

The affectivization of the public sphere: the contribution of psychoanalysis in understanding and counteracting the current crisis scenarios

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Abstract

Current Western societies are characterized by a deep anthropological and socio-institutional crisis. The many signs of this turmoil indicate a creeping affectivization of the public sphere. Psychoanalysis can play a pivotal role in understanding the current socio-institutional scenario beyond a reductionist splitting between individual and society. 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 challenges. Addressing affective dynamics enables fundamental advances to be made in understanding the reactions against uncertainty and the loss of social bonds. In a dynamic semiotic perspective, affects are forms of embodied, a-semantic, hyper-generalized sensemaking processes. They pragmatically ground cognition, and their roots are cultural, linking forms of intersubjectivity and ways of thinking and acting. From this standpoint, a model of counteractions and interventions can be organized in terms of the development of *semiotic capital*. This consists of intangible symbolic resources that enable people to internalize the systemic bond to the public sphere and experience it as a basic drive for their thoughts and actions. Semiotic capital instantiates what is psychoanalytically defined as *'thirdness'*, namely the acknowledgment of otherness. The promotion and implementation of *'intermediate settings'*, with social practices where meaningful interpersonal bonds are active, can drive social development in terms of thirdness.

Keywords: *affectivization; affective semiosis; psychoanalysis; society; sensemaking processes; semiotic capital; symbolic resources; intermediate setting.*

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The challenges of the current crisis scenario

Contemporary Western society has been undergoing radical socio-institutional turmoil for the last decade. Xenophobia, values polarization and religious radicalization, racial and gender violence, weakening of civic infrastructures, spreading of fake news, declining trust in people and in national and transnational institutions, diffusion of far-right, sovereign and populist political cultures, devaluation of representative democracy and its institutions, sharpening of ethnic and international conflicts, re-emergence of the spectre of nuclear weapons, immobilism towards the climate crisis: these are some of the socio-cultural and political-institutional phenomena that mark our turbulent contemporary age.

This dramatic scenario of socio-institutional crisis has been made even harder by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has further highlighted the close, recursive link between individual psycho-physical health and social well-being. In this context, it has become patently clear that the macro-factors (e.g., economic insecurity) and the intermediate factors (e.g., disruption of community networks) of the contextual conditions can have an impact on persons and families (Venuleo et al, 2020) as well as the fact that people's feelings and behaviours are important for the success of measures designed to protect and promote public health (Schimmenti et al, 2020).

This close, recursive linkage challenges psychology in two ways. On the one hand, it calls for a deeper understanding of the circular, recursive relation between mind, collective patterns of behaviour, and institutions (i.e., the fact that the individual mind is grounded on

the collective dynamics that at the same time it helps to shape). On the other hand, it becomes critical to develop methodological frameworks for multi-level interventions – namely, interventions that are able to address the individual and the systemic dimension of social dynamics in integrated and synergic ways.

Just a century after the year 1921, Freud's words continue to be relevant and cogent:

The contrast between Individual Psychology and Social or Group Psychology, which at a first glance may seem to be full of significance, loses a great deal of its sharpness when it is examined - more closely. It is true that Individual Psychology is concerned with the individual man and explores the paths by which he seeks to find satisfaction for his instincts; but only rarely and under certain exceptional conditions is Individual Psychology in a position to disregard the relations of this individual to others. In the individual's mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent, and so from the very first Individual Psychology is at the same time Social Psychology as well—in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words. (Freud, 1921, p.1)

Some years later, the psychoanalyst and group analyst Foulkes more clearly questions the juxtaposition of an inside and an outside world, of individual and society, stating: “Each individual – itself an artificial, tough

plausible, abstraction – is basically and centrally determined, Inevitably, by the world in which he lives, by the community, the groups, of which he forms a part (Foulkes, 1948, p. 8).

The affectivization of the public sphere: a symptom of the contemporary age

The present manifestations of the crisis are specific in their content, drivers, contextual conditions, impact, and therefore have to be understood in their unique aspects. Nevertheless, from a complementary standpoint, these manifestations can be interpreted as signs of a general underpinning dynamic: the enslaving of the public sphere to the individual and group emotional enactment. Recent studies integrating the psycho-cultural and psychoanalytic framework have conceptualized this basic process in terms of “*affectivization of the public sphere*” (APS – Salvatore et al., 2019).

There are several signs that allow this trend to be detected. We recall some of them below (for a deeper discussion, see Cremaschi et al, 2021).

First of all, affectivization is expressed in terms of *publicization of the private*, that is, the tendency to make the affective object of the sphere of primary relationships a subject of public communication. Although affects, feelings, emotions are one of the most typical expressions of human experience and its development, the current difference with respect to past dynamics consists in the self-referential nature of this communication. Communicating in a strongly affectivized way is currently a widespread form that tilts the balance between denotation and connotation towards the latter. Affect itself is the goal and not the message (as is evident in current political communication strategies).

Another symptom of the deep affectivization of the public sphere is a widespread process of “*enemization of the other*” (Mannarini & Salvatore, 2020; Salvatore et al., 2018). This involves the saturation of the social and collective space by the categories of friend/foe with the affective representation of the unfamiliar/other being categorized exclusively as an enemy. The effects of this dynamic are the spread of a paranoid vision of experience, the loss of a dialogic space in which extraneousness can mingle, the constitution of a single, totalitarian and messianic way of thinking.

Starting from what has just been described, there is another signal of affectivization - in some way it is an implication of the previous one: the *irradiation of the identity bond*. Identity is reified as a mythical and foundational object to which the belonging of “we” is linked. Identity is an object of inclusion or exclusion. Therefore, identity is detached from the historical, contextual, cultural and intersubjective relationship to become an idealized and pre-existing object. Populism, for example, recalls the identity of a nation as a mythical a-priori form to which it belongs.

Another indicator of the affectivization of the public sphere is the *loss of the temporality of social life*. The notions of process, development and transformation are denied, and experience follows a phenomenology of acting out instantaneous and reactive forms, or also objects (notions, values, ideas, etc.) categorized as eternal, without history, unquestionable and non-negotiable. The de-temporalization of collective experience finds its paradigmatic expression in the spread of gambling, in the lottery, in betting as well as in the new addictions as non-symbolized ritualized forms of repetition outside historical time.

We find further clues of the process of affectivization of the social sphere in the dominant discursive modalities or the canons of public language, marked by slogans, body gestures, vulgarization, screaming, denigration and offense of the interlocutor rather than criticism, argumentation of the contents and the development of reflective thinking starting from dialectics.

This last process leads us to consider another indicator of the affectivization process: *dereferentialization of the signifier*, that is, the loss of the capability of signs (words, images, symbols, gestures, etc.) to provide those who use them with a "grip" on the things to which the signs refer (Salvatore, 2012). The strong implication is that speech no longer performs the function of linking the subject to the world through processes of meaning-making. The signs have lost much of their value of knowledge-building and are progressively replaced by instant socio-affective value - that is to say, by the fact that they are contingent events acted out as objects of immediate emotional consumption, defining belongingness. It is worth noting that the post-truth phenomenon itself appears closely connected to this trend. Post-truth warns us of the loss of the meta-organizer framework of knowledge that can assure forms of negotiation and socio-cultural dialogue between different demands.

All these affective processes directly recall one of the fundamental distinctions of psychoanalysis since its inception: the *primary process* and the *secondary process* as two distinct principles of functioning of psychic processes (Freud, 1911). The primary process is considered a mode of functioning of the psychic apparatus, which is characterized

by an immediate discharge of the drive (to give rise to pleasant sensations or to eliminate unpleasant sensations). By means of the unconscious processes of condensation and displacement, one passes freely from one representation to another, without these being connected by logical links (the principle of non-contradiction does not apply) and tends to invest representations linked to experiences of wish fulfillment.

The secondary process, on the contrary, develops gradually and later. Its main feature is the ability to delay the time between the need and its gratification. From an energy point of view, the tendency of the secondary process is to defer, divert, dampen or prevent the discharge of drive investments (in terms of instant pleasure and satisfaction). A central feature of the secondary process is the stability of the tensional charges, which are defined as "tied" since they refer to verbal or object representations. This makes thinking, causal reasoning and logical reasoning possible.

According to this interpretation, the phenomena above (and many others) represent the multiple symptoms of a progressive global loss of momentum of the role of rational thinking¹. With rational thinking we refer here to the way of making sense of reality and relating the action on the grounds of criteria like universalism, functionality, consistency, independent validation, means-goal linkage, cost-benefits optimization, expertise, and so forth. These processes are often picked up in the psychoanalytical literature as 'Ego functions' (Freud, 1923; Hartmann, 1939/1958; Rapaport, 1960), and their basic tenets are the temporalization and spatialization of experience, in order to perform *Reality Testing*.

¹In a similar vein, in his analysis of the current social malaise (and the difficulty of being and existing among others in society), René Kaës (2012, 2013), focuses on

the faults in symbolization activity and the deadlock of thinking and the construction of meaning.

However, one does not need to embrace a view of the Ego as an entity, or a concrete region of the psyche, to recognize that these functions consist of a system of sophisticated psychic processes designed to mediate, regulate and negotiate forms of relations between inner states and outer states - i.e. self, others and the world. Through these processes, the time of experience is expanded by the coinciding of the need and its gratification, and spatial experience becomes more sophisticated, with a dynamic separation between inner world and outer world. Without negating the pivotal and essential role of phantasy, imagination and creativity in the human experience and its development, yet Reality Testing helps to prevent the confusion, the ‘symmetrization’, the ‘homogenization’ between the symbolopoietic power of desire and the relations with the other. On one hand, affective attunement is essential for each stable social bond, but in another respect the saturation of this dynamics implies a deep loss of subjectivity and of temporal perspective, a weak distinction between the phantasmatic object and reality, scarce or absent borders between the inner world and outer world (and the individual mind can be totally re-absorbed by the group mind as well).

In the current scenario, it seems that more and more people discard valid analyses of the complexity of problems and effective solutions that safeguard their interests and promote their wellbeing; instead, they seem prone to use events and circumstances to foster emotional activation in the immediacy of the present moment (e.g. Demertzis, 2020).

This rich phenomenology of affectivization of the public sphere and its manifold implications fosters the current scenario of *socio-institutional crisis* (SIC), characterized by

a deep rupture of social bonds, trust, civil engagement, collective action and institutional regulation.

The SIC needs to be addressed in complex systemic terms, beyond a person/society split. The SIC can be described as an anthropological rupture where the affectivization – to use Bühler’s semiotic terminology - is at same time *signal*, *symptom* and *symbol* of the current psychosocial processes. In its quality of rupture and deep discontinuity, it is not possible to conceive a homeostatic return to the past condition of order, balance, and normativity. The SIC requires a theoretical frame of understanding and intervention that can address the whole spectrum of affective processes.

From reductionist approaches to domain-specific approaches: the persistence of epistemic issues

All these affective phenomenological forms could be interpreted under several restrictive approaches. Below we consider three possible forms of reductionism of affectivization in terms of a) irrationality, b) reaction to structural causes, and c) narrowly domain-specific research programmes.

a) Affectivization as irrationality

Affectivization could induce us to consider a wide psychosocial scenario characterized by completely irrational events and trends. Actually, early last century, irrationality was an explicatory key-notion to address concerns about the mass and its wild, passionate irruption on the political scene. The sociologists Le Bon, Tarde and Sighele considered the mass an instantaneous, irrational, holistic entity that acts only by the mindless force of passions

and drives. In this view, only the individual appears able to restore rational thinking and the ability to make the right choice. Freud recalls this commonsensical view of the single individual as fully rational against the uncontrolled power of the mass (Freud, 1921). He leads us to consider that the primary matrix of “*psychological*∧*social*” life is unconscious. In this perspective, affectivization constitutes the transversal expression of every unconscious process beyond irrationality. Therefore, in the psychodynamic domain, unconscious processes continue to be the foremost target of study, research and work as opposed to a reductive form of irrationality and beyond an individual/society split. Unconscious and affective processes can be considered cogent points in the agenda of social researchers, clinicians, politicians and educators. Serge Moscovici already stated we need the return of the Unconscious in social research programmes (Moscovici, 1993). The repression of this statement in the last fifty years has provided no great gains. However, today we are prone to consider affectivization not as the lack of rationality, but as another kind of logic that always underpins human experience.

b) Affectivization as the effect of structural causes

The affectivization of the public sphere is interpreted as directly connected to the structural-material conditions of a society. It risks being seen primarily as a reaction to exclusively material conditions (for example, our societies are characterized by economic inequalities and poor access to resources). A possible implication is thus that the response and the offsetting are constructed through a paternalistic approach aimed at correcting misper-

ceptions, misinterpretations and distorted beliefs. The reductionist risk - implied here - considers a straightforward causal link between negative material conditions and affective reactions, although history has often taught that it was precisely starting from the recognition and awareness of social difficulties that it is possible to inaugurate programmes of development and social planning. Furthermore, in reading affectivization as a reaction to the worsening of people's material conditions, a simplified view of the mind and cognitive processes persists. It must be recognized that people do not react to the situation itself; rather, these reactions reflect the interpretation of their conditions, which is expressed in terms of beliefs and feelings of uncertainty, loss, dissolution of life structures (Salvatore, Mannarini et al, 2018). We are saying that the interpretation of social reality is always, and in all cases, triggered by material conditions; however, once triggered, it has a more or less wide range of autonomy with respect to the data of reality.

These arguments lead us to consider the impact of affects on thinking not as the failure of an ideal model of cognition. On the contrary, the direction to be pursued is the recognition of affects as an integral part of cognition: they contribute in an essential way to the effort of the cognitive system to map reality in the most functional way possible. We therefore need models that allow us to understand the synergy between the rational and affective components of cognitive processes.

c) Domain-specific- approaches based on uncertainty

A longstanding tradition of thought in the social sciences relates phenomena of the kind described above to deep social transformations. According to this view, which can be

traced back to the seminal analyses of the impact of modernization on social-cultural bonds (e.g., Durkheim, 1893/1984), the socio-cognitive correlates of contextual turmoil are the way people cope with the radical uncertainty fostered by the turbulence of the social world².

The socio-cognitive literature of the last thirty years has further investigated the issue, focusing on the empirical detection of the socio-cognitive effects of uncertainty - *Compensatory Control Theory* (Kay et al, 2009); *Terror Management Theory* (Solomon et al, 1991); *Defensive Approach Motivation* (Major et al, 2007); *Worldview Verification theory* (Marigold et al, 2010); *Meaning Maintenance Model* (Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012); *Self-Uncertainty Management Model* (Sedikides et al, 2010); *Control Uncertainty Model* (Weary et al, 2010); *Uncertainty Management Model* (van Den Bos & Lind, 2010). Though all these theories diverge as to the relevant facets (i.e. the definition of uncertainty, its specific socio-cognitive effect, the underlying mechanism), taken as a whole, they provide findings supporting the general conclusion of the destabilizing impact that environmental instability exerts on cognition. However, less clear is how this impact works - i.e. by means of what mechanisms - and, above all, how it is possible to counteract it.

All these socio-cognitive theories have the merit of bridging cognition, social behaviour and socio-institutional frameworks. However, due to their methodological focus on individual cognitive processes and specific factors of the social environment (e.g., death salience, out-group members' behaviour), taken as a

whole, these theories are characterized by one or more of three major limitations.

- First, these theories are domain-specific - namely, each of them focuses on a specific set of cognitive and behavioural responses (e.g. the adherence to ideological and religious beliefs or the search for cognitive closure, or the commitment to authority).
- Second, these theories remain at the functional level (in accordance to Marr's distinction between computational and functional explanation (Marr, 1982): They are able to detect the impact of uncertainty on cognition, but they provide limited insight as to *why* and *how* it happens - for a discussion, see Salvatore, 2016).
- Third, socio-cognitive theories privilege an individualist focus of analysis. As a result, both the social dimension of the responses to uncertainty and their contribution to reproducing social contexts is left in the background (Hogg, 2010).

These three limitations prevent socio-cognitive theories from providing a fine-grained understanding of the current SIC and from designing effective counteractions. Indeed, as previously observed, the crisis is global and demands a unitary interpretative framework, integrating (not substituting) the phenomenon-focused explanations (e.g., populism, fake news, etc.). Moreover, in order to design interventions, the understanding of the '*what*' and '*when*' has to be integrated with the comprehension of the '*why*' and '*how*' - namely,

² Uncertainty and loss of stable references appears as the cipher of the contemporary society and its anthropological rupture. Think of the broad strand of reflections on the liquid society (Bauman, 2000), the loss of

boundaries and gravity (Melman & LeBrun, 2002), the loss of the psychic meta-organizers (Kaës, 2012), the contemporary age of bewilderment (Bollas, 2018), the fragmentation of modernity (Appadurai, 1996).

we need to open the black box and develop computational models of the mechanisms working inside it (Salvatore, 2016). Moreover, we need to understand the recursive linkages between social context and individual response to uncertainty. The more clearly these processes are modeled, the more we will be able to develop effective tailored interventions.

The psychoanalytical contributions for advancement in understanding affective processes

Our thesis is that the way the relation between socio-institutional turmoil and modes of thinking, feeling and acting outlined above can be addressed is through the theoretical framework based on a long-lasting tradition in psychoanalytic analysis of social phenomena. Indeed, due to its focus on the affective processes linking inner mental life and social field (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983), psychoanalysis can play a pivotal role in understanding the current socio-institutional scenario. It has to be recognized that contemporary psychodynamic theory and practice tends to focus on individual and micro-social phenomena (first, psychopathology) - with some effort to enlarge the focus of analysis to the community meso-level (Caputo & Tomai, 2020). However, psychoanalytic theory is historically characterized by a great conceptual and practical interest in socio-cultural and institutional dynamics -e.g. Freud's analysis of his contemporary society, Russian psychoanalytically informed pedagogy, French psycho-sociology, Bion's basic assumptions of the group mind, Foulkes' group-analysis, Kardiner's anthropology. This tradition of thought is still alive, as shown by the contribution to the under-

standing of cultural phenomena by the interpersonal tradition (Frie, 2014), the Italian psychodynamic analysis of the Mafia's way of feeling (Di Maria, 1997; Di Maria & Falgares, 2013; Schimmenti et al, 2014), the Lacanian semiotic analysis of identity motives and the rise of ultra-right parties (Mandelbaum, 2020; Laclau, 2005).

The contribution of psychoanalysis can be important in challenging the crisis in contemporary society. However, there is crucial step to take: we need to overcome the individual clinical view as the focus on deviation from normal psychological functioning and its impact in terms of adjustment and quality of experience (Salvatore, 2018). The individualistic frame leads directly to a rigid psychopathology-cure dyad. Yet, this shrinkage has never been the primary or sole aim in the history of psychoanalytical development. Psychoanalytic theory was born as a general theory of personality and as a method of analysis of the phenomena at a plurality of levels of observation (family contexts, organizational frameworks, social and cultural dynamics, art, religion, anthropological field). In this sense, clinics can cease to be an end in themselves and acquire the value of a methodology (founded on a theory) in order to be able to deal with a wide range of phenomena. The affective valence of the forms of social action stimulates psychoanalytic psychology, and offers it the opportunity to broaden its horizons concerning problems and processes which are crucial to the future.

Based on the model of psycho-social phenomena integrating psychoanalysis and cultural psychology, the innovative perspective of Semiotic Dynamic Cultural Psychology Theory (SDCPT) (Cremaschi et al, 2021; Salvatore, 2018, 2016), has recently provided a theoretical, empirical and practical advance

in the analysis and counteraction of the socio-institutional crisis. Major outcomes were produced by the H2020 Re.Cri.Re. research project (www.recrire.eu).

The Semiotic Dynamic Cultural Psychological Theory (SDCPT) is a socio-cultural psychological model (Markova, 2003; Salvatore, 2016; Valsiner, 2007, 2014, 2020, 2021), which integrates aspects of psychoanalysis (Matte Blanco, 1975; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011; Salvatore & Freda, 2011), dynamic systems theory (Laura-Grotto, et al., 2009; Salvatore & Tschacher, 2012) and pragmatic semiotics (Peirce, 1935).

The core is based on the pivotal idea that psychological processes consist of sensemaking processes shaping the experience (De Luca Picione, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2017, 2021; De Luca Picione & Freda, 2014, 2016; Neuman, 2003, 2014; Salvatore, et al., 2018; Salvatore et al, 2021; Valsiner, 2014).

Its conceptualization is presented in terms of the following three empirically supported major tenets.

Tenet 1. The semiotic view of affects.

The SDCPT moves from the recognition that *affects are a particular kind of meanings*: forms of bodily activation that make sense of the world. Affects can be viewed as embodied, primitive meanings working as a holistic interpretation of the experiential field as a whole, framing the cognitive elaboration of the sensorial input (Salvatore et al. 2021). The unconscious can be considered a particular affective mode of signifying experience (Fornari, 1979; Matte Blanco, 1975; Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Salvatore & Venuleo, 2008, 2010; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011; Tonti & Salvatore, 2015). If we consider meaning as the capacity of a certain state of mind to relate with/trigger certain other mental states

(Peirce, 1935; Proulx & Inzlicht, 2012; Salvatore, 2016), then affects are meanings because they are able to trigger further mental states.

More specifically, affects are embodied, a-semantic, hyper-generalized classes of significance (Salvatore et al, 2018):

- *Embodied* in the sense that their content consists of (bipolar) global patterns of body activation (e.g. pleasantness vs unpleasantness). Many studies have systematically described the structure in terms of basic affective dimensions, each of them composed of two opposite polarities (Larsen & Diener, 1992) – e.g. positive versus negative affect (Watson et al., 1999), tension versus energy (Thayer, 2012), positive and negative valence as well as low vs high arousal (Russell, 1980). Barrett's theory of core affect (2006; Barrett & Lindquist, 2008) adopts the same view, modelling the basic affects in terms of two dimensions: valence (pleasantness vs unpleasantness) and arousal (activated vs deactivated). The literature on Semantic Differential is based on a similar view of affective meaning in terms of bipolar dimensions (Osgood et al., 1957). This view is consistent with the general perspective proposed by Embodied Cognition, which has highlighted that meanings have a bodily nature, rather than being symbols – a modal representation according to Barsalou's terminology (1999) - stored in the mind. .
- *A-semantic* in the sense that each class of affective meaning merges together characteristics and specimens, regardless of their semantic relation. Namely, affective meaning establishes

a relation between objects and properties that does not take their semantic content into account, relating them by reason of the fact that they share the same affective valence (e.g. Turvey & Fertig, 1970).

- *Hyper-generalized* in the sense that they refer globally to the whole field of the experience, rather than to specific discrete objects. Hyper-generalization is implied in the a-semantic nature of affective meanings. They work holistically shaping the whole field of experience and in so doing they frame the interpretation of the content of the experience (Salvatore & Freda, 2011). Furthermore, affective meaning has a homogenizing effect, namely all objects that are part of the same field of experience tend to be likened to the affective meaning associated with that field, regardless of the semantic differences among them. The more intense the affective activation, the more evident the homogenizing effect.

The semiotic view of affects outlined above is consistent with theories from psychoanalysis - e.g. (Stein, 1991), social and personality psychology (e.g. Barrett, 2006), embodied cognition (Lindblom, 2005), cultural psychology (Valsiner, 2020), psycholinguistic (Osgood et al, 1975). Recent studies framed by SDCPT (Ciavolino et al, 2017) have provided further empirical evidence in support of it (for a review, see Salvatore et al., 2021).

Tenet 2. Affective meaning grounds cognition. Affective meanings frame cognition (Salvatore & Freda, 2011). The embodied view of affects implies the idea that all cognitive processes are always situated and at the

service of action. This is not a computational mechanism that firstly elaborates the representation of the situation - regardless of the course of action -, and then uses it to regulate its response. Conversely, representations are dynamic patterns (i.e., processes that change over time) of affective sensory-motor activity in terms of which the body maintains its action coupled with the world.

There is a structural relationship between affective states and generalized patterns of environmental

co-occurrences – in other words, certain environmental states come to be associated with a certain

affective state (more or less) preferentially. It is due to this structural relationship that affects assume semiotic valence, making them the on-going map of the scene in which cognition is unfolding.

The embodied, situated and on-line nature of cognition leads us to recognize one of its essential aspects: the *inferential nature of the process of sensemaking*. Since the environmental situation is always intrinsically dynamic and changing (in terms of a set of occurrences that tend to vary moment by moment), consequently the sensory-motor micro-variations are necessary to keep the body coupled with the situation and they must be activated very quickly; otherwise, given the rapidity of environmental variation, they would already be irrelevant at the moment of their realization. This implies that the sensory-motor micro-regulation cannot take place on the basis of a feedback mechanism that acts once the behavioural response has been produced, namely on the basis of its outcome. If so, the correction allowed by the feedback would refer to an environmental state already belonging to the past; the cognitive system would be in a condition of perennial delay in interacting

with the environment. Through affective activation, the body does not regulate its state in a reactive manner with respect to the current state of the situation, but in an anticipatory way, according to the forecast of the environmental state of the next moment. That means this anticipation works as a type of Bayesian inference (i.e., the prediction is conditional and based on previous experience of the evolutionary trajectories of the environment) (Barsalou, 1999, 2009; Barsalou, & Lawrence, 2011). The inferential mode considerably increases the efficiency and effectiveness of the regulation, making it suitable for enabling an "on-line coupling" of the action with the environment, as it allows the process to be monitored moment by moment, rather than by *post hoc* verification of the outcome of the action. The fitness can be modelled in terms of meta-stability, namely as the invariance between the simulation of the schematic version of the senso-motor pattern that will occur in the next instant and the senso-motor pattern actually occurring in that next instant.

A corollary of the inferential nature of cognition is its *self-referentiality*. By this concept, we mean that cognitive processes work according to the fundamental rule of investing a certain experience with meaning (Valsiner, 2007, 2014, 2021). Firstly this allows them to remain anchored/coupled with the world, and secondly the system of meanings to reproduce itself in order to maintain the fit of the inference. It is worth noting that self-referentiality does not imply a cognitive solipsism. Such a characteristic works in terms of the dynamic pattern of dialectical interaction that lasts as long as it is possible and functional; therefore, new elements/stimuli from the outside environment can always be grasped for the purpose of implementing and regulating relational meta-stability.

Consistently with classical studies (Murphy & Zajonc, 1933; Turvey & Fertig, 1970), recent SDCPT studies have shown the grounding function of affects. They have highlighted that affective meanings shape: a) beliefs and attitudes - e.g. towards foreigners (Salvatore et al, 2019), vaccination (Rochira et al, 2019), medicine and practitioners (Venezia et al, 2019); b) individual psychological characteristics - e.g. cognitive styles (Salvatore et al, 2019), visual attentional distribution (Salvatore et al, 2019); c) behaviour - e.g. tertiary studies' performance (Venuleo et al, 2016), propensity for gambling (Venuleo et al, 2015); voting behaviour (Mannarini et al, 2020; Veltri et al, 2019).

Tenet 3. The cultural root of affective meanings. Affective meanings are not only in the individual mind – they are the basis of the cultural models (i.e., social representation, cultural worldviews) that are active within the cultural milieu as well. The cultural embeddedness of the affective meanings is robustly supported by the vast semantic differential literature, which has shown the systematic transversality of basic affective meanings across societies and time (e.g., Osgood, Suchi & Tannenbaum, 1975). More recently, the Re.Cri.Re. project has highlighted a similar transversality of affect-laden worldviews (in the SDCPT terms, "symbolic universes" - Salvatore et al, 2018) in contemporary European societies' cultural milieus.

The affective meanings are shared among individuals of the social group because they constitute the basic, bodily "grammar" each sensemaker is equipped with (Barrett, 2006; Salvatore, 2016; Stein, 1991). Thus, the affective meaning can be seen as the hinge between intra-psychological and inter-psychological levels of analysis – like language, which is

both inside the mind and in the social world, affective meaning is at the same time the basis of the culture and of cognition.

It is worth highlighting a direct implication of the affect-laden, holistic nature of the sense-making process: its performative nature. The affective sensemaking processes that ground and channel cultural dynamics are reproduced over time and within the social groups through the very fact of being enacted. In other words, the cultural dynamics is not a matter of explicit negotiation; rather, the symbolic universes shaping the cultural manifestation are reproduced – and may develop – because of (and in terms of) their being embedded within the social practices.

Theoretically and empirically relevant implications of the previous tenets

Below, we examine in more depth some implications of the previous tenets on affective sensemaking.

- *Dimensionality model*

The affective meaning can be modeled – and differentiated from other forms of cognition and cognitive models (e.g. ruled-based judgments) – in terms of a low-dimensional phase space, each component of which consists of a basic, bi-polar dimension of variability of the environment the body is equipped to map (Salvatore et al, 2021; Kleinbub, et al., 2021). Accordingly, the hyper-generalized, a-semantic characteristics of affective meaning correspond to the “implosive” effect of its low dimensionality.

The dimensionality model is focused on the constant search for stability and organism-environment fitness. The purpose of affectivization in crisis conditions is to lower/decrease the variability of experience, that is, to reduce the dimensionality of the sensemaking process. As we explained above, the embodied cognitive system is moved by the need to maximize the fit, namely the best correspondence between the Bayesian forecast and the actual body state at the minimal energy expenditure. Therefore, at the moment of an environmental change a certain level of uncertainty is triggered. We believe the salience of the affective meaning in cognition is a function of cognitive uncertainty: the higher the uncertainty, the more the salience of the affective meaning³.

Beyond a threshold of quasi-stable balance, the body perturbation triggered by the decoupling exposure instantiates a pattern of affective activation. The more intense the perturbation of the lack of fit, the more intense the affective activation. The affects work in term of low-dimensionality inasmuch as the lower the dimensionality, the fewer the environment’s components of variability to map. To restore and maintain the fit with the environment, the body will set the dimensionality of experience – i.e. number of components of the pattern of affective activation – at the lowest possible level.

It is worth pointing out that this view adopts relevant aspects of Freud’s research on developing an understanding of psychic processuality, from the idea of *neurotic inertia* (1895), *principle of constancy* (1911) and *Nirvana principle* (1920). The general Freudian

³ This hypothesis is consistent with some social cognition theories on the impact of uncertainty. However, it adds a further element to these theories, focusing on the

specific mechanism (i.e. the affective meaning) mediating the relation between uncertainty and its socio-cognitive effects.

idea is the living being's effort to remove tension and seek stability and equilibrium (until a hypothetical entropic state is reached).

The low-dimensionality hypothesis is based on the Chilean psychoanalyst Matte Blanco's formal model of unconscious and affective meanings (1975) and further clinical and mathematical developments (Carli, 2006; Lauro-Grotto, 2008; Salvatore, 2016). Moreover, it is consistent with the semantic differential literature, which has systematically found more or less the same few dimensions of affective meanings as well as with psychoanalytic clinical theory, which has identified few affective patterns underlying the variability of individual and social phenomena (e.g. Bion, 1952; Fornari, 1994). Preliminary evidence of the low-dimensionality model were provided by the Re.Cri.Re research framework: the symbolic universes that prove to be characterized by the highest incidence of (whether positive or negative) affective meaning at the level of their content as well as being associated with polarized attitudes towards the in-group and outgroup and to higher polarization of the distribution of visual attention - i.e. *interpersonal bond* and *others' world* - are those that have the lowest dimensionality (Salvatore et al, 2019). Based on these findings, Salvatore and colleagues have defined semiotic capital as high dimensional symbolic universes, namely those that are associated with progressive social behaviour and wellbeing conditions and outcomes (see also Cremaschi et al, 2021)

Convergent results have been produced with a similar methodological approach, yet applied to the psychotherapy research - quite a large array of intensive single case studies of the psychotherapy process (Gennaro, et al 2020; Rocco et al, 2017; Salvatore et al, 2010, 2012)

show that the clinical quality of the therapeutic exchange, its in-session impact on narratives and patient's states of mind as well as on the therapeutic alliance is a function of the complexity/dimensionality of the system of meaning underpinning it, and more specifically, of the affective meanings at its core.

More recent developments of the dimensionality hypothesis are paving the way to integrate such a computational model with a more fine-grained and theoretically powerful topological approach (Lauro-Grotto, 2008; De Luca Picione, 2020a, 2020d).

- *Homeomorphism and the transversality of the model*

Manifestations of the current SIC (socio-institutional crisis) share a common basic characteristic - the salience of the affective meanings comprising the affectivization of the public sphere. This common characteristic can be identified at different levels of analysis: within subject level (i.e. coherency among different domain-specific manifestations within the same subjects), content level (e.g. the incidence of the in-group/out-group polarization and other underpinning generalized beliefs), neuro-physiological level (e.g. similar patterns of neuro-physiological activation), and at computational level (e.g. low dimensionality). This view is based on qualitative SDPC analyses (e.g. Salvatore et al, 2019) and post hoc comparisons of domain-specific empirical investigations (e.g. Salvatore et al, 2020) that have shown the common root of different social behaviours in the same patterns of affective meaning. Further studies are in the making to provide further evidence supporting it.

- *The salience of affective meaning between individual level and systemic level*

The salience of affective meaning in cognition is quite a stable individual trait, which is distributed differentially within the population, as a function of the cumulative effects of the life history of engagement with the semiotic resources (i.e. high-dimension meaning) available within the cultural milieu. SCDPT considers the access to semiotic resources to be moderated by both a) basic bio-psychological characteristics and patterns of early ontogenetic developments (personality characteristics, attachment styles, parental bonding), and b) past and present community bonds (i.e. structure and dynamics of the community network; types and distribution of social capital). Therefore, the incidence of individual and community factors is in turn a function of the macro-social distribution of the semiotic resources across societies. The more heterogeneous the social distribution of the semiotic resources (i.e. the more the distribution of the semiotic resources within the population is associated with structural differences within societies), the more the inscribed and acquired socio-economic and demographic characteristics (gender, age, socio-economic status, education, size of the familiar nucleus, rank of birth) moderate the impact of individual and community factors.

These hypotheses are based on a plurality of sources that from different standpoints have highlighted the role of macro and meso-social factors in shaping the individual way of feeling, thinking and acting as well as both its partial stability and dependency on life events and ontogenetic path (for a discussion of the relation between cultural and structural factors, see Cremaschi et al, 2021). This conceptualization strives to provide an integrated

model of the multi-level processes bonding the individual mind, social processes and socio-institutional contextual conditions.

The impact of affective meaning

Different levels of affectivization work both simultaneously and complementarily. The salience of affective meaning (in terms of saturation of experience in the absence of reflexive processes) has a prevalently negative impact on both individual and community well-being. This impact is both direct and indirect and it exerts its effect both at individual and systemic level.

The impact of higher affective salience generates a multiple combination of direct, indirect, individual and systemic impacts.

- *Direct/individual impact:* the salience of the affective meaning in individual cognition corresponds to the identification with polarized beliefs, low levels of mentalization, tendency to acting out (Salvatore et al, 2021; Venuleo et al. 2020). We consider the salience of the affective meaning in individual cognition implies a reduced capacity to explore the environment and identify/valorize its resources (Salvatore et al, 2018; Salvatore et al, 2019; Venuleo, et al. 2020), therefore one can expect it to be associated with critical forms of social, existential and/or critical clinical issues (e.g. to a major chance of meeting critical life events, psychopathology).
- *Indirect/individual impact:* the salience of affective meaning in individual cognition implies a reduced capacity to explore the environment and identify/valorize its resources.

- *Direct/systemic impact*: the high salience of affective meaning is associated with a lower level of social capital (Russo et al, 2020) as well as forms of social behaviour that reduce the society's capacity to pursue common goods while increasing an opportunistic logic of action as well as the self-referentiality of lifeworlds (Cremaschi et al, 2021; Salvatore et al, 2018).
- *Indirect/systemic impact*: the affectivization of the public sphere reduces the capacity of institutions to design and implement policies aimed at promoting individual and community wellbeing as well as the people's compliance towards these policies (Cremaschi et al, 2021) (for a discussion of this point, with reference to the public health policies against the pandemic crisis, see Venuleo et al, 2020).
- *Non linear relation between individual and systemic level of affective sense-making*

The distribution of the incidence of the affective meaning within the society produces a systemic, nonlinear effect of emergence. This hypothesis is based on the mathematical theory of synergetics (Hayken, 2004; see also Lauro-Grotto, 2008) that models the emergence of innovative patterns of organization as a function of the ordered parameters characterizing the system's dynamics. According to this field dynamic approach (see also Salvatore & Tshacher, 2012), we expect that the relation between the level of the affective meaning in cognition and the propensity to adopt pro-social social behaviours (i.e. cooperative behaviour, trust in institutions and other people, open-minded attitudes towards

foreigners, low dominance beliefs, low conspiracy beliefs) is a function of the order parameter given by the whole distribution of incidence of affective meanings within the society, rather than of the mere individual level of incidence of affective meaning. In the final analysis, this hypothesis claims that the affective meanings operating at the level of individual cognitive activity helps to set the systemic state (i.e., the distribution of the incidence of affective meaning) that in turn shapes the individual cognitive activity. This thesis has been tested preliminarily by means of a simulation model aimed at mapping the evolution of the cooperation preference in a set of populations of agents characterized by different levels of identification with affective meanings. The study has found that the systemic evolution of the cooperation is a function of the distribution of the incidence of affective meanings. Moreover, it has found that this function enables the simulation model to estimate the actual distribution of cooperation in a set of 30 actual European regional areas (Mocenni et al, submitted).

Counteractions. A model of intervention based on the notion of thirdness as development of semiotic capital

- *Semiotic capital and the third*

To counteract the negative impacts of the affectivization of the public sphere, innovative high-dimensional semiotic resources need to be promoted - "semiotic capital", in the terms of SDCPT (Salvatore et al, 2018).

Semiotic capital consists of the amount of intangible symbolic resources that enable people to internalize the systemic bond to the public sphere and experience it as a basic drive for their thoughts and actions. Semiotic capital fuels and at the same time binds the variability

of the subjects' thoughts and actions, thus determining the conditions of predictability, integration, finalization and reciprocity of social exchange.

The notion of semiotic capital conceptualizes the actor-system relation in terms of models of otherness. Underpinning this interpretation, there is the psychoanalytic concept of desire, intended as the mental (unconscious, fantastic) construction of the object (a person, a group, but also a thing) providing the subject's satisfaction. This conception is somewhat different from the commonsensical way of intending the term. We can consider desire as the other side of the affective psychological process.

As commonly used - desire refers to the propensity to invest in something seen as the source of satisfaction - i.e. wishing to have something; the psychoanalytic notion reverses the relation and defines desire the mental process of construing the something that provides the fulfilment of satisfaction and activates the endeavour to reach an expected-symbolized state of world. In other words, while for common sense, object X is the pre-condition triggering desire - there is object X, and therefore one can desire it -, for psychoanalysis, object X (in the sense of the phantasy of the object) is the product of the desire. The desire is a productive process of reality-making, able to provide a future orienting of action, behaviours, attitudes and social bonds. At the basis of the symbolopoietic nature of desire we can see Melanie Klein's view of the child that experiences the absence of the mother in terms of the bad mother. By an affective sensemaking process, the child constructs the representation of an entity (the bad mother) to make sense of the experience (e.g., Klein, 1967). We are saying that the lack of a result or a critical experience is never experienced as an absence (a void)

but always as something imbued with value. In this way we consider affective sensemaking to be constantly at work.

It may be useful to add that desire as psychoanalytically intended is distant from the commonsensical concept also because it does not necessarily mean the search for gratification. It has a very important implication: desire, intended in psychoanalytical terms, mediates the relation between the subject and the reality - more specifically, the subject shapes the reality in terms of its own desire, shaping the latter in order to make it conform to the desired object (Kirshner, 2011, 2017). This makes us consider an "asymptotic effort" of desire, which is never accomplished fully. Here we find the incessant movement of desire, its function of transformation, and its nature of canalizing effort toward future expected states.

The asymptotic nature of desire is due to the fact that, as is obvious, the reality resists being completely shaped by the subject's phantasy. From the psychoanalytic viewpoint, this inherent resistance of the reality is the 'third', namely the fact that, as implied in the Oedipus scene, the real object cannot be fully shaped by the subject's desire because it in turn is endowed with (active and passive) desire - the mother cannot be fully shaped by the child's desire, because she is also a woman, a citizen, a daughter and so forth - namely, she is engaged in further relations with thirds, being the target and the source of others' desire (Lacan, 1956-1957; Salvatore, 2016; Cremaschi et al, 2021). Beyond a superficial reading of the myth (i.e., 'it would perfectly express a real situation t'), we can argue that for the child, the Oedipus experience is the experience that the object is not the desired object *only*, but the desired object *too* - it is its own mother, but not only that, and therefore it

will never fulfil the desire fully and once and for all. In brief, the third is the primitive social experience of the failure of the totalizing desire, which enables the representation of absence, that is of the resistance put up by reality against being shaped by desire (Bion, 1962, 1967). In this sense, ‘castration’ is thus the acknowledgment of the impossibility of fully achieving satisfaction and triggering the desiring movement. The sociality and the social bonds pass through these intra-inter-subjective primary symbolic experiences.

- *Thirdness between otherness and “eneminess”*

As we have just explained, the dynamics of desire works as an unconscious symbolopoietic process that can trigger thirdness in subjective experience. At this point, what is the link between the symbolopoiesis of desire, thirdness and the development of semiotic capital?

One can model two general modes of making sense of this thirdness - the third as *enemy* versus the third as *other*. The third as the enemy is the representation of the limit of desire as the catastrophic rupture of the relation with the object. In other words, fulfilment is taken for granted, and the lack of accomplishment is represented as a radical violation of the inherent order of things, what one could experience if a piece of one’s body came off. The uncanny, uncertainty, novelty, and difference cannot be tolerated; they are instantaneously changed into a bad object, an enemy.

By contrast, the third as other is the representation of the limit of desire in terms of the limit of the object, namely in terms of the recognition that one’s object is involved in other relations too, and therefore it is not at our complete disposal. As a result, the lack of

fulfilment is not the catastrophic rupture of the order of things, but the (sad, yet acceptable) experience of the limit of one’s desire. The capacity to tolerate this sort of frustration, and the acknowledgement of the partiality of one’s experience opens a constructive transitional space (Winnicott, 1953) of transformation where symbolic resources are now at the service of social bonds, construction of hope and trust, collective forms of future scenario planning, shared and active forms of playing together.

Note the two modes of sensemaking are not alternative – any person can move back and forth between them; this is so because paradoxically what makes the object desirable is its thirdness, namely, the fact that its qualities are the inherent sign of the relation with one’s own objects. Psychoanalysis greatly valorises the achievement of thirdness in terms of otherness inasmuch as it is at the basis of every form of development, both intra-subjective and inter-subjective. Furthermore, the third-as-other – by improving the resource of semiotic capital – is the mode of sensemaking underpinning the recognition of the systemic dimension. In the final analysis, the systemic dimension is the other, namely the recognition of the limit of the object as the consequence of the network of relations the latter is embedded in and as the limit/state of possibility of one’s own desire/project.

In summary, the psychoanalytic standpoint helps to recognize that high semiotic capital consists of the capacity to transform the enemy into the Other. Moreover, and maybe more importantly, it helps to recognize that this capacity is not only useful for making society a better place to live; indeed, it is at the basis of subjectivity – of the actor’s possibility of experiencing his/her own desire– and of intersubjectivity as a form of social bond.

- *Intermediate settings*

Having clarified the psychoanalytical meaning of semiotic capital, in our proposal it can be promoted by restoring the role played by “*intermediate settings*” (Cremaschi et al, 2021). Intermediate settings are social practices where meaningful interpersonal bonds are active; yet these settings are oriented to the pursuit of meta-interpersonal (quasi-universal) purposes (i.e., ‘the third’), rather than being self-referential, as in the case of “pure” lifeworlds. As a consequence of this transitional status, in an intermediate setting, the interpersonal subjectivity and associated affectivized modes of feeling and thinking can be enacted and at the same time constrained/elaborated by reason of the meta-interpersonal purpose. As a consequence of this transitional status, in an intermediate setting, the interpersonal subjectivity and associated simplified modes of feeling and thinking can be enacted and at the same time elaborated due to the meta-interpersonal purpose. As a result, in an intermediate setting, the representation of the systemic dimension of social life is merged and “filled up” with subjectivity. In doing so, people can thus experience the system as something meaningful and concrete for their life.

The intermediate setting proposal is based on the culturalist and psychoanalyst view of the performativity of cognition, namely the idea that the meanings at the basis of social and individual life reproduce themselves by the social practices they frame (Cremaschi et al, 2021; Salvatore et al, 2021); accordingly, the development of innovative cultural meanings requires people to become involved in setting social practices with that take these cultural meanings for granted as their inherent core. Thus, intermediate settings become possible future hubs of semiotic capital. It has to be added that in most Western societies, at least till the last two decades of last century, the transitional dynamics between subjectivity and institutions was performed thanks to so-

cial entities (unions, parties, associations, cooperatives) that have served as structured intermediate settings, playing a key role in mediating between lifeworlds and institutions (Ardigò, 1982). The last thirty years have witnessed the progressive weakening of these entities – and this can be seen both as the main cause of the impoverishment of semiotic capital and the consequence of the socio-political crisis associated with this impoverishment (Russo, Mannarini & Salvatore, 2020). As a consequence, it is hard to think that the promotion of semiotic capital could pass through a re-building of the forms they had in a phase of history now behind us. Instead, it is more realistic to think of intermediate settings as contingent networks of local dynamics rather than permanent structures – namely, of social practices and modes of working of the social exchange that, in a more or less stable and instituted way, could instantiate forms of intermediation as part of their constitutive backgrounds.

There are many domains of intervention that can be detected in order to address socio-cultural contexts where affective dynamics and socio-institutional crisis can be challenged by the activation of intermediate settings working as “*semiotic incubators*” designed to foster processes of mediation, regulation, negotiation and construction of symbolic resources of the local semiotic capital. Consider for example: a) *Bullying and cyberbullying* in scholastic contexts. b) *Vaccination hesitancy and models of health-engagement* with institutions. c) *Gender violence* and the role of consultancy services. d) *Recycling, environmental sustainability, and ecological critical awareness* in local community. e) *Esposal and spread of fake news and conspiracy theories* within social circuits.

The point at stake here is not the design and the implementation of intervention focused just on these specific themes or addressed to specific individuals that are more vulnerable.

The model of intervention is designed to promote forms of participation of stakeholders, local communities, scholastic presidium, health services, local institutions, professional orders, NGO, spontaneous collectives focused on specific purposes operating on the territory, etc.

In the function of intermediate setting, all these formal or semi-formal (stable or transitory) contexts of civic participation are involved in the management of institutional and social actions aimed at coping with major issues in each domain of intervention and, more in general, at developing community wellbeing.

This model of intervention responds to several logics:

- On one hand, the decisions and choices are not the prerogative of higher bureaus or centralized committees but are the recursive effect of participative engagement in social life;
- the individual is not the final passive addressee of a cascade of choices and decisions but a participant (in economics, we could say, he is not a purely consumer but a 'prosumer');
- On the other hand, people do not just express their preferences (a sort of '*demand from the bottom*' to which politicians and decision makers are strictly bound by the promises in the election campaign – namely the populist logic of merely increasing of number of votes);
- People are formerly performing real forms of experiences of social life, construction of social bonds, and recovery of trust in the '*Third*' as common good and as shared future scenario.

Conclusions

We consider that psychoanalytic theory can take up the challenge of the processes of the Socio-Institutional Crisis. Psychoanalysis is able to offer clinical psychology the heuristic and intervention tools useful for developing innovative interpretations and intervention strategies on the systemic phenomena of Socio-Institutional Crisis, which constitutes a real anthropological rupture of our contemporary age. However, that requires overcoming the stereotype of the clinician as the professional who takes care of the individual. Psychoanalytically-informed clinical psychology has only marginally considered the meso- and macro-social dimensions as an object of scientific investigation and intervention. In particular, in the last few decades, the 'clinical' dimension has been explicitly or implicitly conceived and practised as referring to the disciplinary object: the forms of deviation from normal psychological functioning and their impact in terms of quality of subjective experience and of adaptability.

The centrality of the '*psychopathology-cure binomial*' within clinical discourse is well established in this conception. As a result, contemporary psychoanalytical clinical psychology is fundamentally absent on the great themes and problems deriving from the anthropological and historical transformations underway; or rather, it carves out a role for itself on the impact that these dynamics have on people and micro-social contexts. Historically, psychoanalytic theory was born as a general theory of mind and as a method of analysis, used to interpret phenomena on a plurality of observation levels (family contexts, organizations, social and cultural dynamics, art, anthropological profiles).

It must be recognized that the methodological root of psychoanalysis – and with it the idea

that the term ‘clinical’ should be understood as indicative of method, rather than object – has been progressively placed on the margins of the scientific-professional international community (with notable exceptions in areas such as South America and in various post-colonial contexts). The themes and questions raised by the contemporary situation offer psychodynamic knowledge the possibility of making a central and irreplaceable contribution to social, civil and institutional development. In general terms, the reason for this lies in the fact that the phenomena of anthropological rupture of SIC are strongly characterized by the incidence of processes of mobilization of affects (the main expressions of which are enemization of the other, acting-out, instantaneous reactivity, lack of separation between the internal and external world, loss of mentalizing and reflective capacities, disavowal of otherness, difficulty in thinking of the future, etc.).

Psychoanalytic theory has shown how affects operate as fundamental interpretative categories of experience operating in generalized and homogenizing terms. The generalized and homogenizing nature of the affective connotation simplifies the representation of the world, thus allowing to establish and stabilize the context of meaning, namely enabling the subject to extract forms of regularity from reality, in other words to give them meaning. The greater the variability and environmental uncertainty to which the subject is exposed, the greater the use of the homogenizing capacity - therefore simplifying and stabilizing - of the affective connotation of the experience. From this point of view, the profoundly affective nature of current social discourses and practices lends itself to be interpreted as the way subjects recover/preserve the stability of their

own frames of meaning in relation to an environment - as the effect of globalization dynamics - introducing exponentially increasing degrees of uncertainty, loss of stable ideological references, difficulties in imagining the future.

It must be said that not all models that share a psychoanalytic matrix are in themselves capable of offering satisfactory answers to the need to understand the macro-social phenomena of anthropological rupture and socio-institutional crisis underway and of setting strategies for such understanding and methods of intervention. The models that remain within the intrapsychic paradigm suffer from multiple limitations as they lack a systemic, homeomorphic and recursive view of affectivization and respond in many cases to the logic of trauma, deficit, and lack of rationality/adaptation to recover.

Instead, it is first of all necessary to clearly recognize the foundation of the relational matrix of the mind which, albeit in different ways, constitutes a heritage common to the many psychoanalytic currents that have developed over time. The recovery and relevance of this matrix allows to overcome in theoretical and methodological terms the split between the internal world and the external world, that is, between an individual psychology and a social psychology, just to recall Freud’s invitation (1921). As we have shown, between ‘*the forms of intersubjectivity*’ and ‘*the modes of thought*’ there are recursive relations that are instantiated by immanent, affective, embodied, and culturally and pragmatically connoted sense-making processes.

The central aspect of this intersubjective view of the mind lies in the recognition of how individual mental processes (perception, experiences, thoughts, decisions, actions) are produced ‘within and by reason’ of a conceivable

level of affective and pre-symbolic meaning, as the immanent form of the relationship.

From this point of view, psychoanalytic theory allows us to advance the thesis that every setting of social action conveys and reproduces its own form and in doing so it instantiates it as a living meaning operating as a domain of sense, therefore as a cognitive regulator for the actors involved.

This kind of generalization is relevant inasmuch it is possible to derive a general methodological criterion from it: systemic intervention consists of the design, implementation and regulation of social action settings capable of operating as a semiotic hub, that is, capable of introducing and fostering the diffusion within the population of immanent meanings designed to promote forms of life opposed to the phenomena of anthropological rupture and socio-institutional crisis. This is exactly the level of semiotic capital and intermediate settings.

It is worth noting that such a vision of the intervention implies a generalization, but not a structural variation of the consolidated clinical psychological intervention model. In fact, in the context of psychotherapy, clinical change is not produced by the content-knowledge of the interpretative activity as such; rather, it is determined by the fact that, through the exercise of the interpretative function, a different form of organizing the relationship is pragmatically instantiated, capable of innovating the intersubjective field (Stern, 2013a, 2013b), thus opening regions of thinkability in the minds of those who participate in it.

Therefore, psychoanalysis in a broadening perspective contributes with interpretative

models aimed at understanding: a) the affective processes that are fuelled/conveyed by the structural and functional characteristics of systemic dynamics; b) the way these affective processes of a systemic order orient and constrain the forms of (inter) subjectivity (up to a widespread level of population and not only of dyadic relationships).

Understanding these mechanisms is the necessary condition for:

- *In primis*, planning systemic interventions (of a structural, functional, institutional nature), as a method for pursuing the change of affective processes, and more generally of psychosocial dimensions (attitudes, opinions, scripts of action) that fuel systemic criticalities;
- *In secundis*, promoting the ability of systemic interventions to take into account the affective and subjective values associated with the way they are carried out and the impacts they pursue.

Finally, the fundamental implication is that systemic interventions by definition cannot be conveyed through the mediation of individual/micro-social approaches in which the psychologist is directly involved. In other words, this means that the professional's body (the clinician's body, the psychoanalyst's body) is no longer the direct vector of professional action. As argued throughout the work, the embodiment retains centrality, yet systemic interventions are not addressed to single individuals but to intermediate settings in their function of porous and immanent interface of inter-intra-subjectivity able to instantiate meaningful embodied practices.

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