

New Aspects of Well-being in the Crisis Era: Emotions, Generations, Anxieties, and Work

MATTEO PIETROPAOLI

Sapienza University of Rome

matteopietropaoliphd@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper is aimed to offer an interpretation of well-being, both at an individual and social level, highlighting the innovative conceptions that have emerged in the last three decades. This period has witnessed significant changes in various areas of life and has been characterized as an "era of crisis," postmodernity, or hypermodernity. This reading aims to explore how these changes have impacted emotional, generational, psychological, and work dynamics concerning the theme of "well-being" in the absence of certain social certainties and values proper of modernity. The primary focus is to identify the changing relationship between life and work, both in terms of social organization (including the relationship with global opportunities and threats) and at an individual level (including the relationship with personal possibilities and fears).

1. Introductions and crisis era

In this article, we want to investigate the new aspects of well-being in the present era, defined here as the "crisis era". These new aspects are identified in the increasingly accentuated passage from materialistic to post-materialistic values, which contribute to defining a mostly reflective, psychological, and ultimately "emotional" well-being, in contrast to the widespread existential ill-being. After this primary characterization, we want to proceed with the analysis of the generational passage concerning the theme of well-being, in particular by focusing on generations Y and Z, with their peculiar traits and the new anxieties that come both from the social world and from the natural one. Finally, we will try to note how this process of redefining well-being and the primary aspects that characterize it manifests itself through some particular phenomena at a social and work level. Finally, the goal will be to understand the change that has occurred in the idea of well-being in this crisis era and possibly how its diffusion within human organizations can be promoted. This considering the perimeter of a society that is now increasingly multifaceted and complicated, in terms of possibilities and expectations on the part of individuals, but also of threats at a collective global level.

Let us therefore begin with the consideration regarding the current "crisis era", recalling that here this definition only serves as a framework within which to address the issue of well-being (Dodge et al., 2012; Fletcher, 2016; Alexandrova, 2017). Indicatively, we can limit the crisis era to the first 20 years of the 21st century, starting with the terrorist crises (2001), through the economic crisis (2008), and up to the pandemic (2020) and military (2022) crisis. This period roughly corresponds with the advanced stage of post-modernity (Bauman, 1997) or hypermodernity (Lipovetsky, 2006), also defined as "reflexive modernity" (Beck, 1999) or, in a more

political characterization, neoliberal regime (Han, 2014) and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019).

Without going into the specifics of these definitions, and their differences, it is important to note that they all fully fall within Inglehart's (1990; 2018) great subdivision between the era of materialistic values and the era of post-materialistic values. The cleavage of these eras occurs for Inglehart after the Second World War and manifests a growing tendency in societies, especially the advanced Western ones, to put into the background previously central values such as survival, collectivism, and embeddedness, to the advantage of individualism, self-expression, and autonomy. This gap, which seems to strengthen itself from generation to generation moving away from the so-called Great Generation, fully characterizes the last phase of postmodernity, which with its crises gives rise to a paradoxicality in individuals between freedom and fear, happiness, and anxiety, optimization and self-exploitation, action and depression, well-being and ill-being.

In short, a phase in which, from an economic point of view, the production process, which had led to widespread material well-being in advanced societies, has been replaced in its centrality by the process of consumption (Baudrillard, 1970) and moreover of personalized consumption, up to the level of a psycho-emotional consumption (Lipovetsky, 2006). From a political point of view, democracy, although widespread throughout the globe, is facing a questioning of its own mechanisms (Crouch, 2020), both internal in terms of individual rights (expectations of freedom) and social protections (especially with respect to automation), and external in comparison with the increasingly advanced autocracies (first of all China).

In fact, a rampant distrust affects democratic institutions and their representatives, now increasingly emptied of power in favor of transnational realities and often pertaining themselves to elitist interest plans unrelated to the needs of the population (Lasch, 1995). Finally, from a psychic point of view, the social demand for constant activity and the absence of shared codes and ideologies leave the individual in a fluctuating state of frenzy aimed at optimizing his life and difficulty in taking charge of his meaning as an independent individual. This involves the diffusion of the so-called "pathologies of freedom" (Ehrenberg, 1998), such as burnout, addiction, and depression, which undermine the search for well-being that is now far more than material, which becomes constant and due pursuit of happiness (Lipovetsky, 2006; Ahmed, 2010), consequently making daily existence at constant risk of ill-being.

The more existential argument, therefore, will be inserted in the reference to organizational and work issues starting from a socio-cultural point of view, aimed at outlining a brief conceptual framework useful for orienting the different applications and conceptions in times of crisis (Newman et al., 2022; Ortiz-Bonnin et al., 2022). These references, to sociology in general and to the sociology of work in particular (Edgell et al., 2016; Watson, 2017), allow us to pose the underlying question of this research: how the conceptual change of "well-being" affects the organizational and working model in current times, both at a social and individual level, and how best to correspond to this change?

The attempt to answer this question will be structured through five paragraphs of elaboration, focused on highlighting today's relationship between well-being and ill-being, the important generational distinctions in place, the emergence of new psychological conditions (which also impact working conditions), the recent and significant phenomenon of the Great Resignation as an example of a changed attitude towards work. Finally, to draw the threads of this discussion, in the conclusions a profound connection will be presented between the

theme of happiness and that of fragility, which seems to characterize well-being in relation to the organization of work in a new way both at a social and individual level. However, let's start by addressing the topic of actual "well-being" and therefore necessarily its contrast with "ill-being".

2. Well-being against Ill-being

Today's more or less democratic advanced societies have reached during the twentieth century a level of widespread material well-being never seen before in human civilization. Poverty measured globally has decreased exponentially, while the practical possibilities for individuals have increased incredibly, in terms of existential security, mobility, goods, and leisure. Hobsbawm (1994) already recalled that in the golden years of the "short century", a European worker had at his disposal a greater quantity and quality of personal services than an eighteenth-century monarch (from the bathroom in the house and the communication possibilities to medical care and transport). Although that constant growth in the West has slowed down on the threshold of the 21st century, leading to phenomena of socio-economic insecurity and at least perceived decline, individuals of the current era still live in a disposition of "personal" material well-being previously unmatched. What is it then that generates the ill-being (social, economic, psychic, existential), proven both through quantitative and qualitative research and through the common perception, which seems to characterize today's crisis era?

To answer such a question in the limited space of this paragraph, we will try to concentrate on two primary issues that are intertwined: the expectation of well-being and the change in the concept of well-being. Net therefore of an effective decline in the socio-economic conditions widespread in the West and its even greater perception in the population, given both the advance of the rest of the world as an economic competitor (see the reduction of "global" poverty [White, 1999]) and the need to put the brakes on the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources (Bardi & Pereira, 2022), there is a substantial change in the theme of well-being that cannot be attributed entirely to conditions external to individuals (Sointu, 2005).

This change, according to the sociologist Lipovetsky (2006), represents the "third phase" of what was previously defined as the consumer society, namely the real hyper-modernity. Without being able to deal here with the transition from the first consumer society (until about the 1950s) to the mass consumer society (from the 1960s to the 1980s) and finally to the hyper-consumer society (which coincides in part with our crisis era), it is now interesting to understand how the individual becomes a "hyper-consumer" and how material and social well-being becomes well-being of "sensations".

Up until the mass consumer society, which finally made available to the majority the entirety of the goods and services produced by industry, consumption (which had become the primary economic dynamic) still possessed strong social and collective characteristics, as well as utility. Think of the importance of the social standing, that some goods and leisures communicated, which still characterized the individual in terms of "class". As well as the sharing character, at least familiar, reserved for some objects (one TV screen per family, one car, etc.) and the activities spread out in common spaces (cinema, holidays in camps, after-work clubs, etc.). Material well-being was also growing, in advanced Western societies but not only, and although there was a lack of many personal services available today (especially in terms of

ICTs), people mostly looked to the future with confidence, convinced that widespread well-being would bring constant personal improvements.

In the hyperconsumer society, which according to Inglehart (2018) involves generations increasingly tied to post-materialistic values, optimism toward the future begins to wane, without slowing down the growth of personal expectations. Indeed, the expectation of well-being has changed to such an extent that, precisely through those post-materialistic values (individualism, self-expression, autonomy), it has gone beyond material goods and consumption, just as it has increasingly freed itself from social and shared codes. In fact, consumption, still dominant as an economic dynamic, has become customized, an individual and emotional consumption, namely aimed at satisfying a set of needs that are as functional and practical as they are psychic and existential. Sociologists such as Bauman (2004) and Lasch (1979) have spoken of the consumerist syndrome and the narcissism that grips the postmodern generations, in the context of the expectation for oneself and the constant uses and discards (in order to have new sensations) as activities aimed at reconfirm one's exceptional self-representation (Lasch, 1979; Codeluppi, 2007). The constant hyperstimulation, typical of daily postmodern life, has to some extent anesthetized (Lowen, 1983) current individuals towards stimuli, requiring ever stronger stimulations, which satisfy increasingly higher expectations of psycho-emotional well-being.

Basically, it is a constant search for happiness, which is no longer considered an aspiration, but rather a condition widely encountered around us and which is therefore required as due. Material well-being at very high levels, good health, leisure, and the possibilities available, which people now no longer fear either losing or showing off out of social envy, but show even when they are not real (on social media in particular), involves a sort of necessity to be happy, which has transformed existential well-being into the primary expectation. Failing in this expectation of happiness, which certainly no political or socio-economic project can guarantee (since it does not depend only on distributed resources), the individual falls into ill-being, albeit surrounded by a framework of widespread comfort and existential security. This is because material well-being is now taken for granted and because the individual himself is now detached from a solid horizon of meaning (the "pact of modernity" by Harari [2016]), namely from beliefs, ideologies, and social doctrines that can provide an existential and collective foothold (Colletti 1980), forcing him to rely more and more on himself for his affirmation and recognition.

So, although different thinkers base their criticism of today's society, and of the personal dissatisfaction it pours on individuals, on various aspects, such as the alienation created by things or the process of constant self-exploitation, basically today's individual for the more is a victim of his expectation of happiness, reinforced in part by the happiness achieved. Therefore Lipovetsky (2006) speaks of "paradoxical happiness", in a context where well-being and comfort are in fact available to the majority, but the threat of ill-being due to missed expectations, now very high and psychologized, is constant. Concerning this paradoxicality, proper to crisis era and related to the new aspects of well-being, it is also to take into consideration the ambivalence we can find in alternative forms of work and organizing in which "fun at work" and "happiness" are encouraged but are mixed with neo-normative control attempts (Mielly et al., 2023). In fact, not only existential security, satisfaction of basic needs, and collective and community referral are no longer sufficient, but consumer goods and leisure are no longer enough either. In this third phase of hypermodernity, they must, first of all, be customized and no longer standard, therefore responding to the personal criteria of

the individual, but above all, they must be psychologized, made emotional, and therefore they must regard aspects such as sensations and experiences, no longer functionality and social status.

Therefore, the problematic issues are no longer related to the presence or absence of things, which can alienate people, but to the emotional relationships with people, first and foremost the existential relationship with oneself. The greater psychological attention both to the individual, in terms of freedom and needs, and to the interrelational spheres, entails repercussions of expectations not only on the levels of sentimental relationships and personal affirmation, but also on the level of work, health, leisure, and politics. Regarding work, in particular, consider recent research on the conceptualization of "boredom" in management and organizational studies (Noury et al., 2022). Consumption therefore becomes consumption not so much of goods but of experiences and sensations, consumption of people, relationships, moments, and identities, and it becomes so in the modality of the "syndrome" exposed by Bauman, namely with a constant frenzy of new beginnings and discards. All this is always toward happiness, which however, as it is never a stable possession, must be constantly sought in an anxious way, with all the load of emotional deepening required by current times, on pain of ill-being.

This character of emotional frenzy, aimed at happiness and achieved mainly through consumption (not just the material one as mentioned), is certainly not the prerogative of the new generations alone (which will be discussed more in the next paragraph). Rather, as it involves the entire social process, the change in the concept of well-being and high expectations have significantly affected the same generation of the so-called Baby Boomers (Roberts, 2012), with respect to which, on the contrary, some very unusual outcomes can be found (above all in the mixture of emotions and new technologies). In short, the process of growth of post-materialistic values as opposed to materialistic ones has led to an immediate acceptance of the new psycho-emotional principles of well-being for the less young generations (starting from the first who did not experience the war).

Having fully enjoyed growth and a certain personal as well as socio-economic fulfillment, many Baby Boomers now seem to be trying to regain perhaps that freedom and self-expression that they had lacked in their youth (at the beginning of the individualist revolution). The widespread reference to "youthfulness" thus reveals itself for the previous generations as an attempt to recover, through the consumption of new goods, amusements, and certainly products to rejuvenate, precisely that existential and emotional well-being which in part had been left aside in the social rise, in an attempt now to mitigate the anxieties related to the end of life. Thus, while society itself seems to have less and less need for "seniors", even in the important roles and economic conditions which they cut out for themselves, existential security is not enough to drive away ill-being due both to aging and the impossibility of making full use of one's concrete possibilities (Lipovetsky, 2006). This is because they too, like the new generations, now seem mostly devoid of symbolic means and solid ideological, religious, or at least cultural references to face suffering and death, without existentially falling back into mere senselessness.

3. Generational distinctions

The set of transformations of values and beliefs that took place after the Second World War, including individualism and the change in the theme of well-being, which is increasingly witnessed in the younger generations, is based primarily on existential security. This is due to the possibility of satisfying the primary needs of subsistence, but it is not only linked to the measurable reality of this security, rather it also changes with the change in the perception of security. As the perception of security decreases, according to Inglehart (2018), the same post-materialistic generations can invert some priority criteria.

The demand for personal growth and self-development, often combined in today's young people with advanced education and the desire to get involved, in fact, collides in the crisis era with the effective offer from the world of work. Even without taking into account the frustrations of tangled work systems in advanced societies, where for the most part work is not found through linear processes but through relationships and contacts, even the most advanced and "clear" systems present job possibilities that are often far from what for which individuals have prepared themselves.

Already Lasch at the end of the 70s pointed out the drastic distance between advanced mass education and the jobs actually offered by the US reality. Most of the young people would have found themselves, and still find themselves, demoted with respect to both the cultural and specialized education received. Society trained executives or specialists who were assigned roles as employees or laborers (Lasch, 1979). While this, in a less widely educated and technologically advanced industrial society, could have been fine in terms of survival goals and well-being (as well as the care and growth of a family), therefore limiting itself to materialistic values, now the situation is different. Most job offers, to date, do not present themselves as a stimulus for over-educated young people and their goals of post-materialistic happiness.

Moreover, this phenomenon seems to affect mainly two of the generations that we can ascribe to Inglehart's macro-subdivision between materialists and post-materialists. In fact, although even the so-called Baby Boomers and Generation X would fall within Inglehart's distinction from previous generations, as post-materialistic in their turn, the issue of disappointment with the expectation of well-being mainly concerns the Millennials (generation Y) and partly Generation Z.

Among the leading sociologists who have analyzed generations, Neil Howe and William Strauss assume central importance in identifying the Millennials (Howe et al., 2000). Without being able to delve into the aspects highlighted in this and other research, it is useful to see the initial identification of the Millennials as a new Great Generation (such as that of the Second World War) based on the characteristics of a sense of duty and personal ability, on the one hand, of optimism and narcissism, on the other. Unlike Generation Z, in fact, Millennials are a generation found in the form of social change and the crisis era (at least in terms of the West): grown up with the evolution of digital but not digital natives, children of the economic boom (and of the Baby Boomers) but who lived in recession, globalized close to global dangers (relocation, terrorism, pandemic, war), environmentalists before climate disaster was established as a priority. Therefore, a generation born with personal expectations, a social system, and a world, that suddenly changed, also through the ultimate influence of Generation Z, which in part "shows" to the Millennials (still full of doubts and guilt) what it's like to be

fully in the crisis era because they were born in it. This means: not only losing that collective illusion of social, political, and personal optimism, but never having had it.

With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, which for Generation Z marks the great collective clash of the pleasure principle with the reality principle (as 9/11 and the 2008 recession had been like for Millennials), today's "adults" find themselves reconsidering their entire existence. For Generation Z, the pandemic was the first severe setback to their desires and intentions for well-being, but within a general conception of the future's absence and pessimism that makes them resist well to the crisis (the key word is "resilience" [Liu et al., 2019]). On the other hand, the Millennials, already depressed by the illusion's loss, find a new motivation (positive or negative) to try and redeem themselves from the disappointment. The pandemic also breaks for them the last ties of "duty" to which their parents' generation still called them (the Baby Boomers who, with more or less hard work, in times of economic rise, had accumulated positions and properties, also used to maintain children). The strengthened change in the values of well-being, from material to emotional, personal, and psychological, is the liberation of an often frustrated generation, sometimes given up for lost, which at the last (narcissistically perceived) twist of fate decides not to play the old game's rules anymore and dedicate themselves only to themselves, as Generation Z seems to be able to do without guilt (Seemiller & Grace, 2018).

It is no coincidence that some US scholars have also called the Millennials the Boomerang or Peter Pan generation (Howe et al., 2000), given the propensity to return to the past, in particular to childhood, and not to carry on the social process of growth (with the rites of marriage, children, stable work commitment, etc.). Net of the objective practical difficulty, due precisely to years of stagnant economy first and then in recession, on an existential and social level the procrastination or refusal of these passage's rites certainly shows the prevailing narcissism (of a generation that believed itself destined for great things), linked however to the fact that in childhood the perception of the world and oneself was completely different, then "betrayed" over time. A disappointed optimism that Generation Z has never experienced, already freed both from the illusion of an ever better future and from that sense of underlying duty and personal responsibility required of those who are "born with all possibilities", as they were believed (even by themselves) the Millennials.

4. New Anxieties

These generational distinctions perhaps allow us to better understand what was said above on the change in the concept of well-being in crisis era. However, it would be an insufficient consideration if it did not take into account the advent of new kinds of anxieties, typical of the social, cultural, and certainly natural changes that have occurred in the last 20 years. These anxieties, endogenous to the new generations but partly internalized by the previous ones, are on the one hand what undermines the new concept of well-being with the constant threat of ill-being, but on the other hand, they are also the sign of a possible response to this ill-being, useful to understand how to mitigate it. In accordance with post-materialistic values, in fact, these new anxieties seem to be something very different from a material fear, namely the fear of something immediate and concrete, rather a deeper and more anguished call, in some ways existential, aimed at the future and the difficulty of being oneself in times of uncertainty.

Let us, therefore, start from the primary anxieties of the crisis era, which we mentioned in the introduction as "pathologies of freedom", recalling the definition of Ehrenberg (1998). According to him, the transition from a Western society based on conflict (social, psychic, political), and on "negativity", to one based on freedom, and "positivity" (Han, 2010), has also generated a change in the manifestations of ill-being, up to the linked mental pathologies most widespread: attention deficit disorder, burnout, addiction and, above all, depression. Indeed, if individuals in industrial society, still partly dominated by materialistic values, tended to suffer ill-being mainly due to concrete shortcomings or "repressive" instances (the neuroses of Freud [1929], the orthopedic and disciplinary bio-power of Foucault [1975]), the post-materialistic generations of the digital age are oppressed not by poverty and repression, but by abundance (of goods and possibilities) and excess of expectation. The widely relaunched proposal of freedom, effective material well-being, and the expectation of full and existential happiness lead the individual not to a level of dialectical contrast with social forces but to that of alternating exaltation and insufficiency of oneself, of not being able to be enough or fully oneself.

Thus hyperactivism and multitasking, to be able to take advantage of a greater number of possibilities and to use time in a fully experiential way (even on the virtual), lead to disturbance of attention, to the absence of possibilities for rest and boredom. The constant self-optimization, in terms of feelings, work, body, information, and relationship, leads the individual to the risk of burnout: from the frantic and dissatisfied consumption of everything to self-consumption. Finally, the issues of addiction and depression, the most important for Ehrenberg (1998), both reside in the abandonment of the individual to himself, with no more social, cultural, or ideological supports (and constraints). In a reality in which spontaneous initiative and personal responsibility, basically autonomous action, decide what the individual himself is, his identity, and the value of his existence (individualism, self-expression, autonomy), if there is a crack in this positive tendency then the person collapses without support.

In short, depression, as a pathology of initiative, is precisely that block of action that occurs to the individual, for more or less external reasons, driving him back into the lack of sense of his actions and throwing him into ill-being. On the other hand, addiction is the way to respond to this abandonment to oneself, and to the possible relapse into ill-being, by seeking a unity of self with other, up to the fusion. The individual finds strength and support for his social initiative in something other than himself, thus sacrificing his freedom and autonomy (and responsibility for his actions) in order to appease his ill-being determined by the absence of foundation and from the senselessness of his existence. Instead of taking on the responsibility of being himself (and of being happy), with the effort it requires, he chooses to be an "addict" and find his meaning and driving force in something else: sex, virtuality, sport, adrenaline, shopping, or, above all, drugs, true prêt-à-porter happiness.

In the face of these underlying psychological and certainly existential themes, which form the backdrop to the crisis era, today's advanced society also unleashes more specific anxieties. The extension of the individual on the digital (and also the virtual) level certainly causes a constant and re-launched self-exposition which, if on the one hand favors the value of self-expression, required by a widespread narcissism (Lasch, 1979; DeWall et al., 2011), on the other makes him constantly "exposed" to the judgment of others and possible social rejection. The use of social networks, the constant connection through the internet and smartphones, the immediate resonance of words and actions, and the absence of oblivion, are all factors that especially

agitate the new generations and generate not only hyperactivism, attention disorders, and frenzy communication, but also threats to psychological stability, especially for the most fragile ones (Elhai et al., 2016). Here too the freedom and the potential of connectivity and brand new information and communication tools, bearers of indisputable social and material possibilities, reveal an existential threat to the well-being of the individual, making him more dispersed, anxious, and at risk of emotional collapse (as a counterpart of the self-exaltation).

This emotionalization of social relationships and the use of technology itself, typical of this "digital" as well as "crisis" era, has been further tested by some concrete and apparently fleeting crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukraine war, but also from a constant, definitive and apparently inescapable underlying crisis: the climate disaster (Richardson et al., 2011; Masson-Delmotte et al., 2021). Through the first two crises, which appeared at a time when the economic recession seemed to be partially over, the new generations were suddenly faced with the so-called death reflection (Guerriero et al., 2022). In short, the phenomenon whereby the direct threat to life, especially in a society with post-materialistic values in which survival is taken for granted, causes mostly voluntary upheavals to personal and social habits, even once the imminent risk has disappeared. For example, what has conditioned mainly for Millennials, among other things, the "Great Resignation" (Cook, 2021; Cohen, 2021), namely an abandonment (or restructuring) of work in the name of a better relationship with free time and the quality of life (considered at that point fleeting). In Generation Z, which has even undergone these upheavals during the school period, with repercussions on their ability to meet and socialize, death reflection has caused widespread aggravations of both anxiety and personal insecurity, while apparently it has not changed the centrality of post-materialistic values in favor of those of survival and security.

Moreover, it is precisely on this generation, "the last" to be able to make an authentic change, that falls the deepest global threat to human existence as a whole, as a species that lives in a given ecosystem. Net of the political considerations relating to climate change, now ascertained by almost all global scientists in its danger and speed, even the mere thought of this constant threat and future's absence is affecting hundreds of thousands of young people (and not only) throughout the world. This phenomenon, first analyzed in psychology, is mainly called eco-anxiety, but in the academic debate, it is also comparable to definitions such as climate anxiety, ecological grief, solastalgia, and ecological trauma (Pihkala, 2020). The peculiarity of this set of anxieties is certainly the "collective" (even global) reference to individual pathologies, unlike what happens with the pathologies of freedom in the proper sense (widespread but with an individual reference). In fact, various media, more or less specialized, have taken an interest in the phenomenon and have reported the cases, often dramatic, relating to the effects of this form of anxiety, which sometimes resulted in striking suicides (The Guardian, 05/19/2022).

But what is eco-anxiety and how does it affect well-being in a crisis era? Although not yet included in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), the official definition of this phenomenon, by the American Psychological Association, is the following: «a chronic fear of environmental cataclysm» (Clayton et al., 2017: 68), which comes from observing the seemingly irrevocable impact of climate change and the associated concern for one's future and future generations. In short, it could be defined as the "fear of extinction" (Pietropaoli, 2023) or of natural changes so striking that an individual no longer feels himself "at home" even on Earth. This anxiety, perhaps the most underlying in this crisis era, is thus connected to what was seen previously in outlining the current "fragile individual"

(Millefiorini, 2015). Always in frenetic movement and consumption, individualistic but at the same time aimed at narcissistic self-expression (virtual and always connected), today's individual is constantly distressed by the idea that the only undisputed foundation still left to him, the nature of his planet, threatens to fail.

5. Resignation from work

The changed conception and perception of well-being, together with the new sources of ill-being, characterize the crisis era both for the individual level and for the social one in the broadest sense: organization, politics, and work (Millefiorini, 2022). All three of these aspects, which intertwine with each other, are also characterized by the need for cooperation between individuals. Although therefore only the theme of work will be addressed in this paragraph, the considerations presented also partly concern the other aspects in a general sense, as levels in which the individual must relate to strangers, or the so-called "generalized others" (Millefiorini, 2015), and to instances that are not only autonomous.

The big issue regarding work, in the crisis era, seems to be its disappearance as a central feature of individual and social life. Of course, this does not mean that work will disappear, although developments in digital technologies and cybernetics will render (and have already rendered) a large number of jobs largely superfluous (Harari, 2016). Rather, what first of all changes is the way individuals relate themselves to work, among the various fundamental aspects of life. In accordance with the strengthening of post-materialistic values and certainly with the disappearance of embeddedness in classes, social codes, and cultural, ethnic, or sexual groups, the importance of work in terms of social recognition and personal affirmation diminishes. If in the previous industrial society, it was possible to determine a large number of characteristics of a person from the work she did (income, clothing, housing, property, culture, politics, etc.), today the individual is less and less characterized by work commitment, while his facets aimed at self-expression, personal and personalized peculiarities count much more (Joyce et al., 2010; Keith et al., 2020). From mass society, we have moved on to a sort of mass individualism, in the sense that in numerous widely reproduced aspects of themselves, people resemble each other, yet what is constantly claimed in these aspects is precisely the exceptionality, freedom, and personalization of life.

Thus the importance of work, even in a neoliberal era aimed at self-optimization and self-exploitation (Han 2010; Cederström & Spicer, 2015), is ultimately directed towards the fulfillment of the individual and personal happiness. The idealistic, universalistic characters and everything related to the work ethic in terms of social "duty" are missing. The obligation remains on the issue of retribution, which in a consumer society (or rather hyper-consumer one) also represents the possibility of access to happiness. Yet even here it is not the acquired material asset and the property that is sought, nor the social condition in the proper sense, but the psycho-emotional experience and the possibility of exceptional self-expression (basically a personal meaning "out of the norm") (Lasch, 1979; Lipovetsky, 2006).

The rejection of the masses, typical of the individualism of advanced societies, certainly influences consumption but also work, which receives more and more attention in terms of personal well-being, in the search for psycho-physical serenity in the workplace, and autonomous relationship with free time and amusements, where the individual truly seeks to characterize himself. What Ulrich Beck (1999) defined as the "ontology of differences", the

system by which individuals were distinguished by standardized criteria, divided into categories that were difficult to permeate with each other, is now missing. Thus work itself loses importance, on the one hand, in terms of concrete survival, given the widespread material well-being, on the other, in terms of affirmation and fulfillment, given that individualism, self-expression, and autonomy lead to seeking one's happiness elsewhere (for those who do not work in exceptional fields, always emotionally and existentially stimulating, who on the other hand risk burnout).

Occupational and social phenomena such as the "Great Resignation" (Cook, 2021; Cohen, 2021) or "Big Quit" [Curtis, 2021] or "Great Discontent" [Hirsch, 2021]), namely the significant increase in resignations from work that occurred in a large part of the western world (especially in the United States) in 2021, have shown a trend that the most advanced companies have already anticipated and tried to counter through the so-called "corporate welfare". These phenomena are certainly favored by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has required a restructuring of work environments in terms of smart working and remote work (when not through complete stops) (Nayal et al., 2021). On the one hand, in fact, the exceptional nature of the event gave some people much more free time and modified an established routine, allowing them to try out a very different lifestyle, from which it was then difficult to go back (with hours of traffic to get to the workplaces, which were often uncomfortable in physical terms and toxic in relational terms [Islam & Sferazzo, 2021]). On the other hand, the same increased pressure on some categories, such as the health and ICTs fields, has led to reactions similar to burnout and has therefore convinced many to have to take a break from work and change their lifestyle. All this, as we have seen, is favored by that death reflection which suddenly calls into question the pre-established routines and the system of values to which, perhaps unconsciously, the individual had adapted until then.

However, even net of the pandemic in a specific sense, the era of crisis is characterized by a basic tendency towards uncertainty and change as the only permanence (Bauman, 2004) and the need to grasp life as it unfolds to make the most of it. The idea of a permanent job, as well as that of lifelong relationships or goods kept forever and handed down, is something very far from frenetic consumption and spasmodic desire to renew things, emotions, people, and oneself. Equally the "will" for work is such as long as it provides economic possibilities of consumption adequate to aspirations, but also a personal enhancement in a psycho-emotional healthy environment and certainly the ability to encourage self-expression. Very soon however, for reasons that are on the one hand relational and on the other pragmatic, work ceases to be an element of existential fulfillment and becomes a constraint and an obligation, favoring alienation from one's profession aimed at identifying oneself only in free time, leisure, home, and family.

The widespread demonstrations of lucky or wealthy workers who describe themselves, mainly through social media, as people who "work not working" (influencers, content creators, Silicon Valley geniuses, etc.) create a new imaginary to aspire to, above all for the young people, different even from that of business tycoons and Hollywood stars. In fact, the new idea of work does not concern a commitment adequate to fame, but the possibility of working the minimum that allows one to lead a very good life in free time, namely a wholly instrumental and not personally characterizing vision of one's own activity, which all the more it is senseless the more detachment allows. It is no coincidence that some recent research attests that a large majority of people believe they are doing a bullshit job (Graeber, 2019), a senseless and mostly

easy one, which may also provide them with income but which does not grant any social and individual meaning.

So, in a crisis era, work becomes mostly "superfluous", as indeed are the individuals who practice it in the inevitable process of economic and technological development. A tolerable work (net of poverty) only to the extent that it respects a broad psycho-emotional well-being, which includes a positive physical and relational working environment, the enhancement of one's person, and the possibility of self-expression as a peculiar individual. Otherwise, such work is ideally to be rejected, even at the cost of not having any recognizable activity (the increase of NEETs in advanced societies), so as to have the time to take care of oneself, to take control of one's life, and to express oneself freely. With the constant risk, however, of falling into the "block of action", caused by the loss of any social meaning and by the absence of any broader sense than mere living, and thus sinking into depression (or encountering addiction exactly to avoid this ill-being).

6. Conclusion

We have thus outlined a conceptual framework that tries to connect the latest features of well-being. The framework is focused on the interplay between social and individual relationships with ill-being, as well as some psychological and work phenomena. These factors are intertwined with generational dynamics and the current crisis situation. The results suggest a paradoxical situation that affects both the organizational and work spheres. It seems like there is a tendency to move away from what is due, codified, and shared, towards embracing individualistic values that are essentially post-materialistic. This escape, however, which is at the same time a continuous search for affirmation and exceptional realization even *within* the ordinary organizational and working process, seems to show first of all the fragility of the current individual, who needs to integrate the constant pursuit of freedom with a new form of social recognition (that is at the same time adaptable, personalized and emotional). In this final paragraph, therefore, we will try to provide an idea regarding how the paradox of a frantic search for happiness and a rethought working dynamic (also in its meaning for individual and collective life) can meet these new aspects of well-being, and thus allow a conception of the individual-work and society-work relationship renewed on the basis of the possibilities and threats inherent in the era of crisis.

All of these considerations, in fact, should make us reflect on how much the changed concept of well-being, and partly of ill-being, is linked in the crisis era both to external global events and to a transformation of social and individual values of reference, especially in advanced Western societies (but not only). Whether these events and transformations are positive or negative is not the task and possibility of this paper to establish. How, for example, can we evaluate the fact that in the world we currently die more from pathologies linked to obesity than from hunger? (Harari, 2015) Rather, it is a matter of noting an important structural change at a social level, especially in the organizational field of human action (Bonazzi, 2008), whether it is in the pure work

environment or extends to the political and public level in general (de Leonardis 1997; Kossek et al., 2012; Millefiorini, 2022).

Human organizations must now take this epochal change into account and re-orient their structural direction. The theme of sustainability, however widespread, cannot be conceived in a limited way to natural sustainability (which is already a far away and scarcely sincere goal), but we must extend it to the "existential sustainability" of life on the part of the individual. "Environmental" sustainability becomes a necessity in the broadest sense, also understood as the sustainability of the natural and social environment for the individual, therefore also in the workplace, in free time, in cities, and in the family (Ochoa et al., 2018; LeMay, 2022). Otherwise, there is a risk of exhaustion and depression for that same individual, who can no longer avoid expecting a call to happiness, in terms of self-fulfillment and self-affirmation. An individual so "fragile" that, although aimed at autonomy, he increasingly needs a context and meaning created artfully, precisely by those human and social institutions from which he constantly frees himself. A context and a meaning which, however, in this unbridled individualism, must be evanescent and enveloping, rather than peremptory and disciplining. It must precisely "support" the individual himself and constantly mend his torn bond both with nature and society and with himself.

For human organizations, whether they are institutions, companies, or associations, this means first of all modifying their logic of action and profit (Van Woerkom, 2021) so that, on the one hand, would satisfy the worker's desire to autonomously manage the relationship between working time and free, with the correct remuneration for access to personalized leisure activities. On the other hand, however, it is also necessary to carve out a central role for personal affirmation, socially recognized in the working community, which guides the unstable and fragile path of the personal search for meaning. In fact, therefore, the workplace must become the community to which the individual binds himself without external constraints, thanks to the creation of a set of internal and external meanings that strengthen personal identity, at the very moment in which they allow to modulate one's timing and choices. Orientation and control (Jenkins & Delbridge, 2014) that is neither strong and repressive nor weak and loose, but materially unnoticed and socially, emotionally, and psychologically profound. Such that it may support and guide the individual, at the very moment in which he, who is given the freedom of autonomous action, gets lost. All to obtain in return a motivated worker, who is happy to sublimate the shortcomings of his fragility through cooperative action and a common purpose.

Keywords

Well-being; Crisis era; Happiness; Generations; Anxieties; Work.

References

Ahmed, S., (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham: Duke University Press.

- Alexandrova, A. (2021) *A Philosophy for the Science of Well-Being*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bardi, U., & Pereira, C. A., (eds) (2022) *Limits and beyond: 50 years on from “the limits to growth”, what did we learn and what’s next?.* London: Exapt Press.
- Bauman, Z., (1997) *Postmodernity and its Discontents*, Cambridge: Polity Press, Cambridge 1997.
- Bonazzi, G., (2008) *Storia del pensiero organizzativo (History of organizational thought)*, Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Cederström, C., and Spicer, A., (2015) *The Wellness Syndrome*, Hoboken: Wiley.
- Clayton, S., Manning, C.M., Krygsmann, K. e Speiser, M., (2017) *Mental health and our changing climate: impacts, implications, and guidance*, Washington: American Psychological Association, and EcoAmerica,.
- Codeluppi, V., (2007) *La vetrinizzazione sociale. Il processo di spettacolarizzazione degli individui e della società (Social showcase. The process of making individuals and society spectacular)*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Cohen, A., (2021) How to Quit Your Job in the Great Post-Pandemic Resignation Boom *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 10-05-2021.
- Colletti, L., (1980) *Tramonto dell’ideologia (Sunset of ideology,)* Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Cook, I., (2021) Who Is Driving the Great Resignation? *Harvard Business Review*, 15-09-2021
- Crouch, C., (2020) *Post-Democracy After the Crises*, Hoboken: Wiley.
- Curtis, L., (2021) Why The Big Quit Is Happening And Why Every Boss Should Embrace It *Forbes*, 16-07-2021.
- de Leonardis, O., (1997) Declino della sfera pubblica e privatismo *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 38(2), 2: 169-194.
- DeWall, N. C., Buffardi, L. E., Bonser, I., Campbell, W. K., (2011) Narcissism and implicit attention seeking: Evidence from linguistic analyses of social networking and online presentation *Personality and Individual Differences*, 51(1): 57-62.
- Dodge, R., Daly, A., Huyton, J., & Sanders, L. (2012) The challenge of defining wellbeing *International Journal of Wellbeing*, 2(3): 222-235.
- Edgell, S., Gottfried, H., Granter, E., (2016) *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment*, London: Sage.
- Ehrenberg, A., (1998) *La fatigue d’être soi. Dépression et société (The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age)*, Paris: Editions Odile Jacob,
- Elhai, J. D., Levine, J. C., Dvorak, R. D., Hall, B. J., (2016) Fear of missing out, need for touch, anxiety and depression are related to problematic smartphone use *Computers in Human Behavior*, 63: 509-516
- Fletcher, G., (2016) *The Philosophy of Well-Being. An Introduction*, London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M., (1975) *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison (Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison)*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Freud., S., (1929) *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur (Civilization and its discontents)*, Berlin: Boer.
- Graeber, D., (2019) *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Han B.C. (2010), *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft – Burnoutgesellschaft – Hoch-Zeit* (The burnout society), Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.
- Han B.-C., *Psychopolitik: Neoliberalismus und die neuen Machttechniken* (Psychopolitics. neoliberalism and new technologies of power), Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer.
- Harari, Y. N., (2016), *Homo Deus. A Brief History of Tomorrow*, London: Penguin Books.
- Hirsch, P. B., (2021) The Great Discontent *Journal of Business Strategy*, 42(6), 439-442.
- Hobsbawm, E. J., (1994) *Ages of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London: Penguin Group.
- Howe, N., and Strauss, W., (2000) *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, New York: Vintage.
- Inglehart, R. F., (1990) *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Societies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Inglehart, R. F., (2018) *Cultural Evolution. People's Motivations Are Changing and Reshaping the World*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Islam, G., and Sferrazzo, R., (2021) Workers rites: Ritual mediations and the tensions of new management. *Journal of Management Studies*, 59(2): 1-54.
- Jenkins, S., and Delbridge, R., (2014). In pursuit of happiness: A sociological examination of employee identifications amongst a 'happy' call-centre workforce *Organization*, 21(6): 867–887.
- Joyce, K., Pabayo, R., Critchley, J. A., Bambra, C. (2010) Flexible working conditions and their effects on employee health and wellbeing *Cochrane Database of systematic Review*, 17(2), doi: 10.1002/14651858.CD008009.pub2.
- Keith, M. G., Harms, P. D., & Long, A. C. (2020) "Worker health and well-being in the gig economy: A proposed framework and research agenda", in *Entrepreneurial and small business stressors, experienced stress, and well being*, Perrewé P. L., Harms P. D., Chang C.-H. (eds.), pp. 1–33, Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Kossek, E. E., Kalliath, T., Kalliath, P., (2012) Achieving employee wellbeing in a changing work environment: An expert commentary on current scholarship *International Journal of Manpower*, 33(7): 738-753.
- Lasch, C., (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York: Norton & Company.
- Lasch, C., (1995) *The Revolt of the Elites. And the Betrayal of Democracy*, New York: Norton & Company.
- LeMay, C. P., (2022) *Millennials and Conflict in the Workplace. Understand the Unique Traits of the Now Generation*, New York: Routledge.
- Lipovetsky, G., (2006) *Le bonheur paradoxal. Essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation* (Paradoxical happiness. Essay on the hyperconsumption society), Paris: Gallimard.
- Liu, Y., L. Cooper, C., Tarba, S. Y., (2019) Resilience, wellbeing and HRM: A multidisciplinary perspective *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 30 (8): 1227-1238.
- Lowen, A. (1983) *Narcissism. Denial of the True Self*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Masson-Delmotte, V., Zhai, P., Pirani, A., Connors, S. L., et al., (2021) *IPCC 2021 Summary for Policymakers Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mielly, M., Islam, G., & Gosen, D., (2023) Better Sorry than Safe: Emotional Discourses and Neo-normative Control in a Workplace Safety Council *Organization Studies*, 44(6): 889-917.
- Millefiorini, A., (2022) Gli effetti del processo di individualizzazione nella sfera politica, civile e organizzativa (The effects of the individualization process in the political, civil and organizational spheres) *Rivista trimestrale di Scienza dell'Amministrazione. Studi di teoria e ricerca sociale*, 3: 1-27.
- Nayal, P., Pandey, N., Paul, J., (2022) Covid-19 pandemic and consumer-employee-organization wellbeing: A dynamic capability theory approach *The Journal of Consumer Affairs*, 56(1): 359-390.
- Newman, A., Eva, N., Bindl, U. K., Stoverink, A. C., (eds) (2022) Special Issue: Organizational and Vocational Behavior in Times of Crisis *Applied Psychology*, 71(3).
- Noury, L., Ahuja, S., Parker, M., Sturdy, A., Tyler, M., (2022) In praise of boredom at work *Organization*, 29(5): 791-805.
- Ochoa, P., Lepeley, M.-T., Essens, P., (eds) (2018), *Wellbeing for Sustainability in the Global Workplace*, London: Routledge.
- Ortiz-Bonnin, S., Blahopoulou, J., García-Buades, M. E., Montañez-Juan, M. (2022) Work-life balance satisfaction in crisis times: from luxury to necessity – The role of organization's responses during COVID-19 lockdown *Personnel Review. A Journal of People, Work, and Organisations*, 52(4): 1033-1050.
- Pietropaoli, M. (2023) *Individualism and the Rise of Egosystems. The Extinction Society*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pihkala, P., (2020) Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety *Sustainability*, 12(19): 7836.
- Richardson, K., Steffen, W. e Liverman D., (2011) *Climate Change: Global Risks, Challenges and Decisions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roberts, K., (2012) The end of the long baby-boomer generation *Journal of Youth Studies*, 15(4): 479-497.
- Seemiller, C., and Grace, M., (2018) *Generation Z. A Century in the Making*, London: Routledge.
- Sointu, E., (2005) The rise of an ideal: tracing changing discourses of wellbeing *The sociological review*, 53(2): 255-274.
- The Guardian (2022), in https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/may/19/climate-suicides-despair-global-heating?CMP=share_btn_tw (19/05/2022)
- van Woerkom, M., (2021) Building Positive Organizations: A Typology of Positive Psychology Interventions. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.769782.
- Watson, T. (2017) *Sociology, Work and Organisation: Seventh Edition*, Milton Park: Taylor & Francis.

White, H., (1999) Global poverty reduction: are we heading in the right direction? *Journal of International Development*, 11(4), 503-519.

Zuboff, S., (2019) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, New York: PublicAffairs.

Acknowledgments

National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), Mission 4 Component 2 Investment 1.4 Call for tender No. 3138 of 16 December 2021, rectified by Decree n.3175 of 18 December 2021 of Italian Ministry of University and Research funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU; Award Number: Project code CN_00000033, Concession Decree No. 1034 of 17 June 2022 adopted by the Italian Ministry of University and Research, Project title “National Biodiversity Future Center - NBFC” Sapienza CN5-Spoke 7