

AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

Italy (Milan) and the World at the Dawn of 2015 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

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 Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:

1. Ego-centre, depressive attitude, mourning.

Discussion begins with members expressing distrust and detachment towards the external world, from which they are willing to take distance. Feelings of uncertainty, lack of serenity, fear, "internal contraction", heaviness, emerge. The outer world is like an old movie, mechanically showing the same old clichés, in a situation that seems to be lasting since forever. Members experience a sense of impotence face to a magmatic reality which is very difficult to grasp, full of negative elements, unchangeable. Any sense of hope is weakened, almost dead, and this sentiment seems to be a general existential condition, specially for the members of the group in their 40 and 50, males and females. Some participants underline the "dull looks" of the people they casually cross in the streets, which communicate a sense of loss of any possible future. Participants in their 40 appear to suffering more that others for the sense of loneliness and the impasse they experience in their life, expressing a sentiment of "generational failure"; hence, the internal necessity to take the distance from the external reality, looking into themselves to try to find the courage to face the outer world. Centering on ones Ego is therefore a possibility to recover an internal focus, which may help to reconstruct minimal existential priorities. Participants express the need to get more involved with the small everyday things, in the family, at work, in the relationship with their

children, taking care of themselves through their own emotions while waiting for “something to happen”. An internal work that takes the forms of “mourning” for the loss of the idea of a possible future, which is not however experienced as a defence against the outer reality, but as a resource, a possibility for internal reconstruction.

“I feel insecure at work, for my sons’ future... my wishful thinking would be a decent work for the new generations that need a future... I’m thinking at all the young people I meet in the streets, who have dull looks because they can’t figure out their future, which makes me very sad...”

“I feel a profound sentiment which I believe is not only mine, I can see it reflected in other people... is an idea of an internal contraction because of this difficult time, is an idea of uncertainty which is around me and also inside me... I can feel it in the city, in the streets, in relationships, through the movements and gestures of the people around me... at work you have to be more concerned about costs and delivery schedules... I have a daughter and a son, and I feel that my relation with them is more stressed than in the past, I wish I could be more serene, more open minded, more relaxed in my family, at work, in the everyday life...”

“My general feeling is expectation for “something to happen”, for things to go better, I’m waiting for a change that never happens... I would like a big change, a revolution, I would like to have opportunities instead of fear and anxieties...”

2. Minimal surviving strategies

A depressive position towards the crisis engenders a first “reflective”, non confrontational attitude, centred on ones Ego and ones specific internal needs and priorities. The second step is an attempt to answer through what we could define as “minimal survival strategies”. The longing for community and for experiences of sharing (often grounded in the past, as in example the scouts when children), can lead to new social practices that start from the bottom (car sharing, group of buyers) and connect different world of experience, working on the thresholds, those “middle lands” that also are border areas. A new personal internal attitude towards the world, “kindness”, could be a possible answer, as well as self-indulgence, failure as a possibility for new learning, “creative listening”. Yoga is seen by members as a technique that helps to find a new balance. Some of them mention the necessity to find a balance between “loving and doing”, which is experienced through the difficulty to put into practice what they think and say. This is on one side a source of discomfort for being inadequate, but on the other side is also an opportunity to ask themselves about what we “can do” and what we “want to do”. The

problem of personal responsibility is questioned by asking themselves "what kind of reflective citizen do I want to be?" Gaining awareness means not only looking into themselves, but also coming back to a micro-dimension, to the small facts of the everyday life where one can be an active protagonist instead of only stigmatizing other's failures. The macro-dimension is confusing, redundant, doesn't help to light sparks of creativity.

Some members express however also a sort of anger towards the present, and their life strategy takes the form of a defence; they experience a generic undifferentiated anger, an endless complaining which is not related to anything specific. References to the past are memories of a glorious time...

"I have been to the scouts for many years, I really care about sharing, I think that the will of people to do things together is a very positive sign, I like experiences that come from the bottom. I have two small children and I can see only joy in them now, I want to give them something positive from the world, I want them to open up to the world..."

"I believe that we could take an "attitude of kindness" towards ourselves and the others, grant ourselves with errors... those small steps I believe are very important, sharing passions, giving something to the others."

"I struggle to understand what happens in me, I struggle to put into practice what I say, sometimes I ask myself Mara, why is it so difficult for you doing what you say? I have to turn the light into myself, I can not escape from this.... What kind of person do I want to be? What kind of reflective citizen?... A new awareness in the everyday life, that's the most difficult thing to find..."

"I believe that taking care of myself through small things is very important, at work and in life. I practice yoga, it helps to understand where I'm going, even if I fail, that could be an occasion for new discoveries... there is a lot of energy around, people want to share, is a drive for life..."

"I didn't say anything until now because I want to listen what other people think, I like it... though it happens more and more often to listening to people that are furious about their life, therefore they don't think anymore... a few people want really to listening to others, adults keep saying to me that at their time everything was better, but they don't want really to listen to me, to us..."

3. Denial of the present

Some of the members express strong feelings against the present,

which seems to be “stuck”, inhibiting any possibility of action. The Italian situation, in particular, is judged as extremely negative in comparison to the abroad. The examples given, however, appear extremely polarised: on the one side generic references to the on going situation which don't help a real understanding of the social context (the increasing of the unemployment in the labour market, the financial politic of the banks, the Italian bureaucratic system...); on the other side personal references of ones frustrating experiences at work and in the family. Members express concern about ethic, anger for the systems diffused corruption, which is menacing and “contagious” even if you don't agree with those principles.

At the same time they express a strong denial of the present, specially in connection to an excess of information which is difficult to process. The macro dimension of the external world is perceived as menacing, as a threat that provokes internal splitting with a polarization on the extremes that leads to paradoxical statements (“I believe in revolution, but let's see if they allow us to do it...”). We are all “bombed” by communication, we can protect ourselves from anger and frustration only by “switching off” the connection, in a denial of the external reality (“I feel better when I switch the TV off”). However, rage takes the form of a frustrating generalized sense of powerlessness, which is incapable of transforming in new forms of political consciousness and representation, new forms of processing information to find out new strategies for collective action. Members express worries about themselves and their sons, specially teenagers, and they fear to lose all they have got until now.

“I can feel in the air immorality, greediness, little enhancement of the being...”

“I believe that we are great as individuals, but we are not sustained by the system. If you think for example to crowdsourcing, which is a phenomenon increasing all over the world, specially in the UK, the Italian law forbids to invest more than 500€, unless you have got an authorization form the banks.... I'm disgusted for this lack of honesty.”

“Someone said he doesn't read newspapers, someone that she feels alone, we are intoxicated, bombed with too many information, submerged by market analysis... I have a dear friend that is keen of bio food, she is an expert on bio, once she told me so many bad things about how bio food is processed that she got to ruin my dinner, I didn't want to eat anything anymore....”

“I agree, we are bombed, I feel really angry, when I switch off TV I feel better... I don't buy newspapers and I feel better, they only talk about negativity... abroad is different, but here in Italy we are submerged by negativity that inhibit thinking.”

“There is always more distance between people and facts, I believe. People are furious, but they don't connect their anger to some specific facts, they express only general anger, which makes me worry. Some years ago there was consciousness about what you could achieve at work, today you don't know what to do, what is good and what is bad, people are confused, there's a lack of political representation....”

“This is exactly the problem, anger that ends up in sterile complaining, we're doing nothing effective to change... I tried to do something at work when I experienced injustice, but nobody sustained me... I tried to rebel because I couldn't bear my situation at work any more, but I was punished because I had said too much...”

“I wish we could have the same courage than 30 years ago....”

4. Paradigm shift, the end of an era.

The different ways members have to connect with present, past and future testimony the profound fragmentation of visions among the group, underlining the splitting around some specific polarisations (young people/old people, founding fathers/rebel sons). The generational conflict is mainly expressed by a different way to live in the present. The youngsters, under 30, show an energy, a will of doing, a motivation, they don't feel like powerless nor crushed by fear like adults, they tend to look at the future with hope and optimism. The older express nostalgia, reflecting on their own life story which is often idealized (I'm using here the word “old” instead of the more neutral “senior” because it has been actually used by members in the discussion in a confrontational way). If sometimes they share some common life strategies (social experiences of sharing, like car sharing and co-housing, seem to be intergenerational practices quite popular among the members), the personal attitude they apply to confront with reality is really different. However, the optimistic vision the youngsters express is not able to turn into a real forms of action in the present, fading away in verbal expressions like a “will to power” which edge are rather vague and sometimes contradictory. All the members feel the unconscious need for a radical change of paradigm, that should represent a complete fracture with the past. However this fracture ends up to be in practice only a confrontational challenge towards the old generations (the founding fathers, the baby boomers) that failed in their project to give life to a better world (“We are crushed by the '68 legacy...”). What is missing, however, is the capacity to foresee an earnest collective “social project”. What is missing is the attitude to express, even if only in words, a “collective US”. The optimistic vision of some of the members is expressed only through generic statements about the capacity of the young generations to act differently, specially through technology, satisfying their needs

through social practices based on sharing: car sharing, co-housing, are seen like alternative “revolutionary” social practices. However, the common feeling is, all in all, that revolution should be a totally different thing, that this is not enough to make a shift of paradigm, that we all are still “wearing an old dress”, bearing the burden of the old and the new together.

“Listening is fine, but quite often you have to endure something you don’t like... we act like “ostriches”, we put our head into the sand, don’t we?... ”

“The problem for me is how to bring small experiences into the big system...”

“I feel a big need of change, but we are paralyzed by fear, we keep on saying that nothing works but we don’t do anything... my question is, what could we do?...”

“I’m not afraid, I really want to do something... I know a lot of young people who are working on start ups, they actually do a lot of positive things... but I have also friends that have a lot of difficulties, working with precarious contracts... I’m positive, I don’t feel anxious nor scared about my future, though about the national situation what I see is an incapacity to give value to our points of strength... what we lack is the capacity to take on responsibilities, what I see around is the lack of willpower and this is bad for keeping up the motivation ... we need uprightness on taking decisions, that would help us on “waking up”... but all in all, I see today a lot of drive to do things on new generations, this is very positive...”

“What I see is a lot of confrontational forces on a social level, which reminds me that the failure we were talking about could be the result of all those distances. I’m 40 and I think that my generation is so lonely, we never co-operated, I can see that now young people are so different. We have always been acting as individuals, never had enough strength for a collective struggle. Is an historical failure, from the ’68 legacy.... Today young people act differently, they share projects and ideas, all this is so good, something new which emerge from many expectations...”

“I feel deeply concerned by the crisis as a young, or to better say as an “old young”... I feel like I’m wearing an old dress... I was telling this to an old man yesterday, when he said that we are the first generation of “not baby boomers”, and I replied why should I care to buy a house? I can share an apartment, a car, if I’m paid 1000€ per month, well, I’d make a vegetable garden... buying stuffs is not my model, is yours... is an old schema of the founding fathers that did the ’68, they think they know how to do things, how to be represented, and they say to us that

we are not able to do anything because we don't know how to organize a mass movement... but we know how to build up our own spaces... The new and the old paradigm, there is a clash..."

"This too is an old schema that doesn't help, seeing the world parted between old and young people doesn't help... I'm 60, I was too young on 68 but I grew up in the 70s that were full of false myths and stereotypes, a one-way thinking that made all banal. I had the same problems of yours though, I struggled to find a job, never thought to buy a house, to get married, but I have a son..."

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members 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 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. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following two interrelated hypotheses:

1. SPLITTING, SEARCH FOR AN AUTHENTIC REFLECTIVE CAPACITY

Analysis

All along the session few references are made to specific facts, as if what is happening in the social context, which is usually the starting point of the discussion, was purposively denied. A small reference to what "happened in Paris", the terrorism, is mentioned only at the end of the third part of the session. The present seems to be too harsh and too difficult to be contained, and despite some requests of the convenor the members struggle to stick to the emotions. A member brings in some examples of how much the world has changed – professions that suddenly disappear from the working market, personal situations that are very difficult to manage, like a 90 y.o. mother to take care of -, all situations that are very different from the past, the feeling is that we don't have instruments that could help us to manage those changes. The metaphor is "like crossing a river without knowing how to swim". Members seek refuge in a "quieter past" through nostalgia, trying to protect from the fear to lose what they have got already in the present, even if the present doesn't seem to be satisfying. However, nostalgia can not be an alibi, nor an excuse, there is an awareness that times are changing and that the risk is the parents' dream become a cage for the sons, who are trapped into a "dreaming of their parents' dreams".

Hypotheses

There are, however, plenty of stimuli for the search of an authentic self-reflective capacity, which could help to avoid the easy ready-made solutions, hence becoming a true internal quest potentially able to produce a new quality of thinking, to get out from "paranoia" and to open up to a new way of being. Some questions are frequently asked all along the session: what do I want to be? What can I do? Internal resources seems suspended in an "expectation for something that has to be born" (defined by someone as the "internal puer"); carefully avoiding, however, the engendering of "messianic expectations" for someone (a leader, a Messiah...) who provides an easy solution. No leaders therefore, no Messiahs, are requested at this stage. However, members find extremely difficult to confront with the domain of the project, which is carefully avoided and constantly put aside.

"I feel nostalgia of the past, I live badly in the present, I can't see myself in the future... I have anything I could wish for to make the present happy, but I can't enjoy it."

"We are living a splitting, a fracture between the present and the past, we should think that failures open up new possibilities for change..."

"The present is unbearable, is the terrorism in Paris... we should hold our fears to be able to go forward, our fears should become our allies... taking refuge into nostalgia is trying to escape from this task..."

"We are putting out alibis, talking about terrorism, of course we are scared but we should also recognise that we are privileged compared to those countries that confront with terrorism everyday... this is an excuse for not living in the present"

"We tend to forget all we have, I know that I have many fantastic things in my life and I should be grateful for that all..."

"I feel today a profound distance between what I have to do and what I would like to do, my responsibility towards my family and my work, I feel like I'm split apart... the most important question is what I want to be? I have to stay in the present and find some clarity to understand where to go... change is good, but when you live it is like to be in a whirlpool..."

"We have to face the fact that we can't do that much alone... we should open up to the influence of others, we should meet the new generations that don't have a past... I feel sometimes that we are trying to make the young to dream our dreams, we are stuck in our "heroic" past, instead of taking advantage of the enthusiasm of the youngsters."

2. FRAGMENTED VISIONS, A COLLECTIVE WHICH IS DIFFICULT TO GRASP: ME-NESS

Analysis

Fragmented visions, distance from the external world, splitting between the individual and the collective dimensions, difficulty on mediating, engender a block on reading/bearing complexity on a systemic level. Could the activation of internal resources to look into oneself degenerate into the tendency to see only your belly-bottom? Into the incapacity to create bridges with the external? All the evil is put outside, interiority is for the members a constant escape, a way of thinking to exert extremely analytical refined judgemental capacities, which are not however useful in the present, as they lead them to become a silent audience. Members experience a palpable difficulty on recognizing in a "collective US".

Hypothesis

The collective is either demonized as the source of any uneasiness, or idealized as positive energy; however the members lack of the capacity of recognizing themselves in a collective us, identify in a common project. To stand in the present, bearing all the painful emotions it provokes, seems to be a much difficult task for the members, that feel lost in their individual visions. They tend therefore to split, acting out either leaping back – the nostalgia of the past – or leaping forward – the positive energy the idea of the future inspires -. The incapacity to stay in the present leads to a strategy of constant avoiding, through the splitting between young and old people expressed sometimes with squabbles. The tendency to avoid easy ready-made solutions, to investigate in depth, turns therefore into the impossibility to find a common projects, turns into impotency. The very same idea of responsibility becomes, eventually, a block for the achievement of a new personal awareness.

"Is difficult for us to live in the present... we're used to live thinking about the past or worrying about the future, we're afraid of our failures in the past..."

"How can you get out of those dichotomies? Reflecting about the past maybe, working on thresholds that could help to build up some hope..."

"We are very analytical, judgemental, which means taking distance from the facts, not living in the present. We have strong capacities of analysing the situations, but like a distant audience, we analyze but we don't live...we feel lonely and we are not able to see the macro-dimension around us..."

“I would like to question our past, it was not a land of plenty, there are always been problems ... we have to face lot of questions today, about the meaning of what we are doing, we apparently know a lot but we are destroying our environment, everything is damaged, even the milk that the children get from their mothers... we are well-off, but is this the point?”

“What will we entail to our children? In what kind of society will they live in the future? We should face our responsibilities, ask ourselves what could we do... ”

“Responsibility is an important issue, but sometimes this awareness is like a block, a stop to the action... I mean, today if you want to buy something in a responsible way you have to be a living encyclopaedia, you are blocked in the present and that makes you responsible for the future.... Nothing is only right or wrong, everything is complex, and I'm asked to be responsible for it...”

Convenor: Elisabetta Pasini