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(Eds.)

# The Importance of SMEs as Innovators of Sustainable Inclusive Employment

New Evidence from Regional Labour Markets

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## Homage: What Patrizio Di Nicola Has Left Behind

*Renato Fontana*

Since its very inception, Patrizio Di Nicola was one of the key figures of the European Network on Regional Labour Market Monitoring (EN RLMM). He passed away too early. He has left a void that cannot be filled. In these brief notes, I will try to outline the research paths on which he ventured and, at the same time, to understand how to gather and continue the very considerable contributions he left behind.

Patrizio delivered many studies, contributions, and suggestions that are difficult to put in order (because he was not a “tidy” researcher). The leaps he made were numerous and important. His contributions can be summed up in three key topics:

- The first concerns flexibility and precariousness in the labour market;
- The second has to do with his interests in the business world and in particular with the organisational dimensions in which the factors of production are combined;
- The third is the one that absorbed Patrizio's energies more than any other, namely, his studies on teleworking and smart working.

The topics are contained within a larger framework that recognises the sensitivity that the scholar Patrizio had for the social, political, and historical inequalities that have been growing dramatically in recent years. Before examining these three topics one at a time, it should be noted that it was very important to him to constantly compare his scientific work to everyday reality; a reality marked by social complexity that makes it complicated to define a clear boundary between the exploited and the exploiting subjects and hard to grasp the responsibilities. In times of “surveillance capitalism” (Zuboff 2018), it is quite easy to identify the exploited, weak, and poor subjects who pay the heaviest consequences according to this specific development model; but it is far less easy to discern the subjects responsible for the very serious injustices that split Europe and, for example, Italy in rich and poor. In fact, they do not have a face: they are corporations, companies, network enterprises; they are virtual places where responsibilities always belong “to others”, or, at least, “to the system”. I get the feeling that Patrizio fought against this elusive nebula of social and economic responsibilities.

***The militant researcher.*** It is almost impossible not to grasp the militant nature of his studies, especially when he first faced the issue of flexibility and precariousness in the labour market. Patrizio's latest editorial was a jointly authored book entitled "Storie precarie: Parole, vissuti e diritti negati della generazione senza" ("Precarious Stories: Words, Experiences, and Denied rights of the 'Without' Generation") (Di Nicola et al. 2014).

As everyone knows, flexibility is a disaster that has hit the labour market since the second half of the Seventies and that continues to disrupt acquired rights, working conditions, and the lives of younger and older women and men. On the back cover can be read: "Being part of the 'without' generation means not being able to afford life plans, having no elementary rights, being worse off than one's parents despite having studied more: in a few words, workers live on the edge of the labour market, seeing themselves denied an important part of their own identity". The book collects the stories of 470 respondents and their message of complaint is very strong. In fact, this is not a book for academics but a book for everyone, even for those who have no academic experience or knowledge. For the purpose of putting this on public record, here is what a young woman with a postgraduate degree living in a region of central Italy complains about to the interviewer: "To be precarious means working six years without a contract, but having to do it to pay the rent. To be precarious is to obscure your life, but having to do it in order to study [...]. Precariousness is a way of life. Because if you know that today you work, but maybe not tomorrow, you have to design your choices, your needs, your desires not on the basis of what you have today, but on the basis of what tomorrow you may need to have. Precariousness is exhausting, it wears out your self-esteem. Building precariously means digging by the sea" (Di Nicola et al. 2014: 140). This is the life of many female and male workers who suffer the sad experience of precarious work. Everyone seems to be against precariousness, but there are also those who promote it, namely, hundreds of thousands of firms in Europe.

***The academic researcher.*** Patrizio taught for years at Sapienza University in Rome and held courses and conferences around the world, particularly in the United States of America (USA). His contributions, above all, have underlined the consequences of the organisational and technological transformations that have gradually taken place in the business world. In the book "Visioni sul futuro delle organizzazioni: Persone e imprese nell'era della complessità" ("Visions on the Future of Organisations: People and Businesses in the Era of Complexity") (Di Nicola 2009), together with a team of young collaborators, he focused on the organisation and

reorganisation of businesses, outlining the signs of a process that he calls “the great mutation”, and which clearly draws its inspiration from Karl Polanyi’s wonderful contribution, “The Great Transformation” (1974).

In his book, Patrizio wonders about the consequences of the crisis that started in 2008 and he is convinced that the same economic crisis and financial instability accelerate the change of modern businesses by bringing up new economic, psychological, anthropological, and philosophical skills. Looking at what he wrote, we can observe that the following lines can also be applied to the very serious current crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic: “Companies will have to rethink their organisational paradigms quickly. In fact, to deal with the difficulties, some basic rules should be applied. First of all, when production is reduced, companies must try to lay off as little staff as possible. Mass layoffs have the defect of striking indifferently, alienating even the most critical and indispensable professionals from the production cycles. In this way, in an attempt to survive in times of crisis, companies risk collapsing in the recovery phase, when they will no longer be able to resume production. Needless to say, those nations that avoid these mass layoffs within their workforce and those who maintain the social contract with the labour force and its unions, will have more chance of survival” (Di Nicola 2009: 17-18). His reasoning continues with the belief that time freed from work should be reserved for training as a driver towards more suitable forms of professionalism to face the risk of unemployment and towards the possibility of creating innovative products. Who can blame him? In my opinion, the suggested path is also very topical for the crisis that we are experiencing or that we are close to experiencing. I also observe how these prospects have not been pursued by businesses at all, but this opens a front that goes beyond these brief notes.

***The committed researcher.*** In my opinion, the most important contribution of studies and reflections that Patrizio bequeaths to our scientific community concerns the thematic area of remote work, a research journey that could be summarised with “from teleworking to smart working”. In 1997, Patrizio published one of the first books on the subject in question in Italy. Its title is “Il manuale del telelavoro: Nuovi modi di lavorare nella Società dell’Informazione” (“The Handbook of Telework: New ways of Working in the Information Society”) (Di Nicola 1997). It is an important text that explains the spread of these forms of work and, at the same time, points out their advantages and disadvantages. This book is a sort of panegyric of the topic addressed. However, it does not hold-back from denouncing the main limits concerning “the isolation and reduction of external relational life” (Di Nicola

1997: 21), together with the workaholic syndrome, namely that syndrome suffered by “those who tend to get drunk on work by losing the distinction between productive activity and free time” (Di Nicola 1997: 23).

As a further evidence of the obstinacy with which Patrizio studied telework, the following year, he edited a new book entitled “Telelavoro tra legge e contratto” (“Telework Between Law and Bargaining”) (Di Nicola 1998), which took the form of a guide to legislation, national and corporate bargaining, the design of workstations, the use of technology, and the areas of labour union relations. Clearly, it has been very useful both for workers and unionists.

In his paper “Dal telelavoro allo smart work: Una innovazione che fa bene a tutti?” (Di Nicola 2016), Patrizio focused on the transition from telework to smart work, carefully identifying and defining the similarities and differences between telework, smart work, and agile work. Then he had to stop his work, for reasons of *force majeure*. In this paper, Patrizio explains very well that the three terms teleworking, smart working, and agile work do not refer to the same activities and are not synonyms, even if, in common language, they are often confused. The curiosity remains as to what he would have written about remote work, now that millions of Italian and European workers practice it. What everyone calls smart working today is only a way to work from home, since it is not possible to go to the office; that is all. It does not open new horizons. It does not outline epochal organisational changes. It is not the sign of an enlightened management. It is a response to the pandemic. More precisely, it constitutes an improvised reaction that, once again, can be interpreted in terms of social and political stratification; I think that certainly would not have escaped Patrizio. The internal layering of the workforce becomes evident in the fact that, on the one hand, there are those who are able to stay at home to work, while on the other hand, many workers are pushed to go to the factory or to the office because they are an integral part of the “essential” production services.

I am convinced that Patrizio would have had something good to say, being motivated, as he was, by the propensity to fight social inequalities and claim a more participatory role for those classes dominated by profit and rampant capitalism. Now, all we can do is enhance his cultural heritage, with the certainty that new generations will want to gain from his teachings, both in studies and life.

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