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2. IBM Italia labor unions and Black-Boxing Fear¹

The consolidation and growth of IBM in Italy happened in parallel with that of left-wing social movements. Following in the footsteps of the Berkely Counterculture and of the French protests of May 1968, the years 1968 and 1969 saw an increased politicization first among students, and then among factory workers. The autumn of 1969 is known as “Autunno Caldo” (Hot Autumn), after a very intense political activity in Italian factories, made of strikes, marches, blockages and occupations. These protests stemmed from the 1968 students movement, and were fueled by the expiration of the steelworkers national contract. In that period, work conditions in IBM were quite privileged, and overall labor unions did not have a large base when compared to other large Italian companies, for example FIAT. IBM workforce was also generally more qualified than the average factory worker who participated in 1969 protests. However, the wave of protests culminating in the Hot Autumn greatly impacted IBM as well. In this period, a group of workers started to revitalize and renew the company labor unions. From the end of the 1960s, IBM labor unions became more vocal in criticizing the company and in reclaiming a role in its decisions. Furthermore, some of the achievement of the wider workers movement fostered a greater cooperation between labor unions from different companies, for example the “Statuto dei Lavoratori” (Workers’ chart) in 1970 and the establishment of the “Federazione Lavoratori Metalmeccanici” (Steel Workers Federation) in 1972². This meant that, although small in size, IBM labor unions could count on a wider network of support and exchange.

IBM labor unions, however, were quite unique in the Italian context. Some of the key struggles of other labor unions, for example the reduction of working hours and the increase of salaries, were not applicable to the IBM situation. Furthermore, working in IBM gave a first-hand experience of what it

¹ “Black-Boxing Fear” is a fearful narrative which describes a technology as a necessary tool for social and individual empowerment, when at the same time the technology actually disempower users. A “black-boxing fear” is characterized by two elements: first, a technology which can’t be fully understood and adapted by the user (material aspect); second, a narrative on the negative consequences resulting from not using the technology (ideological aspect). The ideological aspect of Black-Boxing Fear in the history of computing is tied to the use of “fear of falling behind” as a way to promote the use of computers. I define “Fear of falling behind” as the argument through which computers were presented as an urgent and unavoidable technology, whose speedy adoption was necessary to achieve and maintain geopolitical, economic or social status.

² This is important because many IBM workers were placed in the category of “Steel Workers”

meant to work in a technologically advanced multinational company guided by a “rational” management style. This was not the norm in Italy, but rather a model to which other companies should have aspired if they wanted to have success in global capitalism. In a way, then, IBM Italia employees were working in the future. Because of these peculiarities, IBM labor unions produced a quite encompassing critique of Black Boxing Fear. First, they discussed the ideological aspect of Black Boxing Fear, as was common in the Italian workers movement. But they also analyzed the material aspect of Black Boxing Fear, pointing out how IBM products were often “black boxes” also to IBM employees themselves.

2.1 A brief history of labor unions in IBM Italia

The first documents signed by IBM Italia labor unions, at the time organized in a “Commissione Interna” (Internal Committee), dates to the early 1950s³. The Committee was composed by representatives of the two main labor unions of the time⁴: CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, Italian General Confederation of Labour) with its affiliate FIOM (Federazione Italiana Operai Metalmeccanici, Italian Federation of Metalworkers), and CISL (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori, Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions) with its affiliate FIM (Federazione Italiana Metalmeccanici, Italian Federation of Metal Mechanics). CGIL-FIOM was related to the Italian Communist Party and was mostly popular between blue-collar workers, while CISL-FIM was related to the Christian Democracy and was mostly popular between white-collar workers⁵. In this period the work of the IBM Internal Committee was more similar to that of other trade unions, as it mostly concerned issues like the reduction of working times, salary increases or the distribution of production bonuses⁶.

³ When IBM opened its first Italian branch in 1927, the fascist regime had just made all labor unions illegal: in 1926 the “Commissioni Interne” (Internal Committees) formed by labor unions were replaced by the confederation of fascist labor unions. This situation was unofficially reverted in 1943 with the fall of fascism, after which workers started to form again Internal Committees. The freedom to create labor unions was made official in the Italian Constitution of 1946, and the relevance of Internal Committees was further sanctioned in a 1947 agreement between the industrialists organization Confindustria and the labor unions CGIL.

⁴ Other labor unions were present at the time, for example the social-democratic UIL (Unione Italiana del Lavoro, Italian Labor Union) and the anarcho-syndicalist USI (Unione Sindacale Italiana, Italian Workers' Union). UIL, together with CISL, stemmed from CGIL in 1950 when the communist faction became majoritarian. USI existed from the 1910s but it was dissolved by the fascist regime and then founded again following the split of CGIL.

⁵ Verbale delle votazioni [elezioni della Commissione Interna], 1953 – IBM Italia RSU archive

⁶ See documents in IBM Italia RSU archive

Alongside the 1960s, the Italian Workers Movement had both a quantitative and a qualitative growth. In particular, the status and role of white-collar workers became increasingly central. In 1964 FIOM-CGIL organized its first “National conference on technicians and employees”, followed by a second one in 1969. These debates on the role of “technicians and employees” were particularly important for IBM workers, as many of them could be categorized as such. The main question was whether white-collar workers should be considered part of the workers movement or not. Traditionally, the workers movement had been mostly animated by blue-collar workers. But the contemporary changes of the job market led many white-collar workers to increasingly identify with the struggles of the historical Workers Movement. At the times this process were referred to as the “proletarianization of technicians”. Such process pointed at a key contradiction in the ideological aspect of Black Boxing Fear: if computers were bringing the world into a bright new era, then why did white-collar workers felt increasingly similar to their blue-collar colleagues?

Another key process happening in the 1960s was the increasing criticism towards Internal Committees, often judged as too distant from workers and not enough effective. During the Hot Autumn, many workers started to spontaneously constitute “Consigli di Fabbrica” (CdF, Factory Councils). These were assemblies of workers similar to the Russian Soviets, first established in Italy by socialists and anarchists in the 1910s and then swept away by the fascist regime. CdF were not based on a set of representatives as were the Internal Committees. Some of the workers would indeed act as “delegates” to negotiate with the company management, but always in close connection with the larger base. This new model was officially approved with the “Statuto dei Lavoratori” of 1970. This was a quite unique piece of legislation and one of the most successful outcomes of the Hot Autumn and the 1960s workers protests. The “Statuto dei Lavoratori” established a series of requirements which had to be respected by most employers in the country. Among these, there was the establishment of the “Rappresentanza Sindacale Aziendale” (RSA), based on the model of the CdF.

The Hot Autumn represented a turning point for the relationship between IBM and the Workers Movement: it was in this period that most of the issues of future struggle were defined. In March 1969 some IBM workers founded a “Gruppo di Studio” (GdS, Study Group)⁷. This was meant to provide a space for workers’ discussion other than the existing Internal Committee, which was judged as too stiff

⁷ On the history of the GdS see: Bogo and Toloni, *Il consiglio di fabbrica IBM dal 1969*, Gioventù Evangelica, 1977 – IBM Italia RSU archive; Gruppo di Studio IBM, *Capitale Imperialistico e Proletariato Moderno*, Edizioni Sapere, 1971

and too abiding to the company management. The GdS was active in organizing strikes and demonstrations and in producing pamphlets and other written materials to distribute among fellow IBM workers.

The GdS had a quite heterogeneous composition: mostly technicians, a former supervisor who asked to be downgraded for political reasons, another supervisor “in crisis”, and some labor unionists. This also translated into a certain cultural and political heterogeneity, as there were both Catholics, Marxists and former Liberals. During its short existence, however, a part of the GdS became increasingly disillusioned with labor unions. In the first half of 1970 there was a fracture between them and the rest of the IBM Workers Movement. In the following months this distance increased and the group stopped to use the name “GdS” as its members opted either for a greater involvement in labor unions or in the extra-parliamentary left.

Notwithstanding its short life, the GdS was presented as an important event for the establishment of a “class consciousness” between IBM workers, and as a milestone in the history of the IBM RSA. The relevance of the GdS was discussed in a 1977 article by CISL-FIM IBM workers unionists Paolo Bogo and Giancarlo Toloni, published on the magazine “Gioventú Evangelica” (Evangelic Youth)⁸. The article was titled “The IBM Factory Council from 1969 to today” and was a history of workers movements in IBM. The article situated the 1968-69 protests and the establishment of the GdS as the founding moment of a real workers’ struggle in the company. The article explained that at the beginning the GdS was marked by two issues: first, the connection between anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism, resulting in the fact that capitalist multinationals such as IBM inevitably brought to the “proletarianization of all the workers”. Second, the idea that they were living in a pre-revolutionary historical phase. For this reason, they initially focused on increasing the politicization of already politicized workers, in order to establish a vanguard to lead class struggle in IBM. However, Bogo and Toloni observed that these ideas led to a failure in the mobilization of workers. Over time, most of the GdS realized that it was not enough to have a small group of committed and prepared workers to stimulate class consciousness in the company. On the contrary, it was necessary to be among workers, and to make them discuss with each other about their problems. These discussions were the catalyst for the growth of a small but committed group of workers unionists: in 1972, unionists from CGIL-FIOM,

⁸ Bogo and Toloni, Il consiglio di fabbrica IBM dal 1969, Gioventú Evangelica, 1977 – IBM Italia RSU archive

CISL-FIM, and UIL-UILM established the IBM CdF and RSA, after the existing Internal Committee ended its mandate and was not renewed⁹.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the IBM CdF established itself as a small but committed presence in the company. This was a period of huge growth for IBM Italia, which at the beginning of the 1990s counted more than 10 thousands employees in the country. Until the early 1990s crisis, the status of IBM workers remained a very privileged one. Two of the most important workers struggle of the time, namely the reduction of working hours and the negotiation of salary increases, were not particularly relevant to most IBM workers¹⁰. First, white-collar workers became increasingly prevalent in numbers over blue-collar ones. And because of existing company agreements most white-collar workers did not have strict timing requirements. Second, IBM used its own method of salary increases which was based on a very personalized treatment of its workers. This method was not entirely clear and worker unionists often asked for more transparency¹¹. But ultimately IBM salaries were higher than most other companies, thus workers did not have many incentives to demand a stricter compliance with national work agreements. And the salary was only one of the many benefits that IBM workers enjoyed¹².

More in general, IBM invested a lot in promoting an image of abundance and prestige: former workers recollected how they would always be placed in high-class hotels during business trips, and how training courses for new employees were held in beautiful and luxurious locations¹³. To the workers who had a stronger political awareness, all this prestige rather looked like wastefulness. But this was not the case of the majority of IBM workers, with consequences on the popularity of labor unions. The feeling that all employees were part of a big family run by “Mom IBM” was quite prevalent among IBM workers¹⁴, thus labor unions appeared quite irrelevant to many. Because of this situation, the very first challenge of unionists in IBM was to engage other workers.

⁹ [Dalla Commissione Interna alle RSA], 1972 – IBM Italia RSU archive

¹⁰ This information, and the following explanation, were reported by former IBM Italia worker unionist A.R. – IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

¹¹ See for example: Dibattito, May 1969; Trent’anni di contrattazione, 1982 – IBM Italia RSU Archive

¹² For example, IBM provided an integrative healthcare and pension, and services which took care of employees’ private administrative issues, such as paying utility bills and renewing their car insurance. Reported by V.B., and A.R. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

¹³ Training courses were in Rivoltella Del Garda, for technicians and representatives, and in Novedrate for administration employees. Reported by V.B., G.T., A.R. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

¹⁴ As reported by V.B., G.T., A.R. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

Indeed, IBM labor unions were quite different from other Italian unions, both in size and in scope. Former IBM unionists recalled how they were ironically called “the Indian reservation” by colleagues from other unions¹⁵. In the 1970s, Italian unions in large industries organized a strike after another, with massive participation of employees. This did not happen at IBM, even though some successful strikes were also organized there. In general, IBM unionists had sometimes to get quite creative to speak to their colleagues: for example, in the 1970s, they would sometimes attach posters upside-down to draw the attention of their colleagues¹⁶.

In this context, what motivated people to actually join labor unions was not an utilitarian criteria, but rather a cultural commitment¹⁷. Here, the word “cultural” must be read in both its meanings. First, it was “cultural” in the “cultural belonging” sense, because many workers unionists already had socialist sympathies when they joined the company. This aspect is exemplified by the personal background of many former workers unionists, and by their engagement in leftist political issues alongside the wider Workers Movement¹⁸. But their commitment was “cultural” also in the sense that they perceived a lack of cultural stimuli in the company¹⁹. The cultural vivacity reproduced in *Rivista IBM* and the other materials by the IBM Direzione Comunicazione was not experienced by IBM workers unionists. This contradiction is particularly visible in comparison with Olivetti. While Adriano Olivetti himself established a library in his company, in IBM it was the labor unions who set up one. And while Adriano Olivetti hired people like Ugo Fedeli to organize cultural events for workers, in IBM a similar initiative was organized by workers unionists with the “150 ore” program²⁰.

Because of this double cultural commitment, the experience of IBM labor unions in the 1970s and 1980s represents a very valuable source of criticism to Black Boxing Fear -and also an example of its most negative outcomes. First, they produced an informed criticism of the ideological aspect of Black Boxing Fear on both the global and local level. This criticism is particularly interesting because it often pointed at the emotional practices involved in the reproduction of Black Boxing Fear by IBM. Second,

¹⁵ Reported by A.R. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

¹⁶ Reported by G.T. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

¹⁷ This claim and the following explanation were reported by V.B., A.R. and G.T. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

¹⁸ Most of the people who actively participated in the union during the 1970s and 1980s came from the political left, either from communist parties like the PCI, the PDUP and Democrazia Proletaria, or from movements of the extra-parliamentary left. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

¹⁹ As reported by former unionists - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

²⁰ This was a program in which workers could use 150 hours of paid labor for their education over the course of three years.

they also pointed at the material aspect of Black Boxing Fear by showing that the “lack of culture” in IBM also involved the lack of a serious commitment in fostering a “computer culture” in the country. In the 1990s both these aspects became painfully relevant for most IBM workers, as the company started a reorganization followed by massive firings, which continues today²¹.

2.2 A Debate or an Interview? Emotional practices in IBM

The main points of criticism to the ideological aspect of Black Boxing Fear by IBM labor unions were outlined in the IBM workers magazine “Dibattito” (“Debate”). The magazine was started in 1969 in Milan by CISL-FIM²². The first issues of Dibattito pointed out how computer narratives promised an idealized world only achievable through technological development. This idealized world also carried a specific set of values: failing to achieve them meant failing in life.

The first issue of Dibattito, from January 1969, focused on “violence”, intended as the intrinsic violence of the master-worker relationship, and on the “alienation”, which was an outcome of this violence. The articles pointed out how the very individualized work relationships of IBM did everything but democratize the work process. IBM labor unions claimed that “what is not masterfully hidden authoritarianism, is paternalism: the usual, super American and Borbonic paternalism”²³. According to IBM workers, this change in work relationships pointed to a wider loss of values caused by capitalism and consumerism, as these ideologies placed too much importance on material goods and on individualism. The cultural and moral shift being enforced by IBM upon its workers, and eventually upon society as a whole, was described by IBM workers as a form of violence. Their analysis of this violence directly pointed at the ideological aspect Black Boxing Fear: “[The worker’s] conscience is violated when the acquisition of a new series of values is imposed upon him through media and marketing strategies. These values correspond to the commercial interests of the dominant class: failing to achieve them would represent in absolute terms the ‘failure’ of a life”²⁴.

²¹ The latest announcement of a massive lay-off in IBM Italy was very recently published, in the middle of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

²² At least one of its successive issues was made by the GdS. The issues from January, March and May were signed by FIM-CISL, while the June one was signed by the GdS. It is known, however, that the GdS was formed in March and they reported that at first they worked under the guise of labor unions. Therefore, also the issues of March and May might have been authored by GdS members.

²³ “ciò che non è autoritarismo abilmente nascosto, è paternalismo, il solito americanissimo e borbonico paternalismo” Dibattito, January 1969, p. 7. The word “Borbonic” is a reference to the Bourbon dynasty which ruled Southern Italy until the unification of the country in 1861. In Italian the term is often used as a synonym of paternalism and old-fashioned ways.

²⁴ “Si violenta la sua coscienza, imponendogli, attraverso la stampa e la tecnica pubblicitaria, l’acquisizione di una serie

The following issue of Dibattito, published in March, extended this analysis to the global arena, pointing at the relationship between Black Boxing Fear and imperialism, underdevelopment and exploitation. The March issue harshly criticized imperialism and its consequences on developing nations. According to IBM workers, imperialism relied on a false narrative about the advantages of the capitalist model. This false narrative was addressed in a section called “The myth of the opulent society”, which questioned the promises of Black Boxing Fear: “first of all, we are being told that technology is a mean through which man can free himself from the slavery of labor. This goal makes of technological progress the true and ultimate goal of our life. We are being told that underdeveloped areas will gradually disappear and if they are still not developed it is only because they have not reached an adequate degree of technological development. We are told that consumer goods are very useful things, even indispensable, and that with good will (there is still the myth of the ‘self-made man’) we will be able to possess them”²⁵. All these elements were ultimately identified as part of a wider cultural shift: “Ultimately, the balance of this [capitalist] society is ensured by the diffusion of a CULTURE²⁶, which is an explanation of the world: ideas, hopes, prejudices, ideals, goals, modes of action, a value scale”. And in this value scale “there are money or success on top, all the rest is subordinate. The average Western citizen in reality do believe that money is more valuable than gift, even when he call himself a Christian”²⁷.

A particularly interesting aspect of the IBM labor unions’ criticism to Black-Boxing Fear is the relevance they gave to the emotional practices involved in its reproduction. The emotional experiences reported by labor unions are a useful entry point to understand the limits of human agency in the IBM worldview. In fact, in order to keep up with production speed, IBM could not afford to spend time with labor unions. Its management style aimed at creating open channels of conversation between workers and managers. However labor unions often pointed out that, behind this narrative on “openness”, IBM

di valori, corrispondenti agli interessi commerciali della classe dominante, il mancato raggiungimento dei quali rappresenterebbe in senso assoluto, il ‘fallimento’ di una vita”. Dibattito January 1969, p. 2

²⁵ “Anzitutto ci viene detto che la tecnologia è un mezzo mediante il quale l’uomo potrà liberarsi dalla schiavitù del lavoro; questo obiettivo fa diventare il progresso tecnologico il fine vero e ultimo della nostra vita. Ci viene detto che le aree di sottosviluppo gradatamente scompariranno e se sono ancora così è solo perché non si è arrivati a un adeguato grado di sviluppo tecnologico. Ci viene detto che i beni di consumo sono tutte cose utilissime, anzi indispensabili e che con la buona volontà (c’è ancora il mito dell’uomo che ‘si è fatto da se’) si può riuscire a possederli.” Dibattito, March 1969

²⁶ In capitals in the original text

²⁷ “infine l’equilibrio di questa società è assicurato dalla diffusione di una CULTURA, cioè di una spiegazione del mondo: idee, speranze, pregiudizi, ideali, scopi, modelli d’azione, una scala di valori”. [...] in questa scala di valori “in cima ci sta il denaro o il successo, il resto è tutto subordinato. Il medio cittadino occidentale anche quando si dichiara

used emotional tactics, and particularly fear, to keep the workers in line with the company ideology. These could be seen in openly anti-workers unions behavior²⁸, but also in the use of specific management tools which used fear -directly or indirectly- to enforce adherence to IBM ideology. The most famous practices in this sense were the “open door policy”, for which employees could always consult their bosses if they had problems; and the individual “evaluation-interview” in which the performance of the employees, and any possible concern they had about their work, was discussed with their managers.

The practice of the boss-employee “interview”, in particular, was pointed as one of the main tools used by IBM to enforce its organizational culture, and thus its moral and cultural values, upon workers. Unionists argued that, by generating emotional ambivalence in the employees, the interview was a tool for the individualization of work relationships. The “interview” was harshly criticized in the first issue of *Dibattito*, and again in the issue of June 1970. The June issue published an alternative “interview”, mocking the practice of individual boss-employee interview. The alternative interview was ironically presented as if it was retrieved in a safety box with a CIA mark and the writing “DANGER” over it. The use of psychology as part of the bosses’ training was particularly emphasized. Through the interview questions, the GdS ironically suggested that the bosses who traveled to the USA were brainwashed in the same way the Soviet were accused to do. The last question of the interview explicitly mentioned fear: “did you know that some of these courses uses psychology, in its possible applications to human resources management, to better motivate you, stimulate you, scare you and isolate you from your comrades?”²⁹. The magazine followed by arguing that the strategy of IBM was to make people feel motivated so they would not feel exploited.

In 1971 the workers magazine *Controbullone* published an article focusing on the mechanism of the interview. The article pointed out how during the interview: “the worker is alone. He prepares for an individual judgment (or a clash); in any case, to the iron logic of the organization he will only be able

cristiano, in realtà crede che il denaro vale piú del dono” *Dibattito*, March 1969

²⁸ Most reported cases of anti trade unions activity came from the 1970s. This meant boycotting workers protests, firing or otherwise retaliating against people who participated in strikes, using intimidation and pressures against politically engaged workers. For example, in June 1970 some workers were menaced of disciplinary procedures because they were handling fliers to promote a demonstration against the Vietnam War. In 1976 some delegates were threatened of disciplinary procedures because they were collecting money for a solidarity initiative. See: *Trent'anni di contrattazione in IBM, 1982 - IBM Italia RSU archive*

²⁹ “Sapevi che alcuni di questi corsi prevedono l’uso della psicologia, nelle sue possibili applicazioni agli aspetti del trattamento del personale, per meglio motivarti, stimolarti, spaventarti e isolarti dagli altri tuoi compagni?” *Dibattito*, July 1969

to oppose the fragility of his position, the complicity of his desires, the weakness of his fears”³⁰. The article further observed how the notion of “meritocracy”, on which the “interview” relied upon, was a mystification of privilege and discrimination: “it is like this because it is natural (hence right) to be like this’, as if people were born with the destiny of being a punch-card operator or a stoker. The interest of capital are smuggled as ‘natural order of things’, and the mental pollution produced by capital as ‘natural tendencies of the human soul’”³¹. Instead of promoting and encouraging workers independence, then, the “interview” was functional to reinforce existing social hierarchies.

In 1975 “the interview” was mentioned in an article on “Gioventú Evangelica” written by IBM trade unionist Paolo Bogo. The article reflected on the organization of work at IBM, on the “proletarianization of technicians” and on the role of trade unions to counter this process. The “interview” was considered one of the main tools used to enforce the IBM organizational model, and particularly the individualization of work relationships. Bogo observed that: “The moment of the evaluation-interview is the typical moment in which the worker is alone, with his smallness and impotence, in front of the master’s organizational machine. His only options are to be squashed or to be persuaded”³². Therefore, IBM individualized management style produced a situation in which the worker “will always be subjected to discrimination, to intimidation, to blackmail, and he will always be afraid to step up for his rights”³³.

A similar argument was brought forward again in 1980, in a fake, ironic issue of the company magazine “Notizie IBM”. An article was again devoted to analyzing the “interview”, focusing on how instead of “coercion” it used “seduction” to make the workers behave how the company wanted. However, the authors pointed out how this seduction was not completely successful in persuading workers. On the contrary, workers perceived that IBM narrative was not based on a “natural” order of things, as already pointed out in 1971: “certainly, the illnesses that we find today such as nervousness, emotive instability, uncertainty, fear, loss of identity, and which can sometimes become real illnesses,

³⁰ “Il lavoratore è solo. Si prepara a un giudizio (o ad uno scontro) individuale; egli alla logica di ferro dell’organizzazione in ogni caso non potrà opporre se non la fragilità della sua posizione, la complicità dei suoi desideri, la debolezza delle sue paure.” Controbullone luglio 1971

³¹ “è così perché è naturale (e quindi giusto) che sia così”, come se si nascesse col destino di perforatrice o fuochista. Gli interessi del capitale vengono contrabbandati come “ordine naturale delle cose”, e l’inquinamento mentale prodotto dal capitale come “tendenze naturali dell’animo umano”. Controbullone luglio 1971

³² “Il momento della valutazione-intervista è il tipico momento in cui il lavoratore è solo, con la sua piccolezza e impotenza, di fronte alla macchina organizzativa del padrone e allora non gli resta o di venire schiacciato o di venire convinto” Gioventu’ evangelica 1975 - IBM Italia RSU Archive

³³ “sarà sempre soggetto alla discriminazione, all’intimidazione, al ricatto e avrà sempre paura di muoversi per far valere i suoi diritti”, Gioventú evangelica 1975 p. 7 - IBM Italia RSU Archive

can't be uncoupled by the efforts of adaptation which are imposed by the integration in companies and societies which tries to bound men to their utilitarian needs"³⁴, they observed.

These examples mostly reflected on the ideological aspects of Black Boxing Fear, and on how IBM's proposed move to a computer society was actually not as smooth as planned. First, IBM efforts to enforce its worldview and organizational culture produced negative emotional experiences in some workers, as they recognized that there was nothing "natural" in the order of things which was being presented by the company. Second, tools such as the "interview" fostered the individualization of work relationships without addressing power inequalities in these relationships: in this way the interview was an occasion to scare workers away from political engagement. These considerations points to the fact that the IBM "rational style of management" was actually based on promoting "fear of falling behind" among the workforce. When it came to work relationships, IBM "rationality" consisted in finding clever ways to avoid workers complains and protests. On the one hand, this "rationality" was certainly useful to prevent workers strikes and blockades which could hinder production. But, on the other hand, this same "rationality" was not necessarily beneficial for the increase in computer technological know-how in Italy. In fact, IBM Italia labor unions seemed to be much more committed and interested than the IBM management in fostering local R&D.

2.3 Challenging the material aspect of Black Boxing Fear: the struggle over research centers

From the mid-1970s, IBM labor unions increasingly directed their criticism toward the lack of proper R&D investments in the country, directly engaging with the material aspect of Black Boxing Fear. IBM employees were not alone in this criticism: at the time there was a rather close relationship between the workers of computer companies in the Milan area. Labor unions of multinational companies, such as IBM, Honeywell and Amdahl, asked their employers for a more serious commitment in fostering technological innovation in the country³⁵. In particular, IBM unionists frequently discussed how the IBM model, far from promoting the sharing of technological know-how, was actually based on a strict division of production among the various local branches. This model gave to local branches a very fragmented knowledge of the production process. Furthermore, unionists pointed out that the

³⁴ "Certamente i malesseri che spesso oggi si riscontrano come nervosismo, instabilità emotiva, insicurezza, paura, perdita d'identità, che possono a volte essere la causa di malattie vere e proprie, non possono essere scollegati con gli sforzi di adattamento che vengono imposti dall'integrazione in aziende e società che cercano di ingabbiare l'uomo all'interno delle loro esigenze utilitaristiche". Notizie IBM 1980 (falso) - IBM Italia RSU Archive

³⁵ This was reported by A.R. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

investment policy of the company was not really meant to improve local expertise and development. In fact, IBM had huge revenues coming from the sale of computers in Italy, but at the same time invested only a small percentage of this profit in R&D activities in the country. More in general, increasing employees knowledge on computing appeared to not be a priority in IBM Italy. For example, a former worker unionist hired as a highly-skilled white-collar worker in Vimercate reported how the plant even lacked a proper technical library³⁶. Indeed, as labor unions frequently pointed out, IBM claims to be fostering a technological culture in the country were likely exaggerated.

The lack of R&D investments became an important source of conflict between the unions and the company management in the mid-1970s. In March 1974 the labor unions bulletin “Notiziario per i lavoratori della IBM” (News for IBM workers) published a proposal for a “piattaforma aziendale”, a sort of negotiation between the company and the unions. The proposal pointed out that Italian plants were only assembling pieces produced elsewhere, thus not receiving any real know-how on how computers were made. In 1975 this theme was further developed in a “vertenza” (a labor dispute)³⁷, also with a specific mention to R&D. Italy was compared to France, where there was a complete production line, involving the making of both the hardware and the software for the “System 3750”. On the contrary, in Italy the software was only installed and tested. Furthermore, unionists pointed out that the research centers opened in 1969 in Pisa, Venezia and Bari were more similar to marketing operations than to real research units.

In the following year, 1976, trade unions organized a “conferenza di produzione” (production conference) in which they further reflected on the causes and implications of the IBM investment policy. This conference offers interesting insights on “software” and directly mentioned the material aspect of Black Boxing Fear. Unionists observed that investing in a local software center would not be very expensive: IBM just choose not to do it, because the lack of public investments in R&D meant that there was not a real competitor in the country.³⁸ Furthermore, the spreading of technical know-how about software was even more limited in the newest IBM applications. This was particularly the case of the brand new SNA (system network architecture). Workers unionists observed that: “we are in front of

³⁶ Reported by G.T. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

³⁷ Vertenza IBM: occupazione, organizzazione del lavoro, premio di produzione, diritti sindacali; 1975; Notizie IBM dicembre 1975 – IBM Italia RSU Archive

³⁸ When convenient, IBM would use public money. For example in 1974 they received money from Cassa del Mezzogiorno to open a new plant in Pomezia, which was supposed to increase employment. This never happened, and in the 1976/7 trade unions were also asking explanations about it. See: Notiziario per i Lavoratori della IBM, agosto 1977 – IBM Italia RSU archive

software ‘closed boxes’ (which after some years are added and integrated with the hardware ones). Their functioning logic is impenetrable and their maintenance is reserved to the labs which have developed them and which obviously are not in Italy: the industries which will use these products will always be bounded to IBM USA”³⁹. This claim directly addressed the material aspect of Black Boxing Fear: the actual functioning of IBM hardware and software was not accessible, not even to the local branches of the company.

In 1977 these issues were brought to public attention⁴⁰, following the efforts for the renewal of the “Contratto Integrativo Aziendale” (Integrative Company Agreement). In February IBM labor unions organized a conference in Vimercate, titled “National IBM Conference for Employment and Investments”. Members of the local sections of the three main political parties were invited, as well as representatives from the FLM. This conference was shortly followed by the opening of a “vertenza”, asking for a greater investments of IBM profits in Italy, and particularly in the field of research. At the times, IBM had only 50 employees in 3 research centers, accounting for a ridiculous percentage of its total Italian workforce. Some days after the February conference, some IBM workers were called by the management to constitute a new group for “the development of software products”, as reported by labor unions magazine Controbit⁴¹. However the tasks of the group were not clear, and apparently they were going to work anyway with the “closed box” SNA. Controbit stressed again how this technology was “a set of products, both hardware and software, which are defined as a ‘black box’⁴²: this means they are imported in Italy as a ‘closed box’. There are no schemes about the hardware part and no lists of programs for the software part. For security reasons, so IBM says”⁴³. The SNA was ultimately defined by Controbit as “a product which for the first time was completely imported in Italy as a ‘black box’, with the level of technological know-how equal to zero”⁴⁴. Therefore, IBM Italian workers had no idea of how the new system worked, even its maintenance had to be performed by the USA mother

³⁹ “Siamo di fronte a ‘scatole chiuse’ di tipo software (che a distanza d alcuni anni si aggiungono e si integrano a quelle hhardware) la cui logica di fnzionamento è impenetrabile e la loro manutenzione è riservata ai laboratori che le hanno sviluppate e che ovviamente non sono in Italia: le industrie che useranno tali prodotti saranno legate a doppio filo alla IBM USA” Contributo del C.d.F. di Milano alla Conferenza di Produzione, dicembre 1976 – IBM Italia RSU archive

⁴⁰ labor unions magazine reported many articles on the issue published in the national Press

⁴¹ Controbit, Aprile 1977 - IBM Italia RSU archive

⁴² In English in the original text

⁴³ “è un complesso di prodotti, sia hardware che software, definiti ‘black box’: vengono cioè importati in Italia a ‘scatola chiusa’; di questi prodotti, per la parte Hardware non esistono schemi e per la parte software non esistono liste di programmi. Per motivi di sicurezza, dice la IBM” Controbit, Aprile 1977 - IBM Italia RSU archive

⁴⁴ “un prodotto che per la prima volta in Italia è stato completamente importato a ‘scatola chiusa’ con il livello di conoscenza tecnologica zero” Controbit, Aprile 1977 - IBM Italia RSU archive

house. The only task entrusted to the Italian programmers of the SNA was to develop interfaces for the clients, a rather low level job when compared to the complexity and the potential of the system.

In June 1977 the participants to the February conference signed a document showing support for IBM labor unions' *vertenza*. The position of the *vertenza* on R&D was very clear: IBM was asked to complete a full production cycle in Italy, and to increase its R&D investments in the country, making them proportional to its revenues. The document was subscribed by DC, PCI, PSI and Democrazia Proletaria, together with the IBM CdF and the FLM. However, IBM did not make any concession, also backed by Assolombarda, the organization of industrialist from Lombardy⁴⁵. In November, IBM management circulated in the Vimercate plant a document about its recent retreat from India. The document explained how, after a two years long quarrel with the Indian government which was asking for more investments, IBM had decided to cease operations in the country⁴⁶. This sounded like a sort of warning, because similar requests were being made in Italy: the document subtly implied that IBM could leave a country at any moment, if their terms were not going to be met. However, workers unionists objected that laws regulating multinational investments of local profits were already present in other Western countries "and IBM never made a scandal out of that"⁴⁷. Later in December, another negotiation was held. Labor unions were very displeased with the results: for what concerned R&D, IBM and Assolombarda conceded some investments for the development of small software projects, but refused to change the functioning of Scientific Centers or to engage in any significant research project⁴⁸.

In January 1978 the new company agreement was finally signed, and the workers obtained the promise of more investments in the scientific centers. However, already on June 28th of the same year, the workers of the scientific centers went on strike: IBM was not respecting the agreements and the employment rate was lowering instead of increasing. Furthermore, the management was threatening to transfer all the centers to Rome⁴⁹. In March 1979 the IBM CdF published a document inquiring on the productive presence of IBM in the country. The document observed again how "the downgrading of technological know-how in Italy is reaching alarming levels: Hardware and Software products are

⁴⁵ This was similar to *Confindustria* but on a regional level.

⁴⁶ On the history of IBM in India see: Rajaraman, V. (2015). *History of Computing in India: 1955-2010*. *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, 37(1), 24-35.; Subramanian, R. (2014). *Technology Policy and National Identity: The Microcomputer Comes to India*. *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, 36(3), 19-29.

⁴⁷ "La IBM in India", Novembre 1977 - IBM Italia RSU archive

⁴⁸ *Notiziario per i lavoratori della IBM, Speciale trattativa del 5/6 Dicembre 77* - IBM Italia RSU archive

⁴⁹ *Controbit August 1978* - IBM Italia RSU archive

increasingly sophisticated, and are increasingly like ‘closed boxes’ which are given to Italians only to be used”⁵⁰. In the same year, as labor unions had anticipated, IBM closed the centers of Bari and Venice and opened a new “Centro Sviluppo Software” in Rome. After this final move by IBM, the requests for more R&D investments seemed to quiet down, even though scientific centers employees occasionally pointed out how there were still many problems with IBM R&D commitment⁵¹. At the beginning of the 1980s the configuration for the following decade was defined: two scientific centers, the old Pisa one and the new Rome one, plus the Rome “Centro di sviluppo software”. The Pisa center was closed in 1992, during the company crisis and worldwide restructuring.

These debates on R&D show how the material aspect of Black Boxing Fear was a frequent source of conflict between IBM Italia and its labor unions. The lack of proper investments in Italian research centers was a much debated issue. This lack of investments was part of a larger failure by IBM to increase the know-how of its employees. At first, unions pointed out how the lack of a full production cycle meant that no real technical know-how was being shared in the country. Then, when computer systems became more complex, the transmission of know-how became even more scarce as they were brought to Italy as “closed boxes”.

2.4 International workers solidarity and global crisis: Black Boxing Fear and IBM restructuring

In the 1980s the criticism of Black Boxing Fear in IBM started to be discussed on the international level with the founding of IWIS (IBM Workers International Solidarity). This was an international organization of IBM labor unions, which from 1984 met annually or bi-annually until 1992⁵². The founding of the organization was quite peculiar: the workers of IBM Japan had won a lawsuit against the IBM mother house, and used part of the reimbursement to organize an international meeting of IBM labor unions⁵³. The first IWIS conference was held in Tokyo in May 1984. Delegates from France, Greece, Italy, Sweden, the US and Japan were present. The Tokyo conference was followed by Athens (1985), New Orleans (1987), Paris (1989), Rome (1991) and Sindelfingen, Germany (1992). After the first meeting, more countries joined the original group, sometimes discontinuously: Germany, Portugal,

⁵⁰ “lo scadimento di conoscenze tecnologiche in Italia sta raggiungendo valori allarmanti: i prodotti Hardware e Software, sempre più sofisticati, sono sempre più delle ‘scatole chiuse’ date solo in uso agli Italiani”
<http://rsuibmsegrate.altervista.org/790300.htm>

⁵¹ See for example: ricerca e sviluppo nella IBM (Lavoratori Sviluppo Software, 28/9/1981)
<http://rsuibmsegrate.altervista.org/810928.pdf>

⁵² When the European Union established European Workers Councils (EWC) in 1994, IWIS meeting stopped, as European labor unions opted for creating an IBM EWC.

the Netherlands, South Korea, Austria⁵⁴. All these labor unions could be very diverse from each other. For example, in Italy the political and social importance of labor unions was so strong that even a small group like the IBM Italia CdF. could organize successful strikes in which no worker showed up in the company. On the other hand, one of the US delegate participated under a pseudonym as his union had not been officially recognized by IBM⁵⁵: Italian unionists discovered his real name only in the 1990s⁵⁶.

The diversity of IWIS participants made it quite difficult to plan for joint actions and campaigns. However, they represented an unique occasion to analyze common problems and discuss the future of IBM. The most concrete outcome of IWIS conferences was a final declaration signed by the participating unions, showing how most of the problems of IBM Italian labor unions were shared elsewhere. In the first congresses, the final statements addressed generic concerns related to the ideological and material aspects of Black Boxing Fear. In the first three conferences, IWIS participants agreed on two aspects. The first was the prevalence of IBM anti-trade unionism. A very harsh version of “fear of falling behind” was used in this case, because workers unionists faced repercussions for their engagement or the workers themselves were scared away from joining the union. The second common point for IWIS participants was the lack of proper R&D investments. In the first IWIS conference labor unions committed to increase the technological know-how in every country, fostering a better integration of IBM in local economies. In the second IWIS declaration there was again a request “to contribute in a more specific and permanent way to the economies of the countries in which it operates”.

From the fourth conference, Paris 1989, the upcoming global IBM crisis became increasingly relevant in IWIS discussions. The first point of the Paris final declaration was particularly unforgiving towards IBM, stating that the company had no respect for individuals, contrary to what it claimed to be one of its founding principles. Workers then criticized deregulation, forced competition between European branches, the downsizing and closings of offices and production plants. Similar discourses were made in the following IWIS conferences, during which labor unions from across the world could share their experiences of the global reorganization of the company. These discussions were quite relevant for IBM Italia labor unions: by participating to IWIS conference they increased their awareness of the

⁵³ As was reported by A.R. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

⁵⁴ See IWIS reports – IBM Italia RSU archive

⁵⁵ Two unions were present from the US: the recognized National Black Workers Alliance (NBWA) and the unrecognized IBM Workers United (IBM/WU)

⁵⁶ As reported by A.R. - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

global IBM situation, realizing that something was happening before the 1990s massive firings started.⁵⁷

From the late 1980s, IBM Italia labor unions started to warn their colleagues of the possible negative consequences of IBM crisis on its personnel. For example, in 1987 Italian unions published a document by the German IBM management, shared by the German unions during an IWIS conference, which clearly stated that the objective for the future was to keep doing the same job with less people⁵⁸. Similar news were often shared in assemblies and in labor unions communications, but they were mostly unheard. IBM employees could not believe that “Mom IBM” was betraying them. But when the first massive firings started to happen, they increasingly turned to labor unions. During the 1990s, and particularly from 1993, thousands of people were laid off by the company: more than 12.000 people worked in IBM in 1990, while in 2000 they were around 6.000⁵⁹. In some cases entire branches of IBM were sold, thus there was mostly a passage of employees from one company to another. But many IBM offices around the country were actually closed for good.

The crisis of IBM, and its global restructuring, pointed at some very crucial outcomes of Black Boxing Fear. On the ideological level, the IBM promise of endless progress and wealth was heavily challenged, together with its “rational” and “personalized” management style. IBM employees found out that, when the chiefs’ duty became to fire and not to listen, there was no “open door” who could get them better exit conditions. Furthermore, the very same personnel policy of IBM contributed to the crisis. All the small salaries increases and promotions made to foster a “personalized” relationship with employees, and to deny the usefulness of labor unions, became unsustainable on the long run. On the material level, IBM crisis confirmed how little importance was given to R&D in Italy. The already scarce research activities were among the first to be further reduced. In 1992, the last standing research center in Pisa was shut down, followed by a further centralization of all research activities in Rome⁶⁰. And, contrary to their expectations, employees in high-skilled jobs were among the first to be laid off by the company⁶¹.

⁵⁷ This was reported by A.R., who was one of the Italian delegates in IWIS - IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020

⁵⁸ Il vero volto di IBM, June 1, 1987 – IBM Italia RSU archive

⁵⁹ Scheda sulla presenza IBM in Italia (1991-2000) – IBM Italia RSU archive

⁶⁰ Centri Scientifici IBM: continua la provocazione, 1992 - IBM Italia RSU archive

⁶¹ As reported by former unionists, they were particularly skeptical of the fact that something could have happened to them – IBM Italia RSU interview January 2020