

Editorial

Cultural involution and Psychology

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For about the last twenty years the systems of living together in our country have been undergoing a profound cultural transformation which is becoming more serious. This transformation is specific to Italy, but it may anticipate that of other western countries. A great deal of research into the local culture, carried out in different domains and contexts over the past twenty years, confirms the direction of this cultural transformation. What does the change consist of?

Relations based on power (in the sense of the capacity to influence others, to determine their behavior, to convince and manipulate them and to condition their thoughts, attitudes, decisions, and life choices) take the place of relations based on exchange, on values of solidarity and interest in diversity, on respect for the law, on the condemnation of organised crime, on the pursuit of cultural, social and economic growth. Gaining the tools of power seems to be the prime aim in many domains of our social life. The possession of tools that can influence and bend individuals and social systems to one's will is idealised, along with being rich and holding influential positions. Power is used to gain dominance over others, and to transform public property, and the organisation and systems of living together, to one's own advantage. The power of men over women and adults over children or the elderly is admired and practised, as is the power to control information, the power to influence political life in all its aspects, the power to condition family life, the relations between employers and employees, teachers and students in schools and further training. We could go on at length. It is important to point out that this cultural transformation, profound and widespread in our country, affects the most varied domains of public life, science, the professions, the services, the world of work, the generations, cultural, political and economic products, and even citizen's rights as the foundation of our civil identity. The transformation we are talking about is relegating the intellectuals of our country to an irrelevant role, it is mortifying culture and thought, spreading cynicism and indifference, in the pursuit of an illusory pleasure deriving from the subjection of others and the triumph of one's own image.

The pursuit of power without competence, as a value system, goes beyond the greed and possessiveness underlying "having" in Fromm's perspective. The pleasure of influencing others, of making others dependent and impotent before one's own manifestations of power, the power of appearances, the power to gain prestige in the pursuit of an unlimited popularity, the non-acceptance of diversity, the rejection of opinions differing from those of the holder of power, of criticism and debate among different positions, the taste for centralised decision-making, for judgment and condemnation of those who think, live and behave in a way that differs from what is prescribed by the systems of power, all permeate the cultural transformation that for about the past twenty years has marked Italian culture. In a way that is now visible and threatening, the cultural transformation underway pursues a specific conformist modality. This is not a conformism that supports a well-trying and relatively effective way of adapting to reality, but a conformism that supports the illusion of power without competence. Anomia is met with a response of omnipotence. It is therefore a conformism regulated by those who have the means to dictate the rules, but at the

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same time it is a reassuring conformism because it is a-conflictual. The power of the banking system, if we can leave Italy for a moment, is an example of this: think of the precise and specific responsibility of trading banks, in the world economic system, for causing the global financial crisis, for creating desolating new poverty in every corner of the world. Think of the use of public funds to bail out a banking system which, according to economists themselves, has recommenced its speculative “games” with the money from the bailout. The banking system used the greed of inexperienced people, transformed from savers into investors, to speculate on the ignorance and credulous feeling of omnipotence of this *naïve* category of people convinced of being able to get rich without work, toil, creativity or competence. This situation has had serious repercussions on our country, where the banking system tightened the purse strings on loans to business and channeled its liquidity only towards the demand of the strong powers. This therefore hindered young business people and mortified competition on the domestic market. Remember that the password “let the market work without rules” has dominated the economic world for twenty years, showing a marked shift of attention away from the ability to organise productive relations and the valorisation of human resources, towards how to produce wealth through money.

Think of the young and the short-term work most of them are forced into, thus blocking their race up the “social elevator”. This blockage has also affected much of the country’s middle class, with the creation of a new poverty, widespread and humiliating. Think of the serious stalemate in politics, bringing impoverishment, of its loss of true competent power, and at the same time the inability to consider the problems of people and of social systems, of the great part it plays in the unstoppable decline of services, from health to education. It is a world that is increasingly convinced that populist appeal via the mass media can make up for the ineptitude of initiatives and the inefficacy of the legislative role. The power of the mass media, exalting one-way communication, with no possibility of feedback, is transforming our culture into a sort of “television culture”, with all the emotional simplification that this entails.

One might ask how all this is related to psychology. We feel that there is a very close relationship. There has been a profound change in the demand for psychologists’ interventions by a social system undergoing the cultural change we have mentioned. But psychological culture itself is undergoing transformations consistent with those underway in the country’s broader cultural system.

A major change concerns the attempt, more and more common and illusory, to identify and define *invariant dimensions* in the domain of psychology. By invariant dimensions we mean stable characteristics of the personality, that can differentiate classes of individuals on the basis of these traits. More and more often we hear talk of “distancing mothers”, of “subjects that cannot tolerate ambiguity”, of “risk-inclined teenagers”, of “type A or B personality”, of “persons with external or internal locus of control”, of individuals with high or low alexithymia, and high or low empowerment, just as years ago we used to talk about introverted and extroverted, of poorly-off and well-off, or many other stable features of the person. Each of these typologies claims to be able to predict and classify behaviors, feelings and relations between people and between groups of people on the basis of the single individual’s membership of specific “invariant” psychological dimensions¹. Why

¹ We would like to get people thinking about the difference between invariant dimensions such as attachment style or lifestyle and other invariants, like the global-articulated cognitive style proposed by Witkin in his specification of field dependence and field independence. Field dependence-independence is a construct with no evaluative power; it “simply” describes two modes of approaching reality based on a prevailing interest in the self or in the context. Those who are field dependent – independent both have ways of approaching and treating reality that are “useful”, albeit different. The study of cognitive style is not designed to differentiate the normal from the pathological, correct from incorrect behavior, or healthy aspects from unhealthy ones. The invariant dimensions that are being researched, measured and evaluated today, on the other hand, have the purpose of identifying groups of normal, healthy, correct individuals from groups of deviant, pathological individuals who need to be corrected. This is an extremely important difference if we are to understand the relation between research into invariance and the consequences of this research for the psychology profession.

is it called “invariance”? For a very specific reason: these are stable characteristics of the single individual, which the person carries independently of the spatial, temporal, relational, historical and social context of his experience. If a mother is “distancing”, this feature is described atemporally and with no reference to the context in which the “distancing” takes place. There is a sort of stigma that is considered to be permanent, to be inevitably handed down through generations in an incurably contagious way. Today we tend to question this idea of the transmission of attachment styles; it has been seen that the attachment style can change over time in the same person; attachment style has been transformed from being a stable trait defining the mode of relating, into a dimension contingent to particular situations or living together. Accepting this contingent dimension transforms attachment style into a re-edition of well-known defence mechanisms, when relating to another person, which have been discussed by psychology since the 1940s. But in spite of this re-thinking of attachment styles, many scholars and researchers continue to use categories like “distancing” or “disorganized” to describe psychological invariances that allow for correlations and inferences. Likewise for the corrective hypotheses concerning the behavior of those belonging to one group or the other. What are the implications of this tendency to research and propose invariant dimensions of the individual’s personality and behavior as a psychological entity marked by stable traits?

Let us look at some of them:

a – *the psychologist positions him/herself outside the relationship with the individuals, groups and organisations he/she is dealing with.* The (diagnostic) attribution of stable characteristics to the individual, the capacity to define him/her as belonging to a group marked by specific invariances, alexithymics, for instance, means that the psychologist has the illusion of being able to take a position that does not entail the analysis of specific relational dynamics with the person being studied and classified. This gives rise to the certainty of being able to do without relating, with all its emotional components; therefore to be able to do without affectivity, to be able to get around the great problem of subjectivity in psychology. As a result there is the belief that without relations, affectivity and subjectivity, psychology can acquire a more credible status as a “science”.

b – *the competence for intervention in psychology is cancelled out.* The stable characteristics of the personality and of the individual do not envisage interventions to change features which, if they were susceptible to change, would confute the very invariance that typifies them. The intervention, on the other hand, is reduced to actions intended to prevent problems and harm that individuals with stable characteristics could do to themselves and others. For instance, a colleague of ours thought it right to ban any experience of fostering or adoption to mothers stigmatised by attachment styles that were not “secure base”, with a particularly vehement rejection of “distancing mothers”. The examples could go on at length. In the case of some invariant features, the psychologist can work to convince the individuals to adopt more “healthy” behaviors, with various means of persuasion, including bio-feedback, some cognitive interventions, and conditioning in its various forms.

c – *the possibility of knowing by relating is precluded.* This means that emotional dynamics are not analysed and this area of getting knowledge is not used to work on the relationship, to develop with the other person a line of thought about the processes characterising the relationship itself, historically and contextually situated. As we have said, if the relationship is eliminated, and with it the emotionality that marks it, the psychologist expects to take a position outside the phenomenology being studied. Remember that the relationship, being of necessity part of history (time) and context (space) does not envisage stable invariant dimensions. The relationship cannot be classed as a “type”, and those who have tried to do so have failed miserably². When the relationship is studied, the scientific rigor is based on a method of study and intervention that can deal with variability. When stable, invariant features are studied, the objectives and methodologies are profoundly different. Tolerating this difference seems to be an unbearable constraint for those who, in invariance, see the guarantee that psychology research is scientific. Invariances have to do

² On this, we recall a group of university clinical psychologists working in a hospital in a large Italian city. These scholars had been working for years on the doctor-patient relationship, defining invariants that were typical of this relationship in specific clinical situations. What’s more, although the group had been working for years in the hospital, they had never had any contact with the doctors in the division, they had never sought them out nor had they received any encouragement to intervene in the doctor-patient relationship in the hospital context. We find this a serious scientific problem for research in clinical psychology.

with modifying the individual's behavior: the psychology intervention has to do with developing the relationship between individual and context³.

A second change concerns the emphasis, continually present in every project for transforming psychology, on the fact that we absolutely cannot do without systems of evaluation: evaluation of the profession, of scientific production, of the efficacy of training. Evaluation is certainly an important stage in our profession, as in any other activity that tries to have a scientific basis. First of all, we must underline the profound difference between evaluation (judgement of the category of person or organisation: for example the "*virtuous*" universities) and verification (exploration based on criteria for the achievement of pre-established, agreed-upon objectives; therefore of the evolution of a relationship and of its products). Secondly, we stress that the problem is one of method on the one hand, and of power on the other.

People want the Italian university to be subject to performance, efficacy and efficiency evaluations, that is, they want a university where the virtuous components are rewarded and the non virtuous ones penalised. There is an atmosphere of threat, where punitive intentions seem to prevail over the valorisation and development of things well done. It seems obvious that evaluation used as a threat loses its motivational power for improvement⁴. It seems that there is no desire to promote an improvement, but rather a punishment of those who do not keep to the norms promoted with evaluation.

All this is being proposed after over ten years of reforms of the university, and of psychology in particular, which have been disastrous to say the least⁵. The disaster does not derive just from the reforms, one worse than the other, but from the collusive process that has been triggered between reformism and local power. This is particularly evident in the domain of psychology, if one takes it into account that the holders of power in university training in the psychology domain often have little or no knowledge of the professional problems and employment opportunities offered to psychologists in our country.

It seems that the senselessness of the reforms and the threats of evaluation have gone hand in hand in the recent history of the Italian university system. It is a troubled history, but it is still the history of training and research that, though beset by problems, has been able to resist to a unexpected degree against the attacks coming both from without and within. We want to make this clear: the good working of the university *also* involves a rigorous verification of its competence to do research, to train new generations of students, and to administer the university; while evaluation alone, however well organised, has never produced and never will produce good functioning for the university. If it is genuine, evaluation is a central component of organisational functioning, but it never has been and never will be able to correct bad organisational functioning. In the latter case it

³ An example could be the research project of the Department of Psychology-Copenhagen University about Supervision, defined as: "The aim is to be a leading Nordic centre for research, mediation and knowledge on supervision and supervision-related topics (e.g. psychotherapy, training, development and identity)". When what is being studied is the supervision of psychology work, which is a specific area of relating, the objective is methodological, strongly contextualised and historicised, as can be seen in the project guiding this intervention-research.

⁴ In 1990 for the first time in Italy, we carried out the ISO certification for SPS, the professional practice where we work. It was an interesting experience which brought out the certification's basic role in improving organisation. All dynamics based on the threatening symbolisation of the certifying body inevitably entail the falsification of the very process of certification. This close, significant correlation between verification and the threatening function of the evaluator does not always seem to be clear to those dealing with evaluation in the university system.

⁵ Remember DM 509 of November 1999, introducing the 3+2 system; DM 270 of October 2004 modifying the 509 and setting new rules on the relation between the three-year degree and the 2-year "specialisation"; the 270 was followed by other not insignificant modifications, with for instance the name change from specialisation to "magistrale" for the 2-year course; lastly, the Gelmini reform of September 2010, with further changes in the structure of the university training provisions. It seems that the lawmaker, conscious of the limitations and bad results of a poorly designed and even more poorly organised reform, has tried to correct the previous plans, with problematic outcomes for the university, at every change of ministers in the MUIR. Each time this has simply worsened what had been decided up to that moment.

is inevitably transformed into an instrument of power and therefore a threat that causes demotivation and makes the evaluation easier to falsify.

Lastly, let us take a quick look at the state of affairs of university psychology in Rome.

Many readers perhaps know that the Psychology faculty at the Sapienza – the oldest psychology faculty in Italy, set up in November 1991 – no longer exists. Today, thanks to the hybridisation that has just been completed at Sapienza⁶, its place has been taken by the Faculty of Medicine and Psychology.

The Chancellor of the Sapienza anticipated the Gelmini reform by reducing Sapienza's faculties to 12; for the time being the number is 11. This reform follows a change in the opposite direction, introduced several years ago, when the intent was to decentralise the faculties, "forcing" many faculties, including Psychology, to split into two. Today they are being centralised. But how did this centralising trend come about?

Before the centralisation– hybridisation there were the following faculties at Sapienza:

Architecture Valle Giulia, Architecture Ludovico Quaroni, Economics, Law, Pharmacy, Philosophy, Letters and Philosophy, Humanistic Sciences, Engineering, Aerospace Engineering, Information Engineering, Medicine and Surgery 1, Medicine and Surgery 2, Psychology 1, Psychology 2, Mathematics, Physics and Natural Sciences, Communication, Political Sciences, Statistics, Sociology.

There were also three schools: School of Aerospace Engineering, Special school for library and archive studies and Oriental studies.

The new faculties are:

Architecture; Economics; Law; Philosophy, Letters, Humanistic sciences and Oriental studies; Mathematics, physics and natural sciences; Civil and industrial engineering; Information, electronic and statistical engineering; Medicine and Dentistry; Pharmacy and Medicine; Medicine and Psychology; Political, social and communication sciences.

What happened? The seven "new" faculties in italics remained exactly the same, losing the split faculties, assessed as being pointless (another change without verification), but retaining their specific scientific and teaching individuality. Medicine went from two to three faculties⁷. Psychology, Sociology, Communication were hybridised and lost their specific individuality as autonomous faculties. As can be seen, it was the sciences of man and society that lost their autonomy, being hybridised with areas like medicine and political sciences, long considered leading areas.

Now, the "historic" faculties at Sapienza, apart from the decentralisation and centralisation, would number 12: Architecture, Economics, Law, Political sciences, Letters and Philosophy, Engineering, Medicine, Pharmacy, Sciences, Statistics, Sociology, Psychology. Within the obligation imposed by Gelmini not to have more than 12 faculties per university, why not keep this classic set up of Sapienza, and then facilitate developments and differentiations within the various faculties? The answer seems clear: if this simple and obvious path had been taken, there would have been no

⁶ It is embarrassing to write "at Sapienza" and not as we used to, "at the Sapienza". On this point, we recall the long study carried out in order to change and "optimise" the imagine of Sapienza, which led to a change in the logo (where the "head of the Sapienza" was replaced by the "head of a cherub") and, with a stroke of genius, the article was removed from the traditional name "the Sapienza", which was simplified to "Sapienza" - Università di Roma. With this change we should no longer say: "I work, teach, study at the Sapienza" but "I work, teach, study at Sapienza". All changes without verification, obviously.

⁷ It might be useful to remember that the Chancellor, responsible for the present "reform", was the long-term Dean of Medicine at Sapienza.

multiplication of the medical faculties, and the faculties of the sciences of man and society would not have been sacrificed, losing their autonomy.

But let us go back to Psychology. The question of its being hybridised sums up, in our opinion, the two themes dealt with so far in this editorial: the pursuit of power on the one hand, and the search for psychological invariants on the other. Support for the Chancellor's proposal, according to those in the institutions responsible for psychology and their representatives with the Chancellor, was given without detailed consultation and without any voting on the part of the bodies presided over by these same figures of responsibility. It is interesting to notice that people in elected positions took this important decision about the structural and cultural organisation of Roman psychology without consulting their electorate and checking their agreement via a vote. One wonders, perhaps they were afraid of the possible outcome of a vote?

In evaluating the decision, the institutional figures responsible hastened to clarify the positive side of the hybridisation with medicine: "The cultural inspiration motivating the convergence of the Departments of Medicine and Psychology in the new faculty derives from the need for a global approach to the protection and promotion of health, intended to ensure not only more successful treatment of illnesses, but also the capacity to respond to the growing demand for education, prevention and promotion of well-being, by acting on lifestyles, attitudes, behaviors, mentalities and health culture"⁸.

When there is talk of the relation between life styles, behaviors and health, here intended in a strictly medical sense, things fall into place. But how can one talk about attitude, mentality and culture of health? This can only be done if the idea of health is still relegated to the medical domain: attitudes may be related to the prevention of illnesses or to maintaining a state of physical well-being, in the general sense. But it needs to be said that the psychologist in this perspective would become an ancillary of the doctor in contributing to the conservation of a state of physical, somatic health, in the medical sense. It would be related to prevention, hygiene, and the rules for physical well-being. On the other hand it is far more difficult to talk about psychic well-being: in this case the idea of well-being must necessarily be part of subjectivity, individual choices, that cannot be transformed into invariances. The utterance quoted therefore seems very ambiguous, making an incorrect use of important psychological notions (behaviors, attitudes, mentality, culture) but referring to the construct of health which is imprecise and cannot be defined, unless metaphorically as a psychological construct, which is of marginal importance also in medical epistemology.

With the psychology of health and the promotion of well-being, moreover, we inevitably and problematically move further away from the psychology intervention and the function of psychology as the analysis of the demand based on problems experienced by those who contact the psychologist. The psychology of health and of well-being does not professionally treat the users' *problems* because they are presumed to be known, and are described as problems of health and well-being. The psychology of health does not "intervene", using the methodology of the psychology intervention, for the construction of the request for intervention, the analysis of the processes marking the relationship between the psychologist and the person who brings the problem to the psychologist. As the few lines quoted above say, the psychologist of health "acts" on lifestyles, attitudes and whatever follows. The promotion of thinking about the relationship seems to have been replaced by acting on psychological invariances.

The hybridisation with medicine therefore tries to wipe out the psychology of intervention, the focus on the individual-context relationship, the objectives of promoting development, not only of correcting deficits. This wiping out would apply to the contribution of psychoanalysis to psychology, to the relevance of emotions and unconscious dynamics, to the role in structuring relations that

⁸ Aglioti S., Antonucci G., Baumgartner E., Bombi A.S., Caprara G.V., Dazzi N., De Coro A., De Vescovi A., Ercolani A.P., Giannini A.M., Ortu F., Violani C., Zavattini G.C., "Sulla nuova facoltà di Medicina e Psicologia alla Sapienza", a document sent to colleagues of the two ex-faculties of Psychology, teachers and researchers on 9/12/2010.

these dynamics play in collusive processes and in the changing of systems of living together to which psychology has made a contribution in the past twenty years. None of this remains, only illness and health. One of the present authors has stated, hopefully clearly, an opinion on the psychology of health and well-being⁹. This stated the limited nature of a vision of psychology relegated to the individual, the indefiniteness and ambiguity of a construct like that of “health”, if applied to psychology. We can add the great ambiguity and the misleading effect of applying the construct of “wellbeing” to psychology, whether it be of the individual or of the organisation. Wellbeing, an a-historical, a-contextual construct, appears to be an obvious and at the same time ambiguous proposal. What does “demand for wellbeing” mean? Whenever can any of us claim to be in a state of wellbeing or to aspire to wellbeing? And then, are we sure that it should be pursued at any cost, at the expense of “feeling discomfort”? Were the Fiat workers who voted “no” to the contract proposed by Marchionne, thus risking their jobs and after many years triggering a serious clash with management (a clash that has already made the Italian public rediscover that “workers” still exist, amidst serious problems) pursuing wellbeing? And were those who voted “yes” because they need to work to ensure their own and their family’s economic survival, pursuing wellbeing? Do Fiat workers in general make a demand for wellbeing? Do we think the term “wellbeing” gives us knowledge and guidelines to name this complex dynamic and intervene in it?

Can we use the categories of “wellbeing” and “health” to interpret the movement of university students who filled the streets to protest against the proposed Gelmini reform? We can ask the same question about the peoples of the world suffering from the poverty of a global economic crisis, and take to the streets in protest, fighting for acceptable living conditions and more adequate wages for survival.

If organisational systems want to pursue development, innovation, and efficiency, must they follow wellbeing or pursue objectives? We could continue, seeing how the word wellbeing, in its futile flirting with something positive, is historically detached from every possible psychological, sociological, economic, historical, political or religious interpretation of phenomena characterising living together and its frictions, from the stories of people, populations, and social groups in their context.

With the perspective indicated by the health – wellbeing coupling, there is no longer any interest in the “problems” that people have learnt to bring to psychologists, such as in mental health centers, in the psychological work done in cooperatives dealing with adolescence, youth disorientation, violence towards women, employment guidance, and mental health. Attention is no longer paid to the problems of youth employment, where casual work is destroying hopes and professional skills, and entire generations of the young and the not so young are experiencing catastrophic situations of emargination and loss of faith in the future, of humiliating economic and social dependency on their family. There is no longer space for a psychological intervention in organisational situations where conflicts are generated by a new authoritarianism, by the emphasis on cost cutting as the only way for the firm to survive, where there is a loss of motivation for innovation, competence, change, research into new paths to development. Instead of intervention, and the analysis of collusive processes that guide and condition living together in the various contexts, one thinks of illnesses and of the growing need for wellbeing. We must ask ourselves how psychologists dealing with organisational wellbeing see the future direction of relations between management and workers, in the grip of a controlling, authoritarian tendency. It makes us wonder, when faced with a cultural climate dominated by power without competence and by success, by the subjection of the weak to the strong, whether the value supporting psychological work should be that of pursuing “wellbeing”. If Italian psychology, especially Roman psychology, takes this path, we fully intend to change professions. But before giving up, we can assure our readers that we will fight for those professional values that we have been advocating for many years.

⁹ Cfr. Carli R. (2010), Parte 2a, *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*, 1, 151-155.
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