

Work in “different economies” as value-creating education

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ABSTRACT

Starting with Makiguchi’s vision of education as “value creation”, we examine the meanings attributed to “value” in education and learning contexts and consider them in view of capitalist forms of production predicated on the tradable value of intangible assets. We go on to outline the competing perspectives of value creation as a humanising vehicle of personal development (pedagogy of social creation), and the biocapitalist exploitation of our increasingly commodified lives and careers (pedagogy of capital).

Drawing on a series of multi-year studies exploring work and learning in different (or alternative) economies, we then present a number of illustrative examples of how women and men are transforming the act of learning in work and production contexts. We also look at forms of work in such economies and the meaning attached to them, wherein life and the relationships between living beings is set at the heart of the value creation process.

Keywords: *Learning – Different economies or alternative – Work – Value Creation*

Il lavoro nelle economie diverse come apprendimento che crea valore

A partire dal contributo del pedagogista Makiguchi sull’educazione come “creazione di valore”, l’articolo entra nel merito dei significati che ha preso il valore nei contesti educativi e formativi alla luce delle forme di produzione capitalistica che mettono al centro la conoscenza immateriale come valore di scambio. Si delineano dunque i contorni di un conflitto tra la creazione di valore come processo umanizzante e di sviluppo della persona (pedagogia della creazione sociale) e la messa a valore biocapitalistica della vita e del lavoro sempre più compresi in un processo di mercificazione (pedagogia del capitale).

Sulla base di ricerche pluriennali su educazione e lavoro nelle economie diverse (o alternative), il saggio presenta alcuni risultati che mostrano come donne e uomini stanno trasformando l’apprendimento nei contesti di lavoro e produzione, le forme del lavoro e i suoi significati, mettendo al centro della creazione di valore la vita e la relazione con il vivente.

Parole chiave: *Apprendimento – Economie diverse o alternative – Lavoro – Creazione di valore*

Education as value creation vs. the “pedagogy of capital”

One might ask why I focus on value and struggle so obstinately over such a difficult problem? I believe the effort is necessary if we are to make sense of education or, rather, if we are to create a system of education that makes sense in human terms. Human life is a process of creating value, and education should guide us toward that end. Thus educational practices should serve to promote value creation. The point is of profound importance, and the more we reflect on it in social context, the more meaningful the conceptual clarification of value becomes. (Makiguchi, 1989, p. 54)

The paragraph above was composed by Japanese pedagogue Tsunesaburō Makiguchi in 1930, and appears in one of his most important works, *Education for Creative Living. Ideas and Proposals of Tsunesaburo Makiguchi*. Writing almost a century ago, Makiguchi, a prominent exponent of pragmatism as it applied to the field of pedagogy, emphatically stated the case for the creation of value as a foundational dimension of the construction of meaning in education, and of education’s humanising power. In a Japan in the throes of a radical conversion from a feudal, agricultural country to an industrialised, capitalist state, his work – both his theoretical contributions and more concrete efforts towards educational reform – was deemed highly provocative, coming under attack and eliciting negative reactions in his own circles (Tarozzi, 2000).

Human dignity arises from value creation. One scholar has gone so far as to proclaim that the creation of value is the highest form of human activity. Everyone has to play his or her own role in the workplace of humanity in order to create values to meet the inexhaustible demands of living. Education can do much to fulfill this fundamental human promise. There is no need to nurse regrets for past errors; rather, educators should intensify their efforts to revitalize education into something that will foster active involvement of persons in the creation of value. But the question remains as to just how educators can relate to the problem of creating value. (Makiguchi, 1989, p. 54)

I raise the issue question of value creation, drawing on Makiguchi, because at this moment in time it presents an unescapable consideration for those of us who work in the field of pedagogy, whether directly involved in education and training or concerned with the field’s more theoretical aspects. After all, it is we who assume responsibility for initiating and directing pedagogical activity, both in theory and in practice.

In recent decades, education systems across a good part of the world have perhaps been too passive (or too naïve in many cases) in the way they have a profit-oriented, economic approach (Nussbaum, 2011). Whichever is the case, we have reached something of a “breaking point” when it comes what meaning we ascribe to education. At its most vibrant, to

paraphrase Makiguchi, education is the creation of value as a factor in what makes us human. What I am interested in highlighting in respect to this “breaking point” is the connection contemporary capitalism has created between educational relationships, social relationships and commodities, and its consequences for educational action. I find the juxtaposition of two challenging terms such as “pedagogy” and “capital” is fruitful in illuminating both a complex aspect of our current time, and the difficulties that we, as educators and trainers, encounter on a daily basis in our work in the field. Contemporary capitalism has radically altered the concept, and practice, of “exchange”, which is now understood as that which occurs when relationships are formed within society, and between people, goods and other assets. It therefore brings with it a certain vision of education that we may chose to term the “pedagogy of capital” (De Vita, 2009).

With the spiritual renewal of capitalism over the last thirty years, the relationship that exists between assets and relationships, between assets and language, and between assets and experience, has been profoundly altered. This renewal has been commented upon as much as it has been mythologised, and commonly accepted as much as it has been misunderstood in its radical implications for interpersonal exchange and the societal and educational forms of our relationships. Pervasive and inescapable, “the new spirit of capitalism” (Boltansky & Chiapello, 1999) has seen huge upheaval, both in our physical environment and in the contexts of social and educational action. It offers/imposes a particular form of experience in our social and interpersonal relationships, one that tends towards mercantile exchange, utilitarianism, a compulsory individualism and competitiveness, foreignness to the experiences of others, and the superfluousness of relationships outside of their capacity to providing some form of productive value. Thus is “the new way of the world” (Dardot & Laval, 2013). For decades now, we have been heading towards a relational economy that is profoundly stunted by an economic outlook, which, with its peculiar ideology-cum-pedagogy, seeks to indoctrinate us all, young and old, into a way of being in the world that increasingly resembles the experience of shopping at the supermarket, into treating our own selves as assets that can be turned to profit, or both these things at the same time. To paraphrase Christian Marazzi, we become producers of goods through the mediation of language (2011), where the language is the relationships from which we are composed. Exchanges between humans and living beings, giving, owning, giving away, swapping, nurturing our interests, our desires, living and working within a huge economy characterised by equally immense levels of exchange: the pedagogy of capital does not overlook any of the things that circulate between and around us. Rather, it uses them, diminishing their power by removing their value and imposing a symbolic order that establishes, with certainty, what has value and what has not.

Such are the implications of this pedagogy of capital in the contexts of education and training that it presents us with a radical challenge, giving rise to a conflict between the meaning of “value creation” – as understood in terms of humanisation and personal development – and the meaning that “value” has assumed in the re-signification of post-Fordist capitalism and in the biocapitalism responsible for producing a knowledge society in

which knowledge itself equates to an albeit intangible asset that can be exchanged and put into circulation like any other material good.

This struggle lies at the heart of the political and academic work of Tsunesaburō Makiguchi, who was spurred to set out his theory of value in education not least by the conflicts engendered by industrial societies, such as that of early-20th-century Japan. The impact of industrialisation on educational, social, political and economic institutions had already provided an indication of the slippery slope on which the processes of value creation now lay. In *Education for Creative Living*, Makiguchi contrasts a creative, happy life that draws inspiration from cooperation between individuals and communities, who thereby become value creators, with an uncreative existence characterised by pronounced competitiveness and the primacy of utilitarianism, which extends to the dimension of learning (2000, p. 7)

The struggle between the capitalisation of knowledge and education as a humanising vision

While making use of [material possessions], man has to be careful to protect himself from [their] tyranny. If he is weak enough to grow smaller to fit himself to his covering, then it becomes a process of gradual suicide by shrinkage of the soul. (Tagore, Santiniketan, c. 1917)

In recent decades, the literature has dedicated ample space to examining the new characteristics that distinguish contemporary forms of work. In doing so it has emphasised the important shift from Fordist to post-Fordist models of production. This change has a significant bearing on our subject, i.e. “value” as it relates to education. At this point, we might benefit from briefly revisiting French philosopher André Gorz’s elegant reconstruction of the foundations and characteristics of the knowledge society as manifested in changes in the world of work and methods of production. In one of Gorz’s more recent works, in which he affirms the immaterial nature of work in the post-modern age, and the change (or crisis) in the concept of value, he demonstrates how, in the knowledge society (or a society based on cognitive capitalism as it is sometimes described), the concept of value and the process by which value is derived or created, have undergone a profound transformation. What has “value” is determined by increasingly immaterial processes of production. In contrast to the straightforward “abstract work” of the time of Adam Smith, in which simple work was the source of value, it is now complex work that determines the value of that which has worth (Gorz, 2003). The idea of “immaterial work”, in which knowledge is the primary productive force, is closely associated with concepts such as “human capital”, “knowledge capital” and

“intelligence capital”. Thus, the axis shifts away from “immediate” work, which can be measured and quantified in terms of product units per unit of time, towards the general state of science and technology, in which classical units of measurement are cast aside. The labour process – immediate, material work, so to speak (Marx, 1970) – is thus superseded by the production process, in which the material quality of work is subordinate to the immaterial elements of production. The production process is largely concerned with engendering certain lifestyles, and even certain subjective outlooks, motivations and imaginational experiences (Lazzarato, 1997). It is underpinned by a new understanding of value based on intelligence and the engagement of the individual in all his or her qualities. Production now engages with the individual’s abilities and his or her life outside of the workplace. For themselves, “as labour-powers [individuals] must become a fixed capital demanding to be continually reproduced, modernized, expanded and valorized” (Gorz, 2003, p. 11). What I wish to emphasise in examining this shift towards immaterial, cognitive variants of capitalism is the extent to which we can now talk of “biocapitalism”, a form that, by turning workers’ language and even their “subjectivity” to the needs of production, has effectively subsumed their entire existence. These workers, then, find themselves caught in a “biopolitical trap” (d’Aniello, 2015), which is not only soul-destroying in general but is also lacking in various features associated with job quality, e.g. recognition of the value of one’s work, the social dimension and stability that work can offer. Rather, what is cultivated, continuously and inexorably, in such situations is a crisis of meaning, which in terms of everyday experience takes the form of increasingly frequent and demotivating “voids of meaning”: “This lack of meaning, intended as the absence of a ‘symbolic order,’ is without doubt the point at which the historical development of capital and its vocation to uproot and decode everything culminate” (Marazzi, 2011, p. 72).

As such, if the changes we have witnessed in the system of production and the forms assumed by work – and the way work and workers are organised – have tended towards the commodification of both the act of working and relationships with workers (Gallino, 2007), can we then say that work has lost its “soul” (along with its meaning, its quality)? And ask, where and when did work lose its ability to make workers more open to growth and a spiritual education?

As Adriano Olivetti elucidated as far back as the 1940s and 50s, the idea of work as an experience that means something in the lives of individuals is, in fact, necessarily connected with the notion that work has a spiritual dimension (Olivetti, 2012). In the 1970s, by engaging in a variety of radical – and critical – lifestyles and approaches to work, other figures would go on to demonstrate the need to maintain a connection with one’s own environment or local area and the importance of persevering in working towards a global form of social justice and criticising the all-conquering consumerism of the age. Albeit with certain notable departures (Bertell, 2016), this trend has assumed a renewed vigour in recent years in movements for land, water and a new justice. Those who are living and enabling these alternative modes of life and work have engendered a profound change in the existential

relationship between their mere existence and their lived experience. Their experience thus becomes a form of political activity in which the “economic” is knocked from its pedestal.

The practicability of life vs biocapitalism

In the last few years, a number of movements have emerged into the public consciousness in whose work and activity the pursuit of the “practicability of life” (Berell, 2016), and the spirit of “*primum vivere*” (Praetorius, 2011) and “starting with yourself” (Diotima, 1990; 1996), have replaced the centrality of capital. Here we find individuals connected by a zoe-centric outlook (Braidotti, 2013) that, on the one hand, stands in direct conflict with the dominant doctrine of biocapitalism, and on the other, reaches out to the natural world, the environment and all living beings, knocking anthropocentrism to the economic and political sidelines. Essentially, these are movements that have given rise to, and put into practice, what the TiLT research group (Territori in Libera Transizione)¹ has termed “different economies”.

These movements, which might also come under such labels as “alternative economies”, “solidarity economy networks”, “economy of the commons” and so on, arose in response to the need to challenge the culture of consumption. With time, they have developed their own practices and value systems, which in turn have paved the way for new, alternative lifestyles. To fully understand the original impact of these practices – which are closely associated with radical lifestyle changes – in terms of social justice, it may help to reflect on a number of episodes in the history of movements for ethical consumption. The origins of political consumerism are marked by the boycott campaigns of the 1980s, which offered a demonstration of the power that purchasers of goods and services could exert, i.e. by simply refusing to purchase goods they deemed ethically unacceptable, consumers could undermine the success of a product. There followed the emergence of the fair trade shop, which marked the first real attempt to base retail around both the need for fair and equitable relations between producers and consumers and the importance of denouncing the inequalities typical of global production processes and relationships of dominance and subservience, especially between the northern and southern regions of the world. In our own time, we have the producers who belong to the various different economy movements. Within the producer-consumer relationship there is an ethical-political imperative to bridge the divide, as it were, to shorten the supply chain and acknowledge the value of the individuals involved in the actual production of products. Organic farmers, bakers, wine, jam and pasta makers, cooks, baristas, bookshop and B&B owners, libertarian educators, and even engineers are discovering new value in their status as workers within these different economies. From invisible,

¹ TiLT (Territori in Libera Transizione) is a cross-disciplinary, inter-university research group study new citizenship practices. Established, originally, at the University of Verona it involves researchers from other universities in Italy and around Europe.

interchangeable “bodies” they have become figures of responsibility who bring the promise of informed choice and change.

Why “different” economies? Firstly because, as Marco Deriu has asserted (2013, 2016) these economies are not built around a shared centre, nor do they express some sort of greatest common divisor so much as a lowest common multiple. In other words, they represent a project that transcends – but includes – each individual component. Secondly, as Lucia Bertell maintains (2013, 2016), although these new forms are frequently confused with the “social economy”, they are in fact different. They represent similar, but not identical experiences that. Although they share a common motive – a spirit of solidarity – different economies are not generally inspired by the principles that characterise the third sector. They also take a different approach: rather than aspiring to effect changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the wider population, they adopt the maxim of “starting with yourself”, which covers everything from the everyday choices inherent to critical purchasing, consumption and production – choices informed by a concern for the fate of the local community and the wider environment – to relationships with other people and the local area. In all this, the economic dimension is sidelined in favour of a concern for the individual’s life, and in particular its practicability, a quality that

brings with it a different understanding of work and life, one which is rooted in everyday existence, and which includes the economic, but more so a set of determinedly political, relational and social practices that are aligned with the existence of the planet as a whole, and that stand in resistance to, and in conflict with, the dominant system of power. (Bertell, 2016, p. 118)

The study, from one methodology to another: case studies and grounded theory

Building on the theoretical premises and contextual conditions that helped it to refine the notion of value creation as a component in a conscious conflict between the pedagogy of capital and the pedagogy of social creation, the TiLT research group has carried out a number of studies that examine the “different economy” context from a multi-disciplinary perspective.

My work, in all of this, has focused on the role and presence of education/self-education and training/self-training in the experiences we encountered; in examining the different economy movements as workshops for new forms of citizenship created by adults in informal settings, it is the pedagogical aspect that interests me most.

Following an initial study, which ran from 2010 to 2012 and provided the necessary material from which to draw out the meanings and principal categories of the different economies (Bertell, Deriu, De Vita & Gosetti, 2013), we began another project in 2014 that focused more expressly on the experiences of the workers and producers operating within

these movements. The research was conducted in the regions of Veneto and Sardinia, and in two distinct phases. The first was based on a series of case studies (CS) (Bertell, de Cordova, De Vita & Gosetti 2017), while the second adopted a grounded theory methodology (GT) to gather and analyse data (Bertell 2016). The choice of methodologies was prompted by the group's realisation, following the original analysis of the cases covered, that it would need to abandon its initial hypotheses. We reasoned that in order to fully comprehend the process set in motion by the individuals who choose to work and produce within these different economies, we would need to begin again with a blank slate, so to speak. The case-study phase had proven fruitful inasmuch as it offered an initial survey of the phenomena, from which we could develop a theoretical road map to orient ourselves. However, in other respects it was found wanting, especially when we tried to frame the data gathered according to our initial hypotheses, which were based on a number of existing theories and previously identified aspects of the contemporary economy. We therefore posed ourselves the question: which research instruments might be most effective in clarifying the social processes and conceptual patterns – particularly as revealed by the participants' direct accounts – in a way that would enable us to discern a theoretical model (albeit a context specific one)? Our conclusion was that grounded theory, with its potential for constructing theories from the ground up, was our best option.

For the first phase of research, we adopted a case study methodology, or more specifically a multiple case model, meaning the study of multiple, parallel cases (four in this case) following identical protocols (Niero, 2001; 2008; Yin, 2013; Corbetta, 2004; Gerring, 2004).

The following data gathering techniques were employed: 1. initial data gathering in meetings with network “gatekeepers” and focused discussions with the wider research group; 2. sessions of participant observation at workplaces; 3. in-depth interviews with the owners of the participating businesses; 4. semi-structured interviews with individuals in the “orbit” of these businesses (“satellites”).

The cases studied were: 1. Marisa and her organic farm; 2. Umberto and his organic bakery; 3. Silvano and the organic bread cooperative he heads; 4. Giandomenico and his organic farm. During this phase, 4 in-depth interviews and 19 semi-structured interviews were conducted, the in-depth interviews with Marisa, Umberto, Silvano and Giandomenico taking place at two different points in time.

In respect to the preceding phase, the change to a grounded theory methodology for the second phase entailed numerous steps backwards, and a few sideways. The results of the CS, which followed a deductive/descriptive methodology, did allow us to identify symbolic and cultural aspects of, and meanings attributed to “learning” in the context of different economies, but they were less useful in uncovering the underlying processes set in motion by the new (or renewed) meanings and cultures associated with work and (self-)education at work. In other words, we were able to identify the motivations of the workers involved in these different economies, but not how these manifested in practice.

For the grounded theory phase, we wanted to ensure that the emergent categories had a solid foundation in the data. To achieve this, the collection and the analysis of the data needed to be carried out contemporaneously. This was made possible using a theoretical sample and proceeding by means of induction.

We began this phase with a new research question that became gradually more defined as the data were collected and analysed (“The precise formulation of the problem cannot be clearly defined in advance, otherwise there is the risk that it will condition the data” – Tarozzi, 2008, p. 44). We began with a general, open-ended question with broad scope for development that had emerged from the case studies used to define the thematic area of research (i.e. worker self-realisation and self-education in different economies): “What happens when you work in a different economy?”

In keeping with the classic grounded-theory process, the interviews were subjected to theoretical sampling as, little by little, categories capable of supporting a suitably robust theoretical model emerged from the three standard phases of analysis. In this way, 25 interviews were administered and analysed using NVivo 10 software (which also offers traceability) (Coppola, 2011).

[...] to be honest [...] the relational-community [aspect], has been at the heart of our work since the beginning, although economic concerns have always been there in the foreground, but the real benefits lie elsewhere [...]. [We] prioritised other aspects, apart from money, the relationship [...] there is a spirituality, let's use that word, there are these aspects, that represent a different way of looking at life and at the world, which [we see as] bound within a network. (2D)

Value creation in experiences of work and education in different economies. Principal outcomes of the study.

I wish to begin with one of the questions that guided the group's investigation and led to the selection of the three men and one woman who, together with their experiences, became the subjects of our case studies. Using this methodology, we were able to begin our research looking at the subjects' personal stories and the contexts to which they belonged, and considering the meaning and the quality of the work they had chosen.

Why do you do what you do? The choices made by workers operating in different economies and their motivations

“Why do you do what you do?”: it is a question that cuts to the heart both of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations – the personal stories and desires – that have given rise to a particular line of work, and of the possibility of grasping the peculiar quality – in terms of value creation – of such work-related and existential questions. The articulate answers that we received directly from the four principal participants, as well as from other individuals associated with them (suppliers and clients), are unanimous, at least in terms of lexicon: they believe in what they are doing, and in the decision that has brought them to where they are today. It is a sort of permeable, dynamic, lay creed that can respond to adversity, and which for all four individuals has stood the test of time, time in which the question “why do I do this?”, and its implied counterpart, “who is making me do it?” is framed by real, practical, everyday problems.

Given my focus on the pedagogical implications of the four cases studied, it has been particularly interesting to trace the symbolic and practical developments that have enabled the individuals involved to envision, create and then sustain work within these different economies. For them, their work has become an exercise in learning and (self-)education, the transfer and exchange of knowledge, social authorship and authority and, ultimately, an exercise in *auctoritas*. As we explored the processes by which individuals acquired learning and were invested with “capability” within these contexts, the analysis of their existential and professional progress yielded numerous points of interest, not least a close link between particular modes of value creation – which cannot be entirely assimilated to those promoted by (although at times well beyond) capitalistic forms of production – and the generation of new forms of creative resilience at both the individual and collective level.

The decision to undertake such “eco-autonomous” forms of work – i.e. built around the autonomy of the individual and informed by an ecosystemic outlook – which differ in many respects to work as it is traditionally understood, is itself a point of interest. As is the motivation behind this, and other related choices, many of which are driven by the individual’s lack of satisfaction with an earlier job, or by his or her desire to find some sort of personal meaning in work. We also detect the desire to escape from a particular sense of alienation that is inherent to the current system of employment, and to resist, indeed rebel against, a particularly brutal system of production. In such decisions – about work, and more broadly about life – we see a shift away from the notion of work as mere sustainable activity, in favour of the concept of work as relating to practicable modes of production (“practicable” insofar as they can be enacted via certain *practices* within a “zoe-centric” system characterised by harmonious relations between individuals). We might say it is the transition from one *model* to another, although it might be more appropriate to speak in terms of a shift towards a new *form* of life (including the dimension of work). This transition, which is already well under way, is made possible by the practicability of the life philosophy concerned (and thus the practicability of work), insofar as it is effected

through everyday actions that are carried out with a certain degree of autonomy, where individuals actually put their beliefs into practice at the most immediate level, starting with their place within the living world: ECO-autonomy. (Bertell, 2016, p. 123)

Why, then, do these people do what they do? To express themselves, and maintain a link between work and life; to feel pride in themselves, in their existence, in their own abilities; to seek meaning through work.

In this existential investment in work, what appears to motivate the individuals involved in the study is the day-to-day grappling with the “stuff” of work, with whatever they need to learn in order to actually make their business flourish. The knowledge/research/learning dimension of work is fundamental, both as a form of personal engagement and as a way of sharing experiences. Knowledge and learning become tools to work with, but they also form part of the meaning of work itself. It is in this context that we must place the pursuit of a form of work in which meaning is generated in the process of learning how to work, how to be autonomous (a process in which learning becomes an element of value and quality). In this search for “harmony with the living world” (De Vita, 2013), for a respectful, non-objectifying relationship with nature, the individual learns to negotiate difficulties without having to turn to the prevailing thinking of conventional production processes. In the accounts, you can almost hear the tension melting away as the just-in-time model so dear to post-Fordist industry is supplanted by the rhythm of the seasons.

Work, and competence in work, is self-learned. And it is in learning more than any other area that we find the quality of self-determination that came to form the basis of one of our research questions. Growing crops or making bread becomes an adventure, a treasure hunt. Only here, it is the product, a discovery brought to light entirely by one’s own efforts, that is the true prize.

I went looking for older people – this is something that really fascinates me – I actually set out looking for older people to ask their advice, pinch a few ideas, about old types of bread, designs, shapes you don’t get any more. I’ve got it all on my phone. These old folks are thin on the ground these days. We’re losing the knowledge they have ... in fact, when we organise events in the villages where there the traditions are hanging on, and there are a few of these old people, you still find this sort of thing, but women aged 45-50 have either never learned, or they’ve forgotten, and when one of them comes to buy some bread, or a little flour, they all start off all raring to go, but after a while ... because it’s really tough work, you lose that enthusiasm. I remember my poor mum when she made bread she would start at four in the morning and finish in the afternoon. In fact, on bread days there would be no actual cooking. She would make two focaccias with tomato, basil and garlic, and that’s

all there was to eat because there wasn't time for anything else. (2A, Umberto, baker of traditional Sardinian bread)

Traditional Sardinian bread of the sort produced by Umberto is the result of a painstaking, complex process that is itself the product of extensive research. He uses an ancient variety of organic durum wheat, and a sourdough starter that results in a more nutritious loaf than would be produced using an industrial yeast. Then there is the traditional wood-fired oven. The wood is gathered by hand and carefully selected to ensure that the oven cooks the bread properly and imparts the right aroma. This artisanal approach gives rise to numerous processes of learning and knowledge creation, and the transfer of know-how between past and present. It seeks to weave together the material and immaterial aspects of work in a manner that restores its sense of meaning and spirituality.

Umberto is a person that, thanks to his bread, has become part of our daily lives, how we eat, yes, but more than that. Plus, if you dig a bit deeper, behind it all, there are other people. There's Angelo, who produces the Cappelli wheat, who I was pleased to meet at an event after years that I only really knew him through the poster we had given to Umberto. So, there's all the knowledge of people who work in a certain way, who do things the way the land dictates, and so on. There's this understanding, what we were talking about at the start, let's call it the spiritual quality of the relationship, which in this sense is a real thing, like a certain way of looking at the world made solid. It could just stay an abstract thing, if it wasn't for Umberto's bread, Monica's tomatoes, Angelo's melons and watermelons. Instead, you can reach out and touch it, because we know that this melon or that loaf of bread was produced thinking about the cycles of nature, the earth, with the sort of love that you just don't get with the bread you buy at the supermarket. There, you don't get it at all, while here, you find a relationship that isn't based on violence, and together we reinforce the links between people, because I feel this sense of gratitude towards the women who prepare our food for us, who work hard. (2D, customer of Umberto, baker of traditional Sardinian bread)

The product itself, then, is the result of something that is more than merely a job done well: the bread embodies the traditional knowledge and know-how of a rural culture that has succeeded in preserving a profound set of values, a way of looking at the world that can be retrieved and renewed as a way of honouring our ancestors, but also passed on to future generations. It is a vision of a world that knows how to take responsibility for its own citizenship (Dewey, 2004), and for humankind's relationship with the planet (Mortari, 2001).

As with Umberto's experience as a baker, so too in the case of Marisa we find a profound belief in the validity of organic methods of cultivation that radically reshape the farmer's relationship with the earth and the environment and that provide the conditions in

which the product, and the act of working, can both take on a new and different value. The melons grown by Marisa are different, because the story behind them is different. So too, are the processes involved in their production. This system of organic cultivation is far removed from conventional approaches to farming, which seem unable to respond to either environmental crises or ethical imperatives. Here, instead, respect for the earth and the environment acts as both a driving and a limiting factor.

If you ask me, there's a different way of looking at life, based on the fact that you do *that* particular job, you support yourself with your work, you don't feel the need to go out and buy a big four-by-four. Often, people spend money to have a nicer house, do things they always wanted to, go on a cruise, have a higher standard of living. Then there are people like Marisa, who make the choice to get up early every morning, a bit like I do. I get along fine, here. I enjoy myself. Every now and then I manage to eke out a couple of days for myself, but I find my work rewarding anyway. Having a job that lets you feel good about yourself, you know, it's not an easy thing to find. I have a lot of friends who curse the morning when the alarm goes off at six o'clock because they have to go and work eight hours a day in a place they don't like. It's like being in jail! I admire her a lot, because I think she's very courageous. The fact that she's still selling after all these years shows that she's capable of making it work. I've known a lot of people over the years who have had to quit, but in all of the people who've managed to make a go of it, I've sensed an inner strength, more than in those who do it as though it was just a job like any other. (1B, supplier to Marisa, organic farmer)

Marisa's strength of conviction, and the existential courage and great inner strength identified by her supplier may be easier to interpret in light of what Makiguchi had to say about the creation of value.

We begin with the recognition that humans cannot create matter. We can, however, create value. Creating value is, in fact, our very humanity. When we praise persons for their 'strength of character', we are really acknowledging their superior ability to create value. (Makiguchi, 1972, pp. 5-6)

Learning and knowledge in work and self-education: autonomy is something you learn

In working, and learning from their work, the women and men we encountered in the course of the study are effecting a precise choice. Frequently, there is a transition – from job “1” to job “2” or a number of different jobs – which is perpetuated by a set of values that effectively reject the capitalist model (environmentalism, sharing, equity, self-sufficiency, prioritising well-being). This decision to undertake a change of job, and lifestyle, is driven by the pursuit

of individual autonomy. The process manifests itself in various forms of self-expression. To an extent, the decision itself is also an expression of recognition: of a personal journey, a personal choice and set of values, self-worth. In a similar fashion, the autonomy that is the ultimate goal of the processes set in motion by these individuals' employment choices is a form of expression and self-education. Autonomy is something you learn. What we see, in these cases, are choices that are not based on the conditions normally in place at the launch of a new business: necessary expertise already in place, a business plan assessing sustainability/potential risks, finance from banks or capital grants made possible by favourable legislation. What we see, instead, are individuals choosing change, a choice that invariably correlates with specific pre-conditions: a solid value system, strong convictions, a sense of enterprise, a yearning to find meaning in work that is conducive to fullness of life, disappointment and dissatisfaction with existing employment (in terms of self-expression and a need to test oneself).

The decision to pursue work in a different economy does not come with the pre-condition that you "know how". A "can do" attitude and belief that "it can happen" are both far more important. Reliance on prior training that can be used as a "down payment" on the viability of the enterprise gives way to forms of expertise and training that are part of the process of work. It is as though there was a virtuous cycle of factors that bolster the individual's commitment, such as strength of conviction, personal engagement and the fact that his or her values are shared by a community and a network of like-minded people. The self-reinforcing quality of the process lies in self-education, the exchange of knowledge, and an inclination towards ongoing self-improvement and the refinement of products. What we are witnessing, then, is the creation of communities of practice by women and men who, by doing so, are also giving rise to informal routes to education among adults.

The underlying aims of this process are: autonomy from the system or from hierarchical powers, autonomy as a form of self-expression and a means of achieving recognition as agents of a possible change that starts with the individual and the relevant community of practice but retains a global perspective.

The theoretical model that emerges from the grounded-theory analysis demonstrates the practicability of forms of life and work that, themselves, are able to give rise to new enterprises founded on a set of conditions that are different from, and in opposition to, those of the majority of businesses. A form of work that is only possible with: decentralised income streams, with a principal (though usually meagre) income supplemented by other cash flows (e.g. other jobs/from family); varied forms of remuneration such as payment in kind, small batches of goods that help lower the cost of living (material remuneration) and even a return in terms of satisfaction which is perceived as a compensatory reward (non-material remuneration); useful relationships which, with the informality of employment arrangements and exchanges or offers of assistance in the work setting (e.g. from family members), offer meaningful assistance in the form of practices that are native to this particular context; finally, but fundamentally, the opportunity and attraction of simple living, without which the other considerations that determine the practicability of work in different economies would be far less compelling. The way that the self-education undertaken by these individuals brings to

light multiple facets of learning was the subject of much discussion within the research group. For instance, there is the question of the “need to learn” when getting to grips with a new job, or the way that knowledge can be contextualised and related to individuals, to a specific area, and to the wider environment. Then there is the circular aspect of learning, which becomes autonomy in one’s activity – in and of itself – but also autonomy in one’s activity as the inspiration for new learning. The individuals involved display a clear inclination towards putting their own capabilities to the test by learning, studying, and meditating upon and extending their knowledge of particular issues and subjects. Putting their chosen approach to life into practice is therefore a process of self-education, of professional development, but it remains tightly connected both to the demands of the job and to the need for creativity and autonomy – in the sense identified by Ivan Illich as the inclination that “enables us to exist”. In the light of a pedagogy of social creation, this becomes a valid, generative position.

Conclusions

The exhortation – frequently attributed to Gandhi – to “be the change you want to see in the world” can find echoes in the choices individuals make about work, specifically when they challenge conventional modern concepts of work and open a pathway towards the re-actualisation of a particular meaning. As Dominique Méda asserts, this meaning is reformulated in terms of historical rather than sociological categories (1997). It has been decoupled from both the equation of every possible thing with work or the work-money-consumption cycle. Instead, the meaning of work is distanced from the appropriative values of capitalism and market liberalism and reinstated – by the workers’ own resistance to conflict and depletion – within a system built around the needs of the wider living world: in other words, work in the form of everyday practices (as such, “practicable”) that form part of a harmonious whole together with the individual’s own existence, and that of the planet.

Acting in the interests of eco-autonomy, rather than economic priorities, brings into play a set of values that are capable of withstanding the dominance of capitalism that pervades our lives and our ecosystem. Here we have individuals who are pursuing a goal, and who therefore enjoy a privileged relationship with the processes of learning and self-education that elevates their potential for self-determination and the creation of value. It appears to me that their creativity is revealed most clearly when we consider that, in other circumstances, they might be consigned to a state of social marginalisation. Instead, they learn from their very singularity, harnessing their status – which arises from their contemporary pursuit of both happiness and virtue – in the interests of social creation. I have borrowed the words “happiness” and “virtue” from Makiguchi, and they seem particularly fitting when highlighting the contribution of these “eco-autonomous” workers to the development of a form of social conscience that is sensible to situations and conditions of injustice.

The fullest experience of life does, indeed, come only when happiness and virtue coincide. The egocentric accumulation of wealth, as noted earlier, is a delusion, a delusion that, far from leading to happiness, leads rather to emptiness and disappointment. If our society condones and encourages virtuelessness and false values in the lives of its members, we must remake society so that happiness and virtue do coincide. Such a revitalization movement would deal with current problems of social inequality, for these are part of the same disparity. (Makiguchi, 1989, p. 27)

We might even say that these workers are “instituting new worlds” or that, at the very least, they are pointing us in a new direction through their struggle and refusal to be identified as dissidents, preferring instead to affirm their difference, and thus escape assimilation into what they perceive as a commodifying, consumerist system that deprives individuals of their capacity for self-determination.

If we restrict our perspective to the micro scale, it may appear that these individuals’ affirmation of themselves – by which they acquire a “different” status – and their ability to create new worlds and new educative values, reveals the fragile and fragmentary nature of the different economy experience.

However, considered in terms of a transition from a model built around the commodification of existence to one that promotes the pursuit of new forms of harmony with the living world – in other words, social creation as a pedagogical practice of value creation – they speak of the quest to mediate meaning across the micro and macro scales and create new potential configurations and forms of understanding that, in turn, might give rise to a multitude of experiences with which we can illuminate and define an entire new landscape.

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