

The Estrangement of Youth and the Quest for a different Society

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Abstract

The author contends that any contestation or countercultural movement, no matter how generous, is bound to failure unless it develops as a rational project. Violence, as such, might help visibility, but, in the last analysis, it amounts to nothing more than self-gratifying narcissism, incapable to produce positive results, even less to satisfy the request of present day youth for a different, more open society.

Keywords: estrangement; violence; open society; new community.

In contemporary sociology the notion of «value» acquires importance as a rejection of positivistic positions and theories of instinctive behaviour, which tended to focus on their organic impulses. Talcott Parsons refers to Windelband's «philosophy of values» with his trichotomy (the spheres of science, with truth as norm or value; of morality, that of action, with the norm of goodness; and of art, that of intuition feeling, whose norm is beauty). Windelband's epistemological stimulus, taken up by Rickert in his historicist relativism, and by Weber, leads to positions current today, such as Howard Becker's, for whom «value» becomes a central category in the analysis of society and the formation of personality, so as to be able to account for the difference between sacred (traditional) society and modern (secular) society.

The evolution of values after '68

The Paris May of '68 managed to be particularly photogenic, and left many orphans. The «values» it caused to tremble, and those it felt it should create, are still at the centre of discussion. Thus it is still *sub judice* whether the current explosions of violence should be attributed to the Paris May, to its failure or to its inspiration¹. In general, «values» emerge from such discussions rather mythologized. One tends to forget that values are simply responses to human needs, of concrete, specific men and women, that they are thus not fixed, given once and for all, since man has not only nature, but history. The historical variability of emerging needs implies the necessity of constantly reformulation of values, their de-dogmatization, and their fluidity. For this basic reason the consideration of human situations and problems which are not historically «dated», and are instead analyzed abstractly in terms of the pure

¹ See, in this context, my polemical exchange with the philosopher François Chatelet, in *Dialogues Franco- Italiens*, Paris, ed. France Culture, 1979, pp. 31-51.

and simple phenomenon, however little or however much these may be relevant («freedom», «justice», «love», «death» etc.), de-historicizes them. That is, it does not overcome the limit of the naturalistic level, and hence does not achieve that of critical discussion. It remains an act, possibly brilliant and picturesque, of mystification.

In Italy, after a 1968 which is correctly seen more as an opening up than a beginning, because of many accompanying and historically specific factors – from widespread industrialization to accelerated urbanization – there emerged a demand for significant participation and recognition for new social groups which, in the prevailing institutional system had not found and could not find adequate and speedy satisfaction. Therefore, rather than a «crisis of values», there was a «void of values» in the sense that the emotional link, in the broadest sense, between individual and institutions, dried up. In a word, *authority had ceased to be authoritative*.

This is not only a cultural process. It involves the whole of society. It emerges from the underlying economic structure and involves the material relations of life in which contemporaries in a given historical situation necessarily create between themselves. This cannot be pleasant for the intellectuals, who see in this, not without reason, the warning signs of their «technological unemployment» as privileged guards of mankind's great values. However, the idea of culture as creator and generous dispenser and watchful depository of values both universal and meta-historical, has lost much of its gloss. Culture was forced to show its shame. Referring to May '68, Edgar Morin said: «Here is the faceless revolution». But was it really faceless, or were there too many, different ones, according to whether one speaks of Paris, or Berlin, or Berkeley, or Rome?, Alain Touraine declared optimistically «It is only a beginning». But it was the beginning of the end.

Certainly, 1968 was an experience of crisis, making a double value. First, the crisis tore, divided, shook, social roles established by a long, venerable tradition. Old professional prestige fell in the dust. Professors killed themselves. Others more wisely limited their action to resigning from teaching or chose early retirement. However, the crisis also had a demonstrating, revealing quality. It cracked, it broke, but at the same time opened, unveiled. It made us look inside. It forced us to question received truths, beliefs *in verba magistri*, repeated and ritualized, but not experiences. An extreme need for coherence and substance was present. Not the crisis of values, but the void of values – that was the danger. It was in this void that the new irrationalisms grow, spread and easily achieved a position of uncontested domination. Here the new irrationalism, undisciplined and capricious subjectivity, and a vapid nebulousness, in which ideas lose their rigorous outlines and everything blurs into pure gratuitousness, live.

The worthwhile experience of '68, its specific contribution, was the struggle against authoritarianism, especially, as starting point of the clash, academic authoritarianism.

Then, it grew to oppose the forms of authoritarianism which are open, codified and hidden, and indirect, in global society. It was a negative contribution, but its scope cannot seriously be questioned. For the holders of authority and positions of power, 1968 was really awful, a veritable *experimentum crucis*. They were quietly sitting on power, and unexpectedly power began to shift, to totter. To have power was no longer like wielding a static prerogative, unobjectionable, given, and thus obtained once and for all: *semel abbas semper abbas*.

The men of power were accustomed by a long formalistic tradition to consider power as an object, as their private property – a car one parked where it seemed convenient, a cigar-lighter one carried in one's pocket. Without warning, this power, once so docile, safe and definitive, began to tremble and shake, and became a feeble prerogative, an attribute to be merited, and which had to be mastered on every occasion. It began to cease to be a personal prerogative and have a rational, collective function. Power could no longer be greedily hoarded. It had to be spent, to be exercised. There was need to take initiatives, and hence to be judged on the basis of the results. Promises were no longer good enough, just as formal guarantees were no longer sufficient.

'68 had this peculiarity, this specific element: it claimed to reduce formal legality to its essential reasoning. It no longer accepted pure representativeness; for example, the fact that someone had been elected a deputy. It demanded the representativeness of representation. The deputy must deserve his role, re-conquer it every day, in close contact with his electors. The distance, the break between base and summit must disappear. The base *was* the summit. Democracy was proclaimed by pressure from below. Popular sovereignty was where it had its origin, its natural headquarters. It seemed obvious, but had been forgotten.

The recall of these obvious truths had upsetting effects. The men of power were in a state of alarm. Their reaction was not long in coming. They took advantage of every uncertainty and weakness of the movement. And weaknesses were not lacking, and soon made themselves visible. Far from being a faceless revolution, as Edgar Morin argued, '68 appeared as a whole series of faces. It was against the war in Vietnam and racial discrimination in the United States, against de Gaulle's paternalism and the old notion of *grandeur*. It was against the centripetal society, without real opposition, mystified and manipulated by the Springer newspapers, in the German Federal Republic. It was against a democracy in danger of becoming a gerontocracy in Italy, as a result of the slow political turnover and a democracy dominated by increasingly severe class fragmentation behind an only-apparent pluralism, based more on marginality than participation. 1968 was undoubtedly a strong, negative, decisively anti-authoritarian protest, but the protest did not know how to turn itself into a plan. The accusation was not changed into a proposal. The accusation, insistent and documented, but unable to turn into a proposal, collapsed into impotence. It became

mass frustration. It constructed the basic conditions for social despair, aggressiveness, and widespread violence.

Many have tried to connect the neo-modern reply to the so-called secularization process – proclaimed by many after the Church Council period, with the choice made for terrorism by numbers of ex-Catholics. First of all, it must be made clear that the «process of secularization» is possibly a suggestive formula, but has little explanatory power. «Secularization» understood as a loss of religious conscience in the strict sense rests on an ambiguity: that is, it confuses critical demands on religion as church structure, that is, a hierocratic structure, with the fall of religion as religiosity, an internal but not solipsistic experience, the sense of mystery, the community link, which has value in itself, which is post-contractual, non utilitarian².

The choice of terrorism, or the decision to devote oneself to organized political violence, made by some ex-Catholics, is not self-evidently to be attributed exclusively to Catholicism. Rather, it calls forth the impatience typical of a particular *homo religiosus*, now wholly laicized, against the politics of gradualness, or politics as patience, instilled with what for Edmund Burke was the chief virtue, as it were the «professional» one, of the classical politician – *prudence*, which recalled the Aristotelian σοφροσύνη. There is in the ὕβρις, in the furious activism, of the terrorist the anxiety of one who does not know any other technical means of purifying society apart from the gun, as well as the insecure, paranoid suspicion of one who scents in the impersonal procedures of the democratic regime a pure and simple fraud.

The «new subjectivity» and the crisis of Marxism, or «lyrical Marxism»

Since the end of the war, and even more in the hot years of the contestation around 1968, it seemed that Marxist culture must supplement, if not completely eliminate, the other two major cultural currents which, especially in Italy since the end of the Risorgimento, had held away with varying success – liberal-democratic and catholic culture. Based on a strictly speculative judgement, Benedetto Croce, in his *How Theoretical Marxism Was Born and Died in Italy*, gave Marxism up for dead even before the First world war. However, possibly the philosopher's arrogance was due for a clear disproof. Stored in the attic after Giolittian era, Marxism was in time to regain the main floor and spread out into the streets.

In fact, it seems correct to me to hold that Marxism is the victim of its own success. It has become a sort of κοινέ, an intellectual *vulgata*. A certain way of arguing «Marxistically» has penetrated the minds of all averagely informed people, and has become the common opinion. Even political, social and cultural forces with attitudes hostile to or competitive with Marxism now think in terms of the «analysis of forces»,

² See my «Introduction» to *Forme del sacro in un'epoca di crisi*, Naples, Liguori, 1978.

«counterposing of interests» and «operative effectiveness of ideas». Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History* would today not be understood even by bishops. Who does not refer to the practical interests underlying ideas? Who is not aware of the historical pressures and sectorial interests which are expressed in the supposedly impersonal and sometimes «providential» mechanism, the «market»? Who now refuses to refer to the material relations of life? There is an implicit Marxism in the very mode of posing the problems of the political community which today must be seen as a common patrimony, accepted with such naturalness that acceptance occurs in a wholly painless way.

However, Marxism's success has a fairly high price in terms of specific doctrines and contents. The triumph of Marxism coincides with its dilution, and demands of it a judicious watering-down. This is not only a question of classical revisionism from Bernstein to Kautsky. It is rather a reduction of Marxism from a body of explanatory and predictive propositions connected with the «nature» and functioning of capitalism as a global system – economy and society, class and ideology – to a canon of historiographic investigation, as the young Croce meant in *Historical Materialism and Marxian Economics*, or to hypotheses of the «ideal-type» of analysis, as Max Weber suggested³.

There is no doubt that the high-point of the influence of Marxism was seen during the contestation of 1968, but the price in this case was even higher, if that is possible. Marxism became a sacramental formula. A doctrine born and developed with a critical and demystifying purpose, which at times approached savageness, was turned into its opposite, frozen into a dogma and reduced to a prayer. One might think that fifty years on, today there is being repeated with a new cast the same anti-positivist and anti-Marxist reaction which, from Bergson to Sorel, from the Historical School to the neo-Hegelians and in Italy to the speculative and political work of Croce and Gentile, had dominated the beginning of the twentieth century. This opened out into a hard struggle against reason and against science as a public activity, and which was to smooth the path for the clear sighted madness of Fascism and Nazism.

Today, the political and cultural situation is different. The attack at reason is more subtle and comprehensive. The influence of Marxism during the contestation of 1968 became dominant because it was thanks to Marxism that the young militants managed to grasp the contradictions in which they lived, and to understand society as a «system». It would seem the right road, politically and intellectually the most productive. The idea of system should open up the way to an understanding of the *interconnectedness of the social*, should lead to an understanding of how, socially

³ With special reference to the relation between Max Weber and Marxism, I refer my readers to my *Max Weber e il destino della ragione*, Bari, Laterza, 1964, and my introduction to the Italian edition of Max Weber, *Sociologia delle religioni*, ed. C. Sebastiani, 2 vols., Turin, UTET, 1976, pp. 9-37.

speaking, everything hangs together. Existential experience is linked to macro-social functional requirements. Structure and superstructures, micro- and macro-, personal and political, like private and public, are not mechanistically separable, but rather play on each other according to a series of dialectical mediations, specific and concrete, to be explored with the patience derived from an awareness of the complexity of the social.

Not a bit of it. The militants «reified» the «system», mad a monster of it, twisted the Marxist conception into an anthropomorphic target against which they vented, in a conspiratorial manner, the long repressions and frustrations built up in years of suppressed revolt against the father, or better still, the fathers (father, family, teachers, spiritual guides, sports' directors, police, etc.). This process of reification crudely ideologized everything, crushed any analytical perspective, and reduced everything to an instant politicism, which no longer saw real problems, and in its purely verbal universality repeated empty formulas, which were deafening and monotonous. The inability to take up a relatively distanced approach to guarantee the necessary critical discourse thus achieved an involuntarily comic effect.

Marxism, not understood, reduced to a few formulas, dogmatically repeated like phrases in the liturgy, came to be seen as lacking because it was insufficiently personalized. The situation recalls scenes from the theatre of the absurd. The ironic paradox was that in wholly good faith many thought they were perfecting and completing Marxism, in a grandiose attempt to explain the productive and reproductive mechanism of the capitalist system in scientific, or impersonal and necessary, terms, adding to these a chapter on the psychology of the individual personality, its «value» and motivations. The result of the process of «completion» is unfolding under our eyes, and is more or less unexpected. The psychologization of social problems has pushed into the background and eventually led to the neglect of the rational analysis of questions of structure in favour of that of states of mind. It has modestly cast a veil of silence over objective contradictions, from inflation to involuntary unemployment, in favour of the «new subjectivity» and «great feelings». Here it is that the most insidious part of the process of emptying Marxism as a rational, verifiable and inter-subjective construction begins. Meanwhile, the surrender to irrationalism prepares the way for the triumph of behaviour without ends, purely expressive, and of violence as a new play activity, an insane and even criminal invention, which still allows one, it is argued, to escape from the daily routine, to shake and defeat the flat grayness of the «bourgeois» world.

Acute observers of fashion have duly noted this tendency which seems confirm the uncontested domination of the private, and also manages to present the private as the real political instance, the basis of the true, unique revolution. «Worries, uncertainties, loneliness, aggressiveness, indifference, and even anger», says Giovanni Belingardi, «many are discontented because the future terrifies them. They have only age in

common. Nonetheless, as a couple (he and she) live out their love story»⁴. Even in the left-wing press there are no noteworthy reactions. *Lotta continua* for a long time risked looking like a kind of war dispatch about broken hearts. The tone varies from a rather dated student open-mindedness to the affectations of the romantic weeklies. The press of the historic left on the other hand seems bound by mechanisms of self-censure, linked with a certain element of conformism. Whoever does not bow to the latest fashion and find Patti Smith an extraordinary poet risks the charge of being reactionary. To talk of relations of production, or psychagogic manipulation, even quoting the Frankfurt School with due concern, is seen as backward.

And yet, for big papers and presses to «splash on the front page» strictly private stories as, for example, that of a middle-aged man caught in the grip of the jaws of an untimely first love is on close inspection not only the result of the popularizing taste of the editor. This thing is deeper. It should be connected with the whole semi-serious literature of the so-called «return to the private».

This is connected with fairly well worked-out attempts, even though these may appear with a fortuitous aspect due to sudden extemporization, intended to divert public attention from questions of structure to those of mentality. Feelings, individual psychology, the subjective, and the personal and private: these are the aspects emphasized daily, presented and commented on. What was once experienced with a certain degree of more or less genuine modesty, in the dark, and under cover of privacy, as an intimate experience, as something so deep and internal as even to be weak and trembling – certainly not to be shown off and given as news to the general public, vacant and omnivorous – is today dished up like a corpse, anonymous evidence on the pathologist's table, dissected and analyzed with care, freed from any remaining mystery, and even proclaimed as having certain revolutionary effects, so as to render more or less obsolete the traditional idea of social revolution, if not outdated, then backward and ridiculous.

Out datedness aside, it still seems to me true, especially today, that the crisis of a culture and a way of life should be measured in terms of their inability to come to terms with factual situations and structural contradictions, and hence of their tendency to turn objective questions into problems of perception and feeling, diluting them in the most evanescent forms of a state of mind. I must, however, acknowledge that the psychological instance is winning. It seems to me secondary that this victory should often be presented in terms of greater analytic sharpness or a more penetrating interpretative ability. What is certain is that the spreading psychologism, simply by virtue of its existence, and its existence on a mass scale, performs an influential service for constituted interests, for whom a revolution comparable to love making, of even

⁴ Cf. G. Belingardi, «L'amore è una coppia meravigliosa», *Corriere della Sera Illustrato*, 6 October 1979, p. 9.

multiple, and of various (homo-hetero-trans-) sexual, types, can only be music to their ears, sweet always because inoffensive and at times downright entertaining.

This reaction may seem tinged with what Alvin W. Gouldner, in a polite but tough exchange, had occasion to call my «crude Veblenism». Gouldner was anxious to take the correct distance with regard to Marxism, though he is so critical of the prevailing American sociology, and to anything which might smell even from afar like materialism, historical or dialectical. However, my intention is different here. I simply want to register the rather unheard-of fact that, with the declared aim of «completing» the social revolution, there is a tendency today on the right but also, and above all, on the left, to emphasize and put individual feelings, or the problems of the ego, or need of the «new subjectivity» in prime place without perceiving, or bothering about, the consequences this involves.

In the history of social thought, this is by no means ignored. Everyone knows that for years Gabriel Tarde and Emile Durkheim polemicized long and bitterly on the relative primacy of psychology over sociology. However, already in Spencer the problem was thoroughly alive, and for Comte was so lively that it was decided and resolved by means of the simple cancelling of one of the two terms – psychology. Shortly after, it was Georges Gurwitsch's turn to show that the problem was interesting and tedious at the same time, in that there are no individuals without society, and no society without individuals.

The contemporary novelty, however, concerns different levels and themes. The psychological emphasis passes over the conceptual level to occupy that of existential experience: the sociologist is challenged personally as distant analyst and forced to bare himself in a political strip-tease of exceptional shamelessness. Years ago, the historian of social thought, Giovanni Busino had praised worthily tried to «humanize» the dry figure of Vilfredo Pareto, attributing to him a love poem which would certainly not have gone well with recent sociological works in fashion, and which really, it seems, was by Alfred de Vigny. This is an understandable concern, though now it is rather unnecessary. Sociologists and modern social analysts in general, with a style of which one does not know whether to admire more the impartiality or the facility, tend to approach intimate, «amorous», not quite scientific, themes, in the traditional, that is, inter-subjective, perspective. What is striking is that in the name of the universality of social questions, it is exactly the structural social aspects which are cheerfully and poetically sacrificed in favour of the individual-psychological ones.

Hearsay Freudianism is now a mass, perhaps irresistible, phenomenon. The left seems to have been taken by surprise, and even in its more competent scientific forms, possibly in the name of the political opportunity of understanding «the youth generations» and sharing empathetically in their miseries, does not seem able

to examine the nature of the phenomenon with the necessary critical coolness. It does not condemn its privatizing consequences. It confines itself, in certain cases, to illuminating the class character, expensive and thereby aristocratic, of psychoanalysis. It even, as Lorenza Mazzetti has done, proposes a mass psychoanalysis for use by the proletariat («give me your dreams and I will give you happiness»). This would be modestly priced, and included among the services paid for by health insurance, but it does not look at the root of the problem by exposing the risk of a «revolution» reduced to an oneiric experience. It is only by chance that love is presented as the true, great, exalting revolution of today? At one time it seemed to me that this was really only the «revolution of the genitals». Now I shall have to revise my views. With the aid of the writers who have risen up as watchmen of Marxism, fortunately purged of any dross of materialism, I shall have to assure myself that by taking that road we have reached the historic goal of the «socialism of the bedroom»⁵.

In this formula there is no polemic fancy, but on the contrary a rigorous demonstration of the naturalistic aim to which «bourgeois» thought and practice logically aspire. The current triumph of the private, the psychological and mass psychoanalysis is based on the exclusion, more or less concealed, of the historical and social, institutional and class, dimensions. At the moment the ego is fondled and apparently placed in the centre of attention, it is really impoverished, separated from its structural economic background. Its historical memory is cancelled out. In the neo-biologicistic perspective of comparative ethology, the ego is again snatched from history and from the rational plan for a structural transformation of social relations. It is atomized, delivered up to and resolved in the internalized privatization of the social crisis – a crisis which is made to coincide with the unchangeable human situation in the world, and which is, however, described as only surmountable through judicious re-adaptation to it. Is it then surprising if real, historical, flesh and blood individuals rise up and revolt against these refined techniques of conformism and social conservation?

Expressive conduct and instrumental conduct

Urban violence, even when it manifests itself as the most brutal, when it is gratuitous and readily not understandable in its motivation, is really based on a deep and meaningful motivation. It responds to the desperate need of human groups for identity, groups which have lost everything, cheated of their collective memory and traditional culture, and at the same time not accepted, or unable to participate in the prevailing culture, suspended in the limbo of that no-man's land, the void of values in which anything can happen because nothing is culturally (morally) motivated.

⁵ Cf., for an occasionally brilliant but unusually de-historicized treatment (hence inevitably a superficial one – and despite the deliberate and possibly arrogant ignorance of the immense literature on the subject). F. Alberoni, *Innamoramento e amore*, Milan, Garzanti, 1979.

In this sense, unmotivated violence belongs to the sphere of expressive behaviour: that is, that conduct and behaviour which has no value as regards ends or predetermined goals. Rather, through its pure and simple happening and unfolding in time, it produces a group climate, helping the formation of a collective consciousness, however fluid, and often so spontaneous as not to solidify into articulated behaviour. Finally, it swells into an identity, or the fact that a human group feels united by gestures, words and behaviour in which the whole takes part. On the other hand, instrumental conduct is defined as conduct which is justified, and has no value in itself, except in regard to the ends it devises, and which, however, implies two distinct moments:

- a) the rationally calculated connection between means available and ends desired (in this sense, instrumental conduct is close to and recalls what Max Weber called *Zweck-rationalität*);
- b) the assumption, at personal and group level or that of organization, of a clear responsibility regarding the objective, so as to make instrument behaviour rationally evaluable on the basis of the aims actually pursued, and not only on the basis of intentions or effects wished for, imagined, or achieved.

In a time of transition like the present, marked by the coexistence of traditional societies and industrial, or rationally directed and technically organized ones, expressive behaviour is typically ascendant. The former seem in worldwide decline, even though this tendency does not exclude unforeseen leaps back to tradition, and regressive «falls», such as to challenge the simple historic canons of idealistic and historicist materialism. The latter are emerging with much effort, in the terms of a technological neo-imperialism which has easily replaced the political one of the last century. Major social movements rise and spread, set in motion by aspirations which, however, remain vague, and by ideals which easily pass from the general to the generic, without, therefore, reasoned, certain objectives and without well-defined collective goals to aim at. They are generic social movements, whose power is directly proportional to their degree of nebulosity. It is not by chance that they find in spontaneity their relatively, common and positive meeting point, whilst their total lack of selectivity and logical negation of any order of priorities or standards of judgement make them at once attractive and elusive.

Orderly, logical thought is resented, criticized and avoided, as a poorly hidden attempt at authoritarian repression. This takes Nietzsche literally: «One must have a chaos inside oneself to give a star to the world». However, they forget to add immediately that one must also *be* Friedrich Nietzsche, possess his culture, sensibility, his sweet, beautiful and methodical madness, according to the rules of the *Gute Wahnsinn* of Goethe. On the contrary, there is a belief that it is enough to let oneself go, act for the sake of acting, let one's instincts speak, reely and at once, to express oneself

authentically, to create something beautiful, genuine and – they assure themselves with a rather moving candour – significant.

The most remarkable consequence of the spread of expressive conduct is a certain general «feminization»⁶, if by this we understand programmed dominance of the absence of rationally thought-out programmes, the superiority of the instinctual sphere, something close to the unpredictable and endearing mutability of the child who is permitted to live by «self-demand». On the level of practical behaviour, we notice relative irresponsibility regarding duties, a flight from circumscribed commitments, which can be evaluated on the basis of results achieved, and accusations against society, but at the same time, claims to be maintained by it, and a state of chronic indecision, which, however, manifests itself and is perceived as an opening to and readiness for all eventualities, the most disparate and apparently contradictory experiences, to the «wind of the spirit» and its playful gusts. *Expression leads the way at the expense of reflection.*

Without bearing this picture in mind, it is hard to understand the attitudes of groups of young people today, also as regards violence and its more sensational forms. It is still harder to understand by what means culture, from being a normative model, based on individual refinement and the methodical ability to doubt, should have become culture in the anthropological sense, or culture as a way of life, a mode of being together, a system or complex of sentiments and values more fundamentally lived through than rationally shared, without bearing in mind the experiences of the young in the last few years. To have a reference point which is also chronologically fixed, one thinks of the great festival of over half million young people in August 1969 at Woodstock, a quiet New England town.

Woodstock is important as a point of reference, but also as a way of not mistaking results for the causal framework. The youth culture announced its presence at Woodstock, proclaimed itself as self-exalting, but within the institutional and objective framework of an affluent society which could allow itself so to act, whose permissiveness was perfectly contained and understandable in the productive and consumptive framework marked by a high level of productivity and the illusion, very common at the time, that the market and basic raw materials would be limitless – made in the image of God and part of the nature of God. Scarcely ten years have passed, but they seem like ten centuries. The local citizenry was so shocked by that incredible happening-carnival-fair-exhibition-production that now, when permission was requested to celebrate the tenth anniversary in the same place, it was firmly rejected, despite the probable financial advantages.

⁶ I use this term not as value judgement, clearly, but as a phenomenological resolution, in the sense close to that of the German sociologist Scheuch.

The weight of the economic crisis

Things have changed, radically and hurriedly. I remember seeing a cinema documentary of Woodstock, just opened in Washington in spring, 1971, at the height of the protest against the Vietnam war, along with a group of young Americans. Identification with pop music, with Joe Cocker, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, the Jefferson Airplane, etc., was extremely strong and at the same time natural. The music was not composed just to be listened to, but to inhabit, like a new, unpredictable, novel house. Drugs were not a delayed suicide. They were experienced as a revelatory manifestation, a psychedelic broadening and enriching of the personality. Inter-personal relations were from time to time devised as though human nature were naturally good, with «flower children» who discovered themselves, acted, sang, danced spoke, like unwitting grandchildren of Rousseau. Everything rested on the faith that individual spontaneity and goodness could coincide, and were even the same thing. This is not the place to recall that this behaviour had no goals, and still less presented itself as stages in the realization of a plan. The very notion of a plan was seen as authoritarian in itself, and to be avoided as repressive. This was the time in which it was believed, as indeed social analysts in Europe as starved of historical knowledge as they were politically destitute behind, that every movement in its fluid or nascent phase already contained elements of its own justification, and that therefore it only required compliance to take from it those positive aspects of which it saw itself as natural depository. They did this without the evidence of noticing that in this way they were made guarantors and accomplices of irrationalism – let it be as vaporous and allusive as you like – but fatal for any genuinely innovative perspective, let alone a revolutionary one.

It was, therefore, the victory of expressive behaviour, of that behaviour believed to have value in itself, in that it happens, and helps a whole group to feel itself a group, an enthusiastic, cohesive community. It is supplied with an identity which the group, behaving in a particular manner, smoking, dancing and singing together outside any received norms, gives to itself. This ultimate irresponsibility, it is hardly necessary to recall, is possible whenever a society in experiencing a period of relative economic prosperity and hence has the margin or a direct physiological need that a certain amount of waste can appear, and that someone thinks of «producing consumption». It is not by chance that the spirit of Woodstock was born in America and took root in other industrialized societies. Here there are margins of permissiveness: more, here there are the compulsions formed by technically developed, more or less bureaucratized, societies, against which was launched the vitalistic impulse and the imagination the young wished to bring to power.

It is correct to consider these signs, as we have said. It has been remarked: «It is important that these should be the workers' movement in its various forms, which seek to understand, and not others. Certainly, this does not mean healing such a grave

rupture by magic. Nor does understanding mean to absolve and justify everything, lose ground on the cultural level and that of ideals, but rather to raise a signal: that we understand the anguish of being young today, to be squeezed between the difficult understanding of the prospects of socialism, the separation from work, drugs, the big unresolved questions of our world [...] Dalla, De Gregori, Patti Smith, Joe Cocker, names often unknown to adults expressed differently from one another, youthful states of mind, which interpret them. Or so it appears to the young [...] It has been said that these huge get-togethers are forms of collective loneliness. Even here, how can the echo of the "lonely crowd" not be heard, the attribution to concerts of ways of being which cannot be limited to the concert, but involve the very way of life in big cities, for which it would certainly be ungenerous to give the blame to the young»⁷.

As regards Woodstock, the situation today is profoundly changed. The economic cycle has entered a phase of crisis on the world scale. This is not only a passing, coincidental, phenomenon. It has a complex structural framework. It overshadows the '80s. The dream of constant and continuous development has been roughly shattered. Purely expressive conduct has clearly demonstrated its limits. That the individual-personal could be immediately translated and even equivalent, to the social-political, as some argued, without any mediation force, and that there was no problem which could not be solved in a trice by simple spontaneous impulse, was revealed to be worse than sophistry. It emerged clearly as a trick played on the backs of the young. Revolution was not around the corner, and the movements, in their rising phases had no historically valid assurance of realizing in daily practice their splendid but false promises.

Hence the disappointment, the retreat to the private, the increase of suicides among the young or, relatedly, the flight to drugs no longer as means of broadening sensibility, as a recovery of the imagination, but rather as pure and simple suicide, a resignation from life, absolute passivity and self-destruction. However, there are two more attitudes linked to disappointment-frustration, which are manifest and are deeply interesting. These are the decision to have recourse to violence as pure force instead of the power of reason, of which they confess to be incapable, and refuge in the sacred, as an alibi, a mystical and consolatory substitute.

The 1969 festival was a triumph of expressive behaviour in the framework of a society which could afford it. With the energy crisis and the general economic depression, instrumental behaviour returns to fashion. That is, the behaviour which has value as related to predetermined ends, implying a plan, the ability rationally to connect available means with desired ends. However, their urgings sound rhetorical to the ears of the young, and are objectively backward. Roberto Roversi has noted with great clarity that «... In the 1960s, the great assemblies (the great waves) of young people began to be organized in ever-increasing numbers [...] These assemblies were tolerated

⁷ Cf. Enrico Menduni, «Ai giovani arriva un segnale», in *L'Unità*, 16.9.1979, p. 3.

and endured by institutions because they happened in distant places, that is, in open, decentralized spaces. The official assumption was: the young with the young, to get over their sulks. Whereas we, the society of motorways and state enterprises, had to travail within real problems. In short, in those years a clear anthropological subdivision was under way. In the one hand were the men just born, men wholly to be created and formed: on the other, were those already created and formed, important, imposing men – managers of the fate of the world: the real werewolves. [...] Now, going beyond the too tidy or interesting analyses, the young are no longer a *class* to be counted and investigate as a social ailment, but simply and clearly they, with all the danger of this for the outdated idle grubs of society, *just are*»⁸.

The slowness of the political parties

As regards the expressed and implicit needs of the young, the slowness of parties and unions – a lag not only a platforms or ideological-political programmes, but before that, linguistic, is worsening. For years, these socio-political organizations have neglected the pedagogic, formative dimension, and staked everything on a political, ideological immediacy in the short term. They have identified themselves with an angry manner of making claims which does not link the norm, still less the consciousness of duties, to the request for rights. They have been afraid of seeming to be moralists if by chance they insisted on the dignity of *any* labour, on the basic human value even of the most marginal, unskilled manual labour.

Today, the young do not recognize themselves in the official parties, nor their programmes. According to the social-psychologist Gerard Lutte, the hundreds of thousands of young people who did not participate in the 1979 Italian political elections are another proof of the deep rift which exists not only between the adult world and the world of youth, but also between youth movements and political and union organizations of the left. Anyone who follows the development of the youth condition over the years, he says, with its increasingly serious marginality and oppression to which the young are subjected, is hardly surprised by this abstention from the use of the vote, which is just another indication of their rejection of this society. This is a much deeper rejection than appears from the elections results, as the vote often does not signify support for a party, and because millions of young people not yet eighteen are excluded from the elections⁹.

It is a fact that young people today do not recognize themselves in the official parties and their programmes. These last have discovered «issue by issue» politics, with its crude but substantial concreteness, in which one confronts real, specific problems,

⁸ Cf. Roberto Roversi, «I giovani? Parliamone, ma senza pregiudizi», *L'Unità*, 5.8.1970, p. 3.

⁹ Cf. G. Lutte, with E. D'Angelis, S. Gentile, S. Forcina, E. Liberace, D. Rizzello, «La percezione che i giovani studenti hanno della loro condizione», *La Critica sociologica*, n. 50, Summer, 1979.

very close to daily reality, but in a fragmentary and loose manner. Thus the young lose sight of the overall design. At the moment they feel they have life within their grasp, they run the risk of pure and simple absorption. In this situation, emphasis on subjectivity, on the ego, is suspect, even though it corresponds to a real problem. It has not been grasped that the problem of subjectivity is not a subjective problem. Individual happiness, enlightenment *bonheur*: certainly, this is a right, but its practical realization falls outside the chances of the individual involving society. All the basic values on which one could (if one could) re-found and reconstruct the social order are inter-subjective, and go beyond the purely individual, subjectivist sphere. In its emphasis on the ego, in contemporary youth culture, I see the sorry signs of an historic defeat. Woodstock, with all its light and shade cannot return, because the objective conditions do not allow it. This very falling back on subjectivity conceals real unease and regret, possibly a poorly masked psychological enfeeblement. Is it not perhaps true that one speaks a lot of what one has lost and still more of what one is losing? Of revolution when now the game is over and the restoration hastens to celebrate its dismal triumph? Or of love and eroticism when the structural conditions of work and collective life are such as to emasculate virility, by wasting productively passive, but humanly and convivially necessary, time, by hampering love as a real experience and subsequently offer only a dreamlike and narcissistic caricature of it?

Perhaps the daily obsession with the ego is only a melancholy and already resigned reflection of a decline of individual responsibility, the emotional need to return to a mythic primordial group, the original womb. In this situation, to flatter the young, offer them sentimental short-cuts of a romantic fascination, imitate them, is the easiest way to corrupt them and make them prematurely old.

Above all, however, it is the most efficient way to keep them indefinitely in a position of psychological and social subordination, and at the same time force them to remain on the outside, for which, paradoxically, they are held responsible. This crucial aspect of the youth condition has been investigated by Lutte and his co-workers both from the historical and theoretical point of view and that of empirical research. According to Lutte, adolescence is «a social institution which makes its appearance in human history because it corresponds to specific socio-economic structures and serves the interests of production, more precisely of the classes which control economic and political power»¹⁰.

From the historical point of view, the increase in life expectancy is already a factor which allows the postponement of the time of entry to the adult world. When the average life-span was under 40, it was impossible to keep everyone under 25 out of productive work. Not only the existence of the period of adolescence but also

¹⁰ Cf. G.Lutte, D. Visca, B. Bellerate, A. Zuliani, M. Amann-Gainotti, A. Albanese, B. Pavan, P. di Giorgi, *La condizione giovanile*, Pistoia, Cooperativa Centro di documentazione: Roma, Centro Cultura Proletaria della Magliana, 1979, p. 11.

its length is explained by the economic situation, in which the productive labour of adolescents, apart from being unnecessary for the collectivity, may also constitute an unwelcome competition for the adults. Landis¹¹ analyzed the play of forces in modern North American society which prevent the young from entering the world of labour. He mentioned these factors: a) transition from a rural-type economy to an industrial economy marked by huge concentrations of capital and labour-power in big production units dominated by the law of profit, not individuals' needs; b) growing mechanization and automation of productive labour with the resulting exclusion of many workers, especially young ones. The use of expensive machines assists manpower with more experience and patience, it is said; c) growing mechanization and automation, the need for more trained personnel, and the struggle of the workers' movement against the exploitation of child labour are transformed into the banning of work before a certain age and the extension of compulsory schooling; d) increase in union power seems to favour specialized, that is, adult, workers.

Youth for an alternative society

The research undertaken by Lutte and his co-workers on young students in Formia allows us to judge the importance of these structural factors as regards the self-perception of the young. As the authors clearly recognize, it is plain that the research only informs us about what these young students *think*, but does not allow us to check the consistency between behaviour and opinions. Many replies reveal aspirations which often lack the instruments and organization to be put into practice, and which in particular cases could be simple delusions, idealization of oneself, rationalization of one's own behaviour, and conformity to the prevalent youth culture. However, there are views based also on an implicit or explicit counterposition to adult culture, and which do not permit us to foresee the development of these attitudes and opinions when these young people become adults, especially if they hold position of power and privilege in society. The fate of many «revolutionaries» of 1968 has shown that the validity of life-choices is to be established not in the short term and by words but over a long period, and the practice of many years. Thus, the replies to the investigation should not be idealized.

The survey, however, does also demonstrate great interpersonal variation within each group of males and females in each school. The general tendencies we have stressed should not obscure the fact that young people differ among themselves. Consequently, we shall try to develop a typology of groupings of attitudes, opinions and values, since we believe young people are differentiated mainly according to life schemes which are really important to them. In other words, we shall try to establish the hypothesis whereby there are major differences between groups of young people who want a society of equals, and others who females, social classes or various types of school.

¹¹ Cf. P. Landis, *Adolescence and Youth: the Process of Maturing*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1952, pp. 303-313.

This variation in the replies of young people does not prevent us, however, from concluding that statements about the *qualunquismo* (i.e., apolitical conformism) of the young, their retreat to the personal and to the religious, cannot be applied to the majority of Formia secondary school students. Such statements, which inflate the behaviour of a minority of young people in the big cities, allow adults to justify their own attitudes and behaviour vis-à-vis the young, but at the same time prevent them from understanding youth culture, the values of youth and the real causes of the conflict with institutions and the diffidence they express regarding all adult organizations – schools, church, parties, and unions. Adults often construct a convenient image of the young so as to keep them in a subordinate position with a good conscience, and to repress them when they try to free themselves.

Among other ways, the young defend themselves by living in a world extraneous to the adult world. Spare time is essentially time to live in a spontaneously-formed group of contemporaries. Only 2% of young people in Formia say they never spend their free time with friends, while 83% of boys and 53% of girls say they often, as often as possible, are with a group of friends. Though the number of girls is less than that of boys, this is not from free choice, but because parents force many of the former to stay at home to work, or to avoid the «danger of the streets». The real life of the young, of the majority, is not lived in the family, at school, at church or in party headquarters, but in spontaneous groups, in places not controlled by adults.

Is the rupture between adults and young irreparable, then, that between adult organizations and movements, groups, of young people? On the basis of this survey's data alone, it is impossible to give an answer, but I can attempt some relevant comment by drawing on the general analysis of the youth condition.

The contradiction between adults and young people is structural, that is, it derives from the very existence of a youth condition of subordination and marginality. This contradiction is most noticeable at times of economic, social and cultural crisis, such as the one we are now experiencing, since these crises are always paid for by the weakest, the most marginal, and especially by the young. Think of the mass unemployment which affects them, of the breakdown of the school system, of the humiliations and blackmail which follow from their economic – and, until 18, legal – dependence, on the family, and so on.

However, this contradiction does not prevent a dialectical collaboration with certain adults and adult organizations which, to be handled correctly, must conform to certain conditions, such as respect for the autonomy of youth movements, the struggle for the radical transformation of the condition of youth, and the taking over of new values of youth culture. If adolescence, the condition of youth, is a period of arbitrary extension of dependency, of the denial of basic human rights for economic reasons,

and for the interests of privileged strata which wield power, the specific objective of a struggle by the young to resolve their problems in the long term can be none other than the abolition of the «condition of youth». Just as the final and specific objective of working class struggles is the abolition of the working class condition, and that of women the ending of the «condition of women» as one of inferiority and exploitation in society, so it is with the young.

These conditions of marginality and oppression have common roots. These include socio-economic organization, power-group interests as well as a centuries-old history of oppression and a cultural tradition, often internalized by the oppressed, which makes marginality and exploitation seem natural. For this reason, dialectical collaboration between movements of young people, women and workers seems indispensable in order to change relations between people and to build a society of equals. I also think many young people would be ready to take part in common action with the parties of the left and the unions if these were to propose to, or, better, work out with, the young some plausible plans for an alternative society, and showed a real willingness to fight to achieve them.

However, as these struggles involve different social subjects – women, workers, youth, which often have different social connections and are active in different places, have different needs, and represent different cultures and values, it seems to me the autonomy of each movement must be respected. The failure of the parties' youth federations does not seem to me due to contingent factors regarding programme or organization, but to their very nature as groups subordinate to the politics and interests of adults, even those of the left.

It does not seem, however, that the unions and the parties will manage to re-establish a valid relation with the mass of youth unless they profoundly modify their method of «doing politics», and unless they acknowledge the values and the needs manifested by the young, and especially by the young women. Throughout this and other investigations, in fact, we have argued that usually there are more girls than boys who are sensitive to new values, the need to change relations between people, and who reject the cult of leadership, direction from above, bureaucracy, delegation of powers – all power relations. To re-start dialogue and collaboration with the most sensitized sectors of the young, it will not be enough to make a proclamation of self-criticism. A cultural revolution within the union and party organizations is needed. Looking with attention and respect at what is happening among the young who are striving for a society of equals, and encouraging these experiences, instead of hindering or smothering them with aid, defending the political space of youth movements, allowing those who have least power to fight – all this could provide suggestions for adults. For those adults, that is, who are convinced that without radical changes in

objectives, organizations, and ways of life, it will not be possible to find a meeting point for youth, women's and workers' movements in order radically to change society.

But are the traditional organizations of the left capable of undertaking this cultural revolution? The type of organization, the values and attitudes shown in these past years towards the young are also obstacles not easily overcome.

In any case, the liberation of the young must not be delegated to adults and their organizations, just as the liberation of women must not be delegated to men. The real autonomy of women's and youth movements seems an essential pre-condition not only for social progress, but also for a re-structuring of the traditional organizations of the left. Is this not perhaps the meaning of the replies of the majority of Formia students who counterposed to the parties and unions, in which they had little confidence, awareness, organization and collective action on the part of the young, women, and workers?

Is a post-ideological politics possible?

Elsewhere I have brought out the terms of the fatal contradiction which marks technically advanced societies, and which the Formia survey confirms through the self-perception of the young¹². But what does the rejection of the traditional parties and their ideological schemata lead? What results can this produce in general political terms? What other forms of political presence, apart from traditional representation, will it be possible to work out and put into practice?

Ideological frameworks have become, for the young, prisons. Agreed. But what does it mean to talk of a post-ideological politics, how is it presented and elaborated? It would be probably be a «case by case» politics, in which the impatience of the young will find satisfaction in attacking, rapidly and frontally, problems as they arise, one by one, still immersed in the everyday, before ideologico-cultural «systematization» has purified and inevitably impoverished them. However, will this kind of «committed pragmatism» not run the risk of absorption? In other words, will not there be a danger of moving, breathlessly, from one problem to another, and thus losing the sense of structural connection? Will one not end up falling to see the wood for the trees?¹³ Or, and in the same context, without an ideological orientation – which the young perceive as too schematic, rigid, and «old» - will they not easily fall victim to contemporary campaigns of large-scale mystification, those which scientifically exploit the «noble feeling of youth», such as love, friendship and brotherhood, presented for the purpose

¹² Cf. my *Giovani e droga*, Naples, Liguori, 1977, pp. 16-21.

¹³ In the '50s, while I was studying the organizational problems and the political alignment of labour unions in the US, especially their violent revolutionism as regards methods, and their extreme moderateness as regards final goals, this seemed to me the basic «dilemma» of technically advanced societies, or those provided with genuine industrial mass production. Cf. in this respect my *Il dilemma dei sindacati americani*, Milan, Edizioni di Comunità, 1954.

as decisive revolutionary realities, whilst in effect they are used only as anesthetics, to make millions of young people forget their structurally determined exclusion, as they fall back into themselves to listen to themselves?

The exclusion of the young from the adult world, determined by structural causes, is thus smoothed over by the instruments of mass psychological manipulation, to the point at which objective exclusion is reversed at the psychological level into a conscious secession, by means of a small strategic masterpiece through which the victim first collaborates with and then become accomplice of, the executioner, finally becoming his own executioner. The young turn in on themselves, discover the closed group of «equals», listen to their music, develop their language, establish their internal rules – to some extent they in fact invent and enter into their own clandestinity. As regards the rest of the world, they become an unknown planet.

Is this how youth sub-culture is born? And is this exclusion, relived as a secession, which gives rise to extraneousness from and thus hostility to, the adult world?

R. A. Cloward and L. E. Ohlin, in their theory of gangs of delinquents in the United States, seem to me to make conclusively plain that it is not enough to say, after Robert K. Merton, that individuals belonging to the lower socio-economic strata are driven to transgress established norms and take illegal directions¹⁴. The argument was that this was because of the contradiction between ends prescribed by the dominant culture – for example, financial success and social prestige - and the limits of their resources – for example, education, investment capital, etc. It may also be that, above all for adolescents, there develops through time a radical distrust not so much towards what means to adopt, but directly towards the ends prescribed by the dominant culture and described as noble and worth pursuing. Hence the concept of sub-culture, which to Merton and other sociologists and social psychologists is of necessity still internal and subordinate to the dominant culture, would not be enough to explain the attitude and behaviour of youth groups. Therefore, one must replace it with a concept on the basis of which youth sub-culture appears, at least potentially, as freed from the dominant culture, of which it often challenges both the presuppositions and the prescriptions concerning practical conduct.

As I have remarked elsewhere, the concept of sub-culture, despite the undoubted success this has aroused among students and commentators of social problems, must not be adopted without important reservations, and in no way can be taken as an easy passe-partout. It is too easily forgotten that implicit in the notion of sub-culture is the concept of a hegemonic or dominant culture, of which the sub-culture is supposed to be a subordinate and basically homogeneous part. However, especially in the case of youth, it is precisely this dominant culture which stands on trial, and is often fiercely

¹⁴ Cf. R. A. Cloward, L. E. Ohlin, *Delinquency and Opportunity; a Theory of Delinquent Gangs*, Glencoe, Free Press, 1960.

condemned. In fact, the contemporary condition of youth, seen as sub-culture, is based on so radical an antithesis as regards the social structures and the current moral and ideologico-political values as to put it in a position of obvious negation and thus, at least tendentially, of a counter-culture¹⁵. J. M. Finger reached similar conclusions where he distinguished the two basic senses in which the concept of counter-culture is used: a) the totality of norms on the basis of which specific groups of individuals define themselves in terms of the general normative system of society and of which they form part, and b) the norms worked out by a group which finds itself in a situation of frustration regarding the rest of the collectivity.

I think in this regard a step forward in the analysis needs to be taken, by noting the conclusions of many investigations in the field, which tells us that sub-cultures do not have their genetic composition simply derived from a psychological state (for example, disappointed – expectations, frustration, various forms of maladjustment, etc.), but rather their own specific structural origin. Their framework is objective. It corresponds to real contradictions in society and collective life. A conflictual situation, not to be resolved in wholly verbal terms, thus becomes central as regards the dominant culture. In this case, the formation of youth groups obeys a logic above that of the normal tendency to association which one finds in any moderately developed society, and does not simply give rise to psychological problems of identity related to the phenomenon of multiple loyalties, or «overlapping loyalties». This is not all that is involved. Rather, we are dealing with a deeper problem, which concerns the whole individual insofar as it binds him to an effectively alternative normative system.

The group is thus structured like a «little homeland», the source of a new, different morality, supreme criterion of ethical justice, the beginning and end of social experience, and which justified every sacrifice, may make any demand from the renunciations of a personal nature so far as to crime. The «group of equals» thus becomes a micro-society, with its own rites and laws, language and traditions, its iron hierarchy and its code of behaviour.

The analysis of these micro-societies has, understandably, generally been made in psychological terms, but their composition is one of structure. And violence is their «ideal cement».

From Mafia groups to youth groups, the internal articulation of these micro-societies is provided by total dedication to the group and the group's needs for survival and perpetuation, with a devotedness which cannot withdraw before any request at all. As I have remarked elsewhere, violence in these conditions becomes a basic means of definition for the group a) violence makes the group visible, b) violence dissociates, that is, distances from the rest of the community, cuts back the margins available for

¹⁵ Cf. *Giovani e droga*, cit., pp. 16-19.

dialogue and compromise, and c) violence acts as test of love, the supreme test of loyalty from the individual towards the group. «If you really love me, if you believe, what are you prepared to do for me? Are you ready to shoot, to go to prison, to face a trial, putting yourself against the whole of normal society?» (It seems certain that certain apparently gratuitous or inexplicable attacks have been organized as recruiting test or «admission exams» for new members of terrorist groups)¹⁶.

Violence as «ideal cement» of the group

As often happens – remember *Rocco and his Brothers*, by Luchino Visconti, as regards the problem of internal migration – it is the function of particular artistic creations to put forward these sociologically crucial issues in a intuitive manner, almost as if beating a path for social analysis. A film like *The Warriors*, in spite of certain misleading aspects, is in this regard, in my opinion, a valid example.

It is the story of a «good night out»: punches, curses and kisses in almost equal proportions and shaken well before use. We are in New York. One summer night all the gangs of the city have gathered in the Bronx, North of Manhattan, for a great parley of reconciliation, but also of strategy, with the aim of conquering the city, district by district. The meeting is thus something in between the Mafia gathering of «Godfather 1 and 2», and the pop and rock festival of the Woodstock type. While the super-leader is talking of the future plans of all the gangs joined together and sent in to seize urban power, he is fatally wounded by a provocateur-turncoat with a face which seems to make him born to prove Cesare Lombroso right. The «Warriors» are indeed accused of the crime, and they, by supreme misfortune, are those who control the territory furthest from the Bronx, Coney Island, at the opposite end of the city. One could say that, had the blame fallen in another group, the director would have been afraid the film would not last long enough. Only at dawn, after a suitable series of difficulties, showers of blows, subway trains caught by a hair's-breadth, is the real culprit discovered and each gang, one presumes, will carry on its own daily activity of petty extortion, violence, theft with or without breaking and entering robbery with or without violence. Related in these basic terms, the plot seems slight, hardly enough to support the idle unwinding of banal shots.

This is not so. The leaden New York nights, the lighting effect – one broken here and there by the dark stains of the parks and of the little squares more or less regularly lit up by slashes of violent light – these are well done. It is a technically well constructed film, with effectively balanced scenes, and with a rather refined taste of the contrapuntal game between violence, survival, and group solidarity. In this game, at times, one has the impression that it exaggerates, that the bravura gives rise to a somewhat revolting perfectionism. At once it winks at the alerted viewer: it is the night crossing of New

¹⁶ Cf. my *Alle radici della violenza*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1979, pp.38-39.

York (who has forgotten the reference to Paris), and it is also a revised and conveniently gone to the bad version of *The Boys of Paal Street*. Finally, especially in the opening sequence, it recalls even too closely the killing of Malcom X while he addressed the crowd, with the double charisma of a baptiste minister and a revolutionary leader.

But the real hero of the film is the city, the urban phenomenon, seen from the subway, its subsoil, in the depths of its intestines. From this viewpoint, the distance which divides this film and the problems it presents from *The Boys of Paal Street*, can be measured. It is the distance between a modern metropolis and the life, all in all a quiet one, of a Central European city in the inter-war years. Then there was still a desired goal, a collective end, which in the latter case was stifled before it was even born.

The eternal problems return: the gangs confront each other to win a position, to rip off a morsel of territory. However, one has the impression that now the urban desert is drier than before. It is enormously enlarged. The few comfortable bourgeois who by error, absent-mindedness or simply because they are late, wander in at a certain time of night flee in terror. Sociologists such as Durkheim could still believe that the demographic density which marks the modern city would be translated into social enrichment, a positive fact for all. Here, instead, we breathe an air anxious and heavy with curfew. This is no longer the knightly battle between two gangs of young people who the next day will meet again on the same school benches. No: the battle is more violent, without rules and without foul blows being excluded. Violence runs the risk of presenting itself as an end in itself, violence for violence sake's. Yet if we look hard, this wholly negative and moralistic vision does not hold, and does not manage to grasp the problem. In the urban desert, these gangs of youths do not simply express the unleashing of criminal instincts. In the very process of violence as such, the individual finds himself, the leader is chosen, basic human virtues appear (group loyalty, friendship, the sense of responsibility, for one's task, for the appointment at Union Square, which must be kept at all costs...).

Where are parents? Where are the schools? Where are the social workers? How is it that the adult world has absconded? Is it possible that there are only police and paddy wagons for these young people? Can we then wonder at their dreadful commonplaces, their machismo, at one mean and fierce, their inability to accept women except in a clearly subordinate position, and then contemptuous derision for «queers», and their exhibitionist super-virility, which all too clearly betrays their unadmitted fear of latent homosexuality?

A society which has lost its human dimensions in order to trust itself totally and blindly to the logic of the market, so as to make that the sole logic in all binding respects, is already one which presents itself to the young as a foreign land, if not an enemy territory.

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