



From “subject” to “project”. Subjectivity’s transformations in workspaces

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate, through a theoretical analysis, the transformative processes that invest subjectivity in its relationship with the working dimension, starting from the consideration of the centrality of capitalism for contemporary society and of the performative role it plays with respect to human and social experience. The subject has often been analyzed from an “object” perspective, in that the analyses mainly focused on how much capitalism makes the subject an object. Currently capitalism is not limited to this type of exploitation but affirms even more its performative dimension by shifting the perspective from the subject as an “object” to the subject as a “project”. What is the social actor’s role in this way? The impression is that some resources, such as trust, creativity and sociability are used, but not respected in their constitutive logic, nor reproduced.

The point is that the question is not on the analysis of the processes that involve exclusively the economic sphere, but in the examination of the processes that risk producing important effects on the social life, as demonstrated by the colonization of every vital area by the economic logic, which advocates efficiency, incentives and speed as the criteria to be used no longer and not only in the economic sphere, but even in the most private areas of the personal dimension.

Keywords: *subject; project; subjectivity; capitalism; workspaces; personality.*

1. Introduction

This paper aims to investigate, through a theoretical analysis, the transformative processes that invest subjectivity in its relationship with the working dimension, starting from the consideration of the centrality of capitalism for contemporary society and of the performative role it plays with respect to human and social experience.

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Compared to the literature that has long investigated the relationship between subjectivity and the world of work, these reflections intend to dwell on those specific transformative dynamics that are generated when the subject is considered as a “project”. Rather than addressing the topic in an exhaustive way, the paper elaborates some suggestions and intends to share some possible theoretical paths.

With respect to the relationship with capitalism, the subject has often been analyzed in an “object” perspective (that is to say, how much capitalism makes the subject an object). The Marxian thesis is perhaps the best known compared to the processes that derive from this objectification in terms, for example, of alienation. As known, currently capitalism is not limited to this type of exploitation, but affirms even more its performative dimension by shifting the perspective from the subject as an “object” to the subject as a “project”. In this sense, we are in the presence of a “project subjectivity”: capitalism weaves a relationship with the subject in terms of a real “project”. A project of self-realization and self-affirmation of the subject which, must pass through the capitalist dimension to be fulfilled.

This subjectivity’s idea as “project” seems to be based on:

1. the importance of the theme of happiness;
2. the existence of a capitalized personality – or of a personality’s capitalization.

2. The main project: happiness

In the age of the subject understood as a “project”, it is on the shoulders of the subject that weighs every area of his life. How does this process take place? It is only through a certain kind of self-realization, which rests on the cornerstones of capitalism and depends on capitalism itself, that happiness can be achieved. This represents the most contemporary promise that capitalism makes to the subject and that makes capitalism similar to a religion.

The happiness guaranteed by capitalism also passes through living certain experiences, in some cases particularly adrenaline. Experiences that seem unique to us and that make us unique. In our uniqueness lies the achievement of happiness. We can mention, for example, the emphasis on “We are responsible for and creators of our own happiness”. Hence the real obsession with well-being, the thriving self-care industry, motivational coaching courses that aim to make the subject “entrepreneur of himself” (Han 2016). Or, again, all those products that, through their consumption, guarantee happiness, or rather, provide us with the illusion of having conquered it, albeit briefly, for example in the period of time necessary to consume a tea (a well-known brand of tea has on its filters the words “Instant happiness. Just add water”).

“The self as a project, which believes that it has freed itself from external obligations and constraints imposed by others, now submits to inner obligations and self-imposed constraints, forcing itself to performance and optimization”, says Byung-Chul Han (2016): here is one of the greatest performative capacities of capitalism and this aspect reverberates in particular within the working dimension, especially in all those hybrid work contexts.

The capitalist promises connected to “happiness for all” replace the promises once offered by the religious world, also in the guarantee of an answer to “anxieties, sufferings, apprehensions” (Benjamin 2011: p. 84) of the subject. Faced with the observation that this promise cannot effectively satisfy the totality of the subject’s desires – since the social cannot be subsumed in the economic without this causing a distortion of the sense of the

social dimension itself (Iannone 2020) – he lives a peculiar ambivalence: on the one hand, his identity is reduced from subject to “entitled” (Mongardini 1997: p. 77) and this reduction puts him in front of the evidence that many of his expectations remain unfulfilled; on the other hand, all those non-economic and non-rational components of the personality, forcibly reduced to a capitalist logic, tend to try to escape the economic order and the process of rationalization instituted, reaffirming, to the detriment of homo œconomicus, the centrality of “homo complexus” (Giacobello 2016: p. 50).

From the process by which calculating reason, in the era of late modernity, has progressively placed the accent on some aspects of the life of the subject, marginalizing others, changing “the meaning of individuality and building on this transformation a different world” (Mongardini 1997: p. 193), there also derives the exasperated opposition between the sphere of feelings, emotions and instincts, proper to each subject, and the sphere of objectified social relations and forms of organization. An opposition that makes any attempt at mediation and synthesis between the two extremely complex. It seems to re-emerge, albeit under different guises, the eternal struggle, of Simmelian memory, between life and forms, between the “non-economic sources of social life” (Mongardini 1997: p. 193) and the capitalist forms that force these elements into a logic distorting their original and constitutive meaning (Iannone 2020).

3. Subjectivity and personality in (or, better, at) work

How does current capitalism operate with respect to such mechanisms? It would no longer be limited to the exclusion of the personal qualities of the worker from the workplace – left outside the factory gates, according to Marx, or in the cloakroom, according to early Sombart (1916) – but would increasingly require the contribution of the personal qualities of the subject in the workplace. This is what has been highlighted through the conceptual category of biocapitalism (Codeluppi 2008; Fumagalli 2009; Moulrier Boutang 2002) – for example in the reference to how and to what extent capitalism engulfs the bodily and intellectual resources of the worker – but which in the transition to the idea of the project takes a further leap.

It is on the idea of the subject as a project that many of the currently existing corporate ideologies seem to be implanted. The personality of the worker, an essential tool through which to pass the affirmation of a project, is not placed in a corner, as happened in early capitalism, but is shaped based on the needs of the system. It is put at the service of capital.

In 1934 the German sociologist Werner Sombart stated: “All employees” within the company, “from the General Manager to the last packer” (Sombart 1941: p. 33) carry out their daily work not according to their own perception of how best to act, but according to “a system of norms and prescriptions” (Sombart 1941: p. 33). Once the doors of the “office or factory” – it is indifferent, since it is a transversal process – are closed, the subject is nothing more than “a number in a mechanism that cannot be determined by him either in detail or in complex”. It is the company that ‘walks’ and the subject “with it” (Sombart 1941: p. 33).

The rationalization of work required the rationalization and standardization of machines, from which derived the standardization of products and, from the latter, the standardization of workers. The rationality of work thus had to rely on an autonomous organizational basis and no longer depend on the subjective dispositions of the workforce.

The workshop had to function all the better because its operation no longer needed the spirit of cooperation of the workers (Gorz 1992: p. 71).

Today we see that in all forms of “hybrid” work the boundary between the private personality of the subject and the organizational personality – in other words the working personality – becomes increasingly blurred. The organization no longer stops at the threshold of the private personality of its members but intends to shape it to generate discipline and self-control internalized by the worker.

As is known, it is essential to distinguish between the aims of the organization and the personal motives of those who belong to it. The personality of the subject is not reducible for the purposes proper to the organization (Barnard 1970). Each member of an organization has a double personality: his own (individual) and the organizational one. The first concerns the personal motives of the subject; the second concerns the way in which he performs the services required of him (Bonazzi 2002). The relationship between the two personalities can take different forms. There are, in fact, cases in which the individual personality tends to identify with the organizational one and others in which the individual reveals itself intensely different, if not even opposed, to the organizational personality.

It is from this distinction that Chester Barnard – a well-known American business manager and public administrator, author of an innovative study on management theory and organizational studies – reminds us how it is possible to identify two different dimensions of organizational action: effectiveness and efficiency. Effectiveness measures “the degree to which the organization achieves its goals,” while efficiency concerns “the degree to which the personal motives of being part of an organization are satisfied” (Bonazzi 2002: p. 62). The intersection of effectiveness and efficiency can give rise to four different possibilities. An organization, in fact, can be: effective and efficient (this is the optimal situation); effective but not efficient: when it achieves its goals, but fails to satisfy its members; not effective, but efficient: when it does not achieve its goals, but manages to satisfy its members; not effective or efficient (this condition is the worst situation).

The organization can act on these two dimensions through what Barnard defines as the “model of the incentive and persuasion economy”. When the individual believes that the benefits he receives are greater than the costs he incurs he continues to participate and contribute to the organization. If, on the other hand, the costs are deemed greater than the benefits, then he will decide to leave the organization. The latter, therefore, has two tools at its disposal to ensure that effectiveness and efficiency are met: relying on the system of incentives and that of persuasion. In the first case, the incentives are not only material, but also moral. In the second case, persuasion acts at a deeper level, since it intends to modify existing expectations, replacing them with new motives. The purpose of persuasion is to “change the desires of a sufficient number of people so that the incentives it can offer become adequate” (Barnard 1970).

Starting from these considerations, the sociologist Gideon Kunda recalls how we can speak of “multiple self-personalities” (Kunda 1992). That is, “however demanding” (Bonazzi 2002), an organization cannot go so far as to request the annulment of the personality of its members. The private personality can never be fully identified with the organizational personality.

Today it is possible to see how organizations are increasingly based on what is defined as “internalization in the consciousness of employees of values, codes of conduct and corporate objectives”. What was once identified, on the one hand, as “coercive

control” – or first-level – and on the other as “hierarchical-bureaucratic control” – or second-level control – is now increasingly replaced by “cultural control” (or third level). Through it, the members of the organization become “the most diligent controllers of themselves and their work colleagues” (Bonazzi 2002).

The most important novelty consists, therefore, in the observation that, through cultural control, the organization no longer intends to stop at the threshold of the private personality of its members – as Barnard affirmed – but aims to completely shape this personality, “in the conviction that only the total and passionate identification with the values and desires of the company itself can lead to internalizing discipline and self-control” (Bonazzi 2002; Iannone 2019).

In the organizational culture are contained, therefore, a series of elements that can have a significant impact on the motivation of the members.

Cooperation of workers is demanded more than ever before. They are asked to contribute more and more with their personal qualities, even when the type of work to be performed does not require such a contribution in itself or requires it only to a limited extent. This is the idea of the workplace as “a big family” (Bonazzi 2002: p. 170), as the place where the worker is required to be creative, to identify himself completely with the values of the company for which he works, letting his private self be colonized more and more by the organizational self.

By exploiting the idea for which working is not only equivalent to “producing economic wealth”, but also represents “a way of producing oneself” (Gorz 1992: p. 93) – and, therefore, realizing oneself as a project – a real “ideology of human resources” seems to be generated, as Gorz defined it (1992: p. 78) of which a typical expression can be found in the idea of the organization of work considered as “human” and “conceived as a place of realization and individual and collective initiatives and therefore as the engine of economic and social progress” (Gorz 1992: p. 78).

This is a culture that shows to be “pathological” and that produces malaise (Bruni 2018: p. 9). The current business organizations appear, therefore, more hierarchical than the traditional ones, while presenting themselves to external eyes with a “participatory look” (Bruni 2018: p. 12) and, going beyond the rhetoric of the team, it is possible to find an increasing loneliness, both at the management level and at the lower work levels.

While supporting the prohibition of mixing the languages and emotions of private life with those of business life – this is a “golden law” (Bruni 2018: p. 12) of the managerial culture in question – it is possible to note how all the fundamental words typical of family, social and community relationships, not only are not kept outside the workplace, but rather they are increasingly claimed as manipulable for the purposes of business logic. In doing so, managerial culture comes to distort, to bend the meaning of these relationships.

4. Some consequences of this process

Among the main consequences, two seem to be more relevant:

1. the transformation of the class struggle into an inner struggle for the individual/worker;
2. the increase in the presence of mechanisms through which the worker constantly blames himself and no longer perceives, or perceives less, as determining the dimension of the “system” (Han 2016).

With respect to the first point, although it is clearly not possible today to speak of “class struggle” as we understand it in a classical way, all those instances expressed by the workers and attributable to the idea of the existence of opposing interests between the various parties involved seem, in fact, to weaken in favor of an inner struggle with the subject. Our adherence to the project that the company we work for has created for us clashes with those processes through which we try to detach ourselves from our role. The project it intends to advance is opposed by those interstices in which the private personality tries to take refuge, through cynicism – that is, the demystification of corporate ideology – through rejection, depersonalization and so on (Kunda 1992).

Linked to this is the second point, the weakening of the idea of “system”: “my project depends on me”, so even my successes and failures depend uniquely on my abilities or inabilities. The meritocracy typical of this vision means that there is a greater legitimization of inequality between people, since it interprets talents not as a gift, but only as an individual merit. From this it follows that those who are poor are easily considered as “guilty” (Bruni 2018: p. 9) of their situation, with serious repercussions in terms of de-responsibility for the role of institutions, for example.

The incentives, in this framework, simulate the function of the gift with the aim of generating forms of gratification of the worker by the company, but it is a reduced gift, a partial gift that has nothing to do with the logic of the real gift (Bassi 2000; Godbout 1992; Godelier 1996; Mauss 2002).

Even “sacrifice”, today, through “semantic manipulation” by current capitalism, is experienced by the subject as a form of “voluntary gift” (Bruni 2018: p. 47).

All this happens without “bloodshed” (Zuboff 2019: p. 530). In exchange for the promised happiness, the subject willingly surrenders all that is doubtful, “chaos, uncertainty, conflict, in favor of predictability, pacification and automated regularity” (Zuboff 2019: p. 530).

5. Conclusions

What are the real spaces for action for this “project subjectivity”?

The language and logic of human relationships that come to life outside of work are increasingly strongly demanded within work relationships. All this, however, does not seem to lead to a strengthening of the subject in the workplace, but, on the contrary, contributes strongly to distorting the relationships themselves. It is a “relational and emotional fragility” (Bruni 2018: p. 11). But it is also the syndrome of the so-called “burnout”, which Kunda (1992) talked about in the 90s, when he indicated that the organization would no longer stop “on the threshold of the private personality of its members” (Iannone 2019: p. 131) but would fully shape it.

And while, on the one hand, real behaviors of separation are cultivated – consider, as Bruni states, the case of those managers who do not intend to fraternize with their subordinates in canteens or in sports and recreational clubs – on the other, these new enterprises instrumentally employ words typical of the most intimate areas of the person, such as family, friendship, ideals, ethics, religion.

But what is the social actor’s role in this way? The impression is that these resources are used, but not respected in their constitutive logic, nor reproduced. “So, this logic will continue to be compromised if these resources, such as trust, creativity or sociability are treated as sacks of flour or mechanical tools” (Iannone 2019: p. 128). “The problem is not (only) ethical, but functional. Once ‘employed’, trust, creativity and sociability are not reproduced if the logic of employment is not their typical one. For

example, if you use a person's trust opportunistically, the next time that person will no longer trust you" (Iannone 2019: p. 128).

While in the typical enterprises of the first and second capitalisms workers and managers were asked considerable participation, workers and managers of today's capitalism are asked for everything, impoverishing all other areas of life other than work. There is no return, therefore, for the social actor except in terms of an instrumentalization of the deepest human dimension.

Capitalism, while feeling the need to invoke gift and gratuitousness - as factors capable of activating the most intimate component of the person - is in fact enormously afraid of the devastating effects they have on the functioning of contractual logic. "If companies were to accept and embrace the gift-gratuity register", says Bruni, "they would have to deal with workers who would follow their own intrinsic motivations, which would go beyond the limits of the contract [...]. They would be confronted with people who would go outside organization charts, outside job descriptions" (Bruni 2018: p. 99).

It is not a question – and this is a central point – of analyzing processes that involve exclusively the economic sphere, but of examining processes that risk producing important effects on the whole of social life, as demonstrated by the colonization of every vital area by the economic logic, which advocates efficiency, incentives and speed as the criteria to be used no longer and not only in the economic sphere, but even in the most private areas of the personal dimension.

It is necessary to understand how all these processes affect the subjective dimension, even by redesigning a new subject, which feeds on very precise social relations and above all on a certain representation of these relationships within a new idea of society (Iannone 2019).

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