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Cover illustration: Drawing by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) - Study of the Human Face

Corinto G.L.

Promoting Environmental Awareness Through Art 129 - 144

Labate S.

Utopia, Work, Neoliberalism. Marginal Say and Foucault Notes 145 -156

Oesterdiekhoff G.W., Dux G., Hummell H.-J.

The development of painting in history.
Psychological stages and sequential epochs 157 - 180

Corinto G.L., Gómez-Ullate M., González Manrique M.J.

Pilgrimages and Rite-of-Passage Trips in Four Iberoamerican Films 181 - 197

De Pascale F., Di Matteo D.,

The transhumance perception: a macro-regional phenomenon
in the Mediterranean basin. A comparison between verbal descriptions
of the tradition in Calabria and Molise (Southern Italy) 199 - 211

Chiarelli B., Annese M.

The Carrying Capacity of the Environment as it relates
to Human Consumerism. 213 - 228

Chiarelli B.

The Duration of Life and its Biological Analogy: The Great Taboo 229 - 243

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Michel Foucault, Jean- Baptiste Say.*

Utopia, Work, Neoliberalism. Marginal Say and Foucault Notes

We are used to refer to neoliberalism as the age when economic rationality triumphs. Quite the contrary, the thesis of this contribution is that the deep force of neoliberalism lies in its utopian core. Such a thesis is pointed out through the analysis of Michel Foucault works. Even the current transformations of the meaning of job find in this way a moral legitimation, not only a rational one, due to the appeal and the force of this utopian core.

«quiconque se mêle d'instituer un peuple,
doit savoir dominer les opinions,
et par elles gouverner les hommes» (J.J. Rousseau)

***Olbie* or Liberalism's Utopia**

A few years before he wrote his famous *Treatise on Political Economy* Jean-Baptiste Say published an occasional essay which was clearly utopian in inspiration¹. The title itself echoes the great works of the most celebrated utopians in the history of thought: *Olbie ou Essai sur les moyens d'améliorer les mœurs d'une nation*. It came out in 1800 and thus represents a 'sort of watershed between two centuries'².

The previous century had proclaimed and enacted the revolutionary utopia. This utopia was fundamentally a matter of inventing the category of the people. This is not an arbitrary interpretation. *Olbie* is, in fact, an occasional essay. The occasion was the following question posed by *Institut national*: '*Quels sont les moyens de fonder la morale chez un peuple?*'³. A biopolitical interpretation of this text – which I would like to put forward here – is thus entirely legitimate. The occasional issue is, specifically, an analysis of biopolitical considerations. How can a people be created? Via the art of governing.

¹ For a consideration of Say's essay's place in the history of utopian thought, see J. Servier, *Histoire de l'utopie*, Gallimard, Paris 1976.

² "*Olbie, ou Essai sur les moyens d'améliorer les mœurs d'une nation*'s only merit is as a timid renewal of utopian thought, a sort of watershed between two centuries" (*Ibid.*, p. 164. It is a harsh but overall not ungenerous judgment).

³ J.-B. Say, *Olbie ou essai sur les moyens de améliorer les Mœurs d'une nation*, in Id., *Ouvres morales et politiques*, Economica, Paris 2002, p. 191.

But an art of government capable of inventing a people can no longer be monarchical. The latter is, in fact, by definition not interested in the people because it requires no legitimation. Self-legitimated, monarchy rules its people without needing to govern it. At such time as legitimation becomes a *revolutionary* movement, a long journey is required involving creating a people through a shared moral code and thus making politics the science of the means required to found a shared moral code and inventing a people in this way⁴.

Let's take a small step backwards. Attention to the art of government is tangible as early as the beginning of the 18th century, and in particular in its utopian tradition, on one hand, and, on the other, the means required to make this art effective. In Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* – an essential link in the passage from one era of utopian thought to the next – the king of the giants' Island sarcastically comments a description of English civilization prey to chaos and war:

'He confined the knowledge of governing within very narrow bounds, to common sense and reason, to justice and lenity, to the speedy determination of civil and criminal causes; with some other obvious topics, which are not worth considering. And he gave it for his opinion, "that whoever could make two ears of corn, or two blades of grass, to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of politicians put together"⁵.

What can be juxtaposed to an art of government in decline? What governing utopia can be prefigured? We might put it like this: the art of war government can be juxtaposed with an art of government based on reason, justice and good. Even better: one which encompasses reason, justice and good within 'good common sense'. It will thus, from now on, be a matter of making the art of government capable of transforming 'good sense' into 'good *common* sense' and, at the same time, shaping its contents according to stated principles.

This shaping takes place via anthropological-moral typification: who is the man who will allow a given art of government to be successful? Here words are truly harbingers. 'All the genius of politicians put together' is no longer juxtaposed by philoso-

⁴ Say introduces *Olbie's* utopian project with the following words: 'These, I believe, are the principles which should guide the institutions in their search for, and adoption of, the appropriate way to found a people's morals. I will now show these same principles put into practice in a society which has based its political liberties on the destruction of an absolute monarchy and consolidated the edifice of this liberty by entirely changing its customs or, if you like, its habits. Half a century later, this people, residing in a town called Olbia, enjoys liberties based on good laws, and thus progressed along the road to wisdom it has no fear of reproaches (*reproches*) which might reawaken the memory of its ancient depravity.' (*Ibid.*, p. 201).

⁵ J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Penguin Classic, London 2011, p. 166.

phers – utopian times have definitely changed since Plato’s day – but he who would seem to be a ‘worker entrepreneur’ or ‘*homo œconomicus*’ (we will shortly examine these two categories), to force an analogy for the purposes of bringing the question to fruition and preparing the argument of this work. Let us try to re-read the second part of the Swift citation. On one hand crisis in reasons of state (Swift would seem to shore up Foucault’s analysis) represented by politicians’ impotence. Their ‘reasons of state’ are no longer capable of ‘working for the best’. All the subversive power of the Enlightenment progress utopia is tangible here. It is in the name of progress that we get impatient with politics. What is described in Swift is not simply a crisis of internal legitimation within a political system but a full blown system shift. The impotence of the politicians is to be replaced with a different character of power which comes from outside and re-founds the legitimacy of the state. Who to turn to, at this point? He who could eradicate from outside the braking action of 17th century reasons of state was to be he who ‘grows two ears of wheat where before there was only one’. This statement is extraordinarily evocative.

First and foremost, the progress utopia takes the form of a religion of growth. Progress’s birthing pains deliver the historical material of economic growth. But above all the subject who takes the place of the politician is he who works the land in a rational way. One who is capable not solely of drawing an immediate utility from his work, of exploiting the earth beyond what he needs to simply survive or for the commodification of its fruits alone. Such exploitation is a merely entrepreneurial ability: it is a matter of increasing the value of a plot of land, exploiting it twice as much as previously. *The worker is thus he who invests* his own capital, increasing its value via his own labor and rational strategies (technique, clearly).

As with Locke, it is a new model of worker who legitimizes sovereignty externally (we might almost say that such a worker *appropriates* the latter and, at the same time, *frees* it). The worker capable of transcending his own work, transforming it into production and his production into progressive growth in the value of his capital. The invention of modern work⁶ proceeds, first and foremost, from this: from the idea of work tasked primarily with transforming the earth into capital and, in this way, with legitimizing what was then to be redefined into the institutional terms of a no longer monarchical (i.e. no longer self-legitimated) state. Certainly the division between capital and labor which is society’s order principle is still missing – but we’ll get there in a moment⁷. At this level it is as if work itself is already taking on the veritative dimension of capital (i.e. transform-

⁶ A. Gorz, *Métamorphoses du travail*, Galilée, Paris 1998 ;

⁷ Ten years later a further utopian ideally closed this circle arguing that the executive power of a state ‘must be entrusted to the entrepreneurs who employ the greatest number of labourers with their peaceful activities. [...] In future societies, the counts and barons of industry, organised hierarchically according to their merits, will be the best suited to guiding society in the direction of ever greater material wellbeing.’ (C. H. de Saint-Simon, *Oeuvres complètes*, t. V, Puf, Paris 2015, p. 16).

ing itself from source of subsistence to source of investment and added value production), binding itself intrinsically up with its *law*.

These few lines by Swift – written approximately sixty years before Say’s occasional essay – philosophically justify the latter’s thesis: ‘A good political economy treatise must be the first book of morals’⁸. It is useful to sketch briefly over the passages which bring Say to this affirmation.

The first passage is a definition/reduction of moral science: ‘Morals is the science of customs (*moeurs*). I say science because, in the state of society, rules of conduct are not all naturally instituted. They are learnt. [...] Morality is the habit of consulting the moral rules in all occasions (*actions*)’⁹. Here morals are explicitly biopolitical¹⁰. They concern ‘the rules of conduct’, the way of acting on all occasions, for all our behaviors and customs.

The second passage could be termed a contractualist moral foundation and a reduction of the happy nation to a good market: ‘the purpose of morals is to procure for men all the happiness compatible with their nature. Thus the duties it prescribes can only be of two types: (A) those whose object is our survival and our greatest good: the benefits are immediate and direct; (B) and those which make other men happy. In this case the benefits are reciprocal. [...] This is the case of a mutually advantageous contract. *A nation which knows and follows the moral rules in general terms is, literally, what is defined a good market (un bon marché) also. It would be the happiest of the nations*’¹¹.

The third passage is, in some ways, the definitive one. For Say this moral foundation of political economy (or vice versa) is to go as deep as possible. It is only at this level that the *Institut national*’s question (*Quels sont les moyens de fonder la morale chez un peuple?*) can be answered. External institutionalization is not sufficient. What is needed is *interior* institutionalization. Political economy is the first book of morals because its object is not exchange but ‘men’s hearts’. Say writes: ‘Justice does not teach morals: it is prudence and shrewdness which teaches. If divine and human laws do not have the power to found good custom, where are the means (to do it) to be sought? In men’s hearts (*dans le coeur de l’homme*). ‘Anyone tasked with creating a people (*se mêle d’instituer un peuple*) must know how to rule opinions and through these govern men. [...] It is thus, I repeat, a question of seeking in men’s hearts, and there alone, guarantees of good

⁸ Say, *Olbie*, cit., p. 193.

⁹ *Ivi*.

¹⁰ Just below Say writes: “When the good idea of wanting to reforms customs is deposited in the heads of a nation’s leaders, there are two institutional forms which require their attention: those which are to supply good customs to future generations, namely those with some relationship to education, and those which can reform adult men (*les hommes faits*)” (*Ibid.*, p. 195).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194 cn.

conduct'¹². The biopolitically radical nature of political economy's revolutionary aims come across here.

The first advantage of this rapid *excursus* is to offer us an epistemological suggestion. It may be worthwhile, as this utopian thought has just demonstrated, conceiving this radicalism – namely the presumption of viewing political economy as the primary means for 'seeking in men's hearts, and there alone, guarantees of good conduct' – in (perversely) utopian terms, too.

The relationship between utopia and liberal society has been much discussed, frequently in the prejudicial form of 'negative utopia'¹³. This entirely understandable prejudice is not however, philosophically productive. There is no intention in this work to judge liberalism's utopian content nor to interpret it externally¹⁴. The more philosophically relevant question is rather how liberalism came to view itself as a utopia and how this self-image played a decisive part, in a certain period, in the shift which I will summarily define as the passage from liberal society to the neoliberal era. There is a nexus, I believe, between what we have seen and Foucault's intuition according to which:

'It is also a sort of utopian nucleus which is constantly reactivated. [...] I will refer to someone who is not truly American, but rather Austrian, about whom we have already spoken many times and who lived in England and America before returning to Germany. This is Hayek who said a few years ago: what we need is a liberalism which is a living concept. Liberalism has always left the task of fabricating utopias to socialism and it is precisely from this utopian activity and the task of developing theories that socialism has drawn much of its vigour and historical dynamism. Well, liberalism needs utopias too. It is up to us to build liberal utopias, designed in accordance with liberalism's methods, rather than presenting liberalism as an alternative government technique. Liberalism is thus to be understood as a general style of thought, analysis and imagination'¹⁵.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹³ To cite one example, the Budapest school referred to 'the negative utopia of capitalist industrialization' (F. Fehér – A. Heller – G. Markus, *Dictatorship over Needs: An Analysis of Soviet Societies*, (1982). For a discussion of this theme see Z. Bauman, *Dictatorship over Needs*, in Id., *Globalizzazione e globalizzazione*, Armando editore, Roma 2005, pp. 294-301.

¹⁴ The theme of 'capitalism as religion' which seems to have come to the fore in capitalism's hermeneutics would seem to be an example of this understanding from outside. I believe that the utopia theme allows for a shift of the understanding process from outside to inside to a much greater extent. I am not certain that capitalism in its current state can be understood as a religion. Quite the contrary I believe that it would not be entirely impertinent to see a utopian content in the current self-image which acts (or has acted) in certain ways to move the neoliberal era closer to other 'genetic' periods in modern society (Say was an example).

¹⁵ M. Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique*, Seuil/Gallimard, Paris 2004.

The thesis I would like to reflect on in what remains of this essay (including via the help of certain considerations of Foucault's) is to be contextualized within this general (and, in my opinion, a little undervalued) approach regarding the nexus between liberalism and utopian nucleus. If the Foucaultian synthesis of Hayek's invitation is true, we can translate neoliberalism's qualitative leap forward as an epistemological concentration on liberalism's quality as a 'living concept'. The new passage would thus be having radicalized the utopian nucleus present at the outset (as Say has demonstrated) involving a transformation from straightforward alternative government as a general style of thought, behavioral code (learning, we might say, utopian socialism's lesson).

From Say to Foucault

Via Swift we have already underlined how the point of modern work can be pre-figured as founding principle to the legitimacy of power (in its final form which leads to capital's conflictual logic as the Saint-Simon excerpt cited in a previous note shows perfectly). Let's start from there. The central thesis on which I have focused is that [I] the 'substitutive power' of the worker (the latter's ability to replace the sovereign as the subject of sovereignty); [II] is essentially bound up with the ability to *capitalize* the profits from his labor to the greatest possible extent.

[I] The first part of this thesis thus argues for the 'substitutive' task of the economic agent as subject of sovereign legitimation. The theory of absolutism is replaced with political economy as the science underlying (and institutionalizing) conduct capable of stabilizing society. In this way Say seems to anticipate Foucault's description of *homo oeconomicus* as subverting reasons of state¹⁶:

'For his part *homo oeconomicus* is not content with limiting the sovereign's power. To at least some extent he invalidates it. And in the name of what? Of a right which the sovereign must not touch? No, it is not a matter of this. He invalidates it to the extent to which it brings out the sovereign's essential inability - a fundamental and decisive incapacity - the inability to rule over the totality of the economic sphere. As regards the economic sphere as a whole, in respect

¹⁶ The true historic reference point in this prevalent historical legitimation of reasons of state is Botero rather than Machiavelli, as has been repeatedly underlined by Lefort and, to an even greater extent, Senellart, 'the exception for medieval thought remains encompassed within the field of the validity of the laws while for the author of the Prince it is the rule. This, for his adversaries, is the starting point of the definition of Machiavellianism as the art of tyrannical rule based on permanent war. It is to this warlike logic (corresponding and increasing wealth. [...]) Botero understood that stability could no longer be defended from the starting point of traditional ethical categories. Faced with the Machiavellian challenge, the novelty of his thought was not limiting himself to moral condemnation but shifting the political question of how to govern the state from ethical (practising virtue) to economic (satisfying interests) terrain.' (M. Senellart, *Machiavélisme et raison d'État*, Puf, Paris 1989, p. 86; on this theme see also G. Botero, *La ragion di stato*, edited by C. Continisio, Donzelli, Roma 2009).

of the economic field, sovereigns can only be blind. [...] It is precisely for this reason, I believe, that the emergence of this *homo æconomicus* notion represents a sort of political challenge to the traditional, legal conception – whether absolutist or otherwise is of little importance – of the sovereign¹⁷.

[II] Say would seem not to describe the classic figure (which, moreover, he could not yet know) of the salaried employee – interwoven with the logic of capital (and the blackmail which derives from an *external* conflict, the servant-owner struggle) – but goes as far as to describe the neoliberal figure of the entrepreneurial worker, he who has re-signified his salary in the form of profits and in this respect has internalized the law of capital, thus becoming an entrepreneur.

There is no need to point out that these same characteristics are those which the academic literature has highlighted as specific to the processes underway in the neoliberal era: job insecurity as institutional subjugation device in workers' private lives; competition as a social virtue defining workers' self-image in a similar way to that of entrepreneurs (though more repressed and unhappy, obviously); the economy of the passions as by now hegemonic colonisation of the human heart¹⁸.

Olbie thus contains a description of a utopia which is in many ways prophetic. In its apparent ingenuity¹⁹, it defines what comes after the classic liberal society and what we have designated as society of labor. Say defines a post-salarial and neoliberal society and is thus much closer to Foucault than to Marx.

Some of the lectures held by this French philosopher at *Collège de France* in 1978-1979 dedicated to *Birth of Biopolitics*²⁰, in which he attempted to trace neoliberalism's genealogy, give an insight into what this has to do with a radical transformation in the meaning of labor. But let's start from the beginning.

First and foremost this genealogical function of labor is contextualized within considerations on so-called 'American neoliberalism'. And in what did this latter differ right

¹⁷ Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique* cit., p. 238.

¹⁸ Of the great many bibliographical references on this theme, I have chosen to limit myself to these three alone: C. Laval - P. Dardot, *La nouvelle raison du monde. Essai sur la société néolibérale*, La Découverte, Paris 2010. *Critica della razionalità neoliberista*, DeriveApprodi, Roma 2013; F. Lordon, *La crise économique comme événement passionnel*, Critique, no. 783-784 (2013); W. Brown, *Undoing the demos. Neo-liberalism Stealth Revolution*, Zone Books, New York 2015.

¹⁹ The moral tension cutting through and guiding Say's words prompt him to hope that the new economic-political underpinnings of society will be a way to make it more equal and less unjust. In other words, Say, too, seems to fall into the temptation of justifying the moral primacy of political economics via the metaphysical functioning of an invisible hand. By letting political economics get on with it and shifting sovereignty to its players society goes further than earlier historical eras. As Say writes, for example: 'Poverty exposes people to constant temptation. What am I saying? To primary needs. [...] But great wealth is no less damaging to good conduct. Opulence hardens the soul: it is difficult to appreciate needs which we do not feel safely and that do not seem definitive to us.' (Say, *Olbie*, cit., p. 202).

²⁰ M. Foucault, *Birth of Birth of Biopolitics*, cit., pp. 176-237 (the March 1979 lectures).

from the start from its historic offshoots, such as French neoliberalism? Foucault introduces an element of distinction which highlights - and radicalizes - the question of the handing over of sovereignty which we have already seen in Say. Foucault writes thus, with unsurpassed clarity: 'Liberalism, that is, has been called to account as the founding principle and legitimizing principle of the state. It is not the state which imposes limits on itself via liberalism but rather a liberalism's need to found a state. This, I believe, is one of the traits of American liberalism.'²¹

Thus if the political function of *homo œconomicus* – in the Foucault extract cited here – seems to consist in “invalidating the sovereign's power”, in the case of American liberalism the task is not solely negative and deconstructional but foundational. *Homo œconomicus* is he who tasks himself with ‘founding the sovereign's power’ with the forms and limits which he alone can confer. American neoliberalism's cultural hegemony is fundamental to the neoliberal construction. It is, in fact, not simply the era of *de facto* delegitimization of the traditional democratic institutions but rather their restructuring from the starting point of a *de iure* subjugation (not to a higher order of sovereignty but to a different order of legitimacy).

It is precisely here that Foucault introduces the work theme. And he does so to mark the difference of analysis between American neoliberalism and the traditional model of conceiving of work according to capitalist logic. We cannot follow the whole of Foucault's sophisticated considerations here, unfortunately. I have thus chosen to focus attention on one specific thesis. For American neoliberalism the issue is no longer considering work as a ‘cog’ in a relational mechanism between things and processes, like capital, investment, production and so on²². Interpreted in accordance with this relational mechanism, labor can no longer be defined as ‘abstract work’. For Foucault the Marxist lesson is entirely coherent with traditional capitalist logic. It is undeniable that labor is abstract in traditional capitalism and this is in no way a good thing. *Quite the contrary, neoliberalism is simply attempting to reduce this abstraction by restoring labor to the heart of the economic debate.*

‘What Marx effectively demonstrates is that capitalism's economic mechanisms, the logic of capital, reduce labour to strength and time alone. It makes a commodity of it and reduces it exclusively to the effects of a task produced. Now, what the neoliberals wonder is this - and this is where their analysis separates off from Marx's criticisms - according to Marx, who is responsible for this abstraction? The responsibility is capitalism's. It derives from the logic of capital and its historical reality. The neoliberals argue, on the other hand, that the abstraction of labour, which effectively takes shape only via the time variable, is not the product of real capitalism, it does not derive from real economic process mechanisms but rather from the way in which it is the object of classical economic thought. [...] Consequently, what is needed is

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 183.

rather theoretical criticism of the way in which labour as such became abstract in the economic debate'²³.

Marx's error – and with him traditional political economics – is thus seen as having judged abstract work to be necessary to capitalist logics without grasping that it was precisely this latter which has turned out to be inadequate to real capitalist processes. Thus, as regards labor, a cognitive defect occurred. How can this be overcome? Reconsidering as the essence of labour not its strength, time or value but *the individual working*. Restoring the relationship between worker and his or her work to the economic theory center stage (a relocation which is intuitively a negation of alienation). It is worth reading this further passage from Foucault carefully:

'Economics is thus no longer analysing processes but has now become analysis of an activity. It is no longer analysing the historical logic of processes but rather analysing internal rationality, the strategic planning of the individual's activities. But then at this point what is economic analysis of labour saying? What does bringing labour within economic analysis mean? Certainly not where labour is located, so to speak, in the midst of capital and production. [...] It is a matter of knowing in what way those working use the resources available to them. This is to say that bringing labour into the field of economic analysis means looking at the matter from the perspective of those who work. Labour will need to be studied as economic behaviour and practical behaviour, enacted, rationalised, calculated, precisely by those who work. And what does working mean to those who work? And what choice and rationality system does this working activity obey? And thus all of a sudden, from the starting point of this grid, which projects a principle of strategic rationality onto the activity of work, it becomes possible to see in what and how qualitative labour differences can have economic type effects? [...] Schultz and Becker wonder: why, at the end of the day, do people work? Naturally to earn a salary. [II] But what is a salary? In simple terms a salary is an income. From the worker's point of view a salary is not the price he can sell his labour for. It is an income. And thus the American neoliberals return to Irving Fischer's old definition which asked: what is an income? How can it be defined? An income is simply capital revenues. And, inversely, everything which can be a source of future income in one way or the other can be called 'capital'. Consequently if we admit that salary is an income, it will thus be income from capital'²⁴.

[I] Foucault synthesized the elements of discontinuity between American neoliberalism and classical capitalist theory. This discontinuity is inherently epistemological. It concerns not simply describing real processes but rather conditions of logical possibility via

²³ *Ibid.*, p.182.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

which meanings are assigned to the processes themselves. Taking the argument to the extreme, we could thus say that neoliberalism goes beyond capitalist logic by means of a transfiguration of the meaning of work. This is, first and foremost, an attempt to get away from the abstract labor concept. The objective meaning of work needs to be restored to individualization. This is to be achieved via two linked procedures. The first is to uncouple work from its dialectic with capital. This clearly does not mean restoring dignity to work whatever its capacity to produce (or reproduce) capital (as the social democratic compromise of the era of rights in some way attempted to do) but rather defining work in direct capital terms: the capital-labor dialectic is resolved by neoliberalism by bringing labour in line with capital (and, in this way, *logically* negating exploitation - because capital cannot *exploit* itself, it can at most *invest in itself*). The second procedure is juxtaposing its re-individualisation to the abstract meaning of work. The subject of neoliberal policies will thus not be labor - namely that specific segment of production in conflict with its correlate, capital - but the worker *tout court*. Labor policies thus become laborer policies and their goals will be regulating workers' inner rationality and life choices, controlling their expectations, desire spaces and social status. What Say called 'men's hearts'.

[II] The motive for which Foucault was so attracted to neoliberalism is thus clear²⁵: because it places a full blown worker biopolitics at the heart of capitalism's logic mutations. Labor theory is 'labor government'. Its anthropological consequences go beyond abstract work via the figure of the worker-entrepreneur itself. Foucault described this figure via the purely symbolic transformation (i.e. applied exclusively to meaning systems: alienation's meaning changes whilst practically remaining the same) of salary in income and income in capital. This passage well delineates neoliberalism's discontinuity as regards capitalism's logic. Let us take the example of Polanyi's celebrated analysis according to which labor is transformed into a commodity²⁶. Its analytical accuracy is now out-of-date: it is no longer simply a question of judging work as a commodity. Labor-commodity is effectively incorporated into the economic exchange cycle. Labor is no longer simply something which can be exchanged for a salary. It is now a matter of conceiving of workers as those who make a profit from their capital. If work is no longer a commodity but rather capital, workers' rationalization of themselves will be that of entrepreneurs²⁷. No longer selling their labor, they are profiting from it after identifying deep down with it.

²⁵ See D. Zamora (ed.), *Critiquer Foucault: Les années 1980 et la tentation néolibérale*, Aden, Bruxelles 2014; D. Zamora – M. Behrent (eds.), *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2015.

²⁶ The reference is clearly to K. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, New York 1944.

²⁷ Foucault's ultra-famous words are these: 'Neoliberalism also has a theory of *homo œconomicus* - which it does not conceal but rather proclaims - which is in no way to be understood as a partner in exchange. *Homo œconomicus* is rather an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. This aspect is so true that practically all the analyses carried out by neoliberals have, at all times, postulated the substitution of *homo œconomicus*, understood as a partner in the exchange with *homo œconomicus* understood as entrepreneur of himself and as such his own capital, the producer of himself and the source of his [own] income.' Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, cit., p. 186 cn).

Beyond Say and Foucault: the Double Bind of Contemporary Work

The Foucaultian interpretation of neoliberal work has many virtues but one fundamental defect. The virtues are very clear if we observe this interpretation from the starting point of Say's prophecy. Neoliberalism's discontinuity as regards capitalism's traditional logic is bound up with the shrewd undertaking to reactivate that 'utopian nucleus' present in the modern era's foundational discourses. This reactivation by neoliberalism has not been philologically neutral: the utopian nucleus reactivated is precisely the idea that the economy must become the sole source of sovereign legitimacy. It might be clearer put thus. If Say's utopia was to shore up society in legitimacy crisis from the starting point of a moral government of the economy, the anthropologically complete figure of this utopia can be no other than *homo æconomicus*. *Homo æconomicus*'s first moral quality is thus that of representing *the* moral man *par excellence*, the only one authorized to legitimate sovereignty.

This utopian nucleus that Say's essay so well describes lost momentum over the centuries of capitalism's history, however. It is precisely work which has made capitalism's utopian self-image impossible. Because when they are obliged to abstract their work by selling it like a commodity workers do not fully take their *homo æconomicus* qualities on board. The struggle between capital and labor moves us away from Say's happy island and the attempt to imagine capitalism as a utopia. Work rather shows 'capitalism's poverty'. It is precisely at this point that analysis of the neoliberal project comes into play as it grasped the centrality of the nexus between utopia and work with great clarity. It is a matter of reactivating capitalism's utopian nucleus, reducing the *realist* resistance to abstract labor. Thus the most radical objective of the neoliberal project - in accordance with Foucault - is substituting the alienated meaning of labor with *homo æconomicus*'s moral power. Ensuring that workers see themselves increasingly more as *homo æconomicus* and less and less as subjects of alienation by capital. Not being able to change work, the birth of biopolitics acts on workers' self-governance.

It is at this point that Foucault's analysis reveals a fundamental defect. It is as lucidly capable of grasping the essence of neoliberalism in the nexus between reactivation of the original utopian nucleus and substitution of the centrality of 'abstract labor' with that of 'worker entrepreneur' as it is incapable of anticipating to the full the unexpected outcomes which labor biopolitics have led to in recent decades.

On one hand, it is, in fact, true that the imperative of removing the perception of alienation to focus on the hyper-individualization of the worker entrepreneur has become the epistemological thread by which to interpret all labor conditions reforms. A reading from this perspective of two prevalent political-cultural trends concerning the world of work will suffice here: the life of a worker who follows capital fluctuations via job insecurity measures (which serve not only to synchronize work but also the very life of the worker with the variable needs of capital); the increasingly widespread exploitation of unpaid work (via the pervasive biopolitics of the web or de-unionization which makes workers increasingly incapable of placing limits on capital's demands).

On the other hand, however, this robust dissemination of neoliberal meanings has in no way made workers less exploited or more powerful. If we return to the original utopian nucleus proposed by Say and then confirmed in the Foucaultian interpretation of American liberalism, one of the intrinsic characteristics of *homo œconomicus* was founding or legitimating sovereignty in order to himself become the ultimate benchmark of power.

It thus seems to me that the most recent stage in neoliberalism has modified that (already ambiguous) utopian nucleus to be reactivated in the name of a gigantic biopolitical double bind, defining workers self-image now in hegemonic form. These latter are now increasingly obliged to adopt a self-image according with the *homo œconomicus* self-image: to capitalize themselves to the point of self-exploitation, organize their lives according to purely economic criteria, judge all policies which make them more and more economic beings as legitimate and illegitimate all policies attempting to defend them against exploitation by capital. But at the same time they do not experience the wider meaning of *homo œconomicus*. To the extent to which workers are obliged to adopt a *homo œconomicus* self-image, they feel the impotence of not being able to inhabit this in the forms and methods promised by the shrewd hegemony of neoliberalism. Workers legitimize no sovereignty, do not liberate themselves of any external rule (much less control) and do not diminish their experience of alienation. This is the double bind: *Workers cannot be other than homo œconomicus but cannot truly be it either; necessarily remaining alienated workers*. The latest stage of neoliberalism has thus not reactivated the utopian logic that Say prefigured and instead has rigidified its ideology. Alienation has not been overcome but workers' recognition of it has been falsified and with this demonstrating – contrary to Foucault's interpretation – a marked continuity with traditional capitalist logic.

But there is no doubt whatsoever that beyond its actual systemic outcomes there is, in neoliberalism, an ideological challenge which, having powerfully modified workers' very inner understanding of the meaning of work, requires a resistance exerted at the same theoretical level. Thus it is not a straightforward regressive vindication of different labor policies but an anti-ideological reflection which transforms the system of meanings with which labor is interpreted once again. It is a full blown philosophy of work capable of saving the utopian and humanizing nucleus from ideological drift and precisely from the neoliberal shift from alienation to self-exploitation.