



Italy at the dawn of 2018

Report of a Listening Post held in Milan on 22 January 2018

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND 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.

Theme 1: Inability to widen the eyes, micro-trajectories of life

At the beginning of the session the participants start talking about the daily events of their life in a very intimate, vaguely depressive way, turning the eyes into themselves, experiencing a sense of fear for the world outside. The young student says he is in a "moment of passage", about to leave the university, a comfortable environment he knows very well, fearing to have to face the working environment, a new world he doesn't know at all.

The middle-aged professional says she lost this morning her favourite jewel, "is like I'm losing everything", she senses the pain and fear of losing things that are parts of herself.

However, anxiety seems to be mostly hidden in the pleats of the "typical events of the day": "I work with organizations and I see that everybody is disoriented, people don't think, they just run after the last novelty in a very superficial way", says, paradoxically but without realizing the paradox, the famous organizational consultant.

The relationship with sons and daughters highlights the fragility and the precariousness of the young people today, at the eyes of their parents: "I'm a very worried mother, I can't hold the rudder bar any more...". The lack of mentors to rely on is confusing, face to the world we feel a sense of loneliness in

our lives.

However, the migrants seem to be responsible for most of our fears, “those men of colour I meet daily at every corner, in the 700 metres I walk every morning to go to work”; they undermine our ethical conscience and “make us feel guilty for being born in the right side of the world”; hence, “when I see them in the street I look away, I pretend not to see them, I feign to talk at the phone, and I feel disgusted for the sense of exclusion my attitude involves”.

A member underlines “a comparison between sons and migrants, both are victims of an injustice, we should feel guilty”. Someone else points out the radical dichotomy between “we can’t host all of them” and “we can’t let them die”, the impossibility of the “et/et” which could give space to a new thinking, if only we could ask ourselves “what is that we fear about them”?

Face to these profound primary emotions, fear and guilt, the reaction is to look away, trying not to see what happens outside because is too frightening, something which we have lost control of. The only sheltered comfort zone we have lost seems to be, oddly enough, technology, which appears like magic, is not like science because is far from reason as a sidereal world. Trough the media technology spreads around enticing promises, like “giving you a new heart, a heart beating without making noise”, maybe because the noise we have inside is already almost unbearable?

We look at the world with blind anesthetized eyes, “eyes for not to seeing”, that allow us, however, to withdraw from the world taking refuge into ourselves, projecting on the migrants our neurosis and fears.

Looking at those who come from afar, we ask therefore to ourselves “Why did you leave your country? Were you not better at home than here? What kind of dream are you after?”; hence disregarding the reality of the wars, famines, exiles, tortures, without seeing the ghosts hiding behind our unlikely questions.

In the ancient times the ones who leaved for a journey surviving the ordeals and the deaths of their companions were celebrated as Heroes who discovered new worlds, like Aeneas, Ulysses, Jason in the myths; did the Hero become, nowadays, the sacrificial Victim of the Westerners sense of guilt?

Theme 2: Need of recognition, mythologizing of the past

The desire to close the eyes face to the present is coupled by the recovery of a mythologized past. Someone tells having met an “old flame” on Facebook, and the social networks take on a consolatory function that make the oldest feel young, feeding the sense of omnipotence of a generation that is now experiencing a huge sense of impotence.

The “68 generation” celebrates this year its fifty anniversary, a year that was largely mythologized by those who considered political engagement the most important mean to affirm their presence in the world and feel today that they

are not “recognized”, at least not like they were in the past.

The individualism, isolation and fear that characterize the present are opposed to the “erotic power” of the group, which was the mirror of an “healthy narcissism” and a sense of omnipotence, while today we are “old and lonely, nobody recognises me”. However, could this lack of recognition be compared to the “metaphor of the migrant”, him/her too lost in a nobody’s land where he/she’s not recognized? Paradoxically, could the recognition of a similar faith we share with the migrants be the first step of an encounter, like a safe resting area in order to recover the capability of thinking?

The past is mythologized also by the youngest who are struggling for affirming themselves in a difficult working environment, living with great anxiety the separation from the university, the family, a quiet and reassuring life (the metaphor of the “Linus’ blanket”), and fearing their future perspectives.

A generational contrast stands out strongly, the youngest rebels against suffocating oppressive fathers and mothers who don’t let their sons go and don’t spur their autonomy. “I’m in between the Generation X and the Millennials, I’ve been struggling for years at work and now I manage my own company and I have to deal with people who bring their grown up sons to the working interviews, they don’t want let them go, there’s no dignity on it”.

The intersection of the personal stories nourishes the impression of a great waste of resources, a true “generational murder”; the competences are nor recognised and the sacrifices made to achieve a goal are regarded with annoyance and disappointment.

In this apparently generational clash, however, young and old people are united by the same desire of recognition, the will to be seen for what they have been and for the values of their times the oldest, the need of commitment and the efforts their personal development requires the youngest.

Many questions arise: are we able to recognise each other? Are we all blind, incapable to see anything else but our own problems and solitude? Don’t we care enough about the others? Is this why we are struggling about the word “us”? The relationship with the “unrecognised others” in the daily life seems to be conditioned by a sense of collective paranoia.

Theme 3: taking action, expectation of hope

In such a closed reality perceived as persecutory and depressive, slowly emerge some hints of hope.

Someone says the migrants are “the bearers of values we have lost”, that could lead, however, to “a new transition from the I to the Us”. The time of crisis we are living in is the result of unmanaged phenomena that come from an age of waste and incapacity to give value to real competences; but “young people are essential to development, “they shouldn’t be marginalized because they are constructive

forces”, the bearers of “new creative ways of thinking”. “Life is like a mosaic to be composed” more than a path to be followed, and in this mosaic “resilience and creativity are precious resources in a time of crisis”. We have to learn “how to walk on the wire, in order to understand how to knot the loosen threads of our social bonds and how to build up a new imaginary”. If we are stuck in a “bare and raw reality”, we have to find new words to give space to hope and to take action; members admit that face to the crisis of the present we are all too passive, too folded up on ourselves.

The metaphor of “doing and praying” stands up, like the Benedictine “ora et labora”? translated into the need to find a new time for an encounter, in a desire of engagement and social bonds, because “we need a cause to feel alive”. A newborn granddaughter is therefore the signal that, eventually, “I have internalized my real age”, hence giving value to the shrinking time.

The expectation of hope is therefore in some way connected to time and value: “standing” to bear the fear of the passing time and of the frightening world that surrounds me, standing without running away, stopping and watching, taking the time to not turn the eyes away, rediscovering the traces of the human beyond the fear of loss and difference.

Could in that way the death instinct transforms in life instinct?

We should give ourselves the time to know each other, to know the others and ourselves,

and the word we find for expressing this is “courage”: the courage to face the generational contrast, to face our fears, the courage to live the time necessary for acknowledging, the courage to find the personal resources that are needed to face the reality in a creative way.

The antithesis between “us and them” we use daily (young/old, migrants/hosts) could be a false antithesis. We need different eyes to find the way of a new encounter inspired by authenticity and trust, and we have to be aware that for doing this we have to made one step back (I Rely on You, a song of Jovannotti – a popular Italian pop singer – is mentioned, with his famous phrase “what are you ready to loose?”); we should face the reality freed from prejudices but also from idealisations, like the myth of the “et/et” at all costs.

In the end, the future is built “step by step, working in groups, making relationships, because alone you die”.

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