“Civiltà delle Macchine” 60 years later

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Abstract The year 1953 saw the first issue of *Civiltà delle Macchine*, the company magazine of the Italian industrial group Finmeccanica, founded in 1953 by the poet-engineer Leonardo Sinisgalli (1908–1981). These were the years leading up to the so-called Italian economic miracle, and an anthology of articles from the pages of this magazine shows the weave of people, knowledge and technology that formed the fertile ground for Italy’s transformation from an economy primarily based on agriculture and craftsmanship, following the ruinous years of Fascism and war, to one of the most industrialised nations in the world. Sinisgalli, while appreciative of the potential offered by industry, nevertheless never lost sight of Italy’s cultural and traditional values.

Keywords Leonardo Sinisgalli · Civiltà delle Macchine · Italian economic miracle · Two cultures

This year is the sixtieth anniversary of the birth of *Civiltà delle Macchine*, the company magazine of the Italian industrial group Finmeccanica, founded in 1953 by the poet-engineer Leonardo Sinisgalli (1908–1981) and directed by him until the first issues of 1958. This anniversary provided the Centro PRISTEM of the Università “Bocconi”, in collaboration with the Fondazione “Leonardo Sinisgalli” of Montemurro, the village in Basilicata where Sinisgalli was born, an opportunity to reflect on the important role played by the magazine, with the publication of a trilogy of volumes containing a selection of its

articles. The first is entitled *Civiltà del Miracolo*, edited by Gian Italo Bischi, Liliana Curcio and Pietro Nastasi, with remarks by Gillo Dorfles and Paolo Portoghesi, two leading figures at the time of *Civiltà delle Macchine*. This will be followed by a volume dedicated to physics, and a third dedicated to cybernetics, both seen through the pages of Finmeccanica’s magazine.

The choice of the title for the first volume is tied to the fact that the years in which *Civiltà delle Macchine* was being planned and its publication began are situated in the period that went from the end of the second world war to the so-called ‘economic miracle’, which economic historians generally date between 1955 and 1963. In effect, flipping through the magazine’s pages today, you can breathe the air of those years, get a 360° feel for the weave of people, knowledge and technology that prepared the fertile terrain that favoured Italy’s transition from a country destroyed by war (and by the Fascist regime) based prevalently on a system of agriculture and independent craftsmen, to one fully inserted in the echelon of the world’s most industrialised nations, rising to levels of excellence in various economic and cultural sectors.

There are many analogies—though also many differences—between the Italy of the 1950s and that of our own day. Once again Italy is trying to come out of two decades of darkness and rise from the ashes of a disastrous economic crisis, and is called to innovation by means of a renewed relationship with science, technology and knowledge, and, what’s more, in a context of widespread globalisation. The portrait of Italy that emerges from reading *Civiltà delle Macchine* depicts a nation with an elevated capacity for innovation, that promotes basic scientific research, explores original routes in the area of energy, invests in precision mechanics, electronics and chemistry, is the third country in the world to launch its own satellite into space. And, in the

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Italian National Institute of Health (the Istituto Superiore di Sanità, ISS) we even find non-Italian Nobel laureates who found Italy the most suitable venue for carrying out research.

Today we hear talk of a desire for industrial recovery and growth, but at the same time we see budget cuts for culture, schools and universities, in spite of the fact that Italy already invests less today in culture, research and education than other European countries. A very different message comes through from the pages of *Civiltà delle Macchine*, where scientists, authors, poets, economists and philosophers were considered teachers, guides to development, with public schools and universities seen as strategic institutions for training new technicians and managers, and in which to invest to guarantee industrial development. There we find articles on some of the greatest role models—from Leonardo da Vinci to Maynard Keynes, from Mauro Picone to Francesco Severi and Enrico Fermi—and articles about newly founded Italian industrial groups. Articles highlight the continuity between the traditions of agriculture and craftsmanship and the new industry with its machines. There are discussions of road networks and vehicles, from the ‘Autostrada del Sole’ to the ‘Paperino’ motorcycle, from problems of education and the necessary improvements in technical and scientific studies in order to train the workers and managers of a modern industrialised nation. The articles involved include poets, painters and even schoolchildren sent into the factories to describe, in the languages of art and literature, the machines, workers and products of industry, to suggest the pre-eminence of quality over quantity, the blending of usefulness and beauty, to show that even marketing and industrial production must have a soul. To this end, ample space is devoted to industrial design, to underline the concept of aesthetics either applied to mechanics or deriving from it. Factories, in spite of the problems related to production and mind-numbing repetitive work, nevertheless become communities, places where ideas and knowledge were exchanged, as well as temples to man’s ingenuity, places where Sinisgalli ‘entered bare-headed as one enters a church’ and places ‘to go in the evenings to admire the weary machines, as they rest in silence’.

Sinisgalli, on the strength of innumerable contacts with diverse areas of culture, was able to create a magazine with a broad range of topics, one that was refined from the point of view of graphics and aimed at an international readership, with the purpose of communicating to men of culture the importance of being open to technological progress and, at the same time, offer technicians and industrialists a window on the concepts and masters of science, art and literature.

This was not Sinisgalli’s first experience as the director of a company magazine. Earlier he had directed the magazine *Pirelli*, where he had been called by the engineer Giuseppe Luraghi (1905–1991) who wanted him by his side in all of the large companies he directed: from Pirelli to Alfa Romeo to Bassetti. Thus, when in 1952 Luraghi left

Pirelli to go to Rome to direct the offices of Finmeccanica, he decided to call Sinisgalli in order to take advantage of his by-now 15 years of experience in the area of publicity (Sinisgalli had begun by directing the publicity office of Olivetti).

Sinisgalli undeniably enjoyed the advantages of a solid education in the sciences as well as a keen poetic and aesthetic sense. Thanks to this he was able to enter competently into a dialogue with poets, philosophers, painters, architects, engineers, computer users and economists, commissioning them to write the most important articles for the magazine. At the same time, for many of these authors Sinisgalli’s invitation to collaborate with his company magazine was the springboard towards a new way of conceiving interesting and stimulating cultural openings, and accepting as a natural fact the osmosis between art and science, technology and imagination that composed the underlying premises for the Italian economic miracle. All this is found in synthesis in the pages of *Civiltà delle Macchine*, where Sinisgalli concentrates on communicating this osmosis to the world, seen from the points of view of intellectuals, industrialists, artists, poets and even schoolchildren, across new horizons opened by industrialisation without losing sight of the traditions and masters on which it was based. The extent to which industrial progress is perceived as a continuum with the pre-industrial traditions, rhythms, forms and culture can be seen from the following passage written by [1]:

All of us do nothing but swallow our days, without chewing, without ruminating, and probably without thinking. It is logical that the frightening amount of energy that is consumed would be entirely wasted if it did not at least serve to give a toy to the last child in Basilicata or Korea, I say a toy, if it didn’t serve to buy a dictionary and the ink and notebooks for the last Eskimo or Zulu children, if it did not serve etc. It might also come to the minds of some that machines are the instruments of power of the rich who, giving up the sword after the French Revolution and giving up even the landed estates because all told they earn too little, have bought up the Ports and Plants, the Wells and Factories, the Stacks and Mines, the Neutrons and Mesons. My idea is that the machines belong to those who stay with them, like the fields belong to those who cultivate them and know them and tread on them and walk on them, like the woman belongs to the one who lives with her. I have the impression that the Prince, or Lord, or Master are figures emptied of meaning, are by now only masks or puppets, only old outdated symbols. ... I often happen to

think about how, like sheep cannot live without a herd, and a lost sheep is a dead sheep, machines too complete each other, staying within fences, gathering in a sheepfold. I must say that I find infinitely more comforting the thought of a thousand, two thousand, ten thousand labourers working together on a construction site, in a workshop, in a space a little smaller or a little bigger than a village, than the solitude of a shepherd or a cobbler. But my coppersmith, my tinman, Giacinto Fanuele of the race of coppersmiths and tinmen of Montemurro, was always of good cheer. ... We received him with many honours and much gaiety when Giacinto Fanuele and his son came to our house for a few days, not to serve us, but to help us. And so the copper pots, and skillets, and pitchers, and pans, were all held up to the light to discover a hole, or a crack. Then Giacinto with scissors, bellows, acid, tin and solder, set himself to making his marvellous forms, oil cruets, lamps and funnels. Maybe from looking at them for so long when the sphere of the visible is so restricted, maybe from reacting to a civilisation that wants me as its son, and which proclaims its legitimacy in every instant, maybe it is to restore, every time I have a chance to, the merits and responsibility to the man, that I in this cold and clear January evening, linger to re-evoked the warmth and light of a lamp, and the slender, cutting physiognomy of the Basilican oil cruet.

To the great thesis entitled “Industrial design” I want to make this small, but precise personal contribution,

the careful, patient, loving work of a tinman from an old Italian village. It is clear that these forms are to be taken as dialectical expressions, so full of beauty, a beauty perennial and by now immutable. Felicitously conceived, the rasp of centuries and generations has perfected them down to the last millimetre.

Translated from the Italian by Kim Williams

Reference

1. Sinisgalli, L.: Una lucerna, una lanterna, una oliera. *Civiltà delle Macchine* 2, 24 (1953)

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