

by Renzo Carli*

In July 1969 at Pirelli the contract for the production bonus was expiring. In March, the company tried to bypass the trade union initiative by offering a “package” that anticipated and improved on the union’s claims: reduction of working hours, a short week, possibility of part time contract for women and students, as well as other things. This episode has rarely been analysed in contemporary history books, but in my opinion it is very important: the trade union reaction was clear and strong, with strikes and initiatives damaging for the company, such as the reduction of productivity. The atmosphere of participation in the clash with the bosses reached levels that even the trade union did not expect and, in certain respects, triggered the “hot autumn” that was to characterise a period of Italian history.

The Pirelli package was designed to attenuate the conflict between trade union and management, so as to eliminate it through the negation of the trade union function. The entrepreneurs of the time thought the workers’ identification with the trade union was collapsing, as CUB (Rank and File Committees) were being set up, and many workers were leaving the “big three” unions (CGIL, CISL, UIL). The entrepreneurs’ idea was clear: if they could monetarise relations with the workers, bypassing the unions and their fight for better working conditions and their organised opposition to the business world, they could create non-conflictual working situations, easily managed by the “personnel offices”. The non-conflictuality would be the result of the destructuring of one of the parties in the conflict. The workers’ response was harsh, aiming to loudly denounce the attempt to eliminate conflictuality. This attempt to eliminate conflictuality, and therefore the union, in the name of the economic wellbeing embodied in the bosses’ offer, stood as an example and had very high costs both for the firms and the workers. From that time onwards, thanks to the struggle in 1969, the Italian owners, the entrepreneurs in our country, felt the need to improve their scarce managerial skills and become professional, in the light of the pitiful attempt embodied in the Pirelli package. It was realised that the company, but more generally the social reality, includes as an inevitable reality the conflict between workers and employers, the conflict between different roles, functions, ways of seeing life, traditions, and cultures. The conflict between students and teachers in schools and universities cannot be eliminated; or the conflict between generations, political forces, religions, genders. The problem is not conflict, a potential resource for social systems, but the way conflict is experienced, symbolised and enacted. Conflict is a sign of diversity, of otherness. Conflict is therefore at the basis of exchange and reciprocity. Without conflictual diversity, relations of reciprocity are not possible, but only relations of identifying with an idealised demand.

Today our country is swept by cultural winds that see in non-conflictuality the solution to all the evils of our social system. This non-conflictuality is an acritical support for the monolithic will of a group of people in power, characterised by the strong power of their head.

Italy is coming from a recent history which began in the immediate post war period, when the three great powers, the leading nations that had defeated fascism and nazism, decided to subdivide the world into two great blocs, the Western world and the Soviet bloc. This decision was made in 1945 at Yalta; we all remember the picture of the “three great men” sitting for the official photo at the conference which gave rise to the “Yalta spirit”: Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin.

De Gaulle, the French leader, was not invited to the conference.

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The policy established at Yalta influenced the world right up to the fall of the Berlin wall and immersed it in the “cold war” (from 1945 to 1989). The fall of the wall created the premises for the reunification of Germany. In fact Germany had been cut in two by the conference. This did not happen to Italy, thanks in part to the presence of the strongest communist party in Europe and to the fact that the anticommunist political forces were in the majority. In Italy¹ the “great nations” accepted a sort of “internal Yalta” in the country, where the institutionalisation of the conflict between DC and PCI, or rather the anticommunist bloc and the communist party, enabled there to be a dynamic balance, consisting of local conflicts, of pacts based on the K-factor (from the Russian “*Kommunizm*”). The K factor, Alberto Ronchey’s popular usage of the term, stood for the need for a clear and unsurmountable break between a majority that guaranteed the country’s membership of the western world and its communist “part”, which could exist and develop locally, as long as it did not challenge this membership of the western bloc by exerting its presence at the level of national government. The Yalta spirit therefore had a wholly Italian version, which institutionalised the conflict raging elsewhere, often violently, both between the blocs and within them. The Yalta spirit was translated, in the world, into the cold war, with its implications and its troubles. There were conflicts in Italy and the influence exerted by them was important in the history of our country in those years; but the balance between the governing bloc and the one represented by the PCI, firstly in alliance with the PSI and then alone, was maintained. The only exception was the attempt on Togliatti’s life on 14 July 1948, when the leader himself had to intervene to calm the pressing demands for insurrection among the militants of his party.

After the failure of the centre–left reformism in the Sixties, the Seventies were marked by the “historic compromise” and by the government of national solidarity championed by Aldo Moro. The statesman, who was secretary of the Democratic-Christians, was brutally assassinated after being kidnapped while on his way to Parliament to support a one-party government under Andreotti, dubbed that of “not no-confidence” due to the implicit consent of the PCI. That was the end of the peculiarly Italian “internal Yalta”, and it opened a troubled era of great reforms and of extreme conflicts, of uncertainties and of hopes. After the post-war period and after the period of fascist dictatorship, Italy experienced great tension at a political, social, religious and cultural level. These conflicts were often

¹ Historians argue that the unity of Italy within the division of the world into two blocs was also due to two statesmen who in the post war period worked hard for this outcome: De Gasperi, with the USA above all, and Togliatti with the USSR.

impossible to heal because they were based on ideology, but there was also tension over “third issues” of common interest, where the conflict was constructive in leading to openness to the problems of all people. The impenetrable European iron curtain had a far more attenuated version in Italy where there was willingness to engage in political, social and above all cultural dialogue.

The new era, which began in 1994, saw a worsening of the intransigence towards dissent, an often blatant use of the mass media for the construction of a culture of approval, acquiescence, often along with opportunism and conformism. Conflict and its management was replaced by the emargination of dissent and the expulsion of those who display opposition. This may all be reassuring, it may give the impression of law and order in the social situation, but for many years we have been living in a culture characterised by conformism and resignation, a culture where demonstrating what is already known is preferred to exploring, where the humiliation of thought has reached previously unknown heights. We live in a culture with no antagonist and no debate. In a culture where every day we hear talk of the gag-law and of the predicted, or fended-off, expulsion of the dissident group in the majority party.

All this is highly relevant to clinical psychology and its work. The need to control the other person, in both working relationships and in the affective and family sphere, has greatly increased. Control involves the realisation of a fantasy of possession; a setback in control involves anger, often towards oneself. The demand addressed to the clinical psychologist is also aimed at control, and this expectation increasingly marks the requests of those who go to the psychologist. Shared values have changed: they are values connected to appearances, taking the mass media as their reference point. The means of communication in turn contribute to the rise of these exhibitionistic values.

The expectation of lack of conflict involves a negation of diversity and of the dialectics that diversity entails. Whoever does not belong to the a-conflictual culture is out, they have no right to have their say and there is no interest in listening to opinions that differ from one's own. Lack of conflict creates separateness and isolation. At the same time, conflict is transformed into a continuous competition to see who wins and who loses. And those who lose have no further role, they are cancelled out. We seem to be watching a collective revenge on the values of solidarity and attention to the weak that were typical of the conflict between Catholicism and Marxism. That was a conflict that when it flowed together in the Seventies, seems to have opened the gates to values of possession and of the economic justification of greedy, victorious possession. Identification is with the winner, who has respect and admiration; the loser is cancelled and sinks into shame.

How many times have we heard repeated on TV or in the papers “it's impossible to talk to this opposition” or “with this majority there is no room for negotiation”. It is not just a political climate: no matter. Instead it is a mentality that sets out to deny diversity and not to feel curious about diversity.

Without conflict, the social system, but also daily life, become impoverished and rapidly slide towards conformism. This is an issue on which we psychologists are called to make our contribution.