

# INDUSTRIAL WORK AT THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL CROSSROADS

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**Abstract:** *This paper, written by following a methodological approach of a critical-historiographical kind, faces, on a pedagogical basis, the post-Taylor-Fordist evolution of the organizational, productive and training modalities of the waged industrial work, paying close attention to those dynamics (not only the ones within the companies) that could outline, both in a positive or negative way, the representation of the person who works and the conditions of his/her educability. The argumentations below firstly give prominence to the educational potentialities connected with the new configuration of the working activity, then highlight their main criticalities and, in closing, leave room for an educational proposal which tends to promote a person-centred culture of the economic action and the work.*

**Key words:** *industrial work, educability, motivations, consumption, economic education.*

## 1. Introduction

The several, deep and incessant changes that give substance to the contemporary age going through it and, as a consequence, the impossibility of understanding the complexity of its changeable identity profile in its entirety, make both an univocal definition or a vision of definitive synthesis impracticable. Also the prefix post, used in many attempts of qualifying a topicality that is by now bereft of strong models of thinking and “great narrations”, is not helpful. In fact, referring to an amply experimented before and to the passing of some of its aspects, it denotes the difficulty in outlining the characteristic features of our age in absolute terms. Surely, the above-mentioned complexity corresponds to the concept that best frames a picture

still in becoming, however it is undeniable that the historical season we are living in, starting from the late Nineteenth century, first of all stands out because of its ambivalence. In effect, Western post-modern, post-industrial, post-ideological, etc. man and society fluid float on the asphalt of everyday life, tossed about by the foamy waves of a contradictory reality, in which coexist, on an anthropological level, contrasting evidences and incentives that nourish the fermentation of a fragile and disoriented humanity, leading the person's representation, the conception of his/her way of being, acting, doing and the reasons of his/her educability in the face of an uncertain destiny.

In order to illuminate the nature of such ambivalence, contradictoriness and all the criticalities that accompany them, I could rely on the antinomies which permeate

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numerous vital worlds, but I will limit the focus of this article to the exemplariness of what it is happening in the working world, with the firm belief that it is just in working background – and by extension in economic-social dynamics – that we play a lot of the person’s representation, of the conception of his/her way of being, acting, doing, and of the reasons of his/her educability. In detail, I will examine the productive waged work of the industrial kind.

## 2. The work for the person

Approximately in the last forty years, the dense succession of technological innovations – from the introduction of information and automation technologies to the pervading 2.0 means – and the progressive variation of consumer demands – from the need of a flexible production rather than a strict one to the tendency to exalting the value of a good for its ability to convey meaningful symbolic, aesthetic, emotional and identity-making distinction experiences instead of its material specifications [25] –, together with the parallel spreading of globalization and the so-called knowledge economy, urged a gradual review of the productive and organizational orders within the companies, giving abundant room to a different way of conceiving the working activity [16].

Although organizational-productive modalities bound to the dictates of modern capitalism still resist, it has in a large part effectively passed: from man as an appendage to the machine to man as its supervisor and, finally, as its operator; from the Taylorist logic of “one best way” and the Fordist “move the metal” to the Toyotist one (revised in a Western view) of “kaizen” and “total quality”; therefore, from the “lonely” work to the team work; from the centralization of the command,

the bureaucratic parcelling out of the tasks and the verticality of the relations to the management decentralization entrusted to interdependent and multipurpose groups, the integration of tasks into one entity subject/group, and the horizontality of the relations; from the interactive closure of the island-companies to the opening of the network-companies, imposed by outsourcing processes following globalization, and to their need of making their central/peripheral workers share information and skills and of starting negotiable strategies with different institutions [21]; and also, signally, from the exclusive bend on the “material” and on the abstract work centred on big masses of fixed capital to human capital mediated work, to the combination of material (subordinate though irreplaceable) and “immaterial” (superordinate), in the light of an operating model more and more dependent on industrial computerization and, for this reason, on the management of the information and communication flows [17].

Coherently, from a formative perspective, once the training worry concerning a codified and repetitive “know how” has lessened, one witnesses the intent on supporting the prefigured centrality of the person and of the socio-technical dynamisms by referring to the global enhancement of the human resources and relations [1]. Which means harmonizing the technical-professional qualification for the reference sector with both the strengthening of the factors that – by facilitating the emergence of knowledge from the tacit, its conscious learning, exchange, negotiation and transferability – allow to totally unveil that knowledge potential which to this day represents the main productive driving force [23] (apt to providing adaptability, resistance and competitiveness on the market to the companies), and also with other skills:

heuristic and hermeneutical, organizational and self-organizational, evaluative and self-evaluative, communicational, ethic and relational, emotional-affective, aesthetic and creative.

In effect, paraphrasing A. Gorz [15], if immaterial work has become the core of the value creation, if this kind of work essentially consists in a continuous devotion to the interception and management of the aforementioned flows by means of the involvement of purely personal and interpersonal qualities, and if its optimization could only be possible thanks to “workers’ self-managed production”, then the know how is not enough. There needs to be, also, a know how placed and connoted in a socio-cultural way [13], which invests *in toto* and is simultaneously backed up by the *savoir-être* and the *savoir-vivre ensemble*. In other words – here I am about to explain the sense of Gorzian “self-managed production” – there needs to be a complete availability of the human personality as a result of its intelligence, imagination and experience, of its level of education and information, its faculties of learning and meta-learning, its familiarity with making the best of unexpected situations, its masteries and attitudes, its dialogic, behaviour and expressive inclinations, its predisposition for inter-subjectivity, its multi-memberships, in short of its especially non-working being.

So, while inside Taylor-Fordist manufactures and industries the workers «became operative only after having been deprived of their knowledge, abilities, and habits developed in everyday culture and after having been exposed to a parcelled division of the work [...] instead post-Fordist workers have to enter the production process with the whole cultural baggage they acquired thanks to the games, the team sports, the fights, the arguments, the musical and theatrical

activities, etc. It is just in these non-working activities that their liveliness, their co-operation and improvisation abilities developed. Post-Fordist company gets to work their vernacular knowledge» [15].

In view of what I have just outlined, it would prefigure, as I revealed in advance, an unprecedented dominance of the “human factor” within the work environment. And this, reasonably, leads, in conjunction with a large group of organizations theorists, to the promotion of an idea of the subject at work that is no longer assimilated to a mere gear of the factory or to a spare passive executor of some instructions given from above, but to an active element (autonomous and responsible) who is moreover accredited in the unitarity of his/her being and experiencing. By this recognition, in addition, it could be possible to reconsider/revise professional training (initial and continuous, internal or external to the companies) as a space of “personalization”, that goes beyond the domain of the uniquely performative instances to sustain also worker’s human growth.

Therefore, work, and the professional training by reflex, would appear to show the neo-humanistic nature of a microcosm which is able to give man’s self-realizing drives a way out, satisfying the desire to put “the doing” within a self-educational planning that can give it an essential and existential meaning and sense, and, in the same way, the interests of the management, since it could consequently count on more collaborative employees because of their intimate motivation [7]. Work (and the professional training), moreover, by recovering the comprehensive subjectivity and by announcing its explicative increase in advance, in this way contributing to the anthropological fullness both on the aspect of the liberation of the person in

him/herself *tout court* and on the one of his/her inter-human elevation, would prove to be at the service of being and acting [29] and not to be their antagonist. Work (and the professional training), all in all, would assert itself as a place in which it is finally possible to celebrate the sustainability of the human dignity, tuned with the supremacy of the profit, by supporting everyone's right to set oneself up as an unconditional *primum*, a goal never a means, and to exercise an essential freedom [26]: the freedom of fully being oneself, becoming totally human, giving vent to one's own potentialities (at work, too) in the sign of the confrontation with other people, the conviviality of the differences and the constructive interdependence/reciprocity.

Although it is indisputable the etymologically educational promise incidental to the taking of the shape *in fieri* by the post-mechanist and post-Fordist form of work, and although there are many attempts to actualize it through the revisitation of European systems of VET (Vocational Education and Training) [11], the implementation of the communities of practice [31], [2] and strategies of workplace learning [12] and the outlining of information-relational models of knowledge management [22], [24], still persist some structural and finalist perplexities which prevent the previously used conditional tense from transforming into undoubted certainties and, therefore, from corroborating without reserve the hypothesis of an anthropocentric turning point able to reveal and legitimate the agreement and fair order between educational reasons, and the ones referring to the protection of personal dignity and well-being, and economic reasons. The following paragraph is going to clarify these perplexities and all the problems that breed them.

### 3. The person for the work

As argued by G. Lipovetsky and J. Serroy, the fact that post-TaylorFordist company gives substance to organizational modes which hinge on employee's autonomy, responsibility and involvement, by mobilizing the whole individual subjectivity, can eventually lead to "eutopic" visions. But, underlying and as a first step, the downwards displacement of the responsibility for the actions and the resulting burden cause high stress rates and considerable performance anxiety. Even, «giving value to the idea that success or letdown in matter of competence totally depend on the individual in first person, then post-Taylorist company arouses feelings like anguish, disesteem and underestimation of one's self». In addition, «within a context in which the pressures of the short-term increase, the individuals live in fear of a permanent judgement and of not keeping up with the requirements of the company».

This identity-making insecurity is furthermore sharpened by employment precariousness which marks the current working scenarios, in the presence of which «workers in difficulty feel humiliation and a personal guilt» [19].

It is opportune to dwell upon this last statement. Precariousness, in fact, does not only clamp down a long-term life planning, confirming its inadmissibility. It jeopardizes one of the most relevant motivational disposition to working commitment. In the labor of the *animal laborans* described by H. Arendt [3], meant as historical condition of the servile work and, recently, both of waged "work-goods" and Taylor-Fordist work, in spite of the technical division of the tasks and the impracticability of a deep conversation among colleagues, the worker was anyhow able to test motivations connected with the interactive sphere [20]. The motivational

dimension – to some extent having links with the objection raised by R. Sennett concerning the master H. Arendt [28] – did not dry up in carrying out the duties connected with the biological needs for sustenance. It rather found nourishment in stable and lasting interactions that can be conceptually translated into the expression «solidarity of the “homogeneous group”» [20]. A solidarity which animated the action of the *zoon politikon* (of Arendtian memory again), observable in working class’ claim for rights, and which, once in retirement, even caused regret for not as much what it was done and for the “suggested” anti-human measures to do it, but the lost affections. Whereas, nowadays, due to the tendentially grouping nature of the working activity, there is conversely the opportunity to perform and facilitate a deep inter-human conversation – with all that derives from the reasonable expectation that such interfacing, especially if supported by *ad hoc* training interventions, further enriches worker’s identity making and self-fulfillment process – precariousness ends up by weakening any motivation of inter-relational kind, at the same time slamming the door to a plausible evolution of a politically active citizenry. In this regard, it is difficult not to agree with G. Lipovetsky and J. Serroy when they assert that workers feel absolutely personal guilt: given that human relations are unstable, faint and ephemeral, and it is no longer felt the sense of belonging to a «class destiny», inevitably «the individual bears the burden of his/her social and professional condition more and more alone» [19].

It is possible to object that within post-TaylorFordist becoming of the work, giving this a bigger margin to creative and inventive action rather than to the merely executive-repeating one, other motivations arise, that are typical of Arendtian *homo faber*, since they refer to subjective

visibility and therefore to the recognition of the self through the mediating action exercised by the product. But, as the philosopher remind us, such motivations need the absence of the filters between who works and who buys, so they can subsist in autonomous work (especially the one on-line, in which the feedbacks for the service/good provided are direct and potentially uninterrupted), but not in the waged one. However, they do not solve the previously cited problem, because they do not come from processes of reciprocal human recognition, but from a “gratitude” which is linked with the saleability of the service/good [20].

In brief, post-TaylorFordist workers have to count paradoxically only on their own strengths and, besides the stress and the performance anxiety, the ghost of precariousness looming over them and the lack of a tough relational handhold, they also have to undertake the temporal intensification of the working activity, as reported during the last twenty years; while the physical dangers due to the exposure to risks, the occupational diseases, the accidents, the cases of death in the workplace do not considerably decrease, [10], and, above all, while emerge the devastating outcomes of the blackmail-work attributed to outsourcing. The result, obtained by adding the terror for the possible loss of job to the corrosion of the character determined by precariousness and hyper-flexibility [27], the afflictions of the hyper-work, the never sufficient pursuit of keeping up with its rhythm and the obligation to lower acquired rights and profitable positions, is the ever-increasing trend of psychotropic substances consumption, in order to withstand the clashes of the working lived experience and to reach a state of self-alienation [8].

At this point, a question arises spontaneously: in front of these criticalities, what happens to the

aforementioned mobilization of human energies? Or better, which is the goal of such mobilization if the presented counterpart obscures the perception of a different and positive worker's anthropology and reduce the prospects of his/her educability and of the total training within the working environment to a minimum potential state? Well, the mobilization could be useful for a perfect exploitation of the person, transferring hyper-efficientist prerogative from the soles hands (Taylor-Fordism) to mind and heart too. As M. Combes and B. Aspe would say, work adheres to the subject, and not vice versa like happened in the past, in order to originate a renovated servitude [9]. In P. Levy's words, «the innermost "personal development" will lead to a better emotional stability, an easier relational openness, an intellectual acuteness better addressed», but, presumably, not to the advantage of neither company nor workers, but to «a better economical performance» [18].

After all, it is not a mystery that economic action, bolstered by having swallowed up the whole human-care sphere within the vortex of utilitarian distortions, always shifts the balance in its own favour, «by making the part weigh upon the whole and by using all the human qualities, that are per se aimed at other purposes, to reach its goals» [30]. In this case, in consonance with an ethical reductionism which expects to satisfy only with money and consumption the demand for a personal/community growth and well-being, for its goals it is meant the transfiguration of the person into the new machine, suitable for the new market and to the strengthening of the short-circuit productivism/consumerism.

Therefore, the danger standing out on the horizon would consist in the turn of the subject from being an offshoot of the productive instrument or the supervisor of

the same instrument to being the instrument him/herself, with an unprecedented functionalist incorporation of every human virtuality, capacity, talent, by now totally enslaved to the expansion of the kingdom of consumerism.

To this end, Z. Bauman maintains that the pivotal principle that ensures prosperity to such kingdom is associating «happiness not as much with the *satisfaction* of the needs [...], but with the *constant increase of the quantity and intensity* of desires, and that, in turn, implicates a quick utilization and a quick replacement of the objects through which it is thought to satisfy these desires [...]. News needs demand new goods; new goods demand new needs and desires; the coming of the consumerism starts the age of the "planned obsolescence" of the goods provided on the market and points out the spectacular rise of the garbage disposal business» [5].

Similarly, even the worker could not escape the spiral of this vicious circle, because he/she is an "object" too, through which satisfy the "desires", that could be quickly replaced. In the «society of consumers», in fact, «it is believed that nothing will last forever and nothing is irreplaceable. [...] All things, begot or manufactured, human or not, are until further notice and not indispensable» [6]. In line with this approach, the worker would be a means chosen for a goal which, pedagogically speaking, is not him/herself and the other. A necessary means, metaphorically comparable, in Z. Bauman's words, to a "smart missile" [6], able to make use of its learning competence and its other resources to track down in all probability the assigned objectives, but still a means, useful as long as hardware and software will react with proper readiness. When this readiness will lower, then it will be the time for another missile. What really matters is coping with the speed of movement of the objectives

(needs trade-in), and if one is not more adequate, because he/she is worn out by the draining of his/her own potential, or because he/she is not able to keep up the pace, or because there is someone else who can carry out exactly the same mission at a lower cost, then unemployment will bide its time. Precariousness would rise, neither more nor less, to a rightful and inevitable condition of a system which, since it is founded on the intensity and the increase of the human yearning and therefore on the binding suddenness of the change, admits the perishability of the individual meant as an instrument/product, if he/she is convenient. If he/she is not convenient, it also admits his/her substitute even before the symptoms of this perishability appear. After all, we are in the age of the planned obsolescence.

Considering this visual perspective, then the emphasis on subjectivity – borrowing Z. Bauman's words again – would dissimulate a mere «subjectivity fetishism» [5], which has got the merit of hiding a truly and exceedingly commercialized reality, both in working and everyday life. In plain words, one would pretend to honour the integrality of the personality in order to conceal the determination of an integral subjugation.

All I have adduced until now and, in particular, the brief outlines about the short-circuit productivism/consumerism and about the commercialization of the reality, allow, in the home stretch, to go back to the topic of the motivation and to come full circle. Actually, once the relational base has disappeared and every collective political tension has vanished, on the motivational side, with the already mentioned exception of the autonomous work, there would be nothing left but the consumable thing. So one would work only to stay alive and consume and, if one is lucky, to hyper-consume, remaining out of the new and large union of the excluded

ones [4]. And here the supposed plot hatched by capitalism will disclose the subliminal nature of its most penetrating message, comparable with the messages conveyed by the billboards for the 1988 movie *They live* by J. Carpenter: dear worker, do not waste your time looking for motivations within the relations with your fellow men/women and let their spreading be delegated to the homologated imagination of consumerism. Gaze upon the goods, that are the only permanent things in your life (working life), and work to buy. You are the first of our customers, we care about your satisfaction. Resign yourself to consumption, happiness is waiting for you, let yourself be cradled by the real well-being.

According to this interpretation, and here I conclude, post-TaylorFordist work and the hypertrophy which identify it would rise to being the headquarter of a underhand value-related colonization, and the worker, more and more isolated and impoverished in the exercise of his/her rights, would confine him/herself to consuming him/herself in the self-production to consume, ratifying the victory of neo-liberalist capitalism over waged work, as shown by L. Gallino [14].

#### 4. Conclusions

In conclusion, it is obvious that we face a complex transition, in tension between promising humanistic impulses, often put into practice, and plausible instrumental drifts, more frequently rampant. Pedagogical reflection, therefore, and specifically the pedagogy of work, is unavoidably asked to lavish its contribution to remove the suspension dots and shift the unstable balance in favour of the person and his/her authentic educability.

As a start, by contributing to the return as a co-star (and not as a scene stealer) of

the economic action within the ethical sphere, that would allow to dispel the doubts about the concept of the worker and the finalization of work. From this point of view, as for my part, it would be appropriate a critical close examination which perimeters the arrangements and the European socio-economical priorities (not only them), faces the myth of the growth at any cost (in which the cost is eminently human), investigates the quicksand of globalism where general and steering politics are, willing or not, mixed up in, preventing their resolute and cohesive intervention at many levels, and contemplates the culturally persuasive function of pedagogical, educational and training strategies, actions and advices.

The space at my disposal, nevertheless, does not authorizes me to make a deep dissertation about these topics. So, I am going to dedicate brief final considerations to the role that can be played also by an economic education since the primary school.

The education to which I refer is not the one, traditionally in Italy or in other countries, that is sponsored by banks and aimed at conveying, above all, the value of saving. It is an education which pivots on children literature in order to sharpen children's critical thinking. More precisely, the educational project arises from an Italian (former economist) publisher's will, who has recently published two illustrated books regarding, exactly, work and consumerism, and who has asked my collaboration to promote them among teachers in Marche, along with other activities that could radicalize and magnify its basic intent. In summary, by means of a lexicon close to childhood experience and funny cartoonistic images, the first book, in which two cute crocodiles star, using as a pretext the price fixing of some goods produced by themselves, accounts the human conformation of work and what lies behind "human doing", pointing out with

situations, words and illustrations how it could give the go ahead to original learning, experiential regeneration of the knowledge, important emotional and relational dynamics, ethic and aesthetic sound agitations, self-aimed challenges, confidence in one's own means, creativity, gratification, personal recognition and community progress. In the second book, using as a pretext the crocodiles' visit to a television studio where it is recorded an advertisement addressed to children, the attention is focused on the distinction between reality and fiction and on the artificiality of multiple needs, on their induction.

The undertaken adventure is only at its initial stage and, if my suggestion will be agreed by the school principals, it should also include the synergy between the contents of the stories (of which it is expected a further proliferation) and concrete experiments of simulated company (obviously child-friendly). So, at the moment there are not results to disseminate. But from the unripe feedbacks gathered by the first group of pioneer teachers thanks to the sole utilization of such books in the classrooms, with regards of their capacity to show the backstage and make the gaze diverge, I think that also an education with these traits could take an active part, starting from the childhood in view of a committed adulthood, in the development of an economic and working culture neatly inclined to the care for the people and the world they live in.

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