

## Political crisis and the role of Psychology. Our ‘variations on the theme’

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### *Introduction*

In a recent publication, Carli and Paniccia have identified two different approaches in Psychological Sciences. On one hand, the aim of Psychology would be to formulate general laws which may scientifically explain human behavior. On the other hand, Psychology would be regarded as a science of intervention, whose aim is to produce changes in individuals in relation to their background.

These are undoubtedly opposing perspectives. Although the first one is traditionally the most widely adopted, Carli and Paniccia observe that its effects on people’s lives and well-being, on coexistence and on communities have been minimal.

For years our interest has focused on the current role of Psychology too. As a matter of fact, the only negative effect of such an excessive interest on scientific strictness is the gradual isolation of

Psychological Sciences. Unlike Carli and Paniccia, in our opinion Psychology – in order to foster their development – needs to concentrate on both individuals and their background (2004, p. 126). Moreover, it is vital for Psychology to reinforce its status of ‘politically involved science of coexistence’ (Di Maria, 2000). Namely, it means acknowledging that the political sphere has an influence on individuals’ lives (Elias, 1991) and that Psychological Sciences inevitably have a ‘political function and responsibility’ (Pagliarani, 1977).

After all, it would not be possible to analyze cultural and social changes and their impact on individuals without offering first a political consideration of such changes. Our ‘variations on the theme’ support this vision, stating the crucial role of politics in human existence and, in general, in the development of valuable relationships inside the *polis*.

A clarification of our interpretation of politically-structured intervention is also provided, through the description of the research/intervention we have recently conducted.

### *The psychosocial perspective of group analysis*

Since the 1990s, group analytic research have focused on politics and in general on the major role collective facts (cultural, anthropological and social) have in the development of an individual’s personality and in determining his/her conditions of well-being and malaise from a psychic and existential point of view (Di Maria & Lo Piccolo, 2005).

Research focuses particularly on political sense and action, in relation to an idea of individual whose ability to think, design and pondering over the social dimension we have previously described.

As a consequence, we have hypothesized the influence that social dimension has on individuals (operationalized by Di Maria and Lavanco in 1993 through the so-called “political and environmental” level of the transpersonal) which later led to a view of politics as a mental and cultural dimension. It always highlights the issue of the relationship with the others, with those who are different: such different dimensions that cannot be unified in terms of needs and desires but – at the same time – represent an essential element of every relationship.

Politics is therefore seen as an established social space where rules and ways of coexistence are always negotiated, in an effort to govern too various interests and needs which are often opposing and antagonistic, though defending the right of social identity and common citizenship.

Afterwards, we have also focused on the Psychology of coexistence (Di Maria, 2000). Coexistence does not mean living above the threshold of visibility, not even beyond it, but to live with other individuals (as its Latin origin – *cumvivere* – suggests). Coexistence is therefore something about our relationship with ourselves and with others, with the groups that others represent and with those which belong to our same

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geographical and mental space. In other words, coexistence means being conscious of oneself as a 'citizen' with a political sense of belonging to his/her own community (De Marè, Piper & Thompson, 1991).

More recently, the contribution of some authors of different geographical and cultural backgrounds has enriched our theoretical and research-oriented perspective. In particular, Earl Hopper and Norbert Elias made important deductions about the role of deep interconnections between political and mental systems.

Hopper – an English analyst with a group-analytic background – formulated the concept of 'social unconscious' (2003), referring to the existence of social, cultural, relational and communicative influences people are unaware of (because they have removed them) but which bring about significant effects on their lives.

Also the sociologist Elias (1991) made an important contribution about the unconscious effects that politics and ideology may have on individuals, so decisive effects that can orient people's behaviour.

### *Political crisis, political management of crisis and new forms of social distress*

Current expressions of social distress may be better understood if we consider their political origin. In other words, we believe that anthropological transformations – such as the pathomorphism of psychopathologies (Stanghellini, 2006) – derive from a wider political crisis which is changing the entire system of values in our community.

So, what links the current political crisis to the deeper crisis of both individuals and social connections in our communities? And what are, in this context, the role and the social (and political) function of clinical psychology?

First of all, it is worth considering that the sense of belonging to a community (the *polis*) – which has specific political responsibilities and important effects on people's lives – is slowly but gradually disintegrating, especially among younger generations.

As a proof of that, in the public (political) debate there is no trace of reflection, interest, consideration about the community and its administration. Therefore, the social dimension of these issues has been lost, along with the sense of *munus* and giving (Esposito, 1998), the need to govern the community, but most of all, that mental space of representation and production of sense which helps separate the concept of *munus* from mere personal sacrifice, thus retrieving the value of the *pars costruens* of community life as a basic anthropological and physiological need.

Both community and the sense of community are undergoing a crisis, and that is because of the crisis of politics and especially of political parties, which are unable to offer valid models in order to effectively govern the complexity of contemporary world. An example of this may be the perverse way our government deals with social emergencies, first of all unemployment. On one hand, they propose miraculous – and falsely charming – remedies which deprive citizens of their responsibility and make them subjects of a court of powerful people. On the other hand, at the same time, citizens' needs are stymied through the approval of rules whose sole purpose is to keep citizens in check, to blackmail them and rape the creative and proactive part of them.

The inevitable result – with a significant consequence also on the psychological plan – is the growing disillusionment, sometimes turning to intolerance, towards everything which is labelled as Politics, its methods and practices and, more generally, towards the party system in Parliament. They are all perceived as distant, self-referential and closed in themselves like obsolete castes. In addition to this, there is also a gradual decline of all those 'social containers' where the society's malaise used to be diverted, and then identified and answered on a political plan. In particular, we are referring to the institutions of the party and the trade union representation. They are not only means of struggle and transformation of the existence, but also places for the elaboration of collective and alternative visions of the future that helped for years to symbolically keep hope and trust alive.

From a clinical point of view, there is an evident link between the growing narcissistic needs and a politics which is losing its value of community in favour of the one of immunity, fuelling narcissism in an endless spiral. Yet, what mostly surprises us is the absence of trust and hope for the future (this is one of the greatest faults of politics towards citizens). We are referring not only to a very high unemployment rate among young people, not even to temporary and unstable jobs, but also to all those people who neither work, nor study, nor look for anything or expect anything.

This leads us to identify a traumatic fear of the future, which goes beyond the physiological boundaries of adolescence and hits young adults hard. The sense of precariousness heavily influences our existence and

makes it precarious as well. It causes a feeling of uncertainty, lack of hope and an even greater lack of trust in the future and in the possibility that it may hold something good for us – especially after having invested a lot in oneself and in one's own education, in terms of more personal than economic efforts.

At present no project of autonomy is realistically conceivable, as it would be influenced by the various and endless reforms of the labour market.

What is more directly relevant to the clinical work is the relationship between social and existential uncertainty. Apparently, social uncertainty does not allow a complete development of a strong feeling of personal identity and economic determinants are essential to lay the ground for a real autonomy.

Clinical work also shows us that at the basis of a great number of uncertain existences there are very fragile personalities, with a severe lack of identity often hidden behind extremely rigid masks, as in pathological addictions. Massimo Recalcati (2009) frequently mentions this topic in his last works, talking about a liquidness which is the complementary aspect of an intrapsychic rigidity.

Unfortunately, it is not difficult to find in the tragedy of berlusconism those 'social containers' that during the last twenty years have given shape and substance to all of this. The Premier's personal events have deliberately been imposed as an ideal model to follow blindly, up to the current consequences. A number of words and images aimed at fuelling a self-praising and misleading image of the self that often unfortunately overflows, thus affecting the destiny of a nation and its citizens.

### *Clinical psychology for politics: an intervention for the social well-being*

The purpose of this section is to describe an intervention for the social well-being that we carried out in the streets of Palermo some years ago. It was addressed to young people from some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods and realized with the funds of the law 285/97: "Provisions for the promotion of rights and opportunities for childhood and adolescence".

The team was made of about fifty young operators with very different professional backgrounds: very young psychologists, social workers, graduates in philosophy and psychopedagogy, actors, social entertainers and also young people from the target neighbourhoods. All the groups met in general once every two weeks for continuous training. Moreover, each of them – which managed the intervention in a specific neighbourhood – met periodically with other colleagues who were in charge of planning the intervention and keeping a good working atmosphere in every single group. One member from each group acted as a coordinator and facilitator for the other members; also the coordinators met periodically to elaborate what happened in the streets.

In a couple of afternoons per week we organized several activities in each neighbourhood such as street festivals, sport events and workshops on photography, theatre or artistic expressivity. Obviously, many debates took place between operators and young people about life in the neighbourhood, personal and relational issues, family background, problems at school, sexuality, drug consumption, cancer and hope for the future.

As previously mentioned, the project was funded with specific resources for childhood and adolescence, but it was not only addressed to adolescents. The main targets of the intervention were young people aged from 14 to 21 but it would have been too restrictive to have only such a target considering that the scene of our work were the streets and squares of the neighbourhoods. That means, territory in its entirety. This is why we were asked many times by the adults living in those neighbourhoods to deal with issues that were considered as apparently secondary, though crucial for the quality of life in the neighbourhood, such as problematic and unresolved issues about urban conditions.

Small squares and playing fields have been brought to life and saved from urban decline with the contribution of young inhabitants. We acted as mediators with local institutional representatives – often not easily identifiable – about critical issues such as the malfunctioning sewage system which polluted buildings and streets of the neighbourhoods, the recovery of open-pit landfills and so on.

In our opinion, taking care of a territory and its community is one of the most interesting, inevitable and emotionally engaging destination psychological research has led us to. It is the construction of a psychology for politics, for the administration of the *polis*. It is about relational competences made available for the communities in order to realize autonomy and home rule for those same communities and all the people who are part of them.

At this point, the objective of our intervention should be clear: to develop and increase the potential of local communities, their resources and relational networks. We also wanted to give young people the opportunity

to experience and learn that there are different possible ways of living one's own neighbourhood, of telling its story and stories, of taking care of it, which is essential also to take care of one's own existence.

These are only some of the ways to promote social well-being, to have something more on the streets than violence and decline. This work implies a deep commitment and refined competences, for sure more than the ones needed to work as an analyst in a private office.

The intervention consisted of two phases.

First, the so-called mapping of the territory: it lasted several months and consisted in the operators going around the neighbourhoods, wandering to become familiar with the streets, their places and faces, but also to make the neighbourhoods' inhabitants become familiar with this new and unusual presence.

Initially, there were serious doubts about this mutual encounter and the possible impact of the prolonged presence of extraneous groups and the way local communities might have accepted them. Our main concern was to find closed communities, deeply soaked with the typical culture and mindset of Mafia, thus not that permeable or available to something new, unknown and different. What is more – and this is something deriving from Sicilian life and culture in general – institutions and their measures have never been looked at as a positive presence, also due to the harmful way the ruling class has governed this land over time. Our first challenge was therefore to identify the means and ways to act, what to say and how to behave in order to make people understand that we were different from those categories, even though we were still an institutional presence carrying a strong culture of legality.

The fact that institutional representatives were there, taking care of people's needs without self-interests and asking nothing in return represented a strangely new event, in sharp contrast to the deep-rooted culture.

What is more, we often had to prevent the administrative district representatives from interfering and taking advantage of our presence for electoral purposes; our strategy was to open a dialogue with them and simply define roles and competences by setting clear boundaries.

Such results were concretely achieved with the second phase of our intervention: knowing and acknowledging each other, establishing a connection with the territory – a slow and still unstable process, yet not as gruelling as expected. Actually our challenge began with an elementary ascertainment: the overabundance of needs with such a small number of possible – or better, reliable – representatives.

Each neighbourhood of course needed a different period of time to adapt.

Our action was easy: show up, let people approach us, answer their questions, start a dialogue with those who were interested, introduce ourselves to local points of reference such as schools, churches, community centres or cultural centres – where available – but also get to know barmen, shopkeepers and in general the productive part of society in each specific neighbourhood. Also, when children and adolescents approached us and asked to take part in some activities, we talked to parents to explain the reason of our presence there, to reassure them and to make ourselves available.

To sum up, we built a network of connections with the local community through constant dialogue, and our role was to establish and take care of the relationship between the participants.

Theories about the technique of participation and group conduction are extraordinary because they are easily refutable, rearrangeable and applicable to very different contexts, and this is because the work in the community also has completely different prerequisites from the point of view of its practical implementation. The analytic psychotherapeutic setting is based on the contrast between thought and action; in the interaction between participants it is necessary to reduce action so to leave the widest possible space to thought, reflection and verbal interaction.

Art therapies have taught us a different way of conceiving clinical work as a road which passes through participated interaction – that is already relation and communication – to connect with thought and speech. Games as a pretext to build a text. But neither the pretext nor the text is prevalent, they are both equally important as foundations of the relation.

The real challenge is therefore to constantly connect thought and action, like the strings in a knot it is impossible to undo, made of relations and human bonding.

For this reason we are not simply entertainers, even though we accept proposals and set up different kinds of games. And this is why we are not simply psychologists who listen and respond with dialogue, even though we listen and talk a lot. Sometimes the most rewarding thing to have in return is an action rather than a word or a conversation.

What is clear is how complex and difficult it may be to manage all these levels which are intertwined, how necessary it is to be constantly trained to carefully think of all the multiple variables at stake and to keep a professional identity which is however poor because of its uncertainty.

The academic work done by the team represents a crucial part of this study, because it shows that it is impossible to take care of anything if first we don't learn how to take care of ourselves.

A continuous and constant training was fundamental, not only to develop better technical competences but also – and most of all – to have relational spaces where to restore relationships from their potentially toxic elements. This is another significant difference from the psychotherapeutic approach, which anyhow aims at the patient's healing. And it is no coincidence that a medical term is used in a strong sense to suggest the strong ethical tension at the base of psychotherapy, whose objective is however people's wellbeing. Such difference entails a different idea of the time of a relation, with a series of emotional complications which derive from it.

The clinical and social operator must be able to manage the extremely variable structure of the setting and have both the context and the aim of the intervention always clear in mind.

One last consideration needs to be done about the demand. Obviously, the whole intervention starts because institutions commission it to the group of operators. There is not – and cannot be – any kind of demand coming directly from those people the project is addressed to.

For this reason it is necessary to simply make oneself available to others in a state of participated listening, without forcing anything, without trying to create the demand.

It is necessary to try and act as catalysts whose presence may bring to light people's various needs and who may help exploring different relational spaces. All this very often turns into structured requests for intervention and help.

These are some of the possible paths to follow in order to make available to the *polis* competences and models of intervention on that vital social fabric made of people and communities.

A clinical and social intervention then, which becomes at the same time an intervention of social politics, aimed at increasing the existential possibilities of disadvantaged people or of those who are undergoing a critical period of transformation – like adolescents often do – or those who live at the supposed margins and at risk of isolation.

It is also extremely important to have a relational space where to conceive and experiment a different way of thinking about oneself as an individual being part of a community, which is itself a vital space to take care of, to govern and nurture. A space where the *polis* can be conceived as something inevitable in one's own existence, a dimension of citizenship and belonging, a mental and relational dimension in whose absence there is often only emptiness and bewilderment.

Such mental dimension – the *polis* – cannot absolutely be taken for granted today, but needs to be achieved like social and relational competences in order to peacefully live and govern the social space, the *agorà*, the various streets and squares which are the scenes of our real existence, not replaceable at all by the virtual squares of media and computers.

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