

# Globalization, demand of sense and enemization of the other: A psychocultural analysis of European societies' sociopolitical crisis

Culture & Psychology  
0(0) 1–30

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DOI: 10.1177/1354067X18779056

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**Abstract**

The paper outlines a cultural–psychological interpretation of the current European societies' socio-institutional crisis. To this end, preliminarily, the cultural psychological

view of social behaviour is outlined, focusing on the idea that socio-political choices depend on how people make sense of their world. Second, the paper provides an interpretation of the current socio-political European scenario of crisis, based on the main results of a recent study that has mapped the cultural dynamics underpinning some European countries. The interpretation focuses on two complementary facets: on the one hand, the lack of symbolic resources (defined: semiotic capital) enabling people to perceive the collective dimension of life as a lived, subjectively relevant fact of experience; on the other hand, the relevance of a cultural form (defined: paranoid belongingness) that channels a trajectory of sensemaking consisting of the affective connotation of otherness in terms of threat and enemy. Third, the paper deepens the interplay between these cultural dynamics and the social, political and economic conditions that may have been triggered by them. In that perspective, the function of semiotic regulation played by the enemization of the other is highlighted. The conclusive part of the work is devoted to discuss implications the analysis suggests for policy makers.

### **Keywords**

Semiotic capital, enemization of the other, symbolic universes, globalization, socio-political crisis, cultural dynamics

## **Introduction**

In the last two decades, the semiotic approach to cultural psychology has developed a new understanding of the mind, based on the recognition of the affective nature of sensemaking (Salvatore, 2016a; Valsiner, 1998, 2007, 2014; Valsiner et al, 2016; Zittoun, 2006). This approach sees culture in dynamic way, as an on-going process of sensemaking through which sensemakers shape the form of experience, and thus feel, think and act. From a complementary standpoint, the semiotic approach to cultural psychology highlights that the on-going process of sensemaking is constrained/channelled/mediated by generalized meanings embedded within the cultural milieu and working as affect-laden systems of assumptions (Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Valsiner, 2007). Accordingly, sensemaking is inherently social and situated – it is performed within and through the cultural milieu of which the sensemaker is part – and it implies always an affirmation of identity: people feel, think and act in a certain way and in so doing they strive to make their social life a lived reality fulfilling the sense of who-one-is.

Cultural psychology's highlighting of the role played by sensemaking in shaping how mind works has led to a re-conceptualization of many psychological and psycho-social phenomena – e.g. education, memory, imagination, creativity, psychotherapy, work behaviour, health – in innovative ways. Alongside this direction of theoretical development, in more recent years, two further directions of inquiry

have emerged. On the one hand, the elaboration of a cultural psychological general theory of intervention, grounding – on the semiotic view of how mind works – a methodological framework for promoting psychological and psycho-social change (e.g. De Luca Picione et al. in press; Salvatore & Valsiner, 2014; Sammut et al., 2016). On the other hand, an interest in macro-social phenomena characterizing the current historical scenario – e.g. globalization, immigration, irregular economy, institutional dynamics – (e.g. Magioglou, 2014; Salvatore, Gennaro, & Valsiner, 2014; Salvatore et al., 2009; Schlieve, Chaudhary, & Marsico, 2018). These two directions of inquiry are signs of growth – they show that there has been a broadening of the spectrum of cultural phenomena the theory is able to address; at the same time, they offer further chances of conceptual innovation, by perturbing the theory with considerations of new challenging phenomena, and in so doing compelling it to develop (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010).

This paper intends to make a step ahead in the aforementioned directions, providing a cultural psychological interpretation of the current European societies' socio-political scenario. To this end, it moves from first results of a cultural analysis of a group of European countries carried out recently (Salvatore et al., 2018). These findings are presented in light of some new concepts (e.g. semiotic capital, enemization) elaborated for the sake, on the one hand, of highlighting the role that affective semiosis plays in macro-social cultural dynamics (characterized by a complex intertwinement of institutional, socio-economic and psycho-social phenomena) and, on the other hand, of building an interpretative framework grounding the definition of strategies for counteracting the crisis.

## **Times of institutional crisis, times of intolerance**

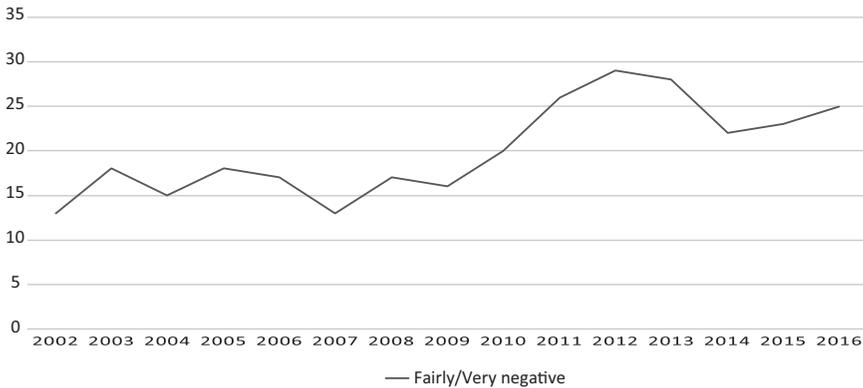
In recent years elections in European Union (EU) countries have been generally regarded as a moment of truth for European institutions. As the 2017 electoral results in the Netherlands and France showed, the pro-EU positions have emerged winners again, and this has returned a bit of confidence in the future of European integration. Yet Euroscepticism is anything but defeated – its relevance lies in the very fact that European institutions have become a matter of debate, with any electoral competition transformed into a referendum about them.

On the other hand, the politicization of European monetary and institutional integration is the tip of a quite larger iceberg made up of socio-political turbulences crossing European societies (e.g. weakening of the partnership among European countries, authoritative evolution of democratic systems as well as the rise of far-right and/or populist parties, waves of xenophobia, more or less soft racism, no-immigration and no-Romani rhetoric, religious radicalization and the return of anti-Semitism). These turbulences have an evident common ground – they represent the various forms of intolerant closure towards the other, whatever this consists of (e.g. other States, the 'bureaucrats in Brussels', the political caste, refugees, Romani people, homosexuals, Muslims, etc.).

The progressive spread through society of those forms of intolerance, coupled with their increasing emotional intensity and appeal, are quite alarming signals, similar to what happened in Europe prior to the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

It is largely accepted that the current scenario of socio-political crisis is a result of the social effect of the Great Recession, prompted by the 2007 US subprime mortgage crisis. From a complementary standpoint, many authors have highlighted the critical impact of deeper inequality dividing European societies from within (e.g. Piketty, 2013/2014; Utting et al., 2012; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Yet several convergent considerations lead us to recognize that the current socio-political crisis cannot only be viewed as a direct consequence of the serious worsening of European societies' economies and consequently of large segments of people's living conditions (i.e. unemployment, reduction of public services, personal debt).

First of all, while it is true that the anti-systemic protest against the economic conditions and the request to quit the Euro are part and parcel of the political offer of populist and far-right parties from all around Europe, it is also true that they are embedded within – and fuelled by – a broader narrative that has at its core the defence of identity threatened by migration fluxes, Islamization (Sammut et al., 2017), and, at least in some countries, identity threatened by ethical themes (e.g. opposition to civil rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender [LGTBs]). Thus, the fact that such a narrative has proven appealing to large segments of the European population suggests that what people see as the core critical condition to face is not the economic situation in itself, but the broader sentiment of being attacked in their way of life (e.g. values, forms of life, habits, safety) by a whole set of social, economic and political circumstances. This is even clearer in the case of opposition to inclusive migration policies. It is clearly and widely recognized that these policies bring important economic advantages to the host countries, though these advantages are not necessarily distributed equally within the population, due to the fact that high income people have more chances to take advantages, whereas non-skilled workers and people depending on welfare are subjected to negative impacts. Yet, it has been highlighted that the negative political opposition to inclusive policies – as signalled by populist voting – proved to be higher among the petty bourgeoisie, whereas it was lower among non-skilled manual workers and segments of population characterized by higher dependence on social welfare, namely among those segments that should be more interested to defend themselves from the negative impact of migration on their socio-economic status (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). The Brexit referendum is a clear example of how people do not make political choices in accordance with the optimization of their own economic interest alone – indeed, the economic effect of the UK quitting the EU was impossible to foresee at the time of the referendum, in view of the on-going interplay of a very large set of political, financial and cultural factors – on the impossibility of grounding the pro-con Euro position on an economic basis, see Davanzati (2017).



**Figure 1.** Negative image of European Union over EU population (Source: Eurobarometer; authors' elaboration).

From a complementary standpoint, it is worth observing that the anti-systemic and anti-EU attitude is not solely associated with the economic crisis. Figure 1 shows the incidence of the negative image of the Europe Union across the EU population (our elaboration based on Eurobarometer data). As can be seen, this started to increase greatly in parallel with the onset of the economic crisis (more particularly from 2009) and then it followed the inverse-U trend of the crisis until 2014. Yet from that year – therefore more or less coinciding with, on the one hand, the refugee crisis and, on the other, the intensification of the terrorist threat – it started to rise again, despite the improvement of global economic conditions. Again, it can be noted that the relation between the 12 UK macro-regions' gross domestic product (GPD) and the percentage of the UK Leave votes over the whole electorate is inverse yet low and not significant ( $r = -.239$ ; authors' secondary analysis of the UK's Central Electoral Commission and Eurostat data). To take a further instance, polls of the second half of 2016 estimated the far-right German populist party (AfD) as the third force (about 15%) of Bavaria, the richest German Land. Similarly, as the very name suggests, the main electoral settlement of the 'Lega Nord' – the far-right Italian populist party – is the Northern part of the country, namely its richest area.

### Socio-political crisis and cultural dynamics

The considerations proposed above are not intended to deny the role played by economic issues in the current socio-political crisis, but they make us look more deeply into the linkage with the general dynamics of making broader society.

To this end, according to a copious pluri-disciplinary literature, it is worth assuming that people are not guided by the maximization of economic utility (e.g. Granovetter, 2017). Rather, they make decisions and act by reason of the

fundamental need to make experience meaningful (Salvatore et al., 2009; Valsiner, 2007). This does not mean that people are irrational and void of economic interest, but that what they consider good and useful and the way they weigh up pros and cons depends on how they interpret the situation they are involved in. Accordingly, it is not the economic status in itself that motivates people's political attitude, but the way this status is interpreted as indicative of a more general individual and collective condition.

For instance, with regards to voting behaviour, in their analysis of populism, Elchardus and Spruyt (2015) state that '[the] economic position will not have a direct effect on populism, and that its effect will be mediated by an interpretation [. . .]. Feelings of relative deprivation can provide such an interpretation' (p. 6).

Long gone are the days when voting was only considered a function of economic self-interest (Downs, 1957). Several studies have highlighted that political attitudes are affected by general considerations concerning the whole society (Mutz, 1998) and many other non-economic factors contribute to orientate people's voting choices (Baldassarri, 2013). Political scientists noted that the traditional social cleavages that had structured the configuration of European party systems since the second half of the 19th century (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967) were gradually replaced by a value-based conflict that has little to do with economic considerations (Kriesi et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, identity appears to be more powerful than economic considerations in explaining support for to European integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2004). And identity motivations are proving to be less and less positive – that is, aimed at supporting a certain worldview – and more and more negative/oppositional – that is, to get rid of the political caste, against privileged city-dwellers, and so on (Cramer, 2016; Rosanvallon, 2006/2008).

More in general, several authors have highlighted the nexus between the sense of uncertain and unsafety fuelled by the dynamics of the socio-economic scenario of globalization, and the centrality gained by identity issues (e.g. Kinnval, 2004; Strandell, 2016). This nexus is easy to recognize in the life of everyone. Therefore, it could appear somewhat self-evident: even a little baby knows that when it lets go off an object from her hand it falls down; similarly we are used to the fact that unsafety and uncertainty raise the emotional need of restoring the sense of oneself and reaffirming who one is.

On the other hand, as physics has modelled gravity beyond the experiential recognition of it, we need a deeper comprehension of the psycho-social mechanisms underpinning the nexus between socio-economic conditions, their impact on people's lives, and identity issues (along their manifestation in terms of intolerance, distrust, anti-systemic attitude, etc.).

Consistently with the theoretical framework adopted, the current analysis assumes that in order to move in that direction, it is relevant to consider the role played by cultural dynamics. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on the affect-laden systems of meanings embedded within the cultural milieu, through which people make sense of their life conditions and respond to them, and in so

doing contributing to the very process by which they are shaped in turn (Valsiner, 2014).

### *The European cultural milieu*

Recently, Salvatore and colleagues (2018) reported the findings of an analysis of cultural milieus of European societies (more specifically, results concern four countries: Estonia, Greece, Italy, and UK). The analysis was based on an on-line multiple-choice questionnaire designed for detecting generalized meanings comprising the cultural milieu (Ciavolino et al., 2017) (the authors term these 'symbolic universes'). The questionnaire is grounded in a methodologic framework integrating psychoanalytic and psycho-cultural theories (Salvatore & Venuleo, 2013; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011) and it is aimed at mapping the latent affective oppositional structures underpinning modes of interpreting reality. To this end, the questionnaire was designed for detecting global patterns of responses, each of them transversal to different domains of experience, therefore interpretable as the marker of a generalized, affect-laden meaning.

The survey mapped five symbolic universes, each of them corresponding to a basic, embodied, affect-laden generalized worldview: (1) an *ordered universe*, (2) a matter of *interpersonal bond*, (3) a *caring society*, (4) a *niche of belongingness* and (5) a hostile place (*others' world*). Moreover, based on the possibility for associating each respondent with the symbolic universe that is representative of her/his response profile, the distribution of the symbolic universes over the countries in the analysis was carried out. Finally, due to their content (e.g. trust in rules and institutions, universalistic attitudes, recognition of otherness), authors interpreted the first (*ordered universe*) and third (*caring society*) symbolic universes as semiotic capital.

As defined by Salvatore and colleagues (2018), semiotic capital denotes a set of symbolic resources (e.g. meanings, cognitive schemas, values, social representations, attitudes, behavioural scripts, etc.) that enable individuals to interiorize the collective, supra-personal dimension of life, namely to experience the systemic regulative framework as a vital dimension, a concrete fact impacting the ways of thinking and acting.

Two relevant facets unveiled by such an analysis of the cultural milieu are worth considering.

*Lack of semiotic capital.* First, the sample of European societies under analysis proved to have a marked *lack of semiotic capital*. Less than one in four respondents proved to be associated with the symbolic universes *ordered universe* or *caring society*. This is the same as saying that less than 25% of European seems to have access to the semiotic resources of their cultural milieu that enable the interiorization of the collective dimension of social life, therefore to live it as a fact of experience.

The concept of interiorization underpins the notion of internalization, coming from both psychoanalysis and cultural psychology, which concerns the process by which representational content is experienced and endowed with *value of life*, (the concept of *value of life* is proposed by Salvatore, 2012; see also Salvatore, 2016a), namely as a lived experience of something that exists-out-there. Indeed, not all representations (thoughts, beliefs, descriptions, forecasts) are experienced as endowed with value of life. For instance, only in certain cases is one carried away by a film and immersed in it to the extent that one feels it as part of one's actual life. Behaviours and decisions (e.g. smoking, gambling, paying taxes) can be considered as not depending only on the foreseeing of their consequences, but also on the level of internalization of such consequences, namely how actual and concrete they are felt to be by the decision maker.

Consider the following vignette as a way of showing what the internalization of the systemic framework means. Take two individuals – Tom and Dick – at a traffic light that is red. The road is free of cars and the visibility is optimal. After having checked that no risk is present, Tom decides to cross the road, Dick decides to wait for the green light. What marks the difference between Tom and Dick's choices? If we want to use the notion of semiotic capital to explain this difference, what distinguishes Tom and Dick is the field of experience assumed as frame for their choices and actions. For Tom the field of experience making up the world of his actions is the local, contingent experience of the relation with potentially present car drivers. Given that no cars were on the horizon, Tom decides to cross. Instead, Dick's field of experience is given by the systemic order, as it is instantiated by the abstract traffic rule. Dick's decision is a function of this abstract, exogenous rule, rather than of the situated, endogenous state of the relation with the other actors (i.e. the car drivers). In sum, what distinguished Tom and Dick is neither the level of knowledge of the normative framework (Tom knows the rules of the game – pedestrians may not cross the road when the light is red) nor the prediction of the consequence of their decision (Dick knows that there is no risk in crossing the road). Rather, the difference is in the framework of experience adopted, and due to it those elements of reality that were made pertinent, namely having value of life for them: the local contingent circumstances of social action (Tom's framework) vs. the abstract systemic framework in which such social action is embedded (Dick's framework). In brief, what distinguishes Dick from Tom is the fact that the former has access to semiotic resources fostering the internalization of the systemic framework.

Given that the collective dimension can work as a normative framework only if it is felt to be a vital dimension, the lack of semiotic capital means that the systemic rule, even if it can be recognized at the cognitive level, is unable to guide individuals' thoughts and actions.

More importantly, not only does the systemic rule not regulate desires and actions but, at the same time, it does not exert any normative power to counter-balance the domination of local and private contexts, such as family, friends, particular memberships, personal worlds, private and group interests. In fact,

the systemic regulative framework can work as a regulative principle of human life and subjective experience to the extent individuals are able to perceive it in its existential valence. Hence, the lack of semiotic capital in the cultural milieu of European societies facilitates the hegemony of local and private contexts in the process of identity formation – for many people the systemic regulative framework is nothing but an abstract concept, without any relevance to the construction of their individual and social identity. The ongoing debate about the recent Italian law which made vaccinations for children compulsory demonstrates the weakness of semiotic capital in the Italian cultural milieu. Beyond the pros and cons, the debate reveals that, in the main, health is perceived as a private matter resting merely on personal decisions and preferences whereas the interconnections with the public interests do not have the same existential salience.

It is worth highlighting a relevant implication that is noted in the previous example. Not any form of disengagement and distance of citizens from institution is due to lack of semiotic capital. Indeed, in some cases, the distance can result from the deliberate unwillingness of citizens to accept the norms of institutions they do not trust. The mistrust may be due to the fact that the institution is seen as conflicting with the systemic rule and for this reason it is criticized/confronted. Therefore, in such cases, unwillingness is a sign of high semiotic capital, rather than the opposite.

Thus, it has to be underlined that the notion of semiotic capital does not imply a functionalist approach – as it would if semiotic capital necessarily entailed people's cooperation with institutions and willingness to systemic integration. On the contrary, the competence to recognize the systemic rule can lead people to conflict with institutions that are perceived to violate the systemic rule.

*Enemization of the other.* Second, the cultural milieu of European societies appears to be characterized mainly by a cultural form that can be considered the expression of a *paranoid interpretation of belongingness* (henceforth: paranoid belongingness). Specifically, the analysis of the cultural milieu disclosed that a significant proportion of European citizens (about 40%, of the sample, though with differences among countries) views the external world as if it were full of threats able to disrupt their vital spaces (Salvatore and colleagues (2018) defined the worldview [i.e. symbolic universe] comprising this cultural form: 'Niche of Belongingness'). Facing this global menace, individuals resort to their system of belongingness in search of protection, considering it as the only form of survival.

This worldview has been defined 'paranoid' without any reference to its psychiatric meaning; rather, consistently with both social cognition (Kramer, 1994, 1998; cf. § 4.1) as well as psychoanalytic theory (Klein, 1967),<sup>4</sup> the notion is intended here to refer to a very basic form of affective sensemaking that leads to personify the critical event that constrains/obstacles individual action and desire, and to perceive it as an active threat, an enemy with a destructive will that one has to defend oneself from. To use psychoanalytic terminology, the absence of the good object is lived as the presence of the bad object (Klein, 1967).

Also Kramer (1994, 1998) use the term ‘paranoid’, without any psychiatric implication. According to this author, it consists of a form of social cognition, characterized by hypervigilant and ruminative modes of processing social information.

Paranoid belongingness denotes a spiral link between identity and connotation of the other as enemy: identity (the *we*) is constituted *because* and *in the form* of the emotional construction of the other as enemy. In other words, ‘we-ness’ originates from the striving to defend oneself from external threats and, at the same time, develops because of the enduring perception of others as threatening enemies. Accordingly, paranoid belongingness can be seen as an extreme and at the same time a far different form of community linkage, that turns it from a system of bonds *for* into a system of bonds *against*.

It is worth highlighting that this semiotic dynamics shows a specific trait within the broadly shared recognition of the role played by group belonging in the identity formation process. Indeed, while the most acknowledged perspective (Social Identity Theory – cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1986, and Social Categorization Theory – cf. Turner et al., 1987) posits that the perception of the in-group is based on the concurrent differentiation from the out-group, but not necessarily on its representation as an enemy, paranoid belongingness entails that the perception of otherness as the enemy is constitutive of individual identity. In other words, we-ness (and therefore I-ness) exists thanks to the enemization of the other.

### **The cultural milieu as explicative dimension. The enemization of the other**

The analysis of the cultural milieu outlined above provides an empirical based framework for a better understanding of major critical issues of the current European socio-political scenario, such as the centrality assumed by identity issues, the weakening of support for EU institutions as well as the wave of intolerance and aversion towards others, as manifested in social (e.g. xenophobia, hate crime) and political forms (e.g. populism, increasing support for far-right parties). More specifically, the detection of the incidence of paranoid belongingness enables us to understand some important facets that cannot be grasped at the level of simple observation.

First, as explained above, paranoid belongingness is an emotional construction based on the enemization of the other as inherent in the making up of identity. Accordingly, one has to recognize that intolerance/aversion is not only the effect/reaction of the threatening power attributed to the other. In fact, the representation of the Other as an enemy to defend oneself from (and/or to attack) is constitutive: it is the semiotic mechanism of identity that is dominant in the current historical stage; it is the way a large segment of the population satisfies the need for identity. Needless to say, this does not deny that the other can be consistent with and even anticipate its representation as enemy.<sup>2</sup> Yet, such ‘collaboration’

with its own enemization accelerates and radicalizes the process, but it is not a necessary part of it. If one were to need a counter-proof of how the enemization of the other is independent from the actual aggressive force of the other, just consider how it works in the stigmatization process of social categories that offer no reason to be considered a source of peril (e.g. homosexuals, Jews).

Second, it is worth taking into account that paranoid belongingness is a sense-making process lacking a specific object. Indeed, due to its emotional, affect-laden characteristic, it works in a generalized and homogenising way, as the mode of making sense of *otherness* – rather than of specific social objects (Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Tonti & Salvatore, 2015). Once the world is perceived as the conflict between the besieged *we* and the threatening *they*, any relevant element of experience can only be either part of the in-group or the enemy.<sup>3</sup> It follows that it is necessary to consider any single critical form of the current socio-political scenarios (i.e. xenophobia, logics and modes that are less and less representable of the EU institutions, radicalization, etc.) as one of the different sides of the same dice. Needless to say, this does negate the different socio-political implications of any specific critical phenomenon and event, nor the specific process and conditions associated with each of them. Rather, it serves to recognize the need for consider phenomena of intolerance as the contingent manifestations of the very same *fundamental systemic dynamics of identity construction* – that need to be dealt with as such.

Third, it has to be recognized that European societies seem to have few semiotic ‘antibodies’ to counteract the capacity of paranoid belongingness to shape the socio-political scenario in terms of the enemization of the other. Indeed, as observed above, the analysis of the cultural milieu has shown that only a limited proportion of the European population (about 25%) is able to access the semiotic capital available within the cultural milieu, whereas a large part of the population (about 35%), though not characterized in terms of paranoid belongingness, is however unable to propose an alternative means of identity construction (Salvatore et al., 2018).

## **The cultural milieu to be explained. Hyper-connectivity and opacity of the systemic dynamics**

The interpretation of the socio-political crisis through the lens of the underpinning cultural dynamics is not intended to underestimate the role played by other factors (power, political strategies, institutional, economic, technological, normative, ideological facets), and their interplay. According to the framework adopted (i.e. Semiotic Cultural Psychological Theory, see Salvatore, 2017; Valsiner, 2007, 2014) – each factor works as the constraining medium through which other factors operate (cf. Salvatore et al., 2018). For instance, norms regulate behaviour through the mediation, and within the constraint, of how they are interpreted (cultural mediation), as well as of economic and technological conditions. From a complementary standpoint, technological devices (e.g. Facebook) shape the socio-

psychological as well as economic environment (e.g., the impact of the capacity of big data elaboration), and in so doing they provide new frameworks of experience that trigger, constrain, and channel sensemaking.

It is worth noting that the consideration above involves a systemic notion of causality (Salvatore, 2016a). According to this view, socio-economic conditions (economic dynamics, norms, technologies, and so forth) do not cause cultural effects, as happens in the case of two bodies whose collision makes them exchange kinetic energy. Rather, the cultural milieu re-organizes itself in order to interpret the progressive change of socio-economic conditions. This means that socio-economic conditions trigger the evolution of the cultural milieu, operating as a perturbation demanding the cultural milieu to adjust (on the interpretation of the stimulus in terms of perturbation, see the conceptualization of systems in terms of autopoiesis in Maturana & Varela, 1980). In the final analysis, this means that strictly speaking the evolution of the cultural milieu is promoted, yet not caused by external conditions, emerging as consequence of its inner dynamics only. And this means that the forms of cultural milieu have to be regarded as the stabilization of the ways people have adopted in order to make sense of their world and adapt to the changes it is undergoing. This conceptual point is very important not only for theoretical reasons. It is even more important because from it one gains insight into how any cultural dynamics, regardless of the social, ethical and functional desirability of their content, are ultimately a form of adjustment, that is, a solution that enables people to satisfy the basic need to make experience meaningful. It is a sensemaking process that opens up the possibility for further conceptualization and actions (Luhmann, 1984/1995), even to those who lack semiotic capital and who have a paranoid interpretation of their belongingness.

Consequently, the cultural analysis of the socio-political scenario needs to be complemented by the analysis of the socio-political and economic conditions that have led to the consolidation of the cultural dynamics identified (and more specifically, the lack of semiotic resources and paranoid belongingness).

To this end, here the focus is on two complementary characteristics of the dynamics of globalization in which individual and social life is embedded: *hyper-connectivity* and *opacity*. *Hyper-connectivity* here refers to the dynamics induced by globalization leading to the growing reduction of material and immaterial distances which physically and subjectively separate individuals, systems of activities and collectives (e.g. Lamy, 2013). Just to take a few examples from the infinite number available, consider the following: internet mediated communication devices (Skype, WhatsApp, Tweeter) have expanded people's ability to keep in touch regardless of spatial, but also social and pragmatic distances (e.g. one can chat while involved in another activity); low cost flights have transformed the very sense of geographical distances and social meaning of travelling; as shown by instant lottery as well as financial transactions, computer-aided decision making reduces the temporal distance between input, decision and impact; the growth of productivity capacity involves a symmetrical capacity of impact on the whole ecological system (climate change, consumption of non-renewable resources) that affect

people's way of life around the world; local wars are less and less local: any conflict trend to affect the whole world, as is shown dramatically by international terrorism and foreign fighters.

Secondly, *Opacity* here refers to how the global systemic dynamics – and therefore the functional connections between the local domains of life and what is external to them – are increasingly and massively dependent on abstract and diffused mediators/processes. Due to their abstractness and diffuseness, these processes operate according to logics and modes that are less and less representable (starting from the very possibility of identifying their space–time location as well as physical drivers). Financialization of the economy, de-territorialization of decision making, virtualization of social relations and distribution of information provide paradigmatic examples of these mediators/processes generating opacity: people's life depends on systemic mechanisms and processes that escape not only their control but, in their essence, from the very possibility of being represented and therefore elaborated at the level of lived experience.

According to a functional, external standpoint, hyper-connectivity and opacity are interrelated and interdependent: opacity is the consequence of the hyper-connectivity and a condition of its development; indeed, the greater the connectivity, the more the global dynamics are distributed and the less they can be represented in terms of discrete, localized acts, decisions and events. Moreover, the greater the opacity, the less the chances of controlling the systemic dynamics and the more the systemic dynamics tends to work in accordance to inner, self-referential rules, therefore to develop and spread.

On the other hand, in the experience of many individuals the relation between hyper-connectivity and opacity corresponds to a disorienting condition: the condition of being subjected to critical changes (e.g. climatic changes, demographic transformations, unemployment, dismantling of welfare services, rupture of social linkages, need to change place of residence), that are as disruptive and conditioning upon life as they are hard to be represented. At the same time, these critical changes are lived as the sign of the weakening/disruption/violation of the boundaries of their local, situated forms of life (the community, the situated domain of activity, the local group, the place where one lives). Thus, people find themselves confronted with a radical *deficit of sense* – they experience critical changes that have high existential impact but the processes that generate and drive those changes remain hidden – people experience *what* happens, but not *how*, *why*, *by whom* and *what for*.

### *Paranoid belongingness as a way of making sense of the systemic dynamics*

Poverty of semiotic capital is the sign of this deficit of sense – namely of the inability of the symbolic resources traditionally available within the cultural milieu to enable people to build meaningful and effective representations of the link between the local spheres of existence and the world as a whole. Ideologies, civil and religious values, political–institutional forms, scientific knowledge and so

on are cultural forms whose categories (e.g. ‘state’, ‘honesty’, ‘person’, ‘change’, ‘equality’, ‘rights’, ‘progress’, ‘natural selection’) have lost – or however highly weakened – their semantic force and normativity. An increasing number of individuals perceive them as empty words, unable to represent the relationship with the world in a vital way that is, cognitively coherent and subjectively meaningful. At a cognitive level, paranoid belongingness entails hypervigilant and ruminative modes of processing social information, which are referred to as paranoid social cognitions (Kramer, 1994, 1998). Such modes, which can be considered an adaptive response to make sense of disturbing and threatening social environments, are likely to result in three main judgmental consequences, namely the tendency to over-attribute lack of trustworthiness to others, the disposition to interpret others’ actions in a disproportional self-referential way, and an exaggerated perception of conspiracy.

From a complementary standpoint, paranoid belongingness can be seen as the semiotic consequence of the impact exerted by the twofold force of globalization (i.e. hyper-connectivity and opacity) on people’s lives.

In order to understand such a semiotic process, one first has to take into account that when a sensemaker (be it a single individual or a group) is confronted with a major, disruptive change, the first response is emotional – namely the rupture will be interpreted at first in terms of affective sensemaking (e.g. Salvatore and Freda, 2011; Valsiner, 2014; see also the phenomenon of affective priming, Murphy & Zajonc, 1993). Only then, and in certain conditions, does affective sensemaking develop into more differentiated forms of interpretation (Salvatore, 2016b; Valsiner, 2007; for a neuroscientific perspective, see also LeDoux, 1996).

Now, affective sensemaking has two main distinctive characteristics: *generalization* and *reification*. Firstly, affective sensemaking provides homogenizing and generalizing interpretations that are not confined to the specific event triggering it, but encompass the whole field of experience – e.g., the supporter’s first emotional reaction to defeat of the beloved team is a feeling of generalized mourning, i.e. generalization. For instance, consider when one is very happy – everything seems good and nice, as if one were walking on air. Secondly, affective sensemaking sustains the tendency to feel what happens in relational terms, namely as the sign of an entity endowed with a certain intentionality towards the sensemaker (e.g. the sensemaker feels the loss of something as someone robbing her/him of that something, i.e. reification;<sup>4</sup> cf. Matte Blanco, 1975; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011; Tonti & Salvatore, 2015).

Accordingly, people make sense of the critical, disruptive<sup>5</sup> impact of global systemic dynamics on their spheres of life in affective terms. Such a process of affective sensemaking is strongly favoured, fuelled and channelled by the hyper-connectivity and opacity characterizing systemic dynamics. Indeed, on the one hand, hyper-connectivity makes people confront a diffuse plurality of endemic critical changes and ruptures (e.g. unemployment, worsening of living conditions, increasing presence of strangers associated with different styles of life and practices in the local territory) that have on-going, ubiquitous negative impacts on their

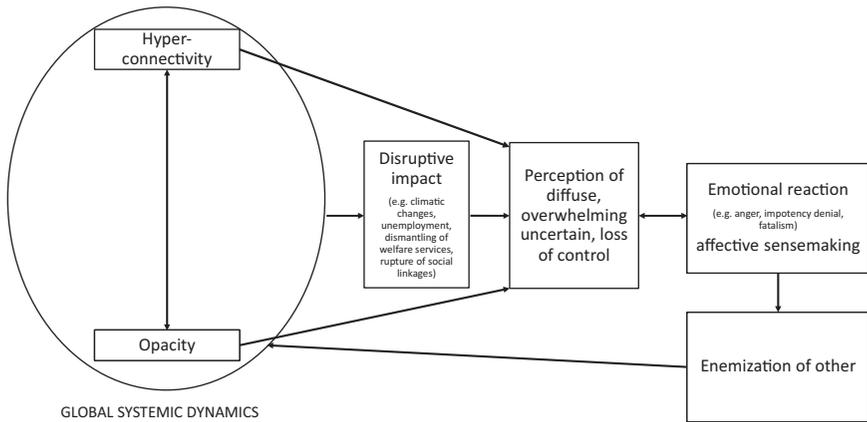
domains of experience (i.e. their life as well as the life of relatives, friends, neighbours, and colleagues). This diffusiveness lends itself to be interpreted in a generalized way that is typical of affective sensemaking, and in so doing it fuels this emotional form of interpretation.<sup>6</sup> This is so due to the fact that it works through generalized meanings. Affective sensemaking requires minimal redundancies (e.g. the fact that some people speak a different language from sensemaker) to make sense of the field of experience (Salvatore, 2016a). Indeed, the affective interpretation of the world in terms of the friend-foe schema implies that the whole variability of the circumstances is reduced drastically to just the one-degree-of-freedom distinction between to be or not to be other-than-us. Thus, the more people have to address heterogeneous, fragmented, disruptive fields of experience, the more affective sensemaking provides a powerful way of assimilating the discrete events they encounter and framing them in a meaningful, coherent significance. Accordingly, the diffused plurality of negative ruptures cannot but trigger an overwhelming negative emotional feeling of the context.

As result of that, people do not experience the many critical impacts of systemic dynamics in terms of a number of discrete, separate self-contained events and facts, each of them interpreted individually. Instead, people experience them in terms of a homogeneous, generalized, single, permanent, global feeling of having been subjected to a dramatic rupture. Each relevant change is assimilated to this global experience, that is, reproduced over time and across the various domains of experience.

From a complementary standpoint, it has to be noted that the opacity of systemic dynamics helps consolidate this emotional form of interpretation. This happens because opacity is a trigger of affective arousal per se, given that the more a certain event is incomprehensible and therefore experienced as being out of cognitive control, the more it prompts an emotional reaction. Moreover, opacity prevents people from elaborating more developed interpretations of critical events (e.g. explanation of the causes of the critical condition, comprehension of the intentions and standpoint of the actors involved, plans, solutions) enabling them to go beyond affective sensemaking.

Thus, the combined effect of hyper-connectivity and opacity fuels the emotional form of interpretations of the critical impacts of global dynamics on people's lives. People perceive these critical impacts in terms of a diffused, and overwhelming loss of cognitive and pragmatic control on their life. In turn, this global perception triggers a large spectrum of emotional reactions depending on the psycho-social characteristics of the sensemaker (anger, impotency, distrust, fatalism, denial), associated with the basic affective interpretation – generally working implicitly, as an embodied habit on the margin of awareness – of being subjected to the destructive attack of a hostile entity coming from the outside. Figure 2 depicts this semiotic process.

In so doing, the emotional category of the *threatening enemy* becomes far more the way for connoting the alleged source of this or that critical state. More radically, it works as the *fundamental way of interpreting and engaging with the world*,



**Figure 2.** The process of enemization of the other.

applied globally and homogeneously to potentially any form of otherness that it may be associated with (and therefore interpreted in terms of) any perturbation and uncertainty of one's sphere of life. To paraphrase Hegel, in the night of affective sensemaking of disruptive changes, all cows (be them terrorists, the political caste, Romani, refugees, and so forth) are black.

Moreover, one is led to expect that the virulence of systemic dynamics fuels the intensity and diffusion of paranoid belongingness. The more the systemic dynamics produces extensive critical disruptions in individual and local spheres of life, the more (both in terms of diffusion within society and in terms of intensity of the process of generalization/reification) the interpretation of these ruptures will be carried out in terms of the emotional construction of a mythical, generalized all-encompassing form of enemy, which in turn constitutes a mythical form of identity: a *we-ness* seen as the complementing generalized 'inside' attacked by the external enemy.

To put it briefly, for a significant segment of the European population, the generalized we-vs.-enemy category is the fundamental form through which the world may make sense. Here it lies the capacity of paranoid belongingness to fulfil the demand for sense, fuelled by the disruptive impact of systemic dynamics: *the vision of being involved with a besieging enemy is the way of making a perturbing, hyper-connected, and opaque world meaningful.*

If one considers how widespread its socio-political manifestations are, this semi-otic process seems to be highly effective. Indeed, though the affective sensemaking process of enemization leaves people engaged with negative and painful feelings (i.e. the feeling one experiences in front of to the attack of an enemy), yet it provides two more fundamental subjective resources.

In fact, on the one hand, paranoid belongingness provides a comprehensive lived perception of system-induced changes, enabling us to mentalise them,

namely to make them palatable at the cognitive level. Whatever the event/change experienced, paranoid belongingness enables its classification in terms of the category of *hurt/threat*; namely to interpret it as the intentional effect produced by the external enemy (claims stating that immigrants are the cause of unemployment are indicative of this semiotic process). The stronger the paranoid belongingness, the more powerful will be the simplification of experience and its reduction to the hyper-generalized, all-encompassing and homogenizing form of the friend-enemy scheme. Trump's claim '*America first*' is a strong and appealing message as it acts as a kind of blender capable of homogenizing everything – on the one hand, it presents the American people as one. On the other hand, the rest of the world, as if it was a whole as well. In a reality so defined there is no need to distinguish and grasp the nuances: a single all-encompassing category (being American) offers a clear and coherent vision of who one is, what one wants, what the world is like, how it works, why it works the way it works and where it has to go. On the other hand, the enemization of the external world consolidates the bond of belongingness, and this restores the sense of identity and membership, fuelling meaningfulness and gratification. A clue of this socio-affective process is offered by the inebriating joy felt by people (including those who are not supporters) when their national team wins competitions like the Soccer World Cup. The gratification does not lie in the victory itself, but in how through such an event one experiences oneself to be part of an emotional, dense, homogeneous whole.

Needless to say, the heuristic and emotional effectiveness of paranoid belongingness does not imply its epistemic validity. Rather, the opposite is plausible – an all-encompassing theory can be applied to any latitude of the world precisely because it offers a hyper-simplified representation (on an affective basis, i.e. in terms of friend/enemy scheme) – of reality. *The world becomes representable, but on condition of remaining not understood.* From this point of view paranoid belongingness can be seen as a kind of *semiotic drug*. It fulfils the radical demand of sense induced by the disarticulation of the actor-system relationship, rendering the experience meaningful. It does so, however, in essentially hallucinatory terms, through representations of the world that lacks the informative and epistemic elements necessary to design functional developmental solutions. In other words, *the experience of representing takes the place of representing experience.*

*Belongingness has become the problem.* It is worth observing that paranoid belongingness does not refer to a particular and delimited physical and social environment. Rather, it denotes a symbolic space that covers all the people who share the same identity referents, whether they are real or unreal. Accordingly, several domains of belongingness might feel the force of paranoid identity: family, club, community, territory, nation, people-like-me, and so on and so forth. Perceiving the others as if they were enemies allows individuals to overcome social, geographical, and cultural differences and experience a sense of *we-ness*, the sense of being united in and by the common threat.

Accordingly, paranoid belongingness can be seen as the outcome of a process of *irradiation of the identity bond*. Irradiation here refers to the tendency to define the *we* in terms of dematerialized symbolic objects, weakened in their anchorage to/confinement within places, practices, interests, and social positions, therefore capable of extending themselves in an unlimited and asymptotic way in spite of social, cultural and economic differences.

Indicative of this process is the political evolution of the far-right Italian party ‘Lega Nord’. The party was born as a local subject, with a strong territorial settlement, designed to represent the identity demands of a local community (Northern Italy) in the perspective of federalist autonomy-independence from the central State. In the last few years it has changed form, becoming the Italian equivalent of France’s Front National, – a national populist party whose identity and political project is defined by the opposition Italian vs. other people. In so doing the irradiation of the previous juxtaposition of Northerners (‘Padanian’ people) vs. Italian has been accomplished.

Populism is the paradigmatic form of this homogenizing process of irradiation. Grounded on such a definition, the *we* evoked by populism is a mythic entity endowed with an organic and unitary will, with indefinite and indefinable borders. In the rhetoric of populism, people are not an aggregate of individuals grouped due to an inclusion criterion (e.g. those who possess the nationality of a certain state). On the contrary, who and what are people are tautologically defined: all of those who participate in the common ground shared by the population, *because of their being against those who are outside*. In this way, the people category can be expanded or narrowed in line with political and rhetorical contingencies and convenience (cf. Elchardus, and Spruyt, 2015; Müller, 2016).

Accordingly, paranoid belongingness has to be considered as the way the community bond changes to defend itself from systemic dynamics: membership is freed from its roots within the vital territorial bond, and takes as its reference point a mythic generalized entity (the people, the nation, the values of Western society), the foundation of which is the enemization of otherness.

This is a rather paradoxical process. The absolutizing of belongingness makes the belongingness the fundamental anthropological form of being-in-the-world. Yet, once absolutized, belongingness simply disappears, at least in the historical form in which it has been practiced: the community bond. This happens in two complementary ways. On the one hand, because, as observed above, the irradiation of the identity bond means that the bond loses its roots in situated social practices, and it is replaced by emotional, mythical melting pots, made of virtual arenas,<sup>7</sup> performative rituals,<sup>8</sup> and spectacularized forms of involvement and expression.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the bond is emptied of its fundamental meaning of being the symbolic and pragmatic space of sharing. Actually, the form of sharing persists, yet its content changes radically – what is shared is no longer the common resources, but the common enemy. Incidentally, it is worth considering that one thesis as to the etymology of the term ‘community’ considers it as deriving from the reciprocal gift: *cum-munus*, that is, what the participants of the bond

share. One could say that the evolution of the community leaves room for an interpretation deriving from the reciprocal sharing of the defence from the outer enemy: *cum-moenia* ('moenia' meaning 'wall').

In this shift, belongingness, from being the solution, becomes the fundamental problem of contemporary European societies. This applies irrespective of ethical or axiological reasons: *the paranoid drift undermines society and institutions because it conveys a hyper-simplified interpretation of the world, as such incapable of generating projectuality able to cope with the challenges raised by the current systemic dynamics.*

A line of thought that is trying to rethink and relaunch the community is proposed by authors that put at the centre of their focus the category of commons (Ostrom, 1990; see also Pennacchi, 2014). However, if one considers these contributions critically, they can be considered a further source of evidence of the limit of belongingness once it is seen as a general solution to the integration between subject and system. Indeed, experiences of communitarian regulation of collective action and commons proved to be effective; yet insofar as they concern relatively small groups and are pursued in terms and for the sake of local belongingness – they at best do not consider what lies outside the community (Vitale, 2013).

## Conclusion

As observed above, while it goes without saying that the economic crisis has played a major role in the emergence of paranoid belongingness, it must also be recognized that the crisis does not seem to be associated with critical economic conditions in a straightforward way. According to the widespread perception, as well as to what is conveyed in political discourses – identity issues are at the core of the current socio-political scenario, as they are fuelled by the refugee crisis, inter-ethnic conflicts, religious radicalization and so on. This means that a more complex causal link between systemic factors of crisis and cultural dynamics needs to be elaborated.

The way the relation between the cultural milieu and systemic dynamics has been discussed above enables us to envisage a model for this complex link. Indeed, it is implicit in the consideration proposed above that the systemic factors of crisis play their role by reason of their capacity to produce ruptures in people's spheres of life, and, in so doing, to trigger affective sensemaking. In other words, the cultural impact of systemic dynamics does not depend on the content of the change that people face in itself, but *on the critical intensity, depth and extension of the rupture that such a change generates.*

This distinction is relevant, because it allows us to see that people adopt a *holistic*, affect-laden approach – namely, that people have just a single emotional yardstick to measure the existential, subjective value of the changes they experience, regardless of their specific content and source (demographic, ecologic, economic, technological). In sum, *economic inequality, inability to access credit,*

*unemployment, terrorism, pressure of migrations, weakening of neighbourhood relationships and the like, all contribute to the affective interpretation of reality.*

According to this approach, it is plausible to conclude that the social impact of the economic crisis has probably worked as the first trigger of paranoid belongingness and, more in general, of the changes of the cultural milieu. This is consistent with many studies that have highlighted the negative impact of the economic crisis on cultural dimensions (Uslaner, 2009). On the other hand, as some evidence shows, this impact is due not to the economic conditions in themselves, but to how they have been interpreted (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2015). The following emergence of demographic and (broadly speaking) ethnic issues in 2013–2014, driven by, on the one hand, the refugee crisis and, on the other hand, the consolidation of a scenario of permanent terrorism has added and further radicalized the evolution of the cultural milieu in terms of enemization of the other, providing the perfect fuel for feeding the semiotic machine of paranoid belongingness.

The lack of semiotic resources and paranoid belongingness represents critical factors that prevent the positive evolution of the current socio-political scenario. This is so for several convergent reasons that have been underlined above and that are summed up below.

- a. The lack of semiotic capital implies that a large segment of population is unable to identify themselves with the systemic rule. This means that institutions are weakened in their ability to frame and regulate social life, and therefore to serve as the grounds enabling cooperation among divergent interests and identities. Above all, this means that the cultural milieu is unable to provide the ‘semiotic antibodies’ that enable people to counteract the tendency to intensify their recourse to affective sensemaking as a defensive response to the overwhelming, uncertain and profound disruptions induced by systemic dynamics.
- b. Taken in itself, paranoid belongingness is not a totally new cultural phenomenon – yet the diffusion it has reached within European societies, along with the poverty of alternative forms of identity construction, makes it quite critical. Counteracting it needs to be recognized as a core strategic priority both at supranational, national and regional levels. This is so because its manifestations in terms of enemization of the other (e.g. xenophobia, hate crimes, radicalization, intolerance, destruction of inter-ethnic dialogue) undermines social cohesion and transforms the institutional and axiological foundations of the European space. Above all, the systemic force of the risks associated with the current diffusion of paranoid belongingness lies in the fact that it implies a radical devaluation of supranational institutions together with a progressive informal (in certain cases also formal, as, for instance, in the case of the new Hungarian constitution) re-shaping of national institutions in authoritarian and/or illiberal terms. Last but not least, due to its emotional grounds, paranoid belongingness is as much able to fulfil the demands for sense induced by the systemic crisis as it is unable to provide functional analysis and solutions to the big problems making up the crisis.

To conclude, the interpretation of the current socio-political scenario in terms of cultural dynamics and sensemaking should have shown that European societies' cultural milieu needs to be put at the core of research and policies. Studies are needed in order to reach a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and conditions that mediate and moderate the relation between systemic dynamics and the spreading of affect-laden modes of interpreting them within societies. Policies are required in order to address these mechanisms and in so doing to deal with the most critical aspects of the current socio-cultural dynamics, namely the lack of semiotic resources and the enemization of the other.

### **Authors' note**

Rozlyn Redd is now affiliated to Imperial College, London, UK.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The study is part of the Re.Cri.Re Project ([www.recrire.eu](http://www.recrire.eu)), that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No. 649436 (<https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/>). All authors are members of (15 out of 17) institutions involved in the Re.Cri.Re project. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

### **Notes**

1. Recently (February, 2017), a German politician, a candidate in the German elections of September 2017 with the AfD (far-right populist party) posted on the web an invitation to Adolf Hitler to come back. What is worrying about such an act is not only the content in itself, but the fact that it somehow signals that a certain symbolic dyke has weakened, and this makes it possible to enact thoughts/fantasies whose public expression would have been un-thinkable just a few years ago.
2. Daesh terrorism is a clear instance of a strategy aimed at accelerating and radicalizing the enemization of Muslim communities, in order to promote their counter-radicalization.
3. As has been recognized, one of the characteristics of populism is its being based on the definition of an enemy (Taggart, 2002).
4. According to the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, the child does not experience the absence of the mother in terms of the fact that she is not there, but as the presence of the bad, threatening mother. This means that affective sensemaking – i.e. the form of sensemaking typical of the children's mental processes – works only on presence (Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011): the child does not experience facts, but entities endowed with positive or negative relational intentionality – as happens when the baby feels that there is a monster hidden

- in the dark. However, this process of reification is not specific to children – it is a basic mechanism of affective sensemaking (Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Stein, 1991), that is more evident in children’s thought because at that level of cognitive development, affective sensemaking is less antagonized by secondary elaboration. A clue of the basic nature of the reification mechanism can be provided by considering how in current times people react to events like fires, explosions, plane crashes: the first thing one thinks – and the first thing the media discourse focuses on – is to ask if it was a terrorist attack or an accident. In this one can find the sign of how the first form of interpretation consists of the friend-foe affective categorization.
5. Needless to say, systemic dynamics do not have only disruptive and critical impacts on people’s lives. However, the focus here is on paranoid belongingness as the way people make sense of critical circumstances.
  6. Though based on a different theoretical framework, Terror Management Theory (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1991) proposes a consistent view when it highlights how people respond to emotional disruption by reinforcing their adherence to worldviews that are generally based on the polarization between the valorisation of the in-group and the enemization of out-group.
  7. It is worth noting the importance of web communication for populist and far-right parties (Krämer, 2017). In Italy, the 5 Stars Movement makes extensive use of web consultation in order to make the ‘citizens’ decide about specific issues. On the other hand, the leaders of that movement exercise their leading functions by controlling the web communication of the movement.
  8. The Bulgarian para-military group, self-claimed defender of the national boundaries from the refugee invasion, is a paradigmatic example of these kinds of rituals - a social practice devoid of any functional meaning but working as a powerful symbolic driver of the mythical construction of identity. The same can be said for Trump’s project of building a wall on the border with Mexico to prevent the drug traffic and the passage of illegal migrants. The ineffectiveness of such a measure is so evident that it appears astonishing how it can be proposed and taken seriously even for those who recognize its symbolic, rather than functional function.
  9. An emblematic instance of this spectacularization comes from the following observation: Beppe Grillo, the leader of the populist Italian party 5 Star Movement is also a comedian. The forms of discourse and the content of his narrative deployed in the two contexts – as politician and as showman – are substantially the same.

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