

## INTERVIEWS

# Digital Labor and the Sharing Economy: An Interview with Ivana Pais



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### Abstract

Prof. Ivana Pais was interviewed by Ivan Pavlyutkin, associate professor at the National Research University Higher School of Economics. The conversation occurred at the Department of Sociology of Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan. Pais introduces us to her career path as an economic sociologist, and explains challenges that economic sociologists encounter while teaching economics students and why it is more insightful than teaching sociology students. She also talks about directions and peculiarities of economic sociological thought in Italy. There is a strong tradition in Italy to study industrial districts with their network of small firms and labor markets.

In the interview, Pais shares her previous and current research projects. She points out the significance of the digital economy for a better understanding of some market processes happening within the local community and describes her current research concerning the sharing economy. Applying Karl Polany's theoretical perspective, she argues that the Italian sharing economy is embedded in noneconomic institutions. A pure digital sharing economy model that lacks social interactions (the Silicon Valley type) does not work in Italy.

Finally, Pais provides information about her participation in the conference arranged by the European commission and the organization of future mini-conference in Berkley.

**Keywords:** digital economy; sharing economy; local community; economic sociology; social embeddedness; peer-to-peer economy.

— *My first questions are about your career and academic path. How did it happen that you are now working as an economic sociologist?*

— I started with my thesis, my degree thesis in the sociology of work, about the French model of “Bilan de Competence,” an interesting opportunity to reflect on the mobility of professional careers, the individualization of work and the transformation of labor policies. Then, my professor, Silvia Cortellazzi, asked me to work with her on research about the relationship between training and work. I then did my PhD here, at Università Cattolica.

— *What was the topic of your PhD thesis?*

— It was about the new economy, so I started to study the digital economy in 1999. And my idea as a PhD student was to study the new economy not strictly because of the digital aspect but because, through the “dot-com bubble,” we

were experiencing a new form of organization and labor relations. That sector was the one in which you could see things changing, and the main research question of my PhD study thesis aimed at understanding if that sector could lead transformation even through other sectors. The social transformation was so fast that I started to study the dot-com period when it was at its best and was changing the culture of organization. But then there was the dot-com bubble. Everything changed, and it was far more interesting to understand how the failure was managed.

Then, I won a public competition, and I began working as an economic sociologist researcher at the University of Brescia. Brescia is a very industrial city, and my focus shifted more to industrial relations and trade unions, of which there is a strong tradition.

Also, because of the period from the speculative bubble until the 2000s, the digital economy has had little relevance in Italy. I resumed my studies on these issues with the spread of social networks, but the most interesting impact has to do with the so-called sharing economy or economy platforms that have begun to mediate goods and services, not just information.

— *We are talking about economic sociology in Italy, so can you give some examples of scholars working in Italy who now are well recognized in economic sociology?*

— There is a strong tradition in Italy of the study of the industrial district and the role of community and the local internal economy, in particular in some areas where there are networks of small firms that work together and complement each other in terms of education and “local collective competition goods.” Even while studying digital economy, you need to understand local economy. One of the prominent scholars in this field is Carlo Trigilia, who served as the minister for territorial cohesion. Related to this field, there are some studies in regulation models, such as those led by Marino Regini.

Another main topic is the labor market and various kinds of transformation. One leading scholar in this field is Emilio Reyneri. Today, this field is more about immigrants and young people, while, in the past, there was a focus on gender. Gender studies are also widespread in organization studies. The research of Silvia Gherardi is interesting, even because of the methodology she adopted: she uses grounded theory and qualitative methods, while, usually, labor markets are more strictly studied with the help of quantitative methods and longitudinal data.

Furthermore, we have a strong tradition of studies of industrial relations, in particular on trade unions, such as those conducted by Gian Primo Cella.

Finally, a significant figure for Italian sociology was Luciano Gallino, who died a few months ago and who, by the way, also worked on globalization and inequality.

— *When I came to Italy, I noticed that sociologists here often use in discussions such terms as local, community, social capital, networks, gift economy and sharing economy. Can we say that these concepts represent the tradition of Italian economic sociology? Do they serve as a distinction between US economic sociology and European studies?*

— It is like that. And I think that it is related to our society and our economics. You need the right lens to analyze what you are studying. And, if you are a good researcher, I think you change your lens in order to use a more appropriate one to understand the economic context you are working on. For example, you can't study the digital economy in Italy and Silicon Valley using the same approach. So, in order to understand the society and economics in Italy, the local is really important because this is one of the meanings of embeddedness.

— *So, you find here embeddedness in a pure form?*

— Societies rarely manifest phenomena in pure form, but, certainly, the study of embeddedness in the Italian economy is particularly interesting.

— *I have several questions about teaching. I saw your students from the economic department. Do you think there is a difference between teaching economic sociology to economists and to sociologists?*

— Yeah, completely. I prefer teaching economic students because, when they understand sociology, it can change the way they analyze phenomena. I give them different tools in order to understand the same topics they used to analyze through other categories. If they learn and appreciate it, that can really change the way they will do their job. While, as an economic sociologist dealing with sociology students, you don't change the way they think and they already manage the same analytical categories, you help them to apply those categories to a specific field.

— *So, if you don't need arguments for sociologists, do you need them for economists?*

— Yes, but I enjoy it because, sometimes, you have tough debates with economic students, and it's more productive. While, with sociology students, they often agree with you and your approach, ... with economic students, sometimes they argue, and you deliver the best lesson when students argue because you need to support your approach and demonstrate how good and useful it can be for them. So I prefer this kind of lesson.

— *What do you usually discuss with students?*

— It's more about the approach, about what you are looking at when you study some phenomena. For example, together with a colleague, I had a lesson with my students about methodology. We made an exercise, and we asked them to identify indicators of happiness. And their first reaction was: "Why should I need to measure happiness? I don't care." So we tried to explain, for example, the economics of happiness. And, during the exercise, at first they were only looking at economic indicators of happiness. And then, when we told them, "Ok, there are other indicators," they could not see them at first. Then, if you work with them, some of them really start to look at the same phenomena with a different approach, and it is really rich.

— *Can you list some papers or books that you appreciated or books that really influenced your vision of economic sociology?*

— Italian?

— *Not only Italian, but maybe in a broader sense. What are the main books for you?*

— Karl Polanyi, for sure.

— *The Great Transformation [Polanyi 1944] you mean?*

— Yeah. *The Great Transformation* by Polanyi was one of the most influential works for me. And Manuel Castells' books on the information society [Castells 1996]. But Polanyi is more about the approach; Castells is more about the topic. So it was a good analysis because of that. Granovetter because of the idea of embeddedness and the role of social networks, the strength of weak ties... [Granovetter 1973; 1985], but also — in this field — Nan Lin and Ronald Burt. In my training, it was also important. *The New Spirit of Capitalism* by Boltanski and Chiapello [Boltanski, Chiapello 2005].

— *What about some contemporary books in economic sociology? You also mentioned David Graeber [Graeber 2014].*

— Yeah, David Graeber is rather an anthropologist; I really appreciate that.

— *Could you name some major works concerning the new economy or research about the sharing economy?*

— For example, the article by Juliet Schor on the sharing economy [Schor, Fitzmaurice 2015] is important and influential. He is not a sociologist, but, for my studies, ... Yochai Benkler's works were also very important [Benkler 2006]. I even really appreciate the work of Ursula Huws about digital labor [Huws 2013]. But it's too early to judge how this research will change the way we look at some phenomena.

— *Does it mean that, for what you are doing in research, there are not many books that were published and papers that are influential for the whole perspective?*

— Yeah. This depends on the fact that they are recent studies and also on the new academic way of doing things. The new incentives lead scholars to publish more articles but fewer books, more specialized or focused papers and a less global theoretical approach. We have some great scholars on specific topics, who do a very good job on a specific topic, but they are not really changing the way we look at phenomena.

— *What are your explanations of this?*

— The simple fact that books are not appreciated anymore... writing a book is a different kind of job to writing a paper. You thus need a global approach and you have to explain it while writing papers; it's more technical stuff. It's useful because it can lead to a more incremental approach, but you often lose a global approach to social phenomena.

— *I would like to discuss the new economy, sharing economy and all these issues of your main research area. Can you say a few words more broadly on what you are doing?*

— Oh. I will focus on the sharing economy; that's easier. Digital labor and the sharing economy are related to each other. Yeah, it's a global scholarship community but with strong ties to the different national communities. What's interesting, I think, is that the debate about the sharing economy is open both to scholars and practitioners. The debate about the sharing economy is run jointly by scholars and consultants or people coming from movements or associations. And practitioners are inside the field but with a strong reflective practice. And they are much faster than academics. That is important in such a fast-changing environment. That's why they are leading the public debate more than academics. I mean, when you publish your paper, everything is changed, while people who have a blog can think, write and publish in real time. And so, I think they are leading the debate more than scholars because of that. That's why academics should not focus their research on day-to-day transformation, but we need to play our role in order to watch the main scheme...

— *The whole picture...*

— ...The whole picture. It's not very easy, and it's good to collaborate together with these consultants because they can follow the day-by-day life courses. But we need to distinguish our approach and give a different contribution that can last longer. So we need to produce knowledge that, even years later, can be useful.

— *Ok, you mentioned that there is a debate about the sharing economy. When did it start in Europe?*

— The debate about the sharing economy emerged from the crisis of 2008. When the crisis began, we used to say that the Chinese ideogram for crisis means danger and opportunity at the same time. Then, we discovered that it is not true, but we liked the idea and we continued to tell this story. The years passed by, and we didn't find new opportunity. The crisis was there, but no one was really debating about the problem at the source of the crisis. No one was looking for solutions; we were waiting. At least in Italy, we were waiting, telling each other, "OK, it will finish. OK, it will finish and everything will be as it was," without really debating if we were happy about what was going on before the crisis. The sharing economy, at least in Italy — I'm not sure it's the same everywhere — captured people trying to find a different way to manage the economy. And it was a sort of collector of ideas and experience that was trying to figure out a different way to run the economy. So, the most important thing about the sharing economy was the raising of the idea of re-socializing the economy.

— *Who are the main intellectuals who now influence such kinds of ideas and notions of re-socialization?*

— They are mainly "grassroots intellectuals."

— *What do you mean?*

— They are not scholars in a strict sense. The idea of the sharing economy was introduced by a consultant, Rachal Botsman...and, now, it is shared by other consultants or intellectuals close to social movements, such as Michel Bauwens, but, in the sharing economy, it is going on exactly as was explained by Boltanski and Chiapello. The idea is that capitalism absorbs its critics and incorporates them in order to build a new form of capitalism and culture of capitalism. What is going on with the sharing economy is impressive as long as you can observe the economic development that occurs together with the grassroots and companies.

— *Can you give any examples of new initiatives from Italy?*

— Yes, for example, Sardex,<sup>1</sup> initiated by some unemployed people. It's more like a grassroots initiative but an economic one. So, Sardex is really interesting because it stays inside the market dimension, but a re-socialized one, and uses the local currency in order to do it. When I was in Sardinia in order to do research about the sharing economy, I was impressed by the fact that, when speaking with people using Sardex, they spoke more about trust and reputation than about money.

— *Do you have any classification of the practices of the sharing economy?*

— There are some practices, some classifications that are really good, but there is not a commonly accepted one. The main distinction is about profit and nonprofit forms of the sharing economy. In Italy, we have had an interesting experience in the nonprofit field. For example, another really interesting initiative in Italy is the "social street." The idea was born a couple of years ago in Bologna, where some friends decided to open a closed Facebook group for all the residents of their street, via Fondazza. They opened this Facebook group, and then they put some ads on the street, saying "we are opening a Facebook group; if you live on via Fondazza, please, join us." People who did not know each other by being neighbors started to go to the Facebook group and interact through the group. When the Facebook group grew, then they started to meet each other in person and make some social and economic initiatives. And, now, there are a lot of streets all over Italy, and that's a really interesting phenomenon because the Italian sharing economy incorporates

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<sup>1</sup> Local currency used in Sardinia, which was introduced by a group of friends after the financial crisis of 2008. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/cf875d9a-5be6-11e5-a28b-50226830d644.html> (accessed 20 May 2016).

more mixed online-offline activities than the Silicon Valley model implies. While the Silicon Valley model is all about the digital, in Italy, the sharing economy works when it is more embedded into the local, and the digital and face-to-face aspects work together. Otherwise, it doesn't work. The pure digital sharing economy doesn't work.

— *Are there any theoretical debates on this issue?*

— It's starting. One topic these days is about platform "cooperativism." There was an interesting conference in New York last year.<sup>2</sup> One of the main topics about the sharing economy is about how to redistribute value to the "peers" that generate it through the platforms.

The main scholars in this field are Trebor Scholz and Nathan Schneider, who organized that conference. They adopted a critical approach, and so they see the sharing economy as an extreme form of neoliberal capitalism, not as a re-socializing one, because the sharing economy uses social value in order to increase economic capital. And, for example, I did a map of the sharing economy initiative in Italy, and we mapped more than 200 platforms, and only two were cooperatives, while, in Italy, we have a strong tradition of cooperatives, but not in the digital economy sector.

Another topic concerns the regulation of the new economy because this peer-to-peer economy can damage the traditional economy as it changes the way we understand it and analyze its impact on the traditional economy. It's really important. Another huge topic is about labor in the digital economy because people sharing goods and services are neither employees nor employers.

— *Like freelancers?*

— Yes, it's a type of freelance work but with a really short-term job. It's micro freelance.

— *This is a point, for example, economists, sociologists and anthropologists now have a debate about. How is it limited to some disciplinary boundaries, or would you say that the sharing economy has no disciplinary boundaries, for example...*

— It has disciplinary boundaries, but economists are not looking so much at these phenomena. I had an academic debate with economists, and they told me it's because the sharing economy nowadays has no strong impact on our GDP.

— *Does anyone try to measure its impact?*

— No, because they say it's not ... so relevant. So, this colleague, for example, told me "until the sharing economy becomes huge, I won't consider it, it's not my business.... It's more important for me to study the car industry because the car industry is leading the economy." Maybe they will change approach when (and if) car sharing and carpooling prevail. So, now, we have more sociologists, anthropologists and jurists and law scholars.

— *Thank you!*

Interviewed by Ivan Pavlyutkin  
Milan, Italy, 12 November 2015

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<sup>2</sup> Platform Cooperativism is convened by Trebor Scholz (The New School) and Nathan Schneider (University of Colorado Boulder). Available at: <http://platformcoop.net/> (accessed 20 May 2016).

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