

The Evolution of Blue-Collar Work in the Fiat Factories. On “The Car Profession” Research

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Abstract

This comment reflects on “The Car Profession” research on the background of previous sociological investigations on Fiat factories and with references to parallel international debates. By looking at the historical, industrial relations and organizational aspects, it frames the question of why labour at Fiat appeared more successful in the “domestication” of Fordism than in that of post-Fordism, and outlines some avenues for further research on this question.

Keywords: Work organisation; automotive industry; Toyotism; Fordism; labour movement; resistance.

1 Introduction

Fiat has had a unique role in the Italian thinking about work. It has never been representative of the Italian production or employment system, but, as by far the largest industrial company it has been a reference point for Italian management, for Italian political actors, and for Italian trade unions. It has been a reference point and a favorite subject for Italian sociologists too, even earning the half-serious status of disciplinary field, “Fiat sociology” (Bonazzi, 2000). Since the 1980s, with radical restructuring, reorganisation, and ownership changes, its nature as reference point has diminished, but has not disappeared, as the national echo of its industrial relations developments continues to demonstrate. The “Car Profession” research conducted

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by CGIL, FIOM and Sabattini and Di Vittorio Foundations comes therefore in a noble line of worker inquiries that have investigated the evolution of industrial work at Fiat, often trying to detect wider social and political implications. Taylorism, effort bargaining, robotisation, Japanisation and modular organisation have been grounded by empirical research at Fiat and subsequently functioned as corner stones of sociological theorisation. If French work sociology was marked by Alain Touraine's *Evolution du travail ouvrier aux usines Renault* of 1955, in which he theorized a link between forms of work organization and worker consciousness (Touraine, 1955), Italian sociology of work since the 1960s has engaged in a collective, not necessarily coherent but certainly rich elaboration on the evolution of blue-collar work at Fiat.

In this reflection, three key aspects of the investigation will be critically considered — the direction of change, the industrial relations dimension, and the organization models — to conclude about the importance and possible implications and future directions of this research.

2 1971–2018, and the Subtlety of Comparisons Across Time

The article by Matteo Gaddi (2020), summarizing the extended research report (Bennati et al., 2019), combines a rich snapshot of work at Fiat sites in 2018 with frequent comparisons, by interviewees and by the research team, with the standards set in the historical collective agreement of the 5th August 1971. The picture is one of sharply worsening working conditions. This is interesting, not only because the 1971 agreement was a high-water mark for unions' control over work organization and because it has remained the normative reference until the early 2010s (in the Italian collective bargaining system, collective agreements do not have an expiry date). Consideration of historical evolution is indispensable for serious sociology, and historical memory is a foundation for the labour movement. Yet comparisons across such long periods require caution and contextualization.

Reading this large-scale inquiry, the differences with previous waves of research are apparent. In the past, the focus was on *the* factory of Mirafiori, the enormous Turin site whose headcount peaked at 65,000 in the late 1960s and at whose gates some of the best work sociologists, such as Vittorio Rieser, had become part of the landscape. In the 1990s the attention shifted to the greenfield sites in Southern Italy, and in particular the Melfi factory where new production models were introduced with most impetus. Today, to have a picture of work at Fiat's Italian plants (which has in the meanwhile become FCA, is registered in the Netherland and is about to merge with PSA), Gaddi's team has had to investigate sixteen sites. And even these sixteen cannot provide an exhaustive picture, because of the process of internal outsourcing bringing non-FCA employees into the factories, and because of the increasing interdependence with non-Italian plants — as it happened in the early 2010s when management put Italian workers in direct competition with their Polish and Serbian counterparts.

While the comparison between today's working conditions and the 1971 agreement is striking and suggestive, it is also uneven. It is a comparison between a normative situation in 1971 (in other words, the situation on paper) and an actual situation in the everyday operation of the plant (the situation in practice). The two are obviously not directly comparable from a sociological perspective, even if the former is a reference point for union action dealing with the latter. First of all, working conditions in the early 1970s were very different from technological, ergonomic and environmental points of view, with cases such as the notorious painting shop of Mirafiori fortunately unthinkable in today's large western factories (although sadly enduring in certain segments of the economy). But even more importantly, the 1971 agreement was never fully implemented. Without any doubt, it was an impressive, influential agreement that

put work organization at the centre of trade union activity. And it was impactful in allowing nine years of “truce” at the company level after the large conflicts of 1969–1970, while enabling continuous, largely informal effort bargaining at the shopfloor level with the important material results of falling saturation, better environment and respect for employees (depending on perspectives, a strong reduction of the previous rough exploitation or a massive fall in productivity). But the actual fall in saturation was largely a form of “effort drift,” occurring informally at shopfloor level rather than through formal bargaining, let alone codetermination.¹ The three committees that should have applied the agreement (on piece rates, qualifications and work environment) never really worked, largely because of the lack of negotiating capacity on both sides (soon to be poisoned by the terrorist activity of 1974–1979 against both managers and trade unionists). The historian Giuseppe Berta’s conclusion that with that agreement “the union gained almost everything, to then manage almost nothing” (Berta, 1998, p. 75) may be excessively blunt, but does point to the reality that the unions managed to put a number of “patches” on the worst aspects of Taylorism but without ever establishing an alternative vision of work organization. As a result, after the labour defeat in the 1980 strike, the subsequent post-Fordist restructuring was conducted unilaterally by management.

3 Industrial Relations Developments

This historical flashback is useful to appreciate the important industrial relations dimension of the “Car Profession” research. A huge role in the determination of work conditions is played by the presence of independent union delegates in the shopfloor, for instance on the production cards. In a situation of deep information asymmetry, the production cards, and their absence, work to obfuscate the nature and amount of required effort, until worker representatives manage to gather and interpret the information and to negotiate on them.

Yet employee representation itself has been a central matter of dispute at FCA in the last decade, following the company’s exit from national sector bargaining and attempts to exclude the largest trade union, FIOM-CGIL. This research, by indicating a number of worsening working conditions, shows why the shift to disorganized decentralization of collective bargaining prompted by Fiat in 2010 matters. Italian industrial relations have long lived under the shared belief, but no legal guarantee, that collective agreements had the regal cover of *erga omnes* validity, which prevents changes *in peius* at company level and the backsliding of employee rights. When in 2010 Fiat CEO Marchionne called the bluff off and shouted that the king (sector collective bargaining) was naked (not binding), all that remained enforceable from sector agreements, on the basis of constitutional court rulings, were the wage and working time minima. But work standards have many more dimensions, which are not protected by the 36th Article of the Constitution. With a multi-site organization of production, and in difficult labour market conditions, the risk of race-to-the-bottom concession bargaining once the sectoral protections are removed is serious. So far, the Italian collective bargaining architecture has survived Marchionne’s shock, but in a fragile, “naked” form, with the employer side strengthened by the new availability of an “exit” option (Leonardi et al., 2018).

Fiat’s exit from multi-employer collective bargaining has the important corollary of its exit from the nationally agreed system of employee representation. The FIOM-CGIL union has been expelled, then reintegrated, but marginalized. Which affects the dynamics of shopfloor

1. Similar phenomena were observed at the time in British industry (Brown, 1973; Terry, 1978).

arrangements: if in the 1970s the informal drift tended to be in favor of employees, now it tends to occur to the advantage of management.

Industrial relations' developments, by reducing employee information (in itself a contradiction with the declared World Class Manufacturing pillar of "clarity of objectives") is also a source of stress. Not only are industrial relations one of the aspects judged most negatively by respondents to the "Car Profession" survey. "Physical and mental stress" are the most frequently mentioned problem, showing the cumulative effect of the other denounced issues (working time, workloads...), but also suggesting a stress-inducing process of communication and information.

4 Japanisation and Beyond

Fiat was a surprising case of "Japanisation" in the 1990s. Its plants — large, Taylorist, automated, conflictual, ageing — did not seem to have the physical, organizational, technological and social prerequisites for Toyotism, but still managed a comparatively successful and only moderately contested implementation of many of its aspects. Gaddi rightly refers to the numerous critical analyses of lean production, but by not naming or discussing the more numerous positive evaluations he skips the issue of why Fiat managed to introduce lean production in the first place. Some elements in the research he reports indicate that some explanations proposed by Bonazzi (1993) may be valid.

Firstly, Japanisation was preceded by intensive robotisation in the 1980s, which involved important ergonomic improvements, which were instrumental to gain workers' consent to change. Ergonomics still appear in the Car Profession research as the aspect workers complain the least about (although they do still complain). Moreover, the new Ergo-UAS system has worsened saturation on many work positions, but in the case of the most uncomfortable positions it has improved it (with higher ergonomic factors than in the 1971 agreement).

Secondly, Gaddi's report of how workers appear to "work forwards" and vary their speed and effort over the working day reminds of the classic sociology of work studies on the paradoxical "bimodal distribution" of industrial workers' effort (Roy, 1952; Burawoy, 1979). Instead of working at constant speed, workers vary it both in order to hide from management their maximum capacity (which would otherwise be quickly absorbed into production norms resulting into a continuous intensification of work) and to survive the working day by making it more interesting through "production games." Japanisation increased the scope for such production games, and this may be a second major reason for its acceptance.

But the critical aspects of Japanisation are also confirmed. Fiat's transposition of Toyotism is selective, and it does not include some potentially progressive and work humanizing elements such as team empowerment (team leaders are coopted by management rather than elected), task rotation and the possibility of stopping the line to immediately fix problems, as dictated by the *Kaizen* (continuous improvement) principle. Work reorganization has failed to enrich and widen tasks. Mechanisation still appears to condition rhythms and to "objectify," in the Marxist sense, work organization. Also digitization appears to have surveillance functions rather than process improvement ones.

With the endurance of the negative effects, but the exhaustion of positive conditions that had allowed Japanisation in the 1990s (recent memory of ergonomic improvement, occupational promises in greenfield plants in Southern Italy), it may be asked whether worker consent to lean production, a system that at its worst can be very exploitative, will still last for long. Especially at a time when deep change is expected soon for the automotive industry. If consent

is exhausted, FCA may regret not having treated employee representation more positively, as comparative research shows that in high-unionisation and codetermination countries such as Norway digitalization is applied in the workplace better than in low-trust, unilateral managerial environments such as the UK (Lloyd & Payne, 2019).

5 Conclusion and Emerging Questions

The history of sociological reflections on Fiat confirms that knowledge is a form of power. Fifty years ago, workers were empowered by their analysis and understanding of Taylorism to the point of managing to turn many of its aspects to their advantage. Producing social knowledge on new production and organization models, as with the *Car Profession* research, can be equally important.

The next steps will be to draw implications for worker agency, possible alternatives, and industrial relations. Deterministic frames *à la Touraine* would be misplaced, but it is important to investigate the conditions, sources and effects of resistance. For instance, Gaddi mentions positive experiences of worker control on organizational aspects at Magneti Marelli (which in the meanwhile has been sold out by FCA), and it would be interesting to know how they have emerged and if they can be extended and replicated. It would also be important, in the line of the social investigations of the previous decades, to know more about the workers. It is important to analyse how attitudes to work organization vary within the workforce, and why — something the research report has only started to do, and does not produce typologies as some previous investigations had done (Accornero et al., 1985). And it is also urgent to understand the implications of another important change from the 1970s, the increased share of atypical workers through subcontracted, temporary and agency work. Research of this kind will shed light on the ongoing evolution, or maybe rather involution, of blue-collar work at Fiat/FCA.

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