

## Iper-Modern Paradoxes and Iper-Modern Symptoms

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### Perspective

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### Abstract

Today, in virtue of numerous social changes, Psychoanalysis is interested in the new sceneries regarding subject, society and their mutual relationships; among the new contemporary themes often emerge "the paradoxes of the happiness", and this fact brings to wonder as these contemporary phenomena can be correlated to some destabilizing dynamics and to some new forms of mental illness. The increasing attention about these controversial aspects is a sign of awareness of the need of a new perspective on the subject and the collectivity. These examinations are also useful to answer to the questions: how the patients are changed today? To look for an answer we have to explore some paradoxes that science and sociology have recently deepen.

**Keywords:** Iper-modernity; Paradox; Psychoanalysis; Symptoms; Sociology; Psychosis

### The Evolution of Symptoms

Mental illness can change over time according to the social context: during the First World War the main attention was on hysteria, while the field of psychoses was neglected. From the end of the First World War to the beginning of the Second World War appeared a new focus on psychosomatic and narcissistic pathology [1]. At the end of the second world war a further change emerged: a new focus about borderline and psychotic illness; as a matter of fact the psicoanalists were more and more aware that their patient were more frequently diagnosed as "borderline", therefore it was very important to understand which new tools could be useful for their needs. Twenty years ago, Elisabeth Roudinesco (1999) observed as the patients were similar to the image of the society in which they lived: depressed and full of nihilism, suffering of narcissism, depressive troubles, loneliness and loss of identity. It is immediate to ask ourselves: what

happens in our contemporary historical context? Today we can observe some new social phenomena: the increase of divorces; the change of parental roles; the socialization of children with different parents and the increase of step families, etc. Now we can ask ourselves: which are the deepest social and individual dynamics accompanying this change? In Psychoanalytic field has been analyzed in depth the contempoary crisis of the meta-social warranties: mechanisms and structures that articulate the meeting between the subject and the inter-subjective wholes, they organize and regulate social and cultural life, having the function to guarantee the stability of the society and the stability of the psychic structure and organization. For meta-social warranties we mean: myths, ideologies, beliefs, religion and authority [2]. Which are the contemporary dynamics that can contribute to the crisis of these meta-social warranties? In the iper-modern reality there are some specific and paradoxical social processes that can have some repercussions on mental

health. Thus it's very important to point out that some new social paradoxes sometimes seems to be much complicated to be elaborated by the subjects. As a matter of fact this article will deepen some curious and specific social phenomena because the knowledge of these dimensions is very important for our clinical practice.

### Perspectives on Sociology, Economy and Paradoxes

Today a lot of parents ask for a psychological help for their sons, reporting situations analogous to the case of P. in these circumstances the teen-ager has been previously visited by the gastroenterologist for a stomach ache; the doctor, after various analyses, declared that it was "simply psychosomatic". P. spends a lot of time alone, because his parents are "always working", and he listens day by day to their discussions about their carrier, feeling abandoned; formerly his need of attention and care has been replaced by a gift: an expensive PC. The stomach ache (curiously) degenerates. Which is the meaning of this episode?

This situation happens in the era of "Homo economicus"; this theory, created by Bauman, describes the stereotype of the lonely person guided in his decisions only by monetary benefits; he is a subject who regards his time as an investment from which to obtain the "maximum profit". Detached from self-awareness, his main purpose is the advantageous exchange, and the satisfactions the interaction can bring him [3-5]. The key to everyone's happiness, according to this sociological perspective, is the increase in gross domestic product (GDP), which is calculated on the basis of the total amount of money spent by each individual, however emerges the evidence that these kind of substitutes cannot replace the human ties; nevertheless the correlation among economic growth and the increase of happiness today is considered a truth [5,6]. This fact reveals a paradox, regarding which different scientific studies have been developed: Easterlin (2001, 2003 2004) has examined some measures of subjective wellness compare to the income, and has shown that, increased happiness is not caused by the growth of economic resources, "quite the contrary, once a certain threshold is exceeded, income continues to grow while the indices that relate to happiness remain constant, to the point that they tend to decrease, following an inverted U-shaped curve" [5,7-9]. These researches show also that the ability to enjoy material goods is physiologically limited: those people whom accumulate more possessions can humanly consume few more than the other people, and the accumulation can bring a certain stress for watching the stuff that has been accumulated.

These dynamics suggest that it would be better to invest in "relational goods": areas in which hedonic accumulation and social display are less important. Layard (2005) concluded that wellness increases with the domestic product only in the context of a population struck by the poverty that can be able, thanks to the addition of some material resources, to satisfy some basic needs, as to eat; once these necessities have been satisfied, the next step is inevitably to consider the interpersonal level [10]. This datum seems consistent with the hierarchy of the needs and human motivations classified by the "Maslow Pyramid" (1954): initially the individual tends to satisfy some basic needs, and when these have been satisfied, "relational satisfactions" became more desired [11]. The general explanation of these phenomena can be reassumed in concept of "the paradoxes of happiness", first introduced by economists and later in psychology. They have called paradoxes because they indicate that there is a crisis in the equation which believed that a growth in wealth was linked to the increase of well-being. This data takes us even farther away from the misleading idea that those who have a lot of resources are more satisfied, or possess "more means to happiness" [5]. In view of this, we can ask ourselves: why nevertheless individuals continue to accumulate?

### A Dangerous Treadmill

Now we can focus on another contemporary paradox, first described in the '70s: the concept of "treadmill of pleasure"; this theory points out that dynamic that drives us to seek new stimuli to maintain some pleasure levels (without ever reaching satisfaction). As if running on a treadmill, the subject maintains the illusion of moving forward (in this case to increase his/her levels of satisfaction) but remains immobile [12]. This theory can also be applied to the consumerist tendencies: the subject maintains the illusion to increase his/her wellness buying a lot of stuff, nevertheless remaining static. What actually rises is the level of addiction and therefore dependence for consumption that became necessary to maintain the preceding level of satisfaction. As a matter of fact among the new forms of iper-modern suffering there is the syndrome of compulsive accumulation: the first known case of this disease (considered unusual at the time) was that of Collyer brothers, in 1947. They died in New York, under 130 tons of "stuff" accumulated in their house [13]. Today tv programs show many cases of these disorders: documentaries are focused on individuals that express the obsessive need to acquire a great quantity of goods (even if unhealthy), creating a lot of damages to their daily life, relationships and health. Starting from a simple

tendency to accumulate, this people develop a real obsession; this happens for the belief that the objects can help to maintain a sense of safety and equilibrium, attributing a strong emotional value to the possibility to gather stuff. As a matter of fact these persons work to be able to buy things that seem to reassure them; anyway accumulating things doesn't offer any great benefit, as mentioned. At the same time today is arriving the "decluttering phenomenon": the tendency to eliminate objects to live in essential way; someone became also a compulsive declutter, following the strong desire to throw things in his/her own house. These facts indicate how the iper-modern subject is changed in front of the artificial solutions to the new contradictory needs (artificially induced) [14].

### Schizophrenic Everyday Life

In the attempt to deeper understand some novel realities we are going to analyse a further paradox: the contemporary relationship with food, symbol of a series of contradictory messages [5]. What we are talking about? Watching television programs we will find spot that propose two themes incoherent among them: we see fitness programs, diets, products for weight loss, while conversely there are a lot of spots that induce to eat inviting foods and create sumptuous tastings. "The subject is asked to lose weight (and keep a food regime) while tempting him to overeat, metaphorically oscillating between anorexic and bulimic tendencies that are continuously intertwined. Such phenomena are rampant, as is the growing demand for professional help. Rapidly expanding industries that promote the desire for more refined, exotic, sophisticated, expensive foods exist alongside increasingly prosperous businesses that create "miraculous" products for weight loss and diet. All this happens while obesity rampages in Western countries" [5]. Today food is conceptualized as delicious but also as dangerous: these are a lot of contradictory messages. We assist to the proliferation of different kind of foods: gluten free, sugar free, aromas free, salt free etc. In this context the consumers are always hocked in a struggle between pleasures and dangers. They are torn on the choice between "slow, healthy and biological food", and the "fast food". There is a battle in which it's difficult to decide which is the correct perspective, really because contradictory values are proposed. Observing these dynamics, we can remember some researches of Gregory Bateson about schizophrenia (1956; 1963); he wrote about a clinical case, showing the characteristic of schizophrenic communication: a mother sees her son after a long period of hospitalization [15,16]. The son

tried to embrace his mother, but she became stiff; her son (perceiving her rigidity) stopped, so his mother apostrophizes him in the following way: "You must not be afraid to communicate your feelings." There is a confusion of message and meta-message, and according to Bateson we know that in this situation some contradictory messages are communicated, and this attitude can cause: guilt, confusion and communicative difficulties. He affirms (Bateson, 1963) that these kinds of communications, represent perfect scenery for the creation of a schizophrenic personality. As a matter of fact he wrote about the "double bind" describing a paradoxical chaos that can contribute to confuse the subject, create misunderstandings and disorganize him. We must remember also the experiments of Neal Miller on the guinea-pigs (1941): he offered lard to these animals, immediately provoking them an electric shock, so they began to be confused and developed some irrational behaviours. Thanks to these researches has been created a theory: when attraction and repulsion are in equilibrium the most probable reaction is an irrational behaviour. Can these experiments help us to better understand the contradictions of the iper-modern era? The skill to manage the complexity is a human characteristic, but up to which point this skill can be used to manage some constant paradoxes? Perhaps because of these facts today we can see the presence of a strong qualitative change of the mental suffering [16-18]. As a matter of fact Gaddini (1984) stated that the patients continually change, also coherently with external social events that stimulating psychopathological symptoms (that otherwise would have been silent); in this way were born some new epidemic pathologies. What is happening today? Someone stated that we are sailing with increasing speed toward the psychosis [19].

This affirmation seems consistent with the frequent presence of contradictory messages and opposite impulses. How can psychology and psychoanalysis answer to a new kind of mental suffering? How the psychoanalysts are changed? [1]. These questions are very important because the social context is changed, and this revolution, in which we are inevitably involved as subjects and as clinicians, also influences the development of psychotherapy that has to deal with new needs; we meet therefore new challenges: some kinds of subclinical psychosis (also called "white psychosis"), somatizations, alexithymia, difficulties to symbolize [5,20-22]. These symptoms are born in correlation to some aspects of this paradoxical reality, hardly susceptible of psychological elaboration. This difficulty or impossibility to be sufficiently structure and elaborate the experiences

reveals the crisis of the meta-social warranties that we have already mentioned [2].

## Conclusions

Examining this historical excursus, we can remember what Waters and Sroufe observed (1983): in the past, mental disorders have been explained like dimensions regarding only the individual and his inner reality, rather than try to understand the symptoms also in relationship with the social context [23]. Today we are aware that is fundamental to improve our clinical practice opening a reflection on the social phenomena that function as background. As a matter of fact this examination allows to open new questions and analyze in depth the relationship among subject and society. Certainly approaching the knowledge and care of the person means also simultaneously examining various aspects: "horizontal relationships", "vertical relationships", "inter systemic relationships", and their intertwining. The so-called "horizontal relationships" (ie between individual and individual, individual and group, individual and external environment) interface with both "vertical relationships" (ie along the axis of knowledge, which connects the sensory event to perception and thought), and with the "inter systemic relationships" (between mind, soma, and environment): the mutual influence between these dimensions is certainly a relevant aspect of our existence, and that it is therefore important to overcome the classical point of view concerning society, individual, and the contrast between these two concepts, trying to understand how the mutual influences between these entities are articulated, and how their mutual dynamics develop together [24-28]. An excursus that shows how the subject and society evolve together can therefore be consistent with this purpose. According to Bensayag (2015) we can finally specify that present analysis is certainly in contrast with the diffused idea that we are in an epoch distinguished by the greatest part of the historical periods thanks to its great realism [18]: we intend to put in discussion this sentence. Only through a critical approach we can be really involved in the social realities and in the circles of mutual influence between individual and society.

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