

How capital and labor change: the new meaning of production factors

The economy of the twentieth century has known two great protagonists: on the one hand, "capital", on the other, "work".

The first, strong of the means of production and therefore of the economic supremacy, of which the first Detroit auto factories are perfect representation; the second, devoid of these means, and indeed itself "commodity", as an instrument of mass production, hostage to wages and therefore generally poor, and in perpetual struggle with "capital".



General Motors workers sleep over the machinery of their busy factory in Detroit in the 1930s

In this context, those needs for job protection, denounced by Pope Leo XIII himself with the encyclical "Rerum Novarum" of 1891, acted as a forerunner for a regulation capable of delimiting the perimeter of working time and managerial and organizational power of "capital", compared to both the methods and the spaces (those of the factory) of operation.

Today, these two protagonists continue to move on the scene but with different appearances. And they will do it even more in the future.

Thanks to the effects of the technological revolution, in fact, even "work" has equipped itself with the means of production and, as an antagonist of capital, is now able to invoke to itself some of what have been the exclusive prerogatives of capital.

They are means of production, for example, the smartphone and the mobile devices that allow the worker to remotely manage the assembly lines, which were under the aegis of "capital". Or that allow the crowd worker to connect to the digital platform not only to win the order deemed most advantageous, operational (such as the delivery of consumer goods) or intellectual (such as artistic or musical creations). And this generates a power of choice that up to now has been the son of the managerial power of "capital", but also to make the

choice with margins of autonomy that the power of hetero-organization, equally in the hands of "capital", up to today he did not contemplate.



The morning of the crowdworker

In the same way, 3D printers are means of production that allow the worker, under the guise of consumer, to independently create real products. Making tangible the fact that, as Médaille (Distributism. An economic policy of equity and balance) argues, the consumer is the same person as the worker. In other words, the workers are, and in the future even more, will be able to govern part of the processes of the factory or in any case of the production chain, even if in virtual form as a platform, and to establish, within certain limits, the times and workspaces and, more generally, the organization of it. If this is true, then it is true that the regulation of twentieth-century child labor must give way to a new one, capable of responding to the phenomena that this changed scenario generates. In fact, it is no longer a question of delimiting the power of "capital" over "work" but of building a relationship of loyal cooperation between them, by virtue of which neither party abuses the other. In the sign of that participatory logic that Article 46 of the Italian Constitution clearly contemplates but also, for example, of the German experience, workers could thus finally participate with wider margins of autonomy in the management of the company, or rather become important "stakeholders. And therefore, on the one hand, take on greater responsibilities, on the other, receive the guarantees that this role of greater responsibility makes appropriate. First of all, economic guarantees, linked not only to the so-called "means obligations", which can impose a "doing" without results, but above all to individual productivity and therefore to the so-called "result obligations", on job security, on reconciling times of life and work - with positive effects also in favor of working mothers and fathers. It is a game that can be played, and which is already played in part today, on the ground of corporate social responsibility towards the worker, who - we still remember - is also a consumer.

On this ground, the union also plays a decisive role, as guarantor of the new interests of workers, and with it, the important task of rethinking. Representing these workers means, in fact, leaving the factory boundaries where, in the future, they will probably not set foot for the possibility of working remotely, restructuring the related economic treatment to reflect the objectives set by individuals, updating the tasks with collective bargaining in the light of the innovations introduced by technology and, last but not least, language.

An equally decisive role is reserved, in this field, to Italian and European legislators. And in fact, the task of a discipline capable of responding to decent work standards, which in Italian sounds like "decent work", which the International Labor Organization has been promoting for years, according to the new perspective of the worker "stakeholder" .

Moreover, there are already experiments aimed at strengthening the protection of the company's "stakeholders", or of those who have various kinds of interests towards it. For example, the recent European Directive Shareholder II (Shareholder Rights Directive 2017/828), for the first time, assigned to the shareholders' meeting a binding voting power on the remuneration of directors and strategic managers of listed companies.

According to this new perspective, work is less slavery, in the sense of forced and therefore unworthy activity - as Plato defined it in "La Repubblica" - and more freedom, creativity and solidarity. Therefore, a favorite way for the realization of the human person.

This is, moreover, the prevailing purpose which the social doctrine of the Church recognizes at work. Among other things, we are reminded of the "Laudato Si" by Pope Francis but also the "Caritas in veritate" by Benedict XVI.

Ultimately, with the technological revolution, "capital" and "work" stop challenging each other to meet on unexplored borders. Extraordinary fruits can result.

Perhaps these are the things that, to quote a classic of dystopia such as "Blade Runner", men could not even imagine but, above all, this is the real "disruptive" scope of the technological revolution. Net of debates about whether and how much employment it eats. And so, love of work will no longer be a contradiction in terms. As Jeremy Bentham believed a few centuries ago.