

# A Factory of Sociologies from FIAT to FCA

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## Abstract

This introductory essay puts the sociological debates on FIAT in perspective, by showing the relations between the evolution of the Italian multinational and the changes in the practice of sociological inquiry. At several junctures, the debate on FIAT has been so publicly relevant that it became a difficult and somehow hostile terrain for the development of a "quiet and cold" explanatory sociology independent of any positioning in the field of contention. But this is exactly what makes the relation between the Italian automobile factory and sociology a specific one, a privileged perspective through which it is possible to look not only at the changes in the world of labor, but also at the evolution of the discipline over time.


**Keywords:** Sociological inquiry; industrial sociology; Fiat-Chrysler; working class; trade unions.

## 1 Inquiring FIAT: From Gramsci to Postwar Sociology

This debate about a sociological inquiry on working conditions at Fiat-Chrysler Italian plants has a specific importance for an international sociological journal rooted in Italy.

For a long time, a conspicuous part of the Italian field of industrial sociology has been characterized by debates around FIAT-Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino, the biggest Italian industry. In Italy, FIAT has not only embodied the rise and decline of the Fordist mode of production, its specific work organization, but it has also been a key site where sociologists have

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explored the life and condition of the working class, its forms of mobilization, and aspirations to centrality in politics.

For a century or so, the factory has been a sociological laboratory, with specific styles of thought and forms of inquiry that have shaped the debate and the evolution of Italian sociology.

There seems to be a “relational effect” between the rise and decline of the industrial working class at FIAT and the centrality of industrial sociology, especially the one focusing on automobile industry, in the public debate.

This relation dates back to Antonio Gramsci’s most sociological writings. As a Sardinian student, the social and political theorist went to Torino in 1911 to study Glottology. In a few years his political socialization developed and he became friends with Palmiro Togliatti, meeting socialist intellectuals and working-class activists. It is the experience of modernity in the Turinese metropolis that made of Gramsci an innovative Marxist theorist, deeply impressed by the new Taylorist work organization as well as by the mobilization power and size of the industrial working class at Turinese factories, among which the rising FIAT, where Gramsci observed the first forms of workers’ councils. It is through these observations and reflections that Gramsci wrote classic essays like *Americanismo e Fordismo* (Quaderno XXII, 1934) and for which in 1929 he forged the famous note “hegemony here is born in the factory” (Gramsci, 1971, p.285, ed. it. 2007, Quaderno I (XVI), p. 72): an expression that became a foundational assumption for labor-process scholars worldwide.

After the fascist parenthesis, with the renascence of an intellectual interest in sociology in postwar Italy, many sociologists turned their attention on the rising industrial working class. While becoming a global author, in Italy Gramsci’s writings were transformed into a theoretical tool by the Italian Communist Party (PCI). Paradoxically, in the Italian intellectual field he got domesticated as a historicist thinker, deprived of his most sociological elements and functional to Togliatti’s new political projects (Mordenti, 1996).

Other two distinct, although interacting, progressive intellectual trajectories emerged in a phase dominated by the Catholic tradition and the new American sociology imported with the Transatlantic programs of cultural exchange.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, a rising generation of Marxist intellectuals focused on FIAT to relaunch the tradition of Marxian “worker’s inquiry,” introducing elements of critical sociology and who gathered around socialist intellectual Raniero Panzieri, founder of *Quaderni Rossi*, a key journal in Italian intellectual history (see the selected writings in Panzieri, 1994). Many of the young sociologists who worked with Panzieri would then develop autonomous trajectories of research and activism, and their work, nowadays, is nurturing scholars and networks in the area of critical labor studies in several parts of the world.

On the other hand, those who would then become among the leading figures of Italian sociology — Franco Ferrarotti, Luciano Gallino and Alessandro Pizzorno — and who were working at the Social Relations Unit of the Olivetti “factory-community” in Ivrea, a city north of Turin and one of the first centers of Italian sociology (Ferrarotti, 1984; Pizzorno, 2000; Gallino & Ceri, 2014).

In the lively new field of Sociology, which became institutionalized in academia only at the beginning of the 1960s, interactions and collaborations were frequent among these intellectu-

1. As a matter of fact, in the context of these Italian-American exchanges, the Catholic intellectual world introduced new ways of approaching the problems of the industrial world. Agostino Gemelli, priest and intellectual, introduced modern psychology of work in Italy and contributed to import the American *human relations theory*, a functionalist psychological approach vehiculated by the US in this delicate phase of the Cold War and used to deal with workers in Italian factories.

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As an example, Bianca Beccalli, one of the first women in the sociology of work, belonged to the editorial board of *Quaderni Rossi* before participating to the pioneering sociological inquiry directed by Alessandro Pizzorno on the cycle of contention regarding workers and trade unions at the beginning of the 1970s. This is the first comparative sociological research — based on several industrial sectors in the Milanese area — where Pizzorno developed important elements not only for his researches on political representation, but for his whole theory of recognition (Pizzorno, 1978).

Another case is Vittorio Rieser, one of the young intellectuals of the group *Quaderni Rossi*, who graduated under the supervision of Luciano Gallino and then conducted for decades important worker's inquiries for the labor unions at several FIAT plants in Northern and Southern Italy.

Also the profile of one of the most important Italian industrial sociologists, Aris Accornero, is connected to FIAT. A worker employed at RIV, one of the plants producing components for FIAT, Accornero started his heterodox trajectory as a CGIL unionist and contributed to factory newspapers and bulletins. He was a member of the PCI and in charge of its affiliated Centro Studi di Politica Economica (CESPE). Later on, he would publish some of the most important essays on the working class and working conditions, works that led him to become full professor of Sociology at the Sapienza University in Rome in 1980. His handbook of the sociology of work, which later become a guide for generations of Italian sociologists, reflects the deep knowledge and accuracy of his rich practical and theoretical experience (Accornero, 1994).

## 2 Going Global: From Torino to Detroit and Beyond

An overview of all the inquiries and researches conducted on FIAT, the way they have shaped the field of social research, and its relation with the intellectual and the political field require more than a book. At several junctures, the debate on FIAT has been so politically relevant that it became a difficult and somehow hostile terrain for the development of a “quiet and cold” explanatory sociology independent of any positioning in the field of contention. But this is exactly what makes the relation between the Italian automobile factory and sociology a specific one, a privileged perspective through which it is possible to look at the evolution of the discipline over time.

This is what motivated Giuseppe Bonazzi (2000) to write a book that is explicitly called *Sociologia della Fiat. Ricerche e Discorsi 1950–2000*, quoted by both Guglielmo Meardi and Valeria Pulignano in their replies to Matteo Gaddi's essay, part of this *Sociologica* debate.

Bonazzi's profile as a young scholar is typical of the first generation of Italian postwar sociologists, for whom sociology is in part the equivalent of “America”, but also of progressive political engagement, given that he studied industrial work through Marxian theories and the first classic American sociological texts available at the United States Information Service (USIS) in Piazza San Carlo in Turin. Bonazzi's researches on FIAT cover all the evolution of the factory over half a century, since the dawn of Fordism and mass production in the new Italian postwar capitalism until the rise of Japanization and lean production in the 1980s: an intellectual trajectory that has been well summarized by Bonazzi himself in a sociological autobiography (Bonazzi, 2006).

But many aspects of FIAT have changed since these studies on the introduction of the principles of lean production and the model of “integrated factory.” With processes of industrial

restructuring and delocalization, Torino has lost part of its centrality both in the production process and in the intellectual debate. If during Fordism many migrants left the Southern regions to reach FIAT plants in Torino — a process that has inspired important sociological accounts (Fofi, 1964) — these dynamics have partly evolved between the 1980s and the 1990s, with the organizational innovation of the plants in Termoli, Cassino and Melfi that became important experiments of a new course for FIAT in Southern Italy<sup>2</sup>.

Although FIAT has already been an international player since the end of the 1960s, with plants in Turkey (1968) and Brazil (1973), it is only between the 1990s and the 2000s that it fully became a global player operating in Poland (1992), Argentina (1995), India (1997), and Serbia (2008).

It is from this period on that new researchers have had to deal not only with a local Italian issue but with a consolidated multinational phenomenon. However, despite this expansion, in the early 2000s, due to the contradiction of Italian capitalism facing privatizations and growing international competition, FIAT experienced a deep crisis (Gallino, 2003).

This brought to radical changes, until FIAT CEO Sergio Marchionne and Chrysler CEO Bob Nardelli agreed to merge the two companies, giving birth to FCA in 2009: the crisis shared by the automobile industry in Turin and in Detroit clearly set the need for a global transformation of both players.

The role of the new FIAT CEO was key in taking advantage from some windows of opportunity opened by the global crisis. If US workers were experiencing the end of the “Detroit union order,” Marchionne exploited also the alliances between the United Automobile Workers and the Obama administration to convince both about the advantages of supporting — politically and economically — the corporate merger of FIAT and Chrysler (Berta, 2011).

The birth of FCA had direct implications on different “localities.” In the US, the “contract” between UAW President Bob King and FCA CEO Sergio Marchionne included serious changes like the salary reduction to 55\$/h and strike limitations. In Italy the introduction of World Class Manufacturing and annexed attempts to modify labor law in line with the American experience triggered a new phase of contention between FCA and unions, which brought to a polarization between the most representative metalworker unions, on the one side the critical FIOM-CGIL and on the other side FIM-CISL and UILM strongly supporting the new plans (Simoni, 2011). In this new phase, Italian unions faced the uncertainties linked to the capacity of the Italian industrial relations system for responding to the structural changes triggered by the new power of FCA as a global player (Cella, 2011).

It is in this highly conflictual and uncertain context that new inquiries proposed by different union cultures took place. A group of researchers belonging to the Polytechnic in Milan and Turin, close to the FIM-CISL area, conducted a research on FCA workers<sup>3</sup> (Cipriani et al., 2015) which was followed a few years later by another one promoted by FIOM-CGIL<sup>4</sup>, which is the object of the debate hosted in this issue of *Sociologica*.

2. If Cassino was for FIAT the first experiment of “highly automated factory,” the new plans in Melfi and Termoli brought the unions to conduct one of the most important collective inquiries on the “integrated factory” (Carriero et al., 1993). At the same time, one of the FIAT managers that designed the Melfi plant was Maurizio Magnabosco, one of the first graduated in Sociology in Trento in 1970 (Donzelli et al., 1994).

3. <https://www.fim-cisl.it/ricerca-studi/le-persone-e-la-fabbrica-ricerca-fim-cisl-su-wcm-word-class-manufacturing/>

4. <https://www.fiom-cgil.it/net/index.php/la-fiom/il-congresso/734-2018-xxvii-congresso/6100-fca-il-mestiere-dell-auto-materiali>

Like the so called “mass research” on FIAT workers and employees — which got published only in 1990 — directed at the beginning of the 1980s by the sociologists of CESPE (Accornero et al., 1990), sociological inquiries are far from confirming the expectations of political or union cultures. On the contrary, they are powerful tools that trigger lively and informed debates that foster critique and reflexivity, while changing our own perspective of social phenomena like work, as well as the cultural and political interpretation that shape it.

### 3 A Sociology of the Present: This Debate

This debate originates from Matteo Gaddi’s essay (2020), which summarizes the results of a collective inquiry on working conditions at Fiat-Chrysler Italian plants organized by some researchers of the Fondazione Sabattini and Fondazione Di Vittorio in collaboration with the Federation of Italian Metalworkers (FIOM-CGIL), published in three volumes in 2018.

Gaddi presents the empirical results of an inquiry based on 7.833 questionnaires and 167 in-depth interviews. To debate such research, *Sociologica* selected scholars among the most well-known international sociologists of work who are specialists of the automobile industry.

The first contribution/reply is by Guglielmo Meardi, whose early work in the 1990s was one of the first international comparisons to look at FIAT as a multinational player. By examining the key implications of the Central-Eastern European enlargement, Meardi analyzed the evolution of union activists in Italian and Polish FIAT plants, adding a necessary international perspective to a debate that was traditionally restricted to domestic politics (Meardi, 2000). Quoting Touraine’s classic inquiry at Renault factories (1955), Meardi’s contribution for *Sociologica* puts the evolution of blue-collar work at FCA in a global perspective and, while acknowledging the importance of the inquiry, he raises some suggestions for the future, like a focus on worker agency and conflict, as well as on the conditions of new atypical, temporary, and subcontracted workers.

The importance of the comparison between Poland and Italy is frequently cited both in the Italian public debate on the destiny of the automobile industry and in the scholarly debate regarding the evolution of political economy and labor. The contribution by Adam Mrozowicki goes in this direction, by discussing Gaddi’s empirical results with previous inquiries in Poland. In Mrozowicki’s view, the critique of the way lean production and WCM have been introduced in Poland are in line with the trends emerged in the Italian inquiry of FIOM.

The third contribution is by Valeria Pulignano, who has not only published important contributions on the international automobile sector in the last few years (Pulignano et al., 2008) but also started her career as a sociologist by investigating the variation of conflict after the introduction of teamwork and lean production at FIAT in Melfi and Rover in the UK — a process that was low in Italy and high in the UK (Pulignano, 1999). In this sense, reading again Bonazzi’s researches, Pulignano’s contribution to this debate sees the outcomes presented by Gaddi as the return of Burawoy’s “industrial games” in a productive environment affected by Total Quality Management and World Class Manufacturing.

The final contribution by Paul Stewart interprets the Italian inquiry at Fiat-Chrysler in light of the main evidence emerged and discussed in the global debate on lean production and automotive workers since Mike Parker and Jane Slaughter’s classic research (1988). Stewart’s sociological researches on automotive work developed over decades of global studies (Charron & Stewart, 2004), and the contribution reads in an innovative way the multilevel implications of lean production as a practical and ideological tool, by suggesting also some elements on how to respond to it.

Finally, this debate hosted on *Sociologica* takes place when a new merging process of Italian-American FCA and French PSA is about to happen. In this sense, the goal is to invite sociologists to discuss an inquiry proposed by trade unions that has great implications not only for a specific industrial sector, but also for the world of labor in general. Thus, that has consequences on the practice of sociological inquiry itself.

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