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Work in Early Modern Italy, 1500–1800

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Foreword

Among the many effects of the economic crisis that has touched most western countries since 2008, the most important one is the refocusing of our attention on some social and economic topics, and chief among them is "work". Since the 1980s and early 1990s, multinational enterprises, entrepreneurship and consumerism have been portrayed in some quarters as the engine of economic growth, while technological innovation and artificial intelligence have been idealised as potential substitutes for manual and technical work, suggesting a possible "end of work". If this was the case, rather than living in societies "based on work" we would live in societies in which not-work, leisure and free time would absorb the majority of the world's population in their daily activities and expectations.

These visions have not come to pass, and the limits and consequences of such a development model have become more and more apparent. Increasing inequalities within western countries and at a global level are marked. Moreover, there has been a gradual reversal of the social advances made during post-war European "economic miracle" of the mid-twentieth century. The price has been quite high: the increasing precariousness of social and work status, the deterioration of wage and contractual conditions, the exclusion of men and, mainly, women from the labour market, and even their enslavement, in forms that nowadays are called (partially euphemistically) "modern".

Instead of talking about the "end of work", we faced one of the umpteenth global reorganisations of capitalism, a process that in the long run affects and damages the life of workers from the economic, social, political and cultural points of view, inside and outside the working place.

In the fields of the humanities and social sciences, historians have been reflecting on these topics for several decades, but this project has often had to be conducted far from the public arena and without the attention of mainstream mass media, despite the best efforts of scholars to engage with wider society. Since the late 1990s, much research has sought to scrutinise topics that are crucial for the wellness and reproduction of society. This thematic, chronological and geographical extension resulted from a broader conceptualisation of labour (one no longer related only to wage-labour and productive labour) and relied on more interpretative models so as to avoid teleological interpretations or generalisations.

The chronological concern of this book is what is defined, from a western point of view, as the Early Modern period. Early Modern research has benefitted from many methodological and conceptual innovations over the last twenty years. I want to summarise them here briefly, before leaving the reader to fall back on the bibliographical references in the various chapters.

The first and most important improvement was the determination to look beyond wage work as the main unit of analysis. Instead of seeing it as a signal of modernity and progress, wage work (which is difficult to find in its purest form) is just one of the working relationships that capitalism used in its process of emergence from at least the sixteenth century, if not before. Reciprocal and obligated labour, forced and autonomous, voluntary and tributary, as well as other intermediate forms, contributed in a decisive way and as independent variables in this process of expansion of the capitalistic model. The second crucial point was the rethinking of the opposition between *freedom* and *un-freedom*, between freedom and slavery. Research on European and extra European areas, primarily by jurists and legal historians (especially Robert Steinfeld and Simon Deakin), shows that there are various degrees of coercion (economic, corporal or mixed) that limit the spatial and professional mobility of workers across time and space. A third crucial element was the re-examination of the clear division between productive and reproductive work. Gender analysis has made a major contribution to our understanding of the role played by work within the domestic environment for the functioning of past and present economies; it also showed that only the construction of the political economy during the nineteenth century led to the evaluation of reproductive work as an unpaid and secondary form of work.

Therefore, the analysis of the world of work, in every historical period, cannot exclude these elements, and must encompass them when dealing with both the past and the present.

Studies of the Early Modern period, and especially of the pre-industrial period, were strengthened by the application of these theoretical premises in a variety of fashions. Specifically, it has been possible to reconsider many hypotheses that social scientists first promulgated in the twelfth century. Strong criticism has been levelled at characterisations of a transition from a society defined by the absence of the market and limited by the rigidity of work imposed by community and guild rules, to a society defined by free trade. Research has shown that market logic was present in ancient regime societies, but that the mechanisms of price and wage formation were related to more complex dynamics; they were certainly tied to norms, customs and traditions, but also to the laws of supply and demand as determined by both individual circumstances and societal roles. There has also been revision of the idealisation of the urban artisan workshop, as well as of the rural house, as places where pre-industrial economic and social relations were created before being swept away by the machines and new working arrangements of the industrial revolution. Not only did the pre-industrial economy feature a wide scope of organisational forms of work (with various levels of integration), but it also experimented with various forms of control, time articulation and creation of discipline that were functional to the organisation of the system and that were dependent on more than just nature, the seasons and meteorological conditions. Just as important was criticism of the idea of a transition from a negative to a positive idea of work that, according to Max Weber, was associated with the Protestant world above all. Work is first of all an historical concept, one that nourishes itself in the economic, social and cultural contexts, and that—quite before the Lutheran Reformation—played a crucial role in the development of society in both positive and negative ways. In these interstices, the various social actors, individually or collectively, have been able to gather together and organise, inside and outside the working, domestic and social environments, in order to reaffirm their cultures, their beliefs and their rights, none of which were taken for granted or fixed, and all of which were constantly being negotiated and re-asserted.

Much recent scholarship has focused on specific productive sectors, either taking wide views, sometimes global, or, on the contrary, looking at specific case studies, with different ranges of observation. Global perspectives encourage looking further than political borders and western horizons while the micro-historical approach (without excluding an exchange between the two approaches) in its different forms can shed new light on developments and strategies, especially on the problems of socio-economic

systems that might be readily visible at first glance from a more general angle.

Work in Early Modern Italy, 1500–1800 adopts the approaches described above, and enriches this line of research, getting to the heart of the Italian debate while also managing to achieve synthesis and regional perspective. Thanks to an ample bibliography, the two authors question some postulates that often go unchallenged: the division between city and countryside, with its assumed detrimental impact on economic integration; the regional differentiations within the classical geographical partitions (North-South in the case of the Italian peninsula); and the urbanisation of the countryside as opposed to the regionalisation of the economy between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All these elements have long contributed to scientific and public debate, especially in the last quarter of the twelfth century, but it remains vital to propose a more thoughtful analysis of the dynamics of economic growth and decline. Also noteworthy is the regional approach adopted by the book. It is a perspective that encourages reconstruction rather than repetition of the areas of analysis, and it is essential because it is useful in the revision of wider debates, such as those surrounding continental or global divergences. For example, it shows that the inclusion of the Italian case in this discussion must take into account the diversification of the Peninsula between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, the inclusion and the evaluation of the role of work in this field must be more nuanced and recognise the diverse forms that it acquired, instead of relying solely on data of salaried (adult) men.

Therefore, as is readily apparent from the first pages of the book, work is not a *lifeless* means of production. We can properly understand it only in relation to other elements (technology, science, knowledge, capital) and as *embedded* in social and power relations. Only an overall analysis of these elements can help us to understand the role of individual and collective action in the functioning of social and economic systems, and to reach a more inclusive vision of what was and what is the world in which we live.

Italian Society of Labour History (SISLav) Andrea Caracausi

Contents

List of Tables

CHAPTER 1

Work and Labour: Meanings and Concepts

The aim of the book is to analyse the history of work in the Italian peninsula in the Early Modern period. Adopting a variety of perspectives, we will look at who the workers were, their numbers, and the nature, extent, location, and results of their work across different geographical areas and time periods. Before proceeding, we will clarify the fundamental issue of what "work" meant in the Early Modern period. As with every concept, the understanding of "work" was an evolving one, changing across time and space. And positive or negative social values are assigned to work activities based on very specific social contexts. Naturally enough, what we currently consider to be "work" displays very different characteristics to Early Modern "work".

Therefore, we will distinguish as clearly as possible between what is and what is not "work", we will delineate between "work" and "labour", and we will identify the various forms of work (not-work, anti-work, reciprocal labour, tributary labour, commodified labour) that were present in the Early Modern period and that remain with us today, albeit in altered manifestations. We will trace the historical evolution of these concepts and provide a rounded picture of work in the Early Modern period by reflecting on the freedom of work and the importance of domestic labour in the context of the pre-industrial economy.

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1.1 What Is Work

Let's start with a fundamental question: what do we mean by the word "work"? Karin Hofmeester and Christine Moll-Murata, in the research project "Global collaboratory", refer to the definition proposed by Chris and Charles Tilly: work is "any human effort adding use value to goods and services" (Hofmeester and Moll-Murata 2011, 5; Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly 1998, 22; van der Linden 2011, 27). On one hand, as the authors underline, this definition allows us to go beyond the equivalence between work and salaried work, taking into consideration

> the unpaid, mostly household-based labour of more or less all family members, including women and children, who are physically able to work. It also comprises all types of labour relations, from slavery to independent entrepreneurship and everything in between. (Hofmeester and Moll-Murata 2011, 5)

This is also the interpretative stance taken here because it avoids the analytical method that emerged during the Industrial Revolution and linked "work" directly to salary. But this definition could be further expanded; indeed, from a perspective that is in a certain way quite a Marxist one, Chris and Charles Tilly consider as work only such activities that "add use value" to goods and services, explicitly excluding "purely destructive, expressive, or consumptive acts […] as they reduce transferable use value" (Chris Tilly and Charles Tilly 1998, 23). We will come back shortly to the concept of anti-work, suffice it to say for now that this approach inevitably excludes activities that are effectively "works" even though they do not add any economic value. Military labour is a clear example of such a phenomenon, and was for a long time excluded from the historiographical analysis for this reason (Zürcher 2013, 11). We can say the same for other activities, such as the tribal ceremonies reported by Thomas in his article *Work and Leisure*. While these activities ("both cultivating the ground and dancing at a religious ceremony") do not lead to an increase in the value of goods and services, in the social context in which they are performed they are "equally useful forms of activity" and so are referred to using the same word (Thomas 1964, 51).

In this sense, we think that sociologist Heiner Ganßmann's definition, quoted by van der Linden, is more suitable: "Work is human activity that transforms matter/energy and applies information for the purpose ultimately of providing resources to satisfy needs" (van der Linden 2011, 27;

Ganßmann 1992, 263). The kinds of needs and resources (material or intangible) in question, and the ways of transforming them, are all concepts that should be historically and socially contextualised. It is interesting also to underline two more elements that van der Linden stresses as differentiating work from other human activities: "premeditation" and "usefulness" (van der Linden 2011, 27).

These definitions are undoubtedly valid and they help to shape such a complex concept as "work" because they are historically and socially grounded. Moreover, they highlight other topics that are equally important to analyse. Talking about labour also means identifying other activities that are included in the categories of "not work", "rest" and "leisure": however, as we will observe throughout this book, the hardening of the distinction between these fields (while never becoming absolute) was the result of the historical evolution of work and how it was perceived. As the spaces and times for performing work expanded alongside reflection on the idea of work itself, definitions of work became more limited and more closely linked to remuneration. Thomas referred to what he called "primitive societies" as useful case studies for the pre-industrial period, which despite shortcomings could raise critical issues for debate:

> In these societies there are no clearly defined periods of leisure as such, but economic activities, like hunting or market-going, obviously have their recreational aspects, as do singing or telling stories at work […]. Finally work is not regulated by the clock, but by the requirements of the task. (Thomas 1964, 52)

This statement prompts discussion of the mix of leisure and work, which was clearly not just a trait of pre-industrial societies (the exaggeration of the influence of clocks in setting the chronological articulation of the working day is the topic of Chap. 5). However, we completely share Thomas' view on the importance of not transposing typical contemporary attitudes to the strong distinction between work and leisure to other times. If the concept of work is historically and socially grounded, so is that of not-work (leisure).

Van der Linden himself refers to this concept, specifying that "work can be distinguished from non-work and from anti-work"; in this sense, not-work is intended in its broader meaning, as "recovery from work". In other words, it is an activity that is intrinsically connected to work itself; indeed, not-work, being a form of recovery of the energies after a working

activity, could not exist without the latter. This interpretation leaves some doubts, however, given that it excludes, just to take one example, not-work because of unemployment or other forms of inactivity that are not necessarily linked to post-work rest (van der Linden 2011, 27–28). In respect of anti-work, it "covers all playful activities that cost a lot of energy but are not meant to produce useful objects or services" (van der Linden 2011, 28). Besides doubts over the definition of "not-work", van der Linden's proposition is very interesting because it helps to define a hypothetical three-way partition of human activities: working activities that require energy and are (or should be) "useful", even if this concept is mutable; not-working (perhaps best understood as the absence of activities); and anti-working efforts and wastes of energy that lack "useful" aim in socio-economic terms (such as sporting pursuits).

As Thomas suggested, it is not possible to definitively separate these concepts and moments, and as Van der Linden himself underlined, human actions often intersect within this triangle.

The declarations above on work, not-work, and anti-work point to another problem: why do people work, instead of dedicating themselves to not-working activities? The answer is more complex than we might expect. Van der Linden identifies three fundamental "work incentives": coercion, compensation, and commitment (van der Linden 2011, 28–29). In this case too, the limits of each category are fluid and the working relations that resulted (or that changed across time) can be affected by one or more of these elements. Coercion implies the presence of compulsions (violent or non-violent) that convince people to work; further consideration of the intricacies of this category is required and will be provided below. Commitment, on the contrary, is a sort of persuasion of the workers "that what they are doing is useful, important, and honorific" (van der Linden 2011, 29). Therefore, there is a sort of "immaterial payment" for the work performed, contrary to what happens in the case of people working against compensation, that is receiving a remuneration in money or benefit in kind for the activity performed. It is important to reiterate that these push factors can act independently or in varying combinations with varying measures of influence.

Following on from these conceptualisations, the members of the working group produced a taxonomy of labour relations, as summarised in Fig. 1.1 (Hofmeester and Moll-Murata 2011, 6, 21–23); compared to the categories proposed by van der Linden, the active/inactive population category is divided not only according to the push factors that lead to the