FEAR, AFFECTIVE SEMIOSIS, AND MANAGEMENT OF THE PANDEMIC CRISIS: COVID-19 AS SEMIOTIC VACCINE?

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an extraordinary challenge to clinicians, health care institutions and policymakers. The paper outlines a psychoanalytically grounded semiotic-cultural psychological interpretation of such a scenario. First, we underline how the actual emotional reaction (mainly of fear) of our society is a marker of how the mind functions in conditions of affective activation related to heightened uncertainty: it produces global, homogenizing and generalizing embodied interpretations of reality, at the cost of more fine-grained and differentiated analytical thought. Such a process, called affective semiosis, represents an adaptive response to the emergency in the short-term. Second, we argue that this adaptive value provided by affective semiosis will be reduced when we have to deal with the process of managing the transition to the post-crisis and the governance of the medium and long-term impact of the crisis. Third, we suggest that, in order to manage the pandemic crisis on a longer temporal frame, affective semiosis has to be integrated with less generalized and more domain-specific ways of interpreting reality. To this end, semiotic capital (i.e., culturally-mediated symbolic resources) should be promoted in order to enable people to interiorize the supra-individual and collective dimension of life. Accordingly, COVID-19 is proposed as a semiotic vaccine, a disruption in our everyday life routines which has the potential of opening the way to a semiotic re-appropriation of the collective dimensions of our experience.

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1. Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 has determined what is now represented as the biggest world-wide crisis since World-War II. In order to contain the infection rate among the population and not overload the health systems, most of the affected countries have been implementing emergency lockdown measures. In Italy – the second country worldwide after China to be massively hit by the crisis – strong measures have been established by the Government, firstly applied to the so-called "red-zone" (Lombardia, and fourteen provinces of Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Piemonte and Marche), then to the whole country (Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers, 9 March 2020). It goes without saying that the current situation may be experienced as extremely threatening. The threat is felt at different and interrelated levels: individual concerns – e.g., the fear of getting infected and/or of infecting someone else, of losing friends or relatives, of being alone, of not "making it" economically – intertwine themselves with the generalized sense of being projected into a global scenario of uncertainty, where nothing will ever be as before. As Time (2020) reported: "we must get it into our heads that our lives have changed".

This situation poses a hard challenge to clinicians, health care institutions and policymakers, because it merges different conditions that probably are active together for the first time. On the one hand, millions of people's psycho-physical health is at risk and therefore interventions aimed at protecting and restoring individual wellbeing are a strategic priority; on the other hand, people are also unintentional drivers of the pandemic and by reason of this they have to be seen as the target of social and economic measures aimed at neutralizing their potential contribution to the spreading of the virus. And all this has to be done together with policies enabling the whole system to contain the impact of both COVID-19 and of interventions to counteract it.

Thus, COVID-19 proves to be a scenario where health and social dimensions are embedded recursively within each other: the evolution of the health situation depends on how society manages the lockdown, the practicability and control of which is in turn a function of the pandemic dynamics. As a result of this intertwinement, classical distinctions between levels of analysis and interventions (i.e., the individual level of the personal psycho-physical health and the systemic level of the governance of society's economic and health conditions) break down, leading to the emergence of a challenging new pattern of critical problems – that, to add a further element, have to be understood and

addressed very rapidly.

Like many other categories, scholars of clinical and social sciences are called on to face this challenge. A task they can address is to use their theories to frame interpretive models of the current scenario and outline its evolutionary trajectories. This function could prove to be relevant because the newness of the situation created by COVID-19 means that our toolkits of methods, criteria and solutions, elaborated in/for different conditions and contexts, cannot be taken for granted but, if needed, reworked in order to adjust to the new challenge.

The current paper has been written in the middle of the pandemic (first half of April 2020) and, from within such a temporal framework, is meant to provide a contribution in this direction, with the focus on what kind of tomorrow is waiting for us. Based on the conceptual framework of the psychoanalytically-based Semiotic Cultural Psychology Theory (SCPT, Salvatore, 2018; Salvatore & Venuleo, 2013; Valsiner, 2007, 2014), it provides (a) an interpretation of the psychosocial dynamics underpinning how society is currently engaging with the pandemic emergency; (b) a scenario hypothesis of the possible evolutionary trajectory of this psychosocial dynamics, and their potential negative impact on medium-term crisis management; and (c) the proposal of some strategic and methodological criteria aimed at reducing the risk of this negative impact.

2. What is happening? The role of the fear

2.1. Cues

Considers the following phenomena that characterize how different people have been dealing with the lockdown.

- *Polarized connotations.* On one hand, one can observe many instances of in-group idealization: people sing together from balconies, activate solidarity networks (free psychological assistance, free help-lines, voluntary assistance for old people and poor people), express a deep sense of being part of a collective event that cannot but have a positive end because it concerns the good group - what happens to us cannot be bad because we are good (e.g., the first page of the most read Italian sports newspaper published the words of the 2006 World Championship Italian soccer team's coach: "Our country is strong. If there is a problem, we say: 'now I'll show you what to do'"). On the other hand, there are a corresponding number of signals of the connotation of other persons (even of the same group) as an enemy, the source of all troubles and problems (e.g., newspapers and news agencies used titles like "Hunt the runner"[see Rondelli, 2020] or "Hunt the plague spreader" [see Terranova, 2020]). The same polarized connotation can be observed with regard to political institutions and policymakers: extremely positive – e.g., "thoughtful caring father", "the saviour of the country" – and extremely negative representations and claims – "we need to have a new Nuremberg", "dictator"– run in parallel on social media, fuelling each other.
- *War language.* Discourses around the pandemic prove to be framed by affect-laden metaphors and contexts, with a clear prevalence of war language –COVID-19 an "enemy to defeat", hospitals are "the trenches", doctors and nurses as "heroes on the military front", the counteraction against the virus as a "war".
- *Appealing of conspiracy theories.* The web is plenty of videos and articles claiming and providing evidence that COVID-19 is a bacteriological war or a way of manipulating the financial market. These theories persist in spite of the opposing evidence published in respected scientific journals and counterevidence provided by experts. President Donald Trump has pandered to conspiracy theories, talking about the "Chinese virus" and "virus of Wuhan" (Cassandro, 2020). To give just one example coming from Italy, a video broadcast in 2015 on a national channel, talking about the creation in a Chinese laboratory of a coronavirus strain has been circulated as evidence of the conspiracy, rapidly going viral. Experts were ready to clarify that the Sars-CoV-2 responsible for COVID-19 is not reproducible in the laboratory, but the video was shared many times on the Internet anyway, accompanied by alarmist comments and violent allegations against Chinese people.
- *Confusion between individual and systemic standpoints.* Evidence from China, South Korea, Italy, and Iran suggest that COVID-19's lethality is quite low in the population, with the exception of older people and people with serious pre-existing conditions (Novel, C.P.R.E., 2020). As many commentators have highlighted, for most people the health emergency does not represent a concern for them as individuals; rather, it is a threat for the health systems' capacity to cope with the impact of the massive increase in demand for intensive care due to the pandemic. In spite of this, the prevailing feeling among people is the fear of being mortally infected and the belief that they must therefore stay at home to protect their personal health. Needless to say, the view of the staying at home as a systemic epidemiological measure aimed at reducing the speed of the infection (i.e., the reproduction number) is recognized; and yet, it occupied little space in the media and in daily life discourses compared to the emotional connotation of the lockdown as individual/family protection.

These signals highlight the emotional nature of most people's reaction to the pandemic. Such a phenomenon is not at all surprising, as we are told by many scientific theories as well as our daily experience. A reaction of fear, and more in general an affective activation of anxiety, is the common response to conditions and events that are a major violation of the expected state (e.g., LeDoux, 1996; Proulx, & Inzlicht, 2012; for a review, see Townsend, Eliezer & Major, 2013; for an analysis of the emotional response to a pandemic, see Kim & Niederdeppe, 2013). Accordingly, the signals listed above can be seen as manifestations of the spreading of this basic biological-based mechanism at the level of the population. Terror Management Theory (Greenberg & Arndt, 2012; Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszczynski, 1991) has convincingly shown that people react to basic anxiety associated with the salience of death by increasing their adherence to affect-laden and identity grounded generalized beliefs (ideologies, religious credo, traditional values), usually based on the ingroup-outgroup polarization (cf. also Mannarini & Salvatore, 2019). Among other manifestations, this polarization expresses itself in the militarization of language as well as in idealized and counter-idealized representation of otherness (e.g., Mannarini, Veltri & Salvatore, 2020; Salvatore, Avdi et al, 2019a). Again, the fear responses to epidemics and pandemics have

already proved to be fertile motivational drivers for conspiracy theories, as for instance shown by studies focused on the H1N1 influenza in 2009 (Smallman, 2015) and the Ziza epidemic in 2015 (Smallman, 2018). Another example is provided by the spread of beliefs identifying the causes and drivers of AIDS, blamed variously on, groups such as gays, intravenous drug users, and prostitutes (Kalichman, 2009; Niehaus & Jonsson, 2005; Wagner-Egger et al., 2011). From a different, yet complementary perspective, the overlapping of the systemic and individual standpoint can be interpreted as the marker of a key characteristic of how the mind works in conditions of fear, and more in general of affective activation. Indeed, such a state is characterized by the salience of generalized affect-laden meanings that enslave sensemaking to produce homogenizing interpretations of the reality within which all elements are assimilated to each other, in a single whole – e.g., Italians are good people; politicians are thieves. Henceforth, we refer to this process with the term *affective semiosis* (Salvatore & Freda, 2011; see below, § 3.3).

2.2. The adaptive role of the fear response

It has to be highlighted that the emotional response – and the underpinning salience of the affective semiosis – has proved to be an adaptive way of coping with the urgency of the pandemic crisis. This is not surprising, given that fear arousal plays a major role in adaptation, enabling the organism to break routines and mobilize the cognitive and physical resources for the vital task of coping with the emergency (e.g., Coombs, Fediuk & Holladay, 2007; Greenberg & Safran, 1987; Jin, 2009; Lang, 1979; Lazarus, 1991; Naby, 2003; Samoilov & Goldfried, 2000). Epstein (1994, 1998) suggests that a personally meaningful emotional experience is more likely to produce change, compared to information provided at a rational level (e.g., cognitive restructuring). Evidence from cognitive science and experimental psychology (e.g., Anand, Ward, & Tatikonda, 2010; Polanyi, 1966) has shown that tacit knowledge – which involves the emotional-affective system and represents the most archaic, deeply rooted structure common to all of the most evolved species – provides an "immediate knowing response" that directs the organism to action. This is consistent with daily experience, in which plenty of cases show that emotions, and more particularly fear, can be a more effective driver of habit change than analytic thought. For instance, a sizeable proportion of the population is aware of the harmful consequences for their health of their high fat diet or of smoking, without apparently being either willing or able to do much about it (Hirani & Newman, 2005). However, when they are caught up by strong fear and feel that their survival is at stake, they may more probably break their entrenched habits and, at least in the short term, try to change. Frightened by a pain in the back, smokers book the medical check-up that has always been postponed and – at least temporarily – throw away their pack of cigarettes.

With respect to the COVID-19 emergency, it is reasonable to think that the widespread fear response has worked as a powerful trigger of protective behaviours (e.g., frequently washing hands, wearing masks) as well as a decisive inhibitor of habits which had to be broken to enable the lockdown measures to be followed. Needless to say, with reference to the Italian context, the measures were not universally followed, with quite a few people contravening orders, as shown by the high number of fines issued by the police. However, although not absolute, and although it may prove to be lower than in other European countries, the level of compliance of the Italian population was markedly higher than one could have expected if one considers the quite low level of social capital (public spirit, trust in institutions, commitment to the common goods) characterizing Italian communities (e.g., Salvatore, Avdi et al, 2019a), and at any rate high enough to enable the systemic effectiveness of the lockdown.

A similar association between fear and compliance was found with regard to other pandemics. For instance, higher perceived fear of SARS was associated to compliance with quarantine measures in Taiwan (Hsu et al., 2006); increased observation of quarantine during the H1N1 pandemic in Australia occurred when a family member was infected, which again may be associated with increased perceived risk of disease transmission (McVernon, 2011).

Furthermore, emotional activation mobilizes relational resources, creating a dense solidarity network made of large and small gestures of generosity, participation, mutual help, encompassing the society as a whole, unified in the fight against the shared enemy. Examples range from the many companies like Ferrari and Armani that converted their production to make sanitary equipment, to the mobilization on a voluntary basis of thousands of health personnel, from the myriad of actions aimed at providing assistance to elderly non-autonomous people, through to the impressive amounts of funds raised by public and private institutions.

3. What can we expect will happen in near future?

3.1. Scenarios

One can be optimistic that, also thanks to the societal reaction fuelled by the fear response, the reaction to the acute pandemic crisis will be able to produce results. What has already happened in China and Southern Korea – and seems to be occurring in Italy –gives grounds to think that the speed of infection (the so-called R_0) will slow down and thus that the health system will be able to withstand the impact.

However, it must be recognized that this optimism concerns just one part of the world – it is quite a Eurocentric belief, which cannot be generalized. This is because the public health systems of many countries (e.g., African and Latin-American countries, but also some economically advanced countries like the US) are unable to support the burden of even a slowed-down epidemic and/or because of the passive policies adopted (e.g., see the case of Brazil and, at least in the first stage of the crisis, of the UK). Accordingly, it must be highlighted that the considerations below refer only to countries where the peak of the infection is expected to arrive in a reasonably close future. On the other hand, as the following discussion implies, this limit of generalizability provides a further argument to our thesis (i.e., the forecast that the exit from the crisis is not just around the corner).

The key question to ask is what will happen once the pandemic is contained, when the peak of infection has been reached and the spread starts to slow down? What already occurred in China and is now occurring in Italy shows that the management of the crisis does not end with the first success in containing the infection. After that, there are three scenarios that can be imagined.

First, as has been recognized, the lockdown eeds

to be kept up for several weeks, even months after the peak (Alvarez, Argente, & Lippi, 2020; Karin et al. 2020; Pueyo, 2020). In China, restrictions on the movements of Wuhan citizens ended on 8th April, after 76 days from the beginning of the pandemic and almost two months after the peak (13th February; Center for Systems Science and Engineering, 2000). In Italy, the first Western country to introduce major restrictive measures, the (partial) lockdown at the level of the national territory started on 9th March, about two months after China; the peak was reached on 21st March (Dipartimento Protezione Civile, 2020), and since then, the infection slope has been decreasing more slowly than in China. Thus, one can expect the restrictive measures to be kept in place for at least several more weeks, a forecast consistent with the decision taken by the Italian Government as we are writing to prolong the restrictive measures up 3rd May. And it cannot be ruled out that the lockdown could be even longer if the higher infection rate in neighbouring countries where the pandemic started later should impinge on the falling trend in countries where it started earlier.

Second, once the pandemic has been stopped and zero new cases are observed, this does not mean that the virus will have been fully eradicated. Epidemic hotbeds in countries where Sars-CoV-2 arrived later will make it necessary to manage the transition to normality, maintaining high levels of alert without falling into the temptation of a local short-term strategy (Gates, 2020; Nacoti et al, 2020; Radulescu & Cavanagh, 2020). Countries will enter this transition scenario gradually, in scattered order. For instance, the Italian Government has clarified that the so-called "Phase 2" of the exit from the lockdown will be progressive – economic activities will be the first to re-start; schools will come back to hosting students in the new scholastic year, in September 2020. It has been suggested that there could be a differentiated resumption of social and economic life over the national territory, by reason of the different infection rates of the Northern and Southern regions. Probably – and hopefully – the transition scenario will see institutional efforts of trans-national coordination of socio-sanitary policies (e.g., in fields like scientific and pharmaceutical research, health organization, regulation of frontiers, transportation); on the other hand, it will involve people in their daily habits (e.g., limitation of movements, use of protective masks, adoption of social caution; trackability of social contacts). It has been envisaged (Tuite, Fisman, & Greer, 2020) that the management of the transition may require a yo-yo strategy, with an alternation of periods of absence of measures and brief periods of re-activation of restrictions to deal with new outbreaks of infection in their early stages.

Third, the transition scenario can be expected to end only when a medical solution to COVID-19 is found, something experts foresee could take between one and two years (Anderson et al., 2020). After that, however, the game will not be over, because a post-crisis scenario will emerge. This is so for two main reasons. On the one hand, the restrictive measures adopted to tackle the pandemic will leave very critical issues behind (e.g., risk of generalized economic recession, large increment of public debt, destruction of jobs; possible weakening of the EU) (Remuzzi & Remuzzi, 2020). On the other hand, it must be recognized that the pandemic crisis has highlighted potential elements of development. For example, the awareness of the need to empower the health system (subjected in the last twenty years to a progressive dismantling in most Western societies as a result of neoliberal policies); the recognition of

the capacity of democratic institutions to cope with such a complex crisis; the perspective of a possible, more advanced balance between individual rights and systemic constraints, in the domain of the protection of strategic common goods like health; the role of scientific knowledge in political decision-making. Moreover, it would be highly desirable that institutions – from territorial to international level – could make an effort to learn from the experience and elaborate more or less radical solutions to avoid future pandemics. Indeed, one need not adopt a conspiracy approach to realize that COVID-19 is not an isolated event due just to the malignity of Mother Nature. Pandemics, have been occurring more and more often for the last two decades (Smith et al, 2014), and it is reasonable to hypothesize that in this phenomenon a role is played by the socio-economic conditions fuelled by globalization (e.g., dramatic increase in interconnectivity, climate change, intensive livestock production, weakening/lack of development of health systems). So far, with few exceptions, the institutions have addressed pandemics in a reactive way, as if they were always faced with a new emergency, rather than in terms of a strategic, global and systemic design aimed at reducing the impact of distal causes and enabling rapid, coordinated measures of containment in the early stages of the insurgence of hotbeds. A paradigmatic exception of this attitude, that should indicate the road to take, is South Korea which, after the SARS pandemic, designed a prevention plan that proved to be efficacious in reducing the impact of COVID-19 in that country.

3.2. The psychosocial resources issue

The considerations presented in the previous sub-paragraph highlight that the pandemic crisis has to be conceived at least in a medium-term temporal perspective, rather than as a short-time response to the acute urgency of the current moment. Such a recognition raises a central question: are the psychosocial resources people are mobilizing in response to the acute stage of the pandemic suited to support the management of the crisis in its whole breadth and depth?

Institutions are rightly making efforts to gather and develop the structural and technical resources needed to manage the crisis as well as to face the impact of the management itself on society (e.g., new doctors and nurses, hospital beds, drugs, availability of credit and financial support, platforms for smart working, apps to track infections, computational forecasting models, new administrative formats and normative frameworks, and so forth). Yet, psychological drivers play an essential role in grounding, motivating, and channelling the social and individual behaviour: structural and technical resources are necessary, but they are not sufficient, because they still have to be implemented by human beings. Therefore, the distribution within the population of the psychological resources (i.e., worldviews, interpretative frameworks, beliefs, modes of feeling, thinking, and acting) underpinning people's capability to address the crisis is a strategic issue that has implications far beyond the sphere of individual wellbeing: it concerns the whole capacity of the system to reduce the impact of COVID-19 and to prepare for the chance that a similar event could happen in the near future.

In our view, so far the issue of psychosocial resources and their promotion has been substantially backgrounded by institutions – people are seen, at the best, as persons to support in terms of the subjective

impact produced on them by the crisis (e.g., distress, fear and depressive states) rather than a strategic target to empower because of their being the drivers of the crisis management. Precisely in the days we are writing this paper, the Italian Health Minister has launched a call for psychologists willing to deliver psychological support to the population on a voluntary basis. This Government action is appreciable per se, yet it attests to the logic outlined above – namely, the implicit idea that, in time of pandemic, people are those to be helped, rather than those who help.

This "reparative" approach grasps only one side of the coin, and it could prove to be more and more insufficient the more the scenario of the crisis evolves progressively in the three forms envisaged above. At a first level of analysis, this is so because the fear response in unable to support the mobilisation of behavioural and cognitive resources for a prolonged time. Indeed, the fear response is reactive to a trigger, programmed to interrupt routines (Gray & McNaughton, 2000) and, in so doing, to make the organism's resources converge in order to cope with a super-ordered survival need. Accordingly, the fear response – therefore, its motivational power – persists insofar as the alarm trigger is active and it is, however, prone to fade away as a result of desensitization. Accordingly, one can expect the following critical spiral: the more the lockdown is prolonged, the less the emotional activation will be able to support compliance with the restrictive measures; as a result, the more the institutional communication will stress warnings about risks, and the more this will accelerate further the process of desensitization. In the Italian context, one can already pick up some indications that can be read as first signals of such a cycle: just a few days after the announcement that the peak of infection had been reached and that the slope had started to decrease though quite slowly, sports newspapers began to discuss the imminent re-starting of the football championships. Again, after the announcement of the peak being reached, the number of people contravening the stay at home restrictions increased so that political and sanitary authorities considered it necessary to seriously warn against the risk of letting our guard down.

This spiral is associated with three quite critical problems. First, it could lead to a global reduction of compliance. Second, this would mean a further need for restrictive measures and therefore further damages to the socio-economic system and psycho-social conditions. Third, as an important side effect, it would mean a further intensification of the polarization of the institutional and political agenda on the pandemic, and the consequent backgrounding of the many other issues (e.g., economy, justice, education migration, climate change) involved in governing a system as complex as contemporary societies.

In sum, the fear response can help in the short-term in coping with the crisis but not in the process of management of the transition to the post-crisis and the governance of the medium-term impact of the crisis. To make an analogy, the fear response is a kind of doping with immediate release, that is useful for the sprinter but is harmful if taken by the marathoner.

3.3. Beyond the fear response: the SCPT model of affective semiosis

The issue is even more complex insofar as one takes the affective semiosis underpinning the fear response into account. Indeed, as implied in previous discussion (cf. §2.1), the fear response is associated with the salience of affective semiosis. Accordingly, a deep comprehension of the former requires the latter to be taken into account. To this end, a brief outline of the Semiotic Cultural Psychology Theory (SCPT)'s model of affective semiosis is provided below, in order to frame the following analysis of psychosocial processes underpinning people's current response to the pandemic crisis as well as the possible evolutionary trajectories.

At the core of the SCPT there is the view of the individual as a sensemaker, namely a subject engaged continuously with the interpretation of experience (Salvatore, 2018; Valsiner, 2007). This on-going interpretative activity is grounded on affective semiosis, namely on the process of structuring the whole state of the experience in terms of the basic affective embodied meanings (e.g., pleasant/unpleasant; powerful/powerless; active/passive) (Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Salvatore & Venuleo, 2008). This means that SCPT conceives of affects as the basic component of the semiotic dynamics of sensemaking, rather than mere neuro-physiological processes (Salvatore, 2016). Affective semiosis is always active, even when it is outside the focus of consciousness; it shapes the global coupling between the organism and the environment without interruption, as a kind of "neuro-physiological barometer" (Barret Feldman, 2006, p.30) which selects discrete events and objects that are part of the field of experience and channels their representation. Incidentally, this means that affective semiosis is not confined to connotating objects that are already experienced by the subject; rather, affective semiosis filters and constrains the field of experience, foregrounding the elements of the field that are consistent with it. In this sense, affective semiosis is *constitutive* of the experience (Salvatore, 2016; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011). Idealization is the emblematic example of the process of foregrounding of positive facets and backgrounding of negative facets; thanks to this work of selection, an object endowed with the characteristics of perfection and goodness is constituted.

This semiotic view of affects – i.e., the affects as a peculiar mode of sensemaking, characterized by the production of *global*, *absolutizing* and *homogenizing* interpretations of the reality – is at grounds of several psychological theories in domains like emotion (Barret Feldman, 2006; Niedenthal, Halberstadt & Innes-Ker, 1999), meaning (Osgood, Tannenbaum & Suci, 1957), and community relationship (Mannarini & Salvatore, 2019). Moreover, it is a key contribution of psychoanalysis, framed within the re-reading of the Freudian notion of primary process from a semiotic perspective (Carli & Paniccia, 1999; Fornari, 1979; Kirshner, 2010; Matte Blanco, 1975; Muller & Brent, 2000; Neuman, 2000; Salvatore & Venuleo, 2008, 2009, 2017; Sanchez-Cardenas, 2011). A paradigmatic example of the absolutizing and homogenizing nature of affective semiosis is the tendency of a large segment of Western society to interpret the social landscape in terms of the representation of the other – variously seen as migrants, political elite, Europe, Arabs, bureaucrats in Brussels – as a *threatening enemy* (Mannarini & Salvatore, 2020). To refer to the context of COVID-19, in several countries Chinese restaurants and shops were avoided, being considered dangerous; in certain cases, Chinese people living in the host country for many years were subjected to verbal and even physical aggression, as if they were responsible of the contagion. All these facts can be viewed as manifestations of the same homogenizing tendency of affective semiosis: the virus,

Chinese people and Chinese goods are assimilated to the same homogeneous affective class of "what comes from China", with the effect of transferring all negative valences associated with the virus to all the members of the class. The same can be said for the first COVID-19 patients, who in certain contexts were seen as infectors, namely assimilated to the negative valence of Sars-CoV-2. Incidentally, the very fact that daily life but also institutional discourses systematically use the name of the disease (COVID-19) to denote its pathogen agent (Sars-CoV-2) is a clear instance of the metonymic (i.e., the part for the whole) homogenization characterizing affective semiosis.

A second core tenet of SCPT is that affective semiosis sets the sensemaker's mind so as to constrain his/her identification with sets of beliefs and attitudes that are available in the shared cultural milieu the sensemaker is embedded in. In other words, the preferred (for the subject) pattern of affective meaning in terms of which the sensemaker shapes the experience operates as a filter that "tunes" into just a certain area of the cultural milieu; in so doing, the preferred affective meaning constrains the chance of interiorizing only the cultural worldviews and beliefs that fit with it (here and henceforth, with interiorization we mean the transformation of the inter-psychic reality in an intra-psychic one, a concept share by psychoanalysis and cultural psychology; Wilson & Weinstein, [1990]). For instance, if a person enters a relation with the world by systematically connoting the experience in terms of an unpleasant and powerless field, he/she will be channelled to interiorize beliefs that picture others (institutions, people, migrants, and so forth) as threatening, untrustworthy and therefore to adhere to social and political ideologies based on/ referred to this kind of beliefs. Salvatore, Fini and colleagues (2018) identified five generalized, affect-laden worldviews (symbolic universes, in the authors' term) that are active in the European cultural milieu. The world as a nice, trustworthy place (*ordered universe*), the world as interpersonal linkages (*interpersonal bond*), the world as a source of support for one's own agency (*caring society*), the world as a jungle and the primary network the shelter from it (*niche of belongingness*), and the world as an anomic, hopeless place, belonging to those who have power (*other's world*). They have shown that each symbolic universe is embedded in a particular underpinning pattern of more basic affective meaning – e.g., the ordered universe is channelled by the pattern of affective meaning emerging from the combination of the affective connotation of the world as "good/friend", and of one's position with respect to it as "active/engaged". Thus, the SCPT grounds the linkages between the individual mind and the cultural milieu on affective meaning. On the one hand, the sensemaker's mind is structured by a biologically based affective language; on the other hand, these affective semantics sets the mind to interiorize the cultural meanings that are consistent with the preferred affective pattern of meaning (Salvatore, 2016).

Third, affective semiosis can have a variable salience in sensemaking. As stated above, it does not stop working as the grounds of the interpretation of reality; the sensemaker can introduce further dimensions of meaning (e.g., shared values, specific semantic contents such as ideas and beliefs, normative frameworks, plans and purposes, information, scientific based knowledge, validation criteria) to a variable extent, and in this way his/her mode of thinking can gain higher or lower levels of differentiation (Salvatore, 2016; Salvatore, Palmieri et al, 2019). Thus, the capacity of detecting the complexity of the reality does not depend on the fact

that affective semiosis is switched off; rather, it depends on how many components of meaning are "added" to the basic sensemaking process. The less is added, the more the interpretation will reflect the basic structuring of experience provided by the affective meaning only. The prototype of this form of sensemaking, enslaved to affective semiosis, is feeling, thinking and acting in terms of the *foe-friend* schema, in accordance to which the world is divided into just two classes: those on my side versus the rest of the world; no other distinction is made and, therefore, both classes work as "the dark night where every cow is black". In contrast, the more one adds further dimensions of meaning, the more the incidence of the affective meaning is "diluted" – namely, the less salient it is in the representation of reality.

3.4. Evolutionary trajectories of sensemaking

The SCPT models proposed in the previous sub-paragraph frame our scenario hypothesis on potential critical trajectories of the psychosocial dynamics underpinning the management of the crisis.

As envisaged above, in the near future people will not only have to accomplish the task of complying with negative regulations – e.g., remain at home, keep your distance from other people – and adopting routines – e.g., washing hands, wearing a mask. In fact, they will have the harder task of modulating their behaviour in daily life according to, time and situation, finding contingent balances between the multiple demands of life (e.g., social relations, work requirements) and the requirements of the post-crisis management. Moreover, people will have to do this over an extended temporal window, rather than "in apnea" – as the momentary reaction to a storm. Each of us will have to make daily life choices in condition of ambiguity and conflict – i.e., mediating continuously between consolidated habits and the new rules of prevention and precaution implicitly conveying a different model of social relationships. In the final analysis, this means that people will be asked to integrate a reference to an *abstract common good* – the management of the risk of resurgence of the pandemic – in their mindsets, as a salient regulator of their way of feeling, thinking and acting.

Our core hypothesis is that *it will be hard for such a complex socio-cognitive task to be accomplished by forms of affective semiosis.* Indeed, as discussed above (§3.3), modes of thinking characterized by the salience of affective semiosis provide people with simplified modes of interpreting the world. Stereotyped thought as well as discourses characterized by a high level of mobilization of affects (e.g., political discourse exalting the national identity in a context of polarized conflict; Farquet, 2014; Klima, 2004) are emblematic instances of the simplifying power of affective semiosis.

The salience of affective meaning means a self-referential way of thinking, aimed at reproducing the grounds of the system of assumptions, rather than exploring the reality analytically. This way of thinking leads the sensemaker to take his/her experience for granted, so that this experience becomes unquestionable, concrete, saturated, invariant, and made of rigid positions, clear-cut yes/no statements, and polarized evaluations enslaved to the in-outgroup differentiation. Thus, the greater the salience of affective semiosis, the less people are able to use cognition to explore, to modulate, to learn from errors, to valorise the plurality of standpoints – in the final analysis, to go beyond the absolutization of their lifeworld and to assimilate the systemic dimension of the common

goods within their subjective life (for the interpretation of the affective meaning as inability to interiorize the systemic dimension of life, see Salvatore, Fini et al, 2018; Salvatore, Mannarini et al., 2019a).

One could hazard a prediction of what could happen if people were to go on engaging with the forthcoming stages of the crisis using the same affect-laden modes adopted to cope with its acute insurgence. A broad segment of the population will prove to be unable to interiorize the systemic dimension of the crisis and therefore to regulate its behaviour accordingly. So far, this interiorization has not been necessary, because it overlaps with the threatening individual meaning of the pandemic (see § 2.1). Yet, once the acute stage of the crisis has been overcome, concerns associated with the personal/interpersonal sphere will be backgrounded; as a result, in the absence of the psychological capacity to interiorize the abstract, systemic dimension of crisis management, it is probable that many people will simply be blind and deaf to it. Needless to say, they will recognize the existence of the crisis scenario, but they will represent it as a conjectural reality, empty of any anchorage to their subjective life. Thus, the requirements of crisis management will be experienced by many people as they experience many other systemic objects (e.g., climate change, European Union, State institutions, economic inequality): as evanescent ideas lacking any relevance to the self, therefore unable to regulate feeling, evaluations and choices. As a result, many people's social behaviour will be inconsistent, even in overt contrast, with the requirements of crisis management. Just to mention some emblematic instances of these inconsistent/conflicting behaviours – signals whose potential emergence are already identifiable – consider: the foregrounding of individual needs with respect of institutional norms; the negation of risks; the enactment of living styles claiming performatively that life has come back to normality; the lack of any interest for the issues concerning the post-crisis management.

It has to be added that one could expect a deep cleavage and a consequent polarized conflict between those blind-to-the-crisis people and those who will be able to keep themselves identified with the idealized endorsement of the normative framework associated with the management of the crisis (e.g., take the many discourses where the adherence to the lockdown is interpreted as a sign of national pride). A good example in group conflict is a video circulating on the web documenting a brawl in an Italian supermarket triggered by the insult one user addressed to the person before him in the queue, because he was not wearing a mask.

3.5. The embeddedness of the emotional response in the cultural milieu

The analysis of the possible evolutionary trajectories of psychosocial dynamics implies also a reverse standpoint: the focus on the role of psychological resources in crisis management has to be complemented by the focus on the potential impact of the crisis on psychological resources. In order to move in this direction, two preliminary points have to be outlined.

First, it is worth highlighting the peculiar way of considering the relation between affective meaning, emotion and reality that is implied in the SCPT model of affective semiosis. The SCPT steps back from the mainstream view of emotion as the response to the triggering stimulus and adopts a non-essentialist, pragmatist conceptualization of emotion (Barret

Feldman, 2006). This is done in a way that is consistent with psychoanalytic theory too, which considers the outside object the target, rather than the trigger of the phantasmatic meaning (Klein, 1967).

To put it briefly, according to the SCPT, the emotion comes after and is grounded on the affective interpretation of the whole field of the experience, as a further elaboration of it. This view derives from the SCPT tenet that the person first interprets the whole field of the experience in terms of homogenizing affective meanings (e.g., in terms of pleasant/unpleasant) and only then, on this basis, does he/she select and interpret the discrete elements of the field. Accordingly, when an affective embodied pattern of meaning goes beyond the threshold of activation and therefore enters the focus of the consciousness, this state needs to be interpreted. Thus, the sensemaker identifies the element of the field of experience that helps to make sense of it (Barlett Feldman, 2006). The feeling of the emotion (e.g., fear, disgusts, joy) makes up this interpretation, and the contextual elements the interpretation is anchored to assume the status of the interpretative sign of the emotion and of the underpinning affective activation.

The SPCT view of the constitutive nexus between affective semiosis and emotional response leads to a specific reading of the relation between COVID-19, fear and, more generally, anxiety. One could echo William James to synthetize such a reading: people feel fear not because there is COVID-19; rather, there is COVID-19 (i.e., the perception of certain characteristics of it) because people are affectively activated in an anxiety-like way. In what follows arguments to clarify and support this statement are provided.

Our interpretative thesis is that *people did not respond emotionally to the pandemic per se, but to the global media and institutional scenario mediating and shaping the representation of the pandemic.* People started to be concerned when and because of the fact that a sequence of ruptures in their quite stable personal and social routines occurred – e.g., the President of the Government communicating directly to the nation, TV broadcasts and newspapers monopolized by topics revolving around the pandemic, schools and offices closed, individual restrictions reducing individual freedom as had never happened before. Thus, one has to distinguish two different levels of analysis – at the functional level, these measures are the technical response to a socio-sanitary issue; at the semiotic level, they were the pattern of elements that in their totality afforded the affective-laden interpretation of the field of the experience as a whole. Anxiety is the affective meaning comprising this interpretation – that is, the embodied, generalized connotation of the whole field of experience as destroyed by a powerful enemy. In this basic form of affective semiosis one can trace the paranoid anxiety that qualifies the basic affective semiosis in terms of which the newborn shapes the experience of the absence of the good object – namely through its structuring as the presence of the destructive bad object (Klein, 1967; for a discussion of the schizoid-paranoid position as a constitutive form of affective semiosis, see Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011).

Thus, according to our interpretative hypothesis, anxiety – intended as a pattern of basic affective meaning – was the first embodied mode of making sense of the experience of the rapid disruptive change of the socio-institutional field. Fear, concerns, suspicion and so on came later, as emotions resulting from the anchorage of the affective meaning of anxiety to this or that element of the field (COVID-19, but also infectors, laboratories of genetic manipulation, untrustworthy

politicians and scientists).

To get an idea of the counterfactual evidence in support to this thesis, consider climate change – a real, concrete driver of catastrophic impact for the whole of humanity, exponentially more disruptive than Sars-CoV-2, yet unable to produce even remotely a reaction of fear like the pandemic can. People only recently are progressively becoming sensitive to climate change; and this, according to the SCPT framework, is not because they have thoroughly understood the risks of climate change, but because a sort of whole "semiotic blob" started to expand (e.g., Greta's media exposure) and to impact on the whole network of practices and discourses, therefore on the people's whole field of experience.

We have dwelt on presenting our interpretation of the role played by affective semiosis in mediating the relation between COVID-19 and the emotional response because we believe it leads to an enlargement of the analytic focus on the topic at hand. Indeed, to say that the psychological responses to the crisis depend on the affective interpretation of the whole field of experience implies that to understand them (and their evolution) one has to take into account the *context* and the *dynamics* of this affective interpretation – namely, the *cultural conditions within which it was activated*. In other words, the affective interpretation of the insurgence of the pandemic scenario, rather than depending on the inherent characteristics of COVID-19, reflects the patterns of affective meanings grounding the cultural milieu at the moment in which the interpretation was enacted.

A systematic analysis of the cultural context grounding the sensemaking of the insurgency of the pandemic goes beyond the scope of this paper. Here we simply refer to several authors who, from different perspectives, have highlighted how the contemporary socio-cultural landscape is characterized by an endemic condition of anxiety, fuelled by the deep uncertainty triggered by the socio-economic turmoil (economic inequality, anthropological transformation induced by migration flux, transformation of the forms of labour, technological acceleration, progressive human-machine synergies) induced by technological development and globalization (Elchardus & Spruyt; Mannarini & Salvatore, 2019; Inglehart & Norris, 2017; Russo, Mannarini & Salvatore, 2020). The *enemization of the other* – namely, the interpretation of the social field in terms of the foe/friend schema (Salvatore, Mannarini et al, 2019a) – is the marker of such a paranoid, anxiety-laden affective semiosis.

Thus, to conclude, the affective interpretation of the pandemic scenario in terms of anxiety is in full continuity with a key pattern of affective semiosis at the core of the cultural milieu. And, in the final analysis, this means that, regardless of the medical characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is the cultural anxiety already active in the cultural milieu that makes this interpretation – and the related fear response – prevail in many societies, rather than the opposite. This thesis could appear paradoxical; yet one can consider two aspects in support of it. First, the variability of the way the pandemic was approached among countries, which leads us to think that the interpretation was a function of the different affective frameworks characterizing the cultural milieu of those countries. For example, the Swedish view of the constitutional constraints preventing restriction measures can be seen as reflecting the affective interpretation of society as endowed with a holding capacity, an inherent "good" to be brought to the fore; or the initial orientation of

the UK Government to rely on herd immunity, which can be seen as reflecting the connotation focused on the in-group's power to defeat the enemy, whatever the individual sacrifice. Second, recent history teaches that the anxiety-like affective semiosis of the social landscape does not need an actually dangerous situation to be enacted. The political elite, the Euro, migrants or Arabs are examples of generalized signs used in recent years to fuel what someone has called the politics of fear (Wodak, 2015). Thus, one could generalize what was stated by Krasteva (2019) who, referring to migration and paraphrasing Sartre, observed that "If the migration crises did not exist, post-democratic leaders would have invented them" (p. 4).

3.6. The impact of the pandemic crisis on the cultural milieu

The last observations in this subsection are intended to have more than a merely speculative nature. They suggest an interpretation of what could be the semiotic impact of COVID-19 on the cultural milieu.

First, one has to consider that in this moment the "pandemic" (here and henceforth the quotation marks are used to refer to the sign, rather than to the actual event the sign stands for) is a *hyper-dense sign*, namely a sign that stands for the whole of social life. We live in the time of COVID-19: the pandemic is not felt and represented as an event – however significant – happening within our lives; rather, our lives unfold within the pandemic. Here the sense of being in the midst of the making of history lies, found in much discourse of this period.

The hyper-density of the "pandemic" makes it polysemic. That is, the sign "pandemic" is able to denote very many aspects of the social landscape, and is therefore used within a great many discourses and social practices, with different cultural and psychosocial content – e.g., one finds "pandemic" and associated signs (e.g., "contagious", "COVID-19, "crisis") within expressions of fear, concern, anger against those in charge, as well as in expressions of national pride, war, scientific language, institutional engagement, practices of active citizenship, acts of solidarity, feeling of concern, thankfulness, admiration, hope and so forth. All of these expressions are enacted in the same crucible that makes all people feel they are partaking of the same reality (the only recent experiences that, as middle-age Italians, we can compare were the few hours following the winning of the World Cup by the Italian team in 1982 and 2006; however they were very short-lived and did not cover all the population).

Now, in the near future one can expect that the hyper-density of the sign "pandemic" will fade away alongside its progressive loss of its centrality in public and private discourse. The gradual recovery of the social and productive routines will lead to the restoration of other social and discursive practices, that will gain new momentum in the cultural milieu. TV, newspapers, social media, political speeches, interpersonal conversations and the like will devote less and less space to the topics associated with the pandemic, while other new or old frames and objects will be foregrounded. The semiotic consequence of this inescapable (and hoped-for) process will be the progressive decay of the polysemy of the sign. In other words, the "pandemic" will stop being used by the whole society and will enter a specialized narrative and discursive circuit, associated with certain segments of society and therefore with this and/or that area of the cultural milieu. To find a similar

process, consider the evolution of the sign "Resistance" in the Italian context. After World War II and for about half a century, it was almost universally used as a hyper-dense sign identifying the essence itself of the Italian identity and its project of renaissance from the wartime destruction and the scourge of the civil war. In the last twenty-twenty five years it has lost this almost-universal coverage of the Italian society and in so doing has entered selected discursive circuits. As a result, in spite of many enduring efforts to counteract such a drift, it has become an identity sign for only a part of Italian society.

Needless to say, the "pandemic" will go on to be part and parcel of the scientific and technical discourse. Besides that, however, one can expect that, should the pattern of paranoid affective meaning remain as it is now, the "pandemic" will be progressively patterned with those narratives and discursive practices that share the same roots in the paranoid affective framework. In other words, we are envisaging an evolutionary scenario where the "pandemic" will lose its quality as a universal concept and will be drawn towards the cultural area providing worldviews, beliefs and values grounded on the paranoid affective interpretation of the context (e.g., anti-migrant narratives, hate speech, endorsement of populist, sovereign, far-right and xenophobic movements).

In their analysis of the cultural milieu of several European countries, Salvatore et al. (2019) identified a symbolic universe that is peculiar to this area of the cultural milieu: the niche of belonginess (see above, § 3.3). The incidence within the European societies of this symbolic universe varies from 22% (Estonia) to 50% (Greece). Moreover, subsequent analyses showed that this symbolic universe is associated with the centrality of identity motives and intolerance (Salvatore, Avdi et al, 2019b), vote choice in Brexit referendum (Veltri et al, 2019), association with a securitizing and de-humanizing framing of migration (Salvatore et al, 2020).

What the assimilation of the sign "pandemic" to this symbolic universe could lead to is not only the evolution of its meaning; but, more importantly, the fact that, due to this evolution, the incidence of the paranoid affective meaning conveyed by the sign could contribute to make this cultural area even more attractive than it is now. This would take place by favouring, for a certain segment of society, a linkage between the previous meanings associated with the sign in the acute stage of the crisis and the subsequent paranoid meaning – for instance, a linkage between the national pride associated originally to "pandemic" and the ingroup-outgroup polarization that is a peculiar component of the friend/foe schema at the core of the paranoid affective interpretation. Again, a linkage between the trust in the Government's capacity of take decisions and responsibility (part of the current meaning spectrum of "pandemic") and the call for an authoritarian simplification of the democratic institutions (typical issue of the political culture grounded on paranoid affective semiosis).

Such a process would not be totally new: one of the main drivers of populism and the far-right's political success over the last decade – in countries as Italy, France, Germany and US – has been its capacity to attract within its discourse horizon the pattern of signs concerning economic insecurity and inequality, and in so doing to drain the consensus of the segments of society anchored to that pattern of signs.

In sum, this evolutionary scenario suggests that the "pandemic" could further fuel the salience of the paranoid affective interpretation of the social landscape

within the cultural milieu and, therefore, the power to attract of narratives and social practices that mobilize the enemization of the other as the semiotic device to make sense to the radical uncertainty of contemporary society. And this would mean, concretely, to find the "COVID-19" sign merged metonymically with and further fuelling the paranoid discourses of ideological polarization, xenophobia, intolerance, revanchism, search for scapegoats, distrust of institutions, spreading of conspiracy theories, polarized idealizations of the in-group membership in juxtaposition to other social groups and/or countries and/or supra-national institutions, and so forth. Two hints of where these processes could lead: the Hungarian Parliament has given Orban full powers because of the pandemic crisis; in these days, in Italy a wave of comments and claims spreading over the social media against EU countries, guilty of "having abandoned" Italy to fight the pandemic alone.

4. What to do? The promotion of semiotic capital

From the discussion above, one can draw the following main practical implication: anxiety-like affective semiosis is unable to ground the modes of feeling, thinking and acting needed to address the new, more complex tasks that the evolution of the crisis management will bring at the fore. Accordingly, affective semiosis has to be integrated with less generalized and more domain-specific components of meaning thanks to which the sensemaker could map the social world in a more differentiated and functional way and, in so doing, empower his/her capacity to engage with the reality efficaciously.

4.1. Semiotic capital

In previous works one of us, with other colleagues, has modelled these further components of meaning in terms of *semiotic capital* (Salvatore, Fini et al, 2018). Semiotic capital is the cluster of embodied and symbolic meanings (implicit habits, worldview, values, social representations, cognitive models, pockets of implicit and explicit knowledge) that fuel the capacity of the individuals to interiorize the collective dimension of life and, in so doing, to make such interiorized dimension a pre-reflexive, embodied component of the experience: a concrete fact, a subjective significant regulative component of his/her identity. In so doing, the sensemaker can feel the relevant aspects of the social and political life as endowed with value of life (Salvatore, 2012). First, he/she can feel the collective interest as something that matters, therefore the common goods as a super-ordered framework of sense grounding the contingent attitudes and actions in concrete situations. Moreover, the embodied feeling of being part of a social world enables the sensemaker to recognize the value of regulative frameworks (the "rules of the game") and the interdependence among standpoints, therefore the need for structures and institutions to enable the cooperation and coordination required for collective action. Thus, the conditions and factors that political and social sciences have highlighted as relevant to social development (social capital, active citizenship, civic-mindedness, trust in others and institutions, tolerance of diversity) can be modelled as instantiation of the psycho-social and psychodynamic process of internalization of semiotic capital (Andriola et al, 2019).

On these grounds, several social and psychosocial phenomena – e.g., negative attitudes towards foreigners

(Salvatore, Mannarini, et al., 2019b), Brexit referendum (Veltri et al., 2019), the spread of anxiety in the way of perceiving the social reality (Salvatore, Mannarini et al., 2019a), the affectivization of the public sphere (Salvatore, Palmieri et al, 2019) – have been interpreted in terms of the variable distribution of semiotic capital within and among different cultural milieus, due in turn to the condition of radical uncertainty that characterizes contemporary societies (Salvatore, Mannarini, et al, 2019a). Incidentally, this view involves seeing the psychosocial resources as grounded on the cultural milieu, and therefore seeing individual modes of feeling, thinking and acting as the manifestations of the level of access to semiotic capital (Salvatore, Avdi et al, 2019b). However, this perspective does not imply a disavowal of individual differences and the role of constitutional and biographic factors in them. It focuses on a more general level of analysis because it reflects the need to think of systemic interventions that have the whole population as their target.

In sum, the components of meaning that enable the sensemaker to feel the systemic dimension of experience, and in so doing to make the regulation of the interdependence with others a taken-for-granted core component of the self, can be viewed as a kind of "semiotic antibody" of the great salience of anxiety-like sensemaking that characterized the current socio-political scenario, before the insurgency of the pandemic, and that risks being the cultural and subjective framework shaping the psychosocial modes of addressing the crisis.

4.2. The promotion of semiotic capital

The discussion above raises the issue of how semiotic capital can be promoted. Following Andriola and colleagues (2019), it is useful to distinguish between two complementary lines of action. First, the promotion of semiotic capital requires *structural systemic policies aimed at the global reduction of the level of uncertainty*. Indeed, as observed above (§ 3.5), the incidence of anxiety-like sensemaking in the cultural milieu – which is to say the low level of semiotic capital – is strictly connected to the state of radical existential uncertainty that constitutes participation in social life for vast segments of the population – above all, the so called "losers" of globalization (Teney, Lacewell & De Wilde, 2014; Williamson, 2005) but not only them. This is so because the salience of affective semiosis in sensemaking is the way people make sense of their world when it is too complex to be interpreted through more differentiated components of meaning (Salvatore, Mannarini et al, 2019a; Salvatore, Palmieri et al, 2019).

The structural interventions required to reduce uncertainty involve new economic policies aimed at: the reduction of inequality and economic insecurity; the limitation of the opacity and self-referentiality of the financial system, as well as its separateness with respect to production systems; the empowerment of the national and super-national regulative framework in order to place constraints on the increasing self-referentiality and, in so doing, to create a protective barrier from the aggression of the dynamics of globalization. Moreover, the reduction of uncertainty comes about through a new institutional deal that inverts the current trend characterizing many societies, where the institutions are perceived by citizens as part of the problems rather than a resource. Efforts have to be made to empower the institutions, and this not only in their technical and administrative efficiency, but also and above all

in their vision and mission: in their capacity of be attuned to – and promotional of – people's way of feeling and thinking. Again, a restoration of the vision and practice of the welfare system is much needed, with a radical inversion with respect to the neoliberal policies of dismantling. The welfare system is both the direct buffer to the uncertainty and the setting within which individuals can have concrete experiences – in key domains of life such as health, education – of the meaningfulness and promotional valence of the linkage with society and their institutions.

Second, the promotion of semiotic capital is a matter *of promoting innovative cultural resources as well as the psychosocial processes though which these resources are interiorized*. This requires investment in social and community infrastructures to foster this process of civic and socio-cultural innovation. This proposal is based on the recognition of the performative nature of sensemaking (Russo, Mannarini & Salvatore, 2020; Salvatore, & Venuleo, 2013) – namely, on the idea that meaning is promoted by enacting the social practices grounded by such a meaning. In other words, given a certain social practice, its enactment brings with it the cultural consolidation of the meaning working as the inherent criterion of regulation and justification of that social practice. For instance, to promote the value of cooperation, rather than advocating it, social practices grounded on the representation of otherness as a resource have to be implemented within the social group. First comes action, then meaning follows: a meaning is rooted within the social group's mindscape because it grounds and shapes the social action, therefore because it is enacted by such social action. Accordingly, semiotic capital emerges from the *generalizations of the structures of action settings*: the promotion of semiotic capital is carried out through the design and activation of settings of social practices that encapsulate the worldviews, the beliefs and the views of otherness making up the semiotic capital.

In this perspective, a strategic role is played by the intermediate social bodies (e.g., NGO, ad hoc groups, associations, organized forms of civic participation in local institutions). This is so because intermediate bodies represent the place where people's lifeworld and subjectivity meet the abstract universalistic dimension of the institutional framework and can be fused: the systemic institutional rule finds the way subjectivity is substantiated and at the same time individuals are involved in meaningful social practices favouring the interiorization of the systemic dimension. In this sense, intermediate social bodies are the natural hub of semiotic capital. On the other hand, intermediate bodies have been progressively losing their relevance, at least in Western societies, and this can be interpreted both as a main cause of the lack of semiotic capital and a clear marker of the current socio-political crisis (Russo, Mannarini & Salvatore, 2020).

4.3. Covid-19 as a semiotic vaccine

The mantra of "nothing will be as before" accompanies these days of pandemic. This refrain is a signal of the disruptive impact of the crisis and at the same time an expression of hope, through which people help themselves to face the situation.

Probably, it is more realistic to think that something might be different if institutions and society were able to learn something from the crisis. Yet, the eschatological mantra holds a significant truth: after decades dominated by the rhetoric of the end of history

(Fukuyama, 1992), and the corresponding refusal/inability to see the temporal dimension of social life – as if we lived in an eternal present regulated by invariant social and economic rules, inherent to the reality of facts – the deep disruption the pandemic has made in our routines has opened the way to the semiotic re-appropriation of our collective future. The future is again a thinkable object, regulating our present and helping to make it meaningful. According to this perspective, the pandemic provides us with the chance to restore the representability of time – the possibility to develop the vision of the social world, both at local and systemic level, as a reality where people and institutions can learn and change, and therefore where it is meaningful to invest efforts and competence to make it a better place to live.

In this paper we have highlighted the risk that the "pandemic" sign could be assimilated by the general anxiety-like affective sensemaking and in so doing make it a further driver of the salience of this form of affective semiosis. However, the awareness of this possible evolutionary scenario must not prevent us from recognizing the potential innovativeness that the "pandemic" has with respect to other signs that have been used and are still used to anchor and motivate the prospect of social development (e.g., the risks associated with climate change, economic inequality, the reference to values and the ethical framework). Indeed, the pandemic has four characteristics that make the signs standing for it (i.e., "pandemic") a potentially very powerful semiotic resource. First, it is *global*. As already observed, though to variable extent among countries, the disruption of the routines involves all domains of social life and due to this, the "pandemic" is become the meaning of the whole within which everyone is similar to others – cinema stars, soccer players, Cabinet ministers all share the same procedures and conditions of common people. Second, it is *transversal*. It crosses different levels of the social reality, encompassing concrete individual domains of experience (e.g., the restriction of movement, the experience of seeing the urban environment deserted), more abstract and mediated levels of social life (e.g., the new forms of smart work, the interruption of sports events, the media discourse), as well as the even more global and abstract level of the health and institutional management of the crisis (e.g., the mathematical modelling of the epidemic trend, the institutional decision making). Third, it is *identity-based*. It is lived in immediate and self-evident way as something concerning, in the here and now, the core of the individual existence, one's own and significant others' health as well as the modes of exercising interpersonal bonds. Fourth, it is *transitional*. It implies settings, experiences, discourses and practices where institutions and individuals are clearly identifiable reciprocally as resources and conditions of possibility – e.g., individuals have the chance to experience the institutional decision-making in terms of its direct and almost immediate effect on their lives, just as the institutions depend in their efforts on how people feel and behave.

Due to these characteristics, the pandemic could work as the catalyser of social settings and practices, lying at the core of people's identity, through which people could enact and thus interiorize the reciprocal inherency of the individual and systemic dimension of experience. Moreover, this would concern social practices that have an inherent power of generalization, given their being associated with the radical disruption of the pandemic, which encompasses the whole of social life and crosses the boundaries among social groups.

It is in this sense that we propose to think of Covid-19 as a *semiotic vaccine*: a destabilizer of the social world, powerful and extended enough and yet not fully destructive, that catalyses the cultural milieu's response, triggering the production of the semiotic antibodies required to empower individuals and institutional effort to manage the crisis of today and to learn from it how to build a better tomorrow.

5. Conclusions

At the moment we are writing, half of the world population is subjected to restrictive measures that require keeping a distance from each other and avoiding public and social gatherings. As a result, people have stopped going to work, visiting relatives and friends, praying in churches, doing sports in the gym and in parks, visiting museums, attending cinemas, theatres, bars, and restaurants, taking part in social and cultural events, taking a walk, shopping. Schools and universities have been closed in many countries and asked to reorganize their educational activities at a distance. The public administration's offices have also been reorganized through working from home. Finally, most factories and almost all commercial activities – with the exception of those supplying basic needs and services – are closed, with some companies being asked to restructure their production to make protective masks and scrubs for people, and ventilators and swabs for hospitals.

In this paper we have presented some analysis of the psychosocial processes underpinning how people are coping with this completely new situation and how this could evolve in the near future, together with the evolution of the management of the pandemic crisis. Our main thesis is that psychosocial resources, therefore the cultural milieu they are embedded within, are strategic to enable people to cope with the pandemic and, hopefully, to make the pandemic into a chance to learn, in the perspective of the development of a more inclusive and reflexive society. This means that institutions should consider the promotion of psychosocial resources a strategic aim of their action, no different from the central importance they place on the promotion of economic, infrastructural, technologic and institutional resources. And it means also that scholars of the many facets involved in the mind-society interplay have the historical task and opportunity to provide a contribution in this direction.

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