
HUMAN WEALTH

WORK, ITS NON-PLACES AND VALUE

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A great utopia of our capitalism is the construction of a society where there is no more need for human labour. There has always been a spirit of the economy that dreamed of "perfect" enterprises and markets to the point where you can manage without humans beings. Managing and controlling men and women is much more difficult than managing docile machines and obedient algorithms. Real people go through crises, they protest, they enter into conflict with each other, they always do things other than those that they should do according to their job descriptions, often they do better things.

Simply because *we are free*, spiritual beings, and therefore always excessive in relation to our tasks, contracts or incentives. A *truly* perfect market would then be the system of techniques, controls, incentives and instruments that are finally able to ensure maximum efficiency and maximum production of wealth, reducing everything to the point of eliminating human presence from the new cities of the new economy.

Today, thanks to the extraordinary achievements of automation and digitization, there is a serious danger of that ancient utopia coming true. In fact, if we look closely at the climate that reigns in big companies, we can notice that the objective that lies behind the rhetoric of a certain type of managerial culture (which says exactly the opposite) is standardization, predictability and formatting the behaviour of workers, to depotentiate the charge of freedom that cannot fit in technical rationality. They would want work performed without workers, work without people, extracting only the part that's perfectly oriented to the objectives of ownership from human action. Reduced to its barest essence, this is the nature of the increasingly sophisticated *ideology of incentives*, which is the new religion of post-modern capitalism.

But when work is reduced to technique and performance, when organizations become so rational as to "build" workers who imitate the logic of machines, nothing remains of the primary anthropological activity that is human labour, or of its mystery. And if men and women lose their ability to work they lose a lot, too, almost all of their dignity, of their having been made "*a little lower than the angels*" (Psalm 8; the word-by-word translation of the Italian quote is: "little less than Elohim"). The realization of the utopia of labour-without-humans would then only be a realisation of the perfect dehumanization of life in common. And to

continue to live, we would be forced to emigrate en masse to other lands and other planets where it is still possible to really work.

This Labour Day may therefore be the right moment to remind us and to remember what work and the workers really are. We should remember, for example, that if we really want to get to know a person we have to watch them *as they work*. That is where they are revealed with all their humanity, that is where their ambivalence, limitations but also, and above all, their ability to give freely and exceedingly can be found. We can party together, go out for dinner, play soccer with friends, but nothing compares to work as an anthropological and spiritual window that reveals those around us to us. It is not uncommon that we thought that we knew a friend, a parent, a child, until one day we happen to see them working and suddenly we discover that we had never really known them, because an essential dimension of their person had been veiled from us, one that was only opened up while we watched them work: as they were repairing a car, cleaning a bathroom, teaching a lesson, preparing lunch. All of us are present in the hand that tightens the screw, in the pen that writes, in the rag drying: it is here that we encounter our humanity and that of others. And, almost always, a new appreciation and a new gratitude for work are born and we see and discover them as a gift. Few organisations actually give more joy of the work well done, and so very few (if any) give more misery of bad work, even when we cannot do otherwise. We all have grown up watching the grown-ups work.

I "got to know" my grandfather Domenico when, as a child, I saw him in his workshop building a small stool for me with his own hands. Only there did I realize what his big, callous and expert hands really were, and it was from then on that I really got to know him. The only thing I have left of him now is that cutty-stool, kept in my studio next to my books, and his spirit is perfectly and entirely present in those pieces of wood, because one day I saw him *incarnating* in that object, built as a gift to me.

A severe form of poverty of our children is not being able to watch the work of adults anymore, because too many jobs are becoming abstract, invisible, confined in far away non-places, inaccessible especially to children and young people. What work will they create tomorrow if today they live immersed in a thousand shows, but are deprived of the sight of work being done, which is the greatest show to see on this earth? A great gift for our children is to give them a chance to see real and concrete work, to begin to see the world from there.

There are few more real human and spiritual experiences than walking through cities and watching people as they work. Therefore, there is no better way to celebrate work than starting to watch it again, seeing it, recognizing it, and then returning with feelings of thankfulness. Our esteem and appreciation - on a personal and collective level - for work and for workers is the first and real reform the world of work needs. And maybe, on this day of non-work, let's read a few pages of the classics of the Italian civil tradition about work again: "*There is no work, or capital,*" Carlo Cattaneo wrote, "*that doesn't begin with an act of intelligence. Before any work, before any capital there is intelligence that begins the work, and first impresses the character of wealth on it.*"