

The right to work

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Talking about the town means talking about money. As stated above, capitalism was born in towns, which have always maintained a vigorous relationship with the economy. They currently represent an ever increasing proportion of national economic growth, which ranges between 55% of the Gross National Product in poor countries, and 85% in those countries with higher incomes. Town planning, has, of course, been paying attention to this fact and not infrequently has played a major role in this regard. At certain moments it even has made this its central axis of performance. Like, for example, when it proposed organizing town planning with particular attention to the economic profitability of its companies: their working in a more efficient way, promoting its concentration, the use of the so called economies of scale, better services, etc. Therefore a cliché of town planning has been created in this field, which the new circumstances of the world of money, but also (which is what interests us more now) the world of working, makes us revise with close attention. New circumstances have meant drastic and brutal changes in the economy and in the situation of the worker, which have in effect wrong-footed the town planner.

Article 23 of the Declaration states, among other things, that the right to “equitable and satisfactory conditions at work” and the balance between the conditions of similar workers, “with no discrimination”. It establishes the right to enjoy dignity at work, and the dignity of the different occupations, jobs, and professions. The Universal Declaration proclaims that the right to work and the right to have an equal salary if the work is done well, as a necessary element underwriting a worthy existence for all.

The right to work was one of the first historical rights to be claimed. Originally, it was more a question of the freedom to work than a right to the activity. But soon it began to be understood as the latter. Liberal ideology has never considered that recognizing this right as either viable or appropriate. It has been the socialist school of thought which has claimed it as pathway for the individual towards self-realization. This is why it is a right. This also explains why, in keeping with this last criterion, social assistance policies of the state or of the towns, in their respective levels of performance, have tended to favour at least the existence of work and of a sufficient economic activity which can ensure it. The secular authority, the state and the towns have always had an interest in favouring the fulfilment of this right.

Town planning policy, as part of this more general policy, has on not infrequent occasions been the servant of this idea. At the beginning, as we have already said, this was a question of trying to improve the conditions of this activity in the town, conditioning the appropriate industrial spaces and improving its relation with the rest of the town. Developing, for example, a good network of communications was conceived with the idea of distributing products as well facilitating the easier mobility of the worker. Thus the relationship was adapted between work and housing and with respect to the appropriate services. Trying also to avoid the conflicts of the world of work with other worlds of urban activity. Trying finally, to make companies feel comfortable in the town, and providing the remaining uses in tandem with the companies. All this programme was justified as part and parcel of that municipal policy, interested in attracting companies and thus favouring an enhanced incidence of work: more jobs in the town.

All this is what has been exacerbated lately. Nowadays the human competitiveness, as it is called, has come centre stage. On not infrequent occasions municipal authorities have become like agents outside their towns. They strive to secure the – oh so precious - interest of the big companies (the bigger, the better) before anybody else. This is taking the policies of subsidies, tax exemptions and other direct financial advantages (like giving away land) to dangerous extremes, and municipal authorities are running the risk of embarking on costly financial adventures with uncertain results, which in turn favours aberrant policies.

The world of work has also changed. Richard Sennett summed it up in a single image: we have gone from the “career” (the way in which professional activities are canalized across the full span of our lives) to the “job” (which apart from meaning a fixed employment also has the meaning of ‘task’). We have also encoded the essence of its *raison d’être* in the new flexibility at work. This flexibility has changed the working conditions while at the same time changing the way people live. Sennett talks plainly of “the corrosion of character”. He takes this view because the new working conditions imply the eschewing of experience. For flexibility, although it overrides routine, in turn creates anxiety; establishes the imperative necessity to innovate; dilutes responsibility; and puts the working groups under pressure to reach objectives in terms of production of profits, which are usually above their capacity. The end result of this is, irremediably, having an influence on character. With a weak working identity, the loss of “taking pride in one’s work” and the secular authority’s desperation (the power remains), morale and

motivation plummet among the less privileged workers. These are conditions that some people have denounced as a return to the 19th century.

Town planning policy seems to follow these changes as far as working conditions are concerned. It is not by chance that uncontrolled competitiveness is bound up in the non-mindfulness of the working conditions according to the new working situation already described. In this context it is not unusual for the town planning of our politicians to be a conflict between the two objectives we mentioned before. A struggle between the guarantee to have enough work for everybody (the right to have a job) and its dignity (the right to have a dignified job). Two kinds of capitalism have been distinguished: the Anglo-saxon model and the Rhenish model. In the area of town planning this means choosing between having more or fewer regulations. In other words, between make it easier for new companies to establish themselves or obtaining (or demanding) certain minimum conditions from them. When it has come to choosing, too many towns have chosen the former, which looks like a definitive homogeneity for the Anglo-Saxon model, that is, job-creation instead of dignified jobs. Things are not, however, quite so simple. There are too many questions. To begin with, nobody says that there will be more employment by reducing the demands on the urban nature of these jobs. What makes a town more attractive for the new capitalism is becoming ever more ambiguous, and ever more difficult to pin down.

This is the reason why - against the whirl of flexibility and forced innovation - we have to re-affirm the value of dignity. We need to guide urban policy towards an improvement of the general conditions of the town, without getting obsessed with attracting more companies, as a priority and at whatever cost. This is an improvement which in turn means describing clearer and more conclusive objectives, such as favouring the accessibility to the places of work (together with a policy of mixing uses, or a decisive policy with regard to public transport), improving the general environmental conditions of the towns, or balancing conservation and innovation. These are old objectives which are still valid. On top of this, we must not lose sight of the process of production as a global whole, of what happens in those companies outside the town (we also have to think globally and act locally here). All this cannot be a policy of defensive resistance - to stay true to the old social democratic policies - but rather the framing of a radical new policy, reacting sensibly against actual events which are in the process of ruining the world of work: against the hegemony of trash contracts and the widening of the informal economy, which is being sold as the only possible future.