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THE AGE OF RELATIONSHIPS IN CRISIS

The couple, the family, school, health and work.

Conflicts, paradoxes and opportunities in the interpersonal revolution

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SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION	5
1. NEW WAYS OF RELATING TO OTHERS	10
1. How and why the needs and rules of interpersonal relations are changing	10
2. Cultural change and revolution in communication	11
3. From patriarchal authoritarianism to relations on equal terms	12
4. From democracy in politics to democracy in daily life	13
5. From antagonism to collaboration	15
6. Lights and shades of change	18
7. The increase in manifest conflict	19
7. Alone in a crowd: from real to virtual relations	24
8. New needs, old models. The need for new ways of communicating and relating.	28
9. Developing the ability to make an informed choice	30
10. Facilitating a new sociality through relational education, help services, meeting places	31
PART I – THE REVOLUTION IN THE AFFECTIVE SPHERE.	35
THE COUPLE AND THE FAMILY	35
2. THE COUPLE UNCOUPLED? NEW PROBLEMS AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR LIVING TOGETHER	36
1. Old models in crisis	36
2. Couples in search of a new formula	40
3. New liberties, new problems	41
4. Communication between man and woman: difficulties and prospects	47
5. Falling in love and revolution	51
6. Attraction and falling in love: affinities and differences	52
7. New expectations for old needs	56
8. Living as a couple is difficult, but we can learn	60
3. PARENTS AND CHILDREN	62
1. The change in the family structure	62
2. Problems of transition from the couple to the family	66
3. Children’s education: a new vision	68
4. The dilemma between authoritarianism and permissiveness	71
5. New educational methods to build parent-child relationships democratically	72
PART II – THE REVOLUTION IN THE ORGANISATIONS:	76
SCHOOL, BUSINESS, HEALTH	76
4. RELATIONS AT SCHOOL	79
1. Foreword	79
2. Relations between teachers and pupils	80

3. The evolution of educational models	81
3.1 From seeking uniformity to promoting individuality	83
3.2 Cultivating responsibility	86
3.3 Developing awareness	87
4. Relations among students.....	88
4.1 The peer group.....	89
4.2 Bullying	91
5. Relations among teachers.....	93
5. RELATIONS AT WORK;	96
1. Work that evolves: free time – personal fulfilment – well-being	97
2. Counter-evolutionary trends and risk factors.....	102
2.1 Stress.....	104
2.2 Burnout	105
2.3 Mobbing.....	106
3. Improving the quality of life: a solution that benefits everyone	109
3.1 Well-being at work and the quality of relations	110
6. THE DOCTOR/PATIENT RELATIONSHIP	114
1. From authoritarian paternalism to patient rights	115
2. From compliance to joint cooperation	117
3. From aseptic detachment to empathetic communication.....	118
4. Relational implications connected with the rise in chronic illnesses	122
5. New professional identities and new training needs	123
PART III – HANDLING CHANGE CONSTRUCTIVELY	124
7. SENSITISING, EDUCATING, AGGREGATING	
1..Building awareness and providing information on risks and opportunities	
2. Education in relational communication skills	
2.1 Relational teaching	
2.2 Principles and methods for effective relational education	
2.3 Adult relational communication	
2.4 Operator training and refresher courses.....	
3. Physical and virtual places for interaction and aggregation	
8. NEW SERVICES AND PROFESSIONS FOR PREVENTING AND HANDLING INTERPERSONAL DIFFICULTIES.....	
1.Relational counselling	
1.2 Online counselling.....	
2. Interpersonal mediation	
3. Family psychotherapy	
4. Interpersonal facilitation in the workplace and in organisations	
5. Who will train the new relational professionals?	
9. CONCLUSIONS	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	

INTRODUCTION

Never before has humanity been so free to experience social relations, nor has there been such freedom to express our emotions and feelings. We can experience our sexuality, intimacy and affections in our own way, without being subjected to social disapproval; we can debate with our parents, teachers, superiors and even question them, without automatically being banished; we can depart from customs and social mores and invent a relational style of our own; we can decide for ourselves with whom to relate and how to do so, negotiating the aims and rules of this relationship directly with the other people involved, without asking for permission from higher authorities.

All of these things, that today seem normal and obvious, are a real *revolution* compared with even the recent past, when social relations were carried on according to strict, established rules and patterns, to which all the members of a community had to conform; it was unthinkable to follow different paths, change the rules, live one's role as a parent, child or spouse in different ways from the rest of the community, except by being subjected to social disapproval or even more serious sanctions.

Notwithstanding this greater freedom (and on the contrary, as we shall see, partly because of it) psychosocial unease and existential malaise are more and more widespread in contemporary society and one of the main causes is the unsatisfactory quality of interpersonal relations, which are less and less reassuring and increasingly conflictual, within the couple, the family, at school and at work.

Interpersonal relations are among the factors that have the greatest influence, for better or for worse, on our psychophysical well-being and can make us feel enthusiastic, happy, fulfilled, or embittered, irritated, depressed, or even be the cause of real psychosocial, psychoemotional or psychosomatic illnesses. The quality of our relationships affects our level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction in our private lives; it reflects on the gratification or frustration we experience at work; it affects our self-esteem and our sense of identity – in short it underlies all the main spheres of our social life. If we ask people what makes them serene or happy, the majority will answer: feeling they are acknowledged, appreciated, loved, and having a good relationship with their partner, with their friends, their children, with their colleagues. If we ask them what makes them anxious or unhappy they will say: friction and quarrels, feeling they are not understood, considered, accepted, having a poor relationship with their colleagues at work, with their partner, with their parents and so on. Therefore, happiness and unhappiness, gratification and dissatisfaction all depend not only and not so much on material aspects but also (sometimes especially) on relational and emotional aspects.

For millennia these aspects have been regulated in a rigid, authoritarian, repressive way,

allowing no form of deviation or creativity. In patriarchal society social relations were not freely established by the parties, but were predefined by strict norms and hierarchies imposed from above and feelings and emotions could not be freely expressed and experienced, but had to be controlled, manipulated and often repressed. Relations between rulers and citizens/ subjects, between patrons and workers, between patriarchs and other members of the same family were all but democratic; communication was all but fluid and on an equal footing.

Then, as we shall see, in the west a slow but constant process of reawakening of individual liberty and sensitivity began; starting from the Renaissance and passing through the Enlightenment and Romanticism, it led to greater and greater freedom in relationships, communicating one's needs and points of view and in expressing emotions and feelings. However, only in recent times, with democracy and then the counterculture of the nineteen sixties, have the various phases and components of this process been reunited and integrated, triggering an authentic revolution in the interpersonal sphere, earlier and more evident in western countries but visibly emerging elsewhere too. Beliefs, values, customs change, but also identities and the ways of relating to oneself and above all, in all spheres of social life, there is a change in the *aims* and *ways* in which we relate to others. We are rapidly progressing from family and community-based relationships to relationships based on the single individual, from ways of relating based on rigid, socially established schemes to self-determined and flexible relationships, from formal communication to spontaneity, from sexual taboos to total freedom, from control and repression of emotions to unrestrained expressiveness.

This revolution is in many ways a positive evolutionary change, towards a more democratic, free and creative society with more gratifying, constructive and mindful human relations. However there is another side to the coin: just as excessive repression and control has generated and generates authoritarian and bellicose societies and individuals who are mentally rigid, sentimentally cold and uncreative, so too, unlimited freedom, without awareness or adequate tools, may lead to a crisis and the dissolution of individual and collective identities, the loss of moral values and norms, in short, to social and existential chaos. Unfortunately there are plenty of signs of this: the sense of identity and social and sexual roles are in a deep crisis while conflicts and separations of couple are on the increase and the family seems more and more fragile; solidarity and social cohesion decrease while loneliness and individualism are increasing; the authority of teachers and their ability to manage the class are diminishing while demotivation and bullying are on the rise; there are more work-related illnesses such as stress, mobbing, burnout; relations between citizens and institutions tend increasingly to be distrustful, with the result that the social order suffers in various ways.

One of the most salient consequences of the interpersonal revolution is the increase in manifest conflicts and the worsening of the forms these take: conflicts between engaged couples, between husbands and wives, between siblings, between children and parents, between pupils and teachers, between workers and employers, between citizens and institutions, between individuals belonging to different cultures and religions and so on. In the past an engaged couple did not have to discuss and agree on the rules and objectives of their relationship but simply follow the behavioural models that their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents had followed and passed down. It was the

same between children and parents, between workers and employers and so on. It's not that then there were no conflicts or emotional and relational problems, but they were more concealed, suffocated on the one hand by the authoritarianism and severity of roles and rules, and on the other by a culture and a religion based on tolerance and forbearance.

But nowadays, in democratic societies, where, at least on paper, there are equal rights between the different parties, conflict can emerge, giving rise to more evident and sometimes more dangerously effervescent manifestations. In short, on the one hand the increasing freedom and equality of interpersonal relations provide new, stimulating possibilities, but on the other hand they reveal many deep conflicts, for thousands of years repressed or controlled by a rigid, authoritarian social structure and now with less and less substance.

Nonetheless, however tumultuous and painful it is, according to many people the present way of relating is fairer and above all more rewarding and healthier than it was in the past, because it offers us greater freedom, which needs careful management of course, but which is a precious conquest for human development and fulfilment.

One of the key arguments on which this book is based is that *the new freedom has to be properly managed*, and that to this end suitable cognitive, operative and knowledge-based "instruments" are needed, to help people find their way through the new ways of relating and to tackle constructively the many conflicts and paradoxes they contain. In authoritarian societies it was not difficult to learn the ABC of relationships, because there was little freedom of choice and the rules were few and strict. Today on the contrary the greater social complexity and conflict deriving from freer and more democratic relationships demand new, more structured instruments than those used by our forebears.

Unfortunately neither families nor schools have yet undertaken to update their knowledge or their educational "programmes" to keep up with these new communicational-relational requirements. The negative results of this inattention are all too evident. Clear examples of this are the coldness and impersonality – or even suspiciousness and acidity – of relations in the workplace, often characterised by hidden conflicts between colleagues, envy and jealousy, relationships based merely on appearances or even harassment. The situation is no better in schools, where teachers and pupils continue not to understand each another, to have different interests and motivations, not to cooperate, and where there are still too many situations of psychosocial unease, from isolation to bullying. In families too the situation is not good if we consider the often difficult relations between parents and children and the higher percentage of separations and divorce, not infrequently accompanied by heated conflict. Relations between informal couples are no better, if we consider the decreasing average duration of relationships and the general incapacity of the partners to understand one another and constructively and peacefully face the many and often hidden differences that exist between men and women. So, our civilisation is defined as being "technologically advanced", but it is little more than illiterate on the communicational-relational plane.

Scientific knowledge and the tools to broach interpersonal relations in a new and more constructive way already exist but, despite the urgency, have not yet been

adequately disseminated in society and thus individuals, groups and organisations do not have for now the “know how” to exploit the new potentials that are being disclosed; on the contrary, they are often the helpless victims of the many negative side effects. Everyone is left to learn by himself, through trial and (painful) error, like learning to swim or at least float in the rough sea of ever more conflictual, incomprehensible and unforeseeable relationships.

Although we are in the midst of an authentic revolution, only a few people seem to have grasped its scope, and only some of the aspects of the phenomenon have as yet been highlighted, especially the emotional ones, brought into the international limelight in bestsellers by Daniel Goleman and Antonio Damasio, as well as by other less known authors, from Claude Steiner to Peter Sharp.¹ The emotional dimension undoubtedly has a central role in interpersonal processes, which cannot be reduced to this; it is important to focus also on the other contributing aspects - from the motivations inspiring the relationship to the rules and ways of communicating which concretise it - aspects relating to the socio-anthropological and psychosocial field and which have as yet been insufficiently explored, except for some contributions to the scenario such as those from Alberto Melucci and Anthony Giddens, or sectoral contributions like those from family sociology or the sociology of labour or of the organisations.² At present there is no global analysis of the phenomenon, highlighting causes and consequences, on the contrary, there is indeed no agreement about the fact that this phenomenon can be considered an *interpersonal revolution* and not, instead, an “emotional revolution” or even only a singular aspect of a more general process of “cultural change”.³

This book aims to help to fill this gap, linking up some of the different and until now separate approaches and studies on the subject, in the belief that only a holistic vision of the phenomenon will enable us to understand its complex dynamics and thus tackle its deep-rooted, spreading negative repercussions, which involve not only the private sphere but also the other spheres of social life, from schools and teacher-pupil relations to work and its organisation; from relations between citizens and institutions to relations among peoples and among nations.

We shall start by focusing on the main causes and the general aspects of the interpersonal revolution (Ch. 1), then examining some of the spheres most deeply affected by this phenomenon in more detail: relationships between couples, between parents and their children, relations in the scholastic, work and health contexts (Ch. 2-6). Finally we shall identify possible measures of personal education and growth to help individuals, groups and organisations to constructively manage the change which is taking place, (Ch. 7), so as to reduce to a minimum the conflicts and unease caused by

¹ Cfr. D. Goleman (1996); A. Damasio (1995); C. Steiner (1997); P. Sharp (2001).

² Cfr. Alberto Melucci (1994); Anthony Giddens (1995; 2000). Concerning family sociology, compare, among others, M. Barbagli et. al (2004); P. Donati (1996); L. Zanatta (1997). Concerning the sociology of labour and of the organisations, see, among others, A. Bonzanini, D. De Masi (1987); F. Butera, (1990); A. Strati (1996; 2006).

³ These shortcomings and disagreements depend on various factors: some, which will be illustrated in the text, relative to the marginality of the communication-relational sphere in the authoritarian patriarchal culture dominant up to now; others, which we have mentioned elsewhere, depend instead on the sectoral approach of the scientific research, which means that the objects of studies that – like ours – are on the borderline between different sectors of disciplines, end up being neglected or tackled using approaches that fail to grasp the multidisciplinary complexity of the processes involved (cfr. in this regard E. Cheli, M. Morcellini, 2004, Ch. 17).

the interpersonal revolution and benefit from the many interesting opportunities it reveals.