

**"Italy and the World
at the Dawn of 2009"
Report of two Listening Posts
held on 16th, (Italy South) and
8th, January (Italy North)**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

→ **Italy North Report**

**Italy (South) and the World at the Dawn of 2009
Report of a Listening Post held on 16th 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.

Extracts from this part are:

"I have been coming to this event every year, this time for the first time it seems to me that we are experiencing a trend for the worst rather than for the better. I can recognise single episodes taking places in my experience but not a whole process."

"Poverty is growing around us and it seems that nobody is fully aware of it and of its implications. Can the single individual do something? I believe she can, however I do not know how and this is a source of preoccupation for me."

"Social differences are growing and this is particularly true for our societies. The financial crisis seems to be just ours, not all parts of the world have the same experience."

"It is not true we are suffering, we are enjoying our way of living. We are removing and denying our difficulties. I am experiencing a feeling of suffocation."

"I feel we all are tired and wear out. I am waiting for someone to save us but I have no trust in any government. We are facing the abyss because nobody is using the theories."

"I have difficulties in focusing on the present, keep thinking of the past."

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 four major themes. They are:

1. Hopelessness as blindness

Members talked of how difficult it is to see a collective and positive way out of the current crisis. Such feeling of hopelessness is coupled with a feeling of helplessness. It seems as there are no external and/or internal sources capable of restoring a satisfactory degree of hope. Nobody (and nothing inside us) seems capable of restoring hope. Among the evidence for this theme several members have spoken of the impossibility to see both the source of the problems and the way out and forward. Blindness is at the same time turning our head away from the growing and difficult problems of our societies and inability to imagine the future. It represents our inability and impotence to deal with the crisis.

2. Splitting and dissociation

Members made comparison with previous example of end of historical and economic eras (among others the end of the Ottoman Empire and the 1929 financial crisis). Our frames of reference are not useful and helpful. The overall feeling is of being separated (for example our leaders are very distant from us and do not let us 'touching them' with our problems and difficulties). It is present a strong feeling of being trapped in a space where there is lack of breathing, a very claustrophobic experience where transition to a new space seems never ending. The similarity with autistic situation was hinted.

3. Financial bankruptcy as emotional bankruptcy

The impossibility to address the situation seems to feed us back an ideas of our democratic systems as 'tired and overburdened' where we hear statements (or, sometimes, rambling speech) from professionals who seem to have the right answer but not a good one. We are hearing too much rational talking on the current situation; however the financial crack seems to mirror a sort of emotional crack that is visible at individual, family, community, organisational and societal levels. Such emotional bankruptcy can be traced in the failures of the family, the difficulties in educating new generations, the conflicts among parents and children and the lack of solidarity.

4. Change and hope as result of local and small innovation

Members expressed the persistency of a passive position not just in the great scale of life but in the daily life. The change of big societal processes is too slow and it seems that many are excluded from the decision-making places and processes. There is fear for the future and what will bring. However there is something that as individual and small collective it is possible to do: exploring new ways of living together. This can be seen as a plea for processes of 'societal building' based on the creation of small societal experiments. There is the need to rebuild the societal fabric; however this is not possible unless members take up a more active role in their lives, and this is the most painful change. It implies take stock of members' lives and re-assess priorities and change accordingly.

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

Impotence

Analysis: Among members of society there are overwhelming experiences and feelings of processes, circumstances and situations that are far beyond the reach of ordinary life. Nobody and nothing seem capable of influencing, let alone controlling and managing, the events we – as members of society – are experiencing and their speed and pace. No societal institution seems capable of holding members' inability in fully understanding and acting on such events. The wish to belong ('to have a family') to some sort of collective agency and/or body (that is the satisfaction of a dependency need) is constantly unmet and leads to individual and collective frustrations. The evidence is the trend to look for a place where to retreat in before any further development could reach and affect us. As a member put it, "People seem to be seated on a sofa waiting for somebody who will pick them up (and take them out of their misery)." Another noted that "It is as if a veil is covering our eyes (and our ability to understand) and we, on our own, seem incapable of ripping it and looking to our world in a different way." And another "Our experience seems to be like being inside an egg, trying to tip it in one way or another, but the egg tilts-up and fails to break."

Hypothesis: The expression of an individual and collective impotence seems to touch the possibility itself of mobilising essential and basic vital energy. As if society is incapable of performing creative acts, it is the impossibility of giving birth to a new reality and/or way of thinking whereas impotence is another word for infertility. Thus members of society try to avoid having a complete 'join' with what is happening. They look for experiences that have meaning for the individuals concerned, or try to stop any experience before it reaches a painful (or pleasurable) stage. It is like sitting on a sofa in a lounge and watching TV rather than going out and looking around. The fear seems to be expressed as 'Would I be alone if I go out or is there somebody who will share a walk?' Impotence is then the expression of the incapacity of thinking and generating the new (new ideas, new institutions, new selves and, basically, a new era). As if the difficulties of a new birth are the difficulties of giving birth to the new.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

The risk of change as the risk of learning

Analysis: The 'credit crunch' is one outcome in a society where there was no awareness of the different types of risks and their implications. Paradoxically a society split between taking no risk and try to foresee everything (e.g. long and complex contracts) and taking unsafe risk and living with no certainties (e.g. the rising of 'gambling' to the status of a noble and acceptable activity). As one member put it "The virtual society is the result of the rupture of a good enough relation between 'me' and 'us'." The lack of awareness of risk has become part of our routines blocking our ability to understand where the boundaries are located. If society is boundaryless then the possibility to learn and change is compromised. Thus we are discovering that the societal institutions that used to help us making sense of our reality are empty boxes where only the façade is left to remind us of how was the time that is no longer.

Hypothesis: The anguish some members of society express about societal institutions that are no longer functioning is the evidence of how deep is the weakness of these institutions. This weakness is also the evidence that a societal institution is no longer good enough for holding the complexity of our societies. A new way of thinking, a new frame of reference, a new set of institutions is required and these cannot be generated magically without any change process in the societal members. New ways of being members of society are required; it seems that the first step is taking the risk of learning to take back the responsibility that members of society had put into societal institutions. It is the individual member of society (the reflective citizen, perhaps) who has to keep in his/her mind the strength of the societal bond that was used to be fully externalised into the societal institutions. New responsible societal institutions can be created, can be born, if members of society are prepared to take up the risk of changing through learning and learning through change. Responsible citizens and reflective citizens here are two sides of the same coin.

Convener: Antonio Sama

→ [Italy South Report](#)

**Italy (North) and the World at the Dawn of 2009
Report of a Listening Post held on 8th 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.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In the second part of the session, the group was divided into 4 sub-groups who each produced their own synthesis of the experiences shared in Part 1. From these the Convenor proposed to identify 2 broader themes: two 'clots' of ideas (the group liked the word and its association with blood, evoking a feeling of a displeasing 'disgusting' material, making it particularly effective for the subject matter).

1. The Crisis as Ruin, the Crisis as Re-birth

This theme emerged from the very opening comments of the first phase and the group returned to it throughout the session. Although there was much to be gloomy about, the crisis was also seen as an opportunity for hope.

The perceived gravity of the social and economic crisis in Italy cast a malicious and immovable spectre over the discussion. While this spectre pervaded the various socio-cultural-economic roles each participant fulfilled, as well as their roles as citizens, it nevertheless produced strong anti-depressive reactions: declared intentions for hope/trust (reminiscent of Kennedy – Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country) that stimulated an awareness of the possibility for positive

development in the future. Participants seemed to want to minimize the gravity of social problems, preferring to underline positive elements that could be obscured by too negative a representation of the phenomena.

The financial crisis was seen as catalyzing a series of phenomena that characterize globalization: turbulent internationalization of culture, a rapid transformation of everyday life, widespread difficulties of organization, decrease in the quality of work, an increase in litigation, and, the fear of foreigners living in Italy as a consequence of their continual and visible presence around us.

Within the larger, global crisis, the group alluded to certain national factors that make the Italian situation particularly 'grim' without ever explicitly defining what these factors are. However, while the crisis creates conditions that 'bring out the worst' in each of us, it *could* also provide an opportunity to 'rediscover certain fundamentals' within our society as a whole.

2. Reduction in the capital of trust

The group perceived a lack of necessary preconditions for effective leadership within Italy. There was confusion as to what 'legitimate citizens' expectations' vis-à-vis those in power. The group saw those in power as being paralysed by a dilemma of government: should those who govern listen or direct?; should they limit themselves to describing phenomenon or offer active solutions in response to it?

The group recognised a lack of moral political reference points embodied by elites of the past and the ideologies they represented. This phenomenon has been increasing ever more rapidly in recent years, with serious consequences: citizens now find themselves in a void, no longer able to identify with the leaders that claim to represent them.

Participants ironically lamented Italians' inability to reach stable agreements. This manifests itself in two ways. Firstly, politicians, while ostensibly agitated and active, ultimately prove immobile: the group liked the Mayor of Napoli's metaphor – "le tarantelle politiche." [1] Secondly, and to some extent in contrast to the first, politicians are too willing to fragment over issues, defending small and narrow interests. The group adopted Lenin's maxim of 'extremism as the infantile illness of communism' and rephrased it – 'fractionism as the infantile illness of Italian democracy.'

An unscrupulous and manipulating media has caused a number of problems within society: a collective sense of displacement and unfamiliarity, a difficulty to think clearly and consequently a prevalent lack of new ideas in society. Although some participants were quick to point out that it was 'too easy to blame Berlusconi,' there was nevertheless unanimous suspicion between media representations of the world and reality ('Can I trust Scaiola, Interior Minister, who tells me there is enough gas to last the winter?') Not only is the level of information we receive too high, the information is also unreliable ("If I weren't a journalist, I wouldn't read the papers. Knowing who owns the paper is enough to know where you stand.") The group mused over who was better off: were our parents' generation, with less information, happier? Or are we fortunate to know as much as we do?

The group referred to Berlusconi throughout the discussions. In as much as he was disparaged as the Great Corruptor, ironically he was also defended as a cute interpreter of the national mood: "I understand" said one participant "that he is truly my leader because he embodies all those things I hate in myself; my conservatism, my fear of others and even, my fear of getting old."

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

The Crisis: Ruin or Re-birth?

Analysis: The group quickly formed hypotheses based on opinions expressed previously. The group observed that the more positive and less nostalgic opinions came from the younger members within the group. These younger members (who joked that this still meant well over 30 years old) declared that because they felt unburdened by expectations from the past, they would never harbour the illusionary hope of previous generations, belying a feeling of liberation and/or regeneration. No sooner had the group began to form this hypothesis, than they turned it on its head: the current social situation doesn't transform itself positively because the younger generation does *not* rebel, does *not* propose ideas and does *not* act. Instead they passively adapt to the situation created by the crisis without conceiving of an original and/or courageous plan of action.

Hypothesis: The group tried to create one hypothesis that took into consideration both generations' ability to look at the crisis positively and yet be essentially passive in their response to it.

Despite the desire to look at the Crisis with hope, society is experiencing a paralysis that stems from the different generations not fulfilling their respective roles. The older generation don't defend tradition and the young don't try to subvert it. In fact, the roles have been reversed. The older generation fulfil the role of their younger counterpart, either praising, admiring, or imitating them. Conversely, the young assume an attitude of benevolence and insincerity, patronising their elders and criticising the inherited hopes and illusions from which they (the elder generation) will never be free. This makes for an insufficient dynamic between the generations and creates a paralysis in society in a time where what we need is positive action.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

The reduction in the capital of trust

Analysis: The discussion of the 1st theme dragged into the 2nd. The reduction of trust within society is a direct result of the ideologies of the past having been 'deconstructed by cultural changes.' This deconstruction has come from a series of failures within society on the one hand, and technological innovation on the other. This deconstruction has significantly reduced the possibility of talking about the future in terms of 'progress.'

In the analysis phase the group's discussions resembled what the clinical world would call 'enactment:' a dynamic within the group that mirrors the same problem the group is experiencing or trying to overcome. The 2 groups – the nostalgic pessimists and the trusting optimists exchanged lively critiques. The former accused the latter of living in a dream world of computers and virtual/false perceptions, which the former saw as positive. The optimists claimed to feel free of the normative ideals of how things ought to be that impede the pessimists of looking at the present positively. Although the group had claimed a lack of intergenerational struggle within society in reference to the crisis, this struggle was suddenly very much alive.

Hypothesis: The group saw important similarities between situations observed in and of the group, and clinical situations where mourning is not given due importance or is left unexpressed. Italy has yet to mourn the illusions/megalomania's of the past: Italy as the original 'political laboratory' that constructs the 3rd way between socialism and capitalism, Italy as the '3rd or 4th most powerful industrial economy in the world.' This lack of mourning has lead to something akin to a melancholic syndrome within Italy. The group coalesced around the expression 'umore patibolare' (a gallows-like mood) to describe mood disorders in which depression and a maniacal response to that depression live side by side: a lack of trust and depressive expectation on the one hand and, an excessive and unjustified euphoria on the other.

Convener: Giovanni Foresti

[1] The tarantella is a dance from Naples characterised by agitated immobility.