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Social  
picture  
and  
trends

 CENSIS

44<sup>th</sup>

ITALY

TODAY

FRANCO ANGELI



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and Isa Mohrhoff.

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## I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS



1. We are about to come to the end of the two-year period 2009-2010 forecast as the bearer of an unprecedented economic and social crisis. And there is no escaping the feeling in the collective psychology that the period has passed without seeing the destructive effects predicted at the time. We have hung on through the most dramatic months and events thanks to the structural nature of our development model. While there are obvious signs of strains in daily life and worrying levels of unemployment, we have nevertheless maintained our earnings and consumption. In the last few months, people have started to believe that recovery is underway, though we are not yet seeing the signs of a full-blown upswing. However, some movement is starting to surface, for example the many Italian companies now operating in emerging markets. Every day we are hit by new waves of fear, almost fright, about the aggressive international speculation on our public finances, but the collective psychology has not internalized these fears. This may be because these anxieties are generated by remote things, way beyond our reach, that cannot be controlled by people themselves, whom, at best, have already accounted for the aforementioned increase of tensions in daily life.

2. So for once, in the face of a predictable situation, and, without wanting to appear too scandalous, we can break free from the usual compulsion to wait for and/or predict “what’s around the corner”. Though, of course, this is a totally understandable impulse in people who write and/or read annual socioeconomic reports.

Instead we can more humbly direct our attention to an examination of what Italian society has become after a difficult and troubled decade. In the last two years our fears have reached a peak, but the entire period has also been marked by a collective resistance to symptoms and processes of decline. To some extent this resistance has been enough to satisfy us, but it has also exhausted

us, giving rise to the doubt that, even if growth does start soon, our society will not have enough solidity and strength to tackle the complex challenges we must face.

Continuing to repeat the Italian model, as we have done in recent years, will be a valuable weapon to defend Italian society against global crises or decline at home, to a lesser or greater extent, but it does not guarantee a genuine recovery. And what's more significant, it will not involve collective engagement, like the wide-ranging participation we have seen in our development over the last ten years.

**3.** We have deliberately used the terms solidity and strength, knowing full well they go together, since strength is not merely an expression of energy and collective psychological will, but is also the dynamic assertion of society's complex maturation.

And it is this maturity that gives rise to doubts: feelings of fragility reverberate through Italian society today, both in individuals and *en masse*, making one think that the foundations of the whole system – including the moral and mental spheres – are becoming unstable. We often see people behaving and adopting attitudes that are rudderless, indifferent, cynical, passively adaptive or getting by as best they can, held prisoner by the influence of the media, condemned to the present without the anchor of the past or the future. There is an implicit, widespread resignation, not only in the face of the terrible violence committed by organized crime (“nothing can be done”), but also when analyzing the craziness of many daily insanities (“we're all a bit mad”).

In short, society is insecure in its very human essence. And if you examine the stratospheres of sociopolitical debate (strictness and recovery, austerity and development) you wonder whether discussions are deliberately being conducted on such a high level because people are avoiding tackling the nub of the problem, which has become more complex over the years, namely a collapse in the basic foundations that are the fundamental cornerstones of people, collective bodies and institutions.

**4.** But what is collapsing and creating that feeling of flatness, monotony, lacking any major peaks, in which we feel plunged (expressed by Heidegger as “the desert grows”)?

First and foremost, the noble heights of our social and sociopolitical life are collapsing, as we mentioned last year. This collapse can be seen in the legacy of the *Risorgimento* movement uniting Italy, the pre-eminence of the

lay State, the culture of reformism, the faith in a continual and progressive development.

At the same time, some important landmarks, hallmarks of our collective history have also crumbled. Just think of the widespread desublimation of archetypes, ideals and role models. Or the loss of meaning in social relations at all levels, condemning people to live in that state of isolation we have previously defined as “mush”. Or the progressive disappointment in the domination of the market and the liberalization/privatization of the economy. Or the inescapable waning of the option to verticalize (and personalize) power in such a way as to create healthy decision-making faculties in those governing the country.

The third collapse refers to the spatial and temporal references in everyday life, especially in relation to individual psychologies. Modernism, post-modernism, globalization, and life on a planetary scale have created a world where time has been reset to zero (so-called real time), and thus space has been reset to zero too, with events occurring simultaneously in every corner of the globe. This has destroyed the meaning time and distance once created in the lives of people and populations.

5. Everything has flattened out and become more monotonous, with only the frequently empty horizontal dimension winning out, so much so it has been said the globalized world is “a football pitch that does not even have goal posts to aim the ball at”. While not as elegant, the quote is reminiscent of the above-cited “the desert grows”.

This rising trend towards the horizontal in socioeconomic and sociopolitical dynamics should not be worrying for us Italians, as we were the first to understand it and, in some way, exploit it. This dates back to the start of the 1970s, when we established the black market, the small business, economic sectionalism. But over time, we have had to regretfully observe a sociopolitical culture unable to draw up ideas and rules that are coherent with the growing horizontality, namely the rising polycentrism in individuals and powers. And in fact, sociopolitical culture deliberately bucked the trend, putting emphasis on the less than glorious period of verticalization and concentration of personal power.

So, we should not be surprised if a “flat” insipid society like Italy’s also flattens the people within it, causing them to collapse, and, in particular, flattening their subjective ability and strength. A high subjective society, which had built its fifty-year history on the vitality, determination and strength of individuals, now has to face the decline of subjectivity. Yes, it is

still strong enough for people and families to withstand the crisis. But it does not have enough strength to deal with processes rooted in and driven by external forces from outside Italy.

The same is true for competition, which does not offer any points of reference or give subjective instincts something solid to grip onto. It is not enough to tackle dynamics and circumstances where individual subjectivity is diminishing and losing importance. In a nutshell, it is not enough in a world where it is not people who decide things, but the reverse.

6. This flattening of subjectivity, this horizontality given free rein, have led to three very unusual phenomena that shed light on what is happening: there is rising confusion, meaning social trends are moving within a blurred picture with indistinct boundaries; there is an increasing “lack of discipline” in society, now governed by a vacillating, random, and centerless system; and there is rising disorder/intemperance in people’s impulses and behaviors.

7. There is growing confusion. It can be seen in the political dialectic, which is increasingly unclear and polarized; in journalistic reporting, with pages of identical news stories that run in tandem, barring unscrupulously targeted reports; in television, forced to communicate in a disproportionately provocative way and report events that have no lasting impact on the collective psyche; in the new forms of technological communication, where it is difficult to differentiate between messages and individuals and their respective accountabilities; in the field of institutional responsibility, which is too divided and contradictory; in the labor market, characterized by a nebulous combination of unemployment, unstable jobs, black market workers etc.; and in the country’s very ethnic composition, as so little importance is given to processes of integration. And this is without even mentioning what is happening on the ambiguous and diaphanous boundaries between the legal and criminal economies.

Italy is not merely a “fluid” society, as some people have said; it is even more decisively confused. It is so confused that the best of us indulge in the fashion for an almost compulsive recourse to fact and figures, quantification and measurements, monitoring and evaluating.

While the worst among us fall back on the philosophy that “nothing can be done”, which seems the most vindictive reaction imaginable, and certainly the most pointless.

The “abundance” of these two attitudes means the confusion is destined to stay confused for a long time.

8. There is an inert cause lying behind the growth and permanence of confusion, and it is the fact that in the flattened, insipid plains of today's society there is no system of regulation, no "discipline". For example, the many different local rules governing the DOCG certification of wine, or the fact that the European Union busies itself with regulating minute facets of daily life. Overall, Italian society lacks regulation: everything appears random and fluctuating. So we can talk about power and politics until the cows come home, and we can also discuss the more profound concepts of biopower and biopolitics; but we are no longer able to identify a basic underlying system – whether central or suburban, moral or judicial – that regulates behavior, attitudes, and values.

The same futile hot air is also wasted on the word "values" and the issue of ethics: these concepts are now rhetorically bandied about and squandered in every kind of philosophy, whether rooted in the real world or based on the influence of the stars. In the face of the inherent weakness in values and ethics, a cynical-pragmatic drift ends up triumphing. Day after day, discipline and authority are on the wane not only as visible phenomena, but also in their symbolic meaning, which is most coherently linked to individual and collective psychology.

9. It should therefore come as no surprise that this situation leads to a widespread and disturbing proliferation of uncontrolled drives in Italian society. In fact, the day-to-day trivialities of Italian life reflect many kinds of behavior caused by purely unrestrained drives, lacking any sense of purpose, and founded on a self-referential, narcissistic selfishness. This kind of behavior is not only being seen on an individual level, with the uninhibited addiction to intoxicating drugs, the narcissistic trance of anorexia, the libidinal retreat into depression. And it is not merely restricted to those who use crime to climb the ranks of power within the criminal system.

These phenomena are much more widespread and perhaps even invasive. You just have to look around to verify these unrestrained drives: in the episodes of domestic violence; in the uncalled-for and at times senseless aggression on the streets; in the inclination to commit common crimes driven more by apathy than cruelty; in the trend for equally apathetic, easily accessible sexual pleasures; in the research for extreme forms of external stimulation to compensate for an inner vacuum; in the frenzied hunt for objects to purchase and enjoy; in the often crazy search for death-defying experiences, from kids indulging in so-called balconing to those who deliberately crash vehicles into walls at high speed.

All this, the sum of many individual behaviors, becomes a dense collective wave of uncontrolled drives, where a person's conscious intent (the "thing they wanted to say") is often unintelligible. Perhaps this is because the very act in question expresses an almost compulsive lack of meaning, reflecting an underlying disintegration in every kind of social relationship.

**10.** However, it is part and parcel of the researcher's art and responsibility to step aside from and go beyond this collective lack of meaning. There is a need to dig deeper, understand, interpret, and find a meaning behind what is happening in the innermost, though not hidden, actually publically exposed entrails of our social life. The researcher must also overcome their intellectual resistance to "analyzing the void", since the suspicion is that the dominant element in a society where confusion, lack of discipline, and uncontrolled drives hold sway is actually that very void, reflected in both the moral and psychic spheres.

Italian society is dangerously bearing the signs of the void, as an historical cycle filled with interests and social conflicts is being followed by one where all constructive interests and conflicts are being annihilated and anaesthetized, so that whatever might threaten the apathy and the self-referential drives is being expunged from society.

**11.** Running in parallel to and in symbiosis with this, we see that individual psychology is equally characterized by the compulsion of the void. People in Italian society are being left more and more to themselves, free to pursue their own whims, no longer subject to the everyday control of basic rules, or dictated to by their belonging to intermediate systems. As such, these people can gloriously embark on essentially personal adventures, for example the explosion of small businesses seen in recent decades. But they can also slide towards the dissipation of their own selves, as is happening today. The development model arduously constructed in the past is being gobbled up, repeated, and consumed. The idea of belonging to more or less formal social groups is being eroded and dispersed. And often, people more or less consciously allow the dissolution of their own personalities.

This secret, dual form of self-annihilation, which creates and feeds the void, generates a widespread, but highly personalized sense of insecurity in people. Obviously, generally speaking we can cope with an objective sense of insecurity, since it is a trait of our modern world. We can also agree that a certain level of uncertainty is the name of the game in a process of globalization that imposes extreme flexibility across the board. But, at the

same time, we must realize that all this translates into a rising tide of personal insecurity. And this is not easy to accept in a society where security has been pursued as a fundamental value and has guaranteed us stable jobs, our own homes and a consistent level of savings.

**12.** Insecurity is the real virus operating in society in these years, and this is what needs to be worked upon. Yes, it is a phenomenon that affects people as individuals but it also has a large social bearing, because the many personal insecurities all add up to create a result that sits uncomfortably with our tradition, so deeply rooted in the supremacy of security.

This has led to a reflection that is, for the moment, a little hesitant and basic, but the deliberation is, nevertheless, ambitiously rational:

- on the one hand, one thinks insecurity should be tackled from on high, with actions aimed at reassuring fears. More laws and rules in every sphere that produces anxiety; more control over economic contingencies and as a way to stop the erosion of the collective society; more order in everything; more obligations and duties for everyone;
- on the other hand, one thinks the battle against insecurity should start from a grassroots' level. This could be done by increasing people's skills, their preparation, their rational capacities and developing their conscience through policies that encourage merit as the only way to achieve affirmation for individuals and to enable the governing classes to develop and grow.

Laws fostering a sense of security and the promotion of merit: today, these are the two hypothetical responses to individual and collective insecurity. However, these solutions may be too "rational" to combat an insecurity that appears driven mainly by irrational impulses. Newspaper stories do not express any clear desire for meaning: what do the kids who go balconing, or those who murder close relatives or casual bystanders actually want to say to us? What do they want to be? But, in the face of their evident lack of meaning, we must not analyse these events in too rational a way, otherwise the only thing we are left with is the impotent incredulity and dismay we all feel when considering these kinds of behaviors.

**13.** If rational regulations and conscious reasoning are no longer enough to understand what is going on, then we need to dig even deeper into people's personalities and into the collective subjectivity.

We need to have the courage to look inside ourselves and verify if the individual subconscious is functioning, and how. Here we are not referring

to the subconscious as the irrational dimension in each and every one of us, but the place where we mentally regulate our own powers and behaviors.

In fact, the subconscious is the seat where two great life forces square up to each other and adjust their influence accordingly: the forces of law and desire. It is desire that expresses the wish and the need to overcome the void, experienced as a “lack of being”, by purchasing objects and pursuing relationships. And it is law (external or internalized authority) that, by denying or restraining desire, causes individuals to either adjust to it or give it up in a neurotic way.

a) However, with every passing day it seems as if desire is becoming more lifeless, losing strength, weakened by a socioeconomic world:

- which has satisfied the majority of individual psychologies thanks to a long period of satiating desires harbored for decades, if not centuries (owning our own homes and furnishing them, having more mobility thanks to cars and planes, getting an education and a qualification, having holidays, free time, etc.);
- and which, on the other hand, is based on the dominance of consumerism, which means people are forced to enjoy objects they never actually wanted, or did not want enough (kids forced to be happy with toys they’ve never asked for; adults forced to buy, rather than actually wanting the umpteenth type of mobile phone, etc.).

Perhaps the people who predicted that capitalism would triumph through the strategy of continually intensifying consumption, as an unbeatable tool that leaves no room for desires, were right. So today, the subconscious lacks the basic material with which to work, namely desire. It is too weakened to be able to create that dramatic clash with the law, necessary to spark off the alchemy that drives people’s personal values and behaviors.

b) What’s more, the other element in this mental alchemy is not in any better shape. The triumph of the horizontal and the process of desublimation weaken individual frames of reference to the vertical and irrevocable power of the law, the authority of one’s father, religious dictats, one’s very conscience, which actually often becomes the passkey and/or alibi for tritely self-referential short cuts to get around regulations. We are living without rules, almost without individual boundaries of normality, and as such everything in peoples’ minds is random wandering, unable to refer back to a solid foundation.

**14.** A progressively weakened law, combined with a desire that has increasingly lost power, leads to a dangerous decline in the game of adjust-

ment exercised by the subconscious in every one of us. But this problem is not merely limited to individuals, because society is also suffering the same loss.

In fact, on the one hand, the day-by-day evaporation of the law also leads to a lack of social certainties and not only those in the sphere of values: the rules get mixed up and overlap; power fragments and becomes scattered; and decision-making crumbles. What wins out is the rapid succession of circumstances and the way to face up to them. And even when politics uses its apparent power of last resort (for example in the management of financial flows), it does not seem truly capable of regulating the system.

On the other hand, the collapse of desire leads to the triumph of enjoyment and mass hedonism, to compulsive behaviors, to people's resignation to being manipulated from the outside, to a euphoria of living in the moment, the rejection of any long-term constructive projects, the excessive emphasis on the external world compared to the cultivation of interior worlds. This fragmented individualism increases and its corruption leads to a dangerous social vacuum.

**15.** When faced with this parallel decline in law and desire, the initial temptation is to work on the former, in the conviction that the only solution for a society with growing secularization and desublimation is a return to the fortress of principles (state, civil, moral, and religious) to guarantee those certainties necessary to combat our individual and collective insecurity. But, above and beyond the ambitions and dangers of fundamentalist vocations, it must not be forgotten that Italy does not possess the authoritative figures and institutions which could, or should, restore power to the law. This is because Italian institutions are ineffectual, even if they do have a strong charismatic component (the most striking example is the Catholic Church).

**16.** It would be more useful at this point to call for a re-launch of desire, both individual and collective. A "return to desire" may seem an inappropriate prophetic rallying cry, yet we mean it as an attempt to resuscitate a civil virtue, inviting people to focus on the more intimate sphere of individuals and the community.

This intimate dimension can be the starting point, in the knowledge that only desire "necessitates the other" (whether it be an object, a relationship or a condition), thus "disintoxicating us" from being constantly condemned to self-referential subjectivity. Only desire stops us from being flattened in the entirely horizontal desert onto which we are slipping. Only desire makes us lift our sights from those horizontal networks that ensnare us in the present