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Social  
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 CENSIS

42<sup>nd</sup>

ITALY

TODAY

FRANCOANGELI

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## I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS





1. The year now drawing to a close has seen three different kinds of crises overlapping and intertwining: the creeping fragility of the Italian sociocultural structure, already noted last year; the proliferation of many small and medium-sized collective fears; and then, the sudden, explosive panic spread by an almost unprecedented international financial meltdown.

2. In our 2007 Report, the use of the term “mush” caught the public’s imagination. The phrase refers to a totality of individual, basic organisms living alongside each other without any form of reciprocal integration, and thus powerless and without a future. This term was, and still is well suited to the particularly blurred nature of the Italian social system, characterized by a high incidence of unconnected, subjective individuals, without any impetus to work towards common goals and commitments.

After daring to make such a ruthless assessment that caused uproar in the media, it is right and proper to return to the matter a year later, to verify or more precisely qualify its interpretation. In the meantime, have events confirmed that “deep-set fragility due to weak connections”? It has been corroborated by the accentuation of the anthropological drift that made such an impact on us at the time: the pre-eminence of emotions as drivers for individual and collective psychology; the tendency to search for new, even stronger emotions; the propensity to “repeatedly” experiment with these emotions (getting high or at worst becoming addicted) or to cultivate expectations for new psychic impressions; the multiplication of presumed “experiences of the soul” which actually end up as soulless exercises, not even providing a relish for the experience; and the fascination of living in the moment (where violence or mental distortion deceptively create the impression of an unrepeatable glimpse of eternity, whereas they are just steps into the void). People who read about Italian life on a daily basis, looking more at

the crime news than politics, know that such an anthropological regression exists – above and beyond surprises or horrors reported in the media – with its dangerous effects of social fragility. And they know it is most probably in expansion.

3. So, on the basis of this, it should be no surprise that the last year has seen the rising emergence of a variety of fears, of different types and importance. It could be dubbed the year of fear, in a spiral fed by the mass media's exploitation of the issues in a bid to attract the daily collective attention, thus broadcasting endless fear-evoking stories. Fear was also exploited by politicians, who found it advantageous to emphasize collective fears in an election year, making promises to tackle them with suitable public security or social protection initiatives.

As a result, public opinion was gripped by many fears (both major and minor) in the first few months of the year: fear of immigrants; of robberies and thefts (perhaps by Rom youngsters); of petty street crime; of road accidents caused by young drivers under the influence of drink and drugs; fear of youth violence, especially the increase in bullying, now even seen in hitherto unexpected age ranges; fear of unemployment or temporary employment; followed by more specific socioeconomic fears (loss of spending power, the consumer downturn, difficulties in making mortgage repayments etc.). The list could be continued, but examples serve more to jog people's memories rather than to provide an exhaustive rundown.

In the face of these many fears, politicians have tried to introduce specific measures to boost security, ranging from the deployment of soldiers on the streets to the introduction of a social card for the less well-off. It is still too early to properly evaluate the impact of these initiatives, even as far as public opinion is concerned, but an impression, perhaps only on face value, suggests that, in the end, the spiral of fear has produced a deeper and more personal sense of insecurity, almost further adding to the feeling of fragility.

4. However an examination of this impression became less of a priority because the small and medium-sized fears were overtaken by the "major fear", a generalized panic induced by an international financial meltdown that could endanger Italy's economy and its future in the international socio-economic sphere.

In the last few months thousands of pages have been written describing and interpreting the various aspects of this panic, from the vaguely neo-ideological (on the free market or the return of nationalization) to those about

the interwoven web of interests involved (the relationship between the world of finance and the banks on the one hand, and the real economy on the other) and the more immediate, mainstream impact (the new unemployed, the new poor, the new social security safeguards etc.). But the most striking thing is that the crisis appeared to mark a turning point in the very way of considering Italy's development, and whether it can or must develop further. Almost every day, one hears the phrase "Things will never be like they used to be" used to urge everyone (consumers, companies, banks etc.) to make changes in their attitudes and behavior. "Big crisis, big fear", because the crisis was unexpected and its effects appear unforeseen and somewhat uncontrollable.

The national and international networks of political responsibility tackled the big fear with carefully weighed interventions, perhaps because they previously dealt with the small- and medium-sized fears on a case-by-case basis. Convinced it was mainly a financial crisis, priority was given to security measures propping up the financial and banking system, to guarantee the physical functioning of the real economy, as well as companies and families, in simple terms, sociopolitically "sensitive" areas. The political determination – verging on "personalization" – displayed in recent months is significant proof of this trend.

Obviously we are not yet able to understand the depth of the crisis and outline the prospects for the future. But there can be no denying it has been a salutary collective warning and *habet rationem signi* ("there was a reason for the signal").

The "signal" has been sent, now it remains to be seen if it can become a challenge and a provocation for everyone, something significant in a society like Italy, where the most successful challenges have been those met with the greatest collective mobilization.

5. So, taking a more long term view, we will verify if and how Italy's social society can confront the crisis with vigorous reaction to recuperate the continual advances it has made in the last decades. Though this should be prefaced with the warning always necessary in Italy: remember that when media dramatization stokes anxiety about events (as seen in recent weeks), the *Italian tendency to repress phenomena and minimize events, in the easygoing and reassuring confirmation of the system's basic soundness* is always lying in wait ready to pounce.

6. First of all, there could be the *tendency to repress* the crisis in indifference, almost in the hope that the major fear is nothing more than

“another fear”, one of the many generated by the inextricable complexity of the society in which we live.

Italian collective culture is expert at running for safety, organizing life so as not to notice the drama of things: “Bevagna at war? Unthinkable” is what we wrote seven years ago, just after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers and the start of the war in Afghanistan. This phrase referred to that collective tendency to purely concentrate on the quality of life found in small “hamlet” settlements, which is one of the outstanding, or even well-grounded characteristics of social evolution today.

For the moment we do not have such an exemplary metaphor to cite (it is probably too soon to bring the matter into focus), but we have the impression there is a certain propensity within society to let the crisis pass, reinterpreting the factors close at hand to achieve a more or less transitory re-grouping.

Perhaps it will be a new emphasis on business (nevertheless Italy has 5.5 million entrepreneurs, representing a significant mass); it will be the increased role played by the family in the way people earn, consume and live; it will be a strategic renewal of the territory as the bedrock for competitive quality and not just good living; at worst it will be a critical re-exploration of recent myths about the western way of life (subjectivity, money, competitiveness, the creation of values etc.) as a way of establishing “rules of measurement” for life and for people. Perhaps the reevaluation will be a mixture of these more or less “retrograde” propensities, but it is probable that some of this is circulating in the social system, spreading the sensation that “the major fear may be nothing but another fear”. It is not for those who work in the field of phenomenological analysis to express a substantial judgment on this collective sensation; our duty is only to point it out.

7. This all goes in tandem with a *parallel tendency to downplay things*, based on the suspicion that the current “epochal” crisis is merely a new expression of the “bubbles” that have cropped up in the modern economy (or better in modern finance) for years.

The enormous availability of money that has exploded in Italy over the last twenty years, and the widespread propensity to “make money with money” have slowly imposed (whoever wanted this to happen) the formation of increasingly larger waves of speculation with worldwide impact. So, in the last ten years we have had the new economy “bubble”, which rapidly burst; the property “bubble,” which also miserably imploded; the oil price “bubble”, which quickly exploded. We have had a more or less convincing attempt to create a “commodity bubble”, especially for foodstuffs, which has folded in on

itself if not actually burst. So, it is understandable for the “common people” to ask the question: in the end, after many adventures with very random loses and gains, has the international finance system thought to “make a bubble out of itself”, namely on the dynamics of financial values (in the Stock Exchange, share prices, the banks’ scalability, slumping funds, etc.)?

So, a bubble like any other then, even if it is necessarily of enormous, planetary dimensions. The underlying currents of the country’s psychological climate are all tinged with the temptation to accept this conclusion, paradoxically supported, in part, by the fact that the reaction by national and international powers reaffirms the role of politics and of public action over the basically speculative gambling of the major international financial circuits, in an attempt at avoiding a distortion of the real economies’ functioning, especially those that were inherently viable.

**8.** This was important for an economy like Italy’s, which can *indulge in the reassurance* concerning the basic soundness of its development model, laboriously and tenaciously built up over the last decades. More than other systems held to be more modern, this model has been shown capable of facing up to the storm created by the current crisis. Indeed, with a hitherto rather uncultivated national pride, it has been authoritatively recalled that Italy’s development model can resist the crisis better because it is based:

- upon the supremacy of the real economy, rather than on the ambitions and ambiguities of the financial economy;
- upon the supremacy of manufacturing and its modernity in terms of innovation in products and processes (“we are second only to Germany”);
- upon the supremacy of small businesses, now so widespread and branched out in various niches in the world market that it has become an indispensable factor in the daily processes of globalization;
- upon the supremacy of family economics and their processes adjusting consumption, savings and investments;
- upon the supremacy of localism, where the quality of community sees the territory as an added value, acting as a competitive factor and with a role in development, also internationally speaking (“we are the country of districts”);
- and consequently upon the supremacy of local banks and all the banking structures that maintain daily “counters of osmosis” with families, businesses and the territory. This is not a secondary structure in a financial crisis where the fundamental problem is capital on the one hand, and client loyalty on the other.

Reexamining these conditions of strength (which CENSIS has proudly discovered and praised over the years) one can also smile about the fact that politicians and observers who for years turned up their noses at the importance of these factors, are today extolling them as aspects of solidity, almost the real bastions of the Italian system's soundness, even the ability of the country's financial institutions to realistically look at the possible interactions between the financial crisis and the real economy, though naturally with unavoidable concern.

9. Whatever the reference base, we cannot, however, exaggerate the tendency to repress, minimize and reassure. Whatever collective emotions come to the fore in the near future, it would nevertheless be a mistake to deny that the crisis in these months represents a strong "sign" of Italy's socioeconomic evolution. And it would be damaging to lapse into the hope that everything will be resolved in the long term, perhaps by using those adaptive abilities and cunning that have been the Italians hallmark for decades if not centuries.

Indeed, we cannot forget the tremendous doubts expressed, also at the beginning of this Report, about the innermost fragility of Italy's social structure and collective culture: the former stamped with a perverse abundance of emotions; and the latter delineated by the inability to integrate the individual elements in society. When combined, these factors are dangerous influences towards a society without distinction, of slushy mush. If we decide to faithfully sit it out for the long term, without any viable reaction to a crisis affecting all the world's socioeconomic systems (some of which, most probably, will spark off fundamentally aggressive reactions), then we risk that the long term actually becomes a position for contraction and the renunciation of further development.

- In other words, the risk is to passively accept trite slogans and watchwords that are no longer universally shared (we are already seeing this today with the themes of the market, westernization, globalization, an enlarged Europe to a greater or lesser extent etc.);
- another risk is to passively accept the more or less virtual symbols of a modernity that we have not adequately internalized (pop music, fashion, the state-of-the-art cell phone, mega-events, etc.);
- we risk the continuation of living individualistically, with few significant relationships, accepting a way of life that changed Italian attitudes and behavior in the 1960s and '70s but no longer speaks to us today;
- we risk social hardship (and perhaps also conflicts starting to reemerge)

that could come from the reduction in the basic security provided by a currently crisis-hit welfare system, and from the subsiding hope of becoming a middle-class society, given the present prospects and fear of impoverishment;

- we risk suffering further effects of the age-old imbalances in Italian society (the underdevelopment of the south, the inefficiency of public administration, the dramatic power of organized crime).

In other, more blunt terms, we also risk imploding in our very own bubble (perhaps warm and soft) that is just as dangerous as the ones previously mentioned. Let us remember that apparently strong systems have “imploded and collapsed”, from communism at the end of the 1980s to the international finance system in recent months. And it cannot be ruled out that by passively accepting the current crisis, we are doomed to a silent implosion.

So we cannot ignore the challenge, the alarm and the fear generated by the current situation: it should not inspire terror for a potential imponderable future, but it is not enough to react in a purely adaptive way, we must go one step further.

**10.** In biology, where there is a more in-depth examination of evolutionary processes, the traditional term *ad-aptation* (to be coherent with what happens) is contrasted with the term *ex-aptation*, to indicate a non-automatic process of adaptation made essential and incisive by an external factor, a chemical reactant, a stimulus for transformation. More a process of metamorphosis than pure adaptation.

If one looks at recent history, it is easy to see that from 1945 to 1975 Italy underwent its “first metamorphosis”, imposed by the indescribable difficulties from which the country was emerging, and fed by the spirit of “finding a way around things” we had passively developed for centuries. But it was also strongly driven by some major external factors, namely by exaptation: the explosion of genuine democratization alongside its political-electoral manifestation; the chemical reactant of the unstoppable spread of individual subjectivity; the lever of power wielded by public intervention in the economy and welfare; the behavioral attraction of the western lifestyle model. So, a metamorphosis that was not simply a form of adaptation, but something more. And if we can now speak of a long-term phenomenon, it is because the historic period we are considering is so diverse and complex that its effects are still being felt.

But the difficulties we face today, in a less dramatic context than at that time (we are thinking of the crisis of meaning, of direction, of individual and



collective vitality resulting from the frustrations of a lost war following on from those created by a senseless dictatorship), can be a useful challenge for us, in that they can help us avoid the implosion we felt was so close a year ago, and spark off processes of far-reaching change. To summarize, they can push us towards a second metamorphosis, perhaps already silently underway, hidden in the shadows like all the innovative processes that matter in Italy.

**11.** In every metamorphosis, the decisive problem is to make room for chemical reactants that can generate transformation, escaping the dependence on society's historical and/or primary characteristics, the ones that tend to be governed by processes of pure adaptation, without too many rifts or too much innovation.

As a matter of fact, Italy is not an amorphous country (something amorphous cannot be transformed), it has built a development model with highly original traits, which can even grow stronger in times of crisis. A new metamorphosis will not happen if we rely on these alone, which would only lead to a collective adjustment corroborating the first metamorphosis, which occurred between 1945 and 1975. Indeed one cannot deny that today's fears reposition behaviors and decisions towards the berth of society's ancient "characteristics": anchored to individualism, the subjective control of social relations, the economic strength of the family, the importance of the home, the small, unseen entrepreneurial initiatives, community cohesion, the importance of the territory and its institutional dynamics, the habit of being spectators (on television, in the sports stadiums, in politics), the fundamental dominance of personal interests over collective interests, the poor opinion of the State's role in development.

In every historical period we are thus tempted to bring back these original traits into play because of their potential consistency and adaptation to the concrete daily reality. This lets the media's anthropological glorification of the virtual dimension prevail, even in knowledge that it will soon be quickly consumed.

**12.** If we continue on this path we certainly cannot think of a second metamorphosis, in fact we will actually only heighten the significance and role of the first. But, as one of Italy's renowned figures in publishing Giulio Bollati wrote, "the Italians' nature is the result of history and of invention", and that time-honored intuition is quietly resurfacing through underground processes that are slowly changing Italy's evolutionary development. Perhaps these processes are too sophisticated to be called exaptation, but they are moving along that wavelength, also with regards to original characteristics.

Thus, it is most probable that the second metamorphosis will be the result of a combination of the traditional structure of the first and the external input (the chemical ingredient) that will come:

- from the presence and the role of immigrants, given that many future innovations will spring from their qualitative consistency, their demographic vitality and their emulative reproduction of the entrepreneurial spirit;
- from the action of the vibrant minority whom we mentioned last year, especially those protagonists (small and medium-sized commercial and financial players) who still have a significant role in the international economy;
- from further growth in the territory's competitiveness (we will have new urban belts beyond the districts and hamlets, new city-enterprises, new urban poles, with unpredictable effects on territorial mobility and commuting);
- from the affirmation of a propensity towards moderate and measured consumption and behavior;
- from the passage moving from a mixed economy (public-private) to an oligarchy, combining both public and private economic entities (foundations, banking groups, utilities etc.);
- from innovation in geo-political trends, given that one can predict a reduction in western "dominance". Then there is the still embryonic attention being paid (prompted by either curiosity or fear) to trends in politics, culture and religion from the east and south of the world.

These are some of the "ingredients" potentially concurring to determine an *exaptation*, i.e. innovative adaptation, in the standard-bearers and extollers of innate Italian characteristics: suffice it to remember that immigrants, or new opportunities for women, are considered "too marginal" and out of context. But it is likely that the effects cannot be avoided. If one observes them closely, one sees they come "from the depths of the sea", or rather from essential primordial instincts and not from the lofty rationality to be found in the firmament of international culture. As such, they are extremely coherent with the most profound aspects of Italy's survival over time.

**13.** Therefore the country's second metamorphosis will be linked to a progressive mixture of many specific mechanisms and small metamorphoses: since it is impossible to propose a unified interpretation of the relevant phenomena and processes, it will be imperative to accept a broad range of players, options and timings for the countermeasures adopted.

The economic and social system needs to take a deep breath to assert its

authority and bear fruit. It is not so easy to accept such a banal truth, especially when we are in the midst of the crisis. The managerial classes and not only the politicians, tend to move in the opposite direction: they reduce the range of decisions, limiting them to very narrow spheres of responsibility, contracting them to the short term view or even focusing purely on the present.

While it is not so interesting to know that the number of world leaders has risen from eight to twenty or more, it is interesting to note that planetary-scale measures and initiatives can be adopted in just a few rooms, but then reality follows more diffuse options, behaviors and fears. It would be detrimental to take point-by-point action (an earnings supplement fund here, government subsidies for replacing old goods there), which will never help to recover a system involving many different subjects (the large-scale market, if you wish), the only dimension necessary to collectively emerge from the crisis.

The large-scale market, an open economy and decisional polycentrism are still always the options to be respected.

So, it is not interesting to know that the current crisis has created urgencies and decisions to be made in very short timescales. Indeed Italians cannot limit themselves to actions to be taken on a day or over a weekend, because, if they want to be successful, these actions must operate in the necessarily longer timescales of the various entities involved. The recapitalization of a bank (whether large or small, joint stock or merchant) can actually take place in a few hours, but then that bank needs to adopt suitable defensive and development action across all its daily work routines. The temporal contraction of decision making could even lead to sterility in the medium term.

**14.** Let us make room for the metamorphosis, ensuring it involves more subjects, has more time and has more input from market dynamics: not only centralized power, but power accompanied by the wealth of connections; not decision making reduced purely to the present, but decision making accompanied by a wealth of imagination. We must escape from the twofold imprisonment caused by a lack of understanding of the connection between primary characteristics and their essential chemical reactions; and a lack of imagination about the future, deliberately left to the scourge of the unforeseen. And this twofold leveling off leads to a third kind of entrapment, making many people think that vertical decisions made “in real time” are the only possible solutions, if not the only ones suited to a society with a strong anthropological bent, almost as though control over development can be resolved by a succession of short-term decision-making announcements.

Whereas those who have always followed the path of a long term

philosophy, with its slow evolution and its collective participation, know we will only move forward by creating a second metamorphosis based on a “Giulio Bollati-style” mixture of history and invention. With the reasonable hope that the decades needed to understand (and today perhaps extol) the values of the first metamorphosis, will not be needed for the second to take root in the paradigms of Italy’s managerial classes.