

## The systemic challenges facing the contemporary world.

### What semiotic-based psychoanalytic psychology can do and why.

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#### **Abstract**

Contemporary societies are marked by deep socio-economic and institutional changes that have raised a plurality of challenges. The main thesis of this contribution is that psychology, and more specifically a semiotic-based psychoanalytic psychology, can provide a relevant contribution to the challenges contemporary societies are facing with. The paper highlights that this is due to two structural characteristics of the new scenario: a) social phenomena are intrinsically affective and b) they have a systemic dimension. Accordingly to these characteristics, an interpretive framework is provided, lying on the general psycho-cultural tenet which states that any behavior is not merely the effect of the environmental state, but even the consequence of the mediation of its interpretation by the social actor. Semiotic-based psychoanalytic theory complements this psycho-cultural tenet with the corollary claiming that the interpretation performed by social actors is grounded in and channeled by affect-laden generalized meanings that are active within the cultural milieu. Methodological implications from the interpretative framework are drawn as to how the psychology can contribute to address the systemic challenges.

**Key words:** *semiotic-based psychoanalysis, systemic challenges.*

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## Scenario

Contemporary societies are marked by deep socio-economic and institutional changes that have raised a plurality of challenges. On the one hand, economic crises have worsened and rendered uncertain the life of broader and broader segments of society, progressively widening the gap between the winners and the losers of globalization. On the other hand, in the context of climate changes and structural political and economic weaknesses in developing countries, the migration fluxes represent a global challenge, which calls into question a scenario of radical transformation of Western societies' demographic composition. The defensive commitment to identity and the specular enemy-making of otherness seem to be the major ways in which societies are responding to these upheavals (Salvatore, Mannarini et al., 2018). Ideological and religious radicalization are gaining momentum, along with the polarization of the axiological, ethnic and political differences within societies, as shown by the multiplication of episodes of hate crimes and political crimes, as well as the success of far-right and/or populist parties in many countries. In their turn, these processes are feeding a climate that has weakened the trust in supra-national (above all, European Union) and national institutions, and favors the raise of sovereignist and authoritarian politics that represent a real threat to the very existence of liberal democracy.

These dynamics are intertwined with each other and impact virtually every domain of social life, manifesting themselves in some cases in terms of disruptive critical events, capable of polarizing attention and collective concern (e.g. episodes of racial violence, the electoral success of far-right parties, episodes of aggression against teachers and school administrators by students and family members, as well as the spread of fake

news). What is taking place is an anthropological drift, a radical change in the way people feel, think, and act, which obscures institutional frameworks, interpretive categories, modalities of co-existence, and forms of life that were taken for granted until the recent past.

In this newly emerging anthropological scenario, politics and policies seem more prone to pander to the demands of security and identity, often doing so through the identification of scapegoats (migrants, gypsies, Euro-bureaucrats, Muslims) set up as targets of the people's feelings of revenge. However, the wave of identity politics does not solve, but rather increases the need for new models of policies enabling the government of the relationship between demand and supply of essential common goods and resources (e.g. health, education, mobility, innovation, and climate). What is required is to understand how to address the current disarticulation between vital words and institutions in areas such as the educational cooperation between families and schools, as well as healthcare systems, the promotion of innovative forms of civic and political participation, the urban and social development of territories, the pursuit of social cohesion, the expansion of civil rights, and the search for new and more efficient models of value construction, based on the service business logic of high personality intensity (Salvatore et al., in press).

It is all too obvious just how psychology, as a science and as a profession, is called into question by such a scenario. Trying to help address the problems and issues at stake is primarily an ethical imperative. At the same time, it is an extraordinary opportunity for scientific development, enhancement of the professional function, consolidation of the

relationship with society, and growth of employment opportunities.

### **Current contributions of psychology and their limits**

Many lines of psychological research - e.g. social and community psychology, psychology of organizations, educational psychology, cognitive and behavioral neurosciences - are interested in meso- and macro-social phenomena, namely in the scale of events and processes where the challenges outlined in the previous paragraph lie. To give just one example, think of the contribution that psychology has offered to the renewal of the interpretive paradigms of decision-making in the social, economic, and political spheres (for a recent review, see World Bank, 2015).

However, the new anthropological scenario poses theoretical, methodological and pragmatic issues that the currently dominant approaches within psychological research struggle to face. It is therefore not by chance that the undoubted scientific impact of psychological research in the meso- and macro-social fields has not been able to feed a line of professional development even minimally comparable with the professional settlement reached within the traditional clinical domains (e.g. , and health psychology).

For the purposes of this discussion, it is worth highlighting two structural characteristics of the new scenario that play a role in the limits of the current mainstream approaches: emerging social phenomena are: a) intrinsically affective and b) have a systemic dimension.

Many of the contemporary social phenomena are characterized by forms of subjectivity that lend themselves to be considered irrational on the descriptive plane. People produce choices and behaviors that appear to go openly and clearly against their own interests (e.g. the refusal of immigrants by those who should be more interested in integrating them), and/or remain blind to relevant information (as it is demonstrated,

for instance, by the fact that many people are against vaccination in spite of the scientific evidence supporting its necessity); another paradigmatic evidence of this blindness is provided by the consensus gained by a leader such as Trump, even if the distance of many of his statements from reality is widely recognized. Such behaviors favor solutions with an immediate emotional impact without taking into account their actual medium-term consequences (populism has been defined in precisely these terms - as short-breath politics searching for immediate results in spite of their actual ineffectiveness, see Guiso, Morelli & Sonno, 2017) and pursuing preferences based on Manichaeon visions of reality (again, see the populist split between the totally good 'people' and the totally bad 'elite'). This is not the first time this happens: the last century recorded at least two such processes of collective "madness", both resulting in the tragedy of World War. It should therefore be recognized that these forms of subjectivity are the expression of systemic dynamics: they are phenomena at the broader population level, whose manifestations (but not their determinants) can be located at the individual level.

This poses a relevant conceptual problem: on the one hand, it appears evident that the social phenomena at stake are strongly imbued with affectivity: they are associated with forms of thought and action that favor identity-cohesion at the expense of the reality test. At the same time, given the macro-social scale of these forms, they do not lend themselves to be explained using the categories of psychopathology or, in any case, any model of interpretation centered on the individual mind.

Mainstream psychological models of social and economic action are not able to offer satisfactory answers to this conceptual problem either. Indeed, these models are based on the paradigmatic assumption of the actor endowed with limited rationality – that is to say, characterized by constrained cognitive processes. Thus, if they maintain a focus on the individual mind, on the other hand, they do not consider the affective

dimension as immanent to, and constitutive of, cognition. Therefore, they do not offer satisfactory conceptual solutions to the need to understand how and why, in a certain historical moment, the thought of relevant segments of society takes forms so strongly imbued with affectivity and characterized, in their content, by such a massive connotation of the other as enemy.

### **The cultural and psychoanalytic framework**

The main thesis of this contribution is that psychology, and more specifically a semiotic-based psychoanalytic psychology (Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011), can provide a relevant contribution to the strategic challenges contemporary societies are facing with. However, it has to be recognized that this is not so obvious, given that the contemporary form of psychoanalytic clinical psychology has addressed to meso- and macro-social phenomena only marginally (for some exceptions, see, for instance, Carli & Paniccia, 1999; Hopper, 2001, Di Maria, 2005; Lo Verso & Lo Coco, 2002). More particularly, in the last quarter of a century, the clinical dimension has been explicitly or implicitly conceived and practiced as referring to a disciplinary object: the forms of deviation from normal psychological functioning and their impact in terms of adjustment and quality of experience. The centrality that the binomial psychopathology-cure has within clinical discourse finds in this conception (the clinic as object) its epistemological foundation. In addition, the approaches of investigative and clinical intervention that distance themselves from this binomial (for example, the research and practice related to health psychology) share with it the adoption of the individual and/or the micro-social scale (interpersonal contexts, groups, family relationships) as the fundamental unit of analysis and intervention.

As a result, contemporary psychoanalytic psychology is fundamentally silent on the major issues and problems deriving from on-

going anthropological and historical transformations; or rather, it carves out a role to the extent that - and in terms of - the impact that these dynamics have on people and on micro-social contexts (e.g. the psychological impact of the traumatic experience many refugees are subjected to). To say it with an image: psychoanalytic psychology is interested in immigrants, but it leaves migration to other professions and areas of the social sciences.

Actually, this choice is neither obvious nor necessary. Indeed, psychoanalysis has historically shown that - to use the previous image - the interest in immigrants does not prevent attention being paid to migration. Psychoanalytic theory was born as a general theory of personality and as a method of analysis of the phenomena on a plurality of levels of observation (family contexts, organizational frameworks, social and cultural dynamics, art, anthropological profiles). According to this extensive view of psychoanalytic theory, the term "clinical" should be understood as indicative of a method, rather than as an object; namely, "clinic" should not denote a specific set of phenomena (e.g. psychopathology), but a mode of addressing to (analyzing, treating) a plurality of phenomena, at micro-, as well as meso- and macro-social scales.

On the other hand, it should be recognized that the psychoanalytic methodological approach has been progressively marginalized. This is not the place to investigate the reasons behind this process of progressive loss of interest in the meso-/macro-social dimension. What should suffice here is to highlight the socio-cultural, rather than epistemological and theoretical motivations behind this evolution. In other words, if psychoanalysis has gradually focused its attention on the dimension of the cure, this is due to the historical and institutional conditions within which the psychoanalytic professional and scientific discourse developed, rather than because psychoanalysis lacked the conceptual and methodological resources to deal with the challenging issues of the social world.

Today conditions have changed. The themes and issues raised by the socio-political crisis call for psychoanalytic knowledge in a compelling way. The affective valence of the forms of social action stimulates, and offers the opportunity, for psychoanalytic psychology to broaden its horizons concerning problems and processes which are crucial to the future.

### *A semiotic-based psychoanalytic framework for understanding contemporary social scenarios*

In what follows, psychoanalytic theory is used as the grounds for a methodological interpretive framework regarding macro-social dynamics. The framework is considered methodological because it is not focused on any specific phenomenon; rather, it provides the basic conceptual tools to enable a psychological understanding of the plurality of processes that can be recognized at the level of macro-social scenarios.

At the base of the framework lies a general psycho-cultural tenet which states that any behavior is not merely the effect of the environmental state, but the consequence of the mediation of its interpretation by the social actor (e.g. Cole, 1996; Moscovici, 1961; Valsiner, 2007, 2009; Salvatore, 2018). This general psycho-social tenet can be expressed in the terms of the following formula:

$$B=f(I_{a(s)})$$

Where:

B is the behavior and  $I_{a(s)}$  stands for the interpretation (I) of the environmental state (s) enacted by the actor 'a'.

This general psycho-cultural tenet can be recognized as being involved in a huge variety of models and theories, across the entire domain of social sciences – e.g., sociology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), anthropology (Geertz, 1983) – as well as within the psychoanalytic field (Kirshner, 2010; Muller, 1996). According to this tenet, interpretation makes up reality – it does not create reality, but it shapes the way it is experienced and

perceived – by means of intra-psychological and communicational processes of integration of information, as well as by means of the foregrounding of various pertinent aspects (Bruner, 1986, 1990; Gergen, 1999; Harré & Gillett, 1994; Linell, 2009; Salvatore, 2013; Salvatore & Freda, 2011).

A corollary of the general psycho-cultural tenet is that the interpretation performed by social actors is grounded in and channeled by generalized meanings that are active within the cultural milieu. These stable systems of generalized meanings shape, in an immediate and implicit way, the image the social actors have of themselves and their relation with the world (Salvatore, 2012; Valsiner, 2014). Thus, the way people feel, think and act depends on the dynamics of sensemaking that are located not only in the individual's skull, but in the transactional space between the subject and its cultural context.

The definition of culture used here is semiotic and dynamic (Salvatore, 2018), quite distant from the common-sense view, as well as from the view implied in cross-cultural studies (Heine, 2011; for a critique, see Valsiner, 2007), which see culture as an independent entity characterizing a certain social group. The semiotic and dynamic view of culture is based upon the idea that the distinctive quality of human phenomena is that they are characterized by dynamics of sensemaking (Smedslund, 1997), that is to say, they are constituted by “transitions between signs” (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2013).

According to this conception, culture is not a general factor, competing with others (e.g. economy, technology or biology) in the construction of human events; rather, it is the dynamic gestalt where human events come to life and develop. The generalized cultural meanings can also be conceived as attractors that channel the trajectories of sensemaking, namely, the way actors associate meanings with each other in order to interpret reality. Psychoanalytic theory integrates the psycho-cultural semiotic tenet with two further corollaries that deepen the understanding of the

regulative role of cultural meanings, in addition to providing a way of modelling how to intervene on/through them.

### *The affect-laden valence of cultural meanings and sensemaking*

Firstly, as psychodynamic constructs such as the institutional field, the trans-personal and local culture imply, semiotic-oriented psychoanalytic psychology proposes a specific approach to the conceptualization of the transaction between individual minds and the social context, based on the recognition of the role that affects play within this transaction, as well as on the underlying unconscious foundation (Salvatore & Freda, 2011). Accordingly, psychoanalytic theory leads one to recognize the affect-laden nature of the generalized cultural meanings that comprise people's worldviews. It is thanks to their affective valence that cultural meanings are able to ground and channel people's subjectivity. In this vein, Salvatore, Fini, and colleagues (2018) recently modeled cultural meanings in terms of symbolic universes, highlighting their being *a-semantic, generalized, affect-laden worldviews* that shape the way people feel, think and act. More particularly, they have shown that:

- each symbolic universe is a system of meanings consisting of a network of less generalized meanings that are linked in accordance to their affective valence, regardless of their semantic relationship. The authors use the term "a-semantic" in order to highlight that the generalized affect-laden meanings are the expression of a level of sensemaking working in accordance with a different – but not fully alternative – logic than the rational one, namely, the logic of emotional, affect-laden daily thinking;

- generalized meaning plays a higher-order, regulative function in sensemaking. As indicated above, it works as an embodied system of assumptions that channels how the less generalized meanings are used, and in doing so, it guides the way people feel, think and act;

- generalized meaning exercises its regulatory function with regard to the sense-maker's field of experience as a whole, rather than merely with regard to single components of this field (i.e., specific events and objects). This means that it works as the *universe of sense* in which individuals are completely embedded.

It is due to these characteristics that symbolic universes lend themselves to being conceived as the basic system of assumptions framing the way experience is interpreted. This means that they are not changed by experience; rather, experience is shaped by them. It follows that any person feels, thinks and acts from within his/her own symbolic universe, and in so doing she/he also tends to reproduce it.

### *The mind-action correspondence tenet*

From a complementary point of view, the decisive contribution that psychoanalytic psychology can offer to model or act on social dynamics concerns the methodological principle of the correspondence (more precisely, of reciprocal immanence) between the form of the relationship and the modality of thought, which is at the core of the psychoanalytic theory of technique (for a discussion, see Salvatore, 2016). It is thanks to this principle that psychodynamic intervention is configured as intrinsically two-dimensional, centered on the reciprocal and recursive interaction between the quality of relational patterns and the ability to access more mature ways of thinking. Because of this interaction, the intervention may identify, on a case-by-case basis, the appropriate distribution between action related to the configuration of the setting and action aimed at promoting advanced ways of thinking (e.g. interpretation).

More generally, the mind-action correspondence tenet leads us to recognize that if one wants to change the cultural milieu and, in doing so, promote more advanced individual and collective forms of thinking and adjustment, one does not have to claim meanings

(beliefs, values or principles), but has to design social practices encapsulating them; in other words, symbolic resources are not produced by statements, but by *generalizations of action structures* – first comes action, then meaning follows: a generalized meaning is consolidated within the cultural milieu not because it is stated, but because it is enacted, namely it is pursued by the terms of a certain social practice, conveying it as its inherent criterion of regulation and justification.

## Conclusion

Psychoanalytic psychology has theoretical and methodological resources to provide a valuable contribution to the understanding of and the intervention within the social dynamics of the systemic order. This contribution is based on the ability of the psychodynamic models to recognize that individual minds and social contexts are mutually connected by reason of the affective dimension. Due to

this fact, psychoanalytic psychology can develop interpretative models aimed at understanding: a) the affective processes that are fed/conveyed by the structural and functional characteristics of systemic dynamics; b) the way in which these affective processes of the systemic order orient and constrain forms of subjectivity. From a complementary point of view, the understanding of such mechanisms – together with the recognition of the inherent linkage between mind and action – is the condition for: 1) designing systemic interventions as a method to pursue the change of psycho-social dimensions (cultural models, attitudes, opinions and action scripts) underpinning systemic critical issues; 2) promoting the ability of systemic interventions to take into account the affective and subjective values associated with the way they are performed and the impacts they pursue.

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