



AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

Italy and the World at the Dawn of 2017
Report of a OPUS Listening Post®
held in Milan on 11th January 2017

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS & EXPERIENCES

In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, 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': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

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

The first part of the meeting is dedicated to everyone's self-presentations. These focus mainly on the dimension of change in everyone's professional/personal path. What emerges is an "ongoing" existential condition, characterized by situations of confusion and disorganization in the past alongside a spirit of enterprise and openness to change. Everyone seems to be willing to find their own way (the changes they experience are not paralyzing): in this process, energies activate in order to connect to the context one lives in and look for new ways of self-realization.

I have a 14 years-old son who plays football... I would like to make use of my studies to help kids imagine the sports life differently. I volunteered as an intern in a few clubs from my area, and I saw a lot of changes. Originally I'm an economist, I've worked for a company for 30 years in human research, I've also been a corporate coach for years. I recently separated from my partner, so I'm now back to being a single working mother, and I feel a great energy, I'm pushed towards a lot of new experiences.

... I was fired. At that time I was also buying my house and my partner was pregnant. It was all quite a mess, but the end of my career took me away from that world for a while. Now I'm back to work: I deal with active policies at a company characterized by an evolving structure.

This appears to be less true for the seniors of the group.

I'm actually quite lucky, people my age are generally well-established. We had to go through less of a struggle to find our own place and identity, compared to today's younger generation.

The debate's themes start to take form: they focus on the role of social media and the key impact it is having in our lives as far as change is concerned.

Theme 1: The true/false theme: chaos, confusion, disinformation, lack of competence, decisions made on wrong assumptions, lack of authenticity in relationships

This theme is mainly addressed by the younger part of the group, and it is linked to new technologies, social networks in particular, and all the paradox we have to face with.

We live in a hyper-connected world, but technology often seems to keep people apart more than it draws them close.

People withdraw in the cocooned world of social media... I've already seen families sat together at the same restaurant, everyone of them separately interacting with their phone...

Social groups appear to be easily influenced by the media. Lack of competence also plays a part, and this can entail harmful consequences: adaptation, flattening of one's personal dimension, media "hoaxes" generating consent and mutual influence, lack of awareness (and control) of the consequences of one's actions.

The social media world... Sometimes you get caught in certain mechanisms and you don't know what you're doing... It's a new tool people don't know how to use... It's like entering a vortex where you are forced to behave in a certain way...

This is a key theme for information in general... The fact that social media often tend to generate false information because of a lack of competence, and that this false information can influence a great deal of people, entire social groups even... This is such a dangerous mechanism, it is something we need to address seriously, with a strong political stand.

Using new technologies poses the problem of being able to use them with competence, maybe we're not "capable" of making good use of such tools, neither are we very much aware of the risks we're running by doing so.

We live in a world of false and misleading information, where words are often taken out of context. In this world our research is chaotic, such as the false information provided by the media. The word I keep coming back to is "information", collusion, falseness, manipulation...

The impossibility to critically read what goes on around us is not limited to social media, but applies more generally to every other "social" environment:

- very often the workplace exposes us to "nonsense" situations which we are

forced to witness, confused or angry (everyone talks about “competence”, but this concept has been emptied in meaning, since decision-making processes are often carried out by people who don’t have the necessary level of competence; the same goes on in companies claiming they use good team strategies and then doing exactly the opposite...)

- The civil society welcomes the news of new economy companies (such as Amazon) investing locally, without understanding the negative impact these have on the quality of working life for the people involved.

Today I was in a meeting with the company managers and I had another proof of this tendency: these people just talk about random numbers, they tell us we will grow... They make assumptions but lack the competence to do so, and when things go wrong people are fired. This makes me angry.

Amazon says it’s going to hire 350 people in my city... Which caused a debate. Vercelli’s (a town in the north of Italy between Milan and Turin) citizens see this as a fruitful investment, but maybe we should discuss it: what will be the quality of life of these people?

... The ability to contextualize problems is decreasing, just like our ability to connect... it seems that the world is revolving more and more around this lack of knowledge...

There is an education problem for the younger generation, and a political responsibility attached to it.

How do we educate the young without being false? I see a desert... I don’t know if the pervasiveness of these new technologies can be considered in optimistic terms

I have 3 children and I feel a great responsibility... About social media, I often think about how I use it. There are infinite possible ways to destroy a person, you have to be able to tell yourself: “wait”...

Politicians are blind, deaf and dumb...

Theme 2: The ethics theme: depersonalization, denying one’s value and moral values as an existential point of reference, lack of substance and responsibility

The impact of social media on human relationships (in its most negative meaning), pushes the discussion towards the broader themes of ethics and values. What is the role of the other when the relationship becomes virtual? Exchanges between people appear to have become more interactions than relations.

Lack of virtue and narcissism are two of the key emerging features. These words help us describe what we see in exchanges, in the real world too. Apparently we maintain superficial relationships, where a “void of substance” makes us reject the value of the other.

The difference is in the quality of the relationships between people. It's a different way of communicating, it's the impact of social media. We don't completely avoid relationships... But it would be more appropriate to speak of interactions: a more superficial kind of relation.

On social networks there are a lot of beautiful, ethical words, but in their actual social life people don't behave accordingly...

What I perceive in today's relationships, is not only narcissism but a kind of solipsism: people withdraw in the cocooned world of social media... I've already seen families sat together at the same restaurant, everyone of them separately interacting with their phone...

This theme is primarily addressed by the senior part of the group: they link it to a loss in the ethical dimension, and they underline the need for recovering yesterday's values

"Kant used to say: we need to start considering the other as a purpose and not as a means"

What is the role, in our lives and relations and workplaces, of such words as ethics, virtue and values? What part do they play in the education of the younger generation? The sensation is that ethics have become a confined dimension, one that is accorded less and less importance. The relationship with the other seems to be instrumental: the other appears to be used for a purpose.

The greatest concern for me is that organizations never address the theme of virtue (I mean cardinal and theological virtues: prudence, wisdom, fortitude, faith, hope, charity and justice)... Everyone talks about competence: virtue has been forgotten.

Ethics don't exist (...) the problem is that we considered this existential baggage to be superfluous.

Doing the right thing is no longer that important...

Forgetting all this poses a double risk, an individual and a collective one - on the one hand, there is the risk of having a much too volatile identity (one which lacks substance and becomes just "appearance"), on the other hand there's the risk of being less and less responsible of one's own actions towards the other in terms of what we say and do. Social media, once again, is presented as an amplifier of such phenomena. Not just social media, though: new forms of employment, for example, seem to introduce on the market a lower and lower appreciation of people.

When you speak with someone in person, you take your responsibilities. On social media, you just throw something out there, without any responsibility...

With social media you can get caught in certain dynamics without really knowing what you're doing... It's like you're in a sort of vortex...

Just like working for Amazon: you're like a robot, you go in and they tell you you

have 35 seconds to pee, if you need to, because this is how long it takes according to them. All for the efficiency of the system.

Theme 3: The dual reading of change: something new or the repetition of an old scheme?

Two competing interpretations emerge as far as the changes described during the meeting are concerned

... Did we go back in time? Or has nothing ever changed?
... Everything changed, it's the form that changed the substance...

Change is the theme entailing the most divergent views and readings. Age appears to have a key role in this segmentation.

As far as the more mature part of the group is concerned, the extent of the undergoing change is denied: the conclusion (a reassuring one?) is that, eventually, "there is nothing new under the sun". A stereotyped idea emerges: the same power dynamics are called into question to explain what appears to be dehumanizing. The same dynamics as 30 years ago.

The assembly line has changed... Such as times and methods... But the same used to happen 30 years ago... Dehumanization, lack of competence: they were already there.

The dynamics are still the same: the theme of power, of narcissism... We should have gained the experience to face such themes... The form evolves, but not the substance.

As far as the younger part of the group is concerned, an opposite view emerges, underpinning disorientation and a greater struggle in understanding the phenomena here described: accepting and understanding change is more difficult.

The mere fact that our ways of living and behaving in different social contexts have changed makes us think we've been deeply changed, it makes us less sure about knowing how to interpret all this.

It's not true that there is nothing new under the sun... Our way of living has changed, and we need to agree on this, because the complex context we live in makes it hard to read between the lines of what's happening, we need new lenses... It's harder because we find ourselves inside these processes...

It's hard for me to see the changes occurring right now... it's like I'm looking for something that hasn't been named yet. I feel like a lot of things have flattened: engagement, objectives... We are helpless when it comes to situations which elude our control, or behind which we can't understand who actually takes decisions...

My struggle as a citizen is that I'm disoriented, I can't make sense of things... There's a void of meaning...

The lack of institutions who can provide containment on the one hand, and a liquid society on the other (here Bauman, who recently passed away, is quoted) makes everything more fluid and shapeless, and just like liquid substances tend to take the shape of their container, we take the confusing and volatile shape of the medium we're surrounded by.

It's not as if such dynamics didn't exist before, but before there were institutions who could contain them... Now this lack of substance is a lack of identity...

Social media absorbed us... It probably even changed something in the way we think... There's an element of apathy to all this... Everything can be scrolled down on a screen, what I don't understand is:

Is shape changing substance? What about this confused idea of "us"?

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3, the participants 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, participants 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 & Hypothesis I: the fracture between the inside and the outside

A hypothesis is made regarding the existence of a fracture between what concerns the ID and what the other. It's as if the idea of self-efficacy was only linked with the ID dimension, while the collective dimension was characterized by chaos and disorder. We feel like we have control over and can make an impact on the decisions that regard ourselves, but the same doesn't happen when it comes to decisions on a larger scale. There is therefore a greater distance between oneself and the outside world. If the "outside" was a stage, we would increasingly shift from being actors to being extras, with a more passive role, mere players in someone else's plot.

When we talked about ourselves we talked about a positive change... But when it comes to society, we see a negative change.

The problem today is in the fracture between these two levels, which, in my opinion, hold together the human being. We also need to acknowledge that the young are talking about information, and the old about ethics...

There's a great deal of energy spent on ourselves but on the outside everything is confused, we don't speak the same language... Just how much the issues we're talking about here are possible mechanisms?

ACTORS VS. EXTRAS, we stick to the script

By being extras I mean that the majority of on-line social relationships could reduce one's identity to mere appearance, thus preventing one from authentically being themselves

When it's about ourselves we get to decide, but from the outside the change is imposed, someone else has control

There's a great energy towards oneself, but we don't know what to make of it because everything is confused

Analysis & Hypothesis 2: dehumanization and power dynamics

The fact that we give less and less importance to certain values makes us think we're dealing with a process of dehumanization, where the substance and value of human beings gets lost.

The risk is to lose the possibility of being authentic. This turns into discomfort, because we live experiences where there's incoherence between what one says and does, and consequently the relationships between people deteriorate.

People lack in substance... Is it because of this dehumanization?

CHAOS versus SUBSTANCE, people can't be coherent nor authentic

The concept of DEHUMANIZATION describes certain experiences on the workplace, such as the denial of a person's value... Maintaining this very value in spite of all the difficulties is today a great challenge.

A relation between dehumanization and certain power dynamics is then theorized: is it a consequence of the kind of power held by who is in charge of governing? This kind of power is not very transparent, it is one which recalls certain dehumanized mechanisms of the mafia, where the ultimate purpose is the enjoyment of power itself, and ethics play a more and more marginal role.

And when it comes to power... Who really commands on whom? In a vessel caught by the storm the king of Naples asked: who rules on whom, here? And the boatswain came out and told him to shut up...

Power doesn't enjoy a thing, it just governs... The mafioso doesn't care about anybody else. Mafia is inhuman, it's like a beehive: where is our human part?

What we have seen up until now is dehumanization... It's what power allows...

Analysis & Hypothesis 3: the importance of "shaping" along the path of values, of an exchange across generations, and the role of new technologies

Today we have felt the need to have pillars: specific points of reference in order to give shape to a society which, being liquid, is in danger of being too exposed to the

medium it is surrounded by can values play a part? And what about individual responsibility?

I think pillars are absolutely necessary in order to structure our society... And manage change... Otherwise change is going to eat us up...

Individual responsibility about what we do is what we can work on, it's the idea of virtue we talked about earlier

It's important to remember that these values exist... But who is teaching them today? It's an ethical discourse, the very sense of what it means to be alive, in terms of value...

How much our keys for interpretation are actually possible and can they act as defense mechanisms against a chaos which would require a different pair of glasses, one that we're still unable to find?

How can we find shared meanings if the "young" and the "old" don't speak the same language?

Maybe we don't understand each other... The path of change has to start from the renegotiation of a shared meaning across generations

We should also try to focus on the good influence of social media. How vital are the new technologies? How destructive are they? Maybe they are not only negative. There is also room for authenticity and true relationships, someone in the group has even found love using the social media.

Social media isn't only negative, there are people who actually find love on Meetic...

The "mental coach" metaphor fuels enthusiasm and hope for the future: generating an exchange of experiences and accounts across generations could make a big difference

We are hungry for this exchange between generations, my sons are extremely interested when I tell them about ethics... What is important? People are hungry for this

A change I'd like to see is a more direct relationship between generations... Real change comes with interaction and exchange of experiences... And with testimony: it needs to be seen

... I was thinking about the mental coach... It has such a great value. Real change begins here, with an exchange of experience, not with indoctrination...

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