



Weber and Luhmann: Connecting Threads between Work Faith and Systemic Trust

Pier Paolo Bellini

Università del Molise

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to highlight a common thread between the reflections of Max Weber about the relationship between work and faith and those of Niklas Luhmann, dedicated to the issue of the trust: there is, in my opinion (in an obvious discontinuity linked to the different contexts) a link between the process that led the human structure to shift the focus on “transcendent transcendence” to the “immanent transcendence”. Stated more simply, the slippage “from heaven to earth”, identified by Max Weber and marked by the birth of capitalism, could not erase the religious instance dwelling in the human spirit and simply “hallowed the ground, sacrificing the sky”. This is the context in which Durkheim’s hypothesis fulfills itself: the “inevitable” god coincides (today) ultimately with the social system, creating new, unresolved “vulnerabilities”.

Keywords: professional faith, systemic trust, transcendence, personal responsibility.

Introduction

In the last few decades the luhmannian concept of “systemic trust” has been in the spotlight within the sociological surveys on a global level. But what is this concept? And, above all, what are the previous cultural processes from which the idea of “trust in the systems” derives?

We can not assume that this peculiar process has been absent in any period of human history: when a man gets himself in society, when he enters and maintains a relationship, he can only do that on the basis of a minimum of reliance on the other. For this reason trust is defined as an *elementary situation of social life*: without trust the individual «can not even get out of bed every morning. He would be absorbed by an indeterminate fear and by a paralyzing panic» (Luhmann, 1968/2001, p. 5).

The question, then, must be further clarified. Like any human cultural process, even trust shares the typical historicity of human events, made of accelerations and stops, second thoughts and returns. What were the cultural processes that have significantly altered this “elementary situation of social life” over the last centuries?

We think that a valuable “indicator” of this process could usefully be located, in the analysis of what is now commonly referred to as “social action”. Social action can be described as any human attitude “if and to the extent the individual who acts, or the individuals who act connect to it a subjective sense [...] that is referred to the attitude of other individuals, and oriented in its course on the basis of this» (Weber 1922a, it. transl. 1961, p. 4). The analysis of social action brings to the fore significant signs of ongoing changes: The meaning and the change of meaning can be seen from the actions and in the actions, or better in the “interactions.”

We would like to conduct our investigation focusing on a particular type of social interaction: the weberian analysis of *professional duty* provides, in our opinion, an extraordinarily effective point to “monitor” the parable that are of interest to us, the link between work faith and systemic trust. The concept itself of “duty” introduces us to the critical field of morality, of what is valuable, what is the ground on which we stands on and what prompts you to engage because “it’s worth it”, but, above all, of what is a call we need to “answer” and take charge, *responsibility*: this effort is always been refereed to as work.

It is worth noting that in recent centuries there has been a particularly significant, radical and accelerated change in societal and individual identity construction linked to professional activity. We decide to start from today, by how you live now the job in the advanced societies, to recover then its ideal roots and its most recent historical changes.

Work and Realization

Let's start by noting that, in Western culture work has become «the only prominent source and the only accepted parameter for measuring the value of man and his activities» (Beck 1999, p. 16). This trend is so heightened and pervasive that you can observe in parallel the proliferation and the spread of «a conception of childhood and adolescence as “occupational careers”» (Ferrucci 2008, p. 43).

Where does this sudden promotion of professional activity as overriding indicator of the “value” of the person come from? It has become customary to consider work no longer «as a mere instrument to procure a living. Instead,

it takes on a deeper function» (Venturelli 2000, p. 84) placed «at the center of the building and of the transformation of identities in the modern world» (Dubar 1996, it. transl. 2004, p. 151). In other words, work has become the fundamental social action by which one can define his/her own identity: *it is through what he makes that the individual says and shows what he is*. In essence, «work has stopped being seen as a condemnation, to become element around which one can build a satisfactory picture of himself» (Venturelli 2000, p. 84).

There has been a time (which we want to try to identify more precisely) where «the decline of ethics of duty and the birth of the ethics of self-realization» started (Eicahrdus and Smits 2008, p. 244). This shift, as we shall see, does not happen without consequences and without short circuits. Work is loaded with such high expectations that can not be fulfilled from it (except in very rare cases). As a consequence, we have currently often times passed the burden of realization to “free time”. The modern worker «was given the freedom to use a large part of his free time as he wish or, if you prefer, he was condemned to do so» (Berger and Berger 1975, it. transl. 1995, p. 289). For this purpose, the thriving entertainment industries «provide the support for private fulfillment and for finding a self-identification. The non-working time has become an extremely important sector of consumption» (ibid, p. 290).

This conception of work has not always been such. Work, in human history, was yes often considered an *asceticism*, that is an effort, a form of training, a struggling to support and improve life. However such asceticism became a cornerstone for the building of one's identity, that is, of the *value* of the person, in a radically *intra-worldly* version, only in recent times.

The “Professional” Revolution

The “classical” conception of work is extremely simple: according to Aristotle, the servant (i.e. the working man) «is an animated object of property» (Tranquilli 1979, p. 53). In ancient society only the slaves work, while free men devote themselves to the “liberal” or military arts. A first great conceptual revolution takes place in medieval Christian society, according to which all men are equal (in dignity) in front of God: if this is a radical change in the consideration of the person, that does not translate however, in a revolution of the functions assigned to working activity itself, which continues to be referred as a mean to fulfill «not the overall human needs, only the bodily needs» (ibid, p. 83). In simple societies therefore, «work is not a symbolic field themed in itself. It coincides with the activity destined to procure subsistence» (Donati 2001, p. 55).

All in all, on the threshold of modernity, work is therefore perceived «as alien, if not to man, to his deepest aspirations» (Tranquilli 1979, p. 69), since they do not yet have the intellectual tools to focus on the disproportion between the unlimited power of human labor and the narrowness of the simple physiological needs and hence the «net overabundance of the inherent potential of this one compared with the little requirements of the others» (ibid, p. 90).

This awareness emerges instead as unexpected product of a religious revolution, after which nothing would have remained as before in European culture (therefore in Western culture): the Protestant Reformation, which brings a «radical break between a pre-modern and modern sense of work» (Donati 2001, p. 59).

In fact at the heart of Lutheranism (beyond the moral “opportunities” that motivate its reforming action) there is a revolutionary thinking about the value of *human action*. As it is well known, in protestant theology *human actions* are radically devalued: only God is capable of a redeeming action. The more you give value to human action, the more you reduce the divine one.

It was not Lutheranism, however, to draw the revolutionary (and, after all, paradoxical) consequences of this new theory of (social) action: it is more properly in Calvinism, in fact, that this explosive and disruptive trigger is switched on. The theology of “predestination”, in fact, comes to create a whole new feeling of existence in the world: «even if good actions are an unsuitable mean for salvation, they are however an indispensable mark of election. They are the technical means, not for salvation, but to break free from the anxiety of salvation» (Weber 1904/05, it. transl. 1977, p. 197).

But what “good actions” or activities are we talking about? The choice of the type of “privileged” activities is already very significant and, in my opinion, little regarded by many of the scholars on this field: work, or, better still, success in work is a mark of election. Why really work? Are there (religiously speaking) marks less subject to instrumentalization and equally worthy of being considered as a sign of predilection? The fact is that Calvinism establishes, on the basis of theology of predestination, a «concept of work as a goal in itself, as a vocation (Beruf)» (Weber 1904/05, it. transl. 1977, p. 119).

The point that captures the curiosity and the meticulous intelligence of Weber is the clear contradiction between the strictly “rational” structure for achieving the objectives and the apparent irrationality with which the profits derived from work are used: in fact, they are regarded as the *aim* of human life, and no longer as a *mean* to satisfy the material needs. In practice, you produce goods that you are no longer using after: they are simply and compulsorily reinvested. For a “Latin” mind all this would be inconceivable. Yet, “this reversal of the natural relationship, which is even meaningless for simple common sense, is clearly a fundamental motive of capitalism” (ibid, p. 105).

How, can we then «rationally justify an acquisitive activity which systematically prohibits the immediate enjoyment of the fruits?» (Poggi 1984, p. 71): «We are interested here, precisely, in the source of that irrational

element, which is contained in this as in every other concept of “vocation”» (Weber 1904/05, it. transl. 1977, p. 137).

Weber's answer is enlightening with respect to the radical change of conception of the meaning of work, a concept which, through progressive mutations, will arrive to this day: it is around and through work that man fulfills himself (socially), or, more specifically through professional success. What is initially justified by religious reasons fades gradually more and more in the background and becomes irrelevant, accessory.

Our hypothesis is that, in fact, the religious dimension will inevitably continue to support this type of concept, always in different forms, but always “supporting” (being and feeling “correct”) in a professional and social system more and more laden with contradictions and short circuits.

Residual Calvinism

What is remained, what has changed and what instead is lost, a little later, of the original push from which capitalism was born? It is worth to re-read the final summary of the path acutely constructed by Weber: «The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so [...] Today the spirit of religious asceticism has escaped from the cage, but capitalism no longer needs its support [...] As a ghost of religious concepts that were, professional duty wanders into our lives. People even stop trying to justify it at all. In the country where it developed the most, United States, economic activities, stripped of any ethical-religious sense, tends to be associated with purely agonistic passions, which often assumes the character of sport» (Weber 1904/05, it. transl. 1977, p. 305).

The original theological system was soon dispersed: the bourgeois culture of “welfare” has gradually breached the system of thought and of religious morality, disrupting and replacing it. It remains the cage, the structural product of this revolution, the market, which is now able to self-produce. However what remains with it is the Moloch of *professional duty*: this unreflective moral attitude, “so obvious to us today, and in fact in itself so little understandable as a characteristic of the social ethics of the capitalist civilization» (ibid, p. 106). This is the first “residual” (almost in the paretian sense) of the Calvinist idea that still lives in Western culture, but perhaps I should say in capitalist culture, because its applications in the Orient have been and are perhaps even more radical than the Western version.

Initially this supreme order is justified by the heavenly “predestination” connected to it and dependent on it, and coincided with the vocation (“Beruf”). It later becomes simply the «fulfillment of own worldly duties, such as they result from the position of each one in life» (ibid, p. 145). Finally the service to the glory of God is manifested essentially «in the performance of professional duties imposed by the *lex naturae* and takes thus the objective and impersonal character of service made to the rational order of the social world around us» (ibid, p. 186).

From heaven to earth, therefore we witness numbly a progressive slippage, photographed by the very effective expression of *intra-worldly asceticism*, practiced «in the earthly reality, in the public world common to all» (Poggi 1984, p. 95). The intra-worldly ascetic is «the called man», which [...] does not pose questions neither has need to do it, being enough for him the awareness to realize, with his personal rational action in this world, that wish of God that remains inscrutable in its ultimate meaning» (Weber 1922b, it. transl. 1999, p. 236). This reliance, slipping almost inadvertently by faith in God to the unthinking confidence in the system, is, in our opinion, the root of that luhmannian ‘*se confier*’ we want to analyze. Even then, «the attitude towards the world remained a patient “inclusion in its ordinances”» (Weber 1922b, it. transl. 1999, p. 255).

Another calvinist “residual” is the new structuring of ‘the way to do business’ remained almost intact to this day and all rooted in the principle of rational method, i.e. in calculations. This approach led to two significant consequences.

The first on the radically secularized horizon of work: «Only the ascetic Protestantism really gave the final blow to the magic, to the extra-worldliness of the search for salvation. [...] For Asian religiosities of all kinds, the world remained rather a large magical garden» (Weber 1922b, it. transl. 1999, p. 308).

The second consequence, however, is that concerning the mode of relationship between people at work: being also defined by the rational method, it becomes, accordingly, functional, anonymous and instrumental and leads to that «emotional neutralization of the social relationships that the spirit of capitalism imposes» (Poggi 1984, p. 85). It is the dogma of predestination to provoke in the individual a keen sense of his isolation from the others, which leads him to «treat everyone with a certain detachment» (ibid, p. 98). In summary, little by little, the intra-worldly asceticism authorizes to treat the world «as a wholly separate reality from God, devoid of mystery, of symbolic meanings and mystical occasions of access to His will» (ibid, p. 97).

If then, «from the transcendent, the ethic of work becomes immanent» (Donati 2001, p. 60), and becomes all intra-worldly, it can only be all determined by the rules of the working world, that is, from the *market*, last residual of the great calvinist parable. The new *faith* is the belief that, abandoned all moral and operating hitch of religious type, it is able to regulate itself and to foster, according to Adam Smith, «thanks to an invisible hand, the material progress of the whole society» (Colozzi 1998, p. 208).

Again, therefore, an act of faith placed in «the most impersonal relationship where the human beings can enter. The absolute impersonality contrasts with every spontaneous form of human relationship» (Poggi 1984, p. 45): and so the dynamics themselves of “personal recognition” are fixed at market conditions, «transforming the

individual into a greyhound chasing rabbit never receiving enough recognition for fastest kilometer» (Willig, 2009, p. 351).

From faith in God to trust in the system

The work, therefore, becomes the new *source of ethics*, for which «identity and social status are derived only from one's profession and career» (Beck 1999, p. 88).

How did this transition that absolutizes work as a criterion of individual evaluation happen? «In the simple social systems, a way to live safely, that went beyond the confidence in particular individuals, was obtained by means of religious beliefs about the very existence, of nature, of the supernatural, and again by means of the myth, the language and the natural law» (Luhmann, 1968/2001, p. 73). For Luhmann, therefore, the beliefs have been the glue of the «simple» societies, a definition that, we think, should refer to the pre-modern societies.

With modernity, though, a process began (that ripened in postmodernity) according to which «the citizen who has lost his faith in God, believe in the divine nature of the work produced by his hands which creates all that he hold more precious: well-being, social status, personality, meaning in life, democracy, political cohesion. Name any value of modernity and I can demonstrate that it has as its premises what it hides, namely participation in paid work» (Beck 1999, p. 96). Work, then, could be identified as a «functional substitute» of religion in «complex» societies: Work could be charged with those expectations, those unavoidable functions, essential for individual and social existence.

In a certain sense, we could say that only now Durkheim's prophecy completely fulfills itself: «This reality, which the mythologies have represented in many different forms, but which is the objective, universal and eternal cause of feelings sui generis of which is made religious experience, is the society» (Durkheim 1912, it. transl. 2005, p. 482). Only now it takes place (at least theoretically) the radical slipping *from transcendent transcendence to the immanent transcendence*. It is still a *faith*, but *systemic*, all internal to itself.

Such faith, as all faiths worthy of respect «not applies only to social systems, but also to other individuals seen as personal systems» (Luhmann, 1968/2001, p. 33). Here is the closing of the parable: the «rational method» that in Calvinism had imposed an «affective neutralization» among the participants in the system, translates in the consideration of the *other as a system*, with its ethical consequences. Here then that the dominant suggestion of the new culture becomes a desirable «suppression of the moral impulse» because to follow that impulse means taking responsibility and «leads to involvement in the destiny of the other and to commit to its well-being» (Bauman 1999, p. 50).

Faith in the system, however, implies that the relationships are instrumental: this isn't about a risky investment on the person as such, since «everyone is relying on the fact that within the system there are sufficient reliability controls, and that these controls are functioning independently of the motivational structures of each of the participants, so that you do not need to personally know individuals who have acquired that knowledge» (Luhmann, 1968/2001, p. 82).

A vulnerable faith

This new interpersonal situation in which credibility is delegated, theoretically and practically, to the reliability of the system is, after all, a necessity consequent to the growing complexities of society: the systemic trust runs to the rescue of the individual, assuring him that at least the familiar things will keep their stability, guaranteeing the minimum threshold of *ontological security* necessary to the continuity of own social identity and of the social and material environment. «But it is a phenomenon more emotional than cognitive, rooted in the unconscious» (Giddens 1990, p. 96). In fact today, perhaps more radically than in Durkheim's times, «faith rests on mechanisms of knowledge that the uninitiated largely ignore [...]. Most people almost always, trusts in social practices and mechanisms of which they have little or no technical knowledge» (ibid, pp. 92-93).

Strange retaliation: the abandonment of religion, of the unpredictable, of the mystery, sanctified a seemingly knowable and manageable element (the social system), in fact more unknown, scary and risky than the ancient beliefs. If, as we have seen, the ascetic Protestantism gave the final blow to the magic, we are forced to ask ourselves if this unthinking confidence in the system does not have, paradoxically, characters similar to the attitude own of the pre-modern civilizations towards their fetishes, those characters that are studied by Durkheim in his careful analysis of the totemic religion. Here is the emergence of a paradox for which «one can safely say that right here, in the modern Western societies, there are millions of people whose worldview is full of magic, miracles, wonders, as much as the vision of the New World Testament» (Berger 2004, it. transl. 2005, p. 152).

This new faith (to call it simply «confidence» is just a secular strategy politically correct, but, at bottom, hypocrite), just like the old ones, is not enough to heal the anxieties of his followers, anxieties that cyclically re-emerge on the surface: «This situation also creates new forms of psychological vulnerability and the trust in abstract systems does not offer the same psychological gratification of the trust in people [...] the trust in abstract systems provides a sort of daily reliability but, by its very nature, can not provide the reciprocity and the intimacy that the personal relationships of trust offer [...] There is a strong psychological need to give confidence to the 'neighbour', but, compared to the pre-modern social contexts, there is a lack of personal ties institutionally organized» (Giddens 1990, pp. 116- 117-121).

From this point of view, the luhmannian “semblance of sincerity” proves to be a good functional substitute of sincerity only within certain limits: “At the micro and macro social level, the “as if” of the credibility is useful, functional, to the extent that it not absolutizes itself, neither expires in an absolute self-righteousness. That is, it works if it is based on the sincere adherence to ultimate values and meanings that individuals share and are not willing to question. If the “as if” is pushed too far, it would create an uncontrollable generalized “suspect” on the relations, that would paralyze them» (Gili 2005, p. 86).

A Necessary Alternative Frame

«But the political and social relationships, once reduced to pure relationships of rationality, will limit their function precisely to the simple pursuit of rationality. However, can the latter, whatever, constitute an acceptable purpose for man?» (Bixio 1988, p. 233). We make this question ours: the systems in which we place faith, those born in the wake of the great *rationalization* of procedures, of functions and relationships, are able to “keep faith” to the promise of identity stabilization? Sociological analyses are more and more bringing to the fore new or old urgencies of the human structure who are suffering in this new faith: it is insufficient to support the inevitable «push toward self-realization, based on fundamental trust, that in the personalized contexts can be reached only through an “openness” of the I towards the neighbour» (Beck 1999, p. 125).

If in advanced societies (as we highlighted at the beginning of this study) we witness the decline of the “ethics of duty” and the birth of the “ethics of self-realization”, perhaps it should be considered that such a realization is possible only «freeing work by reifying conceptions proper of ancient and modern cultures, as well as by aesthetic, relativist and subjectivist conceptions proper of the so-called post-modern cultures» (Donati 2001, p. 205), since «work responds to needs that, far from being “private”, are increasingly relational» (ibid, p. 172).

There is much talk today of *responsibility*, on the one hand as an essential component for the preservation of social systems, on the other side as a practice unpleasant and strange, if not, ultimately, contrary to one self-realization. In this incurable dialectic tension, the strategy of the *planned reduction* of responsibility, that does not impose unsustainable loads (such as the well-being of their own kind) to the individual already overly stressed, is myopic in the end: responsibility describes a relational property which, if pursued, brings the subject to ask questions about the fundamentals and the values of its social action and the nature of ‘otherness’.

To take seriously the relationship with the other, to take responsibility for responding to the pro/vocation that he/she inexhaustibly reiterates is perhaps the more urgent bearing needed if the men of post modernity, are still to be able to imagine «that there is something more than the mere existence they lead, something more of the legal systems of the world to which they are hopelessly bound» (Adorno 1956, it. transl. 1990, p. 131).

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