

Editorial

by Renzo Carli*

A psychoanalyst friend, in one of the frequent, interesting evening discussions amongst psychologists in the Sixties in Milan, used to say: in times of economic crisis, psychotherapy is one of the activities affected by the tendency of the middle class to economise. Psychotherapists were therefore one of the professions that suffered more from the economic crisis. The reasons? The most varied; but at that time people certainly didn't put psychotherapy at the top of the scale of activities that were necessary for their well-being, for survival or for their ordinary existence.

Today? Things are certainly no different.

Slowly but inexorably Italian society, like European society in general, is witnessing the formation of new social groupings which we could call the *new poor*. This grouping has a diverse composition: the "young", often on short term contracts for years, and many of whom are now middle-aged. Workers and office staff who have seen the buying power of their wages progressively falling. Teachers, university researchers, small shopkeepers, owners of small and medium-sized businesses, not to mention the unemployed, the laid-off workers, and those who increasingly lose their jobs. Experts of economic statistics say that 25% of the Italian population risks poverty, or is already poor: that is almost 16 million Italians who are experiencing or will soon experience indigence and social exclusion. In our country this figure has never been reached since the end of the second world war. It places Italy at the bottom of the ranking of Europe's industrialised countries.

The social inequality gap, the distance between those who possess great economic resources and those who live hand-to-mouth, between those who are rich and those who are sliding towards poverty, has become far wider. The intermediate band between the two states of wealth and poverty has become much narrower; there has been a considerable reduction of the social component that in the past was called quite "well-off".

Meanwhile one wonders with growing concern and perplexity who "the rich" actually are.

Italy is known to be the country with the highest rate of organised crime; this is, according to economists, the business with the biggest turnover in our country.

From all sides it emerges that corruption has invaded the country's major nerve-centres.

Apart from the not infrequent exceptions, the political class has reached unprecedented levels of intolerable squalor. Politicians too often contribute to the life of organised crime and to the growth of business based on corruption. "*Scilipotismo*" indicates the levels of political illiterateness, ignorance and irritating arrogance reached by the representatives elected by the people, thanks to a short-sighted law that forces electors to vote only for the person designated by the party leadership. Remember, too, that the problem is not only that of the lack of preferences in the vote, but also and above all that of the foolishness and weakness of the parties' central organs, in designating people that are often unworthy of filling representative positions in the legislative institutions, in the system of governing the country or the local authorities.

The new poverty, in short, is part of a cultural crisis caused by a history of past mistakes that has a profound, widespread effect on the institutions.

For years it has been proclaimed, sickeningly repeated and celebrated by the mass media, that the main value of our population is only to get rich, to make money and lead a life devoted to fashionable consumption and the pursuit of "luxury". The new poverty is part of this cultural context, degraded and devoid of any cultural values other than appearances and the importance attached to money. The new poverty poses cultural problems of great importance, it conveys a demand that cannot find an answer only in the economy, development and the economic growth of

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the country. Economists can “get the accounts in order” and call for sacrifices, promising a better future in the medium to long term. They are not able to provide an answer for the short term; this is to be sought in cultural change, in rediscovering important values like solidarity, interest in others, social participation and the valorisation of competence. Such values can translate into shared behaviors, in actions that are useful to others and to the context in which one lives. Exactly the opposite of the money-hungry, narcissistic egoism typical of those seeking social “approval”, fame and conformist success.

The country needs a new cultural policy. A cultural policy that can only come “from the bottom”, and in particular from intellectuals. Intellectuals: a social group that seem to have lost their identity and their role, overshadowed by television conformism and scientism devoid of values. This social group, in the present state of the country and more generally of Europe, can find a sense again and place themselves once again at the service of cultural growth.

Can psychologists intervene in this situation?

Can they contribute to a relaunching of culture, can they offer their help in the new problems caused by the country’s social and economic situation? In the mental health services, for instance, the demand for intervention is changing; the problems posed by the “new clients”¹ more and more often concern the experience of emotional precariousness and insecurity triggered by the new socioeconomic situation in individuals, in family groups, in whoever is setting up a business, in the young, in those who find themselves hopelessly facing an anomic future.

Psychology and more specifically clinical psychology, is faced with a new challenge: to rebuild, in individuals and social groups, faith in the development of the context and at the same time to promote the role of emotional thinking, in a situation where the habit of emotional acting-out seems to have got the upper hand.

One wonders whether Italian clinical psychology will be capable of doing this, whether Italian clinical psychologists will be able to give a coherent, competent response to the new demand, which originates in the experience of precariousness and poverty, not only in the “real” economic conditions. Lived experience, it is worth remembering, is an important “reality” in marking behaviors, decisions, emotions, relations, social dynamics and organisational processes. Culture has more to do with lived experiences than with “real” data, especially economic data. The question about psychologists concerns the increasingly conflictual contrast between a rampant scientism and the attention to the demand made by the context. What characterises scientism, in clinical psychology, is the marked lack of interest in the social demand specific to the working context, and in the expectations that persons and social groups may express regarding psychology. It focuses the attention of many psychologists on models, verification tools, concern for international “visibility” which inevitably detaches them from the context in which the psychological intervention has a meaning. Every competent professional action clearly needs validated models, verification, and attention to the scientific context in which one operates. The problem becomes serious if this attention becomes more important than the sense of one’s work, than the feedback from the person benefiting from the psychological intervention, than the efficacy of the intervention in the culture that requested it and that expects the intervention to bring about a change.

Economists increasingly state that “psychological” factors are important in determining the economic crisis; a crisis with roots in the cultural change that the economists themselves helped to create, for instance with the shift of the economically advanced social system from a system of production to a financial system. Psychologists are capable of working with and guiding systems of production but seem to have lost all contact with financial systems and with the cultural consequences of a society that is increasingly concerned with the financial dynamic and its difficult outcomes. It is in this direction that the contribution of clinical psychology can move, paying less attention to the psychopathological diagnosis and focusing more on analysing the problematic demand of those facing the new cultural and social situation that the international financial system imposes on the countries of the world and on their specific cultural realities.

The financial system rejects culture. Just a few months ago the then Italian Minister for the economy made a serious statement: “one can’t eat learning”. This is a profoundly false statement, and at the same time it expresses that financial culture which in the space of a few years really has

¹ See: Carli & Paniccia (2011).

pushed millions of families into indigence. If the economy is not integrated with a strong cultural driving force, it shows all its limitations. The future of our country will be better only if it is based on the rediscovery of values and cultural stimuli that can create collusive systems grounded in the valorisation of the resources of solidarity and communication, instead of the conformism that aims at getting rich and creating a spectacular façade. If psychologists have the ability to contribute to this necessary and difficult movement of cultural politics, the role of psychology will be able to recover a sense to its existence.

References

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