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Post-modernity: which changes in the social framework and psychic function

Anna Maria Ferraro¹, Cinzia Guarnaccia², Francesca Giannone³

Abstract

Aim of this work is to highlight some psychic consequences of post-modernity and particularly the sliding towards more archaic levels of functioning. Therefore, after presenting some distinctive characteristics of post-modernity, we briefly report some data related to the last Censis report on the social situation in Italy, we continue highlighting the emergence of some specific behavioral and relational difficulties show by the recent clinical literature and, finally, using as a vertex of analysis the groupanalytic theory, we propose a key of reading still little explored, on the link between the changes registered at the social level and those recorded at the psychic level (affects, thoughts, behaviors) that can explain the general shift towards more archaic levels of operation.

Key words: *modernity; social changes; groupanalysis*

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Introduction

To understand the psychic repercussions of the characteristics of postmodernity, and particularly fundamentalist drifts, it is necessary to keep together, in a single reading, the "macroscopic" changes signaled by the philosophical, sociological and anthropological literature and the "microscopic" changes signaled by clinical literature. For this purpose we will use some basic concepts of groupanalytic theory.

According to the group analytic perspective, in fact, the individual is not simply conditioned but psychically "permeated" by the conditions of the community in which he lives (Foulkes, 1948).

To understand what happens on the psychic level, then, we must look at the habitus (Bourdieu, 1980), the conditions of rooting of our psyche, for understand how they have changed, and grasp in this change the reasons for the affirmation of a different functioning of the thought, of the behaviors, of the symptoms and the bonds.

To this end, on the one hand the reference to groupanalytic theory and, particularly, to transpersonal studies (Giannone & Lo Verso 1996; Lo Verso, 1989, 1994) and on the other to some recent contributions by Kaes and Recalcati will help us to understand the reasons for the shift towards a more archaic functioning, both on an individual and social level.

The reflections propose below, in fact, show as some postmodern characteristics may have facilitated the shift towards more archaic levels of functioning, and is the aim of the article to clarify some theoretical hypotheses concerning the link between the social and psychic changes.

Therefore we begin presenting some social characteristics of postmodernity, continue presenting the psychic changed highlighted in the clinical literature, and finally propose a link between the two analysis plans.

Postmodern changes on social frame

The following report some characteristics of postmodernity with an important impact on the sociality dimension:

- The loss of the "big frameworks" described by Lyotard (1979) (metaphysical, ideological, religious, political, etc.), that makes difficult to understand the world starting from universal principles and, instead, promotes a context in which everyone is returned to himself (Van Mekjl, 2012; Lyotard, 1979). The loss of these frameworks, or inspiring principles, has been the first step to end of "the century of the neurosis" (centered on the eternal conflict between pulsion, ma also desire, and limits imposed by orders and social bonds). Until the previous epoch, instead, the big frameworks cultural, ideological, religious, political, ecc. have inspired (consciously and unconsciously) the behaviours, and posed their limits. Today, we are in the deregulation era.

- The eradication of social relations from their local contexts and the transfer of them to indefinite and global space-time dimensions described by Giddens (1994) has exacerbated the virtualization of relations, changed the frames of intimacy, of privacy, etc. making difficult the adaptation to relational in offline reality, which results in a frequently failure of real relationships, escapes from reality, and in new forms of web-related psychopathology che aumentano molto i comportamenti compulsivi, l'incapacità di auto-regolarsi and the addictions " without object" or new addictions (Volpe et al., 2016; Schimmenti & Caretti, 2010; Young & De Abreu, 2010).

- The "proliferation of the same", underlined by Byung-Chul Han (2016) who writes about how and why the social media represent a real atrophization of society: The omnipervasive digital network and the digital communication do not facilitate the meeting with others, rather they serve to find the same, who has our own opinion, leaving aside the different and the others. Which makes our horizon of experience increasingly limited. The author claims that we are "involved in an endless equality" in "a self-propaganda that indoctrinates us with our same ideas". On the web, says the author, we accumulate "friends and followers without ever really meeting the Other". All this predisposes to fundamentalist thought, as well as to attitudes and uncritical and dogmatic behavior towards some not necessarily religious ideas. And also, predisposes to identify the danger and the enemy in those who do not believe in our ideas. This, from a clinical perspective, is very reminiscent of paranoid thought.

- The multiplication of the "non-places", as defined by Augé (1992) that increase the sense of strangeness from the community. And, we know, from a clinical perspective, as the loss of references regarding oneself and the our community recalls psychotic and pre-psychotic experiences (Borgna, 1995).

- The exaggerated individualism described by Lasch (1981) and its effects, as the widespread fall of moral and political tension, expansion of the cult of the body, the obsession for old age and death, etc., that are aspect all dominated by prevalence of the instinct of death

- Bauman (2000), in this society, disoriented by virtual space-time, uncritical, dominated by fundamentalist visions, by the death instinct, adds a last "fatal" requirement: the liquidity. He defines liquid, in fact, that society where the practices which influence the human behaviors (but also the af-

fects), change still before consolidating. This social condition remands, once again, the individual to itself. Toward a disturbing liquidity or toward its pathological counterpart which, perhaps, is the fundamentalism

To these characteristics, we want to add some data from the last (52nd) Censis report on the social situation of our country in 2018. The Censis report on Italy returns us the image of a country that feels a strong discomfort for the present, and is unable to invest in the future.

Overall, the data suggest a emergency definite, from the Censis itself, as "psychic sovereignty". This sovereignty together the expulsive movements toward the foreigner, is accompanied by centrifugal respect to relations with Europe. The reasons are many, linked above all to the failure of the economic recovery, but the data show that uncertainty and fear of the future are increasingly exorcised through the search for the scapegoat. Therefore the report speaks of an increase in feelings of suspicion and paranoia, of a widespread "badness" as defines the Censis, which makes the Italians opposed both immigration from non-EU countries (63%) and from EU countries (45%) with already high percentages that exceed 70% in metropolitan areas, and among the most fragile people: the unemployed, and the elderly. Speaking of "paranoid attitudes", the report also notes an increase in the desire for "justice do from you". In fact, the 39% of Italians (4 out of 10) are in favor of introducing less stringent criteria for to possession of a firearm for personal defense. The percentage is in strong increase if compared to the 26% recorded in 2015. And, also in this case, the higher percentages are recorded in the most fragile population: in the more old one, and in the one with a lower degree of education.

After mentioning the postmodern features, and the Censis data, we return to the central topic of this work: to present and discuss some theoretical hypotheses about link between social and psychological changes. Naturally, all the different hypotheses are valid, and depend by the perspective adopted to re-

spond. But, despite different teorical perspectives, some hypotheses are particularly agree in considering the postmodern characteristics "responsible" of certain impact both in individual and collective psyche. In this work we will refer to these hypotheses and particularly, to groupanalytic hypothesis. But first, let's see what are the changes detected by the clinical studies on the psyche and behaviors.

Postmodern changes on psyche and behaviors

Over the last ten years, several studies have investigated the effects of postmodernity on the identity, behaviors, and psychopathology (Cianconi et al., 2016; Castellini, 2016; Turner, 2003). Also these studies, despite the different perspectives, are agree to believe that mental disorders are strictly related to context changes, and that currently, in the post-modernity, we assist to psychological changes and risks to mental health both individual and social level.

In particular, different studies highlight an increase in the crisis of reflective function with repercussions to interpersonal skills and deterioration of social bonds. Other studies suggest a significant reduction of impulse control ability, an increase of dysphoria and other uncomfortable mental states as irritability, restlessness, boredom, feeling of emptiness, shame, etc. (Castellini, 2016; Stanghellini, 2011; Van Meijl, 2012; Van Meijl, 2010; Stanghellini, 2015; Ferraro, Giannone & Lo Verso, 2014; Gratz et al., 2010; Peters & Geiger, 2016; Scheel et al., 2014; Ferraro, 2011).

Finally, other studies highlight an increase of communication problems with alterity, an increase in multiple weak identifications, and a collision between localization and globalization (Van Meijl, 2012; Gumpfer & Escande, 2013; Ferraro, 2011; Ferraro et al., 2015; Van Meijl, 2010; Stanghellini, 2015).

These aspects that regarding:

- the affectiveness (increase in dysphoria, shame, irritability, restlessness, boredom, feelings of emptiness, etc.);

- the behaviour (reduction in impulse control ability, interpersonal skills and reflective function, etc.);

- the limit sense (the weakening social bond, the inability of the dialogue with alterity, etc.)

are indices of the important changes that involving the individuale, and can be considered a mirror of postmdoern social change above described; in these, in fact, it find their frame of meaning.

In particular, we believe that these changes show a general shifting towards more primitive levels of personality functioning (borderline and psychotic). At this regarde in a previous article (Ferraro et al., 2016) we have talked about the sliding towards to borderline functioning, analyzing one of the indices involved in the diagnosis of the functioning levels: the "integration vs diffusion of identity" index.

Here, given the emphasis on danger sensations, date the research of the enemy, it is important consider the involvement of another index, also involved in the diagnosis of the personality functioning levels, that is: "the reality exam" (McWilliams, 2012; Kernberg, 1984). An important aspect of the reality exam it is the ability to realistically evaluate one's feelings, behaviors and thoughts inside of the social rules shared.

However, if we said that we live in the deregulation time, and even in an time of misinformation in which fake news and trolls abound, we must ask us if these aspects can have repercussion on the "reality exam", causing its deterioration, its loosening. Naturally, an adequate "exam of reality" involves the absense of psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations, deliriums, disorganization of behavior, etc. But the propaganda against the enemy, added to the growing sense of danger, can drive toward a more primitive functioning, eliciting, for example, paranoid thoughts and behaviors. The paranoia is a disorder of thought (distorted judgment, wrong) mainly a persecutory theme, not corresponding to reality, of which the patient does not have awareness.

This belief system can manifest itself in very different clinical situations and at various levels of severity: by a simple trait of personalities, to the paranoid personality disorder, until the true persecutory delirium. But, in any case, despite the clinic frames are very different, at different level of severity, this belief system tends to be chronic.

Now it is not our intention to enter into the specifics pathologies that contemplate this erroneous belief system, but evaluate if and how the changes detected at the social level can facilitate a shift towards erroneous belief system, eliciting more arcaic levels of functioning.

Hypothesis on the tie between social and psychic changes

Now, starting by the group-analytic perspective, we would like propose a possible link between the social and psychological changes above outlined. In particular, we believe that the postmodernity has partially corroded and modified our constituent matrices; and that this corrosion has created favourable conditions for the sliding towards more primitive levels of functioning (borderline and psychotic).

But let's try to understand why. The social changes that we have mentioned (loss of big frames of reference, spatio-temporal coordinates, excess of individualization, liquidity, etc.) make more slack the link between the individual and its constituent matrices, producing a detachment effect and, making more difficult, under these conditions, the acceptance and dialogue with alterity.

At this phenomenon we have given the name of disidentity (Ferraro et al., 2016; Ferraro et al, 2014; Ferraro & Lo Verso, 2007) to underline that condition of indefiniteness, emptiness, lack of planning, etc. which seems to correspond to the corrosion of the established codes.

Said differently: taken together, the mentioned social characteristics have caused a progressive, partial and unconscious separation of the individual from his belonging matrices, which interfering with the unconscious

dialogue Idem/Autòs (Napolitani, 1987), has made more difficult the dialogue with alterity.

This dialogue is fundamental for the healthy development of our identity, for not to remain only linked of the idem, the sameness, for to accept and integrate the alterity and diversity.

As group analysts, we ask ourselves what are the effects of this partial but profound detachment from our matrices, what effects it produces, and if the reaffirmation of fundamentalisms is not partly due to this too.

But at this point, a brief reference is needed to some aspects of groupanalytic theory (Giannone & Lo Verso, 1996).

The Group analysis and the Transpersonal studies, having studied the foulesiana idea of the correspondence between internal-external, individual-social, etc., can help us to understand the link between the changing anthropological and psychic scenarios.

Transpersonal studies, in particular, analyze the "contents" of the matrices, grouping them, for scientific purpose, in the following different levels: biologicogenetic, familiar, ethnic-anthropological, institutional, sociocommunicative, and political-environmental, also known as transpersonal levels (Lo Verso, 1989, 1994).

Anthropological social scenarios represent a specific aspect of matrices. It is therefore inevitable that changes at this level interest our psyche. In group-analytic theory, the constituent matrix concept corresponds to the "sameness" concept, and it is the presence of the constituent matrix precisely allows the dialogue between identity and alterity. This presence guarantees the dynamic balance between identification and originality, self-fidelity and adaptability to different social contexts, continuity and discontinuity, permanence and change. But, in the absence or lack of elements of sameness (metaphorically fixed into the constituent matrix), each biography risks getting lost in small, disconnected pieces that would make it difficult to integrate the sense of identity and consequently the opening to the other. Constituent matrices, indeed, offer the possibility to

identify oneself (both consciously and unconsciously) with unconscious expectations, behavioural codes, relational modalities, internal or social prohibitions, etc., starting from which each individual can work to develop his own identity (for adhesion or differentiation). Therefore, the corrosion of constituent matrices generates uncertainty in "self-construction". More precisely, we believe that the contemporary corrosion of the constituent matrices impairs the continuous dialogue between the sameness and the alterity. From our point of view, postmodernity is responsible for the lack of established codes, or "metapsychic guarantors" (Käes, 2013).

Adopting group-analytic language, we would say that the the social changes have involved the dialogue between identification (with the constituent matrices) and originality, or between Idem and Autòs 44, determining the loosening of some social and internal structures that constitute the boundaries of meaning-making. The consequence of this phenomenon is an "epiphany" of signs that are completely different from those that have characterized the previous modern epoch neurotic, causing a sliding towards more archaic levels of functioning.

The construction of identity is not in fact a private matter, immediately implies dialogue with the other and otherness; the dialectic between identification and originality, continuity and discontinuity, persistence and change, idem and autòs (Napolitani, 1987), it implies "the dynamic compromise between loyalty to ourselves and adaptability to the contexts of social life" (Stanghellini, 2009). But the loss of the "metapsychic guarantors" as writes Käes (2013) makes this dialogue more difficult. This is because the postmodern characteristics wear out the dimension of the sameness, and this makes it more difficult the dialogue between idem and autòs, sameness and otherness, continuity and discontinuity. In fact, in a more vacuous identity sense, consider the otherness, not as value

but as an inference, a disturbance. This can push toward the identical to me. Towards a fundamentalist thoughts and behaviors.

The conclusions we are arrived through our reading, meet (despite different conceptual perspectives) other clinical readings, such as the one proposed by Recalcati (2010, 2011) and by Käes (2013).

Recalcati and his group, in particular, agree in supporting the thesis of a "psychotic background" of the new forms of suffering. According to Recalcati, this change is the fundamental difference between the clinic of neurosis and the clinic of the void is no longer based on the removal of desire, but on the defense against anguish. In new social contest what "emerges" is no longer the metaphorical return of the removed desire, but rather the prevalence of discharge, of action, of the passage to the act. This are all processes of archaic functioning, that already Freud identified as "primary thought". According to Recalcati, all this moves against the background of the evaporation of the Law of the Father that designates the crisis of the symbolic Other (ie of politics, religion, ideologies, the dimension of values, etc.) which, if we want, is a another way and another language to say of the "corrosion of established codes". But also from Käes (2013) who believes that the malfunctioning, interruptions and reconfigurations of the metasocial guarantors influence people's psychic life, determining the "malaise". He also refers to the change in the structures that should be used as a framework for regulate intra and interpsychic processes (ideals, beliefs, authorities, hierarchies, etc.). And he too believes that the contemporary malaise is due to this.

The clinical intervention and particularly the group intervention can be very interesting, due to some of its characteristics, to recompose, rediscover, within a setting with precise coordinates the value of the other, but of the importance of the clinic in the social sphere, will talk in a next work.

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