

A Review: D. De Masi, Lavorare gratis, lavorare tutti. Perché il futuro è dei disoccupati ("Working For Free, Working Everybody: Why the Future Belongs to the Unemployed") (Milano: Rizzoli, 2017)

by Fausto Corvino

Nowadays it is interesting and stimulating to deepen the knowledge of the relationship between technological advancements and the increase of unemployment. In his latest book, Domenico De Masi offers a clear and accurate discussion of the contemporary phenomenon of jobless growth (economic growth without a proportional increase in job opportunities), arguing that this trend could either lead us to the hell of pervasive inequality, in which very few people control all the wealth and large masses are deprived of any opportunity to get an income, or to a paradisiacal social arrangement in which the ancient purpose of liberating human beings from strain can finally be realized. The likelihood of either of the two options will depend on how we actually decide to regulate, through political institutions, the growing presence of machines in the workplace – much to the detriment of more numerous potential human workers.

In addition, De Masi tackles the less common issue of what intermediate strategy we should adopt in the current transitory phase – where job opportunities for humans are gradually diminishing but have not yet disappeared. The answer, provided by the author, is that we should undertake a radical program of redistribution of existing executive work (as distinguished from creative work) by reducing the weekly work time schedule. In this way, executive workers would work less but they would all work. Moreover, De Masi also puts forward another proposal: unemployed people should offer their skills and performances for free on the market. In doing so, they would unbalance the mechanism of supply and demand that has kept them out of the job market at the same time paving the way for a new post-industrial society that is based on cooperative cohabitation and freed from the most dramatic by-products of competition. The latter proposals for the transitory phase explain the title of the book. Nonetheless, the aim and scope of De Masi's work is much broader and more am-

bitious. Hence, in this review, I will try to say more about it by following the two lines of thought that I have indicated above as the source of its originality. I shall start with the first one.

When discussing the apparently relentless process of robots stealing jobs from humans (whether from an economic, sociological, or political perspective), there exist different predominant attitudes. Some people are astonished by the exponential development of artificial intelligence and look at it with scientific admiration while remaining neutral about the political consequences of the phenomenon. Some others call for drastic political reforms that should accompany us through the present social transformation with the key proposal being the introduction of a basic income for the unemployed. Still others look at this new industrial revolution that we are witnessing as a selfish opportunity for entrepreneurs to constantly accumulate larger amounts of money. Nonetheless, apart from the differences regarding the point of view from which the phenomenon is analysed, very few people consider technologically induced jobless growth to be a favourable opportunity for the working class. But De Masi is one of them. He believes that the advent of machines is offering to all humans an incredible opportunity they have never had during their lifetime: the liberation from work, and the conquering of free time as the only possible space where they can develop their talents and follow their vocations. In other words, technology is now giving humans the chance of dwelling in what De Masi has described in some other of his works as ‘ozio creativo’ (‘creative idleness’), a situation in which the individual is free to dedicate her time to the performance of non-alienated activities.

This ideal situation is something that a limited number of humans have already experienced during their millennial history, in those social arrangements in which a group of people decided to dedicate most of their time to art, culture, and pleasures, while delegating to a second group of people – the slaves – all the practical incumbencies that we could now assign to machines. De Masi indicates Pericles’ Athens (5th century BC) is the archetype we should look at. This was a city where free men, assisted by slaves at a ratio of almost one to five, dedicated their lives to theatre, poetry, religious celebrations, and politics (pp. 181-182). The Greek model, with the apparent injustice of slavery and lack of freedom being corrected by robots, is the one that, according to

De Masi, we should counterpose to the American one, which is based on laissez-faire economics and reckless consumerism, in our inescapable march towards the radicalization of jobless growth (pp. 204-208).

Here we come to another stimulating intuition that De Masi unravels while taking inspiration from J. M. Keynes. The realization of the amended Greek model in our society would require the 'svezzamento' ('weaning') of people from work. One of the biggest obstacles in the liberation from work is that people would not know what to do with their liberated free time. In a truly post-work society, humans would suffer, on a much larger scale, the kind of crisis that workers face in the first months after retirement, when many of them feel lost, not knowing what to do with the amount of free time they are abruptly assigned.

Somehow challenging the dominating rhetoric on work, De Masi denounces workaholism as one of the most widespread diseases in our society. People have lost the capability to enjoy their free time. They find in the workplace a sort of self-realization that they simply do not know how to achieve in the few moments in which they are free. This is one of the main reasons both managers and employees keep on working just as previous generations used to (and in some cases even more), despite having at their disposal machines that can do many of the things that their grandparents had to do by themselves. This discrepancy between the cultural and technological spheres of our society does not simply have negative consequences for workaholics, but it also worsens the situation of those people who are excluded from the job market and have fewer chances of entering it than if employers and employees actually did work less. This is why De Masi provocatively argues that those people who work more than needed should feel ashamed of themselves for stealing job opportunities from the unemployed, instead of demanding others' praise for being overactive and over-productive members of society (pp. 211-216).

The latter remark shows how the cultural obstacle towards the shift to the Athenian model of society goes hand in hand with a political one. Liberating people from work incumbencies through robots would lead to a consistent group being structurally excluded from the labour market, given that the potential human supply of labour would consistently outweigh the number of jobs

offered to humans. However, these newly free individuals should be put in the condition of meeting at least their basic needs; so, the introduction of a basic income would become inevitable. This could either be a universal basic income or a means-tested subsidy given to all those who are left with no job. In both cases, the amount should be financed through a radical redistribution of wealth from those people who remain active in the labour market, both as employees or as entrepreneurs and employers of robots, towards the blameless unemployed. The political conundrum is the following: Why should the former agree to shoulder the maintenance of the latter?

The answer to this question is fundamental to attaining the paradisiacal social arrangement that De Masi envisions. To render sustainable a hypothetical future society in which almost all executive work is delegated to machines, and only a limited number of individuals take part in the labour market through their creativity and through capital investments, it is of paramount importance to explain to those who will keep on creating wealth why they have to redistribute a considerable part of it to those others who dwell in idleness without participating in the scheme of social cooperation that so far has involved the majority of human beings. De Masi goes over this issue very quickly. He says that we would need a new kind of social contract (p. 239), but he does not explain how we might make it acceptable to all signatories. Unsurprisingly, he does not dedicate many pages to this conundrum, because this is the point at which his inspiring sociological intuitions overlap political theory. Perhaps it is probably a question to which political theorists need to find answers.

As mentioned above, the second important contribution of this book by De Masi concerns the medium-term strategy that we should adopt while job opportunities are progressively overtaken by robots. We are still far from seeing the complete disappearance of human jobs, yet we are coexisting with the phenomenon of jobless growth. The pace of economic growth is inferior to the rate of job creation. The more successful a company is – that is, the more wealth it produces – the more capital it will have at its disposal to invest in automatization – in other words, in the dismissal of human workers. New high-tech companies can yield a turnover that is higher than that of classic engineering industries while employing much fewer workers (p. 156). So, the question is

this: how do we deal with the *decouplement* of economic growth from job growth?

De Masi responds that we should make executive employees work less in order to reabsorb as many unemployed people as we can in the labour market. He does some rapid reckoning based on Italian data. In Italy, there are 23 million employed people working on average 40 hours per week. Of the latter, eight million are creative workers while 15 million are executive workers. On the other hand, there are four million unemployed. Of these, 1.3 million would be creative and 2.7 million would be in executive roles. Solving the problem of unemployed creatives by cutting the work time of employed creatives is difficult because the latter perform their jobs in a way that goes well beyond the work day. De Masi says that they are permanently working through their thought and imagination. However, the story of the executive workers is different because their work time is far more easily measurable, hence it is more open to regulation. Were Italian executive employees working 34 hours per week, instead of 40 hours, the 2.7 million of unemployed executives could be reabsorbed in the labour market (pp. 250-251).

The same discourse could be extended to the European Union or even to the whole world. But De Masi is pessimistic about the implementation of his proposal, because it goes against classical economic theory, and because the unemployed are not adequately organized and represented, unlike the case of both entrepreneurs and the employed. Therefore, he concludes his book with a type of revolutionary advice for the world's unemployed, that at the moment do not have any realistic chance of conquering a share of the job market by pushing back the army of the employed. All those people who lack a job contract or remuneration for performing a job should offer their work for free. They do not have anything to lose, and in so doing they would undermine the market mechanism based on the logic of supply and demand, which has left them without any hope of getting even a small share of the available work. Moreover, those unemployed individuals who choose to provide for free what De Masi calls 'white work' would escape the trap of apathy and disillusionment, would somehow feel a greater sense of self-realization, and at the same time could consider themselves as the pioneers of a revolutionary post-industrial society that resists the rules of the market and ex-

periments with new ways of cooperation and coexistence (pp. 255-257).

The pages that De Masi dedicates to what I have defined as his adaptive strategy and to the last resort of free white work by the unemployed are much less in proportion to the ones where he describes, from an historical perspective, the relation between technological advancement and employment, with his vision of a future society where humans will finally be free from strain. Therefore, his indications for the interim should be seen as food for thought for multidisciplinary analysis and discussion. Some issues remain open. One concerns De Masi's proposal of helping the unemployed to meet their needs by redistributing existing work – that is to say by reducing the work week. Does it mean that the employed would see a reduction in their salary? If this be the case, would it be proportional to the hours of work that will be cut? Economists might also confirm that such a plan could work, but the political issue remains about whether we should tackle widespread unemployment by redistributing some income from the employed, or rather it would be fairer to insist on taxing investors and owners of capital, those that profit the most from jobless growth and automatization.

Meanwhile, the other issue concerns the advice given to the unemployed about starting to work for free. Obviously, the provision of free white work can be sustained over time only with an unconditional basic income or with sound unemployment subsidies being in place. But the question here is this: What would be the real consequences of this revolutionary act? More specifically, who would benefit from this free work? If the unemployed did offer their free work to whoever needs it, without making any distinctions, they would give rise to the paradoxical situation of offering their time and skills to those very persons who are responsible for them being stuck outside the labour market. This could account for the complete surrender of the unemployed. On the other hand, Domenico De Masi holds that the appearance of all this white work would muddle up the market, and this could be the last resort in order to change the status quo for the better. These two tendencies need to be weighed with care.