King's Research Portal

'Covid-19 opened the pandora box' of the creative city: creative and cultural workers against precarity in Milan

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Creative and cultural workers (CCWs) concentrate in large cities due to the livelihood opportunities they facilitate. Synchronously, cities have experienced the highest rate of Covid-19 infections. Focusing on the case study of Milan, the paper explores the criticalities of the sector and the impact of the pandemic using qualitative interviews and digital ethnography. It highlights how C-19 has exacerbated the effects of neoliberalism on CCWs, illuminating their precarious working conditions but paradoxically providing time and focus for workers to collectively organise. This paper captures CCWs use of the city to make their precarious working conditions visible in response to the unsustainable demands of neoliberalism. It also engages with the need for re-futuring contemporary understanding of the creative city, questioning the value of agglomeration economies and creative city policies, especially if workers' rights and livelihoods do not become central to the future local policy agenda.

Introduction

There is growing research on the precarity of contemporary working livelihoods (Lazzarato, 2017; Neilson and Rossiter, 2005; Waite, 2009), with cities acknowledged as the battlegrounds of fast-changing, competitive 'pop-up' cultures of precarious work (Harris, 2020). Within this broader literature, creative and cultural workers (CCWs), who are commonly bound geographically to metropolitan centres where creative and cultural industries (CCIs) concentrate, have been heavily affected by precarious labour cultures, especially following the 2008 global financial crisis

(De Peuter, 2011). The working conditions resulting from neoliberal policy interventions have put CCWs in contemporary cities in an unsustainable position, dramatically exposed by the Covid-19 (C-19) pandemic (Comunian and England, 2020; Tanghetti and England, 2021). Large cities where CCWs and work opportunities were concentrated pre-C-19 became the locations with the highest rate of infections during 2020.

This paper looks at the impact of C-19 on CCWs based in the Italian city Milan, which, before the pandemic, made headlines for its image as a creative city. In early 2020 Milan's

administrative region, Lombardy, became the epicentre of the initial spread of C-19 in Europe and remained for months one of the areas with the highest percentage of contagions and fatalities (Kapitsinis, 2020). Living in Milan during the 2020 lockdown, we observed an upsurge in social media activities of and between CCWs. The ending of the first lockdown (March–May 2020) saw CCWs marching through the city to protest about their precarious working conditions and the changes needed to improve livelihoods. The following lockdown (October 2020—February 2021) made the diffuse uncertainty even more challenging as the re-opening of cultural venues and the return to 'normality' continued to be postponed. Our observation of CCWs public outcry on the impact of C-19 on their livelihoods prompted the research project behind this paper and the need to answer some emerging questions.

The article draws on qualitative interviews with CCWs in Milan alongside a digital ethnographic analysis of online interactions between CCWs on social media groups and blogs. The paper's theoretical framework explicitly argues for the need to consider how three key (overlapping) dimensions of neoliberal policy interventions have specifically shaped the livelihoods of CCWs: (i) individualism, subjective worth, and entrepreneurialism (Dent, 2019; McGuigan, 2010; Ross, 2004; Scharff, 2016); (ii) de-regulated working practices (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005); and (iii) urban competition in the context of global cities (Peck et al., 2013). Building on this framework, we present how the impact of C-19 on CCWs' lives has led to a collective response to these three dimensions. First, a rejection of individualised struggles and collective awakening. Second, the use of new forms of associationism to make CCWs visible and campaign for better conditions, and finally, a rethinking of Milan as a creative city requiring an alternative policy framework that recognises its reliance on the workers

that drive it. Finally, the conclusions reflect on how C-19 might have changed the future development of the 'creative city' as an established policy framework pre-2020. This highlights the importance of rethinking labour conditions, agglomeration and mobility in connection with the sustainability of urban creative economies. Ultimately, C-19 has further exposed how creative cities face a significant threat if they fail to address a more equitable and supportive employment environment for their creative workforce.

Creative and cultural workers: entrepreneurialism, precarity and the city

There is a significant body of literature on the political and economic dynamics of the CCIs and their workforce (Conor et al., 2015; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013). However, CCWs have been subject to specific policy interventions over the past twenty years that have added further challenges to their precarity and therefore needs particular consideration. Overall, these challenges can be explained within the theoretical framework provided by neoliberalism (Springer et al., 2016) and its consolidation in our society (Brown, 2003). Concerning CCWs' livelihood, three critical dimensions of neoliberalism have been singled out in the literature. First, the literature recognises how neoliberalism has fostered an understanding of individuals as self-managing a wider range of structural challenges (Ross, 2004). This applies both to the economic dimension of livelihoods— through a push towards entrepreneurialism (Scharff 2016), reshaping ideas of self-worth and dimensions of subjectivity in what has been termed the 'neoliberalization of consciousness' (di Leonardo, 2008). Second, the de-regulation of work and workers' rights (Crowley and Hodson, 2014) has eroded basic welfare provision for workers. Finally, within the context of cities, we have witnessed

an increase in international competition and neoliberal urban branding and planning exercises (Peck et al., 2013) alongside the erosion of public services. As discussed, all these neoliberal developments that affect individuals, their work and access to the cities are exacerbated further when we focus on CCWs and their livelihood in the past 20 years.

First, we know that the construction of CCIs, which emerged in the late 1990s, connected creativity with the growing economic-driven agenda of neoliberal economies, a rationale that was soon after globally adopted (UNDP and UNESCO, 2013). The political discourse on the value of the CCIs was promoted specifically with an individualist and competitive agenda. The internationally recognised DCMS's (Department of Media, Culture and Sport in the UK) definition of the creative industries in 1998 explicitly focuses on the individualist nature of CCIs as 'those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent', having 'a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property' (DCMS, 1998, p. 3). The sector was therefore promoted and celebrated mainly for its value to the economy, without highlighting its significant interdependency with the public and not-for-profit sector and evidenced collaborative and social dynamics (Comunian et al., 2020). Policymakers focussed on the individualistic and competitive nature of the work created (McGuigan, 2010) without consideration of how this discourse was internalised by CCWs in connection with entrepreneurial subjectivity (Scharff, 2016) and individual self-worth (Dent, 2019).

Second, CCWs have been proven to be front-runners with the broader socio-political changes that are associated to what Beck (2014) defines the 'brave new world of work' driven by the neoliberal agenda and the emergence of the 'gig economy' (Prassl, 2018). In particular, CCWs were amongst the first to have concepts such as 'flexibilisation' and 'autonomy' applied to their job descriptions. As knowledge spread of the various employment models and governance, it exposed geographically dispersed examples of inequality and exploitation that had become normalised within these new cultures of work. Thus, precarity emerged as a unifying concept to understand the framework of employment across multiple creative, media and cultural sectors (Alacovska and Bille, 2020; De Peuter, 2011). Gill and Pratt (2008) use Negri's concept of the 'factory without walls' (p. 7) to describe the duality of precarity, which on one side multiplies 'unstable, insecure forms of living' (p. 3), but on the flipside generates the possibility of 'new forms of political struggle and solidarity' (p. 3). However, new forms of solidarity and resistance have been slow to form—due to the individualistic accounts of the struggle to succeed as previously mentioned—while the sense of self-worth associated with being creative (Dent, 2019) has obscured the ability to recognise and/or resist precarity (Arvidsson et al., 2010). Therefore, this article builds on the 'invisible precarity' of CCWs (Comunian and Conor, 2017). It is important to consider how the strong individualisation of CCWs has resulted in less visible forms of solidarity and resistance that have been reported for other sectors of the gig economy[1] (Heery, 2009; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020)

Finally, policy and research recognise the strong connection between the celebration of CCWs and the development of global cities. The broader literature from urban studies charts the emergence of the global city as an interconnected system for the flow of information and finance, with wealth accumulation benefitting the corporations and businesses that drive this flow, rather than being put back into the city itself (Sassen, 2000). The neoliberal constructs of the creative class (Florida, 2002) fed into a political drive to facilitate growth and urban competitiveness as a catalyst for further job creation. The concentration of CCIs into major global centres has been used to reinforce the

position of the CCWs as an essential element of localised urban regeneration and city branding interventions with little attention to their diversity and needs (Grant and Buckwold, 2013). However, the concentration of capital and investments in these cities also highlighted their exclusionary dimension. While the CCWs are often partially responsible for the increased economic value of a locality due to creative placemaking (Courage and McKeown, 2019), they are paradoxically pushed out due to limited access to affordable housing and unsustainable local amenities such as healthcare, childcare and social service (McLean, 2014). Labour precarity in the CCIs was further exacerbated by the global financial crisis. This temporarily created the space for new models of urban consciousness to emerge (Mayer, 2013; Novy and Colomb, 2013). Other authors have reflected on the response of CCWs to the dynamics of urban creative neoliberalism. There are multiple examples of CCWs contesting the neoliberal creative city policies that lead to their displacements, such as in the case of Berlin (Novy and Colomb, 2013).

Bringing together these three sets of literature and policy interventions allows us to shape a new framework where CCWs are evidently working across three broader issues associated with the urban creative neoliberalism: the application of individualistic and entrepreneurial models to every sphere of life, precarious working conditions and increased financial pressure derived by creative policy interventions (including place branding and redevelopment). These dynamics are self-reinforcing and place CCWs—despite their high level of human capital (Comunian et al., 2021)—in an extremely weak position within the urban hierarchy. This vulnerable position is also connected with the invisibility of CCWs in economic, social and urban policies. When the C-19 pandemic reached Europe early in 2020, these pre-conditions imposed by the increased adoption of neoliberal practices and policy in global cities created a 'perfect storm' for CCWs. In

this paper, building on this theoretical framework, we explore how the impact of C-19 has been experienced by CCWs, in the case of the city of Milan and structure the discussion around the same three dimensions: their individual and collective understanding of their work and working conditions, their demand for visibility and working rights and their vision for the future of creative urban agendas following the pandemic.

Milan: the creative city at the heart of the Covid-19 crisis

Milan is a global city (Anselmi and Vicari, 2020); with 1.4 million inhabitants, it is the second most populous city in Italy after Rome. Milan produces 10% of the national GDP, and the pro-capita GDP was around Euro 49,000 in 2019, almost twice the national average (Euro 26,000) (Assolombarda, 2019). Recognised as the heart of the Italian creative economy, in 2019 CCIs in Milan and the surrounding region (Lombardy) generated Euro 25.4 billion of added value, employing approximately 365,000 workers, respectively, 26% and 24% of the nation's total (Symbola, 2019). According to Montalto et al. (2019, p. 63), Milan is fourth in the Top European Cultural & Creative Cities after Paris, Munich and London, primarily due to the high level of employment opportunities across the creative sectors, explicitly confirming the importance of CCWs for the city. On one side, the city enjoys international headlines as a 'creative city' (Armondi and Bruzzese, 2017) and is famous for major events (De Carlo et al., 2009), such as Milano Fashion Week and Salone del Mobile. At the same time, scholars have investigated some criticalities concerning CCWs' conditions and the city's cultural policies, especially in relation to the scarcity of institutional funds for the arts and the predominance of private initiatives in the cultural sector (Arvidsson et al., 2010; d'Ovidio and Cossu, 2017).

In 2020, Milan and the wider Lombardy region became the Italian area most affected by

the C-19 virus. Between February 2020 and June 2021, the region recorded around 800,000 C-19 infections and 33,000 deaths, with Milan identified as the Italian metropolitan area with the highest infection rate (Regione Lombardia, 2021). These numbers were accompanied by local and national periods of restriction (see Supplementary Appendix 1), during which CCIs have been hugely penalised. It is the concentration of CCWs and the impact of C-19 on the area that makes Milan a fascinating case study to reflect on the impact of C-19 on CCWs within a creative city, specifically how their precarity and working conditions stood the test of the global crisis. National, regional and city initiatives prioritised the health crisis, while national, regions and city initiatives and funding were only slowly put in place to respond to the impact of C-19 (end of 2020), leaving businesses and individuals to fend for themselves for almost a year. Many of these measures (see Supplementary Appendix 1) were not able to reach CCWs, and even when they reached them (late 2020), they did not provide for the livelihood of individuals who were not able to work for almost 12 months.

Methodology

This study emerged as a consequence to the uprise of CCWs operating in the Milan city-region, in response to C-19 in the period March–May 2020. As our interest and the project developed, we intertwined digital ethnography methods (Barassi, 2017) with qualitative interviews to gather a better understanding of the phenomena as it was developing.

We conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with 16 CCWs based in Milan and the Lombardy region (Table 1) alongside a digital ethnography (Barassi, 2017) of locally based online platforms and blogs either set up or active following the C-19 pandemic (see Supplementary Appendix 1).

The interviews were conducted remotely, using internet-mediated communication, from November 2020 to June 2021. Interviewees were offered complete anonymity, although some were keen for the group they represented to be mentioned (Table 1). Each participant was asked to provide an overview of their working situation pre- and post-C-19, with follow-up questions exploring their awareness of precarity prior to the pandemic, the structural problems of the sector, and their connectivity with other CCWs and emerging or existing associationism. We were interested in participant's relationship to Milan, its role as a creative hub and the opportunities it offered (pre- and post-C-19).

Data and Analysis

In light of the theoretical framework proposed, we analysed data referring to the following conceptual areas: (i) individualism, subjective worth and entrepreneurialism; (ii) de-regulated working practices and (iii) urban struggle in the context of global cities. Building on these concepts, we aim to add to this literature by connecting it with the conditions that create an insurgence of awareness and collective resistance. In doing so, we emphasise an urgent need to reconsider the urban dynamics of CCWs and their future.

From individualism to collective awakening

In March 2020, the normal modes of production suddenly stopped, granting CCWs time to pause and reflect. Most of the participants in our study reflected on the shift from their busy schedules to being at home, with time to spare in front of a screen connecting with others.

> Being stuck at home has allowed us, both artists and technicians and other support workers to organise, to find the moment to see each other virtually […] The lock-down created a self-awareness in almost everyone [Interviewee 11].

The time and remote connectivity provided an opportunity to communicate, share common

Table 1. *Interviewee sample (in two cases, interviews 7 and 12, the interview included two people, with different profiles and personal experiences but jointly representing a workers' group/association).*

	Sector	Gender	Profile
Interview 1	Performing Arts & Events	M	Light/sound technician, non-VAT registered
Interview 2	Public Art	M	Public art venue director, employee
Interview 3	PR & communications	F	PR & Press specialist, company owner
Interview 4	Visual Art	F	Curator/Intern/Art Student non-VAT registered
Interview 5	Performing Arts	F	Theatre taylor, non-VAT registered
Interview 6	Performing Arts	M	Actor, non-VAT registered
Interview 7 Participant a	Visual Art	F	Art Curator, Art Workers Italia (AWI) representative
Interview 7 Participant b	Visual Art	F	Lecturer and Writer, Art Workers Italia (AWI) representative
Interview 8	Performing Arts	M	Dancer, Employee
Interview 9	Visual Art	F	Cultural Association director, VAT registered
Interview 10	Performing Arts	M	Actor and playwright, non-VAT registered
Interview 11	Performing Arts	M	Light/Sound technician, non-VAT registered
Interview 12 Participant a	Performing Arts	M	Video technician, Artemis association representative
Interview 12 Participant b	Performing Arts	M	Sound engineer, Artemis association representative
Interview 13	Visual Art	F	Art Curator
Interview 14	Visual Art	F	Art Communication Specialist

struggles and the consequence of their precarious condition on their ability to make a sustainable living (or support a family) both prior and during the lockdown. This contrasted the individualised accounts of economic and precarious labour demands pre-pandemic, showing that immobility and time became valuable resources for passing from a 'self-focused' to a 'collective' perspective.

The summer season was cancelled, […] we created this group called "Tailors on the Stage" we were already in contact and even before we would help […] but now this group has expanded, we have decided to come together, to produce information, share the information everyone had [Interviewee 4].

The universal inability to move, travel and work created the conditions for cross-sector communication through newly created platforms that evolved from established social media platforms as this interviewee articulates:

AWI [Art Workers Italia] was born as a Facebook group, totally spontaneous and at the beginning, quite disorganised [...in a short time] the group literally exploded in our hands, with people angry, frustrated, but also enthusiastic about the idea of finally having [...] a space for discussion [Interviewee 7a].

Rather than existing networks mobilising online, new groups emerged specifically when restrictions came into place. For the first time, CCWs seem to start using the language of 'we' as opposed to the individual. This was also acknowledged by the use of the hashtag #siamotuttisullostessopalco (#weareallonthesamestage).

During the lockdown, social media platforms and digital communication tools enabled an emerging sociality that benefitted from this pause, which interrupted their previously competitive individual livelihoods. Our qualitative research captured a desire to use the standstill purposefully. As Interviewee 12a explained, shared experiences of complaint and injury created a move towards collective action, 'people started to ask questions, started to go and study, we organised working groups, this was the main thing that happened in this period, the study'. Suddenly CCWs became much more aware of the contractual issues affecting the sector, as the interviewee explains, 'we studied and found out that what was paid in social security via cooperative [...] do not allow you to build a pension plan [...] we did not know this before' (Interview 12a). Therefore, the main objective of this emerging sociality and solidarity (Beck and Brook, 2020) was to come together in the moment of emergency but also to consider long-lasting changes not just for CCWs in Milan but the wider labour force.

For many, the turning point was a recognition, through research and knowledge sharing, of new competencies and an ability to engage in sector development, again overturning the previous logic of seeing working issues as individual issues requiring sacrificial (Ross, 2004) or entrepreneurial responses (Scharff, 2016). As Interviewee 6 reflects, 'we are not going to be able to substitute lawyers and lawmakers, but up until now, we were absent from discussion around our profession'. Therefore, the engagement was directed towards shaping CCWs future in a different trajectory. In a few months, many of the informal Facebook groups had become partially formalised. New associations and organisations were formally created (see Table 2), as Interviewee 7b highlighted, 'we wanted to have a legal entity, a format that was recognised [...] AWI was born on the 1st of May 2020, Labour Day, for us it is a symbolic date'. Furthermore, there was also a degree of meta-coordination emerging as many of the more sectorial organisations started also talking to each other under the umbrella of *Coordinamento Spettacolo Lombardia* (CSL). This coordination body allowed for shared discussion to take place in relation to future actions but also to create a critical mass to engage with the city and regional policymakers. This also meant sector-specific organisations were no longer working in silos, and the level of collective lobbying power could increase.

Artemis [association] was born [...] we invited another association of audio-visual workers that was created to talk [...] we asked them how can we overcome the fact of being freelance, to try and united present the perspective of workers and have a unique common block [Interviewee 12b].

The groups emerging tended at first to be very specific to the sub-category of workers (for example performing arts technicians, visual art workers, theatre tailors etc.); however, as discussed, their reach grew and evolved. A few groups were previously using online or mobile communication to interact, but 9 of the 11 groups included in this research project emerged during the C-19 outbreak.

Table 2. *New collective groups emerged during the C-19 pandemic (alongside pre-existing ones).*

Collective/workers Organisation	Sector	Started (month/year)
Coordinamento Spettacolo Lombardia (Umbrella organisation)	Lombardy Performing arts and Showbusiness Coordination	March 2020
ATTREZZISMO VIOLENTO	Performing arts/Showbusiness Technicians	Pre-Covid-19
LAVRATRICI E LAVORATORI DELLO SPETTACOLO LOMBARDIA	Performing arts/Showbusiness workers	March 2020
LAVORATORI DELLA DANZA*	Dance workers	March 2020
ATTRICI ATTORI UNITI*	Actors and Actresses	March 2020
BRESCIA UNITA LAVORATRICI E LAVORATORI DELLO SPETTACOLO (BULLS)	Performing arts/Showbusiness workers (Brescia)	May 2020
MOVIMENTO DI SCENA*	Performing arts workers	March 2020
SARTE DI SCENA*	Performing arts/theatre tailors	March 2020
(The group existed previously as a Whatsapp chat, but it formalised during the lockdown)		
SALTIMBANCHI SENZA FRONTIERE*	Circus/street arts workers	Pre-Covid-19
ART WORKERS ITALIA*	Visual arts workers	May 2020
ARTEMIS* Associazione Rete Tecnici E Maestranze Intermittenti dello Spettacolo	Performing arts/Showbusiness Technicians and Artisans	November 2020

*Operating also at national level.

The activities—thanks to the coordination of CSL—also resulted in collective demonstrations as soon as the lockdown restrictions were lifted. As Interviewee 1 reports, 'I took part in workers' action that started from the 30th of May and afterwards, I am following the activities of CSL very closely'. Many highlighted the necessity of physically connecting with each other and to give visibility to their struggle in person in the main streets of the city.

> It was great to have the possibility to meet each other, it was the demonstration in the main square on the 30th of May in Milan, I did not know anyone […] so many people came towards me, introducing themselves, talking, like the situation created a thread, an invisible thread, connecting us […] it was not like that before [Interviewee 6].

The trajectory of development, from the informal discussion to the more formalised association and activism in the streets, is seen as a crescendo and an essential step for CCWs to not only gain self-awareness and transform it into public-awareness but also to open up the discussion with institutions to create change and dialogue that will inform the future development of the sector and its workers. Therefore, the move of many of them towards more formal structures suggests the need for long-term sustainability of CCWs rights and working conditions, rather than simply addressing the impact of C-19.

The data presented demonstrates how atomised working and emphasis on subjective self-worth, pushed by neoliberalism agendas, have come to the fore during the pandemic and, crucially, were critically exposed due to the interruption caused by C-19. The initiatives created illustrate a desire to move beyond individual solutions to making broader structural change, breaking with a neoliberal logic that puts the responsibility on individuals to 'manage' themselves and their precarious work.

From the awareness of precarity to making de-regulated working conditions visible

While all the participants in our project discussed at length the unique and catastrophic impact of C-19, there was a universal recognition that its impact was exacerbated because of the precarious condition that pre-dated the pandemic. As described by Interviewee 1, even before C-19, their work involved 'big periods of maximum effort, of work pressure, […] you can work almost every day and there can be other long periods—for long I mean weeks/months—in which there is nothing to do'. Despite the recognition of precarious working conditions pre-C-19, all respondents indicated how C-19 heightened and exposed their fragility. Many used strong visual images to represent their vulnerability to the new challenges created by the pandemic seen as a 'gust of wind on a house of cards […] it was standing only thanks to the sacrifice and precarity of its workers' (Interviewee 6) or as Interviewee 5 reported:

> The inability to work unmasked the harsh reality, making it much more visible than before. Covid-19 opened a pandora box, somehow unveiling the darker side of creative work that before had been ignored.

Many acknowledged the level of pay as problematic, and there was an increased concern in unfair contractual arrangements, the lack of social security and welfare buffers. This was openly identified, as explained by Interviewee 4, 'we work on-call, projects with the shortest of notice, contracts which are even shorter'. These conditions were rationalised as 'structural', 'part of the job' as confirmed by Interviewee 5—'we move with the productions […] precarity and stability—a fixed home-personal stability is just very relative in our work'. The fragmentation of contracts and jobs that characterised the sector made their labour invisible within the welfare support system that accompanies other forms of work, as highlighted by this contemporary art worker:

> …any professional in the contemporary art system during the pandemic found themselves outside any frame or structure, therefore outside any possibility to have access to subsidies or economic support of any form [Interviewee 7a].

Another interviewee 1 stated that only now he realised that things were not well before C-19 and that 'the rest of the world of work has social security we did not have'. This invisibility is also acknowledged in the hashtags used on social media #esistoanchio (#Iexisttoo) #iononsonoinutile (#Iamnotuseless).

The C-19 pandemic did not simply expose issues of work precarity or lack of social security for the sector. More critically, it highlighted to many CCWs the invisibility of their work, professionality and skills.

> …we always worked with the view that what was important was delivering the results no matter what, […] first of all it is a working sector in all its rights […] the world should see us, first of all, as workers [Interviewee 12b].

Others denounced that this is connected with a particular perspective on culture as a sector. A sense that the public discussions on valorising or protecting culture were focused on its materiality, not the immaterial side like live performing arts (Interviewee 4). This has led to a tendency to think about material and institutional dimensions rather than a focus on who produces and creates.

> …the feeling of being abandoned, the indifference by institutional organisms […] never before I realised that the sensation of being invisible, of not being recognised, […] even within the emergency measures, even in the distribution of specific funds towards the art

and cultural sector, the figure of the worker is always forgotten […] they talk about art, sites, culture, […] institutions. The actual workers, the artisans and technicians, the workers like us, have never - up to today - been considered [Interviewee 12b].

This invisibility is often acknowledged in the social media hashtags and comments, a post on 'Lavoratrici e Lavoratori dello Spettacolo Lombardia' (Performing Art Workers Lombardy) posted on 15 October 2020 read 'people are not like stage equipment, you cannot simply dust them off when you need them' with the hashtag #esistoanchio #(Iexisttoo).

With the easing of lockdown, the physical demonstrations became a very important moment for CCWs to make themselves visible in the fabric of the city but also visible nationally in the context of their contribution to

Milan as an important economic, cultural and communication centre in Italy. Their presence (with its colourful and performative dynamics, see Figure 1) was set often in the backdrop of squares that have been empty for months but also important institutional/iconic buildings or spaces—like the square of the Duomo di Milano (also visible in Figure 1) and in other key locations in the city (Figure 2).

Table 3 presents our analysis of messages of resistance and protest that were displayed on banners during this period (see also Supplementary Appendix 1). As visible in Figure 2, these have been displayed in front of institutional buildings, main cultural venues and large corporate buildings of companies involved in leading international events taking place in Milan (for example, Milano Fashion Week or Salone del Mobile). The lengthy closure of cultural venues in many ways helped

Figure 1. *Photograph of the 'demonstration' in Piazza del Duomo di Milano (30 May 2020) with performers and protest banners (photo courtesy of CSL).*
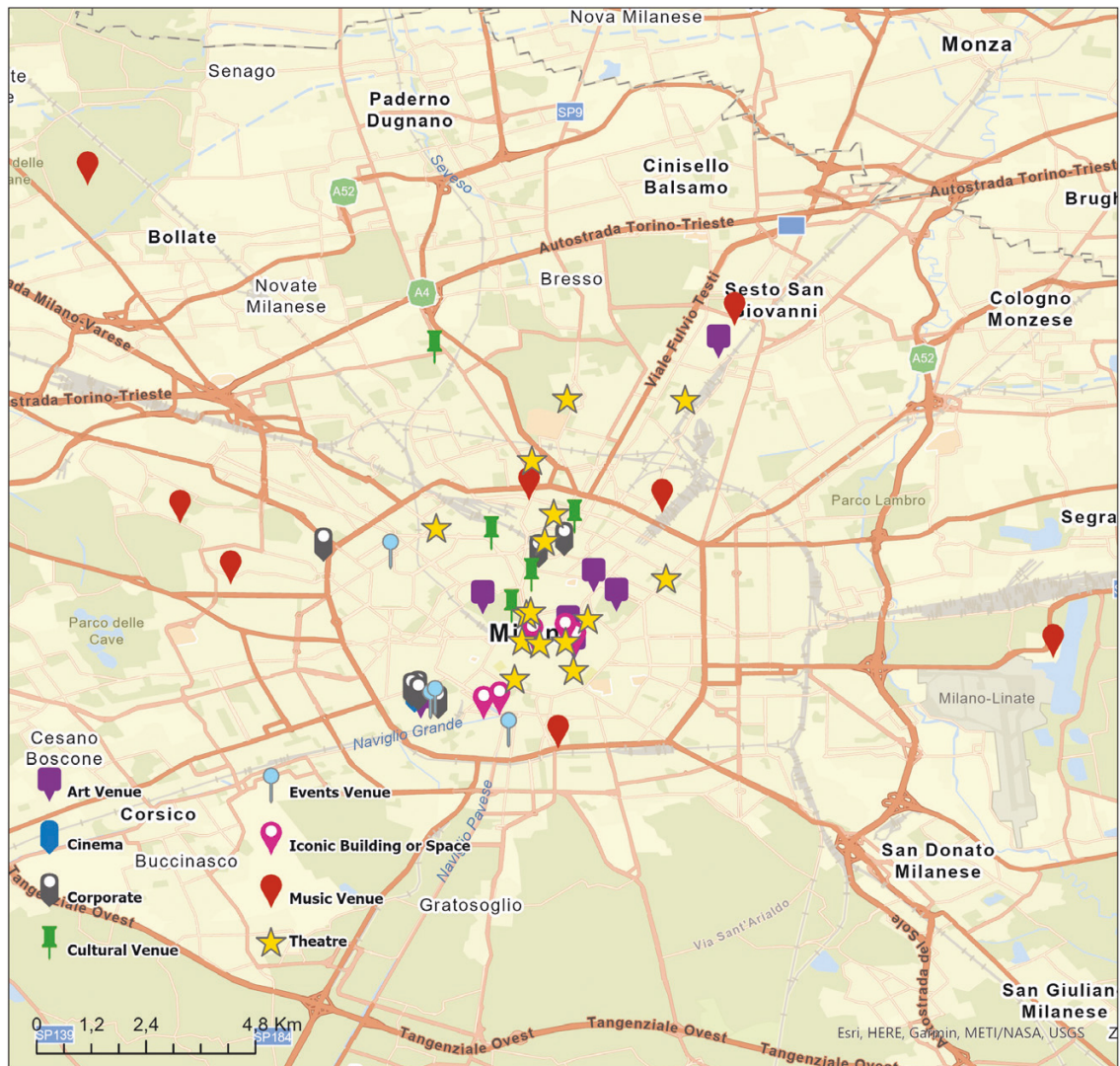
Figure 2. *Map of Milan and the location of protest banners across the city and its cultural and institutional venues.*

to highlight the contrast with the animated spaces in front of them. It also gave visibility to the range of skills and expertise that remain hidden or unacknowledged in most cultural venues. As this post from the CSL Facebook group made on the 7 April 2021 remarks:

> We are used to be behind the scenes, to move silently, always dressed in black not to

be seen. We are used to working to enable others on the stage, to give them a microphone so they can voice what they have to say. In the last year instead, we are the ones that have something to say.

Throughout the protest and demonstrations, the CCWs received little institutional support from the city and regional institutions. Both the

Table 3. *The locations and content of protest banners displayed in Milan.*

Venues	Banner
Music Venues (FondazioneAugusto Rancilio; Carroponte) **Theatres** (Teatro della Cooperativa, Piccolo Teatro Strehler, Teatro Manzoni, Teatro Dal Verme, Piccolo Teatro Grassi, Teatro Lirico, Teatro Elfo Puccini, Teatro Out Off, Teatro Verdi) **Event/ Cultural Venues** (Fiera Milano Rho, Associazione Olinda Onlus, Zona K Scappatoia Culturale)	Our job is live. NO to the Netflix of Culture. (Il nostro lavoro è dal vivo. No al Netflix della Cultura.)
Theatres (Teatro Arcimboldi, Teatro Bruno Munari) **Events/Cultural Venues** (La Fabbrica del Vapore, Fiera Milano City) **Music Venues** (Alcatraz, Stadio San Siro, Circolo Magnolia, Ippodromo del Galoppo di San Siro) **Corporate Venue** (Allianz Cloud) **Art Venue** (Pirelli HangarBicocca)	Invisible but indispensable. (Invisibili ma indispensabili.)
Theatres (Teatro Fontana, Scuola Di Teatro Luca, Ronconi, Teatro Arsenale)**Event/Cultural Venues** (Base Milano, Casa degli Artisti) **Cinema** (Cinema Mexico) **Art Venues** (Mudec Gallerie d'Italia GAM Galleria d'Arte Moderna Triennale Milano) **Music Venue** (TunnelClub) **Iconic building/ space**(Duomo di Milano)	Culture is not intermittent. Overcoming the crisis to rebuild the future. (La cultura non è intermittente. Superare la crisi per costruire il future.)
Iconic building/space (Borsa Italiana,Galleria Vittorio Emanuele) **Corporate** (Fondazione G. Feltrinelli, Direzione Generale Unicredit) **Art venue** (Palazzo Reale,Museo della Permanente) **Event/ Cultural Venue** (Castello Sforzesco, Superstudio, Auditorium Fondazione Cariplo)	State of permanent agitation of culture and performing arts. (Stato di agitazione permanente della cultura e dello spettacolo.)
Iconic building/space (Ponte AldaMerini) **Corporate** (Moncler, Fendi, Zegna, Armani Silos)	There's no fashion week without performing arts workers. (Non c'è fashion week senza lavoratori e lavoratrici dello spettacolo.)
Music venue (Santeria Toscana 31)	There's no music without performing arts workers. (Non c'è musica senza lavoratori e lavoratrici dello spettacolo.)
Iconic building/space(Naviglio Grande)	There's no Salone del Mobile without per-forming arts workers (Non c'è Salone del Mobile senza lavoratrici e lavoratori dello spettacolo.)
Theatres (La Scala, Piccolo Teatro Strehler)	Rights Dignity Income Culture. (Diritti Dignità Reddito Cultura.)

interviews and digital ethnography exposed the limited reach of regional policies in response to C-19. Local institutions and policymakers were exposed for not caring enough about CCWs—or maybe lacking awareness about their role and work structures—and not acting fast enough when providing support. Interview 12a explained how the city of Milan might provide funding to culture but needed to better understand how they were used as most of them simply were directed towards structural and building costs. Institutions were prioritised over workers, reinforcing pre-existing hierarchies rather than considering the long-term impact.

[in other regions in Italy] they have allocated funds specifically for performing arts workers, giving subsidies to workers like us, through regional calls. In Lombardy we still do not have them, all that has been done has been directed to institutions, like La Scala, Piccolo [theatre]… only institutions have been helped, workers have not been helped in any way [Interviewee 8].

Our digital ethnography illustrates the inability of city and regional institutions to interact with CCWs and recognise the value of their work as a Facebook post on the Lavoratrici e Lavoratori dello Spettacolo group's page demonstrates, 'during the emergency and during the "re-opening" there have been many sectors classed as marginal and unnecessary: culture and performing arts are amongst them, policy is remaining deaf to any request of help' (10 June 2020). However, within this lack of policy engagement, as Interviewee 9 reflected, 'never like in the last nine months performing arts workers have been talked about'. She added that all of this has led to debate opening up. While the dialogue with institutions has presented many challenges, for the first time, the coordination of workers has allowed them to have a voice.

Overall, the data presented in this analysis section demonstrates the value of collective responses to the issues of individualised precarity created by neoliberalism but exacerbated by the pandemic. It shows the engagement towards making CCWs more visible and the need for collective actions; beyond the demonstrations, it highlights longer-term agendas to reshape structural issues and working conditions in the sector. Arguably C-19 could make CCWs even more competitive and therefore generate more individualistic tendencies, so long-term sustainable actions here seem to contrast short-term solutions towards a more long-term rethinking of CCWs working conditions.

Urban struggles and the role of policy: the future of the creative city

Our interview data reinforced the public calls exhibited in banners of the need to support CCWs during the pandemic and the failure of the city to do so. However, they also reflected on the consequences of failing to support CCWs, such as workforce reduction, loss of skills due to their necessity of finding other forms of work. As Interviewee 1 highlighted, 'since the first lock-down, I did not stop sending CVs or finding jobs, even outside my professional area, to find a temporary solution'. Others (Interviewee 12a) also considered personally this problematic re-deployment of their skills: 'I know this for sure, family men [breadwinners] reinvented themselves as postmen, delivery drivers, heavy logistic, even agricultural labourers' to which Interviewee 12b added, 'I wash dishes [as a job], now'. Withdrawing from the industry was identified as a necessary solution both in response to the recognised status of CCWs in the wider labour market and the need to secure an income to afford the high costs of living within Milan. It is too early to fully comprehend the impact of these changes on the sector, a phenomenon that again was considered by participants as Interviewee 11's articulation indicates:

> …we risk losing our professionalism, many like me are looking for other options to sustain themselves, have a livelihood, and for many, if you are not able to practice, if you cannot keep the art and professionalism alive, you might never be able to pick it up, back from when you left. […]

Interviewee 10 highlights how the Milan job market is very unsustainable because the city runs on two speeds, one being the super-up-to-date, innovative, creative cluster, comparable with other European capitals, the other is the one of a slow labour infrastructure, with a flagging bureaucratic framework a factor of 'the limitations of the Italian system'. He added,

Figure 3. *Photograph of the protest banner in front of Teatro Piccolo Strehler with the message Rights Dignity Income Culture (Diritti Dignità Reddito Cultura) (photograph courtesy of CSL).*

'this becomes a very dangerous boomerang for people who want to develop professionally' because it traps them with no opportunities to grow. Similarly, Interviewee 7b in reference to the contemporary arts sector acknowledges that it is 'an environment that does not allow you to plan anything, because you are trying to pay a rent that you cannot afford'.

One respondent highlighted how the city had in the past mainly used culture as a form of 'window dressing' (Interview 13), and therefore, the engagement with CCWs was always oriented towards exhibiting and showcasing rather than supporting creation/creativity *per se*. Similarly, another interviewee (2) acknowledged how, from the policy perspective, the value of culture has been associated with numbers. For example, blockbuster exhibitions promoted in the city, to the point that, when museums could open again over the summer,

in between the Spring and Autumn lock-downs, and numbers could not be achieved (due to social distancing measures) the entire value of keeping museum opened was questioned. He explained, 'they talked about break-even point' in relation to visitors' numbers as if a public sector museum was a business. All of this seems to suggest, he added, that when museums cannot be large tourist attractions, they 'have no reason to exist and be there'.

For the respondents, this means that the C-19 pandemic will have an even greater impact at the urban level, as many aspects that were key to Milan as a creative city become less important, while some other elements which were not so important before (communities, quality of life, green spaces) are now valued much more. For Interviewee 6, this might break the 'the monopoly of the 'Milanocentrism''. For some respondents, there was a consideration

of whether C-19 might shift the branding of the city, which has created unhealthy dynamics in the creative economy and perhaps make it more feasible for new opportunities to emerge. Interviewee 4 wished 'you could have more distribution in Italy of cultural hubs, so that you do not have to have people in Milan starving [to work in the arts]'. Other respondents consider the dynamics of re-location (out of Milan and the region) that has followed. Interviewee 3 reflected on the fact that from the first lockdown, many CCWs have moved back to their cities, regions and towns of origin: 'they worked from there, they might still be working from there […] they are probably better off there, maybe more comfortable, with their families, with larger houses, with a lower living cost, with more greenery around, less pollution'.

Some of the reflections from the interviews pointed at the need for re-futuring, which we understand as rethinking and redesigning current practices with the future in mind as to make them sustainable in the long-term (see Gross et al., 2021), by reorganising CCWs' contractual arrangements and reconsidering their relationship/role in the city. Interviewee 14 discussed the need to abandon the idea of 'resilience' and instead embrace change 'we would be idiots to be resilient, going back again to the same frameworks […] the crisis needs to be regenerative […] no more *where are the best practices?* There are no best practices, we need to write it all *ex novo*'. Specifically, concerning working conditions, all the respondents argue that Milan's institutions and policymakers had a responsibility to improve CCWs operating conditions and contracts. As the public sector is involved in both the running or funding of many city institutions—as well as commissioning a range of providers for events and city-wide provision—the city municipality itself needed to take the lead in the transparency of contracts, rights and social security connected to them. Interviewee 1 observed that the Italian public sector has invested in recent years on health and safety at work and better financial

transparency for events. Still, they have not considered the rights of event workers and contributors and the contractual management of CCWs failed to account for their long-term sustainability through a limited social security entitlement mechanism.

Finally, a post on the 9 June 2021 on CSL Facebook group acknowledges that after 12 months of pressure from CCWs groups, the Regional administration (Consiglio Regionale della Lombardia) recognised the need for a new framework for contractual arrangements for CCWs in the showbusiness and performing arts. The Regional administration also agreed to commit and promote at the national level a reform that would take into consideration the suggestions put forward by the CCWs associations but also to consider specific areas where the region could act and implement changes directly.

The data presented in this section highlights how the impact of C-19 has broader implications for cities that aim to sustain the title of 'creative' cities. These implications are still developing and might be felt in the months or years to come as mobility and new working patterns emerge. However, it is clear that the relation between creative cities and their CCWs need to be re-articulated.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper investigated three key impacts of neoliberal policy interventions on CCWs: (i) individualism, subjective worth, and entrepreneurialism (Dent, 2019; McGuigan, 2010; Ross, 2004; Scharff, 2016); (ii) de-regulated working practices (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005); and (iii) urban struggles in the context of global cities (Peck et al., 2013), exploring specifically the impact of the C-19 pandemic on these dimensions.

The paper adds to the literature on the individualism of cultural and creative work (i) through considerations of the conditions that create opportunities for connectivity and

associationism: C-19 triggered a consciousness and collective solidarity that had been previously obstructed due to the fragmentation, individualism and pressure of CCWs careers. Whether we can determine this as a permanent shift towards collectivism or representing a singular response to a moment of crisis, remains an open question. An update of our digital ethnographic analysis shows that at the time of writing (March 2022) all the targeted groups are still actively operating. However, further research is needed to address how this newfound collectivism will evolve.

Our data confirm issues of precarity as preconditions for working in the CCIs (Alacovska and Bille, 2020; De Peuter, 2011), showing the invisibility of the de-regulated working practices in the sector (ii). Adding to this literature, our findings highlight how the sudden interruption of production provoked an urgency in making these previously unconsciously accepted conditions visible, first virtually through online platforms and social media and, following the lockdown, through public demonstrations, banners and protests. Lastly, the article contributes to the literature on CCWs' urban struggle in global cities (iii), showing the unbalanced relationship between the institutional attention to CCIs for urban regeneration and city branding and the limited attention to CCWs' diversity and needs (Grant and Buckwold, 2013), connecting also to the exclusionary dimension of the city. C-19 created the opportunity for new models of urban consciousness to emerge (Mayer, 2013; Novy and Colomb, 2013), bringing many CCWs to change jobs and even city, while protesting against culturally-based neoliberal urban policies. This inevitably raises questions on the role of policy makers in protecting those who make the 'creative city' happen.

As Comunian and Conor (2017) argue, the lack of policy interest and structures for CCWs tends to become visible only in moments of crisis. C-19 has provided a critical moment to make visible the fragile and almost absent structural recognition and support of CCWs both to policymakers, wider public audiences and the workers themselves. Our data have illustrated how this pandemic has turned the city into a site of public struggle and request for recognition.

Therefore, as illustrated in the summary Figure 4, C-19 and the 2020 lockdown have in many ways created opportunities to question, respond and rethink the frameworks that neoliberal policies have imposed on CCWs and their livelihood. CCWs have reacted to their individualised self-worth and entrepreneurial subjectivity with new practices of collective action; they have made their work much more visible in the city and requested better social security and working conditions for the future; finally, they are questioning and considering how their mobility and their relationship with the creative city can be reshaped. Through the proposed theoretical framework and data collected, we can understand the impact of C-19 on three key dimensions of neoliberalism that have shaped CCWs livelihoods and understand the way the pandemic has impacted CCWs in a more holistic and ecological approach (De Bernard et al., 2021; England, 2021).

This inevitably made us reflect on the role of policy: CCWs in Milan discovered not only that they had no 'power to determine the structural boundaries and hierarchies that organise urban society, including their own positioning in it' as Valli (2017, p. 4) considers, but that they had been completely left out of any support structure. This also posed a critique to the industry and its agglomeration economies. If it is unsustainable for people to make a living as CCWs in Milan, then we can understand agglomeration economies as working for the industry in terms of creative outputs for a competitive market, but working against the CCWs ability to live a sustainable life. Many saw this time also as a moment for the city of Milan to rethink its cultural offer but also the condition in which its CCWs are working to survive within the city.
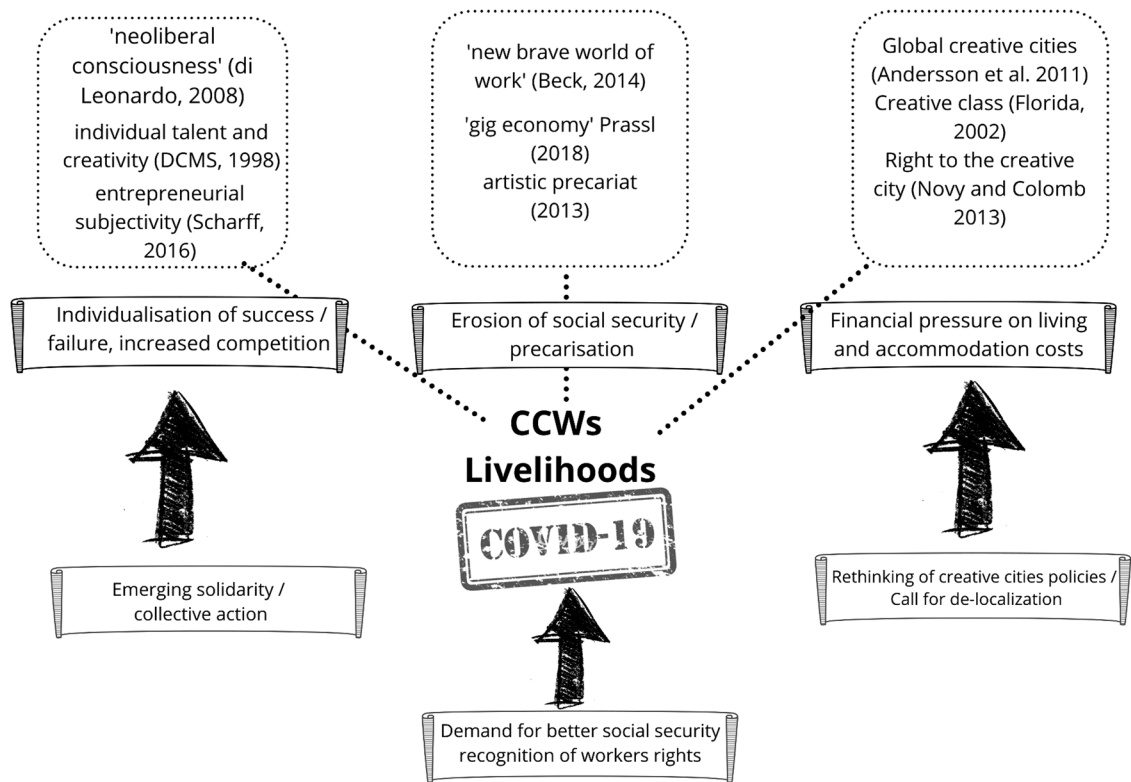
Figure 4. *How C-19 triggers CCW resistance to the impact of neoliberalism on their creative livelihoods.*

Many respondents push for this to happen through harmonisation and homogenisation of the rights of CCWs as workers. So, the challenge for future creative cities is to rebalance the presence of institutions and the cultural offer, with a recognised ethic of care for CCWs that pays attention to and recognises their needs of sustainable welfare support (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2019; Wilson et al., 2020).

Overall, the paper contributes to the literature on CCWs' rights to the creative city (Novy and Colomb, 2013) by reflecting on the impact that C-19 has had on urban-based CCWs (Gross et al., 2021). While the city-region of Milan has been used as a case study, we want to acknowledge that many of the issues observed have been experienced by CCWs in other cities across Europe and beyond. It is essential

to question whether cities that have invested more in their image and brand over the quality of life and sustainable working conditions for CCWs might experience a longer-term creative economy backlash following the more imminent economic and health crisis caused by C-19.

Is there scope to imagine a more fluid, mobile and geographically dispersed creative economy, with the shift to remote working creating more sustainable opportunities for CCWs who are no longer bound to the creative city with its extortionate living costs? This echoes the work of others trying to capture the importance of regional and interregional mobilities of talent (Brydges and Hracs, 2019), especially concerning new affordances offered by technologies and in connection to individuals' different lifestyles and lifecycles. Our research

raises a further question on whether C-19 has created an opportunity for creative cities to re-future their image by adopting a policy agenda that is centred on liveable working conditions for CCWs to ensure the sustainability of the industry. There is scope for Milan—and many other European cities—to engage more critically on the value that CCWs bring to the 'creative city' and how intrinsic their well-being and livelihoods are to the dynamics of urban development not only economically but socially and culturally. There is no creative city without CCWs, and their futures are interdependent and intertwined.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary data are available at *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* online.

[1] The 'gig economy' describes a range of working arrangements denoted as precarious, flexible and contingent, including casual workers, temporary agency workers, those on zero-hours contracts and dependent contractors (De Ruyter and Braun, 2019).

Acknowledgements

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