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The recent book *Idee di lavoro e di ozio per la nostra civiltà* (Firenze University Press, 2024) represents a monumental, intellectual work. The reasons for such a demanding definition of this work lie in the fact that, together with Antimo Negri's *Philosophy of Labor*, the two volumes of the book edited by Giovanni Mari, Francesco Ammannati, Stefano Brogi, Tiziana Faitini, Arianna Fermani, Francesco Seghezzi and Annalisa Tonarelli provide an other, systematic attempt to draw an history of Western philosophy of labor spanning more than 25 centuries. The specificity of this work, however, mainly consists in the multidisciplinary perspective through which the authors reconstruct the history of western ideas about labor and its reversed cast: namely, idleness.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, the cultural magnitude of this intellectual enterprise dictates to me to outline a sort of overview of the book and its main merits in a growing scale of importance and, only after that, to propose some reflections about a new possible sense of work for the future.

First, the book distinguishes the different cultural conceptions of labor that have changed the meaning of leisure and labor time by punctuating social life in Western societies: leaving aside the last section of the book, which is entirely devoted to the Italian context, this history is divided in five parts, concerning 1) conceptions of *slavish labor and intellectual idleness* in ancient Greece and Rome and 2) the *universalization of the necessity of labor after the Adamitic expulsion from Eden* together with the *cultural suspicion towards ecstatic and mundane idleness* in the Bible and in Christianity, 3) the *“semantic reoccupations” of manual and intellectual labor* in the Middle Ages, 4) their *theoretical and socio-political processes of valorization* during the modernity to the 5) *end of its political centrality* in post-Fordist societies.

Second, the ideal-typical reconstruction is combined with a polyphonic analysis of the main authors who contributed to writing this history. In *ancient Greece and Rome* labor was not only the inevitable fate reserved for humans after the end of the Golden Age, or a painful necessity for slaves and second-class citizens, deprived of political rights: this activity was also exalted by authors like Hesiod and Virgil as the potential source of an active happiness, distinguished from the contemplative version linked with leisure time exalted by Aristotle.

Even in the *Judeo-Christian tradition* labor has not only been conceived as a painful condemnation for all humanity after Adam's original sin: in addition to this interpretation, human labor somehow calls back God's architectural design at the root of the world's creation. This conception inspired the Christian process of moral valorization of lifetime through the *legitimization of “labor as a duty”* (consider St. Paul warning to suffer hunger for those who do not want to work) and the *condemnation of inactive idleness* by St. Augustine. Between the moral valorization of labor as a means for vices prevention and human conditions' sins expiation and the economic exaltation of this activity in capitalistic modernity we find not only the Calvinistic outflow of this ascetic activity outside of monasteries analyzed by Max Weber, but also the increasing criminalization of idle poverty which is part of the creation of a relative overpopulation

as an effect and the historical premise of capitalist accumulation (consider capital's original accumulation in the seventh section of Marx's *Capital*).

The modern process of labor's valorization, however, is also the effect of a theoretical shift: political economy takes over theology and becomes the vector of legitimation of labor, understood as the main source of any economic value (Locke, Smith). Avarice becomes an economic virtue thanks to the market's invisible hand that transforms private vices into public virtues. At the same time, political economists like Smith were fully aware of the risks linked with a monotonous and repetitive labor.

While utopists, socialists and communists tried to politicize this activity as never before and contributed to conceiving labor as a right rather than as a duty, capital's reaction can be distinguished on theoretical, social and political levels: neoclassical economy reduced labor to a mere commodity and its value to the output of supply and demand of the labor market; Taylor's scientific organization of labor within workplaces and the introduction of the assembly line provoked workers' de-professionalization, depriving workers of any chance to free themselves at work while conceding the opportunity to freely consume their wages in the leisure time in the Fordist era.

Last but not least, the book questions the classical realms of utility/necessity and freedom to which labor and leisure time have been respectively assigned by schematic reconstructions of this history. Such a problematization highlights two quite fruitful but underestimated paradoxes.

The first paradox concerns leisure time, which is, of course, time freed from labor, but it can be a liberating time on the condition that it is not merely devoted to meaningless activities or to passive consumption of goods and services for the satisfaction of living and alienating needs. Ancient and modern conceptions agree about the eleutheric potential of leisure time when it is spent as an activity aimed at self-care. *In turn, self-care always implies work on oneself*, as highlighted by Michel Foucault's third volume of the history of sexuality, namely the care of the self.

The other paradox is nothing but the reversed cast of the former: labor is not only – in a very minimalist and trans-historical sense – a socially necessary activity aimed at producing some kind of utility for the worker's and for society's needs. In this regard, besides the distinctions between intellectual and manual labor and between autonomous and subordinated labor there is another one worth mentioning, especially if we want to provide a new meaning to this activity in a time when the neoliberal conception of labor has not only prevailed over liberal and socialist interpretations, but also made this activity meaningless. Work can become a vehicle of freedom if at least two conditions are institutionally and socially ensured.

First, it has to be freely chosen by workers. But what does this expression mean? I think we should distinguish at least three different answers to this question. Isn't profit-driven capitalist maximization itself grounded on the systemic combination between markets economy, private property of means of production and free labor? Of course, the free choice of labor cannot merely consist in the subjective will to sign a labor contract, unless we understand such a free choice in terms of an obligatory choice dictated by subjective necessity: if this were the case, the only activity which could provide goods and services necessary for living needs would risk becoming the most mortifying as well. After all, this is precisely the main paradox highlighted by the young Marx in his *Manuscripts*, when he dealt with the alienated relationship between the workers and their professional activity. According to a great deal of the Italian public opinion, this is exactly the price that any person who lives off their own work should be willing to pay in

order to achieve their dignity through any work: one year ago, the public debate of the last summer was literally monopolized by complaints from tourism entrepreneurs who could no longer find workers willing to work without pay for their overtime or to work 10 to 14 hours a day because of citizenship income. This is a good example of what I call a “reactionary glorification of labor”.

According to an interpretation opposite to this, a freely chosen work depends precisely on the fact that labor ceases to be only a necessity for the workers and starts to be an opportunity to develop their own attitudes and capacities. This means that work cannot be chosen only because it is necessary for the satisfaction of living needs of the workers: it has to mirror the workers’ need of self-realization. Therefore, a basic income is required to *free labor before working*.

Precisely on this point another position should be distinguished: I call it the „libertarian demonization of labor“. Most of the theoretical-political options that valorize the “eleutheric potential” of basic income end up disregarding workplaces, underestimating the persistent emancipatory potentialities associated with work and the drastic reduction in power relations resulting from the institutionalization of an unconditional basic income disconnected from union demands and claims.

In my view, all these are consequences – no matter whether intentional or unintentional – of the widespread understanding of basic income as a strategy to directly free leisure time rather than as a strategy to free it through the liberation of labor. In addition to this, no proposal concerning extra-labor income can be carefully considered apart from its relationship to employment policies, proportionality of tax levy, etc., which can only apparently be taken as exogenous variables. Therefore, in order to pursue labor liberation rather than liberation *from* work a politically instrumental conception of “transitional formative income” is required.

A transition to what? Someone could ask. In order to answer this question, it should be noted that the free choice of labor requires other institutional conditions, such as employment policies and, before that, industrial policies aimed at expanding socially useful jobs and sustaining existing ones. In other words, freely chosen labor requires transitional formative income as well as full employment.

Freely chosen work is not enough. Even if a transitional formative income were institutionalized, many people might freely choose poor, hierarchical, harmful and polluting jobs by passionate and even devotional reasons: consider, in Italy, how many people work in the private-social sector because they strongly believe in the social utility of their professional activity, even though they perfectly match the category of working poor. Just to make another example: consider those people who are willing to do whatever is demanded by the management or to do „bullshit or dirty jobs“ for their high wages.

The second condition for labor liberation, hence, is dignified employment: labor has to be freely performed by the workers. In this second case, freedom at work depends primarily on the social organization of labor: hence, on the *decisional autonomy*, *material security*, and *social utility*, including *environmental compatibility*. These are, in my view, the main conditions to provide subjects the opportunity to do a meaningful labor, at least in a neosocialist perspective.

Even in a world where work is the final product of total and fragmented social labor, getting over the *homo faber* paradigm introduced by Benvenuto Cellini does not mean doing the same with the human aspiration to professional self-realization. Quite the contrary, such a desire can be actually

pursued if freedom in labor is ensured by its social utility, ecological compatibility, material security and decisional autonomy. Even though the care of self has been traditionally associated with leisure time, labor can become an opportunity to take care of oneself even though we do not live anymore in the craftsman world where Benvenuto Cellini lived, if the *democratization of this activity* and the *radicalization of democracy* are taken into serious account together with *work's de-commodification* and *needs' de-fetishization*.

On a closer inspection, an eco-socialist conception of labor reverses the neoliberal exaltation of labor, which is entirely grounded on a sort of valorization of this activity detached from its contractual, wage and organizational conditions: professional *self-fulfillment of workers* is reconnected to their *material security* and *autonomy in decision-making*, their social recognition to the *social utility* of the work performed, and the latter to its *ecological compatibility*.

These desirable transformations are more urgent than ever, especially today since we are witnessing an inversion of the modern shift from a contract of work to a contract of employment – what I call the forced **entrepreneurialization** of the precariat – and a radical change of the social organization of labor within digital companies.