

History, Legacy and Future of the Olivetti experience



ANGELO PICHIERRI

Abandoned Utopia

(New York Times Style Magazine)

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- Olivetti, a renowned designer and manufacturer of typewriters and accounting machines, decided to provide for its employees through retirement. They were given the opportunity to take classes at an on-site sale and trade school; their lunchtime hours would be filled with speeches or performances from visiting dignitaries (actors, musicians, poets); and they would receive a substantial pension upon retirement. They would be housed, if they liked, in Olivetti-constructed modern homes and apartments. Their children would receive free day care, and expecting mothers would be granted 10 months maternity leave. (Nikil Saval)

Protagonists of Italian “economic miracle”

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- Fiat and Olivetti, both located in Piedmont, are part of a very small group of large economic corporations leaders in the 50s and 60s of the “Italian economic miracle”. They present important similarities and striking differences.
- Olivetti:
 - constantly increasing productivity *and* employment;
 - innovating products, processes, markets;
 - inventing a “made in Italy” style.

What the two models have in common

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- Hierarchical-functional organisation of an orthodox Taylor-Fordist type, including chain work and assembly-line. An Italian translation of the works of Frederick W. Taylor, by Olivetti engineers, was published in 1952 by the Olivetti publishing house.
- Absolutely dominant role in the local labour market.
- Highly developed paternalistic corporate welfare.

In what the two models differ

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- **The factory and the city:**
 - Fiat: separateness and dominion
 - Olivetti : integration and influence
- **Corporate welfare**
 - Fiat: hard paternalism with strong anti-union attitude.
 - Olivetti : soft paternalism: unions were legitimate partners in a system of industrial relations.

“The remains of the day”

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- Ivrea and Canavese are not a waste land; the process of deindustrialization was however a radical one.
- A certain turnover of Olivetti technicians and scientists was a constant in the life of the company. In the period of its decline and final crisis a real diaspora took place; the presence of Olivetti men was highly influential in several Italian academic and business communities.
- In Ivrea, the original Olivetti imprinting of the local élite is naturally decreasing .
- Is the Olivetti heritage just industrial archeology?

The meaning of the Unesco recognition

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- In 2018, UNESCO declared Ivrea a World Heritage site; the effect has so far, for better or for worse, been unnoticeable. (“UNESCO’s ‘World Heritage’ listing is the kiss of death,” the acerbic Italian critic Marco D’Eramo [wrote in a 2014 article](#) for New Left Review. “Once the label is affixed, the city’s life is snuffed out; it is ready for taxidermy.”) (Saval)
- The risks
 - Syndrome of Paradise Lost
 - Economy of nostalgia (Berta)

“Hidden resources”

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- The term “deindustrialization” is polysemic. While a large part of the literature emphasizes the dramatic consequences of the decline of American and European manufacturing, other interpretations underline its physiological aspects in the transition towards a knowledge and services economy.
- In the second perspective Ivrea and its region probably preserve some cultural and psychological resources. Positive value of (even disruptive) innovation and the idea of “intelligent” manufacturing are components of the Olivetti organisational culture that still remain.

The urban dimension and the relations with the regional capital.

- Adriano Olivetti dedicated much effort to urban and regional planning, and in its time Ivrea was never a mere periphery of Turin.
- The possible role and vocations of middle-sized cities are at the center of a lively scientific and political debate. In the field of urban policies and local government the recent Italian evolution presents, however, more constraints than opportunities.
- Constraints must be faced; opportunities are not a fact, they are a social construction. The role of Ivrea in the metropolitan area and the kind of relations to build with Turin, and other North West cities, are a decisive challenge.