

WORK AS ENJOYMENT IN LUIGI EINAUDI AND GIUSEPPE RENSI

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ABSTRACT

For the philosopher Giuseppe Rensi, only play and contemplation produce happiness. Therefore, any work that does not result in this is not compatible with human nature. If this means that self-fulfilment can only be achieved by cultivating what is in itself a source of enjoyment and not what is instrumental to the attainment of future enjoyment, the activities that can be loved, because they produce pleasure at the very moment in which they are practised, are, for Rensi, those of the artist, the craftsman, the scientist, the intellectual in general and the sportsman. The creation, then, of a society in which all men are free is mere utopia, since a necessary condition for the play and contemplation of some is the dehumanising work of others. Einaudi tried to escape this impasse by identifying in the reduction of working time for the production of serial and standardised goods of the Fordist industry the possibility of guaranteeing a progressively longer time to attend to spiritual improvement and therefore also to intellectual leisure.

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Only in play, “that of children who chase each other, even until they sweat, of young people who dedicate themselves to sport, even until they are tired, of the artist or thinker, who often until they are tired compose verses or music, paint, investigate, reflect, write about problems of science or philosophy [...] man is free, he does what he wants, what he loves to do, his spirit expands in a fully autonomous way, and he is [...] truly man, he fulfils the highest and noblest destiny of humanity”¹ (Rensi 2022 [1935]:

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¹ The quotations from the work of Einaudi, Rensi and other Italian authors are translated from the original texts.

47).² This is what Giuseppe Rensi wrote in his *Critica dell'amore e del lavoro* in 1935, when, already a lawyer, director of the socialist magazine *Lotta di classe*, socialist deputy in the Grand Council of the Canton of Ticino and professor of moral philosophy, he had been deprived of his chair by the fascist regime for a year, to which he had adhered in the early 1920s (Meroi 2016).

If, therefore, it is the case that man only reaches his fulfilment and his fullness in doing what he loves to do, all work that is not play, defiles, scars, and disfigures him. If this means that self-fulfilment can only be achieved by cultivating what is in itself a source of enjoyment and not what is instrumental to the attainment of future enjoyment, the activities that can be loved, because they produce pleasure at the very moment in which they are practised, are, for Rensi, those of the artist, the craftsman, the scientist, the intellectual in general and the sportsman. Play and contemplation are “the only two specifically human functions” (Rensi 2022 [1935]: 47).

Like play, in fact, contemplation is something that in itself brings happiness, as several philosophers, from Aristotle to Spinoza, have taught us, Rensi recalls. If the former in the *Nicomachean Ethics* qualifies the contemplative one as the form of human life superior to the others (a position also expressed in *Politics*),³ for the latter, observes Rensi, the *virtus*, “which is one with *beatitudo*, is the intellectual life, contemplation; and the *amor intellectualis Dei*, in which this *virtus* essentially consists, is the passion to understand reality, to ‘contemplate’ Being” (*ibid.*: 49).⁴

If we want to adhere to Rensi’s reasoning, then, the professions, for example, of the street cleaner and the notary, although so different in the level of income they produce, are both unsatisfactory on the human level, because in emptying bins or signing deeds of sale there can be no enjoyment, but rather only a guarantee of economic resources aimed at obtaining future satisfaction. The painter who paints does so, if not always at least sometimes, because in the act of dipping the brush in the palette of colours he feels happiness, the notary who juggles between cadastral surveys always postpones his happiness to when the remuneration received will allow him to buy a painting to contemplate.

That the painter in his play-work makes what he wants of himself is demonstrated by the fact that, again if not always at least often, he would

² The 2022 edition reproduces the first part of *Critica dell'amore e del lavoro* of 1935.

³ For the relationship between work and intellectual idleness in Aristotle, see FERNANI 2024: 61-69.

⁴ “Beatitudo non est virtutis praeonium, sed ipsa virtus”, reads Spinoza’s *Ethica* (SPINOZA 1915 [1677]: 286).

not give up painting even if he were to win hundreds of millions of euros in the lottery (in the same way, the poet would not stop writing poems). In fact, the painter would attend to his paintings even if not paid, because art and nothing else gives meaning to his life, unlike the notary who would not write any deed without payment of the fee. *A fortiori*, Rensi rhetorically asks, “would the textile worker or the metallurgist, having become a millionaire, continue to work? This proves that he feels work as his slavery and therefore hates it” (*ibid.*: 75).

Such inhumanity, and hence the Rensian criticism of the culpable omissions of Marxism, being an intrinsic characteristic of any work that does not result in play and contemplation, can only be a distinctive feature of any economic regime. Even in the communist system, the worker will be forced to do a painful job, which will condemn him to unhappiness. Even in a classless society, in fact, the miner’s work will be “forced, constrictive”. Human spirituality demands

that man does not work or works when he wants and as he likes, on a whim, always almost playing. This is what man, with all his innermost drive, truly, always and only wants; this is the only thing for which he can feel enthusiasm. Until this is achieved – and of course it will never be – everything else, the socialist and communist systems, moreover a thousand times tried and tried again in vain throughout history, will be small, secondary, insignificant palliatives and accommodations (*ibid.*: 80).

There is no salvation in the very gloomy Rensian diagnosis. Humanity will always be divided between a few free men, dedicated to play and contemplation, and others, divided, brutalised and harnessed to the assembly lines producing brushes and tubes of tempera to guarantee the former a free life (in short, the communist society dreamed of by Marx will never be realised, a society that “makes it possible [...] to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner”, just when one feels like it, “without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (Marx and Engels 1966 [1932]: 22).⁵ There is no escape, in short, from the fact that the freedom of some necessarily requires the slavery of others. Hence,

⁵ In truth, there are those who have noticed (PETRUCCIANI 2024: 674-677) an evolution of Marx’s thought that from the clear distinction in his youthful writings between alienated labour in capitalist society and emancipated labour in socialist society will then arrive in the *Grundrisse*, composed between 1857 and 1858, and especially in the third book of *Das Kapital*, to the conviction that “the realm of freedom begins only where labour determined by necessity and external expediency ends; it lies by its very nature beyond the sphere of material production proper (MARX 1991 [1894]: 958).

the criticism also of Luigi Einaudi, “albeit so bright and brilliant” (Rensi 2022: 130), who had naively believed in the possibility of achieving the joy of work in industrial society. Rensi was referring explicitly to an article published in the aftermath of the end of the First World War, in which the Piedmontese economist argued that the goal of the factory worker was to achieve the highest possible salary and working methods that would transform work into “advantage and pleasure” (Einaudi 1919: 1).

Through factory committees, district committees and central parliaments, “in which both parties are represented by election” (*ibid.*), employers and workers would examine and discuss matters of common interest.

Einaudi cited as a model the *National Joint Industrial Council*, also known as the *Whitley Council*, named after John Henry Whitley, a Liberal MP. The councils proposed by Whitley, and composed of employers and workers’ representatives, had been conceived during the Great War to foster industrial relations between the counterparties in order to guarantee the maximum war effort (they, however, would have been successful only in the public sector, where, despite being “under attack from neo-liberal reforms”, they are still operating today (Gill-McLure 2017: 15)).

However, Einaudi added, the satisfaction of the workers would not be achieved only by raising the “level of wages to a point that leaves” the entrepreneurs “still a margin of interest to produce” (Einaudi 1919: 1). Why, he wondered, “do the heads of companies, professionals, and scholars⁶ not count the hours of work? Why does it never occur to any of us who study, who write, who fight for something, for some idea, to ask for six or seven or eight or twelve hours [...]?” (*ibid.*). Because, Einaudi answered, “for us work is not a chore, but a joy, it is life”. There were also several manual jobs in which the same “joy of working” existed: that of the craftsman as well as that of the farmer who enjoyed “seeing the tree and the vine pruned, the soil cleared of weeds, the leaves and fruits defended from diseases” (*ibid.*).

It was therefore necessary to find a way for the industrial worker and the worker of the large farms to experience “the joy of work”. In fact, the reduction of working hours, the increase in wages, the fact that the factory was “bright, luminous, equipped with bathrooms and gardens” and “that the house, clean and happy with children celebrating and cheered by the vegetable garden, awaited the worker after the daily fatigue” (*ibid.*) were not enough. These achievements would not have guaranteed the

⁶ A couple of years earlier, Einaudi, reviewing the work of William SMART, *Second Thoughts of an Economist* (1916), agreed with the latter in indicating in the teacher one of the greatest examples of a “happy man” as he is intent on an occupation “in which the thing done or the service rendered, and not the mere remuneration obtained, are the goal and the conscious purpose” (EINAUDI 1917: 567-568).

aforementioned joy. How to achieve it, then? The end of the article was actually very disappointing. Einaudi, in fact, got away with a “we will discover little by little the way to bring it about. Today the problem is posed. It will be resolved, like any other, by trial and error” (*ibid.*).

Einaudi returned, prompted by the reflections on the theme of Keynes, to contemplate the evolution of work and leisure in the early 1930s.⁷ If scientific and technological progress had been able to free man from routine activities aimed at the production of standardised goods necessary to satisfy material needs, more time would have remained to “attend to the life of the mind” (Einaudi 1932). But to do this it would have been necessary to have, in Italy alone, hundreds of thousands of extra teachers and professors and staff to open libraries, “general and specialised, fixed and mobile, that it would be convenient to organise in every small village” (*ibid.*) as well as laboratories, scientific offices and archives. Furthermore, the aforementioned progress would not have placed any “limit on the variety of beautiful, distinct, individual things”, capable of “gladdening the eye before satisfying the taste”, to the creation of “artistic furniture, fabrics, paintings, which the blind machine will never be able to manufacture, or, by manufacturing them, will diminish in value and thus remove from the category of desired things” (*ibid.*).

For Einaudi, spiritual perfection therefore implied an active life, aimed at scientific or artistic creation (or their illustration), or at a material one, as long as it produced a unique and unrepeatably artefact. Without an active life, in fact, there was only idleness, the harbinger of material and moral regression.

For Einaudi, however, neither communism nor capitalism as they had historically developed could favour this improvement as both tended “to standardise, to conform the actions, deliberations, and thoughts of men, to destroy the joy of living, which is the joy of creating [...], to reduce men to mere instruments, minimum links in an iron chain that works and produces” (Einaudi 2024: 176-177).

If the competitive economy had the merit of “satisfying the needs of men at the lowest possible cost”, of “freeing men from the slavery of working as hard as before to obtain the same quantity of things” and

⁷ Keynes, at the beginning of the decade, by virtue of the impetuous technological development and the increase in production levels, had hypothesised that within a hundred years the massive reduction in working hours would have freed up a lot of time dedicated to work in favour of free time: “for the first time since his creation man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem: how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably and well” (KEYNES 1930: 367).

of increasing the time to devote “to study, meditation, scientific research and [...] to hammer nails in the house and move paintings, prints and ornaments”, it was also true that the evolution of capitalism in the second half of the nineteenth century had produced unhealthy factories and “disordered cities, repugnant to human life” (Einaudi 1942a).⁸ The task that Einaudi entrusted to technological development was once again to reduce the working time for the production of serial and standardised consumer goods to expand the time dedicated to the achievement of “leisure goods, without which life is not worth living”, goods that would give new and greater space to the independent farmer, the craftsman, the small and medium entrepreneur, the inventor, the artist, the writer, the poet, the teacher, the thinker (*ibid.*).

In the last essay cited, Einaudi, a wine entrepreneur in the Langhe from a very young age, tried to keep industrial development and pre-industrial traditions together. If this perspective could appear naive in the 1940s, when nothing foreshadowed the end of the Fordist model of production, can its revival today appear less unrealistic?

Post-Fordism, the third and fourth industrial revolutions, robotics, information technology, digitalisation and artificial intelligence have, on the one hand, led to the increasing assignment of routine and alienating jobs to machines, aimed at the production of standardised goods, and created, at least theoretically, the conditions for individual self-determination of what and when to produce and therefore for the realisation of work that is enjoyable in itself. On the other hand, they have also generated unemployment, precariousness and new subordination, especially for the less qualified members of the world of work (Tonarelli 2024: 953-964).

Outsourcing, informality, flexibility, unemployment, intermittent work, “uberised” work, platform work, then, do not seem to be a sign, as of today (Antunes 2024: 1161), of an age in which only work in which man realises his intimate personality and humanity has the right of citizenship.

What was invoked in Rensi’s aforementioned appeal (which the author himself in truth, as we have seen, considered unrealisable), namely a society in which “man does not work, or works when he wants and as he likes, on a whim, always almost playing”, seems light years away from being realised.

⁸ On this point, see also EINAUDI (1942b: 49-72).

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