An Organisation for Promoting
Understanding of Society

Rome at the dawn of 2020

Report of the Listening Post held in Rome on January 16 2020

Conveners: Patrizia Minniti, Alfredo Veneziale

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND 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 in a semi-central area of Rome, where an analytical Balint association is based. Of the total of twelve people, nine were present from the beginning, including the two conveners: four women and five men, from forty to sixty years old, each one a long-time citizen of Rome, most with experience of living in other cities in Italy or in other foreign countries. Two other people, men, aged between twenty and thirty, who moved to Rome recently, joined the group 20 minutes later. The last to arrive was a young woman, a journalist, who arrived just before the start of the third part of the meeting.

Some members had previously attended a Listening Post, while most were new to the experience.

The conveners outlined the work of the Listening Post and its international context, and recalled that the last meeting in Rome was held in 2017.

The first intervention begins with a sentence: "then we could also remain silent", and soon after with a parish priest who recently invited the vice mayor of Milan for a meeting in his parish in Rome, perhaps because in Milan things are working and in Rome don't. People started talking, one after the other, spontaneously following the circle of chairs. Everyone spoke at least once, actively participating in the discussion, except for the conveners.

Each intervention connects to the next one. The group seems, on the one hand, unwilling to leave room for the silence evoked by the first intervention, and on the other hand, really eager to share personal experiences.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

Upon indication from the conveners, the group splits into two small subgroups with the aim to identify the main themes emerged in the first part. Participants then gathered all together, for the last ten minutes of the session, to share the themes.

Theme 1: IMPOVERISHEMENT, WAIVER (or renunciation/ or giving up), PARALYSIS

Related feelings: resignation, malaise, vital space shrinking, frustration, anger.

The interventions point to the awareness of having fewer resources than in the past: giving up doing things in order not to face inefficiency, feeling of being suspended in the emptiness in face of stasis and total paralysis, having the impression that projects are often a waste of time. Impoverishment invades the work field, companies move away from Rome and more and more difficulties arise in finding a job and keeping it.

There is the shared perception of Rome as a city in which resources are lacking, people "are satisfied with little" and even the mayor flaunts on social networks the asphalting of a road or the closure of potholes as if these actions were major conquests. The theme of Rome as a mediocre city often returns: "the ugliest Christmas lights in the world", a degraded city where citizens have low expectations. The mass media spread increasingly poor, unstructured, often unverified and leveled down information.

The cultural dimension is underestimated, discredited and ridiculed, impoverished to the point that citizens avoid confrontation rather than live in a dialogical dimension, in an overly simplified and polarized communication context.

Besides the material impoverishment of people without work and city without economic resources, there is also a cultural, an informational and relational impoverishment, a transversal "settling for a little", from the mayor to the citizens.

Even cities such as Milan and London, initially thought as more organized and efficient, do not seem to offer valid reference models: the feeling that impoverishment and lack of resources are widespread prevails.

Theme 2: PESSIMISM AND REFUGE IN INDIVIDUAL SELF-ISOLATION

Related feelings: loneliness, individualism, closure to relationships, blockade, lack of trust, helplessness, disappointment, disillusionment, fear, unthinkability.

Especially in the interventions of the oldest members who ~~lived~~ have been living in Rome for a long time, there is a widespread pessimism that shows Rome in a worse condition even when it might have improved". Internet is seen as a comfort zone from which it is difficult to escape; the contraction towards an individual dimension is also linked to the concern for an unplanned and, therefore, unimaginable future, in which it is not known what kind of work young people will do, how the housing market will go, how immigrants will occupy specific work sectors. In a crescendo of competitiveness disguised as self-entrepreneurship, citizens are no longer able to collaborate and cooperate: even associations of merchants are no longer able to agree on Christmas decorations in the streets.

Theme 3: HOPE AND NICHES OF RELATIONSHIPS

Linked feelings: desire for sharing, contact, exchange, belonging

Rome is described as a place where "you can still choose": it is a vast city, a "heartless magma", which hosts a "mosaic" or "kaleidoscope" structure, which in turn hides several "secret groups", reached by chance, "welcoming niches", "spaces of resistance", "beautiful people". Within these areas of desire, there is a space for a smile, the search for human contact, empathy. However, these "resistance niches" seem to be only casually accessible resources reached through personal networks, with informal and unpredictable modality ranging from advice to recommendation.
Rome is a city where people still talk to each other, even if they are unknown people who accidentally find themselves together, like in a "bus stuck by flooding".
The vastness of the city also allows you to meet "positive people". A desire to connect seems to emerge, well represented by the new political movement of the "sardines", described by a participant as a context in which people "smile".
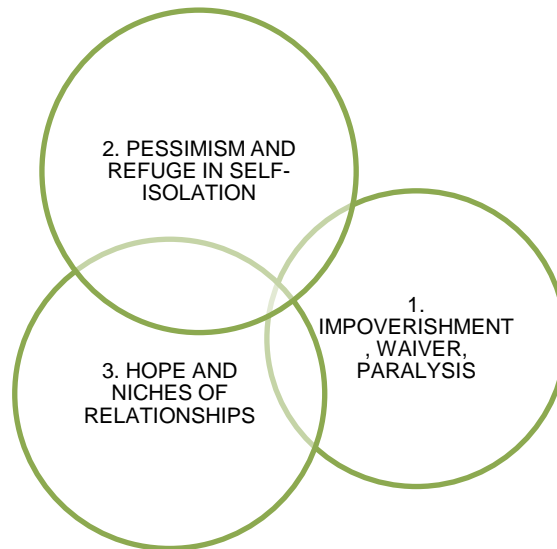For younger members, who recently moved to Rome, the city seems to be the place of optimism, of possibilities, of "self-realization".

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.

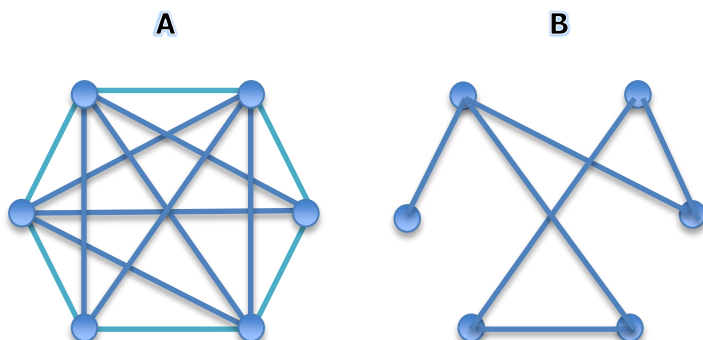The three themes identified are closely interconnected.

Analysis 1: IMPOVERISHEMENT, WAIVER, PARALYSIS

Contrary to other Listening Posts held in Rome in previous years, the issues of personal safety, garbage, maladministration are avoided or only touched upon, as if, as Roman citizens, a sort of resignation to coexist with what does not work prevail. There seems to be a habit of suffering, an acceptance of the "settle for little" that one has to be content with, indeed, a real "race to give the least" both at an institutional, organizational and collective level and at the individual level, adding up to the paralysis at every level.

Hypothesis 1:

We are witnessing a decrease in imaginative capacities and in the mobility of thought caused by the depletion of economic, cultural and cognitive resources and by the absence of perspectives in the present and visions of the future. It follows that citizens, who swing without equilibrium in an emotional state between resignation and anger, are paralyzed within their own vital space, with the result of a contraction both of vision and of action. ~~It also~~ What follows, is a social structure made up of many small groups, like families or other kinds of social groups, almost isolated from each other, in which people are guided by instincts of self-preservation. The multiple connections, typical of social networks, have almost all fallen on deaf ears and with them the infinite possibilities of meeting.

Analysis 2: PESSIMISM AND REFUGE IN INDIVIDUAL SELF-ISOLATION

There is a feeling that after the time of the opposition and the "fuck-you days" organized by the political movement currently at the government in Italy, there has been a betrayal of the leadership, which generated feelings of distrust and resignation. Shared ideologies no longer provide refuge, care and belonging. The growing confusion, combined with the way in which the internet is used, generates a dangerous situation in which lies seem to have increased and spread. The identification of self-entrepreneurship as a substitute for dependent and "safe" work forces the exit from the comfort zone and the betrayal of belonging. In the dilemma between competitiveness and cooperation, the latter seems delegated to the "sardines", a new political movement in Italy, so citizens can entrench on an individual level in a defensive position of self-preservation and isolation.

Hypothesis 2:

We are witnessing (again) a movement of contraction towards an individual dimension, caused by feelings of distrust in the collective dimension, of disappointment towards leadership, of disillusionment towards communicative possibilities. The result is an interruption in the transformative cycle of evolution from the individual to the collective, a reduction in the potential of individual and social becoming.

Analysis 3: HOPE AND NICHES OF RELATIONSHIPS

In the previous LP, beauty niches that offered hope and comfort emerged as if encysted and hidden in the body of the city. In this LP "niches of relationships" emerge, more or less "secret" groups searching for basic ties, new forms of collective identity, and belonging capable of care taking.

Hypothesis 3:

There is a growing need for belonging, caused by the need to counterbalance the movement of contraction towards the individual dimension, in order to give space to an oscillation between inner and outer that balances emotional experiences. What follows is the multifaceted possibility of belonging to groups held together by different adhesives, and by the shared desire for a community, where there is contact, exchange and belonging.

Rome, February 5, 2019   **Patrizia Minniti & Alfredo Veneziale**