

A non-manual of human resource management, or how to survive the ‘imaginary humanists’¹

Nicoletta Masiero

Preface

In Italy, organizational studies have undoubtedly an excellent reputation and a strong consensus. They have given rise to many University Departments, Schools, Research Institutes and Foundations which have produced a set of knowledge and power exerting an almost undisputed cultural hegemony. This hegemony has been relaunched during the 90s, when Knowledge Management rhetoric and Knowledge-Based Perspective, in association with European Politics, have emphasized knowledge and its valorisation as a strategic resource for organizations. Basically, the “knowledge asset”, combined with lifelong learning and the promise of organizational and individual development, has permitted the introduction of more and more insidious management strategies, without questioning neither the transformations involving power relations in the workplace nor their social consequences.

The body of this set of knowledge boasts a certain internal cohesion, as anyone can notice looking through the pages, for example, of *Sinergie. Italian Journal Management*. Besides the age-old problem of the gap between academic discourse and its application in organizations, the main dichotomies of the “discipline” concern opposite tendencies between theoretical models and rigour versus strong empiricism; strictly scientific perspective and a pretended more humanistic, ethical one; openness to international dimensions and Anglo-Saxon empirical methods versus valorisation of traditions. At the same time, with regard to a more popular literature, the shelves of book shops are full of more or less serious handbooks and guides, promising success and professional fulfilment. The general public is thus overwhelmed by a number of managerial (self)training proposals and suggestions that the individual as responsible subject will practice in order to lead his life in a efficacious and healthy way.

Until now, few voices have been able to achieve a remarkable spread by criticizing the effects of management strategies on individual conducts and the identities of the subjects concerned by power relations. Some years ago, a book written by the ex-manager Francesco Varanini gained a certain attention, but, in spite of the title (*Contro il management – Against management*, 2010), the book aimed only at denouncing the ambiguous link between a certain “bad” and “inhuman” management and financial speculation.

There are, of course, some well-known intellectuals and scholars opposing the managerial order of the discourse, such as Luciano Gallino or Marco Revelli, but, in spite of the lively and “politically incorrect” production of some small publishers, few Italian researchers, often working abroad or fighting strong and deep-rooted resistances, are really interested in the specific field of Critical Management Studies.

Two publications are worth to be pointed out: the recent issue of *Sociologia del lavoro* entitled “Creating value with diversity” (n° 134/2014, FrancoAngeli), in which Patrizia Zanoni assumes the CMS perspective in order to criticize the *diversity management*, and the book *Diversità culturali e*

¹ Note by Nicoletta Masiero - researcher Ires Veneto This note on the book *Le risorse umane* by Massimiliano Nicoli, Rome: Ediesse 2015, is a revised version of the review published in *Economy and Society Regional* XXXII (2) 2015 pp. 119-12 DOI: 10.3280 / ES2015-002009. Thanks Alex Reynolds and of Critical Management Studies Team for language consultancy in English translation.

di genere nel lavoro tra tutele e valorizzazioni (FrancoAngeli, 2009), in which, in addition to Zanoni herself, also Vincenza Esposito, Mario Pezzillo Iacono and Lucia Silvestri work on the same subject. Of course, many interventions and contributions can be found on the web, but in this academic and quite closed panorama, the publication of a critical and accessible book such as *Le risorse umane* by Massimiliano Nicoli represents a remarkable novelty that deserves all attention.

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Summary

In this note I try to illustrate the meaning of the publication in Italy of a critical and accessible book on the human resource management issue – *Le risorse umane* by Massimiliano Nicoli. In the Introduction, I explain the collocation of this ‘non-manual’ in a panorama where HRM theories and practices are very approved. Sections 2-3-4 follow the Author’s way of examination on the "human resources" vicissitudes in the industrial and post-industrial age, not aiming to trace the concept’s history, but seeking to interrogate behaviours and conditions of the domain of the concept given by psychology, pedagogy, educational sciences, etc. In fact, the book looks at how the power is embroiled in this imposition of the knowledge in the workplace. Particularly, section 4 and the conclusions (section 5) stress the importance of Michel Foucault in this analysis.

1. Introduction

Compared to the numerous handbooks published on Human Resource Management, the manual by the philosopher Massimiliano Nicoli *Le risorse umane* (The human resources) could be defined as a ‘non-handbook’. It was published in early 2015 by Ediesse as part of the series ‘fondamenti’ (<http://www.ediesseonline.it/catalogo/fondamenti> in Italian it can mean both ‘fundamental concepts’ and ‘structured minds’). It was conceived to be a ‘monographic’ and ‘for high divulgation’ work, and it aimed at dealing with not strictly philosophical issues by a ‘critical’² approach. Within this series, Nicoli’s book forms part of the sub-series ‘cos’è?’ (‘what is it?’), as we gather from the question mark on the cover. The monograph, then, does indeed address a very specific topic with a view to explain and clarify it for its readers. Anyone turning to this book, however, in order to equip themselves to effectively manage human beings will surely be disappointed. As the author points out right at the start,

“this is not a book of management and it doesn’t contain any useful information either for workers in the field of human resource management or for people who would like to work there” (p. 9).

The intention is rather to

“use the experience of working in a company to show how and in what terms the whole problematic of ‘human resources’ forms the correlate of a specific mode of exercise of power and / or governance of people: all in all, the book in your hand doesn’t speak about anything else than this” (pp. 14-15).

The aim of the book, then, is not at all to train or to ‘qualify’ its readers as workers in the field evoked by its title; rather, its aim is to call into question the notion of ‘human resources’ which has acquired, along with such related terms and notions as ‘human factor’ and ‘human capital’, a position of predominance in today’s ‘ordinary language’ and to show what is problematic about these notions as regards to their provenance, their social function and their political implications. Like many another, these terms and notions present

² ‘Critical’ approach is sometimes, and by convention, synecdoche of ‘philosophical’.

themselves wrapped in an air of (pseudo-)scientific ‘objectivity’ which tends to ensure that they are applied – often by opposing political sides – in a neutral way that however generates persistent effect on our lives. To critically question this purportedly ‘purely descriptive’ vocabulary and the effects that have ensued from it means to try to make intelligible the interwoven preconditions and practices that have made this pseudo-objective discourse possible. A critical approach (whether we also call it ‘philosophical’ or not) ought to consist in an effort (simple but, for all that, far from easy) to show that which presents itself as ‘real’ was in fact, in its genesis, merely one of many ‘possibilities’, and to clarify the interwoven practices that structure this ‘reality’. Such is the operation carried out by Nicoli: one necessarily resistant to the restrictions that inhere, by definition, in the ‘manual’ and the ‘practical guide’. Distinguished by a great clarity of exposition which succeeds in reconciling the pedagogic-explicative aim of the work with the broader critical intention animating the whole series, *Le Risorse Umane* represents a détournement of the discourse, the vocabulary, the conceptual register and all the attendant distortions of the current ‘human resources’ literature, so that the book can be said to set out on a road generally avoided by ‘management theorists’.

2. The management science: from the human factor to the humanistic turn

The strategy, so to speak, of this non-manual is a throwing off track that puts the reader in front of what is usually kept out (the un-thought which philosophers talk and talk about?) of the subject on the ‘human factor’ ever since its appearance in the industrial context – or rather, since its ‘discovery’ by the ‘school of human relations’ in the 1920s. The emergence of this notion of a ‘human factor’ appeared at the time as a factor partially disrupting the inflexibility of that scientific management which functioned essentially only in terms of the regulating and disciplining of employees trained and supervised and thereby rewarded and punished. ‘A high reward in the case of success and a forfeit in the case of failure: this is the elementary principle that establishes organizational justice and that requires the putting in place of a thoroughgoing system of corporate micro-penalties’ (p. 85). We can imagine what an almost ‘celestial’ air surrounded this epiphany of the ‘discovery’ of a ‘human factor’ when we place it in its historical context of the epoch of the ‘assembly line’, when the mechanical process had come to comprise each gesture and the time required for it (pp. 100-101) and the very apex of ‘abstract labour’ had been attained through the elimination from the work process of almost every subjective or human element. In fact, the ‘human factor’ extravagant rush in the manufactory will gradually lead the personnel management to strip from the dehumanizing paradigms of the effectiveness and the efficiency. So, the personnel management, through a more and more refined research of the workers’ welfare, lands to the ‘human capital’ promotion of which ‘the turning point of the humanistic management’ will brag.

An especially remarkable feature of this so called ‘humanistic turn’ has been, especially in recent decades, the support provided by legions of ‘philosophical consultants’ who, looking for a way out of that path of academic training in the humanities – which is nowadays almost unanimously perceived to be ‘useless’ and a ‘dead end’ – eagerly exchange their academic gowns for business suits and place themselves, through activities of mentoring, counselling and coaching entirely in the service of this supposedly ‘human’ element within the corporation (pp. 25 and ff.). This ethical-psychological ‘re-styling’, however, does not really differ from any other business tool, since the ‘humanization’ of the organizing of work does not aim in the end (nor can it aim) at anything else than increasing company profits. But the effect of the ‘humanistic turn’ was not to end there. This complicity between productivity and ‘human resources’ management was finally to succeed in bringing about a complete transition from a coercive form of authority – which, it had been realized, involved certain disadvantages – to forms of ‘leadership’ involving moral accountability. These can activate the ‘humans’ in the exercise of power, thus activating a full-scale corporate ‘governmentality’ which extended even to those areas of resistance and potential points of rupture – the true and effective obstacles to unlimited profit and to ‘social order’ – which might have eluded merely disciplinary mechanisms of the ‘scientific organization of labour’:

“the Taylorist-Fordist biopower does not succeed in capturing a sufficient proportion of bios; that is to say, it does not subsume ‘life’ in its entirety and there persists a residue of vital time that evades the grip of corporate power.” (p. 135).

Already with the emergence of the early prototypes of ‘human resources’ discourse, however, there begins to be imposed on this ‘residue’ a certain adherence to the ‘enterprise’.

Though maintaining a suitable distance from the growing number of Foucauldian followers, Nicoli’s work still draws its vitality from Michel Foucault’s work – “a necessary and unavoidable point of reference“ (p. 12) – making good use, as it does, of many key Foucauldian notions (‘dispositif’, ‘biopouvoir’, ‘biopolitique’, ‘gouvernementalité’, ‘véridiction’), that are, it must be said, unfortunately often misused. Moreover, the notions that Nicoli acquires from Foucault are those in which we find most densely concentrated that undeniable heuristic potential which allows us to reconstruct the co-involvement between the structures of power and the dictates of science. A ‘deviant’ reading, then, of the ‘science of management’, in which a transparent and prudent use of the conceptual apparatus provided by Foucault – particularly the Foucault of the 70s – brings to light an ongoing coordination between the micro-physical level (the exercise of ‘clinical’ practice on subjectivity and of control and surveillance on bodies) and the macro-political level (scientific organization of production and the rationalization of the socioeconomic structure). There emerges from this an analysis of a decidedly political character whose open disagreements with the uncontested domination of the discourse of ‘human resources management’ find firm support in the book’s epistemological arguments.

The book consists of four dense chapters, accompanied by a small glossary and some ad hoc bibliographical references. These chapters closely examine the varying fortunes of the notion of ‘human resources’ in the industrial and post-industrial age. The author does not aspire to write a ‘history of an idea’ in the traditional sense, but rather to critically investigate those forms of conduct and conditions which have formed the domains of several concepts constructed by the bodies of knowledge called psychology, pedagogy, training etc. and to look at how there has always been inseparably involved, in the process of imposition of these forms of knowledge, the moment of the exercise of power within the workplace. The author calls these forms of knowledge ‘humanistic organisational knowledge’ (p. 24), meaning thereby the practices and discourses which fall within the ambit of Human Resource Management (HRM). These latter acquired a differentiation, in the course of the 1960s and 70s, also on the academic level from such disciplines as sociology, psychology and labour law. The knowledge-forms constituting HRM acquired ever broader currency in subsequent decades, while remaining nonetheless of radically uncertain epistemic status, ‘suspended between theory and practice’ (p. 25, see also pp. 113 et seq.), finding their focus sometimes in the economic-business aspect, at other times in the aspect of the psycho-pedagogical organization of the enterprise. The countless management schools, which have been a flourishing entrepreneurial sector ever since the days of Frederick W. Taylor and his ‘principles of scientific management’, have devised equally countless variants of these knowledge-forms, with their techniques of ‘active listening’, ‘empowerment’, ‘performance management’, ‘job evaluation’ etc., combined with ever more meticulous personnel selection. Today, the technology developed by these sciences continues to apply a whole battery of tools (from the ‘behavioural event interview’ to the operational package known as an ‘assessment centre’) designed to x-ray subjectivity of the actual or potential employee, tirelessly examining and measuring this latter’s abilities, skills, and potentials so as to eliminate those ‘unfit for purpose’ (‘inhuman resources’?).

A meticulous observation of the life and the morality of the worker had already been practiced also by ‘scientific organization of labour’ of Taylorist/Fordist. However, its inspiration amounted, at bottom, to a simple ‘will to knowledge’ aimed at mathematically standardizing motions and the times required via the disciplining of the labour-force (especially its lazy or insubordinate members) so as to produce docile and productive individuals (p. 92). The ‘industrial psychology’ was, instead, from the very beginning, to apply the tool of knowledge about the employee in his/her entirety so as to exert a governance over this latter’s character and thus to ‘humanize’ the climate within the corporation, inspiring in the workers sentiments of

gratitude and eager availability to the company, which was to be perceived more and more as a place of happiness and fulfilment.

These ever more subtle disciplinary techniques had, however, to continue to struggle with persisting pockets of resistance which they now began to conceptualize in terms of a 'human' variable unsusceptible of being measured in numerical terms. The psychologizing of power relations in the enterprises found a theoretical foundation here – albeit not a very sophisticated one – in the 'human relations' theory of Elton Mayo. That is when “the inmost folds and wrinkles of subjectivity emerge as a new field of inquiry” by way of which the corporation can penetrate with its disciplinary tools and techniques even “beyond the moral behaviour of workers, inside and outside the factory” (p. 123), that is to say, into spheres that Taylor and Ford had had no hope of attaining.

With the rise of Human Relations theory, that mere disciplinary engineering that had been 'the scientific organization of labour' becomes, in fact, transformed and enhanced by the practice of an activity of the 'clinical' type – one which scrutinizes the deepest and most hidden traits of the 'humanized' resources and sets about rearranging these traits. The enterprise was thenceforth to be set up as a hotbed of relationships between 'human beings' trained in such a way as to bring into being a novel and clamorous alliance between the psychological wellbeing of the worker and the constant increase of company profits. Managers were assigned their 'walk-on parts' in this new drama: namely, to incentivize these new forms of participation for the workers, so as to render the climate within the company progressively more 'human' and achieve a state of general contented obedience in the execution of labour, an activity finally become as 'pleasurable' as it is 'profitable'. In the more industrialized countries this figure of 'the manager', as the 'third element' between the boss and the employee, begins to take more and more substantial form, in the period just before the Second World War, as a kind of embankment set up against any remaining conflicts. The 'manager' henceforth takes on, at one and the same time, the role of directing force and that of “moral example” (pp. 126 et seq.). An ethical foundation was given to this notion of managerial action by Chester I. Barnard's introduction, in 1938, of a distinction between (organizational) 'efficiency' and mere 'effectiveness'.

Nicoli identifies within the action of the 'manager' of this type and his managerial innovations

“a movement toward the 'strategic supplementation' of the Taylorist disciplinary mechanism, a manoeuvre of 'recovery' that perfects, de facto, the mode of supervision and control exerted in the workplace and also constructs, without consciously intending to, certain of the conditions for the transcendence of the Taylorist-Fordist model within the context of the affirmation of what will become a new neo-liberal 'governmentality'.” (pp. 131-132).

A heterogeneity of ends – from which there was then to emerge a 'first-order' role for 'humanistic organizational knowledge' that would go beyond mere 'strategic supplementation' (p. 172) – made possible by the compression of the collective and social dimension of work in the face of the emphasis placed by the 'science of management' on its psychological-individual aspects, resulting eventually in the conversion of the space of the enterprise into an ecosystem for the psychological development and the 'maturation' of the individual. Thus, precisely insofar as work within the company henceforth was to become camouflaged as a kind of 'psychagogia' indispensable for the reinforcement of the self, and for this self's emancipation by means of a process of ascetic discipline leading to self-awareness and self-control, the conscious and autonomous subject – stripped naked now and rendered innocuous – was to become a model 'human' individual. This subject, in fact, was henceforth to represent an individuality reconciled and thereby 'adult', which might be contrasted and opposed to that childishly reluctant 'labour-power' which had previously – as Marx had shown in the first volume of *Capital* – offered a certain resistance to the despotism of the foreman and floor manager thanks to that 'cooperation' and 'socialized labour' in which the masses had found a way to give expression to their own power. It was this subtly ubiquitous movement of 'personalization' – which was later further hastened and promoted by the massive increase in 'service sector' and so-called 'immaterial' labour – that was to provide the framework for the construction of consensus, just as the

insidious injunction to 'self-examination' tended to lead to the obliteration of all that is exterior to the self, that is, of the collective, the public, the political.

In the 60's the 'Human Relations' model was supplanted and replaced by the 'Human Resources' one (Raymond Miles introduced the latter in 1965) and, passing through the "growth medium of motivationalism" (p. 130), there was to be seen a gradual transition to 'management by objectives'. This latter was to expand

"during the Post-Fordist era and within the context of neo-liberal policies focused on 'human capital' until it became a generalized form of the relationship between individuals and their own practices, both of work and of life: the 'construction of the self' henceforth became something like the 'incorporation' (in the specifically legal-commercial sense) of subjectivity" (p. 131).

With the 'resource' being projected in this way in terms of its potential results, work became 'pleasurable' also qua opportunity for workers to test their skills and their capacities in a kind of race that offered prizes, promotions, and careers. A thrilling competition that was to prove all too easily transformable, once the climate changed to one of austerity and restructuring, into a desperate fight to hold on to a job of any sort.

3. The pleasurable labour in the happy organisation

In an enterprise model based on the 'performance dynamic' the execution of work was to be as continuously monitored as the actions of the inmates in Bentham's Panopticon, and constantly evaluated. In Nicoli's book, this evaluation is given a very incisive definition as "a managerial act executed by *autonomia*" (p. 33). It now comes to invest – claiming, in a manner that allows no discussion, to be inspired by indices and parameters of a purely objective nature (for such are the 'criteria of merit', *ça va sans rien dire!*) the entire cycle of 'human resource' management, from the selection interview right up to the dismissal letter. To the point that, for HRM experts, the evaluations in question here take on an actual ethical significance. These evaluations satisfy, in fact, a basic requirement of justice which, as such, guarantees the absolute 'neutrality' of management discourse. The virtue of neutrality, in fact, is a founding virtue of this discourse, boasted of by all the different schools of management science (that set of heterogeneous practices and discourses within "a framework that obsessively declares itself humanist and a-political" (p. 27). It is in this way that labour and capital are magically reconciled, thanks to incontestably impartial and cathartic forms of knowledge, inasmuch as they are extrapolated from power relationships and purified of the germ of class conflict, which now becomes sublimated in a culture of emulation – or distorted in a fierce competition – between subjects at once 'happy and exploited', to borrow the phrase of Carlo Formenti³. With the achievement of a fusional state of grace in which 'core business' converges with the development of the personality and of its potential, nothing seems more 'natural' than that the subject now comes to achieve a perfect fusion with the culture, the 'vision', and the 'mission' of the company and gives proof of autonomy, initiative, motivation, willingness to participate in team work, but also of self-denial and zeal, lavishly investing in its work all its various aptitudes and competences, even the most private and hidden, which now become indistinguishable from professional competences. Those traits of subjectivity which are diagnosed and evaluated now concern, to an ever greater degree, the emotional and personal sphere of the employee or potential employee, so that companies come more and more to resemble 'corporate clinics' for the 'human resources' they employ. The greater the company's skill in appearing to give back the results of these evaluations under the form of a graciously offered free contribution to the integral development of the employee's personality, the more firmly will be cemented that 'corporate spirit' which will ensure the employee's grateful and unconditional adhesion to the organization.

This organisation itself is the other pole to which HRM stubbornly applies its practices. The organisation must work on its external and internal image; must strengthen its values, symbols, and trademarks; must be

³ Carlo Formenti (2011), *Felici e sfruttati. Capitalismo digitale ed eclissi del lavoro*. Milano: Egea.

open to change ('to change' is an imperative duty that none can escape) and will thus be able to arrive at 'commitment' – that outcome of the cognitive phenomenon that, in the literature, is referred to as

“organizational identification ... a phenomenon of overlap between individual identity and organizational identity. The emotional involvement that goes along with it is 'emotional attachment to the company', a 'moral obligation' to stay with the organization and contribute to it” (p. 40),

quite regardless of the benefits that can or cannot be derived from such loyalty. It is in this idyllic reciprocity between individual and organization that there consists the philosopher's stone of 'humanistic management'. The recipe for the magic potion to be administered to the 'resource': increasing doses of empowerment and reinforcement of decisional authority 'to taste' – i.e. so-called 'leadership empowering', whereby the manager ceases merely to manage and becomes a charismatic, 'Socratic' adviser, or even a friend or a father, to the employee (pp. 192-193) – resulting in the creation of an emotional alchemy so intensely felt that the employee will act in the name of the firm even against his/her own interests. During the crisis of 'big industry', when Fordist 'stability' was evaporating, 'Human Resources Management' was to equip itself with multiple devices of 'flexibility' aimed at “encouraging autonomous, free and creative actions” (p. 171) and encouraging self-entrepreneurial behaviour. This was to allow capital, even in the midst of the processes of globalization and the 'dematerialization' of labour, to respect the strategic and pervasive obligation to 'flexibility' which had supplanted the solidity of the earlier model of production and society.

It is in the fourth and final chapter that the author turns to look at the changes introduced by the just in time and lean production methods that emerged during the period of so-called 'Toyotization'. He looks at the capitalist capture of 'general intellect' as living labour, and at the “'transubstantiation' of post-Fordist labour by managerial technologies” (p. 168) – following out some themes of Italian operaista and post-operaista debate from the late 1970's up to the point where they issue into today's discourse on globalization. Seen from this angle, the theme of neo-management's successful capturing of 'subjectivity qua human capital as the last stage in the privatization of socially produced knowledge' (p. 170), takes on a novel aspect. It is above all here that the application of Foucauldian conceptual tools brings to light the resonance between Post-Fordism and neo-liberalism: “a governmentalization of the company and a managerialization of the state” (p. 173).

4. The human resource and the veridiction places

At this point, the monograph enters into a digression as Nicoli's attention to Foucault is awoken by a passage that brings out the full critical achievement of the analysis conducted in *La Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France (1978-1979)*. As this detour is far from negligible, I will now follow Nicoli's lecture of this Foucauldian analysis centred on economic liberalism and neoliberalism and on how the question regarding the 'truth' of the market has been structured since the 18th Century. In that course (in the lectures of 17th of January and 7th of February in particular, and throughout, although this theme is a central theme also of the previous course *Sécurité, Territoire, Population*). In this course it is pointed out that, from about 1700 onward, the 'truth' finds a privileged locus for its formation and manifestation precisely in the 'market'. The 'truth' shows itself in the 'naturalness' of exchange processes ('true' is the price of the goods according to the 'natural' mechanisms of market allowed to 'be' and 'do' – i.e. the laissez-faire market) which acquire the status of 'natural laws' in the formulations given to them by political economy, thus rendering them incontestable for a form of statal governmentality that is ever more 'frugal' and 'minimal'. The market ceases to be a subject of jurisdiction on which there was to be exercised an uninterrupted process of legal regulation and becomes a place of 'véridiction', 'a natural mechanism for the formation of the truth' which state government must now no longer supervise or sanction but rather protect. All that remains for the state is a task of residual control, to be performed in accordance with the 'natural laws' of the market. In this way, the abstention from all state intervention in the 'natural' economic processes will guarantee equivalence between goods, free trade and, in the course of the development occurring in the 19th Century, also free

competition between individuals. By allowing free play to the private interest of each person, the state – such is the narrative – will in fact cause benefits and wealth to accrue to the entire population. But, beginning as a policy of *laissez-faire* qua self-limitation, this renunciation by the state of all interference will end up being decided by the market itself, which will henceforth become the essence of economic rationality and will be assumed by the new minimal state «as a norm and a rule, as a principle of ‘verification-falsification’ of its specific practices» (p. 175). Foucault’s lesson of February 7th lays special emphasis on the ‘ordo-liberal’ variant of economic liberalism emerging in post-war Germany when, with the original terms of the problem overturned, it was to be economic freedom that, acting as a kind of ‘siphon of consensus’ for a form of government guaranteeing a free market, would grant legitimacy to political sovereignty. Foucault sees the German case as exemplary of an inextricable mutual co-involvement – a mutual articulation between jurisdiction and *vérédiction*, between law and truth – that characterizes the whole of Western history, and that required at this point a transformation of the (bio)political technologies «by which men seek to direct the conduct of other men» (p. 176). The issue henceforth was to be how to promote the (self-)government of the individual according to the same ‘natural’ principle as governed economic processes and how to ensure both the competition and the control of subjects knowingly cast into struggle. It is the initiation of an ‘epistemological shift’ in economic analysis, which will henceforth take as its object of inquiry the human being qua capital to be brought to ‘appreciate’ in the same way as a company ‘appreciates’, along with the conduct of this latter.

«With this aim in view, American neoliberal thought will develop the notion of ‘human capital’, in which Foucault sees the matrix for the transformation of individuals into ‘unit-enterprises’ – *homines oeconomici* as ‘entrepreneurs of themselves’ – operating in the market/society by the strategic rationality of capitalist exploitation» (pp. 176-177).

Now, the genesis of ‘human capital’ – whose theory, as noted, is to be refined in the 60s by the Nobel economist Gary Becker – can be located in that transformation, which we have just referred to, of the market from ‘object of regulation’ into ‘locus of the revelation of truth’. It is on the basis of a logic of free competition, in the name of which the state now acts, that the new techniques of government of human conduct now come to be configured in the form of a return of ‘naturalness’/‘truth’ in the relationships that men maintain among themselves. Under the guise of this ‘naturalness’, the notion of ‘human capital’ can now brandish the market economy as the ‘true’ model for the individual’s shaping of his/her relationship with himself/herself qua ‘entrepreneur of his/her own person’ free to make use of his/her bios (his/her self-capital) as it pleases him/her to do.

The space of power, then, left for what remains of the state is merely that which consists in the confirmation, for individuals subjectivized as ‘human capital’, of their respective quotas of (self-)government in a society henceforth transmuted into a universal market where the imperative is to compete. What else does ‘empowerment’ consist in if not in the obligations vis-à-vis ‘power’ undertaken by the subject become ‘entrepreneur of the self’, whether he/she is an employee or not? In this sense, the author argues, the exponential multiplication of atypical contracts in recent decades corresponds, paradoxically, to a precise strategy by which, the more a neoliberal state contracts and retreats on a legal level, the more it responds to the needs of the flexible organization of companies and markets.

Nicoli likewise pushes on into valuable, unexplored regions of theory when he reconsiders in a new way the Foucauldian topic of ‘the place of *vérédiction*’. Nicoli does more here than merely recognize in Foucault the prophet who, already in 1979, foresaw how, and to what an extent, we would find ourselves daily bombarded, a few decades later, by harassing appeals to the ‘truth’ of global markets by politicians, economists and managers. The really decisive theoretical innovation that Nicoli achieves here is the revival and re-examination of the theme of that other ‘place of *vérédiction*’ which coincides with the subjectivity of the employee, or (to adopt the terms of the discourse itself) of the ‘human resource’. This latter form of ‘*vérédiction*’ occupies the interiority of the subjectified resource through a psychological contract which is a surrogate of the legal one, in order to achieve a total identification between the individual and the enterprise.

That tool, specifically the technology of government, which makes it possible to tap into a subjectivity actively and eagerly disposed to offer itself as a motivated and proactive instance of ‘human capital’, corresponds to the archetypal managerial action of the ‘evaluation’. Since the imperative to compete constrains him/her to transform his/her own life into a source of income, that is to say, into ‘capital’, the individual is seduced by forms of acknowledgment and recognition which are of devious and underhand character but which he/she believes to be indispensable for his/her own ‘self-marketing’ (i.e. for the maintenance of his/her ‘employability’), something he/she thinks can only be achieved by subjecting himself/herself to constant evaluation. «To put it in very broad and general terms: every individual needs an assessor who will give him/her a measure of his/her status as ‘capital’ in order to have access to something like a ‘real’ subjectivity» (p. 187).

The notion of ‘human capital’ – the ubiquitous pivot of scientific theories, educational and legal institutions, socio-economic activities and administrative jargon – plays the leading role in the production of the ‘truth’ that structures the order of discourse within the present ordering of society. Within this regime of truth, based on the incontrovertible postulate of ‘human capital’, a ‘game of truth’ in which each individual participates in the first person’ (p. 188), is organized. Nicoli, taking up here the themes developed by Foucault in his final years, explains the essential point in his interpretation: «there can be no *véridiction*, or game of truth, or government of individuals by means of truth, unless it is the individuals themselves who speak this truth» (pp. 188-189). It has been by submitting oneself to self-examination, and ‘putting oneself into discourse’ – for example, through confession – that one has traditionally ‘become a subject’ in the Western world, since it is in the form of this ‘looking inward’ (in *interiore homine habitat veritas*, as we read already in Augustine) – this ‘autopsy’ practiced by the subject upon itself in the presence of an evaluating and assessing ‘spiritual director’ – that the configurations of subjectivity, truth and power have taken shape for over two thousand years. For Nicoli, then, the worker finds his/her own ‘truth’ – that is to say, identifies with the company to such a point as to recognize in himself/herself the very form of the enterprise – through the techniques of self-examination and of assessment by management which lead the individual “to discover human capital as the secret code of his/her own soul” (p. 190). Scanning and plumbing every dimension and degree of the actual and potential employees, ‘Humanistic Organisational Knowledge’ establishes a link between assessment and subjectivity itself, and occupies with visibility (expendability) the ‘real’ self of the ‘human resource’, that is, his/her ‘truth’. In the key practices of this knowledge – the verbalization of one’s own inner life during an interview for recruitment; the continuous expounding of one’s ‘self’ to one’s immediate company superior; the enunciation of one’s inadequacies and one’s talents, one’s vices and one’s ‘authentic’ virtues, *vis-à-vis* the manager (or, better, the ‘coach’, who examines and evaluates these performances) – Nicoli recognizes that structure of the confession which is inscribed by Foucault within the ‘technologies of the self’ through which Western man discovers his/her own ‘truth’. Self-knowledge has thus assumed the form of a moral obligation, supported and promoted by mentoring and self-mentoring, coaching and self-coaching, counselling and self-counselling techniques, and many other managerial liturgies⁴. The ‘factory of human resources’ – to borrow a phrase from Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval⁵, themselves indispensable authors within this field of analysis – thus produces a form of life as an ‘enterprise-subjectivity’ that is only partially and improbably fixed and solidified. In fact, HRM continues to maintain in operation – such is the cunning of capital! – also another insistent refrain

“that even includes that principle of a quasi-religious ‘change of heart’: that ‘metanoic imperative’ that has been urging man from antiquity right through to modernity : ‘Du musst Dein Leben aendern’ (‘you must change your life’)” (p. 196).

5. Conclusions

⁴ See: Dal Lago A. (2007). *Il business del pensiero. La consulenza filosofica tra cura di sé e terapia degli altri*. Roma: manifestolibri. pp. 126 et seq.

⁵ Dardot P. et Laval Ch. (2010). *La nouvelle raison du monde. Essai sur la société néolibérale*. Paris: La Découverte.

Might one not accuse, then, *Le risorse umane* of being an ‘ideological’ text? The painful anathema is indeed bound to strike at some point or other this politically non-conformist work. Or, vis-à-vis so implacable a critical investigation of HRM, one might rather raise the objection that the philosopher who sets about dissecting and exposing the rhetoric of the recent ‘humanistic turn’ in the economic-corporatistic discourse of ‘management theory’ is setting himself/herself an unfairly easy task, since this discourse is by definition a discourse that raises mere facades. It is an even more childishly easy task, it might be argued, for the philosopher to take his distance from that rather caricatural form of philosophy – ‘practical philosophy’ in the shape of ‘consultancy’ – which enters into a marriage of convenience with business, perhaps bringing to the enterprise, as a wedding gift “a resurrected Socrates ... [who] would exercise, today, his uncomfortable role of ‘gadfly’ at the sessions of boards of directors or at meetings of senior management” (p. 21). As to ‘philosophical consultancy’ – this prodigious device for the transformation of individuals and organization, or even for ‘existence therapy’ – Nicoli appropriately refers to the aforementioned lucid and compelling pamphlet from 2007, wherein Dal Lago challenges the presuppositions underlying such a practice, applying the art – learnt at the knees of the Marx Brothers – of ‘bringing the whole house of cards down by removing a single card’. But in the end, in view of the long-standing troubles of the labour market and of productivity, this new role for the philosopher as ‘corporate consultant’ is perhaps not the most brilliant solution either for the problem of the employment prospects of those foolish or unfortunate enough to have chosen to study the humanities, nor for the problem of how to fortify the ‘human factor’, that lever of success for any business, praised indeed as an “indispensable generator of added value” (p. 26), which has acquired an even more strategic role now that it is a matter of competing in a flexible and globalized ‘knowledge society’ and ‘knowledge economy’.

It is difficult not to concur with the author in recognizing, in the insistent and indiscriminate use, within workplace contexts, of this term ‘human’ a lazy «corporate mantra repeated without substance» (p. 51) and, in the phenomenon of the ever-growing prevalence of ‘philosophical consultancy’ in personnel management a symptom of ‘the hypertrophy of the signifier ‘human’ in the organization of labourand an indicator of a series of changes bearing on ‘governmental reason’ in the workplace and on the technologies of power insistently applied there’ (p. 22). It is equally difficult not to recognize in the encounter between business and that which might be defined as an ‘imaginary humanism’ the ‘symptom’ (p. 24) of a certain one-to-one correspondence between organizational forms of knowledge and techniques of ‘governmentalization’ of subjects already mastered and broken by practices of corporate control with a very long tradition, the transformations and vicissitudes of which have been identified by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello⁶ in *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, well known to Nicoli (pp. 129 and 144).

However, this exploration in the regions of the impensé (hostile and terrifying regions for most, but a congenial native land for philosophers – it is true, indeed, that Nicoli is ‘playing at home’!) is not conducted without a final and decisive effort of overturning within Nicoli’s own fractured and controversial discipline of philosophy itself. The overturning here concerns, in particular, the discourse which we conventionally name ‘political philosophy’ and consists in setting aside that more ‘elevated’ reflection on principles of sovereignty in order to allow the discourse to

“continuously redefine itself by means of critical work taking its departure from ‘lowly’ objects – in this case ‘human resource’ management practices – which nevertheless contribute to manufacturing, ‘from the bottom up’, the material conditions of formation and viability of our subjectivity” (p. 11).

The political philosophy which the text seeks to practice is, therefore, one

“which does not forget the question of subjectivity and which, indeed, goes to hunt it down on the level of the practices, operations and gestures which form it ...and at the level of the political

⁶ Boltanski L. et Chiapello E. (1999). *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard.

conditions that make it possible, and in its connection with various forms of power and the resistance to these latter” (p. 12).

Political philosophy as a form of life, as an ethics both of existence and resistance to the arts and technologies of governance – that is to say, of resistance to ‘the arts and technologies of structuring the possible fields of action available to others’ – such a political philosophy can be only critical. Since ‘critique’ is not in fact a privilege of the intellectual caste of ‘the critics’, nor an exclusively theoretical gesture performed by ‘the philosophers’ (as we might be tempted to believe where our idea of it remains dominated by the towering philosophical monument of Kant’s *Kritizismus*). Rather, ‘critique’ is a certain ‘mode of being’ of thought in general. ‘Critique’, indeed, is nothing other than an art antagonistic to the art of governance: it is the art ‘of not being overly governed’ – so Foucault in the masterly lesson from 1978: *Qu'est-ce que la critique?*

As often happens in the course of the critical exercise, several questions of interpretation remain here too undecided. For example, the question regarding the linearity or otherwise of the evolution of ‘management science’ in respect of movements in which we observe an alternation of re-openings and resolutions, smooth transitions and ‘epistemological breaks’. Moreover, the dissolution of certain nodal points bearing and supporting the contemporary debate tends to transcend the initial proposition at the base of this effective operation of excavation carried out upon the various forms of the rhetoric of self-knowledge that are professed by a ‘managerial humanism’ or ‘imaginary humanism’ which, having reduced the world to an appendage of subjectivity, aspires eventually to attain to a general and total de-politicization.