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Culture of Listening and Social Wealth

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In medio stat virtus

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1. The negotiators' abilities

When you want to resolve a conflict cooperating, you should: (1) ride over the matters of principle, which are bound to the personal identity, thus not negotiable, nevertheless very expensive; (2) understand emotions, needs

and interests of the parties because people must learn to manage their emotions (which stick them to the matters of principle) in order to negotiate their needs and interests; (3) make people propose something instead of claiming something. Each one of these three steps has to do with your *listening abilities*, which are the basis of effective communications.

About the first step, Giorgio Santacroce (President of the Court of Appeal of Rome), during a convention in 2012, recalled a trial about 30 euros lasted eight years; at the same convention another lecturer recalled a trial about a rural house, lasted 45 years: 3 generation of heirs were involved in it and the ones who survived saw the ruins collapse. The matters of principle are very expensive for the litigants, for their descendant and for the whole society: how can a judge, engaged for 40 years in the decisions about the property of a shack, help the society? Maybe we should start to ask ourselves how the matters of principle improve our social wealth.

We know, reading the statistics of year 2008 from the European Community, that Italy has one trial every 15,16 citizens. At the second place we find the Spain, with one trial every 42,13 citizens: people in Italy argue more than the double compared to the second country more pugnacious of Europe. In order to answer to my first question (how arguing helps us to feel better people in a better society) maybe we should study our culture, which we don't know very well, because we can't feel satisfied saying that Italians are latin people with a hot temper. It's not enough and we should start to study why we prefer arguing instead of negotiating, but people don't start wondering until a problem becomes *important*.

About the second step, let's say that the emotions, arising when we feel in danger, bias our ability to focus with rationality on facts. If you counched someone who couldn't solve a simple problem because of her emotions, you can understand how difficult it can be to help someone in a really difficult situation. Thus we have to manage the emotions first, the interests second. And to manage the emotions we must accept them, then contain them with acts of effective communication.

About the third step, note that when you *propose* something, you propose actions that *you* could take; but when you *claim* something, you claim actions that *someone else* should take. Striving for something, we tend to claim, instead of proposing, so being stucked on our matters of principle, thinking "to be right" and "to deserve something"; but, this way, we forget

that our claims put the others in control of the problem because they can decide what to do about our claims. Losing control makes us feel in danger and sticks us in the conflict frames.

2. The negotiators' tools

A negotiator, in order to act her abilities, must: (1) speak to ask questions to people; (2) listen to people using a proactive behavior; (3) focus the parties on the proposals. We negotiate communicating and, to some researchers, our entire existence and every our experience are communication, which is our main tool to behave and to survive. We can use it unconsciously well, but we can use it out of the way too, ignoring the consequences of our actions. Communicating, we produce effects. Our words modify the reality: they may be just words to us (representing our internal representations of the world) but they are part of the reality to other people. When we communicate (e. g., when we write and promulgate a law or when we say the wedding "Yes") we operate on the reality, transforming it (the rights of people change, our partner changes status, etc.). We *meta-communicate* when we want to understand the reality, talking about what and how we are communicating. It's the same difference passing by angry John, barking and raising hell (communication), and Mike, who states to be angry, explaining his feelings and how he came to his anger (meta-communication). Would you like to talk to John or to Mike?

When somebody has a problem with somebody else, usually they need just a bit of wisdom or just some common sense, otherwise they need a negotiator who, meta-communicating, facilitates the transformation of their realities, focusing from the expression of emotions to the needs and interests, underlying the emotions. What do you think that would happen if we meta-communicate before we communicate what's in our minds?

Somebody replies that meta-communicating is an unsuitable option in certain cases. In other words, a specialist in communication wouldn't be able to manage certain problems: thus a professional negotiator wouldn't be appropriate to manage certain conflicts. This meaning that who is professionally absorbed in violent conflicts – e. g., family psychologists, social mediators, operative negotiators from police, who prevent even potential sui-

cides and murders – these people wouldn't have the same negotiations skills of who professionally manages the conflicts with force-based tools – e. g., lawyers and judges –. Which conflicts need to be managed litigating instead of negotiating? Let's understand this thing and maybe we can understand if we are doing the right thing when we choose to litigate.

3. Communication and society

Litigating you claim actions that your counterpart doesn't like to behave, this way feeding the conflictual quarrels. Talking about problem-solving is quite a different thing because you focus on how you can transform a bothering situation in a better state for every part of the conflict. To Paul Samuelson, incidentally, there isn't a social wealth if the state of just one person gets worst¹. Litigating we tend to focus on the conflict, forgetting the problem, using our resources to resolve the conflict instead of the problem, thus resolving the relationship instead of the bad facts: litigating we resolve, we close, we break up the relation between us and them, gradually unraveling the social binds.

I think that it isn't just a coincidence that in our historical period we are witnessing the growth of discourses about breaking interpersonal relations: from conjugal separations², to muders, even the bloody ones. The discourses that the society develops about violence are skyrocketing: from crime news to videogames, from suicides³ to the blocked court houses. Some might say that this growth of discourses about violence or conflict depends on the growth of violence; some might say that the growth of violence depends on the growth of the discourses. It's a matter of positions and I don't care about it. I think, instead of it, that we should ignore it because this kind of analysis is pointing us toward nothing better nor different from what we are complaining about. Let's try to reframe the problem: can it be that the discourses about violence are growing because the society needs to be heard and to get rid of its anxieties and fears about conflict? Talking more and more about

1 Paul Samuelson, *Foundations of Economic Analysis*, Harvard University Press, 1947/1983: pp. 219-249.

2 ISTAT, *Separazioni e divorzi in Italia*, 2009: 297 separations every 1000 weddings, the most of them lasting between 5 and 9 years (pp. 2 and 5).

3 On august 2012, Angelo Di Carlo, 54, set himself on fire in front of Montecitorio.

those things aren't we shouting out loud that we feel less and less heard and understood in our needs? This is typical of the post-modernity, of Internet and social media, of an editorial industry in which the authors are multiplying but the tradings collapse: today everybody can shout, but nobody is listening to them, so that somebody shouts out louder, until somebody else takes a violent action, which is an exaggerated way of shouting.

Anthropology⁴ and psychoanalysis⁵ revealed how violence and secrets are kept together: every secret (the *taboo*) attempts to remove the violence; but the violence attempts to remove the secret, trying to communicate something that somebody prevents to communicate. You can notice from outside, meta-communicating, that dictating the silence to somebody or refusing to listen to somebody are two violent actions; but when you are involved in a relationship you can just express your feelings. This way, instead of listening to who is shouting out (because who shouts out is scary and remembers to us the violence, which we must keep apart), we exchange rumors about somebody who shouted out; this buzz feeds new negative emotions which aren't accepted; those emotions feed new rumors, growing on... This way of communicating feeds the secret because nobody accepts it, though it has been shouted out. And if people and media keep growling and shouting, it means that nobody feels to be heard and understood. The society keeps shouting messages about conflicts because it didn't understand the meaning of the conflicts because, fearing them, it slips away from them, it avoids them, it tries to ban them using the force or neglecting them, nevertheless showing by televisions or newspapers or blogs that it cares about them. The hypocrisy is developed on a sensory plane too: somebody uses the voice to exhibit her discomfort and somebody else discusses it using the images: the two channels are different and conflicting, vision and hearing use different brain circuits, reading is different from listening. Do we pay attention to these conflicts in communication? Are we listening to who is expressing discomfort? And, if so, how do we show our attention?

Paying attention it's not enough because we must prove our attention and what we did understand. Watching TV and reading the newspaper it's not enough because we cannot interact with the news. Posting on Facebook it's not enough because nobody can verify our congruence in the real life, if we

4 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 1972.

5 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 1913.

practice what we preach. We need to act daily prosocial behaviors. The mediators do this when they put themselves in the middle of the conflict to meet the parties and to listen to their voices, proving their will to understand the needs and the emotions. This way, they try to spread the will to understand who is different, making people feel human. We could do the worst of the things or we can strive for 30 euros in eight years, when there is no empathy between people, when we can't feel our presence in the others and when the others can't recognize themselves in us. Then, maybe not for the others, but to prevent us from doing useless and paltry actions, we could change our frames and attitudes.

Taking which actions can we weave a new culture different from the one which pushes us to fight and strive for the matters of principle?