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In this article I intend to examine some aspects of the cultural changes taking place in post-modern society. Assuming a certain knowledge of the considerable amount of literature on the subject, I will try first to outline briefly the main aspects of the cultural changes which help to shed light on the meaning of the present crisis of politics. I will then develop some arguments on the possible new developments of the role of politics in our era.

The contemporary cultural situation can be analyzed according to three main levels. *The first level* can be described as *theoretic* and is apparent in the crisis of the great totalizing ideologies. This crisis is linked, as is well known, to:

a) the progressive recognition of the *limits of knowledge* related to the development of epistemology of science in its relationship with empirical experience;

b) the end, as a result, of thorough investigation of the nature of cognitive experience, of metaphysical forms;

c) the disappearance of *télos,* or in other words, the end of the great naturalistic-evolutionist visions and the global interpretation of history;

d) the emergence of the irreconcilable character of both the existential and the social situation, as a consequence of the previous three aspects.

In the absence of a complete and thorough explanation of existence, due to the impossibility of taking absolute fundaments or final conclusions as reference, the question of the meaning of existence is left open and a basic contradiction is revealed between man's infinite desire and the finite limits of the meaning of real experience. God's death marks, in the final analysis, the end also of the great secular movements founded on a mystic concept of humanity, seen as a unitary organism in constant evolution (cf. Crespi 1985a).

The failure of these perspectives influences in particular the progressive shift from concepts directed towards a radical renewal of the forms of social life (of a revolutionary-utopistic form) to more limited concepts of reform. This is not intended obviously as an assertion that in our world there no longer exist active ideological forces of a totalizing nature, but that these forces appear to be in contrast with the main trends of philosophical and scientific experience of post-modernity: in this context the totalizing tendencies prove to be regressive expressions, increasingly linked to social situations characterized by anomie and emargination.

The second level is *psychosocial* and appears to be directly connected to the experience of subjective existence in the new social conditions. This is usually expressed in terms of both individual and collective *identity crisis.* The phenomenon of differentiation and fragmentation of social life which characterizes the societies of late capitalism leads to a plurality of social formations different from the traditional ones (family, class, employment, politics, etc.), so that social groups and individuals are faced with a "growing pluralization of role involvement" (Parsons 1968: 11) and the fact that their identity is no longer "the content of a tradition" (Habermas 1976: 87). The implications of the identity crisis which have affected strata, categories, social groups and even entire national communities (in countries where the process of modernization is fairly recent) are evident, paradoxically, only in the accentuation of the difference between society and the individual and in the increase of the value attributed to creativity, imagination, individual needs, privacy, etc., which characterizes

contemporary culture. The claim to an identity and the search for identification—through participation in the various social movements, associations, and groups based on race, sex, age, politics, religion, various cultural and recreative activities, and sometimes even on drugs or violence—is in many respects a new element. This is so not only in the forms which identity has assumed, but above all because it expresses *in a direct way* the very need for an identity. The priorities of various feminist, homosexual and youth movements today are of an *ontological* nature insofar as what is sought more than anything else is a *right to an identity*, while the pursuit of common *interests* comes only in second place (cf. Melucci 1982). The reasons for this phenomenon can be primarily linked to the instability which characterizes positions and roles in post-industrial societies which are undergoing continuous, rapid changes: societies in which identities, instead of being *granted* according to birth, objective class membership and territorial bonds, are increasingly the result of *choices* made at various stages during a lifetime, through continuous processes of socialization and renegotiation of relationships (cf. Berger 1974: 207; Bell 1976; Sciolla 1983; Gallino 1982: 69 ss.).

It is in this context that the particular relationship which exists between identity and the dimension of power becomes evident both on an individual level—as a problem of interdependence between personal identity and inner power—and on a social level, as the problem of the circular relationship between power as producer (or denier) of identity and identity as a form of legitimation (or delegitimation) of power, including, naturally, the internal connections between these two levels (cf. Robertson & Holzner 1980; Crespi 1983). To examine the problem of identity mainly in terms of interiorization by the individual of the dominant values and models of the social system, as Parsons did in 1968, seems today to be altogether inadequate if we take into account the fact that the present situation is characterized by the plurality of values and models in such a system, by an "excess of alternatives" which, in the absence of a strong ego, gives rise to a growing "indeterminateness of the collective culture" (Rositi 1981, 1983). Thus, it appears that in this situation reinforcement of identity must not be considered, in the traditional sense, as a reinforcement of identifications and social solidarity but, in a more problematical way, as the question of how to increase the inner power of the individual, or in other words, in the ego's capacity to maintain a relative distance from the various distinct

forms of identity that he/she has to assume according to the different levels and phases of his/her social life. One must therefore acknowledge that a certain conception of identity as a stable and permanent form, established once and for all, has entered a state of crisis (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1977). This is instead replaced by a more complex consideration of the inner dynamics which the ego, in its relative indefiniteness, maintains with the established forms of symbolic mediation which ensure each time the objective forms of identity necessary for social interaction (cf. Crespi 1985b). The construction of a personal identity appears today, therefore, primarily as an ability to negotiate social identities internally, or, in other words, as a process of exploration of various possibilities, and different practical solutions (cf. Turner 1968: 1075; Goffman 1961; Luhman 1979; Berger, Berger & Kellner 1973: 62 ss.).

The third level of analysis of the present socio-cultural situation is of a more specific *sociological* character and concerns directly the process of the increasing differentiation of the spheres of social life and the consequent fragmentation of the social system into various specialized sub-systems (cf. Luhman 1975). This situation has been interpreted by Habermas (1981a, b) in terms of the growing divergence between social system and life-world (*Lebenswelt*).

With reference to Max Weber's critique of the concept of rationalization, Habermas emphasizes the fact that the objective-technical processes of modernization connected with the development of capitalism tend to reduce the possibilities for human experience offered by the rationalization of world views and social forms. The assumption central to Habermas' analysis is that the process of cultural rationalization which took place during the history of humanity can be depicted as a rational development of world views and of codified cognitive structures, linked to the concrete transformations of means of production and forms of social organization. According to Habermas, the historical process leading to capitalism has produced an increasing divergence between the reductional principles of functional-instrumental reason which characterizes the structural logic of advanced industrial societies including the possibilities offered by the substantial rationalization processes, and the development of communicative socialization present in these same societies at the everyday-life-world-level. Life-world represents for Habermas the widespread horizon within which are preserved and transmitted the interpretations of preceding generations, the forms of symbolic mediation

by means of which traditional cultures are maintained and repro-
duced, social integration is strengthened, and personal identities
are confirmed (cf. Habermas 1981b, II: 182 ss.). Since, however,
social action develops not only in the symbolic space of the life-
world but also in that of the functional organization of social sys-
tems, as "systemically stabilized action-contexts of socially
integrated groups" (II: 228), it is also necessary to analyze the
dynamic relationship between life-world and functional systems
as dimensions not reducible to one another.

As is well known, functionalist systems are characterized in
Parsons' theory as self-regulating action-contexts which coordi-
nate actions around specific mechanisms or "media," such as
money or power. However, the functionalist model, in Habermas'
view, does not take sufficiently into account the distinctive char-
acteristics of the life-world, where processes of communicative
action follow a logic which cannot be reduced to that of functional
mechanisms (money/power) and cannot be replaced by the latter
without serious pathological consequences. While the concepts of
system and life-world were originally co-extensive, subsequently
social evolution has produced an ever-increasing differentiation
of these two dimensions: the social system has developed accord-
ing to principles of functional and instrumental rationality
through a growing distinction between power structures and kin-
ship structures (formation of the state apparatus as different from
that of the clan structures) and an increasingly autonomous mar-
ket economy in respect to the local spheres of life. This process of
differentiation ended up reducing the life-world to the status of
one sub-system among others (cf. ibid., II: 229 ss.). Since social
systems remain nonetheless linked by specific institutional com-
plexes to the life-world, the differentiation between the two levels
creates serious contradictions and imbalance. While rationaliza-
tion of the *social level* has developed, on the one hand, in increas-
ing degrees of organizational, economic, administrative and
political complexity, rationalization of *life-world* has been charac-
terized, on the other hand, by the separation among different
spheres of value and by the logical advancement of levels of
learning. As a matter of fact, the evolution which has affected
life-world is characterized, according to Habermas, by the pro-
gressive distinction between subjective and social world, further-
ing the transition from an egocentric, absolutist understanding of
the world to a decentralized and relativized understanding of it
(Habermas 1981a, I: 105-6).

The dynamic relationship established between the processes of rationalization at the social-system level (as an increase of its complexity based on functional values of production and control) and the process of rationalization at the life-world level (as a development of creative and critical ability) can be analyzed in terms of its circularity: rationalization of the life-world is a condition of the increase in complexity of the system, but this in turn influences the life-world, reducing its potentialities ("inner-colonization of the life-world," in ibid., II: 517 ss.).

Reductionist mediation of the life-world through system imperatives causes pathological effects

> insofar as critical disequilibria in material reproduction [. . .] can be avoided only at the cost of disturbances in the symbolic reproduction of the life-world (i.e., of subjectively experienced, identity-threatening crises or pathologies). (Ibid., II: 452 ss.)

In point of fact, when the mechanisms of monetarization and bureaucratization of the economic and administrative spheres exceed their role and penetrate the spheres pertaining to the life-world of cultural transmission, socialization and personal identity, the freedom of the processes of communicative action are seriously compromised.

On the basis of the analysis of interaction processes between life-world and communicative action on the one hand, and social system and instrumental action on the other, Habermas maintains that the evils of the societies of late capitalism can be identified with the tendency of systematic mechanisms to intrude into the life-world and with the tendency of functional models to replace the forms that characterize communicative rationality. Taking Marx's analysis as a reference, Habermas explains this tendency as a product of the inner logic of the processes of accumulation and valorization of capital. In advanced capitalist societies, with the development of the Welfare State and state economic intervention, control of the contradictions present on an economic level and in class conflict can be maintained by displacing the tensions into other spheres of social life, where the conflict appears in forms which cannot be linked directly to class structures. In this way new conflicting forms and new movements appear which reveal, in Habermas' view, the contrast between the all-inclusive tendencies of the social system and the possibilities for autonomy and self-reflection which have opened up today in communicative action by virtue of logical development (cf. ibid.: 489 ss.).

Habermas' concept of life-world as the ideal base for com-

municative action gives rise to numerous questions. In the dualism between life-world and the social system, Ferdinand Tönnies' society-community dichotomy seems to reappear in a renewed version: in Habermas' analysis the life-world, as a place of communicative action, is shown as the domain which establishes substantial rationality, while the functional rationality of systemic structures is seen as the principal source of social tensions and alienations. This distinction can be useful in showing how, on a global societal level, the determinate forms of mediation, in order to control collective action, must necessarily have a greater degree of generality and absoluteness: they are therefore more abstract and less flexible with regard to the more differentiated and open forms of mediation connected with the experience of the life-world. The contrast between the two levels in terms of the disparate quality of their relative principles of rationality appears, however, in Habermas' analysis once again to be dictated mainly by the needs of an absolute foundation of value rather than by empirical experience. While acknowledging the interdependence between life-world and the social system, the logic of power and money tends to be attributed exclusively to the social system structure, without equal recognition of its connections with the forces at work in the life-world: the idea of colonization by the social system of the latter does not give, in its unidirectionality, adequate relevance to the dimensions of life-world which contribute to the development of the social system. To say that the tensions of present society are the product of the displacement into the life-world of the tensions and conflicts of the systemic structure—linked to the logic of the development of mature capitalism in its economic and political aspects—seems to be an overly simplistic interpretation (cf. Thompson 1983: 292 ss.), which runs the risk of idealizing the life-world.

This does not alter the fact, however, that the present tendency towards a progressive differentiation between the interaction processes of everyday life and the increasingly complex organizational level of the social system as such is an actual characteristic to be taken into account in an analysis of the crisis of politics, together with the other aspects mentioned above.

Another aspect I feel should be examined in order to understand the specific meaning of the current crisis of politics in contemporary developed societies is the particular attitude towards the norms which seems to prevail in that kind of society. Much of the sociological research carried out in Italy in these last years on

youth movements and identity (see, for example, Garelli, Melucci, Sciolla, et al.) have emphasized, as I mentioned before, not only the fragmentation of social orders and the multiple and provisional nature of identity statuses, but above all what has been called the "expansion of possibilities" or "excess of opportunities" offered by contemporary developed societies. It could be inferred, therefore, that the relationship with the norms tends today, in a situation of relativization of symbolic orders, to be expressed according to a greater freedom of choice. It is in this perspective that the accent has been put on post-materialist values (Inglehart), on the increase in critical reflection, on the shift from needs of an acquisitive nature to those of self-realization (Altan, Sciolla, Ricolfi, Melucci), and on the accentuation of individual rather than collective logic (Garelli), etc.

On the other hand it is also true that, even apart from the episodes connected with terrorism, the considerable success of certain religious movements would seem to indicate a desire to return to absolute forms and certainties capable of reducing the complexity created by the excess of possibilities. How are we to interpret this phenomenon, which appears to swing between the opposing tendencies, on the one hand, of a lack of commitment and increase in critical reflexivity and, on the other hand, of involvement and fanaticism?

Bearing in mind the various types of behavior which can be expressed, on the basis of an analysis of the action-norms relationship, in terms of agreement or disagreement between the internal values of orientation and socially codified values, it can be surmised that we find ourselves faced today with a real *possibility* of radical transformation of the attitude towards the norms, along the lines of what could be described as a *pragmatism based on the recognition of conventionality of norms as such* (a possibility which I have examined elsewhere in terms of an increase in the inner power of the subjects). However, a similar possibility seems today to be far from being realized.

Apart from marginal cases which obviously cannot be ignored, what we are faced with today is neither a situation of widespread *anomie*—since the accentuation of the individualistic dimension seems, all things considered, to allow the individual (perhaps due to a reinforcement of the inner power of the ego) to move with relative ease among institutional norms—nor an ideal situation characterized by an effective increase in the ability to make choices and projects on the basis of new forms of social soli-

darity and a new awareness of the kind of cultural-social transformations taking place. Thus the more diffused contemporary type of political behavior seems to be characterized by discordance between subjective and social values in the presence of relatively flexible social structures, within which no apparent actions emerge to contest the social system as such: a form of behavior determined primarily on the basis of specific interests (whether individual or group) and which tends to make the best use, in an unscrupulous and instrumental way, of opportunities as they arise. A kind of behavior which I would define as *instrumental-opportunistic* without implying by this any moral judgment: it is simply a question of interpreting a pattern of behavior which can in no way be judged either positively or negatively, but which must be assessed in its specificity. The relative weakening of the totalizing character of the normative-symbolic representations, linked to a situation of progressive differentiation of the social structure, seems to bring about an accentuation of the ability, present to some extent in every kind of society, to *go through* the institutional orders in the pursuit of particular aims, without necessarily altering the orders themselves.

Such a hypothesis could facilitate an understanding of the characteristics of many religious and ecological movements which, despite the potential tendency in some of them towards new fideistic forms which arouse fanaticism, never lose sight of practical strategic objectives. In this context, instead of referring to a simple estrangement from politics, the question should be asked whether we are faced with new pragmatic procedures in politics, directly linked to new social and individual realities.

The political function tends to exist increasingly as a pragmatic action tied to specific interests, rather than as an action characterized to a significant degree by ideological choices and capable of producing general consensus. The political institutions, having lost all their sacred characters, are now revealed as forms of normative-symbolic mediation in which the degree of reduction of the complex needs of individual and collective experience inevitably appears very high. On the political level, any determination of meaning must be simplified according to the concrete forms of "average" feasibility, which are always excessively limited as regards the differentiated demands expressed at other levels and in other forms of mediation (life-world level), relatively autonomous as regards politics even if they remain interrelated to it.

In this situation, politics appears to have lost to a great extent its capacity to grant an identity to individuals and groups, and consequently also the possibility of existing as a privileged instance of social belonging and solidarity. In recognizing the plurality of the various dimensions at work in the social system, politics would take its place, therefore, alongside other spheres of sense, foregoing its existence as a privileged form of social integration. The problem appears to lie in ensuring that the recognition of the pluralism of the spheres of sense does not lead to the disintegration of the social order and the accentuation of the corporative dimensions of political action. The risk is that politics' loss of charisma, limiting its potential as a decisive unifying moment, would lead to a levelling of society as a result of the dominance of the normative dimension over that of projection. A progressive disintegration of social unity through the intensification of sectorial conflict could ensue. In these conditions political power, instead of being a function of general management of the fundamental contradictions of society, with a long-term capacity for projection and decision-making, takes on the simple function of maintenance of the status quo, into an administrative role, by means of compromises between the different social forces and patronage concessions.

Given present conditions, it does not seem desirable that political power, apart from its role as moderator of conflict and guarantor of normative order, should try to regain its capacity to interpret the evolutionary processes at work in social reality and to promote the latter's potentialities, through a return to charismatic leadership, as some sociologists seem to think (cf. Cavalli 1981). Nor does it seem possible that politics could today be considered as a totalizing moment, unless as a result of a profound regression, due to the state of uncertainty caused by the same crisis of identity and of unifying ideologies. It would appear thus that an effort should be made to rethink, on the basis of an adequate interpretation of the above-mentioned socio-cultural characteristics, the role of politics in order to promote a renewed capacity of society for self-definition and expression. The result of this should be pursued by an increase on a collective level in the degree of understanding of the evolutionary significance of the processes of social differentiation and cultural relativization at work today, and through an increase in collective power as such, if by power we mean the capacity to direct—pragmatically and without illusory, ideological deformations—the contradictions

which inevitably arise in every social system.

In this perspective, politics would find a new specificity no longer as an ideologically based form which ascribes identity and produces consensus, but as a place of practical communications among different social forces and as a particular medium by which a community formulates projects on the basis of shared interpretations and concrete choices, taking into account its own real needs.

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