

After Fordism, Focus Shifts to the Person

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Abstract

From collective negotiation to today's apology of employee autonomy and self-enterprise: Andrea Ranieri points out different ambiguities and perspectives of this situation.

In the culture of organized labour, autonomy is firmly held to be the fruit of collective effort. Given the imbalance of wealth, power and knowledge on which **subordinate labour** is based, workers have organized themselves to struggle for both contracts and laws that recognize their needs as people. Specifically, this means fair working pace and hours, decent wages, as well as conditions for rest and private life that management cannot interfere with. This collective stance for professional and personal dignity is directly linked to the vertical chain of command of the industrial factory, together with the impersonal nature of bureaucratic organizations.

The fragmentation of tasks and job roles that characterizes the scientific organization of work has been overturned by the notions of basic **equality of conditions** of «upper level» subordinates, and **collective action** by workers in order to fulfil their needs. In any case, the pure model of a **Fordist factory** or a **Weberian public administration**, if ever achieved, would very likely lead to organizational paralysis. Clearly, no factory or administration, however strongly based on procedures, would ever survive without the intelligence and willingness of the employees themselves.

Individual strategies— informal and unspoken (to the boss) — for surviving difficult working conditions have traditionally been adopted by employees to solve problems beyond the reach of the organizational system. However, these same skills have attained the dignity of **autonomy** only when founded on **shared control** of work conditions: time, working pace, and the physical and psychological health of the people who are involved.

The organizational model that underlies enterprise and, even more importantly, relations between the social bodies, has fallen into crisis for several reasons. **New technologies, market globalisation, a more demanding and personalized request of goods and services** have each contributed to challenging the basic notion of a mechanical and prescriptive organization of labour. Now workers are asked not only to diligently carry out their prescribed job roles, but also

- to be involved in the organizational aim
- to assume additional responsibilities
- to adapt to job tasks that cannot be totally defined in advance

Autonomy has therefore become a reference for the professional profile of a great number of subordinate workers.

The defence of employee autonomy to the point of assuming of risk on behalf of the company is clearly based on ideology. Employee autonomy serves to transfer risk onto lower levels of the vertical chain without actually changing job organization. The employee can no longer count on the job security of the good old days, but must accept the notions of risk ideology and market omnipotence. However, there is no turning back to the old scale economy nor the «glorious triad» of Big Industry, Big Labour and Big State.

Furthermore, the greater autonomy and intelligence of workers of the new generation, born after Welfare and labour acquisitions means that they no longer be employed in the rigid routine of the old organizational system. In other words, the Fordist model has declined also because it offers no answer to the increased intelligence and skills that Fordism itself helped to make possible.

Knowledge – whether of scientists or entrepreneurs, formal or informal, transferable or context-bound– is the **key to success** for organizational structures who must deal with constant change regarding technology, market, demand for goods and services; change that has become a primary and permanent feature in the life of an organization.

Nowadays, in the knowledge economy, the **person-as-a-whole**, who once had to be protected against the depersonalisation typical of the Fordist production system, has become the pivot of organizations. Optimists talk of «new liberty»; pessimists say that we are facing the total subordination of the human being to the capitalistic process of exploitation. However, it is the workers themselves who experience the ambivalence of the current situation: wealth vs poverty; the chance for self-realization versus the risk of permanent uncertainty. They live with ambivalence and ask for new political and social answers regarding **the sense and direction of a future** that has yet to be created. And, in order to build this future, a thorough reflection on industrial relations, and on choices to be made by all concerned will surely be of great help.

Companies might choose personalization of job roles instead of dealing with the collective representative of workers. In this way, important issues of salary and professional acknowledgement move from collective negotiation to internal relations, that concern only the management. The reasons for this shift are the following:

- workers are asked for **new skills: autonomy, responsibility, teamwork and change management**, that can't be assessed through the old standards of negotiation and labour action
- a career path requires transverse skills that can't be framed in a traditional job flow-chart

While negotiation has become increasingly personalized, the persisting imbalance of power and information suggests that the need for collective negotiation is still well-grounded. Companies define the new work force as autonomous, self-managing, an internal client, and free from the superstructures of collective negotiations; however, the employee soon finds out that:

- autonomy is relative and depends upon organizational choices that are beyond individual reach
- a career and the acquisition of new skills depend upon limited access to professional experience and training
- the effort towards involvement and loyalty are constantly eroded by the trend to outsource segments of production and services

Small wonder that the individual skilled worker looks for professional and economic gratification on the market rather than within his or her company. The typical complaint of employers on the disloyalty of workers, who exploit the market skills acquired within the company, are completely

unjustified and inconsistent. **Autonomy** is a two-way street, to the advantage of the organization, but also to the person who works within.