**YOUNG PEOPLE AND WORK**

**between projects and insecurity**

**Prof. Mario Tonini** President CNOS/School(National Salesian Formation Centre)

**Introduction**

I write this short statement at a moment, when there is a discussion in Italy on the ddl (decree of law) “*The good school”*, which has in view launching in a systematic way the alternative attendance in the school system, and when in a progressive way the realization of measures connected to the reform of work, the *Jobs Act,* is enacted, which has among its objectives finding a “dual” formation system in an Italian version.

Of course, the question is put if that ferment marks a change of consciousness concerning work seen in its educational dimension.

Up till now work has indeed been considered as essentially opposed to the specific mission of the school, and the prejudice is still deeply rooted that work in general and manual work in particular have very little to do with human formation, for a good education ought to be realized “… *by means of literature, history, mathematics, and not in an artisan’s shop, a technical bureau, a factory or even less in a farm* *[… ]. One has not yet freed oneself, in spite of St. Benedict and civil humanism, of the vulgarized idea that manual work is impure, belongs to servants, slaves, and not to free and intelligent persons”*[[1]](#footnote-1).

Is that really the turning point?

The question is justified because the challenge is very great and one law cannot be sufficient for solving those problems.

**A youth “in suspense”**

In Italy, as in most of Europe, though in different ways, a new form of disparity and thus injustice between the old ones and the new generations is being created, which consists in the creation of conditions of isolation of a considerable portion of the young people, which prevents them from playing a significant role in society and therefore from maturing and perfecting themselves. As a consequence, they stay in the environment of studies which are not adapted to them and to their integration in future work and they also stay too long in the economic sphere of their family of origin.

Because of the transformation of the society and of the role of the family in the last thirty or forty years, a fictitious extension of adolescence, or post-adolescence, understood as an intermediary age between childhood and adulthood, has been outlined in such a way as to make prevail an attitude of “letting it happen” with respect to the needs of recognition in society, as far as it concerns the function of pushing towards assuming progressive responsibility and the capacity of facing the conflicts with one’s children.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In that context one notices the loss of the subjective and social value of work, that is to say the experience which makes one agree to take upon oneself tasks and personal responsibilities and to take advantage of one’s proper talents and competences by realizing a service endowed with an efficient value.

Quite a lot of international statistical sources confirm that tendency, which appears to be particularly emphasized in the South of Europe: in the age group between 20 and 29 the average of persons who do not work (because they are studying or are a part of the *NEET “not in employment, education and training” :* those who, having finished their studies, have no work and/or do not even search for it) is 28%; more than 38% in Italy and even more in Spain, while it is much lower in the Anglo-Saxon countries (USA 16%, UK 18,5%).

The delay of entrance into the life of activity, where the complete economic independence of the person shows itself, essentially happens due to the extension of the study period. That corresponds to the theory of human capital, which considers formation as an investment with a view to pursuing roles endowed with values and an advantage in payment in comparison with the less educated population.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Yet, differing from what that theory foresees, the extension of studies is often connected to a greater difficulty of entering into the world of work; not only because thus one puts off that transition and extends and intensifies the economic dependence on the family or the social welfare services, but also because the system of access to professions that one prefers is problematic because of a lack of demand with respect to supply and because it is subjected to the risk of precariousness and the practices of genuine exploitation, as e.g. in the case of so-called *stages,* by means of which the work of young people is extorted from them without contract, without remuneration and without investment in the future.[[4]](#footnote-4)

That is especially true for degrees which are less captivating with respect to occupation, for the young people with degrees in science, technology, and economics generally face, even in the short and in the medium term, more numerous possibilities of work and more secure ways of entrance from the legal, economic and really qualifying point of view.

That explanation of the segregation of young people from real and recognized roles of work brings us on the one hand back to the continuation of a structural unemployment, which could already be noticed in the time before the crisis and was emphasized by the current process of recession, on the other hand to the characteristics of new workplaces which in most cases demand technical and professional competences besides new forms of access to the market, which have seen a multiplying of types in a time not yet finished.

In addition one must mention the structure of our welfare system, which in the field of work essentially aims at protecting the workers occupied with a contract for an indefinite period, placed in medium and large enterprises and in public administration, which has, however, never (apart from in a negligible way) adopted real policies of protecting young people and of accompanying their first experience in work. That explains the polarisation of the work market between the two components: the *insiders*, i.e. those who are already firmly included in an occupation, and the *outsiders,* those without work and the young people searching for their first occupation.

But the phenomena indicated as reasons for the exclusion of the young ones are in turn the reflexion of a culture which has made its way by means of enlarging the well-to-do social classes, or in any case those who aspire to be so[[5]](#footnote-5); that culture emphasizes the quality of life of the young people, seen as a whole of instruction, leisure, satisfaction of needs, recognition in society, and protection of tasks and responsibilities, which induces the young people and their families to consider work as a function only to be faced under the conditions of social prestige and security.

Moreover, the enterprises tend to more and more show a sceptic attitude towards a certain type of degrees with weak means for occupations, while they prefer a value demonstrated by means of real experience trials, following a progress which starts at nil and which – if that works – then proceeds, in progressive steps, to the desired role.

But the young people do not easily distinguish those opportunities of entering that one could define by qualifying them as genuine forms of exploitation or precariousness, which often hide the trap of limited time, for they provide “insipid” forms of work, not open for genuine qualification, which – after the initial phase – would be the only possibility for the young people to get their proper competences appreciated.

Audacity and a spirit of initiative are decisive in this field in order to avoid the droughts of precariousness without qualification and to insert oneself into an efficient channel of entrance, even if that demands a not short period of transition.

One must remember that a stereotype still survives in public opinion according to which the first kind of work possesses predictive significance for future perspectives of work; that creates a kind of stiffening in waiting of some part of the educated young people, provoked by their degrees themselves, which makes them not available for choices contradicting the investment in human capital. Starting from here there is the number of discouraged ones, composed of young people waiting for a perspective of work, which is becoming more risky day by day; the possibility of rejecting the choice of opportunities of generic work, waiting for the right workplace, depends on the economic, social, and cultural resources of the family, which thus plays a decisive role in orientating the decisions of the children concerning instruction and work.[[6]](#footnote-6) That attitude of protection increases in connection with processes of entering the family enterprise or when playing with social capital, i.e. acquaintances and connections; but the more competitive the economic system is becoming, the more grows the consideration that the personal talent is important which one has demonstrated facing real tasks and problems and dealing with them well and finishing them in a way judged positive. It’s the topic of competences which – even in ambiguities and difficulties – becomes evident both in the educational system and the contest for work.[[7]](#footnote-7) As a consequence, he who has no family that guarantees the refusal of choices waiting for a more prestigious form of work, but wants to find some occupation, no matter which, he is even inclined to leave school in order to insert himself into the sphere of work, hoping to make himself valued in the organisations of work, with a view to informal, but equally weighty processes of selection and conspicuousness.

In the background there still exists a rather static social structure, dominated by adult groups defending several social roles of responsibility and prestige, which due to that remain accessible only with difficulties for young people: in order to guarantee that one has matured, one must take one’s time and … grow older. It is extremely rare with us to find young people under the age of thirty in these roles, in contrast to what happens rather often in the USA.

In our country a certain culture of protection by the family ends in taking away from young people their visibility in society and the opportunity of personal commitment by means of work, preventing them from maturing in autonomy and responsibility. That makes a real obscuring of the value of work evident.

**The “good work”**

Differing from what the critics of today’s society maintain by insisting exclusively on flexibility and uncertainty, one nowadays notices the importance of significant work in the sense of John Dewey in *Democracy and education* (2004), who indicates in professions the “*direction of the activities of life in a sense which makes them perceptibly significant for those who enact them, thanks to their consequences, and even useful for their partners”.*

That definition emphasizes the presence of an important aim from the point of view of its social value, the identification of distinguished occupations, the added value one can accumulate by means of experience. That is confirmed by recent studies which deal with the continuous increase of occupations of high qualification or of intellectual professions.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Work is a fundamental dimension of human experience because it grants a person the possibility of measuring him/herself in roles and problems which challenge him/her, of soliciting his/her human prerogatives of satisfying needs and wishes of others, of contributing effectively to the process of civilisation, of acquiring appreciation et consideration, thus obtaining indications for getting to know him/herself and for recognizing his/her talents.

Work is the fundamental intermediary – not the only one, nor the superior one – of social life and makes the individual free from the cage of his hypertrophic and, as a consequence, feeble and fragile *Ego*.

Work first of all possesses in itself a relational connotation of moral quality, that is to say its usefulness is seen with respect to the advantages it provides for others and society. That is a hyphen between the individual world and the social world; that is the order, the imagination, the connecting tissue of society.

It is the relationship to truth, justice, the good, and the beautiful which makes work an act of the person. Work expands the *humanum* in its specificity: only the human being works. That is the profound significance of the great Christian intuition hidden in the “et” of Benedict: *ora et labora.* It’s the equilibrium of contemplation and action. We have now already left behind, I think, the purely utilitarian concept; we are no more rooted in the great Christian tradition. We do no more know how to answer to the question of education to work: but here is one of the essential dimensions of the great challenge of education.

In this way the quality of significant work leads back to the quality of non-work, and that must not be understood in the exclusively materialistic way, as in the Marxist concept of the reproduction of the capacity for work, but in the human significance proper of a genuine feeling of life and of nourishing the natural disposition of the subject to curiosity and amazement in front of reality.

In the meaning which is outlined in the society of knowledge, individualism is not the best condition for the worker; it’s rather the social and communitarian dimension, the richness of relationships, the capacity of having confidence, of sharing and working in cooperative form which fit significant and distinguished work best. Work is made of *connections* and not of isolated exercise. An individualist behaviour doesn’t only make the life of the person poorer, but exposes it to the risk of losing the human character of the profession itself, which is shown primarily in the sociability and the artistic feature. All that can lead to a loss of motivation, including the phenomenon of *burnout* [[9]](#footnote-9), to shutting out innovation, to desires and conduct of escaping, and also to changes contradicting professionalism, such as “specialism”. Dewey affirms that “*every distinguished profession tends to becoming too predominant, too exclusive and too absorbing in its specialized aspect. That means that practice, the technical aspect are emphasized at the expense of the results.”*

In the meantime the life in suspense which a rather large percentage of the world of young people experiences prevents these young people from understanding themselves by means of committing themselves in significant forms of work realized in favour of others, from which they can draw a more stable and more consistent feeling of themselves, in mutual relationships where they can efficiently realize their proper potentials.

A cultural operation is therefore indispensable, which consists in eliminating commonplaces concerning education and work, the same ones on which the delay of our school system and therefore the orientation of the young generations is based.

The *first* commonplace concerns the structure of occupation: While the perception widely spread judges that the system of occupations will be polarized into a minority component of qualified forms of work and a majority component of unqualified forms of work, research has shown that during the last 15 years the possibilities of work have considerably changed in Italy. The amount in terms of working hours reserved for occupations of medium and low status level, e.g. activities of administration and clerical work, is marked by a continuing and important drop, compared with an increase in the occupations of higher qualification, i. e. the intellectual professions or “significant” forms of work.

The *second* commonplace consists in sustaining the greatest importance of humanist studies for the formation of chief executives and managers. In reality, amidst the third industrial revolution, the most appropriate cultural *milieu* seems to be what is defined as “technological humanism”[[10]](#footnote-10), which provides a scientific and technological rucksack allowing the subject to confront and to overcome complex tasks even by means of original solutions. That must also be served by sensitivity for the human factors which one acquires by the very familiarity with literature, arts and history, not presented in an academic way, but as a contribution to a good life.

The *third* commonplace insists on the growing importance of the sector of services for the economic system opposed to a pretended marginalisation of the industry. In reality in the first place of the commercial balance of our country there are the machine-tools, a fundamental component of our economy: that is the field which is developing the most consistent added value and which stimulates the other fields, too, such as informatics, commerce, scientific and technological research, formation, and management of human resources.

Finally, the *fourth* commonplace considers work as being not more important for the realization of human beings than other forms of identification, such as consuming and social life. Thus aesthetics of consuming and not ethics of work would be the element capable of constituting individual identity. In reality, work represents a decisive element of the social projection of persons, to such a degree that its lack doesn’t only cause problems of economic autonomy; indeed, even when significant subsidies are available, it leads to unbalancing the psyche and the social life of a person who happens to be under the conditions of unemployment.

Only by refuting those commonplaces – only some of them have been identified – we will be able to restrict the removal of a significant social sphere from a part of not minor importance of the world of young people.

To the delay in the process of autonomy of the young people, to which the school and the family add a great deal, there has been joined the generalized crisis of the welfare systems, which since the 80ies has led to a reduction of resources destined for forms of work assurance and for measures particularly directed towards the category of young people.

If you particularly think of the Italian situation, you see coexisting a behaviour of prolonged waiting on the side of young people who can trust in the economic support of their families, but who indeed contribute to raising long-term unemployment and to creating areas of unemployment of intellectuals, and a behaviour of school-leaving and early introduction into the work market on the side of economically more disadvantaged young people. Seen from that point of view the flexibility of the market of work doesn’t seem to overcome social immobility, but it rather tends to re-enforcing social inequalities through the economic role of the family.

In Italy one notices characteristic aspects such as the high youth unemployment; very long times for the entrance of young people into work and a long time of remaining in the family; school careers marked up to secondary grammar school by a high percentage of school-leavers and after that by slow progress during university studies; phenomena of unemployment of intellectuals (of those who have a degree, a licence, a doctor’s degree), whose number by the way is lower than the average in the EU countries. And all that because of wrong orientation and the persistence of a way of choosing studies without a decision about the future work, and not according to a destination.

We are confronted with a considerable tension in the relationship of the generations, which implies an educational and cultural problem: in front of the formation of a waiting-room of suspense and the postponing of choices, which definitely harm the young people and society, it is necessary to support the idea of human realization by means of one’s contribution to the common good, concretely in the form of work. It is necessary to inaugurate a time of commitment concentrated on culture and ethics of work as an opportunity of humanisation and improvement of society.

Work is a fundamental dimension of human life, by whose lack a person is weakened inside, occupied mainly in understanding and searching to satisfy his/her own needs, little inclined to give and to be courageous vis-à-vis the community and the future.

A line of tension will open up between protection and freedom, along which one will examine the moral quality of the new generations and the capacity of the adults of occupying their role of educators in a correct way. The children will have to free themselves from that embrace and try their own ways, in spite of the protecting anxiety of their parents. The latter, in their turn, will have to learn the ethics of responsibility and the necessity of arousing in their children the desire of free and innovative action: “*The fact that the human being is capable of action means that you can expect the unexpected from him/her, that he/she is capable of doing what is infinitely improbable. And that is possible only because every human being is unique and with the birth of everyone something new comes into the world in its uniqueness.”* (Arendt 1999, 129)

1. BRUNI L., *Fondati sul lavoro,* Vita e Pensiero, 2014, p.58 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. SCABINI E., IAFRATE R., *Psicologia dei legami familiari,* Il Mulino 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. BECKER G.S., *Human Capital,* Columbia University Press, 2nd ed. New York, 1975 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cp. e.g. VOLTOLINA E., *La Repubblica degli stagisti. Come non farsi sfruttare*, Editori Laterza 2010 and the website [www.repubblicadeglistagisti.it](http://www.repubblicadeglistagisti.it) . [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the theory of “*deriva signorile”,*  proposed by Luca Ricolfi, who indicates “a society where a large middle class has grown accustomed to a standard of life which it will not be capable of maintaining”. (RICOLFI L., *L’enigma della crescita*, Mondadori 2014, p.162) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. SEMENZA R., *Le trasformazioni del lavoro. Flessibilità, disuguaglianze, responsabilità dell’impresa,* Carocci, 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. NICOLI D., *Il lavoratore coinvolto. Professionalità e formazione nella società della conoscenza,* Via e Pensiero, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. OLIVIERI E. *Il cambiamento delle opportunità lavorative,* “Questioni di economia e finanza”, Banca d’Italia, Eurosistema 117 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. MASLACH L., La sindrome del burnout. Il prezzo dell’aiuto agli altri, Cittadella Editrice 1997 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. GENTILI C., *Umanesimo tecnologico e istruzione tecnica. Scuola, impresa, professionalità,* Armando Editore, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)