Storica, Vol. 23, n.69, 2017, pp. 175-184

The antinomies of Fordism: discourses and practices

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Bruno Settis, Fordismi. Storia politica della produzione di massa (Bologna: Mulino, 2016), pp. 317.

Bruno Settis' study is a detailed and illuminating exploration of the discourses and practices that accompanied the ascent of mass production from the margins to the core of capitalist society. At the centre of this revolution stood Henry Ford, entrepreneur and ideologue, who had collated various elements of the 'American system' and of Taylorism, revamped them and made the most of the idea of assembly line (previously seen in meatpacking, for instance). He stood ready, albeit briefly, to raise workers' wages on par with the pace of productivity. So, strong was his imprint that the regime of production he envisaged was soon named after him: Fordism.

The book aptly uses the plural 'Fordisms' to signal the multiple interpretations and applications of that system, some quite removed from Ford's actual practices, as it spread from the United States to other countries, cultures and industries. Fordism's actual implementation was initially limited, but the reach of its utopian vision was overwhelming, frightening for some, irresistible for others. This division betrayed the inherent, ambivalent nature of mass production: it fragmented tasks, standardised parts, and introduced routines, which further alienated workers from the means of production, but production for the masses could mean a higher standard of living for the industrial working class.

Divided in three parts, Settis takes the reader along the journey through which mass production achieved a transformation of the social order inside and outside the factory, becoming a global phenomenon. The first part, "Detroit, Capital of the 20th Century", sets the groundwork by introducing the figure of F. W. Taylor and his methods; it continues by analysing how Henry Ford built and innovated upon these foundations to achieve the rationalization and standardization of production processes and parts.

Part management consultant, part scientist, part businessman, Taylor brought the spirit of progressive reform into the industrial workplace with a call to technical expertise, efficiency

and rationalisation that would alter the balance of power between workers, engineers, and managers. From Taylor onwards, the authority to lead and "own" the knowledge production process, by means of detailed study, would shift from skilled workers and foremen to managers and be attributed solely to them.

Taylor's notion of measurability of human performance at work ran parallel to two other wider trends that constituted the backdrop for Fordism: the widespread adoption of single-purpose machines, which required workers to perform only one function, and the interchangeability of product parts, which did not necessitate specific skills to adapt to the whole. As Settis remarks, while the latter will be steady evolving in linear progress, the former resembled more to a bell curve that declined when Fordism reached the limits of the rigidity of its methods.

Moving from Taylorism to Fordism, Settis underscores how Ford had an intuitive grasp that the control of industrial relations was key to his project. Here Settis reconstructs the social and political context of the Five Dollar Day, conceived with the intersecting aims of reducing turnover, increasing productivity, reducing production costs while raising mass consumption, which eventually would benefit Ford's sales.

Transforming workers themselves was central to Ford's vision. In effect, one could consider Fordism as an audacious political-pedagogical project aimed to educate workers to a new social order. Without renegading on the ideology of republicanism (the independent yeoman and the self-made men at the core of American mythology), Ford aimed to shape men who could endure the effort and discipline on the shop floor, while behaving as sensible consumers off the factory ground. This was perhaps what most influenced the dystopian representation of Fordism *à la* Chaplin, in *Modern Times*, and *à la* Huxley (Settis refers to a wide range of cultural artefact in his analysis). In the latter's *Brave New World* a totalitarian government, in a world of boundless consumption and genetically modified reproduction, controlled society and collective psychology through Fordist means.[1] Aldous Huxley, in fact, was remarkably prescient in suggesting the effects of mass-consumerism that so much grip our age. Settis writes, 'The increase in productivity was inseparable from the one in control, which extended the efficiency in the workplace to its moral basis outside of it' (p. 73).

[1] A. Huxley, *Brave new world*, (1932), London, Vintage 1998.

As it is famously known, for a little while Ford tried to control the standard of behaviour of his workers, both inside and away from the factory, through an education programme that taught English language as well as the alleged values of Americanness (thrift, work ethics, and a Christian family) to mostly immigrant unskilled workforce. Its short-lived, infamous Sociological Department controlled that workers actually lived those values to qualify for the prized five dollars a day.

Yet, the idea of a Fordism regime as a subtle manipulator of men, via education, has to be qualified. Ford's all-out battle against organised labour attested to his failure to mould men through persuasion alone. As Coopey and McKinlay have shown few years ago, before the Second World War Ford's control on the shop floor was more about 'terror' than it was about discipline.[2] The nature of power and authority at the time of Harry Bennett (the all-powerful manager that secured Ford's plants against unionization) was based on a brutal attitude, which did not generate much detailed knowledge about workers, but was devoted to secure the subordination of their bodies to production. Pre-war Fordism, they argue, was far removed from the Foucauldian notion of discipline underpinned by power and knowledge.

The second part, "The Fordist International", is devoted to the international reach of Fordism in the interwar period. This part reconstructs the varied strategies and outcomes of Ford's spread in a number of countries as well as the international fascination with, or virulent rejection of, the ideology of Fordism. From Portugal to Turkey and from Denmark to South Africa, Ford opened distribution, assemblage or production branches that waded through the interwar period with different and alternate fortunes. In the process, however, Fordism, changed capitalism globally. Settis lingers on the reception of Fordism in Great Britain, where it did not manage to supplant older forms of paternalism in the factories, and in Germany, where Fordist ideas converged with home-grown interests about rationalisation and vertical integration of production, but where factories resisted the reorganisation of production along the lines of assembly production. Interestingly, it was in the construction sector that Germany seemed most inclined to welcome Fordist ideas of standardized parts and rationalised process (p.139).

In the chapter, "Why was there Fordism in the Soviet Union?" (a quip on Werner Sombart's "Why is there no socialism in the United States?") Settis tackles Soviet fascination with Fordism. Could a capitalist organization of work serve socialist ends? This was the topic of a

[2] R. Coopey, A. McKinlay "Power without knowledge? Foucault and Fordism, c. 1900–50", *Labor History*. 2010 Feb 1;51(1), pp. 107-25.

heated debate in the USSR. In fact, as Settis shows, both Taylorism and Fordism enjoyed a notable popularity in Communist Russia, notwithstanding a few detractors among the Soviet Communists. There was an 'ideological uncertainty' about the technical elements of mass production and how should they play out in a Communist society. Settis here highlights the story of the winner of this debate, characters such as Alexei Gastev, nicknamed the 'Soviet Taylor' for being an evangelist of scientific management in Communist attire. Gastev founded the Central Labour Institute to research a classification of work that would fit the principles of Americanism into a Soviet mould. In different ways, Lenin, Trockij and Stalin all tried to marry Fordist technology with Marxist theory, in a struggle for productivity that was vital for the economic and political survival of Soviet Russia. They all implied that a 'Bolshevik' Fordism could liberate the proletariat and overcome the limits of the original American version. Niznij Novgorod, the 'Soviet Detroit' (p. 166), was established with technology and expertise from Detroit, and two of its factories were designed by the same Albert Kahn who had signed the project of River Rouge in Dearborn and a number of Detroit's iconic plants. It was only in 1935 that the honeymoon between Detroit and the Soviets ended, but the 'Fordist mistique' continued, masqueraded by the Communist aims of the Five Years Plans. If Gramsci's pages on Americanism and Fordism are still so cogent it is because the Sardinian thinker achieved a more nuanced understanding of Fordism and Taylorism than many of its Soviet enthusiasts had. Fordism was certainly not value-free, nor a technocratic solution that could be easily bent to Communist aims. The 1950s critique of the Soviet Union as 'state capitalism', best articulated in Detroit by CLR James, Raya Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs, pointed precisely to the mistake of the Soviet leadership in having adopted a capitalist organization of work while claiming to being true to the objective of the liberation of the working class.[3] The exploitation of workers, they claimed, occurred in the same way, only the property of the means of production was different.

In the last part, "The rationalisation in a non-rational world: the Italian case" Settis concludes the book by focusing on Italy, where Fiat constitutes the most obvious example of selective adaptation to Fordism. Settis reconstructs closely the debate that in Italy accompanied the international spread of Fordism. In the 1930s, it was the sociological ramifications of the Fordist project that particularly interested Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci was concerned with emphasizing how capitalism, being unable to function through compulsion alone, needed to create consent. The Fordist factory was designed to be the social nucleus where the ruling

[3] C.L.R. James, R. Dunayevskaya, G. L. Boggs, *State capitalism and world revolution*, Detroit, Facing Reality 1969.

class tried and tested its hegemonic power ('hegemony here is born in the factory', says Gramsci). Across the Atlantic, Fordism embodied a tendency of capitalism to dictate social norms that would indoctrinate workers and prepare them for a Tayloristic factory. To survive, it would have to subordinate the whole society through a 'general system of relationships external to the business itself'.[4]

However, on balance, Gramsci was not convinced that Fordism's bid to suppress class struggle by means of hegemony would ultimately prove successful. The attempt would fail in at least two respects: in the first place, Fordism could not prevent a decline in the rate of profit, and hence in real wages, which underlay its purported ability to function as a 'plan' for capital. Without high wages workers would be not be persuaded to endure a Fordist labour process, nor would they have the means to mass-consume the goods that were mass-produced. Second, he believed, Fordism could not achieve the aimed 'psychophysical' conditioning of the workforce, which would have ensured its pliability. Gramsci argued, controversially, that the 'mechanised' motion of the body does not dehumanize workers. When the physical movement becomes totally mechanical, as in a Taylorist assembly line, the worker undergoes a process of 'adaptation', while the body repeats the same action, the brain can still think. After all, walking does not preclude thinking. Fordism, the ultimate state in the capitalist social relation of production, could not achieve Taylor's dream of turning workers into 'trained gorillas'. Even assembly line work could not stop workers dwelling 'into a train of thought that is far from conformist'.[5] In Fordism, educational and social activities, such as those early attempted by Ford, were meant to address this potential antagonism of the workforce and serve to distract workers from ruminating on their own exploitation. Contrary to other voices among his contemporaries, Gramsci argued that Fordism did not challenge the analytical cogency of Marxism, but confirmed it. As Settis well explains in reference to the wider debate of the time, Gramsci did consider Fordism as a progress and had vitriolic and sarcastic comments in his *Quaderni del Carcere* on the retrograde ruling classes that opposed it. Still, Gramsci saw Fordism as a development fully within the history of capitalism and not necessarily as part of a future socialist society.

At other points of the Italian political spectrum, Fordism was received also with a mix of fascination and repulsion. Carlo Rosselli, a non-Marxist socialist, welcomed the link between increase productivity and workers' spending power and derided the quaint apology of craft labour as the 'golden times' of the popular classes, which was common during Fascism. At

[4] See Quaderno 22 §11, §12 in A. Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere,* Vol. 3, a cura di V. Gerratana, Torino Einaudi 1975.
[5] See Quaderno 22 §12 Ibid.

the same time, he criticised Fordism for not contemplating any form industrial democracy and for its anti-union bashing, whose vehemence he compared with the fascist hate of socialism.

If Henry Ford was able to ship products, technology and personnel to Soviet Russia until 1935, the fortune of his company were much more short-lived in Italy. A plant in Livorno was never completed and an assembly plant in Trieste had a brief life. Benefitting from the protectionist policies of the Fascist regime (and later the Republic) Fiat was effectively able to close the Italian market to Ford. However, the Italian case shows precisely the appeal of Fordism beyond Ford. In the early twentieth century, Taylorism was much debated in Italy, perhaps more than in other European countries, and Fiat, among others, keenly adopted and adapted the Fordist principles to plant construction, organisation of production, and worker regimentation; this in a time in which Fascist rhetoric envisaged a 'virile', frugal nation as antithetic to the Americanist triad of mass production, mass consumption and high wages. There was no space for the ideology of Fordism in the political economy of Fascism. And yet Mirafiori was the result of numerous study visits of Fiat engineers, and Giovanni Agnelli himself, to Detroit where the Italians were fascinated by the blueprint of River Rouge. In their own right, first Lingotto, then Mirafiori, became poles of attraction for European enthusiasts of Fordism. Beyond the layout of the space and of the configuration of machinery, the Turinese company mimicked a Taylorist management which accompanied the centralised direction with shop floor technicians dedicated to achievement of a 'one best way' (p. 236).

The case of Fiat demonstrated that the work organization of Fordism was supple enough to be selectively borrowed and transformed in a different political economy. On the other hand, Fiat used technological and organization innovation to contain wages and did not accept a contractual link between productivity and salaries. In sum, Settis remarks, 'the low cost of manpower was considered an indispensable element of national competitiveness' (p. 257). Industrialists wanted high productivity, but not the renewed social contract that Fordism introduced via consumerism and high wages. These remained contentious issues until 1969, when workers challenged Italy's own version of Fordism on the questions of wages and shop floor control.

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Settis succeeds in the elusive task of reconstructing the way the innovations introduced by Frederick Taylor, then subsumed in the system implemented by Ford, captured the imagination of entrepreneurs, politicians, revolutionaries and writers around the world at the same time as Ford himself was designing a global strategy for his company. In the twenty-first century, allegedly the age of post-Fordism, we take so much for granted the discourse of technical-rationality, the scientific fragmentation of tasks, the inter-changeability of product components, the level of controls of the worker's body, and the internalised work discipline that we often fail to comprehend the extent to which these developments (due to forces far beyond Ford himself) appeared revolutionary to contemporaries. Fordism swept away a working culture rooted in the mastery of the craft and in the American dream of the salaried condition as a temporary station in life. That old ideology—so central to American republicanism—had a long-lasting appeal far beyond the advent of Fordism, but was in increasing contrast with the concentration of working masses that characterised the cities of the American North-East and Mid-West and with workers' economic claims, who adjusted to the expectation of toiling in the factories for their entire life.

It is refreshing that Settis' focus remains throughout on the entangled meanings and consequences of mass production, roughly within the pre-World War II timescale; this represents a subtle criticism of the way 'Fordism' has been used since the Régulation school turned into a shorthand for Keynesian policies.[6] It is also in antagonism with an alleged 'post-Fordism' whose precision as analytical category remains debatable.[7] Perhaps a full engagement with the discourse on 'Fordism' as analytical category deployed in the social theory of the 1970s could be the subject of another book.

To grapple with the antinomies of Fordism is a complex matter, which Settis tackles with dexterity by setting specific boundaries and plunging into the immense literature. His focus is on the 'pre-trade union' Fordism, broadly between the onset of the assembly line and the Second World War. Although he makes references to the understanding of post-Fordism

[6] R. Boyer, *The regulation school: a critical introduction* New York, Columbia University Press, 1990.

[7] B. Jones, *Forcing the factory of the future. Cybernation and societal institutions,* Cambridge, Cambridge University press 1997.

conceptualised by former operaisti and the Régulation school, there is little coverage of the post-war Fordism of the 1940s, 1950s and afterwards. Thus there is little analysis of the way the relations on the shop floor were reshaped by workers' struggles against authoritarianism (a key component of Fordism as originally conceived) and how, from the 1940s, American organised labour lost its social-democratic vigour and was co-opted in a strategy that salvaged a key tenet of Fordism: the managerial control of the assembly line. This epic story is recounted in Nelson Lichtenstein's *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit* and, in most vitriolic terms, in the work of Martin Glaberman.[8] The co-optation of organised labour into mass-production opened a new chapter in the history of Fordism, one that is not covered by Settis.

The strength of Settis' account lays in a solid contextualization of Fordism within US history; it would be scarcely understandable without its origins in turn of the century liberalism, its cultural roots in Progressive America, its dialectics with New Deal policies and ethos, and its reaction to the left-wing politics that would briefly enthuse the industrial working-class between the late 1920s and the early 1940s. At the same time, the book shows the global purview of Fordism, both in terms of know-how and ideology, in a way that was adopted, adapted and contested. In its reception abroad, Fordism was often conflated with Americanism, and the reaction to it revealed cleavages in the national political cultures—Italy is obviously one case in which the author is well versed.

While offering a partial view of the arrays of 'Fordisms', the pre-WWII focus has the benefit of moving the spotlight from the institutional level of economic and societal governance, expounded by the Régulation school, to the social relations of production within the factory (as well as to the ideological level). In Fordism, all the technical specialism was eventually geared to the organization of workers towards a higher exploitation, an aspect that it is eventually shadowed by the emphasis on the institutional framework of the Régulation school.

Rational exploitation is still the hallmark of Fordism today in its most recent incarnations in the alternative frameworks of 'lean production', 'total quality management' and 'high performance', with various level of integration of information technology. These paradigms do not offer any more a social contract, but only a specific type of labour and management model that enables companies to compete in the volatile business landscape of the twenty-

[8] N. Lichtenstein, *Walter Reuther: The most dangerous man in Detroit*. Urbana e Chicago University of Illinois Press; 1995; M. Glaberman, *Punching out* Detroit, Bewick Editions 1952.

first century. Once again, they impinge on the control of the worker's body and mind-set. The Regulationists, among others, had adopted a narrow Eurocentric perspective in sounding the death knell for Fordism in the late 1970s. What followed was a rush to define a world that was allegedly post-industrial and post-Fordist, but in which the definition of these terms was slippery. Deindustrialization has inspired a questionable historical narrative predicated on the shift from an 'industrial economy' to a 'knowledge economy'. But, in a world awash with manufactured goods, where have the factories, and their workers, gone?

Thirty-five years after Bluestone's and Harrison's *The Deindustrialization of America*, industrial production based of tenets rooted on Fordism and Taylorism remains highly significant in the world, though less so in the American Midwest, its original cradle.[9] Successive waves of industrialization in China have given way to a growing literature on industrial relations and production methods in that country, sometimes described in terms of 'neo-taylorism', for instance when manual assemblage of IT components is involved. More than a century after the Five Dollar Day, the factory, and its different, overlapping, *Fordisms* are still key to understanding the political economy, workplace cultures and the political future of global capitalism.

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[9] B. Bluestone, B. Harrison, *The deindustrialization of America: Plant closings, community abandonment, and the dismantling of basic industry* New York, Basic Books 1982.