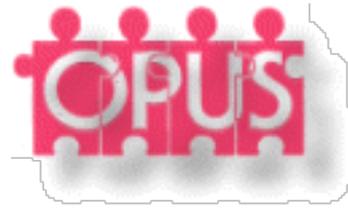**AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)**

**Italy (Milan No 2) 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.

The discussion went on according to the established schedule. The emotional atmosphere was influenced by the terrorist attack to Charlie Hebdo which had happened in Paris the day before the LP. The beginning of the process was stiff and somewhat embarrassed and it became more fluent and talkative only after roughly 20 minutes. The first interventions expressed emotions connected with the shock prompted by the murders caused by overt terrorism, but also the uncertainty and puzzlement connected with the hidden violence implied in the anonymous, influential powers of the financial markets/agencies. Reacting to the mass reaction to the Paris facts (reaction which was just beginning in those hours), the group struggled for gaining/maintaining a more detached and reflective position ("Je ne suis pas Charlie" – said a participant, and many others agreed and followed her chain of thoughts).

The new Pope, Francesco, and the Italian Premier, Matteo Renzi, were evoked as possible sources of positive values and positive messages. Message, communication and marketing became the object of a passionate discussion about the collective processes of (lack of) thinking. Emergent organizers of the exchange were criticism about the dependence from the media-promoted Leaders (the "ipse dixit" phenomenon) and the effects of the misguiding simplifications prematurely established after insufficient analysis.

## 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:

During the second step, the group worked in two subgroups and produced two rich series of items. Two clusters of themes were recognized.

**THEME 1: insufficient processing information (news bulimia), processes of analysis and synthesis, difficult decisions and fear of change**

Thinking about the cultural and economic stagnation, the fear of the future and the social changes which are now occurring (and are so difficult to read and to make sense of), the group focuses on the over-simplification and vulgarization produced by the media. The dependence from the Big Leaders and the hope of change that they express, is based on the promise of "rottamazione" (scraping: transform into scraps, wrecks) of the old "caste" (same word in English: castes, plural). But then? What after?

**THEME 2: stagnation and crisis; IPSE DIXIT and (excessive?) personalization**

In the last decades, the traditional socio-cultural agencies (such as churches, trade unions, political parties etc.) have been methodically discredited and symbolically destroyed. The new social channels – the so called 'social' – open the users to unprecedented personal opportunities. The narrowing/tightening of personal relationships that they promote, though, it is – often – nothing but misleading simplification and virtual/fake pseudo-reality.

**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:

**Analysis theme 1**

In part 3 of the LP, the group discusses the importance of the marketing techniques. If one wants to understand the current cultural trends, this is a necessary cultural component that has to be considered. The group evokes movies such as Big Eyes where the value of the object is

surpassed and overwhelmed by the effects of its commercial promotion. The commercialization has in fact become much more important than the production.

We don't change because we are not yet cognizant of the irreversible nature of the present crisis. In the end, we still are well enough and we don't feel ourselves emotionally 'compelled' to look for new solutions. We seem to think that change is acceptable only if it brings about – for us – positive, cumulative, obvious, material benefits. A childish idea of what the word 'progress' meant and means.

**Hypothesis**

The culture of consumerism and the techniques of marketing have promoted [or better, without presuming a causal relationship, are related to – constant conjunction to be further explored] a collective naiveté, a childish and Pollyanna-like perspective on the processes of change.

They are (not enough) thought about as if the social change were an intrinsically/fully and thoroughly positive phenomenon. The dimension of risk disappears as the inevitable conceptual and existential partner of true transformations. In this emotional horizon, the fear of losses greatly exceeds the charme of change. Change is felt as acceptable only if it adds new goods, new commodities, new merchandises: new objects to be concretely grasped.

**Analysis theme 2**

New technologies such as the web and the social networks seem to mesmerize the group thinking. Some participants are convinced of their positive function while others underline their negative side effects. The discussion tends to stagnate on the eternal debate about apocalyptic attitudes and integrated, complacent attitudes.

The difficulties in dealing with the crisis, and our persistent stagnation, are related to the indigestion of information – someone observes. All of a sudden the group finds its way again. Flexibility and innovations have changed our anthropological environment. We belong to circles of virtually existing human communities, created by mechanical informatics procedures. Traditional social and cultural containers have been harshly criticized and left deserted. This change – a real fracture/breaking of the tradition – has rendered more and more difficult the processes of becoming subject and having/develping hopes. Instead of being somewhere producers and elsewhere consumers, we live in the confused realm of the prosumers: more consumers than producers. Personalization is perhaps a way of pursuing the search for possible, plausible human answers in a world

perceived as post-human and technically driven.

**Hypothesis**

Faced with the complexity of social phenomena difficult to
understand, we are desperately looking for persons – faces – who
could help us in figuring out a personal meaning. The personalization of
the queries is, maybe, an unconscious answer to the disappearance of
true visible/recognizable/plausible protagonists. The old IPSE DIXIT is
perhaps a reaction to the overwhelming power of anonymous media
technologies: the continual flow of new news which is flooding and
paralyzing our minds.

**Convenor:  Giovanni Foresti**