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## WORK, SPIRITUALITY AND POLITICAL ACTION

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People who in their work can feel the vital spark of desire and spirit, who love it and *think of the problems and novelties* that constantly present themselves in our social and work itineraries today – these people I consider lucky.

However, what seems obvious to me in the real contexts where I conduct scientific research is the risk of a divide between spirituality and work. Therefore, the first part of my intervention will be devoted to the illustration of such a possibility; I will then try to show how, in the attempt to limit such a risk, it is indispensable that each of us work at their best rediscovering the «political value» of action, be it the individual's or the social subject's: organizations and work organizations in particular.

### 10.1. THE RISK OF A DIVIDE BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND WORK

Let us begin with work. I think labouring and suffering are, to a certain extent, even intrinsically, part of work; it is thus illusory to think of organizations as places of well-being purified of these conditions.

However, it seems to me that today much suffering at work can be construed as efforts that are disproportionate to the resources available or, more precisely, as frustrations and lacerations of one's self-image linked to impositions and demands of sacrifice, the sense of which is lost or whose aim is not at all shared. This fosters a feeling of non-involvement in work and in the contexts in which one works.

Recurrent proclamations and statements to the opposite seem abstract, and far from the *theories in use*:

- «Human and cultural resources are the most important resource of our corporate assets» (a factory manager).
- «Italy is a democratic republic founded on work» (Italian Constitution).
- «Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons. And this mark decides its

interior characteristics; in a sense it constitutes its very nature» (Opening of *Laborem Exercens*, Ioannes Paulus II, 1981).

As I have already pointed out in a recent conference (14 March 2011) held at the Catholic University, a conference on «Citizenship», «if we think of the subject, at least of the subject appeared in Athens in the early fifth century BC, it has since been considered a cornerstone in social dynamics. It is a human and social subject that historically becomes first a legal person, and much later, is acknowledged as a psychic subject, i.e., is recognized and respected also in terms of its inner space, of its own spirituality: a dynamic space for its affective and cognitive contents and for cultural aspects, for the experiential events internalized by the individual over the entire arc of one's history».

We cannot dwell here on the reconstruction of the history of the «subject», because we also want to focus on the years of so-called modernity.

Let us start by recalling that this triple subject, which is historical-political, legal and psychic in nature, is aware of the fact that in contemporary developed communities, society as well as organizations need it as a producer, as a consumer and as a citizen (these are the social roles that pertain to each of us). Paradoxically, if we did not work, if we no longer consumed, if we deserted the polls, society would break up.

Since the times of Athens, the combination of these three social roles has constantly changed, in the different eras and in the different societies. Societies that, with their institutions, their values, their concepts and languages come before their members, who become men and women through education and adaptation to society itself. This adaptation is not at all passive, automatic nor mechanical. And, if on the one hand everyone has to adapt in order to live in society with others, on the other, man does not embody a vocation to live, as Freud said, as a community of termites. It is within this perspective that I now approach our times, trying to show how modernity is marked by the effort to transform citizens into consumers (Enriquez, 2006) by means of continual, explicit but above all implicit, pressures to conform. Looking at it from a historical perspective, once, at the time of the polis, there was the citizen. It was modern times that invented the manufacturer, as an entrepreneur or as a salaried worker; it is the First Industrial Revolution, it is the long wave of the Hegelian Left that confronted us with this reality.

More recently, after the Second Industrial Revolution, one sees that our contemporary world is increasingly betting on the consumer only. It is only if one consumes, works and has money, that one becomes a citizen too. This is proven by some recurring statements: «we must increase consumption in order to boost the economy»; «those who do not consume are not good Italians», or «those who do not consume are not good French». This is also effectively shown by some newspaper articles of the most recent months on the controversy «working or not working on May 1». And some articles, which I believe hardly shareable, proclaim «hooray for consumption; we all have to consume more». This also applies to immigrants, to non-EU immigrants: in general, we can say that the individual who does not buy, does not have the latest product – be it useful or not – cannot experience the feeling of existing (De La Boétie, 1978).

Even children learn to claim the latest video game ... What a change in such few years! Until twenty or thirty years ago, craving for the latest type of product, for designer clothing, was a phenomenon reported especially among youngsters – and this could be understood – during adolescence, a time of evolutionary crisis in one's personal and professional identity. Nowadays it is children who, as early as four years of age, know perfectly well the latest edition of their electronic game, and want it, take it with them to kindergarten, and show it to others.

On the other hand, it can be seen how easily, in these «globalized» contexts, individuals rebel when they cannot have what they would like to have. And so we observe phenomena of looting, for example at supermarkets; of car fire-setting in the suburbs; a surge in suicides among young people due to the increasing difficulty of giving sense to existence and preserving it; a rise in sadistic attacks against women and children, etc.

If we take a closer look at the world of work, we see that one is required to be up-to-date and savvy in using the latest technologies; to be, as they say, «highly-performant», a good consumer, particularly reactive, making good decisions quickly, in order to survive and remaining «on the crest of the wave»: But what happens to those who cannot make it?

Well, the risk is to be eliminated, fired, and often condemned to spend one's life going from odd job to odd job. People in these conditions return to a state termed «useless to the world» in the Middle Ages: people to whom we – as a society – must give some help (no one is denied a little sympathy) but who are substantially cumbersome. Above all, what is evident is that if these people disappeared, nobody would notice, all caught up as we are in wanting to be like others, in «conforming» and being efficient, and in preserving our haven of affections within the sphere of family and friends; such a defense being protected by some sort of apathy<sup>1</sup> in our relations with an enlarged world.

I cannot delve here into the risk run by the relation of vital tension between a person – existing in itself – and what appears of a person, the subject *in situ*. If this tension is broken – and what I have just outlined goes exactly in this direction – the person is no longer able to personalize itself in its actions, in its socio-relational roles; the person cannot express itself, and what appears is a good mask for carnival yet is essentially useless to oneself and the world.

To better emphasize my thoughts, I will at this point pose a question that may seem rhetorical, but is today fascinating for its enigmatic nature. Does the risk of conformism, and of intellectual conformism in particular, aimed at desiring and wishing that others may think for us, that others may give meaning to events in our place, rise from a desire for subjugation typical of the individual<sup>2</sup>? Or is this risk the product – and this is my belief – of a gradual abandonment of

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<sup>1</sup> It is right to respect and care for oneself, but to what extent is it economic from the psychic and psycho-social point of view? For more information, see Green, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> The topics set forth in the following pages are fascinatingly expanded upon in Jung, 1968. The Swiss psychiatrist formulates, as if he were alive today, the «moral conflict», the clash between ideals and behaviors dictated by interests and conditioning.

«sovereignty»? The latter hypothesis is sustained by a French colleague, Eugène Enriquez, in an interesting essay (Enriquez, 1983) which looks for the origins of social ties on the edge of several disciplines, and shows the relevance, for the psyche, of the role concretely assigned to the subject within a given society. Let us focus then, albeit briefly, on the analysis of the person-context relationship.

## 10.2. THE POLITICAL VALUE OF ACTION IN ORGANIZATIONS

Reconsidering the theme of spirituality and «of ethics in action», we note that these have many ways in which to manifest themselves and inspire our behavior. However, if I think of work situations, all too often in concrete daily events do I have to acknowledge a sort of divide – obviously not overtly stated yet certainly practiced – between the «logic of the spirit» and «the logic of necessity». In decision-making, in problem-addressing, in everyday behavior, far too often is the flag of necessity – inflated by the ever blowing wind of the rapidity of changes continually hitting work contexts, thus individual workers – the logic of necessity, not helpful and supportive of the virtuous art of the possible, as it transforms itself into a filter for a simplified reading of problems fostering a climate of «flabby consensus» for which in the name of flexibility, resilience and neurotic haste, independent thinking in work contexts stops, and a nameless fear freezes the spirit which no longer feeds the imagination, or feeds it elsewhere. Also, decisions made are often *acts* rather than *hypotheses designed* and formulated to influence reality. Falling into activism, which, as it lacks finalization, is inertial, actually serves the aim of avoiding thinking about the complexity of problems: especially the problems which are less tangible and less visible.

This malady of the imagination, which forces our psyche to live in a perpetual hasty present, nurtured by an inertial past but lacking a real re-signification of the past as well as a vision of the future, can be cured, or at least treated by beginning to identify new meanings in politics, and by discovering the political value of action in social and work organizations<sup>3</sup>.

In these times, says Orsenigo (2009), «I think it is critical to try emphasising the fact that politics is done not only by the ‘professional politicians’ but also by work organizations, by people who work there, by each of us» (p. 14). In the current situation criticizing the political class seems obvious; it would lead to nothing and would only add to the feelings of discomfort, mortification, and anger shared by many. This means taking a share of responsibility for the life of the polis, for political developments in the different contexts, towards the others and ourselves, having the feeling of being co-authors of the worlds in which we live.

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<sup>3</sup> To this topic is devoted an entire issue of the journal *Spunti* (12, 2009) edited by Studio di Analisi Psicologica (APS), Milan, <http://www.studioaps.it>.

As the Encyclical Letter recites (*Laborem Exercens*, 25): «This Christian spirituality of work should be a heritage shared by all. Especially in the modern age, the spirituality of work should show the maturity called for by the tensions and restlessness of mind and heart». This becomes realistically possible if we recognize, each for one's own share, that politics is increasingly done, consciously or not:

- by work organizations;
- by those who work in these organizations;
- in day-to-day activity;
- by little though meaningful actions.

Otherwise, how can one influence a world that poses new issues, large and small, capable of arousing a widespread loss of meaning, widespread disorientation to which the institutions, the political class and the social movements do not seem able to provide interpretive keys and maps that may guide us effectively?

We have already noted how this creates disorientation and a vicious circle of violence, and/or dependence on idealized subjects or entities: on a «guru», for example, or on any possible truth, as recently proven by the success of sects, including religious ones (Lenoir, 1998). From a psychological point of view, when considering the individual, it is important to remember that in order to be a subject, one has to continually re-personify oneself; has to be able to see and imagine the world, our institutions, and ourselves as part of a story that can be different; and has to be able to aspire to it, unless, of course, one wishes to slip, even unknowingly, into a mutual sense of impotence which, by emotional contagion, spreads melancholy, depression and/or social hatred.

Differently, one may stop and think about today's risks and insecurities; one may get into contact, even emotionally, with a horizon in which we no longer see safe havens, nor roads already mapped, but «la hiérarchie bousculée»<sup>4</sup> of the powerful who are no longer even familiar with a sense of guilt! Such people testify to an education which seems founded instead on a *sense of disgrace*, a spirit's sickness which, when a crime is publicly revealed, displays, at its best, shame.

This is perhaps the first, critical, political action; it has to do with trying to build something else, otherwise, within systems and boundaries in which we can exert some influence.

Obviously, if I limited myself to considering the individual subject, my words would sound a little illusory. In fact, I'm actually referring to the individual subject and simultaneously to those formal and informal social subjects which show signs of the awakening of the possibility of thinking and making a difference: in particular work organizations, contexts where we, also emotionally and affectively, connect and bond with others, and that exert such a powerful influence on the relationship between person and subject.

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<sup>4</sup> On this topic, see the slides by Sergio Manghi who teaches Sociology of Cultural and Communicative Processes at the University of Parma, published in the website of Studio APS, <http://www.studioaps.it>.

With respect to work organizations, I pose two questions: the first concerns the possibility of construing work organizations as *poleis*, the second the possibility that work organizations be political subjects.

Let us begin with the first question. In a sense, as claimed by Orsenigo (2009), work organizations may be seen as *poleis*, thus as contexts where policies are shaped and implemented; obviously, work organizations are not democracies, and it is important to bear this distinction in mind. Nonetheless, I believe that work organizations can be seen as political laboratories, contexts in which we «practice» politics.

And it is my strong belief that such «practicing politics» is visible in the fact that work organizations are education agencies that shape and nurture individuals and groups, also as citizens. Work organizations are places where one builds and co-builds visions of the world, of others and of oneself; where reading-maps for contexts are formulated; where are produced not only goods and services but also individual identities, both personal and professional, and collective identities. Work organizations are systems of recognition and appreciation; thus, they familiarize people with the perception of what gives honor and is rewarded, and what is disapproved of. In work organizations are interpreted roles and patterns of relating to others which may be more or less synergistic. The technical system, an optimal and a-conflictual model of combination of resources, and the social system, consisting of the bonds between individuals and groups, influence each other in the everyday work world; thus, they are contexts of confrontation and connection between different people; they are places of mediation, negotiation, conflict, diplomacy; they are spaces where patterns of relation with power and authority operate daily. The ways in which are used polarizations, unique classifications, divisions (good-bad, cost-benefit, Catholic-Muslim, public-private, politics-economy, nature-culture, psychology-sociology) are ways to cope with complexity, as well as simultaneously forms of influence, manipulation, domination: they are useful, but also have the great disadvantage of removing one from reality, thus becoming sources of confusion in the long run.

These brief observations intend to highlight the fact that these elements seem to us to be ingredients of political action. Thus, at this point, I ponder: if we reflect on the spirituality of work, cannot we but inquire into the kind of citizens we are, and the kind of *poleis* in which we live?

Approaching the conclusion of my intervention, I propose the second issue mentioned above, namely whether work organizations are political subjects. The hypothesis that I have tried to prove is that work organizations are not only places where – as seen above – politics is practiced (for example, in running an organization with its colonies), but also political subjects. Nowadays, organizations, and work organizations in particular, are commonly felt and generalized as being subjected to – when not, victims of – state, regional, trade union, municipal policies, and the like.

This common feeling and notion has a corollary, namely the fact that it becomes then inevitable to construe the political world and the Italian context as negative, as hindering the positive action of work organizations. Simplistically,

one would rather have a state that refrained from legislating or, even better, that de-legislated; that would be almost like thinking that organizations would operate better in the absence of institutions and norms: «Were there no politics, one could live in a healthier world»; one might think, for example, that it is the government that prompts corruption.

Differently, one may consider that organizations are part of the milieu, and contribute to create the context in which they operate, the task environment and the broader context, for better or worse. Work organizations are political subjects; they are co-authors of the policies of the world in which they operate. We have pointed out above how organizations affect their context indirectly, for instance by educating citizens; however, organizations also directly affect their context, in the way they manage people and the resources needed to produce:

- they exert an influence by products and services provided;
- they exert an influence by relations established with their customers (it is not by chance that I mentioned corruption: one could examine comparative data on corruption in various European and non-European countries<sup>5</sup>;
- they directly affect contexts, in the relations they establish with their suppliers, with institutions and politicians.

Thus, just as work organizations can be homologous to context internally, they can also adopt repetitive behaviors with the outer world in the hope to reap advantages. However, work organizations might also differentiate themselves; and at this point, one may wonder to which extent businesses, services, third sector, and university can construe the potential – not only of an economic nature – of their action in the market and in the world around them; or, if, without splitting the organization's economy and life, they can frame stories which are beautiful and, above all, worthy of being heard and being told.

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<sup>5</sup> On this topic, see *Transparency international* (<http://www.transparency.org>).