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Weaving Prosperity

Opening Textile Factories to Art and People

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Abstract

For years, the fashion system has been questioning how to reduce its negative impact on the environment and society, clashing with the need for constant economic growth. Climate, humanitarian and health crises have fueled the debate on the excessive centrality of GDP as a universal measure of prosperity, often pursued at the expense of environmental and human resources. This reflection prompts a redefinition of the concept of prosperity, no longer just economic, but as a virtuous relationship between people, space and resources, in line with a sustainable and desirable future. The contribution explores whether it is possible to imagine a future for fashion manufacturing in Italy, particularly in the textile sector, which promotes new models of relations between workplaces, people and products, thanks to art and processes of care, in a perspective of renewed prosperity. The investigation is based on three case studies: Bonotto, promoter of the “slow factory” that has brought artists and artworks inside the factory; Lanificio Paoletti, committed to the protection of the Alpago sheep and the enhancement of the territory through events such as *La via della lana (The wool road)*; Lottozero, a creative hub for textile research and experimentation. The analysis reveals a reorganisation of Italian manufacturing, in which factories become places of living, learning and growth, capable of generating prosperity based on relations between people, spaces and objects.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the fashion industry has found itself at the centre of an increasingly urgent debate concerning environmental and social sustainability. The fashion system, increasingly driven by economic-financial aspects and rapid, linear production models, is now under pressure due to its impact on people and the environment. The climate, humanitarian and health crises of recent decades have amplified awareness of the limits of the traditional economic model, based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the main, or even sole, indicator of prosperity (Stiglitz, 2009). This system, focused on continuous economic growth, often neglects the social and environmental costs of production, fueling a “GDP fetishism” that places economic growth as the ultimate goal, to the detriment of human and environmental well-being (Latouche, 2012).

The concept of prosperity, hitherto considered almost exclusively in economic terms, has been the subject of increasing critical reflection. The very etymology of the term “prosperity” refers to what is in line with hope and what is preferable for the future, thus calling for a reinterpretation that goes beyond mere economic parameters (Moore, 2023). According to this view, prosperity can no longer be understood as the accumulation of material wealth, but rather as a relational condition, capable of including social, human and environmental well-being.

In this context, the fashion industry is faced with the challenge of reconciling two seemingly contradictory trends: on the one hand, the need for economic growth to sustain production and employment; on the other hand, the growing demand for sustainability from consumers and communities,

which requires fashion companies to rethink their production models and core values (Fletcher, 2014). This implies not only a reduction of environmental impact, but also a new interpretation of prosperity that includes human well-being and the relationship with territories.

Starting from these premises, the contribution questions whether it is possible to imagine a future for fashion manufacturing in Italy, particularly in the textile sector, which sees a redefinition of the relationships between work spaces, people and products thanks to art and processes of care, in the perspective of a renewed prosperity. Specifically, some examples of transformation of work spaces into places of integration between fashion, design and art will be investigated, promoting processes of cultural innovation and community well-being (Villari, 2013). The analysis will focus on three representative case studies: the textile company Bonotto, promoter of the idea of the “slow factory”, the wool mill Paoletti, committed to involving the public through the event *La via della lana*, and Lottozero, a creative hub integrating art and textile production in an innovative space.

In recent years, several fashion brands and large textile manufacturers, such as Ratti, Zegna, Prada and Trussardi, have shown a growing interest in connections with art, going so far as to establish real collections exhibited in dedicated spaces, often located outside the production areas. However, this contribution focuses on a different approach: not on art separated from production, but on art that enters directly into the factory, transforming it into a place where economic prosper-

ity, achieved through manufacturing work, is accompanied by cultural prosperity; workers are not only seen as instruments of production, but as members of an active and growing community, nurtured by artistic and social connections.

2. Theoretical Framework

Fashion is a complex system that intertwines creative, technological, economic and social dimensions (Craik, 2009). As Kawamura (2005) points out, it is not just a form of artistic expression, but a cultural phenomenon that reflects and shapes society. However, in recent years, the commercial and financial aspect has assumed an increasingly preponderant role within the fashion system, profoundly influencing the functioning and the strategic decisions of the brands, including the appointments and dismissals of creative directors.

Since the end of the 20th century, with the advent of a few large global holding companies dominating both luxury and fast fashion, the focus on economic performance has in many cases supplanted the centrality of creativity (Entwistle, 2000), disregarding the environmental, social and cultural impacts of fashion. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has historically been used as the main indicator of economic progress and national prosperity. However, as Stiglitz (2009) points out, GDP has significant limitations, as it only measures the production of goods and services without taking into account environmental sustainability, quality of life, or social well-being. According to this critique, the exclusive emphasis on GDP leads to economic policies that ignore environmental degradation, increasing inequality and deteriorating social relations.

This view is particularly relevant to the fashion industry, which has historically relied on rapid economic growth and production models that prioritise efficiency and cost-cutting at the expense of sustainability and care for land and people. Latouche (2012) deepens this critique, linking it to the concept of “degrowth” and proposing a radical rethinking of the relationship between economy and society. According to the author, prosperity cannot be reduced to infinite growth on a planet with limited resources. Latouche argues for a “prosperity without growth”, where prosperity is defined by harmonious human relations, ecological sustainability and a reduction of superfluous consumption. In recent years, a relational view of prosperity (Moore, 2023) is gaining ground, which promotes the idea of prosperity that fosters human well-being through social, ecological and cultural relationships, rather than through the mere accumulation of material wealth. The contribution therefore questions whether fashion textile manufacturing in Italy can be the promoter of an alternative vision, whether the factory can be transformed into a new, permeable and training place; a space of prosperity, open to incursions of art, design, people, knowledge and methodologies that have been excluded until now.

This investigation is part of the phenomenon of exhibiting craftsmanship and manufacturing that global fashion brands initiated between 2008 and 2009, particularly in Italy and France (Franzo, 2016). On the one hand, artisans were brought into the city, inside brand shops, often in shop windows, to showcase manual labour and, consequently, the value of the products; examples are: *Gucci Artisan Corner*, a project started

in 2009 by which the brand brought some artisans inside its shops, allowing customers to discover the different stages of making shoes, bags, watches or jewellery; *Behind the intrecciato*, a 2016 project by Bottega Veneta at the Dubai Mall, that included three iconic bags from the Vicenza-based brand, enlarged to become temporary pavilions inside which to discover the processes of making and weaving bags, with videos and archive pieces; *Fatto a mano for the Future*, Fendi's 2011 project hosted inside one of the Harrods shop windows in London, where a performance between artist Rowan Mersh and artisan Cyril Letellier was visible, allowing people to reflect on the contemporary role of the artisan (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Rowan Mersh, *Fatto a mano for the Future*, Performance for Fendi, 2011 (Courtesy Rowan Mersh).

On the other hand, many fashion production sites, located in the provinces, have been opened to the public for visits and activities, hosted schools, associations and institutions to transfer knowledge and awareness; the most relevant example is *Les Journées Particulières*, an initiative of the luxury group LVMH launched in 2011 and now in its fifth edition, which consists of opening to the public dozens of production sites of the group's brands located in peripheral locations and small towns scattered throughout Europe (Fig. 2). This phenomenon therefore responds to the need of international luxury brands to make the value of their products tangible, to distinguish themselves from fast fashion brands through a storytelling made of people, places and know-how that encourages forms of consumer loyalty.



Figure 2. LVMH, *Les Journées Particulières*, 2013.

The approach followed by the case studies investigated in this contribution is different, whose objective does not appear to be to show what they do and their manufacturing skills, but to transform the very idea of the factory and the role played by those who work in it (Franzo and Moradei, 2021), opening the doors to art and design and becoming places of the “craft of combination” in which to encourage interactivity, experience and learning (Lundvall & Johnson, 1994). The industrial district (Becattini, 1998) of the Italian province, in crisis from a production point of view, is thus proving to be an ideal territory for generating change, approaching the idea of an “evolved cultural district” (Sacco & Tavano Blessi, 2005).

3. Methodology and Description of Case Studies

The research was conducted by adopting a qualitative approach, which led to the selection and investigation of three case studies representative of the concept of prosperity, significant for their ability to promote new social, cultural and creative dynamics within Italian textile factories. The data were collected through an initial desk analysis phase followed by a visit to the companies investigated, which allowed for a direct and immediate observation in the field of the transformations taking place in the work context and in interpersonal relations.

The case studies selected are representative of three different fashion districts: Lanificio Paoletti for the wool district of Follina, in the province of Treviso; Bonotto for that of Vicenza; Lottozero for the textile district of Prato. The company characteristics are also different: Bonotto is a listed company, recently acquired by the Ermenegildo Zegna group; Lanificio

Paoletti is a family business, where the tenth generation of the family still controls the activities; Lottozero is a very recent reality, founded about 10 years ago in one of the most important textile districts in Europe. A common element in all three cases is the fact that they are run by a couple of siblings: Marco and Paolo Paoletti; Lorenzo and Giovanni Bonotto; and Tessa and Arianna Moroder in the case of Lottozero.

3.1. Lanificio Paoletti

Lanificio Paoletti, founded in 1795 in Follina, in the province of Treviso, is one of the oldest textile companies in Italy, specialising in the production of full-cycle, carded pure wool fabrics. For over two centuries, the Paoletti family has kept the tradition of wool processing alive, combining artisan techniques handed down from generation to generation with technological innovation. In recent years, the wool mill has embarked on a path towards design and contemporary art, consolidating its ties with the territory and helping to redefine the relationship between manufacturing, culture and community.

With respect to the subject of this contribution, one of the most emblematic initiatives of this openness is *La via della lana*, an annual event that invites the public to explore the factory's production processes and reflect on the connections between art, design and the textile industry. During the event, the doors of the wool factory open to visitors, who can watch craft demonstrations, participate in workshops and interact with international artists and designers. The factory spaces become a temporary incubator, a place for art installations, performances and exhibitions that are intertwined with the manufacture. The aim of the project is to show not only the

final product, but also the creative process behind its creation, emphasising the value of raw materials and sustainability. The event highlights the importance of the Alpago sheep, an indigenous breed that the wool mill is committed to protecting and enhancing, promoting a responsible use of local resources. An example of this is *Federe*, a site-specific installation presented by the Greek collective Hypercomf during the 2019 edition of *La via della lana*, consisting of a 15-minute short film that explores the relationship between industrial looms and the employees, with the aim of emphasising the social and spiritual interaction with the machines, their developers and the society they feed with their products. The short film dialogues with cubes of discarded textiles from which soft hand-shaped seats emerge, contrasting their delicate comfort with the chaotic volume of waste products (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Hypercomf, *Federe*, site-specific installation presented during *La via della lana* at Lanificio Paoletti, 2019.

3.2. Bonotto

Bonotto is an Italian textile company located in the province of Vicenza, renowned for its innovative approach to production, combining traditional craftsmanship, sustainability and contemporary art. The company coined the concept of the “slow factory” as a response to the accelerated industrial pace typical of fast fashion (Vaccari & Vanni, 2020). This model is inspired by the philosophy of the “slow” movement (Fletcher, 2013), promoting quality production that values the natural times of textile creation and rejects the logic of hyper-production. The slow factory aims to restore a harmonious relationship between humans, work and nature, emphasising an attitude of care and attention to detail, both in production processes and in the management of human relations.

Over the years, Bonotto has invited over 300 artists to interact with the factory and create in situ artworks that are displayed in the company’s spaces, including the production and warehouse areas. Currently, the factory houses 17,000 artworks, occupying 10,000 square metres of space and creating a constant dialogue between art, workers and production. This context stimulates the creativity not only of workers, but also of visitors and customers, offering an immersive experience that goes beyond mere manufacturing (Fig. 4).

As evidence of its commitment to art and culture, Bonotto also established the Bonotto Foundation, an organisation dedicated to the preservation and promotion of a collection of works, audio and video documentation, posters, books, magazines and editions of Fluxus artists and international verbo-visual research developed since the late 1950s.

As Giovanni Bonotto points out, the company is strongly

influenced by the vision of his father Luigi, an entrepreneur and pupil of Marcel Duchamp, “according to whom one must live every day as a great artwork”. This has led over the years to place home, factory, family, friends, employees, suppliers and artists on the same level. It happened, and still happens, that workers collaborate with artists while they are in action inside the factory, generating a connection between art and textile manufacturing. This approach has led all the employees of the company, from the top management to the workers, to “wear the spectacles of imagination”, to borrow the words of Giovanni Bonotto, and thus to take a sideways look, to observe things in a new and open way.



Figure 4. Bonotto, view of the factory with Yoko Ono's 2013 work *Dream* in the background (ph. Marco Gavasso).

3.3. Lottozero

Lottozero is a creative hub and textile experimentation centre located in Prato, one of the historical capitals of textile manufacturing in Italy. Founded in 2016 by sisters Tessa and Arianna Moroder, Lottozero aims to be a meeting point between tradition and innovation, craftsmanship and new technologies, art and design. The aim is to create a fertile environment for research and development of cutting-edge textile projects, offering a collaborative space for artists, designers, researchers and companies.

One of the distinctive elements of Lottozero is the Kunsthalle, an exhibition space that serves as a platform for exhibitions, installations and performances related to the world of textile art and contemporary design. Here, the intersections between art and manufacture are explored, with a focus on the material dimension and experimental textile research. Through thematic and solo exhibitions, Lottozero has given space to a variety of artists and designers, promoting dialogue between different creative fields (Fig. 5).

The role of the Kunsthalle goes beyond that of a mere gallery: it is configured as a space of dynamic interaction, where art comes into direct contact with industrial and craft processes. Thanks to the presence of a textile workshop within the complex, artists and designers have the opportunity to experiment with new techniques and materials in collaboration with the Lottozero team. This creates a continuous cycle of contamination between the aesthetic dimension and the productive dimension, leading to the emergence of new projects that challenge the conventions of design and fashion.



Figure 5. Lottozero, Kunsthalle.

Lottozero, thanks to the Kunsthalle, regularly promotes artistic residencies, during which creatives from all over the world can spend a period in Prato working on their own projects. The residencies offer the opportunity to come into contact with the rich textile heritage of the Prato district and to engage with local manufacturing realities. These residency programmes have led to the creation of textile works and collections that blend contemporary innovation with traditional craftsmanship, uniting past and future in a path of constant evolution (Conti & Franzo, 2020).

4. Discussion

The analysis of the three case studies reveals a common perspective that overcomes the traditional dichotomy between production and culture, suggesting a profound reconfigu-

ration of textile manufacturing in Italy. These companies, although different in size, context and history, share an innovative and expanded vision of prosperity, which is not limited to economic growth, but includes cultural, social and relational dimensions. The emerging themes, transversal to the three cases, are the openness to the public, the integration of art in the workplace and the continuous dialogue with the territory.

4.1. Redefining the Factory Space

In the cases analysed, the factory is no longer seen as a simple place of production, but as an experienced, open space, capable of generating social and cultural value. At Lanificio Paoletti, for example, the event *La via della lana* transforms the factory into a place of informal learning and encounter between craftsmanship and contemporary design. This shift of the factory from a closed and productive model to an open and communal one underlines the importance of the experiential and cultural dimension to enrich the value of textile products. Similarly, Bonotto's idea of the "slow factory" reconfigures production spaces as places for contemplation and reflection. Art, integrated directly into the work areas, is not seen as a mere decorative element, but as a tool to rethink industrial rhythms and human relations. The "slow factory" promotes a form of prosperity that includes human and cultural growth, questioning the productivist approach that dominates the contemporary textile industry.

Lottozero also adopts a similar perspective, transforming a disused industrial space into a creative hub where research, production and innovation coexist. Its Kunsthalle, an exhibition space for textile and contemporary art, promotes a

dynamic interaction between artists, designers and manufacturers, blurring the boundaries between art and fashion. Lottozero demonstrates how a manufacturing space can become a cultural and creative reference point, supporting new talents and strengthening the local and international textile network.

4.2. Art as a Catalyst for New Perspectives

The crucial role of art as a catalyst for change emerges. Art is not only exhibited, but becomes an integral part of the production process and company life. At Lanificio Paoletti, the invitation of craftsmen and designers to work inside the factory is a concrete example of how art can interact with production, creating a direct dialogue between creation and manufacture. This exchange not only enriches the final product, but also elevates the cultural role of the factory in the territory.

At Bonotto, art is a philosophical component that permeates the entire company. The invited artists do not merely decorate the rooms, but contribute to a radical reinterpretation of the rhythms and values of industrial work.

Lottozero also fits into this vision, promoting textile art as a means of redefining the boundaries between industry and culture. Its function as a creative incubator allows young designers and artists from all over the world to experiment with new languages and techniques, merging research and innovation with textile craftsmanship.

4.3. Prosperity as a Multidimensional Concept

The cases analysed allow us to understand how it is possible to rethink the concept of prosperity, not measuring it solely in terms of turnover or productivity, but including human, social

and relational aspects. Lanificio Paoletti promotes a vision of prosperity that stems from dialogue with the territory and its specificities. The factory becomes a meeting point between past and future, where economic sustainability is intertwined with cultural sustainability. Bonotto's "slow factory", on the other hand, proposes a form of prosperity that rejects the rhythms imposed by the global market. The company community is seen as a collection of people, not production tools, and art plays a fundamental role in creating a more human and reflective work culture. Finally, Lottozero offers a vision of prosperity linked to experimentation and knowledge sharing. Coworking and accessible production facilities make Lottozero an open laboratory, where prosperity is generated by cooperation and innovation.

5. Conclusions

The three case studies demonstrate how the integration of art, openness to the public and attention to human relations can transform the textile sector into an engine of cultural, as well as economic, change. The factories and workshops analysed not only produce textiles, but also generate new ideas of community, sustainability and innovation. Prosperity, in this context, is not only defined by turnover or profit, but by the quality of the relationships created between people, spaces and objects. At a time when the fashion and textile manufacturing industry is increasingly dominated by global and financial dynamics and is confronted with demands for greater sustainability, these models of cultural innovation represent virtuous and replicable alternatives.

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