions individuals in the social order, that the following section turns: precarity as social disintegration, which is by itself *classing*.

3.1.3 Precarity as a classing process of social disintegration

The work-housing nexus functions as a shared standard of integration: everyone knows what it means, and virtually everyone orients toward it. It operates both as an objective standard, a condition whose fulfilment marks social belonging, and as a biographical script, a temporal sequence that organises expectations and efforts: through study and work, one is expected to secure a career or stable employment, which in turn enables access to a home, which in turn enables family formation and full social membership. The script gives the norm a temporal structure: it is a condition to be met as well as a trajectory to be followed.

Yet this single norm is internally stratified. It admits of different levels, socially recognised and hierarchically ordered, which correspond to different social positions when achieved, and to different forms of precarity when missed. At the upper level, the work-housing nexus takes the form of a professional middle-class configuration: a qualified career in a recognised profession, with autonomy and a comfortable salary, combined with ownership of property in a desirable location. The biographical script that orients toward this level is educational and meritocratic: advanced study leads to a professional position, which leads to housing commensurate with that position. At the standard level, the nexus takes the form of a working-class configuration, historically perceived as 'the norm of the norm': stable employment, even if manual or routine, with regular income and social insurance, combined with home ownership or very secure tenancy, enabling family formation and a modest but predictable life. The script here is labourist and fordist: steady effort and reliable work lead to security. At the lower level, the nexus takes the form of a precarious but still viable configuration: either work or housing is insecure (or both), but the two components compensate each other and, taken together, hold. A precarious job combined with family-owned housing, or stable employment combined with insecure rental accommodation, or even both work and housing somewhat insecure but overall staying afloat, still allow a fragile but recognisable version of the standard to be sustained. The levels of the nexus, and the threshold below which it collapses, are summarised in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Work-housing nexus: levels and ideal types

Level of the nexus	Configuration
Upper level *professional middle-class*	Qualified career in a recognised profession, with autonomy and a comfortable salary, combined with ownership of property in a desirable location. Biographical script: educational-meritocratic (advanced study leads to a professional position and commensurate housing). Failed upper-level integration: Type 1, declassed aspiring middle class (ch. 6).
Standard level *'The norm of the norm': secure working-class*	Stable employment, even if manual or routine, with regular income and social insurance, combined with home ownership or very secure tenancy, enabling family formation and a modest but predictable life. Biographical script: labourist (secure work leads to basic security and autonomous reproduction). Failed standard level integration: Types 2 and 3, precarious working class, two variants (chs. 7-8).
Lower level *precarious working class*	At least either work or housing is insecure, but the two components taken together, hold in a dynamic equilibrium: a precarious job combined with family-owned housing, or secure employment combined with insecure rental, or either combination of insecure job and housing which are together manageable. Biographical script: labourist (work sustain a fragile but still viable version of the standard). *Threshold zone*: precarious working class at risk of falling below respectability.
Below threshold *Collapse of the nexus: subproletariat*	No secure work, no secure housing: lack of autonomous reproduction at socially acceptable levels, even considering family help and state welfare provision. Informal survival or local support. Normative orientation to work persists, but scripts are exhausted; endurance without horizon. Type 4 (shadow type), subproletariat (ch. 9).

These levels are not separate norms for separate classes. They are articulations of a single, shared norm, and everyone in principle recognises them. The son or daughter of a manual worker who pursues advanced education aspires to the upper level, not to 'the norm of the working class.' Aspirations cut across origins: it matters the level at which the biographical script was oriented, not the level from which one departed.

It is at this point that the framework established through Castel, Dörre and Merton, and declined as the work-housing nexus, requires a further theoretical specification. If the norm of integration is to some extent stratified, and if precarity is social disintegration from the norm, the question is: disintegration from *which* level, relative to *which* expectations, and with what consequences for the formation of social positions?

Dörre's class heuristic offers a significant but limited answer.[9] In his framework, each class produces its own 'zone of exclusion,' characterised by precarious employment and below-average social capital. This captures the insight that precarity traverses the class structure and affects each class in a form shaped by that class's specific standards of normality. However, the framework treats this relationship in essentially photographic terms. The classes are there and precarity erodes their margins. What is not fully captured is the processual dimension: people do not simply remain within their class of origin while being precarised. They fall, or fail to rise, relative to the aspirations that oriented their biographical script, and this process itself produces new social positions that cannot be reduced to the class of origin or to its zone of exclusion.

I suggest that Bourdieu's concept of *déclassement* provides the missing piece (Bourdieu 1978, 1988; Bourdieu and Accardo 1999).[10] In his analysis of credential inflation and the structural mismatch between educational aspirations and labour market positions (Bourdieu 1978), *déclassement* is always relative to socially constructed expectations: not an absolute fall but a fall measured against what one was led to expect. Bourdieu's framework already contains both dimensions that are relevant here: a norm that is shared, since the meritocratic promise functions as a universalised institution, and a norm that is known in its stratification, since everyone recognises that there are different levels of arrival and orients toward a specific one. The present framework draws from Bourdieu the mechanism of *déclassement* relative to expectations, and the closely related concept of *trajectoire interrompue*, the interrupted trajectory whose inertia carries aspirations beyond the point where conditions can sustain them. Bourdieu himself recognised that aspirations are not fully produced by class-of-origin dispositions. Institutions can generate expectations beyond what the habitus of the class of origin would produce on its own: in his analysis, the expansion of mass education is the

[9]Dörre's (2023) class heuristic distinguishes six classes (ruling class, old and new middle class, new and conventional working class, new underclass), each of which, except the ruling class and the underclass, produces its own 'zone of exclusion' characterised by below-average endowment of social capital.

[10]The reference is to Bourdieu's 'Classement, déclassement, reclassement' (1978), where the mechanism of the décalage between aspirations and objective chances is formalised. The same framework is applied to the crisis of May 1968 in *Homo Academicus* (1984) and enriched empirically in *La Misère du monde* (1993), where the concept of *misère de position*, the suffering produced by the gap between occupied and expected position, extends the analysis to housing and labour precarity.

principal such mechanism, and the *décalage* between the expectations it produces and the positions actually available is the source of the crisis (Bourdieu 1978, 1988). The present framework extends this insight: the biographical scripts that orient aspirations toward specific levels of the work-housing nexus are sustained by the normative standard itself, institutionally backed and culturally available across class lines (Lamont and Thévenot 2000), and they persist even when the conditions for meeting them have been withdrawn[11]. What matters is the level to which the biographical script was oriented, and the consequences of script failure.

The extension of Bourdieu's framework that the present analysis proposes is twofold. First, a matter of dimension: in Bourdieu (1978), the *décalage* between aspirations and chances operates essentially on the educational-professional axis, through credential inflation and the changing relationship between qualifications and positions. Housing does not appear. Here, the framework is extended to the work-housing nexus as a whole: the educational meritocratic script (studying leads to a career leads to a home) and the labourist script (steady work leads to security leads to a home) are both scripts whose failure produces *déclassement*, with respect to the same standard of the work-housing nexus.[12]

Second, a matter of analytical plane. In Bourdieu, the *décalage* between aspirations and chances produces subjective suffering (*misère de position*) or strategies of reclassification (reproduction of the structure). But it is not thought as a problem of *social integration*. In short, the Bourdieusian question is "how does the structure reproduce itself, or how does one suffer from one's position within the structure", not "what happens to the social bond when the institutional promise systematically breaks". This second question is the one posed by the Mertonian framework of the dissociation between shared norms and institutionalised means, introduced at the beginning of this chapter. Where Bourdieu asks about social reproduction and suffering, Merton asks about the social pact and its dissolution. The present framework combines the two planes: the mechanism of *déclassement* relative to expectations comes from Bourdieu, the grammar of disintegration as a breakdown of the

[11] In Bourdieu's analysis of the Algerian *relogement* (Bourdieu 1977), sub-proletarians desire the modern apartment without possessing the temporal dispositions required to inhabit it. Bourdieu attributes this to the encounter with colonial modernity, which imposes new standards while destroying the conditions of the traditional economy. The explanation is historical and contextual, but it points to a more general possibility: that a normative standard can impose on people whose material condition and whose dispositions make it untenable.

[12] Bourdieu's later interventions on precarity, particularly 'La précarité est aujourd'hui partout' (1998), offer the diagnosis closest to the present analysis: precarity as a permanent condition that destroys the capacity for biographical projection, with an explicit link to the Algerian sub-proletariat (Bourdieu 1977). However, here no systematic links are traced with the concept of *déclassement*.

social pact comes from Merton, while Dörre provides the bridge, through the conceptualisation of precarity as a process of social disintegration.

Déclassement is not merely a material displacement; it is simultaneously a positional and an identity fracture. One falls not only in terms of work and housing position, but in terms of the biographical script that organised one's expectations and self-understanding towards it. The educational meritocratic promise that studying would lead to a professional position; the labourist promise that steady effort would lead to basic security: these are the scripts whose failure constitutes the specific content of precarity for those who held them. The fracture is at once material and normative, positional and moral.

On the basis of the trajectory established through Castel and Dörre (norms of integration), Merton (the grammar of social disintegration), and Bourdieu (*déclassement* relative to expectations), the present thesis proposes a radicalisation of Dörre's framework: precarity is not only class-specific in its effects, but *classing* in its very nature. That is, the failure to achieve or maintain the work-housing nexus, at the general level or in its stratified articulations, does not merely erode pre-existing class positions. It produces, new ones. Those class positions are relational to the norm, that is disintegrated class positions. The process of disintegration itself is a process of class formation.

Two levels of this formulation can be distinguished. The first concerns the relationship between the general norm and the expected norm. Social disintegration is not only the failure to achieve the general standard of integration, as in Dörre's framework, but also the failure to achieve the *expected* standard: the level of the norm toward which the biographical script was oriented. Those who aspired to the upper-level nexus and find themselves at the lower have not 'merely' missed the norm; they have missed *their* norm, the one that their trajectory was calibrated to reach. The second level concerns the distinction between missing the norm and the failing script toward the norm. The biographical script is not a passive expectation; it is a trajectory in progress, a sequence of investments, sacrifices and projected returns whose failure is itself the substance of the new class position. The meritocratic promise, the labourist promise are scripts whose failure is the specific content of precarity for those who held them.

Specific processes of disintegration from specific levels of the norm produce specific class positions. Those who aspired to the upper-level nexus and failed to reach it, or reached it and lost it, are constituted as a distinct social group by that very process, not a 'precarious fraction' of the middle class, but a new position defined by the specific content of the fall: the biographical scripts that were shattered, the norms that were violated, the aspirations that persist in tension with conditions that

deny them. Those who aspired to the standard-level nexus and failed experience a different form of disintegration, structured by different scripts, different norms, different violations. And those for whom even the lower-level nexus is collapsing occupy yet another position, defined not by a fall from a high aspiration but by the erosion of the last viable foothold.

This is what the thesis means by *precarity*: a classing process of social disintegration with respect to the shared norm of the work-housing nexus, in its stratified configurations. As such precarity is always *from* somewhere expected, *to* somewhere else. The content of the experience, what it feels like, what norms it violates, what moral responses it provokes - and what political orientations it structures - is conditioned by the specific trajectory of disintegration: the level at which the biographical script was oriented, the level at which one actually finds oneself, and the gap between the two. The moral and political dimensions of these configurations, which complete the typological framework, are the subject of sections 3.2 and 3.3.

> ***Theoretical definition.*** *Precarity is a classing process of social disintegration with respect to the shared norm of the work-housing nexus, in its stratified configurations*.

The empirical types presented in chapters 6 through 9 are the concrete configurations that emerge from this process. They are not deduced *a priori* from the stratified norm, but ideal-types constructed from qualitative analysis and subsequently interpreted within this proposed framework. They combine a specific structural position (which level of the norm was missed, with what resources and compensatory means) with specific moral and political orientation (whose substance is developed in sections 3.2 and 3.3). In anticipation: Type 1 (the declassed aspiring middle class) corresponds to failed upper-level integration; Types 2 and 3 (the precarious working class, in its two variants) correspond to failed standard-level integration, with divergent moral responses; Type 4 (shadow type: the subproletariat) corresponds to the collapse of even the lower-level nexus, at the threshold of respectability.

The threshold of respectability in the Southern Europe is not state welfare status. In Dörre's German framework, the threshold is located at a specific institutional boundary: the Hartz IV regime, which combined minimal income support with pervasive behavioural conditionality and powerful social stigma. Being 'on Hartz IV' marked a person as someone suspected by the social majority of no longer being able to achieve individual reproduction through their own efforts (Dörre 2022). The threshold was thus simultaneously material and symbolic, and crucially institutionally produced. In

Southern Europe, this institutional marker has historically been absent. Guaranteed minimum income schemes did not exist until very recently: the *Reddito di Cittadinanza* in Italy (2019-2023) and the *Ingreso Mínimo Vital* in Spain (2020) - see Chapter 10 - are recent creations whose institutionalisation remains fragile, oscillating between stigma and emergent claims of entitlement. The threshold cannot be located, as in Germany, at the boundary of a specific administrative status.

What takes its place is a different criterion, consistent with the familistic-owning configuration described in the preceding sections. The threshold falls where autonomous social reproduction can no longer be sustained at socially acceptable levels, through the combination of work (even precarious), state-level social support, and family support (whether economic or in kind). Below this threshold, individuals come to depend on residual municipal welfare, charitable organisations informal networks of mutual aid, often in conditions where the capacity to work itself in the medium-long term gets compromised. The threshold is porous and difficult to locate precisely, because the three levels of compensatory means interact differently from case to case, and the distinction between family support and broader social support is itself blurred in contexts where extended family, neighbourhood and community sometimes overlap. In any case, the discriminating principle is the lack of autonomous social reproduction at acceptable levels, even considering family support.

Those who fall below this threshold are referred to here, as anticipated in the introduction to this chapter, as *subproletariat* rather than as 'underclass', as in Dörre (2023). This is to avoid a term which comes from the America debate where is charged with moralizing connotations (Wacquant 2022), while subproletariat comes from Bourdieu (1977) itself. Compared to his use, I however limit the use of subproletariat for people falling below the threshold of respectability - as outlined by Dörre (2023) - and use the term precarious working class for people above it.

3.2 The moral negotiation of social disintegration

The preceding section identified the norms of integration against which social disintegration is measured in Southern European societies, and traced their stratified articulations through the work-housing nexus. It established that precarity is a classing process: specific forms of disintegration from specific levels of the norm produce specific class positions, each defined by the gap between the biographical script that oriented the individual and the conditions that deny it. What that section left aside is the question of how individuals *negotiate* this gap, how they make sense of a position that was

not supposed to be theirs, and how the moral resources they mobilise in that process shape their orientation toward politics.

To examine how individuals elaborate the condition of social disintegration theorised in the preceding section, the present framework draws on the neo-Bourdieusian class analysis tradition (Savage 2012), its moral turn (Skeggs 1997; Lamont 2000; Sayer 2005; Jarness and Flemmen 2019) and its extension toward political orientations (Jarness, Flemmen, and Rosenlund 2019; Damhuis 2020; Westheuser 2021; Damhuis and Westheuser 2024). It builds in particular on the framework of Westheuser (2021), in dialogue with Damhuis (2020): both develop a tripartite architecture connecting social position, group identity through symbolic boundaries, and political orientations. Westheuser systematises the connection between symbolic boundary drawing and moral economy as a unified pre-political operation; Damhuis brings political orientation to the centre of the analysis.

Applying this framework to disintegrated class positions requires one main analytical adaptation. Rather than taking social position as given and examining how it is expressed through symbolic boundaries, the present framework theorises position itself as constituted by the process of disintegration, by the gap between the biographical script that was expected and the conditions that deny it. The disintegrated class position is then negotiated through symbolic boundaries, and in particular class and moral ones, through the analytical tools of the neo-Bourdieusian tradition. Beyond this adaptation, the present framework extends the analysis to include substantive political orientations, moving beyond the pre-political terrain that Westheuser explicitly theorises: a choice that responds to the research question of this thesis, treating political orientation as an outcome to be explained by leaving it open as a dependent variable.

This adapted framework structures the empirical chapters (chapters 6 through 9) along three dimensions.[13] The first, *precarity and social position* (sections .2 of each empirical chapter), reconstructs both the material experience of social disintegration, the work-housing nexus as a lived condition - its failures and compensatory arrangements - and the identity work that this experience imposes: how individuals locate themselves in the social structure, whom they distinguish themselves from, and on what grounds. The second, *moral economy* (sections .3), isolates the specific normative content of the expectations that are violated or redoubled: what the implicit social contract promised, and in what

Westheuser (2021) decomposes the concept of identity into three relational components: self-understandings embedded in a sense of social location, expressed through symbolic boundaries, embedding moral economies. While the identity element is the focus of the analysis, this is complemented by structural position and relation to politics. Damhuis (2020) employs a comparable tripartite structure in his analysis of different roads to the radical right, distinguishing social bases, moral economy violations as expressed through moral boundaries, and political orientation.

terms its breach is experienced. The third, *relations to politics and political orientations* (sections .4), encompasses both how individuals relate to politics as a sphere and what substantive political preferences they hold: how they evaluate parties and policies, and whether and how they vote.

The argument proceeds in three steps. Section 3.2.1 examines how individuals whose social position is disintegrating negotiate their sense of who they are through the drawing of symbolic boundaries in which class and moral criteria are inseparably fused, and develops the theoretical justification for treating them as a single analytical operation. Section 3.2.2 turns to the content of the normative expectations, the moral economies, that give those boundaries their substance, distinguishing two historically layered formations: labourism and (educational) meritocracy. Section 3.2.3 examines how the violation or redoubling of these moral economies, combined with the direction in which blame is attributed, constitutes the hinge between the experience of disintegration and the orientation toward politics.

3.2.1 Dislocation and the negotiation of social position

The chapter introduction defined dislocation as the moment in which the structural dissociation between shared norms and available means, anomie as a systemic condition, becomes individually perceived. The script that organised one's expectations ceases to function as a practical guide, and the identity that was anchored in that script is destabilised. Dislocation is simultaneously a positional displacement and a disruption of the system of meaning that sustained the position: what was habitual becomes questionable, what was taken for granted demands justification, and the individual is confronted with the task of reconstructing a coherent sense of self under conditions that deny the premises on which that self was built.

In the tradition of cultural class analysis that informs this study, the sense of one's social location is not given but constructed relationally, through the drawing of symbolic boundaries (Lamont 1994; Lamont and Fournier 1993; Lamont 2000). People do not simply occupy a position; they articulate it by distinguishing themselves from others, upward, downward, and laterally. A crucial dimension of this boundary-drawing is moral. Lamont's work on American and French workers (Lamont 2000) demonstrated that moral boundaries, distinctions grounded in honesty, work ethic, discipline, and personal integrity, serve a compensatory function: they allow individuals who cannot claim social

worth through wealth or credentials to construct a worthy self on alternative grounds.[14] In conditions of relative positional stability, such as the factory workers studied by Lamont and the industrial workers and sociocultural professionals studied by Westheuser (2021), this boundary-drawing operates as identity maintenance: the individual confirms who he or she is, by articulating who he or she is not. The boundaries are routinely drawn, habitually reproduced, and sustain a settled, if contested, sense of place. Among the rare works to have extended this framework to precarious workers, Trappmann et al. (2021) document how young workers in Germany and Poland construct their social position through moral boundaries.

In conditions of social disintegration, however, the same mechanisms operate in a different register. The individual whose position is dissolving does not draw boundaries to confirm an identity but to reconstruct one, or to manage the collapse of one. When a young Spanish graduate oscillates between describing herself as the lowest rung of society and as someone who has relative privileged for having been able to pursue university studies, she is not performing routine identity maintenance; she is engaged in an urgent, painful effort to hold together a self that is fracturing along the line between the life that was promised and the life that is. The compensatory and evaluative functions that the literature identifies in stable populations are here intensified and charged with existential stakes. The boundary between self and other becomes simultaneously a boundary between the biography that was expected and the biography that materialised, and the moral judgement of others becomes an attribution of responsibility for the gap between the two.

This is why, in the present study, class boundaries and moral boundaries are analysed together rather than as distinct analytical operations. The argument is not merely that they are empirically entangled, an observation that other scholars have made, but that in conditions of disintegration their inseparability is constitutive. To say where one stands, when the position itself is dissolving, is already to say something about why one stands there and about the moral worth of those who stand elsewhere. The positional assessment and the moral judgement are not two sequential steps but a single operation, because the position can only be articulated through the moral categories that give it meaning.[15]

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[14]The compensatory function of moral boundaries among workers is a central finding of Lamont (2000), who shows that American and French working men claim moral worth through discipline, hard work, and personal integrity when they cannot claim status through wealth or educational credentials. On the inseparability of morality and economy in everyday experience, see Sayer (2005).

[15]This point resonates with Westheuser's own acknowledgment that reconstructing the sense of social location and morality were 'two parts of the same analytical step' (2021: 73). The difference is that what Westheuser treats as an analytical entanglement in relatively stable populations becomes, in conditions of disintegration, a constitutive fusion: the moral

The direction in which boundaries are drawn is not incidental. Jarness and Flemmen (2019) and Damhuis (2020), drawing on Parkin's (1983) theory of social closure, have shown that individuals in the lower regions of the social space engage in "dual boundary-drawing": upward, against those perceived as privileged or undeservedly wealthy, through usurpationary strategies that contest the legitimacy of their position; and downward, against those perceived as morally deficient or parasitic, through exclusionary strategies that enforce norms of individual respectability.[16] The moral criteria mobilised in each direction are qualitatively different: upward boundaries challenge the justice of the social order, downward boundaries presuppose it. This directionality is analytically consequential, because boundaries drawn in different directions do not merely classify different others; they encapsulate, in compressed form, different orientations toward blame and, with them, different moral economies. This vertical directionality coexists, in the cases documented by the empirical chapters (Chapter 8), with a third vector that the literature has less systematically theorised: an inward boundary, drawn by the subject against earlier or possible selves.

This observation establishes the link between the first and second dimensions of the analytical framework. The class and moral boundaries that individuals draw in the process of negotiating their disintegrated position carry, in compressed form, normative expectations about how the social order ought to function and who is responsible when it does not. An individual who draws a boundary upward against those who 'bought their way in' is already expressing a violated expectation that positions should be earned through effort and merit. An individual who draws a boundary downward against those who 'don't even try' is already applying a norm of individual discipline that treats the social order as fundamentally sound and its failures as individual. In short, the (moral) boundaries already encapsulate moral economies.

Sections 6.2.2, 7.2.2, 8.2.2 and 9.2.2 are, for this reason, already saturated with moral content, even though they do not yet name or analyse the specific moral economies at work. That task, explicating what normative expectations are encapsulated in the boundaries and tracing their historical formation, institutional embedding, and modes of violation, belongs to the .3 sections and is the subject of the following section.

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judgement is not appended to the positional assessment but is inseparable from it. Jarness and Flemmen (2019) arrive at a related observation from a methodological angle, arguing that separating moral and cultural boundaries to measure their 'relative salience', as in Lamont's (1994, 2000) framework, obscures the complex ways in which they combine.

[16]The distinction between usurpationary and exclusionary strategies is drawn from Parkin (1983: 89–116), who theorises dual closure as the simultaneous pursuit of advantage against those above and those below. Jarness and Flemmen (2019) and Damhuis (2020) apply this distinction to the symbolic realm, showing that it operates through moral criteria in both directions.

3.2.2 Moral economies and their violations

The preceding section argued that the class and moral boundaries individuals draw in negotiating their disintegrated position encapsulate, in compressed form, normative expectations about how the social order ought to function. This section makes those expectations explicit. It identifies two moral economies that operate in the context of the present study, traces their historical formation and institutional embedding, and examines how their violation, or their redoubling, structures the experience of disintegration.

The concept of moral economy originates in Thompson's (1971, 1978) interpretation of eighteenth-century English food riots, which he read not as spasmodic reactions to hunger but as disciplined assertions of customary norms about just prices and legitimate commercial practices. Scott (1977) extended the concept to the subsistence ethics of Southeast Asian peasantries. In both formulations, and in the broader historiographical tradition they spawned (Götz 2015; Götz and Palonen 2024), the moral economy was conceived as a property of pre-market or transitional societies: the concept acquired its meaning precisely because the rise of political economy had *separated* morality from economy, and the moral economy of the crowd represented the resistance of communal norms of justice against the expanding logic of the disembedded market. This classical formulation carried an implicit temporal boundary: once market societies were consolidated, the moral economy appeared as a relic, and the analysis of modern economic life could proceed in the language of interests, incentives, and rational calculation.

Two extensions have challenged this restriction. Mau (2003) applies the concept of moral economy to the normative infrastructure of modern welfare states, arguing that the institutions of social protection embed reciprocity norms, expectations about who deserves what and on what grounds, that function analogously to the customary entitlements of Thompson's crowd. Sayer (2005) goes further, arguing on epistemological grounds that the separation of morality from economy is itself an artefact of economic theory, not a description of how people actually experience economic life: in everyday practice, economic arrangements are always already evaluated in moral terms, and moral judgements are always situated in material conditions. The implication is that moral economies are not confined to pre-market societies or to the institutional architecture of welfare states; they are a constitutive feature of how individuals inhabit and assess any economic order, including the most thoroughly marketized. A moral economy, as the term is used in this study, designates a set of normative expectations of reciprocity between contribution and reward, embedded in institutions

and internalised as dispositions: the implicit understanding that a certain conduct will be met with a corresponding return in security, recognition, and social position. Two such moral economies are operative in the societies studied here. They are not alternatives but historically layered formations, stratified by class and intertwined in individual experience.

3.2.2.1 Labourism and work effort meritocracy

The first and more encompassing moral economy is *labourism*: the normative expectation that work is the ordinary basis of social membership, and that those who work are entitled to a return in security, dignity, and the capacity to conduct a life. The term is borrowed from Wagner (2023) - who uses it to describe the working-class vision of a productivist moral order - though the present study employs it in a different and broader sense.[17] Labourism rests on a tacit premise: that one works. This is not an authoritarian injunction but the quiet normative infrastructure of what Castel (2003) called the *propriété sociale* and Dörre (2014) the *Arbeitsgesellschaft*: societies in which wage labour is the principal channel of social integration, and in which the status of worker confers not merely income but social recognition and the right to claim entitlements from the collective. It is expected that one works, and if one works, the corresponding expectation follows: stable income, secure housing, the capacity to form a family and to project one's life into the future. The content of this promise corresponds closely to what section 3.1 defined as the standard of social integration through the work-housing nexus: secure work producing secure housing, and both together constituting a social position. Labourism is, in this sense, the moral economy of the norm itself: the expectation that the institutional arrangements of wage-based societies will convert effort into position.

In the Continental and Northern European welfare states where it was most fully institutionalised, through collective bargaining, social insurance, employment protection, and social housing, labourism operated largely as a tacit background assumption: it was so thoroughly embedded in institutional practice that it rarely needed to be articulated as a moral claim. In Southern Europe, however, the relationship between labourism as a normative expectation and labourism as an

[17]Wagner's (2023; 2022) labourism designates the working-class interpretation of a productivist moral order (Giddens 1994; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006), centred on manual work as the privileged form of social contribution. The present study borrows the term but uses it differently in two respects. First, where Wagner's primary analytical interest is in how labourism constructs in-groups and out-groups – above and below - the present study treats it as a normative expectation directed toward the system: 'violated labourism' denotes the experience of fulfilling one's side of the social contract without receiving the expected return. Second, where Wagner restricts labourism to the blue-collar working class, the present study treats it as an expectation shared, though differently articulated, across wage-earning class positions. Both differences reflect a different conception of, and focus on, social disintegration: Wagner (mainly) studies insiders whose integration is deteriorating within the protected institutional context of Germany and Austria; the present study examines subjects structurally excluded despite conforming to the labourist norm, in Southern European societies where the gap between that norm and its institutional realisation was already wide before 2008 (see section 3.1).

institutional reality was always more precarious. As section 3.1 showed, welfare provision was weaker and more dependent on family support, labour markets were characterised by persistent dualism, and housing security depended on family-mediated access to property rather than public provision. Labourism as a moral economy, the expectation that work should integrate, remained normatively in force, but the institutional means through which it was supposed to operate were partial and unevenly distributed. The gap between the moral expectation and the institutional capacity to fulfil it was a structural feature of the Southern European social order well before the crisis of 2008 widened it into a chasm.

Onto this Fordist substratum, the neoliberal transformations of the last decades have grafted a second, partially distinct normative register: *work-effort meritocracy*, the expectation that sustained individual effort, discipline, and commitment determine one's position, and that those who try harder deserve more. This register encompasses but exceeds the entrepreneurial variant: it includes also the humbler figure of the worker who simply does her job well, shows up, does not give up. The genealogy of this register runs from Bourdieu's early diagnosis of precarisation as a mode of domination that produces submission through the generalisation of insecurity (Bourdieu 1998), through the absorption of the critique of alienation into a new spirit of capitalism valorising autonomy and flexibility, the corrosion of collective biographical narratives under the new regime of work, and the systematic production of a subject who relates to herself as an enterprise to be managed (Boltanski and Chiapello 2018; Sennett 1998). Where Fordist labourism is collective and inclusive, promising integration to all who work, work-effort meritocracy is individualist and selective, distributing rewards according to effort and adaptability. Where labourism locates the source of security in the institutional arrangements that protect the worker, work-effort meritocracy locates it in the qualities of the worker herself. The two registers are not simply successive; they coexist, overlap, and enter into tension within the same individuals and the same societies

The tenacity of the work-effort register rests on mechanisms that operate at multiple levels. At the institutional level, the organisation of precarious work itself functions as a disciplining apparatus: discourses of personal branding and entrepreneurial self-management actively reproduce the individualising grammar, and the more one is exposed to material precarity, the less one can afford the costs of resistance (Vallas and Christin 2018). At the micro-social level, this dynamic is visible in how precarious workers construct their social position through moral boundary drawing: even under conditions of objective vulnerability, the individualising grammar tends to prevail among those without access to collective cultural repertoires, with working-class respondents with lower educational qualifications and those in national contexts where class discourse has been most

thoroughly devalued showing the strongest tendency to individualise the perception of inequality (Trappmann et al. 2021; Savage and Meersohn Schmidt 2020).

The work-effort register has a further, structural effect: it is not only a subjective resource but a principle through which inequality is legitimated. Differential outcomes become legible as differential effort, and the gap between those who have and those who have not is read as the ordinary working of a principle everyone shares. How this legitimating function plays out as economic inequality rises has been the object of recent debate. Mijs (2021) argued for a "paradox of inequality": belief in meritocracy grows rather than weakens with rising inequality, sustained by relational segregation and by the circulation of a public grammar that finds less and less collective counter-language able to contest it as the vocabularies of class recede (Mijs and Savage 2020; Savage 2000). More recent evidence has revised this reading: rather than a uniform strengthening, rising inequality appears to polarize meritocratic beliefs, with structuralist attributions growing among those already sceptical while meritocracy-supportive views remain largely unchanged (Ehmes and Gangl 2026). The legitimating function of the register is in this sense neither uniform nor automatic, and is also fragile along specific domains: rising housing costs, for instance, have been shown to erode meritocratic beliefs and reinforce perceptions of the economic system as unfair (Clemente and Formisano 2025). The empirical chapters trace this fracture as it runs within the precarious working class itself.

The individualising grammar, however, is not simply internalisation of a normative discourse: in the absence of other forms of capital, agentic narratives, stories in which success depends on self-reliance and discipline, function as pragmatic moral resources that preserve a sense of worth and agency, producing as a durable effect a lens through which the situations of others are interpreted in individualistic terms (Ho 2024; Franceschelli and Keating 2018). What sustains the register further is that individual effort finds partial empirical support in biographical experience to remain credible: small advancements obtained through perseverance are sufficient to resist wholesale disconfirmation (Vieira 2023; Seehaus 2024). The empirical chapters will show that this reframing is most characteristic of the striving precarious working class (Type 3), while those whose moral economy is primarily labourist tend to denounce the gap between effort and reward rather than covering it.

The coexistence of these two registers - labourism and work effort meritocracy - has a decisive consequence for the direction of blame when the moral economy is violated. In the labourist register, the failure to convert work into a secure social position is attributed to the system: the institutions that were supposed to sustain the link between effort and reward have broken down, the employers exploit, the state does not protect, the social contract has been betrayed. Blame is directed upward.

In the work-effort meritocracy register, the same failure can be attributed to the individual: those who do not achieve security have not tried hard enough, have not adapted, have not acquired the right skills. Blame is directed downward, against those perceived as insufficiently effortful, or inward, against oneself. The two registers thus predispose toward opposite orientations of blame, and their relative weight in the moral economy of a given individual or group is a consequential variable that the empirical chapters trace.

3.2.2.2 Educational meritocracy

The second moral economy is the promise that studying, obtaining credentials, and investing in one's education will lead to a secure and recognised professional position. This is the *educational meritocratic* script: the expectation that the conversion of educational effort into occupational status is not merely probable but just, that it reflects a legitimate principle of social allocation, and that those who have studied deserve, by virtue of that investment, the position to which their credentials give access. Bell's (1973) thesis that knowledge would replace property as the axial principle of social stratification in post-industrial societies gave intellectual legitimacy to this promise, even as Bourdieu's (1978, 1984) work simultaneously demonstrated that educational credentials function as instruments of class reproduction rather than as a fluidification of social structure. The tension between these two accounts, the promise and its structural impossibility, is the tension that individuals who have invested in the educational meritocratic script experience when their credentials fail to convert.

In its original formation, educational meritocracy was complementary to Fordist labourism, and the two reinforced each other. The promise was not merely that studying would yield a return, but that it would yield a return *within* the protected system of wage-based employment: study, obtain credentials, enter a recognised profession, and enjoy the security that the institutional architecture of the wage society provides. Labourism provided the floor: even if credentials did not convert perfectly, the work itself guaranteed integration. Education was the means, secure professional employment was the end, and labourism ensured that the ground beneath one's feet would hold. In Southern Europe, despite the segmented and less protective institutional floor described in section 3.1, the educational meritocratic promise operated with the same normative force: families invested heavily in the education of their children, and the expectation that credentials would convert into a recognised professional position organised biographical horizons across generations.

The neoliberal transformation has progressively detached educational meritocracy from its Fordist moorings. Where Bell's post-industrial promise envisaged credentials as a path into the protected

system of professional employment, Littler (2017) shows how meritocracy has been reconstituted as a legitimising myth: no longer a description of how societies allocate positions, but an ideology that naturalises inequality by attributing it to differential talent and effort. The promise is no longer "study and the system will protect you" but "study because your value is your human capital" Education becomes an investment in oneself, and the return on that investment is the individual's responsibility. In Southern Europe, this shift is compounded by the weakness of the labourist floor: meritocracy without labourism means that when credentials fail to convert, there is nothing underneath.

What Bourdieu (1978) identified as credential inflation in France, the structural overproduction of qualifications relative to the positions available for their conversion, has become, in the decades since, a pervasive biographical experience across Southern Europe. Bourdieu's analysis was already, in substance, a theory of violated educational meritocracy: when education generates expectations that the occupational structure cannot fulfil, the resulting collective experience of déclassement is likely to have systemic political consequences (as he argued for the generation of May 1968).

In both Spain and Italy, high rates of over-qualification and precarious employment in professional occupations indicate a persistent mismatch between educational credentials and attained professional positions (Ansell and Gingrich 2017; Marques, Suleman, and Costa 2022). In Spain, rapid and extensive educational expansion has not been met by a comparable expansion of professional occupations (Gil-Hernández, Bernardi, and Luijkx 2020), despite absolute occupational upgrading (Oesch and Piccitto 2019), while in Italy slower and more limited university expansion has been matched by stagnation in the number of professional occupations (Barone and Guetto 2020). In both countries, educational expansion has not been accompanied by an equivalent transformation of the productive structure in high-end manufacturing and services, the sectors that generate professional middle-class occupations (Marques, Suleman and Costa 2022).

Ayala-Hurtado (2022; 2024) documents how this material and normative structure operates in the consciousness of young college graduates in Spain: the majority drew on what she calls the "achievement narrative" to imagine their futures while simultaneously denouncing it as fraudulent, a contradiction she interprets through Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis. On a larger comparative sample, Ayala-Hurtado (2025) confirms that insecure graduates in Spain perceive themselves as suspended between the status conferred by the credential and the life it was supposed to guarantee, with a narrative of internal merit sustaining the belief that the transition will eventually be

completed.[18] Berlant's (2011) concept of *cruel optimism* captures the affective structure of this persistence: the attachment to a normative script that continues to organise expectations and self-understanding even after it has ceased to function as a reliable guide to action.[19] The promise persists, transmitted through families and educational institutions, precisely as the conditions for its fulfilment erode.

In those accounts, the disjuncture between educational aspirations and obtained positions is registered but ultimately absorbed as delay, not denounced as a systemic violation. The empirical analysis of the declassed aspiring middle class (Chapter 6) shows, however, that this configuration is inherently unstable. When biographical experiences accumulate without resolution, and when collective grammars become available that name the gap as structural rather than personal, the same disjuncture is recomposed as a moral economy violation with an upward direction of blame. It is this transition, from the persistence of the meritocratic script to its rupture and moral-political elaboration, that this thesis analyses.

3.2.2.3 A layered moral economy

Labourism, work-effort meritocracy and educational meritocracy are not alternative moral economies that compete for the allegiance of distinct populations. They are historically *layered* formations, and their layering, I argue, is the product of a specific temporal dynamic. They accumulate. Individuals are socialised into the moral economy of one regime, the Fordist promise that work integrates, that credentials convert into position, that effort is met with security; and then confront the normative demands of another, the neoliberal imperative of self-investment, entrepreneurial disposition, and individual responsibility for outcomes. The older expectations do not disappear; they persist as dispositions, as tacit standards against which the present is measured, even when the institutions that sustained them have been partially dismantled. The layering of moral economies is, in this sense, a form of *normative hysteresis*: the coexistence, within the same individual, of expectations formed under conditions that are no longer in place and expectations imposed by conditions that have not yet been fully internalised. This coexistence reflects the moral structure of societies in transformation.

[18] While Ayala-Hurtado draws on a Bourdieusian framework (hysteresis), she does not engage with Bourdieu's specific analysis of déclassement and frustrated educational expectations (Bourdieu 1978; 1984 [1988]; Mathieu 2022), which already documents a dynamic very similar to the one she describes. On a similar note, the step from frustrated expectations to political orientation, which she flags as a direction for future research (2025: 35), was already present in this tradition.

[19] Berlant (2011: 1) defines cruel optimism as 'a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic.' The concept captures the affective structure of attachment to normative scripts that damage those who hold them.

The specific combinations that this layering produces vary by class position, educational trajectory, and form of disintegration. The declassed aspiring middle class (Type 1 in the empirical analysis) typically holds both moral economies and experiences a sequential double violation: first the educational meritocratic promise fails, as credentials do not convert into the expected professional position; then the labourist promise fails, as even work below one's qualifications does not secure basic stability. The declassed precarious working class (Type 2) is oriented primarily toward Fordist labourism, compounded by the work-effort register: the norm that work should provide a dignified life is violated, and the violation is intensified by the recognition that sustained personal effort was invested and not reciprocated. The two registers are not in tension but in cumulative reinforcement; the second makes the first worse, not different. Educational meritocracy figures as a path not taken or as a regret. The striving precarious working class (Type 3) redoubles the work-meritocracy, covering the violation with an intensified adherence to the norm of individual effort. The subproletariat (Type 4) retains work effort as a distant, almost unreachable horizon, while it retains tatters of a moral economy in the form of "enduring and gracing". Educational meritocracy is instead largely absent from its moral landscape.

Two observations follow from this layering. The first is substantive. The moral economy through which an individual experiences disintegration is not external to the experience: it constitutes it. To lose a job is not the same experience for someone whose moral economy is labourist, for whom the loss signifies that the system has failed to keep its promise, and for someone whose moral economy is educational meritocratic, for whom the loss signifies that credentials have been devalued. The structural event is the same, but the moral meaning is different, because the normative script that was violated is different. Moral economies do not merely 'frame' a pre-given experience of material deprivation; they are part of what the experience is.

The second observation is analytical. In the welfare capitalist democracies of Southern Europe, class and morality are not separate registers that can be analysed independently. This is the very separation that classical political economy introduced and that the concept of moral economy was devised to contest (Götz 2015; Sayer 2005). As section 3.2.1 showed, the class and moral boundaries through which individuals negotiate their disintegrated position already encapsulate, in compressed form, a moral economy and its violation; the present section has made explicit their content. Class position is lived, articulated, and contested *through* the moral economy, not alongside it. The layering between different moral economies, the combinations, tensions, and hierarchies among them, is an operation that individuals perform spontaneously as they navigate the competing normative demands of their biographical situation. This layering, and the specific combinations it produces in each type, is what

the empirical chapters document. The task of the theoretical framework is not to predict which moral economy will prevail in which class position, but to identify the moral economies that are available, the logics of their violation and redoubling, and the mechanism through which these translate into divergent political orientations. It is to this mechanism that the final section turns.

3.2.3 The direction of blame as moral-political hinge

The chain from disintegration to politics passes through the elaboration of a moral economy violation. A moralized biographical script is the individual form of a moral economy: it turns a social promise into an individual moralized conduct. When the script breaks, the promise is experienced as broken and is elaborated as a violated moral economy. A broken promise raises the question: who broke it? The answer can point upward, to elites and to a system that did not keep its side of the pact; downward, to those seen as taking without contributing; or inward, to oneself. This is what the thesis calls the direction of blame, and it orients politically: towards demanding that the pact be repaired, or its rules enforced on others, or towards withdrawal. In so doing, moral economy violations address what (Burawoy 2018:65) identifies as a shared limit in Merton's (1938) and Bourdieu's 'theories of strain': explaining what drives the range of possible reactions to social disintegration.

Three bodies of literature have each illuminated a dimension of this process, which here are integrated into a single framework. The classical tradition of the moral economy, from Thompson (1971) through Scott (1977) to Mau (2003), and relatedly Barrington Moore (1978), theorises the violation of implicit norms of reciprocity as the source of collective indignation. When the tacit social contract between those who labour and those who govern is broken, the result is not mere dissatisfaction but moral outrage directed at the system that failed to uphold its side. Blame, in this tradition, is structural and systemic: it flows upward, toward elites, institutions, and the arrangements of power that permitted the violation. The strength of this tradition is its clarity about the direction of blame; its limitation is that it tends to assume a single direction, as though the violation of a moral economy could only produce critique of the system.

A second body of work, developed over the past decade within neo-Bourdieusian political sociology, has connected moral boundary-drawing with the theory of social closure and with the moral economy tradition. Jarness and Flemmen (2019) and Damhuis (2020), working independently and from different empirical starting points, have both linked symbolic boundary-drawing to Parkin's (1983) dual closure, showing that moral boundaries in the lower regions of the social space operate

simultaneously as usurpationary claims directed upward and exclusionary strategies directed downward, and that this directionality carries political implications. The studies that have pursued this connection (Damhuis 2020; Westheuser 2021; Westheuser and Beck 2025; Wagner 2023) have documented both directions. Yet their analytical attention has tended to concentrate on downward boundaries: either because the object of inquiry was the radical right (Damhuis 2020; Wagner 2023), or because upward boundaries remain reactive and demobilised, finding no political supply capable of articulating them into a programme (Westheuser and Beck 2025).

A third literature identifies a direction of blame that the first two traditions leave comparatively under-examined: blame directed inward, against the self. Its source is the meritocratic grammar itself: where merit is held to distribute positions, one's own falling short is judged as a personal moral failure. This argument was foundational to the very notion of meritocracy - coined by Young (1958) as the name of a societal dystopia - and has been recently retrieved in the critique of meritocracy as an established moral principle inhabiting the world (Laval and Dardot 2013; Sandel 2020). Pushed to its limit, self-blame dissolves the very idea of moral economy as a structure of uneven reciprocity: by placing the entire burden of the outcome on the self, when the self fails to deliver, there is no external party to hold accountable and blame.

How this morality translates into biographical experience has been documented across a range of settings. Cobb and Sennett (1973), in their classic study of working-class men in Boston, documented how workers interiorise class disadvantage as personal inadequacy. Similarly, the "disciplined self" documented by Lamont (2000) among industrial workers. Pugh (2015) has documented the breakdown of the reciprocity relation between work effort and employer reward in what she calls: "one-way honor system": workers hold themselves and fellow workers to a strong work ethic while releasing employers from reciprocal obligation to reward, absorbing rather than denouncing the asymmetry.

Across these documentations, self-blame emerges as a configuration in which the failure of reciprocity is carried inward rather than named as broken. It is depoliticising by nature. From this perspective, the other two directions, upward and downward, could be seen as competing ways of exiting the terrain of self-blame, each restoring an external attribution and, with it, the possibility of political orientation.

The three directions of blame can be specified as follows, each with distinct consequences for the relation between moral experience and political orientation.

Violation of the system (blame directed upward). The moral economy is recognised as a social pact and as a broken one. The institutions that were supposed to sustain the link between effort and reward have failed: employers exploit, the state does not protect or deliver, and the social contract has been betrayed. The boundaries drawn are usurpationary: directed at elites, at those who hold positions obtained through connections rather than merit, at a political class that does not represent. The subject reconstructs a coherent position from within the experience of disintegration: knowing who is responsible provides a ground on which to stand. This configuration predisposes toward politicisation, toward the articulation of demands, and toward receptivity to political supply that names the violation.

Violation in the system (blame directed downward). The moral economy is not recognised as broken. The system works, or would work, if everyone respected its rules. The violation comes from within: from those who do not work, who do not make an effort, who receive without contributing. The boundaries drawn are exclusionary: directed at welfare recipients, at the idle, at immigrants perceived as free-riding on a system sustained by those who labour. The subject covers the anomie with an intensified adherence to the norm: the script is not questioned but redoubled, enacted now as an explicit project rather than a tacit disposition. The effort bargain is honoured unilaterally, in the sense described by Pugh (2015), and the failure of the system to reciprocate is displaced onto those who are perceived as having violated the bargain from below (and occasionally onto the politicians and elites seen as tolerating or protecting them). This configuration predisposes toward demobilisation or toward a conservative orientation that defends the existing order against its internal violators.

Self-blame (blame directed inward). The moral economy is internalised as a measure of personal worth. The failure to convert effort into position is not the system's fault, nor the fault of undeserving others: it is one's own. I did not study enough, did not adapt, did not try hard enough. The violated expectation produces not outrage but shame, and the subject retreats into a privatised relationship with the norm. This configuration can coexist with the second, the subject who blames both self and others below, or stand alone as exhaustion, as the withdrawal from any claim on the collective. It predisposes toward depoliticisation in its most thoroughgoing form: not the rejection of politics but its irrelevance to a failure experienced as personal.

These three directions of blame are analytical distinctions that can combine in empirical types. The specific combination of which moral economy is violated and which direction of blame prevails, constitute the *moral-political hinge*: the point where the meaning-moral negotiation of social disintegration produces political orientations. This is conditioned by the specific form of social

disintegration (from which aspired norm and which broken moralized script), but retains a degree of autonomy. The nature of those political orientations and their relation to the political sphere, are discussed in the following section.

3.3 Political orientations: consequences of social disintegration

The chapter introduction identified three divergent outcomes of the moral renegotiation that dislocation triggers: recognition that the social order has failed, redoubling of adherence to the failing scripts, and exhaustion of the resources for renegotiation. The preceding sections developed the mechanism that produces them, from the structural disintegration of the work-housing nexus (3.1) through the moral negotiation of boundaries, moral economies, and the direction of blame (3.2). Here we trace the political consequences of such a process: how the process of disintegration shapes the relation to the political sphere as such (3.3.1), what political orientations the concatenation of structural position and moral negotiation produces (3.3.2), and through what logics political supply can or cannot articulate them (3.3.3).

3.3.1 Relations to politics as a sphere

The relation to politics is not a variable independent of the process described so far. The capacity to formulate a political opinion, to perceive oneself as a subject whom politics addresses, to differentiate among parties and recognise one's interests in the available supply, is a socially produced competence, distributed unevenly across the social structure and inseparable from the conditions under which it is exercised. Bourdieu (1984) provided the theoretical foundation for this observation: what surveys register as non-response or political indifference is, in his account, a form of dispossession, not the absence of an opinion but the absence of the socially sustained conditions under which an opinion can be formed. In the analytical architectures on which the present study draws (Westheuser 2021; cf. Damhuis 2020), the relation to politics varies as a positional gradient among populations that occupy relatively stable locations in the social space: more capital tends to produce more structured engagement, more refined differentiation among political options, more confidence in one's entitlement to speak.

In conditions of social disintegration, this uneven distribution of political capital interacts with the type of moral negotiation through which the gap is processed. Different violations produce qualitatively different relations to the political sphere. Where the violation is recognised as systemic and the moral resources for its formulation are available, the relation to politics can be intensified:

the perceived injustice becomes a demand that seeks articulation. Where the gap is covered through redoubling, politics tends to become irrelevant, since the problem, as the subject experiences it, calls for personal remedy rather than collective action. Where the conditions for biographical projection have been destroyed, the subject may be dispossessed of the relation to politics altogether, not through lack of interest but through the withdrawal of the temporal horizon on which any anticipation of a different future rests (Bourdieu 1977). This interaction between political capital and moral negotiation means that subjects with comparable resources may relate to politics in divergent ways depending on the configuration of disintegration they inhabit, and that subjects with fewer resources may, under certain configurations, sustain a more intense relation to the political sphere than their position alone would predict.

These qualitatively distinct relations to the political sphere condition the form that the political orientations described in the following section assume, and the receptivity to the supply-side logics examined in section 3.3.3.

3.3.2 Political orientations

The configurations of disintegration and moral negotiation theorised in the preceding sections do not converge on a single political orientation. The framework developed here identifies three orientations as distinguishable regions of the political space toward which the concatenation of structural position and violated moral economy tend to conduct. Each orientation to be activated needs to encounter a compatible political offer on the supply-side.

Populist left orientation

Where the moral economy is recognised as a social pact and as a broken one, where the attribution of blame flows upward the resulting political orientation takes the form of a demand for justice, incorporation, and recomposition of the social contract. This is inspired to the classical tradition of the moral economy (Moore 1978; Thompson 1971). The subject has reconstructed a coherent position from within the experience of disintegration: the violation has been named, the responsible parties identified, and the moral grammar of the violated norm - whether labourist, educational-meritocratic, or their layered combination - furnishes the vocabulary in which the demand is formulated.

In the context of Southern European societies after the crisis of 2008, the dynamic has been documented by the literature on the anti-austerity movements (della Porta 2015) and on the moral

economy of protest from below (Narotzky 2016). De la Torre (2000), in his stud of Latin American populism, showed how populist projects can articulate the demand for material and symbolic incorporation of excluded sectors, with the ambivalences that such articulation entails.

This orientation, however, is not self-sustaining. It requires two conditions that are not guaranteed: moral resources sufficient to formulate the violation as systemic rather than personal, and a political supply capable of articulating the resulting demand. Without the first, the blame may turn inward, dissolving the pact into individual failure. Without the second, the orientation remains latent, present as a sense of injustice and a diffuse left-leaning self-placement, but without political expression. Braconnier and Mayer (2015), studying the French *inaudibles*, documented precisely this configuration: precarious subjects with a clear sense of injustice and a left-leaning self-placement who do not vote, not out of indifference but because no available supply speaks to what they experience.

Conservative-producerist orientation

Where the moral economy of the work-housing nexus is not recognised as broken but redoubled, where the gap between promise and reality is covered through intensified adherence to the norm of individual effort, the resulting political orientation occupies a broad region of the political space that extends from demobilised conservatism to the producerist boundary-drawing documented by the literature on the populist radical right. This region is defined by a common grammar: the system is not contested as a system. The demand is not that the social order be changed but that it function: that rules be enforced, that effort be rewarded, and that those who do not contribute be held accountable. The norm persists as the organising principle of moral and practical conduct, and the subject works actively on the gap between expectation and reality, covering it rather than naming it as a violation. The literature that has explored this region has done so predominantly among the stable or declining working class with a 'history of contribution'.[20] In the empirical part (Chapter 8) the thesis rather focuses on the case where self-blame cannot be resolved by appealing to a record of past fulfilment.

The framework developed here treats this orientation as a spectrum whose internal variation is structured by the relative weight of self-blame and outward exclusionary blame. Where self-blame is

[20] Wagner (2022) reconstructs the producerist moral order among German and Austrian blue-collar workers; Damhuis (2020), studying differentiated roads to the radical right in France and the Netherlands, identifies several configurations within this territory, including the *hard-done-byness* of intra-generationally declassed, financially vulnerable voters whose structural profile comes closest to the precarious working class analysed in Chapter 8. Yet, even in Damhuis, the analytical focus is on subjects that, however vulnerable, retain a biography of contribution that can be invoked with confidence.

weak and the outward exclusionary blame dominates, the orientation approaches the producerist configurations documented by the literature on the populist radical right: the subject is confident of having done her part, and the boundaries drawn downward are sharp, and potentially available for ethnicised articulation. At this pole, blame also turns upward, against complicit elites who protect those who do not contribute: the conflict becomes tripartite, with the deserving in the middle, elites above and the undeserving below and outside. This is the structure the populist radical right articulates (Damhuis 2020), and the latent potential for conversion that Chapter 8 identifies in the striving precarious working class. Conversely, where self-blame and outward exclusionary blame coexist in unstable equilibrium - neither of which strong enough to prevail - the result is a diffuse, demobilised conservatism: a defence of the existing order without partisan expression, an oscillation between self-discipline and moral policing of the boundaries of respectability. Where self-blame dominates and the outward blame recedes, the orientation approaches the territory of depoliticisation: the failure is increasingly experienced as personal, the resources for externalising blame are depleted, and the subject retreats into a privatised relationship with the norm.

The covering that characterises this region of the political space is not a blind adherence to the failing script but an operation under tension: the subject acknowledges, at least partially, that the script does not function as promised, yet continues to organise her conduct around the norm because the alternative, the full recognition of the rupture, would require moral and cultural resources that the position does not provide. What a part of the literature has described as the 'normalisation of precarity' (Lorey 2015; Fuster et al. 2019) is better understood, within this framework, as such covering: not a change of norm but a moral operation that renders the violation liveable. The evidence that the aspiration persists beneath the surface (Mrozowicki 2016) confirms that the norm has not been abandoned but suppressed.

What sustains the covering, and what distinguishes this orientation from the im-politicisation described below, is the persistence of a compressed but still operative biographical projection: the sense that something can still be accomplished and that effort may yet produce its reward. This residual hope, fragile as it may be, is what keeps the self-blame in equilibrium with the outward blame and prevents the covering from collapsing into the exhaustion that characterises the third orientation. At the extreme of the spectrum, where the self-blame has absorbed the remaining moral energy and the projection has narrowed to the point of near-extinction, the conditions of the covering give way and the subject enters the territory described in the following section.

'Im-politicisation'

The two orientations described above presuppose a subject who is still capable of working on the gap between expectation and reality, whether by naming the violation or by redoubling the norm. The third orientation identified by this framework designates the condition in which this capacity itself has been destroyed.

Bourdieu's earliest empirical work provides the theoretical resources for this configuration. In his first work on Algeria (Bourdieu 1977), he studied the condition of the Algerian sub-proletariat, workers expelled from the traditional agrarian economy into an urban labour market that could not absorb them. What he described was not a population with a different political orientation but a population dispossessed of the preconditions for any orientation at all. The sub-proletariat could not project itself into the future, could not formulate rational calculations about its own trajectory, because the minimal conditions for such projection, a degree of regularity, of predictability, of correspondence between effort and outcome, had been destroyed. The capacity to anticipate, to plan, to defer, which both classical economics and political theory take as given, was shown to be a social product, dependent on material conditions that, when withdrawn, withdraw the capacity itself. In the late essays on precarity, Bourdieu (1998) extended the argument to contemporaray European societies: precarity impedes the rational anticipation of the future, on which any form of political or collective action depends.

Unlike the conservative-producerist subject, who still works on the gap, the subject of im-politicisation has lost the capacity to work. The norm may still persist, as a trace of what a life should look like, but it has become inert. The subject has not abandoned the expectation that work should pay or that effort should be rewarded; she has lost the capacity to act on it. The *causalité du probable* has reached a point where the adjustment is no longer a recalibration but a collapse: the objective chances are so narrow that they cannot sustain even a reduced aspiration. What remains is endurance without horizon, a moral economy of enduring and gracing, in which the subject asks not for justice or for the enforcement of the rules but for the possibility of being helped, a request that does not formulate itself as political demand but as a personal request. The boundaries that in the conservative-producerist orientation still structure the moral landscape persist here only as fragments: residual distinctions that no longer carry the weight of an orientation.

This region of the political space is the least explored by the literature on the politics of precarity, for reasons that are structural rather than accidental. The subjects who inhabit it are invisible to political research: they do not vote, do not protest, do not respond to surveys in ways that produce usable

data. They are marginal also in qualitative research, being the hardest to reach, the least loquacious, and those whom the saturation of a sample tends to leave aside. The framework includes this orientation not as a residual category, a default condition of those who do not fit elsewhere, but as a theoretically specified outcome of a specific concatenation: a disintegration so thorough that the moral resources for negotiating the gap have been exhausted, and a biographical trajectory so discontinuous that the temporal horizon on which political action depends has been withdrawn. It is, in the terms of this thesis, the most radical consequence of social disintegration, because it destroys not only the content of the political orientation but its very preconditions.

3.3.3 Political supply: the politicization of social disintegration

Political orientations get articulated and mobilized in interplay with political supply. To mobilise precarious workers, political supply must address both the material and symbolic aspects of social disintegration, encapsulated within the violated moral economies. In short, this requires to politicize their moral economy violation, which implies: recognising the violation, blaming a responsable for it and to proposing a solution to it, within a new vision of society. This can follow a logic of reinstating or remaking society: the re-instating logic simply promises to make the violated pact work again, by enforcing its rules against those who are seen as free-riding and making the system work as it should; a re-making logic instead leverages the violated moral economy, to propose a new-social moral vision that recomposes the violated pact on new and more inclusive terms.

The symbolic injury of social disintegration seem to be particurarly well policized by populist parties (Mudde 2004; Stavrakakis 2017). de la Torre (2000:141) locates the specific appeal of populism in the symbolic reward it offers to voters: "in addition to what other political parties have offered, populist politicians have given back dignity and self-worth to those who are constantly discriminated against in their daily lives". Populism does so, in his account, by inverting the moral hierarchy of society, so that those treated as unworth become the 'true people', and the whatever defined elite is deemed as corrupt. This argument resonates with the literature on the 'outsider' political aligment (see Chapter 2.1), where the mechanism of protest voting (Marx 2015), must be reintepreted as the negaative moment of a claim to dignity. In a similar vein, Antonucci (2026: 89) links populist views, to the interaction of status decline and material insecurity. The precarious workers covered in the

qualitative part of the thesis, carry analogous symbolic wounds deriving from the experience of social disintegration, which manifests most explicitly in the symbolic boundaries they draw.

The material side of social disintegration, insecurity in work and housing, can be politicized by different ideologies, which entail alternative socio-economic policies and embedded moral economies. The radical left, within the re-making logic, pursues egalitarian socio-economic policies (March 2011). The right, and the radical right in particular, pursues selective welfare policies (Chueri 2022) ones within the re-instating logic, informed by producerism and meritocracy: protection and reward are reserved for those who contribute and strive, against those who are seen as taking (Ivaldi and Mazzoleni 2024; Rathgeb 2020).

The populist left (Karavasilis 2026; Font, Graziano, and Tsakatika 2021; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019; Damiani 2020) constitutes a specific and well-placed attempt to mobilise precarious workers, combining material and symbolic appeals: the appeal for universalistic socio-economic policies, and particularly for policies aimed at curbing work insecurity, and the symbolic revaluation of precarious workers. The two appeals are held together by the articulation of the violated moral economy at the heart of populist discourse (Stavrakakis and Jäger 2018:560). For instance the people might condense the moral economies of those who studied and worked as they were supposed to and were not rewarded; the elite condenses their betrayal, as those who live without working or hold power without merit (see Chapter 6). Naming the violation in these terms activates at once interliked material interest (restoring the social property of secure work and housing) and a symbolic revaluation (the dignity of those who kept their side of the pact). What the literature on outsiders treats as two parallel motives, instrumental economic voting and protest voting (Section 2.1.3), are thus two sides of the same violation, and can be articulated accordingly as the Latin American literature on reincorporation (Rossi 2015; Silva and Rossi 2018) and anti-austerity movements of Southern Europe Europe (Della Porta 2015; Narotzky 2016) have shown. In de la Torre's words, populist politicians have succeeded by "incarnating the demands of those at the bottom of society for symbolic and material dignity" (2000: xi).

Once in government, the populist left has to translate its discourse into policies, which those it mobilised measure against the violation it had named. The evaluation of adopted policies can thus sustain mobilisation or turn it into demobilisation (Pierson 1993). The supply-side part ot the thesis (Chapter 10) examines how Podemos, a populist radical left party, and the M5S, closer to social populism, translated the discourse of undoing precarity and restoring dignity into de-dualising policies in government.

4. Research Design

4.1 Introduction: an abductive mixed-methods approach

To understand the politics of precarity in Spain and Italy, this thesis is, overall, underpinned by an abductive research logic. Abduction is a form of inquiry that starts from empirical evidence that is sensed as *jarring*, in the sense that it cannot be easily accommodated within available theoretical frameworks, and proceeds to articulate new concepts that render it sound and intelligible (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). The research process has unfolded through iterative cycles of empirical and theoretical phases, in an effort to solve anomalies raised by the previous one. This logic, though often left implicit, arguably underlies all scientific inquiry (Glynos and Howarth 2007:18).

The abductive logic is best seen at work in two moments of the empirical inquiry. From the outset, the empirical work was planned to combine a quantitative component, eventually focused on Italy and Spain after initial cross-national exploration, with a qualitative component directed at inquiring into the mechanisms that the available literature could not specify. Across the first qualitative interviews, themes that the original framing of precarity could not accommodate surfaced with insistence, with housing the most prominent among them, and pressed the inquiry to rethink what precarity is and which groups it produces. A second movement concerned how that condition translates into political orientation: several interviews displayed moralised expectations and their violations with such clarity that they reoriented the inquiry toward the moral mediations between structural condition and political alignment. Both movements opened conceptual openings that the theoretical frameworks employed at the time could not close on their own, and that took shape only through subsequent iterative work in which empirical anomalies and theoretical resources progressively reconfigured each other. The theoretical framework that resulted from this work is developed in Chapter 3, before the methodological architecture is laid out below.

In its final architecture, the empirical work of this thesis is organised around a main demand-side analysis, supplemented by a supply-side analysis. The demand-side is a complementary mixed-methods analysis of how precarious workers in Italy and Spain orient themselves politically: a quantitative component (Chapter 5) documents the patterns of political alignment in the population with representative survey data, and a qualitative component, the empirical core of the work, reconstructs the configurations of social position, moral economy, and political orientation that produce these patterns (Chapters 6-9) through in-depth narrative-biographical interviews to

precarious workers. The supply-side analysis examines the political supply against which the main mobilized political orientation forms, namely left-wing populism (Chapter 10).

The articulation of these empirical parts rests on a unified Weberian epistemological framework. In Weber's foundations, sociological explanation integrates two adequacies: causal adequacy (*Kausaladäquanz*), the demonstration that a given course of action follows regularly under specifiable conditions, and adequacy of meaning (*Sinnadäquanz*), the reconstruction of how an action makes sense from the standpoint of the actor. Neither alone is sufficient: regularity without meaning yields unintelligible probability, while meaning without regularity has sociological significance only when it can be shown to hold with specifiable frequency in actual action (Weber 2019 [1922]:88; Passeron 2013). The empirical parts of this thesis distribute along these adequacies: the two components of the demand-side jointly sustain causal adequacy (in two modalities that Section 4.3 develops); while meaning adequacy is sustained by the qualitative component of the demand-side, which reconstructs precarious workers' sense-making, aided in one instance by the supply-side analysis, which reconstructs the main political offer against which their mobilized orientations form.

As such, the two components of the mixed-methods demand-side analysis are taken as complementary under this framework. The mixed-methods literature distinguishes between designs in which the components are made to confirm one another's findings, that is, triangulation, and designs in which the components build knowledge relationally one within the other, that is, complementarity (Small 2011; Creswell and Creswell 2017). These categories are analytical distinctions, and in real sociological practice no empirical design exists in pure form at either pole, as complementarity demands a minimum of converging results to assemble empirical evidence together, while triangulation invariably presents empirical evidence, from either method, which exceeds what is triangulated. The choice of complementarity in the present demand-side design follows from the research questions of this thesis, which require both an account of the distributional patterns of political outcomes in the population of precarious workers and a reconstruction of the configurations and mechanisms through which these outcomes are produced.

This combination of a complementary mixed-methods design with a Weberian epistemology has an immediate precedent in Damhuis (2020), who reconstructs the distinct trajectories through which different groups of voters arrive at the radical-right vote in France and the Netherlands. The book is part of an ongoing rediscovery of mixed-methods inquiry in electoral sociology, a current to which the present thesis contributes (Damhuis 2020; Westheuser 2021; Wagner 2023; Berg and Ternullo 2025). The notion of *precarious pathways*, which titles this thesis, acknowledges the shared architecture

with Damhuis's "roads to the radical right", while eliciting two elements that depart from it. The first is the plurality of the political destinations: the empirical design is built to keep the political destination ('the dependent variable') open. The second, and most relevant, is the double trajectory entailed by the term pathways: the path traced is not only one from social position to political orientation but, before that, of the very formation of the social position, reconstructed as a process of disintegration from the work-housing nexus that articulates the structural-moral configuration of the type itself.

The chapter is organised as follows. Section 4.2 articulates the case selection of Italy and Spain as research contexts. Section 4.3 develops the two components of the demand-side analysis: the quantitative part (Section 4.3.1, empirics in Chapter 5) and the qualitative part (Section 4.3.2, empirics in Chapters 6-9). Section 4.4 develops the supply-side analysis of left-wing populism (empirics in Chapter 10).

4.2 Case selection: Spain and Italy

From the outset, this research set out to explore, and possibly to substantiate, a link between precarity and the populist left in Southern Europe. Studying more than one case makes it possible to distinguish what is circumstantial and what is fundamental in that possible relation. And since the aim was to construct qualitative ideal types connecting social characteristics to political orientations, the cases needed similar structural and institutional environments, so that the variation to be leveraged lay within that structure, between different precarious positions.

Southern European countries broadly offer such environments. They combine high unemployment with widespread underemployment, including among graduates (Marques, Suleman and Costa 2022), and labour markets historically dualised by liberalisations at the margins (Polavieja 2006). Their welfare states offer weak protection against unemployment and rely on the family as the main buffer against insecurity (Ferrera 1996; Naldini 2004). Their housing regimes rest on high rates of home ownership, long promoted as a surrogate for social protection (Castles and Ferrera 1996). After the Eurozone crisis, austerity measures and structural reforms further deregulated their labour markets (Picot and Tassinari 2017). These shared features made it plausible to expect comparable configurations of precarity across the region.

Within the region, however, Spain and Italy combine this structural similarity with the widest variation within the populist left. (Unidas) Podemos, born from the protest cycle of the 15-M (della

Porta 2015), is a paradigmatic populist radical left party (Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019). The M5S, instead, has been variously read as an eclectic or polyvalent populist party (Mosca and Tronconi 2019; Pirro 2018), or as inclusionary (Font et al. 2021; Carella and Marenco 2022), but is treated here as a social populist party, combining populism with social themes without a structured left ideology (March 2011: 119): a functional equivalent and a limit case of the populist left. If two such different parties both mobilise precarious workers, what they have in common can be isolated from what depends on other party characteristics. At the same time, and symmetrically, the comparison works as an implicit test of this classification: whether the M5S attracted similar orientations among precarious workers and pursued comparable policies (Chapters 6–7 and 10) is a challenge to the adequacy of the social populist label.

Moreover, both parties were in government when this research began, a new situation for the populist left, which made it possible to study their policies and how these were received by precarious workers (Chapters 6–7 and 10). Finally, in both countries the Great Recession disrupted the party system, giving rise first to a populist left and then to a populist radical right (Roberts 2019), so that the design allowed for alternative pathways for the politicisation of precarity.

A contextual feature that was not targeted at the outset, but proved relevant in the course of the fieldwork (Section 4.1), is housing. In Spain it is more financialised (Gil García and Martínez López 2023; Gil 2025) and has been politicised since the crisis of the 2010s, while in Italy it remains scarcely politicised by parties (Chapter 10). As such, it is likely to be a stronger driver of active political mobilisation in Spain.

4.3 Mixing methods on the demand-side

As discussed above, sociological explanation demands both outlining empirical regularities (causal adequacy) and apprehending actor-centred meaning (meaning adequacy). The mixed-methods analysis of the demand-side is indeed designed to meet, complementarily, these two adequacies. While meaning adequacy is addressed by the qualitative component alone, which reconstructs how precarious workers make sense of their position and see the world politically, causal adequacy is sustained jointly by the two components, each contributing through a distinct modality. Weber himself outlined two possible modalities for causal adequacy, and contemporary methodological debates across methods and epistemologies have reworked it in strikingly similar terms.

On Weber's account, causal adequacy refers to the *chance* that a given course of action is followed by another in a regular manner, "with specifiable frequency, or something close to it", "according to

proven empirical rules" (Weber 2019 [1922]: 88). The chance, which he intends as a structure infused with objective probabilities, can be established through two alternative and equal paths: either "on average" (*durchschnittlich*), when a regularity is observed across many cases and its probability is established through statistical frequency; or in "a 'pure' case" (*im 'reinen' Fall*), when a case is reconstructed as an exemplary instance of the analysed mechanism, articulated with the depth required for the causal connection between its elements to become evident. Weber presents the two paths as legitimate alternatives within shared scientific standards, also for a practical reason: numerical probability, the ideal form of causal adequacy, is rarely available, and the analytical reconstruction of the pure case offers a path to the same explanatory adequacy where statistical measure cannot be obtained.

Recent epistemological debates on the logics of quantitative and qualitative research have outlined a similar distinction, recast in a vocabulary closer to contemporary social research. Small (2009) argues that quantitative and qualitative inquiry are grounded in distinct standards of knowledge production and validation. Quantitative inquiry follows a *sampling logic*, which extends what is observed in a representative sample to the general population through statistical inference, and validates the resulting knowledge claims against criteria of representativeness and statistical fit. Qualitative inquiry follows instead a *case-study logic*, which articulates internal mechanisms within cases compared iteratively to saturation, and validates the resulting knowledge claims through the analytical reconstruction of mechanisms within each case and the saturation of the typological space across cases. On a similar basis, Della Porta (2008) distinguishes between *variable-oriented* and *case-oriented* research, treating both as legitimate approaches operating within shared scientific standards.

These two logics map onto Weber's distinction between the two paths to causal adequacy: sampling logic onto the path on average and case-study logic onto that in the pure case (generally sustaining meaning adequacy). Beyond acknowledging equal dignity to the two paths, Small (2009) argues that each has its own distinctive strengths. Sampling logic is best equipped to produce distributional claims about patterns in a population, their magnitude, and their frequency. Case-study logic is best equipped to produce "ontological statements" (see also Pacewicz 2022), which establish that a certain phenomenon exists (often in varieties), and unpacks how it works in detail through configurational lenses.

As such, sampling logic can establish that a pattern holds in a population with a given magnitude and frequency, but cannot articulate the varieties of cases it aggregates or the mechanisms operating within them. Case-study logic can instead articulate those varieties and unpack their mechanisms in

fine-grained configurational detail, but cannot establish the magnitude and frequency of their occurrence in the population. As Small puts it, "sampling logic is superior when asking descriptive questions about a population; case study logic is probably more effective when asking how or why questions about processes" (Small 2009: 25). The quantitative analysis (Chapter 5) operates through sampling logic, establishing distributional claims about the patterns of political alignment in the precarious population of Italy and Spain. The qualitative analysis (Chapters 6–9) operates through case-study logic on the biographical materials produced by the interviews, constructing a typology of precarious workers that reconstructs the configurations and mechanisms underlying these patterns. Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2 develop the two components in detail.

4.3.1 The quantitative research part: logistic regressions and worker-voters alignments

The quantitative component of the demand-side analysis (Chapter 5) contributes to causal adequacy along the path "on average" (*durchschnittlich*), i.e. through sampling logic. It establishes distributional claims about the political preferences of precarious workers in Italy and Spain, that is statistical representative claims over voter propensities of precarious workers, in terms of electoral participation and party preferences. The analysis draws on the European Social Survey, over a decade, and is based on logistic regression and average marginal effects.

Within the complementary design of the demand-side, it carries less weight than the qualitative component, which remains the empirical core of the work. Yet, it performs the important function of providing a backbone for the qualitative component. The statistical patterns outlined by the quantitative component indeed provide an external anchoring to the saturation logic of the qualitative component. The qualitative part can reconstruct the configurations and mechanism behind the main patterns outlined by the quantitative component, without necessarily needing to cover the full spectrum of combinations of precarious workers and political alignment. This does not deprives the qualitative part of its own autonomous logic of inference, based on saturation. However, it lowers the minimum saturation threshold to covering the main patterns evidenced in the quantitative part (see Section 4.3.2.3). In a nutshell, the division of labour between the two components follows is the following: the quantitative analysis establishes that given patterns of alignment hold in the population, the qualitative analysis reconstructs the configurations of social position, moral economy, and political orientation through which those alignment unfold.

The theoretical definition developed in Chapter 3 understands precarity as a classing process of social disintegration with respect to the shared norm of the work-housing nexus, in its stratified configurations (Section 3.1.3). Being configurational, this definition is difficult to operationalize in the variable register of regression analysis, which works in its standard additive form. This is a relatively common problem in mixed-methods design, as methods tend to carry with them specific onto-epistemology, which is related to concept formation and operationalisation. An additional compounding issue her is that ESS data does not include any information on housing tenure (or property), which only very indirectly and imperfectly can be captured by financial insecurity. As a consequence, the quantitative part precarity can only be proxied empirically by employment and financial insecurity, an operationalization that is equivalent to multidimensional approaches to precarity. Yet, theoretically, those empirical proxies should be thought as embedding a range of discrete positions with respect to the work-housing nexus, which are further reconstructed empirically in the qualitative part of the analysis.

Patterns outlined in the quantitative part (Chapter 5), are not entirely new in the literature and are to some extent confirmatory of existing scholarship, while leveraging over a decade of data. Yet, as different choices with regard to conceptualisation, operationalisation and statistical modelling abound in the existing scholarship (see Chapter 2.1), it can be difficult to convincingly cumulate and compare existing findings. The quantitative analysis of this thesis therefore makes its own choices explicit, in particular its modelling choices, so that its results can be discussed as transparently as possible and articulated with the theoretical framework and the qualitative types. Details on data and empirical strategy are further outlined in Chapter 5.

4.3.2 The qualitative research part: in-depth interviews to precarious workers

4.3.2.1 Sampling and Sample

Between January 2024 and December 2025, I conducted 54 in-depth, narrative biographical interviews with precarious workers in Spain and Italy, 26 in Spain and 28 in Italy. From the start, I aimed at maximizing heterogeneity in profiles of precarious workers, along relevant dimensions of variation, in Small's terms, sampling for range rather than for representativeness (Small 2009). I sought variation primarily along class - proxied by education and occupation - and then along age, gender, as well as geography and migration background. The initial orientation was adjusted as the fieldwork went on, in response to configurations that began to surface in the material, to the relevant literature, and to the patterns coming out of the quantitative analysis.

Beginning with education and occupation, I aimed at reaching both graduate and non-graduate workers, both employed in (service) working class and (socio-cultural) professional occupations, two class markers which can overlap or not. The literature on Southern Europe has long shown that precarity reaches graduates and professional occupations as well, although its highest concentration remains among working-class workers, and particularly those working in "low-skilled" interpersonal services which tend to worse working conditions than the manufacturing working class. Among professionals, socio-cultural professionals overall tend to have the higher degree of employment and financial precarity, as having titles and generally less valued in the labour market. Moreover, both precarious graduates and socio-cultural professionals have been flagged in previous literature as potential constituencies of the populist left (see Chapter 2.1 and Chapter 5). While education and occupation are obviously interlinked, the do not fully overlap, as overeducation is also a defining feature of the employment structure in Spain and Italy, one often linked to precarity (see Chapter 3.1).

While there is a generational dimension to precarity, I deliberately tried to avoid selecting only young workers, as a considerable part of precarious workers are not young anymore. I avoided workers just entering the labour market and sought instead interviewees with at least some years of work behind them, irrespective of age. This was coherent with a precarity as structuring disintegrated class positions and the idea of capturing also the experiences of people who have lived precarity long enough for their biographical trajectory and horizons to be shaped, or even closed, by it.

Geographically, I scouted for interviews in large cities, where service workers and graduate professionals are most concentrated, and peripheral regions with tourism-led economies, which combine high levels of low-paid and low-quality employment, and overall rising living costs. Concretely, in Spain more than half of the interviews were realized in Madrid, while another third was conducted in different parts of Andalusia and the Canary Islands, both almost exclusively in urban areas. I also deliberately avoided targeting regions with strong regionalized nationalist politics - such as Basque Countries and Catalonia - as those would have complicated the link between precarious social position and politics, on the latter side. One interviewee living in Barcelona nonetheless entered the sample, through snowballing from Madrid (Chapter 7). Madrid, where most of the Spanish interviews took place, is also something close to a least-likely site for political mobilisation to the left, given the comparatively conservative orientation of its political landscape. Conducting interviews in Madrid also brought migration background into the sampling, almost necessarily so: respondents with migration backgrounds form a substantial part of the workforce in the city (particularly in low-service occupations), and the field made it impossible to treat the

dimension as marginal. I included those who were already socially rooted in the country, with established work histories and either the right to vote or the prospect of acquiring it soon, conditions that allowed the research question of the inquiry legitimate. They are a relevant minority of the Spanish sample, while constituting a negligible minority of the Italian one[21].

In Italy, the sample was more geographically distributed, concentrating on Central (Florence and Rome area) and Southern regions (mainly Naples and Southern Puglia), while obtaining only a minority of interviews from Northern regions. The Italian sample was also more distributed in terms of urban area, with around one third of the interviews being conducted in rural or semi-rural areas. While this was the result of stronger connections and resources in Italy, which allowed me to reach more peripheral locations, it also reflects the different demographic distribution of the two countries, with population in Spain being concentrated in metropolitan and coastal areas, while being more dispersed and decentralized in Italy.

In practice, recruitment was pursued through three main channels. An important share came through contacts in my personal network, mobilised by mentioning my search to as many people as possible, and as different as possible. The composition of any personal network is, of course, sociologically specific, and the structure of my own networks is itself part of what shaped the access I had to the field. I tried to balance and select reflexively close and more distant ties where appropriate, drawing on a range of profiles: family ties in rural southern Italy, acquaintances among young graduate precarious workers in both countries, and personal connections with precarious working-class in Madrid and Andalusia.

However, to reach respondents beyond the reach of my personal networks, and particularly precarious working-class respondents without university credentials, I posted public calls for interviewees in local public Facebook groups of people looking for a job, multiple of them and in different localities. Those groups included thousands of members, looking for a job in most cases "any kind" of job, and were sufficiently generalist not to identify overly narrow social milieus. As such, they provided an important source of interviewees out of my social circle, even extended. Finally, a minority of interviews came through direct approaches in public (work)places. This channel in general did not work well, as people do not like and feel it weird - surprisingly - to be interrupted by a researcher who wants to interview them, especially in metropolitan contexts. At least on one

[21] This discrepancy is overall the result of access difficulty to precarious workers with a migration background. However, lower number of reached interviewees of this kind in the Italian sample might also reflect structural differences in the level of segregation of the population with migrant background in the two countries, starting from easiness of access to citizenship and linguistic barriers.

occasion this channel however worked, opening up a surprisingly rich set of contacts: such as when a food delivery rider in Italy signalled to me a big WhatsApp group of food-delivery riders I then joined. For each of the three channels and after each interview, I proceeded with snowballing, asking people to put me in touch with other people in similar - or different, where relevant - circumstances to theirs. Finding the best way to present what I was doing to potential interviewees took some time, trying to balance the need for sincerity, avoiding excessive cues while targeting the right group of people. The opening message, ran along these lines: "I am writing a thesis [some other times: 'a book'] on the world of work in Italy (Spain). I am looking for people to talk to, in different occupations and places, in order to understand their work experiences and how they see the way things are going today. In particular, I would like to speak with people who have a temporary contract (or similar ones), or who had one for a long time in the past".

In this way, interviews were framed around "the world of work" (see Wagner 2023: 140), a domain in which people generally felt entitled to have an opinion or personal experiences. The reference to temporary contracts came at the end, almost in passing and as plus ("in particular"), through a neutral category. This was the only cue specifying the sampling target, being open to either to people currently having a temporary contract or who had one for a long time, thus capturing past structuring experiences of (employment) precarity. Overt references to precarity and precarious were however deliberated avoided, as variably involving relative evaluations, possibly stigma, and self-identification and dis-identification with the label, all of which are most likely classed dynamics which would have overly influenced the sampling. In recruitment through snowballing, this detail was dropped as much as possible, since the filter had already been applied by the person passing on my contact.

Asking how respondents "see the way things are going" invited them to articulate their own perspective on the present, against a public discourse in which the views of precarious workers tend to be filtered through other voices, when they are heard at all (Westheuser 2021: 148). It was also a way to be honest about the content of the interview while avoiding explicit mention of politics, a topic that tends to be associated with opportunistic behaviours and to generate distrust, especially among working-class people. On a similar note, when someone asked me in which field I was working or studying, following Wagner (2023: 140) I chose to answer "sociology" instead of "political sociology" (or "political science"), since any reference to the political domain tended to evoke distrust associating me more or less directly to "politicians", while sociology was less coded or associated to a generic interest in social issues.

Seventeen of the fifty-four interviews were monetarily compensated (12 in Spain and 5 in Italy), at a rate of twenty euros "for your time" spent in the interview. The payment served several functions at once. First, it was an infrastructural condition for access to Facebook job-seeking groups: the format of these boards expects job offers, including for small one-off tasks, and administrators tended to remove posts that did not propose any compensation. Compensation was, in this sense, pure access to the field. Second, it offered some respondents what Westheuser (2021: 148) calls a "presentable reason to participate", reframing the encounter as a small piece of work rather than as a victimized exposure of the self. Third, for respondents with little economic and time slack, the payment provided the material basis without which the interview would not have happened: an hour and a half is a lot when every hour is paid or owed. However, sometimes showing willingness to compensate monetarily, had countervailing effects. Some people read the offer of payment "for talking" in the Facebook channels as suspicious, too easy to be true, and saw scam where there was none. Others received the offer of compensation, in person or on the phone, with a quiet refusal: they wanted to tell their story freely, of something that mattered beyond the material circumstances of their life. I had the impression that accepting payment would have meant for them relinquishing the act of giving the story as a personal gesture of free will, irrespective of their material circumstances. As it is shown in empirical chapters, this is coherent with the non-materialistic sense of (moral) worth that precarious workers, of different kinds, at times articulate. While I could not find a systematic pattern of when compensation facilitated consent and when it hindered it, it is quite clear that some interviews would not have been conducted without it being offered.

The sample obtained through this process is summarised in Tables 4.1 and 4.2, along the dimensions of variation just discussed. A few features are worth pointing out. The sample contains more graduate than non-graduate respondents (33 versus 21), an imbalance not surprising in this kind of inquiry: graduate workers typically feel more entitled to speak about their own circumstances, see the topic of a thesis as close to their interests, and respond more readily to a request for a biographical interview, while engaging non-graduate respondents is harder for the inverse reasons. At the same time, the sample contains more respondents in working-class occupations than in professional ones (31 versus 23), with the majority concentrated respectively in interpersonal service occupations and in sociocultural professional ones. The two observations appear to pull in opposite directions, but they are reconciled by the intersection of education and occupational class: the 10 graduates in working-class occupations account for the (apparent) inconsistency. Women and respondents with migration backgrounds are less present in the sample than in the precarious population, particularly so in Italy.

Table 4.1 Interview sample composition by gender, age and migration background

	Spain	Italy	Total
Gender			
Female	13	10	23
Male	13	18	31
Age			
Young (≤35)	14	12	26
Middle (36–55)	11	13	24
Old (>55)	1	3	4
Migration background			
No	20	26	46
Yes	6	2	8
Total interviews	**26**	**28**	**54**

Note: Age categories based on respondent age at the time of interview.

Table 4.2. Sample composition by education and occupation

	Spain	Italy	Total
Education			
Graduate	17	16	33
Non-graduate	9	12	21
Occupation			
Middle class 'professionals'	11	12	23
Working class occupations	15	16	31
Education × occupation			
Graduate × middle class	11	12	23
Graduate × working class	6	4	10
Non-graduate × working class	9	12	21
Total interviews	**26**	**28**	**54**

Note: Graduate = university degree (bachelor's or higher); Non-graduate = below university level.

These imbalances are quite common in qualitative research: they reflect the differential ease of access to different segments of the field, and are themselves symptomatic of the object the inquiry studies, indirect evidence, as it were, of the effects of precarity on the very profiles the inquiry seeks to reach. What matters, in any case, is not the correspondence between sample and population frequencies, but the coverage of the theoretically relevant profiles (Small 2009): each is reasonably covered in the sample, even if a larger working-class subsample would have allowed for a finer-grained saturation (see section 4.3.2.3). The full list of interviewees, with their socio-demographic characteristics, is provided in Appendix A (Tables A.1-A.2).

The sample just outlined was selected through a single, relatively narrow, criterion to define "precarious workers": currently having - or having had for a long time in the past - a temporary contract (or any kind of non-standard contract, including no contract). This criterion broadly corresponds to a longitudinal application of employment precarity as intended by the insider-outsider literature, while the concept of precarity developed in this thesis (Chapter 3) is configurational and multidimensional. An apparent distance opens between how the unit of analysis has been selected and how the conceptualisation has been developed. In fact, this distance is a feature, and a strength, of the design. Precarious work, to begin with, is central both in defining precarious class positions and in activating the moralized scripts of social integration that the experience of precarity disrupts. Selecting on employment precarity, therefore, selects on a dimension that the framework identifies as central within the configurational space of precarity, the dimension through which the other configurational dimensions are negotiated and made sense of.

More crucially, the conceptualisation itself is an emerging product of fieldwork and analysis. Housing precarity and financial precarity were not used to filter the sample, but they emerged through the analysis of the biographies of respondents selected on employment precarity. That they emerged as empirically relevant and stratifying within a sample selected on a single dimension is one of the strengths of the design: the other configurational dimensions are discovered as constitutive within the framework itself. Among other things, the longitudinal reach of the sample makes visible the persistence of precarity along the other dimensions: respondents whose employment has now stabilised, after years of instability, still cannot buy a house, live on limited income, and navigate work and life along the schemas they developed when they were 'employment-precarious'.

The population of precarious workers in Southern Europe is in all likelihood broader than the sample reaches. Respondents on stable contracts with insufficient salaries, or stable in employment yet precarious in housing, would yield further configurations that this design did not directly target. The

configurations the typology reconstructs are those produced by selecting on employment precarity. Other configurations exist, accessible through different sampling strategies, and would constitute a productive direction for further inquiry.

4.3.2.2 Interview guide and interviewing

The interviews followed an adapted version of the narrative-biographical interview (Bertaux 1981; Ferrarotti 1981; Rosenthal 2004; Della Porta 2014), reproduced in full in Appendix A. The median interview lasted around an hour and a half (ranging from a minimum of 40 minutes, to 2 hours and a half) and were conducted preferably in person and when not possible via videocall. As is characteristic of the tradition, the guide alternates between narrative openings, where respondents speak freely with minimal interviewer intervention, and semi-structured passages organised around substantive modules. Crucially, the interview was constructed with the aim of minimizing the cognitive frames introduced by the interviewer, adding them progressively, thus leaving space for the interviewee to mobilize its own categories. The term *precarity* (and similar ones) was not introduced by the interviewer, allowing it to emerge spontaneously in people's narratives. Similarly, politics was addressed only at a later stage, to see if it had emerged before, and no contentious political issues were introduced before the very end of the interview.

Interviews started with two unstructured questions, aiming at eliciting free narrative, with minimal prompting on the side of the interviewer. The first, drawn from the Lamontian (1994, 2000) tradition through Westheuser (2021), opened with a disorienting request: "*how would you describe yourself, if you had to do it in one or two minutes? What kind of person are you?*". People were left to articulate in a register and domain of their own choice symbolic - and often moral - boundaries, through which they understand who they are. The induced synthetic self-presentation, in the void of the opening of the interview, often provided a general frame for the interview, whose logic at times became visible only when analysing the interview in detail. The second narrative opening questions, taken from Wagner (2023) prompts instead a general *récit* of their working life - "*where did you start working, and how has your career evolved up to today?*" - moving between jobs, aspirations, and the personal and residential moves revolving around it. Taken together, this double opening elicited spontaneous material on both morality and social trajectories.

The interview guide then unfolded modularly, cautiously adding frames and less unstructured questions, along two segments: the formation of social position and political orientation. The modular architecture is overall inspired to Wagner (2023), with substantive adaptations and additions. The first segment begins with the work module, building directly on the second of the two opening

questions, with follow-ups on satisfaction and recognition and work and what counts for the interviewee as a good job. People were then asked about future-expectations about work and their life, with the aim of eliciting aspirations of social mobility and (violated) biographical scripts. This question was firstly taken from Ayala-Hurtado (2022), but I then traced back its foundation Bourdieu (1977), and its work on the material foundations of people projections toward the future. Finally, after having discussed in length about their own work and identity, people were asked directly about their relation of social class, class self-positioning and class boundaries, following again Westheuser (2021).

The second segment then reopens micro-narratively, by asking people to recall the first memory they had about politics in their childhood. Linking politics with childhood, a domain typically charged with sheltered affect, offered a smooth and relatively unguarded transition to the political domain. In doing so, information on primary political socialisation and spontaneous relation to the political sphere also emerged. From there, detailed questions on political orientations, vote, judgment of parties and political leaders followed. Again people were allowed to bring up whatever political topic might be relevant to them, before any specific political issues being introduced by the interviewer. Only after political views being spontaneously expressed, direct questions on contested policy measures related with precarity (temporary contract regulation, minimum wage, minimum guaranteed income, rent regulation) were asked. In many cases those issues were autonomously brought up by the interviewees before, either while discussing their political priorities or at various times while recalling and judging their own social trajectory. Rent regulation was added as distinct question in the mid of the fieldwork, after the issue being expressed several times in previous interviews. Views on contested policy measures also provided a match with the supply-side part of the thesis (Chapter 10).

All but one of the interviews were audio-recorded, with information on the rights of interviewees and oral consent to participate collected at the outset. When they were conducted in person, a consent form (see Appendix A) was also provided for signature, detailing anonymization, right to information and retire from the study at any time and the scientific use of the retrieved data.

4.3.2.3 Analysis and typology construction

The analysis of the 54 interviews proceeded through iterative coding on MAXQDA, starting from a combination of open coding and theoretically informed coding, consistent with the abductive logic articulated above. The theoretical framework developed in Chapter 3 supplied a first set of orienting categories, while the open coding worked across the material to register themes that the framework

had not anticipated. Seven macro-dimensions organised at first the analytical work: dimensions of precarity, social support and social capital, future expectations, social and class identity, morality, politics, and policy judgements. Two of these dimensions, in particular, surfaced as analytically central through the analysis: housing as a constitutive dimension of precarity, and specific moral economies (and their violations) as the substantive ground of political orientation. As central theoretical dimensions emerged, interview cases were used to build types in an iterative process, alternating theoretical abstraction and empirical classification.

The construction of the types rests on a principle of typification that combines two dimensions: the form of material disintegration from the work-housing nexus, and the moral economy through which respondents elaborate the condition that disintegration produces, standing in a specific relation. Material disintegration is defines social position, and progressively constrains the range of moral economies that can be materially sustained: as resources erode and outcomes diverge from expectations, certain moral elaborations become harder to hold, until those that were viable in earlier positions of the trajectory are no longer available. Within this progressive funnel, moral economy retains a margin of autonomy that depends on biographical, relational, and institutional resources. The autonomy is temporary, sustained as the active work of the subject, costly, effortful, affectively charged, for as long as those resources are available, and giving way when they are not. Thus, the types so constructed can also be read diachronically as dynamic positions, marking zones along a continuous fabric of disintegration, progressively constraining workable moral economies and related political orientations.

The types operate as ideal-types in the Weberian sense: theoretical abstractions of a few key configurational elements that emerge from the material, accentuated in coherent form. No real case corresponds perfectly to a type, while cases approximate a type with varying proximity, and that proximity is itself part of the substantive analysis. The construction rests on an assumption of configurational causality: the political outcomes the typology reconstructs are produced by configurations of conditions operating jointly, with the causal weight of each condition specifiable only in combination. This is the form of causal explanation that the case-study logic articulated in Section 4.3 is best equipped to deliver: the analytical reconstruction of the configurations within which mechanisms operate.

Methodologically, the typology is sustained by three reinforcing lines of justification. The first is an external empirical grounding in the patterns of political alignment that Chapter 5 documents in the precarious population of Italy and Spain. Those patterns are already established as the population

level, and this relieves the typology from the obligation to saturate, by itself, the full space of possible patterns: it can limit itself to saturate the principal ones that the quantitative analysis has already documented. The threshold of saturation that the typology has to meet is, in this sense, lowered by the external grounding, in the complementary relation articulated in Section 4.1.

The second is the saturation of the typological space through the iterative comparison of interview cases. Each case sustains an analytical statement about the existence of a type as a configurationally identifiable form, and the iteration of cases generates a structured system of such statements articulated along recognisable dimensions, of which the typology is the synthesis. While proper saturation has probably not been reached (Small 2009), moderate saturation is at least achieved: the obtained typology covers the main types and is further sufficiently articulated to make other configurations heuristically intelligible in its light. Finally, the third line of justification relies on external comparison with similar typologies on class and political orientation developed in other studies and national contexts.

4.4 The supply-side: data and methods

The supply-side analysis is the third component of the tripartite design articulated in Section 4.1, with reduced architectural weight relative to the demand-side qualitative analysis that remains the empirical core of the thesis. Its function is specific: to reconstruct the political offer of the left-wing populist parties in Italy and Spain, against which the main mobilised political alignment in the precarious population, documented as an aggregate pattern by the quantitative analysis of Chapter 5, has formed. This is also the alignment that the demand-side qualitative analysis reconstructs configurationally in Types 1 and 2 of the typology, in its formation as a moral-political response to the disintegration of the work-housing nexus. The epistemological function of the supply-side, as already articulated in Section 4.1, is accordingly partial: it sustains the *Sinnadäquanz* of the demand-side qualitative analysis for this one specific alignment, by reconstructing the offer to which the mobilised orientation responds (as well as indirectly that to which Types 3 and 4 do not).

The analysis examines the socio-economic policies pursued by left-wing populist parties in Italy and Spain, as well as the discourse underpinning them. The combination is essential to capture the political project of these parties: policies are the most tangible expression of a party's substantive orientation, while the discursive frames surrounding them carry the normative and moral underpinnings that give them meaning. The cases are *Unidas Podemos* in Spain, as a paradigmatic case

of radical-left populism, and the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* in Italy, as a limit case of social populism. The analysis covers a formative phase and a government phase for each party. The government phase, on which the analysis places primary weight, covers M5S in the Conte I and Conte II governments (2018-2021) and UP in the Sánchez II government (2020-2023). The substantive justification of the cases, the operationalisation of the materials, and the analytical strategy are developed in Chapter 10.

5. The Political Alignment of Precarious Workers in Spain and Italy

5.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses the political alignment of precarious workers in Spain and Italy as aggregate distributional patterns in the population. It constitutes the quantitative component of the demand-side analysis (see 4.3.1), in which precarity is captured by the combination of *employment insecurity* and *financial insecurity*. The two indicators correspond to two dimensions consistently identified as central in the recent literature on multidimensional precarity and politics (Antonucci et al. 2021; Marinova 2022; Zhirnov et al. 2023), but are here mobilised as proxies - indirect and imperfect - for the configurational and classing conception of precarity developed in Chapter 3, which the regression framework cannot easily accommodate. Drawing on data from the European Social Survey (rounds 6–11 for Italy and 8–11 for Spain), covering the general elections from 2013 to 2023, the chapter models voting preferences associated with precarity, through logistic regressions for each country separately.

Three patterns emerge. First, in both countries precarious voters show a clear double pattern towards abstention and the populist-left party (the *Movimento 5 Stelle* in Italy, *Podemos* and its coalition parties in Spain), driven by both employment insecurity and financial insecurity. Second, the educational profile of this populist-left mobilisation differs across the two cases: in Spain, graduate precarious voters support UP more than non-graduate precarious voters do; in Italy, both groups support the M5S in comparable measure, with non-graduate precarious voters slightly more so. Third, precarious voters show no robust alignment with the mainstream parties on either side, nor with the radical right.

The rest of the chapter is organised as follows. §5.2 reviews the literature on precarity and political alignment in Italy and Spain and identifies the open questions this chapter addresses. §5.3 details the data and the empirical strategy. §5.4 documents the double pattern of demobilisation and partial

mobilisation towards the populist left. §5.5 breaks down these patterns along educational (class) lines, and closes the chapter by reflecting on the limits of the quantitative register and on the bridge to the qualitative typology.

5.2 Dimensions of precarity, patterns of political alignment: a review

The cross-national literature on precarity and political behaviour has documented a recurrent pattern of demobilisation among precarious workers (Schwander 2019; Rovny and Rovny 2017; Marinova 2022). Alongside demobilisation, depending on the operationalisation of precarity adopted, precarity is associated either with the populist radical right, or with the radical left (see Chapter 2), although the latter result is generally weaker, except for unemployment (Gomez and Ramiro 2019, 2022). Marinova (2022) has shown that the demobilising effect of employment precarity on turnout is largely mediated by financial precarity: it is not employment precarity per se - measured through employment status - but the exposure to financial hardship that demobilises voters. Whether a similar mediation operates on the party voting preferences remains more of an open question.

On Spain and Italy, a growing body of work in recent years has documented that precarity is associated with the populist-left vote in both countries, with effects more consistent for the *Movimento 5 Stelle* than for *Podemos*. The findings, however, have not yet been fully brought into a systematic synthesis, in part because the contributions cover different operationalisations of precarity which makes interpreting and cumulating evidence harder. Across the literature, two recurrent patterns can nonetheless be extracted.

Financial precarity is associated with populist-left support, at the individual level (Fernández-Albertos 2015; Liu, Kuo and Fernández-Albertos 2022; Lopes 2025 for Spain, Zhirnov et al. 2023 for both) and local level for Italy (Azzollini and Baldassarri 2024, Bloise et al. 2020). Employment precarity is less robustly associated with populist left support, and the divergence between the two countries is itself a recurrent feature. In Italy, employment precarity has been linked to M5S support (Padoan 2020, Corbetta and Gualmini 2017, Girardi 2023). In Spain the picture is instead more uncertain. Padoan (2020) found no significant effect of objective employment precarity on support for Podemos. Gomez et al. (2024) similarly found no effect of subjective employment precarity on Podemos support, while finding a positive association with unemployment. Ramiro and Gomez (2017), however, found that employment insecurity increased support for Podemos in its first year, and more strongly so among university graduates. On a related note, while in Italy precarious workers do not vote for the mainstream left (Girardi 2023, Padoan 2020), in Spain the mainstream left seems

to be contending for them with the populist left, as no significant differences emerge in most cases between PSOE and Unidas Podemos (Padoan 2020, Gomez et al. 2024).

Moreover, no robust association between precarity and the radical-right vote has been documented in Italy and Spain. For Italy, no significant positive effect of precarity on the populist-right vote has been documented in the period covered, with Zhirnov et al. (2023) finding a null effect of financial precarity on the populist radical right vote, an exception relative to the ten-country pattern of their study. In Spain, an electorally relevant radical right is a more recent phenomenon, and the empirical literature is correspondingly thinner. Gomez et al. (2024) find a positive effect of temporary contracts on the vote for Vox, while the other indicators of employment precarity show no significant association with Vox in their data. Finally, studies quite consistently find a negative association between precarity and voting for the mainstream right.

Part of the difficulty in consolidating these patterns into a more systematic comparative reading lies in the fact that the relations among the dimensions of precarity have remained under-articulated in the literature. Several studies include multiple dimensions of precarity simultaneously in the same models without explicit consideration of how they relate to each other, whether one absorbs the other, or whether their joint inclusion produces overcontrol, leaving the substantive interpretation of individual coefficients uncertain. The clearest exception is Marinova (2022), who documents on turnout that financial precarity absorbs much of the predictive power of employment precarity (see also Gomez et al. 2024). Analogous attention to the relations among dimensions has not been extended to the populist-left vote in Italy and Spain, which leaves their joint structure across the two cases an under-articulated rather than an unstudied terrain.

A second and related issue is whether the association between precarity and the populist-left vote is stratified, and relatedly who counts as precarious and who does not: in short how precarity and class intersect (see Chapter 2.2). Fernández-Albertos (2015) frames this question for the Spanish case, making the argument that the social base of the nascent Podemos was possibly expanding from the young graduate middle-class (*el partido de los indignados*), to the party of outsiders (*el partido de los excluidos*), the most exposed to economic hardship. Ten years later, Lopes (2025) shows that (young) graduates are more prone to vote for the populist left in Southern Europe and, crucially, qualifies their profile as first-generation graduates with blocked upward mobility, thus specifying by class origin the insecure graduates that Ramiro and Gomez (2017) had found among Podemos supporters.

This chapter takes up these open issues empirically, addressing the first of the three lines of inquiry along which this thesis delves into the politics of precarity in Spain and Italy: how precarious workers

align politically (see §2.3). The chapter models the relationship between precarity and political alignment in Italy and Spain over a decade of ESS data (rounds 6–11 for Italy, and 8–11 for Spain), separately for each country and through two dimensions of precarity, employment precarity and financial precarity. Two outcomes are examined: political mobilisation in itself (abstention versus voting), and partisan alignment among those who vote. The two dimensions are entered in three specifications that examine each dimension separately and the two combined, in order to bring their respective contributions and their relations into view. The internal stratification of the precarious population is then examined through models that interact precarity with education, taken as a proxy of class in general (and of cultural capital in particular), addressing - as far as possible in a regression framework - the question of who the precarious are as a social group (see §2.1.3).

5.3 Empirical Strategy

The analysis leverages data on a decade (2013–2023), drawing on the European Social Survey (ESS), rounds 6–11 for Italy and 8–11 for Spain. The period covers the emergence of the populist left in both countries as an electoral force. Two dependent variables are constructed from the ESS vote recall item, which records the party respondents voted for at the most recent national general election. The first captures political mobilisation (abstention versus voting); the second captures partisan choice among those who voted, coded at the level of country-specific party families (Table 5.1)[22].

Table 5.1. Classification of parties by party family

Category	Italy	Spain
mainstream left	PD; LeU; +Europa	PSOE
mainstream right	FI (and pre-2013 variants); PdL; UdC; smaller centrist(-right) parties	PP; Ciudadanos; smaller centre-right parties
populist left	M5S [*social populist*]	Unido(a)s Podemos, SUMAR; regional coalitions [*populist radical left*]
populist radical right	Lega; Fratelli d'Italia (FdI); minor radical-right parties	Vox

[22] On the classification of the M5S as *social populist* and Podemos (and the coalition around it) as *populist radical left*, within the populist left umbrella see Sections 4.2 and 10.3.

Two dimensions of precarity are operationalised, in line with the framework laid out in Chapter 3 and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. *Employment precarity* (empl_insec) is operationalised as a dummy variable that takes the value 1 if the respondent is unemployed, on a temporary contract, or in atypical employment, and 0 otherwise. Unemployment and temporary employment are combined in a single dummy because they tend to succeed one another in the trajectories of precarious workers, rather than constituting discrete alternative conditions. Treating them as separate covariates would amount to overcontrolling in our framework, unless one were specifically interested in the effect of a punctual transitory state. *Financial precarity* (fin_insec) is operationalised as a continuous scale from 1 to 4, based on the respondent's subjective evaluation of how the household is making ends meet, ranging from "living comfortably on present income" to "finding it very difficult on present income". The construction and coding of these and the other variables used in the analysis are summarised in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Variables: construction and coding.

Variable	**Type**	**Construction**	**Coding**
empl_insec	dummy 0/1	Contract type (wrkctra/wrkctrb); type of employment (emplrel); main labour market status	0 = permanent contract, employed, dependent worker. 1 = temporary contract OR unemployed (active or inactive) OR no formal contract
fin_insec	scale 1-4	hincfel	1 = Living comfortably; 2 = Coping; 3 = Difficult to live on present income; 4 = Very difficult
edu_high	dummy 0/1	eisced	1 = ISCED 5–8 (tertiary); 0 = otherwise
edu_low	dummy 0/1	eisced	1 = ISCED 0–2 (lower secondary or less); 0 = otherwise
urban	dummy 0/1	domicil	1 = big city, suburbs, or town; 0 = country village or countryside
public	dummy 0/1	tporgwk	1 = public or nationalised sector; 0 = private sector (including self-employed)
female	dummy 0/1	gndr	1 = Female; 0 = Male
age, age²	continuous	agea	Age in years, and age squared

The selection of control variables follows a deliberately parsimonious logic. Because the two dimensions of precarity are treated as proxies for a range of structurally vulnerable positions in the social structure, introducing controls that capture overlapping aspects of those same positions would amount to overcontrolling, partialling out part of the variation that precarity itself is meant to register. This is why occupational class is not included as control: controlling for it would absorb part of the precarity effect rather than isolate it. The same overcontrolling concern applies to the absence of a control for migration background, for which the ESS does not provide an adequate item: the ethnic-minority variable has too few respondents in both countries to be used as a covariate without producing perfect prediction in logistic models. The controls retained in the main models are: sex, age and age squared, two education dummies (university and low education, with intermediate education as the reference category), urban residence, public-sector employment, and ESS round fixed effects.

The models follow a nested structure across three specifications for each outcome and each country: M1 includes employment precarity only, M2 includes financial precarity only, and M3 includes both. Binomial logistic regressions are estimated for the general pattern — separately for each party-family vote (with the remaining voters as the reference category and abstainers excluded) and for abstention (on the full sample); each model uses only the waves in which the relevant party exists as a meaningful electoral option, to maximise the use of available data. The corresponding AMEs are computed from multinomial logistic regressions to obtain interpretable magnitudes of effect, with voters as the sample and the mainstream left as the reference category (PD in Italy, PSOE in Spain), and the mainstream-right and radical-right parties aggregated into a single right category. Interactions between precarity and election year, estimated on M1 (employment precarity only), are used in §5.4 to trace how the alignment of precarious workers has evolved over the decade. Finally, Interactions between precarity and education, on the same specification, are introduced in §5.5.

5.4 Demobilisation and partial mobilisation towards the populist left

The results of the binomial models are shown in Table 5.3 for Spain, and Table 5.4 for Italy, while the corresponding multinomial models are reported in the Appendix B (Tables B.1-B.2). Precarity structures a double pattern of overall demobilisation (in the form of electoral abstention), and mobilisation for the populist left (among those who do vote).

Both employment precarity and financial precarity are positively associated with abstention and with the populist-left vote, in the separate models in both countries. In Italy, employment precarity is

	Abs(1)	Abs(2)	Abs(3)	UP(1)	UP(2)	UP(3)	PSOE(1)	PSOE(2)	PSOE(3)	PP(1)	PP(2)	PP(3)	Vox(1)	Vox(2)	Vox(3)
Empl. insecurity	0.195*		0.120	0.275*		0.214†	0.089		0.081	-0.162†		-0.119	0.062		0.115
	(0.094)		(0.098)	(0.111)		(0.116)	(0.095)		(0.098)	(0.097)		(0.101)	(0.180)		(0.184)
Fin. insecurity		0.152***	0.184***		0.123*	0.090		0.061	0.048		-0.153***	-0.102†		0.040	-0.087
		(0.045)	(0.055)		(0.056)	(0.066)		(0.044)	(0.056)		(0.045)	(0.057)		(0.087)	(0.106)
Female	-0.059	0.001	-0.066	-0.189†	-0.052	-0.186†	0.334***	0.274***	0.331***	-0.175*	-0.187**	-0.169†	-0.373*	-0.301*	-0.387*
	(0.088)	(0.073)	(0.089)	(0.102)	(0.088)	(0.103)	(0.087)	(0.070)	(0.087)	(0.087)	(0.070)	(0.087)	(0.167)	(0.141)	(0.168)
Age	-0.060***	-0.085***	-0.070***	0.018	-0.002	0.015	0.035†	0.044***	0.035†	0.008	-0.002	0.008	0.036	0.045†	0.040
	(0.017)	(0.011)	(0.017)	(0.025)	(0.017)	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.013)	(0.018)	(0.018)	(0.012)	(0.019)	(0.039)	(0.027)	(0.039)
Age²	0.000*	0.001***	0.000**	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000*	-0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	-0.001	-0.001**	-0.001
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
University	-0.285*	-0.284*	-0.229†	0.156	0.158	0.179	-0.124	-0.148	-0.113	0.016	0.044	-0.016	-0.719**	-0.560**	-0.728**
	(0.131)	(0.113)	(0.133)	(0.140)	(0.125)	(0.142)	(0.124)	(0.106)	(0.126)	(0.121)	(0.103)	(0.122)	(0.232)	(0.202)	(0.235)
Low education	0.617***	0.404***	0.566***	-0.305†	-0.266†	-0.335*	0.442***	0.371***	0.424**	-0.337*	-0.146	-0.302*	0.497*	0.399*	0.503*
	(0.127)	(0.109)	(0.129)	(0.160)	(0.138)	(0.162)	(0.131)	(0.107)	(0.132)	(0.133)	(0.108)	(0.134)	(0.221)	(0.193)	(0.223)
Urban	-0.036	-0.004	-0.023	0.282**	0.241*	0.277*	-0.072	0.011	-0.058	0.077	-0.006	0.065	-0.162	-0.114	-0.170
	(0.101)	(0.085)	(0.102)	(0.109)	(0.095)	(0.109)	(0.096)	(0.078)	(0.097)	(0.095)	(0.077)	(0.095)	(0.192)	(0.161)	(0.192)
Public sector	-0.453***	-0.346**	-0.417***	0.056	0.197†	0.079	0.129	0.170*	0.149	-0.202*	-0.290***	-0.227*	0.006	-0.105	-0.046
	(0.121)	(0.105)	(0.123)	(0.117)	(0.105)	(0.118)	(0.099)	(0.085)	(0.100)	(0.102)	(0.088)	(0.103)	(0.206)	(0.186)	(0.209)
round fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
(Intercept)	-0.224	0.162	-0.400	-1.549**	-1.290**	-1.630**	-2.133***	-2.326***	-2.244***	-1.143*	-0.731*	-0.927*	-2.385**	-2.641***	-2.328**
	(0.402)	(0.308)	(0.408)	(0.550)	(0.412)	(0.560)	(0.448)	(0.349)	(0.458)	(0.446)	(0.331)	(0.453)	(0.870)	(0.667)	(0.880)
N	3970	5866	3917	2680	4024	2655	2680	4024	2655	2680	4024	2655	1995	2938	1975
Log Lik.	-1706.3	-2451.9	-1680.0	-1254.1	-1702.9	-1240.7	-1614.7	-2453.0	-1598.0	-1602.2	-2455.7	-1588.9	-552.9	-782.4	-549.1
Pseudo R^2 (Tjur)	0.068	0.055	0.071	0.036	0.043	0.036	0.051	0.046	0.051	0.031	0.042	0.031	0.039	0.036	0.039

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 5.3 Precarity, abstention and party choice in Spain: binomial logit models (ESS rounds 8–11)

	Abs(1)	Abs(2)	Abs(3)	M5S(1)	M5S(2)	M5S(3)	PD(1)	PD(2)	PD(3)	FI(1)	FI(2)	FI(3)	RR(1)	RR(2)	RR(3)
Empl. insecurity	0.372***		0.216*	0.278*		0.126	-0.194†		-0.054	0.089		0.091	-0.209		-0.161
	(0.084)		(0.091)	(0.109)		(0.118)	(0.115)		(0.123)	(0.163)		(0.174)	(0.131)		(0.141)
Fin. insecurity		0.365***	0.315***		0.403***	0.266***		-0.300***	-0.244***		-0.017	-0.029		-0.143**	-0.085
		(0.039)	(0.053)		(0.051)	(0.067)		(0.050)	(0.069)		(0.067)	(0.098)		(0.054)	(0.077)
Female	0.199**	0.249***	0.241**	-0.157†	-0.193*	-0.158†	0.093	0.165*	0.089	0.134	0.043	0.143	0.013	0.004	0.010
	(0.076)	(0.059)	(0.077)	(0.093)	(0.076)	(0.094)	(0.093)	(0.071)	(0.094)	(0.136)	(0.097)	(0.137)	(0.105)	(0.078)	(0.106)
Age	-0.066***	-0.092***	-0.075***	0.007	0.006	-0.004	-0.002	-0.007	0.002	0.004	-0.007	0.009	0.017	0.040**	0.021
	(0.015)	(0.010)	(0.015)	(0.023)	(0.015)	(0.023)	(0.022)	(0.014)	(0.022)	(0.031)	(0.018)	(0.031)	(0.026)	(0.015)	(0.026)
Age²	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	-0.000	-0.000*	-0.000	0.000	0.000†	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	-0.000	-0.000*	-0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
University	-0.426***	-0.321***	-0.353**	-0.317**	-0.237*	-0.256*	0.323**	0.271**	0.260*	0.183	0.114	0.177	-0.257†	-0.241*	-0.273*
	(0.107)	(0.089)	(0.110)	(0.114)	(0.097)	(0.117)	(0.110)	(0.088)	(0.111)	(0.163)	(0.124)	(0.166)	(0.131)	(0.104)	(0.134)
Low education	0.583***	0.454***	0.477***	0.113	0.057	0.010	-0.319*	-0.190*	-0.249†	0.167	-0.009	0.177	0.135	0.186†	0.184
	(0.090)	(0.072)	(0.093)	(0.122)	(0.098)	(0.126)	(0.131)	(0.093)	(0.134)	(0.181)	(0.125)	(0.186)	(0.136)	(0.098)	(0.140)
Urban	0.037	0.079	0.029	0.138	0.179†	0.162	0.214†	0.131	0.210†	-0.138	0.029	-0.154	-0.425**	-0.447***	-0.442**
	(0.107)	(0.083)	(0.109)	(0.120)	(0.100)	(0.122)	(0.120)	(0.094)	(0.121)	(0.190)	(0.132)	(0.192)	(0.151)	(0.117)	(0.153)
Public sector	-0.441***	-0.315***	-0.410***	0.150	0.196*	0.180	-0.029	0.111	-0.049	-0.111	-0.133	-0.113	-0.298*	-0.441***	-0.307*
	(0.108)	(0.084)	(0.109)	(0.115)	(0.096)	(0.116)	(0.112)	(0.087)	(0.113)	(0.166)	(0.123)	(0.167)	(0.134)	(0.105)	(0.134)
round fixed effects	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
(Intercept)	-0.025	0.152	-0.376	-0.245	-0.886*	-0.483	-1.141*	-0.754*	-0.805	-2.771***	-2.224***	-2.800***	-1.448*	-1.661***	-1.393*
	(0.357)	(0.265)	(0.365)	(0.533)	(0.386)	(0.538)	(0.534)	(0.375)	(0.540)	(0.750)	(0.505)	(0.764)	(0.614)	(0.425)	(0.621)
N	4599	7722	4511	2329	3960	2301	2329	3960	2301	2329	3960	2301	2068	3559	2046
Log Lik.	-2226.7	-3688.8	-2166.5	-1394.6	-2143.3	-1367.3	-1396.3	-2387.4	-1372.9	-786.6	-1487.4	-776.5	-1131.4	-2013.8	-1119.2
Pseudo R^2 (Tjur)	0.058	0.062	0.067	0.060	0.090	0.067	0.028	0.047	0.033	0.028	0.028	0.027	0.036	0.039	0.038

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 5.4 Precarity, abstention and party choice in Italy: binomial logit models (ESS rounds 6–11)

significantly associated with abstention and with M5S support (M1), as well as financial precarity (M2). In Spain, the same pattern holds - employment precarity sustains abstention and UP support (M1), financial precarity sustains both (M2) - although the effect of financial precarity on UP support is statistically less robust than in the Italian case. By contrast, the right-wing parties show either negative or null associations with both dimensions of precarity. In Spain, the mainstream-right vote (PP) is marginally negatively associated with financial precarity, while in Italy, the mainstream-right vote (FI) shows no robust association with either dimension. The populist radical-right parties show no robust association either, a finding in partial contrast with Gomez et al. (2024) for the Spanish case. Among the mainstream-left parties, an asymmetry emerges between the two countries: the PD is robustly negatively associated with both dimensions of precarity in Italy, while the PSOE shows a null association in Spain.

When both dimensions are entered in the additive specification (M3), different patterns emerge across the two main outcomes across countries. On abstention, financial precarity absorbs much of the effect of employment precarity in both countries, although asymmetrically: in Italy, the effect of employment precarity attenuates but remains significant in M3, while in Spain it disappears altogether, a pattern broadly in line with the mediation logic documented by Marinova (2022). On the populist-left vote, the asymmetry across countries is inverted. The effect of employment precarity on M5S support (significant in M1) becomes non-significant in the additive binomial (M3) and only marginally significant in the multinomial versus PD. The effect on UP support attenuates more modestly: it remains marginally significant in both the additive binomial and the multinomial versus PSOE. As such, financial precarity carries more of the effect on the populist-left vote in Italy, while in Spain employment precarity retains a more autonomous role.

The strength of those patterns can be read in Figure 5.1 and 5.2, which displays the average marginal effects (AMEs) of employment precarity on the four outcomes in each country. The AMEs for party-choice outcomes is computed from the multinomial model on voters only (M1), that for abstention is computed from the binomial model on the full sample (M1)[23]. In both models, the mainstream-right and the radical-right parties are aggregated, ("PP and Vox in Spain; FI, Lega and FdI in Italy). In the Spanish case, this aggregation responds to a technical constraint: since Vox is fielded only

[23] The two AMEs are computed on distinct models - binomial on the full sample for abstention, multinomial on voters only for party choice - so that magnitude of effects between abstention and party choices cannot be compared directly. Combining them in a single figure thus entails a compromise. The choice is motivated by visual parsimony: presenting the effects on the full set of outcomes side by side supports comparison between countries, and avoids multiplying figures.

from round 9, aggregating the right-wing parties allows the multinomial AME to be computed over the full set of rounds without loss of data. The binomial results discussed above, where no robust separate associations emerge for either group in either country, support the aggregation more generally. The corresponding predicted probabilities for stable and precarious workers, on all outcomes, are reported in Appendix B (Figures B.1-B.2).

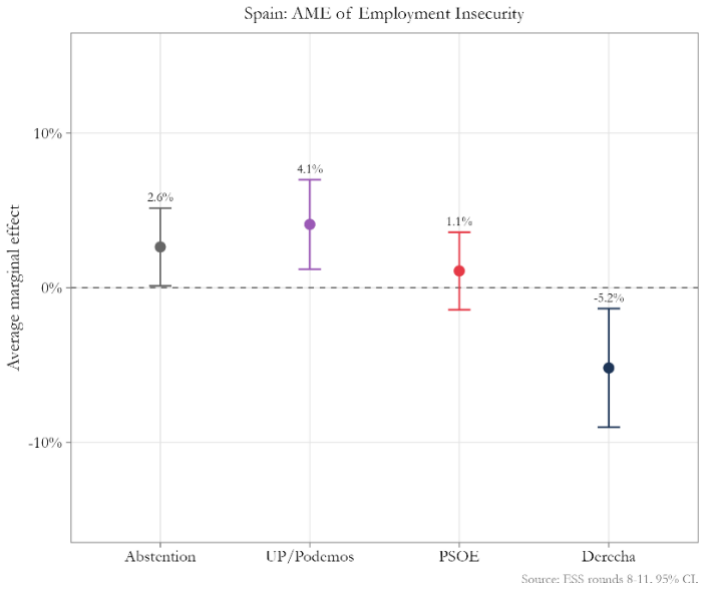


Figure 5.1 Average marginal effects of employment precarity on abstention and party choice, Spain

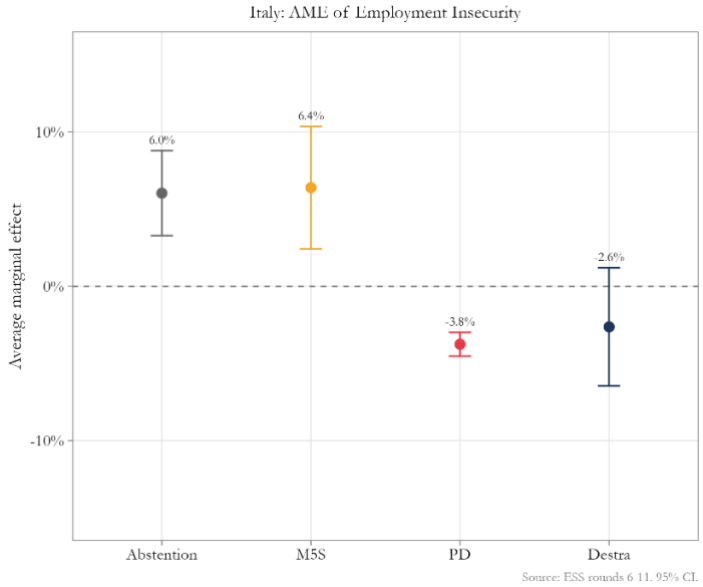


Figure 5.2 Average marginal effects of employment precarity on abstention and party choice,Italy

In Italy, employment precarity is associated with a substantial increase in the probability of abstention (+6.0 percentage points, from 18.9% to 24.9% predicted probability) and in the probability of voting M5S (+6.4 pp, from 31.6% to 38.0%), as well as with a decrease in the probability of voting PD (-3.8 pp). The aggregated effect on the right-wing parties is small and not statistically significant (-2.6 pp). In Spain, employment precarity increases the probability of abstention by 2.6 pp (from 16.2% to 18.8%) and the probability of voting UP by 4.1 pp (from 20.1% to 24.2%), as well as with a robust decrease in the probability of voting for the right-wing parties (-5.2 pp). The effect on the PSOE vote is statistically null (+1.1 pp).

As such the pattern of employment precarity towards the populist-left is quite strong in both countries (~4-6 pp), with an increase of roughly one fifth above the baseline in both cases. On as secondary note, the relation between the precarious vote and the mainstream-left somewhat differs between the two cases: in Italy, employment precarity moves voters away from the PD, while in Spain it leaves the PSOE essentially untouched.

The findings reported so far are average effects pooled across the decade. Yet both the M5S and UP went through marked electoral trajectories over this period, rising rapidly in the mid-2010s and then receding from those peaks (see tables B.3-B.4), making it worth tracing how alignment of precarious workers has evolved over a decade. Figure 5.3 presents the AMEs of employment precarity on the populist-left vote and abstention, at general elections[24] over time (full AMEs for each party family are shown in Tables B.5-B.6). The year-by-year estimates carry wide confidence intervals, with many non-significant estimates, but the trajectories are consistent in direction.

Abstention rises among precarious workers in both countries over the decade, sharply in Italy (from 29% in 2018 to 44% in 2022) and more modestly in Spain (from 19% in 2016 to 29% in 2023), with a corresponding strengthening of the AME on abstention, particularly in Italy. The alignment with the populist left, by contrast, progressively diverges between the two cases. In Italy, the M5S sample vote share halves between 2018 and 2022, from 41% to 21%, yet support for M5S among precarious workers remains substantial across the post-2018 rounds (47% in 2018, 31% in 2022) and the AME on M5S support stays stable: the party recedes in overall reach but consolidates its position among precarious voters.

[24] ESS records vote choice at the most recent general election preceding the survey. Rounds whose fielding follows the same election are therefore pooled and assigned to that election year; the resulting electoral points are 2013, 2018, and 2022 for Italy, and 2016, 2019, and 2023 for Spain

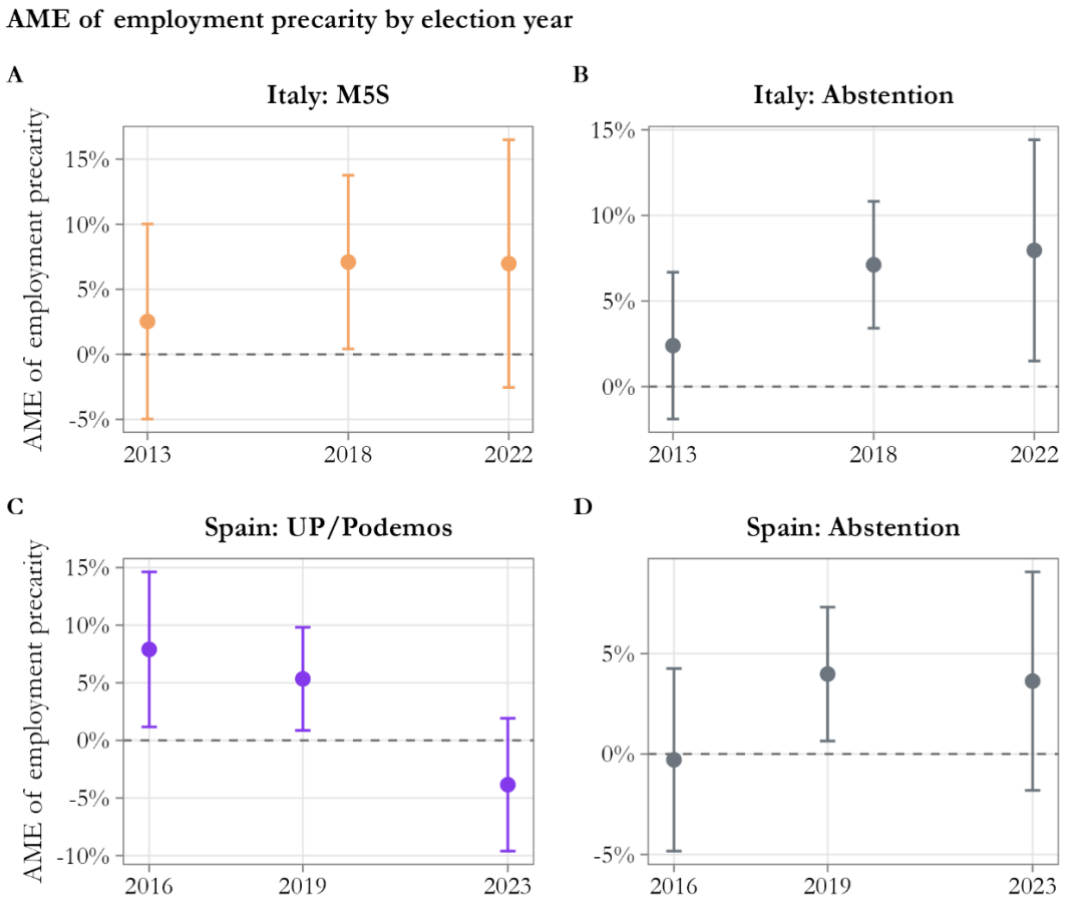


Figure 5.3 Average marginal effects of employment precarity on abstention and populist left vote by election year: Italy and Spain

In Spain, the UP sample vote share follows a similar trajectory in the general electorate (from 26% in 2016 to 15%) in 2023, while support for UP among precarious workers declines more steeply, from 29% in 2016 to 10% in 2023, and the AME on UP support, large in 2016 and 2019, becomes statistically null by 2023: UP recedes in overall reach, and its alignment with precarious voters weakens alongside it. Read against the aggregate double pattern, the decade thus shows an intensifying demobilisation in both countries, while the partial mobilisation for the populist left is maintained, in relative terms, in Italy, and weakens in Spain.

5.5 Breaking the patterns along educational lines

The double pattern documented above holds across the precarious population as a whole, but we do not yet know how it is internally stratified, that is, whether it varies between different profiles of precarious workers. To address this question, we run two series of binomial models, for abstention and for the populist-left vote, each including an interaction term between employment precarity and educational level, the latter taken as a broad proxy for class (Tables B.7-B.8). The interaction term is not significant in any of the models, indicating that the magnitude of the association between precarity and political alignment does not vary by education. The absence of an interaction effect does not imply, however, that graduate and non-graduate precarious workers have the same propensity to demobilise or to mobilise for the populist left, since education provides different baseline levels of support. Taking education and precarity jointly - what a regression framework reads as additive effects - sketches different profiles of precarious workers along the educational divide, with different combined propensities to mobilise politically. Figure 5.4 displays the corresponding predicted probabilities, derived from the same binomial interaction models. This is, however, the limit to which the variable-oriented logic of the analysis can be pushed.

Considering abstention, it is non-graduate precarious workers who show the highest propensity, in both countries. Non-graduate precarious workers abstain markedly more than their non-graduate stable counterparts (+7.8pp in Italy, +5.0pp in Spain), while graduate precarious workers show levels of abstention statistically indistinguishable from those of graduate stable workers (+1.0pp in Italy, −0.4pp in Spain). Demobilisation among precarious workers, in other words, is concentrated on the non-graduate side of the educational divide in both countries. Looking instead at the populist-left vote, the profile with the highest propensity differs between the two countries. In Italy, both graduate and non-graduate precarious workers show the same propensity to vote M5S, at virtually identical rates (33.4% and 32.5%). The M5S coalition of precarious voters is balanced across the educational divide. In Spain, graduate precarious workers show a markedly higher propensity to vote UP than non-graduate precarious workers (22.8% against 15.9%). The UP coalition of precarious voters is graduate-skewed, encompassing both segments of precarious workers while being concentrated among educated ones, which qualifies the existing literature (Fernandez-Albertos 2015; Ramiro and Gomez 2017; Padoan 2020; Lopes 2025).

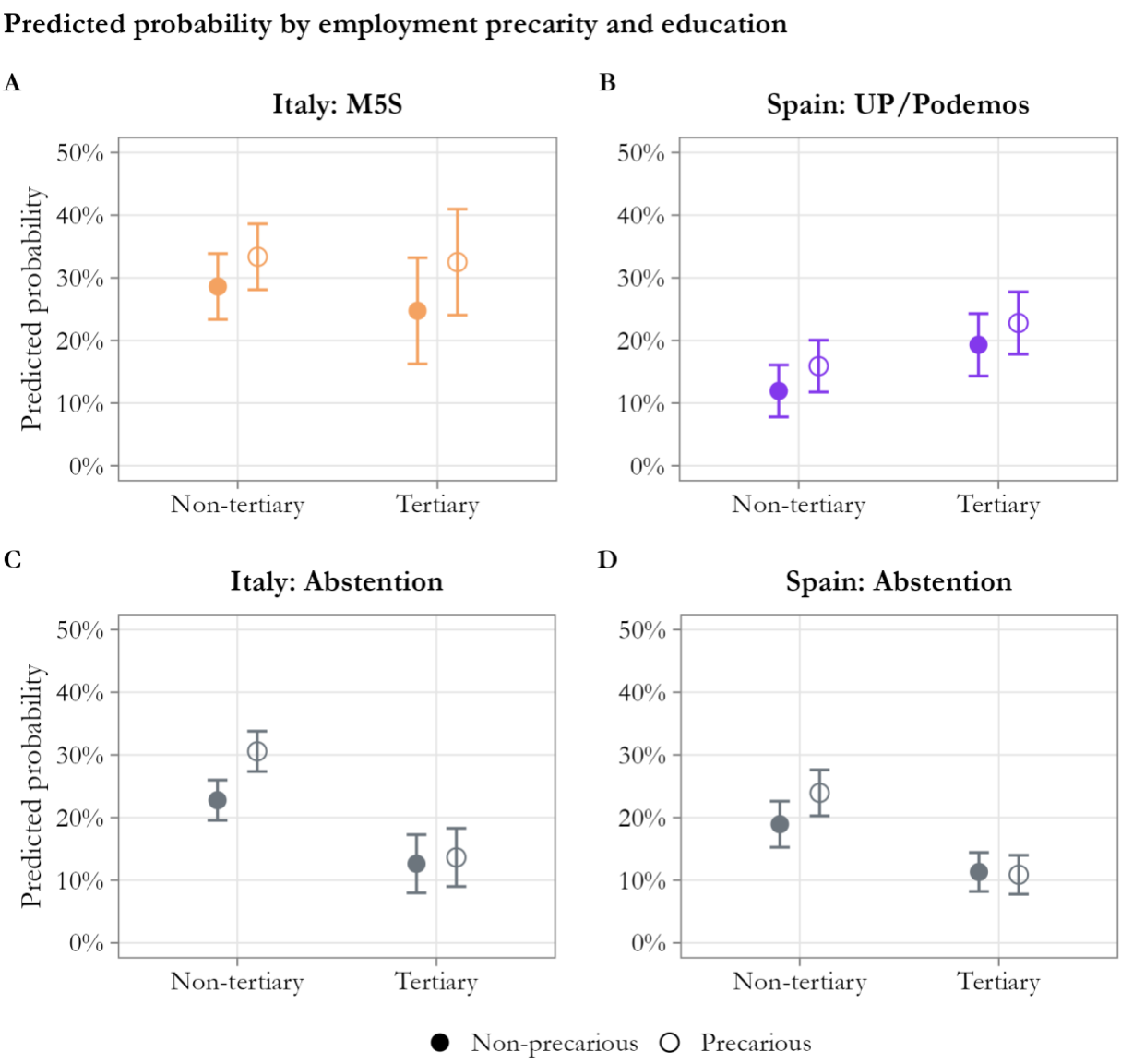


Figure 5.4 Predicted probabilities of the populist-left vote and abstention by employment precarity and education, Italy and Spain

The regression finds no interaction between precarity and education, but the predicted probabilities show that graduate and non-graduate precarious workers display unequal joint propensities to mobilise for the populist left and to demobilise. Behind these unequal propensities possibly lie different motives and mechanisms of political mobilisation or demobilisation, including distinct underlying political orientations among those who abstain (or the very absence of an orientation, which is one). Moreover, "real-existing" precarious workers are thicker than what education and employment precarity, taken jointly, can render: their social positions are constituted by configurations of factors, among which education and employment precarity.

The qualitative chapters that follow reconstruct mechanisms and configurational social positions, connecting them to the patterns sketched here. Graduate precarious workers broadly speak to the *declassed aspiring middle class* (Chapter 6), whose path turns to the populist left, while non-graduate precarious workers speak to two figures of the *precarious working class* (Chapters 7-8) and to the *subproletariat* (Chapter 9), split between the populist left and (different forms of) abstention. Within each of these configurational social positions, different (broken) scripts and (violated) moral economies are at work, structuring their political orientations.

6. Declassed Aspiring Middle Class

6.1 Introduction

The first type of precarious worker, outlined in this chapter, is the declassed aspiring middle class. This label captures workers with high educational credentials - mostly, although not exclusively, in socio-cultural fields - which were expected to be conducive to a (full) professional middle-class social position and lifestyle, but they were not. This expectation is attached to education, irrespective of social origin, although the majority of people belonging to this type come from lower-middle class and, to a lesser extent, working class families. Despite - or simply "with" - educational credentials, those people land in jobs which are unstable, not well paid (and even very poorly paid), which - crucially - prevent access to secure housing through work (breaking the work-housing nexus): not owning their house, but also increasingly struggling to find stable renting solutions. They however maintain some attachment to professional jobs and milieus, which preserves some aspiration to finally fulfil the original expectation and sustain their sense of social location.

The expected professional middle-class position - whose frustration primarily defines this group - is structured by the fulfilment of a higher variant of the shared standards of secure work and secure housing (see Chapter 3): a professional job, secure employment and comfortable salaries, leading to guaranteed access to home ownership (at least one). However, people belonging to the declassed aspiring middle class also variably feel short of meeting the basic general norms of secure work and secure housing, which were indeed met by their parents with lower educational attainment. As such, precarity is here experienced as a double disintegration - and concomitant *déclassement* - primarily with respect to the privileged social position that education was expected to guarantee (Bourdieu 1988; Mathieu 2022) and secondarily - but increasingly - with respect to the general norm of security. The lacerating tension between continuing reference to original professional middle class aspirations - minimally touched, but clung to - and prolonged experiences of uprooting baseline precarity is what relationally defines the social position of this group. This laceration emerges also when interviewees in this group are asked to self-position in the social structure, which costs them struggle and conflicting distinctions, which manifest a peculiar and severe form of status inconsistency (Dogan 2011). It is also reflected in the future aspirations of the group, combining residual hope to fulfil some version of the original standard, and performing suspension of expectations about the future.

Somewhat mirroring their social position, the declassed aspiring middle class experiences a double hierarchical and sequential moral economy violation. First, violated educational meritocracy - the promise that studying and obtaining the "right" credentials would lead to deserved professional middle class standard. This is coherent with studies claiming the persistence of an educational meritocracy narrative among Spanish graduates (Ayala-Hurtado 2022, 2024). Violated educational meritocracy is sometimes blamed on the system as a whole, which does not work and deceives. Other times, blame is directed upward, against those who hold better positions with fewer credentials, either because they 'bought' them through superior economic resources, or obtained them through favouritism rather than merit. Second, violated labourism, the expectation that any dutifully performed work, regardless of the work rank, should grant access to basic security in employment, income and access to housing. This second violation is particularly destabilizing because it reveals that not only upward mobility was blocked, but that the baseline conditions enjoyed by the previous generation - somewhat transversally to class - and incarnated by their parents have been withdrawn: a form of intergenerational regression, masked by relative educational attainment. This combined moral economy framework qualifies Ayala-Hurtado's finding of the prevalence of a frustrated educational meritocratic narrative among Spanish young graduates: once people enter the labour market and their social position is shaped by experiencing precarity, violated labourism combines with violated educational meritocracy.

The tensions inherent to their social position and moral economy, have translated politically into a desire and commitment for systemic change aimed at re-making society and creating a fairer socio-economic order. This has been embodied in support for populist left forces, especially among Spanish interviewees, whose political orientation is structured by the discursive categories and trajectory of the populist radical left *Podemo*s. While sharing a similar aspiration to systemic change, Italian interviewees are more puzzled and fragmented in their political orientations. Some interviews are structured by the experience of the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* and its social populist discourse, while others - while referencing it - lament the absence of a credible leftist option offering a collective horizon of transformation. This shared orientation among declassed aspiring middle class interviewees - with national variations in cohesiveness - is broadly coherent with the findings of Chapter 5 on the political alignment of educated precarious workers (an imperfect proxy for the declassed aspiring middle class) as well as the findings on the political preferences of the limitedly upward mobile working class with university education in Southern Europe (Lopes 2025; Ramiro and Gomez 2017). In both countries, however, many interviewees express a progressive loss of hope in the possibility of re-making society and express scepticism on the adequacy of the parties carrying

this option out. They do not disengage from politics or abstain from voting, but they disinvest emotionally and identitarily in the populist left political projects. This constitutes what I call silent demobilization: a withdrawal of affective investment and collective identification that leaves formal participation intact while hollowing out its subjective meaning. The sections that follow examine this type along the dimensions structuring the empirical analysis: precarity and social position (6.2), moral economy (6.3), political orientation (6.4).

6.2 Social position: disintegration from the middle class and status inconsistency

6.2.1 Disintegration from a middle-class horizon, from standard security

As outlined above, the social position of the declassed aspiring middle class is primarily defined by a missed professional middle-class position and its expected standards: although educational credentials were acquired and professional milieus were entered, the security of work and housing that were supposed to follow did not materialize. Precarity is primarily experienced as disintegration from that position, while some aspirational attachment to it persists.

This dynamic is well illustrated by the paradigmatic case of Miguel, a Spanish journalist in his early forties, who studied and then started his professional career in Madrid, in the early 2000s, now working on a project-basis. When asked to narrate his work biography, at the very start of the interview, he started telling his story by framing it in this way:

> Okay, so I'm going to give you a sort of narrative of my whole work trajectory. Let's say, is this what you want? Well, let's say that I, ehmm… I think I did everything that… they said, you had to do to… have a comfortable life, to be able to live well [*creo que hice todo lo que… decían, que había que hacer para… tener una vida desahogada, para poder vivir bien*]. So, well, I studied, I got a degree, which is not something I was passionate about a priori, because I found it hard to study as a kid, but then I ended up liking the degree and I started working while I was still studying. (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es, italics mine)[25]

[25] Vale, te voy a hacer como una narración un poco de toda mi trayectoria laboral. Digamos, ¿esto es lo que quieres? Pues digamos que yo, ehmm ... *Yo creo, que hice todo lo que… decían, que había que hacer para… tener una vida desahogada, para poder vivir bien*. Entonces, bueno, pues estudié, estudié una carrera, que no es algo que me encantara a priori, porque me costaba estudiar de pequeño, pero luego la carrera me gustó y empecé a trabajar estando estudiando. (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es, italics mine)

Miguel employs this lay violated educational meritocracy narrative - "I think I did everything they said you had to do to have a comfortable life [*vida desahogada*], to be able to live well [*vivir bien*]"-to frame his entire biography. He recalls a precarious but positively hopeful ascent through the media sector, initially as an unpaid intern where "you worked for free [*se trabajaba gratis*]; at most they paid your transport pass" and the privileged few got meal tickets: "those were the really lucky interns [eran la leche]". When he got his first actual contract in a small local media company, he remembers it being verry poorly paid: 500-600€ per month, which he managed to raise to 800€ after staging a personal strike. He then got a better contract in a regional media outlet, which after some time he decided to leave for another one which offered worse conditions, but was more interesting and offering better future career prospects.

Over his account, Miguel alternates and blends the hopeful aspirational tones of the past with the disenchanted tones of the hindsight. For instance, he states that "from the very beginning I was always aware that I wasn't going to make money, but I was just starting [*pero estaba empezando*]. He was thus aware that working conditions were bad, while implying that those were handled as temporary and justified by the aspirational fantasy of reaching at some point a better position. This ambition at some point seemed even to be at reach - "I thought I had finally made it" [*yo pensaba ya que lo había conseguido*] - but soon it proved to be instead a hurtful illusion. The 2008 economic crisis tore apart his aspirational hope, trajectory and social position, as Miguel puts it:

> And then the 2008 crisis hits Spain, for example. And I, luckily, because I have a job, I get through it more or less. But many colleagues were left, for example, without work. A lot of people lost their homes in Spain. I was also affected by that in some way. I couldn't pay the mortgage. Even though I had a job, I couldn't pay the mortgage. So I was still precarious, even though I was a young promise in my field [*seguía siendo precario, aunque era una joven promesa]*, in television. And after that, well*,* it was just surviving [*fue sobrevivir*]. When that programme ends, you go to whatever you can find. You can no longer choose, there isn't much. And they all pay more or less the same. The good times of being a journalist in television were already over. They existed until I came out of university, really, but I never got to experience them. So you realise that you earn the same as a waiter as you do as a journalist. You can pretty much build the same life either way [*Te puedes montar la vida casi igual*].
>
> And if things get a bit difficult for you, many colleagues quit. For me it was very vocational, very much about identifying my identity with that. And that's why I've kept going. But I'm

> already aware that when things go badly, well, if there isn't… Nowadays it's like they hire you for projects, for this programme, for this season, for this… It's six months, three months, a year. If the programme works you can be there four or five. Very rarely are there programmes that last much longer than that. I haven't been there. And I don't know what else I can tell you. That everything they told me I could achieve when I was a student in secondary school or at university, it didn't come true [*todo lo que me dijeron que podía conseguir cuando era estudiante en el instituto o en la universidad, no se cumplió*]. You're not going to have a comfortable life. You're going to be precarious [*vas a ser precario*]. You have colleagues who, well, work in bars and so on and live just as well as you. I don't know if all that effort was worth it. For me it was, because I liked it. But I don't know if for my generation it was worth it. And that's it. (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es, italics mine)[26]

Miguel's account condenses the core features of social disintegration experienced by this type. The biographical turning point is explicitly financial-residential: "I couldn't pay the mortgage. Even though I had a job, I couldn't pay the mortgage." Losing the house constitutes both the driver and the marker of *déclassement* from the path toward a professional middle-class position he had undertaken. And this *déclassement* - centred on losing home ownership and the prospect of a comfortable career - is understood and framed as "keep being precarious" [*seguía siendo precario*]. Miguel also explains what being precarious entails: "surviving" [s*obrevivir*], going through extremely insecure jobs in a collapsed labour market and declining sector. This scenario also evokes the secondary disintegration experienced by this type: lacking secure work and housing even in its basic sense. The comparison with bartenders earning the same wage further captures this idea-the kind of life he senses himself landing into.

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[26] Y ahí llega la crisis en España del 2008, por ejemplo. Y yo, por suerte, porque tengo trabajo, la sorteo más o menos. Pero ahí muchos compañeros se quedaron, por ejemplo, sin trabajo. Mucha gente se ha quedado sin casa en España. Yo también soy afectado de algún modo por eso. *No me pude pagar la hipoteca. Aun teniendo trabajo, no podía pagar la hipoteca*. Entonces *seguía siendo precario*, *aunque era una joven promesa de lo mío*, de la tele. Y después de aquello, pues fue sobrevivir. Cuando ese programa termina, vas al que encuentres. Ya no puedes elegir, no hay mucho. Y todos más o menos pagan lo mismo. La época buena de ser periodista en televisión ya se había acabado. Existió hasta que yo salí de la universidad realmente, pero no la llegué a conocer. Entonces te das cuenta que cobras lo mismo siendo camarero que siendo periodista. Te puedes montar la vida casi igual.
Y como lo tengas un poco difícil, muchos compañeros lo dejan. Lo mío era muy vocacional, muy de identificar mi identidad con eso. Y por eso he seguido. Pero ya soy consciente que cuando esto se dé mal, pues si no hay... Hoy día es como que te contratan para proyectos, para este programa, para esta temporada, para este... Son seis meses, tres meses, un año. Si el programa funciona puedes estar cuatro o cinco. En muy raras ocasiones hay programas que duren muchísimo más tiempo. Yo no he estado allá. Y no sé qué más te puedo contar. Que todo lo que me dijeron que podía conseguir cuando era estudiante en el instituto o en la universidad, no se cumplió. *Ni vas a tener una vida desahogada. Vas a ser precario*. Tienes compañeros que, bueno, trabajan en bares y tal y viven tan bien como tú. No sé si mereció la pena todo ese esfuerzo. A mí sí, porque me gustaba. Pero no sé si para mi generación mereció la pena. Y ya está. (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es, italics mine)

The excerpt also evokes how this experience of *déclassement* is morally decoded: self-worth is preserved by reframing his work as vocational rather than aspirational, violated labourism is evoked in the impossibility of paying the mortgage while employed, and violated meritocracy powerfully opens and seals the entire narrative ("even though I was a young promise in my field"). These dimensions are explored in detail in section 6.3. What is important here is that Miguel outlines both the norms defining social integration in Spain - secure job and especially secure housing - and the meaning of precarity as a relational experience of failing to uphold those norms, primarily in their higher version, but increasingly also in their basic one.

Miguel's experience is not exceptional. Other Spanish interviewees evoke how precarious work translates into housing insecurity - crucially the impossibility of buying a home, but increasingly of renting too. Carmen is a secondary school teacher in her late thirties, working in Madrid on a temporary contract basis. This job was an improvement after years of even more precarious jobs in the hospitality and retail sector in Madrid, a long-period of unemployment during the 2011 crisis just when finishing university in life sciences, followed by a year parenthesis of working as a cashier in a supermarket in the UK. When asked about how she feels about her current job, she says that she also enjoys her work, but:

> Well, I am satisfied, yes, because I like the job. But… I am… I'm being honest, I mean, in Madrid my salary is not compatible with housing. I mean, housing is very expensive for what I actually earn, for me on my own, right? But no… What I mean is that rents in Madrid, or buying a flat in Madrid, is disproportionate for my salary. There's no way I can buy a flat here.[27]

Carmen discusses housing insecurity in relation to the level of her salary, which despite being above average - around 1800/1900 € she says - prevents her from securing an apartment for good. Despite realizing that also secure renting has become increasingly difficult, her aspiration and point of reference remains owning a house, as she concludes "I can't buy a flat here [*aquí no puedo comprarme un piso vamos*]". When pushed to reflect more on the concrete possibilities to opening a mortgage to buy house, she first reproposes the same normative aspiration and then realizes that she had had already an hard time in securing a rent contract. She recalls that the previous year she tried to change

[27] A ver, yo satisfecha sí estoy, porque a mí me gusta el trabajo. - Pero… - Yo soy… - Yo soy sincera, o sea, en Madrid mi salario no es compatible con la vivienda. O sea, la vivienda es muy cara para lo que yo realmente cobro, para mí sola, ¿no? - Pero no… Quiero decir que los alquileres en Madrid, o la compra de pisos en Madrid, es desproporcionado para mi salario. Yo aquí no puedo comprarme un piso vamos.

home, as but she was not able to find a new one to rent. Beyond income levels, having a temporary contract prevented her from securing a rental apartment:

> No, of course… The thing is I can't apply for a mortgage, without of course… well I imagine that maybe if you've been many years, eh… with contracts already for a whole year because you're quite high up, maybe then you can apply for one… but not now, of course not. The thing is I couldn't even apply for a rental, I mean, when I was looking this September… eh well my friend I was living with left the flat, he had to go, and then with another friend we started looking for a flat and since neither of us had a permanent contract… we couldn't fin-[she interrupts], nobody would rent to us, so I stayed in this one… one reason was that too, because… not even for a rental, not even that. (Carmen, 39, high-school teacher, n. 1_es)[28]

A similar dynamic emerges from Laura's account. Laura is a social worker in her early thirties, also working in Madrid. When asked about how she feels about her job she says that her job is demanding - "a nivel currículum y a nivel laboral, es un trabajo muy fuerte, muy exigente" - but the salary is, in "pretty precarious, close to the bare minimum" [*bastante precario, rozando el límite del mínimo*] as she explains currently earning 1,300€ net per month - which she deems "tight, very tight" [*justito, muy justito*]. Laura's employment history is a sequence of precarious arrangements in her professionals field: substitutions, part-time contracts, contracts labelled "obra y servicio" that allowed dismissal at will. Every summer she was fired, then rehired in September. A change in labour legislation (see Chapter 10) converted her into "fija-discontinua", formally more secure, but substantively the same. Only recently did she obtain a permanent contract. When asked whether this changed anything, she stated that while for employment insecurity little changed, this at least granted her access to the rental market:

> Not really. A little bit, the security. For example, when I moved house, if you don't have a permanent contract, they won't let you into any flat, none. So it gives you that security, but at the work level the company can fire me at any moment just the same. They compensate

[28] No claro.. Es que yo no puedo pedirme una hipoteca, sin claro... hombre me imagino - que igual si llevas muchos años, eh.... con contratos ya que todo un año porque estás muy arriba - a lo mejor te lo puedes pedir... pero ahora no, claro que no. Es que no podía pedir el alquiler quiero decir cuando he buscado este en septiembre ... eh pues mi amigo con el que vivía se fue del piso se tenía que ir, y entonces con otra amiga nos - pusimos a buscar un piso y como no teníamos - un contrato indefinido ninguna...no encontr.[she interrupts], nadie nos lo alquilaba entonces me quedé en este... una razón - era esa también, porque... ni para alquiler ni siquiera (Carmen, 39, high-school teacher, n.1_es)

you what they owe, but you're out. So, a little more security, but it doesn't change that much.[29] (Laura, 30, social worker, n. 9_es)

While open-ended contract unlocked access to renting to Laura - differently from Carmen - difficulty persist in being able to afford it over time. With raising rent prices and stagnating wages, that is the relational aspect of financial and housing insecurity, for both Laura and Carmen the prospect looming in the horizon is one of progressive expulsion from their neighbourhood and possibly from the city itself. This is another, more visible and geographical aspect, of the social disintegration induced by precarity: expulsion from places, beyond being expelled from the norms. Alternatively, people who can move back to their parents, thus contradicting the norm tying adulthood to independence through security in work and housing. This looming perspective is clearly evocated by Laura:

Living in Madrid, from Madrid I went to Usera, from Usera I'm moving to [the outskirts], and I see myself living in Toledo in a few years. But since Madrid has become so expensive, also because of tourist flats, everything keeps moving south, people are going south, and the more demand there is in the south the more prices rise, so everything keeps being postponed... I have colleagues much older than me who are unable to leave home on our salary, and you find yourself in your mid-thirties living with your parents, and that's not even half normal.[30] (Laura, 30, social worker, n. 9_es)

For Miguel, the looming perspective evoked by Laura has already materialised. When I met him, he had left Madrid years ago and was living and working in the Canary Islands. In an informal conversation, prior to the interview, he summarised his trajectory with a stark phrase: "they threw me out of Madrid" [*me echaron de Madrid*]. When I asked him to elaborate, he replied:

Interviewer: You said the other day, when we were on the terrace, "they threw me out of Madrid". What exactly did you mean?

Miguel: If you have a precarious salary, which is how the majority of people live, not only in Madrid, anywhere... There are people who live very well, but they are very few, and in

[29] "En realidad, no. Un poco sí, la seguridad. Por ejemplo, para cuando me mudé de casa, para la hora de entrar en un piso, si tú no tienes un contrato fijo, no te dan, no te dejan entrar en ningún piso, en ninguno. Entonces, esa seguridad sí te la da, pero a nivel laboral y condiciones, la empresa me puede despedir en cualquier momento de la misma manera. Te indemniza la parte que te toca, pero te vas igual. Entonces, un poquito más de seguridad, pero tampoco cambia tanto."

[30] "Yo viviendo en Madrid, de Madrid me fui a Usera, de Usera me estoy yendo a [las afueras], y me veo viviendo en Toledo de aquí a unos años. Pero como Madrid se ha encarecido tanto, tantísimo, también por los pisos turísticos, todo se va yendo al sur, y la gente se está yendo al sur, y cuanta más demanda hay en el sur se van subiendo los precios, entonces todo se va como postergando [...] Tengo compañeras que con bastantes más años que yo son incapaces con nuestro sueldo de irse de casa, y te ves con treinta y pico años viviendo en casa de tus padres, y eso no es ni medio normal."

> Madrid you live very well, If you are one of those people... If you have money in Madrid, you're in a wonderful city, but *everything costs money*. Housing [cost] is outrageous, but not to find a great place, to find *something decent* [*algo digno*]. I lived in attic rooms, which I loved, it was my home, I had a great time there. But it was *substandard housing* [*infravivienda*], an attic of 35 square metres. In Lavapiés yes, in the centre of Madrid, but in a rough neighbourhood [*barrio jodido*]. And you pay a fortune. The moment you lose that job or the housing contract expires, where do you go in Madrid? Back to the outskirts, back to [the province] I had wanted to leave!? […] *I feel expelled even to go out on the street, to meet friends*. You can't be in a square, you can't be in a park, you have to be on a café terrace, you have to be consuming. All leisure is always paying, always [...] So *you live drowned. You live anguished.*[31] (Miguel, journalist, 43, n. 23_es, italics mine)

Miguel's account further illustrates how precarity acts as a classing process of social disintegration, which for this type is twofold. After being thrown out of the middle-class security path - losing his mortgaged home - Miguel also struggles to secure housing on the rental market: "something decent" [*algo digno*], not something great [*superguay*]. He ends up living in what he explicitly calls substandard housing [*infravivienda*]. Mobilising a language of dignity and explicitly qualifying his accommodation as substandard, Miguel articulates having fallen below the general norm of work-housing security, grazing its lower limit. He blames this push to the limits on precarious salaries [sueldo precario], which he elsewhere explains as corresponding factually to - and contradicting normatively - *mileurismo*: the fact of earning around 1,000€ per month, and the ideological narrative that this amount was conducive to a normal life. Moreover, this excerpt also illustrates how financial precarity, in a commodified urban space, disrupts sociability. As sociability is mediated by and located in consumption, struggling to consume entails being excluded from social relations. Precarity thus disintegrates the very tissue of social relations.

When later asked what salary would be necessary to live in Madrid, Miguel answers that the alternative would be either robust social citizenship - "if we had many more public things, maybe it would be

[31] Dijiste otro día, cuando estábamos en la terraza, 'me echaron de Madrid'. ¿A qué te referías con esto exactamente? - Que si tienes un sueldo precario, que es como vive la mayoría de la gente [...] Hay gente que vive muy bien, que son muy poquitos. Si tienes dinero en Madrid, eres de una ciudad maravillosa, pero todo cuesta dinero. La vivienda es desorbitada, pero ya no para encontrar una casa superguay, sino para encontrar algo digno. Yo he vivido en guardillas, que a mí me encantaban, y era mi casa. Pero era una infravivienda, era una guardilla de 35 metros cuadrados. En Lavapiés, de acuerdo, en el centro de Madrid, pero en un barrio jodido. Y pagas una fortuna [...] En el momento en que pierdes ese trabajo o se cumple el contrato de esa vivienda, ¿dónde te vas a Madrid? Otra vez a las afueras, otra vez a [las afueras] de donde yo había querido salir [...] Me siento expulsado para ir a la calle, para quedar con los amigos. No puedes estar en una plaza, no puedes estar en un parque, tienes que estar en una terraza, tienes que estar consumiendo. Siempre todo el ocio es pagando, siempre [...] Entonces vives ahogado. Vives angustiado."

possible" - or a salary high enough to live independently in a commodified society. In any case, he is careful to specify that any direct answer is difficult as everything is relational - "so it's all very relational, you can't put a number on it" and that the issue is not private and economic, but collective and of justice: "It's not a question of putting a figure on it, it's a question of social justice". In the absence of both, outside of Madrid, he is forced to rent a flat in his forties.

Italian experiences share the experience of precarity as social disintegration from educationally expected work-housing security, though exact configurations vary across context. In urban and touristic zones, the pattern closely resembles that of Madrid. Conversely, in more peripheral areas, family resources and particularly home ownership transferred across generations attenuate or solve the housing dimension, while secure work remains a mirage. Variations in the Italian sample may reflect more sampling variation in Italy along the urban-rural divide, or overall country differences (as a stronger role of family as a buffer, even compared to Spain). Yet, what emerges across these configurations is the relational, configurational character of social disintegration: even when one element of integration is secured, the collapse of others can be sufficient to prevent the expected standard of middle-class life from materialising.

The case closest to the Spanish model is the one of Fulvio a 50-year-old high school teacher in Tuscany. Fulvio completed a master degree in tourism sciences, after which he immediately started working as a junior manager in a big touristic company with a nice job and good perspectives. When the company suddenly went broke, he ended working two decades in precarious service-worker jobs in tourism. Thinking about his own trajectory, he says that he inverted that of his parents who own a clothing shop: "my parents came from hunger and made a good life [...] I instead had a wonderful childhood, up to 30, and then the descent." As the turistic sector collapsed during the covid-19 crisis, he decided to change sector and raise his conditions by obtaining a teaching qualification. He invested his remaining savings in a teaching qualification and moved to Tuscany with nothing. There, he found that housing was simply inaccesible:

> Because of over-tourism, there are no homes for workers. A landlord obviously earns triple renting to a tourist rather than to a worker, so I had to adapt. Now I live with seven people, I share my room. At 50, I'm still forced to live with seven people, sharing my room, without even total privacy, but this was the best solution. So I'm basically starving here [*Quindi faccio la fame qui, in buona sostanza]*. (Fulvio, 50, teacher, n. 20_IT)

Like Miguel's infravivienda in Madrid, Fulvio's shared bedroom at fifty constitutes a fall below the housing norm that work was supposed to guarantee. Fulvio names the broken promise explicitly: "I

had started out well, I had a lot of confidence, but in reality this confidence was betrayed clearly, betrayed. Moreover, disintegration extends beyond the material dimensions of work and housing into the fabric of social relations. Fulvio's working life had always been itinerant, but tourism work involved constant human contact, many encounters, which - he recalls - gave him the impression of a full life sustained by the sheer density of experience. Now, displaced to a town where he knows no one, working in a school where "there is no human contact, not even among colleagues," even that surface-level but felt sociability has disappeared:

> Before, solitude wasn't a problem, because I was alone among others. Now I'm alone, truly alone, I no longer have my family, I no longer have economic security, and I'm alone in this town. I feel truly alone. Before, solitude meant being alone in the middle of many people; now I feel truly alone and this despite living in a place full of people, yet here I feel truly alone. (Fulvio, 50, teacher, n. 20_IT)

The repetition of *veramente solo* - five times in a single passage - is not rhetorical but diagnostic. Where Miguel described being "drowned" [*ahogado*] and "anguished" [*angustiado*] in a city that excludes those who cannot consume, Fulvio describes being alone in a place full of people, the social tissue has thinned to the point where physical proximity produces no connection. This is social disintegration in its fullest sense: not one broken nexus but the simultaneous collapse of the conditions - work, housing, relationships -that sustain a structure social position and an articulated life around it.

As anticipated, not all Italian interviewees face the housing dimension with equal intensity. Especially outside of big urban zones, family resources can variably buffer housing insecurity. However, despite family support, work insecurity prevents the attainment of a middle-class social position and structures experiences of precarity. This is the case of Roberta, a 26-year-old psychologist working on a three-year apprenticeship contract as a human resource professional in the greater Rome metropolitan zone, earning around ~1000€ per month. At the very beginning of the interview, she tells me that she was in the process of moving out of her parents' home for the first time-a step she frames as both precarious and overdue. She says having tried the rental market and failed to find a suitable option: "I had looked for rentals but they were too high-600, 700 euros a month, I can't afford them. At those prices, on her salary, independent housing was simply out of reach-as it is, she observes, for her peers: "it's not that young people stay at home with their parents because they don't want to leave-it's that they can't leave." Family in-kind support made the difference in her case, as her father, “a public employee” and “ a saver” [*una formica*, lit. an ant], registered a flat in her name. She could thus move out without paying rent or a mortgage.

Yet this partial realisation of the housing norm was not achieved through her own work-and she knows it. The tension between effort and outcome runs through her entire account. She defines herself as "ambitious" and has never stopped: she finished her studies on time, completed a year-long unpaid internship, then a paid extracurricular one, and finally obtained the apprenticeship contract. Yet despite all this:

> Despite all my privileges, I did a year of unpaid internship, then another placement, now I'm an apprentice, all the effort just to get a contract after years. With all my privileges, I still earn a thousand euros a month and I struggle to live on my own.[32]
>
> (Roberta, 26, psychologist, n. 16_IT)

The phrase "with all my privileges" does double work: it expresses genuine awareness of her relative advantage-the father's flat, the private university, a car at eighteen, never being unemployed-but it also measures the gap between resources invested and outcome obtained. If even someone with these advantages earns a thousand euros and struggles, the norm is structurally violated, not individually failed. She draws the conclusion herself: "I think a thousand euros is not much, but sometimes I feel I should say thank you"and adds that none of her friends or colleagues are managing to live on their own. The family buffer prevented the worst outcome-sharing a room at fifty, or remaining at her parents' indefinitely-but it did not produce the expected result of professional work: secure work and finances "in line with the life of today," as she puts it.

In even more peripheral contexts, the housing problem may be absent altogether-yet work precarity can be equally disintegrating. Giulia is a 39-year-old social educator in Puglia, with a master's degree in pedagogy, who works for a cooperative on a so-called "cyclical indefinite" part-time contract-formally permanent but paid only during the school year [*part-time orizzontale*], roughly 700€ per month. Paradoxically, the transition from temporary to indefinite employment worsened her situation:

> I have a permanent contract, but when they gave it to me I didn't rejoice-because as long as I had a fixed-term contract, when school ended I could claim unemployment benefit,

[32] "Nonostante tutti i miei privilegi, io ho fatto un anno di tirocinio non pagato, poi un altro tirocinio, ora sono in apprendistato, la fatica proprio di arrivare in anni ad avere un contratto. Con tutti i miei privilegi, io comunque prendo mille euro al mese e faccio fatica ad andare a vivere da sola" (Roberta, 26, psychologist, n. 16_IT)

> and for those three months get a minimum. But now that I have a permanent contract, I receive nothing.[33] (Giulia, 39, social educator, n. 6_IT)

Giulia's case illustrates a different configuration of the same relational logic: housing is not the critical dimension-she has property in her provincial town, as she never mentions it. Yet the financial dimension of precarity is severe: three to four months per year without income, a salary that amounts to less than half of what colleagues with equivalent responsibilities earn. What is violated is not the housing norm directly, but the expectation that stable, qualified, professional work should provide the financial basis for a middle-class life. The permanent contract, far from resolving insecurity, institutionalises working poverty by cutting access to the unemployment benefits that had previously bridged the gap. One can have a home and still be precarious, if employment and income do not sustain the life that home is supposed to contain.

Taken together, these Italian accounts confirm the configurational, relational character of the disintegration identified in Spain, while revealing its contextual variation. In urban tourist-prones areas, the mechanism mirrors Madrid: housing commodification expels workers. In semi-urban contexts, family transfers of property partially buffer the housing dimension but leave the work-income mismatch exposed. In peripheral areas, housing may be available, but the employment and financial dimension of precarity remains critical. Across all three configurations, the result is the same: the expected standard of a middle-class life-built on the nexus between professional work, adequate income, and secure housing-fails to materialise.

Roberta elaborates this point at some point during the interview. When asked to elaborate why she had described Italian society as "fragmented" [*frammentata*], she explains:

> Fragmented in the sense that you need a series of concurrent conditions to be well off economically: a decent job, owning a home-which is already a lot, that's no small thing-not being alone but having someone beside you. (Roberta, 26, psychologist, n. 16_IT)[34]

In her lay sociology, what I have described as the configurational character of precarity as social disintegration is expressed as a set of "concurrent conditions" [*concause*] - decent work, secure housing, having a couple (or living with someone) - each necessary, none sufficient, and all increasingly difficult to assemble simultaneously. The very term *concause* - borrowed from medico-legal language

[33] "Io ho un contratto a tempo indeterminato, ma quando me l'hanno fatto io non ho gioito-perché finché ho lavorato a tempo determinato, quando finiva la scuola io potevo chiedere la disoccupazione, e per quei tre mesi usufruire un minimo. Ma adesso che ho il contratto a tempo indeterminato, non percepisco niente." (Giulia, 39, social educator, n. 6_IT)
[34] "Frammentata che serve una serie di concause per stare bene economicamente: un lavoro dignitoso, avere una casa di proprietà-che è già quello, non è poco-non stare da soli ma avere qualcuno accanto." (Roberta, 26, psychologist, n. 16_IT)

- captures the relational logic: it is the combination, not any single factor, that determines whether the expected social position can be sustained. As the preceding accounts demonstrate, when any element of this configuration collapses, the others are pulled into question.

6.2.2 Status inconsistency: workers but with culture and vocation

The structural disintegration outlined in the previous section, has a direct correlate in interviewees' sense of their own social location. When asked where they stand in the social hierarchy, declassed aspiring middle-class workers consistently struggle to place themselves. Their coordinates are contradictory: high (but devalued) cultural capital and professional credentials, but low material security; valued work, but precarious conditions; educational distinction, but economic proximity to the precarious working class. This amounts to a severe case of status inconsistency (Lenski 1954; Dogan 2011; Raffini 2013) that is a discrepancy between the dimensions along which social position is typically assessed, which generates not a stable identity but a sustained, often painful effort to keep one's sense together in a disintegrating social order.

This effort is visible in the range of strategies through which interviewees attempt to resolve - or simply articulate - their contradictory location. These range from full irresolution, partial resolutions by averaging or splitting the contradictory dimensions, to more assertive redefinitions of class position that draw on cultural and moral resources. Far from routine identity maintenance, this is active negotiation work under the pressure of disintegration, as interviewees are not describing a settled position but attempting to compose one from incompatible materials.

The most striking articulation of unresolved status inconsistency comes from Laura, the social worker in Madrid introduced in the previous section. When asked whether class categories mean anything to her and where she would place herself, she responds by cleaving her own identity through the eyes of others:

> It doesn't really make any sense, I mean, there are layers [*estratos*], sure. Which one am I in? Well, it depends where you look at me from. If you look at me from the side of empowered people, people with businesses, families that are already settled, secured, with money, with land, I don't know, I'm the lowest piece of shit [*la última mierda*]. If you look at me from the side of the people I work with, I'm an empowered woman, a woman with an education, a

> woman who's had her life sorted out, always, better or worse. So, where am I? Well, wherever I end up, I don't know. (Laura, 30, social worker, n. 9_es)[35]

Rather than fixing her social location by drawing boundaries above and below, which is the standard operation of symbolic boundary work, Laura uses the perspective of her boundary groups to cleave her own self in two: Seen from above, from the propertied and secure, she is *la última mierda*. Seen from below, from the vulnerable families she assists, people living in what she elsewhere calls "learned helplessness" [*indefensión aprendida*], she is privileged: educated, employed, housed. The question "where am I?" [*¿dónde estoy yo?*] is posed and left unanswered. When pressed further, asked whether she feels closer to one side or the other, she does not resolve the split but restates it in the first person:

> I think that, within my own precarity and everything, I'm very, very much in between [*muy entremedias*]. I mean, I'm a worker [*currita*] who works 40 hours, who takes the train home, who pays rent and can't afford to buy a flat, I'm a worker [*currante*]. But then again, if you look at it from the families I work with, I'm a woman who's had everything in life, always, with an education, a stable job, a house, who can afford to pay rent. So, where am I? I don't know [*no lo sé*]. (Laura, 30, social worker, n. 9_es)[36]

What is analytically significant is not simply that Laura cannot locate herself, but *why* she cannot. Her status inconsistency is produced by the very process of disintegration documented in 6.2.1: she has the educational credentials and the professional position that should place her in the middle class, but the material conditions, the precarious salary, the rental insecurity, the impossibility of home ownership, that place her far below it. The inconsistency is not a subjective confusion but an accurate reading of an objectively contradictory position. And the vocabulary she deploys is revealing: upward, the boundary is drawn in terms of property and security ("settled families, money, land"); downward, in terms of education and resources ("a woman with studies, a stable job"). The class boundaries she perceives are simultaneously economic and cultural, precisely because her own position is split across

[35] "La verdad es que no tiene ningún sentido, o sea, que hay estratos, pues seguramente. ¿En cuál estoy yo? Pues según de dónde me mires. Si me miras desde gente empoderada, gente con negocios, gente de familias ya asentadas, aseguradas, con dinero, con tierras, no lo sé, yo soy la última mierda, si me miras desde el lado de la gente con la que trabajo, soy una empoderada, una tía con estudios, una tía que ha tenido la vida resuelta, siempre, con mejores o peores condiciones, entonces, ¿dónde estoy yo? Pues estoy, donde me toque, no lo sé."

[36] "Yo creo que estoy dentro de mi precariedad y todo creo que estoy muy muy, muy entremedias. Sí que soy una currita que trabajo 40 horas, que voy en tren a mi casa, que pago un alquiler y no tengo acceso a comprarme una casa, soy una currante, pero sin embargo, pues lo que te digo, si lo miras desde las familias con las que trabajo en este caso, soy una tía que ha tenido todo en la vida siempre, que con estudios, un trabajo estable, una casa que puede pagarse el alquiler, entonces, ¿dónde estoy? No lo sé."

them. When I finally ask her directly whether she feels closer to one side or the other, the exchange end with and admission of categorization defeat: I can't tell you [*no te sé decir]*.

Carmen, the secondary-school teacher also introduced in 6.2.1, attempts to resolve the same inconsistency through a different strategy: averaging. When asked about social classes and where she would locate herself, she answers without hesitation, but then immediately qualifies:

> Me, lower-middle. I mean, I don't consider myself a person in need… I mean, I have my basic needs covered, of course. I have a roof, I have food, but I can't aspire to much more either.[37] (Carmen, 39, high-school teacher, n. 1_es)

"Lower-middle" [*medio bajo*] is Carmen's arithmetic solution: she has her basic needs met (a roof, food) but cannot aspire to much more. The resolution works by averaging the contradiction into a single position. Yet the boundaries she draws above and below her reveal how precarious this compromise is: (i) below her "people who can't pay the heating at the end of the month" [*personas que para llegar a fin de mes no pueden pagarse la calefacción*], a threshold of extreme material deprivation, bordering the subproletariat; (ii) above her: "people who have a home they own. I mean, that's not even a luxury, it's a home in property [*una vivienda en propiedad*]. That person is already a class above me, for sure" [*está una clase por encima de mí, desde luego*] (Carmen, 39, high-school teacher, n. 1_es).

This last formulation is analytically decisive. For Carmen, the class boundary that separates her from the stratum above is not income, occupation, or education: it is home ownership. Having a house in property is explicitly constructed as a class marker of a social position she does not occupy, something that spontaneously feel to her as a luxury, but, she normatively corrects, should not be a luxury at all. This confirms, from the subjective side, what section 6.2.1 documented structurally: that in the Southern Europe, housing (ownership) operates as a constitutive dimension of social integration, not a secondary correlate of employment status. When Carmen says that owning a home places someone "a class above me," she is articulating a class boundary whose axis is the work-housing nexus itself.

Italian interviewees elaborate the same inconsistency but with different emphases. Fulvio, a fifty-year-old former tourism worker and aspiring cultural professional in Tuscany, resolves the contradiction by explicitly splitting the material and cultural dimensions of his position. When asked to place himself in the social hierarchy, he states:

[37] "Yo medio bajo. O sea, no me considero una persona con necesidades... O sea, tengo mis necesidades básicas cubiertas, desde luego. Tengo un techo, tengo comida, pero no puedo aspirar a mucho más tampoco". (Carmen, 39, high-school teacher, n. 1_es)

> At the moment I'm among the poor ones… economically I'm poor, so I don't know where to place myself. I was forced not to be able to enrich my soul, because I've enriched it enormously, my soul, and so in this sense I feel very rich, maybe richer than the rich, I've lived experiences that you couldn't live even by paying.[38] (Fulvio, 50, cultural worker, n. 20_it)

The temporal qualifier "at the moment" [*al momento*] does important work, framing poverty defensively as a phase rather than a structural position. The resolution of status inconsistency here operates through a different move: splitting the self into an economic dimension ("poor") and a cultural-spiritual one ("richer than the rich"). This is some kind of compensatory moral work negotiating it status inconsistency: drawing on incorporated cultural capital - travel, experiences, human and cosmopolitan exposure - as a source of worth that economic precarity cannot erode.

Fulvio's vision of the social structure is correspondingly polarised: "now I see poor and rich, there's no middle class anymore, either you're forced to work 24 hours a day, just sacrificing to make it to the end of the month, or you have a lot of money and can live well" [*adesso io vedo poveri e ricchi, non c'è più la distinzione del ceto medio*] (Fulvio, 50, cultural worker, n. 20_it). This perception of a vanished middle class is the structural correlate of his personal uprooting from the professional middle class, which creates his very unease in squaring his own sense of social position.

Yet the split between material poverty and cultural richness also generates a downward boundary more subtle, and ambivalently held. Fulvio distinguishes himself from people who:

> "haven't had the chance to nourish their soul, because maybe they even earn enough to afford a 50-inch TV, all the platforms, Netflix and so on, but that isn't richness" […] "[And people who] buy from Zara, watch films on Netflix, watch the game on Sky, play the lottery, and enjoy that, but it's not real enjoyment" [*non è vero godimento*] (Fulvio, 50, cultural worker, n. 20_it).

He is careful to qualify this as "not a criticism of how they live" [*non è una critica al loro modo di vivere*], and elsewhere expresses genuine compassion for manual workers: "I imagine the workers, the families of workers, who leave for work and die at work - that's terrible" [*quello è brutto*]. The boundary is thus cultural rather than moral in the strict sense: it differentiates modes of living rather than moral

[38] Al momento sono tra quelli poveri... economicamente sono povero, quindi non so dove collocarmi. Sono stato costretto a non poter arricchire la mia anima, perché l'ho arricchita tantissimo la mia anima, e quindi in questo senso mi sento molto ricco, forse più ricco dei ricchi, ho vissuto esperienze, che neanche pagando puoi vivere. (Fulvio, 50, cultural worker, n. 20_it)

worth, and it is drawn with ambivalence rather than contempt. Still, it functions as a symbolic resource that preserves a sense of distinction despite material convergence with - or even inferiority to - the very populations he observes with compassion.

A more politically articulated resolution of status inconsistency emerges from Miguel, the journalist in his early forties whose trajectory of disintegration was analysed in 6.2.1. When asked to identify his class position, Miguel responds without hesitation, but through a revealing layered self-description. He opens the interview by describing himself as "a journalist, a curious, restless, questioning person, interested in the world, in the things that surround us, in reality, with social conscience", but then adss: "and simple for the rest, normal" [*sencillo por lo demás, normal*] (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es). Professional identity comes first and carries all the markers of cultural distinction (curiosity, restlessness, social awareness); ordinariness is appended as a second layer, that on the contrary picture himself as simple, ordinary… "for the rest". When the class question is posed directly -"at the level of class, where would you place yourself?" -Miguel answers without wavering:

> Working class [*clase obrera*]. Labour class. I am a... [name of journalist] a journalist I greatly admired used to say that when he walked into the newsroom of El País he felt like he was walking back into the cotton plantation. He felt like a slave. Not quite as much as a slave, no, but yes, we are workers. We have a boss and we all go to the office, whether it's an office or a field. We are workers at work [*somos obreros o a la obra*].[39] (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es)

Miguel resolves his status inconsistency through a more politicised variant of the same move as Fulvio. Where Fulvio calls himself *povero*, Miguel calls himself *obrero*: both claim a position at the bottom through class language, but Miguel's term is more politically connotated, redefining class through the wage relation (we have a boss, we go to work, it doesn't matter whether it's an office or a field, we are workers) rather than through a condition (being poor). The binary vision of society this invokes, workers versus the unfairly privileged [*privilegiada, gente que tiene privilegios... por haber nacido en una familia acomodada o por ser corruptos*], is characteristic of the populist-left moral economy explored in the following sections. Yet in both cases, the class claim does not exhaust self-placement. Just as Fulvio is poor but "richer than the rich" in soul, Miguel is a worker but *curious, inquieto*, a journalist with social conscience: the cultural surplus persists, in a more moral-cultural register for Fulvio, in a

[39] Clase baja. Clase obrera. Yo soy un... [nombre del periodista] un periodista que admiraba mucho, decía cuando entraba la redacción del diario El País que volvía a la plantación de algodón. Se sentía un esclavo. Y tanto como esclavo no, pero sí que somos obreros. Tenemos un patrón y vamos todos a la oficina, da igual que sea la oficina que al campo. Somos obreros o a la obra.

more cultural-intellectual one for Miguel. The downward boundary, while framed in solidaristic terms - people below him are "oppressed, really suffering" [*oprimidos, están muy jodidos*] - still operates through an unstated differentiator: he has work, even if he cannot pay the mortgage, they have nothing. The universalising class language does not dissolve the status inconsistency so much as cover it with a political vocabulary. When challenged by the interviewer on the apparent contradiction of calling himself working class despite holding advanced education, Miguel doubles down but falters: "social status today is not given by education or any of that. Social status today is given by power. You can be super educated and be a worker, I don't know, I don't know how to..." [*el estatus social hoy día te lo da el poder. Puedes ser superculto y ser un obrero. No sé, no sé cómo...*] (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es).

Taken together, these boundary-drawing strategies share a common backdrop in the perception of social structure as undergoing polarisation, with a vanishing middle ground. Fulvio's stark vision - "I see poor and rich, there's no middle class anymore" - is the most explicit formulation, but the same intuition underlies Laura's oscillation between *última mierda* and *empoderada*, and Carmen's "lower-middle" compromise that leaves her one housing tenure away from the stratum above. When interviewees manage to resolve their status inconsistency and arrive at a class identification, the result tends toward a dichotomous class consciousness: a dualistic vision of society divided between workers below and the privileged above.

Yet the boundaries drawn by this type are not purely dualistic. It is not a punitive downward boundary against the undeserving, but a residual cultural distinction that persists within the dualistic frame. Miguel is a worker, but a curious, restless, and socially conscious one. Fulvio is poor, but "richer than the rich" in soul. Laura is a *currante*, but also a professionally qualified woman whom the vulnerable families she works with see as *empoderada*. The cultural capital acquired through education - which no longer secures a middle-class position materially - survives as an incorporated resource that maintains the downward boundary and complicates the upward one. Those below are not scapegoated but observed with compassion (Fulvio's sadness for the workers "who die at work") or professional empathy (Laura's description of "learned helplessness"), while those above are not merely richer but morally marked as undeservingly privileged. The boundary-making is thus dualistic in its basic structure - us workers versus them privileged - but blurred at both edges by a surplus that refuses full dissolution into either a working-class or a middle-class identification. This boundary pattern, characteristic of the type, is the manifested symbolic negotiation of the experienced status inconsistency at the material level. As the following section will show, this "bleeding dichotomic consciousness" encapsulates the moral economy violation through which these interviewees interpret and judge the causes and culprits of their social disintegration.

Another feature of this type is the attachment to professional identity as preservation of moral worth. Giulia, the Italian educator, introduces herself as "almost completely satisfied" with her life, and specifies that what could be better is "not so much what I do, the content, but some of the conditions and the pay" [*non tanto per quello che faccio, per il contenuto, quanto per alcune modalità e anche per la retribuzione*] (Giulia, 39, educator, n. 6_it). The distinction between content and conditions - between the vocation and its material reward - is central. Professional competence and dedication operate as sources of moral worth that survive the devaluation of material position: Giulia is an educator who works with disabled children in schools, is more qualified than many of the teachers she is subordinated to, and earns half their salary. Her self-worth is anchored in what she does and knows, not in what she earns. However the discrepancy between the two is felt acutely, and articulated as injustice rather than mere misfortune.

For Miguel, a parallel move redefines what "making it" means altogether. When asked whether anyone in his cohort managed to achieve the professional success that eluded most, he responds:

> We all made it, in our own way. Because maybe it's not about trying so hard. It's… about keeping on trying. If you never stop working as… […] in the end you make it, because it's what you've always done. But if you finally decide to go and work in a bar, drive a taxi, whatever… well, since you live the same anyway, you're going to earn the same… then you'll end up leaving it, and maybe, if it's not very vocational, you feel like you've failed. (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es)[40]

"Making it" is redefined as persistence rather than achievement, as continuing to work in one's field despite earning the same as a bartender. The material dimension is here explicitly neutralised: "you live the same, you earn the same", something which used to matter, but it does not matter anymore. What matters now is not leaving, not abandoning the vocation (and possibly residual hope of re-integration maybe one day), while success is redefined as "not giving up", after falling into precarity. We all made it, in our own way" is not a vindication of meritocracy but something in between its inversion and its soothing neutralization: the educational promise has not been fulfilled materially, and everyone knows it, but it is symbolically redeemed by vocational persistence, to which is probably attached a residual fantasy of attaining the originally expected social position through vocational

[40] "Todos a nuestra manera lo hemos conseguido. Porque a lo mejor no es esforzarte tanto. Es... seguir intentándolo. Si no dejas nunca de trabajar de... [...] al final lo consigues porque es lo que has hecho siempre. Pero si decides finalmente irte a trabajar a un bar, a conducir un taxi, a lo que sea... bueno, como también se vive igual, vas a ganar lo mismo... pues lo vas a terminar dejando y puede ser que si no es muy vocacional, que sientas como que has fracasado." (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es)

persistence, maybe one day. It is, in other words, the moral reworking of "*violated meritocracy*", a theme that is explored systematically in the following section.

6.3 Violated meritocracy, violated labourism

The social disintegration documented in section 6.2 is not experienced as a morally neutral condition. Interviewees belonging to this type consistently measure their situation against a set of normative expectations about what education, professional commitment, and work should deliver, and find these expectations systematically unmet. What structures this moral economy is a hierarchical, sequential double violation. The first and most immediately articulated breach is that of *educational meritocracy*: studying, obtaining qualifications, and entering a professional milieu should have translated into a secure social position. The second, which emerges as deeper and more destabilising, is that of *labourism*: work itself, regardless of its professional prestige, should guarantee access to the basic material standards of a secure life. The first concerns the broken link between education and position; the second concerns the broken link between work and subsistence. Together, they constitute the double moral injury that defines this type's relationship to the social order. As Miguel put it at the opening of his biography, he did "everything they said you had to do to have a comfortable life," and found that the promise was not kept, not only in terms of professional achievement but in terms of the most elementary material security. This section examines these two violations in sequence, before turning to the residual, contradictory investment in the meritocratic norm that persists alongside its acknowledged breach.

6.3.1 Violated educational meritocracy

The most expressive formulation of the violated norm comes, once again, from Miguel. In a later passage of the interview, returning to the themes that had opened his biographical narrative, he spells out the logic of the broken promise with a clarity that is at once analytical and deeply personal:

> 'Study, study until the end, get your degree'. Nowadays it's the master's, the postgraduate, whatever they've invented since then. So that you can be successful at work and never lack job. But even if you do all that, sometimes work is still lacking. Being successful is much harder. [...] I think I did well… Like many others of my generation [*como mucha otra gente de mi generación*]. Because they sold us a lie [*nos han vendido una mentira*] - that's another thing -

> they sold us - the thing we were discussing the other day - the idea like that it's a personal problem [*un problema personal*]. That it's our problem. That you're not good enough. Not successful enough. You don't work hard enough. It's a lie [*es mentira*]. No matter how hard you try, you'll get the normal thing [*lo normal*]. Whatever there is for everyone [*lo que haya para todo el mundo*]. If you're lucky, well yes, if you have contacts, if you happen to be in the right place at the right moment.[41] (Miguel, 43, screenwriter/journalist, n. 23_es)

The passage condenses several layers of the violated norm: the meritocratic script itself (study, get your degree, never lack a job), its unmasking as a collective deception articulated through the shift from the individual to the generational register ("like many others of my generation"), and, crucially, the denunciation of what Miguel calls the personalisation of structural failure, the ideological mechanism by which systemic precarity is reframed as individual inadequacy through self-guilt. His response is categorical: "it's a lie."

The same violation is experienced by Italian interviewees, though it is articulated through a different moral grammar. Where Miguel formulates the broken promise as a generational analysis of the Spanish labour market, a diagnosis of collective deception in which an entire cohort was sold a script that no longer works, Giulia narrates it as a confrontation with a concrete, vertical, and usurpatory institutional system. Giulia, a thirty-nine-year-old social educator working with disabled children in schools in southern Italy, holds a five-year degree in pedagogical sciences and pursued continuous professional training. She is contractually subordinated to, and paid half the salary of, special-needs support teachers [*docenti di sostegno*] who in many cases hold degrees in entirely unrelated fields and obtained their teaching qualification through what she describes as purchased credentials acquired abroad [*TFA acquistati all'estero*]:

> We are professionally trained graduates [*professionisti laureati*]. Some even hold multiple degrees, in pedagogy, psychology, or other fields. Master's degrees, nearly all of us have them. [...] And yet, because of the way support teachers are recruited, people arrive who are not prepared. Despite having obtained the TFA abroad. [...] They may have studied economics, or law, or something else entirely. But then they want to teach, and the shortest route seems to be special-needs support. [...] We may be doing the same hours as support

[41] " 'Estudiar, estudiar hasta el final, sacarte la carrera'. Hoy día ya es el máster, el posgrado, lo que se han inventado después. Para poder ser exitoso en tu trabajo y que no te falte el trabajo. Pero aunque lo hagas, a veces el trabajo falta. Ser exitoso es mucho más difícil. [...] Yo creo que lo hice bien. Y como mucha otra gente de mi generación. Porque nos han vendido. Esto es otra cosa. Nos han vendido, por lo que hablamos el otro día también. Como que es un problema personal. Que es nuestro problema. Es porque no eres suficientemente bueno. No eres suficientemente exitoso. No trabajas lo suficiente. Es mentira. Por más que te esfuerces, vas a conseguir lo normal. Lo que haya para todo el mundo. Si tienes suerte, pues sí. Si tienes suerte, pues suena la flauta, lo petas."

> teachers and we are paid half. If a support teacher earns on average 1,500 to 1,600 euros for eighteen weekly hours, we earn, when it goes well, 700 euros.[42] (Giulia, 39, social educator, n. 6_it)

The boundary Giulia draws is vertical and usurpatory: those who occupy the positions above her do so illegitimately, because they have purchased the merit she earned. But the violated meritocracy does not end at the level of credentials. Giulia links her working conditions to a broader chain of subcontracting in which the service nominally costs the state two thousand euros per student per month, but the funds pass from the state to the regions, from the regions to the provinces, from the provinces to the cooperatives, and each of them, as she puts it, "everyone has to eat" [*tutti devono mangiare*], until what reaches her is 700 euros. The violated meritocracy thus emerges in the tension between devalued, unrewarded credentials and a merely extractive institutional architecture. Those above her have bought their way in, the system that employs her captures the value she produces, and when she attempts to assert her professional competence - she recounts an episode where a school administrator subjected her to what she calls a "lecture" [*lezione magistralis*] on her own role - the answer she receives is humiliation.

The comparison between the two national articulations is instructive. Spanish interviewees tend to formulate the violated meritocracy as a strong generational narrative, a diagnosis of structural trends in the labour market couched in a quasi-sociological vocabulary: "my generation," collective deception, systemic forces overriding individual effort. Italian interviewees, while acknowledging generational differences, tend to formulate the same violation as a denunciation of concrete institutional mechanisms: purchased credentials, extractive subcontracting chains, clientelistic access, abuse of power. The violations are structurally equivalent, but the moral grammars through which they are articulated diverge. Fulvio, a fifty-year-old high school teacher in Tuscany, recalls understanding at a decisive moment in his career that professional advancement depended not on qualifications but on "closeness to the boss" [*la vicinanza al padrone*], a formulation that condenses the Italian variant of the violated meritocracy into a single relational image. Carmen, for her part, earned the national minimum wage as a qualified biologist in Madrid, spending half her salary on the

[42] "Siamo professionisti laureati. Alcuni anche pluri laureati perché magari hanno preso una laurea in pedagogia, una laurea in psicologia o altro. Master, ce li abbiamo quasi tutti. [...] E spesso, mi dispiace dirlo, per il sistema di reclutamento dei docenti di sostegno arrivano persone che non sono preparate. Nonostante il TFA acquistati all'estero. [...] Però arrivano persone specializzate nel sostegno che magari hanno fatto economia, hanno studiato economia, hanno studiato giurisprudenza o tutt'altro. Però poi vogliono insegnare e la strada più corta sembra quella del sostegno. [...] Facciamo magari le stesse ore dei docenti di sostegno e veniamo pagati la metà. Se un docente di sostegno prende in media 1.500-1.600 euro per 18 ore settimanali, noi per 18 ore settimanali prendiamo, quando va bene, 700 euro."

commute to a workplace that, as she recounts, systematically operated on quasi-illegal yearly contracts in violation of labour regulations, until the day she asked for a raise and was told to leave.

For many interviewees, indeed, the violated meritocracy acquires its full force through the intergenerational comparison, the cognitive operation through which the broken norm is rendered visible by being measured against the experience of the parental generation. Maria, a thirty-five-year-old sociologist working as a social educator in a mental health residence in Madrid, formulates this with a lucidity that reveals both the power and the impossibility of the operation:

> Comparing myself with my parents isn't fair, I mean, it doesn't make any sense. It's something my mother does a lot, but it doesn't make sense. We do it too, because it's the only reference we have [*es la única referencia que hay*], but it doesn't make sense. [...] They didn't have university degrees and they lived better than I do. Supposedly the dream of all parents of that era was to pay for their children's university education because they were going to have even better jobs. But the thing is I've been through two economic crises [*me he comido dos crisis*], my parents haven't been through any. So, look, comparing myself with my parents, fine, yes, but it just doesn't hold up [*no se sostiene*].[43] (Maria, 35, social educator, n. 18_es)

Maria knows the comparison "doesn't hold up," she says it three times, and yet she performs it anyway, because it is "the only reference there is." The Fordist norm of the parental generation, in which administrative positions without university credentials gave access to homeownership, stable employment, and the capacity to save, functions as the only available yardstick even when the person wielding it knows the world in which it made sense no longer exists. Maria's parents, both low-ranking civil servants, paid off their apartment in five or six years; she, with a university degree, will need thirty. Maria says that her mother, who compares housing mortage interest rates - her own at thirteen per cent in the past and her daughter's at five nowadays - feels sometimes entitled to relativise. However, her mother finally confronted with the concreteness of her daughter's situation, had to recognises the shift: "Who would have told me," she once reflected, "that I'd end up advising my daughter to become a civil servant" [*quién me iba a decir a mí que yo le iba a aconsejar a mi hija a ser funcionaria*]. The highest horizon the previous generation can advise for a university-educated

[43] "Compararme con mis padres no es justo, o sea, es que no tiene sentido. Es una cosa que mi madre hace mucho, pero no tiene sentido. Lo hacemos nosotros también, porque es la única referencia que hay, pero no tiene sentido. [...] Ellos no tenían carrera universitaria y vivieron mejor que yo. Se supone que el sueño de todos los padres de aquella época era pagar una carrera universitaria a sus hijos porque iban a tener mejores trabajos aún. Pero es que yo me he comido dos crisis económicas, mis padres no se han comido ninguna. Entonces, a ver, compararme con mis padres es que vale sí, pero es que no se sostiene."

daughter is the position it reached without a degree. It is the parental generation itself that recognises, with bewilderment, that the meritocratic promise has been turned on its head.

6.3.2 Violated labourism

The violated educational meritocracy would be painful but containable if work, regardless of the professional level attained, still guaranteed access to a secure life. As Miguel already put it in the biographical narrative examined in section 6.2.1: "having a job, I couldn't pay the mortgage, and it blew my mind" [*me petaba la cabeza*]. The formulation captures the precise moment at which the second, deeper violation becomes cognitively unbearable: the problem is not only that education failed to deliver the expected position, but that work itself, even when present, fails to deliver the most elementary material security.

This second normative breach, which can be termed *violated labourism*, runs through the interviews as a recurrent, sometimes almost incredulous observation. Carmen found that the violation persisted even after she transitioned from biology to teaching, a more stable professional field: landlords required employment documentation that her temporary contracts could not provide, so that even a working professional with a regular salary was structurally excluded from the rental market. The problem was not qualifications, not career choices, not effort; it was that the labour market itself no longer translated work into the material foundations of a secure life. Giulia's situation reveals the same breach from a different angle. Her employment contract is nominally open-ended, but it operates on a cyclical basis tied to the school calendar: she is not paid during holidays, summer, or the gaps between school years. The state provides a nominal annual supplement of 550 euros for workers in her contractual situation, but the bureaucratic requirements render it nearly inaccessible, and in any case, as she insists, "the 550-euro supplement is not the solution" [*il bonus di 550 euro non è la soluzione*]. What Giulia demands is not a supplement but the full recognition of her labour: "I want to earn them, those 2,000 euros, or 500, whatever they are, I don't want to stay home and receive a bonus because I'm pitiful... let me work" [*me li voglio guadagnare... non voglio stare a casa e prendere un bonus*]. The violated labourism is not experienced as absence of compensation, but as the denial of the possibility of earning what one's work is worth.

The double violation, educational meritocracy and labourism taken together, is what gives this type's moral economy its distinctive and lacerating quality. It is not simply "I studied and did not become what I was promised," which would be a Bourdieusian story of disappointed expectations, nor simply "I work and cannot make ends meet," which would be a classical story of labour exploitation without

security. It is the conjunction: "I studied *and* I work, and I do not have even what my parents had without studying." The second violation intensifies the first and strips it of the residual consolations that vocational attachment or professional identity might otherwise provide. It is this combination that generates the moral indignation, that characterises the type.

6.3.3 Residual normative investment in educational meritocracy

The dominant register of this type's moral economy is, as the preceding pages have shown, one of violated expectations. Yet the educational meritocratic norm, although experienced as broken, is not entirely abandoned. What persists is not a robust belief but something more fragile and internally contradictory: a residual hope, a "maybe I can still make it" that coexists uneasily with the knowledge that the game is rigged.

The clearest institutional embodiment of this residual hope is the figure of the *funcionario*, the civil servant with a permanent position obtained through competitive public examination. Laura describes it as the restoration of everything precarity has broken: "stability, good conditions, a good salary, they can't fire you... not just being able to rent a flat, but having the option to buy one. There you have security for real [*ahí sí que es seguridad*]". She explicitly defines herself as an *opositora*, someone whose present is a way station towards the permanent post. Carmen, preparing for the same examinations, strips the aspiration down to its pragmatic minimum: "the salary is going to be the same, but it's permanent for the rest of my life" [*fijo para toda mi vida*]. Between Laura's full horizon and Carmen's wager on the lesser evil, the civil service functions as the last institutional space where transparent, effort-based selection still appears to operate, a final train to catch. For Giulia, even this residual avenue is structurally blocked: the most direct route to improving her position would be the *TFA*, the very qualification she denounces as purchasable while less sophisticated that the master she already has, but the cost, the time, and the care responsibilities that define her daily life make it practically impossible. "I'm furious about this, on principle, and because it's practically impossible" [*sono incazzata per principio e per impossibilità pratica*].

The meritocratic exit route reproduces the meritocratic violation. At the other end of the spectrum, Roberta reframes structural obstacles as mere delays: "the ladder is slower... I believe enormously in effort, so you get to the same point, but certainly there are those who take longer" [*la scala è più lenta... io credo tantissimo nell'impegno*]. But the formulation, in which inequality is acknowledged only to be dissolved into a question of timing, suggests less a confident investment than a cognitive closure: the

inability to abandon a vision of the world in which effort must ultimately be rewarded, because the alternative would leave no intelligible framework for orienting oneself.

This dynamic speaks to Ayala-Hurtado's (2022, 2024) analysis of young Spanish graduates, who, she shows, mobilise a meritocratic "achievement narrative" to project stable professional futures while simultaneously denouncing it as a fraudulent fiction. Ayala-Hurtado interprets this paradox through Bourdieu's concept of hysteresis: the meritocratic disposition formed during the educational trajectory persists into changed circumstances, and the *funcionariado* operates as the institutional site through which this outdated narrative is reinforced and maintained, because it provides concrete, albeit highly competitive, access to the lifetime stability the narrative promises, in the absence of alternative narratives that resonate equally. Evidence here points in a different direction. What emerges from the interviews is not primarily a story of narrative persistence against reality, a disposition that has merely failed to update, but rather a story of rupture and internal conflict. The educational meritocratic norm is predominantly *broken*: the dominant experience is one of violated expectations, moral injury, and anger at a promise exposed as a lie. What remains alongside the break is not an intact narrative but a residual, almost desperate investment in the last institutional domain where the original promise seems to function. The difference is between a narrative of habitus continuity despite changed conditions, and one of fracture with a residual investment.

The moral economy of the declassed aspiring middle class is thus structured by a double violation and a contradictory remainder. Educational meritocracy, the promise that credentials and effort translate into a secure social position, is experienced as systematically breached, especially through generational deception among Spanish interviewees and institutional extraction among Italian interviewees. Labourism, the deeper promise that work itself guarantees access to the basic standards of a secure life, is violated in turn, intensifying the first breach and stripping it of its residual consolations. Yet the meritocratic norm, although predominantly broken, is not entirely discarded: it persists as residual hope in the *funcionariado*, as trapped circularity in Giulia's blocked exit route, as cognitive closure in Roberta's slowed-down ladder. This double violation and the moral indignation it generates, neither resigned acceptance nor directionless anger, constitutes the hinge between the social disintegration documented in the preceding sections and the political orientations examined next.

6.4 Disillusioned investment and populist radical left

The previous sections have documented the trajectory of social disintegration (6.2) and its moral decoding as a double violation of educational meritocracy and labourism (6.3). But the *bleeding dichotomic consciousness* that emerged in section 6.2.2, the self-placement of educated workers who locate themselves between an undeserving privileged above and a solidaristic working class below (with knowledge), is already a proto-political grammar. It encapsulates the violated moral economy and constitutes its moral subtext: the privileged above are such *because* of violated merit (bought credentials, corruption, birth), and the system is such *because* it sold a collective lie. This section traces how that consciousness encounters and reworks the political sphere, first as a relation to politics (6.4.1), then as a specific political orientation (6.4.2).

6.4.1 Political competence and disillusioned investment

What distinguishes the declassed aspiring middle class from the other types is, first of all, its relation to politics as a sphere. The cultural capital that defines the type does not remain confined to education and professional identity; it converts into political literacy, analytical capacity, and a sense of legitimacy in inhabiting the political field. Miguel defines himself as an activist and analyses the media system with professional mastery. Laura has a trajectory of militancy, from Izquierda Unida to Podemos. Maria was politically socialised in a radical left family. Fulvio teaches law and invokes the constitutional duty to vote. Giulia produces a structural analysis of the extractive chain that exceeds what any institutional actor has offered her. Roberta sits, by family accident, on the local board of the Partito Democratico. All of them engage with politics as a sphere they are competent to inhabit and entitled to judge, a sphere where their condition could, in principle, be collectively addressed. This contrasts sharply with the other types analysed in subsequent chapters: the declassed precarious working class, for whom politics is a sphere of abandonment (ch. 7); the striving precarious working class, who define themselves as *"people of work, not of politics"* (ch. 8); and the enduring and gracing subproletariat for whom the political world is simply impossible (ch. 9).

Spain: from biographical investment to silent demobilisation

In Spain, this political competence found collective articulation through the 15-M movement. The experience is common across cases, though with varying degrees of biographical depth: For Carmen, it was *"very beautiful,"* a moment of recognition; for Laura, the passage from Izquierda Unida to Podemos was the discovery of a *"very vindictive, very strong"* political force that gave voice to a latent discontent; for Maria, who was living in Milan when Pablo Iglesias appeared at the European

elections, *"it seemed like everything was going to be different."* But it is Miguel, the journalist expelled from Madrid after the 2008 crisis, who articulates the 15-M as a full biographical rupture, a 'before and after' that reorganises not only political convictions but the very framework through which he interprets his own trajectory.

> And then the 15-M comes and rescues me, so to speak. [...] I would say I have a previous life. I used to see the world in one way. And now I see it a bit differently. [...] I find out that in Madrid and other cities there are groups of people meeting in social centres, squats, to organise a demonstration protesting how badly everything is going, without unions or parties. And what they are criticising is precisely how all parties and all unions function. *They don't represent us.* It is the delegitimation of politics. I mean, the political class and the unions don't represent the people. I found it a fascinating issue. It was generational, we were suffering it, we saw it every day, but nobody was talking about it. (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es)[44]

The passage from curious journalist to activist of the movement traces, in compressed form, the politicisation of the type. The violated meritocratic promise (*"I did everything they said you had to do"*) and the violated labourist norm (*"even having a job, I couldn't pay the mortgage"*) find in the 15-M a collective language that transforms 'private failure' into systemic critique. The movement did not create the wound; it named it. Podemos, born in that conjuncture, became the electoral vehicle that absorbed not only the energy of the squares but the biographical investments of a generation of educated precarious workers for whom the movement had been the first experience of being politically represented.

However, the vehicle empties. The causes are variously combined across cases, but they share a common structure: the political promise exhausts itself without fulfilling the demand that generated it. One thing that recurs in every account is the internal division of the left: Carmen describes the split between Pablo Iglesias and Íñigo Errejón as a decisive moment of disenchantment: *"it is like playing, you are trying to change something and you can't even agree among yourselves."*; for Maria, the fragmentation is serial and descending: she has *"voted for every left experiment, and every one has gone worse and worse."* Moreover, the critique of wrong priorities and insufficient reform appears as well. Carmen values what Irene Montero achieved concretely, but insists there are *"more important things, like housing, gas, electricity."* The progressive government's concrete reforms are judged and found wanting: the

[44] *Original: "Y viene el 15-M y me rescata. Digamos. [...] Digamos que tengo una vida anterior. O yo veía el mundo de una manera. Y ahora lo veo un poco de otra, diferente. [...] Yo me entero de que en Madrid y en otras ciudades hay un grupo de gente que se reúnen en centros sociales, centros okupas, para hacer una manifestación en protesta de lo mal que va todo sin sindicatos ni partidos. Y que lo que critican precisamente es el funcionamiento de todos los partidos y de todos los sindicatos. No nos representan. Es la deslegitimación de la política. O sea, la clase política y los sindicatos no representan al pueblo, a la gente. Me parecía un tema apasionante. Era generacional, lo estábamos sufriendo, lo veíamos todos los días, pero no se hablaba de eso" (23_ES_2025_02_27, Pos. 61–67).*

labour reform produced *fijos discontinuos* that, for Laura, are *"a bit of the same thing,"* and the minimum wage increase was eaten by inflation, *"so we end up the same."*

It is Laura who formulates the endpoint of this trajectory with an unconscious symbolic precision:

> I'm a bit fed up with politics, to be honest. It has me a bit fed up. And why? Because they all lie. They all lie and each one pulls in his own direction, and since there is a law that says you don't have to tell the truth in political speeches, well, everybody sells their own book, but when it comes to making it real, *it can't be done, because it's utopian.* (Laura, 30, social worker, n. 9_es)[45]

No se puede, porque es utópico. The phrase is the inverted mirror of Podemos's founding slogan, *"Sí se puede": w*hat could be done can no longer be done. The utopia that was once the horizon of political action has become the very reason for its impossibility. Laura does not articulate this inversion consciously, she expresses it spontaneously, as she inhabits it. It is the linguistic trace of a disillusion, resulting in emotional and political disinvestment, a form of silent demobilisation.

The concrete outcomes of silent demobilization vary across cases as well. Carmen continues to vote out of emptied civic duty, *"because I felt bad not doing it,"* and suspends her hope on the figure of Yolanda Díaz. Similarly, Laura recalibrates toward pragmatic social democracy, gravitating toward Más Madrid because its *"ideas are clearer, without being utopian."* On a different but complementary note, Miguel, expelled to the Canary Islands, maintains an activist identity but recognises the forced downsizing. What is common across cases is that the disillusionment is articulated, analysed, suffered: it is the specific form of political frustration of those who invested deeply in a political project because they had the competence and the biographical resources to do so.

Italy: competence without occasion

In Italy, the same political competence encounters a different landscape. There is no eventful protest comparable to the 15-M, no cycle of mobilisation capable of converting political literacy into biographical investment. The available vehicle is the Movimento 5 Stelle, a form of social populism that speaks the language of the people against the corrupt political class, but without the structured ideology, the left identity, or the scope of the emancipatory project that the Spanish cycle offered. As a result, the M5S is voted and quickly abandoned. Fulvio recalls that it *"seemed like a revolution, Grillo's, everything against the system,"* but the disillusionment was immediate: *"just talk."* Giulia *"believed that maybe we could make it,"* then concluded that *"in the end they are all the same, once they sit in that armchair*

[45] *Original: "Estoy un poquito harta de la política, la verdad. Me tiene un poquito harta. ¿Y por qué? Pues porque todos mienten. Todos mienten y cada uno tira para su lado, y como hay una ley en la que te dice que en los discursos políticos no hay por qué decir la verdad, pues todo el mundo vende su libro, pero a la hora de plasmarlo en la realidad, no se puede, porque es utópico" (9_ES_2024_03_12, Pos. 259).*

they all want to stay." As it is visible from those brief excerpts, the investment is shallow, the disillusionment faster and more complete than in Spain, because it presupposes no deep mobilisation.

But the political competence of the type remains intact. Fulvio analyses the death of political ideology with the lucidity of a teacher of law who recognises the gap between what he teaches and what he practises: *"I should say that voting is a duty, and I do say it in school, but personally I no longer go";* Giulia produces a structural analysis of the extractive chain that exceeds what any party offers. Roberta even comes to theorise the mechanism by which precarity generates its own political invisibility:

> It is not the young person who stays at home with his parents because he doesn't feel like leaving, but because he cannot leave. [...] If nobody tries to leave home, and everyone stays at home, a vortex is created where then nobody protests, nobody points out that a young person cannot afford to pay rent. So nothing ever changes. (Roberta, 26, psychologist, n. 16_IT)[46]

The structural demobilisation is not merely political disappointment, as in the Spanish cases: it is produced by the material conditions of precarity itself. Those who cannot leave home cannot protest; those who cannot protest cannot make visible the problem that keeps them at home: the vortex is self-reinforcing. Roberta's analytical capacity, her ability to theorise the very mechanism of her own political invisibility, is itself a trace of the type's political competence, turned reflexive in the absence of a vehicle.

In the absence of an opportunity for mobilisation, the horizon for mobilisation moves elsewhere, as evidence by Fulvio's response to this void. Where there is no party to invest in, the political competence of the type retreats from the political field to the pedagogical one: *"what is needed here is a cultural revolution, giving political consciousness in schools."* The teacher becomes the agent of a transformation that no political vehicle can offer. While the demand for change does not disappear, it is redirected from a sphere where it finds no vehicle to one where the type's professional and cultural resources can still be mobilised.

In both countries, then, the cultural capital of the type produces a political competence and sense of affinity absent in the other types. In Spain, the protest cycle converts this competence into deep biographical investment, making the subsequent disillusionment painful, articulated, and analytically dense. In Italy, the absence of a comparable cycle leaves it as unrealised potential: the frustration is existential rather than biographical, the longing is for the very form of political engagement that was

[46] *Original: "Non è il giovane che sta a casa con i genitori perché non ha voglia di uscire, ma perché non può andare via di casa. [...] Se nessuno prova ad andare via di casa, e tutti rimangono a casa, si crea questo vortice dove poi nessuno protesta, cioè nessuno fa notare che un giovane non se lo può pagare un affitto. Quindi non si fa mai nulla" (16_IT_2024_10_31, Pos. 253–255).*

never available. The endpoint converges: politically competent subjects without a vehicle, carrying an analytical capacity that exceeds what any existing party can accommodate or deliver on.

6.4.2 Populist radical left: breaking to normative inclusive labourism

What I call *populist radical left consciousness* is the political translation of the double structure documented in the preceding sections: a dichotomic class register (knowledgeable precarious workers against the undeserving privileged) and a populist dichotomy (the people against the elites and the system as a whole). The social disintegration from the middle class and the violated educational meritocracy define the social position and moral grammar of the type, but its concrete political demand converges on inclusive labourism: the demand that work should integrate, that the work-housing nexus should function, that a social floor should be place irrespective of work, and through it that dignity should be restored. There is some kind of a paradox here: what politically follows the violation of the educational meritocratic promise, primarily defining this type disintegration, is the idea of a society based on inclusive labourism, not on educational meritocracy. Once the meritocratic promise has been unmasked as a lie, it cannot be reclaimed as an emancipatory horizon. What survives the collapse of meritocratic faith is an inclusive version of the labourist norm - sometimes coupled with fantasies of post-labourism, a society somewhat free from work - and it is on this norm that the political orientation of the type converges, across countries and across divergent rhetorical registers.

Spain: rupturist rhetoric, social-democratic content

The convergence on inclusive labourism is all the more striking because it coexists with divergent rhetorical registers. Miguel, the most politically articulate case, positions himself without hesitation:

> I position myself in a left that is less social-democratic and more rupturist. [...] Breaking with some established things. Like the fact that there is no maximum salary. Like the fact that we don't believe climate change is real and nothing is being done about it. Or feminisms. We must be *rupturists*. We must break some things, like the fact that all judges are right-wing or that all media are right-wing. [...] Asking for a bit more. Asking a bit for the impossible, because since we are not going to get there... But if we ask for a little, we are going to get a little. So we must ask for much more. [...] You need a hundred feet on the street and one in the institutions. When Podemos came, everything went to the institutions. [...] And in the end what happened is that we demobilised. And we are no longer in the streets. [...] They destroyed it, just as they destroyed Podemos from the media, so that a real left would not govern. [...]

> For the PSOE, housing is a market good, not a human right. (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es, italics mine)[47]

The rhetoric is unmistakably that of the populist radical left: rupture with the established order, demand for the impossible as a political strategy, denunciation of the institutional left as complicit with the right, housing as the litmus test. Yet when Miguel is asked about the Ingreso Mínimo Vital, the targeted minimum income introduced by the progressive government, his response reveals the full tension between registers. He calls the IMV *"a wonderful idea"* but notes it has been frozen, affects only 50,000 people, and *"doesn't solve anything for paying the rent."* What he advocates instead is a *renta básica universal*, a universal basic income decoupled from work, citing European experiments he has covered as a journalist:

> But if everyone had their needs covered, we could have a dignified life, a happy life. That's possible. Either by the state providing it for free, because you have a state and a welfare system that is really great. [...] That is, you have healthcare, education, and housing from the state, or you receive money from the state to cover the minimum of your needs. [...] And then do whatever you want. You don't need to work to have a dignified life. That discourse that if you don't work you don't feel fulfilled, that what you must do is work. No, what you must do is live. [...] If the labour reform pleases the employers, it is not good, it can be improved. [...] I would like a labour reform to be approved that would make employers have to hold a demonstration. Because that one was going to be fair. (Miguel, 43, journalist, n. 23_es)[48]

The passage condenses the central tension of the type's political orientation. Normatively, Miguel is post-labourist. The conviction is genuine, not rhetorical: dignity comes from living, not from working, and the discourse that ties self-realisation to work is denounced as ideology (*"that discourse that if you don't work you don't feel fulfilled, that what you must do is work. No, what you must do is live"*). This is

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[47] *Original: "Posiciono a una izquierda menos socialdemócrata y más rupturista. [...] Pues romper con algunas cosas establecidas. Como que no exista salario máximo, lo que hablábamos antes. Como que no nos creamos que el cambio climático es real y que no se está haciendo nada por ello. O los feminismos. Hay que ser rupturistas. Hay que romper algunas cosas, como que todos los jueces sean de derechas o que todos los medios de comunicación sean de derechas. [...] Pedir un poco más allá. Pedir un poco lo imposible para que luego, como no vamos a llegar... Pero es que si pedimos poquito, vamos a conseguir poquito. Entonces hay que pedir mucho más. [...] Hay que tener cien pies en la calle y uno en las instituciones. Cuando vino Podemos, todo fue a las instituciones. [...] Y al final lo que pasó es que nos desmovilizamos. Y ya no estamos en las calles. [...] Se lo cargaron, como se cargaron a Podemos desde los medios de comunicación, para que no gobernara una izquierda real. [...] La vivienda para el PSOE es un bien de mercado, no es un derecho humano" (23_ES_2025_02_27, Pos. 193–205).*

[48] *Original: "Pero si todo el mundo tuviera las necesidades cubiertas, podríamos tener una vida digna, una vida feliz. Eso se da. O dándole el Estado gratuitamente, porque tienes un Estado y una sociedad del bienestar super guay. [...] O sea, tienes la sanidad, la educación y la vivienda del Estado, o recibes un dinero del Estado para poder cubrir el mínimo de las necesidades. [...] Y después haz lo que quieras. No hace falta que trabajes para tener una vida digna. Ese discurso de que si no trabajas no te sientes realizado, que lo que hay que hacer es trabajar. No, lo que hay que hacer es vivir. [...] Si la reforma laboral le gusta a los empresarios, no es buena, es mejorable. [...] A mí me gustaría que se aprobase una reforma laboral que los empresarios tuvieran que hacer una manifestación. Porque esa iba a ser justa" (23_ES_2025_02_27, Pos. 205–235).*

where the cultural capital of the type invests its analytical surplus, producing a normative horizon that none of the other types articulate. But when this horizon touches the ground of practical political demand, what it materialises as is something else: healthcare, education, and housing from the state, or a minimum income to cover basic needs, a labour reform that truly protects workers. These are not post-labourist demands; they are the programme of an inclusive social democracy, a secure labourism with a universal floor, in which the post-labourist imaginary shines through as aspiration but does not organise the content. The distance between the *renta básica universal* Miguel advocates, and the *Ingreso Mínimo Vital* he critiques is not a distance between two different political projects, but between two registers of the same project: the IMV is, in his own terms, *"a wonderful idea"* done badly, not a wrong idea. The rupturist rhetoric and the post-labourist norm survive the political defeat, but the substantive demand converges toward the same inclusive labourism that Laura now formulates without any rupturist dressing: *"I'm not talking to you from communism, but less privatisation, more state, social housing"*. What Miguel calls *"breaking with the established order"* and Laura calls *"less privatisation, more state"* is, at the level of policy content, the same demand: the restoration of a functioning work-housing-dignity nexus, with some degree of security for everyone. The cultural capital of the type does not disappear in this convergence while changing function: It no longer founds the demand but colours the register, lending it the vocabulary of rupture, systemic analysis, and utopian aspiration.

Italy: inclusive labourism through social populism

In Italy, the same inclusive-labourist demand passes through a different political grammar. The referent of the conflict is primarily anti-corruption rather than anti-system in the economic sense. This is directly linked to the violated meritocracy and labourism documented in section 6.3: the extractive chain that Giulia denounces (the state pays for services that arrive to workers as 700 euros after every intermediary has taken its share), the bought TFA credentials, the politicians' pensions, are all instances of corruption understood as the usurpation of resources by those who do not deserve them. On policies, the Italian cases converge with their Spanish counterparts. Giulia's formulation is the richest:

> When they say money doesn't make you happy... it's true. But it solves problems. So start from a stabilisation of precarious workers, the minimum wage that is discussed so much. I mean, for me it is inconceivable that fathers, mothers, should do jobs that are underpaid. It is inconceivable. So if there is economic recognition, there is personal fulfilment, there is a better wellbeing of the person, who can dedicate herself to the family more adequately, who knows she is doing something important, something good. She [the person] doesn't need to buy a yacht, but she knows she can get to the

> end of the month serenely, maybe even putting something aside for her children's future university. [...] There was this video of Fornero going around, she was saying that 9 euros would already be a lot, that 7 or 8 could be fine. But then I wonder, are you the one saying this? How much do you earn? You, who think that 9 euros are already too much for a worker. Look, you know what I would like? Straight from the Soviet Union. Whatever job you do, whatever, you are given a set amount. Whatever. That's it. We are all equal. That there is real equality among everyone. Ok fine, but below that you cannot go, to live a dignified life. (Giulia, 39, social educator, n. 6_IT)[49]

The opening sentence sets the register: money does not make you happy, but it solves problems. Giulia does not value or demand wealth, but standard security, (*"she doesn't need to buy a yacht, but she knows she can get to the end of the month serenely")"*. The entire passage moves from this labourist floor (stabilisation, minimum wage, the inconceivable fact that parents are underpaid) through a radical egalitarian impulse (*"straight from the Soviet Union, we are all equal"*) that is immediately downsized to a dignified minimum, and a deservingness boundary directed exclusively upward: Fornero, who earns incomparably more, presumes to say that 9 euros are already too much for a worker.

It is in her negotiation of the Reddito di Cittadinanza that the inclusive labourism of the type becomes most visible. Giulia is genuinely ambivalent. She is labourist (*"I want to earn them")* and the RdC as implemented - without formation, without real job placement, without accompaniment into work - she finds *"demeaning, as a matter of dignity"*: it reduces the recipient to a passive beneficiary rather than enabling her to work. And what troubles her are the abuses, people who collected it without truly needing it, the frauds she has seen in her own community. But when asked whether she is glad it was abolished, she reverses: *"I am sorry they took it away,"* because some families were managing to get by with a minimum of dignity. She resolves the tension with a principle she learned from a local religious figure: "better to give to those who do not truly need it than to deny to those who do". And she clinches the argument by turning the deservingness question upward: politicians, sheltered by the excessive security of their *vitalizi* and inherited pensions, extract resources across generations without working for the people they are supposed to serve. If that extraction from above is tolerated, then the minor abuse from below, a few freeloaders on the RdC, cannot be the reason to deny protection

[49] *Original: "Penso che tutti i problemi... o meglio, quando dicono i soldi non fanno la felicità, è vero, però risolvono i problemi. Quindi partire da una stabilizzazione dei precari, il salario minimo di cui se ne discute tanto, ma alla fine... Cioè per me è inconcepibile che padri di famiglia, madri, debbano svolgere lavori che vengono sottopagati. È inconcepibile. Quindi se c'è un riconoscimento economico, c'è una realizzazione personale, c'è un benessere migliore della persona, che si può dedicare alla famiglia in maniera più adeguata, che sa di che sta facendo qualcosa di importante, di buono. Non deve comprare uno yacht, però sa di poter arrivare serenamente a fine mese, magari mettendo da parte pure qualche cosa per un'eventuale università futura dei propri figli. [...] Girava questo video della Fornero, credo, insomma diceva che 9 euro già sarebbero tanti, anche 7–8 potrebbe andare bene. Ma poi mi chiedo, ma lo dici tu? Ma quanto prendi? Tu che pensi che già 9 euro siano troppi per un lavoratore. Ma cioè guarda, a me sai che cosa piacerebbe? Proprio da Unione Sovietica. Cioè qualsiasi lavoro tu faccia, qualsiasi, ti viene dato tot. Qualsiasi. Basta. Stiamo tutti pari. Che ci sia proprio uguaglianza tra tutti. Vabbè, però ok, comunque al di sotto di quello tu non puoi andare, per vivere una vita dignitosa" (6_IT_2024_09_13, Pos. 156–162).*

to those who need it. The boundary of meritorious need is always drawn against the privileged above, never against the poor below.

Italy: longing for the populist radical left

The social populism of the M5S does not satisfy the political-cultural capital of the type. Fulvio formulates this dissatisfaction most explicitly:

> Ideally I am left-wing, but I absolutely do not feel like voting PD. Why? Because they do not represent the people, they only represent particular interests, personal and particular interests of the politicians. There is only so much demagogy, only so much talk. [...] It seemed like a revolution, Grillo's, everything against the system, but when you enter the system you either adapt or die. [...] It only gathered the angry [*gli incazzati*] ones, from the right and from the left. [...] What is needed here is a cultural revolution, giving political consciousness in schools. (Fulvio, 50, teacher, n. 20_IT)[50]

The PD does not represent the people, the M5S was *"just talk,"* a gathering of the angry without ideology; and no other vehicle is available. What remains is the longing not only for a *content*, which the M5S partly offers in its social-populist variant, but for a *form*: a vehicle with ideology, with an emancipatory project, with a recognisable left identity corresponding to the cultural capital of the type. In its absence, Fulvio retreats from the political field to the pedagogical one: the *"cultural revolution"* he invokes is the demand for change redirected to the only sphere where his professional and cultural resources can still be mobilised.

Roberta's longing takes a different form. She identifies herself and her constituency as young precarious workers under 30, what she calls the forgotten bracket [*la fascia dimenticata*]: those who have no access to bonuses, no right to any subsidy, yet do not earn enough to leave home. This is not only a social description but a political one: it is the group that no party reaches, and it is from this position that she evaluates the available supply. The party secretary of the PD, Elly Schlein, *"seems not to speak to the people, doesn't speak to people like me"*: too polished, too constructed, incomprehensible to those who live the precarious condition from within. Minimum wage alone is insufficient without paid internships, contractual protections, and regulation of the *situazione precaria* in which her entire cohort is trapped. When asked which political figure she finds more convincing, Roberta names Giuseppe Conte without hesitation: *"much more authentic, much more understandable."* The preference is

[50] *Original: "Idealmente sono di sinistra, però non mi sento assolutamente di votare PD, perché? Perché non rappresentano il popolo, rappresentano solo interessi particolari, personali e particolari dei politici. C'è solo tanta demagogia, c'è solo tante chiacchiere. [...] Sembrava una rivoluzione quella di Grillo, tutto contro il sistema, quando entri nel sistema o ti adegui o muori. [...] Prendeva solo gli incazzati di destra e di sinistra. [...] Qua c'è bisogno di una rivoluzione culturale, dare una coscienza politica a scuola" (20_IT_2024_12_15, Pos. 202–226).*

social-populist: Conte speaks a language she recognises, addresses people like her, appears genuine where Schlein appears performed. But she cannot vote for the M5S, because in her family environment it is socially unacceptable: "I live at home with them, if you mention 5 Stelle they eat you alive *[ti mangiano]*."[51] The family blocks a political choice that the type's own consciousness would otherwise make. And the blockage is not incidental: it is structurally produced by precarity itself. The same material dependence on the family home that prevents Roberta from leaving also subjects her political choices to familial respectability. Where Fulvio's longing is blocked by a structural void, the absence of a party with ideology, Roberta's is blocked by a social constraint that precarity generates as its own by-product.

If Italy had a political equivalent of Unidas Podemos, the same inclusive-labourist content but with cultural-political legitimacy, structured language, and a recognisable radical left identity, these cases suggest it would find its natural constituency precisely in the declassed aspiring middle class.

Comparative closure

In both countries, the educational meritocracy that defines the trajectory and moral grammar of the type does not survive as a political demand. Once unmasked as a lie, it cannot be claimed as a right. What survives the collapse of meritocratic faith is an inclusionary labourist norm: the demand that work should provide security, that housing should be accessible, that one should be able to arrive serenely at the end of the month, including people who don't work through a good universal social floor. The demand is, at its core, for a more compressed, more secure, more integrated society: a functioning social democracy. The cultural capital of the type colours the register of this demand: In the Spanish cases, it lends the vocabulary of rupture, systemic analysis, and utopian aspiration; in the Italian cases, it generates the longing for a left that does not exist. In both, it enables a structural analysis that exceeds the immediate experience of precarity, even as the concrete demand converges on the same inclusive labourism displayed by precarious workers with less cultural capital and a different political register, as the subsequent chapter will show (Ch. 7).

This distribution of political party options across countries corresponds to the findings of chapter 5, where the vote for the populist radical left in Spain is cumulatively more concentrated among educated precarious workers, while in Italy the M5S vote is diffused across educational levels but with its strongest core among the less educated. This suggests that the elective affinity between the declassed aspiring middle class and the populist radical left is the strongest where the political supply

[51] *Original: "A me la persona che viene in mente, Giuseppe Conte. Non è un'idea assolutamente 5 Stelle, mi sbaglio? Ma almeno lui mi piace, però col fatto che io vivo in casa con... che se parli di 5 stelle ti mangiano" (16_IT_2024_10_31, Pos. 305).*

makes it available (Spain), while in Italy social populism captures the type without holding it. The analysis of how political supply shapes and constrains these affinities is developed in Chapter 10.

7. Declassed Precarious Working Class

7.1 Introduction

The second type identified in this study is the declassed precarious working class. These workers' operative norm of integration is the standard one shared across Southern European societies: stable work, regular income, and secure housing, what Chapter 3 identified as the standard work-housing nexus. Unlike the declassed aspiring middle class examined in the previous chapter, these workers do not have attachment to a professional middle class milieu, nor do they define themselves primarily through vocational or intellectual attachments. Their horizon is not career or professional recognition, but what several of them call "*tranquillity" or "living not surviving"*: the possibility of paying the bills, raising children, and not living in permanent anxiety about tomorrow. The expectation is simply to be able to live through one's work. Yet this baseline aspiration is systematically frustrated. Work is precarious, informal, or underpaid; housing is insecure, and if not dependent on inheritance or family transfers. The result is disintegration from the standard working-class norm that does not, however, reach the zone of outright social exclusion. These workers are below the standard, but above, or on the edge of, the threshold of social respectability (Dörre 2022) as defined in Chapter 3 (Section 3.1.3).

This disintegration has a distinctive correlate in interviewees' sense of social location: a characteristic oscillation between a lucid perception of being below the standard - "below (…) not like the majority" - and a defensive claim to dignity outside of the material sphere or of normality that refuses the stigma of the bottom. Interviewees locate themselves with considerable positional competence, identifying who is above and who is below, but many of them lack a proper categorical class language to name their position. Explicit class identification depends on specific biographical resources such as trade union socialisation; for the majority, class operates as what Savage (2012) calls classed consciousness: lived and expressed through moral judgements, but not named in the vocabulary of class. The resulting condition is neither orthodox mobilised class society nor the pure demobilised class society of Dörre (2022), but an intermediate configuration: positional awareness but without proper class identity language, and classed experiences expressed through moral language. This is the terrain in which social populism finds its natural basin, mobilising "the below" as people, naming the experiences of class without requiring clearly-coded class identification.

People belonging to this type come from heterogeneous social origins, and a significant proportion are women, for whom the intersection of precarity and care responsibilities shapes the experience of disintegration in specific ways. What unites them is the norm that structures their experience of precarity: *the expectation that honest work should enable a dignified life*. The type occupies the intermediate zone between the standard norm and the threshold of social inclusion, and an internal gradient is discernible within it. In the upper zone, closer to the standard, are workers who once possessed working-class stability and lost it through market restructuring or biographical disruption, as well as workers with educational credentials who aspire to secure employment without having entered a professional occupation. In the lower zone, closer to the threshold of respectability, are workers whose capacity to work is eroding or whose hopes of integration through the labour market have been exhausted. In the Spanish sample, this lower zone is composed of women with migratory backgrounds from South America, whose trajectories combine the downward pressures of migration, gender, and labour market segmentation: the same profile that was at the origin of the Mortgage Victims' Platform (PAH) (Martínez et al. 2024). The gradient is internal to the type: the shared moral grammar of violated labourism and social-populist orientation runs through all positions.

The primary moral register is violated labourism: the norm that honest work should enable a dignified life. This is the same norm that Lamont (2000) has traced for stably employed workers, who find their dignity in the capacity to provide for oneself and one's family through work. Although that here the same norm operates here as violation, and with a significant gendered dimension: work is expected but fails to ensure self-sufficiency but also to enable the organisation of family life and the raising of children. Unlike the declassed aspiring middle class, who arrive at labourism only after their educational meritocratic frame cracks, the declassed precarious working class has always inhabited it: labourism is the starting point, the foundational expectation that orients work, family, and life plans. The violation is therefore experienced not as a secondary disappointment but as a frontal assault on the baseline conditions of decent existence. A subordinate register of frustrated striving, the recognition that sustained personal effort was invested and not reciprocated, intensifies grounding violated labourism without displacing it.

The relation to politics is marked by a pervasive sense of abandonment: the state did not protect when protection was needed and official politics is opportunistic, sometimes favoured and tolerated corruption. Among interviewees closer to the lower zone, this abandonment shades into direct experiences of abuse - anticipating the systematic oppressiveness examined in Chapter 9 - but remaining here subordinate to the dominant register of neglect. Yet abandonment does not translate into indifference. Interviewees indeed maintain intact practical political competence and a persistent

desire for representation and a distal hope for change. Many voted in the past for social-populist forces with genuine hope and partially benefited from their policies: the M5S and the Reddito di Cittadinanza in Italy; in Spain, where no single party occupies the social-populist space as clearly, interviewees oscillate between Podemos and Sumar on the one hand and the PSOE in its redistributive incarnation on the other, both functioning as partial vehicles for the same labourist grammar. The disappointment that followed is post-populist demobilisation, not pre-political apathy: awareness without vehicle, social populist grammar without a valuable channel.

The substantive political orientation of this type is what I call inclusive labourism from below: a universalist labourism expressed through dichotomic social populist boundaries drawn upward against elites and the political class, while downward boundaries are either absent or just factual, of little importance. Where the declassed aspiring middle class discovers labourism by descending through a cracked meritocratic frame, the declassed precarious working class has always inhabited it. And where the former demands systemic change, the latter demands, more concretely, that the system deliver on its most basic promise: that those who work should be able to live. The universalism at work is not ideological but practical, an *ordinary concrete universalism*, analogous in its effects - but different in its almost lack of ideological loading - to the humanistic solidarity Lamont (2000) identified among French workers.

The sections that follow examine precarity and social position (7.2), moral economy (7.3), and political orientation (7.4).

7.2: Disintegration from standard security, dignity of below

7.2.1 Disintegration from working-class security: "surviving, not living"

As outlined above, the social position of the declassed precarious working class is defined by a fragile or broken work-housing nexus, where the operative norm from which disintegration occurs is not a professional middle-class career but the standard working-class one: stable employment, secure housing, a predictable life. The discriminant with Type 1 is clear: here there was never a credentialised aspiration to a higher level, or it was abandoned. The horizon is tranquillity, not career.

This dynamic is well illustrated by the paradigmatic case of Elena, a 59-year-old care worker in Puglia. Elena comes from a family of state employees, both parents *impiegati statali*, embedded in the kind of stable, modest public-sector life that constituted the norm of working-class integration in southern Italy. She rejected that world early. At seventeen she left home, married a freelance professional, and

for over a decade ran a wholesale clothing business while also working in the fashion sector. She travelled, earned well, built a life on her own terms. The rupture came with separation: she returned to her hometown with a young daughter, no savings, no employment contract, and no safety net.

What followed was a prolonged period of material hardship. Elena rented a flat in her village, but without stable income and with an ex-husband who provided almost nothing, the rent itself became a source of anguish. She recalls working day and night, doing whatever she could find, just to cover rent and food: "it was truly a trauma," she says.[52] At one point she worked as a dishwasher in a restaurant, finishing at three in the morning for thirty euros a shift, bringing her fifteen-year-old daughter along to cut bread for fifteen or twenty euros, because she could not leave her alone and could not afford not to work. The impossibility of reconciling care and employment, of being simultaneously a mother and a worker without institutional support, is a thread that runs through Elena's entire account.

Through an acquaintance, she found a position delivering tax notices (*cartelle esattoriali*) for a consortium of local municipalities. This was a semi-formal arrangement, on a *co.co.co.* contract, a form of quasi-self-employment that allowed her to remain formally unemployed while earning below 8,000 euros per year. The work was demanding, covering ten municipalities, and carried penal responsibility for errors in notification, yet it offered the flexibility she needed to manage her daughter's schedule. She worked at it for six years, was promised that the position would be converted into at least a part-time employment contract, but the consortium was absorbed by Equitalia and all the workers were sent home. "I was cheated," she says, "because I made that sacrifice, I covered ten municipalities, and nothing."[53]

After the Equitalia dissolution, Elena pursued other institutional routes. She spent six years pursuing a position in the fire brigade, passing all medical and physical examinations, only to be failed at the final stage. The reason became clear when a commander asked her, at the end of the training course: "Who sent you? Nobody." She was the only candidate to fail. At the post office, after three months via a temporary agency, an *onorevole* invited her to a hotel. She refused. The contract was not renewed. At a *casa famiglia* for minors, run by a cooperative, she discovered the director had built a personal residence with state and church funds. She left. The sexual barter and the corruption were not isolated

[52]"L'affitto che dovevo pagare … pagavo pochissimo però dovevo riuscire lavorando giorno e notte a cercare di pagarmi l'affitto, di mangiare, è stato veramente un trauma." (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

[53]"6 anni con le cartelle esattoriali, che era ottimo, dovevano impiegarci, diventato poi Equitalia, e ci hanno mandato giù da casa, e sono stata fregata, perché io ho fatto quel sacrificio, appunto 10 paesi mi curavo, e niente … perché hai delle responsabilità penali, se sbagli la notifica." (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

incidents, they were the recurring form through which institutional access was regulated in her experience of the southern Italian labour market.

When asked to narrate her work biography, Elena frames the entire trajectory through a single, condensed formula:

> Until now I have tried, I have chased correctly, to find a job, but neither a private employer nor anyone wanted to recognise me a contract. … A state job, nothing; a private employer, nothing. So at this point I am unemployed, I work off the books, the state doesn't know, and I was able to receive the *reddito di cittadinanza* for one year. Full stop. The house I have it from an inheritance from my parents, it was unfinished and I completed it, paying a mortgage over ten years.[54]
>
> *(Elena, 59, home care worker n. 3, Italy)*

Elena's formula, "I have tried, I have chased correctly" (*ho inseguito correttamente*), condenses the core experience of violated labourism that defines this type. She did what was expected: she tried, she applied, she followed the rules. Neither the public sector nor the private one reciprocated.

Elena's work-housing configuration illustrates one pole of the type. The inherited house holds: it was unfinished, she completed it herself, and it provides the material floor beneath which she has not fallen. But work has never stabilised. For fifteen years she has worked informally as a home care worker, with no contract, no contributions, and a projected social pension close to zero. She is aware of this arithmetic. When the *reddito di cittadinanza* was introduced, she took it for a year without shame. She contrasts this experience with the alternative she had known before: going to the municipality to ask for social assistance, which required explaining one's situation to a social worker and amounted, in her words, to humiliation:

> If you went to the municipality [*lu comune]* and said you needed social assistance, you had to explain your situation, and apart from anything else, you feel degraded. You go there saying "I don't have food," how can you humiliate yourself like that? … Instead, these five hundred euros [the *reddito*], at least you went to the *patronato*, did the paperwork, received your right, and felt at least a little relieved.[55]

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[54]"Fino adesso io ho cercato, ho inseguito correttamente, di trovare un lavoro, né un privato né niente mi ha voluto riconoscere un contratto. … Diciamo un posto statale, né un privato, quindi a questo punto io sono disoccupata, lavoro a nero, lo stato non lo sa, e ho potuto prendere per un anno il reddito di cittadinanza. Punto. La casa me la ritrovo per un'eredità dei miei genitori, era un rustico che poi l'ho finita io, pagandomi una rata, in dieci anni l'ho finita." (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

[55]"Se tu andavi a lu comune dicendo che c'è l'assistenza sociale, gli spieghi la tua situazione, cioè a parte che ti senti pure degradato, tu vai là dicendo io non c'ho da mangiare, come fai a umiliarti … invece queste 500 euro, almeno uno è andato al

(Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

The contrast Elena draws is precise. The *comune* required supplication, a face-to-face confession of need that stripped away dignity. The *reddito di cittadinanza*, by contrast, operated through bureaucratic procedure: paperwork at the *patronato*, a right claimed rather than a favour begged. Elsewhere, Elena frames the RdC as a payback [*rivalsa*], "at the expense of the state that did not want me." The formula is not passive. It is an assertion of reciprocity owed: she tried, the system refused, and so the minimum income is not charity but a belated, partial recognition of what was denied.

Giuseppe's trajectory follows a similar arc. A comic actor and cameraman from a popular neighbourhood of Naples, he comes from a working-class family: his father was a municipal street-sweeper who raised six children on a single salary, without excess but without deprivation. Giuseppe left school early, obtaining the lower secondary certificate through evening classes, and never held credentialised aspirations. His cultural references are the Neapolitan comic tradition, Totò and De Filippo above all, which function both as artistic models and as moral grammars. From the mid-1990s to 2012 he combined multiple activities into a functional, if entirely informal, working equilibrium: he worked as a comic actor and cameraman for a local television station near Naples, producing comedy programmes and operating as a news cameraman. In the summers he worked in a town on the northern coast, first selling goods on the beach, then as a security guard on the seafront, eventually being promoted to a hotel. The arrangement was informal, based on short contracts and seasonal work, but it held together: he earned enough, travelled, built a wide network of relationships, and could take unpaid leave to shoot films.

The rupture came with the 2008 crisis. The government cut funding to small broadcasters; by 2012 the station closed. Giuseppe was forty-one. He turned to his extensive network of contacts, confident that someone would hire him. The answer was unanimous: contracts were only available for workers under thirty-five. At forty-one, the formal labour market was shut. Like Elena, Giuseppe had never possessed a stable contract; what he had was an arrangement that worked, and what he discovered was that the system offered no route back:

> If I had not had my passion, which then became my work, the art, I would have had to do something illegal, or, as many friends of mine unfortunately did, I would have had to kill myself, because I did not fit into anything. I am now 53 years old, and thanks to comedy, thanks to

patronato, ha fatto le carte, gli ha avuto il suo diritto, si è sentito almeno un po' risollevato." (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

cinema, today I survive. I do not live, I am not the actor with the big bank account. But I survive, thankfully.[56]

(Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy)

The formula *sopravvivo, non vivo* is the exact Italian equivalent of the *sobrevivir/vivir* distinction that defines the type across the Spanish cases, arrived at independently through a different biography and a different language. Since 2012, Giuseppe has survived through occasional acting jobs, including a recent small role in a major production, informal work of every kind, and whatever else presents itself. The work-housing nexus is broken on both sides: he has rented the same flat for sixteen years without a contract, the landlord having declared him to the police but refused to formalise the arrangement. His wife has been dealing with serious health problems for seven years, receiving a disability pension of 343 euros per month. The household has no buffer: work is entirely intermittent and informal, housing is held without legal protection, and the family, rather than functioning as a safety net, is itself the site of vulnerability. What keeps Giuseppe above the threshold of the subproletariat is what he calls the Neapolitan capacity to *arrangiarsi*: "a Neapolitan who knows how to move around always earns something." This is not the redoubling of the effort script characteristic of Type 3, but a collective, culturally embedded resource for survival, rooted in community rather than kinship, that prevents the most extreme outcomes without producing integration.

If Elena and Giuseppe represent the case of denied entry, never having accessed the formal standard, Michele represents the opposite trajectory: possessed and lost stability. Michele is a 36-year-old former factory worker in Tuscany, who spent thirteen years as a worker at a multinational manufacturing company, on an indefinite contract with union membership. When the plant abruptly closed, the world he had built around that stability collapsed. Michele captures the configurational character of the loss through a single biographical coincidence: on the very morning the closure was announced, he was in the process of buying an apartment.

The morning the message reached us that the company was closed… just like that… to give you an idea of how unpredictable the situation was, I was looking at an apartment […] to buy. Now, I mean, as a precarious worker, as an unemployed person, I have no possibility whatsoever of buying anything, unless I've got a hundred-odd thousand euros […], which I don't. So basically

[56] "Se io non avevo la mia passione che poi è diventata lavoro, che è quella dell'arte, io avrei dovuto fare o qualcosa di illecito, o come hanno fatto purtroppo tanti amici, mi sarei dovuto suicidare, perché non sono rientrato in nulla. Adesso ho 53 anni e grazie alla comicità, grazie al cinema, oggi sopravvivo. Non vivo, non sono l'attore quello là con il conto bancario molto alto. Ma sopravvivo per fortuna." (Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy)

the precarious worker has no purchasing power, the precarious worker has to make do with what is offered to him.[57]

(Michele, 36, factory worker/barman, n. 11, Italy)

The simultaneity is not coincidental: it captures the moment at which precarity ceases to be a labour-market category and becomes a condition of social disintegration. Losing stable work does not merely reduce income; it dismantles the entire structure of projections, commitments and biographical plans that stable work sustained. The apartment that was about to be purchased names, in concrete form, the future that was about to be consolidated and was instead withdrawn. Now working as a barman on short-term contracts, Michele frames the new condition in terms of radical powerlessness: the precarious worker "has to make do with what is offered to him," must show up even with a fever, cannot negotiate, cannot plan.

The Spanish parallel to Michele's trajectory is Felipe, a 45-year-old shop assistant in Barcelona, who has recently become a supermarket cashier. Felipe studied geography and history at university, but unlike the aspiring middle class of Type 1, he never intended to convert the degree into a professional career. "I never wanted to be a professor of geography or history," he explains. "I study because I like it. I have no aim of earning money from it, no vocation to dedicate myself to it. I do it for the love of knowledge."[58] The credential was, from the outset, decoupled from work: a variant of the same de-credentialising logic that Clara will articulate differently. Felipe's working identity was built in retail and services, where he worked for five years as a train attendant on the AVE, Spain's high-speed rail, on an indefinite contract at full-time hours: "we lived well," he recalls. A change of government brought privatisation of the service lines, an 800-euro salary cut, and three strikes that failed to reverse the damage.

What followed was a cascade of increasingly precarious employment: flight attendant at a budget airline with six-month contracts alternating with six months unpaid, "which is a terrible form of

[57]"[…] io ero la mattina che ci arrivò il messaggio […] che l'azienda è chiusa… così… per farti capire l'imprevedibilità del contesto, io ero a guarda' un appartamento […] da comprare. Ora, io, cioè, da precario, da disoccupato, non ho nessun tipo di possibilità di acquistare niente, a meno che non ci abbia 100 e rotti mila euro […] che non ho. Quindi sostanzialmente il precario non ha potere d'acquisto, il precario si deve accontentare di ciò che gli viene proposto." (Michele, 36, factory worker/barman, n. 11, Italy)

[58]"Nunca quería ser profesor de geografía ni de historia. Estudio porque me gusta. No quiero dar clase, no tengo una finalidad de ganar dinero ni vocación al dedicarme. Lo hago por amor al conocimiento." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

labour precarity,"[59] then a sequence of retail positions at various fashion chains, each ending after six months when the contract should have become indefinite. The mechanism was always the same: "at the end, because you're old, after the six damn months, when they have to make you permanent, they kick you out."[60] The cumulative effect was devastating: Felipe went through five periods of unemployment and suffered an eight-month depression triggered by his working conditions in Barcelona. The pandemic compounded the precarity, confirming what he had already sensed: that the retail sector offered no security against external shocks.

At the time of the interview, Felipe had recently found a position at a supermarket chain, his first indefinite contract at 30 hours per week. He describes it, with visible surprise, as the best job he has had since arriving in Catalonia over a decade earlier: "it's the first time since 2013 that I feel comfortable in a job, and that has no price."[61] That a part-time supermarket position can appear as an achievement measures the distance fallen from the AVE years. Felipe lives in a flat owned by his husband, an architect who came from a working-class family and whom Felipe explicitly locates in the middle class. Without this housing security, he says, the current job would not be viable. Felipe names the formula that crystallises the condition of the type:

> There is more work, yes, because the current government has achieved that. And the indefinite contracts law has been fulfilled. … This is a point in favour of Yolanda. At the work level, Yolanda is a good politician. But no wealth is generated, it's surviving. And in the end, surviving is not living.[62]
>
> *(Felipe, 45, shop assistant; n. 5, Spain)*

Felipe's distinction between *sobrevivir* and *vivir* names the threshold that defines this type. The content of *tranquilidad*, the term he uses for the horizon he seeks, is remarkably concrete: "Having a job that allows you to pay the bills and that lets you pay for health insurance."[63] Not a career, not a return to

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[59]"Cuando nos tenían que hacer indefinidos, después del tercer año trabajando seis meses sí, seis meses no, que eso es una precariedad laboral terrible." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

[60]"Al final, por viejo, a los seis putos meses, cuando te tienen que hacer indefinido, te echan." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

[61]"Es la primera vez desde que llegué a Cataluña, desde 2013, que siento que estoy a gusto en un trabajo. Y eso no tiene precio." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

[62]"Hay muchísima más gente que es indefinida. Esto es un punto a favor de Yolanda. La Yolanda lo ha conseguido. A nivel de trabajo, la Yolanda es una buena política. Pero no se genera riqueza, es sobrevivir. Y al fin y al cabo, sobrevivir no es vivir." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

[63]"¿Y entonces, qué es lo que te da la tranquilidad? Tener un trabajo que te pueda permitir pagar las facturas y con el que puedas pagarte el seguro médico." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

the AVE, but the bare capacity to meet basic obligations and protect oneself against the erosion of public healthcare. What the labour reform delivered, more indefinite contracts, is acknowledged; what it did not deliver is a life. The formal improvement coexists with substantive stagnation. Felipe's trajectory, like Michele's, illustrates the upper zone of the type: workers who once accessed the standard of stable employment and lost it through restructuring, political decisions and age discrimination, and who still measure the present against the memory of what they had.

Clara occupies a different, analytically crucial position within the type. A 36-year-old shop assistant in Madrid, Clara studied photography and graphic design, completed an interactive design course in the UK where she lived for three and a half years, and later pursued a programming master. She speaks English, has international work experience, and holds credentials that would place her firmly within the aspiring middle class of Type 1. Yet her trajectory landed her in precisely the same structural position as Elena and Felipe: four years in a t-shirt shop, performing managerial functions without managerial pay, earning around 1,000 euros a month. What distinguishes Clara from Type 1 is her response to this structural mismatch. Where the aspiring middle class clings to vocational identity and insists on the credential, Clara exited the field, framing the exit as a defence of dignity:

> I have all the knowledge I acquired about this, and if they don't value it, then I don't want to work in this field, because I understand that in some way I would be prostituting my work and my knowledge. It's like, I'm giving this away for nothing, when it cost me so much. So I gave up. I gave up and I said, I prefer to find a job that pays the bills at the end of the month, but one in which my mental burden and my knowledge are not harmed in that way.[64]
>
> *(Clara, 36, shop assistant, n. 19, Spain)*

Clara's formulation is distinctive. The verb *prostituir* names the precise mechanism of violation: to exercise a skill without fair compensation is to degrade not only one's labour but one's knowledge itself. The exit from the profession is therefore not a failure of will but a defence of what was learned, a refusal to let the credential be consumed by an exploitative market. This is the opposite of Type 1's vocational attachment: where the aspiring middle class insists on the profession at the cost of material suffering, Clara protects the dignity of the knowledge by refusing to exercise it. The result is

[64] "Tengo todo el conocimiento que yo sé sobre esto y pues si no lo valoran, pues no quiero trabajar de esto, porque entiendo que de alguna manera estoy prostituyendo mi trabajo y mi conocimiento. Es como, estoy regalando esto por nada, cuando a mí me ha costado tanto, entonces me rendí. Me rendí y dije, prefiero encontrar un trabajo que me pague la factura a final de mes, pero en el que mi carga mental y mi conocimiento no se vea perjudicado en ese aspecto." (Clara, 36, shop assistant, n. 19, Spain)

the same structural position, retail work at subsistence wages, but the subjective register is different: not laceration, but resigned lucidity.

Clara articulates this position through the same *sobrevivir/vivir* distinction that Felipe uses, but with a concreteness that specifies the threshold from below:

> Surviving is basically that your salary doesn't allow you to live comfortably. … Current salaries in Madrid, well, in hospitality or whatever, any ordinary job, the salary is 1,000 euros, 1,200 at most. And in Madrid that covers rent, food, and at most going out two or three times a month. And that's not living, for me that's surviving. … The way things are in Spain, I think in the end people are looking to be able to live, not to be surviving as almost everyone is right now.[65]
>
> *(Clara, 36, shop assistant, n. 19, Spain)*

Clara's formulation specifies what surviving looks like: rent, food, and going out two or three times a month. The content of *vivir*, by contrast, is not elaborated, because it has never been experienced. Her second formulation, that "people are looking to be able to live, not to be surviving as almost everyone is right now," shifts the register from individual complaint to collective diagnosis. Where Felipe remembers the AVE years as a lost standard, Clara has no comparable memory. Her parents had it: her father, a bank employee, bought a flat and paid it off in under five years, entering the workforce without a degree and staying in the same job for life. Clara sees the norm through her parents' biography, not through her own. The intergenerational comparison renders the violated norm visible from the outside, as a historical fact rather than a personal loss.

At the lower boundary of the type stands Ignacia, a 70-year-old housekeeper living on the periphery of a city in southern Spain. Ignacia's trajectory represents the most radical form of disintegration in the group, mediated by migration. She had only two years of formal schooling, but through decades of autodidactic effort and relentless work, beginning at the age of ten, she built herself a position of petit-bourgeois security in Latin America: three garment manufacturing businesses over twenty-seven years, property, employees, a self-made life. Serial expropriation, political violence and economic collapse forced her to migrate to Spain at forty-nine, arriving with nothing. The distance fallen is captured in a single passage:

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[65]"Sobrevivir básicamente es que tu salario no te dé para vivir de una manera cómoda. … Los sueldos de ahora en Madrid, bueno, en hostelería, da igual, en cualquier trabajo así común, digamos, el sueldo son 1.000 euros, 1.200 como mucho. Y en Madrid te da para pagar alquiler, comer y como mucho salir dos veces o tres al mes. Y eso no es vivir, para mí es sobrevivir." "Y como están las cosas en España, creo que al final la gente busca poder vivir, no estar sobreviviendo como está casi todo el mundo ahora mismo." (Clara, 36, shop assistant, n. 19, Spain)

> The hardest thing that has happened to me here in Spain was having to end up living in a room shared with ten, with fourteen people. Because in my countries I always had my apartment, my home.[66]
>
> *(Ignacia, 70, housekeeper, n. 15, Spain)*

The border strips everything. In Spain, Ignacia worked in hospitality at 500 euros a month for six nights a week, then in home care at six euros an hour, holding multiple simultaneous jobs. Kidney failure eventually rendered her unfit for full-time work. She now lives on a non-contributory pension of 517 euros, supplemented by informal domestic work with a failing body, in a building whose recent purchase by an investment fund threatens eviction. The work-housing nexus is broken on both sides: the pension falls below subsistence, and the housing is threatened by forces entirely beyond her control.

Taken together, these trajectories reveal a pattern of disintegration that is distinct from the one documented for the aspiring middle class. The norm from which these workers are disintegrating is not a professional career but the standard working-class one: stable work, predictable income, secure housing, the capacity to plan a life. The subjective formulation of this threshold, "surviving is not living," recurs independently across cases and across countries, in Giuseppe's Italian (*sopravvivo, non vivo*) and Felipe's Spanish (*sobrevivir no es vivir*) alike. It names a condition that is materially concrete and morally charged: the violation is not of a meritocratic promise of differential reward, but of the basic expectation that honest work should sustain a dignified existence.

The internal gradient of the type emerges clearly from the comparison. The lower zone, represented by Elena and Giuseppe, comprises workers who never accessed formal stable employment. Both had functional arrangements that held together for a time, Elena's clothing business and care work, Giuseppe's television and seasonal employment, but neither possessed a contract or institutional protection, and when the arrangement collapsed neither found a route into the formal labour market. What keeps them above the threshold differs: Elena's inherited house provides a material floor, while Giuseppe draws on the Neapolitan cultural resource of *arrangiarsi*, a collective, community-based capacity for survival that operates alongside, and sometimes in place of, kinship-based transfers. The upper zone, represented by Michele and Felipe, comprises workers who once accessed stable employment and lost it through plant closure, restructuring, or political decisions. They know what they have lost, and this knowledge structures both their perception of the present and their political

[66]"Lo más duro que me ha pasado aquí en España ha sido tener que llegar a vivir en una habitación de compartir con diez, con catorce personas. Porque en mis países siempre tuve mi apartamento, mi casa." (Ignacia, 70, housekeeper, n. 15, Spain)

demands. Clara occupies a transitional position: she carries the credentials of the aspiring middle class but has abandoned the aspirational horizon, redefining her expectations downward to the basic standard of a liveable salary. Her trajectory crosses the boundary between types, and her response to credential devaluation, exiting the field to protect the dignity of her knowledge rather than insisting on it, marks the precise point at which a frustrated aspiring middle-class trajectory becomes a fully commodified working-class one. Felipe, too, illustrates a variant of this decoupling: his university degree in geography and history was never intended as a professional credential, but pursued for the love of knowledge, leaving his working identity entirely in the sphere of manual and service labour. At the lower boundary, Ignacia's trajectory represents the most extreme form of disintegration: migration stripped everything, and the non-contributory pension and informal work that remain do not constitute a floor but a surface that could give way at any moment.

Across all zones, the family operates as the characteristically South-European buffer. Elena's inherited house, Michele's parental housing, Felipe's husband's property, Clara's return to her mother between moves: these transfers of property and shelter attenuate the fall and prevent the most extreme outcomes. But the buffer is neither universal nor unconditional. Giuseppe's household, where the family is itself the site of vulnerability rather than a source of protection, and Ignacia's radical isolation in a country where she has no kin, mark the limits of the familial model. Where the buffer holds, it blunts disintegration; where it fails, precarious workers are pushed to the threshold of respectability and sometimes beyond it.

7.2.2 Below but decent

Section 7.2.1 established the structural coordinates of the disintegration: work that does not stabilise, housing that depends on family transfers or luck, a life below the standard working-class norm. This section asks how precarious workers in this position perceive and name their social location. The answer, across all cases, is an oscillation between two poles. The first is *abajo*: a lucid, relational perception of position, the recognition that one stands below where the majority should be. The second is *medio* or *degno*: a defensive claim to dignity, the assertion that one's worth is not exhausted by one's material condition. The two poles never resolve into a stable synthesis. They coexist in the same individuals, sometimes in the same passage, producing an oscillation that is not a contradiction but the form that class experience takes when it cannot be named.

Elena's self-positioning displays the oscillation with particular clarity, in at least three distinct movements within the same interview. She begins on a moral plane: she places herself among the

middle ones [*tra i medi*],[67] not because she earns a middle income, but because she has her faith, her curiosity, a richness of spirit that she contrasts with the sadness she observes in other women in her town who have more material security but less vitality. The second movement is structural: she is *medio* also because she has the inherited house, the one asset that distinguishes her from the truly destitute. But then the third movement reverses the claim. Pressed further, she concedes that she cannot think of anyone poorer than herself in material terms: she is, in this case, the poorest [*io sono la più povera*].[68] The trajectory within a single interview runs from moral dignity to structural anchoring to the admission of material destitution, each register true, none capable of cancelling the others.

Clara's oscillation is compressed into fewer words but carries the same structure. Asked to position herself, she answers immediately: below [*abajo*]. Her options, she adds, are not like the majority's [*no son como la mayoría*].[69] But the same Clara, only minutes earlier, had described herself as privileged, all things considered [*privilegiada dentro de lo que cabe*], because she can still pay rent and eat, and there are people worse off. And the structural diagnosis she formulates is precise: the middle class no longer exists, people are now simply poor or simply rich [*ya no hay clase media, ya la gente es pobre directamente o es rica directamente*].[70]

Paola, a cleaner with a Latin American migrant background living in the region of Madrid, offers the most compressed version of the *medio* pole: she is in the middle, neither here nor there [*yo en medio, ni para allá ni para acá*]. When pressed on what *medio* means, she redefines it as aspiration: she aspires to what is fair, what is fair to make it to the end of the month, what is fair is to be happy [*yo aspiro a lo justo, lo justo para llegar al mes, lo justo es ser feliz*].[71] The middle, here, is not a sociological location but a moral stance: the refusal to accept destitution as an identity, while knowing perfectly well that the material condition is one of destitution.

Michele, asked about his position, collapses precarity and unemployment into a single condition: he is now precarious, or rather not even precarious, simply unemployed, because the two amount to

[67]"Tra i medi." (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

[68]"Penso che non ce ne stanno più povere. In questo caso io sono la più povera." (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

[69]"Abajo. [...] Mis opciones no son como la mayoría." (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)

[70]"Ya no hay clase media, ya la gente es pobre directamente o es rica directamente." (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)

[71]"Yo en medio, ni para allá ni para acá. [...] Yo aspiro a lo justo, lo justo para llegar al mes, lo justo es ser feliz." (Paola, 42, cleaner, n. 2, Spain)

more or less the same thing [*ora sono precario, ora neanche precario, sono disoccupato*].[72] But moments later he identifies certainly as a worker [*certamente come operaio, anzi*],[73] and positions the working class in a hierarchy where it stands just above immigrants and those who lack any rights at all. The shift from *precario* to *operaio* within the same interview marks a passage that most respondents in this group do not make: from the perception of position to an explicit class identification. Felipe makes the same passage with even less hesitation, declaring that he is working class and lower class, forty-five years old and working thirty hours a week [*yo soy clase obrera y soy clase baja*].[74] Both are the most syndicalised cases in the group. Felipe has inherited a tradition of class identification from a family anchored in the *transición*, and declares himself a syndicalist. Michele has self-constructed a class vocabulary after his factory's closure, reading Marx, engaging in a political education that was not available to him before. They are the exceptions that confirm the rule: for the remaining cases, class is perceived but not named.

Giuseppe inhabits the *abajo* pole, but gives it positive content. Asked about his social position, he answers without hesitation: man of the people [*uomo del popolo*]. The category is not a substitute for class, it is a way of inhabiting the class position from below with dignity rather than deficit. Its content is moral and relational: to be of the people means to perceive the hardship of others, to be unable to turn away from it. "Man of the people means being able to understand everything that the street, that the people, that lived experience… to understand the poor person. [...] Being empathic, one perceives the distress of others, so you cannot but become part of that, you cannot exempt yourself, you cannot turn your back."[75] The structural perception is not absent: Giuseppe's account of social classes as "ways of living" fixed from birth, "if you were not born a count, you cannot become one,"[76] confirms the same lucid diagnosis of immobility that runs through the group. But where the other cases oscillate between *abajo* and *medio*, unable to rest in either, Giuseppe's *popolo* offers a way of dwelling

[72]"Ora sono precario, ora neanche precario, sono disoccupato, perché più o meno è la stessa cosa." (Michele, 36, unemployed factory worker, n. 11, Italy)

[73]"Certamente come operaio, anzi [...] la classe sociale che sta prima dell'immigrati e degli schiavi, e gli operai, come è sempre stato." (Michele, 36, unemployed factory worker, n. 11, Italy)

[74]"Yo soy clase obrera y soy clase baja. Tengo 45 años y trabajo a 30 horas." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

[75]"Uomo del popolo. Significa riuscire a comprendere tutto ciò che la strada, che il popolo, che il vissuto… riuscire a comprendere il povero. [...] Essendo empatico, riesce a percepire il disagio delle persone, quindi non puoi non diventare parte di quella cosa, non puoi esimerti, non puoi girarti le spalle." (Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy)

[76]"Se sei nato conte, tu sarai sempre conte, ma se non sei nato conte, non puoi diventare conte. E quindi sono modi di vivere diversi." (Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy)

in the below that is neither stigmatised nor defensive. It converts the experience of deprivation into a source of moral authority: those who have suffered understand what the comfortable cannot.

The symbolic boundaries that respondents draw are nearly dichotomous: sharp upward, faint or absent downward. The boundary against those above is drawn with clarity and moral indignation across all cases, though its content varies with each respondent's experience. Clara identifies those who had better opportunities simply because they were born into a more comfortable family: private courses, expensive postgraduate qualifications, doors that open for some and remain shut for others, while those at the top have no interest in letting people like her advance [*a los de arriba no les interesa que tú prosperes*]. Ignacia's upward boundary is embodied in the owner of the *finca* where she works informally: a man who inherited a large rural estate, votes for the far right, and whose relationship to her labour oscillates between dependency and contempt. When he proudly shows her his collection of paintings and mounted bull heads, she responds that none of it interests her, these are things of the world, here today and gone tomorrow. The boundary is drawn through the daily experience of serving someone whose inherited wealth and political loyalties represent everything she opposes. Elena encounters those above at the *comune*, where bureaucrats make her feel the full weight of institutional contempt when she asks for help, and in the figure of a member of parliament who, knowing her economic vulnerability, attempted to exploit it. Michele locates those above in the factory owners who discarded workers once production was relocated, and in the system of *raccomandazione* that blocked every formal employment path he attempted. Paola, recounting her experience as a domestic worker in wealthy households, describes being treated like a strange creature [*como un bicho raro*] in a world where employers purchased separate plastic cups for the service so that workers would not touch the family's glasses. Felipe, the most unionized case, converts these experiential perceptions into explicit class language: the right does not want poor people to have access to anything, they are neoliberals who privatise education and hospitals. In all cases the boundary is moral and experiential before it is ideological: it is drawn from the lived perception of being treated as inferior by those who have more.

Downward boundaries, by contrast, are either absent or residual. Where they appear, the criterion is always work and decency, never ethnic belonging as such. Elena mentions Romanian care workers in terms of functional differentiation within a shared world of precarious domestic labour, not hostility. Ignacia expresses reservations about some neighbours, but the grounds are that they do not want to work and are not clean, a violation of the labourist and moral code by which she defines her own worth, not an essentialised rejection. Felipe is the only case where irritation toward migration and squatting is more than residual, the point in the group closest to a competitive framing

(Westheuser 2021). But even here inherited class identity blocks the conversion: he will never vote for the right, he says, because he is neither a hypocrite nor an idiot [*nunca voy a votar a la derecha porque no soy un hipócrita y no soy imbécil*].[77]

The oscillation between *abajo* and *medio* reflects a double condition. The *medio* pole is well illuminated by Dörre's (2006, 2022) analysis of demobilised class society: positions arising from negative classification are unsuitable as a foundation for positive collective identity, the available categories do not fit, and the precariously employed respond by ostentatiously placing themselves in the middle. No positive label is available, so *medio* fills the void. Dörre's framework captures this defensive movement precisely: it is the "ostentatious self-positioning in the middle" characteristic of contexts where class is experienced but cannot be articulated as identity (Dörre 2023:23).

The *abajo* pole, however, is not fully captured by Dörre's account. It is not mere resignation, nor is it the threshold anxiety of those who fear falling further. It is, rather, a form of lay sociology: a competent, relational description of position that respondents arrive at through the comparison of their own conditions with those of others. *Abajo* does not reach the force of a class identity, it does not organise collective action or generate a shared vocabulary of belonging. But it names the position accurately, and in a way that the available sociological categories do not. Working class evokes the standard working-class norm, the stable employment and secure housing from which these respondents are disintegrating. *Abajo* is what remains: the honest recognition that one stands below where the majority should be, without a category adequate to the experience. Giuseppe's *uomo del popolo* partially overcomes this void, not by replacing class vocabulary but by inhabiting the *abajo* with positive moral content, the capacity to feel, to understand, to refuse to turn away. Its availability is culturally specific, rooted in the Neapolitan popular tradition, but the function it performs, converting the experience of being below into a dignified identity, is the same function that social populism will perform at the political level.

It is not accidental that the term these respondents reach for, *abajo*, *popolo*, corresponds with the political grammar of social populism: us below, against them above, for the people. The self-positioning and the political orientation share the same structure because they emerge from the same condition: class lived without fully being sayable, position perceived without a clear vocabulary to organise it. The political sections that follow will show how this correspondence operates in practice.

[77]"Nunca voy a votar a la derecha porque no soy un hipócrita y no soy imbécil." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

Yet the oscillation between *abajo* and *medio* is not the only way respondents navigate the gap between position and self-worth. Alongside runs a register of non-materialist self-worth recomposition: a set of fantasies, projects, and spiritual resources through which respondents construct worth outside the domain of work and income. They are imaginary windows, not real doors, and the respondents know it.

Elena provides the most vivid instance. After describing fifteen years of informal care work and the rational calculation that she will live on a social pension, she shifts register entirely: it is not work in itself, she says, new worlds can open up from any situation [*si possono aprire tanti mondi nuovi*].[78] She describes her fascination with the Franciscan *clarisse* of a convent near her town, the enclosed nuns, the peace, the attraction of spending days with them. But the double register is conscious. Immediately after this excursion, she catches herself: do I seem strange to you, talking like this? [*ti sembro strana che parlo così?*][79] She exits into the fantasy, she returns to the denunciation, and she knows she is doing both. Ignacia's version is inflected by the same logic: money comes and goes, she says, as long as God gives her a little food and a roof [*después de que Diosito me dé mi comidita y mi techo*].[80] Her anti-materialism is not resignation but a deliberate reconstruction of moral worth where material worth has been exhausted.

Giuseppe's recomposition takes a different, performative form. He articulates it through the figure of the *cuozzo*, the rough Neapolitan who lives without shame because he has nothing to protect: "The *cuozzo* lives life at 360 degrees, because he is not ashamed of anything. If I am walking down the street and I suddenly feel the joy of singing, I must do it, I must not be ashamed because you might want to judge me, I could not care less that you judge me."[81] Those who give themselves too many boundaries, he argues, are the wealthier classes, who are afraid of losing what they know they have. The reversal is precise: the condition of having nothing produces, paradoxically, the freedom that those above cannot access. Michele's recomposition is secular, the discovery of reading during factory night shifts, the project of a bookshop that would double as a social desk. Clara's is the lightest: she describes herself as a dreamer [*una persona soñadora*], someone who always has ideas and

[78]"Non è il lavoro in sé, si possono aprire tanti mondi nuovi." (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

[79]"Ti sembro strana che parlo così?" (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

[80]"El dinero va y viene, después de que Diosito me dé mi comidita y mi techo." (Ignacia, 70, housekeeper, n. 15, Spain)

[81]"Il cuozzo vive la vita a 360 gradi perché non si vergogna di nulla. Se a me sto camminando per strada e all'improvviso mi viene la gioia di cantare, io lo devo fare, non mi devo vergognare perché ci sei tu che magari mi vuoi giudicare, me ne fotte un cazzo che tu mi giudichi." (Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy)

goals, though whether they come true or not is another story [*que luego se cumplan o no, eso ya es otra historia*].[82]

The fantasy is the form that agency takes when material conditions prevent its practical realisation. But it is not passivity, and, crucially, it coexists with denunciation rather than absorbing it. The denunciation says: the system betrayed me. The recomposition says: but I am worth something for reasons the system cannot touch. The two registers alternate without resolution, each sustaining the other.

7.3 Violated labourism and work effort

The distinction between living and surviving, which structured the self-positioning examined in the previous section, already contains the moral economy of this group in condensed form. To say that one survives rather than lives is to invoke a norm, however implicitly: that honest work should allow a life, not merely the reproduction of bare existence. This norm, which we can call fordist labourism, constitutes the primary register of the moral economy across the entire group. Unlike Type 1, where labourism was a secondary discovery that emerged only after the educational-meritocratic frame cracked, here it is the starting point, inherited through family history and carried into an adult life that systematically violates it. Present alongside it, but in a subordinate and reinforcing position, is a second register, that of work-effort meritocracy: the sense that the violation is compounded because sustained personal effort was invested and not reciprocated. The combination of the two, violated fordist labourism as base, violated work-effort meritocracy as compounding factor, produces not self-blame or redoubling of the effort script, but recognition of systemic violation and external attribution of responsibility.

Elena's trajectory, already discussed above, makes the structure of the violation visible in its most condensed form. She should have had a stable contract, and was denied it; she tried every available route, from the fire brigade to the postal service to the care sector, and at every turn was met not with the normal procedures of a functioning labour market but with gatekeeping mediated by corruption and sexual blackmail. The dignity that a *lavoro fisso* was supposed to provide, the capacity to organise a life with a daughter, to plan, to breathe, was the dignity she was asked to exchange for

[82]"Soy una persona soñadora. Siempre tengo ideas, tengo metas, que luego se cumplan o no, eso ya es otra historia." (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)

her body. She refused, and the system refused her in return.[83] The result is not resignation but a precise form of retaliation. Elena now works informally as a home care worker and simultaneously claims the *reddito di cittadinanza*: the state failed to integrate her through dignified work, and she in turn takes from the state what it refused to give her through legitimate channels. The formula is explicit: "I will take it in the face of the state that never wanted me, all the positions that were there, all the posts."[84] The "in the face of the state" is not a boast but a denunciation: she throws back at the state its own failure to include her. The symmetry is deliberate. The state abused her by denying dignified integration; she, in subordinate position, abuses the state in return. The moral economy that produces this gesture rests on both registers simultaneously: the fordist norm that the state should guarantee inclusion through work, and the effort-meritocratic norm that she followed the correct procedures and was not reciprocated. The two are not in tension but in cumulative reinforcement. The second makes the first worse, not different.

Giuseppe, whose trajectory of informal equilibrium lost and survival without integration was discussed in the previous section, articulates the labourist norm itself with particular clarity. He inherited it from his father, a municipal street-sweeper in Naples who raised six children on a single salary. The norm is not theorised but expressed through direct comparison: his son, now twenty-one, works for an employer who pays thirteen hundred euros a month, respects the calendar, pays double for holidays, gives overtime out of pocket, and limits the day to six or eight hours. Giuseppe compares this to his own youth, when he worked thirteen, fourteen, fifteen hours a day as a waiter. The contrast crystallises the violated norm: what his son has now is what should be normal, and what he endured was exploitation. The formulation draws on the Neapolitan comic tradition as a moral grammar:

> Workers must be treated well, properly at the contractual level, but above all humanely. Because, as Totò said: are we men or corporals? There are too many corporals. I will even let you play the corporal, if you pay me adequately. But if you want to play the corporal and give me two euros an hour, you can play the corporal at your own house, not at mine. [...] I am an

[83]"Quante proposte non ho ricevute proprio perché avevo bisogno, e tanti sapevano che avevo bisogno, cercavano di prendermi così, di farmi cadere." (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

[84]"Me lo prenderò alla faccia dello stato che non mi hanno voluta, tutti i lavori che c'è preposto, tutte le cariche." (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy)

entrepreneur, but without my workers I am nothing. So if I want my product to come out at a hundred per cent, I must make my workers feel a hundred per cent well.[85]

(Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker (n. 25, Italy)

The passage condenses the fordist norm into a single image. The corporal who pays two euros an hour is the contemporary employer; the worker who refuses to serve on those terms is exercising the only form of agency available. The norm is relational and reciprocal: the employer needs the worker as much as the worker needs the employer, and a system that denies this mutuality is not a labour market but a regime of exploitation.

The same norm, articulated from a radically different biography, acquires the force of an absolute principle in Ignacia's account. Having run micro-enterprises in Colombia and Venezuela before migrating to Spain at forty-nine, she carries the memory of a labour regime where she honoured the pact from the employer's side: fortnightly pay, double for Sundays and holidays, punctual wages. When her son-in-law was sent to pick onions for a day, worked eight hours in the sun, and returned unpaid, Ignacia went to confront the intermediary directly:

I went to his bar and told him, without rudeness, with good manners. And I said, you did not pay my son-in-law for the day. [...] He said, and who are you? I said, I am his mother. And I have been twenty years in Spain. But as always, you intermediaries are the thieves too. Apart from stealing in South America, you also come here to steal from the workers. [...] A worker's labour is the most sacred thing there can be. Like children, like the elderly. That is sacred. A worker must never be robbed of their money and their work.[86]

(Ignacia, 70, housekeeper, n. 15, Spain)

The sacredness of labour is not, for Ignacia, an abstract principle. It is the sedimentation of a life spent on both sides of the employment relationship, and it produces a specific form of agency: the direct confrontation, *con educación pero sin miedo*, with whoever violates the pact. The boundary drawn is purely labourist: the intermediary is condemned not for being Bolivian but for being a thief, and

[85]"La gente va trattata bene, regolarmente a livello contrattuale, ma in primis umanamente. Perché, come diceva Totò: siamo uomini o caporali. Ci sono troppi caporali. Io ti faccio fare pure il caporale, se mi paghi adeguatamente. Se invece vuoi fare il caporale e mi vuoi dare 2 euro all'ora, ma io il caporale te lo faccio fare a casa tua, non a casa mia. [...] Io sono un imprenditore, ma io senza dipendente non sono un cazzo. Quindi se io voglio che il mio prodotto esca al 100%, devo far stare bene al 100% i miei dipendenti." (Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy)

[86]"Mi yerno se fue un día al campo a recoger cebolla, lo tuvieron ocho horas al sol [...] y no le pagaron el día. Le robaron el día. [...] Y le dije, no le pagó el día a mi yerno [...] El trabajo de un trabajador es lo más sagrado que puede haber. Como los niños, como las personas mayores. Eso es sagrado. A un trabajador nunca se le roba su dinero y su trabajo." (Ignacia, 70, housekeeper, n. 15, Spain)

the theft is defined not in monetary but in moral terms. To rob a worker of his day is to violate something sacred.

Felipe's case allows us to see the relationship between the two registers, fordist labourism and work-effort meritocracy, with particular precision. The deeper register is fordist: the norm according to which full-time work must allow a life. His parents were working-class people, poor people, who never had access to university and who destroyed themselves working, yet at the end of that destruction they had a restaurant, retirement, stability.[87] The problem is not that his parents had more despite studying less; it is that the same work ethic, applied today, no longer produces the same minimum results. Felipe himself had known the pact in its functioning form: five years on the AVE, indefinite contract, full-time hours, a decent life. The fracture came when the PP government outsourced the rail lines, wages were slashed, and he was forced to move to Barcelona. What followed was ten jobs in nine years, always on thirty-hour contracts, always replaced after six months by younger workers willing to accept less. The violated norm is articulated in purely material terms: at a certain age you cannot keep working twenty hours a week, you need a full-time contract to organise a life, and below that threshold there is only survival. "You can survive on fifteen hundred, but only survive."[88]

The second register, that of work-effort meritocracy, operates as reinforcement rather than alternative. Felipe holds a degree in geography but considers it an intellectual pleasure, not a professional investment; he never claims the labour market owes him a position corresponding to his qualification. What he does claim is that his professional competence, accumulated over twenty-three years in customer-facing roles, should count for something. But the market punishes it, because experience means age and age means expulsion: "If I am so good at what I do, why do I never fit in? Why do they keep people who are worth much less than me? Because they are twenty years younger."[89] This is violated professional meritocracy, not educational meritocracy: the working-class version of the meritocratic claim, where the merit in question is not the credential but the accumulated skill. The crucial point, however, is that this register does not replace the fordist one

[87]"Gente obrera, gente pobre, que no ha tenido acceso a la universidad y que ha tenido que trabajar muchas veces en lo que ha salido. Se reventaron a trabajar." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

[88]"O me subes de horas o me voy porque con una edad ya no se puede estar trabajando 20 horas ni 24 horas semanales. Si no tienes a papá y mamá que te lo paguen todo, si eres un tío que hace su vida, tienes que trabajar a jornada completa." [...] "Puedes sobrevivir con mil quinientos, pero solo sobrevivir." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

[89]"Si soy tan bueno en lo mío, ¿por qué nunca encajo? ¿Por qué se quedan con personas que valen mucho menos que yo? Coño, porque tienen veinte años menos." (Felipe, 45, shop assistant, n. 5, Spain)

but sharpens it. The diagnosis remains that the system does not pay those who work; the compounding factor is that it does not even pay those who work well.

If Felipe's case shows the two registers coexisting in stable superimposition, Clara's captures the moment of transition from one to the other. She studied design, moved abroad, learned languages, and arrived in Madrid expecting that the labour market would recognise the investment. Instead, she found internships at three hundred, five hundred euros, in a city where rent alone consumed more. The *me rendí* passage, discussed in Section 7.2.1, marked the abandonment of the credential claim. But the dislocatory moment that completes the transition is not the abandonment itself, it is what replaces it. Working in a copistería, Clara discovers that the owners want her to do design work without paying for it:

> They also wanted me to do design things, and I told them to pay me for the design things, because it was like, I studied for this, not to do it for you for free. And they did not think that was a very good idea. [...] If you cannot afford to hire people and pay them a decent wage, do not hire people, work yourself. [...] I said, this is not compensating me at all, I prefer to work at something else, that perhaps I invest the same amount of time in, but under somewhat better conditions, because otherwise it is not compensating me.[90]
>
> *(Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)*

The passage shows both registers in the act of shifting. The residue of educational meritocracy is still audible: "I studied for this, not to do it for you for free." But the operative demand has already moved to fordist territory: if you hire someone, pay them a decent wage [*un sueldo digno*]. The norm is no longer that credentials should receive their corresponding return, but that work of any kind should be adequately compensated. Clara does not redouble the effort script, as Type 3 would; she does not insist on the credential, as Type 1 does. She protects the dignity of knowledge by refusing to exercise it under conditions of degradation, and redefines her horizon downward. Once the transition is complete, the operative register is universalist: "The way things are in Spain, I think

[90]"Sí, sí, sí, porque claro, ellos también querían que yo hiciera cosas de diseño, y yo les dije que las cosas de diseño me las pagaran, porque era como, yo he estudiado para esto, no para hacértelo gratis, y no les parece muy buena idea [...] si no tienes para contratar a la gente y pagarle un sueldo digno, no contrates a gente, trabaja tú, ¿no? [...] esto no me está compensando en absoluto, o sea, prefiero trabajar en otra cosa, que a lo mejor invierta al mismo tiempo, pero tenga algo de mejores condiciones, porque si no, no me está compensando." (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)

people are ultimately looking to be able to live, not to keep surviving as almost everyone is doing now."[91] The claim is no longer that credentials should be rewarded, but that work should allow a life.

Eva, a Bolivian care worker in the Madrid region who works seventeen hours a day across two jobs and raises four children, brings to the labourist norm a dimension that the other cases leave implicit: the relationship between work and family as a site of violation. Asked to define what a good job would be, she moves immediately past the meritocratic frame:

> For me a good job would not be because you are an engineer or because you have a degree. All jobs should be good in one respect: both in work and in family. Why? Because many of us have children, small children, and for whatever reason, because of work, we become isolated. And they should study that a bit. For me that would be a fundamental value.[92]
>
> *(Eva, 50, care worker, n. 12, Spain)*

The refusal of the meritocratic frame is explicit: not because you are an engineer, not because you have a degree. Good work is not the reward for credentials but a universal condition that should apply to all jobs equally, and the criterion is not income or status but the capacity to sustain a family life. What is violated, for Eva, is not only the wage but the time: seventeen hours a day means losing the children, who grow up and never return to being small. "We workers lose," she repeats throughout the interview as a structural refrain, "we lose the affection of our family, of our children."[93] The loss is irrecoverable, and Eva knows it: you live life once and it does not come back. The violated norm here is not a different norm from Felipe's or Clara's, it is the same fordist labourism, but articulated from the vantage point of reproductive work and its impossibility under conditions of total commodification. When all time is sold, what remains is not a life but the bare mechanics of its reproduction.

Across these cases, the moral economy resolves into a layered structure: fordist labourism as base norm, work-effort meritocracy as reinforcing supplement. The base norm is universalist, all who work honestly should be able to live decently, and its violation produces indignation directed

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[91]"Como están las cosas en España, creo que al final la gente busca poder vivir, no estar sobreviviendo como está casi todo el mundo ahora mismo." (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)

[92]"Para mí sería un buen trabajo no porque seas ingeniero ni porque tengas título. Todos los trabajos tenían que ser buenos en un aspecto: tanto mismo laboral y familiar. ¿Por qué? Porque muchos de nosotros tenemos hijos. Pequeños. Y por X motivo por el trabajo nos vamos aislando. Y deberían un poco estudiar eso. Para mí eso sería un valor fundamental." (Eva, 50, care worker, n. 12, Spain)

[93]"Los obreros sí perdemos. Perdemos mucho. Perdemos ese cariño de nuestra familia, de nuestros hijos, porque van siendo jóvenes, y ya no vuelven a ser ni gatean, ni toman biberones, ni chupetes. Eso es una pérdida para un obrero." (Eva, 50, care worker, n. 12, Spain)

outward. The reinforcing layer is individual and experiential, but operates within the fordist frame rather than against it: I did not merely work, I strived, and the result is the same precarity. The variants are biographical, but the nucleus is the same: work must pay, and it does not.

The layered structure matters because it distinguishes this group from both Type 1 and Type 3. For the declassed aspiring middle class, labourism was a secondary discovery, and the primary violated norm was educational meritocracy. Clara's trajectory illustrates the transition: she enters the moral economy of this group precisely at the point where the educational claim is abandoned and the universalist labourist claim takes over. For the striving precarious working class (Type 3), frustrated work effort produces not recognition of systemic violation but redoubling of the effort script: if I try harder, perhaps the pact will hold. The crucial difference is that in this group the experience of sustained effort without reciprocation has destroyed the labourist illusion. The respondents have tried, they have followed the rules, and the system has not reciprocated. The response is external attribution, not self-blame.

But the violated labourist norm does not only produce indignation; it also carries, embedded within it, a principle of ordinary solidarity that points toward politics. Giuseppe's father, a municipal street-sweeper in Naples, formulated it in the simplest possible terms: "This piece of bread, if you do not have any, we have half a piece of bread each. And I grew up with this culture. If you do not have one euro and I have five, we have two fifty each."[94] The ethic of the half-loaf is not an ideological commitment but an inherited, practical norm of mutual aid: what there is must be shared. It is the ordinary concrete universalism that runs through the entire group, and it is the moral foundation on which their political demand, as the following sections will show, takes the form of inclusive labourism from below.

7.4 Abandonment and social populism

7.4.1 Abandonment, opportunism, and longing for hope

The moral economy described in the previous section, violated labourism compounded by frustrated effort, produces a precise diagnosis: the system has betrayed those who work. How does this diagnosis translate into the relationship with politics? Not into apathy, not into indifference, but into

[94]"Mio padre mi diceva: questo pezzo di pane, se tu non ce l'hai, abbiamo mezzo pezzo di pane a testa. E io sono cresciuto con questa cultura. Se tu non hai un euro e io c'ho cinque euro, ci abbiamo due euro e cinquanta a testa." (Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy)

a distinctive cycle of mobilisation, disappointment, withdrawal, and waiting. Clara captures the structure of this relationship with particular economy:

> It is really a fight over who has more power than the other. And when you are in power, the other will sink you. Really, nobody is looking out for the people. I think nobody cares even minimally about the people. They make some rules, some laws to keep the people reasonably happy so that they keep voting for you. But really caring, I think nobody cares. You become totally disenchanted with politics. When you realise that nobody is going to look out for you or help you in any way, that you are going to have to fight it all on your own.
>
> (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19,, Spain)[95]

The disenchantment Clara describes is shared across the group. Giuseppe declares himself apolitical. Eva votes null. Michele describes himself as subject to a political programme, whichever it may be [*succube di un programma politico, qualsiasi esso sia*]. Yet none of these positions is apathy. The competence is high, the interest persistent, the refusal active. Ignacia, who cannot vote because she has never obtained Spanish citizenship, illustrates this paradox with particular force. She declares herself *antipolítica*: she does not like politics, she is neither on one side nor the other. But her political analysis is the most discriminating in the group. The PP, she reports, is the party she has seen steal the most in Spain, from the Valencian corruption scandals to the employer who robbed her of two years of social security contributions, who was himself PP. The owner of the *finca* where she works votes for Vox, a party she traces directly to Franco.[96] *Antipolítica* as declared stance; sharp, experientially grounded political judgement as practice. The gap between the two is the gap that defines the group as a whole: they know exactly what is happening and who is responsible, they simply have no channel through which to act on that knowledge.

What produces this condition is not a single disappointment but a recurring cycle, identical in both countries: a window of political mobilisation opens, draws people in through a simple language of dignity and the dichotomy between those above and those below, partially delivers, then disappoints

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[95]"Que realmente una lucha de a ver quién tiene más poder que el otro. Y cuando tú estás en el poder el otro te va a hundir. Realmente nadie está mirando por la gente. Creo que nadie mira mínimamente por la gente. Que al final todo el mundo va a mirar por su bolsillo. Que realmente hacen algunas normas, algunas leyes para tener medianamente contento al pueblo y que el pueblo te siga votando. Pero realmente importarle creo que a nadie le importa. Te empiezas a disgustar mucho de la política. Cuando te das cuenta de eso, de que nadie va a mirar por ti ni te va a ayudar en ningún aspecto. Sino que lo vas a tener que luchar tú todo el rato. Te desencantas totalmente de la política." (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain).

[96]"De aquí, cariño, el partido que más he visto yo robar en España, lo del PP. [...] Y ese que me robó a mí los dos años, ocho meses de cotización, era del PP. [...] Ese Abascal, eso es de Vox, ese viene de lo de Franco." (Ignacia, 70, housekeeper, n. 15, Spain).

or is destroyed from outside, and the window closes. What remains is more awareness than before, without a political vehicle. Michele illustrates this dynamic well. He voted for the Movimento 5 Stelle in 2013 with genuine enthusiasm, describing the experience as "a social agitation, an idea of a peaceful revolution" [*un'agitazione a livello sociale, un'idea di una rivoluzione pacifica*]. The movement disintegrated. At the following election, rather than going to the polls, Michele says he went to shovel mud [*spalare il fango*] to help the local community to recover from a flood. The contrast is deliberate: between the institutional ritual of voting, which he now regards as disconnected from reality, and the direct, physical work of helping people on the ground.[97] But the withdrawal is not a settled condition. Asked whether he might vote again, Michele produces a formula that captures the entire group's predicament in its most class-inflected variant:

> "Until maybe, I don't know… there won't be a new Five Star Movement with more solid foundations that… awakens some conscience in me. I mean basically yes, my conscience is wide awake, and it is that, it is that of class, working class, but let's not say at political levels, more than anything at the level of work and social life." [98]

As Michele says, his class consciousness is awake, he is socially active, put lacks options for political mobilization at the national levels. If such an option would emerge - "a new Five Star Movement with more solid foundations" as he says - he envisions he would find a way and would be willing to mobilize.

Clara went through the same arc from the Spanish side. The 15M movement of 2011 was, in her account, a genuine turning point, the moment when people exhausted by bipartidism decided to go out on the streets and fight. Podemos emerged from that energy with a new idea, a new message, a sense that change was possible. But the two established parties destroyed it, she argues, because its programme threatened their economic interests: they made life impossible for it, they used every means to sink it [*le hicieron la vida imposible para quitarlo del medio*].[99] Clara now votes in blank. The gesture is deliberate: voting is a right that has cost many people's lives, she says, and she exercises it,

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[97]"Invece di andare a votare sono andato a spalare il fango." (Michele, 36, unemployed factory worker/barman, n. 11, Italy)

[98]"Finché magari non lo so…non ci sarà un nuovo Movimento 5 stelle con delle basi più solide che... risveglia qualche mia coscienza, cioè sostanzialmente sì. La mia coscienza è ben sveglia, che è quella., che è quella di classe, operaia, ma non diciamo a livelli politici ma più che altro a livelli lavorativi e sociali" (Michele, 36, unemployed factory worker/barman, n. 11, Italy).

[99]"Salió con una idea nueva, con un mensaje nuevo, con una idea de cambio, y como ya existen dos partidos muy fuertes, lo quitaron de la ecuación. Le hicieron la vida imposible para quitarlo del medio. Entonces no sé hasta qué punto puede aparecer alguien nuevo e intentar cambiar las cosas." (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain).

but in blank, because nothing convinces her.[100] Neither abstention, which would be renunciation, nor participation, which would imply trust, but the active exercise of a right as protest. And the longing persists: "I hope that another social movement emerges that displaces what is there. Because otherwise, as a society, we are heading…"[101] The sentence is left unfinished and the parallel with Michele is striking: same cycle, same residue of hope, same void of representation.

Giuseppe's trajectory completes the pattern. He first voted at eighteen, for Berlusconi, because, as he puts it, Berlusconi promised 350 euros a month to the people. He quickly concluded that politics was a toy [*un giocattolo*], that candidates were brought in and made to rise by whoever controlled the game, and he stopped voting for over two decades. The re-entry came in 2018, when the M5S introduced the *reddito di cittadinanza*. The identification is conditional and pragmatic: the M5S is the only party, in his account, that did something real for the people. They cut their own salaries, spent the savings on schools and healthcare, and introduced the RdC.[102] He regards Conte as the only new face in politics, a cultured man attacked by politicians who barely have a lower secondary certificate. On the minimum wage, he is categorical: the fact that the Prime Minister [Giorgia Meloni] refuses to sign it means there is something wrong underneath, and the M5S, if it returns to power, will deliver it. He will vote for them again.

Elena's identification with the M5S follows the same logic. She votes for the movement because she recognises herself in the social bracket it represents: she is inside it, she says, among those who are not protected [*ci sono dentro come fascia di sociale, non mi sento protetta*].[103] The reason why no other political actor is credible is not ideological but experiential: for fifteen years, every institutional channel she attempted was regulated by corruption, clientelism, and direct abuse. The M5S is, for her, the only actor that gave something without asking for anything in return. The *reddito di cittadinanza* arrived through bureaucratic procedure, a right claimed at the *patronato*, not a favour contingent on personal

[100]"Votar es importante. Es un derecho que le ha costado mucha vida a mucha gente, de lucha. Pero si ninguna se acerca o te convence, estás ejerciendo tu derecho al voto, aunque sea blanco. Para mí sí, es una forma de protesta." (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain).

[101]"Yo espero que sí que resurja otro movimiento social que desbanque un poco lo que hay. Porque si no, como sociedad nos vamos…" (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain).

[102]"A quello che ho visto in 53 anni con la politica, vedo sempre gli stessi, non hanno mai fatto nulla. Gli unici che hanno fatto, che ho visto fatto veramente, sono stati il Movimento 5 Stelle. La prima cosa che ha fatto, si è tagliato lo stipendio, ed è vero. Io ho visto i fondi spenderli, darli alle scuole, i loro soldi." (Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy).

[103]"Si, sicuramente. Perché ci sono dentro come fascia di sociale, non mi sento protetta." (Elena, 59, home care worker, n. 3, Italy).

submission. The identification is moral before being political: it rests on the elementary distinction between those who exploit vulnerability and those who, however partially, addressed it.

The only respondent who has not gone through this cycle is Felipe, who marks the outer boundary of the type. He votes for Yolanda Díaz *con conocimiento de causa*, is a syndicalist, and refuses the right categorically. But even he reports exhaustion: it is exhausting, mate [*es agotador, tío*]. The participation is tired, cyclical, Sisyphean: fight, win a little, watch the right destroy what was built, fight again. His anchoring is an inherited class identity, reinforced by direct biographical experience of the right as a concrete agent of damage: the PP destroyed his job on the AVE, and the cyclical threat to his rights as a gay man keeps the boundary sharp. Felipe is what the others might be if they had institutional anchorage. Without it, the cycle runs its course and the window closes.

The shared condition described across these trajectories corresponds neither to demobilised class society, in Dörre's sense (Dörre 2026; Westheuser and Beck 2025), nor a class mobilised one. It is something intermediate: a semi-mobilised condition punctuated by social-populist moments. The background is indeed the one Dörre identifies: the lasting absence of institutions converting class positions and experiences into class identities and stable mobilisation. But this background has been interrupted, in both countries, by massive social-populist moments that for some time altered and partially reversed it: the M5S in Italy since 2013, the 15M in Spain since 2011 and later Podemos, followed more recently by the Sumar platform. These moments mobilised rapidly through the language of dignity and the dichotomy between those above and those below (Narotzky 2016; Braga 2019; Della Porta 2015). And they partially delivered, as this is felt by the interviewees presented above who mention the *reddito di cittadinanza* in Italy, and the labour reform and the minimum wage increases in Spain.

Yet they exhausted themselves without producing deep and lasting structural change. What they left behind is not nothing, but it is not enough for a stable mobilisation either. It is a half-formed sense of who is on which side, an idea of what the mobilizing political vehicle could look like, preserved in the memory of that window of opportunity that opened and closed. It is an accounting of who delivered what, maintained with precision even by those, like Ignacia, who cannot vote. And it is a grammar, the dichotomy between those above and those below, that remains available for a future cycles. But there is no stable mobilisation and no stable political institution to sustain any of it.

The difference with Type 1 is structural. There, demobilisation was silent: emotional disinvestment within formal participation. The aspiring middle class continued to vote, but without conviction, hollowing out the act from within. Here, the refusal of the electoral channel is explicit. Michele went

to shovel mud. Clara votes in blank as a deliberate protest. Giuseppe did not vote for two decades. Eva votes null. The political competence is intact and the grammatical orientation persists, but the channel is rejected: not because the respondents do not know what they want, but because no one credibly offers it. The longing for a new cycle, Michele's hope for a new 5 Stelle moment on more solid foundations, Clara's hope that another social movement displaces what is there, is the political form that precarious class experience takes in the absence of class institutions.

7.4.2 "For the social, and the people": inclusive labourism from below

The longing described in the previous section is not empty. It has content, and the content is remarkably consistent across cases, countries, and positions within the gradient. The practical universalism that structures the moral economy and boundaries of the type - work must pay, need must be met, the poor are not the enemy - here acquires political form. The *mezzo pane* with which Giuseppe's father taught solidarity (section 7.3) reappears as a political grammar: a demand addressed upward, framed in the dichotomy between those above and those below, and articulated not in the pure language of class but in the language of dignity, the social, and the people.

Giuseppe provides the purest formulation. Asked about his political orientation, he rejects the category altogether, replacing it with a vocabulary that picks up and completes the *uomo del popolo* of section 7.2.2:

> I am of the people and for the people, not for politics. Because politics leads nowhere. If you are right-wing and you do something good for the people, because politics was born for the people, not for personal interests, if you do for the people I give you my vote.
>
> (Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy)[104]

The formulation is conditional, pragmatic, and trans-partisan: it does not matter whether the actor is left or right, what matters is whether it serves the people. The same vocabulary that named the social position in section 7.2.2, being *del popolo*, now organises the political demand: acting *per il popolo*. The identification is moral, structured by the dichotomy between *popolo* and private interests that runs through the entire moral economy of the type.

[104]«Io sono del popolo e per il popolo, non per la politica. Perché la politica non porta da nessuna parte. Se tu sei di destra e fai qualcosa di buono per il popolo, perché la politica è nata per il popolo, non per i propri interessi, se tu fai per il popolo io ti do il mio consenso.» (Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy).

Clara articulates the same grammar from the Spanish side. When asked where she stands politically, she says she feels far from the right but not particularly close to the existing left either. What matters to her is "the social question and the real problems people face every day" [*me importa mucho el tema social y los problemas reales que vive la gente a diario*]. But the formulation quickly becomes more precise:

> Housing affects everyone, not just one person or one sector of the population. There are things I can understand, like taxing the rich. But that only concerns a very small sector of the population. Housing affects everyone. I want that to be sorted, I want people to be able to live well and have some peace of mind. If that puts me close to the left, fine, I am close to the left. But I feel that the parties never manage to really connect with the ordinary citizen. They try, and they keep trying, but they don't know how to reach everyone. Because it's like: "we are the Left, and so on", yeah. But you don't have to sell that you are the left: You have to sell what you are going to do for everyone, not just for the people who vote for you.
>
> (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)[105]

The passage distinguishes between sectorial demands, taxing the rich, which concerns a small minority, and universal demands, housing, which touches everyone. The critique of the left is not a disagreement over ideology but a perception of distance: left-identitarianism appears as something remote and futile, disconnected from the real problems of ordinary people. The *ley trans*, in Clara's account, was an error of this kind: not because trans rights are unimportant, she says, but because, at "the level of scale, it is much more important to address something that many people experience, such as gender violence, than to focus on a small percentage of the population".[106] The demand is for parties to break through from the concrete, everyday experience of the people *[rompan desde la experiencia de la gente]*, not from the sectorial language of left identity.

Eva, when asked what she would change in Spain, produces the most condensed version of this grammar. Her demand is for a single word:

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[105]«La vivienda es algo que afecta a todo el mundo, no a una persona o a un sector de la población. Que hay cosas que puedo entender que, yo qué sé. Los impuestos a los ricos. Es solo un sector de la población que además es muy pequeño. Pero la vivienda es un sector que le influye a todo el mundo. Entonces me interesa que eso esté bien y que la gente pueda vivir bien y esté tranquila dentro de lo que cabe. Entonces si esa parte está cerca a la izquierda, pues sí, estoy cerca a la izquierda. Pero eso, creo que los partidos como que no terminan de romper en base al ciudadano de a pie. Porque es como, no:" y somos la izquierda y tal", ya. Pero es que no tienes que vender que sois tanto la izquierda. Tienes que vender qué vas a hacer por todos: No solo por una parte, No solo por la gente que te vota.» (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain).

[106]«Creo que fue un error la ley trans y todo eso. Si tú me pones una balanza, la violencia de género, que la vive mucha gente, la vive muchísima gente. A nivel de escala es mucho más importante a lo mejor tratar el tema de la violencia de género, que lo vive mucha gente, que centrarte solamente en ese porcentaje pequeño de la población.» (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain).

> Dignity. For the people who are completely vulnerable. Forgotten. Give them an opportunity. Those people who are forgotten, let them prepare themselves. In study. In personal progress. Let them take a leap in their lives. That is what I would like the government to do. Not to park them. Not to clip their wings so they can fly. Let them fly. Because there are many young people who cannot move forward because within their surroundings they have complications. Those people need you to help them. That young man or that young woman needs to fly. Needs to learn things. Because there are many talented people sitting at home because they don't have enough money to go out and study. That is what I would like to change.
>
> (Eva, 50, auxiliary nurse, n. 12, Spain)[107]

Do not park them, do not clip their wings, let them fly. The demand is the most radical in the group because it is the simplest: *dignidad*, the very thing that Eva's life of total commodification, seventeen hours a day, seven days a week, has been unable to fully produce. The desire for the fordist arrangement - stability and on it some opportunities for upward mobility - resurfaces in its fullest form: not "everyone should suffer as I have" but "the state should give people the opportunity I never had." The metaphor resonates with particular force coming from a woman who lives in a settlement that the municipality treats precisely as something to be parked, contained, cut off from services. Michele, from the Italian side, reaches a similar conclusion stressing a principle of universal security based on work and democracy: in a civil society everyone should be able to live a dignified life, regardless of the work they do [*in una società civile ognuno debba vivere una vita dignitosa, al di là del lavoro che fa*].[108]

What distinguishes these respondents from the politically homeless is that their orientation is not abstract. They know who did what, they maintain a precise bookkeeping of concrete benefits received and promises broken, and their identification, however conditional, is with specific political actors. Ignacia provides the most detailed example. She cannot vote, she declares herself *antipolítica*, and yet her account of who delivered what is the most discriminating in the entire group:

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[107]«Dignidad. Para las personas que están totalmente vulnerados. Olvidados. Darles una oportunidad. Esas personas que están olvidados, que se preparen. Tanto en estudio. En progreso personalmente. O sea que den un salto a su vida. Eso sí me gustaría que el gobierno hiciera. No aparcarles. No quitarles las alas para volar. Que vuelen. Porque hay muchos jóvenes que no pueden ir así porque tienen dentro de su entorno juegos, familia, tienen muchas complicidades. Entonces esa gente necesita que tú les ayudes. Necesita que tú les des una oportunidad. Necesita ese joven o esa chica necesita volar. Necesita aprender cosas. Necesita pues prepararse. Porque hay mucha gente talentosa que está en su casa porque no tiene economía lo suficiente para que ellos puedan salir a estudiar. Eso me gustaría a mí que cambiase.» (Eva, 50, auxiliary nurse, n. 12, Spain)

[108]«In una società civile ognuno debba vivere una vita dignitosa, al di là del lavoro che fa.» (Michele, 36, unemployed factory worker, n. 11, Italy)

> The PSOE, Pedro Sánchez, because it is a working-class party, it has always favoured workers. He regularised domestic workers, he raised our pensions, he raised the minimum. Because that PP kept the minimum frozen at 600 euros for nearly ten years. [...] Podemos also voted for that with Pedro Sánchez. All of us who have this little minimum pension, they give us a little payment every year to help with the rent. 517 euros. They are very useful to me, to help me with the gas, with everything. [...] Errejón, that kid, I love him. When he speaks, he speaks, not like a speech, he is very sure of what he says. Without complicating the words, without saying pretty things to the people. He just, ruf!, votes it. Says it just like that, pa' !. [...] I am antipolitical, but for that kid I would vote.
>
> *(Ignacia, 70, housekeeper, n. 15, Spain)*[109]

The passage condenses the entire logic of conditional identification. Each party and each figure is evaluated by what it concretely delivered: the PSOE regularised domestic workers and raised pensions, Podemos voted the rent subsidy, Errejón speaks directly, without embellishment, and for that alone she would break her own rule. The identification is not ideological loyalty but a moral bookkeeping, kept with precision even without the right to vote: I know what you did, I remember, and my vote is the reward for service to the people.

Giuseppe's bookkeeping operates on the same logic from the Italian side. The M5S is the only party that delivered: it cut its own salaries, it spent the savings on schools, and it introduced the *reddito di cittadinanza*. Conte is the only politician worth trusting, and on the minimum wage Giuseppe is categorical: the fact that the Prime Minister [Giorgia Meloni] refuses to sign it means there is something wrong underneath. The *reddito di cittadinanza* functions in these accounts not merely as a policy to be evaluated but as a moral test, the moment when the symbolic boundary between those above and those below became visible in the political arena.

Giuseppe's account of the RdC's abolition is the most powerful passage in the Italian interviews. He begins from his own household. His wife, who suffers from serious health issues and had been an energetic worker all her life, receives a disability pension of 343 euros. With the RdC, she received

[109]«De aquí, la verdad, que aquí yo me gusta más el PSOE, de Pedro Sánchez, porque es un partido de clase obrera, que siempre toda la vida ha favorecido a los trabajadores. Él regularizó las empleadas del hogar, nos subió las pensiones, subió el mínimo, porque ese PP tuvo el mínimo como casi 10 años en 600 euros. [...] Podemos también votó por eso con Pedro Sánchez. Todos los que tenemos esta pensioncita mínima, nos dan una paguita cada año para ayudar al alquiler. 517 euros, me sirven, me sirven, cariño, para ayudarme más con el butano, con todo eso. [...] Ese chavalito a mí me encanta, ese chavalito. Cuando él habla, él habla, no como un discurso, es muy seguro de lo que dice. Sin complicar tanto las palabras, diciéndole cosas bonitas al pueblo, no. Él, ruf!, lo vota. Lo dice así, pa'!. [...] Soy antipolítica, pero por ese chavalito sí que votaría yo.» (Ignacia, 70, housekeeper, n. 15, Spain)

an additional 500 euros a month, and "you could see her more relaxed" [*la vedevi più rilassata*]. Then the subsidy was abolished, and the attack on the poor began. Those who earn 15,000 to 30,000 euros a month, Giuseppe argues, persuaded those who earn 500 euros that the poor person was the problem of Italy [che *tu che ne guadagnavi 500 euro al mese era il problema dell'Italia*]. He watched people who, the day before, had given his wife ten euros for groceries, turn around and attack her for receiving a subsidy. He watched shopkeepers denounce the the idle benefit-claimants *[poltronai]*„ when those very claimants had been spending their 500 euros in their shops.[110]

The passage is at once biographically embodied - his wife's body, his own skin [*l'ho vissuto di prima persona sulla pelle*] - and structural. The mechanism he describes, the mobilisation of those who are themselves exploited against those who are even poorer, is the exact inverse of the solidarity of the *mezzo pane* he professes: instead of the dichotomy between the people and the elites, a manufactured dichotomy between the working poor and the non-working poor, orchestrated by those who profit from both. Clara, from the Spanish side, arrives at a convergent position through a different route: when the discussion turns to welfare benefits and immigration, she insists that the criterion should be need, not belonging. Those who have had fewer opportunities deserve help, because we are not all starting from the same place [*no estamos partiendo de la misma base*].[111]

The same grammar thus produces different concrete demands depending on where the respondent sits within the type. Felipe and Michele, in the upper zone, prioritise labour protection: stable contracts, a minimum wage that allows one to live, a full working day. Felipe's demand is concrete: either you raise my hours or I leave, because at a certain age one cannot keep working twenty hours.[112] Elena, Ignacia, and Eva, in the lower zone, have passed through the labourist demand and come out the other side: they have tried all their lives to obtain work and contracts, they have been systematically excluded, and they now ask for a floor of social citizenship, the *reddito di cittadinanza*, a universal pension, a rent subsidy, because they see reintegration through standard employment as impossible for themselves.

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[110]«Sono riusciti a convincere l'operaio italiano che quei fondi venissero dalle loro tasse. Noi siamo riusciti a farci fare il lavaggio del cervello da chi guadagna 15–30mila euro al mese, che tu che ne guadagnavi 500 euro al mese era il problema dell'Italia. [...] Vedere una ragazza che era una lavoratrice di quella bella, non si fermava mai, vedere che non può più fare nulla, e vedere che grazie a questo piccolo sussidio lei prendeva le 300 più quelle 500 euro, la vedevi più rilassata. Vederla poi abbattuta, perché tu che guadagni e ti fai sfruttare fai la guerra a lei che non può mangiare. L'ho vissuto di prima persona sulla pelle.» (Giuseppe, 53, actor and informal worker, n. 25, Italy)

[111]«La gente que tiene pocos recursos, pues me parece bien que tenga ayudas. Porque no ha tenido las mismas oportunidades que tú. Porque no estamos partiendo de la misma base.» (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)

[112]«O me subes de horas o me voy, porque con una edad ya no se puede estar trabajando 20 horas.» (Felipe, 45, supermarket asistant, n. 5, Spain)

Housing cuts across this gradient. In Spain, it is the demand with the broadest mobilising potential precisely because it is, in Clara's formulation, something that affects everyone, not just one sector. If people cannot have the stability of a place to live, of their own space, you are taking life away from them [*le estás quitando vida*]. She links housing insecurity directly to depression and anxiety, and her political conclusion is stark: if a party arrived and changed the housing question completely, and the labour question completely, it would have half of Spain won.[113] Housing is where *sobrevivir* becomes unsustainable and potentially politicisable: the threshold where the moral economy of violated labourism could, under the right conditions, become a mobilising force. In Italian cases the housing crisis is mediated by family property, Elena's inherited house, Michele's parental flat, which attenuates but does not eliminate housing precarity. The issue is less immediately available as a mobilising frame, but the underlying demand for a floor is the same.

The precision of the bookkeeping, however, also explains the demobilisation described in section 7.4.1. If identification is conditional on delivery, then insufficient delivery produces withdrawal. The reforms of the left are acknowledged but judged against everyday experience, and the gap is wide. Clara's evaluation of the shift from temporary to indefinite contracts is characteristic: it has been noticed, she herself moved from *temporal* to *indefinido*, and so did her colleagues. But wages have not followed:

> What good does it do me that my wage goes up, if then food and housing are going up? I mean, they're deceiving me all the time.
>
> (Clara, 36, shop assistant, n. 19, Spain)[114]

The formula *me están engañando todo el rato* captures the perceived structural insufficiency of reforms that change the legal form of the contract but not the concrete experience of survival. Felipe, from the other end of the gradient, reaches the same conclusion: the labour reform of Yolanda Díaz has produced more people with jobs, but at fewer hours; it does not generate wealth, it is surviving [*no se*

[113]«Creo que a día de hoy el tema de la vivienda, principalmente. Porque si la gente no tiene esa estabilidad de poder vivir, de tener su propio espacio, creo que le estás quitando vida. Le estás quitando una tranquilidad. Creo que uno de los principales problemas de depresiones, de ansiedad, es no saber si vas a tener un techo donde poder vivir. Si llega un partido y de repente cambia el tema de la vivienda por completo, el tema laboral por completo, tendría ganada media España.» (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)

[114]«De qué me vale que me suba el sueldo si luego la alimentación y la vivienda están subiendo? O sea, me están engañando todo el rato.» (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)

genera riqueza, es sobrevivir].[115] And the broader judgement is sharper still. Asked about the left's record, Clara dismisses the very framing of achievement:

> They make small gains and throw a party, when that should have been sorted long ago. Like the minimum wage. Oh, we got the minimum wage!. That should have been done years ago. To me that is no achievement at all.
>
> (Clara, 36, retail, n. 19, Spain)[116]

The judgement is not against reforms but against them being insufficient: reforms are criticised not for existing, but for being presented as victories when they merely catch up with what should have been guaranteed long ago. The minimum wage is not an achievement, it is was something long due and the indefinite contract is not security, it is halfway security [*seguridad a medias*] if wages do not allow access to housing. Failing to address the configuration of precarity along the employment, financial and housing dimensions, is perceived as deception and fosters disillusionment. This gap between delivery and need is indeed precisely what produces the cycle described in section 7.4.1: the window opens, partially delivers, presents small gains as great victories, and the people who live the insufficiency every day withdraw again. The feeling of having been deceived is thus a precise evaluation.

The political grammar that emerges from these accounts is inclusive labourism from below: the same grammar as in Type 1, but articulated from the position of those below the standard norm. The social position named as *abajo* and *popolo* in section 7.2.2, the moral economy of violated labourism and the solidarity of the *mezzo pane* in section 7.3, and the political grammar of social populism in this section, are the same structure seen from four different angles. Politics does not add a content extraneous to the experience: it translates it.

The *from below* changes the register. In Type 1, inclusive labourism emerged as a discovery: the moment when frustrated educational meritocracy broke open into the recognition that what is needed is a system that works for everyone. Here there is nothing to discover. The system has never worked, and the demand is not that it works better but that it provides a floor: work that pays, housing that holds, a minimum that does not let anyone fall. The moral grammar closely resembles

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[115]«¿Qué ha conseguido la reforma laboral de Yolanda Díaz? Más gente que tenga trabajo, pero a menos horas. No se genera riqueza, es sobrevivir.» (Felipe, 45, supermarket assistant, n. 5, Spain)

[116]«Como que haces pequeños logros y montas una fiesta, cuando eso ya debería estar ya solucionado hace mucho tiempo. Es como, el salario mínimo. Ah, hemos conseguido el salario mínimo!. Es que eso ya tiene que estar resuelto hace ya muchos años. Para mí no es un logro en absoluto. Que está bien que lo hayan luchado, pero que ya tenía que haber sido necesario antes.» (Clara, 36, shop assistant,, n. 19, Spain)

that of Westheuser's (2021) social populists, the same above/below dichotomy, but the political outcomes diverge. Unlike Westheuser's respondents, who are politically homeless and potentially mobilizable by the radical right, the respondents in this chapter have had a political vehicle, however exhausted, and ethnic boundaries toward the bottom are almost entirely absent. The difference is probably a matter of both politicisation - the M5S and Podemos windows provided for some time a left-wing populist political grammar and political vehicle to identify with - and class fraction: a precarious working class, sometimes migrant, having not much left to defend against people below. In this respect the type is closer to the social populists analysed by Auyero (2001) in Argentina, whose political loyalty for the Peronism was concretely exchanged for material benefits within a social populist grammar. But the mechanism here is not clientelist: it is an evaluative bookkeeping of policies and interests, structured by the double register, at once material and moral, that runs through the entire chapter.

The universalism that traverses the declassed precarious working class is at once ordinary and concrete, an *ordinary concrete universalism*. It is also, however, differently channelled across the two countries, and the variation is the mirror image of the one documented for the declassed aspiring middle class (chapter 6). There, the populist radical left and its splinters hegemonized the political orientation of the educated precarious in Spain, while in Italy the M5S captured the type without holding it. Here the pattern is reversed. In Italy, the social-populist grammar of the type matches the M5S almost perfectly: the M5S operates as the hegemonic vehicle, all Italian cases structure their relationship with politics through it, and no other party appears as a credible alternative. In Spain, the same grammar fractures across multiple vehicles without stable purchase: the populist radical left parties, at times the PSOE in its redistributive incarnation, with neither capable of monopolising a loyalty that remains conditional and volatile. Part of the problem is that the populist left is perceived as entangled in left-identitarianism (Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini, and Custodi 2023), remote from the concrete problems of ordinary people, a critique that has no equivalent among the Italian respondents, for whom the M5S's social-populist register speaks directly to their condition.

This cross-national asymmetry corresponds to the quantitative findings of chapter 5, where the M5S vote is strong among less educated precarious workers in Italy, while in Spain the populist left vote is more concentrated among the educated. Yet even where the fit is strongest, the vehicle has not held: the exhaustion and demobilisation documented in section 7.4.1 are real in both countries. The grammar is in place but the political institutions are not. This is the political form that precarious class experience takes when the demand is articulated, the orientation available, but the political vehicle is absent or spent.

8. The Striving Precarious Working Class

8.1 Introduction

The third type identified in this study shares with the declassed precarious working class, examined in the preceding chapter, the same structural position: disintegration from the standard norm of working-class integration - stable work, regular income, secure housing - whose achievement these workers have not secured, yet have not relinquished. What differs is the moral elaboration of that condition. Where the declassed precarious working class acknowledges the gap as systemic, blames it systemically and transforms it into a collective demand for re-integration, the striving precarious working class does not perceive the gap as a breach of the system. The system, in their account, ultimately works: what is required is not that it change, but that one works harder within it. The discriminant between the two types lies in the meaning-moral negotiation of the same disintegrated class position.

The moral economy that sustains their elaboration is *work-effort meritocracy* in pure form: the conviction that those who strive deserve more, and that striving is both the legitimate path to a better position and the ground of one's moral worth. When the material disintegration contradicts this expectation, the subject does not abandon it, nor denounce its failure as systemic. Instead, the effort script is redoubled, and onto it an individualised agentic identity is constructed. The narrative-moral operation through which this tension is managed - handling the gap between promise and reality without dissolving either - is what I call *covering*, freely borrowing the term from Goffman (1963) and extending it to the management of a disintegrated social position. What a part of the literature has described as the normalisation of precarity (Lorey 2015) I argue is better understood, in this type, as such covering: not a change of norm but a moral operation that renders the gap liveable while keeping the norm intact. Covering runs through the entire account of the type.

These workers present themselves as agentic hustling selves in control and almost out of class hierarchies: neither poor nor dependent, but constructors of their own trajectory through choice and effort. This identity is the genealogical descendant of Lamont's (2000) disciplined self, but radicalised: inhabited from within precarity rather than under its threat, the task is not to defend a position already held but to reconstruct a viable one. The crucial addition is choice: the striving precarious working class narrates its condition as a sequence of deliberate decisions, converting structural pressure into voluntary conduct. The boundary structure that accompanies this identity runs

predominantly downward - against those who do not strive, who choose not to hustle - and inward, disciplining the self against past or future deviations from the effort script. The upward boundary, by contrast, is largely neutralised, those above tending to be read as deserving their position.

The covering fuses script and identity into a single structure: these workers see the gap between effort invested and security received - they are not blind to it, and fissures surface in the interviews - but the perception finds nowhere to go, either by deferring effort rewards to the future, or by transforming effort into an end of itself. This also speaks to the internal gradient within the type exists: from those for whom precarity is still be seen as a phase, to those for whom the future is closed and effort has become a value in itself, to the extreme case of almost normalization of precarity. The Spanish cases are overrepresented in the sample, but overall limited sample numerosity of precarious working-class interviewees in the two countries makes it difficult to rule out whether this is a substantive variation between countries or just an effect of sampling. On a similar note, almost all cases within this type happen to be male.

From the moral economy and the boundary structure it produces, it derives the political orientation outlook of the type. The individualized agentic self, which does not envision collective solutions, is mirrored by a relation of almost naturalized absence with politics - rather than openly suffered abandonment - as a sphere, which makes it irrelevant to the striving precarious working class. The system is sound, and violations of the duty to effort happen within it, not against it. The resulting political orientation of the type is what I call *demobilised conservatism*, a political grammar that is conservative in substance, defending the system and disciplining its internal violators, and demobilised in form.

The same structure of blame that produces demobilisation contains, however, a latent potential for conversion toward the nativist producerism of the far right (Damhuis 2020; Rathgeb 2020; Wagner 2023), where self-blame recedes and the downward boundary structurally ethnicises. Yet, when the question of housing arises in the interviews, work-effort meritocracy collides with itself: those who strive cannot afford where to live, irrespective of what effort can control. In the crack that opens, a space emerges for systemic demands that the moral economy otherwise forecloses.

The sections that follow examine disintegration from standard security and the agentic hustling self (8.2), work-effort meritocracy and its fissures (8.3), the relation to politics as absence and demobilised conservatism (8.4).

8.2 Disintegration from standard security, agentic hustling selves

8.2.1 Disintegration from working-class security, confident individualized agency

The social position of the striving precarious working class is defined by the same structural coordinates as the type examined in the preceding chapter: unstable employment, insufficient and inconstant income, and a work-housing nexus that, in most cases, barely holds. The operative norm from which disintegration is measured is also the standard working-class one: stable work, regular income, secure housing. What makes this a distinct type is rather the elaboration of that disintegration: where the declassed precarious working class names the dislocation as structural, transforming it into a demand for systemic change, the striving precarious working class covers the same dislocation through an individualised agentic identity of choice and effort, thereby obscuring the missed norm of integration while still clinging to it.

Two paradigmatic cases, whose biography develops from opposite directions, one in Spain one in Italy, anchor the analysis that follows. The first is Pepe, a twenty-nine-year-old warehouse loader employed through a temporary agency in the Canary Islands, who responded to my interview posting on a local Facebook group of people looking for jobs. His parents both had stable employment throughout their working lives, his father as a lorry driver, his mother as a cleaner until disability rendered her unable to work. Pepe left school at 15. The years that followed were years of bad habits [*malos hábitos*] as he describes them, hanging around in the street [*estar en la calle*] doing what young people do [*lo que hace la juventud*], thus not doing anything with his future [*no aproveché mi futuro*], as he retrospectively judges. As he recounts, things changed with the birth of his son. Pepe enrolled in a series of free training courses provided by the local Red Cross - training as waiter, gardener, forklift operator - and entered the labour market in his mid-twenties through a temporary agency, mainly doing warehouse loading and unloading along with other minor casual gigs on the spot, among which the interview itself as he partly understood it. At the time of the interview, his weekly income fluctuated between one hundred and three hundred euros depending on demand, and he specified having only fifty-six cents in his bank account [*tengo 56 céntimos en la cuenta*]. He lived in a flat his family lent him, without which, as he acknowledged at some point during the interview, the arrangement would be unsustainable.

Yet, when first asked to narrate his labour history Pepe does not dwell on the fact that that he has been inactive for a good part of his youth, that he has always been struggling to get by, the family and state support without which his current arrangement would collapse. His account is rather built

around the entangled ideas of personal choice and effort: the fact that he chose do to this or that, and that he is someone that by character is prone to work. Choice and effort do not serve to outright deny his own condition, but to reorganize the degree of control over it and the stigma attached to it. Every element of disintegration is reframed as an element of active choice - and not of structural pressure - and as evidence, even if deferred, of a disposition to strive that defines who he is.

> I always had the mentality of working [*mentalidad de trabajarme*], it was just that I wasn't trained. I was scared of getting a job and not being trained. So, as my son was growing up, I tried to get some training: I trained in palm tree work, in warehouse handling, in various things, I've got several qualifications, forklift operator and all that. I got a flat lent to me by my family, so I decided to start building my future [*comenzar mi futuro*], you know what I mean? Because I'm always looking for a future [*busco un futuro*]. So I started like that, looking through ads on the internet, always on the move, asking around. [...] I'm a person who can't stay still [*quieta*], you know what I mean? I'm a person who always likes to move forward, and, like, I've got a kid, you know what I mean? There's always, always money needed, you know what I mean? I'm not someone who goes around wanting everything handed to them, you know what I mean? I'm a young person, with the drive to get on [*ganas de progresar*], you know what I mean? I don't focus on a permanent job, because I know how life is... Permanent jobs were before [*los trabajos fijos eran antes*], you know what I mean? Before, back in the day, you'd see older people with their permanent job - but these days, a permanent job is hard to come by, you know what I mean? So me, since I'm young and I still have time, I trained in various places, so as to never stand still, always looking...[117]

[117]Yo tenía siempre la mentalidad de trabajarme, pero que no estaba formado. Yo tenía el miedo de conseguir un trabajo y no estar formado. Entonces, en lo que mi hijo fue creciendo, yo intenté formarme: me he formado en palmeras, en mozos de almacén, en varias cosas, tengo varios títulos, también de carretillero y demás. Conseguí una vivienda familiar que me prestaron, entonces decidí comenzar mi futuro, ¿me entiende? Porque siempre que busco un futuro. Pues empecé así, buscando anuncios por internet, siempre moviéndome, preguntando. [...] Soy una persona que no puede estar quieta, entonces me ponía, no solo por la calle, sino por internet también, buscando trabajo, y para aquí, para allá. Por ejemplo, como a usted, que lo encontré en un anuncio, ¿me entiende? [se ríe] Soy una persona que le gusta siempre avanzar, y, por ejemplo, yo tengo un niño, ¿me entiende? Siempre, siempre el dinero es necesario, ¿me entiende? No soy una persona que lo venga, que lo quiera todo regalado, ¿me entiende? [...] Soy una persona joven, con ganas de progresar, ¿me entiende? No me enfoco en un trabajo fijo, porque sé que la vida... Los trabajos fijos eran antes, ¿me entiende? Antes, antiguamente, que tú ves a las personas mayores que tienen su trabajo fijo, pero hoy en día, un trabajo fijo es difícil conseguirlo, ¿me entiende? Pues entonces yo, como soy joven y todavía tengo tiempo, pues me formé en varios sitios, para nunca estarme quieto, y siempre buscando...

(Pepe, 29, temp agency warehouse loader, 24_ES)

The years of inactivity are not absent from the account but reframed so as not to contrast with his foundational willingness to work: Pepe had the *mentalidad de trabajarse* all along but feared starting without the right formation. The inactivity is thus recast as a form of chosen responsibility - better to wait and prepare than to enter unprepared and waste the opportunity - under missing conditions, and his commitment to effort is preserved intact. When he finally trains and enters the labour market, the enabling structural factors - family help, Red Cross support - are downplayed and absorbed into the context of a personal choice to *comenzar su futuro*. Tellingly, permanent employment is introduced by Pepe himself - not by the interviewer - as a standard he feels the need to measure himself against. By judging permanent work as a thing of the past, he both recasts his casual labour trajectory as a rational adaptive strategy to stay in continuous work and escapes away from the normative standard of permanent jobs, which is no longer an obliged reference. The two registers reinforce each other: the structural difficulty becomes evidence that the norm itself has changed, and the changed norm dissolves the structural difficulty as a source of stigma.

This account, where precarious work is diagnosed as the new normality and permanent work feels weakened as a normative standard, seems fully coherent with the thesis of the normalisation of precarity (Lorey 2015; Furlong et al. 2017; Schwaller 2019) and indeed there is some truth to it. Pepe's orientation towards multiple jobs and skills is as much a justification as it is a realistic adaptation to a mutated labour market, and an acknowledgement of partially mutating norms. However, the very fact that he spontaneously feels compelled to justify not having and pursuing permanent job - without being prompted by the interviewer - already signals that the good old standard of work security presses beneath his account. Normalisation of precarity is here not a settled disposition, but an active operation requiring meaning and moral work. The Fordist norm is evoked while being dismissed on the surface, and the gap separating him from it handled through an act of will: "I don't focus on a permanent job" does this work quietly.

This operation becomes louder in the very following block of the interview, this time with some minimal prompting. After asking him a short clarificatory question on his wage - whether the amount he mentioned was gross or net - Pepe feels compelled to justify himself and shifts the tone of his storytelling:

> Look, I'll be straight with you [*te voy a ser sincero*]: I'm young, I've got a kid and all that. I haven't wanted to go for a permanent job: a permanent job meaning always working, like, a company where you've got a job 24 hours, every day, eight hours, you get your monthly wage of a 1000 and something, 1500, like that, you know what I mean? 1300. Never, never pushed myself to do that, because right now I'm going through a rough patch [*mala racha*] with the kid and everything - so I haven't wanted to push forward. But there are jobs out there [*trabajos hay*]. I see the young people saying "there's no work, I want to work and there's no work." I've always been on the move - if you want I'll send you my work history, you know what I mean? The thing is, young people today are in a bad way, you know what I mean? They want everything handed to them [*lo quiere todo como en plan regalado*]. Me, I'll be honest: sometimes I'm tired of working, you know what I mean? And I wish I didn't have to, you know what I mean? But there are jobs out there. (...) I know that, with all the knowledge I've got, the qualifications I've got, and how far I've come in terms of work, I know I can aim for something more [*aspirar a un contrato de más*], a more stable wage, a proper company. But me, like, I already consider this company stable [*la considero estable*], you know what I mean? If you do your job, your work - you know what I mean? - the companies will keep calling you, they're always going to have work [*ellos van a tener trabajo siempre*].[118]
>
> *(Pepe, 29, temp agency warehouse loader, 24_ES)*

"I'll be straight with you" carries the unequivocal admission that the Fordist norm is maintained as a standard and aspiration. The gap from his present condition is however framed and controlled as a

[118]La verdad, mira, yo te voy a ser sincero: soy joven, tengo un niño y demás. Yo no he querido optar a un trabajo, trabajo fijo, porque trabajo fijo en plan de trabajar siempre, en plan, una empresa que tengas un trabajo 24 horas, en plan de todos los días, ocho horas, cobres tu sueldo mensual de mil y pico, mil 500, así, ¿me entiende? Mil 300. Nunca, nunca me he puesto así, porque, por ejemplo, ahora estoy pasando una mala racha entre el niño y demás, pues no he querido avanzar. Pero trabajos hay. Yo veo a la juventud que dice "no hay trabajo, quiero trabajar y no hay el trabajo." Yo siempre he estado moviéndome, si quieres te envío mi vida laboral y, ¿me entiendes? La cuestión es, la juventud hoy en día está mal, ¿me entiendes? Lo quiere todo como en plan regalado y demás. Yo, yo te soy sincero, yo sí, yo, a veces estoy cansado de trabajar, ¿me entiendes? Y ojalá no trabajaría, ¿me entiendes? Pero que, que trabajos hay. [...] Yo sé que, al tener todos los conocimientos que tengo, los títulos que tengo y lo desarrollado que estoy en el tema laboral, sé que puedo aspirar a un contrato de más, ¿me entiende?, de cobrar un sueldo estable, estar en una empresa estable. Pero yo, por ejemplo, yo esta empresa la considero estable, ¿me entiende? Si tú cumples tu trabajo, tu labor, ¿me entiende?, las empresas te van a seguir llamando, ellos van a tener trabajo siempre.

personal choice, thereby quietly obscuring the structural conditions which produced the context of his limited choice. Within that structural pressure, there is some truth to Pepe's judgement: precarious causal agency work also allows, on the side, some flexibility to accommodate care responsibilities, as compared to a permanent job to which full (!) commitment is attached. However, this partial and contextual basis does not countervail the dominant tone: one of recasting a structurally constrained position as an act of wilful highly agentic choice, and in so doing symbolically suspending the threats posed by those constraints.

Yet this move alone is not sufficient to make the present respectable and shore up his position. A second move immediately follows, working not at controlling the upward Fordist norm but demarcating downward from young people who do not work and refuse to work (not working being framed as wilful refusal, as "*trabajos hay*"). Against this negative reference, casual work and continuous striving already grant some form of respectability: the one of being able to survive somehow through his own strive (although partially so), as compared to the inability/unwillingness of idle young people to do so. Not working and lacking the willingness to do so are implicitly recast as the 'new precarity' and markers of the 'new threshold of respectability' - the one demarcating from the subproletariat as defined in Chapter 3 - that needs to be kept at bay. Against that redefined threshold, Pepe stands already on the right side of the line, belonging to a new normality from which the stigma of his 'precarious' poisition has been partially washed out.

Yet this redefinition is visibly incomplete and fragile, as it surfaces immediately after. Pepe states that, thanks to his qualifications, he could aim for something more stable - if he wanted to - and in saying so, the Fordist aspiration re-emerges intact, as a real possibility he considers himself capable of pursuing: a deferred choice at his disposal. Then, in the very next sentence, he corrects himself by going back: he already considers his current job as stable, as the temporary agency *van a tener trabajo siempre*. This correction involves an overt reframe: the word stable is detached from the Fordist referent and reattached to the temporary agency arrangement, provided the right conduct is maintained. The two uses of stable - one aspirational upward, one concrete and defensive - occupy consecutive sentences without cancelling each other, each patching the gap the other leaves open: The Fordist norm is acknowledged as the real standard, and the present is simultaneously equivalised to it. What holds the two together, once again, is the claim to agentic effort: if you want and do work the companies will keep calling, if you choose to the permanent job will be at your reach.

In a conclusive move, Pepe elevates the choice of permanent work to a social destiny to be fulfilled, thereby overthrowing the opening statement of those being a thing of the past:

> I'm not always going to work my whole life with this company. Me, in a year, a year and a bit, I'll get down to looking for a proper company, a good one [*fija y bien*], you know what I mean?, stable, because that's the law of life [*es la ley de vida*], you know what I mean? Work is like that, it's the law, you know what I mean? But for now, bit by bit, I'm getting by [*voy tirando así*].[119]
>
> *(Pepe, 29, temp agency warehouse loader, 24_ES)*

The norm that opened the account as a thing of the past has travelled through the account as a suspended aspiration, a deferred choice, and turns here into a social destiny: something that simply is, that was always going to be, that he was always going to fulfil. In this way, the normative burden is simultaneously lifted and assumed, that is incorporated as the natural order of an adult working life: *porque es la ley de la vida*. Only at the very end, almost inaudible beneath the weight of that law, one phrase escapes both choice and destiny, bringing to the surface for an instant Pepe's present reality of surviving: for now *voy tirando así,* getting by, bit by bit.

While Pepe's biography illustrates an experience of micro-mobility into the precarious working class with the deferred aspiration to climb further, the case of Silvio exemplifies a trajectory of descent into the precarious working class from a standard of working class security once held. Silvio is fifty-nine and delivers food by the kilometre for platform companies in Milan as a self-employed, as he would not like the term bogus self-employed. It was not always like this. Having started working right after the compulsory schooling, for the longest stretch of his life, he was a driver for a trade fair logistics company, having a permanent contract and building something that felt like a life properly made. Then one day the company shut down, leaving him "with my arse on the ground" [*col culo per terra*]. What followed was a series of attempts to find a way back, but nothing came of it. At some point, while having a fixed-term security job at a public institution in the city, he was promised a stable job - "don't worry, you'll be taken on" [*vai tranquillo che sei riassunto*] - but such a promise never materialized, closing his last hope of full re-integration. The platforms, a new thing at the time, were what remained and let him get by. I met Silvio virtually, in and through an online community of food platform workers in Italy.

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[119]Por eso también existe esta opción en las empresas temporales: trabaja y puede vivir. [...] No siempre voy a trabajar toda la vida con esta empresa. Yo, un año, un año y poco, me pondré a ello de buscar una empresa fija y bien, ¿me entiende?, estable, porque es la ley de vida, ¿me entiende? Un trabajo es así, es ley, ¿me entiende? Pero que poco a poco pues voy tirando así.

When first asked recount his story, Silvio does not focus on the company that vanished and the struggle and the blockings afterwards. Analogously to Pepe, his account is organised around a single claim: that he has always worked, has always rebuilt, has never stood still. The losses are named - briefly, factually - and immediately reabsorbed into the logic of serial reconstruction. Similarly to Pepe, a powerful agentic effort is evoked to hold the account together, even as the ground beneath it has shifted steadily downward.

> Preamble, preamble [*premessa*]: I'm 60, I'm almost 60 years old today. I did the compulsory schooling, then after that clearly I didn't, I didn't feel like carrying on etcetera, and I started working, in the world of work. Preamble: at the beginning when I was at school, in the summers instead of going out to enjoy myself I used to go and do the farm work, tomatoes and onions, picking potatoes tomatoes and onions in Emilia Romagna. So I've always, I've always, economically, always done everything on my own [*mi sono sempre fatto tutto da solo*], honestly. (...) I got all the driving licences, clearly, having all the licences, I've got all the top licences, and I started working driving across Europe for a trade fair logistics company. One day, one day, I'll keep it short [*la faccio corta*], one day I was abroad, I come back, I come back to Milan, the company had vanished into thin air: I found myself, I found myself, with my arse on the ground [*col culo per terra*], pardon the expression if you'll allow me - *Interviewer: You're free to speak however you like* - I mean in a nutshell I found myself with my arse on the ground. And from there I had to rebuild my whole life all over again. And so I started looking around, because sitting back on my laurels is not my type [*dormire sugli allori non sono il tipo*], me. I mean I'm not sitting, I'm not sitting on the sofa waiting for work to come to me, I go out and look for it myself [*me lo vado a cercare io personalmente*]. And so looking around I started working with the platforms that were starting to take off in Italy. I started, the first few times I said let's try, if it doesn't work if it doesn't work, so so. I started out on the bicycle, from the bicycle I moved to the motorbike, and from the motorbike I moved to the car. And in a nutshell up to now I'm still working [*sto ancora lavorando*].[120] *(Silvio, 59, platform delivery worker, 23_IT)*

[120] Premessa premessa: io ho 60, ho quasi 60 anni oggi. Ho fatto le scuole dell'obbligo, poi dopo chiaramente non... non avevo voglia di continuare eccetera, e ho incominciato a lavorare nel mondo del lavoro. Premessa: agli inizi quando andavo a scuola, d'estate anziché andarmi a divertire andavo a fare la campagna pomodori e cipolle, a raccogliere patate pomodori e cipolle in Emilia Romagna. Dunque mi sono sempre, mi sono sempre, economicamente, sempre fatto tutto da solo, sinceramente. (...) Ho preso tutte le patenti, chiaramente, avendo tutte le patenti, io ho tutte le patenti superiori, e ho cominciato a lavorare girando l'Europa per gli allestimenti fieristici. Un giorno, un giorno, la faccio corta, un giorno ero all'estero, torno torno a Milano, l'azienda è sparita dalla circolazione. Mi sono trovato, mi son trovato, col culo per terra, scusa il termine se me lo puoi permettere -Interviewer: Sei libero di parlare come vuoi - Cioè in poche parole mi sono trovato col culo per terra. E da lì ho dovuto ricostruirmi ancora tutta la mia vita. E allora ho incominciato a guardarmi

Silvio begins his account with a visible act of framing, *premessa* - repeated twice - over his story: he has always worked and done everything on his own. In this way, the individualized agentic effort is raised to the linchpin holding everything together. The experience of losing his permanent job is told bluntly as a shock out of his control, but remains a brute fact, as Silvio avoids digging into it - *te la faccio breve* - and immediately goes back to a register in which he is the active agent, looking for solutions without depending on others. Finally, landing on platform work is presented within a narrative of continuity, in which social disintegration from working class security gets sublimated away: "in a nutshell up to now I'm still working".

This closure however holds as long as Silvio runs the account on his own terms, unchallenged. When asked about the present conditions of platform work, hinting at the grievances expressed by peers in the online community, Silvio oscillates between the active normalisation of what he has and the unleashed longing for what he no longer can have. He first acknowledges that wage is low - "honestly, you don't get rich" - but then immediately normalizes his condition through its universalisation: "find me a job where you get rich !?' [*trovami un lavoro dove si diventa ricchi !?*]". If no job makes you rich, then his is no worse than any other. Pondering his own question, he continues and answers:

> I'd put my signature on it [*ci metterei la firma*], I mean: if you, as an entrepreneur, offer me a job where I bring home 3000 euros a month, I'll sign it every time, sign it straight away! Net, mind you? 3000 euros, net a month".[121] (Silvio, 59, platform delivery worker, 23_IT)

As in the case of Pepe, Silvio feels compelled to evoke secure employment as a reference, without direct prompting from my side. Silvio would still choose stable employment, without hesitation, but he knows his aspiration is unrealistic, a silent desire bordering fantasy. This operation, displacing persisting but unmeetable aspirations into a zone of near fantasy, could be named, in free dialogue with Bourdieu (1974), "fantasy of the improbable". However, the amount chosen - 3000 euros - is clearly inflated with respect to the Italian labour market - and a multiple of Silvio's current income as we'll see - displacing his desire for security in a protective zone of absurdity. By inflating the standard of secure work 'out of this world', the norm is evoked but kept away, protecting Silvio from the recognition that the realistic standard cannot be met. Unlike Pepe, who could still aspire to the

intorno, perché a dormire sugli allori non sono il tipo, io. Cioè non sono seduto, non sono seduto sul divano per aspettare che venga il lavoro, me lo vado a cercare io personalmente. E così guardando in giro ho incominciato a lavorare con le piattaforme che iniziavano a prendere piede in Italia. Ho incominciato, le prime volte ho detto proviamo, come non va come non va, così così. Ho incominciato a fare in bicicletta, dalla bicicletta sono passato alla moto, e dalla moto sono passato alla macchina. E in poche parole fino adesso sto ancora lavorando.

[121] "Ci farei la firma, cioè: se tu imprenditore mi offre un lavoro che io porto a casa 3.000 euro al mese ti firmo anche sempre, ti firmo subito il contratto. Netti eh? 3.000 euro netti al mese."

norm in a deferred future, Silvio knows he can't. The fordist norm of secure work is thus intact but controlled away: evoked as a standard and kept away as an absurd counterfactual to his present reality. In the same breath, the hint of longing gone, Silvio avoids the register of lack and instead redresses platform work as a life of his own making, a life of agentic choice: "objectively, it's you who decides, when to work (…) obviously [*chiaramente*], if you don't work, you don't earn, obviously, you are, obviously, you're an entrepreneur of yourself". *Chiaramente*, repeated three times, signals the naturalization of this shape of things, one that Silvio actively embraces and values as freely chosen - 'the most beautiful job" he says, as "you're in the open air" and "you're your own boss" - yet it sits in the same breath as the 3000 euros employed contract he would sign for immediately.

The narrative of platform work as a life of his own making is tested when the interviewer, more directly than before, suggests that Silvio sounds bitter [*amareggiato*], in response to his own account of worsening conditions in the platforms. The response is immediate and twice repeated: not bitter, not bitter at all. To accept the label would mean accepting that his condition has defined him beyond his control. He then outlines his structural position more plainly than before:

> I mean, I started working at almost 60 - next December I'll be 60 - and I have to thank, I have to thank the platforms, that have helped me, helped me in these moments of crisis, honestly. Because at my age I am too old for companies to hire me, and for the Italian state I am too young to retire. What do I do - go and rob someone? I adapt, that's all [*Mi adatto, basta]*.[122]
>
> (Silvio, 59, platform delivery worker, 23_IT)"

The Fordist norm - stable employment and a good pension at the end - is not evoked as a silent desire here but recognised as simply unavailable. What remains is a different and lower threshold, the norm of the precarious working class: to keep working, to survive, and finding dignity in being able to accomplish that. The platforms, Silvio says, have helped him do precisely this and this is why he feels gratitude. Yet, even within those limits, Silvio present himself in active and agentic terms: *mi adatto, basta.*

What the accounts of Pepe and Silvio reveal, beneath the surface of choice and effort, is a condition of unresolved tension: between the practical adaptation to precarious work and the persistence of a

[122] Io ti dico: io quando ho cominciato a lavorare a 60 anni, quasi, a dicembre del prossimo anno io ne ho 60, e devo ringraziare, devo ringraziare le piattaforme che mi hanno aiutato, mi hanno aiutato in questi momenti di crisi, ti dico onestamente. Perché io per... alla mia età sono troppo vecchio per le aziende per essere assunto, ok? E per lo stato italiano sono troppo... giovane per andare in pensione. Cosa faccio? Vado a fare le rapine? Mi adatto, basta."

standard of working-class integration-stable work, secure housing, a predictable life-that neither biography has secured, yet neither has relinquished. In Silvio, this standard was once occupied and then lost through staged descent; in Pepe, it was never occupied but transmitted intergenerationally as the horizon of a life properly lived. These aspirations are not purely individual: shaped by each subject's own position and experience, they are also sustained by shared social norms and discourses that keep the Fordist standard alive as an active reference beyond any single biography, and provide the vocabulary through which the tension between aspiration and condition can be managed rather than simply suffered. This tension has a paradoxical structure that Dörre (2014:77-78) has documented empirically: disintegration from the Fordist standard does not produce orientations organised around the experience of disintegration, but around the norm that has been lost or not yet reached, thus generating, paradoxically, extraordinary efforts directed both upward, as aspiration toward the full standard, and downward, as defence against further decline. That both Pepe and Silvio feel compelled to justify, reframe, and narrate their condition, without prompting, is itself the first evidence that the normalisation of precarity has not taken place. A norm that had been genuinely abandoned would not require this work. The gap between aspiration and condition must be continuously narrated, justified, and reframed-converted from structural constraint into personal choice-and this need to narrate is itself the evidence that the normalisation of precarity has not taken place.

What these accounts call for is a concept capable of naming the operation they perform. I propose to call it *covering*: a narrative moral operation through which the distance from the standard norm of working-class integration is managed, reframed, and partially concealed-not by replacing the norm but by covering it. The term is borrowed from Goffman (1963), who used it to designate one specific technique of stigma management: the active work of minimising the visibility of a discrediting attribute without denying its existence. The extension proposed here moves to the management of a disintegrated social position: what is covered is the gap between the standard of integration and the condition in which these workers actually live. The covering does not dissolve the Fordist norm, instead it produces a subject who simultaneously holds the norm as aspiration and organises his conduct around the individual effort required to approximate it, converting the structural distance from it into a personal moral project. The covering operates between two poles that are irreconcilable yet held together by the operation itself. The first is a partial redefinition of the present as already respectable: precarious work is recast as normality, or even as the desirable norm by hinging on autonomy and choice-and here the normalisation of precarity thesis finds its incomplete truth. The second is a persistent aspiration toward the norm that has not been reached: the Fordist standard

preserved as a normative reference, deferred as a future within reach or, where the future is closed as in Silvio, displaced into a counterfactual space where it cannot be refuted. The covering also rests on partial but real empirical grounding: experiences of micro-mobility and genuine improvements in job quality compared to previously held jobs-such as the comparative autonomy provided by platform work (Vieira 2023; Seehaus 2024) provide the material basis on which the first pole operates.

Covering is an unstable labour in progress, requiring continuous renewal and involving an element of self-concealment. What holds the two poles together - and what prevents the tension from collapsing into individual resignation (Seehaus 2024; Chibber 2022) or evolving into collective demand -is the claim to individualised agentic effort and choice that has organised both accounts from their first sentence. What this section has examined is the covering as it operates on the dimension of norms - how the gap between aspiration and condition is narrated, reframed, and converted into a claim to agentic choice and effort. The same operation, sustained by a moral economy in which effort both grounds identity and carries a legitimate expectation of return, runs through the identity these workers construct and the boundaries they draw. These are the subjects of the sections that follow.

Pepe and Silvio are the paradigmatic cases, those where the gap between aspiration and condition is widest, and the covering must work hardest. But the type exists on a spectrum, based on the level of experienced disintegration and how this is morally worked through. The upper end of the type is well represented by Francisco and Franco both twenty-three and Spanish waiters in Andalusia, whose recent experience of upward micro-mobility and youth make the distance from the Fordist standard manageable as a life phase rather than a permanent condition. The deferral is plausible, the disintegration not yet fully visible and the covering operates at its lightest. At the opposite end, Frida, a Mexican-born waitress in her late forties in Madrid who built her working life in the city after arriving from Latin America, represents the limit case in the opposite direction: a dense migratory trajectory that has so consistently confirmed that individual effort produces results that the Fordist standard has ceased to function as an explicit normative reference, replaced by effort and self-improvement as a personal life project in their own right. She marks the lower limit of the type-the point at which the covering approximates full normalisation of precarity.

8.2.2 The hustling people: nor poor, nor a layabout

As the preceding section has showed, the account of these workers is organized around an individualised agentic identity of effort and choice, which serves them to cover the distance between normative aspirations towards standard security and their present precarious condition. When those workers are asked to position themselves and others in their social world, they indeed deploy the moral criteria of effort and choice to judge themselves and others. The moral hierarchy of hustling is what counts and organize their world, while grounding their sense of social position and almost monopolising their self-worth.

What is distinctive about this type is that the moral hierarchy of hustling tends to override and obscure class hierarchy itself. The striving precarious working class are aware of material differences and discuss with competence its markers, but ultimately refuse to be classified along class lines, a refusal that radicalises the individualisation of class (Savage 2000; Savage and Meersohn Schmidt 2020), by appealing to effort and choice.Thus the striving precarious working class tries to rework their disintegration by owning it: rather than acknowledging their precarious social position, they present themselves as virtuous hustlers navigating the social world on their terms, at times presenting their position as chosen and thus under control. Moreover, a paradox follows: by positioning themselves mostly through effort alone - independently of where it leads to - these workers claim worth on grounds other than class, making class hierarchies tendentially irrelevant for themselves. Yet the same criterion of effort, when turned outward, legitimizes class hierarchy: those above have more because they have worked for it, those below have less because they have not hustled and are deemed less worthy for that. As such, through the agentic identity of effort, covering invests their sense of social position and worth. The covering holds this tension together without resolving it.

This is different from the declassed precarious working class (Chapter 7) who also draw moral boundaries to compensate their class position, but without displacing it: the structural position is ultimately named and denounced, while claiming dignity also outside the work domain. The resulting boundary structure for the striving precarious working class is a nearly dichotomic consciousness, but inverted with respect to the preceding types (type 1-2): strong downward boundaries against those below, seen as choosing not to hustle; mostly neutralised upward ones toward those who have more, whose positions tends to be seen as deserved; and distinctively an inward boundary that disciplines the self against past and future deviations from effort. This structure corresponds to a radicalized version of Lamont's (2000) "disciplined self", a long-standing working-class individualistic

ethic of earning one's own existence (Savage 2005)[123], but here expressed by workers that are precarious. What is specifically added here is choice: where Lamont's workers do what they have to do, these workers narrate their condition as a sequence of deliberate decisions and acts of self-disciplining which increase the more they are subjected to structural pressures and disintegration. Ho (2024) has documented a comparable dynamic of construction of an "agentic self" among precarious young people in Singapore.

This moral structure is visible in Pepe, the loader in the Canary Islands introduced in the preceding section. When asked about social classes, he acknowledges that the super rich exist, but for the rest there is no such thing as rich and poor as such: "I don't put labels [*no le pongo etiqueta*], nothing of that, of social classes" he says, "what you have is what you have sweated for [*lo que te has sudado*], and that's it". In this way, class hierarchies are both dissolved into an individualized hierarchy of effort, and de facto legitimized: society is made of "the rich, those having a ton of money", and the "poor, the normal ones", "those who have hustled all their lives" [*se lo han buscado toda la vida*] he chuckles. Asked directly where he would place himself within the class hierarchy, Pepe's first answer arrives unguarded, then he revealingly corrects himself:

> *Interviewer: and you, how would you define in terms of social classes?*
> Poor.
> *Interviewer: What does that mean?*
> Not poor, but hustling [*pobre no, pero buscándome la vida*]. I don't have in my account, no, I don't have in my account 10 euros, for example. Right now in my account I have 56 cents, you know? Waiting to get paid... that's the class... (...) Right now I prefer quality of life over money, you know?[124]
> *(Pepe, 29, temp agency warehouse loader, 24_ES)*

The rectification of class position into a moral position of effort, and its conversion into an owned condition through choice, perform the main operation described above: class is

[123] Goldthorpe et al. (Goldthorpe et al. 1969) documented the instrumental orientation to work of affluent British workers and the withdrawal of working-class identity into the domestic and private sphere. Savage (2005), re-reading the same material, identified the moral core of this formation: the individualistic ethic of 'making one's own living', of having earned everything without privilege, grounding an identity of ordinary individualism. Lamont (2000:30) uses Goldthorpe's affluent workers as a structural analogue to her disciplined self among American workers.

[124] *Interviewer: ¿Y tú, cómo te definirías en términos de clases sociales?* Pobre. *Interviewer: ¿Qué quieres decir esto?* Pobre no, pero buscándome la vida. Yo no tengo en la cuenta - no, yo no tengo en mi cuenta 10 euros, por ejemplo. Yo ahora en mi cuenta yo tengo 56 céntimos, en plan de, ¿me entiendes? Esperando cobrar... eso es la clase... (...) Yo ahora mismo prefiero calidad de vida antes que dinero, ¿me entiendes?

acknowledged as practical experience, but stepped outside of as a position and source of identity, on moral grounds.

Owning is brought to its most explicit form by Frida, a forty-nine waitress, with a migration background from Mexico, currently unemployed and living in a shared flat in Madrid. While she acknowledges that inequalities of opportunities exist - which she sees especially in access to university education - she affirms that once adult you have to confront them through effort, escaping what she calls "the poor mentality": "one has to go for it" she says. When pressed to position herself along class lines, she answers with a laugh: "among the most disadvantaged", then immediately adding: "also because I am in a situation I have chosen [*una situación en donde yo la he escogido]*. Nobody has been forcing me to be unemployed, because there is employment". The position is named but immediately owned as a decision.

Silvio, the food delivery rider in Milan, operates the strongest variant of exit from the class hierarchy. He opens his account by presenting himself as "a sunny person" who doesn't get "knocked down by difficulties" and "always take them head on [*di contropiede*]". When asked about social classes, he reacts with ostentatious superiority - he has never asked himself that question - before diagnosing with banal lucidity the class structure as he perceives it: "There are the poor, the rich, and the super rich, and it is always the poor who end up paying the price, because the rich, the super rich, always keep their heads high." But when asked directly where he would place himself within it, he refuses the operation of class(ification) entirely:

> I feel like myself [*Mi sento me stesso*]. Me, personally, and so on. Neither, nor... myself, full stop. In a nutshell, I am myself: if I can do things I do them, if not I don't... I don't overdo it, you know? I don't overstep my reach. (...) No. No. I am fine as I am, what matters is doing the right things, without complications [*magagne*]. Because otherwise you are not at peace with yourself. If you have a little self-respect [*amor proprio*]... if you are indifferent [to that] then that's another story, but if you have even a little self-respect... that's how it is, all self-respect.[125]
>
> (Silvio, 59, platform delivery worker, 23_IT)

[125] Mi sento me stesso. Son, io personalmente, e così via. Né, né... me stesso, punto. Cioè, in poche parole, son me stesso, se posso fare le cose le faccio, se no non le faccio... non lo straffo, cioè, hai capito? Non faccio il passo più lungo della gamba. (...) No. No. Sto bene come sto, bene a me, l'importante è fare le cose giuste, eccetera, senza tante magagne. Anche perché se no non stai bene con te stesso. Se hai un po' di amor proprio... se hai menefrighismo allora è un altro conto, però se hai solo un po' di amor proprio... è così, tutto amor proprio.

Silvio escapes positioning within the class hierarchy through extreme individualisation. Through that, the class structure - just been named with unusual clarity - is immediately declared irrelevant to the question of who he is. Worth is instead individual and agentic: it lies in handling things, in measure, in not overstepping. To think of oneself as a group within a material hierarchy would itself be a failure of self-respect, so those questions should not even arise. This is, in a sense, a half-conscious admission: classification would cost something, and the cost is dignity.

This refusal resurfaces immediately after, when I ask him whether precarity might be a more meaningful category for him, hinting that some have used it in relation to riders. Silvio feels it as another stigmatizing label being placed on him from outside: he says it has become fashionable for people talking about rider precarity - "like a Prada bag, Gucci, Armani" - but they don't see that "there could be a person [behind the label]". Then he challenges the category by reframing: "Nowadays [*Oggi come oggi*] (...) we are all precarious [silence]. Because you never know if things will go well or badly. We are all precarious, in any sector. Even if you have a permanent contract [*il posto fisso*]: we are all precarious [*siamo tutti precari*]"[126]. Where before he escaped classification by asserting his individual self, here he dissolves the category by extending it to everyone. The result is the same: no class positioning in a hierarchy, no stigma, self-worth intact. Curiously, the move is the mirror image of Bourdieu's (1998) formula "*la précarité est aujourd'hui partout*": where Bourdieu diagnosed the universalisation of precarity as a structural threat to be denounced, Silvio here deploys it as a safeguard against personal stigma and class positioning through universalisation.

The upper gradient internal to the type becomes visible at its other pole in Franco, the twenty-three-year-old waiter on the Andalusian coast, now working in a five-star hotel after some years spent in small bars. "Things can always be better," he says: "you can always aspire to a higher position". He positions himself as "middle class, neither lacking, nor exceeding" [*ni me falta, ni me sobra*] as he can pay his bills, has something left to enjoy, and is not counting cents at the supermarket. The claim is aspirational, but unlike the other cases it does not dissolve the material hierarchy into a purely moral one: it is explicitly grounded in a material distance from below. That distance was not always there, as when he was working in small bars (at 800 euros, fourteen-hour days): "I didn't feel middle class, I saw myself as limited, I couldn't see myself like my parents, I couldn't become independent [*independizar*], I couldn't advance [*avanzar*]. It was a place I didn't see myself for long"[127] . Those who

[126] *Oggi come oggi (...) siamo tutti precari [silenzio]. Perché non sai mai se ti può andare bene, non può andare male. Cioè, siamo tutti precari, in qualsiasi settore. Anche se hai il posto fisso: siamo tutti precari.

[127] "no me sentía clase media. Me veía limitado. No me veía como mis padres. No podía independizarme. No podía avanzar. Y era un sitio en el que no me veía mucho tiempo."

remain stuck below there - "they're always just there, they never manage to get back on track" [*no consiguen remontar*] - are the implicit reference against which his current position is measured and aspirationally constructed as "middle class". What he claims is not the moral hierarchy of effort alone, but a position that is both morally earned and with stronger material bases: far enough from the threshold of respectability and so far biographically validated to assert his aspirational identity.

The striving precarious working class, consistently draw strong downward boundaries against people below who do not - choose not to - hustle. They occupy the lowest position in the hierarchy that matters to them, the moral hierarchy of effort, and are judged accordingly. However, this moral condemnation tends to map onto relatively lower positions on the material hierarchy, such as the unemployed or the inactive - especially the young who have more energy to work - the homeless and people who can't pay a rent. For them, a lower socio-economic position tends to be read with suspicion and equated with lack of moral worth (Lamont 2000:134). As such, the moral self-positioning of the striving working class out of the class hierarchy in practice is not fully devoid of material grounding: they are the hustling people morally, but they are also not the subproletariat materially.

Angelo, a forty-year-old kitchen worker in Italy illustrates well the logic of the downward boundary. Before working as a kitchen worker, he spent several years in prison. There he later completed his schooling and then progressively re-entered the labour market under rigid controls, until his sentence was fully served. When I ask him about how he would describe people below him, he answers as if picking up a thought already in progress about beggars he routinely encounters in the street:

> Sometimes I see young people who well: you've got two legs, you've got two arms, you're young too, and you need to make a bit of an effort [*ti devi dare da fare un pochino*]! I know that waking up in the morning or earning a thousand euros a month washing dishes is no pleasure for anyone. But everyone does it. And so sometimes I think: why should I give fifty cents to this kid here who's got nothing missing? He's young, he's got two legs, he's got two arms, he simply doesn't want to go to work. Nothing comes from nothing [*da niente non viene niente*]: if you want to change things a little, you also have to put in a little effort

yourself. As someone used to say: God helps those who help themselves [*aiutati che Dio ti aiuta*].[128]

(Angelo, 40, kitchen worker, 22_IT)

A similar equivalence between lower social position and lack of moral worth, is deployed by Frida. When asked about people below her, Frida traces with great competence the social logics producing them, but this very reasoning is directed counterintuitively to establish their moral failure:

They are, I suppose, the people on the street. Those who live on the street and those who cannot afford to pay rent. I don't know, I feel that those people have given up [*se han rendido*]. I feel that those people... I don't know why one gets there... To reach a point like that, you have to go through a lot of things [*tienes que pasar muchas cosas*]. First, stop asking favours from your family or your closest circle. I, in my case it would be friends, friendships, you know? And once you have exhausted all the options, then go to social services... it seems very, very, very difficult to me [*se me hace muy complicado*]. And those would be the ones below. If I have to place them, it is people for whom is over [*la gente que ya está*], who have given up [*se ha rendido*], or who, I don't know, some circumstance in life has led them there, it would be those who live... Those who don't have a home. Those who don't have a home, definitely.[129]

(Frida, 49, waitress, 3_ES)

Frida's description of people below her closely resembles the threshold of the Southern European subproletariat as discussed above (Ch. 3.1): people unable to sustain themselves through work in any way - also counting in family help - and relying on residual social assistance (or not even that). Yet, Frida's chain of reasoning takes a sudden shift from structural logics to individual moral responsibility: precisely because so many social institutions must fail to force people in the subproletariat, then people who fall in there must have stopped trying somewhere along the way.

[128] A volte vedo ragazzi che comunque: due gambe ce li hai, due braccia ce li hai, sei anche giovane e ti devi dare da fare un pochino!. Lo so che svegliarti la mattina o guadagnare mille euro al mese magari per lavare i piatti non ha piacere nessuno. Però lo fanno tutti. E quindi a volte dico: ma perché devo dare magari 50 centesimi a sto ragazzo qua che non gli manca niente? È giovane, c'ha due gambe, c'ha due braccia, non ha voglia in pratica di andare a lavorare. Da niente non viene niente: se vuoi cambiare un attimino devi dare un attimino anche te da fare. Come diceva qualcuno, aiutati che Dio ti aiuta.

[129] Son, supongo que la gente, más bien, es que es la gente de la calle. Son los que viven en la calle y los que no tienen para pagarse un alquiler. Entonces, no sé, yo siento que esa gente se ha rendido. Siento que esa gente... no sé, no sé por qué llega... Para llegar a un punto así, es que tienes que pasar muchas cosas. Primero, dejar de pedir favores a tu familia o a tu círculo más cercano. Yo, en mi caso, aquí serían amigos, amistades, ¿sabes? Y al ya agotar todas las opciones, después ir con ayudas sociales... es que se me hace muy, muy, muy complicado. Y esos serían los de abajo. O sea, si hay que ponerle, es la gente que ya está, que se ha rendido o que, no sé, que por alguna circunstancia de la vida los ha llevado eso, serían ellos, los que viven en... los que no tienen casa. Los que no tienen casa, definitivamente.

With one move, structural forces are turned into a individual burden of lacking the moral worth to choose effort.

The same moral structure against people below appears consistently across the sample: Francisco declares "who doesn't work it's because he doesn't want to", Pepe similarly points to "the young ones depending on their parents, who say there is no work and don't go looking for it" and Silvio labels the same group of as "spineless [*invertebrati]*". In every case, what is applied against people below is a universal moral criterion of 'choosing to hustle'. In some cases, this criterium incorporates an ethnic distinction, pointing to migrants as one of the groups that does not choose to hustle. Yet, even in those cases, the ethnicization of the hustling boundary remains incomplete and ambivalent and ultimately subordinated to the universal principle of choosing to hustle, irrespective of ethnicity.

Talking about people who live on welfare benefits, Pepe at some point spontaneously mentions migrants and problematizes whether they deserve help or not, with some clarification questions from my side:

> I would give them help because it is logical it is like if I went to your country, I would also want to receive help. (...) There is a centre here, in El Pardo. Those migrants, what future are you going to give them? They will be there until the years go by because where are they going to find a house? If they have no papers, they will be there forever. (...) However much help you give them, make sure they are looking for a future, looking for a house, looking for stability and give them the papers to be able to stay here. No! Instead they just leave them there to their own devices [*al albedrío*], without papers and without anything (…) I am not racist or anything. Yes, I am racist in the sense that if you don't fend for yourself, then go! You know what I mean? But show it. Show that you are looking for a future.[130]
>
> (Pepe, 29, temp agency warehouse loader, 24_ES)

The reasoning moves in three steps: basic solidarity through imagined identification, gives way to conditionality on activation - and emergent resentment - and then opens onto an unexpected structural critique: if the system blocks migrant, they are left with no path to prove them morally

[130] Yo le daría ayuda porque es lógico como si yo me voy a tu país, yo también quisiera que recibiera una ayuda. (...) Hay un centro aquí, en El Lazo. Esos inmigrantes, ¿qué futuro les vas a dar? Van a estar ahí hasta que pasen los años porque ¿dónde van a buscar una casa? Pero si no tienen papel, van a estar ahí siempre. (...) Por mucho que tú le dé la ayuda, pues asegúrate que buscas un futuro, que buscas una casa, que buscas una estabilidad, que le das los papeles para poder estar aquí. ¡No! Pues te dejan ahí al albedrío, sin papel y sin nada (…)Yo no soy racista ni nada. Sí, soy racista en el plan de que si tú no te buscas la vida, pues vete! ¿Sabes lo que te digo? Pero... demuestra que te buscas la vida, ¿me entiendes? .

through effort. The ethnic distinction surfaces and is immediately reabsorbed within the universal criterion of choosing effort, instead of slipping into a nativist one.

What the interview reveals, though Pepe does not recall here explicitly, is that he himself received welfare benefits during the years he now describes as years of inactivity, namely the minimum guaranteed income, of which as he says was one of the first recipients in Spain. Earlier in the interview, speaking of people on the island who live off [*a costa de ellos*] he had already drawn the line and placed himself, carefully, on the right side of it: "I lived like that for a long time [*un monton de tiempo*]". The judgment directed downward has a biographical referent directed inward. This becomes fully explicit immediately afterwards, when I asked him whether he would instead give help to Spanish people who don't activate themselves, as compared to migrants. Pepe reiterates the universal effort criterion, and without warning turns it on the self:

> However Spanish you are or whatever, you have to train, find something. (...) I tell you: in my youth I was a *gandul* [layabout]. *Interviewer: What is a gandul?* A gandul... like, you're there in bed, you don't want to do anything, out with your mates. [laughs] Well, that. But... but me, I don't know, I... it must be something in my blood or whatever [*será que mi sangre o algo*], I have always known how to fend for myself [*buscarme la vida*], in terms of this, of work.[131] (Pepe, 29, temp agency warehouse loader, 24_ES)

The word *gandul* had not appeared before in the interview and it's released after one hour and a half, with the tone of a confession. The period of inactivity that in section 8.2.1 was covered by euphemism - "I always had the mentality of working, it was just that I wasn't trained" - here slips out in its raw form. What this moment reveals in a vivid and explicit form is that the downward boundary against *gandules* below involves, like a moral third law of Newton, an equal act of moral disciplining against the self inward: an inward boundary. This is characteristic of the striving precarious working class, as compared to type 1 and type 2, but remains in many cases latent or just hinted, without being verbalized explicitly. It is not hard to explain why: the inward boundary involves a painful act of self-judgement and individualized self-blaming for your own precarity, insomuch as others below are blamed for theirs. The moral identity of hustling people is constructed relationally against people

[131] Por mucho que seas español o como sea, tienes que formarte, buscarte algo. (...) Yo te digo que en mi época de joven yo era un gandul. Interviewer ¿Qué es un gandul? Un gandul... en plan de que estás ahí en la cama, no quieres hacer nada, con los amigos. [eheheh] Pues eso. Pero... pero yo, no sé, yo... será que mi sangre o algo, siempre he sabido buscarme la vida, en plan de esto, del trabajo.

below and routinely chosen against the guilt of what oneself has been or could become again in its own social trajectory. In the case of Pepe the "admission" emerges as persisting self-guilt coexists with a narrative of essentialized self-redemption which covers it. The past is admitted without euphemism, but immediately redeemed: through the choice of effort, and through the appeal to nature - his blood - as making that choice inevitable. I was a gandul, but I am not one. The same naturalising logic that extended forward - the permanent job that must come 'because it is the law of life' - is the future face of the same destiny, already half-realized.

The upward boundary is, across the sample, mostly neutralised. The rich and the employers, - those who have more - their position tends to be read as deserved, the legitimate outcome of effort and competence. The moral criterion of hustling, when turned upward, becomes a principle of legitimation rather than accusation: those above have more because they have worked for it. In some cases, however, the striving precarious working class feels superior morally to people above, for their ability to hustle, irrespective of material wealth. Pepe, asked who stands above him, evokes the clear class markers - "stability", "housing", "time to live" - but then he inverts this hierarchy positionining himself above on moral grounds: "however many notes you've got, you won't be above me you could be a fool, or not know how to fend for yourself [*no te sabes buscar la vida*]".

The striving precarious working class tend to identify with employers, displaying an understanding of costs, risks, and constraints of the employer side, rather than denouncing the asymmetry of the employment relation. Where a residue of critique surfaces, it tends to be immediately reabsorbed rather than developed, as section 8.3 shows. The clearest upward boundary, in the sample is instead reserved for politicians and trade unions but it operates through the same moral grammar as the downward one: they do not do and reward effort, they just take others' work. Its political implications belong to section 8.4.

8.3 Work effort meritocracy and its fissures

As is already evident from the accounts and the moral boundaries examined in the preceding sections, the moral economy of this type is one of *work-effort meritocracy*: the conviction that individual effort will be proportionally rewarded, that individual effort is the legitimate and effective path to a better position - or to holding the present one, where ascent is no longer credible - maintained and intensified even when it is not confirmed, or only partially confirmed, in practice. This type is indeed traversed and by a fundamental tension which defines it. These workers inhabit a real disintegration and manage it by redoubling work-effort meritocracy as an individual script of conduct and expected

structure of reciprocity. Everything else that has been shown - the negotiation of norms, the construction of identity, the boundaries drawn -flows from this tension.

While for the declassed precarious working-class labourism opened to denouncing the system for failing to reciprocate labour effort with a dignified life (and was reinforced by a secondary register of work effort meritocracy), work effort meritocracy alone tends to block a systemic denounce. The system's failure to reciprocate is instead absorbed: displaced downward onto those who do not respect the bargain to choose effort, or redirected inward as a demand on the self to try harder. The reward is indeed the ultimate proof of real work effort being performed, which grounds merit claims and personal worth. Thus, the effort bargain is in practice honoured unilaterally - these workers continue to invest effort, endurance, and flexibility without receiving security - without this being read as such.

While this moral economy is clear but implicit in the moral boundaries of the type, it is sometimes explicitly invoked as an organising principle of socio-economic relations. Silvio, discussing how the platform economy works, enunciates it with unusual directness:

> Platforms are clearly based on me-ri-to-cra-cy, ok? That's what it's called, meritocracy. You work well, you are... but it's normal! In this work it works like that, in the platforms as in any non-virtual company. Meritocracy, it's clear! But it's different, in a company you don't have all those things. Because take Fiat, take a Fiat, which is a multinational: look where we ended up, because we have all these... you understand? Let's leave it, because otherwise I go right into it... We have had a government, up to now... we have been screwed by everyone, because they think only of lining their own pockets. You understand!?
> And fend yourself [*E arrangiati*]!
> But come on - 'here and there, back and forth, all over' - let's get on with it! Because today you simply can't sit back on the laur... you can't stay seated on the sofa.[132]

[132] *Io - chiaramente - le piattaforme sono basate sul meritocrazia - ok? Si chiama meritocrazia. Cioè, io... lavori bene, sei... ma è normale! In questo lavoro è fatto sia dalle piattaforme che in un'azienda non virtuale. La meritocrazia, è chiaro! Però è differente - non ci sono, su un'azienda non hai tutte quelle cose - perché prendi la Fiat, prendi una Fiat che è una multinazionale - guarda come siamo andati a finire - perché ci abbiamo tutti i coglio..., cioè capito? Noi abbiamo... lasciamo stare - perché se no entro proprio... abbiamo un governo - fino adesso abbiamo... ci siamo stati*

(Silvio, 59, platform delivery worker, 23_IT)

The passage is a paradigmatic enunciation of work effort meritocracy as a moral principle organizing the world, almost naturalized. This is how things work in platforms as anywhere else, grounding once more a sense of respectability through normalcy in Silvio. Sometimes meritocracy is actually how things should work elsewhere and the reason why they do not: when key companies (Fiat) and the government fail to follow meritocracy, things go to ruin. Silvio opens a political diagnosis but immediately closes it - "let's leave it", and out of politics you are left with yourself and your individual effort: *E arrangiati!*. In a circular masterpiece, meritocracy is thus the principle of how things normally go, the reason why thigs go badly in society when institutions betray it, and the individual resource you have left when things have are gone badly.

This moral economy structures the biographical horizon of this type as a morally-laden script a normative sequence of actions oriented toward integration: keep moving, improve yourself and the reward will come. The biographical accounts with which workers present themselves since the very beginning (8.2.1) are animated by this moral economy, which give to those scripts their moral logic and its biographical direction. The gradient internal to the type corresponds to the degree to which the script has been empirically confirmed. At one pole, the moral economy is easily stabilized: the script has delivered, or is delivering, enough that what still remains can be deferred into the future without contradiction. The two things are, in practice, indistinguishable_ whether the script has confirmed itself or whether confirmation is still ahead, the subject acts as if it will, the integration aspired to appears within reach, and covering recedes. As mentioned, Franco, the waiter in Andalusia we met before, occupies this pole. Describing the trajectory already covered, he evokes a scenario of rewarded effort - " Going, trying wages in different jobs, acquiring more and more experience, improving my English until I ended up in a five-star hotel" - and foregrounding an horizon of continuing advancement "always you can aspire to an higher position, a better wage, or acquiring more skills". Buying a house is for him the next step. He currently rents an apartment with his partner - through which however he managed to get independence from his parents [*indipendizzarme*] - an if he were single, he says, he would be saving at his parents' to buy one. The script and its moral promise unfolds and holds, still foreshadowing a predictable future.

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fregare da tutti, perché pensano soltanto a ingrassarsi le loro tasche. E arrangiati! Però però guarda però "ehh - eh qua - eh là - eh su - eh - qua è là" diamoci da fare! Però, diamoci da fare, perché tanto oggi come oggi non puoi stare a dormire seduto sul divano.

At the other pole, the script is under strain - effort has been invested, but security is not easily on the horizon - and the covering must work hardly. And it is here that the central question of this section emerges. Why do workers at this pole not experience a dislocation of their meritocratic script - the subjective destabilisation of the biographical scripts through which one understands one's place in the world (see section 3.2.1) - evolving in denounce it as false, as the declassed aspiring middle class does with educational meritocracy? Part of the answer lies in what the preceding sections have already shown: the hustling identity and the active covering of disintegration from norms and social position, which fuse (meritocratic) script and (agentic hustling) identity and make the questioning of one the questioning of the other. But does this mean that when the script is visibly disconfirmed, these workers simply do not see it? That they are, in some sense, blind to the gap between promise and reality? The empirical moments that follow suggest otherwise.

Pepe recognises with lucidity his working conditions, the present missing link between his effort and reward, and the resulting life chances that follow. In several moments in the interview he overtly mentions "exploitation" as part of the world of work nowadays. He says that feels and know that he is "a number" - as everyone is nowadays, unless you are "something superior" [*algo superior*] as he says, people with a lot of resources - and, facing commodification, timidly claims "we are also human beings [*personas*]". And he knows that life chances are stalled as even people who have a stable job, struggle to pay the rent, and remain dependent on family or their partner to go on. Yet, this structural awareness never translates in an open structural denunciation of the system - in whatever form- nor in a vertical - class - conflict. To the lucid diagnosis and feeling of structural problems, what follow is instead adaption within "the rules of the game" (Alford and Friedland 1985; Wright 2016) rather than contesting the rules themselves. Even moments in which those rules seem about to be contested, are then reabsorbed and neutralized, as the following passage illustrates

> Things are difficult [*está difícil*], do you understand me? You get paid very little for how life is and how you work. Jobs are hardf [*cuestan*] - you think it just arrives and happens by itself, no! It costs you, for example, to have to analyse all the questions right now, to keep thinking. It costs me to move a... that's why - everything costs. And I know that it cost the employer too, in his moment. But come on - it cost you, fine, but you are already at the top, you already have your stability, the others too, no? Here it is: "I'm the employer, I command and I pay, fend for yourself and do my work". I understand it too, if I were an employer I'd be the same. But I'd have more heart, more tact. As an employer you also have to impose your rules, your order, your respect, I understand that too, you know what I mean? (...) You have all that thanks to your workers, not thanks to yourself, yes you had to fight for it etc.

> etc. (…) but your workers are the ones making your business going on. [...] Yes, you are the employer and you need to facture, it's ok, but I don't know, maybe a little something [un detaillito], an incentive, a little something (…), for instance some companies like IKEA, that are big businesses [grandes superficies] like LIDL (…) that have bonuses for each worker, you know? A bit more money for each one, things like that (…) I found them logical, they motivate you.[133]

(Pepe, 29, temp agency warehouse worker, 24_ES)

Being paid very little for a lot of effort is the opening: is not being reciprocated, the gap between contribution and reward is visible and felt and Pepe longs for a paternalist version of the Fordist bargain ("the others too no?"). At some point he even sketches a radical critique - "you have all that thanks to your workers, not thanks to yourself'. Yet this movement is rapidly closed and neutralized: Pepe identifies with the employer perspective and the longed paternalistic bargain is reduced to a minimum of near symbolic recognition (*un detallito*). The fissure in the work effort script opens and closes within the same breath.

Silvio's fissure is of a different kind - more compressed, almost instantaneous and immediately reabsorbed. In some moments of the interview, similarly to Pepe, he acknowledges for a moment being commodified - "I always say we are little points [*puntini*] on an app", "pawns [*pedine*], they move us at will", "cannon fodder" [*carne da macello*] - but commodification is immediately reabsorbed and owned by clinging on his agentic autonomy to hustle. The more serious fissure to his script comes instead when talking about wages as brutal numbers. In section 8.2.1 he presented himself as an entrepreneur of himself, and said that for 3,000 euros net as a dependent employee he would sign immediately. The longing was kept at a safe distance, in the zone of the impossible. Here, pressed directly on what he actually earns, that distance collapses:

> I can tell you this much, ok. (...) I move around 400, 400 euros a month, if not more, depends on the work. Don't pull the figures out of me! [*si altera*] (...) I can bring home even

[133] Está difícil, ¿me entiendes? Se cobra muy poco para como está la vida y como trabajas. Los trabajos también cuestan - uno se cree que llega y se hace solo, ¿noo! Los trabajos cuestan. Te cuesta, por ejemplo, a ti, por ejemplo, te cuesta ahora tener que estar analizando todas las preguntas, tener que estar pensando todo. A mí me cuesta mover una... por eso - todo cuesta, ¿me entiende? Y yo sé que el empresario también le costó en su momento. Pero coño, a ti te costó, vale, pero ya estás en tu top, ya estás en lo alto, ya tienes tu estabilidad, por el que está, no sé, que los demás también, ¿no? Aquí es: "yo soy empresario, soy el que mando y el que pago, búscate la vida y hazme el trabajo". Que lo entiendo también, yo fuera empresario también sería así. Pero yo tendría más corazón, más tacto. Al ser empresario también tienes que poner tu norma, tu orden, tu respeto, ¿sabes lo que te digo? (...) Tú tienes eso gracias a tus trabajadores, no gracias a ti, sí tú tuviste que luchar, etcétera, etcétera (...) pero tus trabajadores son los que te están sacando tu empresa. [...] Que tú eres empresario y tienes que facturar, vale, pero no sé, un detallito, un incentivo, un detallito (...), por ejemplo hay algunas empresas como el IKEA, que son grandes superficies, el LIDL (...) que tienen incentivos para cada trabajador, ¿me entiendes? Un poco de dinero más para cada uno, cosas así (...) las veo lógicas, ¿me entiendes? Te motivan.

> 1,000 euros a month. Yes, but I live on those 1,000 euros. I have to live on them too, ok? [*Ci devo anche vivere ok*?] [*Interviewer: Working full time, that was the question*]. Working full time... no, wait. Working... without killing myself, because obviously, working, right, without running. (...) But for a company I'd have to bust my arse - me, instead, I go and smoke a cigarette, sorry... and that's that. [Interviewer: So it oscillates, around 400 to 1,000 more or less.] Even 1,200. I bring home a wage - a minimum worker's wage. Clean, net, net! Hey? Net.[134] *(Silvio, 59, platform delivery worker, 23_IT)*

I have to live on them too" [*ci devo anche vivere*] is the fissure. For a moment the moral economy of work-effort meritocracy shows its broken promise: the effort is there, the work is there, and what it returns does not suffice. The script could crack here - the meritocratic promise exposed as false, the effort revealed as not delivering. Instead, the covering closes immediately: the rider who does not kill himself, who smokes a cigarette when he wants, who is his own boss. The agitation at being asked, the refusal to name the figure, the landing on "a minimum worker's wage, net, net, net" - all of it is the covering in action, holding the identity of the autonomous hustler in place precisely at the moment when the script's promise is most visibly disconfirmed.

The two moments above show that these workers see the gap - they are not blind to the distance between effort invested and security received. Pepe names exploitation, calculates the employer's margin, and arrives at a formulation that could anchor a structural critique. Silvio registers, however briefly, that what he earns does not suffice for a life. The script's promise is visible to them as a promise, and its disconfirmation is felt. The question is why that perception does not develop into a dislocation of the script - why the crack opens and closes rather than widening into denunciation.

Part of the answer lies in what the preceding sections have already shown. The hustling identity and the active covering of disintegration fuse the meritocratic script with the agentic identity of effort: to question the script - to say that striving harder does not pay, that the system does not reciprocate - would be to question who one is. The covering that Section 8.2.2 documented as an operation on identity is simultaneously an operation on the script: it renders the script nearly immune to empirical disconfirmation, because the identity absorbs what the evidence cannot.

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[134] Ti dico solo, ok. (...) Io mi muovo sui 400, 400 euro al mese, se non di più, dipende dal lavoro. Non tirarmi fuori gli importi! [si altera] (...) Io posso portarmi a casa anche 1000 euro al mese. Sì però ci vivo, con quei 1000 euro. Ci devo anche vivere, ok? [Intervistatore: Lavorandoci a tempo pieno, questa era la domanda.] Lavorandoci... no, spetta. Lavorandoci... non facendomi il mazzo, perché chiaramente, però lavorando, giusto, senza correre. (...) Però per un'azienda mi devo fare il culo, io invece, vado a fumare una sigaretta, intanto scusami... e niente, è così. [Intervistatore: Quindi oscilla tra, tipo, 400 euro, 1000 più o meno.] Anche 1200. Io mi porto a casa uno stipendio, uno stipendio minimo di un operaio. Pulito, netto, netto! Eh? Netto

But there is something further, which the preceding sections did not yet name. Even where the covering partially yields - even in the moments shown above, where the gap is registered and felt - the perception finds nowhere to go. There is no collective grammar available in which the individual diagnosis could be named as a structural violation, no shared vocabulary for "the system has failed" that these workers can reach for. And most of all there is no lived experience - personal or transmitted - of collective solidarity that has produced something, no memory of a moment when acting together changed the terms. The 15-M gave the declassed aspiring middle class a grammar and an event; the labourist tradition gave the declassed precarious working class a collective norm and, in some cases, a biographical anchorage in union experience. Here there is neither, but a void: the silence of those who lack the tools to say what they suffer (Bourdieu and Accardo 1999; Skeggs and Loveday 2012:488; Westheuser and Beck 2025) … and then cover it. The dislocation surfaces and dissipates, first because no alternative account can bring it to a different direction and is then consequently covered by the only grammar available to bring meaning to a closure and to ground dignity.

This dynamic is brough to its extreme by Frida, which as we said constitutes the furthest limit of the type, where the question posed above - why does the gap not produce dislocation - is both overcome and radicalized. As others, Frida is aware of her position, but the Fordist standard of security has ceased to be a reference norm to which measure the gap. As in Pepe and Silvio, but almost without frictions, her reality is given meaning and worth by work-effort meritocracy itself, so fully incorporated that it has become the only horizon. This surfaces when talking about her hobbies and book tastes, which are morally and biographically loaded:

> And I spent a long time wrestling with self-help literature, you know? (…) I really liked Charles Bukowski. (...) He was one of the *poetas malditos*. He didn't contribute much to personal growth. *Interviewer: There seems to be a bit of a contrast, to me, between Bukowski and personal growth.* That's why I'm telling you, for a long time I was at odds with personal growth. I'm like, from the nineties, you know? And back then everything that had to do with, like, I've suffered, like not being well regarded by society, that was fashionable. Like, it made you seem mysterious. (...) But then you see that it's not entirely right. I mean, what do you want? Do you want to spend your whole life complaining? Bukowski in his life was no example for anyone. He was always an alcoholic, you know? (...) Later I found things that actually do make you grow. (...) Coelho-I think he has interesting things. He makes you reflect on

everyday things, you know? Things you maybe hadn't stopped to think about. He makes you reconsider[135]

(Frida, 49, waitress, 3_ES)

The passage from the "literature of suffering" to the literature of self-improvement is the embracement of a biographical project of continuous individualized advancement through effort with no space for sufferance or breaks. "Do you want to spend your whole life complaining?" is not a covering operation but the point where individualized effort has become the world itself, with no other collective grammar perturbing it.

Across all cases, in shorts, what fills that meaning-moral void is the moral economy of work-effort meritocracy itself - and it fills it completely, leaving no remainder. It operates simultaneously across three registers: as a morally laden script offering aspirational individual strategies of action or in the suspended variant simply keep doing your thing; as an individualized legitimation of inequality; and as a cover for personal worth when the script does not deliver (I strive, therefore I am worth something regardless of where it leads). In the deferred variant, as for Franco, the horizon is still open and the script looks forward: the system will eventually reciprocate, the effort is not yet wasted . In the suspended variant, as for Silvio, for whom no such horizon is available it turns inward: the effort was worth it in any case, the identity holds even if the promise does not. In the limit extreme case of Frida, where the script is not measured anymore against stability continuous effort is naturalized as the new sense of the world. In all three variants, the moral economy of work effort holds. In either case, work effort meritocracy prevents social disintegration from being named as a systemic failure, thus blocking the conversion of individual strain into a collective claim and with that the political horizon that that the preceding types, each in their own way, managed to open. That is the terrain section 8.4 enters.

[135] Y estuve mucho tiempo peleada con la literatura de superación personal, ¿sabes' (…) me gustaba mucho Charles Bukowski. (...) Era uno de los poetas malditos. No aportaba demasiado al crecimiento personal.-*Hay un poco de contraste, me parece, entre Bukowski y crecimiento personal.*-Por eso te digo que mucho tiempo estuve yo peleada con el crecimiento personal. Yo soy como de los noventas. Y en ese entonces todo lo que fuera así como he sufrido, como el no bien visto por la sociedad, como que era un tema de moda. Como que eso te hacía así como misterioso. (...) Pero después ves que no del todo está bien. ¿Tú qué quieres? ¿Te quieres estar quejando toda tu vida? Bukowski en su vida no era ningún ejemplo para nadie. Siempre fue alcohólico. (...) Ya después encontré cosas que sí te hacen crecer. (...) Coelho, yo creo que tiene cosas interesantes. Te hace reflexionar sobre las cosas cotidianas, las cosas en que igual tú no te habías parado a pensar. Te replantea las cosas

8.4 Absence and Demobilised conservatism

8.4.1 Not people of politics, but people of work

As in the preceding chapters, the political grammar of a type follows from the structure of its moral boundaries and the direction of blame they encode. In the declassed aspiring middle class and the declassed precarious working class, the violation of the moral economy is experienced as systemic - the social contract has been broken, the institutions that were supposed to reciprocate have failed - and blame flows upward, grounding the populist left and social-populist orientations documented in chapters six and seven. In the striving precarious working class, the moral economy is not experienced as violated by the system. The system works, in principle: one must work! Coherently, failures are internal to the system: those below who do not work violate the meritocratic principle from the bottom, to some extent those above who take from the striving ones corrupt it from the top, and crucially oneself failure in trying hard enough to work problems through. Self-discipline - and the implicit individualized inward blaming which grounds it - forecloses the political sphere as a terrain of collective redress before the question of political orientation can even be posed.

The discourse that recurs across the sample, captures the structure in condensed form: they are people of work, not people of politics. This is not necessarily lack of political capital (this varies across cases), nor it is generic indifference. It is rather the direct translation of the moral economy into a relation with the political sphere: if the system works and effort is the answer, there is nothing politics can offer that the subject cannot already provide for himself through his own striving.

At a closer look, a latent tension inhabits relation of this type with the political. What emerges actively is a functional conception of politics: it should guarantee that the system works, that the meritocratic principle is not corrupted, that those who do not earn do not receive. For the rest, it is irrelevant: one thinks of one's own. What is naturalised as absent is something different and more fundamental: the very idea that politics could offer collective solutions to one's own problems. This is not rejected as such, but simply - for the most of it - it does not exist as an imaginable - or in some cases realistic - possibility. Fending for oneself [*buscarse la vida*] is not experienced as a condition imposed from outside but as the normal order of things, as identity, as something to take pride in. The inward blame that sustains the covering makes the absence of collective alternatives not only tolerable but morally coherent: if I can always try harder, there is nothing for politics to do that I cannot do myself.

Yet behind this naturalisation, fissures surface: moments in which a latent expectation, never fully formed, breaks through. They are not invested enough to produce a sense of betrayal, as in the preceding type, but still present enough to show that the naturalisation is not complete. This is what

distinguishes the type from the declassed precarious working class, where politics is experienced as abandonment, "you realise that nobody is going to look out for you, (…) that you are going to have to fight it all on your own"- as Clara put it (Chapter 7). Here, fighting it out alone is normal and revendicated: *E Arrangiati!* Silvio answered back. The structure is not abandonment but naturalisation of absence.

Pepe, who declares never having voted in his life and acknowledges not knowing much about politics, once again vividly condenses this spirit: "We have never talked about politics, we are not into that [*no somos de eso, de fijarnos*], into politics or anything. We are into working [*nosotros es de trabajar*], whatever life brings, and that's it. (…) I live my life (…) if they give more work, great, if they give less, great too, because whatever they give more or less, I am going to keep fending for my future, the same. Sure things will change, yes: (…) prices will go up and down, six cents, ten cents"[136]. Franco, who is instead quite politically informed, says he tries to follows debates, but puts the TV on, listens five minutes and changes channel: "politics, honestly, I follow it as little as possible because it is getting myself worked up [*calentarme la cabeza*], it irritates me". He declares having voted blank since he was eighteen because no party corresponds to his thinking, even knowing that a perfect match is impossible.

Silvio who has higher political competence and judges more, talks about politics this way: "they only think of themselves, never of the nation". When asked what a government that thought of the nation would do, answers with a charged metaphoric counterexample: Friuli after the earthquake, where workers "rolled up their sleeves" [*si sono tirati su le maniche*] "as good workers" [*da buoni lavoratori*] and rebuilt the region without waiting for the Italian state, "because if they waited the state…". The model is a self-disciplined community who strives and do things, proudly against an absent state, banalized as useless. He also adds in a sudden moment of group identification then immediately suspended: "I am now with the poor devils, the workers, the peasants, the farmers, damn it! But in this moment I feel apolitical [*anapolitico*].[137]

In the quantitative analysis (Chapter 5) these workers would fit within the precarious working class (non-graduate precarious workers) who is not politically mobilized and abstains from voting. What the qualitative material shows is the structure inside the black box of this abstention: a specific

[136] Nunca hemos hablado de política, no sé, nosotros no somos de eso, de fijarnos en política ni nada. Nosotros es de trabajar, como esté la vida, y listo. Yo vivo mi vida... si dan más trabajo me alegro y si dan menos trabajo me alegro también, porque por mucho que den más o menos voy a seguir buscándome el futuro y así, igual. Que va a bajar, que va a subir, seis céntimos, diez céntimos.

[137] Ecco io adesso sono con quelli che, i poveri cristi, i lavoratori, i contadini, gli agricoltori, che... cazzo! Certo, però in questo momento mi sento anapolitico.

relation with the political sphere - and a latent political orientation nonetheless, as the next section shows - that is grounded in their moral economy of work effort meritocracy.

8.4.2 Demobilised Conservatism

The relation to the political sphere examined in the preceding section - functional, disengaged, naturalised as absence - does not mean that these workers have no political orientation. They do, and it is recognisable as what I call *demobilised conservatism*: a political grammar that is conservative in substance and demobilised in form. Conservative, because it follows directly from the structure of moral boundaries and the direction of blame examined in the preceding sections: the same violation in the system that produces the boundary downward against those who do not work, and the boundary upward against those who corrupt the meritocratic principle from above, generates a political orientation that defends the system against its internal violators rather than contesting the system itself. Demobilised, because the inward blame that the covering sustains - the self-discipline that says I must hustle harder - blocks the externalisation of blame and forecloses the political sphere as a terrain of collective demand. The grammar is conservative, but remains a latent in the sense of not mobilized electorally. Though, seriously enough, a demobilised conservatism of this scale is itself a supremely conservative outcome.

Pepe's political orientation is the most transparent illustration of this grammar, which in his case perfectly adheres with his own moralized account. After having declared that he belongs to people of work, not people of politics, he adds that he feels more consonant with the conservative Partido Popular:

> "The PP for example, it was a president who liked things... that everyone would seek their own future [*buscara su futuro*], that everyone would fight *[luchara*] for it, this way, that way, you know what I mean? that everyone would have their home, their stability, and so on. And the PSOE no! the PSOE... well what it did was that everyone lived off others [*a los lailos*], looking for trouble, looking for... you know what I mean? Everyone... raised all the taxes, raised everything, no help [*no ayuda*].. you know what I mean?"[138]

The PP embodies the aspiration of his biographical project of reaching stability through chosen effort, and in so doing acquiring dignity. The PSOE violates it as gives help to layabouts unwilling to

[138]el PP por ejemplo era un presidente que le gustaba las cosas... que cada uno buscara su futuro, que luchara, que para aquí, para allá, ¿me entiendes? que todo el mundo tuviera su casa, su estabilidad, etcétera. Y el PSOE no! El PSOE... pues lo que hizo es que cada uno viviera a los lailos, buscar guerra, buscar... ¿me entiende? Que cada uno... Subió todos los impuestos, subió todo, no ayuda.. ¿me entiende?"

change, with a vague reference to tax increases burdening people who strive Asked about his thoughts on Vox and Podemos, he says "on Vox, I don't know who he is… you get me?" while Podemos was "the one who had the ponytail [la coleta], they say he stole and went away (…) it is done to gain money (…) nothing more". Other political options don't matter and are barely known by Pepe, consistent with his demobilized conservative outlook.

A variation of the dominant demobilized conservatism, along the lines of technopopulism (Bickerton and Accetti 2021; Caramani 2017), is articulated by Frida. She remembers having participated to the 15-M demonstrations - a new experience for her - and remembers them with warmth: "all united, a lot of unity, it was very civilised". However, she could not bother the left-wing populist twist - or institutionalization - of the movement carried out by Pablo Iglesias: "he drew a lot of distinctions between some and others, that's not what you should do in politics. What you have to do is have more unity (…) And even people themselves started marking themselves out, like 'I'm on this side and they're on that side'. Like the poor [*pobre*], here they call them hippies [*perro-flautas*], the poor and those who have a little more. I didn't like that distinction"[139]. Against the conflictual left-wing populist politics, opposing the "poor" and "those who have a little more", Frida envisages a unitary technocratic politics, where "with your idea, if something can be improved, it is improved, but without a political party". Ideas that can improve things, without conflict, without (class) group division: this is the politics she can imagine. The system just works if well administered for the people, it needs to be made to work better, not contested.

Silvio's demobilised conservatism is more ideologically textured and organised around the same moral code of conduct that runs through everything else in his account. When the conversation turns to his political orientation, he first strongly hints to Mussolini - someone who "did a lot for Italy, at the beginning, you can see it in the buildings still standing today", before he "got taken in" by the wrong alliance - and then lumps together contemporary far rights options - Meloni, Salvini, Vannacci - without hesitation as not serious politicians: "only idiots [*coglioni*] go there". He instead expresses cautious but genuine appreciation for Tajani, the leader of the conservative *Forza Italia*:

> At least he is more... he tells you things as they are, you know? He doesn't give you the bullshit: let's build bridges, let's do the bridge, etc. We are not capable of doing great engineering... I mean, me and Tajani... but right now-I told you-the only one! Because the

[139] "distinguía mucho de unos y de otros - eso no tienes que hacer en política. Lo que tienes que hacer es que haya más unidad (…) y hasta la misma gente se hacía notar como yo soy de este lado y ellos de este lado. Como que los pobres - aquí les dicen perros flautas - los pobres y los que tienen un poquito más. A mí esa distinción no me gustó."

only thing is that he always tries to stay as a peacemaker, you know? But I have never heard him say a word out of place [*mai una parola fuori posto*].-Interviewer: h*e seems like a serious person to you.*-Yes, indeed, you know? But-I'm telling you-right now I don't give a damn... you know? Because elections, if they had them, nobody went to vote, because they're just costs etc. … and on top of that they take over the schools for voting, so if you have kids you can't send them to school. That's it (…) Come on, leave it [*lascia stare*].[140]

(Silvio, 59, platform delivery worker, 23_IT)

The three criteria-not promising what cannot be delivered, saying things as they are, never a word out of place-are the absence of programme elevated to virtue, the "mi adatto basta" applied to institutional life. Tajani, in other words, is the political figure who most closely resembles Silvio himself: measure, not overreaching or pretending, seriousness. Yet even the figure closest to his moral code cannot make politics his world which, which remains ultimately useless, costly and even a nuisance to working people who can't send children to school on the election day.

A further dimension of Silvio's demobilised conservatism - revealing about the general type's reaction to collective political grammars-is his anti-union position. Unions are read through two prisms that together constitute his moral worldview: individualised effort, and moderation as the only viable and legitimate posture toward the system. Those who take without striving, and those who overreach rather than adapt, are both equally condemned. In his reading, the unions that entered the platform sector came not to defend workers but to collect membership fees from those who strive [*piatto ricco mi ci ficco*]: They are takers, in the same sense as the politicians who think only of their pockets. And when they pushed for confrontation, it was the workers who paid when the platforms threatened to leave the market. Collective action of this kind is both morally wrong and also impossible since the beginning. At most, you work with the fascia on your arm as "the Japanese strike": you signal dissent without pretending too much and making a mess, and you do not risk the little dignity that having a job has given you. The same moral judgement applies strongly several times against people below and policies supporting them, such as the Italian citizenship income, which "was given to dogs and pigs [*cani e porci*]" as he bluntly puts.

[140] Almeno lui è più... lui ti dice le cose come stanno, capito, non ti dice le stronzate: uniamo le ponte, facciamo il ponte, ecc. Tanto non siamo in grado di fare grosse ingegnerie... cioè io con Tajani... però in questo momento te l'ho detto, l'unico! Perché l'unico è che cerca sempre di stare da paciere, capito, però non ho mai sentito dire una frase fuori posto.-Sì, infatti, hai capito-però ti dico, in questo momento non me ne frega un cazzo di... cioè capito? Tanto le votazioni se le hanno fatte, nessuno è andato a votare, perché sono solo costi, eccetera, in più in più occupano le scuole per andare a dare votazioni che ha dei figli non li può mandare a scuola, tutto lì, se deve, dai, lascia stare, va!

Demobilised conservatism can radicalise into a mobilized far right grammar, as the case of Franco shows it as possibility, while stopping short of completing the conversion. While he has always voted blank, he says that among his circle of friends - his *milieu* - some are "full-on [*a tope de*] Vox," while others "full-on the PP". He is not fully convinced by either, when his friends argue he steps aside [*me quito del medio*], but those two parties define his political coordinates.

In similar vein to Silvio's anti-syndicalism, but more articulated and conflictive, he thinks Spanish fiscal system as not rewarding work effort. Taxes, and especially social contributions on labour are too high, and they are responsible for eroding workers' net wages: "they raised the wages a bit, but then they raised the taxes even more, in the end the net stays the same or even less". Self-employed workers [*los autonomos*] - to which he equates employers in general as well, and what he aspires to become one day - are the figure who concentrate this violation most sharply: the state drown them in taxes [*los ahogan*], while they are the ones who keep the economy growing through their effort. Yet the position is not monolithically anti-state, rather he demands an application of the meritocratic criterion to the state itself: important workers who merit more - police offers, but even doctors and teachers - should be paid more, also to retain them within the country. However, he generally feels that the government governs without a mandate and spends without accountability - "we are living more in a dictatorship than in a democracy"- and would like citizens to vote directly on each spending proposal.

Moreover, in Franco's case immigration is framed as a central issue and directly connected to the duty to work. As the downward boundary against layabouts tends to be equated with non-native people, Franco's political grammar diverges most sharply from the type, moving closer to the nativist discourse of the far right. Yet this rapprochement is not completed and openly problematized by Franco:

> There are some things from Vox I support, but then looking at their party more broadly... they want to throw people out of the country, immigrants, even those who are working here. That I find wrong [lo veo fatal[. If you are an immigrant who comes from outside, comes to Spain, is working, is paying into the system, it is terrible that they should throw you out just for being an immigrant. If you contribute to the country you are one more [*eres uno más]* [...] But I do think it is right that those who come here and after six months or a year cannot find work, generate no wealth for the country, their help gets cut and they go back to their country. Because if they come here and contribute nothing, absolutely nothing, and on top of that they are eating into the state's resources... [...] In my group of friends there is a Moroccan guy [*marroquín]* who lives off state benefits, and he tells me: "I'm

delighted with the PP, I don't have to look for work. I earn the same as you staying at home". *Interviewer: And what do you think about that?* (…) I tell him: "go find a job" [*que se busque un trabajo*].[141]

(Franco, 23, waiter, 25_ES)

While the moral criterion of work effort remains formally universal, thus opening possibilities for subordinate inclusion - "si te contribuyes al país eres uno más" - examples of violation, including from his direct environment, are exclusively ethicised. The line between conditional and structural ethnicization runs thin. Instances of anti-feminism discourse, his opposition to the "ley sí es sí", one of the first grievances he brings up, further reinforce his proximity to Vox discourse.

Latent potential for a mobilized far-right orientation

The demobilised conservatism documented across the sample t is the political expression of a specific configuration of blame whose particular combination produces demobilisation as a structural outcome: (I) the inward blame keeps self-discipline in equilibrium with outward blame and forecloses the political sphere as a terrain of collective demand before political orientation can even crystallise; (II) the downward blame against those who do not work produces a conservative orientation that defends the system against its internal violators rather than contesting the system itself; (III) upward blame against those that corrupt the meritocratic principle form above is residual and blocked, producing disgust rather and apoliticism rather than denounce. It is the specific weight and combination of these three directions that places the type in the region of the political space that Chapter 3 (3.3.2) identified as the conservative-producerist spectrum, ranging from complete impoliticization, to demobilised conservatism and the nativist-producerist orientation of the radical right, where self-blame recedes and outward exclusionary blame dominates. The cases examined above occupy predominantly the second - and central - element of this spectrum. However, as the case of Franco already highlighted, a latent potential for far-right orientation exist within the striving

[141] *De Vox sí que es verdad que hay algunas cosas que apoyo, pero luego hay muchas... como por ejemplo que quieren echar a gente del país, en este caso inmigrantes, que están trabajando aquí - aunque estén trabajando los quieren echar - eso lo veo mal. Si tú eres un inmigrante que viene de fuera, viene a España, estás trabajando, estás cotizando en España, lo veo fatal que te tengan que echar a tu país por ser inmigrante. Si te contribuyes al país eres uno más. [...] Luego sí que veo bien que los que vengan aquí, si no en seis meses o un año, que no consiguen trabajo, no generan patrimonio en el país, se les corte la ayuda y se vuelvan para su país. Porque eso al final, si son personas que vienen aquí y no contribuyen, no hacen absolutamente nada y encima están comiendo ese patrimonio del Estado. [...] En mi grupo de colegas, hay un marroquín que vive de las pagas del Estado. Y le dice: yo, el PP, estoy encantado con ellos. Yo no tengo que buscar trabajo. Yo cobro lo mismo que tú estando en mi casa. Yo le digo que se busque un trabajo.*

precarious working class, possibly already activated and not directly captured by my qualitative sampling.

The conversion toward the radical right does not indeed require a radical transformation of the moral economy itself, but a reconfiguration of the blame structure within it. First, individualized self-blame must recede: as long as the covering sustains the belief that effort can always be redoubled, the externalisation of failure remains partial and political mobilisation is blocked at the source. The regression requires either biographical confirmation of the script - "I have done my part" - which is the path toward the contributionist configuration that Damhuis (2020) documents, or the denounciation of the work-effort meritocracy script as partially false, demanding it to be restored outside of the self. The latter also necessarily involves some reduction of individualisation, towards a stronger sense of groupness, however partial, of the strivers. Second, the downward boundary of work discipline must be filled with nativist substance (Mudde 2007), in which layabouts are equated with non-natives or, even more radically, non-natives are denied integration through work effort. Franco's case shows the line is already thin. Third, the consolidation of upward blame into a unified political demand: the diffuse disgust for a political class that extracts without producing must be articulated as a structured claim, that those who enable the undeserving be replaced by those who reward the productive. Again this involves some attenuation of individualisation towards a stronger collective identity. Taken together, this internal reconfiguration makes possible the emergence of the nativist-producerist tripartite conflict structure (Damhuis 2020; Rathgeb 2020, 2024; Wagner 2022a) which has been shown to be characteristic of far-right voters: the striving workers against those (non-natives) below who don't work, and those above who enable their "parasitism".

The moral and political grammar of the striving precarious working class - demobilised conservatism resting on work-effort meritocracy - analysed in this chapter is indeed adjacent to, although distinct from, the ones documented by Damhuis (2020) among French and Dutch populist radical right voters: small-business "contributionists" and mostly out-of-work precarious workers of "hard-done-byness." Their moral grammar is closer to *contributionism* - in the moralisation of effort and the downward boundary against layabouts - but the structural position is not: the script remains under pressure, self-blame is still operative, and demobilisation instead of radical right mobilisation follows. Where the script is confirmed and a stable position reached, conversion toward *contributionism* is an available biographical outcome, as the case of Franco already foreshadows. The structural position of my type 3 is closer to *hard-done-byness* - precarity and proximity to the threshold of respectability - but the moral-political grammar is not: these workers are still active in the labour market and their identity is present-tense and agentive.

Conversion toward *hard-done-byness*, while possible, is accordingly less immediate. Welfare chauvinism as a political grammar is weaker and less central in the Southern European context: the welfare safety on which to claim national preference is limited, and the few instruments introduced in recent years were introduced by left populist parties and contested by the populist radical right as violating the duty to work. Still, a distinct path toward the radical right remains available, as the preceding section showed, through the ethnicization of the downward boundary on effort rather than welfare grounds. Among Damhuis's types, it is a contributionist subtype - what he calls "small independents in decline" - that may sit closest. They share with my striving precarious working class a similar "individualistic survival ethic" (Damhuis 2020:159) of effort and aversion toward those who live off others, but they acknowledge structural decline instead of covering it, and their downward boundary is (again) structurally ethnicized, which mobilize them towards the populist radical right.

Housing: Cracking the Work Effort Script

The argument developed throughout this section has been that the moral economy of work-effort meritocracy produces demobilisation as a structural outcome. There is, however, one point where this logic shows real breaks. Invariably, across cases and across both countries, towards the end of interviews - in the politics and policy sections - the interviewees in this type claim that they struggle to afford housing despite striving in their work. Almost every interviewee, reaching this phase of the interview, suddenly denounces the impossibility of affording a home while working and demands, with varying degrees of assertiveness, for state intervention to regulate rents and more in general granting access to housing. Throughout the chapter, work-effort meritocracy has dealt social disintegration from secure work by owning it through agentic effort. On housing, this same moral economy collides with itself: people who strive in their work are unable to afford housing, and unable to control rent prices through their effort. Real cracks open in work effort meritocracy against the bricks of housing, and with them political opening for collective demands for the system to change.

This point is well illustrated by Silvio, the rider in Milan, probably the less expected case within the type to perform such a denunciation. On every other dimension examined, he primed individual adaptation and was opposed to collective intervention in the domain of individual effort. Moreover, differently from Spain, in Italy housing has not become a primary object of politicization which makes the emergence of strong opinions on this topic less likely. I asked Silvio about housing at the very end of the interview, once he had already formed his account, and I introduced it obliquely through a question about Airbnb platform regulation, to which Silvio already showed to be

favourable. Then, asked whether he was a renter himself, Silvio confirmed with a syncopated answer - ″we are renting, renting, renting, renting" - immediately defensively de-stigmatized -″normal, I am not ashamed to say it, renting″ - as he had done previously on his work.

Asked directly whether he would favour capping rents by law, Silvio answers with vigour: "Eh yes! Eh yes! 'Cause we've got to a point, a desorbitisation ["*desorbizzazione*"]! I mean, outrageous. (...) They were renting out in Milan, you could see it in the papers, a bathroom for 1,000 euros a month". Testing Silvio's opinion, I tell him that the right is against rent regulation and according to free market - something he cherished elsewhere in the interview - one can do what he wants with his own property, but he interrupts before the sentence is finished :″In Italy they wanna make money on everything,"; and then again: "it's needed! it's needed, the rule's needed [*la regola ci vuole*]". The same person who defended platform work as the natural order of meritocracy, expressed hostility towards trade-unions and dismissed the Citizenship Income as given to "dogs and pigs" interrupts to demand state intervention on rent prices.

Trying to make sense of the split between his takes on work and housing, perceived as an apparent inconsistency on my side, I finally asked Silvio if I got it right:

> *Interviewer: So if I got it right, in the world of work, one's just gotta work, there's not much to be done about it?* Silvio*:* Yeah, there's not much to be done, if you wanna get ahead you just gotta work, you gotta work. *Interviewer: But rents, on the other hand... is it right to regulate them, 'cause they gotta be accessible, that's the idea?*
>
> Silvio: Yeah, yeah, yeah. (...) I reiterate [*ribadisco*], we must regul.. Gotta give people what's right [*le cose giuste*], let's be straight about it [*parliamoci chiaro*]. You can't, you can't, take a wage of 800, of 1,000 euros a month and pay 900 in rent. (...) The scales, instead of being like this, are like this [gesture: the plates of an unbalanced scale].[142]

The same 1,000 euros claimed earlier with defensive pride as the wage of a respectable worker, and that already showed a fissure - "I have to live on it too" immediately reabsorbed - become, in connection with the rent, a crack: with 1,000 in wages and 900 in rent, one does not live. The covering has no purchase, and what surfaces is systemic violation in its purest form: work must pay, and here it does not.

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[142] *Interviewer: Nel mondo del lavoro uno si deve, deve lavorare, sostanzialmente, c'è poco da fare. Eh sì. Interviewer: Però gli affitti invece... è giusto regolarli, perché devono essere accessibili, questo è l'idea? Eh sì, eh sì, eh sì. (...) Ribadisco, bisogna regol… Bisogna dare le cose giuste, parliamoci chiaro. Cioè, tu non puoi, tu non puoi prendere uno stipendio di 800, di 1000 euro al mese e pagare 900 di affitto. (...) La bilancia, anziché essere così, è così [gesto con le mani]. (...) Aumenta tutto, aumenta tutto, ma gli stipendi sono sempre... (...) se uno poi ha una famiglia."*

The crack that opens on housing - a broken work-housing nexus - opens a space of systemic denunciation that the work-effort meritocracy otherwise forecloses: that the system does not work and one cannot work it out alone. The crack of work effort meritocracy against housing is consistent with and qualitatively qualifies, recent empirical evidence in the UK showing that rising housings costs lead to higher beliefs in the unfairness of the economic system (Clemente and Formisano 2025).

Two directions are possible for the political articulation of this opening. The first is a potential convergence with the political grammar of the declassed precarious working class. Where the effort script breaks against housing, the individualised moral economy recedes and something closer to the inclusive labourism of the preceding type surfaces: work must pay, and paying must include a home, not for those who have striven enough, but for those who work. The second direction is less intuitive but structurally available, as the preceding section on the latent populist radical right potential of the type has shown. Violated effort meritocracy can also be articulated towards the system and selectively: those who have worked and contributed deserve housing before those who have not and, under the right political supply, before those who have arrived from elsewhere without contributing. A demand to overhaul the system, so as to reinstate work-effort meritocracy itself.

The house is thus the one terrain where the covering cracks, a systemic demand surfaces, and the type becomes potentially open in different political directions. This also tells us something about the relationship between type 2 and type 3, and their potential convertibility over time. While distinct types, conversion between the two is nonetheless structurally possible as a biographical - or even generational - possibility, changing the way the same disintegrated class position is elaborated. Type 2 can cross into type 3 where violated labourism finds no political vehicle and covering substitutes for denunciation; but type 3 can also cross to type 2 if a compelling collective political grammar, hinging on real fissuring experiences, is provided.

9. A Shadow Type: The Enduring and Gracing Subproletariat

9.1 Introduction

Where other discussed types occupy positions above, or on the edge of the threshold of social respectability, the type analysed in this chapter lies below it. It corresponds to the configurational position of the subproletariat (Chapter 3.1.3): the position in which social reproduction can no longer be sustained somewhat autonomously at acceptable levels, even combining work however precarious, family support, and state support where available. The threshold lies where the subject even with the help of her family (and in this case partly despite it), cannot stand on her own feet. This position structures a specific form of tattered moral economy, which gives the type its name: the enduring and gracing subproletariat (Type 4).

The type is deemed as a shadow type. The analysis rests on a single, long and rich interview with a precarious worker in Italy: a twenty-nine-year-old woman, mother of two daughters. At the moment of the interview she had been dismissed earlier that day, had been under social services supervision for nine years, had never held a permanent contract, and did not have autonomous housing. A single rich case can sustain an ideal-typical construction when it condenses a configuration analytically irreducible to the other types - it makes indeed that configuration visible as existing (Small 2009; Pacewicz 2022) - and illuminates their logic by contrast. The type is a shadow in two distinct senses. First, it names a missing element of the typological framework, empirically thinned out but theoretically necessary for its completion. The total disintegration of the work-housing nexus, paired with the closure of the political horizon, is the lower bound toward which the other types tend without reaching, and from which the typology derives its anchor. Second, the type is the shadow cast over the other cases and types. The downward boundaries drawn by the striving precarious working class against "those who do not try" are boundaries drawn against this figure, the declassed precarious working class also fears falling into the subproletariat while stigmatizing it, and the declassed aspiring middle class recognises it from a safer distance. That only one such case is available reflects a property of the phenomenon: subjects in this position are difficult to reach, precisely because they are extremely precarious.

The social position of this type is characterised by what I identify as *interlocking precarity*. Multiple layers of insecurity – work, care, housing, legal-bureaucratic - collapse into one another below the minimum socially accepted levels, so that stabilisation in any one domain requires conditions that another domain structurally prevents. Crucially, the state in this configuration goes beyond the role of failed provider of security and becomes an active weaver of precarity: it imposes stigmatising goals of re-integration without supplying the means to achieve them, and blocks the secondary attempts through which the subject tries to reach a 'workable life' (see Wacquant 2009; Davey 2026). This results in an 'impossible life'.

Interlocking precarity threatens to collapse the moral economies through which the subject orients herself in the social world, and with that the sense of personal worth and the relations of social reciprocity they sustain. Lacking the minimum hold on the present that is the precondition for any deliberate effort to take hold of the future, the subject cannot elaborate a life plan (Bourdieu 1979: 69). Without a tenable horizon, no moral economy can hold, whereas all other types analysed so far (Types 1-3) ground their moral economy in the persistence of variable degrees of futurity. What remains for the subproletariat are fragments of a moral economy, which I gather under two movements I call *enduring and gracing*. Enduring is the moralised act of performing effort without the expectation of a predictable reward (a sublimated version of the work-effort meritocracy of Type 3), while gracing is the quasi-magical hope that endurance will be rewarded by help coming, at some point, at the will of an undetermined other (a sublimated version of the labourism of Type 2). No violated pact is denounced: grace is only hoped for. Together they form a self-perpetuating cycle that holds the subject together on the brink of collapse. When grace does not come, it opens to fatalism and despair, as the subproletariat experiences what I call double anomie: unable to attain the standard norm of the work-housing nexus and unable to reach even its lower version.

The political condition that results from the fragmentation of the moral economy is what I call '*im-politicisation*': a politicisation that could never form and is foreclosed, coupled with the reduction of any (would-be) socio-political discourse to intepersonal morality. Any political orientation, like any moralised biographical script, presupposes the capacity to project oneself into a tenable future and to recognise oneself within a structure of reciprocity. When interlocking precarity withdraws that capacity, politics ceases to be possible. The foreclosure operates at the level of preconditions, before any question of choice arises: the type has no political competenence as lacks of minimal political socialisation, while state is experienced as a repression rathern than a space for rights and participation. In this void out of politics, this is lived as a discourse of interpersonal moralisationa

and appeal to empathy: a supplication for graced help, addressed to an indistinct "they", rather than a claim for rights.

This impossibility of politics distinguishes Type 4 from the other types, for which politics exists as a sphere and as an orientation, however disillusioned or dormant. It also identifies a specific mechanism of electoral non-participation (preceding the very possibility to conceive of participation), which the pattern of abstention among non-graduate precarious workers observed in Chapter 5 lumps together with others. The sections that follow develop the analysis along the three dimensions structuring the typology. Section 9.2 examines the social position of the subproletariat as structured by interlocking precarity (9.2.1), and how the subject locates herself at the bottom of society, where moral distinctions persist but are hollowed out, only residual worth persist under the threath of self-blame (9.2.2). Section 9.3 traces the fragmentation of moral economy under foreclosed futurity, with its fragments of enduring and gracing and the threat of their collapse. Section 9.4 analyses im-politicisation, as the fusion of political foreclosure and interpersonal moralisation of politics.

9.2 Blocked below lower security, trying for help

9.2.1 Interlocking precarity

"Today they fired me" began Matilde, getting ahead of the start, as we walked towards the bench where we would sit for the interview, on a cold December evening. Matilde worked part-time in a call-center on a bogus self-employed contract, earning 15 euros for a six-hour day, which she reckoned came to some 200 euros a month, "paradoxical and paranormal" in her words. She learnt about her dismissal that very morning, after being notified by WhatsApp message that she had been removed from the company Facebook group. She then phoned the manager to ask why, as she recalls:

> "I call him and say: 'excuse me, but why did you delete me from the Facebook group?'
> And he said: 'no, look, don't worry, but you've been fired because you were off sick for two weeks'.
> 'But on WhatsApp? firing me by deleting me from a group? Sounds a bit childish to me'.
> "Besides, you're just a collaborator [*collaboratore*], you're nobody'

- 'Ok thanks'".[143]

(Matilde, 29, former call centre operator, Italy)

The status of *collaboratore*, a specific kind of bogus self-employed - exposes Matilde to extreme employment and financial precarity, while granting the company full flexibility. Matilde grasps this with puzzled lucidity: "they write 'collaborator', I think partly to cover their ass (…) and then they wash their hands of it because then you are no longer their 'employee', so to speak, in quotation marks."[144] Being encased as a *collaboratore* brings about extreme symbolic devaluation, which manifests explicitly in the words of her manager and materializes more broadly in her working conditions, with "people treated like shit" and being "always left in the cold, in fact I got sick a hell of a lot". Having fallen sick for suffering cold at work and for "they don't give you [sick] leave" as a *collaboratore*, Matilde was fired for 'undue' absence.

This pattern is persistent in Matilde's work career and defining of her life experience. She has worked most of her life in the hospitality sector, either as a bartender or waitress, where precarious work is endemic. She started working at sixteen in her mother's bar, having to leave school before obtaining the high school diploma. Her mother indeed needed help with the bar, and further needed to be cared after, having a drug addiction. When the bar closed, she continued with the same elsewhere, which she feels as a bitter destiny: "anyway I was born in restaurant business (…) In my life there has been only bar, restaurants, restaurants with kids, bar, bar, bar, always bars"[145]. When she tried to do something else - cleaner, security guard, baby-sitter - work was equally precarious.

Matilde, who is a lone parent of two children, has always struggled to reconcile precarious work with unpaid care labour. This has been a persisting source of disruption, with care responsibilities conflicting with precarious work demands of full commitment under the threat of dismissal, very often enacted. This is brought up by Matilde unprompted, since the very beginning of the interview: "in the world of work, sadly, we mothers are not accepted, isn'it?". She explains that you would always need a babysitter for emergencies, but this is unworkable for her as it is too expensive when

- [143] "Chiamo io e gli dico: 'scusi ma perché mi ha cancellato dal gruppo Facebook?'
  E lui mi ha detto 'no guarda stai tranquilla ma ti hanno licenziato perché sei stata in malattia per due settimane'
- ma su whatsapp? eliminandomi tramite un gruppo?, un po' da bambini mi pare'
- 'ma intanto sei collaboratrice e non sei nessuno'
- 'ok grazie'."

[144] "loro scrivono collaboratore, secondo me un po' per pararsi il culo (…) e poi se ne lavano le mani perché poi non è più il tuo dipendente, diciamo tra virgolette".

[145] "comunque sono nata nella ristorazione (…) Nella mia vita c'è stato solo bar, ristoranti, ristoranti con bambini, bar, bar, bar, sempre bar".

measured against her salary. Moreover, there are periods in which a parent needs to be present for his children. Her children have medical conditions requiring periodic hospital care and when this is required asking for "sick leaves is a nightmare, I mean, in the very sense of the world (…) You ask for example for a leave six months earlier, but you are looked upon badly, you are thrown out because you asked for a sick leave". Then, she cannot help but bearing the ensuing disruption as she has no alternative: "There is only me (…) I am alone, I cannot cleave myself [*dividermi non posso*]".

Precarious work and unpaid care work thus mutually disrupt, and by doing so they feed into each other. Matilde can't reproduce herself autonomously, and is forced to live at her mother's place, who happens to own a small flat, despite Matilde saying having a bad relationship with her mother and further having to confront her drug addiction. This arrangement highlights the ambiguous effects of family 'support' on defining Matilde's social position: by shoring up the collapse of his work and care duties it allows her to survive; however, it equally does not allow her to reproduce autonomously at functional and socially acceptable levels, owing to the strained relationship with her mother. Matilde places below the threshold of respectability, as she can't meet even the lower norm of the work-housing nexus. The standard norm of secure work and secure housing - and secondarily the lower norm as the capacity to stand on her own feet - remains a persisting aspiration: "I'll even be on my own with two kids, but at least a stable job. A home of my own that I can afford. Instead, not even that". Even below the threshold of respectability, secure work and secure housing remains a shared norm (Dörre 2023; Ferrarotti 1970, 1974), although one increasingly unrealistic to be met and mostly lived as an unrealistic desire.

Falling below the threshold of respectability locates the social position of the subproletariat, which characterizes type 4. This activates a different relationship with the state, a relationship that switches from fully or partially absence - such as in the case of type 2 and 3 – to presence in the form of disciplining control, through a combination of welfare and penal institutions (Wacquant 2008, 2009, 2014). As such, those who cross the threshold of respectability are not simply 'excluded' in Castel's terms (Castel 2000, 2003), but also and above all 'controlled'. Extreme precarity is institutionally stigmatized as individual moral fault, which needs to be socially monitored and individually redressed. Matilde is subjected to one typical form of disciplining state control of extreme precarity, that is state-enforced child removal (Davey 2025, 2026): "it's nine years that they haven't left me alone" [*lasciano in pace*] as she says.

Social services removed her children into care judging her a 'bad parent', a decision which was suspended after long legal, conditional on Matilde managing to obtain an open-ended contract[146]: "after eight years they told me 'ok, the adoption case is closed, you're a good mum, but you don't have a permanent contract, so we can't give the little girl back to you yet'. While social services exert the symbolic power of certifying who is (not) a good parent and jointly what material resources one need to be a good one - as social respect is linked to material stability, as stigma is with the lack of it - they place on Matilde the burden of meeting the (state-enforced) norm of secure work. "They, unfortunately, on their part, think it's easy to get a permanent contract" she comments and denounces that that in her experience the employment centre tied to social services - which manages a dedicated active labour market policy scheme - only offers precarious jobs, alongside people which she perceives as disrepute, and where employers' harassment and male violence are widespread, up to sexual blackmail in exchange for an open-ended contract.

Beyond setting the conditions to be met individually - and against the 'poisonous help' of dedicated active labour market policies - state disciplining control also blocks makeshift routes through which Matilde tries improving her social position and securing her life. The first concerns her safety. Matilde is still formally married to her daughters' father, a man who has been violent to her and who, though stripped of his parental rights, keeps stalking her. She would move away, but without a permanent contract she cannot regain exclusive custody, and without custody her daughters are legally placed at her mother's house, so they all must remain there: "they [social services] don't even help you when it comes of saying 'ok you can go to [nearby town]- and then you'd be at ease' (…) get away from this person, instead I mean mmm... it's as if they block you from doing it, cause (…) my mum has the placement, so I can't move". The second workaround concerns work, the attempt to secure better work that while still precarious might allow her to cross the threshold of respectability. Unable to secure a permanent contract, as a second best, Matilde indeed plans to work from home as a self-employed beautician. However, this project is half plan half hope, as she is not sure at all that this would be satisfy social services to grant her custody and thereby unlock one piece of her life, as she describes in a single breadth:

> "In all this deadly chaos I've had social services on my back for nine years, and so they want a permanent contract, which I can't create, I don't know how to do it, so the only way is a VAT number, saying 'ok, I'll make this much turnover in a year', let's hope it goes well, let's

[146] "dopo otto anni m' hanno detto "ok, l'adottabilità è chiusa, sei una buona mamma, però non - hai il contratto a tempo indeterminato, quindi la bambina non possiamo darla ancora a te".

> hope Christ helps me in 2025, and saying 'ok, I'm doing this for my daughters, I've got a turnover, I can take my girls and get out of the house' (...) my mum's house, because with my mum it's nothing but fighting, coming to blows… No, me and my mum don't get along, there's no point staying in a toxic environment, for me, but above all for the girls, that's why I'm telling you work is everything."[147]

Matilde's case condenses the structural attributes that ideal-typically define the social position of the subproletariat, grounding the fourth type. As for the other types, the subproletariat shares the same norm of integration - secure work and secure housing - as their horizon, while not managing to reach it, even in its lower degrade form, which marks its falling below the 'threshold of respectability'. The fall is produced by the way insecure work, unpaid care and insecure housing - as well as lack of solid social support - do not compensate each other, but rather disrupt each other, making autonomous reproduction at socially accepted levels impossible. Below the threshold, however, the state stops being merely a deficient protector, and activates as a pressing source of disciplining control, weaving itself into extreme work-housing precarity: it imposes stigma labels, and goals of social integration without supplying the means to achieve it; through it tend to obstruct secondary integration attempts to reach the lower version of the norm. As such, symbolic devaluation and material precarity are reinforcingly entangled in a loop: falling below the threshold activates state control, who certifies stigma, making it more difficult to overcome material precarity, thus cementing stigma and grounding discipling oversight over people below.

I call this specific form of configurational precarity *interlocking precarity*: a configuration in which the dimensions of precarity collapse into one another below the minimum socially accepted levels (i); and into which the state weaves itself both imposing stigmatising goals of re-integration without providing the means to achieve them, and blocking secondary attempts to reach a material and symbolical 'workable life' (ii), thereby outlining an 'impossible life'. Interlocking precarity thus identifies the - fragile, to some extent porous and nonetheless marking - border that demarcates the subproletariat from the precarious working class (see Chapter 7-8): for the latter life is precarious but still holding, a form of social respectability is overall defended, and state control is looming in its absence as a disciplinary threat. The crossing of the line of respectability – which is materially

[147] "In tutto questo caos mortale ho da 9 anni i servizi sociali addosso e quindi loro vogliono il tempo indeterminato, cosa che io non posso creare, non so come fare, quindi l'unica per una partita IVA è dire "ok, guadagno questo fatturato tra un anno", speriamo gli che vada bene, speriamo che Cristo mi aiuti nel 2025 e dire ok, faccio questo per le mie figlie, ho un fatturato, mi posso prendere le mie bambine e andarmene via da casa (…) casa della mia mamma perché con mia mamma son tutto un litigare, prendersi a botte… No, la mia mamma non si va d'accordo, è inutile stare in un ambiente tossico per me, ma soprattutto per le bambine, per questo ti dico che il lavoro è fondamentale".

grounded and cemented by the stigmatizing enactment of state control - makes a precariously workable and still decent life, into an impossible stigmatized one.

9.2.2 At the bottom trying for help and lacking futurity

Feeling the stigma of being placed below the threshold of respectability, the subproletariat locates itself at the bottom of society, without covering it and finding respect in work effort (type 3) or claiming the dignity of below (type 2). Class is named plainly as fatality, and moral distinctions persist along the same criteria of other types but hollowed out, unable to ground strong worth distinctions and personal sense of dignity. Asked whether it makes sense to her to speak of social classes, Matilde answers:

> "Well yes, because there are lots of people who are, like, rich, who don't help, like, let's say, the lower people [*il popolo basso*], let's say. Because anyway, if I had the chance, I'd help lots of people. So yes, they exist. Unfortunately it exists, you see lots of margins. I'll give you a stupid example. My mum and me: I'm in the social class of the slaves, really put down, like the Egyptians, really the base, the ground. My mum is like she was the king, because anyway she's got the house she owns, she's got a mortgage, she's got a two-thousand-euro salary. Anyway, I mean, she's well off. Me instead, I'm in deep shit. So yes, they exist. There are differences too, sure, yes yes. I believe it. Unfortunately yes. But this thing, this distinction, in my opinion, this too, it's not even fair. I mean, we should all be equal to everyone, in my opinion. It's not fair that poverty exists, it's not fair that lots of things in life exist. But those, whatever, they're just my thoughts maybe. But, I mean, for example, what do you say about these two, right? [pointing at two homeless people nearby] These two chose a disintegrated life [*una vita disintegrata*], but they don't do anything. For example, I've got other mums I know. We try to do everything, but we always stay in the low society [*la società bassa*][. Because nobody gives us the chance to make that extra leap [*quel salto in più*]. There's no help. Of any kind."[148]

[148] "Allora sì, perché ci sono tante persone comunque ricche, che non aiutano comunque, diciamo, il popolo basso, diciamo così. Perché comunque se io avessi la possibilità aiuterei tante persone. Quindi sì, esistono. Purtroppo esiste, tanti margini si vedono. Faccio un esempio stupido. Mia mamma e io, io sono nella classe sociale proprio degli schiavi, proprio messa giù, tipo gli egiziani, proprio base, terra. Mia mamma è come se fosse il re, perché comunque ha la casa di proprietà, ha un mutuo, ha duemila euro di stipendio. Comunque, cioè, messa bene. Io invece sono messa in merda. Quindi sì, esistono. Esistono anche differenze, certo, sì sì. Ci credo. Purtroppo sì. Però questa cosa distinzione secondo me, anche questo, non è nemmeno giusto. Cioè tutti dovremmo essere al pari di tutti secondo me. Non è giusto che esista la povertà, non è giusto che esista tante cose nella vita. Però quelle vabbè son pensieri miei magari. Però, cioè, per esempio che dici questi due, no?

Upward boundaries run across her own family and are drawn against the integrated secure working class embodied by her mum – who works as a manufacturing worker - whose social position is experienced as that of the 'pharaoh' seen from the 'slave' viewpoint. This figure is somewhat related to the general rich, who are timidly judged as egoist for not helping the low people. This lack of empathy grounds for a moment a vain wish for a general egalitarian vision of society - which faintly reminds the 'ordinary concrete universalism' of type 2 (see Chapter 7) - immediately retracted - "just my thoughts" - and then overthrown against people below her - homeless - who 'chose a *disintegrated* life'. Worth distinctions are made also within the subproletariat, and as in type 3, effort is taken as a source of worth and material 'failure' is equated with the lack of it. However here it is a degraded form of effort - one which does not minimally work - which fails to sustain more than a residual sense of moral worth: trying without making it, as compared to those that do not even try in the face of 'disintegration'. The same residual sense of moral worth frames her self-description at the very opening of the interview – "sunny, dynamic and energetic" she states without hesitation: where dynamic and energetic capture her endurance in trying to go on, handling many things at the same time and resourcefully coming up with new ideas.

The fragility of the 'moral worth of trying' is revealed in how deeply institutionally certified stigma is internalized, in the form of self-guilt which threatens depriving the type of its own self-worth. Asked to develop how she would describe people below her, Matilde pictures them as people guilty of their own destiny and includes herself among them:

> "I believe very much that a person, if they don't make an effort to get that something better, it's because of something, I mean, in the sense that if I'm in this condition, it's my fault. So I think that also other people who are worse off than me, or want to be worse off than me… anyway it's a personal conviction. But I put this as a fact [...] if I'm in this situation it's only my fault. So also other people, if they're in my situation or in more denigrated situations, there'll be a reason."

The downward boundary against people 'who do not try and choose a disintegrated life' does not lift her onto another moral plane and proves to be a fragile one, as it is the sense of moral worth it sustains. Matilde's identity is thus also defined by a crushing sense of self-guilt, which threatens to efface her sense of self-worth. Where, for the striving precarious working class, the inward boundary

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Questi due si sono scelti una vita disintegrata, ma non fanno niente. Per esempio io ho altre mamme che conosco. Noi cerchiamo di fare di tutto, ma rimaniamo sempre nella società bassa. Perché nessuno ci dà l'opportunità di fare quel salto in più. Non c'è aiuto. Di nessun genere".

is drawn against a past self and grounds a positive identity redeemed by effort, here it is drawn against the present self, with no redemption in sight. The residual worth of trying and self-blame hold themselves in a fragile pendulum between residual worth and collapse. What renders self-worth so fragile is the rupture of the temporal links between effort and minimum reward, a hiatus that, unlike for the striving precarious working class, is too wide to be covered.

9.3 Enduring and Gracing

Below the threshold of respectability, the linear temporal structure linking present effort to future (due) outcome tends to collapse (Bourdieu 1979: 69) as a by-product of interlocking precarity. The subproletariat comes to lack the "minimum hold on the present" which grounds the capacity "to take hold of the future" (Bourdieu 1979: 69), that is it becomes relatively devoid of a workable instrumental rationality over time. As a result, they increasingly struggle to organize their conduct of life, to keep a grip on the social world, and with both the capacity to experience it as a set of structured relationship between groups.

Matilde's account is replete with the symptoms of lacking futurity. At several points during her narration, her conduct turns to disorganized improvisation - "and now what do I do? […] let's try, let's throw ourselves in [e *ora che faccio? … proviamoci, buttiamoci*]" – and she voices a feeling of estrangement from the world: "I find myself in a world that doesn't even seem mine".

The collapse of temporal structure has a disorganizing effect also on moral economies. Moral economies are indeed moralized unequal relations of reciprocity, which are cognitively infrastructured by linear temporality and predictable relations of conduct and reward between groups. The collapse of the temporal structure fragments existing moral economies, turning expected rewards abstract and the counterpart indefinite. In this respect, they are sublimated versions of existing moral economies, as disorganization implies turning concrete predictable relationships into abstract indefinite ones. The moral economy of the subproletariat is thus maintained by two moral fragments: *enduring* and *gracing,* which are sublimated versions of work effort meritocracy (type 3) and labourism (type 2) respectively.

Enduring is the moralized act of performing effort without the expectation of a predictable rewards that necessary follows: It is, in a sense, a moralized act of nearly directionless effort to keep life together and trying to make it somehow. Matilde's account abounds in examples in this sense. At the

very beginning of the interview, for instance, after recounting how she had been fired for being sick, she concludes "But you keep going, somehow you've got to keep going [*si deve andare avanti*]". When asked about how she sees the future, after having outlined aspirations and difficulties, she ends with "then we'll see, you build brick by brick, I learnt this on my own". Enduring is encapsulated in the residual positive identity of being 'someone who tried' analysed above (9.2.2), under the threat of self-blame to break it. However, self-blame contradictorily acts also as a motivation to endure more, as one is guilty of one's own destiny.

While expressing her self-guilt and manifesting the need to endure more, Matilde is also well aware that there are external limits to effort, as already discussed above (9.2.1). Asked then whether her condition is more the fault of the person or of the system, she opts:

> "most of the time, it's the system because anyway the more a person tries, the more walls you find, I mean you say ok, and now what do I do? How do I crumble this wall? You can't crumble it, I mean, darling, you're stuck there, eh, no, you can't move!"

However, this awareness never translates in open denounce of the system as broken, which a real shift of the blame upwards entails. This contradiction is explained by the fact that in her fragmented moral economy the system owes her nothing: it is an impersonal obstacle rather than as a counterpart that has failed to honour a pact. If what she lacks is not owed to her, she can only hope to receive it: self-guilt pulls towards more endurance, while external limits towards hope of external help. This dynamic is well-outlined by a previous iteration of the question I asked Matilde, of whether only her was to be blames or whether her effort should also be met with external support:

> "Yes, the effort would be, or like, I don't know… reinventing yourself [*reinventarsi*]. I learnt one thing a month ago, it's reinventing myself as much as possible, making as much effort as possible. Oh, sooner or later something good will happen [*prima o poi accadrà qualcosa di bello*]! Oh, what the f... I mean... Otherwise, if I [don't] reinvent myself and always stay still here, and what do I do? Nothing! So I think that if we're in total shit, excuse the term, somehow I have to give myself that push off the bottom and try to climb up any way I can."[149]

[149]"Sì, lo sforzo sarebbe o tipo che ne so, reinventarsi. Io ho imparato una cosa un mese fa, è reinventarmi il più possibile, sforzarmi il più possibile. Oh prima o poi qualcosa accadrà di bello! Oh che cazz... cioè... Se no se mi reinvento e sto ferma sempre qui e che cosa faccio? Niente! Quindi penso che se stiamo nella merda più totale, perdonami il termine, in qualche maniera devo darmi quella spinta sul fondo e tentare di salire in tutti i modi."

The passage outlines the concatenated switch from enduring to *gracing*, that is the moment in which endurance in the face of external obstacles turns into a quasi-magical hope for help. The effort of endurance does not lead to an expected reward by itself – it grants no legitimate rights - rather it give the moral title to be granted help ("something good") at will of an undetermined other at some point in the future. This quasi-magical thinking - almost embodying a secularized theology of salvation[150] – is typical of the subproletarian collapse of temporality: "Magical hope is the is the outlook on the future characteristic of those who have no real future before them" (Bourdieu 1979:69; see also Ferrarotti 1970:38). As such, enduring grounds the moral title to be graced at will, while gracing gives a suspended direction to an otherwise almost directionless endurance.

Gracing as well recurs in several passages of the interview: "fine, sooner or later something good will happen to me" she says at some other point during the interview, and "let's hope Christ helps me in 2025". Yet, it is most strongly embodied in the social ritual of 'playing bingo', almost the only leisure time activity she declares doing in her free time. Playing bingo, and hoping to be graced by fortune, expresses almost perfectly the magical and not necessarily reciprocated aspect of gracing: "today I'm on a lucky streak".

However, when grace does not come in the face of endurance "the leaps into daydream [are] being followed by relapses into a present that withers all fantasies" (Bourdieu 1979: 69): fatalism and despair. Fatalism is the inverse of gracing, the projection that no grace will come as a given: "If your life starts off badly, it ends badly. For me this is becoming a given". Despair is the emotional reading of objective possibilities once quasi-magical waiting is suspended and endurance becomes unbearable. Speaking of the dire working conditions of the jobs sponsored by the social services (see 9.2.1), she glosses:

> "I've seen mechanisms inside social services, when it comes to work, insane, I mean really, I mean disintegrating [*disintegrante*], my mum tells me 'you've lost the will to work'. Yes, I've lost the will to live itself, lately, because I can't find a place in the world, because nobody helps you find it, this place, so it's really hard."[151]

[150] '*Salus fide et operibus'*, closely matching gracing and enduring, respectively.
[151] "io ho visto meccanismi all'interno dei servizi sociali - per il fattore lavoro, allucinanti, cioè veramente, cioè disintegrante, mia mamma mi - dice 'tu hai perso la voglia di lavorare' - Sì, ho perso la voglia proprio di vivere, io ultimamente, perché non trovo un posto - nel mondo, perché nessuno ti aiuta a trovarlo, questo posto, quindi è tanto difficile"

When who should help you makes your life harder and you lose endurance, going on gets really hard, it gets *disintegrating i*n a real sociological sense, threatening the collapse of the subject ("I've lost the will to live itself"). In the face of the double disintegration from the possibility to achieving both the standard norm and the secondary lower norm of the work-housing nexus, and exhausted to endure and grace at the bottom, the subproletariat experiences the most extreme forms of (double) anomie: collapse, to the point of saying to have lost, at times, the will to live. Otherwise, what follows fatalism and despair, is typically a new cycle of enduring: "But fine, come on, we'll make it, we'll make it. This 2025 I have to give the very best of myself."

9.4 'Im-politicisation': foreclosure and interpersonal moralisation of politics

As it is most visible in Matilde's relation towards the future, the fragmented moral economy of the subproletariat hinges on enduring ("I have to give the very best of myself") and gracing ("let's hope Christ helps me"): in either element no definite counterpart exist to from which something can be expected and demanded. Translated at the political level, this structure highlights the impossibility of politics for the type, by which I mean both the existence of an autonomous political field (relations to politics as a sphere) and a grammar of conflict or competition between groups (political orientation). I call this form '*im-politicisation'*, to capture a politicisation which could never form rather than one that was lost, owing to political dispossession and interlocking precarity. It fuses the foreclosure of politics as a sphere with the interpersonal moralisation of politics that occupies its place, the grammar of relations between persons applied to (what would be) socio-political issues. As such, im-politicisation also outlines the impossibility of any form of political participation, which is lumped together within electoral abstention in quantitative studies on political behaviour (see Chapter 5).

Political foreclosure is first shown in her relation to state institutions, which as shown above (9.2) is one of disciplining control, rather than protection and representation (even potential). Matilde is not reached by conventional welfare policies, which are actually blocked by her being under the supervision of social services: The disciplining state blocks the welfare state. When asked about the citizenship income, she mentions having informed herself about getting it, but she found out she could not qualify as residing – and required to reside – with her mother who is a homeowner with a decent wage: "Yes [whispered with regret], unfortunately" she nods and concludes "But I've lost lots of [social] bonuses, because I'm under my mum". More generally, Matilde's frequent encounters with

state institutions – mostly social services and tribunals – are lived as encounters with a suffocating totality ("the system") coercing its own corrupted interest ("for me it's all a mafia in there, because there's no way, come on") over herself.

As it has been shown for other types, moral economy violations structure political orientations through (some) externalisation of blame, grounding a claim for the right order of things to be redressed. For the enduring and gracing subproletariat, blame is directed inwards amd external contrainsts are acknwoledged but not denounced as injust. Far from a rightful claim, endurance only grounds external moral appeals in the form quasi-supplication for *graced help*, which take the language of interpersonal morality and empathy, be their target the employer or abstract (state) powers. This grammar is already at work early in the interview, before politics or class being prompted, when asked about what she considers a good job, she talks about employers in this way:

> "the employer has to be forthcoming towards the person, I mean meet them halfway a bit, because anyway we're all human beings, even those who have a degree, a master's or whatever, they should anyway meet them halfway, because we can't be inhuman just because we've got money […] being empathetic as we were saying before, that anyway if I listen to you and you listen to me […] I tell you I've got a problem at home, but you accommodate me, as I can accommodate a request of yours, because it's also fair and your right to ask me […]. If you've got a problem with the business, you tell me […] 'can you help me?' I'm the first person to help you. This is the empathy I look for at work. Meaning that, anyway, […] after six months they put me on a permanent contract, not that you make me wait six years."[152]

Behind the surface of emphatical reciprocity ("if I listen to you and you listen to me") between the employer and herself, lies the abysmal asymmetry between them and the graced request for help and respect above. Placed below the threshold of respectability, she asks for a minimum of respect as a human being, that she can only beg to be recognized from above. Similarly, while the employer is a subjects of rights ("your right to ask me"), she presents herself as the object of graced concessions ("they put me (…) you make me") in the name of interpersonal empathy at personal will. The same

[152] "il datore di lavoro deve essere propositivo alla persona, cioè venirgli un attimo incontro, perché comunque siamo tutti esseri umani, anche chi ha la laurea, chi ha una magistrale o chi ha qualsiasi cosa, debba comunque venirgli incontro, perché non possiamo essere disumani solo perché abbiamo i soldi […] essere empatici come si diceva prima, che comunque sia se io ascolto te comunque e tu ascolti me […] ti dico che ho un problema a casa, però mi accogli, come io posso accogliere una richiesta tua, perché è anche giusto e diritto tuo chiedermelo […]. Se tu hai un problema con l'azienda, mi dici […] 'mi puoi aiutare?' Io sono la prima persona ad aiutarti. Questa è l'empaticità che cerco nel lavoro io. Che comunque […] dopo sei mesi mi fanno un contratto a tempo indeterminato, non che mi fai aspettare sei anni".

grammar is deployed unprompted when talking about (political) power in the context of her work-care conflicts: "in my opinion they should do something in Italy for understanding the parent, like 'look, I understand you're in this difficulty, I'll help you like this'" before immediately limiting herself "I don't know, I don't know in what way they could do it".

The same grammar is deployed when asked about her opinion on specific socio-economic policies - which she did not express any time before - at the end of the interview. She frames them as concessions to be given and not as rights to be claimed, grounded on the wilful ethical choice to exert interpersonal empathy. She says being in favour of citizenship income as long as it is given to "people like me" who are in need: "if they're in need, why not, I'm the first to tell you, 'yes, ok, let's help them' [*aiutiamole*]". Asked about the idea of introducing a minimum wage in Italy, which she misunderstands as an extension of the same citizenship income, she reiterates: "if there were some help, from the State precisely, it would be very useful". Something closer to an asserted general rule surfaces when asked about regulating temporary work she repeated what she had stated before - "after six months, the contract should be given, a permanent one, regardless" - but the passive voice has no subject bound to give it. Indignation surfaces when the minimum wage is explained to her bordering a right claim using the same metaphor employed to self-describe her social position: "I mean, on this I'm very much in favour. Because for example us, three euros an hour […] But not to be mean, I repeat. Fuck, three euros an hour, not even the slaves in Egypt, really"[153]. However, the threshold of claiming a right is not reached, as the potential demand is addressed to no one in concrete and is immediately self-disqualified as potentially immoral on her side ("not to be mean"). While indignation surges and a sense of justice surfaces, this remains directionless and devoid of a political referent, as the moral economy of the type prevents the formation of a fully-fledged right claim to a blamed other.

Interpersonal graced help is the only language available to her also because she was deprived in the first place from acquiring the political capital that would allow her to address otherwise. The type is devoid of any political competence in the strict sense, that is the incapacity to name any political actor or figure, linking any public debate to it, or coming up with an autonomous political criterion of judgment. When I asked her about her first memory about politics she immediately declared her lack of competence and framed it as a lack of political socialization:

[153] "Sì, esatto, bravo. Cioè, in questa cosa, sono molto favorevole. Perché per esempio noi, tre euro l'ora[…] Ma non per essere cattiva, ripeto. Cazzo, tre euro l'ora, nemmeno gli schiavi veramente in Egitto."

> "When it comes to politics, I've never been interested, but because nobody... ever talked about it with me, so politics, even today... I've never filled in a ballot paper [*fatto una scheda elettorale*], to give you an idea. So me, politics, really zero, I don't understand it, unfortunately."[154]

Despite multiple prompts on my side - asking her about any memory, whether she liked at least some party or politicians – she never came up with a name, instead reiterating her total lack of any substantial knowledge - "'if you ask me about politics I go: 'what's that?'" and practical orientation: "I mean, you put me in front of the ballot paper and I'm like, 'What do I have to do? [inaudible] the lotto? Eh? What, what do you do? Help!'"[155]. Politics is foreclosed to the level of making her difficult to imagine how to perform the act of voting, which is apprehended only analogically with the idea of a lotto ticket. Politics is thus revealed a foreign terrain in which instrumental rationality is substituted by the disorganization of conduct and dominated by 'chance'.

In a final insistent attempt to elicit politics, I asked her whether she knew which political actors had championed the introduction of a minimum wage, which she had just endorsed with indignation. She stopped me gently but firmly:

> "It's been six years, no, nine years that I've been watching Rai Yoyo, so it's a bit hard for me to hear about this stuff… I'm telling you very openly. I've got one television, and we only watch Rai Yoyo, Oceania, […] so, I'm sorry, in that world I can't be"[156]

Matilde reiterates her lack of political competence both in substantive terms and entitlement, to the point of declaring the impossibility of political inclusion "in that world I can't be". She does with a sense of deprivation and ensuing stigma – she feels compelled to excuse herself - as politics is lived as one of the many things she is deprived of and which places her below the threshold of respectability. Interlocking precarity, here symbolized by Ray Yoyo – a cartoon only television channel – reveals as the current driver of blocked politicisation. Im-politicisation thus drives on

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[154] "Con la politica non mi son mai interessata, ma perché nessuno... mai ne ha parlato con me, quindi di politica, anche ad oggi... io non ho mai fatto una scheda elettorale, per dirti. […] Quindi io di politica proprio zero, non ne intendo, purtroppo"

[155] "Cioè, tu mi metti davanti alla scheda elettorale e ti faccio: "Che cosa devo fare? [incomprensibile] al lotto? Eh? Che, che si fa? Aiuto!"

[156] "Io, sono sei anni, anzi, nove anni che guardo Rai Yoyo, quindi, è un po' difficile per me sentire questa roba, te lo dico molto apertamente. Io ho una televisione, e vediamo solo Rai Yoyo, Oceania, […] quindi, mi dispiace, in quel mondo, non ci posso essere".

several sources at once: lack of political socialisation, relation with the state as a subject of discipline not of participation, the collapse of futurity under interlocking precarity all fuse to produce the foreclosure of politics and the supplicant interpersonal moralisation that fills its void.

The 'impossibility of politics' of the enduring and gracing subproletariat (Type 4) distinguishes it from both the declassed precarious working class (type 2) and the striving precarious working class (Type 3). Type 2 has a clear political orientation and is politically mobilizable – although it has demobilized getting disappointed with the populist left political project; Type 3, although demobilized, has an idea of politics as an autonomous sphere and a latent political orientation, which grounds their 'choice' not to participate politically. For Type 4, politics is simply impossible, and the question of mobilization is nor even posed. As such different mechanisms are at play behind – and lumped together - the overpropension of the non-graduate precarious workers to abstain from voting (Chapter 5): disappointment after mobilisation (type 2), demobilisation inscribed in the orientation itself (Type 3), and the impossibility of participation altogether (Type 4). Matilde welcomes the very measures through which the M5S addressed precarity (Chapter 10), but can't either link them with any political actor nor conceive of herself as a participant in politics. Interlocking precarity makes politics as much as needed as impossible.

10. Undoing Precarity and Restoring Dignity: The Socio-Economic Discourse and Policy of the Movimento Cinque Stelle and Podemos

10.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters documented a partial and now eroding mobilisation of precarious workers toward the populist left in Spain and Italy, sustained by two distinguishable pathways: the declassed aspiring middle class, who arrive at inclusive labourism through the cracking of an educational-meritocratic frame (chapter 6), and the declassed precarious working class, who inhabit it as a foundational grammar rooted in working-class socialisation (chapter 7). The convergence on inclusive labourism persists without a credible political channel. This chapter turns to the supply side: the discourse and socio-economic policies through which left-wing populist parties have attempted to articulate that convergence into a political project.

Around the 2010s, often as offshoots of anti-austerity mobilisations, new left-wing populist parties emerged across Southern Europe, many of which entered government by the end of the decade. Existing scholarship on party politics has devoted considerable effort to defining left-wing populism discursively at a general level (Caiani and Graziano 2019; Font, Graziano, and Tsakatika 2021; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014), however with limited engagement with concrete politicized issues and policy proposals. By contrast, the welfare politics literature politics (Afonso and Bulfone 2019; Branco, Miró, and Natili 2024; Bulfone and Tassinari 2021) has focused on policy reform trajectories at the level of coalition governments, rather than on the role of left-populist parties within them. As such, the literature has not yet fully addressed the very substance of these parties' political project, that is their material and symbolic objectives.

Against this background, this chapter analyses the labour and housing policies pursued by the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) in Italy, and Unidas Podemos (UP) in Spain, as well as the evolution of the discourse underpinning them. To this aim, the analysis focuses first on the formative phase of party creation and then on the phase of governmental responsibility. I argue that M5S and UP share a political project of "undoing precarity" in their respective countries. This entails, materially, a

project of de-dualization of national socio-economic institutions, coupled with a moral politics aimed at restoring dignity to people in precarity. This shared orientation is evident in key policies and their accompanying narratives, ranging from the re-regulation of temporary employment to the introduction of minimum income schemes and minimum wage reforms. This claim aligns with the few explorative studies that link programmatically left-wing populist and radical parties to precarity (Picot and Menéndez 2019; Carella and Marenco 2022), and more numerous analyses focusing on their electoral support among people facing precarity (Fernández-Albertos 2015; Padoan 2020; Liu, Kuo, and Fernandez-Albertos 2022; Girardi 2023). However, also differences remain in the extent to which the two parties incorporate foreign nationals and women.

In this perspective, the chapter also recentres the analysis of policy reforms in post-2010s Southern Europe around left-wing populist parties, stressing their role as a driving force of policy change. Far from being the result of a spontaneous leftward shift of social democracy or unification of the lefts (Branco et al. 2024), de-dualization has been mainly driven - whether directly or indirectly - by a left-wing populist political project, grounded in an ambition to restore dignity. Furthermore, this orientation clearly distinguishes the populist left both from the producerist populist radical right (Rathgeb 2020), and, to some extent, from 'real existing' social democracy.

The remainder of the chapter is structured as follows: The next section outlines the theoretical framework, discussing the idea of undoing precarity as central to left-wing populism. I then present the case selection and data sources used in the study. The empirical analysis follows, focusing first on M5S, then on UP, and concluding with a comparative discussion.

10.2 Undoing Precarity and Restoring Dignity

The argument I want to make is that at the heart of left-wing populism lies a twofold idea of undoing precarity and restoring dignity. The two dimensions are analytically distinct but practically inseparable: in re-integrating those who have been disintegrated, the political project simultaneously restores a dignity that precarity has strained. As theorised in chapter 3, precarity in Southern Europe has operated through the erosion of a configurational nexus in which stable work and secure housing jointly constituted the baseline of a socially integrated life. The labour market was dualised at the margins, creating a growing population of workers excluded from the protections available to insiders while housing, in a welfare regime historically centred on family-transmitted ownership, became

inaccessible to those whose labour market position denied them the income stability required for purchase or the contractual guarantees demanded by landlords.

Undoing precarity in material terms then roughly means *de-dualization*, to be intended as a process of de-segmentation of the labour market and welfare institutions - "re-regulation at the margins" - as part of a general process of re-regulation. Left-wing populist parties are those expected to pursue de-dualizing reform projects, which are not just reversing austerity reforms, but also marking a departure from deep-seated socio-economic institutions. In concrete terms, this refers to measure regulating temporary employment, social benefits and wages of precarious workers. It may also encompass some strands of housing policy, such as policies regulating rent prices. For precarious workers, housing insecurity is indeed a crucial transmission mechanism from labour precarity to precarity of life. De-dualization also somewhat involve a critique of the economic model underpinning dualization, i.e. internal devaluation. This is why left-wing populist are expected to appreciate some form of Keynesian state interventionism to stimulate internal demand.

Undoing precarity in moral term instead means *restoring dignity*. Left-wing populism understands material precarity as violating the basic democratic right to have a decent life. Precarious workers are seen as unjustly struggling to have/or lacking the ability to protect themselves from abuse" at work, and to assemble and affirm their identity autonomously in society, which indeed constitute the markers of dignity (Hodson 1996). In this register, de-dualisation is conceived not just as material redistribution but also as an act of moral repair. While Della Porta (2015) analysed the use of moral frames of dignity and justice in anti-austerity movement, I think that the matter has been underappreciated in the literature on left-wing populist parties. Moral economies identify deservingness criteria. Parties - even more than social movements - typically campaign for some policies, for some kind of deserving people. The resulting deservingness criteria are tendentially inclusionary and universalistic.

The twofold idea of undoing precarity is embedded within left populist ideology, typically contraposing a people made of excluded/precarious/poors, to abusing political and economic elites. The discourse is based on a dichotomic discursive structure, which is prone to flexibility in the exact categories included in the people. However, while discursive configurations may vary - for instance from the populist radical left (Podemos) to social populism (Movimento Cinque Stelle) - left-wing populism inevitably tend to address precarious workers. This idea somewhat mirrors the twofold idea of incorporation, developed by the Latin American literature on left-wing populism, which sees it as

a political project of material and symbolical integration of (precarious) people into the state (Castillo and Barrenechea 2016).

The idea of undoing precarity as de-dualization and restoring dignity proves also useful to distinguish left-wing populism from the populist radical right: producerism (Rathgeb 2020) involves a politics of labour market segmentation against precarious workers who are perceived as illegitimate takers, which is at odds with de-dualization; while the deservingness criteria of hard work (Damhuis 2020; Wagner 2022b; Westheuser 2021) tends to be particularist, where dignity is universalist.

One could also be tempted to argue that the idea of undoing precarity marks the border between left-wing populism and "real-existing social-democracy": where there is no precarity to be redressed and dignity to be restored there is no space for left-wing populism to emerge. In the terms of the theoretical framework developed in chapter 3, the political project analysed here corresponds to the re-making logic of political supply, though it also straddles the boundary with the re-instating logic. Many of the concrete policies pursued by M5S and UP, the re-regulation of temporary contracts, the introduction of minimum wages and minimum income schemes, are restorative in character: they aim to give back what has been taken, to make the system deliver on promises it once made or was expected to make. But the discursive register in which these policies are justified exceeds the restorative horizon. When the claim is no longer "give me back my stable contract" but "everyone deserves a dignified life as a democratic right," the violated labourist norm is translated into a broader grammar in which democracy itself functions as a symbolic reservoir for social integration. The demand-side chapters showed that precarious workers already possess this grammar: as a normative universalism grounded in the experience of status inconsistency (chapter 6), and as an ordinary concrete universalism rooted in working-class socialisation (chapter 7). The supply-side analysis that follows examines how M5S and UP have articulated it into a political project, with what reach and with what limits.

10.3 Cases and Methods

This chapter addresses this gap through the comparative analysis of two Southern European parties variably regarded as left-wing populist: *Unidas Podemos* (UP) in Spain, as a paradigmatic case of populist radical left party, combining populism with a radical left ideology (Karavasilis 2026; Katsambekis and Kioupkiolis 2019, 2019), and the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S) in Italy, treated here

as a case of social populism (March 2011:119), populism combined with social themes[157], without a structured left ideology (Caiani and Graziano 2019; Carella and Marenco 2022; Font et al. 2021) a limit case within the populist left group. Left-wing populism is here understood as a broad category of parties articulating a dichotomic discourse combining socio-economic equality, the centrality of the people, and anti-elitism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis 2014). Both parties participated in governing coalitions - M5S in the Conte I (2018-2019) and Conte II (2019-2021) governments, and UP in the Sánchez II government (2020-2023). In addition, the Italian case allows some within-case comparison, as the M5S first governed in coalition with the populist radical right, and then with the centre-left.

The analysis focuses on the labour and housing policies pursued by those parties, as well as the discourse underpinning them. This combination is essential to capture the political project of left-wing populist parties. While policies often provide the most tangible expression of a party's substantive orientation, the discursive frames surrounding those policies uncover their normative and moral underpinnings, revealing the interpretive logics that give meaning to policy choices beyond their material content. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which the parties justify their policy choices and mobilise themes of precarity and dignity to legitimise redistributive and regulatory interventions. The analysis further traces how these narratives vary across the two cases, especially in relation to the inclusion of migrants and women.

For each party, the analysis considers two key moments: the formative moment of party creation and the subsequent phase of governmental responsibility. The genetic phase crystallises the party's foundational identity and discursive frames (Mair and Mudde 1998), whereas the governing phase subjects this identity to the constraints and contestations of political power and competing policy agendas.

The empirical strategy relies on qualitative document analysis. Primary sources include official policy documents, legislative texts and party programs. These are triangulated with ministerial speeches, parliamentary debates and media coverage such as national newspapers and party blogs. Secondary sources from academic research were also used to contextualize and interpret the reforms, as well as to identify discursive continuities or ruptures. Following Korpi (2006) and Rathgeb (2020), the distinction is made between *protagonist* reforms those directly initiated or strongly shaped by the parties under study and *consenter* reforms those in which the parties acted as secondary actors within broader coalitional compromises.

[157] Adopting 'quasi-left and pseudo-radical slogans' (March 2011:119).

10.4 The Socio-Economic Discourse and Policy of the Movimento Cinque Stelle

10.4.1 From the crucible of the Movimento Cinque Stelle to its electoral success (2005 - 2013)

The Movimento Cinque Stelle was formally founded in 2009, but its sprouts go back to early 2005, when Beppe Grillo, who would later become the charismatic leader of the movement, opened an online blog to discuss socio-political issues in the country. The blog rapidly became one of the most visited sites in Italy, emerging as a powerful voice in public debate. This was to become the breeding ground of the Movimento Cinque Stelle's political culture, and then the platform through which Grillo dictated the line and the party organized itself. Precarity figures prominently about the topics discussed on the blog from the very beginning.

In February 2006, one year after the blog launch, Grillo published a blogpost titled "Modern Slaves" (beppegrillo.it 2006) in which he denounced the spreading of precarious work in Italy and blamed in on the Biagi law - approved under Berlusconi II right government - which indeed strengthened liberalization at the margins. The message concluded with the invitation to "everyone who is a victim of the Biagi Law to tell their story by leaving a comment on this post" and the promise to "print them in a book and send it to all the party leaders" (beppegrillo.it 2006).

While it is not clear whether Grillo actually sent the book to "all party leaders", he actually published the book in 2007 under the title "Modern Slaves: The Precarious in Italy's Wonderland" (Grillo 2007). The book received significant attention and ignited public debate, with political figures from the center-left and radical left commenting it on national newspapers (Ichino 2007; La Stampa 2007). However, to my best knowledge, the book has been quite disregarded by the academic literature on the Movimento Cinque Stelle[158]. In more than 300 pages, the book gathered first-hand workers' testimonies, together assembling sort of a c*ahier de doléance* of precarious workers in Italy. In the introduction to the book, Grillo set a number of themes which will be consequential for the yet to be born Movimento Cinque Stelle.

Grillo denounced the specific form of bogus self-employment introduced by the Biagi Law and condemned its employment instability and financial insecurity. He blamed this reform on the right-wing government, as well as on the centre-left who was welcoming the reform because it encouraged

[158]It is mentioned in (Tronconi 2015:22)

labour market participation (Ichino 2007; beppegrillo.it 2007). On top of material precarity, he also denounced the "theft of dignity" and blamed it not just on (corrupted) politicians, but also on financial speculators sacking the productive structure of the country. He continued by saying that precarious workers lacked political representation in Italy and found themselves estranged in a new world of work. In Grillo's expressionist and absurdist words:

> *"The Biagi Law introduced the precariat in Italy. A modern bubonic plague that strikes workers - especially the young. It didn't exist before. Now it does. It turned jobs into time-limited projects. Wages into alms. Rights into unreasonable demands. Everything became a 'project' just to apply the Biagi Law and create the new modern slaves. From cleaning toilets to answering phones. Employees turned into entrepreneurs with VAT numbers - without money, without protection. Biagi transworkers. A subspecies of slaves (…).The Biagi Law is a left-wing law for an ultra-right-wing labour policy. Copied from the Pharaohs. Call centers instead of pyramids. A tool for exploiting workers. No protection. Nothing. Not even dignity.(…) This book tells the collective story of a generation paying the debts of those who came before. All the mistakes. All the mafias, the scandals, the companies destroyed by crooked financiers. A generation that will never retire. That's paying pensions to the elderly. That's getting angry. That has no political representation. A generation with no money, no severance pay, no professional future. A generation of modern slaves. The Biagi Law was supposed to integrate young people into the labor market. Instead, it turned them into cheap goods. And in this whirlpool even workers in their forties and fifties were dragged in - people who, just to avoid starving with their families, gave in. They opened a VAT number and joined the precarious. Tens of thousands of people wrote to me. An infernal and at the same time surreal, comic universe. Where everything is allowed, everything is reversed. A non-place where entrepreneurial risk lies with the precarious worker, and profit with the employer. It resembles Alice in Wonderland. It is The Precarious in Wonderland Italy.* (Grillo 2007:6-7).

This document is all the more relevant as it precedes not just the foundation of the Movimento Cinque Stelle, but also the Great Recession, when anti-austerity movements would adopt a very similar discourse to the one outlined above (Della Porta 2015). In Italy, the early 2000s were indeed characterized by stagnant stability, although plagued by the emerging issue of work precarity. In this vein, "Modern Slaves" is further interesting because it allegedly includes a prologue by the neo-Keynesian economist Stiglitz (Grillo 2007:4-5), in which he condemns labour precarisation for its negative cascading effects on internal demand, economic growth and occupational levels. Whether or not this prologue is authentic, its significance lies in anticipating the Keynesian discourse that the Movimento Cinque Stelle would later mobilise to criticise policy responses to the Eurozone crisis and, more broadly, the Italian growth model based on internal devaluation. Grillo's rhetoric, in turn, was likely shaped by the cultural and political

climate generated by the mobilisations of precarious workers in the early 2000s, culminating in the EuroMayDay Parade (Mattoni 2012:20).

In the following years, the theme of precarity recedes underground, only to resurface later. Pure populism dominates the Movimento Cinque Stelle's political discourse, focusing on the "political caste", its undue privileges and corruption, and how it ruins the people generally intended. These were the indeed years when the first meet-ups - local assemblies of supporters organized online - and the V-Day (2007) - short for *Vaffanculo Day*, literally 'Fuck-Off Day', a mass protest against political corruption and the presence of convicted politicians in Parliament - were launched, laying the groundwork for the foundation of the Five Star Movement in 2009. The creation of the party came in 2009, shortly after that Grillo's request to run in the Democratic Party's 2009 primary elections was rejected, thereby marking a definitive rupture between Grillo and the centre-left establishment in Italy.

In 2011, the Eurozone crisis and the establishment of a technocratic government in led the Five Star Movement to adopt again a social populist discourse. This time, however, the issue of employment precarity was diluted within a broader narrative about those suffering from socio-economic insecurity because of the crisis. As the main felt issues were broader financial insecurity and unemployment - rather than precarious work - the Movimento Cinque Stelle started to focus its discourse on financial insecurity. In this period (beppegrillo.it 2012b, 2012c) the M5S indeed began advocating for a "citizenship income" (*reddito di cittadinanza*): a minimum guaranteed income aimed at fighting poverty, conceived as a fundamental right tied to citizenship. The citizenship income soon became the party's flagship proposal in the run-up to the 2013 elections. The measure ranked first in the party's 20-point electoral manifesto (beppegrillo.it 2012a). By contrast, the call to abolish the Biagi reform - central *in Modern Slaves* - was now relegated to the economic section of the party's more detailed program (M5S 2013).

A blogpost published by Beppe Grillo after the 2013 election - which were won by the M5S, who became the first party in Italy by share of the vote - illustrates the broadening of the platform around which the social populist discourse of the party was articulated. Grillo said that in Italy there were two "social blocs": a "group A", comprising precarious workers, but now including also the unemployed, poor pensioners, and even struggling small and medium-sized enterprises suffocated by taxation; and a "group B" comprising all people who went through the crisis unscathed such as wealthy pensioners, a good chunk of public sector employees, and the upper-middle classes more broadly (beppegrillo.it 2013; Padoan 2024:183). He concluded sharply: "Bloc A demands change, Bloc B wants continuity. Bloc A has nothing to lose" and "Those in Bloc A generally voted for the Five Star Movement; those in Bloc B voted for the PDL or the PD-minus-L [the center-right and center-left main parties]."(beppegrillo.it 2013).

While the Five Star Movement (M5S) emerged as the leading party in the 2013 elections, it was unable to form a parliamentary majority, in part due to its refusal to enter into any coalition agreements and in part to the Democratic Party's refusal to find an agreement on the election of the President of the Republic. As a result, two centrist governments were successively formed with the backing of the centre-left, segments of the centre-right, and minor centrist forces: first the Letta government (2013-2014), and subsequently the Renzi government (2014-2016), both led by the Democratic Party (PD). The Renzi government, in particular, provided the M5S with an opportunity to re-politicize the issue of employment precarity (Radicale 2014). The signature policy of Renzi's government was indeed the Jobs Act, a sweeping labour market reform whose most controversial feature was the significant reduction of employment protections for permanent contracts (Picot and Tassinari 2017).

10.4.2 The Movimento Cinque Stelle in government (2018-2021)

In the 2018 general election, the Five Star Movement (M5S) won 32.7% of the vote, obtaining the highest number of parliamentarians. Not having an absolute majority, it formed a coalition government with the populist radical right League (LN) led by Matteo Salvini. As the major coalition partner, the M5S had greater parliamentary weight in the resulting executive (Conte I government), which was headed by Giuseppe Conte, an unknown law professor proposed as a compromise figure, who would later become the political leader of the M5S. Luigi Di Maio, the M5S political leader of the time, was appointed Minister of Economic Development and Labour. On the 4th of June, the day he took office as minister, Di Maio symbolically chose do dedicate his time to food-delivery workers (Quondamatteo 2021; Carella & Marenco 2022), who at the time were beginning to mobilize to improve employment conditions and social protections, bringing the issues of bogus self-employment and low pay into the national spotlight (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). He did so by convening a negotiation table that brought together the government, platform employers, emerging riders' collectives, and traditional trade unions. The intentional and symbolic nature of the act was made explicit during the press conference following the meeting, where Di Maio declared:

> *"On the day I took office as Minister of Labour, my first act was to meet with the food delivery riders - a category of workers emblematic of the new forms of labour, and of an abandoned generation, with neither protections nor, in many cases, even a contract," (…)"I chose to meet them because we are beginning a process aimed at creating a less precarious, more dignified model of work, with a guaranteed minimum hourly wage. It is a small first step, but we want to send a clear signal to those who are working and asking simply for dignity.". (ANSA 2018)*

Initially, the minister aimed to intervene unilaterally through legislation (Quondamatteo 2021:104), granting food delivery riders employee status as part of a broader labour reform targeting precarious

work. The proposed measure would have applied not just to riders, but to all forms of bogus self-employment in which the employer dictated the time and place of work: the very kind of contracts denounced by Grillo in Modern Slaves back in 2007. On 17 June, Di Maio further strengthened his political intent, declaring: "As Minister, I have decided to declare war on precarity [literally, 'the precariat']. The ongoing state of insecurity and uncertainty facing young Italians is tearing apart the fabric of our society" (Di Maio 2018b). The following day, one of the largest food delivery platforms operating in Italy publicly threatened market exit if the reform was to be passed (Corriere 2018). Then the League, showing a clear responsiveness to business interests, blocked any further legislative initiative on the matter (Quondamatteo 2021:105). The minister then attempted to broker an agreement between platforms and riders, but the reform ultimately stalled (Carella and Marenco 2022).

However, Di Maio's declared commitment to combat precarity did not remain merely rhetorical. In July 2018, he passed piece of legislation that significantly re-regulated temporary employment in Italy. The measure reduced the maximum duration of fixed-term contracts without a justification clause from 36 to 12 months (extendable to 24 months if a specific reason is provided) and lowered the number of possible renewals from five to four. It also slightly increased compensation for permanent employees in cases of unfair dismissal (Di Maio 2018a). Di Maio presented the law in bombastic terms, describing it as "*the Waterloo of precarious employment; the era of precarity without any justification is over (…) It means a little more serenity*" (Corriere 2025). However, he did not frame the reform in oppositional terms toward capital - particularly not toward small businesses - stating instead: "*Our goal is, of course, to fight precarity, but at the same time to acknowledge that businesses also have the right to lower labour costs. So now we are working toward the Budget Law with the aim of reducing labour costs, so that more expensive contracts become accessible to all companies*" (Corriere 2025). Although Di Maio's tones were exaggerated (if not verging on grotesque), the Dignity decree was indeed a significant piece of legislation. If the re-regulation of temporary contracts was in absolute terms moderate, in relative terms it constituted the most significant re-regulation of the Italian labour market since the liberalizing reforms of the 1990s.

Even the Dignity Decree came however with limits and dark areas. The measure failed to restore the legal protections against unfair dismissal for permanent contracts, which had been eliminated by Renzi's 2015 Jobs Act - despite the fact that the Five Star Movement had previously opposed that reform. An amendment proposed by a small new left-wing party to reinstate these protections was rejected, even by the Five Star Movement, likely as part of a compromise with the League, which prioritized business interests and strongly opposed such measures (Ciccarelli 2018). As for the dark areas, the decree simultaneously extended the use of occasional work vouchers in the agriculture and tourism sectors. The League was primarily responsible for this extension, aiming to support small businesses in low value-

added sectors, heavily relying on cheap labour. However, the Five Star Movement was clearly a consenter (Ciccarelli 2018b). As a result, while the decree introduced regulations for the main tier of precarious workers, the lowest tier - where foreign workers are disproportionately concentrated - was further deregulated.

The Movimento Cinque Stelle also succeeded in passing the Citizenship Income (*Reddito di Cittadinanza* - RdC), which had been its flagship policy proposal since at least 2013. In its approved form, the RdC was a means-tested minimum income scheme targeted at low-income households, conditional on financial eligibility and activation for job search. The measure was relatively generous in terms of benefit levels and coverage, and it replaced a much more limited programme - the Reddito di Inclusione (REI) - introduced by the centre-left government in 2017, partly in an effort to reclaim the issue and pre-empt the electoral rise of the M5S in the upcoming 2018 elections. Although the RdC was formally adopted in January 2019 through Decree-Law No. 4/2019 - without the support of centre-left parties - the political agreement had already been reached in September 2018, during negotiations over the draft budget law. At the end of the pivotal cabinet meeting that approved funding for the programme, Luigi Di Maio triumphantly declared from the government's balcony: "*We have abolished poverty*."(TG24 2018).

The measure marked a clear break from past policy, as Italy had never previously implemented a minimum income scheme, with the sole exception of the more limited 2017 initiative by the center-left government (Jessoula and Natili 2020). While the RdC inlcuded a workerist logic - requiring beneficiaries to engage in job-seeking activities - this conditionality was not strongly enforced. Public employment agencies never became fully operational (whether by design or by failure), while labour demand remained fundamentally week I Italy.

Nevertheless, the reform had significant limitations and problematic aspects (Commissione Saraceno 2021). One of the most contentious was the residency requirement: applicants were required to have lived in Italy continuously for ten years in order to qualify. This condition effectively excluded the majority of the country's foreign resident population. The League strongly pushed for this restriction - being already reluctant to accept a non-contributory benefit at all - vigorously opposing the idea of extending it to "migrants." However, the Movimento Cinque Stelle also supported the restriction,

Table 10.1 Policy measures under the Conte I government (Italy, 2018–2019)

Gov.	Policy Area	Primary	Policy Name	Secondary	Policy Content	Stable	Precar.
Conte I	labour market	M5S	Decreto Dignità		re-regulation of temporary contracts; small increase in cost of dismissment for open-ended contracts	(+)	+
		LN			re-introduction of vouchers in tourism and agricolture		(−)
		M5S		LN (−)	*LN sinking emendament extending employed working status to platform riders*		+
	wage setting	*M5S*	*Salario Minimo Legale**	LN (−)	*introduction of legal minimum wage at 9€/hour, complementary to collective bargaining*	+	+
	income maint.	M5S	Reddito di Cittadinanza		minimum guaranteed income		+
				LN	10-years residence requirement for eligibility		(−)
	pension	LN	Quota 100	M5S	early retirement with min 38yrs of contributions at 62yrs, no penalty	+	

Note: + indicates pro-stable/precarious orientation; (+) moderate effect; (−) negative effect. Italics = failed/blocked policies. * = proposed but not enacted.

framing the measure as a right tied to citizenship. In addition, the benefit calculation formula was regressive: it penalized families with children, and no specific provisions were made for single-parent households, revealing further blind spots in the scheme's design.

The most significant unrealized reform of the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) during the Conte I government was the proposed introduction of a statutory minimum wage in Italy. Although the issue was included in the coalition agreement, its content remained vague and unspecified. The M5S proposal was formally submitted to the Senate in July 2018 by Senator Nunzia Catalfo, with the stated objective of combating in-work poverty (Nunzia Catalfo 2018). It called for the establishment of a statutory minimum wage of €9 per hour (gross), to serve as a wage floor, alongside the automatic extension of the most representative collective agreement in force. The dual aim was to raise low wages and reinforce collective bargaining mechanisms. Had it been implemented, this reform would have transformed Italy's wage-setting institutions, arguably becoming the most consequential socio-economic reform of the Conte I government. However, the League, under increasing pressure from business associations, began to undermine the proposal. By spring 2019, it was openly opposing the measure, arguing that "*the only thing we cannot do now is raise labour costs for businesses*" (La Repubblica 2019). The Partito Democratico, while discussing alternative reform projects, did not offer concrete support for a reform (Openpolis 2019). In summer 2019, the League triggered a governmental crisis, and the reform project halted.

The Movimento Cinque Stelle however managed to form a new coalition government, this time with the Democratic Party (as well as later Italia Viva, a PD's splinter party formed by Matteo Renzi). The Conte II government (September 2019-February 2021) was born more on the necessity to avoid early elections - which would have benefited the League - rather than a shared political vision. The new government however managed to find a compromise on the regulation of platform work, which had remained pending. Law 128/2019, approved in November 2019, extended employment protections to riders working continuously for a platform and granted basic rights to occasional ones. It left wage-setting to collective bargaining, with a fallback to the most similar collective agreement if no deal was reached (Carella and Marenco 2022). Despite more limited in scope than the original proposal, the law marked a clear step forward. In contrast, efforts to introduce a statutory minimum wage stalled as the coalition partners were internally split over Catalfo's proposal and its wage floor (that is the very idea of a statutory mimum wage).

Table 10.2 Policy measures under the Conte II government (Italy, 2019–2021)

Gov.	Policy Area	Primary	Policy Name	Secondary	Policy Content	Stable	Precar.
Conte II	labour market	M5S	Decreto Rider	PD	employment protections for platform riders working on a continuous basis		+
			Ban on dismissals		ban on dismissals for open-ended contracts (Covid-19)	+	
			Sospensione Decreto Dignità		suspension of limits to temporary contracts (Covid-19)		−
	wage setting	*M5S*	*Salario Minimo Legale**	*PD*	*introduction of legal minimum wage at 9€/hour, complementary to collective bargaining*		+
	income maint.	M5S	Reddito di Emergenza		temporary minimum guaranteed income with looser eligibility criteria		(+)
			ISCRO		unemployment benefit for bogus self-employed		(+)
			Cassa Integrazione Covid		short-time work scheme	+	(+)
	housing		Blocco degli sfratti		suspension of evictions (2020–2021)		(+)
		M5S	Superbonus 110%	PD	tax credit for energy and seismic renovation of owned dwellings	+	

Note: + indicates pro-stable/precarious orientation; (+) moderate effect; (−) negative effect. Italics = failed/blocked policies. * = proposed but not enacted.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically shifted the government's focus towards safeguarding (the core) of the workforce from the economic shock. The government financed generous short-time work schemes (*Cassa Integrazione*), imposed a ban on dismissals for permanent workers, and emergency one-off payments to self-employed and temporary workers, this time with a very low residence requirement. Proposals to reform the Citizenship income in a more inclusionary direction were raised (Commissione Saraceno 2021), but ended up nowhere: coalition partners were divided on the issue, and the newly formed *Italia Viva* strongly opposed to this very policy measure. Conte, supported by the Movimento Cinque Stelle, also strongly campaigned at the European level for a countercyclical reaction to the covid-19 crisis, fearing a reedition of the Eurozone crisis.

As compared to work, housing never became a terrain on which the M5S politicised precarity. Yet, during the pandemic, the Conte II government suspended the enforcement of evictions (Decree-Law 18/2020), a freeze extended until 2021 and then phased out under the Draghi government. The centre-right opposed it as an unjust burden on "small owners" who had bought a home "with a thousand sacrifices (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2020), while the measure was felicited by small tenants unions. The most relevant housing policy was instead the Superbonus 110% (Decree-Law 34/2020) a comprehensive tax credit for renewing homes. It combined an expansionary anti-cyclical macro-economic intent with the promise that "all families, even those in more economic difficulty" could renovate their homes "at zero cost", thanks to the transferability of the tax credit (Avvenire 2020). In a country where homeownership has long been the main channel of social integration, the measure recalled the post-war Christian Democratic model of integration through diffuse property, but with an egalitarian twist marked by its social-populist character: in principle, the renovation was free for every owner, regardless of income or tax capacity. Yet it addressed those who already owned a home, and left tenancy and rents outside the political agenda. Overall, in Italy the political consensus remained around the protection of current owners, and housing precarity remained a non-politicized latent issue.

10.5. The Socio-Economic Discourse and Policy of Podemos

10.5.1 Podemos from the crucible to the electoral success (2011 - 2015)

In contrast to the Movimento Cinque Stelle, Podemos was the political offspring of mass mobilizations against austerity and social precarity. The Indignados movement, which erupted in May 2011 in response to austerity policies implemented by both centre-right and earlier centre-left

governments, constitutes a prototypical case (Della Porta 2015). Reclaiming dignity - from which the term Indignados is derived - and opposing employment, financial, and housing precarity were central to the movement's discourse. Among many, the slogan "No house, no job, no pension, no fear" (Sin casa, sin curro, sin pensión, sin miedo), popularized by the collective Juventud Sin Futuro ("Youth Without a Future"), encapsulates the movement's spirit (El País 2011). Many of Podemos's future leaders were members of this collective, whose influence was later acknowledged by Pablo Iglesias - back then a political science professor - the party's future leader (Turrión Iglesias 2015)).

After peaking in the summer of 2011, the Indignados movement gradually lost momentum by mid-2012 and fragmented into various strands. One of the most significant was La Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH - "The Mortgage Victims' Platform") (Martínez et al. 2024) . In February 2013, PAH representative Ada Colau - who would go on to become mayor of Barcelona and a key Podemos ally - testified before the Spanish Parliament's Economic Affairs Committee, denouncing Spain's housing policy for producing widespread insecurity, creating a situation "where dignity is the exception in the very place where it should be the rule" (El Diario 2013).

A renewed wave of mobilization surged in March 2014 with the Marchas por la Dignidad ("Marches for Dignity"), further amplifying demands against precarity. Around the same time, Podemos was officially founded, just ahead of the European elections, with the ambition of translating the political potential of these movements into institutional power. In the May 2014 European elections, Podemos won 7.98% of the vote, rising to 20.68% in the general elections of December 2015.

The party's 2014 and 2015 electoral manifestos directly received and elaborated many of the core demands of the Indignados. On the first page of the 2014 manifesto (Podemos 2014), under the headline "Citizen Rescue Plan focused on creating decent jobs in Southern European countries," Podemos called for the repeal of the 2010 and 2012 labour reforms, a moratorium on dismissals, the introduction of a universal basic income, a substantial increase in the minimum wage, and a ban on housing evictions.

The 2015 manifesto further refined these proposals (Podemos 2015). It advocated restoring protection against unfair dismissal for permanent contracts and the automatic conversion of temporary contracts into permanent ones after one year. The universal basic income proposal was reworked into a national minimum income scheme - generous and non-punitive toward those re-entering the labour market - a policy absent in Spain at the time (Natili 2019; Soler-Buades 2025:202). The party proposed raising the minimum wage to €800/month (in 14 payments) by 2018, and to €950/month by the end of the legislative term. In addition to halting evictions, Podemos called for

rent caps at 30% of household income and the construction of public social housing. Overall, the manifesto aimed to move beyond "wage-cut competitiveness" (Podemos 2015: 11) and asserted the state's responsibility to guarantee full employment as a public mandate (Podemos 2015: 61)

10.5.2 Unidas Podemos in government (2020 - 2023)

Despite - or perhaps because of - its spectacular result in the 2015 general election, Podemos did not enter government. Instead, the PSOE opted to negotiate a governing deal with the centrist party Ciudadanos, a formation ultimately blocked by Podemos's negative vote. In 2016, Unidos Podemos (UP) - as the party was now called following its alliance with the radical left Izquierda Unida - secured 21.15% of the vote, a strong result that slightly improved on 2015 but fell just short of overtaking the PSOE, its declared goal. Once again, rather than seeking a coalition with UP, the PSOE chose to facilitate the formation of a centre-right government led by the Partido Popular (PP). It was a stalemate: (U)P wanted to force the PSOE into a coalition government from a position of strength, with the longer-term ambition of replacing it; while the PSOE resisted legitimising a party many within its ranks considered too radical.

This dynamic began to shift in 2017, when Pedro Sánchez won the PSOE's internal primaries in a landslide, moved the party to the left, and began to adopt rhetoric associated with the Indignados movement and Podemos. In June 2018, a PSOE minority government was formed (Sánchez I) after a successful no-confidence vote against the PP, supported by Podemos. In late 2018, seeking support for the budget, PSOE struck a deal with UP that included a rise in the minimum wage from €736 to €900 in 2019 - a long-standing goal of the purple party (El País 2018). Although the wage increase was implemented, Sánchez I failed to pass the full budget, leading to new elections in spring and again in December 2019. After the electoral repetition, PSOE and UP finally agreed to form a coalition government in January 2020 (Sánchez II), which - unlike what might have occurred in 2015 or 2016 - now included Podemos as a junior coalition partner. The pandemic struck a couple of months later, but this did not stop the reform program.

In May 2020 the government firstly introduced a national minimum income scheme in Spain, called Ingreso Minimo Vital ("Minimum Vital Income"). The measure was part of Podemos' historical demands, but it had been included by both UP and the PSOE in 2019 electoral manifestoes and coalition agreements (although with differences). The upsurge of the covid-19 crisis in spring 2020 catalysed its approval. The scheme provided quite generous benefit and extensive coverage and was

particularly generous to household with children and solo-parent households. Moreover, differently from the RdC in Italy, it did not have harsh residence eligibility requirements (Soler-Buades 2025).

The government further raised the minimum wage, which in multiple steps rose to 1080€/month. Pablo Iglesias, still leader of UP, and Yolanda Diaz, minister of labour and rising star of UP, gave a decisive push for the raise (El Diario 2020).

In May 2021, Yolanda Diaz, as minister of labour, managed to get approved a law regulating food deliver platform work, known as the Ley Rider, based on a tripartite agreement signed between unions, employers, and the Ministry of Labour (Carella and Marenco 2022). Unidas Podemos had been sensitive to the issue from quite some time and had promised to deal with in the 2019 electoral campaign. Pablo Inglesias had indeed claimed: "The end of the uberization of the economy will come: those who depend on digital platforms will be considered workers" (El País 2019). The law established a presumption of employment for food-delivery riders, shifting the burden of proof from workers to platforms. It also grants trade unions the right to access information about algorithms affecting platform workers. While the PSOE supported the final law, it had never been particularly vocal about platform work (Carella and Marenco 2022:276).

In December 2021, a similar tripartite agreement - again brokered by Yolanda Diaz - paved the way for the Reforma Laboral (Labour Reform), the most important piece of legislation of Sanchez II government. At its core the reform involved a strong re-regulation of temporary employments, which in its intention was to be reduced to an exception, while permanent employment the norm. The reform indeed admitted only limited causal justifications for temporary contracts: surge in production, substitution and training. The *contrato por obras y servicios* ("contract for work and services") - the symbol of Spanish precarious employment - was cancelled. The reform further introduced the presumption of permanent employment for employees working for the same company for at least 18 months in the last 24 months, thereby limiting the possibility for concatenating temporary contracts.

Policy Area	Primary	Policy Name	Secondary	Policy Content	Secure	Precarious
wage setting	UP	Primero Incremento SMI	PSOE	first rise in minimum wage from 735€ to 900€		+
labour market	UP	Reforma Laboral	PSOE	strong re-regulation of temporary contracts		+
				collective agreement of main company extended to subcontracted workers		+
				strengthening of sectoral collective bargaining over firm-level bargaining	(+)	(+)
				ultra-activity of collective agreements	(+)	(+)
			PSOE (−)	*PSOE blocks strengthening of employment protection for open-ended contracts*	+	
	UP	Ley Rider	PSOE	employed status for platform riders		+
	UP	Decreto-ley trabajadoras de hogar		normalization of domestic workers: granted unemployment benefits and protection against unjustified dismissal		+
	UP	*Estatuto del Becario*		*compulsory contributions for trainees and limit to their numbers over the workforce*		(+)
		Mecanismo RED		extensive use of the short-working time scheme	+	(+)
wage setting	UP	Incremento SMI	PSOE	rise in minimum wage from 900 to 1080€ (multiple steps)		+
income maint.		Ingreso Mínimo Vital		guaranteed minimum income (favorable to families and single mothers)		+
		Subsidio extraordinario por desempleo SED		new non-contributory residual unemployment benefit		(+)
housing		Escudo social (RDL 11/2020)		suspension of evictions for vulnerable households; rent reductions or moratoria for large landlords; microcredits for other tenants		(+)
			PSOE (−)	*PSOE blocks general suspension of rent payments*		+
	UP	Ley de Vivienda (Ley 12/2023)	PSOE	rent caps for large landlords in stressed areas; limits on annual rent updates; application left to the regions		(+)
			PSOE (−)	*PSOE blocks rent caps for small landlords*		+

Table 10.3 Policy measures under the Sánchez II government (Spain, 2020–2023)

The reform thus marked an epochal shift in Spain, where temporary employment had been historically extremely high and a fundamental feature of its political economy, making of it the most important re-regulating reform in Spain since the 1980s (when temporary employment was indeed introduced). The reform was indeed presented by Diaz as an historical rupture:

> With this labour reform, the precarity in Spain is over (…). At last, we are putting an end to what I have called the great Spanish anomaly" (...) "It gives hope that those young people and women who have never known a contract that was not rubbish in their lives will not fall into the trap of precarity" (El Diario 2021).

Beyond curtailing temporary employment, the Reforma Laboral increased protection to subcontracted workers (extending to them the collective agreement of the leading firm) and strengthen collective bargaining (Molina 2023). Reinstating the protection against unjustified dismissal for permanent workers was instead not part of the reform package. This was a longstanding goal of Podemos from its very foundation, but the opposition of the PSOE finance minister stopped it from being included into the law (Duval 2022).

Regarding precarious employment, in September 2022, the government further introduced the so-called *Ley Trabajadoras del Hogar* ("Domestic Worker Law"). The law extended the right to unemployment benefits to domestic workers and cancelled the possibility to be fired without a justified cause. The law partially received the demands of self-organized collective of domestic workers, who had been denouncing their condition as a deliberate blackhole in the Spanish system of social protection (Otxoa 2022). While announcing the reform, Yolanda Diaz recognized that the state had "an historical debt with thousands of woman" (La Moncloa 2022).

The two coalitions partners also diverged openly on housing policy. When the pandemic struck, Unidas Podemos proposed to suspend rent payments, while the Ministry of Transport and Urban Agenda, led by the PSOE's, would only accept deferrals, arguing that a general suspension would hit small private landlords (M. E. El Diario 2020). The resulting decree (Royal Decree-Law 11/2020) suspended evictions of vulnerable households, a measure repeatedly extended until 2025, but imposed rent reductions or moratoria only on large landlords and offered interest-free loans to all other tenants.

A similar divide manifested during the negotiations to regulate housing rents. The coalition agreement had promised to curb abusive rent increases, but in February 2021 the PSOE preferred "to promote rather than impose", since housing was "a right but also a market good" (El Salto 2021).

Unidas Podemos wanted rent caps for all landlords in stressed areas, while PSOE wanted to limit them to large owners (El Salto 2022). The Ley de Vivienda (Law 12/2023), approved only in May 2023 at the end of the legislature, introduced rent containment in "stressed residential market areas" and caps for large landlords. Moreover, the law t left its application to the regions, and by 2025 only a few of them, led by Catalonia, had applied it. Unidas Podemos thus placed housing at the centre of the government agenda, but obtained a late and minimal regulation, as the PSOE defended the interests of 'small landlords'.

10.6 Comparative discussion

Both parties placed precarity at the centre of a populist discourse aimed at undoing precarity materially and restoring dignity symbolically to precarious workers, within an anti-neoliberal socio-economic project. While in government this translated in concrete socio-economic policies. Table 10.4 summarises and compares the main policy interventions across the two countries.

Table 10.4 Policy outputs of the M5S and UP in government, by policy area

Dimension	**M5S (Conte I–II)**	**UP (Sánchez II)**
Labour market regulation: margins	moderate	strong
Labour market regulation: core	abandoned	strong (failed*)*
Wage setting	strong (failed)	strong
Income maintenance	strong (foreign exclusionary)	strong (foreign and gender inclusionary)
Housing: tenants	weak	moderate (partly failed)
Housing: owners	strong	absent

Note: failed policies=blocked by a coalition partner; abandoned = policy claimed in opposition but abandoned in government.

Both UP and the M5S re-regulated employment at the margins, introduced a minimum income and (tried to) strengthen the minimum wage, with UP showing a higher degree of radicality in re-regulation. Moreover, while UP measures where specifically designed to be inclusionary towards foreign nationals, the M5S allowed the inclusion of a restrictive residence requirement for the guaranteed minimum income These differences substantiate at the policy level the distinction between social populism, which aims to reintegrate the precarious into the existing order, and the

populist radical left, which shows more radical reform ambitions and socio-cultural egalitarianism (Section 10.3; Karavasilis 2026: 274).

The more radical profile of Unidas Podemos also extended to housing, as it tried to regulate the rental market substantially, although this was for the most part blocked by the PSOE. The M5S did not, and its housing policy remained ownership-oriented as mostly consensual in the Italian political context. In fact, while in Spain housing is a highly salient and polarized issue in political debates, in Italy it is scarcely politicised by political parties while existing as a social grievance, thus persisting as a political latent issue.

In both countries, then, the populist left pursued the material and symbolic re-integration of precarious workers, through dignity appeals and concrete policy measures. Policies, however, also shape later political behaviour, as those affected judge them, producing continuing mobilization or rather disengagement. (Pierson 1993). As the qualitative interview-based chapters showed, the absence of effective housing legislation was a major factor in the demobilisation of the precarious constituency of Podemos, whereas in Italy the RdC and the proposal of a minimum wage created a constituency of beneficiaries who remained loyal to the M5S and pessimistic about political change, all the more after the right abolished it. This is developed further in the conclusive considerations which follow.

11. Conclusions

11.1 Introduction

The political restructuring that Southern Europe has undergone since 2010 has brought to the centre of both scholarly and public debate the question of how widespread material insecurity connects to the new forms of political mobilisation that have emerged in the region, and to the rise of populist-left parties in particular. The thesis took this question seriously and reframed it: What is, if any, the politics of precarity in Spain and Italy? This question progressively opened onto three lines of inquiry: how precarious workers align politically (i), how precarity stratifies their experiences and shapes their political orientations (ii), and under what conditions precarity can be mobilised politically (iii). The research pursued them abductively, combining the analysis of the voting patterns of precarious workers in the quantitative part, the reconstruction of the configurations and mechanisms through which those patterns are produced in the qualitative part, and the analysis of the political supply of the populist left.

This chapter brings them together, outlining the main argument and contributions of the thesis. Section 11.2 returns to the conceptualisation of precarity as a classing process of social disintegration. Section 11.3 presents the framework of the politics of social disintegration and the four ideal types and Section 11.4 discusses the formation and erosion of a precarious populist-left mobilisation. Limitations and lines of future research follow, concluded by a note on why disintegration, and its politics, is here to stay.

11.2 A classing process of social disintegration

Against the idea of precarity being either a (fraction of a) specific class (Braga 2018; Standing 2011) or a condition transversal to classes (Rueda 2005), and going beyond the idea of its multidimensionality, the thesis advances a configurational and relational understanding of precarity as deviation from socially accepted standards of security. Those standards are shared and stratified across society, setting 'rules' of admission to society at large and specific classes within it. They constitute, in short, stratified norms of social integration, which define social positions as levels of the norm, ranked in term of material security and status.

The thesis argues that in Southern Europe the norm of integration is defined by the joint attainment of work security as permanent full-time job, and housing security as home ownership. This configuration derives from the historical massification of private housing property as an alternative to welfare state development in the two countries, and entrenched as state protection persisted as weak, in both housing and income support. Work and housing are materially and morally linked: on the one side, home ownership provides the material basis through which permanent job produces material security, social respectability and the capacity to plan the future; on the other side, work and work through education, is expected to be conducing to housing property and permanent jobs, following standard moralized biographical scripts. The thesis defines the material and moral link between work and housing as the *work-housing nexus* (Chapter 3.1). The work-housing nexus constitutes the norm of integration of Southern European societies and is stratified in levels of material security and prestige: an upper level, a standard level (the 'norm of the norm'), and a lower level bordering the threshold of respectability, where the nexus collapses producing social exclusion and absolute stigmatization.

As such, in Southern Europe, precarity entails not reaching (or falling from) an aspired level of the work-housing nexus. The thesis thus conceives of *precarity as a classing process of disintegration from the stratified work-housing nexu*s (Chapter 3.1), which jointly involves a material aspect (*déclassement)* and a normative-moral aspect (anomie and broken moralized scripts). This conceptualisation builds on a Bourdieusian-inspired approach to class analysis, bringing together the analysis of social stratification through *déclassement* and the analysis of social integration and its breakdown (Bourdieu 1977, 1978; Merton 1938; Castel 2003; Dörre 2014; Burawoy 2018:61–65). It is 'classing' as it produces *disintegrated social positions* which are bilaterally defined by their current material configuration and their aspired trajectory, i.e. by their aspired and obtained positions on the work-housing nexus.

Figure 11.1 synthetises the social positions of each type, already presented in detail in each corresponding sections of the qualitative chapters (Chapters 6.2.1-9.2.1). The dashed arrows indicate the aspired social positions on the work-housing nexus, while the bold arrows the lower position reached. The social position of each type is bilaterally defined with respect of both arrows, and the cone between them indicates can be read as the 'space of *déclassement*' for each type, allowing a range of within-type intermediate positions.

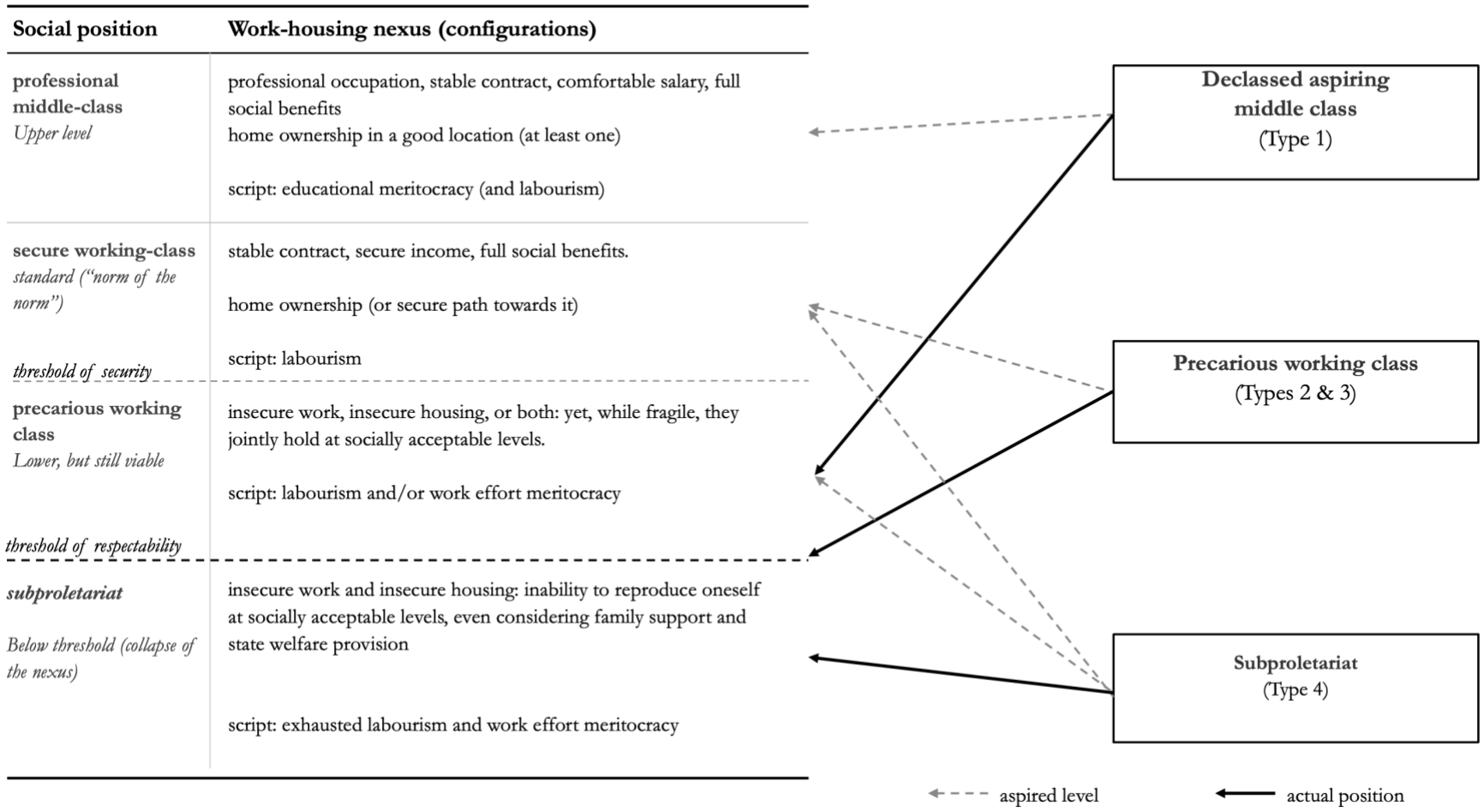


Figure 11.1 Disintegrated social positions and the work-housing nexus

- The *declassed aspiring middle class* (Chapter 6) is composed of credentialed workers whose education was oriented toward the upper level of the work-housing nexus, and whose trajectories landed instead in unstable, underpaid work that does not secure autonomous housing-
- The *precarious working class* (Chapter 7-8) aimed at the standard level of the norm (some having held it and lost it), and now combine unstable employment, insufficient income and a nexus that barely holds. Their cone runs from just below the standard down to the threshold of respectability. Both type 2 and type 3 share the same disintegrated social position, but are distinguished by a different moral elaboration of the same disintegration
- The *subproletariat* (Chapter 9), also aimed at the standard level of the norm and secondarily to the lower norm, and now finds below the threshold of respectability facing interlocking precarity and the threat of total collapse.

Those disintegrated social positions share a common experience of disintegration from the work-housing nexus but were oriented towards different levels of the work-housing nexus and/or land on different positions. The concept of disintegrated class positions thus holds together a tension between the commonality of the disintegration experience (sociology of integration) and the fragmentation of resulting social positions (sociology of stratification). I believe this tension is constitutive of precarious social positions, and the thesis intends it as a proposed solution to reconcile the sociology of precarity with the sociology of class, which is a first core theoretical contribution that the thesis intends to make.

The notion of the norm of integration as the work-housing nexus is to some extent specific to Southern Europe, where private housing property has a central social function and housing provision by the state is very scarce. Yet, as the financialisation of housing and precarisation of labour are general phenomena across (at least) advanced capitalist societies, this model might prove relevant also in countries normally associate to different welfare regimes. More generally, the overall logic behind this understanding of precarity might be adapted to the standards of different societies.

11.3 The politics of social disintegration

Disintegration is a cognitive disorienting and moral injuring experience, as it breaks the moralized scripts that structure everyday personal conduct and social relations. In so doing, it poses into question both the individual belonging to society - threatening exclusion and social worth - and the legitimacy of the social order. The elaboration of such a meaning-moral injury in the form of moral

economy violations links social disintegration to different political orientations, thus grounding a framework of the politics of social disintegration (or the politics of precarity as defined in this thesis). It does so by attributing blame - upward, downward, inward, or a combination of those - for social disintegration, and by grounding, or foreclosing, demands for its redress. This moral elaboration is constrained by the broken script and the current social position, but has relative autonomy, and is influence by the availability (or not) of collective grammars: the same disintegration can lead to opposite political orientations, and different disintegrations the same one. The outline of a framework to study the politics of social disintegration is intended as a second core theoretical contribution, considered as an extension of the neo-Bourdesian political sociology (Damhuis 2020; Westheuser 2021) to disintegrated social positions, linked with the literature on social integration and politics (Gidron and Hall 2020; Wagner 2023), and the emerging fragmented field of the political sociology of precarity (Braga 2018; Scheiring 2020; Antonucci 2026).

The thesis reconstructs four ideal typical figures of the politics of social disintegration in Spain and Italy, whose essential elements are shown in Table 11.1. The four ideal types are intended as recurring configurations of disintegrated social positions (see above), moral economy violations, and political orientations. They nest within the two main political propensities associated to precarity in both countries, as identified in the quantitative part of the thesis (Chapter 5): electoral abstention and voting for the populist left (Unidas Podemos in Spain, and the Movimento Cinque Stelle in Italy). They elucidate the mechanism behind aggregate patterns and hidden heterogeneity behind them, so that qualitative types are to be read with but not reduced to aggregate statistical patterns.

The *declassed aspiring middle class* (Type 1, Chapter 6) invested in university credentials that did not convert. Its disintegration is elaborated as a double, hierarchically ordered violation: first of educational meritocracy, the promise that credentials would translate into a professional position, then of labourism, the more basic promise that work itself should secure a dignified life. Blame goes upward, to a system that reneged on its promise and to economic elites whose very existence proves the meritocratic promise false. The resulting orientation is a populist radical-left orientation: a demand that the broken pact be repaired for all, and not only for the credentialed (see below).

Table 11.1 The four ideal types: moral economies, direction of blame and political orientations

Type	(Violated) moral economy	Direction of blame	Political orientation
(1) Declassed aspiring middle class	violated educational meritocracy (primary); violated labourism (secondary)	Upward	Populist radical left, inclusive labourism (*normative universalism*)
(2) Declassed precarious working class	Violated labourism (primary); violated work effort meritocracy (subordinate and reinforcing)	Upward	Social populism, inclusive labourism (*ordinary universalism*)
(3) Striving precarious working class	work effort meritocracy redoubled	Downward and inward	Demobilised conservatism
(4) Enduring and gracing subproletariat *(shadow type)*	enduring and gracing (fragmented moral economy)	Inward	Im-politicisation

The *declassed precarious working class* (Type 2, Chapter 7) generally did not aim at a university professional career, but at stable work, a secure home and a predictable life. Its primary violation is labourism itself, experienced as a foundational grammar rather often aggravated by the recognition that increased work effort has not been reciprocated. Blame goes upward, compounded by a pervasive sense of abandonment by the political class and the state. The resulting orientation is social populism: a demand that the system deliver on its most basic promise, security and a decent life (see below).

The *striving precarious working class* (Type 3, Chapter 8) shares the position of Type 2 but elaborates it in the opposite direction. The broken promise of work for security, still aspired to, is not named as broken but covered, by redoubling work-effort meritocracy as moralised conduct. Blame turns downward, against those who do not strive, and inward, as self-discipline. Politics is naturalised as absence, irrelevant to people who define themselves through work and withdraw into the private sphere, where they feel comfortable and valuable. The resulting orientation is demobilised conservatism, conservative in substance and demobilised in form, with a latent though blocked adjacency - potentially convertible - to the populist radical right.

The *enduring and gracing subproletariat* (Type 4, Chapter 9) fallen below the threshold of respectability, facing interlocking precarity and the collapse of the temporal structure on which any moral economy

rests. Only fragments remain, sublimated versions of those of Types 3 and 2: enduring, effort without the expectation of reward, and gracing, the quasi-magical hope of help from an undetermined other. Blame turns inward, as self-guilt; external constraints are acknowledged but not denounced, since a system that owes nothing cannot be accused of breaking a pact. The result is im-politicisation: a politicisation that could never form, replaced by supplications for graced help.

Behind the general trends of electoral abstention and populist left support identified in Chapter (5) and generally supported by the existing literature on the voting preferences of precarious workers, hide different types of people and different mechanism driving voting behaviour. Electoral abstention of precarious workers - defined by employment precarity or financial precarity - can be driven either by: i) work effort meritocracy and the naturalisation of politics as absent (type 3); ii) being not the 'choice' to abstain from election - as typically assumed by the underlying rational choice framework of the study of voting behaviour - but having no choice in the form of political foreclosure (type 4); or being the result of demobilisation after disappointment (type 2, see next section). In quantitative studies on the political behaviour of precarious workers, and particularly the insider-outsider literature, those different mechanisms tend to be all lumped together within the category of 'political alienation', without further exploration (Schwander 2018); leaving pending the question of "whether this growing group of voters can at all be mobilized" (Häusermann 2020) without exploring the conditions for any mobilisation to be produced. Elucidating the heterogeneity of mechanism behind know patterns – which are mechanism of different kinds of people – is a third general contribution that the thesis makes to the quantitative literature on the political effects of precarity. This is also methodologically grounded: qualitative studies of politics can reconstruct into mechanism of public opinion formation and voting behaviour that are otherwise difficult to reach.

The four ideal-typical configurations have been read so far synchronically, as distinct positions along the stratified work-housing nexus, each with its own moral economy and its own political orientation. They also lend themselves, however, to a second reading, in which the same configurations appear not just as separate figures, but as "stages of a single ordered process" (Bourdieu 1977: 47). Diachronically, they are figures of a macro-sociological process of disintegration through which people are declassed from their aspirations and biographical scripts are broken, undermining their basic social identity and sense of worth. As one falls down the ladder of disintegration, the space for possible moral elaborations and political orientation progressively narrows down, in a funnel-like restraining dynamic: Type 1 experiences the breaking of educational meritocracy as a script and embraces violated labourism as Type 2; Type 3 embraces redoubled work effort meritocracy in the absence of an alternative grammar and alternative sense of worth; Type 4 has no material resources

even tto sustain work effort meritocracy and is left with graced help under the threat of collapse. As such, the typology is diachronically a staircase that, under the pressure of precarity, tilts toward its lower steps.

11.4 A precarious populist left mobilization

In the framework, the populist left orientation is the case in which disintegration is acknowledge as a collective phenomenon and blamed upward against the system. As mentioned, in both countries the general voting trend of precarious workers was either abstention, or voting for the populist left (Chapter 5): *Unidas Podemos* in Spain, a populist radical left party, and *The Movimento Cinque Stelle* in Italy, as a social populist party. At least in the period covered by the survey (2013-2023), no trend emerges for any other political force.

The qualitative chapters (Chapter 6-7) show that this support rested on two distinct types, which voice the same violation in different registers. The declassed aspiring middle class (type 1) articulates it in a register that combines class and systemic analysis - the knowledgeable precarious ("working class with culture") against the privileged economic elites - with the populist dichotomy of the people against the elites, and in Spain lends it the vocabulary of rupture and of utopian aspiration (Section 6.4.2). The declassed precarious working class (type 2) articulates it in the language of dignity, the social and the people: an ordinary, concrete universalism that asks to be reintegrated rather than to overturn the order (Section 7.4.2). In the end, however, the two registers belong to the same project. When rupture touches the ground of practical demands, it materialises in the same demand for housing, a minimum income and labour reforms that protect. Both converge on what the thesis calls *inclusive labourism*: a moral vision of a reordered society in which work does lead to security and a dignified life, and where basic security and dignity is given to the people in general irrespective of whether they are working or not. In short, the restauration of an inclusionary version of the work-housing nexus. These two types, from their disintegration to their political orientation, are the *precarious pathways to the populist left*.

On the supply side, both parties met this demand with the same political project, one of undoing precarity and restoring dignity (Chapter 10). Its material side was a set of policies addressed to precarious workers: the re-regulation of temporary employment, the introduction of a minimum income and the pursuit of a minimum wage. Its symbolic side was a discourse of dignity, naming precarious workers as a people wronged by an elite that had broken the pact. This combination is

what made the populist left well placed to mobilise precarious workers (Section 3.3.3): it joined universalistic policies against insecurity with the symbolic revaluation of those who bear it, giving voice, in de la Torre's words, to "the demands of those at the bottom of society for symbolic and material dignity" (2000: xi).

Within this common pattern, the two cases vary in a mirror-image way. The register of the declassed aspiring middle class has its closest affinity with the populist radical left of Podemos, that of the declassed precarious working class with the social populism of the M5S (Sections 6.4.2, 7.4.2, 10.6). This corresponds, if only roughly, to the pattern of Chapter 5, where populist-left support among precarious workers is more concentrated among graduates in Spain and more transversal in Italy, as the literature has also noted (Fernández-Albertos 2015; Ramiro and Gomez 2017; Lopes 2025). In each country, however and unsurprisingly, the party-political grammar influences that of precarious workers themselves, irrespective of the type.

Beyond identifying the logic of populist left mobilization of precarious workers, the qualitative chapters also illuminate mechanisms for its progressive erosion, without substantial changes in their underlying political grammar of the types. This seems a strong and so far consolidated trend in Spain as compared to Italy (see Chapter 5). Both Type 1 and Type 2 interviewees indeed show signs of disillusion and disengagement, without their underlying political orientation changing. Type 1 has shifted from strong personal investment to emotional disinvestment, still voting for the populist-left option in many cases but with growing doubts about its capacity to produce meaningful change, while Type 2 has moved from an unfulfilled hope for change toward a sense of abandonment, often translating into withdrawal from electoral participation altogether. With a similar logic, demobilisation seems stronger for the declassed precarious working class.

The common denominator of this disengagement is the perception that not enough has changed, as Clara, the retail worker in Madrid already met in Chapter 7, puts it: *"what good does it do me that my wage goes up, if then food and housing are going up? I mean, they are deceiving me all the time"*. The ground on which the not-enough is felt most concretely is housing, as rising prices make rents unsustainable and housing property unattainable, eroding the advancement obtained on wages and contracts. While the populist radical left obtained important labour reforms during its participation in the coalition government with the PSOE, it was unable to intervene significantly on the housing market (Chapter 10.6), housing insecurity being a highly salient and polarized issue in Spanish society. It is on housing, then, that the work-housing nexus is now felt as being broken. The demobilisation is based on the perception that labour regulation (and security) is being hollowed out by unregulated housing market

(and housing insecurity). This is can be read as a particular case of a demobilizing policy feedback effect (Pierson 1993): where labour market reforms are judged as insufficient - and judged almost devoid of value - for not compensating the absence of protective housing policies. This can be read as an illustration of how the work-housing nexus works in practice, this time also in political judgement.

Reinforcing and complementary to this mechanism, is the perception of a fragmentation of leftists options - variably pertaining to the populist radical left camp - and their absorption in a left-identitarian register (Rojas-Andrés, Mazzolini and Custodi 2023) distant from the pressing concerns of the 'majority of the people'. Where the inclusive labourism demands universalisation – all the more under the pressure of surging housing insecurity - the supply is perceived as particularising: the populist left seems to speak to a (political) minority rather than to the 'majority of the people' and does not function anymore as redresser of the dignity of the people.

In Italy, while the M5S lost much of its overall electorate, retained its relative hold on precarious workers, all the while their abstention propensity rose sharply (Chapter 5). Among the declassed aspiring middle class, relations to the M5S are mixed, from early disillusion to an uneasy willingness to vote for it, as a type the party never fully held (Section 6.4). Among the declassed precarious working class, policy feedback runs mostly in the opposite direction to the Spanish case. The citizenship income created a political constituency for whom the M5S is the only party that did something real for the people, and its abolition by the current right government reinforced this conditional allegiance (Chapters 7.4.2, 10.6). The M5S campaign for a legal minimum wage, and similar opposition from the right government seem to cement the same dynamic. However, allegiance coexist with a sense of political inefficacy and disappointment about the possibility to enacting inclusive labourism from below. Housing insecurity is also a pressing issue among Italian interviews, but remains a latent issue. No major party politicise it and those who suffer it have no shortcuts to frame it as a political question. The M5S is no exception: its housing policy remained ownership-oriented and did not address housing insecurity (Chapter 10.6), like that of the other main parties across the political spectrum.

Demobilisation thus acts on the same material and symbolic dimensions on which mobilisation rested, and which lie at the heart of social disintegration. Materially, policy feedback tends to be measured against the work-housing nexus as a whole: when it is negative, as in Spain, demobilisation follows. The politicisation of both poles of the nexus appears to be a scope condition for this mechanism, as the Italian case suggests by contrast, beyond incumbency and the severity of the

housing crisis. Symbolically, demobilisation follows when the appeal to the dignity of precarious workers gives way to a register they perceive as addressing the left rather than the people, as in Spain. Where that dignity appeal holds, as for the M5S, allegiance can survive disappointment.

In sum, the analysis of different data sources concurs in showing that precarious workers were mobilised for the populist left, which brought together the declassed aspiring middle class and the declassed precarious working class around inclusive labourism, but that this mobilisation has since eroded. Reconstructing the logics of both mobilisation and demobilisation is the fourth core contribution of the thesis, especially addressed to the literature on left populism and on contemporary Southern European politics.

11.5 Limitations and avenues for future research

The thesis has three main limitations to acknowledge. First, owing to the available data, the quantitative analysis does not include housing, the dimension that the qualitative analysis found co-constitutive of precarity in Spain and Italy. Within the mixed-methods design, the quantitative part thus performs a complementary function, framing the aggregate patterns and providing a reference for the typology, but cannot fully triangulate the qualitative. Second, the quantitative data cover the period up to 2023 and do not extend to the years of the interviews, leaving open whether the patterns documented have deepened since. Given the rise of Vox in the polls in recent years, the populist radical right might have mobilised precarious workers in ways the quantitative existing data could not yet capture. Yet, qualitative data (type 3) make this eventual possibility comprehensible. Third, the supply-side analysis reconstructs the policies of the two parties and the discourse underpinning them, but does not offer a fine-grained analysis of their discourse on work and housing, which would replicate on the supply side the granular logic of the qualitative analysis.

Four directions for future research follow from limitations and beyond. First, the typology reconstructed in this thesis lends itself to be tested also quantitatively, possibly through configurational methods (e.g. MCA, CSA). This however would require a dataset having rich data on different forms of material insecurities and political items. To my best knowledge, I am not aware of any public datasets that match those requirements. Second, a fine-grained analysis of the discourse of the housing and work discourse of the parties covered in this study, would complement the policy focus of the thesis. Third, extending the studying of the politicisation of social disintegration on the supply-side to other party families, starting from the Spanish case. Vox's would be an interesting

example, given the symbolic resource of the Francoist regime on housing and housing issue being salient nowadays in Spain (see below). Fourth and finally, an historical political sociology of housing in Italy, reconstructing how mass home ownership was built as a political project. While similar comprehensive studies exist for Spain, this is missing in this form for the Italian case.

11.6 Disintegration is here to stay

Disintegration is here to stay. As Southern European economies come to rest less on production and more on rentier capitalism, of which housing is a cornerstone, work and education turn into impoverished means to obtain overpriced housing security, even less so housing property. Rentier societies with labour-based norms are engines for social disintegration, and rentier economy makes it more difficult to re-integrate disintrated people without undoing itself. The politics of social disintegration is here to stay as well, and Spain seem to have recently turned into its laboratory.

For months this has seemed to come mostly from the populist radical right side, as Vox vocally politices housing insecurity as precarity. It has been talking about the restoration of a society of small property owners "*la España feliz de propietarios con trabajo, casa y coche*": a society in which effort is recompensed with the reasonable possibility of acquiring housing property, being property the only way - and the only right way - to shield oneself against precarity. This operation corresponds to a sort of 'conservative revolution' which turns work-effort meritocracy upside down, with a demand to overhaul the system to reinstate work-effort meritocracy selectively, for those who have contributed. While this operation is inevitably selective - against lazy people below and non-native ones - it has tried to capitalize on the exhaustion of the left-populist grammar in government, while capturing - and in so doing twisting - some of its foundational discourse on precarity.

Yet, as I write these lines the world outside is changing dangerously fast for the argument of this thesis. On 26 September 2026, an eviction in Madrid brought tens of thousands into the streets at the call of the *Sindicato de Inquilinas*. Its discourse seem to be a populist radical left as defined in this thesis, with tenants as a class against rentierism ("Madrid será la tumba del rentismo") and the people against an undifferentiated political elite ("PSOE, PP, ¡la misma mierda es!"). Its carrier, however, is this time a union-movement, which brings the organisational form of the labour movement to housing, the very pole of the nexus on which the institutional populist left lost precarious workers. They demand a significant re-regulation of the housing market, to start.

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Appendix

Appendix A [Chapter 4]

Spanish interviewees

N	Alias	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Migration Background	Date
1	Carmen	F	39	master degree	high school teacher	no	23.01.2024
2	Paola	F	42	primary school	cleaner	yes	08.02.2024
3	Frida	F	49	high school	waitress	yes	14.02.2024
4	Santos	M	23	bachelor degree	rider	yes	16.02.2024
5	Felipe	M	45	bachelor degree	supermarket/shop assistant	no	21.02.2024
6	Sierra	F	33	master degree*	social worker	no	07.03.2024
7	Luis	M	42	master degree	English teacher	no	09.03.2024
8	Lola	F	33	bachelor degree	human resources professional	no	11.03.2024
9	Laura	F	30	master degree	social educator	no	12.03.2024
10	Lucia	F	34	bachelor degree	social educator	no	14.03.2024
11	Diego	M	40	master degree	(academy) teacher	no	18.03.2024
12	Eva	F	50	(post) high school*	auxiliary nurse	yes	20.04.2024
13	Sara	F	49	master degree	multiple jobs (teacher, review editor, cat sitter, babysitter, insurance broker)	no	21.04.2024
14	Andrea	F	46	high school	insurance broker, cleaning lady (auxiliary nurse)	no	18.05.2024
15	Ignacia	F	70	primary school (2 years)	housekeeper	yes	25.05.2024
16	Lorenzo	M	35	master degree (some doctorate)	high school teacher	no	05.06.2024
17	Paolo	M	34	master degree	high school teacher (service workers jobs before)	no	09.06.2024
18	Maria	F	35	master degree	social educator	no	29.01.2025
19	Clara	F	36	master degree	sale assistant in a clothes shop	no	09.02.2025
20	José	M	35	bachelor degree	bartender/actor/educator	no	12.02.2025
21	León	M	29	master degree	retail worker	yes	15.02.2025
22	Ramón	M	29	post-high school/some tertiary	film fixer	no	18.02.2025
23	Miguel	M	43	master degree	screenwriter/journalist	no	27.02.2025
24	Pepe	M	29	intermediate school/high school (ESO-16)	freight loader (temp agency)	no	03.03.2025
25	Franco	M	23	high school	waiter	no	14.12.2025
26	Francisco	M	23	intermediate school (ESO-16)	waiter	no	17.12.2025

Table A.1 Spanish interviewees: socio-demographic characteristics

Italian interviewees

N	Alias	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Migration background	Date
1	Vittorio	M	29	master's degree	clerk traineeship	no	30.07.2024
2	Luca	M	35	bachelor's degree	porter in a variety store	no	02.09.2024
3	Elena	F	59	high school (or less)	care worker old people	no	08.09.2024
4	Mario	M	37	high school	worker in wood factory/blacksmith	no	09.09.2024
5	Simone	M	32	master's degree	student/casual jobs	no	10.09.2024
6	Giulia	F	39	master's degree	social educator	no	13.09.2024
7	Mimmo	M	46	high school	street cleaner/gardener	no	13.09.2024
8	Pio	M	36	post high school	auxiliary nurse	no	17.09.2024
9	Riccardo	M	26	high school	receptionist (call center operator)	no	18.09.2024
10	Chiara	F	33	bachelor's degree	call center operator	no	18.09.2024
11	Michele	M	36	high school	barman (factory worker)	no	17.10.2024
12	Francesca	F	41	master's degree	high school teacher	no	26.10.2024
13	Marco	M	43	master's degree	high school teacher (waiter)	no	27.10.2024
14	Valentina	F	31	master's degree	social educator	no	29.10.2024
15	Serena	F	32	master's degree	social educator	no	30.10.2024
16	Roberta	F	26	master's degree	human resources/training	no	31.10.2024
17	Federica	F	24	master's degree	social educator	no	05.11.2024
18	Elisabetta	F	41	bachelor's degree	leaflet promoter	yes	10.12.2024
19	Cosimo	M	29	master's degree	head waiter (basket coach)	no	13.12.2024
20	Fulvio	M	50	master's degree	high school teacher	no	15.12.2024
21	Matilde	F	29	intermediate school	call center operator	no	18.12.2024
22	Angelo	M	40	intermediate school	assistant cook	yes	31.12.2024
23	Silvio	M	59	intermediate school	shopper	no	07.04.2025
24	Antonio	M	43	high school	rider and mc donald worker	no	08.04.2025
25	Giuseppe	M	53	intermediate school	various jobs + comedian	no	15.04.2025
26	Gaetano	M	62	intermediate school	nativity craftsman (before many service and manual worker jobs)	no	15.04.2025
27	Stefano	M	37	master's degree	high school teacher	no	08.10.2025
28	Tommaso	M	32	master's degree	high school teacher	no	09.10.2025

Table A.2 Italian interviewees: socio-demographic characteristics

Interview Guide

A1. Self-characterisation

How would you describe yourself, if you had to do it in one or two minutes? What kind of person are you?

A2. Work biography

Where did you start working, and how has your career evolved up to today?

Follow-up:

I. *(If they have experience of unemployment)* Have you received help from the employment office? And state support?

II. Are you satisfied with your current job, and do you feel you receive the recognition you deserve?

III. What is a good job for you?

C. Future expectations

Thinking a little further ahead, five years from now: how do you see yourself professionally? What will your life look like?

B. Family of origin

We have talked a lot about your work experience, but what about your parents? Do you remember what they did for a living?

F. Class identity

Some people talk about classes, strata, or about "above" and "below." Does that mean anything to you?

Follow-up:

I. And where would you place yourself?

II. And how would you describe the people who are "below" your own position in society? And those who are "above" your own position in society?

E. Political biography

When you think about your life, what is the first experience you remember having with "politics"?

And today, which party would you say is closest to you?

Potential follow-up:

I. What do you think of politician/party X?

II. If X came to power with a majority of votes after the next national elections, what would you personally expect to change first?

III. Who do you talk to about politics, and where do you hear or read about it?

D. Policy preferences

There is a debate about temporary contracts. What do you think: should the government encourage or limit their use?

There is a debate about the level of the legal minimum wage. Do you think it is a good idea to raise it, or not?

There is a debate about whether the state should support people who are out of work with a minimum income. What do you think about that?

There is a debate about housing rent regulation. What do you think the government should do about that?

X. Snowballing

Could you help me find other people like you…? (I need this for the university… I am a foreigner here…)

Do you know anyone who holds views opposite to yours…?

[Participant's copy]

INFORMED CONSENT

I, Mr/Ms ……, of legal age, aged …… years, declare that I have been informed about the doctoral study **"Work experiences and political ideas of precarious workers,"** conducted by **Walter Haeusl**, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore (Florence, Italy).

1. **I have received sufficient information about the study, I have been able to ask all the questions I deemed appropriate, and they have been answered satisfactorily.**
2. **I understand that my participation is voluntary.**
3. **I understand that the interview will be recorded.**
4. **I understand that the interview or its extracts may be used only in anonymised form, exclusively for scientific purposes (e.g. academic publications), and only by the researcher or his collaborators.**
5. **I understand that I have the right to be informed about the results of the research.**
6. **I understand that I may withdraw from the study and revoke this consent:**
   a. At any time.
   b. Without having to provide any explanation and without any consequences of any kind.

Taking the above into consideration, I GRANT my CONSENT to participate in this study, in pursuit of the objectives specified.

Signature of participant: Signature of researcher:

Name and date: Name and date:

Appendix B - (Chapter 5)

Table B.1 Italy: multinomial logit models of party choice (ref. PD)

	(1) Empl. ins.		(2) Fin. ins.		(3) Additive	
	M5S	Destra	M5S	Destra	M5S	Destra
(Intercept)	0.582***	0.025***	-0.169***	-0.145***	0.218***	-0.202***
	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.005)
empl_insec1	0.322***	0.046			0.120†	-0.028
	(0.065)	(0.061)			(0.069)	(0.067)
femaleFemale	-0.171**	-0.029	-0.251***	-0.100*	-0.170**	-0.025
	(0.064)	(0.066)	(0.037)	(0.046)	(0.053)	(0.055)
age	0.008	0.011*	0.013*	0.020***	-0.003	0.013†
	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.007)	(0.007)
age2	-0.000***	-0.000†	-0.000***	-0.000***	-0.000*	-0.000†
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
edu_highYes	-0.443***	-0.311***	-0.356***	-0.271***	-0.361***	-0.277***
	(0.080)	(0.081)	(0.026)	(0.031)	(0.066)	(0.070)
edu_lowYes	0.303***	0.337***	0.173***	0.208***	0.187**	0.316***
	(0.075)	(0.077)	(0.025)	(0.030)	(0.071)	(0.073)
urbanUrban	-0.059	-0.399***	0.031***	-0.279***	-0.049	-0.413***
	(0.077)	(0.068)	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.077)	(0.069)
publicPublic	0.115	-0.152†	0.077***	-0.306***	0.152*	-0.143*
	(0.079)	(0.079)	(0.020)	(0.024)	(0.066)	(0.069)
essround6	-0.573***	-0.462***	-0.508***	-0.518***	-0.536***	-0.483***
	(0.058)	(0.058)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.060)	(0.058)
essround8	-0.256***	-0.299***	-0.477***	-0.441***	-0.337***	-0.334***
	(0.061)	(0.057)	(0.030)	(0.037)	(0.060)	(0.056)
essround9	0.518***	0.159***	0.440***	-0.003	0.496***	0.152**
	(0.056)	(0.048)	(0.034)	(0.036)	(0.056)	(0.049)
essround11	-0.364***	0.578***	-0.338***	0.432***	-0.381***	0.578***
	(0.047)	(0.066)	(0.028)	(0.044)	(0.045)	(0.066)
fin_insec			0.492***	0.135**	0.345***	0.120†
			(0.052)	(0.050)	(0.064)	(0.064)
N	2254		3851		2226	

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table B.2 Spain multinomial logit models of party choice (ref. PSOE)

	(1) Empl. ins.		(2) Fin. ins.		(3) Additive	
	UP/Podemos	Derecha	UP/Podemos	Derecha	UP/Podemos	Derecha
(Intercept)	0.373***	1.143***	0.689***	1.466***	0.416***	1.367***
	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.006)	(0.007)
empl_insec1	0.163*	-0.154*			0.119†	-0.113
	(0.078)	(0.077)			(0.071)	(0.077)
femaleFemale	-0.390***	-0.381***	-0.218***	-0.327***	-0.387***	-0.381***
	(0.081)	(0.078)	(0.031)	(0.055)	(0.083)	(0.080)
age	-0.009	-0.022***	-0.031***	-0.032***	-0.013	-0.021**
	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.009)	(0.007)
age2	-0.000†	0.000	-0.000	0.000***	-0.000	0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
edu_highYes	0.197**	-0.006	0.235***	0.051	0.205**	-0.036
	(0.065)	(0.052)	(0.025)	(0.036)	(0.071)	(0.054)
edu_lowYes	-0.549***	-0.375***	-0.470***	-0.266***	-0.564***	-0.348***
	(0.052)	(0.050)	(0.022)	(0.034)	(0.055)	(0.056)
urbanUrban	0.270***	0.067	0.186***	-0.026	0.257***	0.046
	(0.050)	(0.068)	(0.037)	(0.059)	(0.054)	(0.070)
publicPublic	-0.043	-0.210**	0.045	-0.297***	-0.040	-0.244**
	(0.059)	(0.076)	(0.042)	(0.066)	(0.061)	(0.078)
essround8	0.763***	0.602***	0.820***	0.722***	0.761***	0.578***
	(0.042)	(0.052)	(0.028)	(0.043)	(0.051)	(0.053)
essround9	0.147***	0.160**	0.192***	0.182***	0.142***	0.123*
	(0.035)	(0.054)	(0.026)	(0.047)	(0.036)	(0.055)
essround11	-0.395***	-0.113†	-0.321***	-0.038	-0.401***	-0.151*
	(0.034)	(0.060)	(0.022)	(0.050)	(0.038)	(0.063)
fin_insec			0.062	-0.116**	0.036	-0.106†
			(0.051)	(0.044)	(0.071)	(0.060)
N	2357		3527		2336	

† p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Figure B.1 Spain: average predicted probabilities by employment precarity

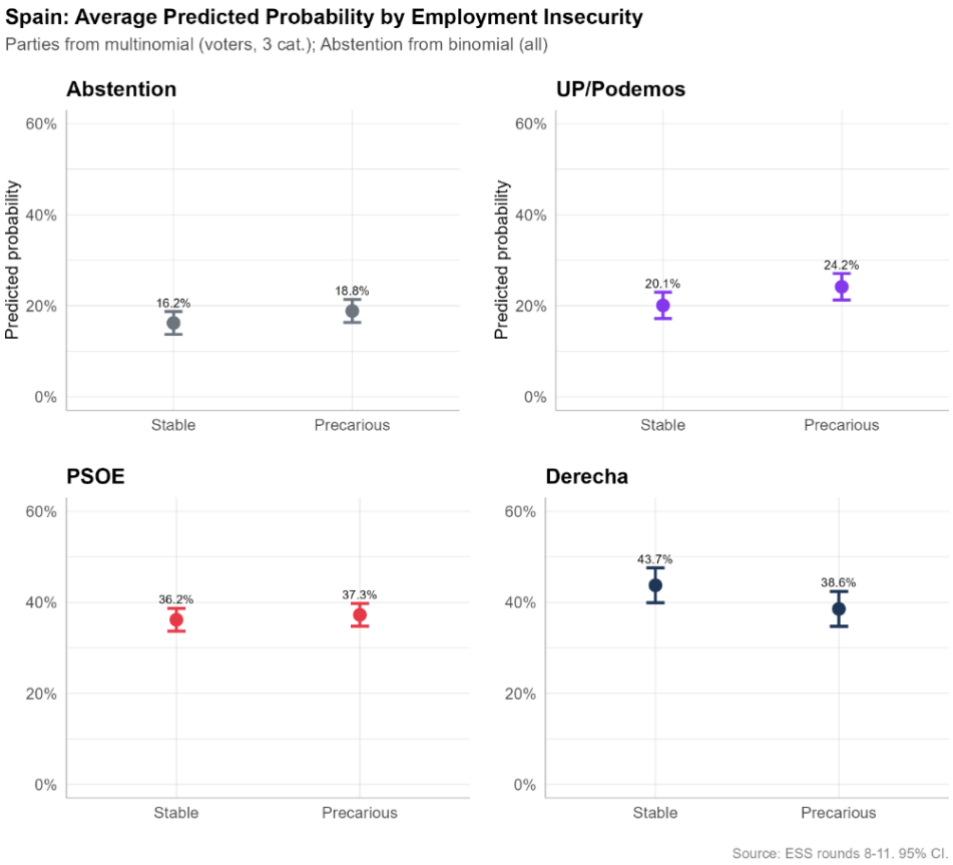


Figure B.2 Italy average predicted probabilities by employment precarity

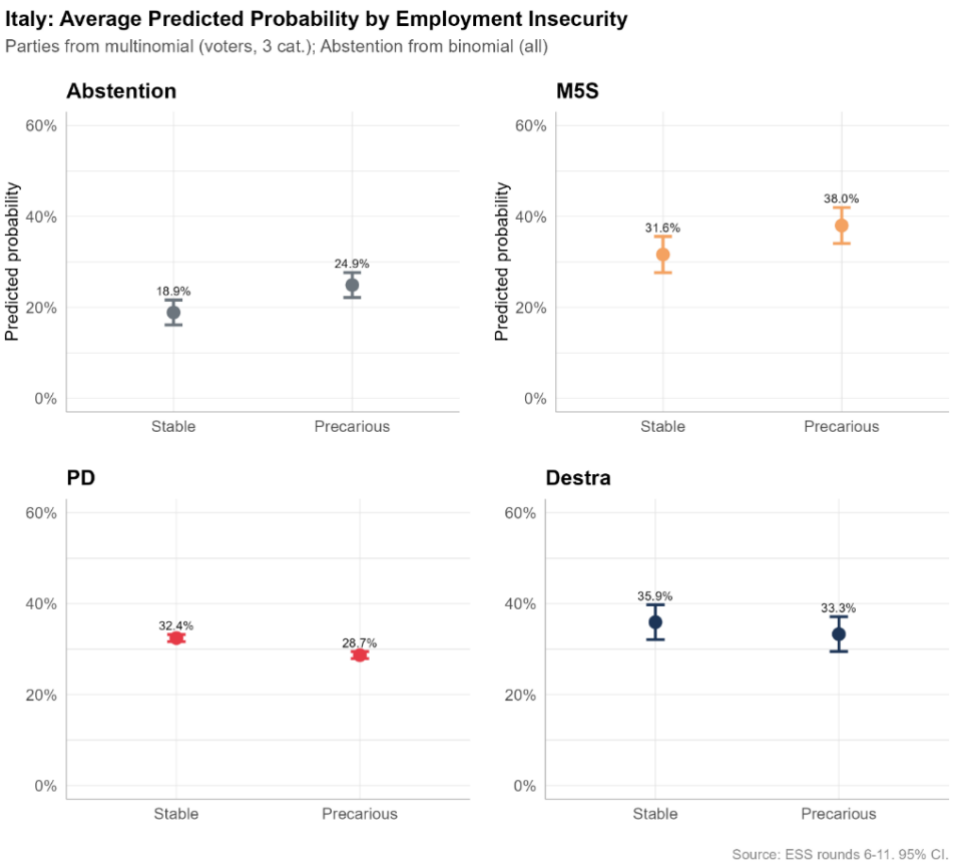


Table B.3 Spain weighted vote share by election year, total population and precarious workers

Outcome		2016	2019	2023
UP/Podemos	Total population	26% [22-29]	18% [16-20]	15% [12-18]
	Precarious workers	29% [24-34]	20% [17-24]	10% [6-14]
Abstention	Total population	16% [14-18]	17% [15-19]	22% [20-25]
	Precarious workers	19% [15-22]	22% [19-24]	29% [24-34]

Note. Shares weighted by ESS post-stratification weights (pspwght). 95% confidence intervals in brackets. UP/Podemos share computed among voters, abstention computed on the full sample.

Table B.4 Italy: weighted vote share by election year, total population and precarious workers

Outcome		2013	2018	2022
M5S	Total population	30% [27-34]	41% [38-44]	21% [18-25]
	Precarious workers	32% [26-38]	47% [42-53]	31% [22-40]
Abstention	Total population	22% [20-24]	21% [19-23]	30% [27-33]
	Precarious workers	29% [25-32]	29% [26-33]	44% [38-49]

Note. Shares weighted by ESS post-stratification weights (pspwght). 95% confidence intervals in brackets. M5S share computed among voters, abstention computed on the full sample.

Table B.5 Italy: AME of employment precarity by election year (binomial logits)

Outcome	2013	2018	2022
Abstention	+2.4 (2.2)	+7.1*** (1.9)	+8.0* (3.3)
M5S	+2.5 (3.8)	+7.1* (3.4)	+7.0 (4.9)
PD	-0.7 (4.0)	-6.3* (3.0)	-2.4 (5.1)
FI	+3.6 (3.1)	+2.7 (1.9)	-6.8* (3.4)
Lega/FdI		-5.2† (2.9)	-1.1 (5.5)

Note. AME in percentage points, SE in parentheses. Models: binomial logits with empl_insec * factor(election_year) interaction, controls: sex, age, age squared, education (high, low), urban, public sector. Lega/FdI not modelled for 2013. Stars: † p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001.

Table B.6 Spain: AME of employment precarity by election year (binomial logits)

Outcome	2016	2019	2023
Abstention	-0.3 (2.3)	+4.0* (1.7)	+3.6 (2.8)
UP/Podemos	+7.9* (3.4)	+5.3* (2.3)	-3.8 (2.9)
PSOE	+1.4 (3.3)	+2.1 (2.7)	+1.7 (4.3)
PP/Cs	-4.1 (3.9)	-3.4 (2.5)	-2.1 (4.0)
Vox		-0.1 (1.6)	+2.2 (2.5)

Note. AME in percentage points, SE in parentheses. Models: binomial logits with empl_insec * factor(election_year) interaction, controls: sex, age, age squared, education (high, low), urban, public sector. Vox not modelled for 2016. Stars: † p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001.

Table B.7 Italy: binomial logits with employment insecurity × education interaction

	M5S	Abstention
Employment insecurity	0.238	0.421***
	(0.123)	(0.090)
Graduate	-0.360**	-0.334**
	(0.130)	(0.122)
Empl. ins. × Graduate	0.165	-0.330
	(0.235)	(0.223)
Female	-0.158	0.200**
	(0.093)	(0.076)
Age	0.007	-0.066***
	(0.023)	(0.015)
Age²	-0.000	0.001***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Low education	0.119	0.576***
	(0.123)	(0.090)
Urban	0.134	0.040
	(0.121)	(0.107)
Public sector	0.149	-0.439***
	(0.115)	(0.108)
Round 6	-0.486**	-0.393*
	(0.173)	(0.160)
Round 8	-0.144	-0.004
	(0.141)	(0.114)
Round 9	0.437***	-0.225
	(0.129)	(0.117)
Round 11	-0.730***	0.497***
	(0.145)	(0.108)
Intercept	-0.245	-0.023
	(0.534)	(0.357)
N	2329	4599
Log Lik.	-1394.3	-2225.6
Pseudo R^2 (Tjur)	0.060	0.059

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table B.8 Spain: binomial logits with employment insecurity × education interaction

	UP/Podemos	Abstention
Employment insecurity	0.346*	0.314**
	(0.160)	(0.114)
Graduate	0.209	-0.144
	(0.165)	(0.151)
Empl. ins. × Graduate	-0.130	-0.360
	(0.210)	(0.192)
Female	-0.191	-0.066
	(0.102)	(0.088)
Age	0.019	-0.060***
	(0.025)	(0.017)
Age²	-0.000	0.000*
	(0.000)	(0.000)
Low education	-0.307	0.620***
	(0.160)	(0.128)
Urban	0.282**	-0.037
	(0.109)	(0.101)
Public sector	0.057	-0.445***
	(0.117)	(0.121)
Round 8	0.445***	0.192
	(0.130)	(0.132)
Round 9	0.087	0.666***
	(0.144)	(0.128)
Round 11	-0.296	0.654***
	(0.152)	(0.127)
Intercept	-1.586**	-0.258
	(0.553)	(0.403)
N	2680	3970
Log Lik.	-1253.9	-1704.5
Pseudo R^2 (Tjur)	0.036	0.069

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$