LISTENING POST
Italy at the Dawn of 2020

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PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

The first topic brought to the attention of the group refers to an experience of "flanerie", described by one of the members as a way of rediscovering old neighborhoods of the city, looking at them with different eyes. Referred to the wandering around of the existentialist "flaneur"in the urban drift, this inner attitude opens up to a "synchronic sight" on reality, defined by the group members as a kind of awakening. It's like a door disclosing aspects you never imagined before in a reality that was believed to know. In an unstable, constantly changing reality, people rediscover an exi- stential, reflective, inner dimension experienced as a lifeline in the urban drift. The reference to the "sardines" movement, which awakened four many the will to regain a social role that seemed re- cently to have disappeared and is now tangible, brings out a dormant need for community, a desi- re for commonality, union and connection, a tension towards new possibilities for the living toge- ther.

"… in the last 20 years I've been working in the social sector, in neighborhood regeneration activities… now I found out this is called "flanerie", a sort of social research, a wandering around without preconceptions, relying on the freshness of your encounters… you can tell needs are there, an ocean of needs, instant things, foreigner children, things that speak to us are right there, is like a kind of awakening… things never imagined before come out, new relation- ships…"

"… fluid society, diseases, is like certain things come out spontaneously … the sardines filling up the squares of the city highlight something else, a forgotten "us" which is less angry, more proactive… this kind of things come out, but they cannot become a reference, cannot ag- gregate, give a shape to our needs… the problem is that when a movement starts to establish an organization, rules, then is no longer good… we are lacking of points of reference, every- thing is all good or all wrong, but people feel enthusiasm, you all try to do good…"

But what are the sardines an expression of? They certainly bring to attention a lot of questions we should face, like in example why there is such an amount of anger in our well-off society (the reference is to the upcoming elections in the Emilia Romagna region)? From where does this ag- gressiveness come from? Why in some poorer compared to us countries (Africa, Nepal) people laugh a lot, and we don't? We talk about the difference between the "Promethean" and the "Epimethean" man, and the possibility to make a shift from a society based on domination over nature and power (from Prometheus, the Titan who stole the fire to the gods and gave it to the humans), to a society based on sharing and hope, accepting the possibility that not everything can be kept under control and relying on fate (from Epimetheus, Prometheus' brother, who gave to the humans hope as the last of the virtues). Face to the threats and the catastrophes

that loom over humanity, against which we feel helpless (the Australia's fires, technology, robotic and AI putting at threats what is human) we feel like our way of life is crumbling. In a world we don't understand the biggest fear is loneliness, a lot of single lonelinesses that can't connect.

We are swaying between fear and hope, powerlessness and engagement, and the desire to find real, not virtual, connections arises; we don't want to be "bits" in a cyberspace, but "lego cu- bes" that fit in a physical space, even an overcrowded one like the sardines' squares. An opening to the social dimension which is also tangible in companies as a sensibility in the day by day ac- tivities.

"I was very impressed recently by the election campaign in Emilia Romagna, which is a well managed wealthy region but people are very angry... you don't understand where this an- ger comes from... people feel alone, they have been left alone... I ask myself from where this anger comes from..."

"Illich talks about the Epimethean man awakening... a comparison between the Emilian and the African women, this is how I see society now, the African woman is Epimethean... I went to an African village once and I realized how much they laugh, sometimes is even disturbing..."

"Also in Nepal people laugh a lot, I asked if it was a personal or a general characteristic of the country. Compared to them we are lucky, but we have much more tensions, I don't know why..."

"We lack points of reference, is difficult to tell what is wrong and right... but you can feel enthusiasm now in the society, people want to be engaged, to make the difference in some way... however, all these efforts are not visible yet, is like we need an exoskeleton that support us..."

"The theme of memory, not acknowledging we are lucky, a great amount of anger... if I look into myself I can feel a huge ambivalence between fear and hope, we need antidotes against threats and discomfort... what is happening in Australia, the destructions caused by the fires... the technological threat, biological robots which are able to learn by themselves, to mend themselves... where do humans go? But there are small antidotes around..."

Connecting is therefore important not only to count ourselves, to share a political project or a plan for action; rather, to connect helps to "link the dots" which are otherwise separated, strengthening the feeling that what each of us can do is not pointless, is not a drop in the sea, it is indeed the only way we can really affect reality and find our voice. Much reasoning does not help, questioning the destiny of humanity is useless, if we don't accept to play the game in or- der to give some directions to change. Letting us to get involved in a "fluid sense of existence", trusting in a sense of community and closeness as resources and antidotes to the individual lone- liness and isolation, may help. Memory is not regarded as a nostalgic reference to the past, like few years ago, but rather becomes a reservoir of common experiences that in the past worked well and could be still useful today with some changes.

"I remember an image we shared here last year about change, our whole world was de- picted as a bunch of connections between millions of sperms, it seemed to me very generative... today I feel like this image, which I recall as the representation of hope, is happening... good things are more visible, people are more positive..."

"Our worst fear is loneliness... many projects aiming to help people in need are in strug- gle because there's no support from the state, politicians are blind, what they do is only cut- ting resources, they promote a language of hate and fear... sometimes I feel ashamed of the language my colleagues use at lunch break... loneliness, lot of people do voluntary work but when the public sector relies on it is a problem, you can't get it for granted... such things are not much debated today but they are real problems, I try to help for what I can but there is a huge gap between what I would do and the policies of

the public company I work for…"

"You find the same loneliness in companies, people struggle to be listen… however I no- ticed that something changed in my work as a consultant this year, with few things I could do great, an important resource is memory, I learned that people need to rediscover their shared memories, storytelling is very important to make this shift… another resource is simplicity, a simple way to use technology and its possibilities helps to ease this sense of loneliness… small video conferences are trivial, common, but they help…"

"I work on recruiting, what I can see from my perspective is a worrying widening of po- verty, people are afraid to get poor even if they are not… highly qualified managers with a lot of experience fear to become invisible, they feel deprived of energy… also in my sector people are sensitive to common good, I believe Human Resources in companies should have a social role… when you work in people assessment you always have to choose someone and to discard someone else, but even discarding candidates you can try to add some value, to offer to them a different point of view…"

"Today more than ever I realize how much the social context entered into companies"

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

THEME 1

- Fear of death, new rituals, anthropological change

- New generations don't need the possession of goods

- An excess of memory can be negative

- Creative tension between opposites

THEME 2

- What is an exoskeleton? A container, a protection, or a connection between dots?

- New will for sharing, getting together to defeat our fears

- Love is better than war to solve conflicts

THEME 3

- Interregnum, opposites coexist

- Clinging to the past versus memory to discern, experience is like a pearl necklace

- Silent voluntary work, connect the dots for not feeling alone

- Bear uncertainties, assessment is a help to activate new resources, like analysis

- We should master the desire of relying in old solutions

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

1. FLANERIE = SEEKING FOR NEW MEANINGS IN CHANGE

The group expresses an important shift regard to the way they live in a reality in constant chan- ge the main protagonist of this shift is the "flaneur", who wanders in the urban drift with no de- fined purposes or preconceptions, being open to surprise and emotions. Flanerie is therefore a metaphor for an explorative attitude towards reality, open to new meanings, to regard the same things with new eyes. A sort of new existentialism which does not end, however, in a merely cri- tical pessimistic vision of reality, but is rather a possibility to bring to life an uprising interest for social issues, the social context is regarded as the field of proactive individual actions. A "silent voluntary work" facilitates a reflective attitude to emerge, everyone questioning herself about her possibilities of action and intervention in their field, searching for connections with the ex- perience of the others, opening up to the upcoming of common meanings. Reality is still proble- matic, tough, menacing, but the landscape is no longer deeply stark. The antidote against indi- vidual loneliness is an emerging need for community, based on the hope to find common mea- nings (Prometheus versus Epimetheus), a more comprehensive "us" emerges, more open to the acceptance of differences (Africans and Nepalese who are able to laugh). Memory is not only a nostalgic look towards the past, but rather a heritage of valuable experiences that strengthen the bonds of the community if only we can use them in different ways.

2. WE NEED AN EXOSKELETON

Everyday reality is still problematic, we shouldn't fall into an easy optimism, devoid of real sub- stance. Technology is frightening, we doubt to have enough competences to master its too many option, the most simple things like buying a TV screen become complicated; fake news are con- fusing, distinguishing between true and false is difficult, scientific knowledge is ignored. Howe- ver, we are becoming more conscious of the complexity of the real and of the danger of a defen- sive closing attitude towards it. What we need instead is an exoskeleton, like shrimps, a protec- ting shell which also makes us able to walk. If total control upon the real is impossible, we could at least stand the idea that we lack something, accepting that we need a container which could be at the same time a protection from the external world, making us less permeable, able to master the negative emotions that stand at the basis of social conflicts (anxiousness, aggressive- ness, fears). A container able to connect the dots of individual lonelinesses, to gather the lego cubes. Many doubts and uncertainties surround the forms this container may take up: could it be the revival of old organizational forms? Could a shared storytelling allow us to put some order in chaos? The shift from the ephemeral transient universe of desire to the world of needs, based on tangible real things, makes it possible to bear the lack and frustration due to the impossibility of having everything under control.

3. THE INTERREGNUM AND THE CHANGELING

We live in an interregnum, a transient middle world; this world however is crowded of many fi- gures, images and heroes; moreover, we can live in it, we are those lego cubes, dots, sardines who learned to swim and are now trying to find a direction in an unstable universe. Because even in a constantly changing world you can find directions and meanings, opposites can coexist if we are able to leave behind the logic of polarization and war. The few references to the pre- sent are accurate, highlighting the trust that individual and collective abilities can have a rollin such an uncertain reality. Assessment takes up a big role in the discussion: assessing is

difficult because implies a choice, if you work on recruiting and HR you know that everyday you have to face the difficulty to reject a candidate, to underline an inadequacy. Assessment, however, is also a possibility to show to someone else something of herself in a different way, to give her the possibility of a change, to highlight her strength and feebleness; assessment means helping her in the difficult task to bear the frustration, accepting to get involved in a relationship through a reciprocal recognition which implies open trust.