

“This system has to change”

Valeria Pulignano on the precarious situation of translators

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“The coronavirus has not only attacked vulnerable individuals – it has highlighted how Europe’s atrophying social ties leave a growing precariat exposed,” says Valeria Pulignano in a recent [article](#). And translators are among them. Counterpoint spoke with Pulignano, Professor of Sociology at the University of Leuven (Belgium), about her research into working conditions of translators and other precarious workers, and the effects of the Corona-crisis.

It is the end of March when we have our interview on Skype instead of in person, as originally planned – trains to Leuven have been cancelled due to lockdown measures. These same measures have also had an effect on the international study Pulignano and a team of researchers began in October 2019. Data collection, scheduled for April 2020, is for the time being partly done by online interviews. Meanwhile, the topic of the research has become more visible than ever. “Paradoxically, Corona brings to light the full extent of the precarious situation of translators and other people in similar working conditions,” Pulignano remarks. “The

Covid-19 crisis magnifies the distortions imposed by neoliberal ideology on the socio-economic system. The question is how people will be affected.”

The research project [ResPecTMe](#) will investigate the precarious working and living conditions in eight European countries of people with so-called ‘non-standard employment arrangements’: people, in other words, who work without the “good, old-fashioned, full-time, open-ended employment contract”. Literary and commercial translators are among the professionals included in the study. Sharing their precarious working and living conditions with a large group of other people, they work in such diverse fields as arts and culture, the care industry and the gig economy, ranging from journalists and ballet dancers to nurses, Upwork freelancers and Deliveroo riders. The number of people working without a contract or with an atypical contract has grown exponentially, especially after the financial crisis of 2008, when people were strongly encouraged to ‘be flexible’ and go into self-employment. Thus, a category

that for a long time mainly applied to people working in high-end professions such as lawyers, private doctors and architects has over the last years become much bigger and much more diverse, whereas the socio-economic position of workers in this category has become much more precarious.

Bogus self-employment

Formally, translators have always been categorised as self-employed. It is precisely this status which currently prohibits them from obtaining collective bargaining rights. But this is a misclassification, says Pulignano, especially now: “Translators are dependent on work that’s commissioned to them. It is bogus self-employment, since their income is based on a client – provider relationship, that is, a subordinate relationship, which would actually require a formal employment.”

Two more factors add to translators’ precariousness: the unpredictability of new assignments, and unpaid work. Looking into the relationship between precariousness and the unpredictability of work, and uncovering the increasing amount of unpaid activities that underlie paid work, are among the goals of Pulignano’s study. In the field of literary translation, unpaid activities include writing book reports, correcting texts for book covers or catalogues, assisting in promotional activities once a translation is published etc. And when translation fees are too low to make a living, which is often the case, even part of the translation work can be considered to be unpaid work. Pulignano: “In the creative industries people are often prepared to do unpaid or underpaid work out of commitment and love for their

profession. As a result of socialisation, it’s sometimes also deemed normal not to get paid for certain types of work. But most of all people are dependent on new assignments. By doing work for free, they hope to acquire what Bourdieu called ‘social capital’: a social network which might enable them to find other assignments.”

“Competition is high, people are eating each other”

The fact that translators only get paid once a book is handed in to the publisher puts additional stress on their economic situation. The long months translators spend working on a book before they receive their fee, and the often modest remuneration waiting at the end of a translation project, force many translators to take on side jobs in order to survive. The online world of commercial translations could offer possibilities for additional income. “But this is an extremely liberalised, deregulated world. There are no fixed prices, but at the same time minimum standards are lacking and required entry qualifications are very low (for most fields of translation there’s no certification). As a consequence, practically anyone can throw himself into the struggle for an assignment. Companies pay no taxes and can always find cheaper labour. Competition is high, people are eating each other.”

Markets and mental state

Meanwhile, circumstances in the offline world of book translations have changed too, and very radically so. Pulignano describes how increased competition and a growing deregulation of the market have resulted in uncertainty and loss of bargaining power for translators. In some countries like Sweden the effects are deepened by the abolishment of fixed book prices resulting in a book market which shows a huge imbalance of power. A few big players, such as large publishing chains, occupy a central position in the market and exert an enormous power, whereas translators are left with hardly any influence. They have no collective bargaining rights, no working guarantees nor (social) protection such as adequate unemployment benefits and paid sick leave. They have, in short, none of the rights or guarantees people with an employment contract usually benefit from.

“We should rethink the concept of work, the way we live and work”

The EU’s role in all this is problematic, Pulignano says. “European competition law, which traditionally focused on safeguarding competition on product markets, doesn’t fit the current market. An individual who works freelance is

considered to be an undertaking, an autonomous economic entity, offering services and bearing the financial risk of it, but the working conditions of the freelancer are not taken into account. Unless EU legislation is adapted in such a way that it protects translators and others who are misclassified as self-employed, it will consolidate or even strengthen the present imbalance of power, and thus make their situation even more precarious.”

When it comes to the impact of precarious working conditions, economic aspects are often in the foreground. But the effects are so much more pervasive: the instability created by precariousness affects and shapes a person’s whole life. Pulignano: “What about having children, for example, or taking out a mortgage when your income can drop at any moment and there’s no predictability of work? What does it mean in terms of respect when you have to do work that’s unpaid?” In order to get a full overview of what exactly precariousness means, Pulignano and her team will not use a ready-made definition of precariousness as their starting point but will instead ask their informants to tell them how they experience it. Using narrative interview techniques, the researchers will look at how precarious working conditions shape people’s life and work trajectory.

Towards a truly sustainable society

Just as precariousness affects the life of an individual, it also has an impact on the economy and society at large. “In our societies, where things are measured according to their economic value, no pay equals no value. By definition, unpaid work (and this includes underpaid work) is part of the informal



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Valeria Pulignano

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economy. It is, in other words, not visible, not respected and not reflected in indexes such as the GDP, an indicator for economic growth. Formally speaking, unpaid work simply doesn't exist.”

The economic and societal impact of this has become even more problematic now that the number of the bogus self-employed and other people working under non-standard arrangements has increased so dramatically. “A crisis like the Covid-19 that we're experiencing now, shows that the system is not sustainable. One thing we shouldn't forget,” adds Pulignano with emphasis: “Economic uncertainty relates to social uncertainty. Protecting the health and social conditions of workers as individuals and citizens cannot be seen as trading off against economic growth. This makes for an essential policy argument at both local, national and EU-level: protecting workers also means protecting companies.” More balanced power relationships in the market will result in more equality and ensure more equal

access to socio-economic resources. This will not only help translators (and others working in precarious conditions). Small and medium-sized enterprises, such as publishing houses, will benefit from it as well.

Thus, the Covid-19 crisis might offer possibilities for a system change. “As a sociologist, I want to give something back to society,” Pulignano says. On a more practical level, the results of her study will be used for awareness-raising workshops all over Europe. But Pulignano thinks bigger than that. “The present crisis shows very clearly that our system is not sustainable. We should rethink the concept of work, the way we live and work. We should discuss how to organise society as a whole in such a way that it will be sustainable. This system has to change.”