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COMMUNITY, ETHICS, AND VALUE

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Towards a common future: hope, social responsibility and sense of community.

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Abstract

The paper analyses the interaction between the individual and his context in the modern, changing world, focusing on the following issues:

- the need for ethical values, i.e. social responsibility as opposed to social individual interests;
- how the respect of differences entails the ethical principle of social justice
- how multiculturalism needs to pursue rights of the individual, and of women

Further significant topics discussed: social identity and sense of community, at a local and global level, in the context of a virtual and technological society. With regards to these topics, connectedness and sense of belonging do not seem sufficient to explain all the implications of social identity and sense of community. The application of research findings on the latter seem

to imply that memories and roots can strengthen social identity, but that sense of community requires a trust in the community and hope for its future.

1. New technologies and sense of community

If we agree with Rappaport that sense of community, identity and belonging derive from shared history, symbols and values, and not merely from territorial divisions, the question becomes: what is the role, potential and significance of the new communication technologies?

The aim, in my opinion, should be to take part in globalization without succumbing to the homogenization produced by the new technologies. As Jacques Cauvin stated, human settlement began in the Neolithic age in order to meet human needs for culture and relationships. It was stone – in the form of dolmens, menhirs, caves, and later columns and palaces – which stood as both the sign and symbol of humanity, as the indicator of cultural and creative progress, interpersonal relationships and human interaction with the environment. Stone and its inscriptions in the distant past had analogous functions to the interactive communication of new technologies and know-how in the present era.

Taking our cue from Calvino in *Le città invisibili* (1972), we can affirm that "the future that becomes reality is the freshest branch of memory". In order to be alive, a branch has to be part of the same tree year in year out; yet it will always be new compared to what it was before, different and yet the same in the continuity of the tree. While in the past stone, and then paper, had constantly renewed functions of relating and communicating, today technology has largely taken over these functions, becoming the instrument of connection, communication and symbology. By engraving and sculpting stone, humanity created the first interactive gate which, among other things, made it possible to communicate human relationships from one generation to another.

The stockpiling of munitions on the Parthenon by the Turks or the grazing of sheep in the Colosseum stand as lessons passed down by centuries which had lost their historical memory. If we are to be able to live in the future, stone will still be the lynchpin of our memory, but it will no longer represent the totality. Multimedia and communities in an undefined space are the new scenario, and have brought new problems and different strategies.

The reconciliation of memory with the future obliges individuals, cities and local communities to update the traditional components of their quality

of life. Those who are able to come up with new ideas for living comfortably in their own mental dimension and in shared social spaces will emerge as the strongest and most successful individuals: the key is to discover how to put the new technologies to good use. Today's great urban contexts are the containers of dynamic communities, where people's aspirations for a good life are invested. Here the local sense of belonging, whether neglected or exaggerated, comes up against the processes of globalization and social transformation.

If, thanks to the new communications systems, our cities constitute the most important stock of ancient values, and represent a catalyst for change, what, then, are the forms and effects of this new phenomenon?

What are the tasks, resources and prospects for the new communication technologies?

Which instruments are available to give back a sense of community and solidarity to our universe of rootless, virtual citizens?

Our various affiliations, seen as resources and roots, reconcile territorial identity with our memory of differences. They allow us not to lose ourselves in the byways of a society whose territorial boundaries have disappeared.

If for Kavafis Ithaca was the place which granted Ulysses the dimension of the voyage, the places of everyday life are the basic connective dimension which makes possible the virtual explorations and globalization of the production processes without a sense of anomy.

In this scenario, according to Serena Dinelli (2002) new technologies can act as an instrument of connection, as an active and interactive gate, a source of active mediation.

The challenge is to create rapid links for common projects, exchanges of know-how, and reciprocal implementation of techniques and knowledge. Or, indeed, there may be new possibilities yet to come.

2. Roots, memories and sense of belonging

History, culture, ethics and sense of community give an insight into the ties between individuals and the community they belong to.

Similarity, interdependence, mutual trust in the meeting of needs, and a sense of social responsibility are all elements of social cohesion and empowerment. Nevertheless, in relations between wealthy, highly industrialised nations and countries with agricultural or pastoral economies, or indeed with reference to degraded areas inhabited by deprived social groupings, the sense of community represents an element of isolation and cultural stagnation...

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Following Sarason (1974), sense of community is what makes possible mutual relationships in a grouping of individuals who share the same territory and living spaces, so as to overcome reciprocal indifference, whether with or without reference to social rules and sanctions. At the local level, in the Euromediterranean area there is nowadays the urgent evidence to foster communities involving ethnic groupings, nations and cultures in which the elements of difference are the source of mutual diffidence and conflict. This is a fertile ground for many of the fundamentalisms threatening today's world. At the same time, a connected issue is that of the interaction of these communities, at a local well rooted level, with the wider processes of globalization. According to Manuel Castells, this is the challenge of glocalisation (1996): a re-balancing of the global and local with a world-wide network of cities which aims at strengthening economic, social and cultural sectors, through peace building and development projects. This approach is based on the belief that globalization can be synchronised with the strengthening of the local quality of life. It therefore calls for the accommodation of global perspectives to local conditions, as well as for a more pronounced role of local subjects in addressing global challenges. In this respect, as we shall see, social psychology has various leads to give us.

Local cultures and religions which are rooted in territorial traditions fear losing their relevance in the face of the intensifying globalization of cultures and markets. Yet the rhythm and intensity of the relations and communications to which we are constantly subjected requires a strong grounding in which identification processes can still be established.

What is at stake is the possibility of maintaining one's roots and sense of belonging without going back to the fundamental origins. Perverse processes of identification are engendered by a strong sense of tradition combined with a lack of confidence in oneself, in the world and in one's own potential. A static adhesion to the past and to memory while refusing to look ahead, are the hallmarks of someone who is too firmly rooted in tradition. Disaggregation, social uncertainty and malaise find an appeal to the past a protective shell against social disturbances. In this perspective the homeland and local interests will become a basic component of the identification processes, acting as the collective point of reference.

This is the seedbed in which all the various forms of religious and ethnic fundamentalism proliferate. We can thus identify in this defence of narrow-mindedness a defence against the malaise of change, that is impervious to a policy that recognises differences.

Our hypothesis is that, in order to reduce the effects of disorientation and loss of identity, the defence of values and the memory of local community traditions must accompany the processes of global interaction.

People should be encouraged to consider identity through a non-homogenizing dialogue, and towards the recognition of differences (regarding spaces, rites and customs). It is not enough to be

tolerant while remaining fundamentally indifferent, and there has to be a reciprocal contamination of boundaries and bonds. In this sense we propose linking the local community with the globalized dimension; the local dimension will become a powerful tool for living in a cosmopolitan community. The homeland (Heimat) will itself sustain the exchanges and globalization, rather than serving as a defence of petty identities and its attendant xenophobia. The challenge is to succeed in getting the differences to interact, but to avoid the personal liberty of one individual violating that of his neighbour. The war in the Balkans has been described as a "war between memories" [1], but this does not mean that we should dismiss the ties generated by the history of peoples.

The Turkish writer Gürsel has described [2] how, having been invited to Serbia a few years ago to participate in a commemoration of the "glorious" defeat of the Serbs in the battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389, he failed to see how that event could possibly provide political and ideological support for waging a new war. At the same time, if memories and roots are extirpated, life itself will be suppressed. The challenge is to consider multiple social identities which interact together, while overcoming the limits of tolerance and the damage of reciprocal impositions. A virtual society, lacking roots and boundaries, is an infinite space in which the absence of a limit or difference causes the absence of social identities, producing a planet of uprooted individuals. This is the new threat, whose consequences are no less serious than those linked to constructing an absolute identity by the exclusion of others. The depersonalizing effect of virtual relationships may find an antidote in what is known as "globalization from below". This promotes interaction and social activity on a planetary scale in which communications technology is used to further the globalization of rights: it is a genuine interconnection which provides new solutions to basic needs for identity, a sense of belonging and change (Brecher, Costello 1995).

It is common knowledge that uprootedness and depersonalization are the prime constituents of the negative and dangerous aspects of totalitarian institutions – prisons, asylums, authoritarian regimes – against which libertarians have to fight. Thus the globalization of cultures cannot be accompanied by a culture of uprootedness, nor can "globalization from below" be substituted by local connective systems.

In complex societies, individual identities take on multiple dimensions, rooting themselves in partialities which are differentiated and mutually dissimilar: the memory of foods, traditions in taste, ways of dressing. Customs and habits emerge as privileged events during our existence and accompany our socialization, as does the pleasure of discovering new tastes, or the significant sharing with others of what we have identified as pleasurable. This is not an individualistic dimension, but rather the recognition that our identities are made up of many little segments of greater or lesser significance.

Thus the global melting pot does not tend to be

homogeneous: inside it mediation and intercommunication proceed undisturbed. An individual will not learn self-control in a condition of uprootedness. On the contrary, individual identity is based on the multiple coexistence of various belongings and identifications. In this sense the absence of identity is not a cure for problems deriving from its excess (fundamentalism and particularism).

Similarly, the retrograde dimension of laudator temporis actis [everything was better in the good old days], together with failure to look to the future with confidence in one's self, the world and one's own capabilities, contribute to the social framework in which perverse processes of identification can originate.

What is vital is the necessity for both the globalization of local cultures and the localization of global processes. This would be reassuring for those who see in global processes the risk of cultural domination. This is due to the fact that the globalization of the world creates shared images at the trans-national level, but with meanings which differ in the various local contexts, creating new interrelations and exchanges. (Courchene 2001). Our priority task as community psychologists is to help the community to find and develop forms of aggregation that will produce peaceful relations, not fundamentalism and the invocation of the past; to create a better common future, while not standing in fear of the new interface between tradition and new forms of social aggregation and shared images.

3. Sense of community

The concept of sense of community embodies the possible reciprocal relationships between individuals who share the same living space, and who therefore overcome each others' indifference without specific reference to rules or social sanctions.

This concept allows us also to examine a given social environment and the ways different individuals interact reciprocally within it. Hence the development of this thematic from a psychological perspective allows us to understand how individuals' relationships are articulated within a given social group.

Social and community psychology, especially in recent British and American publications, have contributed to an understanding of social living through the concepts of social identity and sense of community.

It would seem possible to make a clear distinction between the identity of a community as it is 'perceived, represented or ascribed' and the sense of community which defines the attitudes of its inhabitants towards that community, thus hypothesising a different application of the two concepts (Arcidiacono, 2002) [3].

Puddifoot (1995) introduced the concept of community distinctiveness in connection with the identity of a community: that is to say, a community with a very strong tradition and historic memory, its own language, art or unique masterpieces.

Rather ingenuously, we might allow sense of community and the distinctiveness of a community to overlap.

However, my own research in Naples would appear to indicate that sense of community is significantly characterized by trade and trust-influence and power of the community.

So, if we feel a deep identification with a community through a strong feeling of belonging but we don't trust this community, its influence and power, in its future perspectives, we cannot speak about sense of community.

There is still much to define with regard to the question of trust. So far it has only fleetingly been mentioned in publications, whereas it is the foundation for future bonding. It is of equal importance compared to history, which on the contrary is more commonly recognized as having a founding role in the building of community ties.

If we consider the banking system, economic exchange and the quotation of the value of companies, we see that these are based on future confidence in the development of their specific sectors. Similarly, in the case of social processes we need to think in terms of specifying and promoting areas and values capable of aggregating and building a shared future. We need to view the community not only from the perspective identifying elements proposed by the collective memory, but rather through the identification of the links and the social opportunities that offer a shared vision. It is no accident that studies on sense of community have been considerable in the United States, despite the relative brevity of the country's history. If we follow the suggestions of the social identity approach (Haslam, 2001), it would be useful to consider the aggregation function that would derive from overlapping shared objectives.

Finally. What is urgently required are tools capable of measuring with greater specificity and exactness this trust which is the aggregating and binding agent for social processes and social exchanges.

4. An intriguing issue: Women and multiculturalism

"The empowerment of women and the respect of differences are two topics which are intrinsically linked, if we assume that feminism can contribute to a process of globalization that includes diversity and promotes mobility and inclusiveness. The presence of both women and men in decision-taking in society's institutions, and the social models within families, relationships and childcare, are key areas for evaluating the contribution of women to the life of a community and the role they play. The differences of gender are rooted in the individual's cultural, religious, economic and social background. The women's empowerment proposed at the Peking conference thus acquires specific goals which differ from one cultural and social reality to another.

Looking at the theme of this congress, one question that immediately comes to mind is: what are the objectives of the liberation and promotion of women in an era of cultural globalization? How are we to affirm the individual rights of women? The hypothesis presented here is that the individual cannot exist if she has no roots and relationships. Hence the need to build both a concrete and conceptual universe, so that

individuals may be true to the roots of their own identity and become capable of respecting differences in others." [4]

If in a global society the safeguarding of cultural diversity is one of the most important challenges, when it comes to differences, integration understood in the sense of "hybridization" and promotion of rights of citizenship are the new emergencies for successful coexistence. The role of women in the promotion of their own rights, as much as of their states, is crucial.

For women who have always had their place in the management of the private sphere, a question that needs to be answered is whether multiculturalism means safeguarding traditions with respect to the individual's liberty. This thesis, sustained by Susan Moller Okin in *Is multiculturalism bad for women?* (1997) has caused great debate in recent years. This is not the place to consider all the aspects of the question. Nevertheless, one can state that the respect of differences must include the ethical principle of social justice, in the context of which, criticism of the patriarchy and gender domination cannot be avoided. Women must work out concrete strategies against the perpetuation of violence. Thus equal opportunity is the necessary condition for women's empowerment.

In the illuminating work of Marina Calloni, a feminist sociologist at the London School of Economics (2000, p.58), we must hold fast to a new idea of citizenship which

- a) contains an ethical basis including a critique of violence (taken to mean the will to impose control over the body and hence affirmation of a subject which is integral and non-humiliated)
- b) affirms a conception of equality which is "complex" and distributive, and not merely in formal terms.
- c) conceives of politics as a public domain, not limitable to "ties of blood".

Returning to women's empowerment, we can see that feminist research is working within the wider framework of the debate on "differences". What I am proposing is to empower the presence of women in the various sectors of society, favouring their promotion in decision-making in all institutions; to combine the traditions of culture and religion in the respect of the rights of women as citizens; this will probably mean revising, on the time-scale imposed by history, the roles and functions which religion and the law attribute to women in the private sphere, concerning ties, sentiments and children; to institutionalise women's studies in universities and promote work opportunities by setting up firms run by women.

5. Sense of ties (solidarity) and the pursuit of communitas

The Neapolitan philosopher Esposito (1998), who has devoted much study to the concept of community, believes that social ties do not need common roots and identities: the Latin word *munus* means the debt that is shared by the "community", a voluntary reciprocal debt which underwrites relationships and increases reciprocal wellbeing. The originality and indeed fascination of this perspective, for us who view difference as a precious asset, lies in thinking of community as a value and a limit to be accepted, but not an end in

itself. Thus his belief, which does indeed evoke the necessity of community processes, does not advocate a return to the values of one's origins, nor to view *communitas* as a venue for collective processes of identification. It is not a proposal of the myth of "all things in common", but a safeguarding of the scope for difference in the construction of the common good. His stance turns on its head the myth of common values as the basis for a community and gives value and meaning to the encounter with differences. He advocates the construction of non-obligatory ties which entail bonds and reciprocity. Being in relation to is thus the additional value in the social system which determines its viability and wellbeing. What emerges is a critique of the possibility in absolute terms of disengaging from the social debt, and at the same time a society of bonds, where a tie is a guarantee of wellbeing and not a risk of invasiveness and transgression.

My background as an analyst and psychologist with an interest in the interactive processes between the individual and the social context led me (Arcidiacono 2001) to focus on the need to go beyond the contrast between identity of being and identity of doing. If common memories define belongings and common matrixes of belonging define identity, it should also be possible to accommodate desires and hopes, which are key ingredients for the confidence that can open up the future.

Thus it is necessary to learn to combine memory and belonging with the ability to make plans and hope. Our aim must be to build a universe, both real and conceptual, in order to affirm rooted identities, projected into the future and able to interact through reciprocal relationships and communal participation.

I wish to finish by recalling that today the heritage of a community is to be found not only in its distinctive past but also in its ability to look to the future with hope.

This approach presupposes respect for cultural and linguistic diversity, and favours a genuine dialogue between cultures. Far from being a utopia, this is, in the words of Butros Ghali, "un enjeu politique, économique, social et culturel pour tous... Scientific and technical progress, economic and financial globalization, the instant circulation of information have revealed the commonality of humankind. Does this mean a common destiny?

Perhaps so, but it is undoubtedly still some way off. One only has to think of the exacerbation of the instances of inequality and poverty in the world! The numerical segregation between those who possess information and those who don't! Or again in the risk of hegemonisation of some powers in the drawing up of norms and decisions in which the future of the planet is at stake!" [5]

Our considerations lead to the proposal of some key points on which to focus:

The importance of solidarity rather than mere individualism, thus to consider the community as an asset, as a strategy to contrast the loneliness of great, anonymous cities.

The importance of taking care of our common world: the environment and its people. Respect for rights of individuals in the context of social responsibility.

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Local and global interaction as both a local and virtual form of connection; we need integration between ingroups and outgroups.

Identification and promotion of common goals and overlapping forms of aggregation.

shared values and common objectives for a new form of citizenship.

It seems appropriate here to propose that social psychology is in a position to offer new strategies for society, in particular for the setting up resources to achieve common objectives between different groups, and suggesting the best strategies for attaining the objectives specified.

The methodology of social and community psychology are valuable tools for the promotion of a world made not only of memory, but of the construction of hope and trust in a common future.

The new challenge is that the theories and models of social psychology, which are the interpreters of the processes of identification between groups, should act as both guide and support for intercultural and inter-ethnic dialogue, above all between groups that are in conflict or at war.

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- [1] Cf. Matvejević (1995, p.6)
- [2] Conference of, Naples, spring 1999.
- [3] Arcidiacono C. (2002) Senso di comunità: distintività della comunità e fiducia nelle sue potenzialità. in: Congresso nazionale di psicologia di comunità, Università degli Studi di Torino: Torino 1-3 marzo 2002, abstracts.
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