AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

**Italy (North) and the World at the Dawn of 2016
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 are invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles. This part is concerned with what might be called 'the stuff of people's everyday lives' that relates to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants. Participants are invited to share their preoccupations and experiences as citizens of Australia, and to explore these from their various social roles, be these in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities.

Everybody's attention is on dealing with the immigrants, on the enormous changes and the cultural exchange that is involved. There is widespread worry that although not emerging in intense forms of anxiety dominates everybody's thoughts not leaving space for other subjects (for example, very little attention is given to worries about the youngest generation of their sons difficulties regarding work.)

The discussion appears to be conditioned by a mood of confusion and disorientation: there are no decisive summing up or overall views or attempts to give a rational course to events. What is very strong is that the phenomena which are taking place are invoked at an emotional level with images and metaphors which are interesting symbolically.

People don't know what to think. There are no clear and definite certainties, everyone has their own view. However, strong contrasts and conflicts do not emerge in the group.

Part 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

Bewilderment, worry and confusion

The episodes which touch people most closely are those regarding private life bringing forth an imaginary world that is silently threatening, disorientating, at times de-humanizing, ambivalent and ambiguous,

complex: empty squares, wolves, figures that are half-men-half machines, women's screams, glasses through which to view this increased reality, the two faced Janus.

Last night I went out to supper with one of my 14 year old nieces (...) in a restaurant, in Piazza Duomo, that is a school for chefs run by a celebrated chef, in the Gallery, a wonderful place. We did the bit of ladies who know how to eat well with money to spend. When I came out piazza Duomo was empty, with just the police and us two getting a taxi. There had been the events in Istanbul, I was there a month ago...The emotion was strong, this girl and I in piazza Duomo in a dangerous situation, an implied risk.....

Yesterday evening I went a concert at the Conservatory of Music and on coming out I crossed the city centre and I thought there were few people around, it was a strange episode. Behind the Duomo I heard a girl shouting.....

For a long time I've been living in the country, I work with the mountain walkers association looking after paths. This morning beside the path there was a wild animal which was sick. I couldn't photograph it, my phone was switched off. It opened and closed its eyes when it saw me. I had my dog with me, the best thing was to go away and leave it in peace. This image of a fox struck me....

The events in Paris and Istanbul are mentioned, the memory of the terrorist attacks is close (the session took place the day after the attack in Turkey). For the first time perhaps we feel struck at close hand in the safety of our worlds. Fears and feelings of death coexist and urge us to take sides (on the European side), along with the desire to understand what's on the other side, that of the Arabic culture and of the immigrants who are living here with us. With the awareness of how difficult it is, at bottom, to know what the so-called 'other side' is feeling.

These facts of these last few years, Istanbul, Paris, have really touched me for the first time...

As a Sicilian I approach the Arab world with great curiosity and sense of nearness and even if I'm worried I'm attentive to this other side. It's easy to approach things from a European point of view and it's easy to feel the fear in the air....

A friend moved to Istanbul recently. He's married to a Polish girl.... they moved from Turin six months after the baby's birth, he's a father. His friends were discussing this, they couldn't understand why a person should decide to go to Istanbul now with this sense of threat there. This boy commenting on the situation a few days before the explosion said "No, everything's quiet here, when are

you coming to visit us? There's no danger." It made me think about denial mechanisms, what one tells oneself, how difficult it is to keep a distance but also how difficult it is to understand situations that one finds oneself having to face. Perhaps fear is the dominant sensation here in this moment...

I'm a retired primary school teacher. Having some free time now, for some years I've been working as a volunteer teaching basic language skills to young foreigners. This morning I began a course in a cooperative venture. Every three months a course ends and another begins. This morning I had 21 people in class aged 18-20-25 except for two or three over 40, all of them refugees. They're illiterate African Muslims and I'm amazed after all that's happened how gentle these young people are. I ask myself how far this gentleness is real, what's going on inside them.

At the same time we criticise ourselves for a certain hypocrisy, a lack of empathy, indifference, the difficulty we have to feel touched in the same way by episodes of war and deaths when it's others who die and in countries outside Europe.

We forget about the rest of the world, in Libya seventy soldiers are dead, there are 40 dead in Baghdad, these flow over us like water...

Modern life seems unprotected and fragile, we are unable to imagine different perspectives and we feel powerless and inadequate to give a response to all the challenges posed by mass immigration and terrorist threats.

The immigrants who arrive here have the whole day free and nobody helps them go anywhere. The reception centres make a profit and don't direct them anywhere except out of Italy.

What strikes me is these young people (the immigrants), so full of energy, fine looking, strong (for these reasons who would want to send them away?) and instead they're here and this energy of theirs is wasted because here they can't do anything. I'm struck by this and it makes me feel powerless.

It's difficult to imagine future perspectives. Partly one lives blocked in an eternal present, where the same questions are being continually debated. The ambiguities and the contradictions, the complexity of the situation that lies before us (a muddle) and the problems it poses, takes us back once more to the sense of powerlessness regards what's happening.

I'm struck by the fact that, in the notebook I have here, I've the

same notes as a year ago. The first words are anxiety, fear of our present world.....so we're immobilised, it's the same scheme as a year ago ....this present is an eternal present and continues to create in us a sense of anxiety.

2. A weak and fragile modernity

In a world shaken by enormous changes we discover how fragile we are concerning the ideologies and values of our so-called Western culture.

The modern world seems to be mirrored today more in the hypertechnological 'conquests' that are impacting on our lives than in strong values and/or conquests in the social dimension taking root.

The attitude towards technology is ambivalent (more problematical among older people). We waver between the optimistic idea of an increase in individual capacities and the pessimistic one of a progressive de-humanization and detachment from reality.

> *Things go on, offering glasses for a virtual reality, the world goes on, the blind can use the techniques used by bats to move around (....). So many things happen so quickly. The reality of men who are half men-half machines is getting closer. Are we doing anything about this? The dimension is dramatic but the society can't breathe.*

The conquests of the modern age (literacy, the rights of women and of minorities, laicism etc.) are recent compared to the strong bases of thousand year-old cultures and today seem defenceless. We are frightened by the risk of going back on the steps forward we've taken, due to our incapacity to fight for the conquests we made.

> *Others die and know why, we don't.....*

The massive arrival of immigrants feeds a feeling of being invaded, that today is ever more real, and creates formerly unknown problems for our Western society. What characterizes the meeting of different cultures? What kind of integration are we carrying out in our society? On an individual level a sense of powerlessness prevails, even where we give an active contribution (working in literacy courses, doing voluntary work with immigrant children towards integration etc).

> *With respect to Islam, our culture is seen as supremacy, but the problem isn't cultural but social, How do we integrate foreigners? Day after day people that have nothing to do, after a while... don't we have to integrate their culture with ours, but how are we integrating them?*

There's the sensation that there are taboos which block an authentic exchange and confrontation between the different sides regarding certain social problems, a difficulty in dealing with 'hot issues' that have to do with religion, racism, minority rights etc. The case of Cologne is an example.

> *Regarding the events in Cologne (…..) We've seen the feminist issue and the antiracial issue. How can I keep together the will not to be racist with the fact that only today Italian feminists have condemned the facts out of fear to involuntarily play into the hands of xenophobic movements?*

> *I would like no-one to change because it's going back on conquests made in the sixties and not wanting to discuss these questions is a block.... perhaps to speak also about racism but to discuss it, we don't talk about religion for fear, there's a refusal, but by not discussing these questions we go backwards. I discuss the use of the chador with German colleagues but here we don't talk about it....*

We're asking ourselves the question "Who are we?", "What is our identity?"

> *When we talk about 'we', what 'we' is this? What kind of Europeans are we?*

> *What disturbs me is in the title of a book "Foreigners to ourselves" We risk not knowing any longer who we are and not knowing who are the people we are talking to.*

3.   Some principles and guidelines: the 'lifelines' to hang on to

There are attempts to find some principles and guidelines to hold on to and follow even if the answers found seem fragmentary.

In general, two ways of responding to the situation described have emerged, characterized by openness or closure towards the outside world.

The first centred on daily routine, in the search for tranquillity, apparently not touched by what's going on outside one's own world (apparently adopting denial mechanisms), creates some unease regarding the perceived image of oneself; the other being "traumatized" by dangerous situations which one doesn't know how to deal with, one questions oneself.

According to one's own personal experience and attitudes we waver between idealistic positions inspired by a model of the polis based

more on empathy and solidarity, utilitarian positions directed towards 'an individual search for happiness'' and realistic positions aimed at compromise and non renunciatory solutions.

> *A friend once told me he had an individual vision of happiness. He feels happier if his boss gives him 1000 euro a month and he can work for six months. I've felt this a bit myself, I feel a bit ashamed about it. I wasn't like that and I don't feel it's a positive thing, it's partly why I'm here.*

> *My heart beats for the world (….) each of us can build something better, I'm fascinated by the social world, I'm a volunteer in an association for psychological disorders, I've had experience as a trainee in prisons and my desire to be able to help others with the idea of a better world is ever stronger.*

> *I've been in Iraq and Lebanon. War has become part of me, I'm used to war, I've decided not to go back, I know what it is not even to want to hear fireworks but you learn from the Lebanese who went dancing despite the war, you learn to live, to change your habits and daily routine but not too much.*

Part 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the members are working with the information resulting from Parts 1 and 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 are 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.

1. DIS-IDENTITY and DEFENCELESS MODERNITY as key words to explain this disorientation

The feeling of disorientation and powerlessness make us reflect on the theme of our identity, which has become even more relevant today in a moment in which we are so stimulated towards experience of encountering the other.

If, from a psychological point of view, the impact between different cultures is described as a problem of DIS-IDENTITY, from a sociological point of view the impact is evidence of the existence of a "strong" culture which is perceived as threatening in opposition to a fragile and uncertain culture, which is complex with its negations, not fully aware of itself, that proposes itself through dialogue and willingness. One

aggressive, and the other defenceless. The group has expressed the understanding of modernity as defenceless.

We perceive the risk of letting ourselves be "encroached on by new cultures" but at the same time there is the awareness of not succeeding in standing up to this. How can it be possible, in fact, if we are the first who are not able to tell ourselves who we are (...as individuals?   …..as Europeans?   ….as Westerners?)

If with amazement we realise we are "*strangers to ourselves*"?

The fear of being invaded isn't just a fantasy, it's now a reality.

I'm reading 'Anime Baltiche' (Baltic Souls). It's quick to read, a very refined and well educated journalist who travels round Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania collecting stories of famous people like Hannah Arendt. I didn't know anything about these places and I've discovered that there are millions of people over the years who suffered the Russian occupation, the holocaust… it's a story that is part of our identity and I know nothing about it.

We are disorientated regarding our identity and who we are

Our reflections continue regarding the values that belong to us. What do we know of the values on which our culture is founded? It seems that we've lost our historical memory, we don't recognise the value of past conquests, our values are 'fragile' ones if compared to the values of centuries' old cultures and it proves difficult to use technology to define our identity.

Capacities regarding memory and history are lacking, we too are a population of immigrants. We are incapable of retrieving our past and understanding the present through our past. The experiences of today and scenes that are different from those of the 19th century.

Europe has made great steps forward since the seventies, regarding education and democratic freedom. At times I've the sensation that only a small part of the population have this sense of progress. How many people are aware of the fundamental steps made, against centuries of history? For example forced marriage, for my work I'm concerned with this subject... During President Pertini's term of office the Italian Republic abolished forced marriage, but it's found in the Bible and has played a role in religion for a thousand years, it's found in Assyrian texts... these are conquests but the cultural roots are strong, how can we ask people to perceive this? It's a matter of defending fragile values. How can we shore them up?

The concept of identity is characterized today by a condition of indefiniteness. Today we have before us more possibilities of choice and amidst so many identities we don't know which to choose. If change has become a prerogative that makes us feel free to pass from one identity to another more easily, at the same time it creates the risk of generating confusion and indecision.

> *Dis-identity is also freedom, I don't feel altogether troubled by it. Freedom to redefine oneself, it's also a crossing point from one identity to another.*

> *The key word for me is dis-identity. We, like Europe, are in a situation where we're coming unstuck if our identity is disintegrating.*

There emerges the need to give a sense to things, and for this it seems important to redefine the limits of identity, starting from the values that indicate belonging.

The discussion seems to be expressing the need for a refoundation of our values.

> *We must redefine our regulatory principles, redefine their limits, increase the awareness of the steps forward our culture has taken. Our values need to be renegotiated, maybe making some painful sacrifices. I think this will be inevitable… Either we entrench ourselves in positions that we're likely to lose or we look again at the basic structure of our values, renounce somethings, like the idea that money is fundamental, that time can be spent just working...*

> *It could be interesting to say that that the styles of life that we want to defend aren't so indispensible. Perhaps we don't need to die for freedom, can we think of changing our life style. Our lifestyle is hostile to the world, a certain kind of tourism in poor countries is an act of contempt, then they shoot us. To change a consumeristic life… can we think of it?*

2. **THE OPPOSITION LIFE-DEATH: the supremacy of the pleasure principle at the base of an individualistic withdrawal**

An individual search for happiness seems to be the effect of a hedonistic approach of our society, strongly orientated towards the pleasure principle. An adaptive response basically, that is born as a reaction to the sense of powerlessness that we experience in relation to what happens in the polis.

How do we influence things that happen? It all seems so big and complex, and difficult. And if we can't influence things, then what remains for us but a self centred search for happiness, the desire to isolate ourselves from all the rest?

> *A great sense of powerlessness.... how can we have an influence, what can we do? Everything seems so big, complex, difficult, that the search for individual happiness is a reaction, not just a wish to selfishly cut ourselves off. But anyway what can I do? They're killing each other in Syria and what do I do? Either I leave and I go there or I get my boss to give me a rise. We can't manage an intermediate level of choice.*

The origin of this phenomenon of withdrawal goes back to the end of ideological conflict and of a collective dimension in which to play our own role. The individual dimension in the here and now seems the only one able to give things a meaning today. Time has stopped, our vision is centred on an ETERNAL PRESENT.

> *Individual searching for happiness is seen as solipsistic, centred on a vision of an eternal present. Ideologies are dead, the confrontation-conflict, it seems that time has crystallized... then the only dimension that gives a sense, individual but not collective, lies in searching for our personal happiness in the here and now.*

We hypothesise that it is this very tendency towards individual pleasure that renders us at a loss before cultures in which "to die for something" is a value. We have lost contact with everything that recalls us to a sense of limits in our society: death, old age, illnesses etc. We aren't able to connect with others because we are taken up with ourselves.

> *In the past, in life, pleasure was taboo and death was part of daily life. Death was something habitual, part of life, pleasure wasn't. Now we're in a completely different culture, old age is taboo, pleasure rules our life. Also here we need to re-educate ourselves.*

> *We don't even know to send soldiers any more, we're no longer ready to pay for the value of freedom with our lives. They, ISIS, enroll knowing they can be killed, we nothing. It's one of the things that disturbs me, in a closer conflict we can see who's got courage. They know what they're dying for. I wouldn't go to shoot.*

The problem is that this closure leads us to live the eternal present and to have an incapacity to see the future: we lack the ability to plan. We find it difficult to use our imagination. We don't reflect when thinking of tomorrow. It's as if with the death of ideologies time has stopped, shrinking the boundaries within which to find a sense to a smaller more

individual space.

I find it difficult to imagine, I can't imagine

How to get out of this situation? We need to re-educate ourselves to new values capable of re-creating a greater sense of community, free ourselves from the supremacy of the pleasure principle, move towards a greater collaboration and the management of conflicts, get away from the alternative that demands a choice: accept fully other cultures or fight till death.

What worries me is confining oneself within very narrow horizons. It's this that frightens me, being concerned less and less with the world, those around us, the things that lead me to look for something else.

What will make us feel well is to learn to live the conflicts.

One of the words I hear most is collaboration, we need to learn to collaborate without denying the conflict, build networks, associations. As if the thought that alone one can't do it, we need to know how to stay with others. Perhaps we must start from ourselves, the values that we send back are individualism, pleasure, the idea of happiness. But also incapacity to connect with the experience of other realities.

We need to work more towards a greater balance between the pleasure principle and the sense of limits not only in relations with others, but also in relation to the natural environment.

We are also in a social context where we have lost the sense of boundaries and this disorientates us. The limits of the planet, of resources.....

We need to re-educate ourselves: between cultures of death and the negation of pleasure and cultures of pleasure and the negation of death.

3.   **COMPLEXITY: the challenge of supporting the multiplicity of languages in modernity**

The hypothesis is that we are overburdened with stimuli, information, events. There follows a difficulty in giving a sense to things. The themes we have to deal with are too many and difficult and it's not clear either with what criteria they are to be treated.

It's the complexity of contemporary life. What happens today is difficult to interpret, it can signify everything and the contrary of everything. It's

hard to identify priorities.

The difficulty is giving a sense to things

We feel overloaded also regarding the quantity of themes which have emerged here, they are all such weighty themes that the average person has difficulty connecting or putting them in order of value...how can we establish what is relevant for me, for others, for Arabs, etc?

I'm asking myself if the sensation of unease that we all share, isn't to be connected with our being overburdened with news that our minds can't deal with. I ask myself if modernity isn't pushing our brains to a breaking point , if we aren't risking reaching such a level of overload and if out of defence we're building barriers and filters that don't allow use to empathize with what's happening far away from us...

The challenge is to manage to support the complexity of modernity

To move in a Babel of meanings, in which two-faced Janus represents the double face of phenomena to which we're exposed, the difficulty of finding a common language. An example is the word CHADOR, symbol at the same time of the submission of women (for us westerners) but also of freedom (the chador was used by the Lybian women in opposition to the regime.

CHADOR poses the double problem of submission and freedom. Arab women used it not as a religious symbol but as a form of political protest. Chador as submission to a patriarchal male chauvinist world but for some a symbol of freedom.

Without strong political subjects, the sensation is that it's necessary to re-appropriate public space through a sense of individual responsibility, where the ability to work on the relational plane seems to be a key element. There are already some covert signs.

We no longer have reference points. We're in a changing jagged world. We need to regain possession of the public world, get out of the house, take back this world. There are so many undiscovered phenomena, the possibility to regain public spaces, open a free shop, it has nothing to do with religion and work but with relationships.

Certainly there's the awareness that "we must learn a new language".

Convenor: Elisabetta Pasini, Cinzia Trimboli, Giuliano Mazzoleni, Evita Tomasella, Luisa Ippolito