

# Changing Working Life and the Appeal of the Extreme Right

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## Chapter 5

# Two Psychological Routes to Right-Wing Extremism: How Italian Workers Cope with Change

Patrizia Catellani and Patrizia Milesi

### Introduction

Perception of either a *positive* or a *negative* change in one's working conditions may be related to the development of extreme right-wing attitudes. In the presentation of the survey results (Chapter 3) we have already shown the existence of such a relationship, highlighting some of the variables that play a significant mediating role in both '*winner*' and '*loser*' routes to right-wing extremism. A further, more in-depth examination of these two routes is presented in this chapter, which is focused on the qualitative analysis of interviews carried out on a sample of Italian workers. We will examine how the explanation and interpretation of change in one's own working reality may lead people to develop or consolidate extreme right-wing attitudes.

Some studies have shown how people tend to exhibit heightened authoritarian attitudes and behaviour during periods marked by social, economic and political threat (e.g. high unemployment, high crime rate, civil disorders or war). For example, Sales (1973) found that during periods of high threat (1930s, 1967-70), compared with periods of low threat (1920s, 1959-1964), there was an increase in indicators of authoritarianism, such as concern for power, authoritarian aggression, submission, cynicism and superstition (see also Billig 1991; Esses et al. 1999; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Staub 1989). The studies by Adorno et al. (1950), Fromm (1941) and Rokeach (1960) also postulated a relationship between insecurity, anxiety and perceived threat on the one hand, and authoritarianism and dogmatism on the other. Explanations of this phenomenon have been offered from various psychological perspectives. For example, in a developmental perspective, the compensatory theories of Rogers (1951) and Kelly (1955) assume that extremism and attitudinal rigidity help people to know who they are and what they stand for. In a clinical perspective, Fromm (1941) assumes that when people have a poorly developed sense of self, they cleave to authority and majority norms as a substitute for personal identity and a reliable intrinsic guide for choice. These people also derogate minority and disadvantaged groups because they represent value orientations alternative to their own. More recently, psychosocial research has reconsidered the issue from a new perspective, using social identity theory as a frame of reference (Tajfel 1969;

Turner et al. 1987). Jetten, Hogg and Mullin (2000) have shown that when people are uncertain about subjectively important dimensions, they defensively stick to their own groups and rigidly oppose external ones. This would happen because rigid intergroup processes help uncertain people to know who they are, what to think and how to behave (see also Hogg 2000; Duckitt 1989). In turn, sticking to one's group (ingroup favouritism) and opposing external ones (outgroup discrimination) would be likely to foster authoritarianism and prejudice against minorities.

As already mentioned in Chapter 3, ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination due to high levels of uncertainty may be observed not only in people who find themselves in a low-status, disadvantaged condition, but also in people who find themselves in a high-status, advantaged condition (Ellemers et al. 1992; Ellemers and Bos 1998; Doosje, Ellemers and Spears 1995). Accordingly, in this research we have taken two different categories of people into account: workers who perceive a negative change in their job conditions and workers who perceive a positive change in their job conditions. Based on these different perceptions, we labelled the two categories as 'losers' and 'winners' respectively. Our assumption was that both categories of workers may experience high levels of uncertainty, though in a different way. The 'losers' are likely to experience both *material* and *psychosocial* uncertainty. By material uncertainty we mean the instrumental side of life, mainly scarcity of material resources, unreliable income, insecure job, lack of social security and social protection. By psychosocial uncertainty, we mean the perception that a given social order or social hierarchy is unstable and is crumbling. The 'winners' may be less subject to material uncertainty but are certainly exposed to psychosocial uncertainty, because a positive and rewarding job condition may be also perceived as unstable or threatened by someone else. Thus both categories of workers may experience uncertainty and this may favour the development of ethnocentric, authoritarian and, more generally, extreme right-wing attitudes. Such expectancy is consistent not only with recent results of psychosocial research (see above) but also with recent theoretical speculations of political science (Gentile 1995; Ignazi 1992 and 2000). It has been suggested that the distinctive feature of today's right-wing extremism is its origin, to be found not only in *material* disadvantaged conditions but also, and sometimes uniquely, in *socially* and *psychologically* disadvantaged conditions. Contemporary right-wing extremism would give voice to social categories that are suffering from identity loss or threat, and it would answer the desire for a homogeneous and stable society, with impermeable and fixed boundaries, and a well-defined and 'fair' hierarchy of social ranks.

### The research context

The analysis presented here is based on semi-structured interviews carried out with 20 Italian workers of extreme right-wing political orientation (for more details on sample selection see Chapter 2). All of them worked in sectors characterized by significant and rapid changes over recent years, in Italy as in other European countries: telecommunications, manufacturing as well as information and communication technology (ICT). Half of the interviewees – the 'winners' – had experienced a

significant improvement at work (in terms of contract position, wage or task) over the previous five years. The other half – the ‘losers’ – had experienced a deterioration or were temporary workers, that is, had a job that could not assure them a living in the long run. Interviews were carried out from April to September 2002, according to the procedure described in Chapter 2 of this book. Workers were invited to tell the story of their working life, to describe the changes they had experienced in their job conditions and to provide an explanation for them. They were then invited to talk about socio-political issues and to express their socio-political views. The mean length of transcribed interviews was 9269 words.

Before going into the contents of our interviews, a short description of the Italian economic context at the time the interviews were carried out, as well as of the main transformations occurring in the working sectors of our interviewees, may be in order.

The year 2002 was a critical one for the Italian economy. On the one hand, falling investment and reduced foreign exchange led to a fall in industrial production, in particular in manufacturing, which went down by 1.2 per cent in 2002. On the other hand, in 2002 the variation in the annual growth rate of highly specialized professional services and individual entrepreneurial activities was 7.1 per cent. Accordingly, the Italian labour market evolved towards a polarization between highly specialized professional profiles and non-qualified profiles. Furthermore, in 2002 flexible labour increased by 6.2 per cent and the employment turnover rate (i.e. the ratio between job changes and the total number of employed people) increased from 11.5 per cent in 1998 to 13.5 per cent in 2002, mainly due to the increased number of temporary workers. Overall, such a context did not favour employment conditions: Italy is the European country where wages have grown least since 1996. This picture, along with high inflation and high public debt, cannot help but convey uncertainty and pessimism towards the future in large categories of workers (Istat 2003).

Some of our interviewees were employed in the phone company Telecom and in the associated mobile phone company Tim. In 1994, the public phone company SIP was transformed into Telecom Italia, which was established as the holding company of a group that included both service providers and manufacturing activities. The entire corporate restructuring was completed in 1997 and Telecom Italia was privatized in October of the same year. In the meantime, Tim had become the mobile-phone company that merged with the former public phone company (1995). Because of privatization, employment in Telecom decreased by 20 per cent: in 1994, Telecom Italia employed about 97,000 workers, whereas at the end of June 1999 there were less than 78,500. Workers were given incentives for voluntary redundancy and early retirement, or they were transferred to Tim, where they were employed in customer-care activities and in marketing departments.

Other interviewees worked in manufacturing, a sector that has been characterized by a significant negative trend in recent years. After growing between 1993 and 1997, annual growth rates from 1998 to 2000 decreased: the food, tobacco, leather tanning and textile industries suffered most from this recession. The fall in annual growth rates continued in 2001-2003. Already suffering industries experienced a further crisis and even industries that had been in the lead in previous years (i.e. electric appliances and transport industries) slowed down. In 2001-2003, few manufacturing

industries (i.e. some wood and mechanical industries) were able to withstand this negative trend (Istat 2003).

Yet others of our interviewees worked in the ICT sector. In 2002, the Italian ICT market, following a global trend, shrunk 0.5 per cent. However, prospects for the sector remained high because new products and services continued to be in demand from business, households and government. The sector was propelled by rapid technological change, as product life cycles became shorter and new markets opened up for new products and services. Accordingly, the sector was expected to grow 2.6 per cent in 2003 and 5 per cent in 2004 (OECD 2002).

In all the above-mentioned sectors, the main changes in work organization had occurred or were occurring at the time our interviews were carried out. These changes concerned: a) increased physical mobility, often as a consequence of company restructuring (e.g. workers were transferred from a worksite to another of the same company but located in a different town); b) increased flexibility in working hours, mainly in terms of shift systems and working days extended to Sundays; c) increased automation; d) task re-organization; e) outsourcing.

### **A common start: The vanished perspective of a job for life**

We will now examine how our interviewees reconstructed the changes they were involved in at work. In the first place, we will focus on some common points between our interviewees. We will then take into account peculiarities of interviewees experiencing either a positive or a negative change at work ('winners' and 'losers').

Both 'winners' and 'losers' emphasize that flexibility at work needs to be accepted as a constant condition rather than as an exception, and that the perspective of a job for life has definitely vanished. Here is a 'winner' speaking:

Many people are not prepared ... they still want ... they aim at standard-type employment, at public employment ... this is a completely wrong mentality. That state of things is definitely over. One must ... one must not expect a life-long, open-ended job. (Sandro, entrepreneur, 62)

Here is a 'loser' speaking:

Initially, when I started working, I told myself: 'Here I begin and here I'll finish'. Nowadays, this is no longer the case. I do not have that certainty any more. (Antonio, Tim worker, 40)

Flexibility means being ready to change working hours, places, tasks and sometimes even the job itself. Consistently, all interviewees stress that nowadays the capacity to adapt to new circumstances rapidly is an essential requirement to be successful.

They also agree that flexibility meaningfully influences their personal and social life. Time flexibility requires workers to change their habits, both as isolated individuals and as family members. For example, 'losers' often complain the about shift-working changes:

This change, which has also brought about flexible shifts, so ... has unsettled me. It is one of the reasons why I'd surely be ready to change ... because I'm sorry they should take away time from one's family. ... I mean, you can live family life only at certain times of the day. You cannot live it at 11.00 at night or at 8.00 in the morning when your wife is at work. In my opinion, some balance is necessary. I'm starting to realize that nowadays not only in Telecom, but everywhere they demand time flexibility. Yes, they demand it, and anyhow one's family is not a top priority. (Emilio, Telecom worker, 30)

'Winners', too, stress that they put up with long working hours. They usually start working early in the morning and finish very late in the evening, going well beyond the eight working hours per day. An ICT worker admits:

What I would like most ... if I were to choose ... maybe I'd like to earn the same as now or even a little bit less, as long as I'm given three more hours of life every day. (Riccardo, ICT worker, 35)

Location flexibility also affects workers' habits and has an influence on their social relations. The consequences of commuting are well described by Antonio, a Tim worker who has been moved to a workplace in a different town from where he lives:

So, I leave early in the morning, get back late in the evening, and I have no time left ... all the habits I used to have ... I've forgotten them, I simply haven't got time anymore. In the evening, I'm too tired to do anything. ... You just go home and stay up a little while with your kids, till they say good night and go to bed. (Antonio, Tim worker, 40)

For 'winners', location flexibility has also an exciting side. They describe working in a different city and often going on business trips around Italy or abroad as good opportunities to visit different places, stay at luxury hotels and eat at first-class restaurants. However, location flexibility has some costs even for 'winners'. It often means experiencing some loneliness.

Well, I worked in Turin [150 km from the interviewee's hometown] ... For some time I was not well ... I was also engaged, so I would have liked to spend some more time... instead than living in Turin ... living in Turin, I can assure you, was great fun. Working late, going out and eating in restaurants alone, you may go wherever you like ... I mean ... there were no price limits. I mean ... if I'd wanted to go and eat out and spend 150.000 lire [i.e., about 80 euros], they wouldn't have said a word. However, like all nice things, it would have been good to share them ... whereas if you're alone in Turin ... well ... (Riccardo, ICT worker, 35)

In the end, people are likely to get used to time and place flexibility and to develop new habits. Similarly, old social networks are likely to be replaced by new ones. However, the transition from one condition to the other is critical: in addition to being vulnerable to loneliness, workers are likely to perceive that an entire life system, which has worked well until recently, is dissolving without a new one to replace it.

Flexibility at work also means being ready to change one's job and to accept roles or jobs that are completely different from the ones carried out so far. Many interviewees stress that they have always to learn and develop new skills, to use new instruments and new technologies. At the same time, they have to be willing to get rid

of their old knowledge, which no longer seems to be useful. Accepting these changes may be extremely difficult for people who explicitly state that they like their job as it is and feel very much committed to it. Most interviewees also make clear that work does not just have an instrumental meaning for them and say that work is (or should be) an opportunity for self-fulfilment. Commitment to one's job may partly be due to contextual factors, that is, enhanced flexibility and perceived precariousness of the job itself. Nothing seems as precious as what one risks losing. In any case, all interviewees appear to have a clear perception that the change they are experiencing at work is something that may have consequences relevant to their whole lives.

Thus, the different aspects of job flexibility are widely referred to by both 'winners' and 'losers'. Apart from this, the two groups reconstruct their experience in very different ways.

### **The 'winners' route**

#### *Justification of current changes*

The 'winners' attitude towards current changes at work is clearly summarized by one of the interviewees' words.

All these changes are positive ... If we want to stay on a worldwide market, we must adjust to the others. ... So, there is a cause, a reason for competitiveness. (Sandro, entrepreneur, 62)

Thus, 'winners' seem to think that not only the changes they are experiencing but also the wider changes occurring on the labour market are positive. Many of them claim that fixed-term contracts are preferable to open-ended contracts and describe fixed-term contracts as the best way of achieving fast and successful careers. In the 'winners' eyes, workers who encounter difficulties in their careers should blame above all their own old-fashioned views. Actually, 'winners' often stress that advancement in changing contexts requires individual will and a new mentality, able to adjust to unstable markets:

You must be mentally flexible, because if you are rigid, you risk ... of not learning everything new the market can offer, all the opportunities, all the developments, the new technologies that pop up on the market. (Simona, manufacturing, 25)

According to 'winners', current changes have been brought about by increased connections among national markets and constant market fluctuation. Changes in the Italian labour market are just an example of the overall necessity to stay competitive on European and international markets. Thus, 'winners' explain current changes by referring to market rules and interpret them as an unavoidable and somewhat natural way of running the economy:

This ... in my opinion...this is the human nature. When man started accumulating goods ... at first, he was a hunter and ... he collected what he needed for winter. After he gave up nomadic life and started building cities, he could not help but getting to this. This is nothing else than the extreme acceleration [of this process]. (Riccardo, ICT worker, 35)

*Psychological uncertainty*

Such justification or rationalization of current changes does not protect 'winners' from psychological uncertainty. All of them highlight that a considerable amount of risk and uncertainty is implied even in successful careers. Actually, 'winners' often emphasize the role played by chance in their careers, both in the past and in the future. For example, when telling how he got his current job, an ICT worker who is employed at a website agency says:

As far as I'm concerned, being the first one to get to this agency when they had just started looking for someone with my characteristics was a matter of luck. Maybe one month later would have been too late and they would have employed someone else. So ... I was really lucky. (Federico, ICT worker, 28)

When reflecting about job security, the same interviewee says:

Well ... the safe side of this job is that, when you have a client who wants to invest in their company's image, they will always give you some work to do, so it is something that is likely to remain. Once you've acquired a client, if the client is satisfied, they'll keep working with you. Uncertainty comes when the client decides to cut down on expenses, the first one to be cut down ... because production expenses are necessary, expenses are such and such, so the first cut will be the people who look after the company image ... this is the uncertain side. (Federico, ICT worker, 28)

Nowadays the market poses continuous challenges. On the one hand, enhanced competitiveness spurs one to do one's best; on the other, it implies risky decisions in an uncertain context:

The spur comes from competition, because there are many people doing this job, and you must be competitive as regards economic, qualitative and time aspects. They often call you and tell you: 'I have a conference in a week, so I need a brochure or a website update'. And you have to decide: either you do it, or you do not do it. You have to be honest: if a task is impossible to do, you have to say so, otherwise you lose your client, or you make a fool of yourself, you burn yourself on the market, and you will not be able to get on your feet again. (Federico, ICT worker, 28)

*The 'ride-the-wave' philosophy*

In order to cope with such psychological uncertainty, 'winners' embrace a philosophy of contingency. The impact of chance plays a central role in this, as well as an almost exclusive focus on the present and the individual. Borrowing the words of an interviewee, such a worldview might be labelled as a 'ride-the-wave' philosophy.

'Life is entertainment and survival is a game' ... That is, you must invent it. Guys ... put the coin in the slot machine...new turn, new ride ... provided that you are healthy... you can gamble in this way. ... You have ... of course there's the possibility of a backlash, something may bring you up and down like a surf wave. ... Things happen. That's the reason why I believe that the individual's part is pre-eminent. I mean ... having a culture ... having something that enables you to be independent, reversible and adaptable ... I may

be a little bit slower, I may earn something less, I may earn something more, why not? I'd like to highlight that ... anyhow, the world changes... things are this way. Luckily enough, I am healthy, and I am 34, 35. If I'm afraid now, what will I do when I am 50? (Riccardo, ICT worker, 35)

Obviously, 'winners' want to and struggle to ride the wave as long as they can. As the previous quotation implies, the 'ride-the-wave' philosophy does not produce monolithic optimism. Rather, it implies mixed positive and negative feelings. Competitiveness is without conditions, because survival on the labour market is at stake. Inevitably, enhanced competitiveness and the impact of chance are strongly associated with increased perceptions that any achievement is contingent and unstable: if today you are on the top of the wave, tomorrow it could be somebody else. As the above quotation shows, surviving in such a context requires some boldness. Consistently, the most frequent strategy that 'winners' employ to ride the wave is reliance on the self. '*You are your best product*', Riccardo says. Being prepared enough, and ready to face the job market successfully in case of dismissal or failure, is up to the individual.

### *Perceived individual expertise*

The feeling of having (or of having the possibility to develop) the necessary capacities and expertise to be successful is decisive to cope with such a challenging context. Those skills are often described in metaphors referring to arts and crafts. This is an ICT worker speaking, whose job is software development for business:

In short, I define myself as a tailor. That is, when you buy a suit, it seldom fits you perfectly, that is, it fits you because you like the colour, you like the style, you like the way ... but the sleeves may be too long or it may not fit your back ... So, I start thinking about it and in the end we give it to them [i.e. the clients] ... if not a tailor-made dress, something just as good ... either you straighten your back or I make your sleeves longer. (Riccardo, ICT worker, 35)

To envisage the future, as far as it is possible in an uncertain context, one also needs something that cannot be learnt:

You need passion. It is like a painter. You must close your eyes and you should see ... your picture, as a snapshot, you should see your picture finished. ... If you see it, then take your palette and start painting. Otherwise, leave it alone. (Sandro, entrepreneur, 62)

Thus, in the 'winners' opinion, imagination, creativity, individual insight, personal will and passion are the necessary skills to survive and stay competitive on the market.

### *Perceived control*

The perception of having these skills persuades 'winners' that they can exert some control on their working conditions and status, even in such an uncertain and unstable context, and that consequently they can actively manage current changes, rather

than passively suffer them. However, once again this does not generate unshakeable certainty. Many 'winners' feel that their skills are a means of coping with change, but they are also convinced that they cannot be a stable basis upon which to stand safely. Furthermore, such perception of control is twofold: if success is perceived to depend on individual capacities, the other side of the coin is that failure is also attributed almost exclusively to the individual, their incapacity or their lack of will.

What I say is online, and what I say is done. And this is not bad. Of course, it has its pros and cons, because if you make a blunder, it's your responsibility. (Riccardo, ICT worker, 35)

I'll give you an example: if you and I play draughts and I lose, it's not the draughts' fault. It's just up to me ... I have made the wrong moves. (Sandro, entrepreneur, 62)

Accordingly, pride in success goes hand in hand with the perception of being acrobats performing without a safety net. This is reconstructed as a thrilling experience, a challenge that 'winners' appear to face practically alone. Actually, most 'winners' show strong individualistic attitudes. They are all focused on the self and on the entrepreneurial activities they have created by their own work and sacrifice.

#### *Merit rules govern the job domain*

Finally, what is the general principle that 'winners' seem to draw from the changes they have experienced? 'Winners' work under conditions of high psychological uncertainty, they actively endorse ongoing changes thanks to a philosophy of contingency, they rely almost exclusively on their own individual skills, they feel they are exerting some control but they also bear the responsibility for risky decisions. The outcome is successful careers and rewarding jobs. Therefore, 'winners' can conclude that:

My opinion is that anyway ... good will and capacity are rewarded. When one has the will to do his job well, they'll be rewarded. I don't think that there are advantaged or disadvantaged persons. If a person is good, in my opinion, his merits are recognized, whatever his work position is. (Riccardo, ICT worker, 35)

In fact, the need to defend one's advanced position constantly requires thorough commitment. 'Winners' invest a lot of time and energy in their job, make personal sacrifices for it and often take personal risks when big sums of money as well as their professional reputation are at stake. It is therefore no surprise if they reconstruct their success as a well-deserved prize. In the 'winners' eyes, their advantaged position is only the fair consequence of the big efforts they put in their job. So, according to the 'winners' perspective, people who are willing to do their job well do not have any problem, whatever the wider context may be. In other words, merit rules apply to the job domain and one always gets what s/he deserves.

## The 'losers' route

### *Condemnation of current changes*

When asked about the origin of current changes in their job, many 'losers' focus on the greed for money.

It is money. In my opinion, in the past you worked for the product, for the quality of the product ... There was more stability ... thus you worked for quality, you felt safe. On the contrary, for me now everything has changed, completely. You aim exclusively at money, and what matters most is the balance sheet. Nothing else matters. In the end, if you've made profit, everything is all right; if not, everything is bad. (Emilio, Telecom worker, 30)

Losers do not understand the companies' strategies and they construe them as merely cynical. Just for the sake of monetary gains, companies do not hesitate to implement changes that are bad for everyone: for the workers, who suffer because of them, for the clients, who are offered poor-quality products, and for society, because such a profit philosophy fosters consumerism and a decay of moral values. Accordingly, 'losers' often express a kind of moral condemnation of current changes for the absolute priority given to economic profit at the expense of other important values. Moral condemnation of the present is often combined with regret for a golden and idealized past:

I am old-fashioned. I see that as long as fathers were involved, companies went on well. Since sons have taken over, everything has blown up. It must be something at managerial level, I don't know, something has gone wrong. Maybe, it all comes down to daddy's boys who are not able to be good managers. (Stefania, temporary worker, 30)

Such a comparison with a golden past enhances perceived negativity of current changes. The comparison between the past and the present is construed so that the past is described as definitely positive, while the present is described only in terms of drawbacks.

The fact of having had that job for many years ... I liked it very much [...] I had many proposals to change, but I always refused. ... But everything has changed now. Moving from the international division to the customer information department has been traumatic for me. I have lived it badly. ... For thirteen years I lived well, very well. Then, there was a breakdown ... a breakdown. (Antonio, Tim worker, 40)

### *Material and psychological uncertainty*

In a context that is constantly changing and chasing a profit, 'losers' experience both material and psychological uncertainty. Material uncertainty is exacerbated in temporary workers, who often complain of the impossibility of planning their future due to the instability of their income. In fact, if temporary work represents an improvement as compared with irregular work, it still does not guarantee a living in the long run and does not enable workers to make any plans, even the simplest ones. Fixed-term contracts are considered as a source of instability and precariousness.

If you want to change your car, no bank will lend you the money. ... You have no future ... Really, you cannot make any project, you cannot do anything. (Stefania, temporary worker, 30)

Psychological uncertainty is ubiquitous. Even workers employed in large companies, who could feel rather protected, at least as regards their wages, express serious concerns about their future. For example, a worker who experienced the changes brought about by company privatization and restructuring says:

Today I know I'm here, but maybe next week, things may change ... both at the political level and at the company level ... Thus certainties, especially for us older workers, are becoming weaker and weaker, and this is what we're more and more ... afraid of. I feel that my job is threatened, and since I feel threatened, I'm afraid because ... I don't know what I will end up doing ... As they've come round to flexibility, they might also come round to lay-offs. (Antonio, Tim worker, 40)

Enhanced material and psychological uncertainty make 'losers' focus almost exclusively on the present. However, unlike 'winners', 'losers' perceive their focusing on the present as a frustration of the basic human need to have projects for the future, and they live it in quite a depressed and passive mood.

Five years from now? I am not able to see myself ... I have stopped thinking about the future, about what will happen ... I think about it once in a while, but I can't see anything. I will wait for some phone calls from work agencies. So, five years from now, I hope to find a regular job, but I have no certainties at all. Consequently, I cannot see beyond. (Stefania, temporary worker, 30)

### *The 'mere cipher' philosophy*

The perceived negativity of the situation is worsened by the perception of being at the lowest rank. Drawing once again on interviewees' own words, many 'losers' endorse the 'mere cipher' philosophy:

We really feel like a mere cipher ... We're ... how can I put it ... the interface of the company, which wants us to behave in a certain way. But we've that great pressure on our shoulders ... both from the company and from the clients, who want ... who want quick, immediate answers ... We're between two fires, unfortunately we're in the last row. (Antonio, Tim worker, 40)

Thus, while some powerful others are surely making a profit from the changes, this is not at all the case for the 'losers', who perceive themselves as the victims of an unequal situation.

### *Lack of perceived individual expertise*

In addition to perceiving that they are in a disadvantaged condition, 'losers' perceive that they have no means to escape from such a condition because they do not have the skills that are most required nowadays.

I've always done this job. I would not be able to do anything else ... New technologies, market development ... I mean ... many factors require you to keep constantly up-to-date, and you have to do it all the time, as fast as possible. ... I admit that from time to time I find it difficult to keep up-to-date, about many things ... Here, every day you have to learn, to remember ... my memory is not so ... but it's one of the most important requirements, I think. I often happen not to remember many things. (Antonio, Tim worker, 40)

'Losers' often complain that their own professional expertise, which they have acquired thanks to many years of hard work, is not useful anymore. Even worse, they feel that it is almost impossible for them to acquire the skills that are now necessary to make successful careers.

In the 'losers' accounts, perceived lack of individual expertise is often combined with the perception that workers are faced with a false choice. You can either accept changes or resign, which is seen as blackmail. Most workers cannot afford to leave their job and search for a new one because their job is necessary for the upkeep of their families.

### *Lack of perceived control*

The natural consequence is that 'losers' feel that they have lost all control over the changes. They have definitely lost the possibility of controlling their job both as regards the task they are asked to carry out and as regards their role within the company. As regards their jobs, 'losers' often complain that job re-organization has brought about task fragmentation and that, because of job automation, their job is less professional and more standardized than before:

They give you some inputs and you must follow those inputs and nothing else ... You know ... you don't have the possibility to start a task and then finish it. It's a much more superficial work than it used to be. (Emilio, Telecom worker, 30)

As regards their role within the company, workers feel just like pawns moved from one place to another because of the interests of powerful others:

Then for some years now things have been changing as to company strategies ... they moved us young people, they moved us all to the marketing department and there was no choice, they told us: 'you are here' and that's it ... They don't fire you but they make you go to a department where they need more personnel. (Emilio, Telecom worker, 30)

Thus, 'losers' have often made the painful experience that change is imposed from outside without any consideration of individual expertise or merit. In the 'losers' view changes have not brought about any work rationalization. Rather, they have caused a levelling down of individual merits and an overall lowering in professional expertise. In a word, 'losers' feel that their company has abandoned them. It is only natural that workers for their part abandon the company, at least psychologically, though with some bitterness:

I take this issue to heart because, quite frankly, seeing a company like Telecom losing some points, losing its value it hurts me ... Because I'm the kind of person who works for

the company and wants to do his job well ... Before, I had never thought of changing my job because I liked it; now I wouldn't feel bad about changing it, looking for another job. (Emilio, Telecom worker, 30)

### *Merit rules should govern the job domain*

To sum up the 'losers' psychological condition, we might say that 'losers' experience negative changes and related material and psychological uncertainty. They also feel that they have no means of escape from their disadvantaged situation nor any ability to control the process of change that they are the victims of. On the other hand, they feel they are very committed to their work and to their company. Accordingly, 'losers' perceive an imbalance between the efforts they put into their job and their actual bad conditions at work. In order to make sense of such an imbalance, they often refer to the lack of respect for merit rules at work, because of which people do not get what they deserve.

I'm the kind of guy who likes to do his job well. Also I don't mind making efforts and sacrifices. If I do my job well and try to achieve good results, I make all the effort I can, but I don't like to work with dark glasses on, so to speak. That is, today things are so but tomorrow they may change them altogether, they may upset everything. All that you've done so far it's worth nothing. I don't like it. I feel I have no gear. That is, I don't know how long I'll do my current job, may be in a week or so they'll tell me: 'Alright, you've got to change it completely' ... In my opinion, people who do their job well shouldn't have any problem. (Emilio, Telecom worker, 30)

Thus, when explaining their disadvantaged condition, 'losers' put particular stress on the underestimation of their individual merits. As it is, such an explanation mirrors the one given by 'winners', and discussed above, according to which their advantaged condition is mainly attributable to their individual merits.

### **From the job domain to the political domain**

#### *The merit principle: Legitimizing social inequality*

Considering what we have seen so far, the explanation our interviewees give of their either advantaged or disadvantaged condition at work may be summed up as follows. Some individuals deserve more than others do. Crises, changes and other problems that may arise at work are likely to be solved if individual merits are adequately respected. Neither 'winners' or 'losers' mention other possible ways of solving problems at work that may lie outside the role of the individual, for example solidarity among workers or structural changes in the working system. The only reference to structural changes may be found among the 'losers' and concerns the generic necessity of going back to a value and merit system that is no longer applied. Both categories of interviewees often show this frame of mind in a simple and direct way. According to them, people who respect the 'rules of the game', that is, people who are able and work hard, must be rewarded. In contrast, people who do not respect

the 'rules of the game', that is, lazy or incompetent workers, must be punished. Both 'winners' and 'losers' call for a strong hand that enforces this basic principle. For example, a 'winner' says:

Here what matters is giving people who don't do their job a good kick in the ass, people who don't do their job as they should but just do what they want. ... There are also some people who take advantage, so you must pull the reins on them. (Valentina, Tim worker, 30)

Similarly, a 'loser' says:

If only one felt that his chair might be taken away from him ... For example, it's happened to me recently, one of those guys you find in public offices, an employee with his open-ended public contract, he nearly throws the papers on his desk in your face and he plainly tells you that he doesn't feel like working that day ... Well, that employee, if he feels that his chair might be taken away from him, he might get down to some work for a change and things might go better ... I think that giving some people a good shake would do them good. (Stefania, temporary worker, 30)

### *Authoritarianism*

Such a frame of mind may still be found when interviewees shift from the job domain to the political domain. According to the interviewees, people who break social norms must be punished and are entirely responsible at an individual level. No hint is made at social responsibility or the possibility of implementing political or economic measures that might reduce or prevent the violation of norms. In a 'winner's' words:

I am not a supporter of guarantees and forgiveness. If you rob, you must be punished. ... Mussolini ... you may call it dictatorship, as you like ... It was an example of good government. (Riccardo, ICT worker, 35)

In a 'loser's' words:

Really...there is lack of values in today's society ... Some values should be almost imposed upon ... In my opinion, this also comes from a lack of teaching in the family ... I can remember my father saying: 'lunch time is lunch time: don't be late', because anyway some things must be guaranteed, they must be respected. (Emilio, Telecom worker, 30)

In both 'winners' and 'losers' we may therefore find a distinctive feature of right-wing authoritarianism, namely a high level of aggressiveness against outgroup members who are perceived as a threat against the established social norms (Altemeyer 1998).

### *Prejudice against immigrants*

The way 'winners' and 'losers' speak about immigrants may be a good example of the frame of mind described above. Our interviewees come up with several examples

referring to various social contexts in which immigrants are seen as breaking established norms or deviating from accepted values of our society.

I do not like when those people [i.e. immigrants] come here without papers. They must have papers. You know ... I mean ... when we went to America, we worked bloody hard, they checked whether we had lice, they checked our documents, what we were going to do, the families we came from, whether there were any links with mafia. ... Women had not to be pregnant. If they were...I came across an immigrant woman at the hospital [at the time when the interviewee was at the hospital waiting to give birth to her child] ... well ... I would have kicked her. She stayed in the bed next to mine, she was convinced that they would give her some clothes for the child, they would give her the cradle, they would give her all the necessary, all free. ... And that woman said: 'I made the baby because in this way... my husband hasn't got a job yet ... in this way they will renew his residence permit for one more year'. I can't stand it! You come here and say this to my face? ... Why should we keep all those immigrants? I mean... those who take advantage of the situation, I'd throw them out ... I don't find it fair. (Valentina, Tim worker, 30)

If they [i.e. immigrants] come here to integrate, they're welcome. ... A thing that I can't stand is the fact that anyone, Jewish, Lutheran, animist, Muslim and so on comes here and tells me that at the school my son goes to ... they must take away the crucifix because that little corpse hanging from the cross scares their child...I mean, go to hell ... If you don't like the crucifix at school, go back where you came from. (Riccardo, ICT worker, 35)

Speaking about immigrants, interviewees often do not explicitly condemn them or refer to their individual responsibility. They express their judgement in softer tones and in ways that are more implicit. In today's society, overt expression of prejudice against ethnic minorities is often moderated by social desirability concerns, and shown in socially accepted forms (Altemeyer 1998; Katz and Hass 1988). This means that prejudiced behaviour against ethnic minorities is most likely to emerge when that behaviour can be justified in non-racial terms (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986).

Consistently, one of the arguments often used by interviewees is a consideration of the link between immigration and criminality as practically unavoidable, considering that people who do not work and are extremely poor are very likely to commit crimes.

According to me, what do they do? They come here and, in the end, what do they do? They don't have a job, they don't have a residence permit, and they don't have anything. What should they do? They must rob. (Pietro, temporary worker, 26)

Immigrants who come to Italy hope to find a job and earn some money. Now the fact that either you don't find a job or you're not willing to find one, may lead to criminality, for sure. (Sandro, entrepreneur, 62)

The consequence the interviewees seem to draw from such arguments is quite clear: immigrants should not come to our country.

When you're hungry, you're ready to do anything even if you're the most honest person in the world. If I see my son dying, I can kill somebody to get some money ... The real

problem is not to let them come here ... we have to find a filter. (Stefania, temporary worker, 30)

I'm not a racist, but I don't agree with so many people coming here ... you know ... I can understand those miserable people, but whenever I see those ships overloaded with people ... You should not sink them, of course, for God's sake, but why do they come to Italy only? ... Can't they also go to another country? (Pietro, temporary worker, 26)

The arguments used by both 'winners' and 'losers' about immigrants may be related to the dominant theme of their own view of the working as well as the socio-political life, which may be summed up as follows: Some individuals deserve more than others, hierarchies based upon merit have to be respected and, consequently, social inequality is necessary and unavoidable (cf. Benabu 2000; Lewin-Epstein, Kaplan and Levanon 2003; Miller 1999). This ideological support for meritocracy and social inequality appears to be functional to both the 'winners' and the 'losers' needs. On the one hand, it silences the 'winners' conscience because it corroborates the view that their own privileged condition is fair and legitimate. On the other, it facilitates the 'losers' acceptance of disadvantage because it provides them with the hope that, once a strong authority really enforced merit rules, they would get the privileged positions they feel entitled to (cf. Jost and Hunyady 2002).

## **Conclusion**

The qualitative analysis presented in this chapter has allowed us a close examination of the link between people's explanation of a positive *versus* negative change in their job condition and the development of extreme right-wing attitudes. In this link, the merit principle, according to which everyone has or should have what they deserve (cf. Kluegel and Smith 1986; Major 1994), has been shown to play a crucial role. Our two groups of interviewees often refer to this principle when offering an interpretation of the positive or negative change they have experienced at work. Workers experiencing a positive change (the 'winners') see change as a challenge that has to be accepted, as an opportunity to exert their capacities in terms of professional creativity and control over their life. Even if sometimes they highlight the role of chance in their life and the perception of 'walking on a tight-rope', the main stress is on the role of the individual and their present privileged condition is mainly attributed to their individual merits. Workers experiencing a negative change (the 'losers') see change as precariousness and the lack of the possibility to exert any form of control over one's work. Lack of control ranges from the most immediate sphere of everyday working activity (tasks, procedures, practicalities) to the wider sphere of long-term planning of working careers. The unpredictability of working life is attributed to several causes, but particular stress is laid on a widespread underestimation of actual capacities and merits. Accordingly, 'losers' mainly attribute their present disadvantaged condition at work to the fact that their individual merits are not properly acknowledged. To sum up, 'winners' refer to the merit principle as a principle that actually regulates the work market and as a justification of the advantaged situation in which they find themselves ('people

who work well *do* not have problems'). On the contrary, 'losers' refer to the merit principle as an unobserved rule that, if respected, would allow them to escape their disadvantaged situation ('people who work well *should* not have problems').

Such a marked reference to individual merits and a corresponding lack of reference to any forms of social responsibility or solidarity in the work domain are clearly mirrored in the political attitudes of both groups of interviewees. These attitudes are typical of extreme right-wing parties and are centred on the inevitability of social inequality, on the devaluation of minority social categories such as immigrants, on the opportunity of resorting to authoritarian and punitive measures in order to maintain or re-establish the *status quo*. Several authors have investigated the psychological origins of such extreme right-wing views, and most of them have traced them back to the socialization process during infancy or adolescence. Early socialization in an emotionally cold and repressive family environment would result in people being much more likely to develop repressed hostility that they in turn project onto low-status outgroups, and ultimately in their endorsing right-wing ideologies (inter alia Adorno et al. 1950; Fromm 1941; Rokeach 1960; Tetlock and Mitchell 1993). In addition, our analysis has shown that experiences that people live in later stages of their life, for example during their working life, may also contribute to developing or strengthening individualism and views about social inequality that are typical of extreme right-wing ideology.