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Why-So-Poor. The Social Determinants of Low-Wage Labour in the Italian Tourism Industry (2025–2028)

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Project information

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- positively evaluated (but not founded) and awarded the MSCA Seal of Excellence
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- PI: Francesco Eugenio Iannuzzi
- Post-doc researcher: Francesco Pontarelli (2 years)

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Why-So-Poor?

- Research object: low-wage labour in Italian tourism
- Core question: how is tourism labour produced **as low-wage labour?**
- Empirical field: different local tourism areas in Italy
- Method: qualitative research, case comparison, interviews, documentary analysis and focus group

Tourism labour

- **Tourism as a major source of employment**
- Between 2014 and 2019, **one in five new jobs worldwide** was linked to tourism or tourism-related activities.
- In Italy, tourism employment almost doubled in 2 decades: from around **770,000 workers in 2006** to around **1.55 million in 2025**. Firms + **50%**.
- A strong positive rhetoric: A **pro-poor industry**: a means to reduce income disparities, combat poverty and address labour-market inequalities.
- **58% under 40; 51% women; 28.1% migrant workers**.

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The critical side of tourism labour

- Globally, tourism work is largely concentrated in the **secondary segments of the labour market** (Díaz-Carrión et al., 2020; Appelbaum & Schmitt, 2009).
- Low pay, seasonality and temporary or part-time employment; limited training, high turnover and weak career prospects, low unionization; *(Riley et al., 2002; Baum, 2007; Zampoukos & Ioannides, 2011).*
- Expand rather than reduce inequalities: gender and racialis divisions of work, rooted in the historical association with reproductive (domestic) labour (McDowell, 2009; Zampoukos & Ioannides, 2011).
- Consistently ranked internationally among the sectors with the lowest wages and the worst working conditions
- In Italy, two-thirds of workers in key tourism subsectors are at **risk of in-work poverty**; almost 50% of low wage earners (Ministry of Labour 2022)
- In EU: 36% of of workers in key tourism subsectors are low wage workers (Eurofound 2024)

Dominant explanation I

- Mostly rooted in managerial literature, attributes low-paid tourism work to the **economic and organizational characteristics of the sector**.
- Tourism as a **"naturally poor, disorganised and contingent industry"** *(Gray, 2004)*.
- an inherently **low-productivity sector**, largely composed of small and family-run firms, exposed to volatile demand and with limited capacity for technological innovation *(Baldacchino, 1997; Riley et al., 2002; Matthews & Ruhs, 2007; Eurostat, 2025)*.
- These features constrain profitability, added-value and, therefore, wages.
- Low pay appears as a **natural and unavoidable outcome** of the sector's productive structure.

Limits of explanation I

- **The problem of naturalising low wages**
- It obscures the **unequal power relations** that structure the political economy of tourism.
- Low wages may result not only from sectoral inefficiencies, but also from the **asymmetric distribution of value between capital and labour** within global tourism circuits *(Bianchi, 2018)*.
- Since the 2008 global crisis, tourism has been reshaped by **financialisation, global value chains, large-scale capital investment and technological development** *(Büscher & Fletcher, 2017; Devine, 2017; Wijburg et al., 2023)*.
- In labour-intensive services, wages may rise independently of marginal productivity, following broader labour-market dynamics or regulatory interventions *(Baumol & Bowen, 1965)*.

Alternative explanation

- A second explanation, rooted in industrial relations and labour market studies, shifts attention from sectoral characteristics to **institutional regulation**.
- Low wages and sub-standard working conditions are not seen as natural, but as the outcome of an **institutional vacuum** in low-end personal-service sectors *(Gray, 2004; Watt, 2012)*.
- Institutional regulation refers to the historically and territorially situated set of **rules, practices and actors** that codify and stabilise power relations between capital and labour.
- Since the 1980s, this vacuum has been expanded by neoliberal labour-market reforms, contractual fragmentation and productive reorganisation *(Gautié & Schmitt, 2010; Bosch, 2016; Velthuis, 2019; Zwysen, 2024)*.

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Institutional variation matters

- **Regulation, unions and the quality of tourism work**
- This explanation is supported by territorial variation: tourism work does not have the same value, status or conditions everywhere
- **Las Vegas:** high union density in hotels is associated with greater employment stability and higher wages *(Gray, 2004)*.
- **Toronto:** migrant workers in unionised hotels experience better working conditions, status and social recognition than those in non-unionised hotels *(Watt, 2012)*.
- **Venice:** unionised hotels show lower turnover, better access to welfare and improved employment conditions *(Iannuzzi, 2021)*.
- **Athens:** unions resisted deregulation and slowed the spread of temporary work in hotels *(Papadopoulos & Lyddon, 2020)*.
- The key point: institutional regulation can alter the conditions under which tourism labour is valued and protected

Limits of «institutional» explanation

- It shows low wages are not natural outcomes of tourism work/economy bringing back into the analysis **collective organization and labour institutions**
- However, it tends **to essentialize institutional regulation**, treating it as an independent variable from which working conditions follow.
- This risks obscuring that regulation **is itself produced** by underlying social, political, historical, etc. (it is a determinant but also an outcome)
- Yet what appears as economic fragility or regulatory weakness may be the historical imprint of sedimented social relations and practices (eg low tradition of labour struggles; invisibility of reproductive work; ecc., devaluation of reproductive labour)
- Therefore, this perspective explains significant differences in working conditions but says little about the deeper **underlaying processes through which work in tourism** is produced as low-value labour.

What we know / what remains unclear

- **What we know**
- Tourism work is not "naturally" poor: it is **socially and historically constructed** as low-value work.
- This construction involves different kinds of processes: **economic, social, political, institutional, symbolic and power-related**.
- **What remains unclear**
- How these processes operate concretely, how they are reproduced, and how they stabilise over time and space.

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From low wages to cheap labour

- **The shift:** From explaining why wages are low to explaining how labour becomes persistently available on degraded terms. This requires shifting the object of analysis:
  - ✓ from **low-wage work** as a labour-market outcome
  - ✓ to **cheap labour** as a socially produced condition.
- **Cheap labour** refers to labour power whose cost to capital is systematically kept below the cost of workers' social reproduction *(Baglioni, 2021; Mezzadri, 2022).*
- To bring workers themselves into the analysis: not as a given "poor" workforce, but as socially, institutionally and materially made as cheap.
- The persistence of poorly paid work also depends on processes through which workers themselves are produced as subjects whose expectations, living conditions and capabilities are shaped in ways that make them disposable for low-value employment.

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Labour devaluation

- Cheap labour is not a given. It has to be made.
- We theorize this process through the concept of **labour devaluation**
- Refers to the economic, political, social, cultural and historical processes that interact and sediment over time to reduce the value of labour (and workers)
- Devaluation is not linear or automatic: it may be intensified, slowed down, redirected or partially reversed.
- It is a political process, shaped by unequal relations of power and by struggles over how value is defined, extracted and distributed.
- It therefore concerns the ways in which labour is rendered disposable for capital at lower value.

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Research objectives

- The general objective is to **develop a theoretical framework that traces the conditions underpinning the processes of labour devaluation**, examining how it crystallises into cheap labour, how it is maintained, and how it is challenged across space and time.
- Specific Objectives (SOs):
- SO1 – **Understanding devaluation**: Identifying and analysing the conditions underlying labour devaluation, examining how these conditions take shape within specific territorial contexts and how they shape both the organisation of labour and the production of workers as "low-cost" subjects.
- SO2 – **Unveiling resistance**. Mapping and examining the practices, actors, and institutions that challenge devaluation, and understanding how they take shape, and reorient devaluation
- SO3 – **Uncovering variations**. Reconstructing and comparing how the conditions that shape labour devaluation are articulated across space and time, tracing how similar global pressures are understood, mediated, and reorganised locally and, how these variations configure local trajectories of cheap labour.

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Analytical framework

- Labour devaluation is understood as a **relational, historically situated and multidimensional process**.
- The framework analyses how the value of labour is **defined, reduced, stabilised and contested** across different contexts.
- It focuses on three interconnected layers:
  - **(a) symbolic mechanisms** through which work is perceived, classified and narrated.
  - **(b) everyday material mechanisms** through which the value of labour is lowered in practice.
  - **(c) the reciprocal influences** between symbolic and practical dimensions.
- A **six-dimensional framework** (six arena in which the processes of devaluation and valorization of labour actually take place), which is nevertheless flexible and open to empirical testing

Institutional regulation and productive structures

1. Devaluation through Institutional regulation: Refers to the legal norms, public policies and institutional arrangements that define employment rights, protections and working conditions. It includes collective bargaining, industrial relations systems, welfare provisions, migration regimes, training frameworks and the actors that implement them.

- Depending on how it is oriented, it can either protect labour and strengthen workers' room for manoeuvre, or weaken protections and increase dependence
- Eg**:** collective bargaining may improve wages; migration regimes may instead increase workers' commodification etc.

2. Devaluation through Productive structures and value chains: it concerns how firms are organised, and how this generate labour demand. It includes firm size, ownership, legal form, technologies, inter-firm relations, positions within production networks and governance along value chains.

- Productive structures can either support more stable forms of employment or shift competitive pressure onto labour costs.
- Eg. large firms and integrated employment systems may support more stable labour relations; subcontracting or asymmetric value-chain relations may make low wages appear as a condition for firms' survival.

Workforce composition and symbolic normativity

- **3. Devaluation through Workforce composition and labour divisions:**. It includes sociodemographic characteristics, recruitment networks and the distinction between skills recognised as technical and skills treated as natural.
- Devaluation operates through unequal task allocation, which reinforces historical associations between groups and occupations, and through skill politics, which determines which activities are deemed qualified or "natural".
- **Example:** gendere and racial division of labour. The embodied traits of those who carry out a job tell us a great deal about the value we attach to that job

- **4. Devaluation through Work ethics, representations and normativity:** concerns the moral frameworks, social representations and normative expectations that define what work is, how it is valued and who is expected to perform it.
- Depending on how it is socially recognised, representations can either legitimise low pay and disposability,
- **Example:** when tourism work is represented as "just a student job" or temporary work, low pay becomes easier to justify; when it is recognised as skilled service, claims for higher value become more legitimate.

"We know that women make up most of the tourism workforce and migrants account for about one third. In Venice, however, the situation is reversed: women are in the minority and migrants are relatively few. Local Italian men continue to play a strong role. My conclusion is simple: if the most advantaged group in the labour market still works in tourism in Venice, it is because, here, this work has not yet been devalued."

Trade union representative (2016).

"in the areas I came from, almost all my peers do this kind of work, and that, in a sense, society expected to do it as part of our experience."

Student, anonymous survey (April 2026)

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Labour process and social reproduction

- **5. devaluation through labour process:** This dimension concerns the concrete organisation of work: activities, actors, relations, coordination, control and transformation of work into output. It includes task management, supervision, autonomy, relations between workers and management, and the role of consumers.
- Depending on how work is organized (workplace politics) the labour process can either expand workers' autonomy and recognition, or intensify control, invisibility and subordination.
- **Example:** stronger workplace organisation may instead increase workers' autonomy and bargaining power.
- **6. Devaluation through everyday Social reproduction:**
  This dimension concerns the concrete ways in which labour power is renewed in everyday life. In tourism, seasonality, mobility push reproduction costs beyond the wage relation.
- Depending on how reproduction is secured, it can either sustain workers' autonomy and capacity to refuse poor work, or make low wages possible by externalising, compressing or displacing reproduction costs.
- **Example:** welfare, housing rights and family support may increase workers' room for manoeuvre; shared housing, employer-controlled accommodation or dependence on communities of origin may subsidise low wages and make cheap labour available.

Analytical strategy I

- Consistent with this abductive, theory-building design, the analytical strategy unfolds along three levels:
- **a. Studying the dimensions of devaluation (SO1):** For each dimension, reconstructing the conditions and processes through which it contributes to labour devaluation. The analysis proceeds on two steps:
- *1) Within-dimension: Each dimension can assume different forms depending on institutional, economic, and social configurations.*
- *2) Interdependencies and mutual shaping: Dimensions retain their analytical autonomy yet continually shape and inform one another. Shifts in one dimension may reorient how others are expressed in specific contexts*
- **b. Processes of contestation and revaluation (SO2)** examining how each dimension can generate, inhibit or redirect shifts in the processes of devaluation.
- Empirically, the project identifies:
- 1) which dimension becomes the site where devaluation is disrupted and how these shifts materialise empirically through practices (e.g., collective action redefining representation).
- 2) with what effects on the broader pattern of devaluation and its sedimentation over time.

Spatial variation

- **Spatial variation and local articulations (SO3; WP4):** examines how the six analytical dimensions take shape across different contexts.
- Analytically, it proceeds through cross-case comparison, analysing how similarities and divergencies emerge across sites
- **Why should we expect local variations?**
- The same analytical dimensions may take different forms depending on local labour markets, welfare systems, migration regimes, SR conditions, union strength, development trajectories and social representations of tourism work Similar global pressures are therefore mediated and reorganised locally.
- For example, gendered and racialised divisions of labour are recurrent in tourism, but they vary according to recruitment channels, migration histories, family structures, colonial or patriarchal legacies, and the local organisation of tourist economies (e.g. male workers in Venice)

Empirical strategy

- **Three Italian regions, contrasting tourism models**
- **Veneto**
  Italy's most tourism-intensive region; multiple tourism models and temporalities; strong investment, especially in Venice; tourism embedded in a diversified regional economy.
- **Emilia-Romagna**
  Highly seasonal seaside tourism; historical mass-tourism destination; fragmented productive structure; diversified regional economy; strong reliance on migrant and feminised labour.
- **Calabria**
  Emerging tourism destination; mainly seaside and seasonal tourism; tourism embedded in a fragile economic context; limited investment; predominantly local workforce.

Workplan and current outputs

- **What has been done, what is ongoing, what comes next**
- **Months 1–6:** Literature review; conceptual framework; analytical framework; research strategy.
- **Months 7–12:** 26 interviews with trade unionists, employer representatives and labour inspectors at national level and in the selected sites.
- **Months 13–18 — ongoing:** Worker interviews in the three selected regional cases: Veneto, Emilia-Romagna and Calabria.
- **Months 19–24:** Completion of worker interviews; follow-up interviews with key institutional actors; preliminary coding and within-case analysis.
- **Months 25–30:** Cross-case analysis across the three regions; reconstruction of local trajectories of labour devaluation; refinement of the analytical framework.
- **Months 31–36:** dissemination of findings; preparation of final outputs and development of the next research agenda.
- **Current output:** *Becoming Working Class? Trade Unions and the Contested Incorporation of Tourism Workers in Italy;*