

Uomini e lavoro alla Olivetti

Edited by Francesco Novara, Renato Rozzi and Roberta Garruccio, Bruno Mondadori, Milan 2005.

Review by Aldo Carera

1. The uniqueness of Olivetti

Titles are often created to bring the reader straight to the heart of a subject and its relevance. This is surely the case for the thorough collection of oral histories of working life in a renowned Italian manufacturing enterprise of computers, printers and other business machines, by Roberta Garruccio, *Uomini e lavoro alla Olivetti* Bruno Mondadori (Men and Work in Olivetti) published by Bruno Mondadori.

The words “men” and “work” delineate the two themes that are inextricably bound to each other in the pages of this volume and the words of the workers who tell their stories: humanity and work; the merit and uniqueness of Olivetti.

Giulio Sapelli, in the postscript, identifies “a mythological production...necessary if we want to place the literature and the reflection on life stories” (p.607) into a cultural framework. A thriving company culture and its shared values sold off as contemporary myths, says Sapelli, referring to the recent dissipation of Olivetti’s heritage of organizational loyalty discussed by Francesco Novara and Renato Rozzi: “ While, in other enterprises, the worker was nothing more than a part of an anonymous mass, in Olivetti he or she was a person with a well-defined working life.”

In 1934, Chevrolet responded quickly to the stereotypes of the blue collar worker stylized by Charlie Chaplin’s dazed rapture in *Modern Times*, by producing the film *Master hands* (<http://www.archive.org/details/prelinger>), whose first frames showed a gradual focusing of shapes without faces; an anonymous mass of moving overalls from which the faces of the workers walking towards the factory slowly emerged. For the next forty minutes, there was a meticulous portrayal of the entire productive process, from the first electric switch turned on at dawn to produce energy to wake up the factory, to the finished vehicle that rolled away for testing. This was meant to show how the assembly line was simply a sequence of the productive process that would safeguard professionalism, competence and the authority of work. *Master hands* portrayed the crafted remains of Ford’s working practices, then widespread in the United States. In truth, it is the brutality of the images on the assembly line, of workers’ automated routines, that stays in our mind. This, perhaps, was Chaplin’s revenge; the film strayed far beyond the intention of its producer; laborers are separated from the meaning of their work, and are only joined by servitude. The faces that appear from the blurry background ask the historian the same questions (whether heard or not) that they asked their employer.

In giving a voice to twenty-five interviewees, Roberta Garruccio focuses on “the personnel policy that characterized the heyday of Olivetti...an exceptional personnel policy that emphasized the management and development of its people instead of worrying about the technicalities and peculiarities of what we now call ‘human resources’” (p. 11). In post-war Italy, there was nothing playing in the projecting room, other than the film on Olivetti. The individuals in this book explain the soul of Olivetti’s unique management style.

The highly critical “day after” by Francesco Novara (a short page at the beginning of the volume) is a double indictment: he addresses both the people who decided to sacrifice Olivetti’s business heritage and the historian who should be aware of the civil responsibilities in reconstructing the historical memory of a landmark Italian company. He also traces possible steps towards the necessary reconciliation between labors and work: “These stories of working life are addressed to the humiliated world of work in a torn and confused society, dominated by the uncertainties of an economy based on finance.

They remember the enduring value of the origin of Olivetti’s success --the capacity for constant innovation and thinking ahead; both realistic and daring, rational and imaginative. Here was a company dedicated to the excellence of their products, but, at the same time, to the quality of working life as well as the elevation of human social interaction”.

Regarding the dispersion of the company at the end of the twentieth century, Sapelli’s sharpened pen becomes a scalpel, not fearing to name those who moved from a position of company loyalty to obsequious survival when the enterprise came to a halt. The message of the book goes even further. It calls into question the issue of achieving balance between working life and civil co-existence. In order to make sense of our working lives, our social lives, and the life of business, actions aren’t enough without recalling “the ideals, the objectives, the existential concepts, [because] every honest man should try to carry out only what he believes in without fear or compromise” (M. Romani).

2. The use of oral sources

Given that Olivetti practically cancelled itself from its historical path, the rigorousness of the study could have been at risk. A postscript that analyses the path between history and anthropology, and the first person narrative voice reminds the reader of the connections between the two fields. This work required a solid historical basis, a difficult operation when using of oral sources. This historical basic could not come from the interviewees; only the hard work of the interviewer could separate the wheat from the chaff; that is the filtering and selection that memory is subject to, of our inability to give an account of everyday life when the day doesn’t have anything in particular to mark our life and our memories.

The interviewer, in this case, could count on the fact that daily working life in Olivetti was exceptional, and that first-hand memories of that life still exist. Roberta Garruccio went to the Canavese (CERCA) and part of Piedmont, making a few stops in other places (besides the Centro per la Cultura d’Impresa) to collect the twenty-five personal narratives. She brought seriousness to the historical material produced by the interviews and applied her considerable skills acquired in the course of previous research studies.

In the introduction she puts herself into the “shoes of a blind poet”. She declares the theme of her work and unravels it, aware of the nature and limits of her project. She has also understood the necessity of adapting the oral version to a written one, a difficult but necessary task that requires skill and sensitivity to reconstruct on paper the communicative strength of the original recording, so as to make the pages “intelligible to every kind of reader”(p. 63). The editorial filter, for the moment, has no alternative in experimental dialogue among papers, voices and images; between traditional archives and multimedia libraries. It is not yet the moment for using recorded voices, or faces of real people, incapable as we are of rigorously using all the media of knowledge.

The footnotes meticulously included in each text are fundamental, as is the final chronological outline, for the meticulous reader but also as a possible bridge with the “traditional” records with an eye to a further reconstruction that doesn’t classify its sources only on the basis of typology.

On an original note, the book also proposes some intense pages that substitutes the external point of view of the “blind poet” with that of the people who actually worked in the company and were involved in the sales promotion of the entire volume. Francesco Novara and Renato Rozzi, psychologists, worked for a long time in the Psychology Center of Olivetti. Their contribution is to

report the individual memories to the collective memory to which they themselves belong. With their help, it is easier to go deeply into various pertinent issues: union and corporate relations, production, research and development, commercial services, top management, cultural and social services.

3. Personal accounts from inside Olivetti: you cannot wander from the subject

As Oscar Wilde's *Happy Prince* says: "you tell me of marvellous things, but more marvellous than anything is the suffering of men and of women". Apart from the gender (only one woman was interviewed), it is striking to observe the suffering of those men when they see their work losing its meaning reduced to minor roles of the industry in which they once were a human resource.

The thread of the book is seen from within Olivetti and there, we can see the traces of the organisational changes that characterized many enterprises at the end of the 19th century.

For the most part, the interviews start with the question: "I'd like you to tell me about your experience in Olivetti"; there are a few variations but they always regard the subject's first experiences in the company ("How did you find your job in Olivetti?") and so on. Only a few witnesses give an account of their lives before Olivetti --studies and other short work experiences. The interview of one managing director (Ottorrino Beltrami) is a bit longer in order to explain a physical handicap suffered during the war.

Just once Garruccio starts an interview with a broader perspective; she asks about the subject's family, training, and the choice to work for Olivetti. Then, she finished her question revealing the mystery of the book: "Do not worry about wandering from the topic because you never depart from it" (p.307). Clear and simple, as a conclusion. What can we say about the other mysteries hidden in a mirror game between an inside vision controlled by the management, and an outside vision--a vague reflection of the enterprise from the point of view of the narratives of individuals with their own life choices, culture of work, the previous search for meaning before concentrating it in the enterprise, finally the narration of real lives under construction or already built?

These stories in Olivetti perceive the entire life of the narratives. How much had Olivetti influenced their personal lives—whether it was actually present or not; how much was traceable in the daily life of their families and their social group; how much was to be found in the characteristics of their generation and of the cultural setting in which they lived; how much was to be found in the Canavese area, whose inhabitants include people with different roots? If brought with more decision out of the factory, would these stories have better explained the passions and sufferings in the factory? As far as the method is concerned, did that first insistent question ("tell me about your experience in Olivetti") dry up its sources, rather than producing better results?

We would define it as an impossible claim if it hadn't arisen in the interviews themselves. A working proposal must observe some limits of scientific formality and reduce the reviews to a simple writing exercise. The interesting research hypothesis and competent research of this book has left its mark. Every theme in the volume introduces ideas, raises questions, and stimulates further reflection.

Garruccio's work arouses the reader's attention and could be used in university courses to stimulate a dialogue among those who are soon to enter the job market. How does one find a balance between individual identity and a collective identity with the risk of not having a concrete historical perspective? If a book doesn't teach us anything, what use is it?