

[Architects and Consultants] between Formal Regulation and Organised Professionalism

Abstract: The Italian system of professions is characterized by strong disparities between professionals recognized by the state and non-regulated professions, dividing professionals in terms of protection from market and personal risks. As a consequence, the absence/presence of public regulation is not neutral, but has a direct impact on three factors: education and training, acknowledgement, and welfare integration. This article addresses this issue explaining the divergences between self-employed representatives of two professions (architects and management consultants), considered as idealtypical examples of those disparities. The investigation has confirmed strong cleavages in terms of education and welfare system access, but not in terms of acknowledgement, that still represents an issue for both the professionals considered. Furthermore, our analysis demonstrates that this fragility is partially balanced by a growing interest in self-organization, which acts as a convergent strategy for both regulated and non-regulated professionals in order to deal with increasing instability in the market and social vulnerability.

Keywords: Knowledge Workers, Organization, Professions, Professionalism, Public Regulation.

This article examines the working environment for Italian self-employed professionals, by conducting an analysis of the current working conditions for architects and management consultants. These two professions are currently working in a highly uncertain environment, due to the economic crisis, and to a regulatory system characterised by disparities between (1) professionals recognised and partially protected by the state as architects, and (2) non-regulated professionals as management consultants, who lack public recognition (Ranci 2012). The aim of this article is to examine the limits of the current Italian system for regulating the professions, in combination with the organisational strategies that have been developed by professionals to enable them to compete in the marketplace.

Focussing on the ways in which the profile of self-employed professionals is changing in Italy is conducted consistently with the relevance of self-employment in the national labour market; Italy ranks third in Europe (after Greece and Turkey) for its percentage of self-employed workers (23,1%, as compared to an European average of 15,6%) (Eurostat Statistics Database). Additionally it is still the main occupational condition in which professionals perform their activities. Finally, self-employed professionals are divided between themselves: according to the profession chosen (regulated/not regulated) and the public regulation, both of the market and in welfare provision. However, this tendency toward self-employment on a freelance basis is now changing rapidly, as a result of a more difficult market (due to increasing concurrence and the economic crisis), as well as public regulation being unable to respond to this new economic environment. One of the most important aspects of these transformations relates to qualified freelance workers, whose numbers have been consistently increasing during previous decades (Ranci 2012).

The aim of this article is to examine the limits of the current system of professionals in Italy and the organisational strategies promoted by such professionals in order to retain their ability to compete in the marketplace. On the theoretical side (as examined in further detail in section 2), this is related to the issue of entrepreneurship and the

evolving relationship between organisations and professions. In sociological terms, organisations and professions have frequently been considered to be at odds: professions are governed by an independent governance structure and their natural manner of performing their labour activities lies in freelancing, in contrast with the organisational control principles required by management. Nevertheless, this approach was brought into question during the past decade by a number of scholars (Evetts 2011; Noordegraaf 2011). These have examined the possible interrelation between organisations and professions, in order to establish the practices that emerge when professions embody organisational logic (Noordegraaf 2011).

This article will, in particular, provide evidence of the trajectories of such transformation by considering two different dynamics: (1) top-down (i.e. the role of institutionalisation) and (2) bottom-up (the organisational strategies enacted by professionals to enable them to compete in the marketplace) (Brock 2006; Greenwood, Epton 2003). The investigation attempts to go beyond the traditional model of analysis, which is based on the archetype of the liberal professional and on the joint analysis of credentialism, autonomy and professionalism (Sciulli 2005).

Professionalism and the challenge of organisations

There has recently been a transformation in the way professional work is viewed. Organisations and professionalism (which have previously been considered irreconcilable) (Freidson 2001), have now begun to merge with each other to create new forms, strategies and cultures. Such progressive hybridisation (Noordegraaf 2011) has placed into question the traditional assumptions by which intellectual work within organisations is proletarianised or deprofessionalised (Haug 1975; Mintzberg 1983). On the contrary, it favours the construction of a professional and organisational culture which utilises an organisation as a new space for dialogue (Evetts, 2011). Professionalism is no longer seen as an alternative form of integration into the labour market, but is considered as a plural mechanism (Ranci 2012). When it appears within organisations, organised professionalism demands autonomy, promotes entrepreneurship, and requires managerial and commercial skills (Faulconbridge, Muzio 2008). A number of sociologists are aware of the growing overlap between organisations and professional activities (Evetts 2011; Noordegraaf 2011), and include in their analysis professional activities (such as, in this case, management consultancy), that hold a privileged relationship within an organisation and create added value (Dubar, Tripièr 2005).

These new trends have arrived in Italy in a context characterised by a high degree of institutionalisation of professions. The Italian system of professions is based on the corporatist model, in which every profession is managed and governed by a professional association acknowledged by the state to have the monopoly on a specific activity (Malatesta 2006; Salomone 2010). Through means of their orders and registers, the resulting bodies aim not only to protect the activities of the professions and their specific skills, but also to act as a guarantee for the client. Such a model is frequently interpreted by scholars as the ideology of liberal professionalism (Bologna 2011), by which occupations and professions are distinguished in the labour market on the basis of institutional design, independent authority and identifiable jurisdiction (Sciulli 2010), for so long as such differences and prerogatives are sanctioned by Italian law. However, this mechanism has been placed into crisis by the transformation of advanced economies into post-industrial societies, particularly given the strong growth in service-provider businesses and professionals and the erosion of exclusion mechanisms that had previously characterised professions. The reason behind the changing paradigm for analysing the condition of professionals in Italy is the standard credentialism scheme. This is due to the fact the professional/client relationship is based on trust, and so long as clients buy in expertise that they do not themselves possess (Alvesson 2001) there is insufficient evidence to distinguish professionals in the marketplace. The acquisition of a certain standard of formal credentials (i.e. a specific degree or the membership of a professional association) has always been the institutional mechanism protecting professionals and their clients (Collins 1990). However, unregulated professions (such as consultancies) have not yet developed such a system. As will be seen later in the analysis, professionals are currently forced to address new forms of credentialism that go beyond this model, including informal social networks, reputational mechanisms and organisational brands (Brock

2006; Greenwood, Epton 2003). This has resulted in a progressive loss of the importance of institutionalisation in favour of a trend of incorporating organisational principles into the professional field.

Reactions and interpretations of this growing intersection between professions and organisations differ substantially between scholars. Evetts (2011) notes there are three main interpretative positions: Firstly, professions find themselves highly challenged by organisational logic, thus sanctioning a return to the concept pre-eminent in the 1970s and 1980s of proletarianisation and de-professionalisation (Haug 1975; Mintzberg 1983). Secondly, professions may assume a defensive strategy that relies on demanding higher protection for their jurisdiction and privileges (as is partially the case with architects). Finally, professionals perform new strategies and tactics in order to adapt to emerging challenges and opportunities (Evetts 2011).

On the theoretical side, these facts have raised the need for a new understanding of the different shapes that the relationship between organisation and professionalism can take in specific working contexts. In the light of this perspective, it is no longer important to assess the amount of autonomy sacrificed by a professional within an organisation, but to focus on the new form of professionalism that has been established by a voluntary union of these two worlds. Intermediate bodies (such as trade unions or professional associations) lose their importance in favour of a tailored organisational dimension, which relies on the agency of the professionals involved. As previously discussed, architects and consultants are an interesting case study in so far as they represent both regulated and non-regulated professionals in Italy, and also because their professions have recently been affected by deep transformations in terms of organisation. In particular, new forms of organised professionalism are spreading among professionals alongside the freelance model, in order to fulfil the demands of the market. It has been previously noted that organisational forms in Italy are modifying within what has been called personal and molecular capitalism (Bonomi 1997; Bonomi, Rullani 2005). The focus of this study is on the embryonic process by which professionalism assumes managerial principles and the ways in which the agency of professionals plays a major role in consolidating new forms of merger in the area of professional self-employment.

Presentation of the research design

Sections three and four of this article present the results of an investigation based on a larger study of the political economy of middle-class self-employment. The goal of this study was to examine the transformation of freelance work in Italy during the past decade, with professionals being one of the main components due to the fact that they now represent more than 40% of total self-employment in Italy (Ranci 2012). The section concerning professionals was comprised of the following: (1) an in-depth literature review; (2) the collection and analysis of data concerning the two professional groups (i.e. architects and consultants) via 45 semi-structured interviews with self-employed professionals in 2010 (21 with architects and 23 with consultants, 2 of which were a test for the interview guide). These focused on the interviewees' perceptions of the impact of public regulation on professional activity, and their strategies for becoming successful within the marketplace.

The choice of the professional groups was not intended to be representative of the entire system of professions in Italy, but to give a number of insights into the issue, based on the hypothesis of the relevance of the institutional framework of professions. The main divide between protected professions and non-regulated professions (Cassese 1999; Salomone 2010) is thus explored by taking two relevant examples of the two groups, which had been already highlighted in the literature. Management consultants have been considered prototypical of the largest group of knowledge workers (Meriläinen *et alii* 2004; Donnelly 2009; Bologna 2011), and are usually institutionally framed amongst the groups of non-regulated professionals due to their relative novelty in the labour market (Salomone 2010). Architects, on the other hand, were one of the first professional groups to achieve formal recognition and protection from the Italian state (by law 1395/1923) and relevant studies have been already been conducted on the changing role of organisations in different national contexts (Champy 2001; Ducret *et alii* 2003; Cohen *et alii* 2005).

The cleavage between professional groups has been due to the slow adaptation rate of Italian public regulations, as regards the transformation of labour markets following the shift to a post-industrial pattern of economic structure.

It has also been influenced by the increasing spread of non-conventional forms of professional employment, that are not clearly and easily recognisable in the traditional definition of 'professionals' (Collins 1997; Menger 2002). A number of scholars have previously used the label knowledge workers (Brint 2001; Darr, Warhurst 2008) in order to identify such phenomena, of which management consultants represent an exemplary case. Conversely, the formal regulations relating to architects currently appears insufficient to protect the profession. The number of architects has almost doubled (increasing from 70,000 in 1996 to 131,000 in 2007), with Italy now having one architect per 500 inhabitants, while the European average is one architect per 1,550 inhabitants (CRESME 2009). There are a number of phenomena leading to this increase, and the profession is unable to control it. Firstly, there has been a dramatic increase in numbers of female workers in all professional groups, including architects. Secondly, the boom in the real-estate market up until the financial crisis of 2008 encouraged many to choose this as a specialisation. Finally, becoming an architect appears to accord with a general trend toward professionalism among young people favouring working in the creative and expressive professions (IARD 2004). In addition, in Italy this profession is consistent with a general orientation towards self-employment, since (conversely to the rest of Europe where the profession of architect is more frequently practiced as an employee in a large firm) almost 60% of architects in Italy are self-employed (CRESME 2009).

Table 1 - Main features of the architects' and consultants' populations in Italy

	Architects	Consultants
Population	131,000 registered at the National Order (2007), approximately 53,000 organizations (2001): average number of employees 2.47	Approximately 45,000 consultants (2010), working in 13,400 organizations (2010): average number of employees 3.35
Market	90% by one worker; 6% Associate Firm	Few big Companies (40% total profit of the sector); 85% small companies
Identikit	Mostly men but an increasing presence of women. Homogeneous territorial diffusion	Mostly men. Sector concentrated in North Italy (Industrial Districts)
Self-employment	60% self-employed	Data unavailable. However, a strong self-employment concentration is estimated

Source: Assoconsult (2011), APCO (2006), Cresme (2009)

The respondents have been selected according to territorial and organisational criteria. The research design has been developed in an attempt to respect the main characteristics of the Italian professional market, i.e. the importance of micro business and the territorial differentiation of economic structure (Bagnasco 1977). The latter is comprised of figures for self-employment that differ from traditional stand-alone professionals in that they are innovative networks of organisations based on partnerships of professionals with differing competencies.

Due to the important role played by Milan for both architects and consultants in this economic context, this is where the majority (18 respondents) of the professionals involved in these investigations were based. Milan is the most relevant location for advanced services in manufacturing, and therefore a large proportion of Italian consultants are based there. Milan plays also this role for architects, and particularly for associated firms. The second group of respondents (13) were based in Marche, a region characterised by an economic pattern of development based on SMEs and industrial districts. This context is of interest for both architects and consultants for a number of different reasons: (1) it represents a more stable and less competitive context for architects, while being based on more local and personal networks than found in Milan; (2) for consultants, the profession is based

more on local SMEs in comparison with Milan. The final group of respondents (13) were based in Naples, a very difficult context for both these professions: for architects there is a risk of impoverishment and jobs of low quality, while the conditions for consultants has not previously been investigated in depth. The gender distribution within the groups reflects the strong masculinisation of consultancy and the progressive feminisation of the architectural profession during recent years. Consultants (as previously anticipated) are on average older than architects, as self-employment also represents a means of re-employment for unemployed managers and their colleagues (Maestripieri 2013). Recruitment was mostly from professional associations using snowball selection.

Table 2 - Characteristics of respondents

	Architects	Consultants
Gender	11 Males, 10 Females	17 males, 6 females
Average Age	44 years old	52 years old
Organisation	19 freelance professionals, 2 micro-business	15 freelance professionals, 8 micro-business
Localisation	8 in Lombardy, 6 in Marche and 7 in Campania	10 in Lombardy, 7 in Marche and 6 in Campania

Interviews focused on perceptions of the impacts of public regulation on professional activity, and strategies for becoming successful in the market. The interviews were organised around three main subjects: (1) the interviewees' concepts of professionalism; (2) their efforts to become autonomous; (3) their style of entrepreneurship. The contents of this article emerged due to a content analysis based on these three main sensitising concepts (i.e. professionalism, autonomy and entrepreneurship). In section 3 the effects of public regulation on training and access to the professions are analysed, both on the level of social acknowledgement, as well as that of the welfare system. Section 4 focuses on the strategies employed by consultants and architects to survive and to gain a position in the market, bringing into question the theme of evolution in organisational strategies.

Does formal regulation still matter?

This section analyses the effects of public regulation on training and access to the professions, both on the level of social acknowledgement, as well as on the level of the welfare system. The aim is to stress the differences and convergences (as far as the level of institutionalisation is concerned) between regulated and non-regulated professional groups. The Italian system of professions represents a unique case within Europe, due to the presence (in a formal manner), of strong cleavages in terms of regulation, protection and market exclusion among professionals. It is comprised of three main juridical schemes: (1) protected professionals; (2) regulated professionals; (3) non-regulated professionals.

As far as the first group is concerned, the national state not only certifies competences and skills through a rigid system of formal credentialism (i.e. state exams, subscriptions to orders and bars, and rigid procedures of accreditation), but it also specifies the criteria of access to the profession. For example, an architect is obliged to subscribe to a professional body to perform his professional activity, after undertaking at least two years of training by a senior architect and sitting a state exam. By contrast, the second group (which includes consultants) is part of residual regulation, since the state does not regulate or control either access to the market or the performance of professional activities (Cassese 1999).

The absence or presence of public regulation has a number of consequences: (1) the education and qualifications required; (2) acknowledgment and inclusion in the welfare state system.

To become a professional - The long historical process of consolidation that has characterised the architectural profession has accurately defined its jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988). The presence of an educational course (one specifically structured for this profession) and the obligation to take the state exam, clearly define the successful members of this professional group on the basis of their acquired competences. For consultants, however, there is no requirement for standard training in order to access the profession, nor a common competence base. In addition, it is recognised in the definition of management consultancy that a number of different professional activities exist, with consequences for a wide variety of education and competences among the professionals who define themselves as consultants. Furthermore, a substantial vagueness exists regarding the profession, both in terms of content and jurisdiction with adjoining professional activities.

One reason for this vagueness is that management consultancy began to grow in the 1980s, as a consequence of the trend in Italy towards de-industrialisation. The country greatly reduced its production capacity during this period and manufacturers have streamlined, dispensing with activities that do not form part of their core business (Gallino 2003). According to the APCO survey of 2006, more than a third of respondents had begun to work as consultants when they re-entered the market as professionals with a profile of having worked previously in a managerial capacity (57%). Thus, it can be surmised that management consultants comprise both those who are self-employed by choice, and those who have previously lost their positions with companies. Many professionals turned to becoming consultants after some experience in managerial positions and therefore self-employed management consultants (who represent the majority of consultants in Italy) decided to move on to this career after having gained considerable experience in organisations, without following a specifically oriented training course.

I was 48 at that time and I thought that I could still recycle myself as manager, even if at 48 years old it was getting harder. But I made this calculation that if I was at 53 or 54 years old in the same situation of a change in the top management, which is something normal in the biggest firms, it would have been impossible to find a job [...] obviously, the more logical alternative was that of management consultancy. [Cons, M, 72]

The trend for consultants becoming self-employed in the second stages of their careers is the opposite of the experience of architects, for whom self-employment is the standard model to perform their professional activity from the time they enter the job market, as it is the culturally dominant model of freelance architects “for its own individualistic nature” (Cohen *et alii* 2005).

When I used to work in the biggest professional firm. I might have been a bit unlucky maybe, but I've always felt a bit marginal, just a small element in a mechanism which didn't allow me to understand what there was before me or after my work. You risk becoming a 'specialised' professional and you don't know why [...]. I think that it is more interesting and stimulating to have the possibility to personally follow my projects, and to manage my personal choice, rather than being bound to others' choices. [Arch, M, 37]

Regulation and acknowledgement - Management consultants represent a professional group characterised by being indeterminate, something that is highly representative of the wider universe of non-regulated professionals. At present, there is no intermediate body able to form a reference for the creation of a stronger professional community, and neither is there the intention to create a new order from central government. Moreover, many scholars suggest that it is impossible for them to institutionalise their activities, due to the indeterminateness of their jurisdiction and the variety of their activities. This raises serious questions concerning their chances of being acknowledged as professionals in a sociological sense (Groß, Kieser 2006). The request for stronger institutionalisation is not the focus of management consultants, who are more in line with the recommendations of the European Union when it comes to a higher degree of liberalisation in the Italian system of professions (CNEL 2005). On the contrary, an order and a register regulate public regulation and the institutional acknowledgement of architects: however, in the opinions of the architects interviewed, they are not a strong element of protection

and institutionalisation.

The architects' order doesn't have any value, it has no power. There is the surveyors' order that is stronger than architects' one. Architects are just loose cannons, I haven't had any relationship with them, I don't feel like I'm represented by them. [Arch, M, 41]

Despite these differences in terms of public regulation between architects and consultants, the empirical comparison between them has not highlighted significant advantages for the former. The most important difference, however, lies in the different nature of their professional conflict, which is more inter-professional for architects and intra-professional for management consultants.

Our political representation doesn't exist because there isn't any law about competencies. In Spain it is different: the architect draws up a project, an engineer controls the static element of the building and then there is the engineer who follows the realisation of the project. Here, engineers do everything and they can earn from every single step and so do surveyors [...], outside the city all works are controlled by surveyors. [Arch, M, 36]

A former manager in a bank or manufacturing goes to clients speaking about accounting management and similar topics, but they have just a partial knowledge of what they're saying. They do a lot of damage and so our category suffers... the rest of the world is no longer able to identify who's working properly and who's not. [Cons, M, 55]

The professional status of architects is fragile compared to other regulated professions. They need to deal concurrently with a number of professionals with similar prerogatives, leading to their role in the process of construction being reduced, and often limited to aesthetical choices, and without being given a recognised role in the management of the project (CRESME 2009). Despite the presence of a professional body, the lack of proper professional acknowledgement contributes to ensuring that the market in which architects operate is a difficult one. Italian law acknowledges similar prerogatives for engineers and surveyors, ensuring that the construction job market is overcrowded with professionals (Soresina 2003). Such a situation increases a general feeling of mistrust in the capacity of the institution of the order, which is considered to be an obligation but without effect in terms of acknowledgement and credentialism.

In contrast, consultants view their indeterminate status as a resource rather than a restriction. The possibility that their competences may be defined by law appears to be a rigidity which they find unacceptable in following the market's needs and in renewing their approach. The issue for them is not cohabitation with adjoining professional figures, but the question of credentialism. As long as this is an important issue, it forms the crucial dimension of intra-professional conflicts. If such indeterminateness, due to its flexibility, is a resource that can be used in the market to seize job opportunities, it is also true that there is no shared minimum standard of competencies, which might assist clients to distinguish consultants from other professionals in terms of capacities and skills. Creating an order does not resolve the issue: architects are not exempt from this problem, because the state exam is not able to position itself as a filter for the skills and competences of the orders' members.

Thus the issue of quality is crucial: the presence of professionals who do not respect adequate standards is recurrent, transversally, in all the interviews. Architects frequently explain this phenomenon by the increasing concurrency of the market, most of all as a result of the Bersani (Dl. 223/2006) law, which has reduced the minimum fee. In contrast, the most common motivation among consultants is the anarchy of the market and the lack of innovative legislative instruments. These have superseded the model of registers and orders, which are often judged as obsolete in the contemporary job market.

It is therefore possible to highlight the specific meanings of such conflict for a professional group: while architects feel that their position is threatened, consultants would prefer to abolish the present system of professions as regulated in Italy.

One of the problems that we're challenging as an association is to have some kind of acknowledgment, not within the system of orders, because this is going to disappear except some specific cases like doctors or judges... but others, such as accountants or lawyers, should all disappear. It should form the acknowledgement of a category and then of a role. Today we don't even participate in political

choices, that means we're quite often excluded from the process of decision in public policies financing. [Cons, M, 72]

Such a request, however, may well have negative consequences for their already precarious position: setting boundaries between 'us as professionals and others as not' may represent a core unit in founding a common professional identity. This is a goal yet to be achieved by consultants. However, rather than attempting to set up a corporative solution, consultants (and some architects) prefer 'bottom-up' organisational strategies. This solution may assist in building reputational mechanisms free from the state, however they may become ones tied to brands and organisations, that are necessary at the micro level. It is therefore possible to understand the transverse trend of both professional groups in abandoning the traditional model of the single self-employed professional in favour of a cellular micro-organisation (Miles *et alii* 1996), as discussed below.

Social protection - The situation of professionals is critical when it comes to social protection, both in terms of the vulnerability of life-cycle events (e.g. maternity leave, care leave, illness, pensions, etc.), but also in terms of protection for the loss of wages coinciding with a crisis in the market. The three most problematic issues emerging from the interviews were: illness, maternity leave and social security.

There still remains a general disparity between professionals protected by the common benefits of the public social security and those who have a social security managed by orders. However, this differentiation does not affect the two professional groups studied in this investigation. Architects have their own social security arrangements, which are shared with engineers (INARCASSA¹). Consultants are in a mixed situation: because access to orders is managed through educational qualifications and the state exam, there are many consultants who are part of an order, although they do not practise the profession regulated by that order (i.e. psychologists, engineers, tax advisors, etc.). However, some consultants are not part of any order and are therefore dependent on public social security, which is more expensive and less generous, as can be seen in the table below.

Table 3 - Services' comparison between public social security and INARCASSA.

	Standard social security	INARCASSA (Architects)
Health Services	For hospitalizations only. It pays 38,866 euro/day for people who have an income beneath 65,000 euro/year.	Every member has insurance for hospitalization; if they want, there is the chance to stipulate an integrative insurance for every service that the first does not include.
Maternity leave	80% of income of the year before the birth of the child if the mother has worked at least 3 months. It is provided for 5 months.	80% of income earned the second year before the birth of the child. It is provided for 5 months, with a minimum of 4,753€.
Pension	A contribution of 26.72% of income is requested.	A contribution of 10% of income, plus 2% of turnover is requested.
Life-long learning	No specific service provided.	Order is in charge of organizing events and courses to maintain life-long learning, sometimes free of charge for its members.

Sources: www.actainrete.org, www.inarcassa.it

1 Inarcassa is the body that collects pension contributions from engineers and architects; it represents the basis of the corporatist system of social protection for professionals in Italy. Welfare benefits and contributions depend on the type of professional membership and it is not universalistic.

However, when it comes to social security, the architects and consultants interviewed during the investigation appeared to place more weight on risks and forms of protection, preferring to accumulate resources against the possibility of issues occurring. The general opinion was that private insurance is frequently ineffective and less convenient when compared to private savings and real-estate investments.

Sometimes I have thought about it and I know that if I have a misfortune I'm... poor because my work is my income, so if I can't work where can I get the money to live? But I believe also that this need makes me always feel good: sometimes I think I don't fall ill because I can't fall ill. [Cons, F, 55]

I receive a lot of calls, but I don't want to invest now for my pension. At this time I don't feel it's a problem. Anyway, Inarcassa gives you something. Now I don't have the money to do it. At the end, if I count all that I have to pay out, I really can't do it: the motorbike, Inarcassa contribution... I have to choose in terms of priorities. And this is not still a priority. [Arch, F, 40]

The majority believe that they will work for as long as they are able, simply in order to address the issue of security. They appear to feel obliged to follow this approach, since social security is insufficient to live on as a pensioner, and private insurances are too expensive. They do not invest money in any protection offered by the market (even for care), as they prefer to ask for help within their family network. The most vulnerable subjects in this situation of weak social security are women (Flower, Wilson 2004), who have the double complexity of a family–work balance and weak social security during maternity leave. This leads to the choice of having a child being frequently related to the availability of care from the previous generation. Even if there is a contribution for women on maternity leave, the women interviewed were frequently obliged to return to work before the end of their five month term of statutory maternity leave. This occurs not only because the contribution rate is relatively low (particularly in the public system of protection), but also because they feel obliged to maintain their network of colleagues and customers.

In conclusion: professionals registered in an order have access to a more privileged welfare state system in comparison to professionals accessing the standard public social protection. Nevertheless, even in the most favourable cases, the protection offered by the state is insufficient to protect professionals from the vulnerability of critical life-course events. In a number of cases (as discussed in more detail in the following section) an adjunctive protection may be found in the strategies of the organisation and association, which work to assist individuals so that they are not alone in dealing with the market.

Organised professionalism as a strategy

Reflecting on the strategies employed by consultants and architects to survive and gain a position in the market raises the issue of evolution within organisational strategies. This trend represents a reaction to the increase in the complexity and turbulence of the market, along with the exacerbation of concurrency and a lack of effort towards de-regularisation, which also involves the protected professionals. After focusing on the effects of institutionalisation among different groups, there now follows a consideration of the possible consequences of an association's 'bottom-up' strategy for professionals. On the one hand, organisations may represent a tie with the realisation of a professional project oriented towards self-employment (Mintzberg 1983; Brown *et alii* 2010), but on the other, they may represent a useful means of achieving success in the market (Pinnington, Morris 2002; Brock 2006; Greenwood, Suddaby 2006). Although self-employment still persists as the more frequent condition for practising professional activities, professionals are progressively evolving into a more complex reality, in which previous categories (such as individual businesses or associate professional firms) hide a number of different realities (Pinnington, Morris 2002; Brock 2006).

The interviews with professionals demonstrate this progressive differentiation between stand-alone professionals (who frequently feel isolated and troubled because they are not able to manage the transformation in the market) and networked professionals, who have become part of more or less structured networks in order

to manage such turbulences. From the professionals, it was possible to identify at least three different types of self-employed professional: a) traditional self-employed professionals (who mostly fit into the local market and are relatively exposed to inter-/intra-professional conflicts and market fluctuations); b) self-employed professionals (who have many clients, although the majority of their work comes from medium sized organisations or firms); c) recently formally self-employed professionals (frequently young people, who have recently entered the market, and who are still highly economically dependent (Perulli 2003), having just one client on whom they depend for their work). Among consultants, young workers are quite often employed on a temporary or permanent basis, while architects are quite often 'fake' self-employed professionals, even in large firms.

In conjunction with these figures, it was also possible to identify two types of small firms (ones with 2–3 partners and 1–3 dependent workers), which are part of a more general trend towards associations. These comprise of: a) associated firms of partners, working locally and globally; b) 'mutual aid' firms, in which the association among professionals (quite often belonging to different professional groups) has the primary goal of reducing the fixed costs of their activities (i.e. office rent, a secretary's salary, etc.), but also acts as an informal mutual aid system in the event of any life-course events (i.e. maternity leave, illness, etc.).

These forms will be used in the discussion below to highlight the ways in which the organisational dimension acts on those aspects previously analysed in relation to institutionalisation, in order to understand the ways in which key points for professionals are changing. The analysis will focus first on the process of start-up, followed by the role of the organisational structure as a form of social acknowledgement in the market. Finally it will highlight the condition of ties/aid in terms of social protection that a professional experiences when he/she is part of a structured organisation.

Start-up and market positioning: resources and strategies - The issue of different organisational typologies is particularly relevant, since organisations can represent either boundaries or opportunities, depending on their structures. This is an important issue, due not only to the amount of resources involved in a start-up, since these are limited due to the reduced need to immobilise capital, at least in the embryonic phase. Professionals need only a computer, a fast Internet connection, a mobile phone, a diary, and a car, all of which are commodities of everyday life. For this reason, they do not ask for loans or financial help from banks or their families.

An office can therefore be seen as simply a representative cost. A high proportion of the professionals interviewed have decided to dedicate a room in their house for their professional activities, particularly where there is no need for a separate room for meetings. This domestication of professional activity is relatively widespread among professionals (Bologna, Fumagalli 1997).

This profession gave me a great opportunity to realise my competencies and to act on the change. But you have a to pay a price, which is undeniable, and the price is the colonisation of your private life. Because your work is too greedy, it invades your private life, your family... just because I've a computer that goes in a bag and that follows me everywhere, it stalks me. [Cons, M, 61]

With increased turnover, having a partner becomes a necessity in order to sustain the increasing costs of the professional activity. An organisation frequently becomes a convenient means of attracting more projects and managing higher workloads. For both architects and consultants, the strategic issue in order to survive in the market is the construction of a reputational mechanism, which can occur in a number of different forms.

For architects in particular, building an organisation is a means of achieving independence. They are obliged to enter the professional market through the training mechanism of internship, which is compulsory for registration and is frequently unremunerated. In a profession, this might lead to a condition of strong dependency in the medium term, so long as a large part of the turnover is dependent on a single buyer, since the market does not offer a concrete perspective of self-employment. These professionals are economically dependent (Perulli 2003) and relatively reliant on the purchasing power of larger professional firms. This is a mechanism that does not allow them to develop their own market and accomplish professional competences. However, many young architects employed in larger firms claim limited autonomy and frequently denounce de-professionalisation, since they are observers and actors in a limited part of the productive and creative process, which is always managed and guided

by others (Brown *et alii* 2010). This is often the reason they break away from the large firms within a few years, frequently creating individual spin-offs, or new associations with colleagues.

I've always tried to have one step inside the architectural firm in which I was working and one in the world outside, in order to try to capture new opportunities. In the first firm I was working for, I requested half a day per week to do a training course on the security in building sites [...]; in the second I've cut bit by bit some space for other works, partially for need and partially for myself. [Arch, M, 41]

A challenge for both architects and consultants is also related to their ability to launch and develop a network of clients and contacts in order to ensure their professional activity is competitive in the market. One of the most effective strategies employed by architects and consultants is related to a process of establishing a more 'institutionalised' reputational mechanism. This is achieved to a lesser degree by the anchorage offered by a public entity, and to a greater degree by an organisational brand, which is able to become the point of reference for a reputation that is no longer of the individual professional but rather of an organisation. Among professionals, an association has become a means of guarantee, and a brand that is able to reassure and attract buyers at restrained prices. When professionals decide to start up such a new activity, the association may form simply the vehicle for their reputation: it becomes a spatial concretisation on the web, where it exists in a virtual manner on its homepage and in the emails that are exchanged.

Therefore, in contrast to dependent work, a greater percentage of working time is dedicated to unproductive activities, including the establishment and management of a personal network and also to those operations which anticipate and follow a contract (i.e. signing agreements, requesting payments, invoicing, etc.). Traditional organisational tasks (such as planning, scheduling, allocating resources or business development) represent one of the most important features of being active in the market as freelance worker. Such operations are additional to the management of other phases, which are normally connected to professional self-employment. These include: finding clients and customers; following projects; managing accounts and making payments. Strictly speaking, all these operations lie outside the time invoiced to clients (Bologna, Fumagalli 1997; Bologna 2011).

I will always remember when I told my fiscal expert that I was going to be a consultant. He said "look, you are leaving one job and you're going to take three [...] because you are going to do the same job, then you have to become your own agent, because you have to sell what are you able to do and what you have to understand is to whom you have to address your services... but you have to become also the collection agent of yourself (laughs) that is when your clients will start not paying you, alas!" [Cons, M, 50]

The necessity of at least partially reducing unproductive operations is a further reason for the eagerness of professionals to form associations and partnerships. It is customary that duties among partners are shared and divided, depending on each individual's personal attributes, above all with respect to the more technical and managerial phases of the shared professional activity. In the largest organisations, professionals share the costs of administrative personnel in order to reduce their own bureaucratic duties. This assistance is economically sustainable if its costs are divided between a number of professionals rather than being paid by individuals. Lastly, it is important to underline that having several professionals in a single association or firm represents an advantage in the market, not only because it attracts resources, establishes a brand and acts as an effective marketing tool, but also because with many professionals to call upon, it becomes a more straightforward matter to resolve problematic situations or managing complex projects and also reduces the lead time for clients (Pinnington, Morris 2002; Brock 2006; Greenwood, Suddaby 2006).

In our architectural firm we are a big group, we're two, plus eight colleagues, and then we have young designers. We manage restoration and design; we also take care of museum preparations and cultural activities. We work at a regional level, but we have also recently developed a small connection with Rome. Many clients approach us because they see we're well organised: we can manage projects in a short time even if they're complicated. We are made up of a large number of professionals and everyone has their specific competencies. [Arch, F, 51]

In conclusion: in order to be competitive as a self-employed professional, it is not sufficient to be a member of a specific profession. A combination of self-employment management skills and entrepreneurship is required in order to assist professionals in this complex system of equilibriums.

Organisation as life-jacket - The role of an organisation is not limited only to competitiveness, it also plays a role in structuring protection against risks. This is something that is not provided by the welfare state in Italy, which is lacking in generosity for self-employed professionals, particularly those who are relying on standard social security. As has already been discussed in the section dedicated to institutionalisation, the role of registers is significant in order to access the privileges of the welfare state.

In addition, professionals who do not work as individuals in the market can rely on their organisations during critical periods of their life, such as during maternity leave, sick leave or when injured. Such situations might more or less comprise the full working period of a project, but being involved in an organisation enables a partner to take over the running and also to conclude projects.

We're a bit at risk as self-employed professionals: illness, accidents and all this stuff... we immediately lose our income, then if you lose your income for a certain time you can sustain it but your firm must stay active and it must give you the possibility of entering again the market when you get well. Being in a group, and the fact that you have a colleague who knows your clients well, guarantees at least a continuity. [Cons, M, 53]

Even in the case of 'dependent' self-employed workers (par. 3), being part of an organisation makes it easier for professionals to take leave of absence, even if, as happens quite frequently, they are poorly compensated by the welfare system (if they are able to access it in the first place). At the same time this does not result in adverse consequences for their client networks, due to the fact that they do not manage them on their own.

In the absence of institutionalised generous welfare provisions, organisations can therefore be considered as a form of 'bottom-up' protection, in the manner of a 'do-it-yourself lifebuoy' against life-cycle risks. It is one that intervenes when the welfare system fails to protect self-employed professionals, and is integrated with the role of the ultimate cushion played by families.

Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to identify the main transformations and working mechanisms of self-employed professionals in Italy in the context of the current economic crisis, starting from a comparison between architects and consultants. The investigation has confirmed the existence of a number of disparities between professionals acknowledged by the state (such as architects), and others non-regulated professionals (such as consultants), particularly in terms of social protection. Additionally, the almost total absence of political and professional representation for this latter group renders them invisible in the eyes of the state, particularly as far as social policies are concerned. Previously, the regulations affecting the two professional groups differed greatly in terms of professional risk. However, in reality the progressive de-regulation of the market and the increasing concurrency due to the growing number of architects in Italy have ensured that the two have become very similar.

Institutionalisation, however does not correlate to full social acknowledgement. In the case of architects, the order does not exist to present itself as a means of credentialism, despite the fact that one of its original goals was to conquer social acknowledgement for its members (Malatesta 2006). Meanwhile, consultants do not claim the same system for themselves: the present structure of the system of professions in Italy (with orders and registers

managed by peers and acknowledged by the state through a state exam) is too rigid for the characteristics of their professional activity. Institutionalisation, on the contrary, does count in terms of social protection: those who are able to access an order, or a register, have lower contributions and better revenues compared to those without. The divide runs across the two professional groups as it is determined by the degree achieved. This is true even of consultants: if they have a degree that permits them access to any order, they can access better welfare benefits. However, their orders do not generally recognise their professional activity as their main objective.

Moreover, if the investigation has certified the deep crisis and weakness of the intermediate representative corps, it has also underlined the emerging role and importance of organisational forms (Pinnington, Morris 2002; Brock 2006; Greenwood, Suddaby 2006), which are confirmed as the core strategy employed by professionals in the market. The complexity of the growing interrelation between professional services, organisations, society and professions requires a theoretical advancement in the concept of professionalism (Noordegraaf 2011). It has become necessary to surpass the assumption that organisational principles are detrimental for professions, but, on the contrary, to rely on this dimension to define new forms of collaborations between freelance professionals as they have emerged in the field (Miles *et alii* 1997). As the field study has established, professionals rely on micro business to perform their professional activity, and its reticular form is functional, not only to be concurrent on the market, but also to overcome the main constraint of self employment, which is characterised by high levels of fragmentation and isolation. The role of networks with peers and organisations is crucial to determine the success of a professional, although the question of how to build stable relationships with clients has also emerged as central. Networks (particularly in this time of crisis) do not influence professional experiences alone, they are also important as a form of protection against social risks. Institutionalised organisations with structured networks of clients and collaborators are able to perform better in the market and to sustain their membership in case of leaves of absence, so becoming a sort of 'bottom-up' lifebuoy that can protect them over short periods when the welfare system fails.

In conclusion: self-employed professionals in Italy are not seeking individual or familial solutions to their need for social protection, even in a context characterised by the absence of institutional protection and by the weakness of the intermediate corps. Rather, they employ 'bottom-up' strategies that enable them to continue to exist and establish their activities and enable them to grow in the increasing competitiveness of the market, based on the role played by flexible organisational forms able to guarantee equilibrium between protection and autonomy. This occurs due to the fact that they do not trust the present system of professions which, in their opinion, is no longer able to read and govern the transformations occurring in the market. Since the complexity of today's market is no longer able to sustain a condition of total self-employment, professionals act as autonomous entrepreneurs, adding to this the dimension of an organisation that is able to advance the strategy of cooperating as a professional group.

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