

[Self-employment as a Social Figuration] The Mozart Case

There are at least three levels of analysis within the work that Norbert Elias dedicated to W.A. Mozart (1993; see also Mennel 1992: 271-273): the first one relates to the *micro* level and it focuses on the psychological dimension of the great composer, highlighting his emotional frailty as well as his undisputed extraordinary musical talent: both these factors intertwine with each other and are relevant in determining the events in Mozart's life (Elias 1993: 3-9).

The second level of analysis could be defined as being a *meso*, or an inter-subjective one, and it is based on the relationship Mozart had, on the one hand, with his family – first of all with his father (Elias 1993: 64-84) – and on the other hand, with the royal court environment in which he happened to be living in. Elias talks about the social conflict arising from the balance of power between the genius of Mozart – who knew to be such – and his master and lord. Such conflict was apparently involving only two people, but it was actually concealing – as it was also in the case of the dispute between Drake and his competitor (Elias 2007, Chapter II) – a changing historical reality whose main actors were unaware of (Elias 1993: 109-110).

The choices Mozart made during his short life were sensational considering the education and the world he was from – as Elias is keen to stress (Elias 1993: 10 and ff.) – and they have to be placed within the more general historical and social context of that time. In other words, the analysis shall not forget to take into consideration the *macro* level. This third aspect is only slightly mentioned by Elias. Consequently, it is the least exhaustive one within the discussion he develops about the sociology of a genius, although it is not less important. According to the overall Elias lesson as well, all three levels mentioned are intertwined among them, thus being relevant in determining both the life of the individual and the social transformation processes¹.

In this paper, I will restrict my analysis to the third aspect only of those just mentioned, by proposing a particular key to interpreting the sociology of Mozart's genius. As noted by Elias himself, Mozart was able to leave Salzburg for good to go to Vienna since, according to what his friends, acquaintances and admirers had told him, he would have had the opportunity of finding a job there (Elias 1993: 85-108). As a matter of fact, a free labour market was emerging at that time; such a transformation affected intellectual professions too², thus involving artistic as well as musical production.

The *first* element I wish to highlight relates to the development affecting the labour market and seeing the emergence of modern labour. In this context, intellectual activity – *second* point – by detaching itself from craftsmanship's activity, achieves a more professional appearance, thus drawing near to liberal arts. Mozart witnesses the transition from craft art to artist art, by claiming – similarly to what was happening for the other liberal professions and for intellectual work – full autonomy over the carrying-out of work (Elias 1993:28-42).

The *third* factor to be taken into account is that of intellectual work provider's freedom and, conversely, of the bonds he has to be however subject to, similarly to what was going on in the other professions and, in an even more general way, in the other economic and productive branches. In this latter case, the entrepreneurial activity itself is subject to some forms of "socialization" of its private interest. In that regard (see Perulli 1992, Chapter II, § 2), up to the current discussion about *Corporate Social Responsibility*.

¹ In that regard, it is sufficient to recall that the civilizing process is made up of two aspects: the psychogenesis and the sociogenesis of modern society, Elias 2000; Id., 1993: 42-43. In that regard, see also Tabboni 1993, in particular Chapters III, IV, VI; Loyal, Quilley 2004: 1-22.

² Heinich 2001, regards Elias together with his Mozart as being the initiator of an orientation for art sociology, the one that focuses on the art producer who puts his identity at stake. In this respect, the event experienced by Mozart is a good example, since Elias succeeded in bringing out the artist's identity, Elias 1993: 109-110.

Labour transformations

The short description I am going to provide below (Oexle 2000: 67-79) aims at explaining labour transformations, in order to give the historical background within to place the events in Mozart's life.

We know that in modern age production activities and, notably, manual ones have benefited from a significant reevaluation and enhancement (Weber 1958; 2003; Ogris 1967: 286-297; Poli 2008 see chapter. I). The distinction between manual and intellectual works, dating back to ancient times, was indeed quite strong, although at that time the latter more often coincide – if one just thinks about *Benedictine Rule* – with praying. It is appropriate to point out that also simple manual work was being carried out with conscience and professionalism, so that it as well required the service provider some intellectual diligence. In this sense, it is possible to see how – within the medieval urban domain – the “culture” of work being developed through Arts & Guilds regarded as being an art any rational and good spiritual activity applied to the manufacturing of both material and intellectual tools; it is an intelligent technique of doing something (Perulli 1996: 360-361).

At that time the divisions among arts and occupations were much greater than today: Guilds were close-knit from a professional point of view, i.e. they comprised all those carrying out a job ascribable to a main type, but were very inconsistent within them. In the Middle Ages, also intellectual activities were being included under an art and this was due to their long training process, see for instance visual arts. As an alternative, the intellectual put himself under the protection of some rich patrons and, as such, in the service of political power in order to be able to earn his living. It was only in 17th and 18th century that the differences between the cultured version of some professions and their manual version began to appear; subsequently, the French revolution put an end to the social and economic, and social-working order represented by Arts & Guilds (Sewell 1980, see Chapters IV and V), thus bringing onto the free market a workforce whose usability levels were very different too.

The process of slow compartmentalization within craft occupations had already started at Mozart's time and had been involving also his sector for at least a generation, since it is Elias himself to say that Leopold Mozart was able to shift from the status of craftsman to that of Salzburg's court musician and deputy chapel master (Elias 1993: 64-84).

As for intellectual professions, they take new contours, showing their social utility within the more general division of work that was establishing itself: in science, the distinction between pure one, i.e. theoretical science, and applied one becomes deeper. Following the rise of universities, free-lance *doctores* start demanding remuneration for their work. According to them, remuneration was necessary because of the social utility of their own technical knowledge gained through tailor-made studies, thus allowing some of the intellectual class, such as doctors, lawyers and notaries, to earn their living, to preserve their own group's dignity and to develop their own exclusive organization aimed at protecting their *status* (Perulli 1996: 368-373). However, not all intellectual professions follow the same evolution: in 18th century, for instance, clerical workers were considered as being unproductive.

In the following paragraph, attention will be devoted to the genesis of modern intellectual professions as a segment of self-employment. In fact, with the onset of industrialism little space was being left to those subjects distancing themselves from the profile of the two main social actors, i.e. entrepreneurs and factory workers. This is reflected both at a theory and social research level, and at a legal one; for example W. Mills talked about the relevance of middle classes, mainly made up of employees, not before 1951.

The rise of modern intellectual work

Intellectual work can be defined as the performance of a work aimed at meeting human needs, under a free-market regime. It is characterized by the use of an individual's creative skills in order to meet the client's needs³.

³ From the very beginning of his work Perulli (1996: 8) makes it clear that self-employment is difficult to define and has regulations whose history is a troubled one.

Such creative skills rely on knowledge previously acquired and used to carry out the requested work. The result can be material and tangible (i.e., a medical prosthesis) as well as non-material and intangible (for instance, performing a music piece).

In order to carry out the work, an intellectual worker avails himself of specialized knowledge, mainly of technical and/or scientific nature; however, when performing it, he is free to carry out the work as he deems fit. In other words, he carries out his activity through self-determination in the absence of external intervention powers. In this sense, intellectual professions are therefore not permanent work and as such they fall within the scope of self-employment. Moreover, the intellectual professional establishes not only how to perform and carry out his task but as well *what* to achieve.

The second issue is about the identification of the element describing a profession or a work as being an intellectual one, given that every activity requires a minimum amount of mental engagement. An answer was provided by defining the two criteria the legal doctrine has identified – at least in Civil Law countries – and recognized the possibility of comprising intellectual professions into: discretion and liberality. *Discretion* means the power held by the professional to make choices, in order to achieve the set target, by taking into consideration what the most appropriate option is according to the circumstances. The term *liberality* underlines the fact that the self-employed worker, by relying on his own professional skills and competences when carrying out the work, acts independently on the directives of other people.

Carrying out the task he has been assigned, the intellectual professional (Perulli 1996: 81-84 and, below, pp. 351 and ff.) firstly can rely on a well-established knowledge allowing him to successfully conduct his transaction according to the terms he deems to be the most appropriate and suitable ones in the case. Secondly when managing the situation and carrying out the work, he does not receive any performance instructions by others, thus acting in full freedom and autonomy. All these factors bring the intellectual professions within the scope of self-employment (Perulli 1996: 417-418).

From a historical point of view, self-employment derives from pre-industrial craftsmanship. It is characterized in comparison with dependent work by the fact of bearing an entrepreneurial risk. The self-employed worker carries out his occupation – whose product is aimed at being exchanged – by getting to know and following the whole production cycle without receiving any external instructions about how to carry out work and, thus, being directly responsible for the quality of finished products (Perulli 1996: 14-17).

The second reason why intellectual professions may fall within the scope of self-employment lies in the fact that they represent an evolution of liberal arts. In ancient times, “liberal arts” meant non-manual activities which, as such, were suitable for free men. Instead, manual activities were carried out by slaves. Free men held virtue and wisdom and, therefore, acted in the interest of public good, so that their activity in favour of the community was not remunerated: the gratitude shown by all would make up for the person acting so and the glory deriving from it would boost his social prestige and his influence.

The other interesting item about intellectual profession and work lies in the fact that the worker’s behaviour becomes more and more important and it has to be a diligent one. The worker’s behaviour within self-employment and, even more, within intellectual professions becomes, from a historical point of view, the real distinguishing point with respect to the fulfilling of the obligation (Perulli 1996: 417 and ff.). The transaction’s subject-matter shifts from the asset due – that is from the “thing”, i.e. something which is tangible – to the debtor worker’s, something which is less tangible and with respect to which one relies (it is hardly worth pointing out the concept of trust in Giddens 1990) upon certified knowledge and accredited professional practices (Parsons 1939-1954). This transition has taken place in a paradigmatic way within the medical occupation. As a matter of fact, in the past a doctor was only paid in the event of the sick person being healed, thus proving that the treatment provided had been successful (healing pact). From the mid-1600s on, doctors started to be granted the right to remuneration, regardless of the result indeed. This happened since the essential criterion for assessing a treatment is no longer the healing but the canonical and lawful character of the treatment, being provided by a doctor according to a regular authorization and within the limits of his tasks.

Therefore, doctors’ assessment is no longer carried out according to their effectiveness but to their *modus agendi*. Putting emphasis on behaviour means that, from a legal point of view, the obligation is being shifted from

the result to the way in which it has to be achieved (theory on diligence obligations) (Perulli 1996: 444-446). Consequently, at a social level the expectations as to freedom to calculate the creativity of human intelligence is.

The bonds of freedom

In my opinion, the above-mentioned elements represent the structural feature that has helped to influence Mozart's life. It is therefore possible to identify which the genuine and effective "bonds of freedom" are. First of all the historical and social circumstances do allow the worker to operate on the market as a work provider under conditions of (greater or lesser) autonomy, that means both opportunities and risks. Secondly, further "bonds" are the ways according to which one operates on the market and the social expectations as to freelance work itself; these bonds consequently create corresponding social figurations among the main actors (on process theory and the concept of social figuration, and on the topic of power balances among subjects see, among the others, Baumgart, Eichener 1997², Chapter V). As mentioned before, there is a transformation – to say it in the words of Parsons (1937; 1939-1954) – in the role of a professional.

Finally, the *last* kind of bond lies inside the individual, by making a longstanding sociological issue clearer, that is translating the psychological and individual dimension into the sociological one.

As for the historical and social circumstances, one cannot but share the view of those who believe the profile of self-employment to be the result of the context it lies in: professions emerge and develop if and provided they fulfil social needs (Perulli 1996: 359). These change over time – thus reflecting society contradictions and values – before even taking on the clear features of a shape which is in keeping with changing needs. From this point of view, the interpretation Elias gives about the period in Vienna of Mozart working as a freelance in the music field is a significant one since it well explains the risks and opportunities attached to the situation, the successes and failures that the artist, as any self-employed individual, had to take on more than to face.

For Mozart, the stay in the capital meant the achievement of his lifelong aspiration, i.e. that of being independent from fashion and being able to freely express his artistic, creative and composition talent (Elias 1993: 28-41). It can be said that this was the happiest moment as for his production; it is indeed during this period that he composed the works leading him towards the music Hall of Fame, although he was not immediately hailed as an innovator (Elias 1993: 109-110). If, conversely, he had remained in Salzburg he would have probably composed a more traditional kind of music: to say that in the words of Elias, he would have been a "bird with broken wings".

On the other hand, the uncertainties Mozart was going to face in this new situation without a master were many. First of all, he overestimated his chances: he certainly had plenty of opportunity to teach music by giving private lessons – although he did not consider this activity to be especially attractive – and to give concerts. However, although the music market in Vienna was certainly more open and prosperous than that of Salzburg, the typical audience was made up of noblemen and *haute bourgeoisie* and was, as such, a little lifeless. At that time, the well-educated *bourgeoisie* represented a consolidated market for literature (Habermas 1989, Chapter V) but not for music (Elias 1993: 28 and ff.). That means the main audience base remained however the aristocratic society (Elias 1993: 85 and ff.) whose tastes were ephemeral and, considering the weight and influence of the imperial court, highly unstable.

In other words, Mozart was overestimating his capacity to arouse interest through his name (Elias 1993: 109-111) and his possibility of living as a free artist; in parallel, he was underestimating the hard life of a *free-lance* and the precariousness attached to it. Uncertainty affected not only any sources of income but also any guarantees in terms of the copyright that – for instance – he could derive from his new activity: Elias himself says that the protection of self-employed workers' rights within the artistic sector was therefore yet to come (Elias 1993: Chapter I, note 15).

Mozart was a pioneer of intellectual professions within the field of music as an art. He more generally represents the personification of a long transition process that was already ongoing, although it was only at the beginning. Elias himself points out that for Beethoven, who was around fifteen years younger than Mozart, it was less difficult to achieve what he wished (Elias 1993: 28-41).

The second kind of freedom's bond involves social expectations as to free-lance profession and social figurations arising from it. In the case of Mozart, this phase can be identified in the transition, suggested by Elias, from craft art to artist art (Elias 1993: 42-49). Such transition once again shows a change in the behaviour of the author as a professional and of his audience.

During the period in which craft art is predominant, the artist acts as a mere technical performer of his audience's wishes. We are therefore in the presence of an art wherein the creative and original input of the author must give in to the requests made by clients. In the second circumstance, the author has a greater opportunity of expressing himself and enjoys wider margins of freedom. The framework within which to make art, as well that of the profession, changes and, consequently, the artistic product gains in terms of quality.

On its turn, the transition from craft art to artist art shows a shift of power from the one who enjoys the artistic product to the one who creates it. The new social figuration which comes into being – similarly to what has happened with liberal arts – shows the professional getting the upper hand; he no longer has to stick to the wishes of his clients who, instead, completely rely on him (Elias 1993: 28-41; 109-111).

The evolutionary process involving doctors and lawyers has consolidated a social expectation to these professionals. At the same time such professions have turned into a specialist knowledge and activity, were socially recognised, organised in professional bodies, protected through registers and whose performance is ruled by specific procedures (Perulli 1996: 351 and ff.).

The social expectation regarding such professions is no longer relevant to the result (i.e. healing, work) but to a proper behaviour or, more precisely, to a behaviour deemed to be proper according to standards. Similarly, in the field of art its users expect to be guided through the formation of their taste. Therefore, in both these types of profession the provision of work, i.e. service, is no longer in accordance with client's expectations, thus completely entrusting the freelance worker with the carrying out of work. Consequently, on the one hand, the artist shapes the taste of the audience. On the other hand today – in some aspects and as it happens in some cases – the individual who enjoys the services provided by an intellectual professional is the one to be made responsible, such as in medical prevention linked to lifestyles which is aimed at achieving a better result in the final work carried out by a specialist.

But as it happens to all pioneers, Mozart paid a high price for his audacity of innovation (Elias 1993: 42). As pointed out by Elias, the social process eventually resulting in the emergence and establishment of the free artist had already started. That is to say this phenomenon was possible from a "technical" point of view, although the audience was not ready to accept this new figure yet, thus opposing the kind of music produced.

The Opera *Il ratto dal seraglio* (Elias 1993: 109-111) well shows firstly what means combining freedom of research and intellectual activity with the audience expectations. Secondly it shows the occupational hazards are connected with freedom and innovations.

As a matter of fact, the Opera did not receive a very warm welcome. As reported by Elias, the operatic fashion of that time registered the predominance of singers over music. In this composition of his, Mozart had instead given greater consideration to music and orchestra, thus causing rancour among singers and a negative opinion by the audience.

The shifting of importance from human voices to musical instruments which has just been described and the fact of attributing the latter a relevance never seen before to the detriment of singers, foreshadows what would soon happen because of industrialism, i.e. the subordination of human work to production tools, to machines.

In the transition from craft art to artist art described by Elias, he says that the social figuration existing between artists and those enjoying art changes. And this is also because the audience, which until that moment had been made up of few privileged listeners, has become wider including a higher number of people who, unlike the past, are not able to impose their taste but, indeed, take up the finished good which has been made by a professional of the sector.

Furthermore, within the evolutionary process leading to modern and professional art, this activity has become an autonomous one, by sharing itself the principles of intellectual professions, i.e. discretion and liberality. Therefore, also the artist composes his work by relying on a well-established knowledge allowing him to work according to the modes and techniques he deems to be the most appropriate ones and without any external indication about

his performance, thus operating completely autonomously. As to the behaviour of the intellectual professional working in the artistic field, it can be as well acquired through a training path which is socially defined.

Therefore, one can understand why Mozart is such a good personification of the modern intellectual professional, since he organizes his activity in Vienna according to the principles we have said to belong to self-employment. For this reason, the battle Mozart fought for his independence from any master and for his talent, in order to compose following his genius and not according to the tastes of others (Elias 1993: 109-111). This fact shows a character of extraordinariness that is well highlighted by Elias. As any other intellectuals, Mozart wanted to follow research and experimentation paths allowing the development of the subject matter (and more generally accompanying that of society). Although he was suffering from the disadvantage, as compared with other liberal professions, of not having any protections guaranteeing his work and status, Mozart fought as a man for his dignity. He did not feel inferior to his clients, and defended his art which he asked respect for. And this is the reason why he may be compared with the intellectual workers belonging to the other professional categories.

The last kind of bond regards the free expression of one's talent. It is portrayed by Elias as a process for "civilizing" the creative impulses of artistic, and more generally, intellectual work. When talking about the link between mental life and compositional ability in Mozart, Elias highlights a psychological dispute which is then reflected at a sociological level. By using the phrase "civilizing" the creative impulses, he means that the author – similarly to what happens in the more general process for civilizing human drives – exercises a personal self-constraint on himself when restraining and channelling his artistic fancy (see also Kilminster 2004: 30). In other words, the intellectual experiences an inner drama, since he has to mediate between his talent and the limits he imposes on himself in order to carry out the work. According to Elias indeed, the genius of an artist is but the combination of libido drives that the unconscious conveys and translates into an artistic product and which are socially usable (Elias 1993: 136 and ff.). In other words art – and more generally intellectual production – is a particular form of taming and subsequent socialization of the individual's talent, as the case of Mozart's artistic genius shows.

Similarly to what is required of an artist, also a lawyer or a good surgeon needs to show a special attitude, a natural ability which can be honed by gaining technical knowledge and which is mediated through practice and engagement, so that it turns from pure talent into a profession. This means that by starting from a coarse state it can be conveyed and translated in an activity useful for the community.

Being able to combine the free expression of one's own talent honed by a long traineeship and the knowledge gained through years of strong commitment with the specific standards of the audience's taste, i.e. with the client's needs, thus developing them into professional skills which represent the starting point for carrying out one's own work as well as the source of income, all this represents the framework within which self-employment – a liberal profession as well as an artistic performance – is free to express. In this way, from a quality point of view it presents itself as being very different from dependent work: an objective Mozart had adopted and lucidly pursued.

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