

Narrating Labour: Posture and Positionality

1st Conference OBERT
(*Observatoire Européen des Récits du Travail*)
obert.cggg.fr

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Call for papers

Labour, broadly understood as the exercise of paid (but often underpaid or even unpaid) productive or reproductive activities or as professional identity, structures the life of communities in most contemporary societies, despite the fact that it is now a less effective means of upward social mobility for individuals than in the past (Piketty 2013). Many historical processes of global significance, such as colonial and imperial dynamics and migratory phenomena, have also had labour at their core, and resistances and revolutions have often been articulated around labour conflicts. The changes that have taken place in recent decades and have been labelled as the “third” (Rifkin 2011) or even the “fourth” industrial revolution (Schwab 2015), alongside technological advances, financial globalisation and ecological changes, have transformed the relationship between work, domination and individual and collective freedom without, however, erasing the tension between work and freedom in the lives of individuals and organisations (Donaggio, Rose, Cairo 2022).

The first OBERT conference aims to enrich knowledge of the genres, forms and channels that have been used to narrate, understand and describe the world of labour, from the end of the 18th century to the future scenarios outlined by sociology (De Masi 2017) or imagined by science fiction. In order to draw up a thorough assessment and open up new theoretical perspectives, the aim of the conference is to investigate how narratives of labour have been conceived and constructed – being they are artistic creations, testimonies coming directly from professional circles, representations from so-called popular culture, or theoretical discourses. To this end, we have selected as privileged points of access two elements which may be especially problematic when studying a topic of such great social and political relevance as labour: first, the posture that the authorial or narrative instance assumes in relation to discursive formation (Meizoz 2004, 2010; Donnarumma 2014; Korthals Altes 2014); and second, its positionality (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller 2014) within the cultural, social and political field. The two concepts of posture and positionality question each other and are obviously closely related, since an authorial posture presupposes and/or suggests, yet may also question and be in contrast with, a certain positionality.

Some of the questions that prompted us to propose this dual track of reflection were the following: how do the posture and positionality of the authorial/narrative instance influence the content, language, format and medium chosen? Are such postures and positionalities overt, implicit or hidden, stated or only present in the background? Do these “narratives” define an aesthetic point of view or do they reveal a search for a form of adherence and empathy with the individuals and groups being narrated, or an involvement in their struggles? Are they motivated by an intellectual, social or political positionality and how can these three dimensions, yesterday as today, be reconciled? Do they intend to claim belonging to a group or highlight the disintegration of professional identities? Do they speak on behalf of isolated individuals, a generation, a community, a professional group, an environment or a class? Posited that constructing a narrative, i.e. putting it in order according to a certain sequence, is never a neutral practice, from which position and with respect to which horizon do we stand in constructing a narrative, in describing processes and individuals evolving in a context and, even more, when giving an interpretation? What is the 'worldview' expressed, confirmed or assumed by these narratives? How does it determine their greater or lesser dissemination and how does it contribute to

giving more or less visibility in the public sphere to groups, individuals, activities, sectors and conditions that are to be accounted for? The questions of posture and positionality are not limited to the figure of the extra-, hetero- or intra-diegetic narrator, but extend to the authorial instance present in the social sciences when they resort to narratives, in particular by soliciting life stories analysed with qualitative approaches. Starting from all these questions and from the preliminary observation that these are necessarily interdependent angles, the conference aims to bring these multifaceted perspectives to light and, in so doing, to make manifest the ways in which the world of labour is viewed and represented, in the plurality of its social, existential and material dimensions.

The conference will be structured around four main axes:

1/ Artistic products that elaborate the discourse on labour within a fictional, non-fictional or hybrid universe, in conjunction with a deliberately aesthetic dimension and intent. Literature, film, theatre, photography, visual and performative arts, documentary, narrative journalism, non-fiction, etc.

2/ Discursive productions by the workers themselves, real experiences in certain economic and professional sectors (oral or written testimonies without an initial aesthetic intent).

3/ Co-research (*con-ricerca*). This section includes accounts of research experiences conducted in workplaces that then gave rise to concrete proposals based on workers' stories, mediated by research. We refer for example to the theory and practice of *conricerca* as developed in Italy (Alquati 1993) or to the activities of the French militants and intellectuals who, since 1967, have worked in factories or ports (R. Linhart 1978) or to more recent collectives that bring together researchers and workers (*Ateliers travail et démocratie* or *Étonnants travailleurs* in France; the GKN factory collective in Italy).

4/ Theoretical perspectives. This axis will allow us to evoke analytical approaches that consider the role of labour narratives in the past and in the present, as well as those that position themselves with respect to a future perspective (utopias, dystopias, struggles, defeats, the need to construct interdisciplinary analytical grids) already opened up by discussions on recent phenomena such as smart working or quiet quitting.

In the wake of the multidisciplinary, international and diachronic perspective that has animated the work of the Observatoire Européen des Récits du Travail - OBERT since its inception, proposals for contributions are welcome from all the human and social sciences and on a variety of corpora (texts, iconography, oral testimonies). Likewise, contributions can be devoted to different geographical areas and historical contexts.

How to participate

Paper proposals (title, abstract of approximately **250 words** and a **short bio** of the author(s)) should be sent to: obert.conference@gmail.com

A proposal for a **thematic panel** or **roundtable** may be submitted as an alternative to a paper proposal. Each panel will include a maximum of 4 speakers. Interdisciplinarity is strongly encouraged. As we highly value diversity, equity and inclusion, minorities of all sorts and women are particularly encouraged to send their proposals, and gender balance is appreciated in panel proposals. To submit a panel proposal, a description of the panel (approx. 250 words), the names and bios of the convenors and participants, as well as the titles and abstracts of the proposed papers are required.

The official languages of the conference are going to be **French** and **English**.

Papers in other languages will be accepted, provided that the speakers send in advance (1 week before the conference) the translated texts of their papers.

Deadline for submission of proposals: **8 January 2023**

Notification of acceptance: 6 February 2023

For further information and download the call for papers in other languages, please visit the **OBERT website**: obert.cggg.fr

Steering committee:

Carlo Baghetti, Post-doc, Institute Creativity and Innovation (AMU)

Erica Bellia, Post-doc, University of Cambridge

Marzia Beltrami, Post-doc, University of Tartu

Mariagrazia Cairo, *Maîtresse de Conférence*, CGGG (AMU)

Carmela Lettieri, *Maîtresse de Conférence (HDR)*, CAER (AMU)

(Non-exhaustive) list of keywords and themes:

- Alienation vs emancipation
- Co-research theories and practices
- Body and emotions
- Unemployment
- Ecology
- Ethics and philosophy of labour
- Gender and care
- Cultural industry
- Artistic creation as labour; labour as artistic creation
- Work that produces vs labour that destroys
- Productive and reproductive labour
- Migration
- Mobbing, suffering, violence at work
- Precariousness, flexibility
- Projections and visions of the future (science fiction, uchronies, dystopias, etc.)
- Multimodal representations, cross-media, adaptations
- Trade union demands and conflicts
- Refusal of work, resignation
- Slavery
- Strike
- Subalternity: class, gender, race
- Leisure, recreation