

# LABOR DISORDERS IN NEOLIBERAL ITALY

MOBBING,  
WELL-BEING, AND  
THE WORKPLACE

NOELLE J. MOL



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## Labor Disorders in Neoliberal Italy

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NEW ANTHROPOLOGIES OF EUROPE

Daphne Berdahl, Matti Bunzl, and Michael Herzfeld, founding editors

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NOELLE J. MOLÉ

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*To my mom and sisters, for your integrity, courage, and defiance*



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## Preface

For Russian linguist and literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, the word “lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s” (Bakhtin 1981: 293). Eloquently, he asks us to imagine a single word connected on a great invisible chain to every time it has been spoken before, with its precise inflection and saturated with its historical context. “[Any utterance] is but one link in a continuous chain of speech performances” (Voloshinov 1973: 72). Words, then, belong in part to everyone along the chain; our own sense of what words mean only approximate these visible and invisible past usages.

My ethnography is about a single word: mobbing. I attend to it as a set of practices, images, discourses, fantasies, mechanisms of control, forms of embodied experiences, nodes of affect. Broadly conceived, my task has been to uncover how individuals came to strongly identify with the word mobbing, and how, given certain historical situations, this word became a crucial way for them to make sense of their experience and the world. This is a big story about a little word.



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## Labor Disorders in Neoliberal Italy



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# Introduction

Mobbing attacks “sick” workplaces, where people are considered tools and not precious resources.

— Flavia Fiorii (2006)

For some people, everything is mobbing. It’s not objective, it’s just what they’ve lived [*il loro vissuto*].

—Camilla, mobbing clinic volunteer

In a world of turmoil, who doesn’t fear precariousness?

—*La Stampa* (2004a)

“She said, ‘Everyone has a cross to bear,’” Cinzia uttered in a quivering voice. Her remarkably large brown eyes met mine briefly before she resettled her gaze downward, twisting her thumb across her palm. Three of us sat in close proximity around a glossy wooden desk positioned near a window, which offset the cold institutional illumination with sunlight. The view was less than comforting: a large parking lot. After a moment of silence, Cinzia was prompted gently by Fiore, a woman in her fifties with shoulder-length gray hair and clear-framed glasses: “What did she mean?” Cinzia began to cry and tremble, and then responded, almost exasperated: “That *I’m* her cross. That *I’m* difficult.”

Likening someone to cross-bearing carries a particular set of meanings in contemporary Catholic Italy. Hardly an innocuous remark, invoking the cross and thus the crucifixion of Jesus implies a burden of immeasurable weight: part duty and hardship, part affliction and suffering. Even colloquially, it connotes a highly undesirable encumbrance. In this context, it had been deployed by Jessica, Cinzia’s colleague in the sales branch of one of Italy’s largest and oldest textile companies. The two women were at nearly the same level, though Cinzia had more years of accounting experience while Jessica had a predominantly administrative background. Cinzia described Jessica, who had been actively harassing her for four years, as someone who was “always first in line,” always “had her peace flag,” and went to many political demonstrations. Fumbling nervously Cinzia added: “But that’s her public face. Then she drops comments like, ‘Whoever isn’t part of the union is a parasite.’” Jessica rarely spoke directly to Cinzia but rather insulted her via carefully targeted conversations with others. According to Cinzia, Jessica was adept at amplifying her hostile comments in the close office quarters in order to maximize Cinzia’s intensifying isolation and

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humiliation. Their dispute had been further exacerbated, Cinzia explained, because the company had recently closed one of its factories in the Italian region of Umbria, and this had left many at work worried about their own jobs and economic security. She said: “Now it’s very slippery, no one even knows what they’re supposed to do. Everything’s changing so fast.” She added that the managers were always off-site: either in Umbria, managing the closure, or in New York, managing a newly acquired firm.

In the midst of capitalist corporate turmoil, this dispute among colleagues might seem commonplace; it might perhaps be interpreted as predictable hostility between women or a tiresome labor conflict in a country where union membership remains important. But Cinzia, like millions of other Italians, named this event in a particular and new way: as an act of mobbing (*il mobbing*), which suggests, in its most simplified meaning, psychological and emotional workplace harassment. In the fall of 2004, when I met Cinzia, mobbing was a word moving across Italy and spiraling its way into highly visible spaces: it was in scholarly literatures, on the news, in Italian government and European Union documents, even at the cinema.

During another visit, Cinzia discussed the film *Mi Piace Lavorare: Mobbing* (*I Like to Work: Mobbing*; BIM Productions, 2004). In the film, managers and co-workers mob a middle-aged, single mother, Anna, played by acclaimed Italian actress Nicoletta Braschi. For Anna, a seemingly content worker in the accounting department, things begin to change rapidly following her company’s corporate merger and the arrival of new managers. One day, her ledger is missing; a few days later, her computer crashes; soon after, her desk is taken over by a colleague. In the meantime, her colleagues begin to ignore her or treat her nastily, while the managers demand that she completes impossible tasks, such as locating a single misplaced file in a labyrinthine archive. To her boss, she claims: “I like to work,” adding, “*Not* working tires me much more than working.” She continuously strives to accomplish every new task set before her, whether it is counting photocopies or timing the tasks of factory workers. At times Anna is left without anything to do at all and wanders the halls looking increasingly pale and weak. The mounting stress results in a sharp decline in Anna’s health, and ultimately she suffers a physical and mental collapse. Upon her return, her boss criticizes her for not “adapting” to the new “rhythm” of the company and urges her to resign. Anna, refusing to quit, successfully sues the company for mobbing her.

The practice of mobbing in the film may be bewildering to American viewers, who might wonder why Anna isn’t simply fired or why her colleagues turn on her. From the perspective of the company’s executives, we see that mobbing Anna takes a great deal of time, planning, and energy. And it comes at a great cost: health, legal action, capital, resources, energy. For Italian audiences, however, the film gives shape to how victims of workplace harassment might understand their own experiences. Cinzia said she was upset when her friends criticized the female protagonist for not having done enough to defend herself:

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“They don’t realize how much mobbing makes people suffer,” she said quietly. And by suffering it was clear that Cinzia meant multiple levels of human suffering: psychological stress, physical debilitation, and even a sense of despair, chaos, meaninglessness.

Mobbing seems to defy the supposed economic logics of capitalism, with its values of temporal and financial efficiency: it is circuitous, indirect, paradoxical. For no apparent reason, Anna’s work experience was suddenly governed by fear, suspicion, and doubt. Indeed these quotidian affective disorderings emerged as the most salient elements in narratives of Italians who believed that they were being mobbed. I met a professional chef who was asked to prepare elaborate meals, only to find the cafeteria refrigerator empty. An engineer told me that he was viciously faulted by managers and colleagues for a company-wide computer virus because he had forgotten to reinstall antivirus software. A woman who worked to counsel victims of mobbing believed that her files were being photocopied at night by managers plotting her removal. An elderly police officer reported to me that the stress of mobbing had led to the loss of six teeth after months of being left alone in a room with just the penal code to read. A hotel worker’s visits to the restroom were meticulously timed by her supervisors. There were also people, often men, who described what seemed to fit the prevailing definition of mobbing, but they would either describe it as an instance of the “precariousness” (*precarietà*) of labor or avoid any label whatsoever. For Cinzia, mobbing provoked physical symptoms, including hand rashes and sleeplessness, in addition to anxiety and depression. Mobbing was also why and how she had found Fiore, who ran a clinic for victims of mobbing. The new concept of mobbing had deeply shaped Cinzia’s life: socially, in the way she encountered her colleagues’ actions; politically, in the way she navigated clinics and contemplated actions related to her employment; and intimately, in her psychic turmoil and ill health.

This book is a study of the complex array of practices, affect, and bodily states, and the cultural assumptions and discourses about gender, sexuality, class, global economics, and labor that have accrued around a single term: mobbing. In a brief span of time, a little more than ten years, mobbing has become a deeply resonant cultural concept and a new way of identifying oneself and others: mobbers (*mobbizzatori*) and mobbees (*mobbizzati*), victims of mobbing. Why the pervasive suspicion and doubt in the workplace? Is mobbing a perverse strategy to bypass Italy’s famously rigid labor protections? Why did mobbing become critical just as Italy and other industrialized nations were reforming their labor markets, leading scholars to announce “the end of work” (Rifkin 1995)? How have Italian ideas about social difference, particularly differences of gender and class, reemerged or become obscured within the discourse of mobbing? Through the ethnographic study of mobbing, broad economic, social, and historical structures are made visible in the day-to-day injustices, frustrations, and suffering of workers. At the same time, we see how economic and social alienation and uncertainty can make us, quite literally, ill;

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how workers fashion and are fashioned by the state; and how certain cultural narratives help social actors to grapple with immense transformation (Molé 2007b, 2008, 2010).

Mobbing is one symptomatic eruption, one emergent bubble, one dynamic node of what I see as a millennial dialectic between safeguards and uncertainty, security and insecurity, keeping safe and being subject to risk. Mobbing emerged at a particular historical moment when the workplace was characterized by two opposing forms of employment: stable and precarious. The former, similar to other welfare states, was “based on high degrees of standardization in all its essential dimensions: the labor contract, the work site and working hours” (Beck 1992: 142), and the latter was characteristic of the current workings of global capital, “a risk-fraught system of flexible, pluralized, decentralized underemployment” (ibid.: 154). Italy is famous for its elaborate apparatus of labor protections, which allows Italians to keep long-term job positions. For example, in 2005, 45.8 percent of Italians had held the same jobs for over ten years, compared with the 8.2 percent European average (ANSA Notiziario Generale in Italiano 2005a; hereafter, ANSA). Certain standard employment contracts, such as what I dub the “lifelong” or, more literally, the “indefinite” time contract” (*contratto a tempo indeterminato*), have been likened to being enclosed in a barrel of steel (*botta di ferro*)—nothing can get through it (Williams 2004). In other words, it has been both legally challenging and costly for companies to dismiss workers with such contracts. Since the 1990s, the Italian welfare state has upheld most labor contract protections, while at the same time promoting new policies that legalize nonstandard (e.g., short-term, temporary) job contracts to create greater market flexibility (Di Matteo and Piacentini 2003)—part labor protectionism and part casualization of labor. For the first time, employers in the 1990s and 2000s had a wide assortment of legal ways to hire short-term workers as viable alternatives to lifelong contracts. Many Italian workers suddenly found that their “barrel-of-steel” contracts were less than sound and, for those hoping to find work, the possibility of getting such a contract was reduced to an unlikely aspiration.

Italians use the term “precarious” (*precario*) for this new assortment of what social scientists, notably economists, refer to as “flexible” short-term or self-employed job contracts, and “precarious-ization” (*precarizzazione*) for the process of rendering economic, political, and social arenas precarious—unstable, uncertain, high risk. Further intensifying this sense of everyday precariousness, Italian demographics are in flux: Italy has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world, averaging around 1.2 births per woman since 1993, which has engendered a national debate about the diminishing population (Ginsborg 2003: 69; Krause 2001). There has also been a sharp rise in immigration coupled with increasing xenophobic sentiments, especially in the Veneto region (Cola-trella 2001; Tossutti 2001; Grillo 2002).<sup>1</sup> The immigrant “crisis” is often explicitly linked to Italy’s low birth rate, and news media portray a shrinking Italian population in contrast to the apparently infiltrating *extracomunitari* (non-EU

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immigrants) (Krause 2001). Precariousness thus entails both economic and existential risk and uncertainty. Take, for example, a news article that discusses the state of “pseudo-mobbing.” It warns workers: “Be careful, however, not to mix up the true and real persecution with a subjective state of mind. In mobbing, these two components are connected, but they shouldn’t be confused” (La Repubblica 2001). “Pseudo-mobbing” is an example of existential precariousness: a particular kind of subjectivity and affective state in which persecution of various kinds seems imminent.

Mobbing unfolds as a series of practices, ethics, and ideologies that fluctuate and shift between protection and precariousness. The “cultural biography” (Kopytoff 1986) of mobbing begins at a critical historical moment in Italy when labor rights, good health, and job protections have come vividly into direct opposition with a set of social, economic, and political risks. Mobbing uncovers an Italian state composed of multiple social, political, and economic orders, including a welfare state able to maintain and renew legal protections that safeguard job stability and occupational health; a socialist state keen on upholding the rights of labor; a post-fascist state that tips protection into paternalism; and a neoliberal state that privileges the expansion of corporate power and risk control. This study provides a lens to reexamine debates about the state, neoliberalism, and the regulation of capital. Mobbing also highlights how the configuration of labor under neoliberal conditions creates and shapes particular kinds of gendered and classed subjectivities, somatic effects, and affective registers. Protection and precariousness are not mutually impenetrable categories. Rather, certain labor and state protections actually intensify the precariousness of workers, while within social and economic precariousness worker-citizens find new pathways for protection. It is precisely the volatile simultaneity of protection and precariousness—fueled by social and affective displacement arising from the growing risk-bearing work regime—that has produced mobbing as a culturally urgent issue in Italy.

### The Birth of Mobbing

In 2002, surveys estimated as many as 40 million Europeans were victims of mobbing (Corriere della Sera 2002b); in 2005, reports suggested that from 4 to 18 percent of workers in Italy were mobbed (ANSA 2005f); and in 2008, over 1.5 million cases of mobbing were reported for Italy (Craighero 2008). Sixty-five percent of cases occurred in the North (Corriere della Sera 2003) and as many as 100,000 in northeastern Italy alone (Bignotti 2005). But what is it? *Mobbing* is an English word, yet it is an unfamiliar term to most English speakers, due to its particular social history.<sup>2</sup> Alternative terms for mobbing in English include workplace bullying, emotional abuse, generalized workplace harassment, and status-blind harassment. In Italy, common glosses include “psychological pressures, mistreatment, verbal aggression” (La Repubblica 1999b); “moral harassment” (*molestie morale*; Nistico 2003); and

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“psychological terrorism” (*terrorismo psicologico*). Other terms associated with mobbing include vertical mobbing (*mobbing verticale*), suggesting harassment between workers of two different corporate levels; horizontal mobbing (*mobbing orrizzontale*), which occurs between same-level colleagues; and double mobbing (*doppio mobbing*), referring to the impact on family members and, occasionally, bullying among children (Bignotti 2005). Here is one common definition from an Italian court:

From the English *to mob* (group assault) and from the Latin *mobile vulgus* (riotous crowd), aggression or violence or persecution in the workplace perpetuated with a certain systematic and repetitious manner by one’s manager or . . . colleagues, using behaviors able to harm, discriminate, or progressively marginalize a determined worker in order to estrange him, marginalize him, and eventually induce him to resign. . . . in extreme cases, [this could result in a] propensity for suicide from the absence of self-realization in work and the lack of normal gratification in social relationships at work. (Meucci 2006: 39)

From this definition, it is evident that mobbing manifests not merely as a labor problem, but as a profound form of psychological trauma. Mobbing is highly familiar to most Italians and to many other Europeans; it spans Germany, Sweden, France, Austria, and the United Kingdom (Di Martino and De Santis 2003). In 2001, the European Union encouraged states to pass legislation to prohibit mobbing (Mobbing in the Workplace, A5-0283/2001). In Europe, the Germans and Scandinavians use the term “mobbing,” the French use the term “moral harassment” (*harcèlement moral*), and in Holland the term is “pestering” (*pesten*).

Originally, the idea of mobbing as unpredictable and sometimes unprovoked collective harassment was borrowed from literature on animal behavior, specifically avian mobbing: “The behavior known as ‘mobbing’ has been defined as a demonstration made by a bird against a potential or supposed enemy belonging to another and more powerful species; it is initiated by the member of the weaker species, and it is not a reaction to an attack upon the person, mate, nest, eggs or young” (Hartley 1950: 315). Despite its origins in the victory riots of smaller animals, mobbing among humans primarily refers to the elimination of the weaker individual, not the superior, though the notion of coordinated group action remains salient. In the 1980s, Swedish psychologist Heinz Leymann redeployed the term to the human realm, using it to describe group harassment in the workplace (Di Martino and De Santis 2003).

What consolidated this meaning in Italy was the work of occupational psychologists. Expanding his research into Italy in the mid-1990s, German psychologist Harald Ege (1996, 1997, 1998) focused on the destructive psychological and social effects of mobbing and codified mobbing into six discrete phases, progressing from isolation to harassment to illness. Ege is one of the leading mobbing specialists in Italy and the president of Prima: The Italian Association against Mobbing and Psychosocial Stress (Associazione Italiana contro Mobbing e Stress Psicosociale; Prima 2005).

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Various private and public health organizations have been founded in Italy to address the problem of mobbing, including the Bologna group Mobby and psychiatrist Renato Gilioli's Work Clinic in Milan for research, therapy, and rehabilitation related to mobbing (La Repubblica 1999b). The first mobbing clinic (sportello di mobbing) dedicated to helping victims of mobbing was opened in the northwestern urban center of Turin in 1999 (La Repubblica 1999b).

In 2000, the Italian Movement of Associated Mobbees was created. Its founder recounts: "I have been an executive of the State Railway and for three years I was a classic victim of mobbing: isolated, disqualified, professionally devalued. I began to connect myself to other workers in my situation, and we decided not to be passive subjects, but to create an association, a movement that represented all mobbees" (La Repubblica 2000a). A movement is an appropriate term for the hundreds, if not thousands, of mobbing hotlines, clinics, research groups, and counseling centers in Italy and the rest of Europe. The study of mobbing has become a continually expanding area of specialized knowledge production and includes public discourses, academic and popular literatures, and new educational tracks.

### Mobbing and the "New Economy"

In the mid-2000s, mobbing was considered by most Italians to be new and related specifically to the growing instability of the labor market. "Mobbing Prospers in the New Economy," cried the headline of an Italian newspaper (La Repubblica 2001). Of the many tropes within the discourse of mobbing in Italy, one of the most consistent and powerful situates mobbing as a brutal and dehumanizing aspect of work:

[Workers are] stressed by computers and as if that weren't enough, oppressed by bosses. [It is a] hard life, that of the workers of a technologically advanced society, of the corporations that have adopted the new canon of the "new economy" to the letter. And it is between the desks of the most technologized offices, in fact, that mobbing finds its most fertile terrain: here, the hierarchy is ruthless, exploiting the frustrations of employees. (La Repubblica 2001)

The "new economy," in public rhetoric, describes the state's campaign to advance economic reform of the labor market in order to create fast, flexible, and technologically innovative business organizations (Thrift 2000), and it signifies a new social, political, and economic order of "scientific institutions with techno-elite[s], [a] consumer society, [and] professional communities with social capital and intangible resources" (Carboni 2005: 45–47). Put simply, the "new economy" refers directly to the rise of neoliberalism (Sassen 1998; Edelman and Haugerud 2005; Harvey 2005; Robinson 2007b).<sup>3</sup> David Harvey theorizes neoliberalism as an ideology which "proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual

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liberty, free markets and free trade” (Harvey 2006: 145). In addition to political and economic strategies to commodify labor, privatize welfare provisions and ownership, and deregulate global markets (ibid.: 153; Barry et al. 1996; Collins 2005), neoliberalism is marked by “social polarization and pervasive insecurity” (Gledhill 2006: 323; Goldstein 2004, 2005); the acute expansion of inequality (Held and McGrew 2003; Graeber 2005; Sassen 2005); social injustice; and the commodification of bodies, cultural forms, and lifestyles (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Scheper-Hughes 2000; Ong 2006b). The current debate about the “free market” and the state recalls concerns that social theorists shared about laissez-faire economics in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Antonio Gramsci, for instance, argued that state authority produces the economic mechanisms of the market economy:

It must be made clear that laissez-faire too is a form of State “regulation,” introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means. It is a deliberate policy, conscious of its own ends, and not the spontaneous, automatic expression of economic facts. Consequently, laissez-faire liberalism is a political programme designed to change—in so far as it is victorious—a State’s leading personnel, and to change the economic programme of the State itself (1971: 160).

As Thompson (1967) and Polanyi (1957) later articulated, Gramsci shows that the “free market economy” is based on covertly masking the role of the state in the economy’s regulation (Jessop 1977: 370; Buci-Glucksmann 1980). Similarly, the neoliberal language of an “unregulated” and “free” market suggests a hands-off approach by the state, thereby obscuring the state’s involvement in the process (Sassen 1988; Held and McGrew 2003; Trouillot 2003; Edelman and Haugerud 2005). Indeed, neoliberal policies often extend to the relationship between the state and civil society, and the Western European model of social democracy has historically rested on the notion of a “comprehensive and universal welfare state” (Sandbrook et al. 2007: 14).

Italy’s neoliberal reform, undertaken since the 1980s, relates to Europe’s “market-radical variant of neoliberalism” (Bohle 2005: 58) and has been structured largely by its role as a member state of the European Union (Kierzkowski 2002; Van Apeldoorn 2002; Bosia 2005). Critical to this process in Europe have been transnational migration, monetary policy and exchange, and transnational political governance (Keough 2006: 433; Borneman and Fowler 1997; Berend 2006). Neoliberal economic policies in the 1980s and 1990s led to broad changes in Italy, including high unemployment rates, threats to long-term job security, and a larger informal economy (Blim 2002; Yanagisako 2002; Fargion 2003; Ginsborg 2003; Stacul 2007), while welfare policies in the 1990s focused, in particular, on pension reform rather than on unemployment and family assistance (Fargion 2003: 313). One fundamental aspect of this process has been called the “casualization of labor,” referring to the rise of employment positions with fewer benefits, often with atypical configurations or only for the short term, with fewer safeguards, and with an increasing privatization of la-

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bor (Sassen 1998: 146). Public debates in Italy have reflected a great concern about the vicious effects of neoliberal policies, principally the 2003 Biagi Laws that dramatically restructured Italy's labor market (Corriere della Sera 2006). The notion of job "precariousness" for workers (rather than their so-called flexibility) as mobilized by Italy's left-wing political parties, directly critiques the privatization and destabilization of labor and often situates mobbing as a direct outcome of precariousness. The stripping of protections from Italy's labor market has produced a two-tier workforce, which is split economically and socially between long-term and short-term workers—and this split often overlaps with age, gender, and class differences.<sup>4</sup> The space of the workforce has thus become inhabited in new ways, with effects on the consciousness of all workers. These trends have been particularly strong in Veneto, Padua's region: while life-long contracts were nearly halved, the number of short-term contracts almost doubled between 1991 and 2004 (Veneto Lavoro 2004: 53). Mobbing, I argue, is a form of abjection in that it is produced by labor's rapid devaluation in proximity to lived safeguards and allows actors to name the injustices and human costs of neoliberal orders.

Padua, one of the principal cities of the Veneto region in Italy's Northeast, provides a good site to study neoliberal governance and labor. Italy has a rich labor movement history and strict labor safeguards, yet Veneto has been called "the darling of neoliberal development" (Blim 1990) in part because of its early development of flexible labor strategies (Piore and Sabel 1984). The Veneto region's right-wing politics reflect and further shape anxieties about labor and frame the social and symbolic significance of toil. The right-wing separatist party known as the Northern League (Lega Nord) rose in 1996 to become the fourth largest party in Italy and Veneto's second largest party (Colatrella 2001: 316). The Northern League animates neoliberalism by asserting a specific Veneto identity and Veneto values.<sup>5</sup> Though it includes diverse political and economic allegiances, the league supports two central pillars of neoliberal reform: the decentralization of the state and the reduction of national welfare programs. The party also draws on Catholic notions of diligence and piety to reassert and marshal a particular northern Italian identity, even as it simultaneously affirms the secular order of the state (Ginsborg 2003: 177). Within Veneto's moral economy, work is viewed as a symbol of one's deserving and individualized efforts. Veneto scholar Ulderico Bernardi suggests: "[There is] a certain Veneto way of appreciating *work done as God commands*. Such as the generations of artisans, of farmers, but also of great entrepreneurs, of populists and patricians. [This is] one of the principles shared in the deep identity of Venetos" (2005: 14; emphasis in original). Here, the neoliberal valorization of autonomous labor is reinforced as an act of divine duty. At the same time, middle- and upper-class Veneto worker-citizens see themselves as exploited, because they often feel that their hard labor is stripped from them by the state in the form of taxes for the allegedly unworthy South or to support, via the Italian state, undesirable immigrants.

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