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Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

**Northern Italy and the World
at the Dawn of 2011**
Report 1 of a Listening Post held
in Milan on 12th January

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

A certain confusion regarding the aims of the group project was already expressed during the presentation, and it seemed to resonate together with another confusion regarding one's own social identity and the struggle to face an uncertain situation. Sentences were told like: "I came here but I don't understand what I have to do", together with "I am searching for an identity", "I am an orphan of the Democratic Party" or "I am part of a party that doesn't exist", "I am an architect: a profession that doesn't exist" or "I am in my second adolescence". The participants intervened actively, in a lively ambiance, often excited and oppositional.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. We have identified the following themes:

The debated issues were numerous and tended to dispersion, which made it hard, while identifying the principal topics, to reach a focus that could lead to a proper elaboration. Topic identification resulted either extremely synthetic or expressed as a list; as if it were hard to frame it in an encompassing concept.

Theme 1: The value of competence: surveyors versus architects?

Since the first interventions, in response to the first sentence, emerged a theme focused on lack of competence, and of social and professional sense of responsibility, which could orient personal choices and relations. The initial narration quotes an episode about a permit to restructure an old barn, denied by the competent authority (politicians and architects). The authorities delegated the issue to a particularistic decision of a surveyor, incompetent and unable of a historically correct evaluation. The topic was brought further by another participant, who describes a sense of failure in transmitting true competences to the younger generations, because they don't want to build anything and only perform activities without thought or creativity.

Facing the disinvestment in one's social function, both from the elder generation (politicians and architects that don't assume the responsibility of their social role) and the sons and daughters (who don't learn the job but just want to get by): feelings of anger, disgust and resignation are brought up by the situation. This condition of uncertainty, in which the political and economic life is, paralyses the will to explore of the young people, and often leads to a submission to decisional patterns that privilege an opportunistic accommodation rather than an idealistic pursue (during primary elections you should vote the candidate whom you trust the most or the one most likely to win the opponent?).

A participant underlines how, in the Italian situation, it is hard to openly express indignation, due to the fear of a possible coming back of 'red brigades' terrorism. This condition rather endorses the permanence of an authority unable to manage a competent and effective leadership (the surveyor dictatorship). The trauma of terrorism provides a reason to the inhibition of decisional ability that could make a change, and allows the permanence of a never-ending discontent.

This intervention provokes a lively reaction within the group that leads to the elaboration of the second topic.

Theme 2: Acceptance versus resignation

The second topic presents a contraposition of different subjective positions. Credit is given to an attitude of acceptance of the status quo, that is not considered worse than the one experienced in other recent periods, characterized by big crisis: both economical (huge inflation) and political (Cold War). Optimism is expressed in this case, in opposition to the rather pessimistic aspects of the discussion. The feeling of the crisis is attributed to the melancholy of the elders (the members of the group) that don't have much more future to face, while instead it is convenient to resign to long-distance changes.

“There is no young people here”, says a participant, “but in my family there are five adolescents and I just started a Master”. “I'm unemployed”, says another, “and I want to go back to study. I want to be precarious and combine adulthood and insecurity”.

What for some is considered acceptance, for other is considered as 'accustomed resignation' of a status quo characterized by indifference to common good and to its care (dirty streets that are, for this reason, even more disregarded). A national, dirty, and neglected 'inside' is represented in opposition to a foreign, clean and tidy 'outside', where one could manifest competences that are left without expression in the home country. Emigration permits a decentralization of points of view, and is here brought up as a solution against resigned habits and national untidiness.

This sequence in the group is characterized by a fragmented, and sometimes contentious style, characterized by an oppositional point of view. Communication is very lively, with an almost adolescent vivacity, in contrast with a self-representation of the group as constituted by old people.

The group settled on an oppositional kind of communication, hiding nevertheless the dialectic present in the couple acceptance/resignation, which appeared only in reverse and wasn't fully worked through. On one side, the acceptance (optimistic position) is represented as linked to passivity and non-action (transformations are structural and belong to historical cycles); on the other, in resignation (pessimistic position) is present a demand for action (in opposition to accommodating habits).

Theme 3: Personal leadership versus shared ideals

This topic is about relationships with leadership. The shared perspective presents a lack of a kind of leadership that could be socially representative and expression of social interests, or even ideal values. This works both for the party in power and for the opposition. The actual leadership of Berlusconi, strongly personalized, is not expression of a party, intended as a political representation of ideal values, but to the ideal representation of one individual. Berlusconi is defined, by a participant, as 'a dispenser of optimism', someone who confuses you and makes you delusional, expressions that reflect a rather stable perception among old and young generation, used here as a reference to television (that can, through optimism, turn you numb), and to a leadership exercised through media.

The personalization of leadership is here described as expression of a crisis of figurative imagination, meaning the capacity to represent the offspring of thought elaboration. The need for a value-keeper, that neglects both the values themselves and thought, inhibits 'fraternal' representation of the public domain. Everybody emphasized, even if with opposing aspects, the personalization of the figure of the leader. The debate among participants seems to reproduce political oppositions but, actually, as someone suggests referring to television debates, the discussion reminded of a talk show, as if television could provide a common form of communication and a common language; the 'other' in which reflect and define oneself, even if with a distancing attitude. This reference to television spreads out to various media, and Facebook works as a guarantee for the exchange of virtual relations, instead of family and social relations.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: The analysis shared by the group lead to a reflection on the feeling of disorientation and a lack of social belonging, the idea of a loss of future is not balanced with an interiorized appropriation of the past. In this picture of real-lives, in the group strongly emerged a tendency towards an oppositional definition of identity. The 'Not me!' substantially prevailed on the search for convergence.

The different reactions to the feeling of disorientation, regarding not only the loss of object but also a loss in self-perception, coming together with anger and depressive lived experiences, oriented toward individual-shaped solutions: turning back to traditions and values of the past, which appears as a idealized Arcadia, the rediscovery of the great narrations, the search for new extra national models, as the Anglo-Saxon ones, which seem anyway to be feebly applicable to Italian situation, or the acceptance of a new status of adolescence, as a way of life.

The group reflected on the social meaning of these experiences. The loss of identity and the loss of perception of the self, in a social sense, can be interpreted as a breaking point with bonds of identity and belonging. This determines a fragmentation of the

social identity, together with a sense of impossibility in reciprocal recognition. Disclaiming each other's brings to a constant oppositional tension (talk-show style), where individual identity, frightened by the crisis, is maintained through exiting and chaotic personalization. These topics, while analysed by the group, were dramatized, and points of view were therefore opposed this way: right/left, nostalgic/trustful, pessimist/optimist. These positions were stuck inside their own boundaries, and the complementary ones were attributed to the others, without listening or articulating.

Hypothesis: It is possible to formulate this hypothesis: the topics emerged are expression of a crisis in Italian society, that has shifted from a situation of acquired well-being to a paralysis of development, and appears without perspectives, characterized by a breaking point in the cycle of generational transmission. What is missing is the value of future and past, and therefore society turns into an adolescent, stuck in a present where the future is just and confuse, blurred promise.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: A second analysis operated lead to the emergence topics and concerns, focused on the lack of social and political representation. Participants expressed a fear that a general capacity of thought, of planning and of leadership might disappear. This 'switching off' of ability to reflect is expressed in one way through a reference to current television, that is able to turn off one's thinking ability, in opposition to the television of the past, like the 'news at 8 o'clock', that could reunite the family and allowed to distinguish the particular from the general, linking individual and society, unifying and orienting.

The lack of thought frightens and comes together with a fear of transformations, seen as another possible breaking point with one's past and roots, and not as a new meaning for this crisis and this trouble, that could face the losses inevitably produced by globalization.

Hypothesis: This analysis lead to the formulation of this hypothesis: the lack of ability in thought elaboration and representation, the daze and confusion, from the point of view of the citizen, mirror the struggle to find a representative, social and political, function, able to shape interests and ideals of the community, through a designed and self-conscious approach. A failed relationship between individual and collective shapes an opposition between an individual retreat and a calling for populism. Since the crisis of ideologies (which have been particularly strong and contrasting in Italy), social representation doesn't belong to parties anymore. Society is unable to represent the collective self, and this leads to a maddened personalization of leadership. Television substitutes the collective ideal (Italian political leader is also the owner of television networks), functioning in the imaginary as a reflection of the social.

Convener: Giovanni Foresti

Southern Italy and the World at the Dawn of 2011

Report 2 of a Listening Post held on 12th January

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

A certain confusion regarding the aims of the group project was already expressed during the presentation, and it seemed to resonate together with another confusion regarding one's own social identity and the struggle to face an uncertain situation. Sentences were told like: "I came here but I don't understand what I have to do", together with "I am searching for an identity", "I am an orphan of the Democratic Party" or "I am part of a party that doesn't exist", "I am an architect: a profession that doesn't exist" or "I am in my second adolescence".

The participants intervened actively, in a lively ambiance, often excited and oppositional.

Extracts from this part are:

- "My experience is that social pre-occupations are transferred to my family life. There is an absolute lack of rules. Lack of rules that involves everybody. It is a route to regression."
- "The social divide is bigger. At school young people are not helped to think. Thinking is imprisoned. Learning is now a matter of tests with multiple answers. Students are required just to tick a box. There are no longer open questions where thinking is encouraged."
- The world is currently ruled by internet/facebook. We are experiencing a great number of opportunities for communicating; however I see a great degree of loneliness on the background. I was reading of this young man who was spreading the message 'sign off from Facebook'.
- Nowadays is the time when people can do many things without knowing the consequences and the damages that can be generated
- We are at the beginning of the new century. There is a change. We need to get back the biorhythm of the history. We are at the beginning of a new era, is it post ideology or post ethics?
- We are confronted by great excesses and great deficits: excess of public and private exposition and a deficit in relations; excess of information and deficit of knowledge; excess of virtual reality and deficit of reality; excess in speed and deficit of slowness; excess of long lists and deficit of individuality; many needs

and few solutions.

- We are in the middle of a transition phase with the democracy at risk. The question is how to maintain an ethical integrity. Our relations are like linked like mercury: so easily connectable but at the same time so easily breakable. For this reason Mr Berlusconi has an easy ride, he represents the one that can bring the solution. We do not longer need the commander in chief.
- Society is healthy or not healthy. If it is not healthy brings all the negative behaviours. What do we want to do? We are the biggest problem. We create the problem. We adult need the courage to stop. There the strong need for religion and if there is religion there is no bad society.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part Two the aim was collectively to identify the major themes emerging from Part One. The members identified several themes and these have been distilled into three major themes. They are:

1. Loss of the central position of the individual and ethical decay
2. Economy is ruling mankind and nature
3. Loneliness

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post members were working with the information resulting from Parts One and Two, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Loss of the central position of the individual and ethical decay

Analysis: The fabric of society is experienced as torn apart with no ethical root. This is represented by how the economic situation is leading to severe cuts in the provision of human services. The economic situation is paid more by the most vulnerable parts of our societies. The past does not provide any consolatory experience or fall back option. On the contrary it is experienced as a source of anxieties and fears. Young people live this lack of trust and it is as if they are asking the previous generation not to leave them any prejudice. Values that were strong and binding are experienced as weak and ambivalent.

Members experience the lack of metaphysical framework and in this there is no social institution that provides safe leaderships. Each of such institution seems to have a hidden agenda.

Hypothesis: It seems that members of society are expressing an experience centred on a sort of marginalisation and almost dramatic and terrorising loss of power and influence. The dependency needs are thus exposed and described as unfulfilled. However this situation is a source of almost unbearable anxieties of a lost centrality of

the individual. No leading institution and figure can fill this void and religion is seen and perceived as the only social institution that can come to the rescue with its ethical dimension. The values embedded in religion, regardless of faith and creed, are described as the forces that can repair the torn society.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Economy is ruling mankind and nature

Analysis: The death of the industrial society is again expressed loudly and it is described as the end of a false paradigm. A way of living that has led to the brink of disaster. In this description the difference between industrial and financial economy is ignored. Members are preoccupied with the emotional costs of the credit crunch and this can prevent a realistic assessment of what has happened. It is expressed the wish to find innovative solutions however creativity seems to be frozen by such emotional preoccupations. The local dimension seems to be the one that can unlock the situation.

Hypothesis: The impact of the end of a paradigm seems to generate a state of mind that seems to be locked in a feeling of hopelessness where the awareness of members' contribution to the current state of society is lost. If that is the case members find very difficult to move to a position where it is possible to engage with reality and from this more realistic engagement unlock creativity and rebuilt significant relations. This difficulty seems to be represented by the focus given to the local dimension that is perceived as the only one.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Loneliness

Analysis: Loneliness is described as the result both of fears and anxieties and of complex human relation. However it seems that socially members have lost the ability to deal with both. Such loss is described as the result of the increased 'technicalisation' of our lives and the growth of so called social networks. Members describe the emotional result of this situation as feeling constantly angry. However this is also the evidence that society is alive and kicking.

Hypothesis: It is as if there is no safe place inside and outside members' experience where significant relations can take place. Who and how to trust seem to be safely experienced in the close knitting of the family or in the virtual reality of social networks and chat room. At the least this is the way in which children are growing up and that represents, at the same time, the difficulties adults members of society are finding in building safe places. Members seem to describe unbearable feelings and thoughts that cannot find safe containers where to be expressed and elaborated. It is, perhaps, for this reason that the experience of the Listening Post has been valued and members have expressed the wish to meet and discuss the report.

Convener: Marina Galati

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Central Italy and the World at the Dawn of 2011

Report 3 of a Listening Post held in Rome on 14th January

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

After the introduction from the conveners who explained what an LP is about and its purpose, the first part of the program progressed smoothly. All members spoke, expressing the experiences of their everyday reality along with feelings of frustration, worry, and sadness and also of discovery, connection and hope.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. We have identified the following themes:

Theme 1: "Change is Loss"

The group strongly related the theme of change to a sense of helplessness and of loss. Powerlessness in the face of changes was clearly the notion, and that whether you like it or not, or plan for it or not, change takes away your 'story', makes you lose parts of yourself, threatens your familiar reality, destabilizes life and makes one vulnerable.

Change was the undercurrent to two principal topics: immigration or migration, and communication. The ease with which we travel was connected to the difficult and often humiliating experience for some – especially Asian and African members – who must get visas or residence permits. The images that were mentioned were of recent floods in different parts of the world, and in the group the word 'fear' predominated. 9/11 changed everything, and it highlighted fear of terrorism, in the sense that terrorism becomes now part of our lives, we take off our shoes at the airport without asking why or if we are really in danger. This sensation of massive mobility forces a change in the perception of the world. Migration making majorities out of former minorities – such as some Muslim areas of Europe – could also challenge the essence of some organizations created to serve the old familiar order of the world.

This also connected to the sense of losing one's home, and members were especially preoccupied with questions of belonging, rootlessness and rootedness, dispossession of one's land. The loss and threat in migration and the possibility of making sense and connecting in the new place with strangers, being acknowledged in other languages, and made to feel welcome while uncertain if return will be possible.

Change also was mentioned in relation to communication. From the experience of telepathy to usage of blogs, communication relates to connectedness. There is some hope for better connection and communication with new technology, but most of the time new communication technology fails to bring the sense of better connection or

belonging. It fails to include us, our addresses or vital information, and one still has to wait six months for permits, stand for hours in line to applying for them, and all in a single language, Italian.

Theme 2: Loss of Trust in Institutions

There was a strong notion among the members that institutions today are losing their credibility and cannot be trusted. Fiat, the Italian automobile company was mentioned as changing its agreements with its union workers and trying to deprive them of fair wages. The institutional workers unions were also seen as betraying and abandoning the workers and struggle now only for their own organizational preservation.

The Church was mentioned as losing its credibility after the disclosure of the pedophilia scandals. “There is no guiding hand,” one member said, yet it seems the 'institution' was seen powerful in the negative sense, and perhaps planting the fear of terrorism like a rapidly spreading plague, contaminating and contagious, infecting our lives.

Institutions do not take care of their citizens. Another member asked “Who is taking care of all this?” as government offices make you feel humiliated and helpless, rob one of their land, and do not acknowledge one’s needs.

Although there was a consensus among the members about feelings of disappointment with state institutions and evidence of their lack of support, it seems in the group experienced it differently depending on ethnicity or race. It was the Asian and African members who talked about experiencing humiliation, frustration and uncertainty, and not the European members. The question “What can Africa give Rome?” was posed by a member from Africa. “Rome seems to have so much.” It seems the group shared a map in the mind, not only geographical but also hierarchical. The news reports pay more attention to floods in Australia than in Brazil; large poor populations in the world like south of India are excluded and forgotten.

Theme 3: In Search of Meaning

The quest for meaning, for spiritual rootedness, was a theme raised especially by the religious leaders in the group. The search for something transcendent, with an image of the fire that was lost. What is the role of faith and religion in rapidly changing societies? The experience of the members was of fatigue, even despair. Finally, it seems that the group agreed, the search is a personal one. The way to get rootedness is by giving up that many familiar habits and old books, learn languages, make friends and enemies, and travel light.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

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Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Change, Institutions and Fear: The Loss of Home

The meeting took place in the home of one of the non-Italian members of the group, on a picturesque old street in Rome's historical center. This graphic juxtaposition between the structures of an eternal, glorious past and the globalized internationally diverse group underscored the theme of change fear and loss of home.

The group members seek to protect their clearly delineated mental maps of the world, but they are failing. The real map's geographic realities no longer conform to historical, romantic memory. Boundaries are now easily crossed, floods and natural disasters alter terrain, migration and dispossession alter social and cultural fabrics. The confrontation between what is remembered, imagined and desired crumples when confronted with fast uncontrollable change. This anxiety of estrangement of member's mental map with the real world elevated their anxiety, expressed as overlapping fears of terrorism, war and indifferent malignant institutions that no longer care for people's spiritual or physical wellbeing.

The group's perception of change also provoked an immense sensation of longing for home, a place for containment, warmth, familiarity, belonging, identity and connections. It seems that in the group's collective fantasy there was a split between the changing world and home. Change was externalized, feared and perceived as threatening to the overall wellbeing of one's self and society, whereas home – with its clear boundaries and familiarity – was an object of longing.

Finally, members could begin to see that change was embedded within their own lives, by their choice of missions. They had challenged the old order, left their homes to seek other acknowledgments, found new homes “with friends and enemies,” as one member noted, all while regaining their “personal, international competence.”

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Hierarchy and Spirituality – Searching for Meaning

Members of the group perceived the map of the world and institutional attitudes as not only differentiated, but also as hierarchical.

Among the members, the difficulty of obtaining an Italian government 'permesso di soggiorno' (resident permit) was mentioned as a humiliating experience shared by the Asian and African members. When an Italian member expressed frustration with the authorities as well, she was challenged with the query “is it bureaucracy or hierarchy?” “What can Africa give to Rome, or India, home to 'the poorest of the poor?’” This perceived hierarchy, although perceived as unjust, seem to correlate with the familiar map held in the mind. Changes, especially those connected to migration, technology, or communication which challenge the map in the mind created a sense of crumbling boundaries and feelings of helplessness and confusion.

Vis a vis global changes and personal attitudes society, the members expressed the need to find meaning inside oneself and to find strength. The hierarchy and the old order of the world, along with the clear divisions and status as perceived by group members, gave a sense of protection and security in the familiarity. This also raised feelings of guilt, and aggression was externalized and turned to fear of losing oneself, of war and terrorism. The expressed need for meaning served as an attempt to restore oneself and gain back the sense of who am I, the rooted, and find new meaning in a life of vocation.

Conveners: Anat Hornung, Ziff and Franca Fubini