

## Introduction

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Each and every day we make ritual gestures, we move to the rhythm of external and personal cadences, we cultivate our memories, we plan for the future. And everyone else does likewise. Daily experiences are only fragments in the life of an individual, far removed from the collective events more visible to us, and distant from the great changes sweeping through our culture. Yet almost everything that is important for social life unfolds within this minute web of times, spaces, gestures, and relations. It is through this web that our sense of what we are doing is created, and in it lie dormant those energies that unleash sensational events.

This book deals with everyday life and tries to make sense of what individuals experience in it. A phenomenology of everyday experience is always as partial as the eye of the observer, but there can be no other point of departure for any investigation as to why, for us and so many others, things no longer ‘add up’: why is it that our routine gestures no longer are what they have been even in the recent past as we interact with different people, as we pass from one life ambit to another at work, at home, on holiday, or alone in solitude? And, above all, why is it so difficult to match the meaning of our behaviour with the words we use to name and recognize what we do?

We are trapped in a reality constructed by information – mostly, the particular kind of information that is constituted by images. Our existence, both in its routine and more dramatic moments, is created by information just as it depends on it. To feed ourselves we consume symbols, to love and reproduce we resort to the advice of experts, to desire and dream we use the language provided by the media. Even the threat of nuclear war, the very survival of our planet, hinges upon the control of information.

A society that uses information as its vital resource alters the constitutive structure of experience. The way we conceive reality and ourselves is changed in its cognitive, perceptive, and emotional dimensions: the

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representation of space and time, the relationship between possibility and reality, the link between natural phenomena and their symbolic elaboration are affected. Experience becomes an artificial construct: the product of relations and representations rather than of circumstances, the laws of nature, or contingency.

We lead our lives in the midst of a world of artefacts which no longer are mere *objects* but, instead, have become *processes of the mind*. We live by images, we clothe ourselves in messages, we make events happen by thinking them or by rendering them communicable. Yet this proliferation of material and symbolic artefacts does not cancel out what we naturally are: we have bodies and genes, we are part of an ecosystem, we stand between life and death. Daily life is scored by the marks of an unresolved tension between, on the one hand, the dynamic impulse to continuously create the new space and contents of experience, and, on the other hand, the need to observe the natural confines of experience itself. The ancient Taoist symbol of a jade ring expresses the relationship between fullness and emptiness, aptly conveying the tension between limit and possibility. The hole in the ring, the emptiness, introduces into the dense texture of the material the void – a space for a question that goes beyond what is visible, but yet a space which remains contained within the material itself. It is this tension that generates the questions about meaning that today go often unanswered.

We live on a planet that has become a global society, a society totally interconnected by its capacity of intervening on its environment and on social life itself, and yet still dependent on its natural home, the planet Earth. This twofold relation to the Earth, as the global field for social action and its physical boundary, defines the ‘planetary society’ in which personal life takes place. The accelerated pace of change, the multiplicity of roles assumed by the individual, the deluge of messages that wash over us expand our cognitive and affective experience to an extent that is unprecedented in human history. The points of reference used by individuals and groups in the past to plot their life courses are disappearing. Answering the basic question ‘Who am I?’ becomes progressively more difficult; we continue to need fixed anchor points in our lives but even our personal biographies begin to fail us as we hardly recognize ourselves in our memories. The search for a safe haven for the self becomes an increasingly critical undertaking, and the individual must build and continuously rebuild her/his ‘home’ in the face of the surging flux of events and relations.

I have traced this search in individual experience and contemporary collective phenomena, uncovering its dilemmas but also the potentialities contained in it. A world that lives by complexity and difference cannot escape uncertainty, and it demands from individuals the capacity to *change form*

(the literal meaning of ‘metamorphosis’) while still continuing to be the same person. The constitutive dimensions of the self – time and space, health and sickness, sex and age, birth and death, reproduction and love – are no longer a datum but a problem. The self is no longer firmly pinned to a stable identity; it wavers, staggers, and may crumble. The term ‘play’ is also used as a mechanical term for the movement of a pivot pin that sits loosely in its housing, a free and unimpeded movement from or about a fixed point. The self, likewise, can succumb to trembling and lose itself, or it can learn to give itself ‘play’.

To remain an individual self while learning how to change form emerges as an inevitable and central task confronting us today. The process of individuation must gain access to inner time, to those bodily and affective dimensions which enable us to see, feel, think, and communicate – that is, consciously to construct the field of our experience, playing ever new games. But if the self remains closed in on itself, unable to reach out to rise to the challenges of a planetary society pregnant with both potential and risk, the path of inner life may turn into an illusory flight from precisely such a responsibility or a silent prison of the self.

The problem is therefore how to preserve the relationship between fullness and emptiness symbolized by the jade ring: how to filter the teeming flow of messages that we emit and receive; how to find space for movement, but also for silence and stillness to grasp meanings that words can no longer convey. Without the ability to pass with fluency from one dimension to the other, from opening of the self to its closure, we shall be ultimately overwhelmed by the flow of information or swept aside from communication altogether.

Our day-to-day experience speaks to us of the presence of social changes that have a bearing more on the meaning of action than on the things themselves. In contemporary complex societies, the power built around social codification intervenes in the definition of the self and affects the biological and motivational structures of human action. At the same time, individuals gain wider control over the formation and orientation of their action. In proportion to the growth in the self-reflective capacity of individuals to produce information, communication, and sociality, complex societies face ever more urgently the necessity to intervene in that same action and on the ways it is perceived and represented by individuals and groups. In this manner, the two faces of change become apparent. On one side, the social and individual capacity to intervene in human action as it is produced increases; on the other, the generation of meaning is marked by the requirements of systemic control and regulation.

In this book, I want to venture into that frontier territory in which the

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more visible collective processes come into contact with individual experience and our day-to-day relations. A reflection on freedom that concerns itself with the meaning of individual existence and the destiny of the human species must make reference to both collective processes and subjective experience in everyday life. For this reason, I shall follow a circular route in my pursuit to bring out those areas of collective experience that today deeply affect individual life, at the same time tackling the collective import of those phenomena that on the surface may appear to be merely individual.

Moving around on the frontier territory calls for a special step. In the no-man's-land between well-known territories, knowledge becomes blurred and contaminated. This, however, is different from the confusion between already established languages. It is not necessary to know every word of the languages spoken on each side – and perhaps that would be even impossible. On the borders of the already familiar, one learns that 'elsewhere' the same thing is not quite the same; every time one returns with a slightly different point of view. At the frontier, one's vision of things is altered.

In this book I attempt to develop a viewpoint where we can better see what has gone largely unnoticed before our eyes. There is a naive way of looking that fails to achieve anything that reveals, simply reconnecting the signs of an already established universe to a reassuring confirmation of what was there from the beginning. But there exists another way of looking, one that enables us to *see*; a viewpoint that leads us beyond that which is taken for granted and allows us to reach towards what is invisible at first sight.

We have been accustomed to think that what matters is the aim and the outcome, that the means attain their importance subservient to the ends only. But the planetary changes through which we are now living call for a new kind of a perspective. If the road is made as important to us as its destination, the 'how' as significant as the 'what', then we shall be better able to hold both the jade ring and its hole, both the fullness and the emptiness. The 'how' can enrich the contents of experience with meaning, it can form the stable framework that allows us to let go what we have just lived when the moment is on hand for a passage to new contents. Without losing our selves, we can thus void our fullness and accept to change.

An understanding of what is currently happening to us can only emerge at the crossroads of various kinds of knowledge. In order to understand the modern self with its many faces we must alter our point of view, and adopt a way of seeing through which it becomes possible to grasp relational connections and learn from accumulated experience. It is becoming increasingly clear that human action is an interactive process, continuously

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constructed within a field of possibilities and limits. As a consequence of this realization, it becomes also evident that responsibility for our life on the planet Earth belongs to all of us. Social relationships and individual experience constitute thus the twin poles of the circular path that I wish to explore in this book.

In that, my approach will be phenomenological; the observer is not external to the field s/he describes, nor should s/he hesitate becoming passionately involved. Because my attention will be focused on the processes and not just the contents of experience, I shall concentrate on the frontiers where different territories of human action meet and merge with each other. It is these frontiers that I now invite the reader to explore.

As always in a no-man's-land, what one discovers has not yet developed its definite form and remains therefore ambivalent. The outcome of the processes I shall discuss in this book is thus entrusted to a freedom still to be constructed – a freedom that urges everyone to take responsibility for change.

A preliminary version of this book was first published in Italian in 1991. After *Nomads of the Present* (1989) where I had tried to connect social movements and individual needs in contemporary society, I wanted to devote a specific book to the results of my many years of research on the topic of individual experience in complex systems. At that time the boom of interest in the 'subjective' and cultural dimensions of social action was just beginning in the international sociological literature and the book could look like a lonely exploration by a sociologist with a penchant for psychology. Over the last few years the cultural trend toward 'subjectivity' has been confirmed resembling an explosion and a wide number of books have been published on these topics, including by influential authors and friends like Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman and Alain Touraine. This English book draws from its Italian older brother, but it has been completely rewritten as a new book which is intended to contribute to the current debates on the relationship between individual experience and societal changes.

In this book I present in a discursive way ideas and findings assembled from a great deal of field research and during almost twenty years of clinical work in psychotherapy: some formal results were set out in a number of books written before this one, and many of the themes were also developed and got clarified in discussions with colleagues and students in various parts of the world. The classics of sociology, psychology and anthropology on which the book rests are rarely mentioned, no more than the philosophical background of my perspective: I have listed in a final bibliographical note only the more recent literature to which the reader can refer.

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This book, together with its companion *Challenging Codes*, was first written with the linguistic assistance of Adrian Belton and at its intermediate stage I relied on the fundamental editing work of Timo Lyyra, whose invaluable help contributed substantially to improve both the form and the content of the text. Jeffrey Alexander, together with Steven Seidman, acted the way any author would dream of a series editor: he was supportive, generous and demanding. My editor at CUP, Catherine Max, was an understanding and reliable contact all along the publishing process, with a gentle touch that I could appreciate on many occasions. Let me thank them personally in Italian from the deep of my heart: *grazie*. Too many friends, colleagues and students discussed with me the ideas presented here, and by provoking a displacement of the point of view they contributed to the refinement or even the change of my perspective: Europe, the United States, Canada, East Asia, Latin America were the places where we met. I could not list all these voices by name, but I am deeply grateful to every one of them.

Milano, October 1995

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## The challenge of the everyday

### Metaphors of time

We all have a spontaneous idea of what we mean when we talk about ‘time’; the notion is immediate and intuitive. Yet when we try to define it, we have to resort to imagery, or perhaps to scientific language, which seems to serve as a kind of a *lingua franca* of today. Even when we understand immediately what we are talking about, we find it extremely hard to pin down what the experience of time actually means.

It is no coincidence that human beings have been puzzled about time since the dawn of history, and that they have conceived it as something so important and profound, something so constitutive of their experience, as to earn the status of the sacred. In more ancient cultures, reference to time always conjured up a divine image – often a river god or another aquatic deity which, in the image of the flow, reflects the appearance and disappearance of things and encloses the cosmos in the circular movement depicted by another traditional symbol, the serpent biting its tail. Fluid and enfolding, the experience of time is characterized by a sense of thickness and a density that our definitions seldom provide and which, perhaps for this reason, cultures have sought to convey through the means of metaphor and myth.

This perhaps explains why the experience of time is so diversified. While the West has conceived time as a category having to do with the present, the past, and the future, many aboriginal cultures do not distinguish between inner and outer events, rather associating different times with different experiences. The Hopi people of the Southwest United States, for instance, make the distinction between the time which is (as the time of objects) and the time of whatever is about to come about (the time of subjective experiences, feelings and emotions). Time, for them, is a multiplicity of events, with each event characterized by a specific temporal dimension of its own.

The various forms of time conceived thus flow all in different directions. There is an extraordinary similarity in conceptualization between this kind of idea of time and the one described by genetic psychology as typifying the experience of young children. In early childhood, our temporal categories are in fact constituted by dimensions of locality. For a child, every action and every experience is connected to its own particular time instead of a constant uniform flow of events as a single temporal sequence.

Among the many symbolic representations that historical cultures have created for the inexpressible dimension of time, three recurrent figures emerge. The first is that of the *circle*. Time is perceived and lived as the cyclical renewal of all things, unfolding according to a law laid down by a primordial and atemporal event which repeats itself in visible events governing their regular appearance and disappearance. Thus, for example, the mythical time of the tribe's founding moment, or the sacred time of a culture's fundamental experiences, returns cyclically in events which perpetuate it and at the same time celebrate it. Things repeat themselves, and, as in the great cycles of nature inspiring the image of the circle, nothing is ever definitively acquired or lost. We can find the circle symbol employed in cultures very distant from each other in space and time, from the ancient Chinese cultures to those of the Native Americans and medieval Europeans, and altogether it reflects the special relationship between all traditional cultures and the deep-seated rhythms of nature.

The modern age – that is, the West arisen on the foundation of technical rationality – has imposed another pattern on the experience of time; it descends to us from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. While preserving the basically cyclical image of time, Christianity introduced an additional notion to it: the genesis and the end of the world as marking the limits of a linear progression. The history of the world came to be seen as a depiction of man's downfall and redemption – as the story of his salvation, whose most profound meaning would be revealed only at the journey's end. The modern age inherited this idea, divested it of its religious garb, and expressed it in terms of progress, of the wealth of nations, of revolution, of time which flowed towards its own extinction, towards a timeless standstill for which all previous stages are only a preparation. The circle symbol was thus replaced by the *arrow*: time began somewhere, and it had an end that also served as its culmination – a final point which defined the meaning of the entire trajectory and illuminated its intermediate stages.

This was also the idea that propelled industrialization and brought about the great transformation of the Western world that resulted in the consolidation of the form which the entire planet now accepts – or endures. Whether couched in terms of decline or of progress, the linear pattern of

the arrow has penetrated to the deep roots of Western culture and still today profoundly shapes our conception of time. We remain looking forward to a salvation which, to be sure, may of course no longer be religious: to a secularized salvation entrusted to the powers of techno-scientific rationality, to development, to economic growth – in every case something which projects the meaning of the present into the future.

However, even the figure of the arrow by which we seek to capture our experience of time, the image of a purposive sequence, is now losing its hold. We see around us the great myths of modernity fading away, the narratives which promised ultimate salvation dissolving. Our experience of time undergoes increasing fragmentation as our future grows more uncertain and perhaps more ominous than ever before: what looms in the horizon is today catastrophe. We no longer possess the certainty of a radiant future and final salvation as the destiny of history. Linear time yields to an experience of transitions without development, to a movement between disconnected points, a sequence of fleeting moments whose meaning is entirely grounded in the present point of time. It is precisely this experience, our perception of time as a discontinuous and point-like sequence, which has given rise to a new figure: the motif of the *point*.

### Measuring and perceiving

The cycle, the arrow, and the point are then the metaphors with which the different human cultures have set to define time. But more than being mere cosmographic vocabulary, these organizing concepts convey different ways of living in the time. The diversity of cultures and the diversity of individuals refer us back to the great divide between experiencing and naming which I introduced in the beginning. Yet, in spite of this variety of perceptions and images, men have always tried to measure time. As cultures have sought to circumscribe the fluid, aquatic divinity which swamps everything and gushes in all directions, they have in one way or another confined it using measurements so as to build firm embankments with which at least to give direction to its flow. Cultures, that is to say, have invented ways to measure the immeasurable.

The ways in which time is measured tell us a great deal about how it is experienced. Here, too, the modern age has made a decisive break with the past. The time which we all have inherited from modernity is the time measured by clocks. It is the time which sets the cadence of our daily routines, organizes social life, assigns positions, gauges the gaps between them, decides the value of work. Clocks are machines, instruments which measure time as if it were a homogeneous and divisible quantity. They thus

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both presuppose and create the standardization of time. Clock time is equal unto itself, divisible into smaller units, and the same wherever and however it is experienced.

The cultures of the past measured times in the most disparate ways, but all of them were directly or indirectly connected with the four elements of earth, fire, wind, and water. The measuring of time has always been guided by the idea of flux already discussed, and its instruments have always represented attempts to capture, contain, and freeze that flux. Pre-modern cultures invented devices which used water, sand, wind, a slowly burning flame, or sunlight to measure time. They searched for time in the intrinsic motion of the elements, as if the mere fact of giving a material or visible form to its eternal flux could circumscribe it.

Observing a slowly burning candle or the running sand in an hour-glass is a perceptive and spatial experience; duration is filled with sensory referents, and a relationship is established with the material element. A clock transforms time into an abstract trajectory through space, although its moving hands still maintain a physical relationship between visual perception and the measurement of time. In the mechanical abstraction and standardization of duration that the clock performs, however, there still persists a constant reference to sequence and to flux, made visible by the relationship among the various points on the dial. When we say, 'It's five minutes before ...' or 'It's ten minutes after ...' we are using a perceptual measurement of time which still involves a physical relationship with space, be it no more than the small circuit traversed by the hands of the clock.

The invention of the digital clock, however, has eliminated this last extant reference to space and introduced a new measurement of time: an entirely cognitive pulsation which at any moment of time turns continuum into a series of dots. Time thus becomes merely the reading of signs and their abstract mental processing. The gaze that followed the movement of sand, of a flame, of a wheel or a shadow established a relationship with the 'material', with the sign it expressed, and with the symbolic dimension in which that particular measurement of time was meaningful. The circular movement of the hands of a mechanical clock still preserves a trace of this original relationship. It is given material form and continues to incorporate the memory of the cycle. The arrow is already present and paramount, but the circle has not yet disappeared from the perceptive horizon and is therefore still meaningful.

But when the measurement of time becomes purely a matter of reading of numbers, an uninterrupted but discontinuous sequence of signs, an electronic vibration of immutable regularity, then the point becomes para-