Overabounding and Society

Sociological Essays on Love

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Trespassing of inequalities

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Abstract: Taking in consideration different cases of current marginalization, the paper focuses on the pheonomenon of normalisation of social exclusion. In particular, as illustrative cases the Neets, the yellow vests in France and the technological infrastructures (such as computer technology and new media) are considered as the new faces of marginalization and even its trivialization connected to human suffering. The end point is the urgency to review the concept of exclusion and its explanatory theorising starting points to develop suitable measures to stem it.

Keywords: inequalities, marginalization, Neets, gilet jaunes, computer technology, social exclusion.

1. Introduction

According to Dahrendorf (1989) the current one is the last phase of globalisation: things have become more difficult, problems have become more serious. Since globalisation is, first and foremost, an economic phenomenon, and the pace of economic growth has slowed down considerably, more difficult conditions have arisen for workers (unemployment, precariousness, insecurity) and along with such difficulties, the diffusion of well-being has disappeared (Saraceno, 2015). This trend has generated an unprecedented distance, first of all economic and then social and cultural among social groups: namely, it created social inequality. Since speaking about inequality means speaking about exclusion, as A. Sen pointed out, the distance between society and marginalised people increased. On the topic of exclusion sociology has settled, over time, theoretical reflections and

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empirical evidences on the causal determinants of the phenomenon, on the systems of relationships within which social actors are involved and that, in turn, structure and define (La Rosa et al., 1999, Lodigiani, 2008; Caritas e Fondazione Zancan, 2002; Quaranta e Quinti, 2005; Pellegrino, 2011; Forgacs, 2015). In recognising that the use of generalisations provided by theories could divert the reflections, we reiterate the need to relate theories to the distinctive diversity of the multiple territorial realities: what is valid and right for a context, can be less commensurate with another. The aim of this paper is not to establish who is the "most excluded" among the excluded, as the causes of this phenomenon have already been explored, but rather to reflect on the on-going restructuring of the phenomenon.

In a first approximation, exclusion represents an unfavourable condition that generates forms of discrimination, though these traits have been redefined in terms of emergence, complexity and multidimensionality. In the classical sense, the excluded is the poor, the one who lives outside the labour market and experiences spatial and social segregation. With post-modernity, the forms of exclusion multiplied and alongside traditional poverty, caused by minimal material conditions of survival (economic = income, work, health), new forms of poverty that cannot be immediately characterised in a materialistic sense have been identified. We are no longer poor just because we do not own something, but also because we are socially excluded (Mongelli, 1994): these are the so-called new forms of poverty, that refer to the lack or poor quality of interpersonal relationships, the decline or absence of channels of social participation, the disappearance of the sense of belonging and the crisis of identification models (individual and collective).

The impoverishment of relational systems/networks weakened personal biographies, which have been depleted of resources and a drive for participation. There has been, consequently, an inability to participate in a common project, a feeling of exclusion from a common history, shared uses and customs and the loss of one's rights to have a social life. A further contribution to the redefinition of the terms of exclusion was provided by A. Ardigò (1984, p. 17) with the identification of other areas of exclusion belonging to the so-called "post-materialistic poverty", which identify the needs of self-fulfilment, autonomy, search for expressiveness more than material standards of life. The main characteristic of the new poverty is its

difficulty to be quantified in concrete/economic terms (Mongelli 1994, p. 47; 2004): this is the reason why we still refer to poverty in material/economic terms (Pellegrino, 2011), as they are technically measurable and can be subject to radical complaints, being quantifiable. In this transformation process, by the turn of the millennium, the advent of informationalism generated new forms of inequality (Castells, 2003, p. 75) bringing out a further partiality of the characters of exclusion so far detected. This means that, beyond the economic and social participation deficiencies –as traditionally understood- and the weakening of cooperation, we should also consider deficiencies related to the access - the digital divide - and fruition to the information, whose retroactive negative effects involve both the individual and the social levels (Mongelli, 2016). Dahrendorf (1994) captures the complexity of this phenomenon by pointing out that exclusion is economically harmful, socially corrosive and politically explosive and that the fundamental issue of our times is not justice, in the traditional sense of redistribution, but inclusion. We need a detailed programme for the re-inclusion of people who have been temporarily or permanently excluded: this goal is as necessary as possible.

2. The trivialisation of exclusion

In these pages I will try to illustrate the aspects that exclusion has acquired over last years, namely its transformation into a phenomenon which, in the face of its diffusion among increasing layers of population, lacks a recognition as such. In order to validate my thesis of the normalisation of exclusion I will propose some examples: I will provide images of the new faces that it has assumed and the connected human suffering it produces. The end point is the urgency to review the concept of exclusion and its explanatory theorising starting points to develop suitable measures to stem it (i.e. the welfare). The process of normalisation of exclusion emerges clearly if we consider that until now, the common belonging to the working-class world has pushed excluded people (from the economic system, from consumption, etc.) into a class, that has been recently replaced by an invisible majority. E. Ferrigna (2014) re-encodes the concept by referring to the so-called class of invisible people, that includes workers who are far from the world of formal work and could be able to provide some services to increase social

productivity. It is worth pointing out that the concept of class is a construct centred on the hegemony of an idea and an economic-corporative interest, which has become less reliable as excluded people do not always belong to the category of those who are excluded from the productive system. Therefore, we should refer to an invisible movement rather than an invisible class, which includes a multiplicity of social categories: unemployed and poor people, precarious workers, pensioners, single women, workers who receive a very low income unsuitable for the cost of living, young people who do not study and work (the NEET) and migrants-caregivers. It is a group of subjects who are not granted as much social rights as adequate salaries that provide for social protection.

The glue of this invisible majority is the common interest in the redistribution and universalisation of social rights: according to the Marxian theory, these features represented the starting point to be a class for itself from being a class in itself. This concept is not applicable anymore, both because this movement includes diversified social groups and is also very complex. We believe that, in order to focus on the developing status of this phenomenon, we need a narrative operation, which is comparable to the one carried out by Marx in the XIX century when he formulated this sociological construct and the working class did not exist. Nowadays, as anticipated, a change of categorisation starting from the bases (social, economic and technological) is needed, in order to define exclusion and bring it back to a new category without forgetting that we are facing a movement, which recalls that of the XIX century and the battles it pursued for equality, a question on which people and groups with different horizons converged (i.e. petty bourgeoisie and proletarians). The variability of the subjects included within the perimeter of the current movement is wide: young graduates, adults who buy a house with a mortgage and cannot pay it anymore because they lost their jobs or became precarious, parents disappointed by the fact that their children do not have a job and young people who cannot have a life plan. In an economic context which is facing an increasing crisis and is more and more liquid, if we could still refer to the concept of class, this could rise up; nevertheless, since it is not only a matter of low-income workers, but also of young people without a future and adults with no possibility of making a project, demonstrations of dissent could take on different forms. It is important to ask ourselves about this majority of excluded people

and the practices of exclusion, since reflection produces knowledge and activates conscience and, in particular, it is useful to focus on what we call "the normalisation of exclusion" process, that will be discussed in the next paragraphs.

2.1 The NEETs

The first case is that of the NEETs (not in Education, Employment or Training) which includes more and more young people who developed a sense of exclusion, caused by the difficulties encountered during the educational and existential journey. They are boys and girls who decide not to re-enter the educational system -due to the bad opinion towards training- as they consider it absolutely irrelevant in favouring both the access to the labour market and the social inclusion. The identikit of the NEETs is that of young people who are inclined to think about a short-term future (Leccardi 2009) that takes place in an immediate job, possibly soon after the conclusion of their studies, as they are unable to project themselves into a possible working future and to articulate their choices within life paths in a wide and temporally extended planning. In a context such as the current one, which is characterised by generalised instability and a precarious future, they end up in an increasingly amplified present and in the secure fortress of everyday life, even if it is poor in long-term planning terms. They are representative biographies of a late-modernity made up of uncertainties, fluctuations, discontinuities, inversions and oscillations, which pushes towards do-it-yourself constructs in which the biographical experience becomes a bricolage of short-term projects to be adapted to the circumstances, to obstacles, successes and defeats (Bauman, 2002). Several researches on the topic (European Commission, 2014, Colombo, 2015, Save the Children, 2017) highlight how the progressive process of disaffection towards schools and training contributes to strengthen and radicalise this category of young people. Rosina argues that they "fell into a spiral of progressive corrosion of their condition, not only economic but also emotional and relational" (2015, p. 21) and that if left to themselves, they might risk getting stuck in a social backwash that could lead them adrift (Nanni and Quarta, 2016). They are young people who experienced a poor and incomplete training path that has an end in itself, as it was not transformed into experiences and skills. Even if educational

success or mistrust towards training represent individual choices, they are inevitably affected by family (Bourdieu, 1986), social, educational and socio-economic influences. Social disadvantage, low level of education or lack of perception of the importance of studying and training within the family are elements that distance young people from school and push them to decide to abandon studies. The spread of this phenomenon, that emerged in its complexity over the last years, has been linked to elements that determine its diffusion at a territorial level. We refer hereto welfare systems and educational policies, a connection that is explained in the perverse relationship that links training courses, youth and family. This phenomenon is particularly widespread in those countries of the Mediterranean basin where there are sub-protective welfare systems (Esping-Andersen, 1990) in which families have both a care and support function and operate as a filter in situations of distress and weakness of young people. The role of the family has been made necessary and strengthened by the ineffectiveness, if not the absence, of targeted interventions to support these young people as individuals and citizens, to stimulate their independence and to encourage their timely and effective integration into the working world (Walther, 2006; Karamessini, 2007; Robson, 2008; Gal, 2010). There are about 3 million people aged under-35 who do not study and work and see Italy as the main factory in Europe, due to extensive undeclared work and great parental availability to protection together with low public investment. Most of the NEETs live in the areas of the South: they have lower standards of skills compared to the average of other European countries (OECD, 2016) and serious training gaps that favour the great "production" of NEETs (Rosina 2015; Rosina et al., 2017). For these young people, once they leave the educational system, it is not simply a question of not being able to find a job because of the crisis in the labour market, but also to build up knowledge and skills for a future job. The impression that one gets is that these young people experience a sort of "addiction to the context", live in a condition of expectation, without a family that helps them growing, developing a sense of responsibility and improving self-esteem. In the current context being a NEET becomes the outcome of a process of devaluation of the school system of which the family seems to be the primary responsible, being unable to transmit the value of education to its children. A family stuck in an attitude of de-responsibility with respect to its role can be a source of

deep insecurity. A poor family and social network makes the situation even more complex, leading to a greater risk of marginalisation: therefore, emotional distress and depression, whose corrosive effect inhibit the ability to react, are added to the material deprivation and lack of prospects. These are the situations in which the risk of social exclusion and isolation take root (Rosina, 2015); these dangerous circumstances are difficult to recognise as they are covered by the veil of normality of everyday life. The NEETs, disappointed by educational failures and unrewarding work experiences, develop a mistrust towards institutions and lose their sense of social belonging, a phenomenon that is softened by the family cage that hides and protects them. With his reflections, Bauman offers a further key to understand the behaviour of young people: he argues that we are facing a self-marginalisation, determined by the fact that young people are becoming aware of the impossibility of pursuing their desires, and that such desires are induced by capitalism and consumerism. The risk is considering young people as the waste bin of the consumer industry, as a social burden, no longer included in the promise of a better future. Instead, they young people are considered part of a disposable population whose presence threatens to recall collective memories of adult responsibility (Rosina, 2015; Alfieri e Sironi, 2017).   The self-marginalisation of these young people does not seem to constitute a serious danger for society and for politics, which underestimates the consequences in terms of social and economic costs, despite the recommendation of the European Community to keep this phenomenon into consideration.

2.2 The "yellow vests"

A few years ago, Marc Augè wrote the book "Diary of a homeless" (2011) whose main character, despite having an average income, lives in fear of losing his house because of the small income received. This essay is not about poor people, but people who receive a salary and yet are forced to sleep in the car, seek for a shelter at their relatives' homes and attend public canteens. The salient features of these characters are the initial curious mixture of excitement and euphoria, which accompanies freedom from attachments, bonds and ties to places, and the fear to lose themselves. The characters of the book of Augè are characterised by the precariousness of workers,

who suffer the lack of equity of the current economic system, that pours on weak people the cost of exasperated liberalism. This essay is about precarious careers, that found their actualisation in the demonstrations of the French "yellow vests", and even before the "pitchforks" in Italy or the representatives of Podemos. The yellow vests, or "gilet jaunes", represent the second case of the process of normalisation of exclusion, which presents itself as a genuine popular demonstration movement, that was born in France following the increase in fuel prices, justified by the need to limit the damage caused by climate change, the effects of which, however, heavily penalise the poorest workers living in the French suburbs (the banlieus), such as truck drivers, young people etc., namely people who share a working and existential precariousness. The protagonists of this movement are excluded people belonging to the impoverished popular classes, which are subjected to economic and social policies that have been implemented by the various French governments over last years, which have eroded the purchasing power against which they protest. According to E. Plenel, a distinctive element of this movement is the reassertion of the idea that the history of emancipation, freedom and rights is going further thanks to the losers. A story that keeps on being renewed thanks to those who, in some way, bear the baton for the future. History taught how, from the time of Spartacus to our days, the losers are those who fight for freedoms and rights, those who come from below and who, thanks to their claims, allow society to transform. S. Halimi (2019) analyses the dynamics of the demonstartion by writing: in less than a month, the anger aroused by a fuel tax has led to a general diagnosis, both social and democratic; movements that gather together unorganised categories favour their rapid politicisation. In addition, people find themselves deprived of their future and become spokespeople of diametrically opposed claims with respect to the economic/social policies that destroyed their previously recognised social rights in the name of the free market. On the other hand, Edwy Plenel (2019) carries out an analysis of this movement in his book "*La victoire des vaincus: À propos des gilets jaunes*", where he claims that the danger lies in trivialisation, in the simplification of a very complex reality. He argues that this is a pure event, with new, creative and uncontrollable characteristics, as the movement -like any spontaneous rising of people- goes further than the established organisations and upsets the incumbent rulers. According to his

analysis, the movement, as in every collective social struggle, transforms itself daily into a political creation that has no structured agenda and where self-organisation is the only measure to play the game. He concludes his reflections by pointing out that it is worth making an effort to understand the irruption on the public scene of the "invisible" people, who claim their right to be visible and live with dignity. The yellow vests, still active, with their formidable wave of demonstrations and the way they gathered together schools, public sector, transports and universities gave visibility to the fact that everyone is exposed to the contagion of the normalisation of exclusion, produced by the accumulation of an unfulfilled demand for fiscal justice and not only, a phenomenon that cuts across pensioners, workers and poor people, putting equality back on the socio-political agenda. It is an interesting phenomenon also because it focuses on the process of the contemporary dispersion, which is a prerogative of the social suburbs, a dynamic that begins with a promise of liberation from the ties of work (employment change over the course of life), family (separations, that are the new forms of conjugality), community (virtual communities), etc. and ends up transforming the dispersion into exclusion.

2.3 Technological infrastructures: computer technology and new media

The third case is represented by the technological and organisational conditions of the information age, that changed radically the old model of access to knowledge. The reference is to INTERNET, a computer technology that, by promising inclusion, realises, in fact, the opposite, namely social exclusion. The dynamics through which this happens are related to the offer of several information opportunities, possibilities of participation (in virtual communities) and endless online relationships that end up generating deprivation of sociality in the real life (Bauman and Mazzeo, 2012).

The empirical evidences on the uses and effects of new media are contradictory and can be divided according to the opinions of two categories, namely the apocalyptic and those who integrated: the former support the negativity of the effects of computer communication, while the latter are enthusiastic about the opportunities made available by technology. We will focus on the consequences generated by the recent developments in computer

technology, rather than on the digital divide, on the differential and differentiating appropriation of knowledge by individuals and social groups, who have to know how to manage processes that interact, contradict and mix information, specialised knowledge and shattered data that are hybridised into an uncontrolled information/communication explosion.

The consequence of this dynamics is the polarisation of knowledge, that gives rise to a new form of inequality, as the gap between some sections of the population and the cognitive capital increases. This deprivation is even more serious in a society like ours, the so-called "knowledge society" which, prefiguring a futuristic ideal of individual realisation focused on continuous learning, redefines the position of the social actor in relation to its location in the space of knowledge (see knowledge worker). Knowledge and information, potentially unlimited and ubiquitous assets, which have similar characteristics to those of internet networks, hypothetically constitute a universally available and functional instrument to face changes and reduce uncertainty and risk. The availability of guaranteed access is limited to meet the above-mentioned functional requirements, as the ability to organise and structure knowledge, namely intellectual or cognitive autonomy, are also essential. Cognition, which is never a representation of a given world, but rather a continuous generation of meanings mediated by interaction with oneself, with one's body, with one's mental structures, with the flesh and the external world, loses all these characteristics with the irruption of the internet which, conveying fragmented and flat information, makes cognitive competence a crucial variable of the subject. By this statement we mean that the cognitive potential, made available by new technologies, remains such if it is not developed by the subject in critical and systematic terms: the risks are the conformist drift of the individual, if not the trivialisation of data. It is not useful to have information, it is not enough to even have an opinion and be convinced that it is important, but rather it is necessary to explore ideas and reasoning, to give shape to one's ideas and know how to express them. This refers to the chances actually available for the acquisition and the concrete exercise of all this knowledge, and therefore to the underlying political vision. Acquiring a digital awareness, learning to inhabit the virtual space, understanding the dynamics that agitate that space, and within this awareness, being

able to grasp the origin and the cultural infrastructure underlying the great techno-corporations (Facebook, Google etc.) is essential. The tool that presides over this is the cognitive autonomy with its interaction with knowledge and the capacity to investigate the interpretations of changes and socio-cultural intersections in progress.

Therefore, in addition to the change in the function of knowledge, its effective distribution is also changing among those who have intellectual autonomy and those who have not developed it, a topic that refers to the chances available both for its acquisition and for its concrete exercise. Therefore, equality is not only realised in the access to information, but also in the development of meta-skills (see learning to learn), which are functional for the acquisition and re-elaboration of knowledge and, therefore, for the freedom of the social actor from the conditioning of technological information. Knowledge, which has become the backbone of societal structures, is no longer mere knowledge, but reflective knowledge (second level), the one that Morin calls "knowledge of knowledge". This redefines the status of knowledge that turns into an open process of discovery or rediscovery of data and information, or even goods, whose effect (commodification) has been reported, in particular, by the supporters of degeneration (Latouche, 2011; Latouche and Pepino, 2013), who identify a possible way out of this drift in the construction of social actors endowed with reflexive action and self-interpreting abilities, that is to say competences to control, filter and interpret rationally electronic communications. These are transformations that require a review of the conditions that allow the acquisition of knowledge, the clarification of the constraints and opportunities underlying the organisation of learning skills, as well as learning to learn (Bauman, 2004; Morin, 2001; 2012), a critical review of knowledge and the conditions that allow its acquisition, contextualised through observation of the constraints and opportunities offered by the social context. This knowledge is to be understood as knowing-how-to-live or living-knowledge, a knowledge that accompanies life: it is referred both to a space and to boundaries of relationships and qualities of the same ones; to a space for transforming relationships and emergence of ways of being; to a space where individual (personal) and collective (community) subjectiveness processes are reunited. The reference is to a knowledge that enables to move within a complex context that requires solid inter-relational methods,

which already characterised the previous structures, whose stability was put into fluctuation by the immediate and spontaneous interactions, typical of fluid relational pragmatics. Therefore, the current one is a process that takes information as a common good, (Levy, 2004; Negroponte, 2004), which makes viable the participation of an ever-increasing number of actors in the social construction of reality. Nevertheless, in the face of such positivity, the loss of the knowledge unit, the disjunction between knowledge as science and knowledge as culture, the approximation of information in the network, the obsessiveness and the poverty of digital content, to which to impute the birth of a new incivility, are the perverse effects generated by the information-technology interconnection.

In this scenario, cognitive autonomy represents the essence of a knowledge that unfolds the ability of the individual to control, filter and interpret through reasoning the communications he/she receives from the outside world, which grants individual freedom. This is not to be confused with a purely instrumental exercise of reasoning, but it is rather its unfolding that allows us to emancipate ourselves by overcoming the state of cognitive impotence, in order to be able to use our own intelligence without having to resort to the guidance of others to choose how to act and above all how to do it with conviction and awareness. Cognitive autonomy is representative of a mind which is able to judge independently what is good and what is evil in the era of the triumph of technology, the hegemony of electronic media and the contemporary loosening of organic bonds, typical of twentieth-century society and its institutions.

Since the protection of civil rights belongs now to the physiological normality of the rule of law, an effective claim to rights, which is not limited to the pure electoral ritual or to those social rights that guarantee the effective fulfilment of the expectations of justice and equality, must be continuously claimed through an active participation and informed choices of the citizen in both political and cultural life within the communities. In conclusion, in the information society, saturated with complexity, characterised by the continuous production of information and new knowledge, in which citizens are continuously connected to each other and with the rest of the world, the legal guarantee of the rights to freedom and political rights could be useless if it does not include functional cognitive autonomy, in order to develop a new reflexivity on the contents of communication and the media, which convey such

contents, to form an independent opinion with respect to the processes of self-legitimisation of the elites (economic and political). In conclusion, if it is true that "men are suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before, informed as never before, but also involved the total social process as never before; since with electricity we extend our central nervous system globally, instantly interrelating every human experience" (McLuhan, 1992, p. 382), this population of electric/electronic gatherers needs new capacities to construct a knowledge that acquired the status of a new human right, and cognitive autonomy is both crucial and functional for this new condition.

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