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Exploring *Limbo*: The experience of job-loss and unemployment in a jewellery city in Italy

Abstract: The article investigates the experience of job-loss and the following unemployment. Based on the ethnographic research conducted in Valenza, Italy, between 2008 and 2012, the article challenges an interpretation of unemployment as a liminal phase. I argue former workers experience unemployment as a “Limbo” – an existential condition underpinned by the ambiguity of being and at the same time not-being a worker. The exploration of this “Limbo” sheds light on the emotional, physical and symbolic labour that laid-off workers undertake facing their new condition. This research offers elements to read the loss of a job as an exit from a community of practices and to investigate the ways in which individual negotiate this departure.

Keywords: unemployment, ruins, “Limbo”, community of practices, economic crisis

Introduction

Accordingly, with Eurostat data, since 2008, in five years the unemployment rate of the European countries has jumped from 6.8% to 11%. This figure offers a first datum to grasp the difficult situation Europe and, more broadly, the West are facing at the moment; an horizon marked by an increasing social inequality (ETUI 2012), and a substantial political and economic fragility (Hewitt 2013). In this context, unemployment has come back to the centre of the public and academic debate. Anthropologists are having a role by highlighting the socio-cultural impact of the rise of work insecurity (e.g. Jancius 2006a; Molé 2012; Mollona 2009; Perelman 2008). The question of the social meaning of job-loss and unemployment appears still open. On the one hand, the rising youth unemployment is urging to understand the impact of the economic crisis over young generations (e.g. Jeffrey 2008; Jeffrey 2010; Worthman 2011); on the other, the thousands of jobs lost ask for an investigation of the experience of redundant workers who are struggling to regain access to the job market. This article contributes to this latter thread of research.

While, still recently, anthropologists fathomed the experience of job-loss interpreting it through the concept of “liminal stage” (e.g. Diedrich 2004; Hall 2006; Howe 1990; Newman 1989), this interpretation carries with it a burden of epistemological implications that risk to be misleading. This article challenges this current dominant theory on an ethnographic level. By focusing on the crisis of the jewellery industry of Valenza, Italy, and the job-loss experience among goldsmiths in the city, I argue that this vicissitude represents a “Limbo” – an existential condition underpinned by the ambiguity of being and at the same time not-being a goldsmith – and an individual’s process of self-redefinition and departing from being a jewellery maker. By describing the main steps through which an individual learns the crafts of jewellery making and became part of the professional community of the goldsmiths, I portrayed the structure and the meanings underpinning the community of practice of the city. The theory of Lave and Wenger (1991) has offered an important contribution to understand the making of a business community and the social dimension of an industrial milieu such as the one of Valenza. Unfortunately, little they say of the unmaking of these communities: an aspect particularly topical in this moment of economic uncertainty. This article is an ethnographic contribution to fill this gap: a contribution that highlights a possible pattern of an individual’s departing from a community of practice that pass through eliminating, weakening, and suspending those practices and attitudes that identify an individual with a profession.

Anthropology and Unemployment

To understand the social and cultural consequences of job loss and the following period of unemployment, anthropology offers some conceptual tools developed since the 1960s (Baba 2006). Growing more and more interested in the individual dimension of living in urban and industrialised communities, anthropologists investigated the social and cultural repercussions of the loss of work on individual and social groups. Thus, unlike a purely psychological interpretation of the post-employed condition, anthropologists emphasised the interconnection between social context and individuals’ emotions and actions (Tiffany, Cowan, & Tiffany 1970), exploring the collective and personal repercussions of the loss of job, such as the undermining of individuals’ social status in connection with their self-esteem (Wadel 1973). In so doing, they brought out the social meaning that unemployment has in modern societies. They noticed that this work condition is often considered to be a negatively-marked social status that causes the social marginalisation of the individual: using Goffman’s (1963) terminology, unemployment is presented as a “stigma”. While the stigmatisation of unemployment has emerged as a general trend in industrialised

countries, the strength of this stigma is not universal or universalisable, since it varies on the basis of the social context in which unemployment occurs (Little 1976) and on the gender of the individual who has lost their job (Leana & Feldmann 1992). The dynamics of marginalisation that engage the dismissed person vary as well and involve the agency of both the individual and their community (Newman 1989).

Contextually to marginalisation, anthropologists have pointed out the collective and individual's transformational aspect of unemployment. During the period of activity, Lave and Wenger (1991) pointed out an individual develops practical and social knowledge that allows her to become part of a professional community that shares common social and production practices – a “community of practices” in their terms. In order to be part of a community of practice, the individual embodies social norms and technical skills that shapes her worldview (Paetcher 2003, 542). Whereas the theory of the “community of practices” deals with the social becoming a professional, unfortunately they did not explore the practices necessary to abandon them. On a general level, job loss pushes a person to abandon this knowledge and define new categories so as to accept and understand their new social condition (Leana & Feldmann 1988, 379–380; Perelman 2008, 11). This is a process that passes through a profound and perturbing reconsideration of the system of practices and beliefs to which they previously adhered for their job (Newman 1989, 319). This struggle results in an overall process of disengagement of the individual from a profession and social environment of work that precludes any possible future reemployment in a different trade. In order to portray, anthropologists, such as Newman (1989), Diedrich (2004), Jancius (2006), and Hall (2006), have looked to Van Gennep's (1960) concepts of “liminal stage”. This concept conveys the idea of this double change, since it describes the moment in which individuals are cast off from their (previous) community and required to develop a new world view to be reintegrated into their society and make sense of their new condition (Newman 1989, 91–92). Although this concept portrays a condition of being “between and betwixt” that underpins the experience of unemployment, it also conveys a burden of implications that cannot apply to the case of job-loss and unemployment. First of all, a liminal phase is a ritualised intermediary condition, the temporal boundaries of which are known and determined, that implies the possibility of the individual's reintegration in a pre-fixed role. Unemployment is, instead, a condition whose temporal extension is un-fixed, unpredictable and potentially everlasting. Moreover, it is also unknown what job an individual may take when concluding her unemployment: it could be a similar position to the one she had in the past, or a completely new one. In other words, unemployment emerges as a condition of uncertainty in which the individual is set aside from a previous known state (past employment) and an unknown future (future employment)

structurally different from a rite of passage. Moreover, although evocative the concept of liminality seems not to capture fully the emotional and cultural labour that underpins the experience of job loss and unemployment. However, another concept, the one of “Limbo”, can offer a better insight into the actual tension that characterises this experience.

“Limbo”

The word “Limbo” is often used by anthropologists to refer to a condition of suspension that may involve different epistemological frames such as time (Fabian 1983) or law (Markowitz 1996). This meaning corresponds to the common usage of this term in English, but does not accurately reflect its etymology. The term appears in English in the 14th century. It derives from the Italian *Limbo*, accepted into English after the success of Dante’s *Comedia*. In Dante’s work, *Limbo* is not merely a suspended condition. As Lee concisely explains:

“For Dante and for the medieval world, “Limbo” was the borderland or outermost circle of Hell. Here were consigned those who had had no chance of salvation – ancients, children and fools.” (S. E. Lee 1963, 3)

In other words, “Limbo” is a form of damnation where hellish torment does not correspond to a physical torture, rather to a condition of eternal waiting (for salvation), and a waiting that is eternally frustrated.

In this respect, to classify any social condition as a “Limbo” is not a neutral acknowledgement of a suspension of ordinary conditions. Reconsidering its literary etymology, it is a suspension between guilt and innocence that is imbued with an implicit sense of frustration and defeat. More broadly, reconsidering Dante’s verses it appears that “Limbo” delineates a space/time and a human condition where individuals attempt to make sense of their past by outstretching towards a future that is (apparently) unreachable and unachievable because (it seems that) it will never happen. This propensity to consider becoming is exemplified in Dante’s work and by my informants by a sense of waiting and uncertainty.

Waiting is an attitude that is often described by ethnographers of unemployment, and appears to be an unspoken link between all the different contexts. In fact, the dwellers of Parisians peripheries wait (Bourdieu 1999); Leipzig’s workers wait (Jancius 2006b); Philadelphian sacked persons wait (O’Brien 2006); former miners in Kitwe (Ferguson 1999) as well those in Western Virginia (Stewart 1996) wait for a shift in the economy, a State intervention, or just for an unspecified improvement. Different attitudes may be put in place during this wait, but still, the condition of unemployment appears to be a long wait characterised, Stewart explains, by:

“It’s incessant compulsion to story things that happen to interrupt the progress of events; its endless process of re-membling [*sic*], re-telling, and imagining things; its tactile mimesis of decomposing objects and luminous signs that speak to people to the possibilities of something more [...]” (Stewart 1996, 8)

The display of stories and feelings that the wait brings along, thus, voices the condition of suspension, the “Limbo”, derived from unemployment: an individual’s experience haunted by the “absent presence” (Stewart 1996, 18) of a former work and the struggle of exorcizing the past in order to open oneself to the future. The vicissitudes of former goldsmiths of Valenza can help to better capture the human dimension of this “Limbo”.

Economic Crisis in Valenza

Since 2005 I have conducted my research in Valenza. In particular, this article refers to the data collected between 2008 and 2012 in the city. Valenza is a representative case of the Italian economy and its jewellery is an emblematic example of a “made in Italy” commodity. Moreover, the structure of Valenza’s industry, based on the networking of hundreds of small firms, has made the city a widely studied example of an Industrial District (Becattini, Bellandi, & De Propriis 2009). In this city, internationally known brands, such as Damiani (www.damiani.it), and international companies such as Bulgari (www.bulgari.com), Gucci (www.gucci.com), Cartier (www.cartier.com), and Boucheron (www.boucheron.com) manufacture their jewellery together with dozens of other small and medium enterprises. It is this network of firms and the expertise of local goldsmiths that have made this city the principal Italian centre for the production of high-quality jewellery: a local reality of production that has marketed its product throughout the entire world. In 2004, the industrial fabric of the city was made up of over 1,200 companies, employing approximately 7,000 employees (Garofoli 2004). In an urban population of about 21,000, these figures are a good indication of the relevance of this industry to the entire city: Almost half of Valenza’s working population was directly involved in this business.

The jewellery industry developed throughout the 19th and the early 20th century; however it boomed only after WWII (Gaggio 2007; Lenti 1994). In addition to high quality local production and crafts, the growth of the industry was propelled by the booming of the domestic market in the 1950s and 1960s. The gradual opening of markets worldwide since the 1950s and a national currency whose weakness against major international currencies increased the competitiveness of “made in Italy” products abroad, in spite of strict customs regulations in foreign markets.

In the past fifteen years, after thirty years of success and growth, the jewellery economy faltered. Between 2002 and 2008, it experienced a phase of

substantial stagnation: a two-year period (2002–2003) of a significant recession, mainly due to the instability of the markets after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a new growth that, from 2004 to 2007, brought the local industry to reach sales volumes similar to those of 2001 (De Marchi, Lee, & Gereffi 2013; Paradiso 2008a, 2008b). Alongside this slowdown in sales, the industry stopped its expansion in terms of number of employees.

The bubble of subprime mortgage derivatives that burst in the early autumn of 2008 (Tett 2009) ushered in a deep recession for the Italian economy (in 2008, the Italian GDP shrank by 1.2% and in 2009, by 5.2%), and inaugurated a new period of extreme uncertainty for the world jewellery market. Between 2008 and 2009, the world's demand for jewellery fell by 20% (De Marchi et al. 2013; Gereffi & De Marchi 2010). For the Valenza industry, this led to a sudden plunge in exports, which halved between 2007 and 2009, causing a wave of firm closures, and initiating a major redundancy as brutal as it was unexpected (2,000 people lost their jobs between 2009 and 2010). Moreover, the increase in national public debt in the face of the lack of an effective policy to revitalise the national economy between 2008 and 2012 has exacerbated the effects of the downturn at the local level, in particular due to an erosion of public services and an increase in fiscal pressure. In the 2008–12 the economy did not recover. After five years, the overall impact of the downturn was summarized by two data publicly provided by CNA the past 16th April 2013: since 2008, the job occupation rate in the city has dropped by 65%, the number of jewellery firm by 40%.

Becoming a Goldsmith

These figures well show the impact of the downturn and suggest a disintegration of the industrial milieu. In this context, the experience of job-loss and unemployment are directly linked with the disruption of the professional community that underpinned the business. Therefore, to understand the social meaning of the job-loss it is necessary to look at the ways in which an individual becomes a goldsmith and the expectations that were linked to this profession.

Becoming a goldsmith in Valenza is a progression of individual growth, and increase in technical competence that can be divided into three main phases: becoming an apprentice, becoming a (full-fledged) goldsmith, becoming an entrepreneur (Benzi & Fugagnoli 2004a; Gaggio 2007).

Apprenticeship covers the early years of work, about five to ten years that also encompasses the 3–5 years required to complete a degree in one of the local professional high schools. During my fieldwork, there were two professional goldsmith schools in the city in which youngsters can learn the rudiment of jew-

ellery making. Apprenticeship also encompasses an array of work experiences that includes formal apprenticeship, internships and informal work experiences in workshops (Benzi & Fugagnoli 2004a). Formal apprenticeship is regulated by a national law (Dgl 273/2006). It is considered a form of temporary work aimed at the acquisition of professional skills through a combination of training and work experience. All people from 17 to 30 are eligible for this form of contract, which is extendable up to three years. Despite the existence of this regulation, apprenticeship is developed through different forms of formal and informal activities in the workshop. Students of professional high schools in their last years of education are often involved in internships in jewellery firms. Moreover, most talented youths will be accepted for a few months as informal helpers by firm-owners in order to practice their skills and learn by observing elders at work. These training periods are often preparatory to subsequent forms of occupation. Young people can be hired as apprentices (ex-Dgl 276/2003), or other forms of temporary or permanent employment. Although State regulations limit apprenticeship for a maximum period of three years, to goldsmiths there is no precise limit to this initiatory state. It can take a longer period (during which the “apprentice” is hired under temporary contracts or paid under-the-counter), until, using the sentence I repeatedly heard: “You prove that you are able to stay by yourself without the constant watching of elder goldsmiths.”

In the years of apprenticeship, the individual is asked to perform more and more complex tasks, from milling a plate, to chiselling, pressing, cutting, welding, and setting stones. During work hours the youth is often left alone, although, masters (who may be the firm owner or an experienced goldsmith in the firm) generally explain by showing their apprentices how to accomplish the different tasks. At the end of the day, her work is checked by elder goldsmiths who may accept or refuse it. While in the medieval guild system the apprentice had to prove their mastery through the completion of a particular piece of work (Sennett 2008, 58), in Valenza there is no formal test or a special initiatory rite that apprentices have to pass to be qualified as fully-fledged goldsmiths. My informants noted, however, that a crucial turning point in this process of legitimation is the first full-time contract. The first contract represents the moment when the apprenticeship ends, although the goldsmith may still be used mainly for easier tasks and can continue their informal training. However, goldsmiths defined it an important recognition of the individual’s skills, since it means that a firm-owner trusts their ability and, in their terms, “is ready to bet on this new colt”, offering them a better wage and a larger involvement in production. After this point, goldsmiths are employed full time, officially 40 hours a week, but in some cases up to 70, Saturday and Sunday included. During the working day, goldsmiths stay at their benches, manufacturing the pieces that the firm-owners allocate to them: hour after hour, from 8 am to 6 pm, with generally a two-hour

break around 12 pm. Senior goldsmiths can be asked to undertake some errands in the city, but for the majority of the people employed in the firms their life is spent in the workshop, a micro-cosmos made up of a few rooms, workbenches and tools. In this space, the solipsism of the personal exercise of skills is socialised, by talking with colleagues, by observing them. In this respect, it is not rare to overhear praise or loathing for colleagues' work. There is competition, esteem, envy, love in those judgements of work and skills. These discussions demonstrate well how their peers take the work of a goldsmith seriously. It clearly appears that the individual is legitimated by the others, considered worth of being spoken of, while the work of an apprentice is generally barely considered by goldsmiths and her work, almost never discussed, apart from particular cases in which the apprentice demonstrates particular ability, such as winning design competitions, or made particular "disasters", such as wasting precious metal or stones.

The final step in the path of legitimation is the turn from a worker into an entrepreneur. After WWII, in a context of the expansion of the Italian and international jewellery markets, can be found common examples of artisans who attempted to open their own independent businesses. To have a workshop was at the same time an opportunity for a larger income and a means of self-realisation. One's firm is a sign of personal and familial success, modernity and ability. Whereas throughout the rest of Italy, industry was the subject of desire and hope – an unreachable objective for most due to the high start-up costs, in Valenza this dream was at hand. Low starting-up costs, a highly receptive worldwide market, and a high offer of work from outsourcing were the conditions welcoming an artisan once they wanted to set up their own business. Thanks to these conditions, even small studios thrived and made the desire to become a firm-owner affordable and available to anybody with even modest financial resources. Crucial, instead, was the ability to mobilise social connections to create a market for the new studio because to find other firms interested in outsourcing and creating a (possibly stable) network with them is crucial for any small workshop that thrives on outsourcing from other firms (Benzi & Fugagnoli 2004b; Gaggio 2007; Gereffi 2007). While previous employers may facilitate these contacts, it is the new firm's work that must be appreciated for its quality, that is to say, the new firm's owner as well as their employees must be valued for their products and skills. Thus, the opening and success of a firm can be read as a further degree in the process of legitimation and integration within the goldsmiths' "community of practice".

Young and adults were led to participate to this community by a system of social and economic expectations. First of all, since WWII, the jewellery industry has provided generally higher salaries than other secondary sector trades in Valenza and neighbouring cities (Benzi & Fugagnoli 2004a). In particular,

from the 1970s to 1990s, when Valenza's industry reached its maximum expansion in terms of number of employees and firms (Gereffi 2007), the average wage of a goldsmith was about twice the national salary for metalworkers with the same level of education and seniority. In the case of skilful goldsmiths, the wage could increase and reach the same levels as a head physician employed in a public hospital. Moreover, since the 1960s, Valenza's jewellery industry has rapidly expanded, requiring more trained workers than Valenza's market was offering. The firms, still barely receptive to outsiders in the 1950s (Gaggio 2007), started recruiting newcomers of both genders, even if non-qualified. They were trained in the workshops, providing them with the basics of the goldsmithing crafts, and, since the 1950s, in the new professional schools. Thanks to these institutions, Valenza has become a destination for immigration of people from all around the country and from abroad. Between 1951 and 1971, the city almost doubled in population (from 13,000 to 23,000 inhabitants) and the number of goldsmiths passed from about 1,900 to approximately 5,000. Similarly to artisanship in Crete described by Herzfeld (2004), the jewellery industry offered an opportunity of prosperity for generations of people coming from the countryside, from poverty. However, while in Crete artisans are a marginal group inside urban Cretan and Greek society (Herzfeld 2004, 12–17), jewellery making had provided most of the workers with comfort and an indisputable public recognition in the city (Fontefrancesco 2011; Gaggio 2007). Thus, the system of expectations connected to jewellery production was the motor of an inclusive dynamic that led people from Valenza and outside the city to participate in the same business and be valued mostly for their ability to learn and practice skills and express crafts and creativity.

“Limbo”: To Wait

The recent downturn coincided with the vanishing of these expectations. Since the late autumn 2008, a growing number of workers have seen their jobs become unsure and disappear. In the early months of redundancy, social cushions, such as temporary redundancy funds, offered a minimum economic support for the workers and a hope in a future reintegration into the jewellery industry. However, the recession demonstrated the overall fragility of this hope. The data concerning employment in Valenza recently published by the Provincial Council of Alessandria (Durando et al. 2012, 134–142) show the substantial impossibility of a goldsmith laid-off after 2008 to find a new job in Valenza jewellery industry. In the face of the crisis, Valenza and its jewellery industry turns from a land of hope into a “Limbo”.

“Limbo” is a word that often occurred during my conversations with goldsmiths and in the public debate of the city. Working goldsmiths and in particular laid-off workers used it to describe the human experience of the crisis. The dimension of “Limbo” represented a suspension of the ordinary work activity; above all, it highlights the disappearance of a future. Berardi has notices that

“The future is not a natural dimension of the mind. It is a modality of projection and imagination, a feature of expectation and attention, and its modalities and features change with the changing of culture. [...] Of course we know that a time after the present is going to come, but we don’t expect that it will fulfil the promises of the present.” (Berardi 2011, 24–25)

Similarly, goldsmiths saw in the recent downturn the negation of any possibility of realization of those expectations they had seen in the industry. In this context, laid-off workers define the “Limbo” experience first of all based on their daily waiting.

Like “to wait” in English, *aspettare* in Italian is part of the basic vocabulary. It is a verb whose meaning is suspended between activity and passivity: it describes the attitude, on the one hand, of delaying an action from happening, on the other, of remaining inactive in one place expecting something. Thus, the rhetoric of waiting linked to unemployment would suggest a passive attitude of a person traumatised by the experience of the loss of job and unable to react, (Kessler, Turner, & S. 1989, 651–652). Without negating the social suffering that being laid-off involved, another attitude characterizes the waiting of goldsmiths casted on the margins of the jewellery industry after their dismissal. Most of the goldsmiths I met, in particular in the early month after become redundant, workers showed an active attitude towards job market. An example is given by Matteo, a thirty years old goldsmith laid off in 2008.

After the notification, Matteo started contacting other firms in Valenza and in the surrounding towns to see if there were any jewellery producers interested in hiring him, even if only part-time. I followed him in his search for some days, moving from one workshop to another. In most cases, the firm owners did not refuse Matteo’s application and curriculum vitae, nor did they overtly admit their lack of need for a new worker. In most cases, they answered with laconic expressions that left some ray of hope, such as “I’ll let you know”.

“The first that gave me such an answer was actually my former boss. He fired me and at the same time let me understand that as soon as the turnover grew again he would call me again. Bullshit. In that situation, when no-one clearly says you are useless, what can you do? You wait and continue your search, hoping that someone is going to call you.”

In this context, thus, to wait is not a passive process antithetical to the search for work, but a struggle for a self-redefinition. At the same time, however, it

voices a fatalistic attitude towards the world that is founded on the individual's recognition of the limitations of their capacity to determine their own destiny. Thus, to wait assumed the same connotation, appearing as a discursive formation describing an interstitial status between agency and passivity, in an economic and social context where the individual's destiny appears to rely on agents outside the individual's actions: above all market forces and the wills/whims of firm-owners. Thus, as far as to wait emerges as the descriptive verb of a condition that closely recalls the condition of Dante's "Limbo", it follows that it is in this "Limbo", within this waiting, that is enacted the redefinition of the self.

"Limbo": Removing Ruins

The "Limbo" experience coincides with a period of self-redefinition in which the aspects concerning professionalism and the relationship of individuals with their work and social networks are reevaluated and redirected towards new horizons since the very substance of their past seems to disappear. The transformation does not only involve the relationship between individuals and their professional ability (Newman 1989), but appears culminating in a shift in perception and use of time, space and sociality.

The goldsmiths were explicit in this regard, as the case of Giancarlo, a gem-setter in his thirties whom I met in January 2011, shows. After almost fifteen years of work, he had lost his job in July 2010, after the firm in which he had worked for almost ten years optimized its personnel:

"Unemployment is like a 'Limbo'. Your daily routine is completely upset. You would like to go to work, just because it is normal for you to go to your workshop every morning, but you cannot do it... or rather, you can, but it is useless and painful, since it will remind you that you no longer have a job. Then, you find yourself thinking: what do I do now? You have no idea... then, you realise that you live in a suspension. The time flows but, after a few days without work, it seems to have stopped. You look at the clock, you see the hands turn and you don't know why... time appears suspended... and you understand your life, your time and the space around you, in a different way."

The rupture in daily routine and the vanishing of work opens a new scenario for the individual. No more the common ten hours in a firm with the colleagues; no more jewellery making, handling precious stones, forging gold, silver and platinum; no more extra-work at home in front of the work benches that are in the living room of most of the goldsmiths: the new existential landscape, the one of "Limbo", was generally described as "vuoto" [empty], "svuotato" [hollowed], "solitario" [lonely], and "spoglio" [bare]. In this con-

text, the self-redefinition is seen as the taming through filling the emptiness with activities and new routines. Echoing the experience of American middle class informants reported by Lee (1985), many of them found in their hobbies, house and family care a way to overcome this problem. Others established new habits, such as to go to the gym or doing some volunteering work. In establishing new routines, goldsmiths transform their experience of time and space. They create a new geography for their everyday lives. This process passes through a different allocation of time, and a new form of engagement with public and private space. The “Limbo” is traversed by removing from daily life the ruins of their time as goldsmiths.

Stoler pointed out that “ruins” – “monumental ‘leftover[s]’ or relics” (Stoler 2008, 194) of past times that characterised the landscape – are objects endowed by the analytical and evocative power of making the past live in the present, that is, to make the past haunt the present. In the “Limbo” the goldsmiths’ ruins are well-known places and objects that bring to mind experiences, memories, and actions of their previous activity, such as the firm for which one’s has worked or the work bench and the tools used at home to do some extra work at night. They were described to me as prohibited and uncanny due to the suffering they caused. They evoked ambiguous, perturbing, disturbing emotions that artisans tended to avoid: where in their house, the artisans often removed their bench, taking it into their garage or cellar, or placing it in a closet where it was used as a bulky shelf, in the public space they preferred to avoid going to their firms or even passing in front of them. Thus, the process through “Limbo” pushes individual to rearrange their home and invent new routes through the city in attempt of freeing themselves from the sense of attachment to a negated business.

This process passes through the removal of another “ruin”: the work-social networks they previously built, in particular their friendships with their former colleagues. While the jewellery industry represents a social and affective cosmos in which goldsmiths are embedded (Gaggio 2007), it is normal artisans have strong relationships with their colleagues: colleagues are often friends, sometimes become relatives, have the children raise together in the same school, and shares holidays and free time. While with the dismissal the social ties loosen because the reason for the prolonged everyday relationship ceases, the bond persists. Laid-off goldsmiths indicated their difficulty in meeting former colleagues: such meetings are often perceived as painful experiences because they remind them of the loss and the expectations they had for their former job. Thus, the colleagues turn into ruins to be removed with simple strategies that are enacted in order not to see and remember: visits to them become less frequent; the social gatherings with them are avoided; the free time is spent together with other people.

“Limbo”: The Fall

In the “Limbo”, thus, individuals shape their social and physical spaces by emptying them from the past, haunting presences, and repopulating them with new objects, routines and acquaintances. However, the renegotiation of the self that is – and at the same time is forged by – the “Limbo” moves also on another level of meaning. For my informants, the loss of their jobs was a *caduta*, a “fall”, that materialised through the reduction of economic gains, and the self-recognition of having changed position in Valenza: from being at its centre to be cast almost outside it, in the “Limbo” of being goldsmiths without a work.

In a community in which jewellery making is the fulcrum of the local identity of the city (Fontefrancesco 2011; Gaggio 2007), goldsmiths described themselves at the top of society, in a position that is superior to professionals, civil servants, and all the other workers employed in other trades, such as commerce, education, or health care. In this context, the role of the dismissed worker appears paradoxical: on the one hand, they are still members of a group since they embody its distinguishing practices; on the other, however, they have no longer been active participants in the trade, since their job loss. Thus, their status appears “between and betwixt” legitimisation and delegitimation, prestige and notoriety. In other words, they are stuck in “Limbo”.

This symbolic consideration adds a further interpretative layer to portray fully the “Limbo”. “Limbo” is not just a physical and pragmatic transformation of everyday life: it is also a symbolic move that commences with the individual driven away from the core of social legitimisation to a peripheral, delegitimised condition, suspended between being and not being (a goldsmith). This position is suffered as a “stigma”. However, rather than being the result of a judgment of society, as theorised by Goffman (1963), this is perceived and explained by goldsmiths as a self-judgment, a self-stigmatisation, deeply rooted in the frustration of expectations and the problem of redefining themselves socially and professionally.

The “Limbo” expresses itself into the experience of a substantial contradiction: the contradiction of being a goldsmith, that is to still know and embody the practices and way of understanding production of a legitimised practitioner, and at the same time not being a goldsmith anymore, because of being cast away from that production. This contradiction turns into an object through which the individual reconsiders their place in society and find a new one. To cut this Gordian knot of being and not-being, sacked goldsmiths put in place different strategies. Most of the practitioners I met initially attempted to find a new occupation in the jewellery sector. Hence, they tried to escape the “Limbo” by returning to being a goldsmith. However, experiencing the impossibility of this return, they then began a slow process of departure from that way of being. They

searched for a new, different job often in trades that were distant from jewellery making and the luxury market, but offered a possibility of fast employment and a secure wage, such as care-giving or a position as a cashier in a supermarket. This process is not only an attempt of finding a new material basis for the individual's and her family subsistence but can be seen as a broader struggle that passes through the cessation of a previous way of life and intending oneself in order to find a new way of living and intending herself and, hence, a new place in their community: a difficult change that obliges individuals to renegotiate their expectations, their dreams of success. Even after years since my informants have lost their job in the jewellery industry and found a new, different one, they expressed their nostalgia for their previous activity, showing nostalgia for a social status and a dream of success they feel to have lost forever. Using their words, a new work outside the jewellery industry was a way to rebuild a new life after the fall.

Conclusion

The vicissitudes of the goldsmiths I discussed in this article say about the impact of job-loss over workers after years of activity in a particular business. Their experiences shed light on the actual ways in which a change is negotiated and the condition, the one of "Limbo", they have to endure. In Dante's romance, the souls of unbaptized sages and children lie in "Limbo". Good enough to be spared from the torment of Hell, they cannot enter into Heaven because not baptized. They are stuck in "Limbo", because they cannot depart from their condition of not being Christian: deceased, they cannot cease their being an un-being and in so doing the "Limbo" does not cease as well.

A similar existential paradox can be found in the experience of Valenza goldsmiths: laid-off artisans experience the paradox of being goldsmiths, because they have embodied the social and technical skills necessary to be part of the community of practice, and are goldsmiths no more, because they have lost their job in the heat of a recession that is tattering the industrial milieu of the city. They enter into a "Limbo".

While Dante's "Limbo" is overall a static dimension, in which death excludes any individual's change of status, goldsmiths' "Limbo" is a transformational condition. Cast into the margins of the industry, these workers undertake a process of self-redefinition. This dramatic and woeful process leads individuals to problematize their profession, the expectations that relayed in it, and their being legitimized members of a community of practitioners. This is not the separation from a social status that is conveyed by the idea of a rite of passage, often used by scholars. Rather it is the individual's attempt of redefining the world in which she lives and to which she participates by systematically removing those

objects, practices, and people that, like ruins, remember her being, her having been, a goldsmith. Weakening and suspending these identity traits, individuals come out from the community of practice and open themselves to new opportunities. The vicissitudes of the goldsmiths do not offer elements to understand how deep and irreversible is the separation from the community of practices, but they show a way out, a possible, although uncertain, path to “un-become” a member of a community: a way made of the emotional, physical and symbolic labours that the loss of a job triggers.

While, in this way, the goldsmiths’ vicissitudes offer a starting point to further our understanding about the social meaning job-loss and unemployment, they also tell us about the actual cultural effect of an economic crisis over the link between a community and an industry. Whereas one could deduce that the manifestation of a profound crisis and the consequential closing down of firms and loss of jobs would cause a growing detachment between the workers, and above all those workers that are the victims of the crisis, and the business, the case of Valenza suggests otherwise. The way of expressing the social suffering linked to the loss of a job and the strategies for overcoming the suffering enacted by the former workers tell us about an unaltered cultural role that jewellery industry has maintained in Valenza. Laid-off goldsmiths, in fact, described the process of self-redefinition that they undertook as a form of distancing from themselves from the jewellery industry. While the idea of Limbo involves the existence of a Paradise, it has never clear whether laid-off goldsmiths found their Paradise in the jewellery industry or a particular standard of living that job-loss endangered. However, the very idea that a new job can be a way of rebuilding a life after a fall and the nostalgia they expressed suggests a centrality and a particular significance of jewellery making for my informants. As in the case of the West Virginian mine industry described by Stewart (1996), the case of Valenza seems to suggest that an economic crisis of a specific industry may take the workers to problematize their business. However, at least in the short run, this problematization does not result into a complete marginalisation of the social and cultural role of the business for the community. Rather, the cultural significance is maintained and enshrined in the memories of the individuals. Thus, the industry in crisis turns into a haunting presence that affects the life of those workers that have to find a new occupation even after having found a new job.

Thus, the stories of the goldsmiths of Valenza offer an image of the hardship the present European recession has created at the grassroots level. They describe a human landscape of ruin and haunting presences that overshadow the present of a city and its community. They testify the difficulty of finding solutions and strategies to cope with this new reality. They pose an unsolved question about the future of local industries in these days of economic unrest in Europe.

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*Istražujući Limb: iskustvo gubitka posla i nezaposlenosti u jednom
zlatarskom gradu u Italiji*

Članak se bavi iskustvom gubitka zaposlenja i nezaposlenošću koja sledi. Zasnovan je na etnografskom istraživanju sprovedenom u Valenci u Italiji između 2008 i 2012 godine, i dovodi u pitanje interpretaciju nezaposlenosti kao liminalne faze. Moj argument je da bivši radnici nezaposlenost doživljavaju kao 'Limb' – stanje postojanja poduprto ambigvitetom bivanja i ne-bivanja radnikom u isto vreme. Istraživanje ovog 'Limba' baca svetlost na emotivni, fizički i simbolički rad koji otpušteni radnici preduzimaju suočavajući se sa novim stanjem u kojem se nalaze. Ovo istraživanje nudi elemente za tumačenje gubitka posla kao izlaska iz zajednice praksi i istraživanje načina na koje pojedinci pregovaraju i izlaze s time na kraj.

Ključne reči: nezaposlenost, ruševine, Limb, zajednica praksi, ekonomska kriza

*Explorant le suspens:
expérience de la perte d'emploi et du chômage
dans une ville d'orfèvrerie en Italie*

Cet article traite l'expérience de la perte d'emploi et du chômage qui s'en suit. Basé sur une recherche ethnographique menée à Valenza en Italie entre 2008 et 2012, l'article remet en question l'interprétation du chômage comme d'une phase liminale. Mon argument est que les anciens travailleurs ressentent le chômage comme un „suspens“ – état d'existence soutenu par l'ambiguïté d'être et en même temps de ne pas être travailleur. L'exploration de ce „suspens“ jette une lumière sur le travail émotif, physique et symbolique que les travailleurs licenciés entreprennent en affrontant le nouvel état dans lequel ils se trouvent. Cette recherche offre des éléments pour l'interprétation de la perte d'emploi comme d'une sortie de la communauté des pratiques et exploration des manières dont les individus négocient ce moment du départ

Mots clés: chômage, ruines, suspens, communautés de pratiques, crise économique

Primljeno / Received: 21.03.2016

Prihvaćeno / Accepted: 26.04.2016