



AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

Italy and the World at the Dawn of 2017  
Report of a OPUS Listening Post®  
held at Rome on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2017

---

## **PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS & EXPERIENCES**

*In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, 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': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.*

The group met at 7pm in the centre of Rome at the cooperative's headquarters for conservation and cultural heritage restoration. Ten people were present, including the two conveners: five women and three men, aging from early thirties to sixties. There were one psychologist, one writer, one copywriter, one school headmistress, one restorer, one consultant/cultural promoter, one economist, one coach/consultant. Two people had to cancel the appointment because of unexpected personal and health circumstances. Some had participated in a Listening Post before, while some were new to the experience. After a brief introduction which outlined the task of the work and its international context, people started to express their thoughts.

## **PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

*In Part 2, the aim collectively was to identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.*

Members began to talk fluently from the start, wondering at first about the meaning of being a roman citizen. One member spoke about the lack of identity: the people who live in this city seem to have lost their reference points. Even being born in Rome is no longer enough to feel the citizenship,

One member, who contributed to the discussion with a confused narrative in which wasn't easy to find a clear path or logical connection, through thoughts and associations talked about Romulus and Remus, Rino Gaetano - a songwriter who sang the inconsistencies of social life -, the taxi-driver who cheats, people who think only of one's own interest, the undisciplined, the synthesis and the chaos, the mess and the fear.

Then people start to speak about feeling proud of being in a city considered one of the most beautiful in the world and, at the same time, the feeling of dejection and frustration for this abandoned beauty and of the incapability to do anything to improve its state.

People feel that Rome and its citizens are in a dramatic situation due to the dramatic dysfunctionality of the city.

They recognize this state of affairs, particularly when they compare Rome with other cities abroad where some of the members have lived in the past.

“I see this city has changed over the years and has lost its humanity. I don't know if it has happened only in my neighborhood or it has affected the entire city. And I walk through places like the Pantheon filling my eyes with beauty and trying to compensate for the feeling of loss.”

As convener, I think this expresses two major themes:

A. Fragmentation, that rises everywhere in members' perception: from social life, to personal relationships, even to isolated areas of life - also in a physical and architectural sense -: in the entire city where citizens have lost contact with each other and their reality;

B. in a certain sense, the oblivion or denial of dysfunctionality gets somehow compensated by other forms of gratifications.

One member speaks about the absence of possibilities, as everyone seems to orient oneself only to own's inner world. Someone is even ready to move to another city. Violence, fast pace and impatience seem to characterize human relationships, not just in the real world but also in the virtual one as it is witnessed in the social life of the internet era: an example of this is the "haters". (Online 'haters' are vocal and malicious web users who broadcast hatred and insults whenever they disagree with something or someone. They seek to spread negative opinions and attack a person or an idea. Haters can be outright bigots, racists, and militants who will poison the social fabric of a community and actually threaten and stalk the people whom they hate.)

Someone else wonders whether or not to renounce to his "status" as Roman citizen, even if he recognizes that in the past there were not better living conditions than nowadays. Dreams and vision are missing, and this is connected to the wider crisis of the Western society. Some relief comes only by applying a wider perspective which can make us aware that everything is larger than we perceive.

The crisis itself forces people to face and manage these concerns. But the answer to that seems to be that citizens are not able to react at all, or if they do, they over-react with extreme violence.

The collective dimension of citizenship doesn't seem to exist anymore, while everyone is trying to cheat everyone else. So then, people have given up. There is no one who takes responsibility for oneself nor for one's own actions.

Gambling and video-poker machines are spreading everywhere in Rome. The administration (both of the country and of the city) is regarded as a tick: "which kind

of city is the one which does nothing but sucking from citizens without giving anything back?"

Then some members speak about successful practices abroad, or even in Italy in other cities like Naples where unexpected signs of beauty are emerging and it seems no one is aware of them, "as if we are like elephants moving around in a glass managerie".

Someone affirms that there is still the wish to be linked through associations even in the here and now, like the experience of the Listening Post, or singing in a choir for example. Even the younger generations show the wish to retrieve aspects of their experience as citizen: the enormous paintings/murales on many suburbs buildings' facades are testimony of that.

However some others speak about the absolute lack of response they experience within their own neighborhood, when a bus line was suppressed or the public drainage system flowed into the sewer implant of their own building.

No one reacts everyone is overloaded. Even when people make the effort of gathering in groups or associations, they find a wall in front of them: the Administration doesn't take charge of any needs. As a result even when one perceives injustice does not feel like acting anymore  
People recognize that they are talking about the search for happiness because political institutions have completely failed their promises. So, what is left for the citizens? Adding little pieces of beauty to the everyday life, and be nurtured by them.

**Theme 1: Fragmentation of the social connectedness. Emotional states and behaviours related to this are: need, fear, anger and surrender.**

People are finding spontaneous solutions of social aggregation outside the well known models of associations and of other forms of gathering, in search for some beauty and individual wellbeing. Through this people may encounter some feelings of belonging.

It seems very difficult to build secure bridges in the context of interpersonal relationships, and also to perceive and cultivate reliable links which can evolve into thoughts and into future plans and projects.

**Theme 2: Loss of identity and disaggregation of responsibility. Emotional states and behaviours related to this are confusion and disorientation.**

The perception of time and space is related to the specific area you are living in: it could be a different experience if you are in a neighborhood rather than another one. Rome is like a variety of city-states put together: not just for the established presence of the Vatican, but also because each neighborhood follows its own informal and formal rules.

Leaders and city administrators have failed all the expectations: the result for the citizens is that individual figures of leadership are missing and there is no leadership

managing the governance of the city.

**Theme 3: The presence of one part (of society, or people, institutions, rules, thoughts, emotions) that is not there.**

As conveners, we identify one other enlarged theme: a part which remains silent because doesn't know how to interact with the others, even if it conveys other's people voices, thoughts and feelings, and which is able to recognize and distinguish the extraneous part from its own.

Some voices seem to have no space anymore, even if it is not clear whether the environment is overloaded (an unmanageable complexity) or too void (there is no recognizable counterpart).

We noticed that in the dialogue social structures were missing: only one member spoke about the family, for example, and just once, and little was said about political figures like the recently elected Major, the recent events related to the ongoing trial of "Rome's Mafia", the obstructed system of waste disposal.

**PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION**

*In Part 3, the participants were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, 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, participants 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 & Hypothesis I: Fragmentation of social connectedness.**

The theme seems to represent a citizenship with its own sight obstructed by an extremely short-sighted perspective. There is no longer a containing vision nor the capacity to take care of any connections, links or human bondings, so citizens are more concerned with watching behind their backs instead of looking forward towards the future and the younger generations.

It seems that Italy is a country more suitable for older people. Instead of welcoming the younger generations, the country seems to be more concerned about the conservation of the past rather than investing in the building of the future. Conservation should not be the unaltered maintenance of the status quo but something open to transformation and change. (The LP meeting itself was hosted in a Cooperative for the Conservation of Cultural heritage.)

When the present is most often a continuous repetition of the past, the bureaucratic apparatus becomes a fossilized bone structure which has the sole purpose of self-preservation, and the Administration loses its function of governance and community protection, citizens find themselves with their hands tied and retreat. Taking individual responsibility becomes impossible; the feeling of utter helplessness in

joining something greater than oneself is spreading everywhere. Relational networks are loosened up to be almost imperceptible in the collective mind.

### **Analysis & Hypothesis 2: Loss of identity and Disintegration of responsibility**

The theme covers the loss of the sense of community, of a common reality in which the citizens can recognize themselves and feel that they belong; the disappearance of coherent and explicit values, behaviours and satisfactions that can be shared with others. It is nearly impossible to mirror oneself in the leader's figure, or even recognize reliable political and administrative leaders (the recently elected Major is now under investigation for forgery and abuse of office, after having contributed just two years ago to overthrow the previous one, ours note). It was noted that Mussolini was mentioned three times during the first part of the LP, as if there was the ghost of a dictatorship underneath the participants' thoughts or feelings. "It is possible that there is a kind of guilt, which is dismantling from the inside our homes and social frameworks?" – one member said in part I – and also the image of cancer has emerged during the discussion.

Citizens' aspirations are thwarted by the city government and by the administration system. Citizens, disoriented by not knowing how to take a proper responsibility and by the lack of social relationships extended to a large part of the citizenship, are looking for a possible reaction to the confusion.

So, they retreat into smaller social groups based on the pursuit of beauty, to dance together, sing, ride a bike.

But are these groupings weak expedients or represent a real alternative? Are they comforting answers or capable of recreating a wider projectuality? Can they represent the impulse for new forms of collective identity or are they the cover for avoidance and denial of reality?

### **Analysis & Hypothesis 3: The presence of one part that is missing**

To some extent this representation of society may recall a stage in the evolution path of the human being, at the time when primitive men were struggling against the surrounding dangers. Immediately after that our ancestors had discovered how to find shelter inside the caves, with their backs safe, they were able to evolve their own social capabilities and feel the safety provided by the presence of the group and of the community.

A network is needed so that it is possible to think, a network made by human relations in our life as well as the one made by neurons and synapses in our brain.

As it happened in the time before World War II, when perhaps the thinking capacity was too closed in and narrow to offer a broader perspective on the future or on the possible ways that events could have taken, even today it seems that the signals that something is going wrong are present, even if not completely overt.

If our role's task is to gather thoughts not yet fully devised - the "unthought known"-, then our mental function must include all the parts we feel missing in the perception and in the common dialogue, so to give voice also to the unconscious aspects, since at this point in time citizenship's consciousness does not seem to be able to keep them together.

**Conveners: Franca Fubini & Alfredo Venezia**