"Italy and the World at the Dawn of 2008"

Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

<u>Introduction</u>

In this part of the Listening Post members 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. As usually the invitation was circulated among selected people representing, in some degree, the social stratification of the local context. The majority of participants have already taken part to one or more LPs in previous years; only one member was attending the event for the first time. The group was made up of 10 people (3 men and 7 women). The social composition (this is just one level of members' roles) included: journalists, medical doctors, political member of the city council, accountants, managers of third sector organisations, bank clerks, insurance brokers. Other roles openly stated were: volunteer, mother, father, husband, daughter, son, citizen.

The event started with 20 minutes delay and the document presenting the event turned to be a mixture between last year publicity material an this year one. This was noticed, noted and acknowledged.

Extracts from this part are:

- "in the time that has passed since last year I noticed — at public level — some improvements in the fight against mafia. On the contrary — at private level — the financial life of families has become harder. It more difficult to make ends meet".

- "I had a traumatic experience as volunteer in an African country: I saw an invisible reality that people here in the Western world are unaware of. At the same time I have re-discovered an ethical dimension of my work that is difficult to recognise in my ordinary work here".

- "I envy the serenity of those who come from an experience outside our context. I am not capable of looking with a serene eye at the various poverties I experience in my daily life".

- "The reality is so fuzzy and muddy that it is impossible to orient oneself. We need a more sophisticated critical ability in order to make informed choices".

- "I feel that my ideals have been defeated by history. The actual reality has not met my dreams, and I have worked hard to make that possible. I have difficulties in explaining what is going on to my children. I wonder if a strong leader would be the solution."

- "The challenge that is in front of us — that is the ability to manage the muddy reality we are experiencing — is to maintain the democracy without withdrawing from our responsibility".

- "It is difficult to understand what is right and what is wrong, we have difficulties in communicating to our children which are the values that will help them in their lives."

- "The world is as it is because we made it".

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 five major themes. They are:

1. *Individuals and societies are living beyond their means*
Members talked of several examples (at individual, family and societal levels) in which it is evident that the level of borrowing is very high and it is putting at risk the present and the future. Families, in order to make ends meet, take on loans at very high interest rates. Similarly, although of different sign, humankind is consuming (borrowing) too much from nature and the planet and will leave the debts to the future generations. Naples and its emergency in dealing with the production of rubbish and its disposal (that has been visible all over the world) is the metaphor of our societies that are unable to 'filter', to 'percolate' the production of societal process.

2. *Invisibility in and of some realities*
Members talked of several aspects of their realities that are difficult to see and to make visible. It was expressed a general feeling of darkness that makes very hard distinguishing the features of the reality that members are experiencing. As well as some of the people members share life, context and experience with are invisible if not to them to the rest of society: people and experiences are in a way or another invisible. It is a situation (a sort of night) in which numbness seems to prevail (incidentally, in Italian the equivalent words of 'muddy' and 'numbness' sound very similar). Darkness makes difficult to understand and to choose, who is friend and who is foe?

3. *Experiencing physical and societal death*
Members talked of individual and collective experiences and situations in which life and death are very close. Going away to an African country has exposed those who went to situations where the risk of physical death is very present. Such reality is 'compensated' by the presence of social and relational life. This allows a comparison with the ordinary life members experience in their western context where the strength of physical life (due also to technical and economical development) is weakened by experience of the emotional and relational death. At work this means entering in roles that feel empty because their technical aspects prevail on the social ones. So, paradoxically, some members found themselves going away.

4. _Change is too slow_

Members expressed difficulties in accepting the pace of change, as it seems to unravel itself. It is as if the seriousness of the emergencies and tensions they are facing is not matched by the efforts and the results of those concerned with dealing with them and implementing effective solutions and/or processes. It seems that in this circumstances only those who are not interested (and who will be effected and will loose out from the change) in the change are prospering. As if being a concerned reflective citizen is too hard to bear.

5. _Failure of grand narratives_

Members were struggling with what to make of the aspirations and motivations that had supporting their lives and contributing forming their identities. Reality is giving so many reasons for concern, it is creating so much anxiety and it seems so unmanageable that some members questioned the rightfulness of values and principles that shaped who they are. As if because reality is beyond their control there is no way to control/manage it. The grand narratives were wrong all together and the alternatives, some members made explicit, can only be individual(istic): looking after the closest members of one's family and renounce to any dream of contributing to societal change. Somebody argued that the experience of unsuccessful effort does not mean that the values were wrong but that they are not, on their own, enough in tackling the current situation.

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

Inability in managing the politics of individual identities

Analysis: The grand narratives allowed us to contain the reality (us and the various components of our identity) in one grand framework. Italian society experienced — with great expectations — two great emergencies (the collapse of two historical and institutional 'giants'): the fall of the Berlin's Wall and the collapse of a corrupted internal political system ('Clean Hands'). These events (1989 and 1994) seemed to have liberated a lot of constructive energies and to have started change on a large scale. It seemed that the Italian society was on the brink of changing radically itself. After a cycle of 10 years of 'apparent' big changes Italian society discovers itself as being unable to tackle a simple issue like disposing of domestic waste.

Italian society (and its various components) underwent a process aimed at transforming its identity. In this process a sense of omnipotence replaced the grand narratives: the new identity was there just to be grabbed and would not cost too much. Italian society is waking up to the discovery that that dream has turned in a sour reality. Individuals are reacting to this through two opposite, but complementary, attitudes: tightening the

boundaries of the systems they live in (e.g. family) or letting everything spilling out as if there are no boundaries (e.g. the rubbish in the street).

Hypothesis: Coping with the slow pace of changing one's identity (individual, organisation or societal) means being able to accept that sometimes it looks as if we rather than changing are stuck or are going backwards. Holding on fragments of our identities (or an identity that is made of several parts that sometime sound/look/feel in tension with each other) is a partial and incomplete identity. The ideal (idea/phantasy) of a unitary identity, that it is easy to see, to show, to talk about and to share is over, it seems that individual, groups, organisations and societies are locked in the mourning of the loss of that way to construct identities and have not yet attempted (learned) to manage the building of relations based on 'partial' identities. Being locked in the anxiety of an unfinished bereavement disallow the attempt to risk entering (crossing the boundaries) in relation with others who, sharing our situation, will help us (in a mutual beneficiary exchange) rebuilding new identities.

Failed sense of omnipotence fuels rage, as the passion of many years ago has turned into. Because we cannot act the rage out — being and feeling democratic and civil members of our societies — we retrieve in our individual (lonely) space, complaining that our societies are no longer human and our relations are lacerated and impossible in the urban landscape. We withdraw from engaging with our fellow citizens, and some of us will hope that 'a man of destiny' will take us out of such misery.

All this is telling us how difficult and tiring is to maintain a societal psychological presence in fragmented and lacerated societies. The psychological absence helps individuals in copying with the suffering created by loneliness, sense of generational failure, depression for the future we leave to our children. The noble gesture of volunteering in a poorer country becomes then a case of physical absence in order to regain psychological presence. Rather than tackling the complexity of our society (and acknowledging our limitations and our fragmented identities) we look to a simpler reality where to find ourselves. The poorest countries — in a new form of emotional colonialism — are rich — and will cater for the lack of it in our societies — in simpler ways of creating relationships. Within these societies it is easier for us to get access to a unitary and not threatening identity of ourselves: the difficulties in creating meaningful relations at home are immediately overcome by meeting the very different who leads a simpler life than ours.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

From concerned to reflective citizens

Analysis: It does not come immediately and easily in individuals the acceptance that the reality they are living in can also not change at the pace and with the speed they hope or wish. Acknowledging that change is not always natural (and this is particularly true when it comes to human and societal event) requires reaching an emotional position in which me and not me are acknowledged as legitimate and complementary. That 'me' is helped in defining its identity by 'not me'. However this is a process through which identity is constructed and through which individual(s) express their leadership. It is through learning how much the boundaries can be permeable and how much they can be impermeable that individuals and organisations relate to their environment, and in this process they also learn how to cross the boundaries and create meaningful relations. However if the environment in the mind (the degree of relatedness individuals and organisations have with their environments) is a source of irreconcilably and

unmanageable anxiety the identity is felt under threat and the reaction is flight (withdraw) or fight (rage).

Hypothesis: It seems as if individuals' identities are in the dark and we are in the dark about identities. Being concerned citizens is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being reflective citizens. The difficulty in reaching and holding on a depressive position is also the issue of societal tiredness in holding on societal psychological presence, as if the emotional cost of being a reflective citizen can be too high to bare. The easiest emotional response seems be to accept a fully dependent position and abdicating to individualsí responsibilities. On the contrary the hardest way is to engage oneself in a process for completing the transition from the position of 'concern' to one of 'reflective': that is educating oneself to be (and to remain) a 'mature'/'adult' citizens of our times.

Convener: Antonio Sama