



Wilfried
Martens Centre
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FONDAZIONE
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Beyond resentment

**A Journey through the Italian Middle Class
from Postwar to Pandemics**

Edited by Enzo Risso



RUB3ETTINO

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Lorenzo Malagola

Introduction

Scared, Sorrowful, Torn, but still in Search of Direction

«Scared, sorrowful, torn between resentment and hope: this is Italy in the year of black fear. 73,4% of Italians identify fear of the unknown and consequent anxiety as the prevailing feelings. Which lead to the final dichotomy: better subjects than dead.» The 2020 Censis report has been thus summarized.

In a moment when the victory of the anti-liberal root of modern liberalism – made of *cancel culture*, returning statism, omnipresent communication – seems clear, anxiety about illness, fear of the uncertain, and dread of the unknown spread.

When we launched the research *Beyond Rancor*, which we publish today with Rubbettino, the situation was bleak, we were still at the beginning of the pandemic, and the possible futures remained open: in the past months the scenario of a perhaps irreconcilable fracture between the expectations generated by globalization, Europe, and the Second Republic and the disappointment provoked by the lack of wealth, the impossibility of social mobility, and the awareness of impoverishment prevailed.

The essays which we present here homogeneously illustrate the history, evolution, and perspectives of the Italian middle class, with some interesting digressions concerning the European situation and several attempts to face the Coronavirus challenge.

I would like to highlight here some points in order to allow a unitary cross reading of the text.

The first section, *On the Trail of the Middle Class*, describes and analyzes in detail *the function and the lifestyle of the middle class*. What comes out is a unitary picture in which the middle class constitutes a frame of reference for social and political stability. Its lifestyle – mainly based on the goals of a good education, a stable job, safe property rights, and respectable retirement benefits – is sustained by the aspiration to a better life, especially for the following generation (see the detailed studies provided by chapters 1 and 3, by Orlandini and Drea). The middle class derived

from this task identities which are useful to the democratic system: it has represented an idea of development and possible achievement for many groups of people. The lifestyle of the middle class supported moderate politics since the beginning of the current process of European integration, in the '50s. The middle class was a "mediator" and its crisis resulted in a mediation crisis, which started from the family unit. The human being, the interhuman relations, the social conventions move toward de-socializing and de-personalizing paradigms; this is the reason why resilient places, like families, are today necessary to confront critical and traumatic events. The second chapter by Martinez focuses in detail on family as a vital place for people's identity.

The trait characterizing the current middle class is its *perception of decline*. The opinion that people's financial situation has worsened in European countries in the last twenty years is asserted in Greece (87%), Italy (72%), Spain (62%), and France (56%). Such a perception is accompanied by the belief that the middle class is under growing pressure to meet the most basic financial obligations.

The picture provided by the data – rather than opinions – reveals instead clear stagnation (not decline) of both the extent and the income of the middle class. In the Ocse countries the percentage of people belonging to families of the middle class has little decreased, from 64% to 61% between the mid-80s and the mid-2010s (Ocse 2019). The value of the Italian middle class (59%) remains close to the Ocse average (61%). While the global financial crisis reduced the total income of the Italian population, it actually had limited effects on the overall inequalities.

Whatever the data say, the middle class feels the risk of sliding down and, as a consequence, it fears to see its economic situation worsen. In the Ocse countries such a fear mainly derives from three factors: a) the perception of the unfairness of the current socioeconomic system; b) the increase of the average cost of living; c) the uncertain perspectives of the middle class: insecurity about one's job and fear of moving to a lower income bracket (as for these subjects, see in particular chapters 3 and 4, by Drea and Vitale).

The book also brings to light *the peculiarities of the stagnation of the Italian middle class*, which lies in the intergenerational issue and social mobility. On one hand, the incomes of younger people remained stationary since 2007, while 65 years old and older people enjoyed an increase of 10%. In Italy, every new generation is characterized by the reduction of the average income group. The economy has not been strong enough to create the quantity of well-paid and stable jobs which is necessary to

support the new family formations. On the other hand, social mobility got stuck. The picture of the countries of Southern Europe can be summarized with two metaphors: *sticky floor* and *sticky ceiling*. The floors on which we walk and the ceilings below which we live are “sticky”: social immobility negatively affects the lower incomes and positively affects the super-rich. According to several projections 40% of the children of manual workers become in turn manual workers and more than 65% of the children of the poorly educated follow the same path. This figure is about 25% superior to the European average. The authors added to these components several others, including work-life balance, gender inequalities in an uncertain labor market, and school.

The debate concerning the *dating of the vulnerability of the middle class* is very interesting as well. Two hypotheses are involved here.

The first hypothesis traces the weakening of the Italian *middle class* back at least to the recession of the early '90s (see in particular the fourth chapter by Vitale). According to the Bank of Italy, the main change in income concentration happened in that period and it mostly took the shape of a fall from the lower middle class into the low income class (+5%). According to these first observers, the crisis following 2008 did not affect deeply the dynamics of income concentration. The political fluidity now experimented in Italy should not be judged in relation to ten years of economic turmoil, but in relation to three decades of very low economic growth, declining social mobility, and reduced job opportunities for young people.

The second hypothesis mostly traces the vulnerability of the Italian middle class back to the double crisis of 2008 and 2012 (see in particular the seventh chapter by Toma). This view identifies the income inequalities and the polarization between high and low incomes as one of the causes of the impoverishment of the middle class. Such a scenario seems to be confirmed by two crucial indicators: consumption decrease and increase of precautionary savings.

Still, both the hypotheses share the assumption that the frustration deriving from the impossibility to improve one's economic situation resulted in the support to anti-system and anti-elite movements which are capable of channeling the anger of citizens.

In the second part of the book the reader will find several cues *On the Trail of the Middle Class*, with particular attention to the ongoing pandemic. Over the last 15 years, in our country, the *middle class* went through a crumbling process, a low and inexorable pulverization, with a reduction of almost 30% of those who place themselves in it (from 70%

to 42%). During the pandemic period the Italians who felt to be part of the middle class decreased by 6%, from 39% in the first months of 2020 to 33% in July 2020. In the fifth chapter Risso identifies ten social fractures that must be healed in order to give a voice to the Italian middle class: the imbalance between nature and economy; the split between development and people's wealth; the separation of finance and business; the dichotomy between people and technology (from *digital divide* to knowledge disconnections); the social and class distances; the territorial fractures; the separations between individuals and communities; the generational and gender fractures; the gap between immigrants and Italians; the relation between State and community, welfare and subsidiarity.

The features characterizing the *animus* of the Italian middle class and distinguishing it from the other social segments can be described in ten points (see in particular the sixth chapter by Risso): a less enduring sense of duty; the higher value given to relational aspects such as friendship and balance; a certain interest in culture; the search for a dynamic and active life; the greater weight given to the security issue; the greater importance given to the concept of strength; the stronger impulse to be an open person; a lesser propensity for lightness for its own sake; a low propensity for spirituality and faith; the search for beauty, elegance, and admiration.

While the middle class widely abandoned the will of creating new social futures, it is focused on conferring value on the things which "constitute the whole of existence" and engender narrative sense allowing one to feel to be on a higher, or particular and different step of the social ladder. Managing time, exhibiting distance from others, eating sophisticated food, emphasizing one's and one's children's knowledge, and showing the weight and value of one's acquaintances are the overall traits of the sample of the existence which most of the middle class likes to enact. Particularly interesting is the description of the seven *communities of sentiment* of the Italian middle class, which can give an idea of the *new segmentation of the Italian society*.

The picture emerging from *Beyond Rancor* is bleak: pessimism has prevailed, conflicting situations look like impending clouds, the weakening is generalized. Still, we have the duty to analyze more in depth the Italian middle class' attempts to react. It is also important to look at its resilience, its brave construction of production chains and sense for work, its elaboration of new tastes and aspirations. The middle class is still in search of an identity; it did not settle for the consumerism of which it is often accused. From the political perspective as well, the consent to "Italians

first” and the demand for a strong man can be interpreted as an attempt to express unrest and desire for change.

Beyond the snobbish and elitist behaviors aiming to sully any mindset which is different from the most common ones, the tendency to yield to emotionality and instinct, and a negative view of the country, there are difficult paths of interpretation of social and political dynamics and arduous but necessary attempts of healing current polarizations. This is why we wish you a good reading.

Section 1
Retracing the Middle Class

*Matteo Orlandini**

The middle class, between illusions and historical evolutions

The middle class has not received any good press in Italy. Its first observers were convinced of its amorality. The middle classes were thought to consist of mainly ravenous and rough individuals: expressions such as greedy “mice in the cheese”, and “enslaved and servile” were commonly used to describe the Italian middle class in the 1960s and 1970s.

It’s not easy to tell a different story: one that’s more social, balanced and nuanced, made up of light and dark, of conservatism and change. And yet, the interest in the middle class of the past twenty years has caused other realizations to emerge.

The “derivative” character of the middle class deserves the most attention. It does not appear in nature, and therefore its cultural and political construction is very important. While the lower classes are molded by the market and economy, the middle class is a political construction. Depending on the country, many different constellations of the middle class can be observed: Bismarck’s Germany, post-war France, Italy in the 1950s: they all tell their own parables of the middle class, held together by the idea that an intermediate class is to some extent the result of a set of political strategies (Semi, 2005). In France, the centralist nature of the state requires a network of loyal employees and officials to operate the bureaucratic machine. In Italy, the political agreements are mostly categorical: this creates a middle class of merchants, artisans, farmers, and ultimately VAT numbers.

At the same time, despite being mostly a political construction, the middle class takes action, building its own identity and seeking its own interests. Perhaps it will not have its own “class consciousness” and will split up into many heterogeneous groups, but it still has an important social function. These three elements (identity, interests, functions) are at the center of our time scale. In fact, we will try to navigate between the “Scylla” of the supporters of a middle class brought up without an identity,

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if not easy consumption and the “Charybdis” of the egalitarians who see a distortion of equal starting opportunities in social life within the classes.

We will do this by defining the relationship between groups and classes in Italy and by investigating the main reconstructions on these subjects in the first paragraph. Next, we will get into the evolutionary reconstruction of the Italian middle class by defining three-time scales: the thirty glorious years following World War II, the rampant years of liberalism, and finally the crisis of the last decade. The time frame is largely partial and erroneous, but it captures three clear trends of the middle class: its ability to act as a stabilizer for the political and economic system and its overflow throughout society (we will therefore speak of “cetomedizzazione”); the subsequent traits of a crisis of meaning rather than of entity, which is accompanied by an extension, almost a divergence, of the stratification of the middle class whose common feature is the struggle for consumption. Finally, we will speak of the challenge that the static nature of Italian upper class poses to the middle class of the 2020s.

1. The issue with groups and classes in the Italian context

We will start by defining two terms, “groups” and “classes”, which are generally used as equivalents but refer to different concepts.

Groups of individuals and families possess a similar level of resources and compensation related to their position in the economic and employment processes. Classes embody the distribution of status, social recognition, lifestyle, and prestige. While groups center around employment and the economic situation, classes center around wealth but also around psychological components and social consideration. While groups are mainly used to describe the conflicting positions between different layers of society, the classes and especially the middle classes are considered a stabilizing and unifying element (*Filandri and Semi 2018*). We will more often refer to the notion of a class rather than a group, often using the terms as synonyms both in their singular and plural forms.

The first point of reference for introducing the identification of the Italian middle class can be found in the famous *Saggio sulle classi sociali* (Essay on the social classes) published by Paolo Sylos Labini in 1974, in which classes are constructed on the aspect of income, and in particular on the manner it is obtained: «To distinguish the different social classes, income is therefore an important element, but not so much for its amount

as for the manner in which it is obtained, which in turn is linked to the relations of production; this manner is reflected in the environment and in the type of culture, and is conditioned by the previous history of society, of which the classes are integral parts” (*Sylos Labini 1988, 26*).

Therefore, according to Sylos Labini, the distribution of income depends on three overlapping elements: private ownership of the means of production, political and administrative control over the accumulation process, and different degrees of education and qualification of workers. We can thus identify three classes: the bourgeoisie, the lower middle class, and the working class (Table 1).

Schizzerotto (1988) and Cobalti and Schizzerotto (1994) propose a different structure of the classes, identifying them based on the sector of employment and the employee’s position within it. These authors identify four classes: bourgeoisie, white-collar middle class, lower middle class, and working class. More recently, the National Institute of Statistics has tried a different approach, by identifying multidimensional groups of Italian families starting from their equivalent income (ISTAT 2017). Here, the Italian social stratification is represented through nine multi-dimensional groups. The Institute’s attempt has collected the suggestions of those who - in the multivariate typologies and data-driven procedures - see a more innovative and responsive instrument to represent income inequality¹.

<i>Sylos Labini (1988)</i>	<i>Schizzerotto (1994)</i>	<i>Istat (2017)</i>
I. Real bourgeoisie: large owners of rural and urban land (income); entrepreneurs and senior executives of joint stock companies (mixed profits and income); self-employed professionals (mixed income, with monopoly income characteristics).	I. Bourgeoisie (entrepreneurs with at least seven employees, freelancers, managers and executives).	I. Executive class (wealthy families; executives, middle managers, entrepreneurs, retired freelance professionals, with a university degree).

¹ For critical feedback on this viewpoint, please refer to the article published in *Stato e Mercato* (State and Market), Social classes or dimensional groups? How to depict social inequalities in Italy today, (Marzadro et al. 2019).

<i>Sylos Labini (1988)</i>	<i>Schizzerotto (1994)</i>	<i>Istat (2017)</i>
I Ib. Relatively autonomous low middle class (mixed income): direct farmers, artisans (including small professionals), salespeople.	II. Middle class clerks (employees with various levels of qualification, kindergarten, elementary, lower and upper middle school teachers, knowledge workers, executive employees, skilled technicians).	II. Silver pensions (wealthy families; managers, entrepreneurs, retired freelance professionals, with a higher degree).
I Ia. White-collar low middle class (salaries).	IIIa. Urban lower middle class (small entrepreneurs with at most six employees, self-employed construction workers in sectors like construction, industry, trade and services, members of a cooperative, assistants and “atypical” workers: coordinated consultants and continuing collaborators and occasional service providers).	III. Families of clerks (well-off families; office workers, other self-employed workers; with a high school or university degree).
I Ic. Low middle class: special categories (military, religious and others) (salaries).	IIIb. Agricultural lower middle class (small business owners, independent workers, members of a cooperative, assistants and “atypical workers” active in the agriculture, hunting and fishing sectors).	IV. Blue-collar youngsters (middle-income families; blue-collar or similar, atypical).
IIIa. Working class (salaries).	IVa. Urban working class (employees, such as foremen, factory workers, apprentices, homeworkers on behalf of companies, employees in the construction, industry, commerce and service sectors).	V. Families of retired workers (middle-income families; managers, employees, entrepreneurs or freelancers, pensioners; with an elementary or middle school degree).

<i>Sylos Labini (1988)</i>	<i>Schizzerotto (1994)</i>	<i>Istat (2017)</i>
IIIb. Underclass.	IVb. Agricultural working class (employees such as foremen, factory workers, apprentices, homeworkers on behalf of companies in the primary sector).	VI. Single seniors and unemployed youngsters (low-income families; unemployed or inactive).
		VII. Traditional families from the province (low-income families; managers, employees, entrepreneurs or freelancers, pensioners; with an elementary or middle school degree).
		VIII. Low-income families comprised only of native Italians (low-income families; workers or similar, atypical, unemployed or inactive).
		IX. Foreign low-income families (low-income families; workers or similar, atypical, unemployed or inactive).

All these reconstructions, reported here in a simplified manner², are based on the assumption that work is a source of identity and has the ability to predict conditions and lifestyles. While this was an unavoidable point of

² Here, for example, we leave out the problem of size, regulation and self-regulation and hereditary (closed) or skill-based (open) transmission of groups that play a funda-

reference until a few years ago, is it still the case today? We will be guided by this question, especially during the third historical period in which, as we will see, the role of work, entrepreneurship, and investment in cultural capital decreases considerably, and puts the heuristic capacity of the middle class itself into question. Let us start from the beginning, however.

2. The thirty glorious years of “cetomedizzazione” (1945-1978)

In Italy, the middle class established itself as a political project of systemic integration and as a widespread process of social integration in the thirty years following the end of the Second World War (Bagnasco 2016).

Of course, a middle class already existed at the beginning of the twentieth century. It consisted of farmers, small business owners, and independent professionals. After the Great War, Mussolini had strategically involved the middle class, and the most ambitious groups had seized the opportunity to become the new ruling class. In fact, the fascist party was referred to as the first mass party to represent the middle class (Tonelli 2013). Nonetheless, the goal and result of this idea of empowerment was not the *cetomedizzazione* of the country: that would happen later on, during the democratic period. It was rather an enslavement to the great economic and ideological movements.

The new middle class, which arose almost everywhere in the West between the early 1940s and the post-war reconstruction, was made up of executives, well-paid employees, office clerks and salespeople. Replacing the older generation were emerging groups of children of the bureaucratization process, of organized capitalism, of Keynesianism and of the construction of the welfare state. The dynamic of “ups and downs” will prove to be a constant throughout the history of the middle class, as we will see later. Instead of resorting to disquisitions on the size of the middle class compared to other classes, it is interesting to look into who forms its backbone in a certain period of time, and which cultural discourses it manages to undertake.

We will start from there. Who makes up the middle class in the thirty glorious years? The estimates of Paolo Sylos Labini do not show large absolute differences between the classes: from the end of the nineteenth century up until 1971, the bourgeoisie was represented by somewhere between 1.9% and 2.6% of Italians; the middle class went from 45.9% in

mental role in understanding the dynamics of growth, opening/closing, and the dynamic nature of the middle class (Parkin 1985, Bison 2013).

1881 to a peak in 1951 (56.9%) up to 49.6% in 1971; and the working class revolves around the middle axis, with the lowest point corresponding to the increase of the middle class at the beginning of the 1950s (Table 1). According to the same author (*Sylos Labini 1988, 27*), “The most impressive aspect is [...] a fundamental stability”.

On the other hand, the internal movements within the sub-groups are significant. The white-collar middle class greatly increases in numbers, from 5% in 1936 to 17.1% in 1971 and is only followed at a long distance by the growth of the commercial middle class (the so-called “proletarians of the bourgeoisie”, *Maida 2009*). In contrast, the autonomous lower middle class suffers substantial losses (from 47.1% in 1936 to 29.1% in 1971), which can be particularly attributed to the numerical decrease of direct farmers.

Table 1: Evolution of the composition of the classes (1881 – 1971)

		1881	1901	1921	1936	1951	1961	1971
I.	BOURGEOISIE	1,9	1,7	1,7	1,6	1,9	2,0	2,6
II.	MIDDLE CLASSES	45,9	51,2	53,3	54,8	56,9	53,4	49,6
IIa.	WHITE-COLLAR LOWER MIDDLE CLASS	2,1	2,7	3,2	5,0	9,8	13,1	17,1
1.	Private employees	0,6	0,8	0,8	1,7	5,2	6,9	8,9
2.	Public employees	1,5	1,9	2,4	3,3	4,6	6,2	8,2
IIb.	RELATIVELY AUTONOMOUS LOWER MIDDLE CLASS	41,2	45,9	47,93	47,1	44,4	37,0	29,1
1.	Direct farmers, etc.	22,5	35,1	37,0	35,6	30,3	21,6	12,1
2.	Salespeople	2,8	4,0	4,4	5,4	6,7	7,6	8,7
3.	Artisans and others	15,9	6,8	5,9	6,1	7,4	8,0	8,3
IIc.	SPECIAL CATEGORIES	2,6	2,5	2,8	2,7	2,7	3,1	3,4
III.	WORKING CLASSES	52,2	47,1	45,0	43,6	41,2	44,6	47,8
1.	Agriculture	35,6	24,2	21,8	16,2	11,8	8,4	6,2
2.	Industry (incl. construction)	13,2	18,7	19,6	21,4	22,9	29,0	33,0
3.	Other activities	3,4	4,2	3,6	6,0	6,5	7,2	8,6

Source: Sylos Labini (1988)

While it may seem a trivial point to repeat, it is important to remember that the middle class model that Italian journalists and scholars have in mind today finds its roots in the industrial economy. First and foremost, its growth is driven by the bureaucratization of private and public companies. The middle class of employees, which was already predicted by Max Weber at the beginning of the twentieth century (Weber 1991) and further defined by Wright Mills as a characteristic feature of the United States of the 1950s (Mills 1951), also established itself in Italy. On the one hand, the middle class is expanding in our country thanks to large recruitments into the ministerial machine. With the expansion of the education system, the employees of the Ministry of Education increased from 230,385 in 1946 to 427,641 in 1962 (Santoro 2014), which constitutes the main source of growth for public employment in Italy. On the other hand, there is a trending increase of non-manual employees within the total number of employees in private industry. This so-called “*impiegatizzazione*” (clericalization) shows the growth of the technostructure due to the concentration of production: a country that emerged from the war with almost half of its workforce in agriculture quickly became one of the most industrialized nations in the West. Other substantial factors for the growth of the middle class are the right to a pension, social security and welfare of a categorical nature. These are the golden years of the welfare state, even in a late-blooming country like Italy (Piedmontese 2012).

More and more groups and categories are gradually included in social protection: direct farmers (1957), fishermen (1958), artisans (1959), and finally traders (1969)³. As mentioned by Ferrera (2007), almost the entire population is now included in social protection programs for all standard risks (old age, disability, illness, work accidents, unemployment).

From a systemic point of view, the middle class grows and is constructed based on a political design that sees a stabilizing force of capitalism in it, a class of mediation between capital and work, a role in preserving social assets (Bellini 2014).

While initially, politics “hide” the middle classes because of the idea that they gave legs to fascism (populist “*medioclassismo*”, Lipset 1981), it

³ Masulli lists the independent pension management schemes as of 1966: sea workers, employees of transport services, tax collectors, telephone services, electricity companies, gas companies, entertainment companies, agricultural employees, agents and representatives of commerce, journalists, direct farmers, sharecroppers and settlers, fishermen, artisans, midwives, chartered accountants, accountants and business experts, lawyers and legal prosecutors, housewives, merchants (Masulli 2003, 154-155).

is however organized through inter-class, consociative, categorical parties. The middle class becomes a topic of transversal interest for every political formation: Christian democrats, liberals, communists or socialists⁴. This way, two antithetical cultures coexist: on the one hand, attention to detail, to categories, to corporatism; on the other, the connection between classes, social mobility, aspirations for well-being.

Most social science literature has emphasized the first component at the expense of the second.

The Christian democratic hegemony was based on a heterogeneous social block - Italian industrial and financial capitalism, a large part of the middle classes, and an extensive representation of the working classes - which represented interests that were difficult to combine. "Favoritist particularism" (*Paci 1984*) was the simplest tool to manage this pluri-verse. This strategy of acquiring the consent of the middle classes took place through "individualistic attraction" towards the benefits distributed by the system (*Pizzorno 1978*): inequalities functioned as an incentive to participate in economic, consumer, political benefits or those connected to the possibility of starting forms of entrepreneurship. The characteristics of the Italian social structure - the territorial dualisms and the presence of categories of the marginally employed - have made it necessary to resort to mediation strategies and alliances that led to the progressive acquisition of power by middle class "fractions": "To come out stronger, it was mostly the productive middle classes, to which the political class has in part delegated the function of controlling social tensions, and a new "public-private" class, who were appointed to directly manage this exact function" (*Bellini 2013, 108*).

In the scientific debate, the idea that politics could look to the middle class as a stabilizing and innovating factor in the Italian system has cer-

⁴ On September 24th, 1946 Palmiro Togliatti gave a famous speech at the Teatro Municipale in Reggio Emilia, "Middle Class and Red Emilia", in which he argued the political and historical reasons for constructing a structural relationship with the middle classes: "The defeat of the Emilian reformist movement was essentially a great rupture between organized and collectivistic socialist laborers, and the intermediate groups of the countryside and the city [...] Animators of agricultural progress, protagonists of social and political action intended to provoke it, will today be new social groups and more specifically, on the one hand, the masses of organized laborers, [...] on the other the masses of sharecroppers, tenant farmers and small and medium-sized farmers. [...] Both as social groups interested in a decisive improvement of their living conditions, and as men aspiring to the progress of freedom and justice, the middle classes of both the countryside and the city have their place on the frontlines of the work force out to renew the whole of society."

tainly been overshadowed. The Christian democrats understood that the middle class could be a force for political stability; within an inter-class approach, agreements had to be found with the middle part of the social stratification (*Semi* 2017). In the process of institutionalizing class conflicts, which took place through the formalization of industrial relations and collective bargaining, the middle class was used as a social basis for compromises (such as the workers' statute). The positive wager that politics placed on the middle class is even more hidden in historical and sociological studies on the second post-war period.

In the social pacts to make the middle class grow, the agreement on work ethic, on the intimate topos of orderly domestic life and of the factory as a family (*Asquer* 2011) that intertwine "the lower middle class" and the Italian politics should not be overlooked. For some, this was just a reactionary image, for others it was the basis for the development of an economic miracle.

In addition to appearing as a political project of systemic integration, the middle class is also a great process of social integration. In fact, the increase in available job openings at the middle levels of social stratification, in particular as a result of the expansion of the large industry, has made it possible for part of the lower classes to gain easier access to the middle classes (2013 *Bison*). In addition, this social integration born on the foundations of the industrial economy has created common lifestyles, which has impacted social prestige. Managers, professional employees, salespeople, office workers which have encapsulated and integrated independent farmers and small businessmen (the old middle class) had typical aspirations that "ranged from home ownership to owning a car, from going on holiday to sending their children to school [...] The possibility of pursuing aspirations and practicing consumption patterns specific to the middle class – albeit at different levels in terms of quality and the cost of goods – has been shared not only by the employed and autonomous middle classes, but also by parts of the working class and the bourgeoisie" (*Filandri and Semi* 2018).

Though short and relative, this is the era of a true horizontal and vertical mobility, of the boom of individual initiative, the affirmation of the primal needs of well-being and safety. In this ascending phase, the identity of the middle class has been built around a traditional growth model, based on an increased capacity for expenditure and ostentatious consumption. Consumption has increased and become blatant: living conditions have improved in only a few short years, emphasizing a number of protective phenomena.

First and foremost, the actions of the middle class embody a defensive and corporate tendency of *gatekeeping*, regarding the changes taking place in society combined with defending the work and income positions one has achieved, which as we have seen, is largely thanks to political protection. Mills speaks of a “panic for prestige”, indicating the fear of losing the condition one has reached.

It is precisely from this emulation of consumption from increasing parts of the population that the analysis of ‘cetomedizzazione’ is born, which emphasizes the process of cultural homogeneousization of the middle classes (1980 Mendras). According to De Rita (2017), The Italian ‘cetomedizzazione’ is rooted in the seventies, when all the conditions for an increase in wealth, pride, social scale, status were in place. The explosion of the black economy, which brings with it the possibility for everyone to act, organize and earn, the explosion of independent work and the number of companies (doubled in ten years), the processes of internal migration, the quest for a mortgage, the increase of public employment create “the lake of the middle class”: “Into this lake came the Calabrian forester, hired by the public administration, the janitor who became a civil servant, and who secured himself a salary and constructed himself a home, abusively or not. But also, part of it were the Latin and Greek professors of great Italian high schools, once considered the elite of the world; a professor also capable of writing books, who then became a public servant. All this has created a kind of social mass in this metaphorical lake”. It was not so much the adoption of bourgeois ways by some classes, or the formation of a new ruling class, but the tendency to bring “cetomedizzazione” to the country. According to De Rita, this has two consequences: shapelessness and consumerism of common goods, without the creation of an identity or broad interests.

To conclude this first period, we can say that the middle class was therefore seen as a conservative force in several senses: it was represented as a protective dam in favor of capitalism (Alquati 1978); a force that passively accepts power, becoming both its instrument and its victim (Mills 1951); a group that is not a group, a class that is not a class, a layer that is not a layer, but is uninvolved (Dahrendorf 1963). These and other analyses underestimate the importance the middle classes have played in the dynamic nature of Italian society: they have exploited, and have been exploited as forms of political protection for reasons of consensus building, but have also given life to new processes. Let us think of those who have developed small businesses and innovative self-employment, in which new forms of post-Fordist organizations have been tried and tested (Alacevich 2014).

3. The unravelling of the middle class (1979- 2009)

Until the end of the 1970s, the new middle class therefore played a role of social stabilization based on “a pact that served to prevent all those who were experiencing a form of social mobility, a growth of well-being, from being able to use it against the State” (*Semi* 2017, 2). This pact is illusory, however; since the beginning of the 1980s, the prospects for the middle class have been muffled (*Clark and Lipset* 1991), the social elevator has gotten stuck, and the middle class enters a crisis of meaning, rather than of entity.

The resilience of the middle class becomes clear in the revision by Bison (2013), which combines the data of the three Istat surveys on *Families and social actors* of 1998, 2003 and 2009 with those of Sylos Labini. It still stands between 51.5% and 55.4% of the total, compared to a tripling of the bourgeoisie (from 3.3% in 1983 to 9% in 2009) and the slow decline of the working class (from 42.7% in 1983 to 34.3% in 2009) (Table 2). This is the era in which the “large industry will slowly give way to a production system based on small or very small production units, and to the emergence of the tertiary sector based on providing financial services, brokerage and transport for businesses, and to sales, help and care for people” (*Ibidem*, 179). In this transformation, the protagonists are still the middle classes; no longer clerks linked to large companies, but those on the way back: the old middle classes of artisans, shopkeepers and farmers of the Center and the North East.

It is precisely the autonomous lower middle classes, stamped by scholars as individualistic and corporate, that become the basis of industrial districts in which small size, flexibility in production, entrepreneurial networking, a common base for localist identification create a mix for new economic success (*Sabel* 2004, *Beccatini* 2015). This part of the middle class wants to grow and to create new jobs and businesses, to pay fewer taxes (*De Rita* 2017). And yet, next to the dynamism of independent work (*Ranci* 2012) is the deceleration of the much larger middle class, which hurts its own opportunities and loses the ability to pass on the positions it acquired to its children⁵. This is also the era of the affirmation of a clearer territorial differentiation of the Italian middle class: VAT numbers and

⁵ As Marzadro and Schizzerotto (2011) note, rates of upward mobility slowed down during the 1980s and downward mobility rates increased, confirming a trend that had begun to emerge in the late 1970s. This phenomenon showed its relevance in the 1990s in a context of stagnant opportunities for upward mobility for the younger generation.

small entrepreneurs in the North, a multitude of civil servants in the Center, and the middle classes of public spending in the South. It creates a kind of disparity which is unable to find common ground, made up of convergent identities and interests. Only middle-class consumption and behavior still functions as a glue.

Table 2: Evolution of the composition of the classes (1983 – 2009)

	1983 ¹	1998 ²	2003 ²	2009 ²
I. BOURGEOISIE	3,3	8,3	10,2	10,3
II. MIDDLE CLASSES of	54,0	51,5	55,4	55,4
Private employees	10,2	28,2*	16,1	18,8
Public employees	15,8		18,3	17,8
Artisans	5,8	3,1	3,6	3,4
Direct farmers	7,6	4,3	1,9	1,7
III. WORKING CLASSES of	42,7	40,2	34,4	34,3
Farming	4,0	4,6	1,8	1,7
Industry	26,1	21,2	16,5	15,6
Services	12,6	14,4	16,1	17,0

Source: Elaboration based on data by Bison (2013); (1) Sylos Labini (1988); (2) (2) Research Istat Family and Social Subjects, anno 1998, 2003, 2009.

() No distinction could be made between public and private employees.*

The dynamics of savings and consumption reveal this internal divide in the middle classes. For households in the upper and middle classes, the generational analyses of Negri and Filandi (2010) show an increasing propensity to save. This capacity decreases for working-class families and remains at constant levels for households of clerks. Over the same period (1989-2006), the authors found a general tendency for consumption to grow, although this growth was more prominent for the upper class than for the working class. The consumption situation of young families of the autonomous middle class and the upper class, whose members are under 35 years of age, falls outside of this optimistic picture. The structural changes in the economy and in the way in which the job market is regulated do not seem to have eroded the variety of living conditions of the middle class, which established itself after the Second World War – also in

Italy - nor their propensity to consume, which confirms a certain uniformity of lifestyles and standards linked to mass consumption. The fortunes of the “second Italian economic miracle” were built around consumerism and well-being as the country’s axes of identity.

The reopening of the international debate on the middle class itself (Krugman 2003) came with critical observations of this disparity, with some parts of the middle layer sliding downwards, and others being able to maintain their position or even ascend on the social scale. The Italian scholar most credited on the subject, Arnaldo Bagnasco, argued that the impoverishment and “proletarianization” of the middle class must be reduced, at least in Italy. He emphasized that the distance between the upper and lower strata of the middle classes had become bigger. An “elongation” of the social stratification was in place: from a “big pear” shape with an indistinct middle class at its center, to some sort of “social bradyseism that raises some occupational classes and categories in status, while pushing others away” (Bagnasco 2012).

The external reasons that led to this unravelling of the middle class are manifold, starting with the oil crisis, the end of Bretton Woods, the affirmation of deregulation and neoliberalism, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the advent of flexible and financialized capitalism, and the arrival of globalization. We can at least emphasize the influence of these macro-factors on redistributive mechanisms, which were put up for discussion in the name of a return to the market and individual initiative, and were already in a state of crisis because of the effects of the crises of the 1970s, they “stopped representing a network of protection against declassification” (Silei 2012). Finance invented easy credit, but we all know how that ended (2013 Streeck)⁶.

Among the national meso-factors, the attempt to modernize the Italy of the socialist party, which seeks support from a rampant part of society and relies on some new theoretical ideas (such as the great institutional reform), clashes with the weakness of the project and driving force for change. The end of the first Republic hinders the construction of a new ruling class that can lead the country with foresight (2011 De Rita and Galdo), a unique case in which the explosion of the middle class and the dwindling bourgeoisie live together, the bourgeoisie being a social class

⁶ Subprime mortgages to procure a privately-owned home also have to do with the middle class, because they fuelled “the middle class’s inclusive dream of asset growth, which would turn out to be destructive” (Sciarrone et al. 2011, 321).

with the political function of providing order and creating references in a system otherwise condemned to anarchy.

On these points, the progressive decline of the class vote is a clarifying factor: “the social class continues to influence the vote, but it is no longer as much a conflictual polarization between opposing social identities (employers and industrial workers, for example) as it is - more soberly - a juxtaposition linked to employment and social interests in the market which the new political players are gradually calling for” (*Maraffi et al. 2011, 186*). In Italy, the vote of the bourgeoisie is decidedly oriented first towards the Christian democratic party and then towards the center-right, softening over time in particular in 2006 and 2008. As far as the two middle classes (clerks and lower middle class) are concerned, there is a diversified voting dynamic: self-employment and private employment align with the right of center, while public sector employees⁷ are oriented left of center.

The evolution of workers fluctuates: in the 1970s and 1980s they moved compactly to the left, while in the 2000s they split in half. It therefore seems that Berlusconi’s political offer has responded to a demand for new representation for the productive middle class by offering it support, while the “reflective middle classes” (*Ginsborg 2007*) found an identity on the other side of Italian bipolarity.

Table 3 – Percentages of right of center votes in the considered elections

	1972	1983	2001	2006	2008
Bourgeoisie	65	64	63	53	57
Employees	52	52	47	38	38
Lower middle class	58	55	65	56	63
Workers	41	33	54	40	49

Source: Itanes Association (1972-2008)

⁷ “Have the factors that we have defined as “long-term” – elements such as gender and generation or education, but also social fractures such as class, religion and territory – actually seen their role diminished compared to a greater pervasiveness of “short-term” factors, such as the influence of leaders, preferences on issues, exposure to the election campaign? The answer is altogether affirmative, and indicates - in a progressive shift from society to politics - the most significant interpretative key of individual political behavior in contemporary Italy” (Segatti and Bellucci 2011, 391-392).

We have therefore highlighted a trend: the middle class has not disappeared, but is no longer defined by clear lines and homogeneous aggregations, social differentiation has blown up, and with it the individualization of social and work relations (*Sciarrone et al. 2011*).

How did the middle class react to these upheavals? In the 1990s there was a growing “*paura di cadere*” (fear of falling): even those who were not affected by material problems were at risk of losing their social status. Richard Sennet (1999) gave a voice to this middle-class fragility: the man of the *americana middle class*, who had experienced trajectories of social advancement, was being asked for the sort of flexibility that requires abandoning one’s past and maintaining self-confidence in order to seize opportunities and overcome boundaries. According to Sennet, the outcome is a corrosion of character, particularly in terms of fidelity and mutual commitment, and of long-term goals through sacrifices. Following this thread, several studies have demonstrated a “double income trap” that harnesses middle class families with two workers through increasing costs for housing, education, health: the middle class is trapped in trying to maintain a certain level of consumption, in order to secure its social position and to guarantee a future for their children while tensions are increasing (*Warren and Warren Tyagi 2004*). “Part of the middle class is trapped in the model in which they believe and invest: a double income, home ownership in a residential neighborhood and the consumption that goes with it.” (*Semi 2005, 25*).

The Italian context, albeit different, has also been faced with a middle class for which it has become increasingly difficult to deal with destabilizing events (separations, divorces, disability, deaths). The sense of belonging to a group or class has been weakening since the 1980s and continues in the present; instead of projecting itself into social advancement, even the intellectual elite of the middle class - or as Goldthorpe (1992) calls them, the “service class” - has lost social prestige. By having to focus on the present, on the objective of getting by day by day, middle class families have lost hope in the future and in social mobility. “Uncertainty, rather than general impoverishment is what concerns large sections of the middle class today. Income volatility, flexibility in the job market, but also fluidity in family and social relationships are on the rise. All this aggravates the vulnerability of certain middle classes.” (*Ranci 2017, 174-175*).

And yet, a number of social groups, mostly referring to themselves as the “creative classes”, were able to break free from the mold at the turn of the 2000s and to take advantage of crisis situations and the need

for change, (2011 *Prandstraller*). They have devoted themselves to the creation of new and meaningful forms of responding to the information economy, and have demonstrated three main trends: the search for self-affirmation, the enhancement of individual skills and the construction of open and tolerant environments (*Florida 2003*). The creative class works in high-tech, design, arts and sciences, engineering, architecture, art. Their social function is to create new ideas, technologies and content. This creative class has relocated to large global cities, and this migration has led to a renewal of urban centers, with all the consequences this entails⁸. Alongside the creatives, a social middle class has arisen, which brings together all the dynamic workers in the tertiary sector and in educational professions. This class has not been greatly explored as of yet: it is highly educated, poorly paid, but exhibits a certain dynamism considering that, at least in Italy, its large growth is demonstrated in the employment figures.

4. The challenge of the decline for the middle class

What happens during the double crisis of 2008-2009 and 2011-2012? A considerable factor is added to the previous ones. The Italian economy enters a regime of continuing decline. A new and evocative interpretation of Italian society appears, and what if it were nothing more than a 'mass stately society' (*Ricolfi 2019*)? This term refers to a society which is "the result of a graft - on its main body, which remains capitalist - of elements typical of the stately society of the past, feudal and pre-capitalist": an "opulent society in which the economy no longer grows and in which citizens with access to the surplus without having to work are more numerous than working citizens" (*Ibidem*, 18). According to Ricolfi, there are three characteristics of a mass stately society:

- 1) the number of unemployed people is higher than those that work (going back to 1964). This social group would correspond to the nobles, fighters and clergy of the feudal society;

- 2) the presence of a mass of citizens who have the privilege of consuming the overproduction without contributing to its formation (a process that runs from the end of the 1980s to the beginning of the 2000s): accessing the surplus without work, unlike in a feudal society, is no longer

⁸ Florida has also recently highlighted the critical aspects of the urbanization dynamics of the creative class (*Florida 2017*).

a privilege of the few, but a condition widespread to more than half of the population;

3) the economy is in a state of decline (the decisive turning point arrives with the double crisis, first the banking crisis and then the public finance crisis).

The mass stately society is a cold society, affirmed and stabilized in a state of opulence, and resting on three clear pillars: the enormous wealth accumulated by fathers and grandfathers, left to be exploited by ever fewer children and grandchildren, without having to work; the destruction of schools which have produced entire generations who are unfit to enter the job market and who often choose the path of 'voluntary unemployment'; the formation of a para-slavery infrastructure which is necessary for the benefits of the majority. It seems a gloomy ending to an already bleak drama.

At its base, this setting challenges class theory. In fact, the theory, which is already struck heavily in its core, no longer sees the classes of collective actors (like Marx) or communities of destiny (like Weber) reduced to crumbs. The classes are now defined as a set of occupations that hold similar positions within the stratification of inequalities –, the idea of an opulent and non-productive mass society removes all strength from stratifications based on work and income, precisely because work is losing its power as an organizing force of society⁹.

Or, this bold assertion is a footnote to complex phenomena that above all affect the middle class and are looking for composition: every sub-system (economic, scholastic, family, political, etc.) has created expectations, futures which all in all are unjustified and illusory because they are transient and precarious, always otherwise redefinable. If there is still a middle class, then the challenge it is being presented by the mass stately society goes straight to the core of its story: mediation and stabilization or innovation from the bottom up and self-entrepreneurship are no longer necessary, to the point where work is no longer a source of identity, "derived" (secondary) identities do not count. Individual expressiveness, mass consumption and the exploitation of private and public resources are enough.

⁹Not surprisingly, the excerpt from Ricolfi's book quotes Dahrendorf: "The society centered on work is dead, but we do not know how to bury it".

5. Conclusions

We have made a journey between identity, interests and functions of the Italian middle class throughout the Republic's history, and wanted to emphasize three aspects in a partial but realistic way.

On the one hand, the words *d'antan* of the workerist Romano Alquati of 1978 help us to understand the scope and ultimately the stabilizing function the middle class had in the social conflict: it constituted "a protective dam to the capitalist block against the solid attacking force of the working class and against its strong recomposing and always unifying pressure". The critical reference is removed, but the central idea remains: the middle class. And when it goes into crisis, a crisis of mediation arises.

From its historical purpose, the middle class has derived identities, which are indeed changeable. But what is also important for the democratic system: it represented an idea of development, a possible haven for many groups of people. Perhaps this is exactly what the middle class has been lacking: the inability to overcome mass consumption as an ideal of status, not being able to change one's horizon of meaning for the betterment of the country. There are those who consider this an intrinsic trait to the idea and the very realization of the middle class, and those who have always seen new resources come out of its "belly", such as independent work or the districtualization of production.

The challenge that opulence without growth and inequality without struggle brings to the middle class in contemporary Italy still remains. The challenge of the coronavirus crisis, interpreted in Italy using neo-centralist and statist logic, carries the risk of aggravating the fall of middle-class society: will it attach itself to the paternalistic welfarism of the State in order to continue the legacy of fathers and grandparents, or will renew an old and never extinguished entrepreneurial impulse?

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Salvatore Martinez*

Family: a vital and experiential environment, foundation of a new social order

In the beginning, not in principle, there was family

“What makes man great is the ability to think. All of our dignity exists in thought.¹ From this maxim of the famous scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal we draw the need to give an ideal premise to our reflection, inviting ourselves to refocus on an inescapable truth in these times of spiritual and ethical crisis that the world is going through, and which doesn’t spare people and institutions: to give space and form to a thought that becomes generative again. If we allow our thinking to degenerate, it means we do not care about the future of man, and therefore do not participate in the incessant, powerful work of creation and recreation which has spanned centuries, which affects every reality, which marks common progress and the social and spiritual development of mankind. Every thought always precedes a representation of reality, and every realistic possibility of interpreting it in view of the common good. Thought is always a premise, inspiration, representation, animation, transformation, innovation, boundary, a destiny of reality. Even for a believer who wishes to approach the human experience in front of his eyes with religious intent, “faith in God, if it is not thought of, means nothing”². If, as Johann Wolfgang Goethe states in one of his famous aphorisms, “all intelligent thoughts have already been thought out; you just have to try to rethink them”, today it is man that needs to “rethink”; man, in the salvific power of his vital relationships, especially if authenticated by this incomparable good that is the family, “the vehicle of his future, the premise of his very existence and of every new human life”³.

* Renewal in the Holy Spirit.

¹ B. Pascal, *Thoughts*, edited by B. Nacci, Utet, Turin 2014.

² St. Augustine, in “*De Predestinatione*”, 2, 5.

³ J. Ratzinger, *Ehe und Familie im Plan Gottes*In *Familie, werde was du bist*, edited by N. and R. Martin, Vallendar-Shönstatt, Patris Verlag, 1983.

Family founds and defines the existence of humanity. It is not a random “sociological” construction, formed as a result of concessions from civil or religious authority and thus determined by some type of situation of power or favor of economic structures. It is “existential”, and therefore a universal place in which man, every man, can try to freely deploy his humanity, starting from the ideals of justice and peace, fraternity and sociality which are the foundations of his life and destiny⁴. Ideals which precede every legal system and possess in family a primal place to meet, coexist, grow, to mature *naturaliter*, regardless of the consent of any other institution. The universal vocation of family is a structural need of the human being, which goes beyond any ideological or confessional reduction or exaltation of meaning, as well as the inevitable interaction of the family with the socio-cultural contexts in which it historically lies. If family were not the “premise” of any reasonable historical discernment of the associated human life, the fickleness of power structures and the decline of economic systems to which the family is subjected would have already determined its insignificance or dissolubility.

What is it that renders family princely by definition and primal by origin? We do not hesitate to declare love and a creating love. Family finds an inextinguishable source in love and an extraordinary estuary in solidarity which, of love, is the most accomplished and desired face of human history. Recognizing the fact that there is a kind of ‘natural society’ based on a double bond – between man and woman and between parents and children – does not mean referring to any particular historical model of the family, nor does it mean claiming that the reality of family coincides with the nuclear family. In fact, we limit ourselves to recording the existence of a kind of “social and cultural universal” in family, which can be found empirically in every society. The constitutive data, *proprium* of the family is, in fact, its intrinsically relational nature, founded on love. A bond, which immediately becomes social and is put to the test by today’s culture which often tends to reduce affections to pure emotions, which by their nature are transient and unstable. Family relationships remain an irreplaceable *unicum*, because they hold together the original, fundamental differences of the human being. Unfortunately, within the context of social policies, a generic and improper use of the adjective “family” tends to assert itself, which is also assigned to bonds with low emotional and ethical investment that can be dissolved and recomposed easily and

⁴ See *Family, Family Law and Law*, Studies collected by F. D’Agostino, JacaBook, Milan 1984.

quickly. The result is a society marked by increasingly impersonal and anonymous relationships, which are required to remain “immune” to the overly engaging and demanding bond of the family relationship and end up being extremely egalitarian and competitive.

On the eve of his return from American exile, statesman Don Luigi Sturzo wrote how necessary it is to reaffirm love as a “social bond”. He invites us to investigate the problem of mediation and the exchange of love between social groups: “Love creates equality ... Love is the participation of goods. If there is no equality between social groups, there is no communication.”⁵.

Sturzo’s assumption has found a more recent and authoritative echo in Pope Francis: «We must always remember that there is no authentic humanism that does not think of love as a bond between human beings, be it interpersonal, intimate, social, political or intellectual»⁶.

Family: a community of interests, or one of needs?

Today, the obvious failures of individualist culture cause even the biggest of sceptics to recall the need to regenerate the social bond, to strengthen it, to base it on the foundations of trust, reciprocity and solidarity. These are the specific characteristics of the family relationship, in the strict sense of the word. Of course, individualism is also relational. In fact, it’s not like individualists don’t deal with relationships, it’s that they consider them irrelevant to their own subjective identity. It is therefore crucial whether or not it is intentional that the relationship with the other comes before any other “operational” assessment. The other is the only element through which we can assert our relational identity. In today’s conversations and practices, it is not difficult to grasp a loss of the center of gravity regarding the cultivation of relationships. A spontaneity, a negligence, an overall carelessness of the generative quality of our relationships ends up feeding on the practical denial of everything related to the original and originating ideas of our associated life: participation, reciprocity, agreements, identity, similarity, in other words the anthropological structures which create unity in diversity, of which the family has always been the supreme generative and educational expression. Family, if we understand it as a generative

⁵ S. Martinez, *The real revolution is spiritual. The extraordinary relevance of Christian humanism in Don Luigi Sturzo*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2019, p. 64.

⁶ Speech at the Fifth National Ecclesial Conference of Florence, November 10th, 2015.

relational identity, opens up an “entire moral universe” around it, as it puts into play the authenticity of intentions, the constant commitment to relationships, and the exercise of trust and fidelity. Furthermore, the generative dimension of relationships concerns the entire social world as a fundamental and normative anthropological fact, especially in the most diverse areas of education, training, work organization, civil and political responsibility.

The physiological structure of the family comes from the primary needs of man, since his own life originates from them. It's a mistake to believe that it is interests that specify and develop life. Therefore, if family is a “community of needs”, its physiology is anthropological; if it is a “community of interests”, then its nature is socio-cultural. As a result, the relational dimension will prevail in the first assumption, while the individualist dimension prevails in the second. In the first status, “selfless love” acts as the foundation of “living together”; in the second, however, “love of satisfaction” leads to a “common life”. This essential evidence has long been supported by those in favor of the debate around family. Among other things, it is interesting to note that the loss of the core of reasoning around this theme is recorded precisely among “believers”, among citizens of the Christian faith. When we look at family today, we find ourselves on a forced path: to propose once more the fundamental truth about man and his irrepressible need (not interest) to generate stable relationships based on love. In the desire to affirm the legal validity of “models” of family life, we ended up making family a dichotomic reality, almost denatured, whenever we allowed the primal family institution to be distinguished from its members it is composed of, until they are opposed, or, on the contrary, the individual members to be distinguished from the family. Hence the dilemma: does “family law” or “the rights of its members” prevail within the family itself? It is a fact that if a conflict of rivalling forces has infused within the “family society”, these forces ended up weakening it, until it was almost a-pathetic or anti-pathetic in the eyes of the members who are a part of it.

Coronavirus, tragic and providential reversal of the common feeling

With the arrival of the coronavirus, something unimaginable has happened, because the effects it produced are truly unprecedented in recent modern history. Its focus on man, on his fundamental personal and communal freedoms, on his acquired prerogatives of associated life, has rekin-

dled the familial *pathos*. The pandemic has produced a kind of “backward transition”, a reverse process compared to the historical journey that leads every man from the initial internal ties to his family, to the most extensive and complex ties to the human family, in a movement that extends from his own home to the “common home”, which is the world: the environment outside his family. The coronavirus has led to a kind of backwards motion: a common and profound reassessment of the value of a return to family life. Seeking salvation from a plague, we have forcibly taken refuge in our homes. We were challenged by the return to common life, by the imposed effort of living it “full time”, by rediscovering the value of time and shared spaces in exercising an unedited “domestic patience”. We have rediscovered the perception of family and emotional ties as a return to interpersonal love, which is often brushed off, or entrusted to a thousand mediators; the joy and usefulness of simple daily gestures, which in their family repetitiveness had become discolored and flavorless; creative skills that we did not think we had, exorcising the spirit of death, of futility, of helplessness that no one has been spared from. All of a sudden, the family – with all its contradictions and infidelities, poverty and unanswered questions – has been reintroduced to its ideal and factual prototyping: a community of people, founded on generative relationships that find their expression in love. A sort of rehumanization of the alphabet of humanity, of its incipit and its first course in the family. A sort of reopening of the “construction site of life”, in which the coexistence of needs and affections that they share under one roof has been maintained, in which everyone finds themselves in need of love, and at the same time indebted to it.

Without beatifying family in the time of coronavirus, there is no doubt that our freedom was mortally wounded by the virus. Just as we thought we were safe and protected by a well-established constitutional and institutional balance, we found ourselves on our knees, faced with a new plea for humility, experiencing pain for what we have lost and will continue to lose, for what has rendered us poorer in human, physical, material and spiritual terms, and which now pushes us to desire more humanity, a new human brotherhood. For many, on the other hand, it is as if life has stalled. What will be able to “unlock” the jammed mechanism? Life itself and a new care of life, reimagined from its fragility. Life needs care: without care there is no development of life. A care that provides you with what is necessary to make it grow and experience all its potential. Due to the coronavirus, families have experienced a deeper perception of their sense of limits, weakness and suffering, vital experiences, constitutive of human existence, which forces us to either re-evaluate the essential goodness of

our love-based relationships, or succumb to the lack of it. The limit is not a variable of human existence, but rather a constant that defines us and that specifies our existence in the world. At the same time, the limit is always an interpellation of new love to safeguard our dignity, a sort of dynamic goodness intimately lodged in the heart of man and very often unexpressed, compressed or repressed.

The erosion of its true identity defines or distorts family life, the presence or absence of love, therefore its vulnerability, its ability to persist. In the factory of feelings that is the family, family is always a “community of destiny”, a destiny hopelessly marked by love or the lack of love that can never be legitimately judged, because it escapes pre-packed classification. The Coronavirus allowed the communal multilingualism of love to be revealed, in a rediscovered intergenerational spiritual and cultural dialogue within the family. It is always the language “of the other” that specifies our personal identity, starting from the many irreducible differences that render each of our human relationship dynamic and alive. The coronavirus has shown us that a new affection for man is possible. His future must be drawn “on a human scale”, in a providential offer of fraternity that reformulates the figure of human solidarity. There is no place more suited to fulfilling this mission than the family, where all the decisive steps and passion to overcome the challenge are formed. This great challenge does not exempt any expression of political, economic and religious power from co-responsibility. As Albert Camus once wrote: “True generosity towards the future consists of giving everything to the present”⁷.

A return to “caring for the soul”

As I have already pointed out, I am deeply convinced it is precisely in “fraternity” that we can find “the true unifying and redefining principle of our societies in the aftermath of this severe challenge”.⁸ Will the “spirit of fraternity” make all our individual and collective freedoms more just and truer? In this respect, a piece written by Pope Francis shows a great prophetic power: “We need to feel that we need one another once again, that we have a responsibility towards others and towards the world [...] For too long, we have been in a state of moral degradation, mocking ethics, goodness, faith, honesty [...] Due to this destruction of every foundation

⁷ See. *The Man in Revolt*, Bompiani, Milan 2002.

⁸ See ‘Osservatore Romano’, 30 March 2020.

of social life, we end up pitting ourselves against each other in order to defend our own interests. It causes new forms of violence and cruelty to emerge, and prevents the development of a true culture of care for the environment.⁹

This “feeling”, which is not imposed by principles of political or social solidarity, but by the “principle of fraternity”, is miraculously gaining urgency inside human hearts: it represents the most powerful antidote to the realism of resignation and a future that would otherwise appear hopeless.

The experience of suffering caused by the events of Covid-19 has increased the “perceived value” of life and, above all, increased the desire to live it in a healthier, more aware and responsible, caring fashion. The dignity of man is entangled once more in a common horizon, starting from a new request to safeguard the three irrepressible and decisive goods that characterize it: health, affection, and work. The family is a complex laboratory of humanity, which must regain ground on the safekeeping of these three specific assets, making sure that it is no longer subordinate in terms of power and responsibility to other forms of intervention of civil and ecclesial institutions responsible for the same purpose. Therefore, providentially, the “human figure” can be restored, an order that places the family in a centripetal and attractive function within our social, civil, economic and administrative systems. The words of Pietro Metastasio, poet and reformer of the Italian melodrama of the 1700s, are most effective: “It is the law of nature which moves us to sympathize with those who experience a misfortune that we experienced again; whether love lights up our similarity, or whether it is more meant to understand each other’s sorrows”¹⁰.

Despite the ominous nature of the coronavirus, it is allowing souls to catch up with each other and to not become infected by human indifference. We have moved forward so quickly in recent years that we must now pause for a moment to allow our souls to rejoin us. The soul has been lagging behind: between the flow of things and events it was abandoned on the side of the road. Progress cannot advance faster than our intelligence and conscience, because it is a product of these things. It cannot advance faster than our humanity, because it is a result of our humanity. Jan Patočka, the greatest thinker of the 20th century in the Czech Republic, wrote: “Without caring for the soul as its spiritual basis, Europe has

⁹ *Laudato yes. On the care of the common home*, 229.

¹⁰ Libretto dell’Azione Sacra “Giuseppe riconosciuto”, Vienna 1773.

died and falls into oblivion once more “¹¹. A soul that is still the signifier of our traditions, of our generous capacity for convivial and affectionate relationships, of taking care of one another, that still animates and revives reality, things, and relationships. A soul that modern technology and the nihilism of current thinking failed to warm. A soul that marks the return of the “spirituality of being”, because the being is reality, and is always a “being for others”. A soul that causes a new cultural unity, which is not homologated but creatively plural, that can help to write a different grammar for poverty and wealth and help the orientation of globalization towards more human, solidary, communal, just and peaceful achievements.

In ancient wisdom, the question of the “human” was well identified and expressed. The Latin playwright Publius Terentius Afro wrote: “I am a man and nothing that is human can leave me indifferent”¹². Every person is in need of love, even before prohibitions or concessions, because man cannot live without love. Without love, man will remain an unfinished being, unable to comprehend itself. “No state order, however just, can render the service of love superfluous.”¹³. The times we live in are unfortunately increasingly subjected to the “drought of spiritual values”; an era that bewilders us with its desert-like aridity which renders many a man unable to find meaningful answers in a generation that is losing the truth about mankind. At the beginning of the last century, French Jewish politician Léon Blum wrote: «A society claiming to guarantee people their freedom must begin by guaranteeing them a true existence.”¹⁴.

A new global ethos

The horizon is opening up in front of us; a dawn that breaks on the decline of a civilization that has long been sick from the deadly viruses of indifference, pride, supremacy, markets and discrimination. Will we be able to seize this opportunity to start anew? Or will we return to the way it was before, once we manage to repair the “jammed mechanism” and “unlock our lives”. Will it be worse because we will not have learned anything? It’s impossible to ignore that since 2008 there has been talk of a ‘global crisis’, and that on several occasions, we said and repeated that we would

¹¹ See, *Plato and Europe*, edited by G. Reale, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 1997.

¹² In *Heautontimorùmenos* (“The punisher of himself”).

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 28.

¹⁴ In *Nouvelles conversations de Goethe avec Eckerman 1897–1900*, Paris 1901.

“leave the crisis behind”. In truth, for many of us, talking about the crisis was a pretext for highlighting its effects and not for curing or removing its causes, especially since a new social pact based on the most precious “social invariant” that is the family was not re-established. This crisis has caught us in a state of crisis. No one will be exempted from personal and familial impoverishment, nor from mutual indebtedness in order to regain confidence and strength. In this time of crisis, the responsibility for the future of mankind is not in crisis. We urgently need a new breath of wisdom on the topic of the degradation of the human being that we are gradually witnessing, especially when we look at the consequences of the current phenomena, which destabilize the future of the family.

I have become increasingly convinced that we must urgently create a global *ethos*, which is shared and integrative, and establishes a new alliance to defend the family in safeguarding the common good. An *ethos* that can form the background and foundation for the globalization of the economy, technology and communication, planetary phenomena that are accompanied by an increase in the demand for “social justice”, in the face of old and new forms of poverty and impoverishment that lead to mistrust among people and growing discomfort within communities. What we truly need is a ‘globalization of the human ethos’: not an additional *ethos*, but an essential, vital one resulting from a new, non-ideological dialogue that places man, the question of his innate rights, and his life at the center: not his survival. The human person will more often be at the center of the processes of development and international cooperation, the result of complex historical factors that emerge from an unprecedented interaction of geopolitical and socio-economic dimensions with cultural and religious ones. No law, no state should ever be able to overthrow natural justice. The law is there to serve justice, and not the other way around. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN General Assembly declared: “The family is the natural and fundamental nucleus of society and has the right to be protected by society and the State.”¹⁵

From the de-socialization of the individual to the re-generation of the family
 Certain reductive visions of humanity tend to present the common good as a purely socio-economic state of well-being, devoid of any other authentic finalization linked to the promotion of man, the protection and promotion of his dignity, security, equity, and solidarity. Saint Thomas Aquinas said the following about the use of goods: “The man who owns the goods possesses them not only

¹⁵ Art. 16, 1946.

as his own, but also shares them, in the sense that they can benefit not only him but also others”¹⁶.

Mankind, interhuman relationships, social conventions: they are in fact increasingly based on paradigms that act in a de-socializing and therefore depersonalizing sense. People’s loneliness, relationships emptied of depth and authenticity, the general weakening of the customs and rules on which a community is founded: they all sing a sad refrain.

There are three obvious consequences to the de-socialization that is taking place:

The *de-socialized* man is also *de-culturalized*: the absence of an effective community environment dissolves the great glue of a community’s social cohesion: cultural heritage. The increasingly evident risk is the anonymity of every tradition that is centuries old; especially the family and all the traditional educational subjects responsible for the transmission of memories (cultural, religious, social). As a result, the sense of responsibility and any form of “parental relationship” with the past is contested.

The *de-socialized* man is also *de-spiritualized*: “relativistic virtues” and materialistic paradigms (selfishness, pride, greed, envy, competitive spirit, the rejection of objective rules and futility of the transcendent) tend to attack and reduce spiritual life, to weaken the openness of the heart towards others. The sterility of spiritual life or the use of pseudo-spiritual forms (not reconciling, but alienating), definitely influences the “consummation” of love.

The *de-socialized* man is also *de-moralized*: post-modern times tend to determine a “neutral” society, a place where all values are to be accepted indiscriminately, “beyond good and evil”, throwing man into a world of amorality in which “consciousness” is replaced by instinct and the satisfaction of it. This undermines the “virtues” that generate positive behavior (patience, perseverance, righteousness, integrity).

In the aftermath of the terrible challenge that Covid-19 poses, Italy has the opportunity to make the family a fundamental and non-complementary element in the regeneration of the welfare state. In accordance with the principle of horizontal subsidiarity, family has always been a fundamental intermediate subject in the processes of democratic exchange, identity formation and building trust. The priority of family over society and the State must therefore be reaffirmed, because family is not for society and for the State, but society and the State are for the family. It is on the basis of this principle that public authorities must not deprive the family of the

¹⁶ In *Summa Theologica* I, 96.

tasks which it can perform alone or freely, by associating itself with other families. The social dimension is inherent to the nature of the family, its structure, its tasks, its rights. It is a primordial social resource, and for this reason it must be strengthened and reaffirmed in its social subjectivity¹⁷. In an era increasingly characterized by the progressive insignificance of intermediate bodies and representatives - at least in their traditional prognostic forms - we must give impetus to new and concrete experiences of horizontal subsidiarity that put the family back at the center/heart of our welfare state.

The bitter reality is that in recent years we have built a “post-family” society; a decomposed, fragmented society, which has abandoned the social structure of the family in accordance with a “culturalist” conception of the family itself, as a transition from nature to culture; a family originating no longer from the “laws of nature”, but from the “laws of culture”¹⁸. We distinguish five different “family types”: nuclear or complete, a family formed by a single marital unit (husband, wife with or without children); incomplete or single-parent, a family consisting, for example, of a widowed or divorced mother with children; without structure, family without a marital unit, formed by people with other forms of kinship (e.g. unmarried brothers); extended, family with only one marital unit and one or more cohabiting relatives; multiple, family with two or more marital units¹⁹. We certainly cannot overlook the fact that today, the transformation of its profile, having to deal with demographic aging, with the reduction of births, with the consolidation of the presence of foreign immigrants, has a substantial impact on the family structure²⁰.

Modernity has reduced the family to a more or less random cluster of individuals. This is due to the two main connotations of modernity. First, the fact that modernity organizes the social order around the individual/

¹⁷ See the valuable and still current study of E. Scabini, V. Cigoli, who summarizes 20 years of work of the Center for Studies and Research on the Family of the Catholic University of Milan, *The family member. Bonds, symbols, and transitions*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milan 2000.

¹⁸ Cf. P. Donati, *The family option in a post-family society: the game of relationships in family warming*. In *The family in post-family society*, New Report International Center for Family Studies (CISF) 2020.

¹⁹ See S. Vogliotti, S. Vattai, *Welfare state. Family policies in a European comparison*, AFI IPL 2015.

²⁰ On the ‘scenario of constant propensities and variable propensities (propensity method)’, the reading of G.C. Blangiardo, S.M.L. Rimoldi, E. Barbiano of Belgiojoso is useful, *The future of the family in Italy: what prospects for change?* In *The family in society* Cit.

state axis, that citizenship is to be considered a personal matter, and that the so-called intermediate bodies are viewed with suspicion, as if they are constraints on individuals and potential “alternative” powers for the State. So, the family is not “politically” expected. Second, modernity has given priority to the symbolic code of the market, as a constituent paradigm of the public sphere, as the basis of political democracy, as the engine of culture and the legal order homogeneous to modernity. As a result, the symbolic code of the family is also read, interpreted, and later also regulated, through the code of the market.

Today, everything around us is more fragile, imperfect, inadequate, in need of renewal: social and health systems, political systems, economic systems. The words of Saint John Paul II have never resonated more truly than in his Economic Encyclical, in which he prophesied for the new millennium the limits of technocratic systems not controlled by the love for man: “Man’s main resource is man himself”²¹, that is to say, the goodness of his life. It would be an unforgivable mistake not to appreciate the resilience that families have shown during these trying times: houses that are inhabited like never before, hospitable to the point of embracing the entire country and life itself of the country. The houses were offices, schools, churches, restaurants, hospitals, nursing homes, playgrounds, theatres, tailor shops, barbershops, and artisan repair shops.

Families possess the extraordinary capacity to adapt when they are challenged by change or subjected to shock. And while it’s true that they’ve held up really well, they’re now going to have to face an even bigger test. While acknowledging that there is an improvement in family harmony, as a recent survey shows, families expect the economic and social situation to deteriorate substantially in the future and call for a radical renewal of the political class and social policies.²² Families must be freed from a logic of mere welfare: we need a structural, national family policy that tries to turn emergencies into opportunities. We must not consider the family as a mere *object* of “supportive” measures, but as a *subject* capable of multiplying moral, material and spiritual riches the entire country can profit from.

There are strong similarities between belonging to society and belonging to a family. The family is a matrix of social belonging that gives birth to trust and to the development of the ability to cooperate with the common good responsibly, in an endless mutual exchange. For these prerogatives

²¹ In *Centesimus Annus*, 32.

²² *Families and the Covid-19 emergency. A current photograph*, curated by RCS and Forum of Family Associations, 2020.

the family is considered a “primary social capital” which, if consolidated and increased, will generate well-being for the entire social community; if consumed or weakened, it will inevitably lead to the tearing of the corporate fabric. Until now, the strength of the family has acted as a driving force, compensating for the destabilizing choices made at the socio-political level from a purely individualistic perspective. Let's consider the lack of intragenerational equity and the considerable penalization of younger generations. The relationship between different generations within the same family has ensured that – while a fair exchange of resources was interrupted at a social level – there would be a reactivation through the code of reciprocity and of solidarity within the family networks. The family bears the prevailing costs of generational change: this should be favored in its essential social role.

Family welfare: Cinderella's redemption!

There is no question that welfare must reform itself with new social and community accents, borrowing and assimilating from family welfare itself: taking care of interpersonal relationships, taking care of the weak, sharing and redistributing resources, turning to mutuality and reciprocity to reduce inequality and overcoming economic individualism, the culture of giving as a socialization of generosity, trust as an element of safeguarding unity. When we talk about family welfare, we are describing an “industry”: one of the largest industries in our production system, whose value exceeds 140 billion euros, which is more than 8% of GDP. Its main activities center around six areas of interest and intervention: health support (health expenditure); job support (transport costs to travel to the workplace, expenses related to work itself, nourishment and support “away from home”); educational support (fees for pre-school facilities and access to education and its possible fruition: from teaching, to the acquisition of textbooks, transport, canteen, food and accommodation); care support (services and expenses for elderly family members who are not self-sufficient, for minor children [babysitting] and for help at home [maid]); support for culture and leisure (expenses related to the purchase of books, shows, cultural, social, voluntary, recreational, sports, various arts, body care); support for pension provision and protection (pension policies and supplementary pension funds, life insurance, housing, assets)²³. Family

²³ A thorough study was carried out by MBS Consulting – Welfare Industry, *Report on the Welfare Budget of Italian Families - 2019 Edition*.

welfare has a strategic value, which goes beyond the economic dimension and is central to the satisfaction of emerging and decisive social needs to re-establish and stabilize social cohesion. If well oriented towards its own growth, it can help contain government spending, but also relieve pressure on public welfare.

The family is not simply a major player in the market. It is, in fact, the go-to place for satisfying the basic needs of its members, including the enjoyment of goods and services which are self-produced. There are some aspects of this “family production” that the market cannot easily replace, such as the family as an environment where little ones, the elderly, the sick, and migrants are taken care of. In the most diverse of global contexts, it is a given fact that belonging to a family network represents a crucial factor in economic and entrepreneurial development, performing well in the education system, extraordinary effectiveness in terms of the social inclusion of poor or disadvantaged people, the reduction of participation in criminal networks, and so on. If the family weakens, it drags the whole community down with it, and it foils any attempt to strengthen social cohesion. That is why the State and public institutions (both centrally and locally) must urgently develop the most appropriate strategies to protect and promote the family²⁴.

If we look to the near future, it is clear that the family will be challenged by a dramatic economic emergency. This is much more likely than the return of the health emergency, even though the latter has already led to the economic weakening of households. The risk of companies, businesses and strategic sectors failing, many of which are “family-run” and the increase in reflected poverty that cannot be assumed by social spending, the widening gap between the poor and the rich, the educational emergency and the reorganization of the school supply chain; these emergencies do not belong to a “probable future”: they are already happening²⁵. Those who claim to have the greatest interest in the well-being of society, but do not propose solutions which are genuinely aimed at strengthening the family, delude themselves by making “neutral” choices for the family. In fact, any

²⁴ In this regard, it would be valuable to consult the “Monitoring Report on policies for the family of municipalities as of 31/08/2019” and the “Monitoring Report on policies for the family of regions and autonomous provinces as of 31/12/2019”, carried out by the Istituto degli Innocenti, Florence, published by the National Center for Documentation and Analysis for Children and Adolescents of the Department for Family Policies, 2020.

²⁵ See *Families and the Covid-19 emergency*, cit.

action that does not pass through it, weakens it and fundamentally erodes social well-being.

An authentic family policy should not be confused with a general policy to combat poverty, whether it be aimed at combating demographic decline, at minors, or at employment. It must be an interconnected set of interventions, in which coherence is guaranteed by the fact that the ultimate objective is to strengthen the institution of the family in inter- as well as intra-generational relationships. The possibility of families autonomously organizing themselves to meet their own needs with the end goal of full subsidiarity, essentially depends on whether they have adequate economic resources and time. Adequate social welfare must be the result of integrating services and benefits, and of adopting a new approach between the public, private social, and private sectors. A “system” of standardized interventions, which promotes real opportunities for inclusion and social protagonism of families, who are otherwise excluded from determining and constructing their future.

We should direct our attention to two aspects which in today’s world constitute a core issue of family policies from a standpoint of social policies: fiscal equity and reconciliation between family and work. Without the central core of these interventions, the entire castle cannot support itself: the implementation of a family-friendly tax, uniquely able to guarantee genuine fiscal equity, recognizing the irreplaceable role of the family as the environment in which generational change takes place.

It is no secret that up until now, our country’s fiscal policies have not recognized, but have instead penalized families with children in a significant way. Those who oppose the implementation of a family-friendly tax system often consider such interventions to be antithetical to anti-poverty policies. This creates the belief that a child is “a cost to avoid”, rather than a source of wealth one should not be deprived of. In fact, a good family policy is an extremely effective tool for the prevention of poverty – of which not having children and therefore not having a new generation is certainly one of the most dramatic examples – leaving people and families sufficient resources to respond freely and responsibly to their needs, dreams, and future²⁶. When we look at it from a different standpoint than the purely financial, there are “family-work” conciliation policies. In regards to those,

²⁶ It is interesting to consult the e-book by A. Rosina, R. Zezza on why Italians “no longer create families” and on the analysis of the birth rate in Italy as one of the most serious causes of compromising its future: *Generating a future. Culture and politics to return to being a vital country*, Volta Paper 03, 2016.

it should be pointed out that the current structure of European welfare systems has, on the one hand, been consolidated through the lawful introduction of binding rules regarding employee's rights, such as maximum weekly working hours or laws on leave; on the other hand, by encouraging benefits, usually of a financial nature, for those who organize the work system in a way that is sensitive to the personal needs of employees. A broad cultural reconsideration of these two spheres of life – family and work – is essential, and starts by recognizing each other's implications, through the involvement of all components of the labor market, placing a greater emphasis on the contribution of local authorities, the tertiary sector and the social private sector.

Resilience: the victory of love

It's not easy to discuss the family, and family in the social and political sphere, while at the same time remaining consistent and credible. A decisive contribution in this direction came from Pope Francis, with the publication of a Post-Synodal Exhortation²⁷ at the end of two Synods dedicated to the theme of family. It was certainly a turning point in tackling issues that closely affect the "flesh", the life of families. In the Pontiff's judgment, the problems with dwindling birth rates, with work, migration, the role of the elderly, the need to facilitate the conception of children, or resorting to adoption and custody are not situations to be confined to a specific sector of family reality, but are intertwined in various ways in everyone's life. They end up shaping our relationships and feelings, even our relationship to a faith that, if it is pure, cannot stay confined behind one's front door. "The family must not think of itself as an enclosure meant to protect itself from society. It does not wait, but reaches out in search of solidarity"²⁸.

In defense of the rights of the family, the Holy Father points out "a prophetic appeal in favor of the family institution, which must be respected and defended against all usurpations, especially in the current context, where it usually occupies little space in political projects"²⁹. To this end,

²⁷ *Amoris Laetitia*, Vatican City, 2016.

²⁸ AL, 181.

²⁹ AL, 44.

he proposes “a robust injection of family spirit”³⁰, so that the family may “make God’s love present in society”³¹.

The goal of the family is to become more and more what it primarily is, reaffirming in a dynamic and experiential way: a community whose essence and life are always and ultimately defined by love. However, the definition and formation of vital and creative spaces in which it can give itself remains crucial, in an endless duty to compose families, to progress as communities of people, proactive in the promotion and defense of life in all its stages, in participating in the integral development of the person in society. Resilience: a word that reveals the future of the family and its ability to cope with critical and traumatic events, the injustices and neglects it suffers, the determination with which to reorganize one’s life, adapting it to modern-day difficulties. The family manages to resist time and time again, precisely because of its relational nature and its ability to regenerate itself out of love. Even when it seems to be lacking energy and a future, it shows an unparalleled social flexibility and reserve of resources.

The reality of our social life is, and always will be, an intricate system of traditions, ideas, feelings, needs and interests, which are expressed in public and private institutions. The family is a clear and reflective mirror of that: the primary vehicle of old and new good practices. Our time needs to be loved more, even before it needs to be shown to the new generations between catastrophes or imaginative footage: “Public life is based on justice. Without it there is no state and no political and moral organization. But if justice is not conceived as the love of one’s neighbor and is not complemented by the same feeling of love, it is neither true nor intimate”³².

³⁰ AL, 183.

³¹ AL, 184.

³² S. Martinez, *The Real Revolution*, cit., p. 65.

The Italian middle class within a European context: a case that is not unique, but particularly vulnerable

The position of the middle class in Italy, throughout Europe, and even on a global level, has been fundamentally challenged by the coronavirus. At the social, economic and political level, the associated health and financial crises are increasingly raising questions about the future of the middle classes. And never before has this matter taken on such important traits. The middle classes are not only a traditional support base for multiple centrist political parties, but also play an essential role in making the institutional foundations more solid in social and political terms (*Fukuyama 2011*). They are an engine of the global economy and a fundamental aggregate from the viewpoints of both consumption and demand (*Pressman 2007*). In short, the middle classes are important for our societies, for our economies and for the integrity of our political systems.

The middle-class lifestyle is a framework for social and political stability. This model, which is based mainly on the objectives of good education, steady work, secure property rights and a decent pension, is supported by the aspiration for a better life, particularly with regard to the next generation (*Drea 2018*). It is the model that has made centrist political parties very attractive since the beginning of the European integration process in the 1950s: it is “a lifestyle, that of the middle class, which supports moderate politics”. (*O’Toole 2019*).

And yet, the discontent of the middle class, in countries as politically diverse as the United States, Italy, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, is one of the factors that can have a direct impact on parliamentary democracies. At least in part, this refers to the growing disaffection of middle-class voters towards traditional political parties, and to the broader process through which new political movements try to question the status quo.

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The discontent of the middle classes reflects some clear social challenges which had already emerged in the past decade, in terms of geography (urban/rural dimension), technology and education (skilled/unskilled), demographic data (generational inequality) and employment status (steady/unsteady work). Each of these challenges is in danger of escalating, as a result of the emergency brought on by the coronavirus. It is impossible to reflect on these issues, or to identify Italy's position within Europe, without first recognizing the central position of the middle classes in relation to the increasingly obvious fractures in this age of discontent.

Let us look at a brief overview of this chapter: the first section will highlight some relevant trends at a European level, in an attempt to clarify whether the perception of a decline in the middle class is based on specific elements. The second section will illustrate Italy's position within the European context. We will consider four specific areas: the financial situation, dimension and position of the middle class; the problem of intergenerational inequality; social mobility and the dilemma of expectations; work-life balance in a context marked by uncertain job market conditions. The third section will use the example of the Czech Republic to highlight the fact that the disintegration of the traditional middle class vote in a center-right context is not solely attributable to the reality of Italy. The fourth section will be a summary.

1. European perceptions

Even before the coronavirus crisis, middle class confidence was limited by the belief that everything used to be better in the past, especially before 2008. The opinion (*Pew 2018*) that people's financial conditions have deteriorated over the past 20 years was particularly strong in Greece (87%), Italy (72%), Spain (62%) and France (56%).

Reinforcing this perception was the belief that the middle class was under an increasing pressure to cope with even the most basic of financial obligations. This sense of financial instability was common to most European countries, even before the pandemic. In Britain, 31% of the social group ABC1, which includes professional workers as well as junior and administrative managers, finds it difficult to pay an unexpected £500 bill (*Times/Mori 2016*). The "compression" of the middle class is felt most in countries along the peripheral trajectory of Europe, which were hit hardest by the economic crisis (Greece, Cyprus, Spain, Estonia, Slovenia). Ultimately, according to common opinion (*Eurofund 2017*), the decade

up to 2017 has led to a reduction or stagnation of the middle class in most European countries.

At the heart of this financial anxiety is an uncertainty about how technology, unstable employment patterns and globalization are polarizing the job market. The perception (*Hollinger 2012*) is that the “rapid changes introduced by technology are ‘emptying’ jobs that require fewer qualifications, such as in the bank or public sectors, endangering those who count on steady positions to subsidize their children’s education and perhaps a decent retirement”. This ‘emptying’ of traditional middle-class jobs not only has a detrimental financial impact on the affected employees, but also weakens the general consensus of the middle class itself, which keeps together the development of political rights and the democratic rule of law.

In a broader context, over the past two decades and until 2019, large sections of the middle class have lost confidence in their ability to achieve a higher standard of living and to offer better opportunities to their children. Although European states have mitigated the worst effects of income inequality with well-developed welfare, it is clear that today’s perception emphasizes inequality in terms of opportunities and a lack of social mobility.

It is important to note that this negative perception is not limited to the countries which were most affected by the great recession, such as Greece, Spain, Portugal and Italy. While households in these countries feel that economic inequalities have increased dramatically as a result of the economic crisis, families in countries like Germany and the Netherlands are also pessimistic. Apprehensions are not limited to the current economic conditions (at least not during the period leading up to the coronavirus), but concern future prospects for employment and affect issues such as immigration (*Siegmann and Schafer 2018*). Even in the younger EU member states such as the Czech Republic, the perception of the decline of the middle class is confirmed in the judgement of a modern society perceived as more unfair despite recent economic performances (*Topaz 2019*).

Does perception match reality?

Although we need to proceed with caution when making wider comparisons on a European scale in terms of the middle class (due to the subjective nature of the very definition of ‘middle class’), it is possible to make some deductions from a quantitative point of view, focusing on the income perspective and following the definition of middle class families

as determined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development: families with an median income of between 75% and 200% of the national level (OECD 2019)¹.

If we follow this direction, it becomes clear that there are significant flaws in the economic and social stability of the middle classes: not only in Europe, but all around the world. Among the OECD member states, the average proportion of middle-class households fell from 64% to 61% over the period from the mid-1980s to the 30 years that follow (OECD 2019). In the United States, the average income of middle-class households in 2016 was the same as in 2000, which reflects the prolonged effects of the great recession and an initial economic contraction caused by the *dot-com* in 2001 (*Pew 2018*).

The question of income is directly linked to many of the meta-challenges mentioned previously. In particular, the OECD estimates that out of all current middle-income jobs, one in six runs a high risk of being automated in the future. In addition, the issue of excessive debt was highlighted, which is more common in middle-income households. The level of financial apprehension is common to the middle class in all European states, regardless of economic performance. However, discontent is clearly more widespread in countries like Italy, which were most affected by the great recession that began in 2008.

A major pan-European study (*Siegmann and Schafer 2018*) examined the position of the middle class in nine EU member states between 2007 and 2015. The study included Italy and other countries, such as France, Germany, Spain and Poland, in addition to establishments representing all geographical areas of the Union (Finland, the Netherlands, Ireland, Bulgaria). From an income standpoint, the study shows that most Western European countries, including Italy, have undergone a marginal change both in relation to the overall size of the middle class and to income growth in the 2007-2015 period.

Although it does not match the widespread perception, it has to be said that the stagnation of the middle class is evident in the aforementioned countries and that new major challenges are on the horizon, especially since the weak economic recovery that began in 2016 has already suffered a setback due to the pandemic.

¹ A median household income refers to the level of income earned by a given household in which half of the household earns more and half earns less. It is used instead of the average household income because it can provide a more accurate picture of the true economic circumstances.

The coronavirus has a strong impact on the European middle class, which is already showing significant fragility. The trail that was left by at least a decade of recession has exposed the middle class, which is now particularly vulnerable to further income reductions, or cuts in public services, education, housing and health. While it is still too early to draw conclusions on the possible impact of the coronavirus on the middle class, it goes without saying that the longer the economic crisis drags on, the more widespread the discontent of the middle class will become. There is a level of frustration that could easily be reflected in increasing political polarization and social fragmentation in the years to come.

2. Italian peculiarities within the European context

Based on the research that was carried out, it is possible to refer to Italy within a broader European context, by analyzing specific areas in quantitative and qualitative terms:

- A. The financial situation, dimensions and position of the middle class;
- B. The problem of intergenerational inequality;
- C. Social mobility and the dilemma of expectations;
- D. Work-life balance within a context of uncertain job market conditions.

Please note that an analysis of the most important political implications of current middle-class dynamics is provided in sections 3 and 4.

A. The financial situation, dimensions and position of the middle class

In the period leading up to the coronavirus, and in particular during the previous two decades, the data shows that the Italian middle class has known a clear and significant phase of stagnation.

In accordance with most developed economies, the Italian middle class has ceased to be the engine of cohesion, social mobility and economic dynamism. This dynamic supports the perception of an unsolvable decline, considerably strengthened in view of Italy's weak economic performance over the last twenty years and the fragilities that have been highlighted since the start of the great recession, now over a decade ago.

The size of the Italian middle class (measured in terms of adult workers) has shrunk by about 3% (OECD 2019b) over two decades, until the mid-10s of the third millennium. This is a smaller percentage than Ger-

many, the US and Denmark over the same period, and the decline is very similar to that in the Netherlands. The figure (OECD 2019b) referring to the middle class in Italy (59%) remains close to that of the OECD average (61%). In accordance with this, more than 70% of households belonging to the Italian middle class report having difficulties coping with financial obligations.

While it is evident that public perceptions do not reflect the real economic situation of a country, it is nevertheless interesting to note that Italy has a decent percentage of citizens (OECD 2019b) who identify themselves as belonging to the middle class despite their socio-economic conditions. This self-identification validates a broader feeling of middle-class decline.

In this context, it is clear that Italy is following the broader European and global trends in terms of middle-class stagnation, which is not limited to the European countries that were hit hardest by the crisis of the last two decades. While the great recession is generally the factor that accelerated the decline of the middle class in Italy, it has to be said that its real impact – at least from a financial perspective – has been much more nuanced.

In fact, while the global financial crisis has had an impact on income reduction for the Italian population, it has had limited effects on inequalities. (*Brandolini et al. 2018*). This can be mainly attributed to redistribution measures (the welfare state) and the fact that the drop in income has affected the population as a whole. Italy's middle class was hit hardest by the recession of 1992-93 (*Bitetti and Morganti 2018*).

It is therefore important not to refer to the stagnation of the middle class in Italy exclusively through the lens of the great recession or the economic difficulties generated in the past decade. In fact, we need to broaden the horizon, going back to the early 1990s, in order to understand the many vulnerabilities of the middle class.

While it is still too early to examine the likely negative financial impact, the coronavirus has on the middle class, it is still possible to define three firm points. First, between 2014 and 2019 there was a net improvement in the financial condition of the Italian middle class: in the 2014-16 period, the data shows an increase of 3.5% in average household income, as well as a reduction in loans (*Bank of Italy 2016*). Other recent studies have also shown that between 2018 and 2019, the percentage of 'middle-income' citizens in Italy increased (*Intesa Sanpaolo 2019*)².

² As an "average income", a range of 75% to 150% of the median national income was considered.

Second, this modest but real increase in income has not been strong enough to make a difference in the widespread perception of decline resulting from the great recession, nor will it be enough to mitigate the economic effects of the coronavirus for the majority of middle-class families.

Finally, it will take many months to understand the real impact of the economic disaster, but it is already clear that the main negative effects are spilling over into middle class families. From the loss of income to the inability to cope with loans, over the closure of schools and postponement of education and other public services, the coronavirus has a detrimental effect on the Italian middle class and will continue to do so in the near future. Although this trend can be commonly observed throughout Europe, the financial weaknesses of the Italian middle class, which have increased since the 1990s, cause it to be more exposed and vulnerable to further periods of stagnation (or decline) in income and to limited prospects for employment.

B. The topic of intergenerational inequality

From a social standpoint, inequalities between generations have been growing significantly in Europe since 2008 (*Chen et al. 2018*). Young people's incomes have remained steady since 2007, while 65-year-olds, as well as older people, have enjoyed a 10% increase (*Lagarden2018*). The often absolute protection offered to pensioners by right-wing and left-wing governments has led to a socially unsustainable distribution of wealth (and opportunities) in many member states.

This polarization is documented by multiple socio-economic indicators (for example: higher unemployment and lower incomes), reflecting the aforementioned greater sense of financial insecurity. Over time, this level of generational inequality will inevitably undermine the sustainability of the European social security model, leading to a "lost generation" of Europeans already looking at political parties with disdain (*Dragons 2013*).

Italy has the highest percentage of citizens over 65 (22%) in the European Union. Compared to France (18.8%), the Netherlands (18.2%), Poland (16%) and Ireland (13.2%), this figure highlights that demography is a key factor in the challenge of the middle class in Italy, where each generation is characterized by the presence of a continuously narrowing core in the middle-income bracket (OECD 2019b). As an example, 68% of baby boomers (those born between 1942 and 1964) are on average incomes between the ages of 20 and 29, while this figure falls to 60% for millennials born after 1983.

If not kept under control, a similar dynamic is bound to continue in the future. The aging population, combined with a fairly low level of economic growth since the 1990s, pose two problems for the Italian middle class. The economic environment has not strengthened to such an extent that it offers a sufficient amount of well-paid and steady jobs necessary to support the formation of new households. In the aftermath of the great recession, 50% of people between the ages of 25 and 34 lived with their parents (*Bank of Italy 2015*). In the 16-29 age group, almost 90% of boys and 80% of girls continued to live with their parents (*Eurostat 2018*), compared to 70% and 60% respectively within the EU.

This trend of 'adult kids' also highlights the intergenerational gap in terms of wealth in Italy. Many middle-class parents (even as pensioners) are financially safe and own homes. But the generations of their children and grandchildren are less likely going to be able to combine security and material wealth in the same way.

The perception of a declining middle class and the data on stagnant income are not limited to Italy. And yet, the mix of aging and low growth has fundamentally altered the outlook of the Italian middle class, to a greater extent than in any other member state of the European Union. As mentioned before, this is a trend that dates back to at least the early 1990s, and which was exacerbated due to the great recession and the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus.

The fact is that the income type of the Italian middle class has changed considerably over the past three decades. In 1990, for example, about 65% of Italian household income came from work, but since 2014 this figure has been reduced to just over 50%. Pensions, on the other hand, now account for more than 20% of the total amount of household income, compared to 10% in 1990 (*Bitetti and Morganti 2018*). When we look at the European context, Italian pension expenditure now accounts for more than 15% of GDP, which is second only to that of Greece, and a higher level than in the peninsula's major economic competitors such as France, Germany and Spain (*Eurostat 2019*).

The problems caused by a long-term high level of intergenerational inequality should not be underestimated. In the Italian context, such inequalities are altering public spending patterns. More than 77% of social expenditure in Italy is allocated to pensioners (over 65), and only 3% to working families and children (*Bitetti and Morganti 2018*). In other words, the overall level of public expenditure in Italy, with tax rates and pension contributions, is in excess of the European average.

Intergenerational inequalities in Italy do not only concern public expenditure patterns or family income, but also important factors such as the job market structure and social mobility. If on the one hand it is wrong to argue that intergenerational mobility in Italy is completely stationary (Acciari *et al.* 2019), on the other hand the evidence suggests that its conditions are significantly worse than in most other EU member states.

It should also be noted that the strong intergenerational imbalance that has been developing in Italy since the 1990s will force the younger generations to bear the greatest impact of the coronavirus crisis. Tackling intergenerational inequalities is a political challenge and not just an economic one. The strong reactions to the pension reforms launched by Mario Monti's government (2011-2013) demonstrate that Italy's intergenerational imbalance has a major impact on political decision-making.

C. Social mobility and the dilemma of expectations

The issues of social mobility and the dilemma of expectations are closely linked to that of intergenerational inequality. On a broader social level, inequality is fueling a real problem of expectations on both ends of the demographic spectrum. Italy is a clear example of how the dilemma of expectations is increasing the discontent with traditional political parties. Youngsters are aware of the seriousness of the problems that arise from the difficulties of finding a steady job and the consequent delays in forming independent households. They are well aware that they will probably not be able to enjoy their parents' security in terms of employment and pension. (Bitetti and Morganti 2018). The previous generation (of parents) is deeply rooted in the concept of "fixed employment", and struggles to understand that those same privileges are now impossible for young people to maintain (Bitetti and Morganti 2018). As previously mentioned, the opposition to the pension reform launched by the Monti government demonstrates the difficulties for the political class in changing the expectations of older generations.

We should note that the problems of expectations are not only limited to Italy, although in recent decades, together with Greece, the peninsula is probably the trickiest case within the context of the European Union. In Europe, about two thirds of respondents believe that their children will experience a worse financial condition than their parents (Pew 2017). Even in countries such as Bulgaria and Poland, where unemployment rates are low and economic standards have risen strongly in recent years, respond-

ents are concerned about the economic outlook and how technological standards will affect jobs in the future.

In Italy, 71% of parents fear the greatest risk for their children is that they will not be able to reach the same level of status and well-being. This concern is believed to be one of the three great long-term dangers that worry the peninsula (*OECD 2018*). Italy is significantly below the OECD average in terms of income, education and the employment dimensions of social mobility. There are two particularly interesting tendencies. First, there is the obvious lack of mobility at the level of the lowest incomes, a trend which has been considerably on the rise since the 1990s. 62% Of individuals in the bottom quartile (i.e. 20% of the lowest incomes) are still there after 4 years, which is 5.5% higher than the OECD average. Second, a trend shows that one's economic status remains closely related to that of their parents. Overall, the OECD has pointed out that with reference to mobility issues in Italy, the social elevator is stuck (*OECD 2018*).

In a broader global context, Italy ranks 34th out of 82 countries in the most recent Social Mobility Index of the World Economic Forum. Two specific national weaknesses become apparent: the lack of job opportunities, especially for youngsters (63rd place), and the lack of a coherent plan to support ongoing training (74th place). These weaknesses also take into account the relatively low level of digital skills within the Italian job market (56th place).

All this demonstrates that the issue of social mobility in Italy is closely tied to the issue of education. In 2018, the OECD pointed out that "Italy has made little progress in increasing the number of students who complete their higher education". At the same time, however, "the return on such investments is among the lowest: on average, graduates have earned only 40% more than those with a Baccalaureate, which is low compared to 60% in the OECD."

In this context, the absence of social mobility leads to an increase in generational inequalities. Italy has the lowest level of intergenerational mobility compared to most other developed countries (*Morcetti 2007*), and this is probably due to its economic performance over the past decade.

Another aspect of the issue characterizes the Italian case in the broader European debate, and is linked to the clear geographical divide represented by the North of the peninsula, which experiences higher levels of intergenerational social mobility than the South. A recent study has shown that mobility levels in the provinces of northern Italy are three or four times higher than in the *Mezzogiorno* (*Accieri et al. 2019*). Furthermore, strong correlations have been identified between territorial job market

conditions, indicators of family instability and the quality of the local education system.

At a European level, the delay in social mobility also reflects Italy's clear propensity for pessimism, which is so widespread that it has led to the fragmentation of large sectors of the national political landscape. In this sense, a much more fluid and transitory approach to politics on the part of the middle class is emerging, which reflects on the European (and Italian) skepticism about social mobility compared to other global economies, such as that of the United States. This also manifests itself (*Alesina et al. 2018*) as pessimism regarding mobility increasing the support for redistribution and "equal opportunities" policies. This, in turn, generates greater political polarization and economic paralysis, since negative perceptions in terms of social mobility are felt more strongly on the left side of the political chess board.

D. Work-life balance within a context of uncertain job market conditions

In Europe, middle class families increasingly believe that their financial situation is less secure than in previous generations. This perception has increased over the past decade due to the combination of low levels of income growth, high levels of taxation and an increased sense of job insecurity resulting from both technological progress and poorly functioning economies.

The greatest financial insecurity is apparent in states where affordable housing is a major issue, both in terms of the supply of real estate and of the inability to save money for the purchase (or rental) of a property. Wherever such problems arise, the middle class has a negative outlook (*Siegmann and Schafer 2018*). In Italy, the figures on affordable housing (both in terms of renting and purchasing) have been decreasing since at least the 1980s (*Ingaramo and Sabatino 2009*). It is clear that from 1977 to 2010, the increase in ownership brought a disproportionate benefit to older generations, while debt grew significantly faster than the value of real estate assets (*Bitetti and Morganti 2018*).

The accumulation of possessions, or rather the inability to put aside savings in view of hard times or retirement due to the countless daily expenses, characterizes the middle class. In most European member states (including Italy), the middle class is also burdened by the financing of 'pay-per-use' social security systems, despite the likely decline of available services in the coming decades.

In Italy, the issue of intergenerational inequality, which associates itself with declining social mobility and obstacles in the real estate market, ag-

gravates pessimism among the middle class. There are growing concerns about the future of work and the impact of globalization, technological developments and migration flows on future employment possibilities. The issue of job market insecurity is one of the most evident sources of dissatisfaction for Italy's middle class. The debate raises questions of expectations, which is to say that historical levels of benefit and social protection are impossible to carry forward into the working environment of the 21st century.

The purpose of this study is not to outline the great challenges Italy is facing in a time of profound technological transformations in terms of automation, robotics and artificial intelligence. However, we must highlight a particular unpreparedness of the country (within the European context), in view of the implications of modern and flexible economies of the 21st century. While this issue is worthy of further study, it is certain that the future of work will be marked by greater automation, less stability and less rigidity compared to the past (IMF 2018).

The uncertain future connotation of work has had a direct impact on the perception of safety for the middle class. Even before the pandemic, concerns were increasingly raised about issues such as the high level of taxation and the impact of increased digitalization (*Statesman* 2019). The issue of tax reform, in particular the need to reduce the burden of taxation on jobs and employment, is commonly recognized as a critical factor in the Italian case (IMF 2020).

In general terms, when we discuss the reality and future of the middle class, the issues of innovation and digital transformation are often raised. Across Europe, the countries that have adapted most quickly to technological change are those that have paid the most attention to supporting innovation and research in a structured way, and which nurture the ability of the middle classes to respond to challenges that arise from the world of work. But this is not the case in Italy.

As previously mentioned, the education system in Italy is not adequately structured to prepare students for the modern job market. Compared to the middle classes in other European countries, the Italian middle class seems particularly focused on the idea of steady and safe employment (the so-called "fixed positions"), which goes far beyond the great need for the job security of the past. Any deviation from such a historical expectation is received with anger, and is experienced as if it were a form of exploitation (*Bitetti and Morganti* 2018).

A distinctive trait of the middle class, which has emerged more emphatically over the past decade, calls the work-life balance into question.

The discussion partly reflects the implications that have been identified in the previous sections, highlighting the fact that a tired and insecure middle class felt the need to move faster and faster to prevent from moving backwards. In fact, there is a feeling that it is now difficult to maintain living conditions (and social status) because of the increased obligations and associated stress.

Modern social trends (and economic realities) are leading to increased tensions which are inherent to the traditional middle-class lifestyle. This dynamic, which is noticeable in every European country, is particularly pronounced in countries with strong social and community activism, where religion plays a key role. Italy, Spain and Ireland are certainly the most obvious examples in a community context.

Italy continues to be characterized in Europe by one of the highest gaps in employment rates, with a figure for women of just over 50% (compared to a male employment rate of over 70%). Italy also has one of the highest percentages of women (11%) who take care of their children and have never worked outside their own home, while the European average is under 4% (ISTAT 2019). There are also significant territorial differences within the peninsula: the northern regions show a trend close to the percentages of the European Union, while the South has a higher percentage of women who are not active on the job market.

While these trends might reflect traditional social models, they also point to the importance of the extended family network in Italy (and also in countries such as Spain and Ireland). Although the overall figure for women's participation in the job market is below the EU average, more than half of women, mothers of young children, are also engaged outside the home. This is possible because of the help received from family and - by extension - from childcare (*Janta 2017*).

A feature shared with Germany is the prevalence of women in part-time, often poorly paid employment positions (*Bachmann and Pechara 2018*). The German tax system actually penalizes secondary sources of income, which reduces the incentive for women to look for full-time jobs after starting a family.

In terms of accessibility and sustainability, childcare is therefore increasingly becoming of key interest to middle class parents. This trend is now being pushed both socially and economically. In the prevailing dual-income model, this dynamic represents a big parental stress factor, and a decisive component in the debate on work-life balance. In many countries, it is an important source of financial expenditure. The importance of this issue for middle class families should therefore not be underestimated.

Childcare solutions are intertwined with parents' rules and preferences, with the age of the child, and with the opportunities the job market provides to the parents themselves (*Penn 2017*). Pan-European studies clearly show that the level of attendance in kindergartens does not serve as a prerequisite for high rates of women's participation in the job market. Nonetheless, childcare services provide benefits for children, particularly those who come from a disadvantaged background. A lack of, or a limited access to childcare can have negative consequences for the development of women's careers (*Janta 2017*).

In light of a downturn in social activism (*Putnam 2000*) and the growing difficulties in maintaining a typical middle-class lifestyle, it is clear that childcare and primary education services can play a key role in reducing the "opportunity gap". The debate becomes even more important when we consider disadvantaged children in particular. This dynamic could increase the future life expectancy of these children and reinvigorate the aspirations of employees and the middle class.

3. The discontent of the middle class and the political system: a case study of the Czech Republic

Over the past decade, the Italian political system has been characterized by a high degree of fluidity, and the discourse has particularly focused on the political parties of the center-right side. Although as a rule, this trend is associated with the countries of Western Europe – this is the case in Italy, France and Spain – it has also affected many states in Central and Eastern Europe.

To this end, we will refer to the results of research that was carried out in the Czech Republic, on the ties between middle class discontent and the political system since 2011.

The Czech Republic is an important case study from the Italian perspective because it raises questions about the interpretative keys to the crisis of the middle class as a dynamic that mainly affects the most developed economic systems in Western Europe. It's also interesting because it highlights the fact that the traditional interpretation of the stagnation of the middle class is not the only element capable of explaining its fragmentation in terms of voting behavior.

The current government of the Czech Republic is led by ANO 2011 (short for the *Action of Dissatisfied Citizens*), which was founded in 2011 by the millionaire Andrei Babiš - the country's second richest

man. This populist party was the country's leading political party in the 2017 elections. Their main policies are related to the battle against corruption (in particular political corruption), the fight against unemployment, and the project of creating a fairer society. These are policies which transversely pass through the center-right and center-left formations. ANO 2011 revolutionized the old Czech political system, providing a clear example of how middle-class discontent can drive radical change.

The metamorphosis of the Czech political system since 2010 reflects the volatility of middle-class voters. At an early stage, in the run-up to the 2013 general election, dissatisfaction with the elite found its outlet through the transfer of votes of the center electorate that moved from the ODS (Social Democrats) and to some extent from the TOP 09 (center-right party) to ANO 2011 (2014 *Gregor*). In the 2017 elections, those electorate shares were joined by votes from the left that flowed into ANO 2011, as well. The ability this party has to attract voters, both on the right and on the left side, is confirmed by a detailed survey (*Topaz* 2019).

Rather than focusing on traditional middle class income definitions, survey work has divided society into six attitudinal segments (politically passive individuals; experienced employees; senior authoritarians; activists, those who are undecided, and young liberals) differing in political preference, age, education, and economic status.

In the 2017 general election, only one of these segments (the young liberals) casted more votes for the center-right and center-left parties than for ANO 2011. In all other segments, ANO 2011 received the most votes, thanks to the support of more than a quarter of voters.

By converting the results of the analysis into the structure of the social classes, it becomes evident that ANO 2011 finds the greatest support in six out of seven classes (rich professionals, the traditional middle class, skilled workers, the poor, the working class and the lower classes). Support for pro-European center-right parties is particularly concentrated in the sector of the rich professionals and among the traditional middle class (2019 *Charvát and Maškarinec*).

How could such a drastic change take place in the Czech political landscape? A key feature that emerges from the research is the ability of ANO 2011 to unite the various fronts who share a certain resentment. This resentment can be related to economic factors (unemployment), ethnic grudges (immigration), and political corruption (*Snow 2004 and Crossley 2012*). Harm or injustice, once they are perceived as such, turn into

resentment in the eyes of voters; economic or statistical indicators alone are not enough to identify resentments (2019 *Charvát and Maškarinec*).

With reference to the Czech example, it is interesting to note that the basic economic conditions remain solid, with a low unemployment rate and strong growth (before the impact of Covid-19). However, there is a greater awareness of economic inequalities, which is particularly due to the transition from a planned economy to the free market system in the early 1990s. Among other things, these processes have resulted in the definition of a new social structure, an increase in inequalities and the division between the so-called 'winners' (i.e., those who have benefited from the transformation) and 'losers' (2008 *Hloušek and Kopeček*).

Another source of resentment is migration. The rise of new political parties (especially extreme right-wing populist parties) in Western Europe came at a time when migration flows were increasing significantly (2019 *Charvát and Maškarinec*). However, in the Czech Republic this issue is mainly linked to ethnic minorities, particularly the Roma, which the local population has more negative feelings towards than any other foreigners. The Roma are not foreigners in the Czech Republic, so this mobilization takes on the form of ethnic grievance, rather than of mobilization against the phenomenon of migration.

As is the case in many Central and Eastern European countries, before 2011 the Czech Republic experienced a long period in which politics were perceived as business and clientelism. ANO 2011 attempted to break the traditional control that was being exercised by the old parties, wanting to give power back to the 'people'. This approach generally unites populist movements around the world, including the Trump administration in the United States.

The Czech Republic and Italy have many aspects in common regarding the evolution of their political systems over the past decade. The growth of anti-establishment parties, the great effort by the old parties trying to preserve their votes, and the use of resentment to overcome traditional social divisions are now all characteristics which are present in the Italian political landscape. In particular, the ability of new political movements to attract consensus to the right is a key element of modern Italy as well as the Czech Republic. In many ways, the Italian case particularly lends itself to the adoption of this policy of resentment. As pointed out in Section 2, feelings of decline, stagnation and betrayal shape the Italian economic, social and political landscapes. The case of the Czech Republic shows how all this can represent a high combination of fluidity and instability.

4. Conclusions

This chapter attempts to chart the state of the Italian middle class in a broader, European context. This issue is very important in the light of the pandemic. We analyzed the following segments: finances, dimensions and status; intergenerational inequality; social mobility and the dilemma of expectations; and work-life balance in times of job market uncertainty. The analysis of how discontent among the middle class has fostered the transformation of the Czech political system has also served as a comparative example, by looking at the reality of a Central European country.

Italy is not a unique case

When looking at the broader European context, it should be noted that the perception of a declining middle class is not an exclusively Italian characteristic. In most member states of the European Union – regardless of geographical location or economic performance – the middle class feels deeply uncertain about its future prospects. Daily financial pressures, in combination with concerns about the future of employment in a rapidly changing world, prompt Europe's middle class to believe it needs to move faster and faster to prevent from going backwards. The spread of Covid-19 adds another significant obstacle on the path of the middle classes in Italy and Europe, although it is still too early to assess the impacts of the current crisis.

However, it must be said that before Covid-19 made its appearance in Italy and throughout Europe, there was certainly no total collapse of the middle class. Although it is often perceived as such, the indicators show that stagnation is a long-term affair, giving the impression of a real decline in comparison to the status of previous generations. A sense of decline can be perceived in the major aspects of middle-class life: the economic conditions, employment prospects, and the mobility and social cohesion in broader terms.

But Italy is particularly vulnerable

What distinguishes Italy from many other member states of the European Union, is the fact that several relevant issues have helped to create a particularly vulnerable middle-class structure. Contrary to many public comments, the vulnerability of the Italian middle class does not manifest itself through the great recession of a decade ago. Just as in many EU coun-

tries, including the Czech Republic, the weaknesses of the Italian middle class can be traced back to the recession of the early nineties. Therefore, the current political influence should not be viewed in the light of a decade of economic havoc, but in relation to thirty years of very low economic growth, declining social mobility and limited employment opportunities for the younger generation.

This scenario of low economic growth and high levels of unemployment among youngsters now seems to have gained more traction in the Italian popular debate than is the case in other EU member states. This can be attributed to a combination of factors relating to demography, the education system and the increase of intergenerational inequalities. All this feeds a tendency of pessimism in large parts of the Italian population, and a fierce resistance to any hypothetical weakening of the social benefits which have long been taken for granted. This resistance manifests itself despite any urgent economic and social logic. It is a trend which is amplified by the obvious regional divisions between Northern and Southern Italy.

Protest politics have damaged traditional middle class voting patterns

The ability of the new movements to attract voters to the right side of the political spectrum is currently a crucial trait of the Italian system, and it highlights the dominance of protest politics in the public debate. Italy particularly lends itself to the adoption of a policy of resentment by the new forces on the scene because, as previously mentioned, perceptions of decline, stagnation and betrayal dominate the economic, social and political landscapes.

The protest is currently in the spotlight. Contributing to this are a number of factors such as high unemployment rates, large migratory flows and the prevalence of corrupt political dynamics, which are all omnipresent in the collective imagination. All this has disjointed the traditional voting pattern of the middle class, placing moderate political parties in a difficult position. Just as in France, Spain, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic, the task of center-right parties in Italy is to differentiate their voice from nationalism and protectionism.

Another trait that Italy shares with many European countries is the uncertain prospects of the European integration process. The growth of new political movements (largely of a populist nature) has generally been accompanied by a skeptical stance towards Europe. In view of the economic implications of Covid-19, this is likely to emerge.

Disagreements on the topic of 'corona-bonds' indicate a risk that Brussels could become the focal point of public dissatisfaction, particularly

in countries such as Italy and Spain, which are heavily affected by the coronavirus. Therefore, there is a real danger that support for the EU will be significantly reduced, and that 'protest' channels will gain in strength, which will only feed the movements that are most hostile to the process of European integration.

Italian public policies, stuck between past and present

Another aspect of the debate on the Italian middle class that is evident in the broader European context refers to the growing mismatch between public policies and the daily reality that millions of middle-class families are facing. As mentioned above, the dismantling of the pension reform launched during the Monti government highlights the difficulties in trying to develop policies based on a sustainable and progressive perspective, compared to a protectionist vision.

Similarly, in a number of other areas ranging from educational reform to childcare and to the housing market, Italian public policies are still characterized by the restoration of previous rules, as opposed to defining new frameworks to address the real needs of millions of citizens. This apparent inability to confront established interest groups is a decisive impediment to the development of a stronger economic performance. This is also an important element that may explain the reluctance of many Northern EU member states to support strengthened mechanisms for sharing financial burdens.

Covid-19 and the confirmation of the fragility of the middle class

In combination with economic and social difficulties, the health crisis posed by the coronavirus risks causing economic damage the likes of which have not been seen since the Great Depression of 1930. As previously mentioned, the ongoing pandemic is part of a context of middle-class stagnation in Italy rooted in the past three decades; a crisis that has shaped the face of a pessimistic and troubled middle class, whose traditional voting orientations have been replaced by a more fluid desire for 'change' and 'movement'.

However, it is not yet possible to determine whether the current crisis will lead to a persistent fragmentation of the traditional center-right, or whether it will culminate in a new and consolidated centrist political support. As in many parts of Europe, the final outcome will also depend on external factors such as the role of the EU, the global economic trend and certainly the duration of this new reality brought on by Covid-19.

Luca Vitale*

The elevator is stuck.

Middle class, inequality, resentment. How to start over?

1. Introduction

The so-called ‘policy of resentment’ (*Fukuyama 2018*) has multiple causes. Many have suggested that the economic dynamics of the last thirty years – globalization, technological change and the resulting structural transformations – have played a role. In a democracy, it is inevitable that the orientations of public opinion and voting will also be affected by the economic reality and the perception of that reality, although not all internal dynamics of the political offer are lost sight of (*Mingardi 2019*).

Until a few years ago, at least in the abstract, the link between the economic performance of countries and the political behavior of voters was simple enough to decipher. Today, the reality is much more complex. The unique direction of this link has in fact made room for a broader conception, in which macroeconomic results, which are summarized in a few indices of immediate effect, are easily understandable and comparable, and also have repercussions on purely political dynamics. In fact, the change in the economic fabric of a country seems to inevitably lead to changes in the political fabric as well. The branch of political science that goes by the name of “*economic voting*” aims to study the orientation of public opinion based on economic variables, and is starting to achieve important results within empirical analyses.

Starting from simple correlations between a country’s wealth or well-being and the support for particular parties, studies have continued over the years until they reached a deep level of explanation for political phenomena. This development was determined by the introduction of new economic variables in the study of voting behavior. The study of inequalities has attracted a great deal of attention, especially in recent years. Research in this area ranges from the investigation of (econom-

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ic and political) causes of social inequalities to their (also economic and political) consequences: from their impact on political programs of parties to changes in the mood of voters. There is ample evidence to suggest that candidates adapt their behavior and actively respond to changes in the electorate's opinion. The emergence of populist parties and the noticeably strong support for them in recent national and European elections has also been analyzed in the light of its potential macroeconomic determinants.

One hypothesis shared by many observers is that broad economic inequalities in incomes and opportunities may have fostered a party rhetoric of anti-establishment and anti-elite that is typical of populism. From this point of view, a wider social disparity increases disdain for the so-called 'elite'. A populist strategy could therefore be beneficial for political parties: siding with the 'people' against the 'elite' would allow for maximizing votes.

The thesis of a contrast between the 'increasingly rich' and the 'increasingly poor' (a group associated with an 'increasingly distressed' middle class) has established itself in several parts of the world starting in 2016, the year of Trump's victory in the United States and of the referendum in favor of Brexit. At the same time, Thomas Piketty's book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Piketty 2014) became very successful, precisely because it suggests that the capitalist system in itself will lead to an increase in undeserved inequalities (due to the simple dynamics of capital accumulation). Therefore, it becomes easy for observers to connect current political and economic phenomena to try and explain events. This trend still persists today.

However, each country has its own peculiarities and makes history in its own right, so a clear and unequivocal pattern that is valid for multiple democracies is not easy to find. Italy is also part of the typical narrative we have seen in recent years, both on the political side (the Five Star Movement and Lega fit the definition of populism perfectly) and on the economic side. However, it would be naïve to transplant a discussion that has developed mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world into Italy, without taking into account how different the situations are. Are we sure that inequality and the erosion of the middle class provide the right interpretative keys to explain the growth of populist sentiments in our country? As we shall see, a more in-depth study of the situation allows us to highlight other factors which may be at the core of the political changes we have seen in recent years; first and foremost, the low social mobility and the general impoverishment of the population: two phenomena which are at risk of being exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis.

2. Inequality in Italy

Globalization has often been highlighted as the cause for increasing inequalities within countries, including Italy. Some economic models on international business demonstrate that opening up to foreign trade can have negative consequences for some parts of the population¹.

There is a big difference between theory and reality, however. This simplification does not seem to apply to Italy. Openness to international trade, technological innovation and the use of capitalist policies in the broadest sense have not caused irreversible effects on the concentration of income. In order to become convinced of this statement, it's enough to take into account the reports of the Bank of Italy on the subject (*Brandolini 2018; Map 2019; Cannari 2018*). The first observation that emerges from these reports is that income inequality is relatively high by international standards, but that this is not attributed to any recent surge, even though there has been a modest increase in the years following the economic crisis. The last significant increase coincides with the crisis of 1992 (Figure 1). This monetary crisis, which led the Italian lira and also the British pound to leave the fixed exchange rate system in September 1992, was mainly caused by irresponsible fiscal policies that had placed Italian debt on an exponential growth trajectory until it reached 100% of GDP.

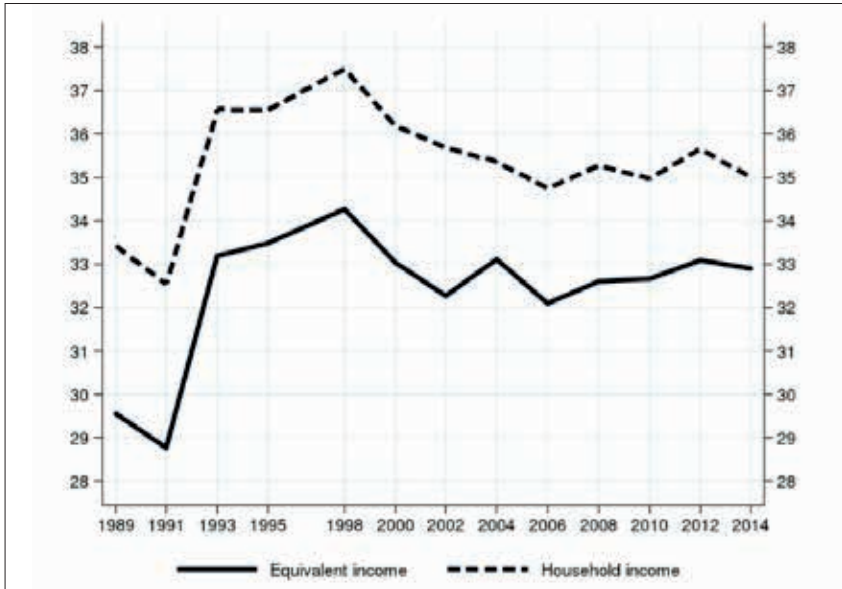
The evolution of the Gini index² shows an increase in inequality during the years immediately following the crisis, and then a noticeable stability leading up to today.

According to the Bank of Italy, the main change in income concentration took place during the recessions of the early 1990s and mostly took on the form of a shift from the lower middle class to the low-income class.

¹ Heckscher–Ohlin model. The Stolper–Samuelson theorem in particular predicts that owners of relatively abundant factors will gain from trading, while holders of relatively scarce factors will lose from it, which leads to increased inequality.

²This is the Index which measures how much the distribution of income between individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. Low values of the coefficient indicate a homogeneous distribution, with the “0” value corresponding to the highest equality, a situation in which everyone earns exactly the same amount of income. High values of the coefficient indicate a more unequal distribution, with the “1” value corresponding to the maximum concentration. The mathematical definition of the Gini coefficient is based on the Lorenz curve distribution and is linked to the area between the line of perfect equality and the Lorenz curve itself.

Figure 1. Gini index of income distribution in Italy (1989-2014)



Source: Brandolini 2018

Even the double crises of 2008 and 2013 did not have a profound impact on the dynamics of income concentration. When looking at things in more detail, we notice that in the early 1990s the low-income population (i.e. with incomes below 60% of the median income) increased by about 5%, even though its share of income had just increased (Figure 2). This increase is due to a downward shift of a part of the population that was previously classified as middle-income. The upper-middle class was not affected much in terms of size and share of income. The ‘rich’, defined as the share of the population with incomes above 300% of the median income, rose to almost 2-3% of the population, but their share of income increased from over 6% to over 10%. The next ten years of modest growth are characterized by limited variations. These figures show us how the crisis had an effect on inequality: before 1992 the two poorest classes possessed 42.6% of the country’s equivalent income. After the crisis, the percentage of the low and middle-income population remained the same but the share of total wealth they held dropped to about 38.9%.

As a result of the double recession, Italy lost about a quarter of its national wealth, dropping from a GDP per capita of linked prices of over

€28,000 in 2007 to about €25,000 in 2013 (against a further exacerbated North-South gap); the changes turn out to be much less marked than in the previous recession, especially related to the middle classes. The population share of the low-income class increased slightly, by about 1%, while the lower-middle class lost about 2%. Conversely, the upper-middle class increased in size and share of income. The percentage of the 'rich' remained stable, but their share of income decreased. The share of equivalent income held by the two most distressed classes remained almost stable (41% before the crisis, 39.5% after the crisis), which is a testament to the near-zero impact of the crisis on income distribution (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Shares in population and total equivalent income of social classes

Table 3: Shares in population and total equivalent income of social classes (per cent)

	Population share				Equivalent income share			
	Low income class (less than 60% of median)	Lower middle class (60-120% of median)	Upper middle class (120-300% of median)	The rich class (above 300% median)	Low income class (less than 60% of median)	Lower middle class (60-120% of median)	Upper middle class (120-300% of median)	The rich class (above 300% of median)
1989-91	16.1	47.1	35.1	1.8	6.4	36.2	51.1	6.4
1993-95	20.7	41.6	34.7	2.9	7.2	31.7	50.6	10.5
2004-06	20.1	43.6	33.8	2.5	7.4	33.6	48.8	10.3
2012-14	21.4	41.2	35.1	2.4	7.4	32.1	51.6	8.9

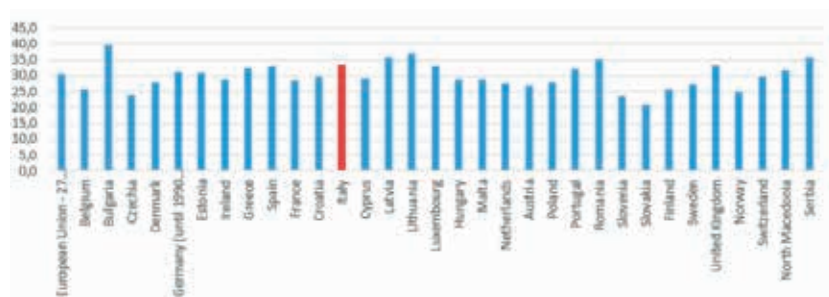
Source: Authors' elaborations on data from Bank of Italy, SHIW-HA (Version 9.1).

Source: Brandolini 2018

No major change took place in the period that followed, or at least not so big as to cause changes to the political fabric. There has been no evidence of a substantial reduction of the middle class since the mid-1990s.

If we take into account the latest available data, the Gini index in Italy is about 5% higher than the French index, 2% higher than the German one and 3% higher than the EU average (Figure 3). Our country therefore presents itself as an economy with a relatively high level of inequality, at least compared to other EU democracies, but our performance has remained almost stable over the last two decades. A much deeper analysis is needed to understand whether this evolution or whether the considerably high absolute level of inequality was sufficient to cause the emergence of populism.

Figure 3. Gini index in the EU in 2018



Source: OECD data

3. Causes of the inequality

Where do the Italian inequalities come from? The ‘Anglo-Saxon’ model often contrasts with the ‘Continental European’ model, and with reason. In one model, the redistributive actions of the state would be more limited, while in the other they would have a greater effect, both through direct measures (taxation and expenditure) and indirect measures (such as the role of trade unions). This explanation may perhaps take into account the differences between the United States and Germany, for example. But it seems of little use to understand the differences between Germany and Italy. Italy certainly has a level of welfare closer to that of Germany than to that of the US, yet it has an inequality that’s very similar to the latter. The idea of globalization-inequality is simplistic and convenient, but insufficient.

In this respect, it should be noted that the Italian tax system is not relatively efficient in terms of income redistribution. State intervention obviously has its effects in absolute terms, bringing the Gini index from a value of 0.51 pre-tax to a value of 0.33 post-tax. However, the concentration of pre-tax income is similar to that of other countries which appear to be less unequal after a state intervention. For example, France’s pre-tax inequality value is exactly the same as Italy’s, while Germany has a value of 0.5. Finland, one of Europe’s least unequal countries, also has the same index as Italy before taxation. An emblematic case is Ireland: a country known for its low tax burden, where pre-tax inequality is even higher than in Italy, and which moves to a Gini index of 0.29 following the operation of the tax system (*OECD 2017*).

Other variables must be taken into account: first and foremost, population structure, social composition and employment. Particularly in Italy, income structure indicators are driven by three key aspects: the level of education of the head of the household, the number of people who receive income from work, and the geographical area of residence (*Brandolini 2018*).

There are three divides that help us to understand the reasons for Italian inequality in particular: old-young, North-South, and man-woman.

3.1 *Old-Young*

The gap between pensioners and young workers is certainly the most obvious and most discussed in Italian politics. Over the years, our country has been known for choosing public policies which are mostly aimed at gathering support from older citizens (who typically have a higher rate of participation in the voting process). While demographic aspects such as a high life expectancy and low birth rates (around 1.2 children per woman, one of the lowest in the world) are (almost) completely independent of the decisions taken by governments in recent decades, reforms of the pension system have certainly helped to widen the social gap between youngsters and previous generations. Between 1980 and 2015, the number of pensioners increased by about 3.5 million. Before the old pay-as-you-go system was (gradually) replaced by a contribution-based system in 1995, many opted for pre-retirement to profit from the generous regulations that were in effect: between 1991 and 1995 the average effective retirement age dropped from 61.9 to 59.6 for men and from 59.1 to 57.4 for women. Through a process of very slow growth, this indicator had risen back to 61 years of age by 2014 (*Brandolini 2018*). New pensioners have therefore benefited from better treatment than previous generations, as a result of the increase in retirement age and the change in calculation of contributions paid. At the same time, young workers did not see their net wages rise proportionally as a result of job market reforms. This disparity has led to the gap that we still live in today.

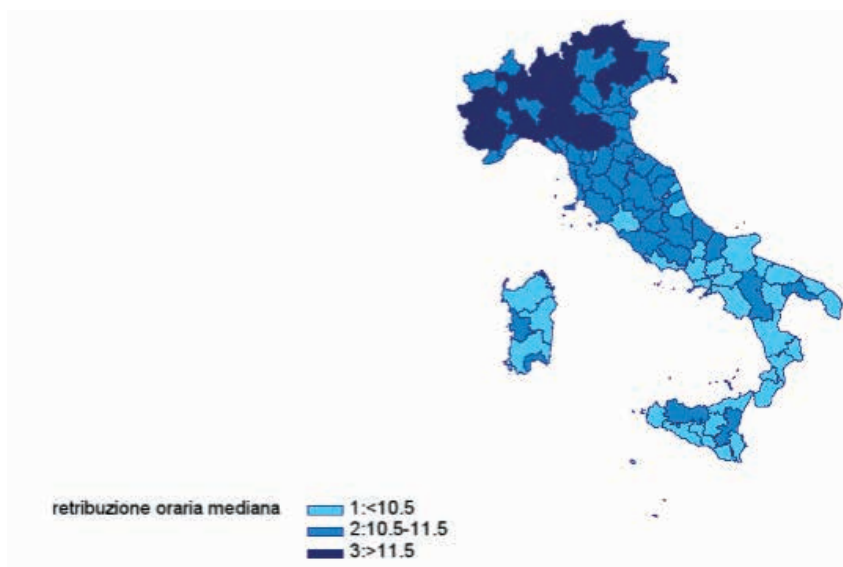
If we leave pensioners out of the picture and only focus on young and old workers, the gap between net wages has widened from 20% in 1980 to 35% in the early 2000s (*Rubella 2007*). This increase is driven by the drop in entry wages: the salaries of young workers seem to be growing at the same rate as their predecessors, but what has changed is the starting point. Explanations such as technological change, globalization and market forces seem to be implausible, because Italy has invested as much as

other countries did, such as Germany, where very different dynamics have been observed. All that remains, therefore, is an institutional explanation. In a system in which older workers are better protected and their wages are steady due to regulatory constraints (i.e., job regulation, pension rules and collective bargaining between trade unions and employers), a negative shock to the job market can have an asymmetric impact on both old and young generations. If the wages of new entrants are downwards flexible, a negative shock gives rise to a two-tier wage system which has the net wage of younger workers fixed at the lowest level (*Rubella 2007*).

3.2 North-South

By analyzing median hourly wages of the twenty Italian regions in the private sector, we can paint a clear picture of the divide between North and South. While in Lombardy more than 50% of workers in the private sector are paid at least €12.03 per hour, in Calabria the median wage is two euros lower, at 10.01€ per hour (Figure 4), (*Istat 2018*).

Figure 4. Choropleth map of median hourly pay in the private sector in 2016



Source: *Istat 2018*

Millions of hypotheses have been written on the reasons for the divide between North and South Italy. The most common theme is a study of the causes that lead to the development of an economy in comparison to its competitors. In this respect, there is a tendency to highlight three fundamental explanations, which are sometimes in contrast with, and sometimes in relation to one another: geography, institutions and culture. However, what interests us is the observable trend of recent years, particularly the past two decades.

There are two reasons we should focus on this: the southern regions are not only characterized by lower family income, but also by much higher inequality within the area. In 2016, the Gini index for the South was almost 4% higher than in the Center-North (*Ciani 2019*). What emerges from the data, however, is a slightly different trend: the inequality between North and South has remained almost stable since 2000, but the concentration of income within the southern and northern regions has become polarized. After 2006, the Gini index within the southern regions increased by about 2%. The same trend can be observed in the northern regions, with an absolute value of the lowest index.

The two macro-areas have different socio-demographic characteristics, which can somehow explain the phenomenon: in the Center-North, for example, families are smaller and educational levels are higher. Other structural factors also contribute to actualizing the 'southern issue' even today.

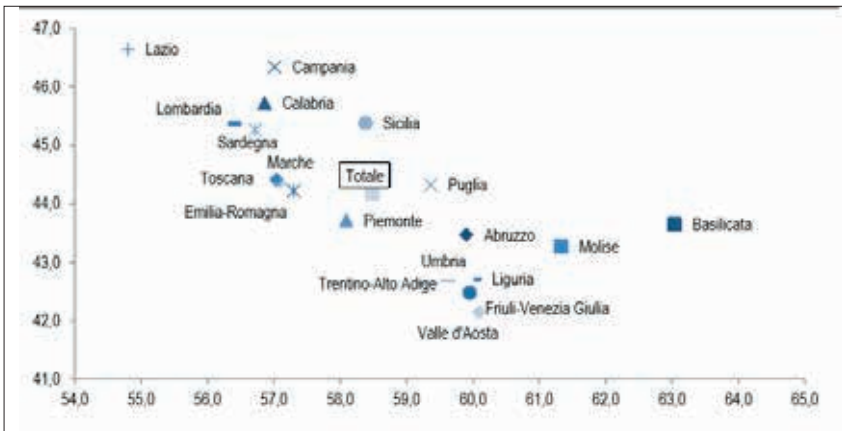
3.3 *Man-Woman*

Four categories are usually observed with regard to the gender gap: education, health, political participation and economic opportunities. The situation in the first two cases is positive: the proportion of women who graduate is even higher than that of men, and life expectancy also follows the same trend. With regard to political participation, if we look at the share of women with seats in Parliament and positions at ministerial level, the gap is very wide: in the latest "Global Gender Gap Report", Italy only comes in at the 40th place. However, the worst result can be observed in economic opportunities, where we only hold the 117th spot. The difficulties are mainly found in jobs where women are most represented, since the retail and clerical sectors are most affected by progressive automation. Women are less active in professions where wage growths have been more significant (the STEM sector in particular). Finally, women are most disadvantaged by the lack of care infrastructure and the difficult access to

capital. In Italy, there is also a wage gap between men and women at the same level and job. In 2019, the drop from 8.8% to 7.4% did not bring us among the most virtuous examples in Europe. And the more women study, the wider the gap becomes: male university graduates earn 32.6% more than college graduates, whereas a female graduate only earns 14.3% more. But that's not all: women struggle to make a career, and the percentage of women among professionals and managers does not make it any easier for us to climb the rankings (D'Ascenzo 2019).

In 2016, 59% of female workers received an hourly wage below the national median, compared to 44% for men. This trend is also confirmed at regional level, where the most favorable situation can be observed in Lazio, at 54.8% (probably due to a high influence of public employment) while the most disadvantaged situation is found in Basilicata (63%). When we look at the jobs occupied by men, the region that treats men and women in the most balanced way is still Lazio, where employment relationships with wages below the regional median is more similar among genders (46.8% male and 54.8% female). The regions with the greatest imbalance are Valle d'Aosta (42.1% male and 60.1% female), Molise (43.3% male and 61.3% female) and Basilicata (43.7% as opposed to 63%) (Figure 5), (Istat 2018).

Figure 5. Share of female (x-axis) and male (y-axis) jobs with earnings below the median value, per region.



Source: Istat 2018

4. Social mobility

As we have seen, the polarization of income has not changed the Italian economic and social fabric to such an extent that we could call it the fundamental cause of the birth of new political movements. To find a new channel through which the river of discontent has flowed into the sea of populism, it may be useful to look “alongside” the problem of inequality. It is true that the middle class has not shrunk significantly, but in order to support a political idea there is no need for a change to have already taken place. The fear that it will happen is enough. Italy’s middle class is in danger of eroding, and this risk is perceived in a widespread way. To clarify any doubts, the OECD (2018) confirms there is evidence to support that this risk has increased over the last decade, causing the fear of losing social status to coincide chronologically with the birth and spread of populist movements. The OECD also informs us of the cause of the phenomenon: the lack of inter- and intragenerational social mobility (Raitano 2019).

4.1 *Is the social elevator broken?*

First, an important distinction must be made between absolute and relative mobility. Absolute mobility measures the overall well-being of children in relation to their parents, and is therefore closely related to global economic growth and structural changes. Relative mobility (often called ‘social fluidity’ in sociology) assesses the extent to which a person’s economic status is independent of that of their parents. We will mainly concentrate on the latter (ILO2018).

The framework of the countries of southern Europe is similar and can be summed up in two expressions: ‘sticky floor’ and ‘sticky ceiling’. ‘Sticky’ is a metaphor for the immobility of the two poles of society, the low incomes and the super-rich. The middle class resides in between the floor and ceiling. It is less ‘sticky’ and more mobile, but although increased mobility means having more opportunities than other population groups, the same concept also means having more risk of slipping down after unexpected events, such as a layoff or a divorce. In truth, upward mobility is more rigid, which strengthens the fear of falling within the middle class, rather than supporting the hope of climbing.

As far as Italy is concerned, two aspects of intergenerational immobility deserve to be mentioned: education and employment. In both cases, we are well below the average for developed countries. We are a country

in which it is highly likely that our children will receive the same education as us, and will do the same work as us. Estimations reveal that as many as 40% of the children of manual workers become manual workers themselves, and that more than 65% of children of parents with low education will follow the same path: a figure high above the European average of around 25% (*OECD 2018*). To get an idea of the continuation we are talking about, an Italian can take up to five generations to move from the low-income class to a median income.

Constructing a specific measure of intergenerational social mobility is not immediate. It is a not straightforward statistical exercise, and each method has its own strengths and weaknesses. When we look at income elasticity and compare the results to other European developed countries, Italy seems to be in the biggest amount of trouble. The results of Germany and France are not exciting, while the two countries with the highest mobility appear to be Sweden and Canada. The data also suggests that upward mobility is higher for first-born children. In addition, it is higher for children who migrate to other regions in Italy once they reach adulthood. Therefore, geographical mobility goes hand in hand with social mobility (*Acciari 2019*).

Intragenerational mobility, by which we mean the movement in social positions other than those achieved after leaving the family of origin, also shows the same characteristics and trends.

Perception and expectations are enough to guide a voter towards their choice. Fear and risk are transformed into a distrust of the institutions. In turn, distrust of the institutions turns into two main things: a low turnout during elections, and/or a support for break-away movements which directly criticize the institutions and claim to want to change the current system.

The perception of social mobility therefore becomes fundamental in this analysis. Italians seem to have little confidence in the rhetoric of work that brings important results. Let us look at the most recent “World Value Survey” of 2006, and in particular at the response to the statement ‘In the long term, hard work usually brings about a better life.’ On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means ‘I fully agree with this statement’ and 10 fully disagrees, the average Italian response is 5.3, a figure which is more than half a point higher than in a comparable European country such as Germany³.

³ This difference turns out to be statistically significant. Unfortunately, more recent data for Italy is not available.

4.2 *The causes of low social mobility*

A few studies seem to suggest some progress in terms of social mobility (Schizzerotto 2008), but there is no doubt that it remains central to the analysis of Italy's socio-economic situation (2010 Brunetti).

If low-income groups fail to achieve better living standards, the question immediately arises as to why. One of the primary problems is certainly schooling. There is a widespread notion that educational decisions are influenced by one's parents: this trend becomes stronger the sooner in life decisions are made. In particular among 20-24-year olds in Italy, the gap in scores for the Piac test (*Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies*) among the children of graduate and non-graduate parents it is about 45 points, while in France and Germany the gap stops at 30 and 25 points respectively. In the 30-45 age group, only 16% of children of non-graduate parents have obtained qualifications in tertiary education. In Germany the figure rises to 23% and in France to as much as 30% (Leonardi and Paccagnella 2019). The low rates of tertiary education are explained by the low return on investment in education. In Italy, the benefit of future income education is much lower than it is abroad (2012 Cainarca). On the other hand, as for the persistence in choice of work, a typical aspect of our country is the average age at which children leave the parental home: one of the highest in Europe (2010 Billari). Staying with one's parents for a long time could affect the nature of one's beliefs and the transmission of preferences. Individuals may feel compelled, or simply prefer, to choose similar jobs to their relatives in order to comply with social convention or family tradition.

Generally, it can be said that in OECD countries a layoff increases the probability of a permanent reduction in income by an average factor of four. The effects tend to increase in times of crisis due to a decrease in the so-called '*added-worker*' effect (increase in labor supply as a result of the partner being laid off). This is exactly what happened in Greece and Italy after 2011. A peculiar aspect of our country that leads to low mobility is certainly permanence: Italy is one of the countries with the fewest changes during one's professional career and with a strong tendency to remain tied to the same employer. Conversely, the evidence suggests that the so-called *job-to-job* changes have a strong impact on mobility.

Other events related to an individual's private life may also affect the likelihood of entry and exit from the low-income class. The most significant are divorce and the birth of a child: the first is tied to the loss of income from the partner and particularly affects women, especially due to their

lower employment rate (average losses for women of 22% as opposed to 9% for men), while the second derives from a reduction in the mother's labor supply and the increased need for economic income.

4.3 *Can we therefore state it is totally wrong to associate inequality with populism?*

Across generations, high social mobility tends to be correlated with low-income inequality. This concept is summarized by the 'Great Gatsby curve', named after Francis Scott Fitzgerald's book, which tells the story of a fraudulent self-made man in the 'roaring twenties'. The negative correlation between social mobility and inequality can be explained through human capital channels: a family's well-being translates into a choice of better schools for their children, which means the return on investment will be higher and future employment will inevitably be better.

Indicators regarding social mobility represent the evolution of income distribution. However, it is necessary to take snapshots that from year to year give us an image of the absolute condition of Italian families. From 1993 until the period immediately before the financial crisis, average household incomes had increased by about 4%, but by 2008 the situation had already returned to the same post-crisis levels as in 1992 (Figure 7).

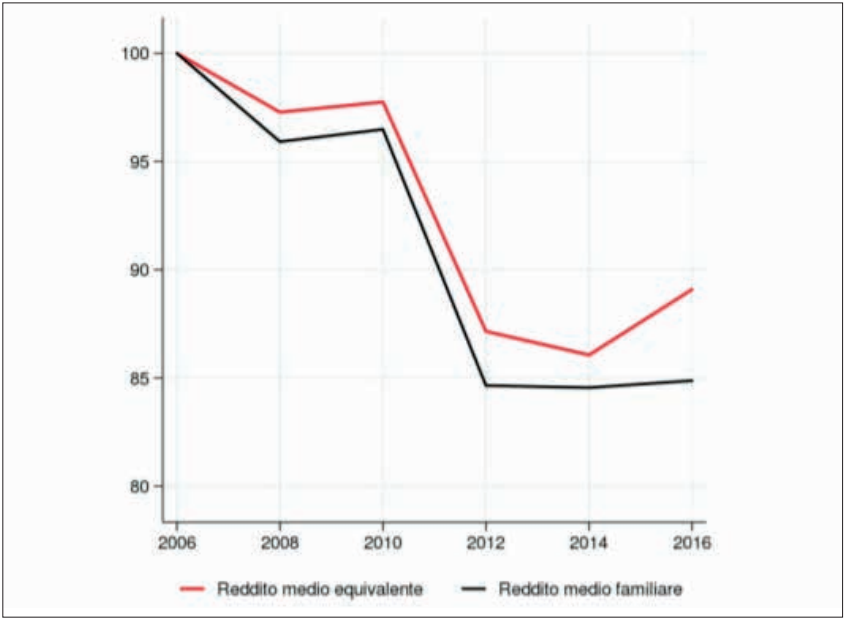
Since 2006 and until 2016, the average real income of Italian households has steadily dropped, even though there was a slight increase at first. It is therefore evident that the double crisis of 2008-2011 had no effect on the relative composition of wealth for Italians, but it did leave a deep mark in terms of absolute well-being. Even today, the average household income in our country is about 11% lower than the peak that was reached in 2006 after years of stable growth (Figure 6), (*Bank of Italy 2016*). The trend of equivalent income⁴ exactly reflects that of average income.

⁴ Equivalent income is a concept of income according to which the incomes of households of various types are made comparable, taking into account the benefits of shared consumption. Since 2002, income distribution statistics have used the adequate OECD consumption unit scale recommended by Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Communities, where the primary adult of the household receives a weight of 1; others above the age of 13 receive a weight of 0.5; children receive a weight of 0.3 (those 0 to 13 years old are defined as children). It is hypothesized that income would be evenly distributed among all household members in relation to the aforementioned consumption needs.

It is very likely that the corona crisis will greatly exacerbate existing inequalities.

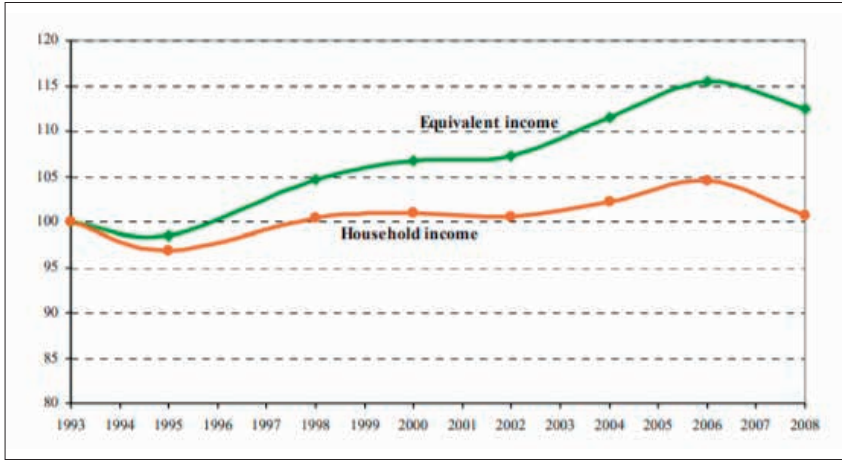
A high polarization of income is therefore a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for the discontent of the middle class which leads to a shift towards the anti-elite parties. In Italy, the fear of the middle class of slipping towards lower income levels was crucial. This fear was driven by two key aspects: the reduction of an upward movement of an already low social mobility (especially employment), and the reduction of the equivalent incomes of Italian families following the double crisis of 2008-2011.

Figure 6. Family income and equivalent income in Italy (2006-2016) (2006=100)



Source: Bank of Italy

Figure 7. Family income and equivalent income in Italy (1993-2008) (1993=100)



Source: Bank of Italy

5. The decline of the middle class

5.1 Erosion or slippage?

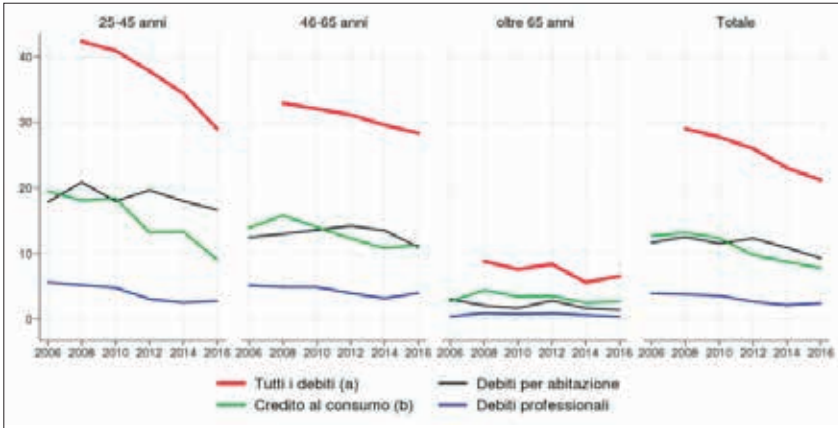
A thriving middle class is synonymous with the well-being of a society. Its presence allows for constant economic growth, through innovation, entrepreneurial initiative and investments in education, and health and capital accumulation. In western democracies, on average the size of the middle class has decreased from 64% of the population to 61% in the past two decades. Italy however, as we saw earlier, is not among the countries with a strong reduction. What has increased is the risk of slipping down and the consequent fear of seeing one's economic situation deteriorate. In OECD countries, this fear stems from three main factors:

1. The middle class perceives the current socio-economic system as unfair: average incomes have grown more slowly than high incomes over the past three decades. There is a perception that too much is being contributed to a welfare state that in return does not provide enough services and benefits;
2. The average cost of living for the middle class has gone up: this increase is mainly a result of rising prices for real estate and for education and

health care, which has led to average incomes going into debt more than they should; however, this phenomenon did not occur in Italy, where household debt decreased by about 10% from 2006 to 2016 (*Bank of Italy 2018*), (Figure 8);

3. The outlook for the middle class is uncertain: uncertainty about jobs, and anxiety about slipping to a lower income level (*OECD 2019*).

Figure 8. Family debt by age of the head of the household



Source: Bank of Italy

5.2 Relative poverty

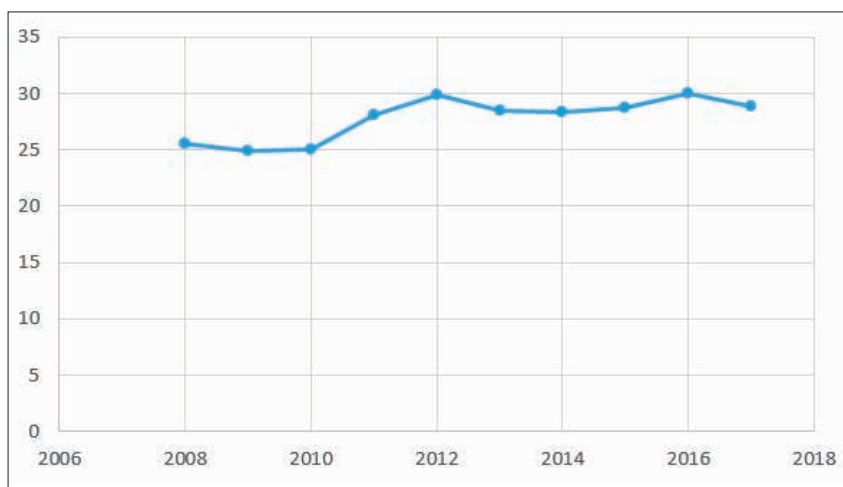
The picture emerging so far is that of an Italy which is rigid on both ends of society. The middle class is worried about not being able to maintain its social status, with a fairly high but stable inequality in the past two decades. The rich are therefore not getting richer and, above all, the poor are not getting poorer. The division of the cake has remained almost identical (evidenced by the social immobility of our country), but the cake itself has become smaller: in short, the problem is not the increase in inequalities (the distances between people belonging to the different deciles of income), but the lowering of the entire income distribution due to the stagnation of the past thirty years. The results of various experiments converge on two points: a) relative poverty levels in 2014 are close to those of the late 1960s; b) from 2008 to 2014, the share of the population in relative poverty increased considerably. Therefore, the results for relative poverty levels only partially copy those obtained

for inequality, which do not appear to have increased significantly in recent years (*Cannari 2018*).

The figure is determined by the presence of migrants in particular, which represented 1% of the population in 1990, as opposed to about 10% today. The composition of this category is also profoundly different, with a significant reduction of individuals born in Western Europe, America or Oceania, and an increase of native Asians and Africans. Upon their arrival, migrants are mostly people with low or no professional qualifications, and no means. This means they ‘fatten’ the lowest decile, giving the impression of a shift in income distribution and growing inequality. But this is a kind of optical illusion, since both in absolute and relative terms almost nothing changes for everyone else.

The share of the population which is at a risk of poverty presents other evidence of the Italian situation. The largest increase occurred during the debt crisis, between 2010 and 2012. From a 25% share in 2010, it reached 29% in 2012, and then remained stable in the following years (Figure 9). Individuals are considered to be at a risk of poverty if their equivalent income is below 60% of the country’s median disposable income.

Figure 9. Share of the Italian population at a risk of poverty between 2004 and 2017



Source: analysis of Eurostat data

6. Conclusions

The behavior of voters is influenced by their perception of the social and economic changes in the environment around them. These changes do not actually need to have taken place already: it is enough for people to think they did. For almost a decade, populism has been growing into an integral part of the Italian political scene and the following it has gathered cannot be ignored. The global spread of this phenomenon has attracted the attention of sociologists, political scientists and economists. In other contexts, the emergence of populism has been explained – sometimes convincingly, sometimes less so – through the dynamics of inequality and job insecurity, identifying globalization and the structural transformations brought about by technological change as root causes. However, the link between inequality and populism is not strong enough in Italy: the increases in income concentration of the past two decades cannot justify the emergence of new ideologies. On the other hand – and this is a more general consideration – inequalities have always been there: what really matters is where they stem from, and whether or not they are perceived as a source of injustice. From both perspectives, the industrial society has created new opportunities for individual and social growth (*Mingardi 2019*). We have therefore focused on two peculiar and complementary aspects of our country, which provide a broader view of the situation: the lack of social mobility and the increase in relative poverty since the crisis of 2008. These dynamics are supported by a number of structural characteristics (in Italy the inequality has been relatively high for a long time, especially when looking at disposable income after taxes) and by certain specific aspects of inequalities (generational, North/South and gender). As the OECD reports show, the middle class is more at risk of lowering its social status than it ever was before. Italy stands out for its intergenerational immobility, which is particularly linked to employment and education; the frustration of not being able to improve one's economic situation while at the same time trying as much as possible not to change it, has resulted in the support for anti-system and anti-elite movements capable of channeling the anger of citizens. The general impoverishment of the population has done the rest, contributing decisively to dissatisfaction and resentment, which then resulted in anti-system electoral behavior on the part of an increasing part of the population. This seems to be the key aspect within our democracy, where the middle class has not narrowed as significantly as in other countries, but where median income has dropped considerably in the past decade. The hypotheses of a mere emulation of

the populism in neighboring countries and of changes resulting from the last major increase in inequality (immediately following the 1992 currency crisis) seem to be rather weak. Conversely, the hypothesis of low social mobility (especially intergenerational mobility) creating risks, uncertainties and frustrations in the middle class, accompanied by an increase in relative poverty indicators and a general decline in incomes, seems to be the most convincing one. These issues are particularly worrying when we look at them in light of the coronavirus crisis of 2020, which according to estimates could produce a contraction in GDP of around (or above) 10% and could particularly affect the less fortunate social classes. The suspension of economic activities due to contagion and lockdown risks are undermining the country's resilience, as well as fueling new populist successes. Understanding the origins is the first step towards adopting appropriate, non-counterproductive therapies.

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Section 2

In the Footsteps of Change

Phenomenology of the middle class

1. The middle class is an archipelago: a complex, relational and symbolic whole

As Arnaldo Bagnasco put it, the middle class is a slippery field of study: “The middle class does not exist in nature, so to speak: its cultural and political construction matters a lot. It has roots in professional categories, but they change over time and are quite heterogeneous. Mills said the middle class is a “mixed salad”¹

Over the past fifty years, many studies have been performed on the middle class in our country. A significant study is the contribution of Paolo Sylos Labini, who broke down the different classes by distributing and fragmenting them into their internal dimension and into their differences and distinctions. His map of the Italian social classes contemplated the presence of the bourgeoisie, the urban middle classes (such as white-collar workers and a lower middle class composed of artisans and traders), as well as direct farmers and the working class².

In the 1970s, Labini began to emphasize the effects of the economic boom on the social structure of our country and identified a new type of lower middle class which is intellectual, artistic and economic. It showed traits of discontinuity regarding the dynamics and classical behavior of the national lower middle class.

In the years that followed, Giuseppe De Rita emphasized the process of *cetomedizzazione* that was happening in our country: “The large middle

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¹ A. Bagnasco, *Il ceto medio dopo il capitalismo organizzato*, intervista di A. Bellini, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262686031>; A. Bagnasco, *Ceto medio. Perché e come occuparsene. Una ricerca del Consiglio italiano per le Scienze Sociali*, il Mulino, Bologna 2008.

² Fr. Sylos Labini, *Saggio sulle classi sociali*, Laterza, Bari-Rome 2015.

class had strengths that vitalized it at the start and that still keep it strong today [...]. A new component has been added to the traditional middle class, consisting of highly trained and specialized groups of workers [...]; working conditions [...] between independent workers and employees, and between different qualifications of the latter approach each other, confusing the income prerogatives of the typical middle class (white collar workers, small entrepreneurs, self-employed workers) with those of manual workers; the tertiarization of the economic system has led to the spread of a more general model of clericalization of job functions. These factors led to an unexpected process of social compacting in the 1970s and it's safe to say that halfway through the decade, the bourgeois invasion that resulted from them comprised more than 90% of Italian society»³.

Even then, a peculiar and significant fact emerged: the middle class did not have a monolithic dimension. It was already a multi-faceted social reality in which characterizing and virtually conflicting interests coexisted.

This class has always been a composite: an aspirational hodgepodge, in which different drives and dynamics converge; experience and various professional conditions; types and levels of distribution of different acknowledgements; unequal and sometimes antithetic cultural dimensions and positions on the scale of innovation; diversified economic statuses and work positions (public, private, self-employed, employee); multiple lifestyle and consumption behaviors; non-homogeneous living locations and housing patterns (small, medium-center and metropolitan city); dimensions of self-projection flowing along the glocal-global axis; coexisting creative dimensions and/or repetitive functions of professional activity. The multiple dimensions that intertwine and generate multiple identities live together within the middle class.

In order to analyze the contemporary middle class, it is necessary to anchor reflections on the economic and social changes that have taken place over the last twenty or thirty years.

First, the series of various economic crises that have occurred in the last 30 years (the devaluation of 1992, the dotcom bubble and junk bonds of the early 2000s, the subprime bubble of 2007-08, the sovereign debt crisis of 2012) and the long recession that began in our country in 2005 have contributed to “peeling away the complexity of social stratification, reducing it more and more to a dichotomy between an increasingly rich

³ G. De Rita, *Composizione sociale e borghesia*, in A. Bonomi, M. Cacciari, G. De Rita, *Che fine ha fatto la borghesia?* Einaudi, Turin 2004. The emphasis in the text is ours.

and reduced portion of the population and the rest of society which despite different fates and events suffers from a giant loss of well-being»⁴.

Second, we need to identify the effects of changes in social life. The French sociologist Michel Maffessoli points out that “the time for rational convictions is over,” and that “emotional seduction now prevails. [...] Our age empirically manifests a genuine transfiguration of politics; not its “end” – that would be too easy – but its mutation, which mobilizes non-rational energies, emotional energies. Hence the emergence of myths – tribes, clans, communities – that are based on a feeling of belonging characterized by a strong affective dominant, and that favor hysterical gatherings of all sorts [...] This explains the transition from conviction to seduction.”⁵.

Nowadays, people are actors who tell their own stories; they choose, act, vote and shop according to the character they intend to portray on the stage of society (both real and virtual).

Ervin Goffman emphasizes the importance of “self-figuration”, the value that a person attributes to their actions in terms of the characteristics they show: “When an individual plays a part, it implicitly requires bystanders to take what is happening before their eyes seriously. He asks them to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he seems to possess, that his actions will have the consequences they implicitly claim to have, and that things are generally as they appear to be.”⁶.

Not only that. Other factors also characterize and influence people’s social behavior, among which we cannot forget the central role played by the symbolic dimension: the imagination. “Every social reality is symbolically mediated,” says Paul Ricoeur. [...] If social life does not have a symbolic structure, it becomes impossible to understand how we live, how we do things and project these activities into ideas; it becomes impossible to understand how reality can become an idea or how real life can produce illusions”⁷.

Since the dawn of the new century, contemporary social reality has been subjected to an intense process of transfiguration and metamorphosis.

⁴ M. Palumbo, S. Poli, *Cetomedizzazione e nuove polarità*, in *Società mutamento politica*, Firenze University press, Florence 2013,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307798736_Cetomedizzazione_e_nuove_polarita/fulltext/57d63f1b08ae0c0081e8c80a/Cetomedizzazione-e-nuove-polarita.pdf.

⁵ M. Maffessoli, *Icone d'oggi*, Sellerio, Palermo 2009.

⁶ E. Goffman, *La vita quotidiana come rappresentazione*, il Mulino, Bologna 1997.

⁷ P. Ricoeur, C. Castoriadis, *Dialogo sulla storia e l'immaginario sociale*, Jakabook, Milan 2017.

The individual consumer or worker, Touraine recalls, is “absorbed by his relationship with technology and the market, [...] dissociates himself from this instrumentality by recognizing social relationships in production, consumption or communication”. This subject defines himself as “as an actor capable of exercising a certain control over his environment, of building a space and an environment”. Therefore, as Touraine suggests, in order to construct social analyses today, the only place to start is from a “self-referential subject whose purpose is to create an autonomous “niche”⁸.

The complexity of middle-class analysis and contemporary social segmentation is situated in this metamorphic dimension. Classes are not the simple and mechanical sum of needs or positions in society. They are not even a collection of individuals (“social classes are not prime realities, nor principles of explication, but [...] what needs to be explained”⁹), nor a great unified and conscious subject. They are archipelagos, complex and relational totalities, in which the relationships of participation and belonging are determined not only by income, family, or profession, but also by a multiplicity of factors such as values, culture, the story about themselves that people want to tell, lifestyle, collective emotions, aspirations, the game of appearances, the sense of belonging, status symbols and image («The ways in which we dress, talk, express emotions and act in different circumstances are entirely determined by our reference groups”¹⁰).

Another clarification: when using the term “class”, a conditioned reflex of rejecting and indexing the concept often occurs. Margaret Thatcher stated that the concept of class was exclusively communist. Raymond Aron himself felt the need to highlight the politically divisive nature of the term: “The notion of class is full of passions and misunderstandings [...] those who claim to be without prejudice on this subject are not credible”¹¹.

The years of ideological confrontation are now over and we can (we must, even) return to using the term “class” in its overall sense which, as Ferrarotti recalls, is “a group whose members converge and finally compete on income, profession, housing and so on. In this sense, the class ceases to be an objective determination differentiated with respect to its position at production level, in order to approach the vaguer notion of social condition, consumption habits, and lifestyle”¹².

⁸ A. Touraine, *Sociologia*, Jacabook, Milan 1998.

⁹ M. Henry, *Marx, une philosophie de la réalité*, Gallimard, Paris 1991.

¹⁰ Z. Bauman, T. May, *Pensare sociologicamente*, Ipermedium libri, Naples 2003..

¹¹ R. Aron, *La lutte de classes*, Gallimard, Paris 1964.

¹² F. Ferrarotti, *Manuale di sociologia*, Laterza, Bari-Roma 2006..

This is not the only possible definition of class. Ferrarotti himself reminds us that there are at least two other definitions of the concept. On the one hand, the class has been interpreted as a “social group which is not so much affirmed by elective affinities or external factors - even objective ones – but by its transient nature, such as place or age, or by the objective basis of the legal status with respect to the cycle of goods production (what primarily defines the class is the access to or exclusion from ownership and the functional control over the means of production)”¹³.

On the other hand, a third possible definition is a group of people who in the concept of a class find a tie to the political dimension, a group ‘whose members come together with a view on ideological and political objectives, beyond the objective structure (and corresponding positions) and cyclical contingencies’.¹⁴

Three different concepts which share at least one element: the principle of commonality, the fact that people feel part of a context based on sharing tastes, expressive needs, consumption (in the first place); or because of adherence to common economic interests (in the second place) or, based on political and ideological ties, regardless of social origins.

In any case, the class remains a classifying concept which identifies the commonality of a number of subjects. In the structuring pursued in this research, the class is based on people’s self-positioning. As we will see in the fifth chapter, it is a non-monolithic concept, but it contains different communities (especially the middle class), distinguished by vision, tastes, behavioral styles, perceived roles in society, refined affinities, and aspirations expressed in symbols and in the imagination.

2. Middle class, the defining choice

A preliminary theme for envisioning the dynamics of the middle class relates to the method of identifying who, and based on what aspects a subject can be positioned in this social segment.

Several analytical approaches have been used over the decades. Some of them use income. According to this criterion, people with an income of between 75% and 200% of median income belong to the middle class. The definition, especially in Italy, is based on the fact that this average income is derived from declared income. Due to tax avoidance and evasion, the

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

definition has many shortcomings and is liable to be underestimated. There is also another, more practical anchor point within this economic vision: the middle class is identified as having an income above 150% of the poverty line. This point of view on the middle class includes singles who earn €1.000 per month; couples with a minimum monthly income of €1.500; couples with a child whose family income is €2.000 per month, and the figure rises to €2.400 per month for a couple with two children.

This kind of anchor point, which exclusively focuses on the aspect of income, runs the risk of ignoring personal stories, aspirations and life events, resulting in a flattening of the social scale that is present in our country.

Another type of social categorization is anchored in employment and one's professional situation. A number of European researchers have tried to define a new structure in 7 groups, called 'European socio-economic groups'¹⁵: senior management, highly intellectual professions, intermediate professions, small self-employed workers, skilled employees, skilled workers, unskilled workers. It is an interesting and useful classification, but it is calibrated to a structuralist-determinist logic, in which the working condition generates the social condition 'de facto' and in a mechanical manner.

There have been other attempts at categorizing the middle class in recent years, such as the one proposed by Mike Savage¹⁶. The British sociologist identifies social and cultural capital as the focal point and, under Bourdieu's influence, proposes a non-constructive vision that takes into account the symbolic strength and methods of accumulation, in particular of cultural capital. By applying this focal point, Savage identified seven different social classes in England: the elite; two types of middle class

¹⁵ M. Meron, M. Amar, C. Babet, M. Bouchet-Valat, F. Bugeja-Bloch, F. Gleizes, F. Lebaron, C. Huguée, É. Penissat, A. Spire, Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques, ESeG, European Socio economic Groups Nomenclature socio-économique européenne, Paris, February 2016. "La nomenclature ESeG (European Socio-economic Groups) est le résultat, présenté ici, d'un travail piloté par l'Insee à la demande d'Eurostat. Cette classification, encore provisoire, a été élaborée avec des statisticiens de France, Hongrie, Italie et République Tchèque, en s'appuyant sur des travaux antérieurs, menés depuis les années 1990. Notamment, la proposition précédente ESEC (European socioeconomic Classification) et les débats qu'elle avait suscités ne sont pas ignorés. De nombreux chercheurs ont participé et largement aidé à faire aboutir ce nouvel outil, qui s'inscrit dans l'harmonisation des statistiques sociales européennes et de leurs instruments de mesure. Le but est de mieux mesurer et comparer les phénomènes sociaux et leurs évolutions en Europe, à l'aide de catégories harmonisées de stratification de la société".

¹⁶ M. Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, Pelican Books, London 2015.

(the 'established' and the 'technical'); traditional workers; the new and prosperous workers who are defined as 'affluent'; workers in the emerging service sector; and precarious workers.

A final model of middle-class analysis is offered by the 2019 report of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), appropriately titled: *Sous pression: la classe moyenne en perte de vitesse*¹⁷.

The report examines the middle class as a socio-economic group and highlights the multitude of growing pressures on it. According to the authors of the report, the main trends that influence 'middle income' households are employment, consumption, wealth and debt, as well as their perceptions and social behavior. The report emphasizes a diverging dynamic between a process of contraction of the middle class over time (especially between the new generations), and the constant and - above all - faster increase in the growth of median income and of the cost of a 'typical' middle class life.

According to the authors of the report, this social segment was an aspiration: "For many generations, it meant the security of living in a comfortable home with a satisfying lifestyle; a steady job with career prospects. It was also a solid foundation allowing families to aspire to an even better future for their children."¹⁸

The middle class has been identified and delimited using a subjective dimension, through the self-identification of people in a social class. A significant experience in this regard was proposed by Robert Bird and Frank Newport, researchers from Gallup (an American analytics and advisory company): "An approach to the social class [...] concerns the way in which people are divided into categories. This is a subjective social class – an approach that has its difficulties but helps to explain the class from the people's point of view. This is important, because the way in which people define a situation has real consequences for its outcome."¹⁹

The field research conducted by the Gallup researchers was based on a survey in which people positioned themselves "in five social classes: the upper, upper-middle, middle, working and lower classes. These five labels are representative of the approach generally used in popular language. 3%

¹⁷ *Sous pression: la classe moyenne en perte de vitesse*, Éditions OCDE, Paris 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1787/2b47d7a4-fr>.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ R. Bird, *What Determines How Americans Perceive Their Social Class?*, Gallup, Polling Matters, 2017. <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/pollingmatters/204497/determines-americans-perceive-social-class.aspx>.

Of Americans identified with the upper class, 15% with the upper-middle class, 43% with the middle class, 30% with the working class, and 8% with the lower class.²⁰

The hypothesis that was pursued in this research uses the same methodological approach that was proposed by Gallup researchers, but it also considers Savage's findings. The study presented in this volume is based on a survey carried out by SWG on a sample of 1,000 adult citizens, and is based on the hypothesis of reconditioning social classes starting from the process of people's self-conceptions – that is to say, from their own narrative and position on the social scale²¹.

As the German sociologist Schütz would say: with people, one cannot speak of something as being separate from its perception, and as Theodor Adorno reminds us: society is not something perfectly defined in itself. It consists of the situations of which it is composed and which constantly reshape it.

The perception of one's own social condition, whether it be real or aspirational, determines people's choices; the point of view through which someone sees their own situation and society; the way individuals are and feel, as well as their lifestyle, purchases, visions of the future, etc.

The methodological objective that was pursued with this research was to overcome the traditional approaches of a stratificist, structuralist or economicist matrix, in order to assume a perceptive clan dimension in which the middle class is not only defined by income or profession, but is a magmatic corpus generated by several aspects flowing together: a person's way of being, income, profession, existential vision and aspirational framework, self-placement on the status scale, relational networks, competencies, tastes, status symbols, imagination and consumption behavior. All this without forgetting that groups and classes are spatially formed social entities (also linked to the place where they live, the size of the urban center, and the area of the country).

To this end, a survey was created which asked people to place themselves in a certain social class, and which integrated this analysis by investigating 5 dimensions:

1. Structure:
 - a. the profile of the interviewed subjects: gender, age, level of education, area of residence, type of municipality, type of employment, type of company (private or public), family types and multi-family housing,

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ E. Rizzo, *La conquista del popolo*, Guerini & Associati, Milan 2019.

- income, profession (with attention to fictitious VAT numbers, or the grey area between employed and independent work), presence and use of social media, technological equipment, home ownership or rental, type of house, type of religion;
- b. social self-placement and social capital: the social class to which the person believes he or she belongs; changes in the social position; the network of relationships; the feeling of inclusion or exclusion with respect to society; difficulties in paying bills, taxes and mortgages.
2. Behavior:
 - a. consumer profile: the type of consumer the respondent believes to be;
 - b. consumption behavior: preferred places to go food shopping (shops, markets, hyper- and supermarkets, discount stores) or to buy clothes (boutiques, shops, large chains, outlets, online, etc.).
 3. Values:
 - a. the value profile: the most important values, the meaning of well-being, the feeling of meaning assigned to work;
 - b. the issues of values: immigration, security, elite, confidence in Europe and judgment on the EU, racism, self-defense, globalization, taxes, the environment, solidarity, mutualism, altruism, equality, Italians first, justice, federalism.
 4. Imagination and aspirations:
 - a. aspirations: what are the most important aspects to feeling good nowadays, what are the most important needs at the moment (work stability, calmness and tranquility, security, buying power, etc.);
 - b. imagination: aspects that make you feel happy, symbols of success; professions that provide status, as well as worries.
 5. Politics and society:
 - a. the framework of political positions: right-left positioning, moderation, Catholic moral role, political identity, presidentialism;
 - b. social issues: social commitment, flexibility of work, entrepreneurial image.
 6. Finally, in light of the period, the effects of COVID 19.
3. Long-term dynamics (from 2003 to 2018): scarring of the middle class and redesign of the social classes

Over the course of the last 15 years, the middle class has undergone a process of crumbling, of being shredded slowly and relentlessly, with a reduction of almost 30% of those who situate themselves in it (from 70% to

42%). At the same time, we have witnessed a metamorphosis of the profile of the middle class during this period, with a leakage and a loss of status of some historical segments (for example small traders and craftsmen, but also professions that have become precarious) and the insertion of new figures (technical, creative and new professionalism) that have ascended the social ladder.

Over the past few years, upward transitions from one class to another have been very limited, while the downward trajectory has been more consistent. The social elevator has largely gotten stuck: only small groups of people succeed in ascending. If we look at the story that Italians created of their own social conditions before 2018, we discover that for 47% of people, the social condition had remained unchanged. Only 5% had risen from the middle to the upper class and another 6% had seen their position improve from the lower middle class to the middle class. Overall, 11% of the population had experienced a process of ascension. On the other hand, 42% of people had gone in the opposite direction. The data of this drop and slowdown trajectory that has been going on for several years is illuminating. 12% Had dropped from the upper and upper-middle class to the middle class; 23% had dropped from the middle class to the working class and 7% had slipped to the lower class.

Not only income was unevenly distributed: so was social capital. The majority of people who claimed to experience a calm economic situation or a sense of abundance also had a large or adequate social network. On average, those who suffered from a low social situation had a small or narrow network (a figure that goes up to 71% among the lower class and 53% in the working and lower middle classes)²².

Even before 2018, the division into classes showed an uneven geographical distribution. In the Islands, the lower class was at 11%, while the working class in the South was at 18%. The landslide process experienced by the classes in the different areas of the country was also indicative. The biggest collapses had occurred in Central Italy (48% had been affected by the decline) and in the Islands (with 51% being affected). The process of embrittlement showed its effects in the North, as well: in the Northwest, 15% had lost their situation of comfort (12% in the Northeast), while 18% had slipped from the middle class into the working class (17% in the Northeast).

The various Italian social groupings had a complex composition in terms of professional geography. The upper and upper-middle classes (8%

²² Ibidem.

of the population) consisted of freelancers, entrepreneurs and managers, but also of housewives and pensioners with a steady income. Among the middle class were professionals, teachers, managers, a small section of employees, several traders and - also here - a number of pensioners. The lower middle class consisted of artisans, many young freelancers, teachers, most employees, the majority of workers and a share of pensioners and housewives. The working class was made up of artisans, small entrepreneurs, a small part of workers and employees, and of course a proportion of pensioners. Finally, the lower class was made up of the unemployed, pensioners, housewives, and some small entrepreneurs²³.

4. The middle class and the effect of Covid²⁴: 3 million people fewer in the middle and upper-middle classes

The issue of widening social inequalities has been discussed at length during the course of the pandemic. Many sides pointed out that the containment measures that have affected and involved everyone have had different effects on people, depending on their social status, the size and characteristics of their house, the number of residents in the house, the economic situation of the family, the technological and recreational equipment, the gender, the type of available digital connections, the working conditions, the area of residence, etc. Sociologist Marzio Barbagli underlined that “the pandemic has introduced new forms of inequality, not only with regard to the degree and distribution of income and wealth, but also within the active population itself”²⁵.

Covid-19 has underlined the existence of macroscopic vertical social inequalities in our country, determined by your economic and social differences, the type of house you own, the habitat and environment you live in (there is a substantial difference between being locked up in a 40m² apartment without a balcony or a view, and living in a house with multiple floors and a garden, or in a 200m² apartment with a terrace).

The pandemic has brought to light the existence of horizontal inequalities between people who were able to use smart working (and not risk their health) and those who had been forced to continue to go to the workplace (risking their health).

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ E. Risso, *Fenomenologia del Covid-19*, Quaderni Cnel, Rome 2020

²⁵ ‘La Stampa’, 26 May 2020.

Covid has also exposed the fragility of an economic system that, in recent years, had broadened its base in terms of precarious, short-term contracts, or had caused the growth of different types of non-contractual, undeclared work, demonstrating the harmful effects of maintaining quotas of people unable to access the frameworks of protection and income support that were put in place in recent months.

Covid-19 has also revealed the extent of gender distancing, not only for the pernicious issue of domestic violence, but also for the continuing gender distinctions in professional opportunities as well as in economic solidity.

There have been many differences between generations, between the metropolises and the countryside, between North and South and the often-mentioned digital inequalities, for access to smart working or between families who had the necessary equipment to provide their children with online learning and those who were not able to.

The pandemic revealed that space is a matter of class and privilege, showing the country that more than a quarter of people in Italy live in a state of overcrowded housing; that the lack of privacy, and the space to move and practice physical activity can compromise health, the ability to choose smart working, and the ability for children to participate in distance learning.

The picture of Italy before Covid (comparing the 2018 data with those of early 2020) based on the surveys carried out by SWG showed some readjustments and an initial process of reconsolidation of the middle class:

1. the upper and middle class had dropped from 8% to 6%;
2. the middle class had increased from 34% to 39%;
3. the lower and middle class (people with an income that allows them access to necessities without luxuries) had increased from 36% to 43%;
4. the working class (people who experience difficulties with work), had dropped from 17% to 8%;
5. the lower class (people with less than what is necessary) had dropped from 5% to 4%.

Due to its economic and social effects, the pandemic has affected this process of readjustment, undoing the initial process of consolidation of the middle class we observed in the two years prior.

People in the upper or upper-middle class remained static (6% of the population). Italians who feel like they are part of the middle class, on the other hand, have dropped by 6% during the pandemic, from 39% in the first months of 2020 to 33% in July 2020.

Italians who situate themselves in the lower and middle class (those who describe themselves as subjects with an income that allows them

to have everything they need without luxuries) are at 46% (with a + 3% compared to the pre-Covid-19 period); while those who feel that they are part of the working class (people who claim to experience difficulties with work) have increased by 3% between the pre and post-Covid-19 period, from 8% to 11%. Finally, those who claim to be part of the lower class (people who have much less than necessary) are at 4%: a figure that remained stable even during the pandemic [Table 1].

It seems as if Covid-19 has led to a process of slipping downwards, which involved both a share of people who felt like they were part of the middle class and who, due to the economic effects generated by the pandemic, lost stability and prospects for the future, and a share of citizens in the lower and middle class who became even more fragile. The former category consists of individuals such as small entrepreneurs, traders, certain types of professionals and employees; the latter consists of men and women with precarious or temporary jobs.

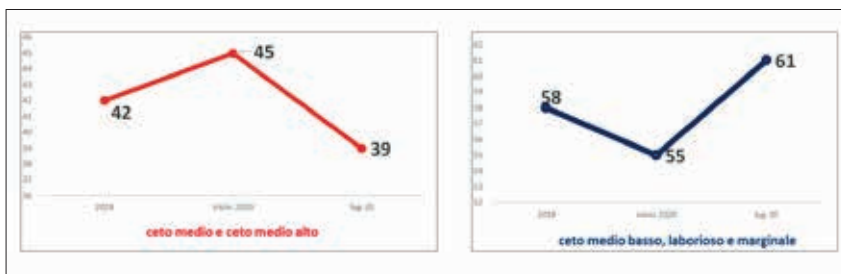
If we look at the changes compared to the 2018-2020 period, we see that the upper and middle classes have suffered an overall contraction of 3%, while the working and lower middle classes have experienced an increase of 3%. Not only that, the pandemic has had a clear impact on the middle class. This segment was slightly recovering at the end of 2019 and in early 2020, and reached 39%. Due to Covid, the setback affected 6% of people. In total numerical terms we are talking about 3 million people who have lost certainties and status because of the pandemic [Table 2].

Table 1 - *La piramide sociale italiana nel luglio 2020*



Fonte: SWG – indagine CATI-CAMI-CAWI su un campione rappresentativo nazionale di 1000 soggetti maggiorenni. Indagine realizzata a inizio luglio 2020.

Table 2 - Le dinamiche dei diversi ceti sociali



Fonte: SWG 2020.

5. The middle class today: geography of an archipelago

The social class is a general category of people's socialization. Forms of identity are not generated by shared misery or wealth, but by a complex interweaving that is determined by the economic condition, value references, lifestyle and behavior, the iconic imagery of reference, aspirations and emotional impulses. Groups and classes are clan-like groups, and not just groups connected by profession or income.

Who makes up the middle class today? Who are those 33% of people that define themselves as such?

When carrying out this analysis, it is necessary to heed Adorno's warning about social classes: they are not homogeneous entities with a unitary and unambiguous consciousness, but multifaceted entities composed of subjects who are in constant competition with each other. For Adorno, the concept of class is a double-edged sword: "it consists in the fact that its formal equality has the function of both oppressing [or opposing, author's note] the other class, and of controlling its own class by those who are strongest."²⁶

5.1 The socio-demographic profile of the middle class

The middle class is a transversal and aspirational entity, which is widespread and present in the different territorial, generational and professional areas of the country.

²⁶ T. W. Adorno, *Scritti sociologici*, Einaudi, Turin 1976..

We find just about the same number of men and women in it. It is most present in the Northwest (38% compared to the average of 33%), while it is more fragile in central Italy (29% compared to the average 33%). From a generational standpoint, baby boomers²⁷ feel like they are a part of the middle class (37% compared to the average of 33%), while only just over a quarter of Z-generation boys and girls and Millennials feel a part of it. From a professional point of view, we see employers, traders and the self-employed (36%), employees (41%) and a section of housewives and pensioners (in line with the average figure of 33%) [Table 3].

In the space between the cities and countryside, between metropolises and villages, people who situate themselves in the middle class are most present in the large metropolitan cities (38%), or in the medium-to-small cities between 10 thousand and 30 thousand inhabitants (36%), while its presence appears more fragile in the vast Italian universe of small cities, and in middle-sized cities between 50 thousand and 250 thousand inhabitants. This dynamic in our country seems to distinguish itself from the studies carried out by Charles Wright Mills in the USA, appropriately named *The Middle Classes in Middle-Sized Cities*.

The author pointed out that a combination of better social integration and a good economic balance in middle-sized cities was able to forge the middle class more easily. Only a few years ago, Arnaldo Bagnasco emphasized that in our country “there is good reason to think that medium-sized cities, especially those of the Third Italy of the past, still have opportunities of this kind, even if they are often endangered by other dynamics. Incidentally, it is worth considering the greater weight that middle-class figures assume in medium-sized cities, in the form of local ruling classes.”²⁸

The data of the survey carried out by SWG in July 2020 shows a trend that, at least for now, seems to be moving away from this historical dynamic. It seems medium-sized cities are no longer as flourishing and capable of generating and nurturing the birth and stabilization of the middle class, while metropolitan cities are better at fueling and supporting the process of social ascent and recognition, despite their fervent contradictions.

²⁷ The scale of the generations: Silent (1925-1945); Baby boomers (1946-1964); Generation X (1965-1980); Millennials (1981-1995); Generation Z (1996-2010); Alpha (2011-2025).

²⁸ A. Bagnasco, *Il ceto medio dopo il capitalismo organizzato*, cit.

The professional profile of the middle class, compared to other social groups, shows a greater presence of employees (+4% compared to the average); of pensioners and housewives (20% for the first and 11% for the latter, more or less identical to the national average), freelancers (+2% compared to the average), teachers and management (+2% compared to the average).

If we look at the family picture, the local middle class is characterized first of all by the number of couples with children (47% compared to the average 42%) or without children (32% compared to the average 28%), with an income ranging between €2000-2500 and €4000 (47%). If we look at religion, there is no discernable overrepresentation of the Catholic world, although compared to the average figure of practicing Catholics (22%), the share of the middle class is slightly higher (24%).

73% Are connected to and regularly use Facebook, while 20% are active on Twitter, 13% regularly use LinkedIn, and 42% are on Instagram. YouTube is used by 45% of middle-class people, while 22% of the middle class turns to Skype for work or communication. Almost everyone is loyal to WhatsApp (87%), while only 10% show some interest in Snapchat. On the other hand, the level of use of Telegram in the middle class is higher, at 42%.

Compared to the national average, there is still a decent level of people reading books among the middle class, with 17% of people reading more than one book per month (the average figure is around 14%) and people reading newspapers - 66% compared to an average of 55%.

Regarding status products, the middle class seems to prefer tablets (54% compared to the average of 49% and 37% in the working class). 27% Of middle-class households own a cleaning robot (compared to the average of 21%) and 23% have already become familiar with different types of domotics (compared to the average of 20% and 6% in the working class). Cars with an automatic transmission are finding their place among status symbols, with a representation of 25% in the Italian middle class (compared to an average of 19%), while other status symbols are the smartwatch (owned by 24% of the middle class, compared to 11% in the working class) and WebTV (52% compared to 40% in the working class).

Table 3 - Geografia del ceto medio italiano



Fonte: SWG 2020.

5.2 Who goes up and who goes down? The expected future and social capital

Despite Covid, the economic situation has remained stable for 67% of the middle class over the last year. 9% Ascended, while 21% went downhill (3% do not comment).

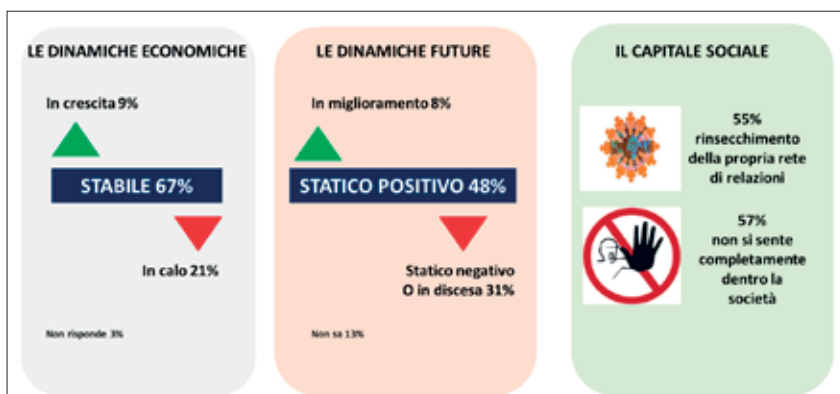
The view of the future is by no means bright: only 8% foresee a growth picture; 48% believe that the outlook will be solid but static, while 31% see a negative or further decline take place. The share capital of the middle class is also depleted. As Coleman reminds us, social capital refers to “the value of those aspects of the social structure that actors can use as resources to realize their own interests.”²⁹ According to Coleman, people are rational actors placed within a social context in which they act by using and focusing on interaction, relationships, values, and all the elements they have at their disposal. “Capital,” says Coleman, “is a concept of the resources that individuals can tap into in order to achieve their goals. “Social”, for the author, “is the distinctive trait of an action which, of course, must be combined with other people.”

The analysis of the number of resources (not economic, but relational) the middle class can tap into, brings to light a reality marked by a dynamic of a fragile relational network and a heightened sense of exclusion from society.

²⁹ J. Coleman, *Fondamenti di teoria sociale*, il Mulino, Bologna 2005.

55% Of the middle class report the extension of their network of social and friendly relationships (a figure that is higher than the national average of 52%), while 57% - the majority of this social group - feel like they are not completely part of society. The perception of exclusion is certainly better compared to the national average of 64%, but it brings to light the fragile balance of this social segment, and its difficulty in perceiving itself as being in the heart of contemporary reality. While it is true that the middle class remains the social class that contains the most people who feel inclusive and resilient (40% compared to an average of 31% and 17% in the working class), it is equally true that the majority of this social group no longer feels like it is in dazzling form, and no longer possesses the certainties and tranquility it did the past [Table 4].

Table 4 – Dinamiche nel ceto medio italiano



Fonte: SWG 2020.

6. Values and issues of the middle class

“The world is experiencing a surprising but understandable metamorphosis, as the reference horizon and the coordinates of action change”³⁰. In his posthumously published book, Ulrich Beck outlines what he calls a quantum shift in world views. A change, a transfiguration, involving people, countries, the global dimensions of our lives. Beck’s stimulus pushes us to carefully scrutinize the transfigurations taking place in social classes,

³⁰ U. Beck, *La metamorfosi del mondo*, Laterza, Rome 2017.

the factors that generate “our image of the world, the way we understand the world.”³¹

The analysis of value dimensions allows us to understand the mood and *weltanschauung* that is present in the middle class, the various *limen* in the relationship with others and with the collective “we”, as well as the role and positioning in the face of politics and the future.

6.1 *The value pyramid and the relationship to work*

The value scale of the middle class aligns with the average framework of the country. At the top³² we find family (60%) and honesty (55%). Respect is in third place, with 41% (but with a lower intensity compared to the average figure of 47%, as well as the value of this issue for the lower middle class, at 55%, and the lower class, at 51%). Work and freedom, both at 38%, rank fourth in the middle class (the density of the value of work, while in line with the average figure, appears to be lower than the importance assigned to it by the working class, which is 43%). In fifth place in the ideal set of values we encounter love and friendship, both at 32%. The theme of affection and love in the middle class is less represented than in the working class (41%) and the lower class (45%).

Protection of the environment takes the sixth spot (20%), with a value just below the weight assigned to it by the lower middle class (23%) and the working class (24%). The value of solidarity comes in seventh place (at 18%) which is much lower than in the marginal class (37%) and the lower middle class (22%). Next are tolerance (17%, an area in which the middle-class scores higher than the working class at 8%) and generosity (still 17%). The middle class gives greater attention to the latter than both the national average (12%), the lower middle class (8%) and the working class (9%) [Table 5].

The relationship to the dimension of work³³ in the middle class is complex. For the majority of people, it is an opportunity for personal

³¹ Ibidem.

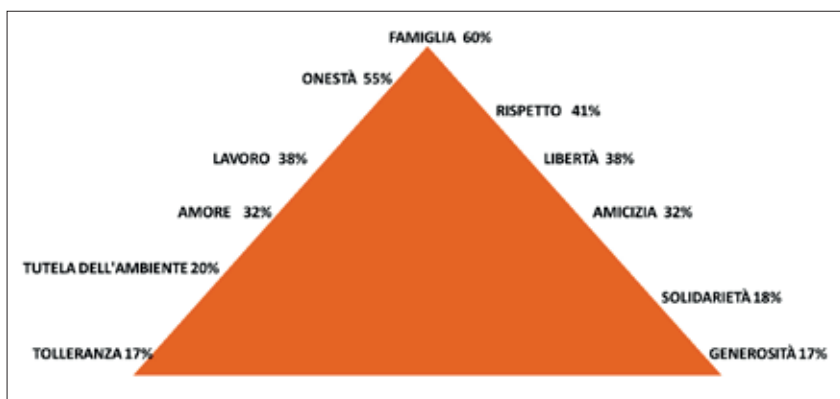
³² The question that was asked: “What are the fundamental values in your life (Express a maximum of 5 preferences)?” Possible answers: Family / Honesty / Respect / Work / Freedom / Love / Friendship / Protection of the environment/ Solidarity / Tolerance / Generosity / Italians first / Belief in God (in your own God) / Simplicity and restraint / Protection of life / Protection of traditions / Patriotism / I don’t know/ I prefer not to answer.

³³ The question that was asked: “When thinking about the meaning work has for you, which of the following definitions best represents your idea? Working is...” Possible answers: an opportunity for personal fulfilment / a way to secure a salary / an opportunity

fulfilment (52%) or an opportunity to raise the economic standard of living (28%). A distinct vision in terms of weight and importance expressed by the working class is that work is first and foremost a way to secure a salary (44%) and a necessity that limits personal life (22%). The comparison between the two classes on the theme of work brings to light not only the difference between a utilitarian approach of laborious necessity, experienced by the working class compared to a dimension of personal gratification expressed by the middle class, but also a different dimension experiencing work as a way to do good for others: an aspect that is very low in the middle class (10%), while in the working world it rises to 15%.

Lastly, the middle class is the social segment least interested in restricting temporary contracts³⁴ and intervening with precarious work: a minority, albeit a large one (43%), compared to the majority (52%) of the working class.

Table 5– La piramide valoriale del ceto medio



Fonte: SWG 2020.

to raise the economic standard of living / a necessity that limits personal life / a way to do good for others / an opportunity to expand knowledge / a way to become a person who matters / other / I don't know.

³⁴ The question that was asked: "In your opinion, is it highly, little or not at all fair to limit flexible contracts?"

6.2 *The middle class on immigration, safety, racism and self-defense*

In order to broaden the picture of the value dimensions expressed by the middle class, it is necessary to zoom out on a broad thematic spectrum, in order to reconstruct the complex map of the perceptual positions of this social class.

40% Of the middle class is annoyed by the presence of immigrants. A figure that is 8% higher than the average (which stands at 32%), but lower than the repulsion expressed by the lower class (53%)³⁵.

The theme of 'others', of those who arrive, causes a part of the middle class to become rigid, defensive, afraid, and insecure in the face of a changing society. In recent years we have witnessed, also in this social segment, the transfiguration of the foreigner: from an element of cosmopolitan potential, to a hostile factor, "always at the front door", insidious and dangerous, a scapegoat and/or enemy who needs to be fought. In any case, immigration has become a topic capable of steering political actions, and of creating sides that are for or against. Despite the anti-immigration impulses that are obviously present in the middle class, this social segment also shows resistance and repulsion towards forms of racism and intolerance. For 60% of people in this social group, a racist attitude can never be justified. This is a much stronger position than in the lower social classes, where the absolute "no" to racism drops down to 49% in the working class and to 42% in the marginal class³⁶.

Parallel to the topic of immigrants is the issue of security³⁷. 45% Of the middle class feels unsafe in the streets of their city. This figure is much less marked compared to how the issue is experienced in other social classes: insecurity in the lower classes goes up to 73%, and up to 53% in the working class.

When we move from security to self-defense³⁸, we uncover a middle class with vigilante impulses. Of course, the majority is in favor of a per-

³⁵ The question that was asked: "Are you very, quite, slightly or not at all bothered by the presence of immigrants?"

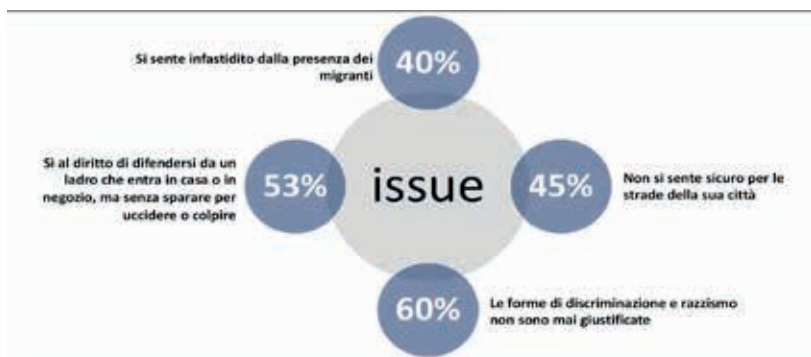
³⁶ The question that was asked: "In your opinion, can certain forms of discrimination and racism (against certain ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations...) be justified?" Possible answers: no, never / it depends on the situation / only in a few specific cases / in most cases / always / I prefer not to answer.

³⁷ The question that was asked: "I no longer feel safe in the streets of the city where I live." Possible answers: I agree / I disagree.

³⁸ The question that was asked: "Do you think a person who sees a thief enter their house or store has the right to defend themselves, even if this runs the risk of killing a

son's right to use weapons only for defense and without killing (53%), but almost a third (29%), consider it legitimate to defend themselves from those who invade their private property by any means necessary. In other social classes, this 'Charles Bronson' drive only goes up: in the working class, the impulse to shoot a thief even at the risk of killing them is ten percent higher (39%). People who, on the other hand, believe it is always wrong to resort to a weapon represent a small minority in all social classes: in the middle class, their percentile is only 13% [Table 6].

Table 6 – Immigrazione, sicurezza, razzismo, legittima difesa



Fonte: swg 2020.

6.3 The middle class, the ruling classes, Europe and globalization

In terms of social positioning and the perception of oneself and one's own role, anti-elite arguments and impulses have less political value among middle class ranks. However, this does not mean the issue is absent. 43% Of this segment takes on an anti-elite stance, compared to 55% in the lower middle class and 58% in the working class³⁹.

person?" Possible answers: yes, but only in defense, you should never shoot to kill or hit a fleeing thief / yes, you should be justified to defend yourself by any means necessary from those who invade your private property / no, under no circumstances is it justified to injure or kill a person, even if they invade your private property / I don't know.

³⁹ The question that was asked: "With regard to the statement that the elite are adversaries of the people:" (I agree / I disagree).

The crisis of legitimacy of the elite has been going on for over thirty years, and it has asphyxiating effects on the democratic, social and economic life in our country. Today's ruling class is considered less honest, competent, prepared, creative and progressive than it was twenty years ago. The national elite is viewed as a group that is attached to their armchair (38%), careless (20%) and trying to live off the state (21%). On the whole, 79% of the public has a negative and critical opinion towards the local ruling class, while only 10% believes there are innovative, progressive and dynamic people in charge (the remaining 11% does not express an opinion)⁴⁰.

This unflattering assessment not only involves the world of politics or public administration, but also the business world⁴¹. 65% Of the middle class has a negative opinion on local entrepreneurs: 35% thinks of them as vultures (a figure that rises to 47% in the working class), and 30% believes they see themselves as 'tiny Bonapartes'.

The crisis of legitimacy of the elite does not come without consequences. It affects a number of factors that determine the country's development, such as:

1. instrumental action (directed at transforming reality);
2. the development of purpose-oriented action (the ability to "do" with success and determination);
3. communicative action (the ability of the different groups to find a mutual understanding on the big issues despite their differences, without looking for compromise, adding water to wine or, on the contrary, ideological and paralyzing clashes);
4. the drive for innovation, the growing of a generative social humus (feeding the growth of autonomous, talented personalities capable of fueling the development of a thriving and authentically dynamic society);
5. the morphology of the ruling class (the will and capacity to select the best)⁴².

Moving from the image of the elite to that of Europe, the picture does not improve. The middle class remains the most pro-European segment of our country, but it is an increasingly cold and timid dimension. 39%

⁴⁰ E. Risso, *La conquista del popolo*, cit. SWG source data.

⁴¹ The question that was asked: "What do you think of the style in which entrepreneurs lead their business?" Possible answers: greedy, interested only in making more and more money / bossy and commanding / managing, attentive to society / open and willing to listen to employees / I don't know.

⁴² Ibidem.

Of this segment shows confidence in the EU (compared to 23% in the lower class and 27% in the working class)⁴³, while 54% are in favor of remaining in the European Union (compared to 19% in the lower and 33% in the working class). This picture does not exactly show a celebration of Europe. Although the middle class is still the social segment most loyal to Europe, the majority of this class (55%) currently displays little if any confidence in the Union.

Despite this fragile Europeanism, the middle class tends to remain pro-global. It splits sharply in two when asked about the advantages or disadvantages of globalization⁴⁴, with a relative majority (45%) being in favor of the process of globalization of economies and markets, and a large minority (41%) standing on the adverse and critical side. If we compare these assessments with those expressed by other social groups, we find that the middle class is the only segment that sees advantages in *mundi-alization*, while 51% of the lower middle class and 52% of the working class express their criticism [Table 7].

Table 7 – *Élite, imprenditori, Unione Europea, Euro e globalizzazione*



Fonte: SWG 2020.

6.4 *The confrontation with global warming and the push towards a greener lifestyle*

Topics such as the environment and global warming⁴⁵ are interclassist and tangential issues in the political field. The opinion of needing

⁴³ The questions that were asked: “Do you have plenty of, enough, little or no confidence in the European Union?”; “If a referendum was held in Italy to remove the country from the European Union, you would vote...” Possible answers: “No, to stay in the European Union / Yes, to leave the European Union / I don’t know”.

⁴⁴ The question that was asked: “The process of globalization of economies and markets brings benefits for everyone.” Possible answers: “I agree / I disagree”.

⁴⁵ The question asked: “The problem of the environment and global warming is increasingly pressing, we must make sacrifices to reverse course” (mode of agreement).

to make sacrifices to reverse our course is shared by 82% of Italians, and all the main classes are aligned (middle class 84%, lower middle class 85%, working class 84%). The topic has less of an influence on the lower class (60%). Climate change is the second biggest concern of Italians, overshadowed only by the theme of the economic crisis: global warming (42%), followed by waste management and disposal (41%), water pollution (36%), air pollution (35%), and the increase of single-use plastics (30%)⁴⁶. Many Italians are irked by the fact that the multitude of international climate conferences have turned up nothing. There are painful memories (often blurry, but still present) of the many environmental disasters in recent history. From Bhopal (India), where the pesticide leak from the Union Carbide factory killed about 4,000 people (an estimated 20,000 more people died in the following years), to the accident at the Fukushima nuclear power plant (2011). The list is long. Still present in the Italian collective memory are the explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor (1986); the tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin cloud that escaped from the Seveso pesticide factory (1976); the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil tanker disaster (40.9 million liters of oil flowing into the sea); the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the island of plastic floating in the Pacific; and the explosion at the Deepwater Horizon oil platform (2010) that spilled millions of barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Finally, many alarm bells are going off in the minds of Italians, from the hole in the ozone layer to climate change, to cloudbursts. The environmental theme has changed skin. It is no longer an argument carried by a handful of activists or an aspect that only committed people pay attention to: it has become an integral part of the conscience and values of the majority of people. In fact, only a quarter of the population believes the environmental topic is a temporary fad. The majority of the public (over 85%) considers it a value and an absolute necessity⁴⁷.

A new paradigm is developing in our country, connected to the dimension of a green life style. It is expressed in purchases, daily behaviors, product research, selection of services, administrative evaluations and in researching political visions. It is a paradigm based on the assumption that we are all jointly responsible for the environment and we all have to do our part.

⁴⁶ Source SWG Environmental Observatory, Green Economy and Circular Economy, December 2018 Data.

⁴⁷ E. Risso, *La conquista del popolo*, cit. SWG data source.

A form of (as Edgar Morin would call it) integral ecology⁴⁸ is developing in our country, particularly in the middle class: an ecology that is neither fundamentalist nor militant. It is not intended to convert people to the cult of the Earth, but it is aware of the (total and integral) strategic value of ecology for our lives, our civilization, our behavior, our children, and our future. A deeply critical ecology, both of the profit paradigm and of the exaggerated subordination to the techno-economy. We are not faced with an impulse to protest, but with the prospects for collective awareness, a motivation to rethink society and the way in which everyone behaves. An integral ecology which, the economic crisis and Covid permitting, no longer makes concessions to governments and interests of multinationals, but demands a propulsive attitude from the ruling class in designing and building a new ecological paradigm of development and economy; a vision which has not yet overcome the exchange of blackmail between work and environmental protection⁴⁹ in Italy.

6.5 *State and taxes*

In a post-Covid situation, federalists and municipalists alike assist in returning to the role of the central state in the public opinion. On the state front, Italy is the country of oxymorons and parallel convergences. The majority of the middle class is federalist⁵⁰, divided among fans of regionalism (28%) and supporters of municipalism (24%), with a third (31%) being in favor of an innovative role for the central state (17% expresses no opinion). The axis of distinction between federalists and proponents of state control runs alongside the center of residence: centralists in metropolitan cities and federalists and municipalists in the small and medium-sized towns.

⁴⁸ Edgar Morin in an interview with “Avvenire” of September 10th, 2015 states: “Francisco defines ‘integral ecology’, which is by no means a ‘deep’ ecology that claims to convert us to the cult of the Earth, subordinating everything else. He states that ecology deeply affects our lives, our civilization, our behaviors and thoughts. More deeply, he criticizes the ‘techno-economic’ paradigm: a way of thinking that drives all our conversations, making them mandatorily faithful to technical and economic postulates to solve everything. At the same time, this text marks an awareness, an incentive to rethink our society and to act”, Pope Francis, *Laudat, sí*, Full encyclical text. With reading guide by Cristina Simonelli, Piemme, Milan 2015; C. Giuliadori, Fr. Malavasi (edited by), *Ecologia integrale. Laudato si’*. Ricerca, formazione, conversione, Vita e pensiero, Milan 2016.

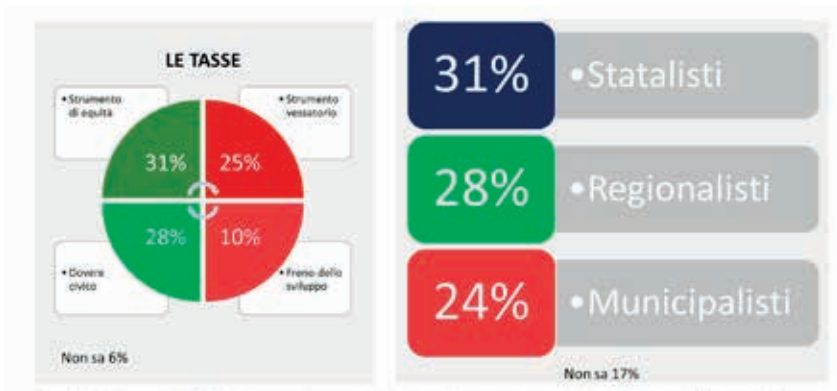
⁴⁹ E. Riso, *La conquista del popolo*, cit. SWG data source.

⁵⁰ The question that was asked: “In my opinion, in the near future Italy will need...”. Possible answers: a greater role for the central state / greater autonomy of the regions / a greater role for the municipalities and more funds to support them / I don’t know.

On the other hand, the state's appeal is more distinctive in the working class, and is less influenced by the place of residence: the support for the state is at 42% compared to an average of 31%.

Taxes are a topic that clearly splits the middle class in two⁵¹: 59% considers them an instrument of equity which guarantees adequate services for all citizens (31%) or a civic duty (28%); for the remaining 35% they are a vexatious tool in the hands of the State (25%) or an impediment to economic development (10%). 6% Does not express an opinion. Other social classes also take on an anti-tax stance. Negative opinions add up to 40% in the lower middle class, 47% in the working class and 55% in the lower class [Table 8].

Table 8 – Tasse, Stato, regionalismo o municipalismo



Fonte: swg 2020.

6.6 *Italians first*

Compared to any other factor, the need to improve the protection of Italians is an issue of major importance in the country. It constitutes a seductive opinion which attracts 54% of the public opinion in various

⁵¹ The question that was asked: "I think taxes are...". Possible answers: an instrument of equity that guarantees adequate services to all citizens regardless of income / a vexatious tool in the hands of the state / a civic duty / an impediment to economic development / I don't know.

ways, especially the middle class (58%), the working class (68%) and the lower class (60%)⁵².

The leading narrative is not simply a programmatic indication, but becomes a real issue of ideology and identity. It generates a constellation of themes and political impulses around it, capable of generating a world view, albeit not unified and not monolithic.

In this narrative, fringes of the conservative Catholic and post-modern liberal universes converge; anti-globalist, Northern and anti-European forces are mixed, with opinions of surrender of the Mezzogiorno and demands imbued with anti-tax anger. These impulses are also mixed with the search for a truce: a future with more certainty and less worries, with security and stability.

In the patchwork represented by "Italians first", 82% of people are bothered by the presence of immigrants; there are also those who are dismayed by the weight of the major powers (82%); those who denounce the unsustainability of taxes (83%); those in favor of free access to weapons for all (64%) and those who want to see the death penalty reintroduced (52%). On the economic front, 68% of supporters of the primatist issue are in favor of protectionist measures and 53% express clear anti-global opinions. In the field of fourth-generation rights, a majority of primatists believe that too many concessions have been made to gays (55%) and 63% advocate for defending the traditional family. Finally, 53% are in favor of presidentialism, 57% consider it necessary to abolish the crime of apology of fascism and 57% are in favor of taking to the streets if things do not change in our country⁵³.

In the ideological narrative of "Italians first", we notice a thematic mix of existential needs (increased income, housing, work, possibility of being a consumer, safety), alienated needs (aspiration to a comfortable life, social recovery of lost positions), the need for ownership (being able to enjoy top goods and status symbols, feeling included, a part of society), the need for anchor points (possessing solid points of reference in a rapidly changing world; having stability and simplistic answers when faced with complexity), the need for similarity (being among like-minded people, not feeling enveloped in a multicultural and multiethnic reality, rejecting the contemporary mix, returning to a more archetypal status that has gotten lost).

⁵² The question asked: "Are you very, quite, little or not at all in agreement with those who say 'First of all you have to think about the Italians?'" (arrangements for agreement).

⁵³ E. Risso, *La conquista del popolo*, cit. Fonte dati SWG.

6.7 *The middle class on the value of solidarity, altruism and mutualism*

Hiding behind an apparent consensus on solidarity issues⁵⁴, our middle class has a tendency to fall back and safeguard its own egotistical demands. On all three issues (solidarity, altruism and mutualism), this social class appears slightly colder and disenchanted than the national average. Even though the differences are not big, they do show a less accentuated sensitivity. When we analyze the topic of solidarity, we notice that 40% of Italians consider it “very important”, while the figure for the middle class comes in at 35%. In the lower middle class, it rises to 44% and in the lower class it shoots up to 66%.

A similar dichotomy can be observed when looking at the value of altruism. It is considered very important by 36% of the public, but it goes up to 52% in the lower class and to 39% in the lower middle class, landing at 32% in the middle class. Finally, there is mutualism. Among the three issues, this one is generally less shared, being viewed as very important by only 16% of Italians. The figure comes in at 18% for the working class, 19% in the lower class, and 11% in the middle class.

Even though today's society as a whole cannot be defined as being aimed at the maximum ‘Comtiana’ of ‘living for others’⁵⁵, conflicting pressures emerge in the middle class through which, by a greater willingness to charitable forms, significant individualistic attitudes also emerge, of egotistical disinterest in the community and the common good, and of substantial avoidance of the maxim of Seneca: “No one can have a happy life if he looks only to himself, turning everything to his own advantage. If you want to live for yourself, you must live for another”⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ The questions that were asked: “In our society, how important are the following things to you: solidarity / altruism / mutualism?”. Possible answers: very / fairly / hardly / not at all / I don't know.

⁵⁵ A.Comte, *Positivist Il catechismo positivista. Sommara esposizione della religione universale in undici dialoghi sistematici tra una donna e un prete dell'umanità*, Aracne, Ariccia 2018.

⁵⁶ L.A. Seneca, *Letters to Lucilius*, Rizzoli, Milan 1993.

Table 9 – Solidarietà, altruismo e mutualismo

Fonte: SWG 2020.

7. The legacy of Covid-19 in the middle class

The pandemic has left traces of fragility and vulnerability in our middle class. Covid has accustomed us to living in a bubble that consists of a latent sense of omnipotence. It made us look at life from a certain distance, unresponsive to the demands of regulation or limitation of our own existence. Covid has broken the certainties of the middle class, has upset the balance, and has called into question our styles and ways of being.

The middle class was the social class which was emotionally affected the most by the events of the pandemic. More than the average Italian, it felt more vulnerable (37% compared to an average of 32%); it experienced a great sense of helplessness (33% compared to an average of 28%); and above all it expressed the need to self-confine at home (13% compared to an average of 10%).

Emotionally, the middle class swung like a pendulum between uncertainty (50% compared to an average of 45%) and hope (37% compared to 32%). It was less shrouded by sadness (13% compared to 20%). This sadness is emblematic and tells the story of the existential differences that exist and are experienced by the different classes during the lockdown. While only 13% of the middle class was struck by sadness, this figure more than doubled for the working class (32%) and even tripled for the lower class (42%). Another illuminating statistic relates to the feeling of anger. It reaches 13% in the middle class, rises to 26% in the working class, and to 28% in the lower class.

7.1 The lessons Covid left behind in the bowels of the middle class

The sense of vulnerability and of having discovered new ways of working that were previously deemed impossible constitute the main lessons the pandemic has bestowed upon the middle class. Smart working comes in at 37% in the middle class, compared to an average of 34%. The sense of vulnerability is more marked and consistent in this social class (48%) compared to segments such as the working class (34%) or the lower middle class (42%).

The fragility of life is the second great lesson Covid teaches the middle class (32%, compared to an average of 29%). This topic is much more significant in the lower class (45%) and the working class (38%).

Not among the main lessons learned from the pandemic in this social segment is self-criticism towards a contemporary lifestyle and consumption, and the need to reshape it. 26% Of the middle class are convinced of this, compared to 31% in the lower middle class and 28% in the working class.

Called into question by society for its difficulty in making sacrifices, the middle class tends to ignore this aspect: only 17% of the middle class recognizes this problem, while this figure rises to 25% in the working class. On the other hand, in terms of the need to increase solidarity between people, the middle class is more sensitive (21%) compared to the working class (13%) and the lower class (14%).

The final lesson the pandemic teaches the middle class is questioning the value of globalization (20% compared to an average of 15%), while the search for a scale of natural priorities is slightly above the average (19% compared to 17%).

7.2 What will remain of the experience of the pandemic according to the middle class

The emotional experience of the pandemic by the middle class also reflects on the judgment of the aspects that will continue past Covid. In first place is the development of public health (47% compared to an average of 45%), followed by the growth of attention to social relationships (spending more time with family and friends stands at 28% compared to an average of 25%).

The middle class is a social segment with a strong individualistic marking which, due to Covid, feels the growing need to pay attention to the needs of the community: 24% among the middle class, against 13% in the

working class and 14% in the lower middle class. Finally, the last issue this group focuses its attention on relates to safety at work (21% in the middle class, compared to an average of 18% and to 15% in the working class).

When we draw a map of the aspects of life that in the perception of the middle class will undergo the greatest changes, we can observe:

- the growth of smart working (51%, compared to an average of 44% and to 7% in the lower class);
- the reduction of holidays (35%, which is in line with the national average, but this figure rises to 39% in the working class);
- the decrease in meetings with others (29% in the middle class, compared to an average of 27% and to 31% on the working class);
- the reduction of leisure opportunities (26% in the middle class, compared to an average of 28% and to 43% in the working class).

8. Politics: a multifaceted and unfaithful class

Hannah Arendt said: “Politically, men organize themselves based on certain essential common traits within an absolute chaos, or an absolute chaos of differences”⁵⁷. The middle class embodies what is perhaps the expression most precise and adherent to this representation.

Overall, 68% (tend to) aspire to moderate political opinions and formations (a figure just above the national average of 64%), while a fifth of this social segment has radical political impulses. The differences with the other social groupings are significant, especially in the lower class, where the push for moderation stops at 46%⁵⁸.

The Italian middle class also shows clear presidentialist signs, with the direct election of the President of the Republic⁵⁹ supported by 58% (+4 points compared to the national average and +6 points compared to the lower middle class).

Peculiarly different is the perception of the quality of the Italian democracy that the middle class seems to have, compared to other social groupings. 48% Of the middle class in Italy believes the quality of the

⁵⁷ A. Arendt, *Che cos'è la politica*, Einaudi, Turin 2006

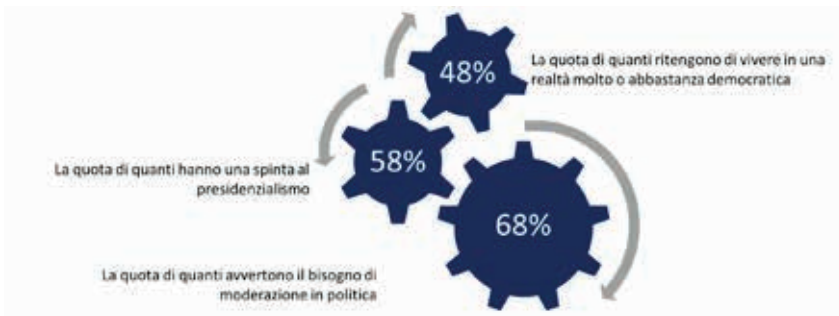
⁵⁸ The question that was asked: “In the Italian politics of today, do you think that there is a lot of, sufficient, little or no need for moderation with respect to more radical political opinions?”

⁵⁹ The question that was asked: “Towards the proposal to implement a reform involving the direct election of the President of the Republic, I...? (agree / disagree)

democracy is good. This is a positive assessment that we do not find in the other social segments of our country. In the lower middle class, the positive assessment of the state of our democracy⁶⁰ falls to 40% (with 54% even thinking of Italy as an undemocratic reality); in the working class, the perception is even more negative, with 68% considering our country undemocratic.

If we attempt to draw a first profile, we discover that the majority of our middle class is moderate and presidential, and tends to be satisfied with the level of democracy offered by our country.

Table 10 – Ingranaggio democratico nel ceto medio: moderazione, presidenzialismo e democrazia



Fonte: SWG 2020.

8.1 *Between Church and Justice*

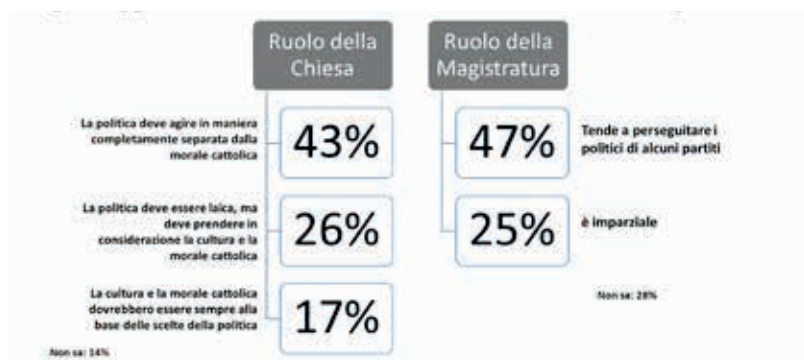
Two political issues that have characterized the history of our Republic relate to the roles of the Church and the Magistracy.

The relative majority of middle-class members (43%) believes that politics must be completely separate from Catholic morality. This is lower than both the opinions expressed by the lower middle class (45%) and the lower class (58%). On the other hand, there is a share of people (17%) in the middle class that gravitates towards basing political choices on Catholic morality. This figure is 7% higher than the national average (10%) and 10% higher than the opinion of the lower middle class (7%).

⁶⁰ The question that was asked: 'Do you think that today we live in a very, fairly, slightly, or not at all in a democratic era?'

Opinions on the role of the Magistracy show similar fractures. 47% Of the middle class believes the togas are not impartial and tend to target politicians of certain parties. In the other social groups, the numbers are clear: in the lower classes, only 23% denounces the partiality of the Magistracy, while in the working classes the figure rises to 43%.

Table 11 – Ingranaggio democratico nel ceto medio: chiesa e magistratura



Fonte: swg 2020.

9. Inside the vortex of political identities

In the middle class, most national political identities host and live with each other. Three aspects need to be clarified in advance. First, there is a dichotomy between self-declared political identities and voting for parties: similar identities can lead to voting for different parties. For example, there are people who can be described as left-wing or right-wing and vote for M5s; others can be called anti-fascist and still vote for Lega, M5s, Renzi, etc. The fluidity of the relationship is extensive and demonstrates the hodgepodge of identities that make up the electorate of today's parties. Second, the percentages relating to political identities concern the entire electoral body (including those who abstain from voting) and not just voters (as is the case for voting intentions). As such, the correspondence between political identity and voting is neither direct nor mechanical. Third, political identities do not automatically lead to a party vote. Each identity is comprised of the others and the choice of voting for a party is defined by the emotionally predominant identity at the time of voting. In fact, a large proportion of people often change their vote depending

on the moment and the sensations they are feeling. In any case, political affiliation is always trending and multiple identities and impulses co-exist in every person.

If we try to map political identities, we discover a four-dimensional country. 36% Identifies with a more or less nationalist-conservative stance. If we break this figure down further, 15% expresses an identity of “Italians first”, in which federalist-autonomist, Lega and anti-European identities converge. Another 12% identifies with a liberal stance, in which many moderate-conservative, anti-communist, liberal anti-tax and Berlusconi identities converge. Finally, in this area we can observe a third identity linked to patriotism (9%), in which nationalist, fascist, conservative, right-wing and patriotic drives converge. Compared to the national average, in the middle class we see a +3% of “Italians first”, 1% more liberals and 2% fewer patriots.

A second political area in the middle class moves along the liberal-traditionalist axis, in which about 27% of people are located. This is the area in which the middle class diverges the most from the national average. It contains two different affiliations, the first of which is disenchanted centrist, in which 15% of the middle class resides (+ 3% compared to the national average); the second is liberal, which looks to the center-left and consists of 12% of the middle class (+2% compared to the national average). The disenchanted centrist identity is a group which includes identities such as moderates, Catholics, and Christian Democrats. The ranks of liberals are characterized by identities such as liberals and reformists, environmentalists, Catholics, and secular republicans.

A third political crux of the country is tangential and revolves around anti-corruption and anti-political beliefs, with environmental and nimby impulses: a hodgepodge of impulses that altogether amount to 11% in the middle class (12% in the national average).

Finally, there is the progressive magma. Overall, it has a share of 29% in the middle class (– 3% compared to the national average) and is composed of three different dimensions of identities. First, there are the traditional reformists (18% in the middle class and 19% in the national average), characterized in turn by a multidimensionality of issues (anti-fascist, social democratic and anti-Mafia). The second identity is eco-green, in which we find the environmental and participatory issues. It represents 9% of the middle class (compared to a national average of 8%). Finally, there are the radicals, in which we find political and value positions linked to the dimension of the classical, post-communist and revolutionary left. At

2%, it is the least represented identity in the middle class, compared to a national average of 5%.

If we compare the political identities expressed by the middle class with those of other social groups, we can observe significant differences. In the lower middle-class, there is a greater presence of traditional reformists (+3%) and radicalists (+4%). Moderate positions are more fragile in this segment, with a - 4% of disenchanted centrists and a - 2% of liberals. The anti-fascist section in this class is at + 3%, while the national conservatives drop by 5%. Overall, compared to the middle class the lower middle class has registered a - 7% center-right identity, + 5% center-left, + 3% self-identifies with anti-establishment impulses, and finally there is a - 6% for centrists and reformists.

The working class paints a different picture. In this segment, liberal and anti-tax identities (+6%) are over-represented compared to the middle class, while both patriotic (- 3%) and 'Italians first' (- 4%) impulses are weaker. In the central area, the liberals are at the lowest possible level with - 9% compared to the middle class. Anti-establishment recorded +6%, while the progressive magma shows - 2%.

Nostalgic radicalists and eco-greens recorded +3% and +1% respectively.

Overall, the centralist area shows - 7%, while the center-left shows + 2% and the center-right - 1%.

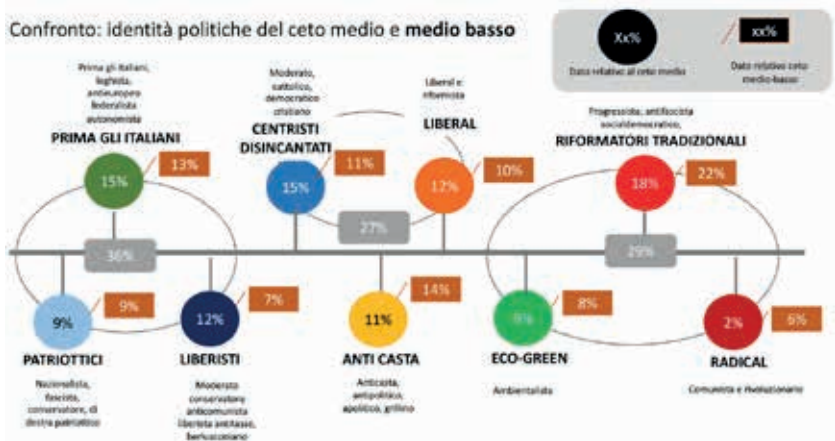
Lastly, the lower class shows a peculiar picture, with some significant accents. The identity segments that have seen the greatest collapse compared to the middle class are - 11% for the progressive magma and - 8.5% of eco-greens. In this social segment, the area of nostalgic radicalists is growing (+6%), the liberals and liberalists are at a minimum, while the anti-establishment impulses (+9.5%) and patriotists (+ 5%) are on the rise. Overall, in the lower class, the center-left loses 13.5% compared to the middle class, while anti-establishment movements reach their peak at 20.5% and the center-right shows +1%.

Table 12 – La mappa delle identità del ceto medio



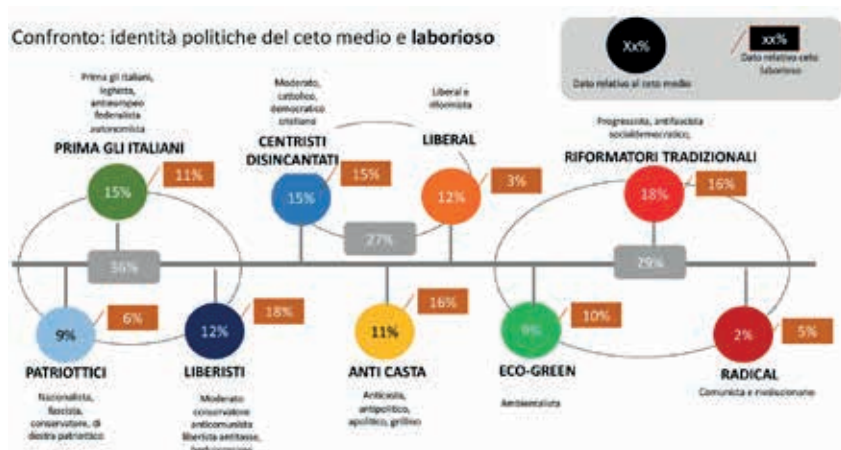
Fonte: swg 2020.

Table 13 – Confronto tra identità politiche del ceto medio e medio basso



Fonte: swg 2020.

Table 14 – Confronto tra identità politiche del ceto medio e laborioso



Fonte: SWG 2020.

10. The evolution of the role of the political leader

In contemporary politics, the role of leadership is structured along a number of peculiarities that have been emphasized by Sergio Imparato in an interesting way: “A. Contemporary leadership is built around the principle of visibility. This is expressed through the exaltation of the leader’s aesthetic and private experience; B. Visibility provides the democratic leader with a type of symbolic legitimacy, which identifies them and at the same time distinguishes them from their electorate; C. The visible power of the contemporary leader is not limited to the symbolic dimension, but is inextricably accompanied by decision-making power; D. The end of the leader’s political power corresponds to the end of their visibility⁶¹.

In politics, leaders have always played a central role in identifying and embodying a party’s project, style, mission, and values. Personification has always been an integral part of the political experience of the large mass parties of the twentieth century. In today’s world, many factors have contributed to accentuating and modifying the role of the leader, among which is the collapse of traditional political and social cleavage, with the consequent accentuation of the personification and ‘nomadization’ of voting behavior. Over the past thirty years, old sociological factors such

⁶¹ S. Imparato, *Il Presidente sovrano*, University Press, Pisa 2015.

as belonging to a class or family tradition have lost weight as structuring elements of voting behavior and political affiliations, while the importance of contingent factors, thematic issues, and the image of candidates has increased. Michele Sorice underlines the contribution of media coverage on society in this transformational process, which in his opinion has determined “the development of mass culture, the maximum expression of which can be seen from its media representation: it is within the framework represented by the media that popular culture undergoes a process of “being questioned” and of social legitimacy. The tendency to overlap the public functions of the political actor with their personal characteristics is not really a phenomenon that was born with the media (contrary to popular belief), because it was already present in many political systems of the past. Take Roman times, for example: a world in which the personal characteristics of the political actor were almost always fused (and confused) with their political skills. Nevertheless, it is clear that this process has become strongly accentuated by the modern media, which have produced a kind of multiplication and acceleration of these trends [...] in which individual subjects have become prominent due to the traditional format of their party growing weaker⁶².

The rise of social networking has further intervened in this process. It creates communities around political leaders. The strength of social media is expressed not only through the content that is conveyed directly by the leader, or through the offered unitary vision or advocated ideology, but through the ability to forge an emotional and narrative architecture of sharing and affinity, through being able to find common ground between the people and the leader⁶³. Social networks allow for the construction of collective and intimate experiences between leaders and people; they allow for sharing emotions and forming a relationship. They create a separate world around the leader which directly brings people together and mobilizes them, allowing them to feel part of a swarm, an aggregate linked by its loyalty to the leader, to the person-leader. Precisely in these aspects, social media develops a context, a sense of belonging and community, a way of being and thinking that it is centered around the leader, who is no longer just a politician, but becomes “one of them”.

⁶² M. Sorice, *Leader, potere e controllo democratico*, in E. De Blasio, M. Hibberd, M. Higgins, M. Sorice, *La leadership politica. Media e costruzione del consenso*, Carocci, Roma 2012.

⁶³ E. Risso, *op cit.*

On social media, the relationship between the leader and the people develops within a bubble, an echo chamber that generates a community feeling. The relationship is not one-way, but two-way, because the leader must be active: not only do they feed the network with news, jokes, opinions, and self-narratives on everyday life, but they must also respond, interact, and talk about themselves.

The role of social media is not only to create direct contact or an interconnection and sharing between people and leaders: it is also about emotional exchange, in the meta-political dimension of the relationship (emotional and rational), which reshapes the concept of the relationship between the leader and the people, capable of producing and sharing visions of the world; ways of interpreting the facts and positioning oneself in the political and social arena.

After the end of ideologies, social networks operate on several levels, as if they were new party sections. They:

- feed the leader-people relationship on a daily basis;
- place the leader among the daily lives of people;
- facilitate the opportunity of deepening the content offered by the leader;
- generate a warm relationship with the leader, based on a direct contact with the “boss” and with their personal dimension, not just their political one;
- support the emotional dimension of the relationship and forms of sharing;
- accentuate and expand the empathic bond with the leader, as well as the construction of what they stand for.

The 360-degree relationship generated by social media goes beyond the size of the contingent and of individual positions. It facilitates the structuring and consolidation of new doctrines; that is to say, perceptions, readings, interpretations of society and the facts that take place.

10.1 *The ideal leader for the middle class*

Innovator: this is the main profile a leader must have to attract the attention of the middle class; a trait that speaks to 57% of middle-class members, compared to 50% in the working class and 44% in the lower class.

At 38%, the second trait (2% more than the average and 11% more than the lower class) is the ability to mediate between different positions and

social bodies; a mediator who does not treat issues by bulldozing them, but who knows how to listen, reflect, be patient and see the bigger picture.

The third trait is picking up the mantle of the unblemished knight, committed to defending the Italians (36%). This figure is well below (–12%) the value assigned to this dimension by the working class (48%).

The fourth trait is decision-making (33%, which is +2% compared to the national average). The leader who is capable of making decisions is especially liked by the lower middle class (37%); who responds to the need for a political reference which, with respect to the future, embodies and represents the social anger of the downgraded class: a perennially uncertain and insecure group.

The traits that least attract the middle class are the profile of a leader who is revolutionary (17%), young (14%), moralistic (11%), or conservative (5%).

The revolutionary trait is more important to the working class (22%, compared to an average of 18%), while the moralistic profile is especially preferred by the lower class (14%, compared to an average of 11%).

Table 15 – Il profilo del leader ideale per il ceto medio



Fonte: SWG 2020.

11. Challenges for the future

In an era of great tensions, inequalities, human exoduses, economic change and great uncertainties, the future is not an empty debate, but a foundation we must confront. As the French ethnologist Marc Augé warns,

they are “two expressions of essential solidarity that unite individuals and societies”⁶⁴.

The following keywords for the future, as selected by the members of the middle class, echo the various foundations which are present in this social segment:

- a. environment (33% compared to an average of 28%);
- b. commitment (25% compared to an average of 22% and 15% in the working class);
- c. Italians first (14% compared to an average of 11%);
- d. order (13% compared to an average of 10% and 16% in the working class).

Glancing at the words, together with all the analyzed data, brings to light the state of the transitional process that has been going on for years in the middle class.

A metamorphosis of this social segment is the result of the process of middle class decline that took place in our country and of replacing large shares of the middle class by the vast and fragile magma, with the desire (the emotional vagueness) to always and still feel a part of the middle class, but, at the same time, being aware of no longer having the economic strength and social role to fulfil that desire.

A metamorphosis that is at the origin of both resentment towards society and the ruling classes (which have become castes, accountable for having led society to the defeat of the crisis), and of the radicalization of political stances (with the consequent narrowing of the spaces of mediation and the search for simple solutions to complex problems), and of the desire for redemption, social ascent and the possession of (consumption and non-consumption) status symbols of the wealthiest class.

The process of transfiguration of the social classes, in particular the middle class, generates a double paradigm shift within our country. On the one hand, it supports the return of class division in the perception and readings of the country, as well as in the dynamics of political and consumer choices. It is a dynamic that pushes the subordinate classes to aspire to the lifestyle and symbols of the wealthy classes, while politically viewing them as distant and hostile. On the other hand, it encourages both the sense of revenge and the need for social redemption as a structuring factor in political choices and visions for the future, as well as the

⁶⁴ M. Augé, *Futuro*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2012.

resentful dimension in the expression of one's own political emotion and party choices⁶⁵.

The experience of Covid, the economic fragility that has affected the country as a whole and all the different social segments (although in a different way) have caused a qualitative leap in the expectations of Italians, with a tendency to move away from absolute presentism, to laboriously and not without contradictions seek a narrative for the future (political, empathic, generative, but also defensive and anxious). A change that opens the door to the search for answers in the medium and long term, to organic projections of the future, to transitional projects of today and tomorrow.

More so than in the past, the scope of today's new challenge is the ability to identify and design tomorrow, to talk about what kind of Italy we will be. In the absence of propulsive solutions and emotional visions for the future, there is a risk that large sections of the electorate will increasingly seek refuge in protectionist anxiety which flirts with ideas of closure and walls, or will decide to follow the impulse to revolt.

Italy is a nation looking for signals of opportunities for its children, of a meritocracy, the right economy, a green society, innovation and social justice, of security and care for its families. Italians, and the middle class in the first place, are looking for a political, empathetic and generative narrative, in which we talk about work and not only about flexibility and uncertainty; in which we develop and try to work towards equity, pay less taxes and earn more wages; a growth horizon aimed at choices of economic, environmental and social harmony.

No matter which path politics and the Italian society will choose to follow, the political field will be measured on its ability to respond to the fractures and contemporary social divides. In order to generate a dynamic future, it is not enough to simply intervene in the state budget deficit or to offer some type of new palliative care. We need to ask the question of an overall strategy that will try to heal the social wounds we inherited over the last twenty years.

The challenge consists of at least ten social divides that need to be mended:

1. the imbalance between nature and economy;
2. the divide between people's development and well-being;
3. the separation of finance and business;
4. the dichotomy between people and technology (from the digital divide to the disconnect to knowledge);

⁶⁵ E. Risso, *The conquest of the people*, cit.

5. social and class distances;
6. fractures between territories;
7. divides between individuals and communities;
8. fractures between generations and genders;
9. divides between immigrants and Italians;
10. the relationship between state and community, between welfare and subsidiarity.

The middle classes. The social archipelago of a fluid class

Premise

This chapter aims to analyze the multiple foundations of the groups that make up the middle class, as well as the segments that aspire to be - or to return to to feeling - part of this social segment.

In order to achieve this objective and offer a broad view of the processes that have intervened with and affect the conformation of people's social identity, this chapter is divided into three successive foundations: the first paragraphs focus on the paradigm changes that have influenced the conformation of social classes in the past 20 years. In particular, the reflection focuses on the results of the path of transfiguration that took place in society, with the emergence of a swarm-like dimension of social groups; on how the metamorphosis of the collective imagination was determined in narrative ecosystems (and "what" a narrative ecosystem entails); as well as the role that social networks play in this process of transition from the collective imagination to narrative ecosystems.

Subsequently, the chapter focuses on the changes in the narrative ecosystem brought on by Covid, by focusing the attention on how the pandemic has affected the habitus of Italians, on the symbols of success, on the identity of jobs that provide status, and on fears.

Therefore, every first paragraph of the chapter is aimed at reconstructing the context within which the multiple communities of sentiment that are present in Italian society have developed, and that can relate to the middle class or revolve around it.

A widening of the analysis has also taken place in order to identify and break down the communities. In the previous chapter and in the first par-

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agraphs of this chapter, the base data that was used was that of people who consider themselves a part of the middle class (33% of the population).

To identify communities, the field was widened. Not only those in the middle class, but also people in the upper middle and lower middle class were inserted into the analytical basis. The decision was made to create an enlarged vision of the middle class, in order to try and grasp the complex dynamics and perceptions that also revolve around it, and not only within it. The choice allows us to grasp a wide range of dynamics, particularly allowing us to read the impulses of those who have undergone a process of social demotion in recent years, slipping into the lower middle class, and those who aspire to be part of the middle class but are forced to consider themselves in its close surroundings due to economic or professional circumstances.

The choice to expand the field has allowed us to uncover the vast archipelago of drives, visions, aspirations and political identities that are moving within the depths of Italian society today, and that tell us about the fluid world that revolves in and around the middle class.

1. The paradigm changes that have influenced the conformation of the classes

The economic crisis that has been raging in our country since 2005 (which began even before the failure of Lehman Brother) has struck hard and generated a vertical process of social fragility, which has impacted and involved much of the country's corpus, redesigning social classes and political blocks.

It has been a trajectory with two streets. On the one hand, there has been an exponential growth of people who live in poverty or cannot make ends meet at the end of the month. In the ten years from 2008 to 2017, Italy was one of the European countries with the largest increase in people who were having difficulties (we only did better than Greece). According to Eurostat data, we have gone from 15 to 17.4 million people on the brink of poverty, a figure that is in stark contrast to France (– 380 thousand) and Germany (–830 thousand), but also to the Community average, which recorded a decrease of 4 million people at a risk of sliding into poverty.

On the other hand, there has been a general process of the intermediate bodies crumbling, with a minority increasing their economic and social strength, and a large share of people slipping away from the middle class, losing the certainties and security they once enjoyed.

The long process of post modernization of our society has brought about changes in the way we are, think, consume and perceive ourselves. It has affected reference paradigms, readings, and our relationships with society, politics and the world; a long-standing composite process that has accumulated experiences on experiences, leading to a qualitative leap in the narrative dimension of society, moving from a collective imagination to a narrative ecosystem.

Due to the specific object of our analysis on the middle class, it is useful to focus on some of these transformative stages, in particular on the changes generated by neo-consumerism and the rise of new media, primarily social networks.

Several factors have contributed to the transformation and redesign of social classes in our country, and not just the economic crisis.

A first element that deserves our attention is determined by the effects and paradigms induced by the rise of mass neo-consumerism. It has been one of the drivers of the process of including large strata of society in the dimension, the social and cultural visions, and the existential styles of the middle class. This was a fundamental element in the process of *ceto-medizzazione* (at least in the aspirations and research of *modus vivendi* and existential habitus) of large strata of society. The elements that have contributed to the *cetomedizzazione* of existential paradigms are manifold. Among them we can recall:

- the democratization of luxury (through the outlets) and access to large quantities of goods, through discounters (consumerism for everyone and for all budgets), which for some people has allowed a partial liberation from the income-price combination, facilitating access to products and styles of consumption;
- the transformation of products in an expressive language of the self and in tools for identifying narration. Goods have become bearers of meaning and have increasingly played the symbolic role of supporting and expressing people's storytelling. Consumers, as Baudrillard points out, do not buy specific items to meet specific needs, but consume signs, which are part of a "cultural system" which "replaces a social order of values and classifications with a contingent world of needs and pleasures"¹;
- cherry picking: the tendency to capture the best from various contexts;

¹ J. Baudrillard, *La società dei consumi*, il Mulino, Bologna 2010.

- the transfiguration of brands from end to relational means, to tools which allow people to interpret and stage a character of themselves from time to time²;
- the development of an aesthetic, individualistic neo-Pirandellism (in which people are no longer one, they are never anyone and often try to be a hundred thousand), with excessive lifestyles and the emergence of mixed identities, projected in search of a dimension of well-being and a good life, an existential style that through symbolic paths and in forms emulates the lightheartedness, seduction and charm of the wealthy classes. Andrea Semprini says: "In the complex postmodern society, the challenges between products give way to challenges between meanings, messages, and perceptions around products"³;
- the growing customization of choices, no longer determined in absolute terms by belonging to a certain class, but focused on the search for personal authenticity, which has become the symbol of wealth, people's possibilities, tastes, and high-class lifestyle. It is about working on the symbolic sense of self, in which belonging to the wealthy and privileged part of society is reflected in the communicative dimension of the self (Willis says: «Symbolic work is necessary, because human beings are just as communicative as they are productive. Maybe they are even more communicative than productive.»⁴).

A second transformative element of existential paradigms is generated by the network, by the digital experience, and in particular by the experience of social networks. Over the past decade, social media have been the engine, the ferry ship, which has transformed part of the paradigms of the relationship between individuals and society. They have allowed people to get out of the existential dimension of their micro-network of relationships, offering individuals vast possibilities for relationships and self-expression, allowing them to perform the coveted script of their own existence on the social stage (such as the possibility of expressing their anger or spewing their discomfort).

² Z. Bauman: "Consumers, who are deprived of the past and the future, must also renounce a fixed identity, as they are seduced by the prospect of being reborn several times in their lives and of starting a new, successful life from the beginning", in *Homo consumens. Lo sciame inquieto dei consumatori e la miseria degli esclusi*, Erickson, Trento 2007.

³ A. Semprini, *La società di flusso. Senso e identità nelle società contemporanee*, FrancoAngeli, Milan 2003.

⁴ P. Willis, *The Ethnographic Imagination*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2000.

Through social media, the process of *cetomedizzazione* of individual storytelling has relied on different possibilities such as:

1. the hybridization and horizontalisation of relational environments (within the network we are all horizontal: social and cultural differences are primarily and apparently torn down);
2. the creation of a stage on which to act, on which to create an act around oneself and to produce one's own identity. Social media has made Guy Debord's historic statement real: "All life in modern societies looks like an immense accumulation of plays"⁵. They have made it possible for people to immerse themselves in an uninterrupted continuity of their own performances;
3. the dissolution of the distinction between real and virtual. Everything is mixed, everything is a constant hopeless reference between what happens in daily life and what happens in virtual life, allowing people to cross social distances and to frame the story of themselves they want to tell;
4. the reduction of social barriers. Online, people experience the comparison to others as being less tortuous than in real life and, importantly, with a lower barrier of entry and with the possibility of staging their own 'augmented' existence;
5. the multiplication of existence. People can belong to multiple communities at the same time and show more of their different lives and passions. In a Pirandellian sense, they can one, none or a hundred thousand; a bit like Vitangelo Moscarda, the protagonist of Pirandello's novel, people feel singular and unique (the image they have of themselves), one hundred thousand (the forms attributed to them by others and the parts they want to perform) and are scared of not being anyone (of falling into oblivion or of no longer recognizing their authentic self among the many roles they play)⁶;
6. the communicative aestheticization and 'window dressing' of individuals. Social media allow people to turn themselves into a commodity, into a story that is placed in the world in order to gain admiration. As psychotherapist Gustavo Pietropolli Charmet describes very well, the rules of the community matter less and less in the scale of values of the individual, in favor of an insatiable need for admiration, the most evident manifestation of which is the obsession with the number of likes that are obtained on social networks; when likes are

⁵ G. Debord, *La società dello spettacolo*, Baldini&Castoldi, Milan 2013.

⁶ L. Pirandello, *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, Giunti, Florence 2015.

not obtained, shame, eating disorders and different states of mental suffering take over⁷;

7. disintermediation between leaders and people and the development of a symbolic and narrative communication, facilitating the direct expression of one's own feelings and opinions, without the filter of political correctness;
8. clan-like recognition: discovering that a person is not alone, but that there are other people, scattered throughout the country (and the planet), who share the same opinions, emotions and passions. A dimension that has given individuals the opportunity to connect and recognize each other, to identify and unite themselves within the masses.

Social media are not merely a tool for interaction and interconnection: they provide resources for the imagination.

2. Community of sentiment and the narrative ecosystem: the results of change in existential paradigms

The economic crisis and the changes in existential paradigms are *arche* of various significant metamorphoses, such as:

- excessive lifestyles and establishing a swarm-like model in groups of people, with the establishment of clans, tribes and *communities of sentiment*;
- the transition from a top-down dimension of the collective imagination to a bottom-up dimension, through the structuring of narrative ecosystems.

Today's sense of belonging is fluid. People gather together and recognize themselves in communities of sentiment: swarms where they share their ways of feeling and being. The swarm is a new symbol of liquid modernity.

Swarms are nothing more than the sum of their parts. According to Bauman, they resemble "images of Warhol: replicas of an original that has disappeared or is impossible to locate"⁸. They are characterized by bonds

⁷ G. Pietropolli Charmet, *L'insostenibile bisogno di ammirazione*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2018.

⁸ Z. Bauman, *Homo consumens. Lo sciame inquieto dei consumatori e la miseria degli esclusi* cit.

that can be fragile and intense at the same time: they can be easily abandoned, but they intertwine people, they generate highly intense emotional experiences, and they are sources of narrative and identity.

Like a modern-day Ulysses, people today manage the narration of their wandering personalities through objects and stories, they generate and manipulate shapes and symbols in search of sharing and differences, singularity and commonality. Opposites by statute, people today have increasingly become cross-tellers⁹, who reveal their existential goals through three ambitions: to be unique, authentic and.... to do the right thing.

As increasingly multifaceted subjects, people no longer have a unitary style: they act and move differently at different times in their life. There is no longer a “lifestyle” that dominates and determines choices, the habitus is chameleon-like, the animus is libertarian, the motto is: “I am a person, not a target. I live in a performance society and portray my multiple ‘selves’. I am multi-faceted, and I create myself and my story”¹⁰. The message sent to brands is unequivocal: “I will choose you if you are in tune with the story of myself, I want to put out there, if you help me to portray it. If you.... relate to what I want to be.”¹¹.

Contemporary swarm entities, which Appadurai¹² defines as “communities of sentiment”, constitute groups with shared meanings, symbols and narrative flows. They are heterogeneous sets of subjects, united and related by drives, affinities, attitudes and passions. They are fluid groups with their own peculiarities, languages, icons and narratives. People are also not part of a single community, but frequently change the affinities they seek, and can be part of multiple communities of sentiment at different times in their daily lives, in their experiences and in their interests or hobbies.

Finally, there is a dual peculiarity to the community of sentiment, of which we find particular traces in the political dimension: they are characterized, on

⁹ E. Risso, *A New Consumer Analysis Model*, in “Micro & Macro marketing”, n. 3, il Mulino, Bologna 2016.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ E. Risso, *La conquista del popolo*, cit.

¹² Community of sentiment is a concept coined by sociologist Arjun Appadurai, *Modernità in polvere*, Molteni, Milan 2005. The mass media allow for collective practices of reading, criticism and entertainment that aggregate individuals within groups defined by Appadurai as “communities of sentiment”, groups of people who begin to imagine and feel things in common. Collective experiences of the mass media, especially movies, videos, or online chat rooms can create a powerful solidarity between consumers and allow them to move from simply sharing a certain emotion to imagining the possibility of collective action.

the one hand, by an aggregate dimension that is not structural, but experiential and emotional; on the other hand, they are characterized by a non-teleological form of assembling conceptions, visions of the world, and opinions.

Their construction revolves around a pivot point, which does not happen linearly, but instead by summations, mixes, by combining parts that in the past were divergent and even distant. They do not generate a real and proper *weltanschauung*, but suggestions of the world which nevertheless express their mythical dimension and act with the intention of simplifying reality and providing maps to transform uncertainty into certainty, instability into stability. Maps that are able to generate a sense of belonging, identity and anchor points, and sense of self among the people who are part of the community.

The second contemporary metamorphosis involved the experience and the production model of the collective imagination, which is translated from a typically top-down dimension to a multi-faceted, bottom-up dimension of social representations.

Today we live and operate within a constant flow of images and sensations, stimuli and interpretations (and reinterpretations). Social representations have increasingly taken on the contours of a perpetual flow, of narrative ecosystems generated by:

- the nonlinearity of representations;
- the intertwining of stories (top-down and bottom-up);
- the development of complexity and narrative cross media;
- the oxymoronic nature of society and the emergence of the need to be admired and to place yourself in the spotlight.

It is necessary to talk about ecosystems because we need to understand social representations as a composite environment, capable of integrating flows that originate from different users, technologies and media objects.

The narrative ecosystem is the result of complexity, of the coexistence of people in multiple environments, of them being subjected to different subcultures, of their branched and reticular relational dimension, of their exposure to multiple expressive modes, of their ability to interact with others, to propose and participate 'bottom-up' in the production of worlds and visions, sensations and emotions (in short, to be part of the overall construction of today's narrative, of contemporaneity).

The narrative ecosystem functions like a story that not only involves the space of the present, but intervenes on the dimensions of the future, tracing profiles, aspirations, and affinities.

Post-modernistic presentism has changed into a “permanent here and now”, in which people who create their own narrative do not detach themselves from reality, but constantly reassess it according to the story of themselves they want to portray. In this process of being “permanently present”, people express not only needs, but also generate the need to always have and produce something new, to be permanently able to be present and express themselves, to talk about themselves differently (in continuity).

Thanks to social networks, creating imagination is no longer the exclusive prerogative of content producers (media, parties, religions, associations, etc.), but has become an asset of the presence of individuals in society. This possibility has also transformed the role of people in reality: from often disjointed monads, they have evolved into interconnecting nodes; passive users have become generators of content, narratives and meaning; from feeling insignificant and aiming to reduce their sense of exclusion, they have turned into actors who participate in an ever-changing collective ‘us’, which is able to fuel a sense of belonging, but requires minor constraints (and reduced efforts) in terms of bonds and affiliations. Social media have allowed everyone the chance to have a place in the spotlight, to obtain certificates of identity, to produce opinions, to scream in anger, to show off purchases and personal stories, to demonstrate their impatience and idiosyncrasies, and to show off their compliant or non-conformist attitudes.

The digital and social age has extracted people from the isolation of the (monadic) man-mass and has made them part of a community of subjects who share passions, emotions and opinions. It has transformed people from individuals within the masses to members of communities, of a collective subject, which has its own identity boundaries, languages, icons, traditions, and forms of rhetoric.

Social media have allowed individuals to emerge from mass society and to leave traces of themselves. However, at the same time they have allowed people to feel part of a group and of new communities, so they can share feelings, passions and affinities with others, to be the ‘touchpoint’ of a collective process of building an identity and a community.

Each person participates in the construction of the ecosystems in which they are immersed, transforming their essence. Because the drives from below, the multiple interpretations and the emotional and narrative expressions of people come into play in the construction of the identities of the different echo chambers. Social networks (along with other new instruments and formats of contemporary narration) have influenced the

complexity of society. Their interaction and horizontal communication have become a cultural production, creating imagination and content. They have impacted the collective imagination, distorting it, transforming it, genetically mutating it.

This process has led to a change from a unitary, overall, collective image - which tends to be stable - to many narrative circles, which by interacting with each other give life to multiple narrative systems.

3. Changes in the narrative ecosystem generated by Covid

A peculiar point of observation to widen the view on the theme of the imagination and its transmutations into a narrative ecosystem is offered by examining the changes or continuities the pandemic experience has inflicted on the symbols of success and on professions that confer status.

Cornelius Castoriadis, a French philosopher of Greek origin, defined the imagination as an “incessant and essentially indefinite creation of figures/forms/images”¹³. According to the philosopher, it is a ‘representative flow’ which is, at the same time, a ‘flow of becoming’.

Ideas, entities, things and meanings only appear to be individual and separate elements. In fact, they are forms and terms of ‘orientation-identification’ that generate what Castoriadis calls the ‘magma of meanings’.

Have Covid-19 and the one-hundred-day experience with the pandemic really affected the substrate of styles and visions of people’s worlds? Have they generated, as Bourdieu put it, the early symptoms for a change of habitus, at least partially? Or was the process only transitory and are the visions, status factors and imagination that constitute the culture broth of society returning to their pre-pandemic state?

During and after the lockdown period, the pendulum of sensations, behaviors and styles swung quickly. Looking at the imagination helps us to understand how some processes have intervened and why not everything will fit into the ranks easily.

3.1 *Changes in the habitus of Italians*

The habitus of people has undergone an evolutionary process. The Bourdieusian category (understood as incorporated practices, the result

¹³ C. Castoriadis, *L’istituzione immaginaria della società*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 1995.

of the dialectic synthesis between internal and external, subjective and objective, as a socialized body, not as a state of consciousness, but as a state of the body, as an active and internalized arrangement¹⁴) helps us to grasp the dimension of change, because it allows us to investigate the multiplicity of levels and practices, lasting dispositions that shape attitudes, values, visions, actions - in a word, the Aristotelian *héxis* of people (way of being, behavior, disposition).

The imagination is an important part of the *héxis*, as it manufactures and stimulates actions, visions and styles. The imagination has undergone a transformative evolution in recent months and some changes persist for now, despite the return to normality.

3.2 *Changes in symbols of success*

A first area of observation is represented by symbols of success. In February 2020, the rankings of status symbols were led by being a cultured person (38%), followed by the possibility of managing your own time (34%), the possibility of sending children to international schools or associating with intellectuals or artists (both at 18%). In fourth place was going on holiday to exotic places (17%), followed by remaining young and going to fancy restaurants (16%). In sixth place was having a beautiful physique, having many followers on social media and attending parties of the *beau monde* (all at 14%).

The rankings of success symbols underwent some transformations during the full lockdown in April 2020. Managing your own time had jumped to first place (from 34% to 46%), switching places with being a cultured person (41%, still 3% higher compared to the past). In third place was remaining young (14%, despite losing 2% compared to February). All other areas of status had suffered some sort of backlash, dropping in importance: sending children to international schools had gone from third to sixth place, losing half of its symbolic value (from 18% to 9%); associating with intellectuals and artists had dropped from 18% to 12%; going on holiday to exotic places had dropped to fifth place and gone from 18% to 10%; having a beautiful physique had fallen from 14% to 8%, while going to fancy restaurants experienced a meltdown (from 16% to 6%). Finally, attending parties of the *beau monde* and having many followers on social media lost half of their value (from 14% to 7%).

¹⁴ Fr. Bourdieu, *Lezione sulla lezione, Collège de France*, Marietti, Bologna 1991; See also *Meditazioni pascaliane*, il Mulino, Bologna 1997.

In June 2020, at the end of the hundred days of lockdown, the image partially consolidated, showing some first reverse movements. Still in first place is the theme of managing your own time (although it drops from 46% to 43%), followed by being a cultured person (41%). Still in third place (although slowing to 12%) is remaining young, while sending children to international schools (from 9% to 11%) goes back up. Everything else remains below the 10% quota.

The country that emerges from the acute phase of the pandemic appears to be a folded and fragile reality, in search of meaning and of greater community affection. For the moment, the classic status factors fail to regain appeal, in part because reality remains characterized by a strong sense of uncertainty and ostentation, as we have observed in previous paragraphs. At least in this first phase, it is replaced by a more committed narrative, by the increased valorization of simplicity, by assigning a lower importance to portray a self-image on the stage of life. For the moment, the pandemic has slowed down – or at least shifted to other areas – the immense need for admiration¹⁵, recognition, self-value, likes and applause which had characterized our society over the past few years.

3.3 *Evolution in the dimension of successful professions*

The symbolic framework can be scanned by highlighting another parameter: professions which are considered to be successful and are able to provide a distinctive status. In this case it is also useful to compare the situation to the period immediately preceding Covid-19.

In February 2020, the top successful professions were: entrepreneurs and managers (both at 29%). They were followed by “a job that allows you to travel the world” (27%) and working on new technologies (23%). In fifth place were intellectuals (19%), followed by holding multiple degrees (17%) and surgeons (15%).

With the lockdown of April 2020, the image of status professions changed. In first place was working on new technologies (from 23% to 34%), followed by entrepreneurs (dropping from 29% to 25%). In third place are craftsmen who create their own things (from 13% to 24%), while volunteers rank fourth (from 10% to 19%). In fifth place we find environmental work (which doubles and rises from 9% to 18%) and having a job that allows for world travel (27 to 18%). Managers plummet to sixth place, dropping from 29% to 17%, equaling the figure of intellectuals.

¹⁵ G. Pietropolli Charmet, *The unbearable need for admiration*, Laterza, Bari-Rome 2018.

At the end of the lockdown in June, the image underwent was partially restored by yet another transformation. Volunteers slightly lose their appeal (from 19% to 14%), as do craftsmen who create their own things (from 24% to 18%). Managers are back on the rise, ranking third (from 17% to 24%); working on new technologies is still at the top (although it loses 4% of its appeal, dropping from 34% to 30%) and entrepreneurs slightly recover, rising from 25% to 28% and remaining in second place. Environmental workers and intellectuals are at 16%, while having a job that allows you to travel the world is back in fourth position (19%).

When looking at professions that confer status, the change generated by the lockdown has partly returned to normal. The new role that was taken on by professions related to new technologies remains, while the value of committing to volunteer work and searching for authenticity through artisanal skills and creating your own products is still in the picture.

3.4 *The incomplete transformation. The path of return after Covid?*

The dynamics of the imagination bring to light the transformations that have taken place in the habitus of Italians. We are faced with an incomplete transformation, in which the various aspects of status are slowly returning through the (probably temporary) loss of value of some symbols of success, while maintaining some elements of diversity.

The Italians coming out of lockdown are not the same as before. The tornado has passed and has left its scars. But they are not a new entity either, nor a dimension that is different from the past. Some aspects have changed: the changes will not be turned around easily, and in all probability, there will be no return to the past. There will instead be a new dimension of normality.

The 'magma of meanings' is composite, with tipping points and new dimensions. The country felt the blow, and society retreated like the sea before a tsunami. The real storm, the economic storm, if it were to happen, could be the process that affects and outlines a real transformation in terms of the 'orientation- identification' of people. For now, we can safely assume that Italy will not return to the exact state it was in before. The country is folded and looking for a new dimension that combines more protection and possibility, stability and freedom, lightness and security, community and individualism, ethics and the need for admiration. Covid and the economic framework that is emerging from it, with its wake of uncertainty and anxiety, vulnerability and fragility, has redesigned in Italians (at least momentarily) the relationship between reality and people's sense of

omnipotence, between empathy and exhibitionism, between the need for admiration and superficiality, between ambition and self-design, between us and the exploitation of the other. Time will tell what will become of us, for today we are in a transition, waiting for events which we do not yet know if we will be able to master.

In this context, one aspect seems decidedly called into question in contemporary Western culture: that certainty of power and invulnerability that Yuval Noah Harari talks about in his *Homo Deus. Breve storia del futuro*: “At the beginning of the 21st century, the average human is more likely to die from binging at McDonald’s than from drought, the Ebola virus or an al-Qaida attack. [...] in the fight against natural disasters such as AIDS and Ebola, the scale of power is tipping in favor of humanity. [...] The time when we were terrified by and defenseless against the epidemics raging on our planet is over”¹⁶. When we read them today, these words have an almost surreal tone to them.

4. The narrative ecosystem of the middle class after the lockdown

When we look at the changes in the narrative ecosystem of the middle class after the lockdown, we can observe the symbolic dimensions of the imagination of this social segment, and how they relate to and differ from the representations of the other classes.

The analysis will focus on four areas: factors that are needed to feel good, symbols of success, status professions, and fears.

4.1 *Factors needed to feel good*

The elements that characterize the animus of the middle class and distinguish it from other social segments can be summarized in ten points¹⁷:

1. a lesser grip on the sense of duty;
2. a greater importance of relational aspects such as friendship and harmony;
3. a certain attention to culture;
4. the search for a dynamic and vital life;
5. a greater importance of the issue of security;

¹⁶ Y.N. Harari, *Homo deus. Breve storia del futuro*, Bompiani, Milan 2018.

¹⁷The question that was asked: “For you and for your life, what are the most important aspects that are needed to feel good today? (No more than 5 preferences)”.

6. the greater weight of the concept of strength;
7. a bigger drive towards being an open person;
8. a lower propensity for lightness as an end in itself;
9. a non-particular propensity for spirituality and faith;
10. the search for beauty, elegance and admiration are linked to personalities who have a high level of interest in themselves.

If we compare the animus that is present in the middle class with that of other social groups, we discover some significant differences.

In the middle class, we find three elements at the top of the pyramid of factors that are needed to feel good, all at 44%: the sense of duty, feeling balanced, and having good friends. In the middle class, there is a lower propensity for a sense of duty compared to the other segments (in the working class it goes up to 53% and in the lower middle class it reaches 50%).

On the second rung of the middle class scale we encounter two other items (both at 33%): always being in a good physical shape, and being a person of culture. Although the culture boost in the middle class is higher than the national average, it is still 4% lower than in the working class.

The elements that most characterize the middle class are: being open (31% compared to 23% in the working class), being strong and confident (29% compared to 25% in the lower middle class), being vital/dynamic (28% compared to 17% in the working class).

Overall, the middle class appears a little less interested in spirituality than the national average (10% of the middle class compared to 19% in the lower middle class) and in existential lightness in general (20% in the lower class compared to 15% in the middle class). Owning a lot of money, on the other hand, is a desire inherent to the most distressed classes: in the working class it comes in at 16% and in the lower class it stands at 28%, while in the middle class it only reaches 10%.

Table 1 – Gli aspetti importanti per stare bene oggi



Fonte: SWG 2020.

4.2 The habitus of the middle class: the symbols of success

Symbols are manipulated and complex contraptions, through which people build the image of themselves, weave social relationships, identify with and recognize themselves in political identities, develop and feed the exchange of information, generate and receive emotions, anchor their existence and aspirations, categorize reality, place themselves in the community dimension in which they live, and outline themselves in cognitive terms: visceral, pedagogical, performative and moral¹⁸.

Each social segment has its own form of “semantic capitalization” (loading the meaning of a sign) and the analysis of this process allows us to identify the habitus that the different social groups take on, or want to demonstrate.

¹⁸ There are many bibliographies on the role of symbols. The works of P. Ricoeur function as an anchor for the vision proposed by this chapter, *Il simbolo dà a pensare*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2002; E. Cassirer, *Filosofia delle forme simboliche. Il pensiero mitico*, Vol. II, Pgreco, Milan 2015; Z. Bauman, *Consumo, dunque sono*, Laterza, Rome-Bari 2010; Fr. Bourdieu, *Le pouvoir symbolique*, 'Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales', 3, 1977; Fr. Bourdieu, *Per una teoria della pratica con tre studi di etologia cabila*, Raffaello Cortina, Milan 2003; G. Durand, *Le strutture antropologiche dell'immaginario. Introduzione all'archetipologia generale*, Dedalo Bari 1972; N. Elias, *Teoria dei simboli*, il Mulino, Bologna 1998; R. Esposito, *Le persone e le cose*, Einaudi, Turin 2014; T. A. Sebeok, *Segni. Una introduzione alla semiotica*, Carocci, Rome 2003.

Symbols of success¹⁹ for the middle class are: time management; possession of culture; the possibility of sending children to international schools; associating with artists or cultural figures; going to fancy restaurants and owning a boat.

Traits that are not fully part of the successful narrative discourse of the middle class are: attention to the physical, the search for eternal youth, exotic holidays, and attending TV talk shows.

A profile that broadly and in all careflessness speaks of a proximity research focused on existence in a permanent present, on a form of neo-paganism that, according to Maffessoli, aims to “enjoy what is offered by living together with others in a world which is certainly imperfect but always preferable to nothing”²⁰. The middle class has largely abandoned the desire to establish new social futures, or the infamous ‘retro-worlds’²¹ Nietzsche talks about, and is focused on giving value to the things that “constitute the whole of existence”²² and which generate narrative sense, in order to feel a like a rung on the highest, or most particular and different social ladder.

Managing time, demonstrating distance from others, eating in a refined way, dramatizing one’s own knowledge and that of children, demonstrating the weight and value of one’s own relationships, are the overall traits of the script of existence that a large part of the middle class likes to perform. It is a generic script because, as we will see later, there are different drives and counter-thrusts within the middle class, and multiple narratives and communities of sentiment.

The habitus of the lower middle class is partially distinct. In these social classes we discover the emergence of Baroque and brasilomania elements²³, without prejudice to the need to manage one’s own time and the need to be a cultured person (which unites the impulses of this segment with those of the middle class). In these social segments, physical performance, holidays to exotic places, as well as eternal youth take on value. The desire to attend TV talk shows thrives, as well as having many followers

¹⁹ The question that was asked: “Thinking about the symbols of success, which ones make the most sense to you today? (4 possible answers)”.

²⁰ M. Maffessoli, *Icone d’oggi*, Sellerio Palermo 2009.

²¹ F. Nietzsche, *Così parlò Zarathustra. Un libro per tutti e per nessuno*, Adelphi, Milan 1986.

²² M. Maffessoli, *Icone d’oggi*, cit.

²³ Ibidem.

fessions are: being an entrepreneur (32%), a manager (28%), working on new technologies (25%).

In the working class, the top professions are related to environmental care (37%) and new technologies (32%). In the lower middle-class, there is an interest for craftsmen who create their own products (24%). In the lower class, having a job that allows you to travel the world (45%) is the most important. The imagination of the lower class is also marked by the aspiration to be a TV personality (24%), working in a job with social commitment (26%), working with new technologies (33%) and being a craftsman who creates their own products (30%).

In the imagination of the middle class, the following professions are not very attractive because they do not confer the desired status: being on TV (6%) and being a volunteer (11%). The bottom of the ranking of professions coveted by the middle class also demonstrates the evolution that has taken place in recent years: there is the infamous “job at the bank” (2%) and being an influencer (5%). Even the idea of becoming a surgeon is not very attractive (11%).

The narrative ecosystem of the middle class, the composite constellation of its imagination, is characterized by Maffessoli as “being owned by the objects you own, [from] giving weight to the aesthetic sense of things, [from] participating in the multiple hypes (sports, musical, religious or political) that mark social life”²⁶.

The photography of the emotional impulses of the middle class shows the structural transformation that has taken place in this social segment, which no longer embodies the traits of the middle class (in which white-collar values are swarming), giving way to a widespread neo-entrepreneurial dimension and the attractive and cool appearance of new technological professions. Our middle class is increasingly aspirational, and the boundaries between what is private and what is public are being torn down; within it have settled the values of an aesthetic nomadism, the search for distinctiveness, uniqueness, commonality in diversity and authenticity (plural and ever-changing).

The self-representation expressed by members who consider themselves part of the middle class is less and less unique; less and less anchored to a merely material status and more and more a patchwork of nebulae “acquired here and there”, in which “they try to co-exist, muddling through, everything and the opposite of everything”²⁷.

²⁶ M. Maffessoli, *Icone d'oggi*, cit.

²⁷ Ibidem.

Table 3 – Le professioni status, per il ceto medio



Fonte: SWG 2020.

4.4 Fears

The main apprehensions²⁸ that concern the members of the middle class are: the fear that something will happen to their loved ones (40%, similar to an average of 39%) and the fear of getting sick (38%, comparable to an average of 37%). One aspect on which the middle class shows greater concern than the average is suffering from aggression (12% compared to an average of 7%). The other fear-related issues are more or less in line with the average population: not being up to it, getting older, being alone (all around 13-15%). The events that cause worries less than average are: becoming poor (18%, which is 5% below the average) and being depressed (9%, which is 4% below the average).

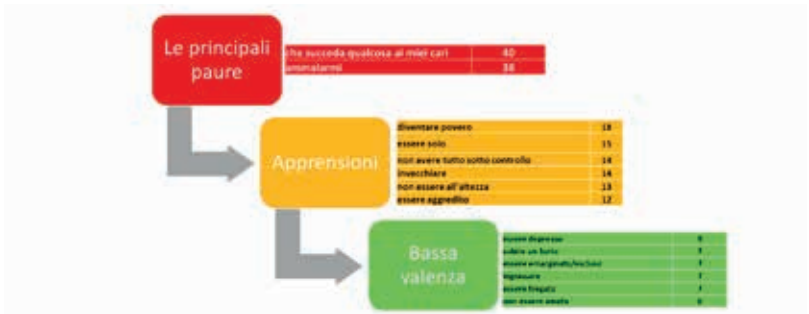
While poverty does not concern a large part of the middle class, it is almost at the top in the working class (34%, +11% compared to the average and even + 16% compared to the middle class). In the working class, security and worries about social capital are all above average: being alone (18%, which is +4% compared to the average), being depressed (15%, +2%), being the victim of theft (13%, +4%), being marginalized/excluded (14%, + 5%), being duped (12%, +4%).

Finally, in the lower class, the fear of becoming poor skyrockets (56%, twice as high as the average) and there is also a fear of aging (29%, which

²⁸The question that was asked: "What are the biggest fears you are feeling at the moment? (3 possible answers)".

is + 14% compared to the average). In this social segment, the fear of becoming poor is higher than both the concern that something will happen to your loved ones (33%), and the fear of getting sick (37%).

Table 4 – Le paure del ceto medio



Fonte: swg 2020.

5. The middle classes: the communities that constitute the archipelago

Italian society is an archipelago, a composite magma, articulated, diversified, with different opposing impulses. As Bagnasco points out, it is necessary to speak of “the middle classes, in the plural, in order to identify different positions analytically”²⁹ and to grasp the dynamics of sense, belonging, vision of society and politics that unfold and blend together in this vast complex of social “islands”.

Over the past few decades, the middle class has undergone a profound transformational process in terms of structure and identity. The path of collapse and scarring that from the beginning of the new century until today has led to a decrease in the middle class (in its sense of a segment of society with a stable and quiet economic condition) has generated a new and declassified group: the lower middle class, in which people who have lost status and economic tranquility have converged with new precarious families, who live in a condition undermined by work, life and instability of status.

When analyzing and breaking down the different dimensions of the middle class, we need to consider all those that can be related to this seg-

²⁹ A. Bagnasco, *Il ceto medio dopo il capitalismo organizzato*, cit.

ment, including not only the 33% who feel a part of the middle class and place themselves in it, but also both the wealthiest segments (5.5% of the upper middle class), and the fringes of the lower middle class (46%). In this way, a vast analytical field was constructed (which excludes 0.5% of the upper population, 11% of the working population and 4% of the lower population), adding up to 84.5% of the population. It was considered a useful choice to collect all the nuances that articulate the drives of both the stable segments, as well as the uncertain and fragile ones that maintain aspirations to join the middle class.

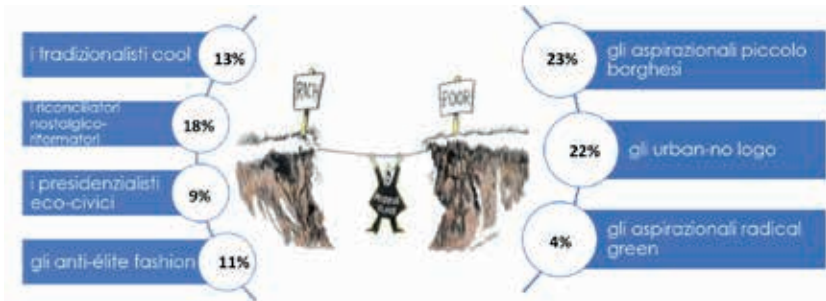
The choice has made it possible to scan the different clans (communities of sentiment) that exist in Italian society and to bring to light attitudes and behaviors, value visions, existential and life choices, aspirations and political dimensions, which permeate our society and which, in various ways, aspire to the middle class.

The vast analytical field allows us to observe the complexity of Italian transformations and to identify that the middle class, through its drives and aspirations, is not an identity limited to 33% (the figure of people identifying themselves as middle class today), but a wider entity composed of multiple communities of sentiment which articulate and differentiate themselves as a result of values, empathies and self-narrative, and by generating aspirations, trends, behaviors, systems of choices, and a search for affinities which, in various ways, all converge into a dimension of *cetomedizzazione* of people's way of being.

Through this analytical process, we can identify seven communities of sentiment:

1. the aspirational small bourgeoisie (23%);
2. cool traditionalists (13%);
3. nostalgic-reformist reconcilers (18%);
4. eco-civic presidentialists (9%);
5. fashion anti-elites (11%);
6. urban-no logos (22%);
7. radical green aspirationalists (4%).

Each community has an individual structural profile, value imprinting, storytelling and narrative ecosystem that characterizes it, but each of them also leans towards a political dimension.

Table 5 – *I molteplici ceti medi*

Fonte: SWG 2020.

6. The community of small bourgeoisie aspirationalists

This is the largest community (23%). It is mostly composed of people from the lower and middle class, who aspire to the leisure and lifestyles of what they believe is the existential heritage of the rich. It is the generation of forty-year-olds who are technologically smart and looking for admiration and success. Its members are wrapped in the need for rise and grandeur. Their aspiration is to have great means. They try to keep up and integrate by purchasing status products, and by frequenting places they consider to be “in”. Holidays to exotic places, attention to their body, the value of friendship, and the search for a personal path towards being recognized and admired are the shared traits of this community. Vanity, comfort and appearance before all else are the existential musts of a group in which success is a social fact that must be pursued and... flaunted.

6.1 *The structural dimension*

In this community we discover a majority of women (54%) and a greater presence of residents in the Northeast (23%, which is +4 compared to the average). From a generational point of view, this clan is most populated by people of “Generation X” - those born between 1965 and 1980 (38% compared to an average of 29%), while the generation of “Baby boomers” - those born between 1946 and 1964 - appears to be underrepresented, (27% against an average of 36%).

The number of people that belong to this tribe and who live in small and medium-sized towns is a little over the average (27% compared to 21%). The same is true for carrying out administrative work (29% compared to 23%). From a technological and social media point of view, this is a fairly smart clan. They own accessories that make them feel part of the elite, such as cleaning robots (20% compared to the average of 15%), smart watches (30% compared to the average of 19%), and web TV (54% compared to the average of 48%). They love their social media. They are active on Twitter (23% compared to the average of 18%), and they love YouTube (55% compared to the average of 45%) and Instagram (53% compared to the average of 42%). Some are interested in Snapchat (9% compared to the average of 4%).

Socially, they land between the middle class and the lower middle class, although the latter comprises the biggest segment (57%). While a share of this clan has a monthly income of around €2,000, a sixth of the community has difficulties making ends meet at the end of the month (15% compared to the average of 12%). 36% Reported that their economic situation had deteriorated in the last year, while 33% considered it static with negative traits.

6.2 *The value dimension*

The value profile of the small bourgeoisie aspirationalists focuses on the themes of work (41%), friendship (37%) and environmental protection (25%). Their interest in the role of honesty (−10%), and the values of freedom (−10%) and tolerance (−4%) are all below the average. First and foremost, their work leads to personal fulfilment (58% compared to the average of 50%) and broadening knowledge. Members of this community are very distrusting of Europe (70% compared to the average of 58%), they gladly embrace anti-European (43%) and anti-global (56%) stances. For them, taxes are a vexatious tool in the hands of the State (36% compared to the average of 26%): they are attracted by the proposal of “Italians first” (+2% compared to the average) and regional federalism (+8% compared to the average). They are not particularly inspired by mutualist proposals (−3% compared to the average).

6.3 *Self-storytelling and the narrative ecosystem*

The people who are part of the small bourgeoisie aspirationalists identify themselves as refined (+7% compared to the average), modern

(+14%), leisure lovers (+4%), impulsive (+6%), playful (+11%) and brand lovers (+6%).

The economic condition of the majority of these clan members causes a large proportion of people to save money (65%).

From a consumption point of view, the members of this community frequently visit hypermarkets (70%) and discount stores (51%), while they like to shop for clothes and accessories in shopping malls (57%).

The aspects that are necessary for a good life are: being a cultured person, living lightly, owning a lot of money and being admired (in all four areas, the members of this clan show a +4% compared to the average).

The symbols of success are represented by: going on holiday to exotic places (+4% compared to the average), having a beautiful physique (+3%), participating in TV shows (+5%), having many followers on social media (+11%), eating in fancy restaurants (+10%), attending parties of the *beau monde* (+5%), owning a boat (+3%) and undergoing plastic surgery (+3%).

The top professions that confer status are: entrepreneur (+4% compared to the average), manager (+5%), craftsman (+7%), owning a start-up (+13%) and being involved in fashion (+3%).

The fears of the members of this community are: not having everything under control (+5% compared to the average), being a victim of theft (+5%) and being duped (+7%).

6.4 *The political dimension*

As in all communities, political drives and visions are not homogeneous. There are some trends, but in each group, there are various experiences, impulses and different political orientations.

Overall, the small bourgeoisie aspirationalists aspire to separate moral Catholic politics (46%). They believe the Magistracy tends to target politicians of certain parties (60%) and they experience the national reality as undemocratic (57%). They prefer a leader who is able to make decisions (+4% compared to the average) and just under a sixth of the members of this community refer to themselves as conservative (11%, which is + 5% compared to the average).

The political identity is composite, but in this clan, we find some over-represented traits: being moderate (+4% compared to the average), "Italians first" (+3%), being liberal (+2%), being anti-communist (+6%), being Catholic and liberal (+2%).

In terms of voting, we notice a strongly abstentionist clan (43%), the political orientation rewards Berlusconi as well as Salvini and Meloni. This clan he also shows a +Europa stance (+5% compared to the average), while there are neither Renzi nor left-wing voters. 27% Vote for Lega, 12% for Forza Italia and 11% for Fdi. At 16%, the M5s has more votes than the Pd, which stops at 12%.

7. The community of cool traditionalists

The cool traditionalists are at 13%. They tend to be unattracted to all that is culture, they do not read books, they are interested in elegance, and in owning unique and authentic things and products.

They are attentive to fashion, and attracted by trendy brands that narrate and express their status. They feel different and want to be unique and distinguished from others. For them, work is just a way earn a salary. They are annoyed by immigrants and not very sensitive to anti-racist discourses.

Within this segment of the middle class, there is support for Lega and Grillo, but the majority is estranged from and disinterested in politics, with a large share of people being undecided. They don't like post-fascist Amarcords, but the clan contains a considerable share of people who feel right-wing and patriotic.

After a hundred years, Thorstein Veblen's axiom seems to return³⁰, which states that the wealthy class of the late nineteenth century was looking for flashy consumption to differentiate itself from the small bourgeoisie and the mass plebs. At a time when the democratization of luxury, outlets and discounters has enabled large sections of the population to access symbols and big brands, this part of the elite seeks refuge in authentic consumption, traditions, sophisticated stories, an obsessive attention to detail, and unique and exclusive objects in order to stand out.

7.1 *The structural dimension*

Cool traditionalists are primarily found in the Northwest (36% compared to the average of 27%) and have a large representation of women (56%). Standing out among them are the "Generation X" (35%) and the "Millennials" (30%), but there is also a decent presence of "Generation

³⁰ T. Veblen, *La teoria della classe agiata*, Einaudi, Turin 2007.

Z" (12%). They particularly live in small and medium-sized towns (+5% compared to the average) and in medium-large towns (40%), while only few live in metropolitan cities.

From an income point of view, salaries above €4,000 per month are 5% above the average. They are not book readers (20% say they didn't read a single book throughout the year, compared to the average of 13%), but they are very fond of status symbols: iPads (64%), connected home systems (23% compared to the average of 17%), voice assistants (+14% compared to the average) and cars with an automatic transmission (+11% compared to the average).

Cool traditionalists have a quiet economic condition (51%) and 49% are fully part of the middle class. The income condition of this community remained stable for 69% and only 17% reported a loss of status. The relative majority of cool traditionalists feels included (40%), but for 64% the social and relational capital is declining. They are attracted by social media: Instagram (+13% compared to the average), Facebook (+10% compared to the average) and Twitter (+5%).

7.2 *The value dimension*

Cool traditionalists put less weight on the value of work (−6% compared to the average, and for 45% it is just a way to earn a salary), while at the same time they are particularly sensitive to the themes of freedom (+10% compared to the average), defense of Italians (+7% compared to the average) and patriotism (+3%). Dying is not on their radar (4%), while 45% are annoyed by the presence of migrants. In this elitist segment, anti-caste drives are lower than the average (−6%), as are anti-European drives (−4%). There is also a large share of people who are behind Europe (+11%).

43% Of this clan believes racist attitudes are justified, and there is an over-representation of those who believe it should be allowed to defend themselves by any means, even at the risk of killing a person (+7% compared to the average). For the majority of cool traditionalists, globalization has brought benefits for everyone (+18% compared to the average), while taxes are a vexatious tool of the state (+10% on average). The strong numbers for "Italians first" (60%), the defense of the role of the State (+5% compared to the average) and a certain attention to mutualism (62%) complete their value framework.

7.3 *Self-storytelling and the narrative ecosystem*

Cool traditionalists are modernists (66%), interested in quality (63%), omnivores (56%), brand lovers (54%), they enjoy the good life (44%), are refined (38%), but also impulsive (32%). They shop in hypermarkets (96%) and shopping centers (57%). A third prefer single-brand stores (+11% compared to the average) and frequent the big brand boutiques (almost three times the average).

To feel good, they need three things: to be successful (+4% compared to the average), to feel beautiful and elegant (+7% compared to the average), to own unique things (three times the average). Members of this clan are rather lazy subjects; they show little interest in fitness (half of the average) and are not attracted by a sense of duty (−14% compared to the average).

Their symbols of success are: going on holiday to exotic places (twice the average) and sending children to international schools (16%). They are not part of the pantheon of imagination: being a cultured person (−11% compared to the average) and having a beautiful physique (−8%). As for successful professions, this community has the largest number of people linked to the old identity of the middle class, with professions such as working at a bank (more than double the average).

The fears that concern them are: the health of loved ones (+5% compared to the average), aging (+9%), not being able to keep up (+5%), loneliness (+12%), depression (+4%) and being assaulted (+4%).

7.4 *The political dimension*

Cool traditionalists are politically linked to the democratic history of our country. They are opposed to presidentialism (twice the average) and want a leader who is mainly innovative (+6% compared to the average) and a mediator (+4%).

The political identity of cool traditionalists is characterized by two opposing spirits: on the one hand there are anti-fascist (+6%) and moderate impulses (+3%); on the other hand, there is a right-wing impulse (+3%).

This clan has 10% more politically undecided people compared to the average. One share vote for Lega and another equivalent segment for Cinquestelle. In electoral terms, 22% vote for the parties of Grillo and Di Maio, while 29% opt for Salvini or Meloni. This clan has the highest number of voters for Toti's "Cambiamo" movement and is among the least interested in Renzi's "Italia Viva".

8. The nostalgic-reformist reconciler community

They represent 18% and are a community with two spirits: a reconciling spirit, with a moderate, welcoming tone of openness, dialogue, and tolerance. Their spirit tries to overcome detachment and separation from others, and the flame of moral outrage burns within it.

The other spirit is classic-nostalgic, in which family moderatism and the need for an anchor point to traditional and Catholic values pushes towards an opposite dimension: of protecting Italians, of unavailability towards others, and of regional federalism.

Glued together by the will to protect and the fear of becoming poor, these two spirits seek answers which are opposed to their own impulses. On the one hand, a minority is attracted to the fairy-tale of a decision-making leader who with his grip can solve the problems that trouble a part of this clan; on the other hand, part of this community seeks answers to their anxieties in an innovative figure: a healing leader who is capable of mediating between the different positions. We are faced with a share of the moderate urban bourgeoisie that is divided between the democrats and Salvini: between a liberal vision of society and a traditional drive of defending the Italians and the classes.

8.1 *The structural dimension*

The majority of members of this community are men (56%), and it is the segment with the fewest women and youngsters.

From a generational point of view, the majority segment is comprised of 'baby boomers' (64%), and a third of this clan lives in metropolitan cities (+6% compared to the average). Professionally, the community is varied but has a peculiar presence of pensioners (39%, + 20% compared to the average) and professionals (+4% compared to the average). This bourgeois and economically quiet clan is 11% above the average when it comes to subjects with an average income between €2,000 and €4,000.

From a social structure point of view, the community contains a large amount of people who are pure middle class (+7% compared to the average) and 49% report a quiet economic condition. However, at the same time there is a share (43%) of individuals who are part of the lower middle class and who experience difficulties in economically managing their existence.

They are avid book readers (7% more than the average, when looking at people who read at least 7 books a year) and newspaper readers (39%

read the newspaper every day). Members of this segment are relatively disinterested in social media.

8.2 *The value dimension*

The value pantheon of nostalgic-reformist reconcilers is clearly traditional: family comes first (71%), then honesty (62%), respect (53%), work (52%), and freedom (45%).

Traits lower than the average are: generosity (half compared to the average) and "Italians first" (half the average), while the value issues of tolerance (+9%), defending life (+4%) and defending traditions (+3%) are more significant compared to the average.

For the members of this clan, work is an absolute tool of personal realization (73%) and an opportunity to raise the economic standard of living (33%). In this community, the dislike of immigrants is lower than the average (−4%), while anti-elite drives are more marked (+5%). Nostalgic-reformists are Europeanists (+13%) and pro-Europe (60%); they are also environmentalists (+5% compared to the average), anti-racists (69%), and markedly no-global (54%). For them, taxes are an instrument of equity (+8% compared to the average) and altruism is a particularly remarkable value (+4%). They are federalists and want more power for the regions (+8% compared to the average), but they are less sensitive to both the theme of 'Italians first' (although still at 48%), and to mutualist pressures (−4%).

8.3 *Self-storytelling and the narrative ecosystem*

The profile of self-storytelling consists of traits of health (73%), the attention to choosing things (70%) and the search for quality products (65%). A good share of this segment defines itself as being committed (70%), willing to experiment (57%), shopping for brands (59%) and attracted by classic taste (48%).

Traditional shops (75%) are preferred for purchases, while multi-brand stores (61%), outlets (32%) and single-brand stores are preferred for clothing and accessories. The elements that contribute to feeling good are friends (+19% compared to the average), the ability to always remain in physical shape (twice the average) and having a strong sense of duty (+13% compared to the average). Being balanced (+10%), open (+8%) and dynamic (+8%) outlines this clan's *weltanschauung*, with a greater attention to the theme of spirituality (+4% compared to the average).

Success symbols are linked to the management of your own time (68%) and being a cultured person (46%). Being on TV is one of the aspects that interests this clan the least (4%), while success in your job is about being an entrepreneur (+3% compared to the average), being allowed to travel the world (+6%), working with new technologies (+10%), and being a craftsman creating your own products (8%). Professions that attract minority shares of this clan are: being an artist (+5% compared to the average), being a surgeon (+6%), being a volunteer (+4%).

8.4 *The political dimension*

Nostalgic-reformist reconcilers are a community that is politically divided in two spirits: a moderate-nostalgic spirit and a reformist-reconciling spirit.

78% Of people belonging to this clan have moderate drives and, while claiming the secularity of the state, the Catholic dimension crosses this segment and the value of Catholic culture and morality is emphasized (11% more than the average). For 31% of people, the Magistracy is an impartial structure (+7% compared to the average), while entrepreneurs are perceived as vultures who are only interested in making more and more money (45%).

The main fears that worry this segment are becoming poor (+8% compared to the average), getting sick (23% compared to the average), or something happening to their family members (+17%).

The two spirits of this community clearly emerge when looking at the identity of their preferred leader: on the one hand, he must be an innovator (69%) and a mediator (44%); on the other, he must have firm decision-making (45%) and moralistic (18%) traits.

From an overall point of view, the share of individuals who vote (31% abstain) is divided into two spirits: the majority is characterized by impulses that are progressive (+8% compared to the average), moderate (+4%), reformist (+5%) and environmental (+2%). The other spirit is characterized by minority, anti-tax (+3%), nationalist (+2%) and anti-European (+3%) tendencies. As a result, 23% of this community votes for Lega and 11% for Fdi, while 32% opt for the democratic party; 12% is divided between Italia Viva and Azione di Calenda. The rest is 'sprinkled' across the other parties.

9. The eco-civic presidentialist community

At 9%, they represent a community of adults who tend to be well-off, consisting of pensioners and 'baby boomers' and are considered the extension of the 19th century middle class. Their value arch is classic, with family, honesty and freedom at its core, while their aspirational horizon is linked to the cultural dimension and is far away from contemporary admiring sirens. Within it are different political spirits that are largely supported by nineteenth-century cultures. They are oriented mainly towards the center-right, with Christian democrat spirits, anti-fascist social democratic spirits and civic-municipalist spirits.

9.1 *The structural dimension*

This community is composed of a female majority (55%), and somewhat scattered throughout the country, although we find slightly deeper traces of it in the Northwest (+3% compared to the average). It is an adult-dominated group (74% 'baby boomers' and 15% 'Silent'³¹), which is present mainly in small towns and villages (+6% compared to the average). The majority of professions is represented by pensioners (50%) and housewives (14%), with a decent income (over €2,000 per month).

They are avid book readers (20% read a minimum of seven books a year) and newspaper readers (8% more than the average). They are a stable and economically quiet social segment (60%). They are the traditional middle class (48% place themselves in this social segment, compared to an average of 33%) and have suffered little from the difficult events in recent years (78% report their economic condition has remained intact). Mostly due to their age, they are not very accustomed to or interested in technology. Only a part of them is fascinated by the iPad (+10% compared to the average).

9.2 *The value dimension*

Honesty (80%), family (73%) and freedom (53%) constitute the value triangle that unites this community. They are not very interested in the themes of love (−12% compared to the average) and friendship (−13%), but are sensitive to the environment (+9% compared to the average) and

³¹ That is, those born before 1946.

to faith (+4%). To them, work is a tool for personal fulfilment (62%) and an opportunity to raise their standards of living (+12% compared to the average).

Three spirits coexist in this community:

1. the one driven by impulses of anti-immigration (36%), safety (55%) and primatism (55%);
2. the one driven by liberal-municipalist traditions, in which low confidence in the EU (60%), support for local initiatives (53% is against globalization), defending the euro (69%) and the push for municipal federalism (29%) come together;
3. the one that is environmental and civic, with 96% being interventionist about the climate, 32% considering paying taxes a form of civic duty, 93% being sensitive to the call for solidarity and 90% paying attention to the value of altruism.

9.3 *Self-storytelling and the narrative ecosystem*

Eco-civic presidentialists have a vision that is calibrated on simplicity (74%), health (69%), reflexivity (89%) and commitment (83%). They are attracted by the classic style (60%), they are habitual people (57%), but also omnivores (56%). For their food purchases they prefer supermarkets (76%) and hypermarkets, while for clothing they turn to shopping malls (59%) or multi-brand stores (70%).

In order to feel good, indispensable elements are a sense of duty (93%), balance (98%), a good dose of culture (55%) and to a lesser extent, spirituality (19%). The trait that marks and unifies this segment is the impatience towards those who compromise on values and important themes (+16% compared to the average).

Success symbols for this community are culture (+12% compared to the average) and the possibility to manage your own time (+14%), while going to the gym (6%) exotic travel destinations (8%) are not a match. The professions that confer status are classic entrepreneurship (5% more than the average) and being a surgeon (+7%), while the profile of a manager is much less attractive (–6% on average). However, some new professions are also drivers of success: working with new technologies (+8% compared to the average), being a craftsman who creates his own products (+16%), and dealing with green economy (+5%).

This community pays attention to the family (with 82% expressing something happening to their loved ones as their main concern) and fears are characterized by the age of its members, showing anxiety about issues

such as diseases (74%), aging (+5% compared to the average), loneliness (+8%) and aggression (+5%).

9.4 *The political dimension*

The threefold value dimension of this community also reverberates on the political front. While the need for a moderate political vision is the common feature of almost all members (81%), the distinct push of the majority is towards a democracy with a primarily presidential (67%) and municipal trait (35% want a greater role for the municipalities, compared to 27% who are regionalist). Their vision is also characterized by a repeated hostility towards the Magistracy (60% believes it targets politicians of certain parties).

Other minority spirits also live within the eco-civic presidentialists. Their reflective spirit warns about greedy entrepreneurs (+4% compared to the average) and would like a leader who is innovative (+7% compared to the average) and moralizing (+16% compared to the average); the municipal and liberal spirit covets a leader who is a mediator (+10% compared to the average) and a civic-federalist. However, the majority of this clan aspires to a decision-making leader (+15% compared to the average) who defends Italians (+13%).

This community is in search of protection, stability, protection and moderation, but freedom and a sense of justice. It frays into three different political and electoral dimensions. In this middle-class par excellence, there are four political spirits, spread across as many different drives of voting:

1. The 'Italians first' (twice the average) and Lega (more than twice the average) drives;
2. the anti-caste (twice the average) and anti-political drives (+3%);
3. anti-fascist (+6%) and social democratic drives (+8% on average);
4. moderate (+5%) and Christian democratic drives (twice the average).

This community is mainly oriented in the center-right (particularly dividing its consensus between Lega and Fdi), but has a third of its members oriented towards the center-left who opt for the Pd. 49% Vote for Lega, Fdi and Forza Italia, while 7% choose to vote for the greens (this is the clan with the largest share of environmental votes) and 29% for the Pd. The M5s captures few votes in this clan (7%), as well as the forces to the left of the Pd, while another 7% are spread between Calenda and Renzi.

10. The community of the fashion anti-elites

This community represents 11% and is composed of young people, with a wide representation of members residing in the South and the Islands, and is characterized by a threefold spirit: fashion, revolutionary anti-caste, ambitious and always in search for success and admiration.

They are partly oriented towards M5s, without ignoring a part of the percentage that goes to the left of the Pd. This community aspires to change and seeks a full role in society for itself, with fears of not being up to the task, and not being loved and recognized. The members of this group want fans and followers, to become TV personalities, or to have a profession that gives inner peace, status and the possibility to spend money; they often have to settle, but they are always searching for something new and unique which will render them different, distinctive and authentic.

10.1 *The structural dimension*

This is the community with the largest presence of residents in the South (34%) and in the Islands (15%), with the largest share of 'Generation Z' (30%) and 'Millennials' (41%). Its members live mostly in small towns (26%) and average-sized cities (27%), while only a small number of them reside in metropolitan cities (–8% compared to the average). In this segment we find a large share of young students (+17% compared to the average), professionals and self-employed people with VAT numbers (+11% compared to the average), and teachers (three times the average).

They are Instagram lovers (+15% compared to the average), are fascinated by Tik Tok (three times the average), Snapchat (twice the average) and Pinterest (three times the average). They prefer YouTube (+13 compared to the average), but they are not particularly confident when it comes to Facebook (–19% compared to the average) or LinkedIn (–9%). They are in search of commodities and attracted by the tools and possibilities offered by domotics and home apps (28%), and they aspire to own Web TV (53%).

For nearly half of this community, the economic condition is quiet (47%), and it is a segment that looks to the future with greater hope and optimism (twice the average), and maintains a solid social and relational capital (+22% compared to the average). They are mostly middle-class children, and 56% of individuals (25% more than the average) feel included in today's society.

10.2 *The value dimension*

This community of youngsters is characterized by values that are far away from traditional drives. Their characteristic values are friendship, generosity, defending life (+4% compared to the average), mutualism (+12% compared to the average), and moderation (+6% compared to the average). Less important value issues are family (−13% compared to the average), honesty (−8%), work (−7%), freedom (−11%), faith (two thirds less than the average). The value of environmental protection is not popular (−5%) and members of this community are annoyed by immigrants (+4% compared to the national average) and by the elite (50%). They are partly pro-global (+18% compared to the average), pro-European (+6% compared to the average) and proponents of the state (41%). Conversely, a large share of this clan (44%) it is in favor of leaving the EU, while another part considers it a prerogative to shoot and even kill a thief that enters their house (+6%), in full contrast to the theme of respecting life.

10.3 *Self-storytelling and the narrative ecosystem*

Fashion anti-elites are attracted by big brands (+9% compared to the average) and describe themselves as people who are first and foremost empathetic and impulsive (+15% compared to the average), who enjoy life (+6%) and who have sophisticated tastes (+9%).

In this community, there is an ample amount of people who love single-brand stores (+7%), visit online luxury retailers (twice the average) and buy exclusive garments in boutiques.

It is a social group whose members yearn for success (+12% compared to the average), aspire to own objects that distinguish them from others (+3%) and want to feel (or demonstrate that they are) safe and strong (+7%). Being balanced is not on their horizon (−32%), just as spirituality is quite distant from their universe (−6%). Members of this community like to feel cultured (+8%) and like intellectuals and artists (+9%); there is a low attraction for the sense of duty (−15%), but they aspire to be admired, to have many followers on social media (4% more than the average), to attend TV shows (+11%), and to frequent parties of the *beau monde* (+5%).

For the fashion anti-elites, conferring status is about being an entrepreneur (+9%), having a job that allows them to travel the world (+7%), owning a start-up (+11%) and - on the precipice between future and past - being an influencer or working at the bank (both data are more than double the average). People in this clan are not particularly attracted

to emerging digital professions (–18%), commitment to volunteer work (less than half the average) or to being a craftsman who creates their own products (–11%).

Finally, the apprehensions that drive the choices of this community are that they are not up to the task (+12%), that they do not have everything under control (+10%) and that they are not loved (+9%).

10.4 *The political dimension*

The political traits that characterize this community tend to be three-fold: the aspiration for radical change; the deep secularity of politics and its separation from Catholic morality (+8% compared to the average); distrust and aversion towards the Italian world of business and employers (+8%).

The profile of their preferred leader is that of a revolutionary (+9% compared to the average), while the political identity of this clan is characterized by a dense adversity to the caste (+4%) and by a patriotic-nationalist sense (+4%).

From a voting standpoint, this is a clan with a strong abstentionist fingerprint (42%), which is more oriented towards Cinquestelle (21%) and the radical left (with a figure of 7%, it is the clan with the largest number of voters for this party), while in its belly are almost a third of center-right voters (29%). The share of voters for the Pd amounts to 14%.

11. The community of the urban-no logos

This is one of the largest clan segments (22%) and the one with the largest metropolitan mood. This lower middle-class community is partly composed of ‘millennials’. Its members believe in themselves but are afraid of being alone and that they will not be able to face challenges. They are anti-racist and the majority is anti-fascist. They would like to be pioneers and vanguards, but they often fall back on TV and easy work. Honesty is the first beacon of their values, followed by moderation. They are disinterested in brands and aspire to a dynamic life based on balance and good friendships.

11.1 *The structural dimension*

Urban no logos primarily live in metropolitan cities (30%) or large municipalities (39%). They are slightly more present in central Italy (+4%

compared to the average) and are comprised of a large presence of 'millennials' (+7% compared to the average) and workers (almost double the average), but they also have a fair share of 'Silents' (twice the average).

On average, their monthly income rotates around €2,000. Urban-no logos are tentative and not very passionate book readers (on average they only read a few a year), and they are not even big on newspapers.

This community is divided into two instances of 'do'³²: those who experience economic difficulties (43%) and those who feel comfortable (46%). The majority of members of this clan are part of the lower middle class (69%) and for more than two thirds their social condition remained the same. Urban-no logos are a social group who partly feel excluded from society (+12% compared to the average), while maintaining a good network of social capital (+8% compared to the average).

11.2 *The value dimension*

Honesty (64%), freedom (46%), love (40%), faith (16%) and moderation (14%) are the value assets of this community. There is some saturation towards values such as solidarity (−5% compared to the average) and work (−5%).

Urban-no logos do not have any particular anti-migration drives (−7% compared to the average), they experience work as a tool to earn a salary (+10%) and as a necessity that limits personal life (+3%), while they are more sensitive than average to the theme of the environment (+3%).

Members of this community do not experience the issue of security as pressing (−4%), they are opposed to legitimate defense at all costs (+4%), a strong majority believes that forms of racism are never justified (+12% compared to the average) and they are less sensitive to the call of 'Italians first' (−3%). For urban-no logos, taxes are an instrument of equity (+10%) and altruism is a value that must be rediscovered and strengthened (+4%).

11.3 *Self-storytelling and the narrative ecosystem*

The storytelling that characterizes people in this community runs along the axes of simplicity (73%), habits (59%), and rejection of brands (56%). Food purchases are almost completely made in supermarkets, while

³² Fara: among the Lombards were the parental group that comprised all those who descended from common ancestors.

for clothing their preference goes to outlets (32%) and general online stores (Amazon, Zalando, Tmall, Rakuten - also at 32%).

The essential assets for living well are balance (+7% compared to the average), having good friends (+17%), being strong and confident (+7%) and being dynamic (+6%).

Their symbols of success are anchored in the traits of a dynamic contemporaneity and in search of admiration: having a beautiful physique (+4% compared to the average) and attending TV broadcasts (+4%). On the other hand, the jobs they aspire to are linked to economic success (being an entrepreneur, +3%), knowledge (having multiple degrees, +7%) or public admiration (being a TV personality, +6%).

The fears that worry this clan consist of getting older (+9% compared to the average), anxiousness about the health of loved ones (+5%), the fear that they will not be able to cope with certain situations (+5%), the fear of being alone (+12%), the fear of falling into depression (+4%) and to be assaulted (+4%).

11.4 *The political dimension*

Urban-no logos display a stubborn stance towards presidentialism (50% are against it), and they consider Italian entrepreneurs to be small business owners, small Bonapartes (+5% compared to the average). On the other hand, their ideal leader is innovative (+6%), able to mediate (+4%), and possesses a revolutionary spirit (+2%).

The political identity of this community is characterized by a sense of moderation (+3% compared to the average) and a rejection of all forms of extremism (+6%). There are still divergent drives within this group, but the largest group is those who abstain: 46%. The majority of voters in the remaining 54% is oriented towards the center-left M5s alliance. The primary parties are Grillo and Di Maio (23%), while 30% vote center-left. The remaining 46% opt for a center-right party (and 22% vote for Lega).

12. *The community of the radical green aspirationalists*

This is the aspirational middle class par excellence, but also the smallest community (4%). Its members live in large centers and aspire to wealth and honor, and they are committed and radicalized. They are disgusted by politics (almost two-thirds of them abstain), and they have a vision of the future marked by environmental protection and dynamism. Their ideal

leader must be young, and the political identity (among those who vote) is mostly oriented towards the left. They are individualists in search of admiration, and they consider being an influencer the top-class profession of the future. They are very critical of the Italian business system (which they consider flooded by small business owners), they aspire to a more ethical economy and find themselves attracted by volunteer work and generosity. They are not bothered by the presence of immigrants, they do not feel attracted by 'Italians first', they are anti-racist and pro-European, but disappointed by the EU.

12.1 *The structural dimension*

Members of this community are mostly men (68%) who live in the Northeast (50%) and in the South (30%). This includes primarily 'Generation X' (34%), 'Generation Z' (15%) and 'Millennials' (32%). They live in medium to large centers (51%) and have professions related to administration (32%) and the civil service (45%). Their monthly income revolves around €2,000, they are 'Facebook addicts' (+19% compared to the average), but they also love Twitter (+15%), YouTube (+18%) and Instagram (+25%). The iPad represents a status symbol (+25% compared to the average), but other technological objects are also sought after, such as cleaning robots (+7%), cars with an automatic transmission (+7%), smart watches (+27%) and web TV (+19%).

12.2 *The value dimension*

Environmental protection and the fight against climate change are critical for this community (+16% compared to the average). Other important issues are generosity (+18%), freedom (+5%) and friendship (+25%). Some values such as family (−13%), honesty (−22%) and respect (−9%) are less important.

To this clan, work is an opportunity for personal realization (+17% compared to the average) and a tool to become a person who matters (three times the average). The issue of immigrants is not at the center of their frustrations (−20% compared to the average), just as security is not among their priorities (−12%). They are pro-Europeans (+7% compared to the average) and anti-racists (+14%). Radical green aspirationalists do side against the elite (−19%), but they do not like the EU (−4%). The environment (95%), solidarity (93%), altruism (88%) and mutualism (61%) are high on their agenda. Taxes are an instrument of equity to them (+11%

compared to the average) as well as a civic duty (+8%), while the message “Italians first” does not resonate with them (less than half of the national average).

12.3 *Self-storytelling and the narrative ecosystem*

The narrative script of this community is characterized by the modernist drives (+32% compared to the average), the search for simplicity (+7%), the desire to have fun and enjoy life (+20%). Clarity (+12%), frantic research of brands (+33%), the pursuit of quality (+4%), but also a certain impulsiveness (+8%), complete the personality framework of the members of this clan.

For food purchases, this group prefers hypermarkets (+33% compared to the average) and discount stores (+24%). When shopping for accessories and clothes, they prefer online luxury retailers (e.g., Yoox Net-A-Porter, Matchesfashion.com, Mytheresa.com – three times the average), as well as general online shops (Amazon, Zalando, Tmall, Rakuten), with a rate that is 13% higher than the average. Shopping malls, on the other hand, have a lower-than-average appeal (-14%).

Their recipe for feeling good contains ingredients such as friendship (+17% compared to the average), culture (+14%), being rich and owning a lot of money (+17%), being successful (+15%), owning objects and things that are different from those of other people (twice the average) and being admired (six times the average). Among the factors that are necessary for their well-being they have an honest view of themselves, as people who do not compromise (+8% compared to the average).

For radical green aspirationalists, the symbols of success are managing your own time (+13%), being a cultured person (+7%), staying young (twice the average), attending TV broadcasts (almost three times the average), and having lots of followers (again, almost three times the average).

Consequently, their top-class profession is that of the influencer (four times the average). This is followed by being a surgeon (more than twice the average), being an artist (more than twice the average), but also being engaged in volunteer work (+7%) or owning a start-up (more than twice the average). An activity that doesn't confer status for this community is being an entrepreneur (almost half the average).

Finally, the main fears of this group are related to not having things under control (three times the average) and gaining weight (more than twice the average). The only aspect that does not trigger any anxieties is becoming poor (only 2 %).

12.4 *The political dimension*

Members of this community are less interested in moderate recipes (–20% compared to the average). For a sixth of this clan, Catholic culture and morality should be at the base of political choices, while 40% have a low regard for Italian entrepreneurs (hence why they are not attracted by the idea of being a manager or owning a company) and consider the Italian style of management excessively bossy (+15% compared to the average).

Their ideal political leader must first and foremost be young (+12% compared to the average) and dynamic. Their political identity tends to be left-wing or prone to abstention. 33% Call themselves progressive (almost three times the average), 8% openly declare themselves as communists (twice the average) and 21% consider themselves patriotic (three times the average).

63% Of this clan generally do not vote, while the political preferences of those who do vote mainly tend towards the Pd (32%). This is the community furthest away from Salvini's Lega (5%) and the (minority) share of center-right voters prefers giving their vote to Forza Italia (16%). M5s gathers the least votes in this clan, while 8% choose to support the greens.

*Andrea Toma**

Projective analysis.
What does today's middle class aspire to?
Which traits will define the collective imagination
in the future?

The trend of a weakening Italian middle class is a phenomenon that has been consolidating for over twenty years.

After the spectacular expansion of the 1970s, 80s and 90s, the factors that have contributed to this regression are the transformation of work thanks to technological innovations, the heavy financial crisis and the sovereign debt that has accumulated between 2008 and 2014, and a macroeconomic dynamic that did not allow for an expansion of the opportunities and possibilities for GDP growth.

The long stagnation then turned into a latent recession as early as 2019. Although there were also some positive signs, the health emergency that started in early 2020 and which is still ongoing radically changed the economic and social scenario of the country.

Therefore, the possibility of outlining the traits, expectations, aspirations and trends of the Italian middle class over the next few years is hindered by the current framework of uncertainty. It is as high as ever before and will inevitably complicate the process of overcoming the weaknesses that were identified over the past two decades.

The narrowing horizon of opportunity for the middle class finds its roots in at least three long-standing factors which still act as a conditioning for the future. Work, the aging population (with all its repercussions for the future of youngsters), and the polarization of incomes (also a sign of a lacking capacity for innovation at a general level) cast a shadow over the opportunities to relaunch the country once the emergency phase has passed, but they do not completely exhaust the resources we must focus on to put Italy's growth back on track.

The many critical issues must be countered with elements that, if properly solicited and guided, could contain the effects of another crisis and strengthen the available productive capital.

* Censis.

The challenges of work, aging and growing inequality – as discussed in the next paragraph – must be tackled by an initiative to mobilize all the ‘unused’ or inert capital that, from an economic standpoint, hides within the ‘liquid’ savings of Italians and which is constrained psychologically and culturally by the current uncertainty, precautionary needs and the weak light that can be seen at the end of a twenty-year-long tunnel.

When we look at the behavior of Italians with regard to savings, we also get an insight on the flip side of the coin, which is instead represented by consumption (par. 7.2). Behind the most recent trends in consumption, we can in fact identify several propensities that are ripening, and at the same time influencing the supply of goods and services. They are fueling a new demand, driven by new expectations and new aspirations. Strengthened by the pervasiveness of technologies like never before, consumption plays the role of a vector of individual and collective behaviors, needs and aspirations.

And it is on the interpretative capacity of the new questions – in a context that is certainly critical, but still mobile – that we need to rely in order to try and design the profile of the new middle class in the coming decades.

1. The terms that affect the future: work, aging, polarization of incomes

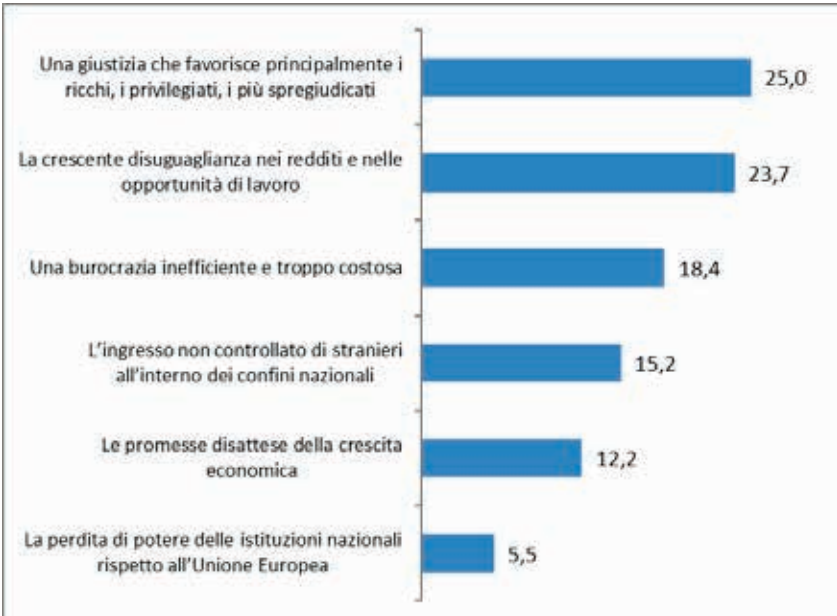
For 23.7% of Italians, the growing inequality in incomes and job opportunities adds to the resentment that has been spreading in recent years. In the same survey carried out by Censis in 2019, 25% brings to light another element that contributes to Italian resentment: a justice system that primarily favors the rich, the privileged and the most unscrupulous (Fig. 1).

The combination of an unfair income distribution and social injustice can be considered as the ‘tail end’ of many years of crisis, during which the hopes of returning to growth have gradually died down, and the expectations of improving people’s work and the economic condition have dispersed.

The ‘betrayal’ of growth is confirmed above all in terms of work and its quality, more so than in its surface representations such as the employment rate (which grew by one and a half percent between 2016 and 2018) or the reduction of unemployment (with 307,000 fewer people looking for work between 2016 and June this year).

The persisting negative mood among Italians has deeper roots and can be partly explained by factors that characterize the evolution – or rather, the devolution – of work, which generates uncertainty and concern.

Fig. 1 - The main causes of resentment experienced by Italians today. (%)



Source: Indagine Censis 2019

Work that does not contribute to income and growth compromises the future of youngsters

Between 2007 and 2018, employment increased by 321,000 units, with a variation of 1.4% (Table 1). The positive trend continued throughout that year. During the first six months of 2019, there was a 0.5% increase compared to the same period in the previous year.

This figure, which confirms the definitive absorption of the impact of the long recession, clearly hides some critical elements. The final result, as seen through the lens of working hours, is the reduction of 867,000 full-time employees and the increase of almost 1,200,000 part-time employees: in the period between 2007 and 2018 this typology of work grew by 38% and also increased by 2% in the dynamic of trends (first semester of 2018-2019).

Today, one out of every five employees work part-time. The involuntary part-time figure is even more critical. The number of employees

obligated to work part-time without an alternative exceeded the threshold of 2,700,000. Between 2007 and 2018, they rose from 38.3% of the total amount of part-time employees to 64.1%. Their increase in absolute terms was over 1.5 million.

When we look at work as a volume of resources devoted to the production of value, and when measured in full-time work units (national accounts data), we see that it has decreased over these eleven years. The work input was reduced by 959,000 units and the volume of actual work hours was reduced by more than 2.3 billion at the same time.

Table 1 – More employees, less work. Employment, work units and hours worked, 2007-2019 (as of, var.%, abs. diff. and val.%)

	As of		2007-2018			var.%
	2007	2014	2018	var.%	Absolute differences	I semester 2018-2019 (*)
Employees 15 years and older (thous.)	22.894	22.279	23.215	1,4	321	0,5
With a full-time (thous.)	19.774	18.188	18.908	-4,4	-867	0,1
With a part-time (thous.)	3.120	4.091	4.307	38,0	1.187	2,0
% of part-time among employees	13,6	18,4	18,6	-	4,9	0,3
With an involuntary part-time (thous.)	1.195	2.603	2.760	130,8	1.564	2,9
% of involuntary part-time compared to the total part-time	38,3	63,6	64,1	-	25,8	0,6
Work units (thous.)	25.106	23.284	24.147	-3,8	-959	0,6
Hours worked (mln.)	45.995	41.805	43.692	-5,0	-2.303	0,5

(*) For the % of part-time employees and the % of involuntary part-time work compared to the total, the absolute difference between the two semesters was calculated.

Source: Censis processing of Istat data

When we look at age, the instability of the inverted pyramid of Italian employment reflects a rejection of youngsters, who are certainly less represented than in 2007 (about 2 million out of the total, Table 2), and who are to a large extent forced to give up their full-time jobs. Involuntary part-time work for young people grows to 71.6% as they are forced to accept jobs that are not in line with their aspirations.

Table 2 – Fewer youngsters at work: employees between 15-34, 2007-2018 (as of, var.%, abs. diff. and val.%)

	2007	2014	2018	var.% 2007- 2018	abs. diff. 2007- 2018
Employees between 15-34 (thous.)	7.082	5.035	5.112	-27,8	-1.971
With a full-time (thous.)	6.024	3.896	3.959	-34,3	-2.065
With a part-time (thous.)	1.058	1.139	1.153	8,9	95
% of part-time among employees	14,9	22,6	22,5	-	7,6
With an involuntary part-time (thous.)	514	881	883	71,6	368
% of involuntary part-time compared to the total part-time	48,6	77,3	76,6	-	28,0
By way of reminder: Population 15-34 (thous.)	13.952	12.885	12.470	-10,6	-1.482

Source: Censis processing of Istat data

Youngsters caught in a trap

The future of youngsters is already being compromised at school. It continues with unskilled work and ends with a blocked social mobility (only 10.6% of parents with a secondary school certificate have children with a degree).

The grade that children obtain in middle school exams strictly determines their subsequent path of education. In their senior school year, only 22% of those who scored a '6' on their middle school certificate went to high school; the others enrolled in technical or professional in-

stitutes. The share of children who choose to go to high school increases parallel to the grade they received on their middle school exam: 40.4% of those who score '7', 62.9% of those who score '8', 81% of those who score '9', 90.9% of those who score '10' and 94.2% of those who score '10 *cum laude*'.

When we look at the students who obtained their middle school certificate during the 2010/2011 school year, of those who scored '6' on their final exam, 69% have not yet earned a bachelor's degree after 5 years. The figure is 37.4% for those who scored '7', 16.9% for those who scored '8', just 6.5% for those who scored '9' and 2.8% for those who scored '10' or '10 *cum laude*'.

It is a very strict selection, which in the subsequent educational path skims students according to their grade, and which five years later is almost always limited to confirming previous performances. In summary: if you're a good middle school student, you will do well in high school. On the contrary, if you are a poor middle school student, chances are slim to non-existent that you will ever obtain a bachelor's degree. In fact, the school system does not promote change: it reflects and confirms the initial performance of youngsters.

In the 2016-2017 academic year, 21.8% of graduate students who scored '60' on their bachelor's degree registered for university studies. The figure is 33.4% for those who obtained a final grade between '61' and '70', 47% for those who scored between '71' and '80', 61.9% for those who scored a grade between '81' and '90', 72.2% for students who graduated with a grade between '91' and '99', 83.4% for those who score '100' and 91.3% for those who graduated with '100 *cum laude*'. At the time of their high school graduation, only 7.3% of students score '100' and just 1.9% score '100 *cum laude*'. In the last academic year, 73.8% of high school graduates enrolled at university, compared to only 33.1% of students who completed their studies in technical colleges and 11.3% who attended professional institutes. Once again, the skimming is rigid and predetermined according to the initial path of education. The portrait emerges of a school system that is strongly anchored in quantitative evaluation: grades that youngsters receive early on determine their future successes or failures.

Almost 4 out of 10 young college and university graduates are working at a job that is below their qualifications: a total of 1.5 million youngsters. In 2017, 41.2% of high school graduates and 32.4% of university graduates were forced to demote. Half (50.1%) of the employed 15-34-year-olds who graduated from high school are stuck in a job that

does not meet their educational qualifications, as well as 37.3% of graduates of technical colleges, 40.8% for professional institutes, and 41.3% of young people with three-year professional qualifications. High school graduates who did not go to university are most subjected to doing underqualified work: one in two works at a job that is below what their educational path would suggest.

60.5% Of university graduates with children also see their children graduate. Among parents with a high school degree, this share drops to 34.8%, and even to 10.6% among people who have only obtained a middle school diploma. It is difficult to bounce back from a bad performance at school, but it can also be difficult to climb the social ladder depending on the background your family of origin. In fact, schools tend to confirm inequalities more than they fight them. While schools don't help youngsters to climb the scales, today's companies also keep them imprisoned at the bottom by giving them underqualified work.

More employees, less work: an unfair equation

The equation 'more employees, less work' also affects both the dynamics of productivity as well as the availability of income.

Between 2007 and 2018, the gross domestic product per work unit was reduced by €339 and this decrease is even more evident if we take into account gross domestic product per domestic employee: in this case the money that was lost over eleven years comes to €3,259, with a negative real variation 4.5% (Table 3). The adverse impact on the wages of employees is equally substantial and is 3.8%, more than a thousand euros less.

Combined with those of work units and hours worked, these signals lead to an objective downsizing of the recent performance of employment. This is not surprising, given that between 2007 and 2018 there was a 20% drop in investments which has resumed to grow only in recent years, thanks to the adoption of facilitation mechanisms (+2.0% when comparing the first half of 2018 to the first half of 2019).

Table 3 – Less wealth produced, less wealth distributed: GDP per work unit and per employee, and gross domestic wages per employee, 2007-2018 (as of, var.% and abs. diff.)

	2018	real var.% 2007-2018	absolute differences 2007-2018 (euro 2018)
GDP per work unit (euro)	73.112	-0,5	-339
GDP per domestic employee (euro)	69.618	-4,5	-3.259
Gross domestic earnings per employee (*)	26.839	-3,8	-1.049

(*) *The real variation and the real absolute difference is calculated using the revaluation index as a deflator.*

Source: Censis processing of Istat data

In the context of a gradual shift in the quality of work and, in fact, a loss of profitability of the labor factor, the weakest sections of employment have now taken on a very important absolute dimension.

Even if we exclude agricultural workers, in 2018 just under two million private employees could count on only 79 paid days per year. The phenomenon even occurs in the public sector: there it concerns 142,000 employees (Table 4).

On the other hand, there are 2,113,000 workers – again, excluding agricultural workers and not including domestic workers – with more than one employment relationship. 913,000 of them receive a gross hourly wage of less than €9 for at least one of their employment relationships, compared to those in place.

The threshold of a gross hourly income of €9 is used as a reference for the introduction of a legal minimum wage, through various regulatory initiatives which are currently under discussion in Parliament.

This is unprecedented for Italy, where setting minimum wages has always been left to national collective bargaining. Using data from 2016, the analyses that accompany this instrument have made it possible to identify the potential audience that would have access to it. According to these analyses, workers with gross hourly earnings of less than €9 would be equal to 2,941,000, of which 53% are men (1,567,000) and 47% are women (1,377,000 - Table 4).

About a third of people earning less than €9 are between 15 and 29 years old (about one million), while the central class, aged 30-49, covers 47% of the total (1.39 million). Among the oldest workers, 518,000 remain below the threshold, while the greatest concentration on the contractual qualification side concerns blue collar workers, who have a share of 79%. In essence, eight out of ten manual laborers in Italy receive less remuneration than the law is likely going to determine to be the basic level of pay.

Table 4 – Little work and little pay. Types of workers by number of annual paid hours, employment relationships and hourly wage (v.a.in thousands)

	<i>As of in thousands</i>
Private employees with less than 79 paid days (2018, excluding agricultural workers)	1.943
Public employees with less than 79 paid days (2018)	142
Workers with more than one employment relationship (2016) (*)	2.113
<i>of which: with at least one job with a gross hourly wage of less than €9</i>	915
Total workers with a gross hourly wage of less than €9 (2016) (*)	2.941
<i>of which are:</i>	
<i>men</i>	1.567
<i>women</i>	1.377
<i>aged 15-29</i>	1.028
<i>aged 30-49</i>	1.395
<i>aged 50 and up</i>	518
<i>Blue collar workers</i>	2.322
<i>Employees and managers</i>	361
<i>Interns</i>	305

(*): domestic workers and agricultural workers are excluded–Source: Censis processing on Inps, Istat data.

There are signs of a new economic slowdown in this critical situation, which involves an important part of employment in a comprehensive and

structured way, regardless of the unemployment figure which, despite its reduction in recent years, still affects more than 2.7 million people.

GDP is close to zero again (with the most optimistic forecasts hovering around 0.1%), there is a trend of an increase in the 'Cassa Integrazione' (redundancy support fund) (+ 37% in the case of the special redundancy support fund, between January and September 2018-2019), and a cyclical reduction of hours worked (comparing the second and first quarters of 2019), combined with a strong international uncertainty. All this seems to be throwing Italy back into the drought of recession, with a series of problems that the recovery in employment over the past few years has not managed to resolve.

The 'betrayal' of growth

When viewed from a European perspective, the focus on a fair minimum wage has several implications and can contribute to pursuing multiple urgent results for integration processes across the board.

First, it can help rekindle the confidence pact that has held the European Union and its citizens together until now (or until just before the crisis), and which was undermined by a series of unmet expectations that have highlighted all the contradictions of the unification process, consequently leading to often opportunistic and protectionist behavior on the part of various countries who are trying to safeguard their own conditions.

Second, the commitment to a minimum wage can speed up a process of homogenizing working conditions and social protection systems between countries, avoiding phenomena of 'dumping' and unfair competition which are spreading through the European job market, mainly due to relocations and the mobility of workers (frontier work, job losses).

Third, a fair and shared minimum wage threshold could revive domestic demand, which in many countries has been too modest for many years, compromising the opportunities for business growth in many traditional sectors and fueling the perception of a 'stalemate' in the dynamics of social mobility.

In recent years, the phenomenon of a 'wageless recovery' was clearly confirmed by the development of several indicators:

- between 2013 and 2018, the Union's gross domestic product grew steadily faster than real wages; in 2017 the distance between the two levels was 2.2%; in 2018, a 2% increase in GDP was matched by a modest increase in wages of 0.7%;

- thirteen countries (including France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Spain, Belgium and Italy) saw real wages rise at rates of below 1% between 2017 and 2018; Belgium and Spain even showed a negative value (– 0.1% and – 0.7% respectively).

The ‘betrayal’ of growth, which has not resulted in a reduction of inequalities or risk of poverty even among those who have a job, continues to nurture a feeling of disappointment and resignation that is widespread among the weakest components of employment.

In recent years, the risk of slipping into poverty has affected one in ten of the European active population (9.6%), particularly women (who show an increase of 16% compared to 2010), and without sparing workers with high levels of education (an increase of 32% in 2017 compared to eight years prior).

The general feeling is that the road to a fair minimum wage for all workers in the Union will be long and tortuous.

The recent signs that point to the weakening economic performance of the Union do not help matters; in particular the Euro area, where for 2019 and 2020 the forecasts for GDP growth (before COVID-19) stopped at 1.1%. This is not enough to consider reabsorbing the great inequalities of recent years, nor to induce companies to share redistributive mechanisms in favor of the labor factor.

The recent efforts of the Italian legislation to establish the level of a minimum wage by law – and in this way to stem a proliferation of collective agreements that legitimize lowering wages – must come to terms with a realistic forecast of the costs that will be passed on to companies.

When using Istat’s calculations on the impact of a gross minimum wage of €9, the following aspects must be taken into account:

- there are 2.9 million workers for whom raising the minimum hourly wage to €9 would lead to an increase in annual pay, which is about 21% of the total number of workers (2.4 million when we exclude interns);
- the average annual increase would be around €1,073 per capita, which is an overall increase in total salaries paid of around €3.2 billion;
- the estimated average annual wage increase on the economic aggregates of enterprises with employees (around 1.5 million) would lead to an increase in costs which, if not transferred onto prices, would result in a reduction of about 1.2% in gross operating margin and 0.5% in added value.

In view of these important findings, we should remember that 12.2% of the active population in Italy is at risk of slipping into poverty, and that three out of four Italians are in favor of introducing an official minimum wage, particularly those on lower-than-average incomes. It is therefore necessary to decide whether to give priority to the sustainability of the economic costs of companies, or to the sustainability of the social costs tied to poverty and of work that is becoming less and less respectable. If the growth forecast for Italian GDP remains around the 'zero point', it will be very difficult to find a solution to the dilemma.

The widening distances between social groups in Italy and around the world

In recent decades, the share of work income in the gross domestic product of advanced countries has gradually decreased. According to the ILO (International Labour Organization) the share of wealth attributed to work income and produced in countries with advanced economies has dropped from 75% in the 1970s to around 60% today. In Italy, the share of work income was 55.4% in 2013, while it was 62.1% in 1993. Within the time-frame of these two decades, the share has also dropped in other countries: in Germany it went from 61.6% to 57.9%, in the United Kingdom from 65.5% to 62.3%, and in the United States from 61.2% to 56.4% (Table 2).

According to an analysis by the McKinsey Global Institute, 65-70% of households living in the 25 advanced economy countries (which corresponds to just over 500 million individuals) have witnessed a stagnation or even a reduction of their disposable income in the period between 2005 and 2014; in Italy the share rises to 97%, in the United States it is 81%, in the United Kingdom it is 70%. In the period between 1993 and 2005, the share of households with a stagnated or reduced income in these 25 countries was less than 2%, or just under 10 million individuals. The Institute states that in a worst-case scenario, 70 to 80 percent of social groups identified through income classes will not see their income grow over the next decade.

The development of these indicators also informs us about three other phenomena:

- the progressive concentration of wealth in the hands of a few that is causing a poverty increase even in advanced countries, as well as a downward shift of various components of the middle class, such as the world of professions;

- the progressive concentration of market power in the hands of a few companies who are riding the latest technological wave and controlling the share of demand induced by the innovation of processes (e.g., technology platforms and services intermediated by them) and products (mainly the digital communication devices that have boomed in recent years);
- the current inability of advanced economy states to activate the function of income redistribution, due to constraints on deficit spending, the cost of public debt, and high taxation. This function was to guarantee the growth of the middle class, support the domestic demand, allow for public and private investments with countercyclical objectives, and ensure a widespread and non-discriminatory welfare system.

Dropping incomes, a compressing demand, reduced employment, and a strong orientation towards cost reduction driven by digital technologies have created a deflation loop: a fate to which many advanced countries seem to be confined.

At one point, the middle class had prospered precisely within the space created by the growth phases of the tertiary sector, and around the demand for skilled, experienced, professional work. It now suffers the effects of an overdetermination of the supply of expert and qualified skills, which pushes down the values of the services rendered to the system of companies (productive tertiary sector) and to that of (tertiary) services (for the tertiary sector). Aside from this, the area of professions and expert work, which has meanwhile been compromised by digital technologies that swallow up entire procedures, control functions and decision-making processes, has become an orphan of the public market which, as previously mentioned, has been bent without appeal to the indiscriminate logic of the spending review. In the past, however, it represented for many professions the “customer” par excellence, especially at a local level, through an extensive outsourcing process carried out in the public sector.

The widening distances between social groups, between parts of the planet, between parts of the same country, between the center and the peripheries of large cities, has left many behind and has narrowed the horizon of opportunity for a large group of individuals.

All this has a clear reflection on the processes that concern work and professional dynamics, on the configuration of employment, and on the role of work as a productive factor and an essential element in creating value.

A reading of the processes and attitudes described above through the lenses of work is particularly relevant when expressed within the Italian

reality. The proposed interpretative key goes from attention to phenomena such as polarization, adaptation, and renunciation. In quantitative but also intuitively more qualitative terms, we can isolate some persistent traces that proceed along three dimensions, from the economic to the territorial, and finally to the generational:

- the income inequality index has grown on a national level since the crisis began, while in previous years there had been a continuous decline; when comparing the areas of Italy, the Mezzogiorno shows the highest gap between the different income classes, followed by the central and North-West regions. In addition, there is a bigger risk for youngsters to slip into poverty compared to older people, and an increase in the percentage of poor workers, even though they are hired as employees;
- the adaptation (although perhaps it would be more correct to use the term ‘folding’) has happened partly through a reduction of hours worked and, consequently, an adjustment to a lower level of disposable income than in the past; for employees, the share of overtime and some components of the variable part of wages have dropped sharply, forcing consumption to compress despite low inflation having contained the impact on real income;
- the adaptation has also taken place for those who are self-employed, in line with the message that underlies the reflection on the crisis: that everyone had to somehow ‘act for themselves’, and as a positive reaction to the sense of loneliness that has affected young job seekers and those exposed to the risk of job loss even though they are employed. The development of activities related to the use of digital technology and new types of services has played an important role for this segment. These activities have created positive expectations and a drive to do business (the phenomenon of start-ups). Start-ups take advantage of the low initial investment needed to start a business on the Internet. They put to good use the digital and IT skills which are acquired outside the normal education and training tracks and which are essentially linked to the spread, daily use and enormous development potential that communication and Internet tools allow.

However, if the widening of economic and social distances translates into a lack of opportunities; it leaves room for the spread of still very marked behaviors of giving up (‘neets’), exposure to poverty and the trap of uncertainty for various weak segments of employment. In essence, there

is a danger that slipping into poverty will become permanent, and there are also worries about permanently uncertain job situations: in the face of a tendential stabilization of employment relationships obtained by recent regulatory interventions, the area of unskilled work is growing at the same time (not surprisingly in sectors such as agriculture, domestic work, and catering services), the use of ancillary work increases, and demotion is used as an antidote to the threat of job loss.

Technologies and polarization

The crisis and the deployment of digital technologies and automation have changed the employment structure of countries with advanced economies.

Both are producing phenomena of polarization and reconfiguration of work in production processes, by transforming the supply and demand of work. The consequences for economic and social systems are difficult to interpret, as are predictions about the future of professional content.

Today we can certainly recall in summary what has happened to the large professional groups in Italy over the past few years:

- between 2011 and 2014, with a reduction of about 320,000 units in absolute terms, the relative composition of the professional groups indicates a greater weight of qualified and technical professions and of commerce and service employees and staff; overall, these two segments increase the percentage share by one percent;
- mainly the area of unskilled personnel increases in size, rising from 10% to 10.9% over this period, all to the detriment of the groups of blue-collar workers and craftsmen, which dropped from 25.8% to 23.5%.

However, the dynamic that occurred in the last phase of the crisis is most evident if we look at the deviations in absolute and relative terms. In 2014, the reduction of 320,000 employees compared to 2011 corresponds to 1.42%, a result that on the one hand summarizes a drop in employment for almost 600,000 blue collar workers and craftsmen, and on the other hand the increase of almost 180,000 units of unqualified personnel (+7.91%), to which are added about 100,000 more employees in the medium to high professional categories.

The decline of skilled work is a sign of a parallel transfer between this type of work towards the bottom, with the extension of low-skilled work,

but at the same time of a reaction of work demand towards different skills and which fundamentally reflects the development of two phenomena:

- on the reduction of the relative and absolute weight of the categories of blue-collar workers and craftsmen – beyond the vagueness of the definitions – there has been a major restructuring of the production system that mainly affected small-scale skilled work, within a process of downsizing that affected companies in the industrial sector in particular; in this case we can also speak of a level of lost competitiveness which has expelled a considerable amount of production units from the market;
- on the downgrading of work, there has been an action of replacing technologies applied to manufacturing processes, which has dematerialized and standardized the process lines, replacing technical skills with mechanical and computer skills as they get absorbed by technologies which are able to produce the contribution of specialized work at lower costs, favoring, at the same time, control and management functions.

Nothing new, then. The market is being reduced, and the least efficient companies which are unable to compete on cost are eliminated from the market. New technical and organizational solutions are being introduced, and professionals linked to outdated and less efficient production models are becoming redundant.

For Italy, there is an additional explanation. The general production of public and private goods and services is the result of at least four major processes: industrial export companies are fast at restructuring and placing themselves in front of the competition, but there has not been an equally effective restructuring of the private component of the tertiary sector, which has gradually shifted its axis towards economic activities such as services for personal assistance and care, and has fueled an expansion in the number of (often individual) companies, in the care and catering sectors, which are exposed to a high rate of stillbirths and a low rate of consolidation.

The latter phenomenon has often been the individual, fragmented response to loss of work and the need to rebuild future work personnel trying to counter the absence of a high-profile investment lever that due to external constraints and rigidities within the sector has triggered a partial reorganization. The re-perimetering of the public sector contributed to the contradictory performance of the tertiary sector which, responding primarily to the need of containing public expenditure, resulted in 'poor

outsourcing, in an excessive blockage of the turnover, and in the renunciation of covering new demands and new emerging needs, thus abdicating the countercyclical action pursued in other times of crisis.

The reading that is derived from the analysis of what has happened over four years of crisis finds confirmation in the projections for 2025: of what will be the structure of employment in Italy and - above all - of what will happen at European level.

The upward and downward polarization and the displacement of the intermediate and specialized part was the key that Cedefop (the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training) obtained by extrapolating the action of the processes of substitution and change that are taking place respectively on the side of labor supply – on all the demographic trends that have a profound impact on the supply structure – and on the side of demand – without prejudice to the impossibility of predicting the real configuration today, and the actual impact of the technological factor in ten years' time.

Based on the evolution of the demographic structure, and starting from the dynamics of innovation and the employment situation in 2015, the European Institute has reconstructed a future employment framework at a community level and for all the current twenty-seven countries belonging to the Union, which predicts:

- increases of more than 10% for managers, intellectual and scientific professions, and intermediate technical professions;
- the reduction of almost 10% of office workers, craftsmen and blue-collar workers;
- a 14% reduction in agricultural personnel;
- the extension of work in commerce and services (+3.7%) and of unskilled personnel (+5.5%).

For the highest segments of employment, the 2025 forecast for Italy essentially follows what is indicated at a European level, but with much greater increases in managers (+68%), intellectual and scientific professions (+23%), and intermediate technical professions (+18%). There is a positive dynamic of unskilled personnel (+3.6%) and a negative one concerning administrative workers (– 1.2%), while work in the tertiary sector and agriculture, as well as craftsmanship and blue-collar work would show a substantial reduction, with variations that reach 23% for agriculture.

But once the path of growth has resumed, it is precisely from the technological and organizational side that another wave of change is expected.

Digitization and automation endanger jobs with manual skills, while the probability of being replaced is certainly lower in occupations where negotiation, persuasion, intuition, and creativity come into play. According to some studies that were recently carried out in the United States, Italy has a share of endangered jobs equal to 56% due to the spread of digitization and automation processes. Italy is closely followed by countries such as Spain (55%) and Germany (51%), and the average for the European Union with regard to replacements is also high, coming in at 54%. In the United States and the United Kingdom, the risk assessment comes in at 47% of total employment.

The tertiary sector: from a place of job aspirations to a victim of the new crisis

Even before the health emergency triggered by the spread of Covid-19, the tertiary sector already experienced a sudden slowdown in economic activity in 2019 and has recorded a lingering stagnation over the past few years.

The latest economic data show the variation in turnover of services between the first quarter of 2020 and the last quarter of 2019, and report a – 6.2% for the general index of turnover of services (Table 5).

In terms of trends (comparing the first quarter of 2020 and the first quarter of 2019), the reduction in turnover was more than 7%.

The general data incorporate the impact of the lockdown on a substantial part of the economy, but also bring to light the severe influence of the effects on housing and catering services (over 24% on both the trend and business-cyclical scales) and on trade (– 6.0% on a business-cyclical basis and – 7.8% on a trend basis).

Table 5 – The impact of the health emergency on the turnover of services. First quarter 2020, trend and business-cyclical comparison by economic activity (var. %)

<i>Activity of services</i>	<i>Business-cyclical (Var. % Q1 2020/ Q4 2019)</i>	<i>Trend (Var. % Q1 2020/ Q4 2019)</i>
Trade	-6,0	-7,8
Transport and storage	-6,4	-5,3
Accommodation and catering services	-24,8	-24,1

<i>Activity of services</i>	<i>Business-cyclical (Var. % Q1 2020/ Q4 2019)</i>	<i>Trend (Var. % Q1 2020/ Q4 2019)</i>
Information and communication services	-0,9	-2,4
Professional, scientific and technical activities	-0,4	-2,6
Travel agencies, business support services	-2,0	-2,8
General index of turnover of services	-6,2	-7,2

Source: Censis processing of Istat data

Professional activities, which are only marginally affected by the suspension, are suffering a trend reduction of 2.6% and a cyclical reduction of 0.4%. This is a sign that confirms the difficulties that a large part of the world of professions has been experiencing for some time. When we compare the first months of 2019 and 2020 in particular, the turnovers of legal and accounting activities dropped by 3.0%, while those relating to architecture, engineering and inspections lost 2.5% (Table 6).

For these two professional areas, the negative variation of added value dates back to 2018 (– 0.22%), while for 2019 the indicator was around zero.

Table 6 – The impact of the health emergency on the turnover of scientific and technical professional activities. First quarter 2020, trend comparison (var. %)

<i>Professional activities</i>	<i>Trend (Var. % Q1 2020/Q1 2019)</i>
Advertising and market research	0,0
Management consulting	-1,5
Architecture, engineering, inspections	-2,5
Legal and accounting activities	-3,0
Other professional activities	-4,6
Total turnover of professional activities	-2,6

Source: Censis processing of Istat data

The state of economic distress that the world of professions has repeatedly complained about, especially as a result of the reforms that have

affected benefits, and which was extremely accentuated after the financial crisis of the past decade, becomes evident when looking at the trend of total declared income between 2000 and 2016.

Considering a minimum annual income threshold of €11,600 (equal to 60% of median income, which is just under €20,000), 27.9% of professionals that were registered in privatized social security funds in 2000 fell below it. In the ten years that followed, the percentage dropped to 24.3%; in 2016 the number of 'poor professionals' kept expanding, exceeding the quota of 2000 and reaching 29.5% (Table 7).

On the other hand, if we base the threshold for professional 'wealth' on an annual income equal to or greater than €97,000 (five times the median income), a growth trend recorded between 2000 and 2010 had to make room for a phase of partial contraction (6.9% in 2016, compared to 7.3% in 2010).

Table 7 – Impoverishment: the income of professionals in the period 2000-2016 (val. %)

Declared total of gross annual income	% of total professionals (*)			
	2000	2005	2010	2016
Up to €11,600	27,9	25,0	24,3	29,5
€97,000 or more	6,0	7,3	7,3	6,9

(*): registered workers paying social security contributions to the appropriate autonomous funds managed by their professional association. This concerns workers who belong to the following funds: forensics, notary, Chartered Accountants, surveyors, accountants, Inarcassa, Enpaia, Enpam, Enpap, Enpapi, Enpav, biologists, Epap, Eppi, pharmacists, employment consultants, doctors and dentists.

Source: Censis processing on Inps data.

Highlighted by income poverty, the crisis of professions is another sign of the middle-class crisis that saw in professions (freelance professions in particular) an objective of personal growth and social ascent, legitimized by a strong investment in training and learning.

In the perception of Italians, the prestige of professions remains quite high, but at the same time the preferences are reshuffled, which reflects a loss of appeal for professions that are partly replaced by technological innovation and are partly victim to a low quality of public and private demand.

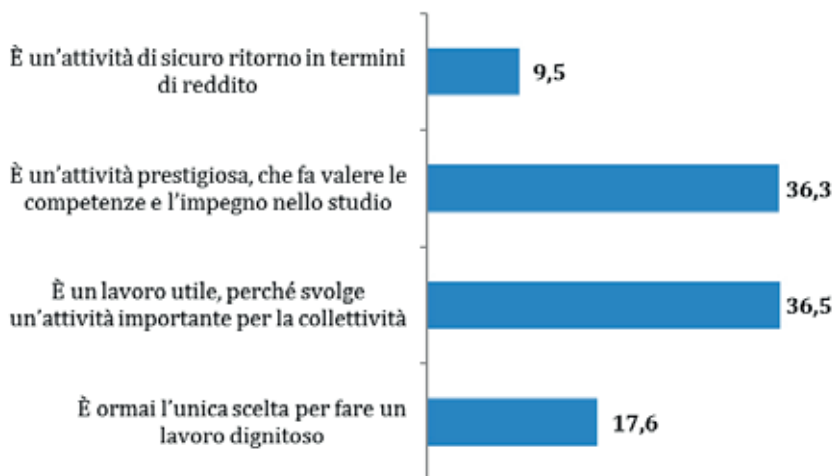
In a Censis survey carried out in 2019, a number of Italians were asked whether or not they would encourage an acquaintance to pick up studies aimed at becoming a freelance professional.

The vast majority of respondents (91.4%) said that they would encourage the choice (Fig. 2), but a steady income is not among the main reasons for this encouragement (9.5%, Fig. 3). At the same time, most people who did not encourage the choice did so because according to them ‘it no longer guarantees adequate levels of income’ (45.0%, Fig. 4).



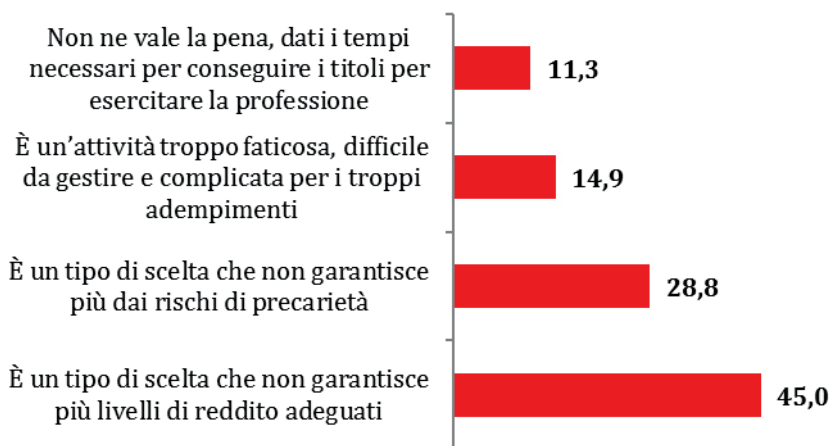
Censis survey, 2019

Fig. 3. Lo incoraggerebbe, perché?



Censis survey, 2019

Fig. 4. Cercherebbe di dissuaderlo, perché?



Censis survey, 2019

2. The levers of potential change

Consumption and savings can be an effective proxy of aspirations and expectations for Italians in the future. The behaviors linked to these different and complementary ways of using one's available resources are both indicative of a short- and medium-term reference horizon, at the individual and collective level. These levers and related behaviors allow us to see the potential for growth based on the demand for goods and services and of 'renunciation' while waiting for better times, or with a view to future projects and programs.

But 2020 has added a disruptive factor to the prospects for change, which are historically induced by the functions of consumption and savings. In just three months, it has already changed the structural and perspective framework for Italy and for the world. The experience of three months of lockdown – total or partial – has already generated new elements in social and economic life: it has become important to correctly interpret these elements of novelty, so as not to succumb to a potentially devastating scenario.

The prospects for change through the lever of consumption

For fifty years, the growth of consumption processes on the national territory has been decreasing. The average annual rate of real growth per decade has in fact progressively reduced: it decreased from 3.9% in the 1970s to 2.5% in the 1980s, to 1.7% in the 1990s, and to 0.2% in the new millennium.

Since then, there has been a persistent steady calm on the consumption front, in parallel with the stagnation of the GDP, albeit with a certain recovery in food expenditure that in the decade before had even gone into the negative.

In the long term of the country, the progressive decline of the consumption mechanisms that originated from the years of the economic miracle has become evident. Initially, they lost their historic function of guaranteeing an escape from poverty and an entry into the middle class. Subsequently, their role as a privileged channel to signal the entry into the welfare society has gradually faded. Consumption is fueled by a climate of optimism and confidence in the future.

In this sense, the systemic shocks that the country has suffered over time have certainly not resulted in any benefits (from the energy crises

of the 1970s through the 'Years of Lead', to the conflicts of the 90s and fundamentalist terrorism). The final blows were the global recession of 2008-2009 and the national sovereign debt crisis of 2011-2013. Although there have been significant changes in their composition since then, consumption processes have stopped growing in value and have been the driving force behind production and investment, and consequently behind employment and household income. They have always remained a fundamental component of GDP (and still are), but it was evident that growth had to be constructed elsewhere (through exports, the articulation of new value chains, and the attraction of investments).

Due to the great recession, the consumption of Italian households in real terms has even decreased over the past decade.

The explanation for this is usually sought in income dynamics, which in turn are influenced by variables that are economic (a low productivity of work and a declining cycle of public and private investments), social (a low job market participation and a growing number of poor families) and demographic (a society that is gradually decreasing). Although fundamental, the available income of households is not enough to grasp the stagnation of consumption. It is also not enough to consider the increase in the precautionary propensity to save, which is directly linked to a loss of confidence in the future, in social protection mechanisms, and in one's ability to ascend using a social elevator that is always becoming smaller.

Other levers have been added to this, which are capable of affecting consumption and the complex link between individuals, the possession of goods and the use of services. Citizens have in fact given rise to a more complex arbitrage between what is needed, what they like, what is good, what is right to buy, and what they should do without, for diametrically opposed reasons. Often, the focus has shifted from the product to the manufacturer.

In essence, we turned to purchases that can generate not only material, but also emotional well-being. This caused the declining trend of non-durable goods (selecting quality and particularity over quantity) and the chronic decline in replacing existing assets during the peaks of the crisis.

At the same time, the process of 'tertiarization of consumption' (health, sport, free time, culture, sharing economy, etc.) strengthened. However, this is a trend associated with high volatility. Finally, in a value context where consumption necessarily 'must' produce emotional satisfaction and where it becomes a psycho-emotional fact which is partly detached from need, families have had to deal with the progressive growth of compulsory expenditure (which reached 40.8% of total expenditure in 2019), thus reducing the available space for so-called 'marketable' goods and services.

In any case, it should not be forgotten that the purchasing power of Italian households in 2018 is still 6.3% lower in real terms compared to 2008. And they are holding on to their money tightly, preferably in cash:

- compared to 2008, there was a +12.5% in real terms of cash money in 2017, compared to a smaller increase (+4.4%) referring to the total financial assets of households;
- compared to 2017, there is still a +2.2% for cash money today, compared to a – 1.5% for total financial assets.

The gap in consumption between the different social groups has visibly widened and runs parallel to a weakening of the spending capacity of the more fragile classes.

During the period of 2014-2017, working class households recorded a – 1.8% in real terms of consumer spending, while entrepreneur households recorded a +6.6%. If we consider the average expenditure of Italian families to be '100', blue collar workers are now at '72' (at '76' in 2014), and entrepreneurs at '123' (at '120' in 2014).

It is very difficult for goods and services that do not ignite the specific desires of individual consumers. They have become intelligent in adopting a logic of satisfaction, and have a tendency to keep their money tight, preferably in cash. This complex dynamic explains why the lowest price does not always win, and why a skillful mixture of price and subjective added value is often appreciated by the consumer.

The prospects for change through the lever of savings

In 2018, the financial wealth of Italian households was €4,218 billion, a figure that reflects, in real terms, a negative percentage change of 0.4% compared to 2008. Ten years have therefore not been enough to return to pre-crisis levels of wealth: it is a sign of how directly the crisis has affected not only the productive fabric, but also Italians' pockets.

Not all items that make up the portfolio have suffered a downturn. In fact, what emerges from the data relating to the individual components of the financial portfolio is the following:

- in 2018, the total share of bank notes, coins and deposits in the hands of households grew, amounting to €1,390 billion (33% of the total portfolio, +13.7% since 2008);
- insurance reserves are growing, accounting for 23.7% of the portfolio with a total value of around €1 billion (+44.6% since 2008), and

the share of insurance reserves for life and pension funds has almost doubled in 10 years (+49.4%);

- bonds dropped by almost a third. They account for 6.9% of the financial portfolios of households, compared to around 21% in 2008; short-term securities almost zeroed (– 98.8% since 2008), and there is a significant reduction in shares and other holdings (– 12.4%).

The evolution of the composition of the Italian portfolio is perhaps among the most obvious signs of how ten years of crisis and the disappearing dream of an economic recovery have changed the relationship Italians have with their own wealth. The most emblematic factor is the swelling of the cash bubble (the share of coins, notes, and deposits in the portfolio) as a combined result of low-incentive returns and fear and uncertainty towards the future - especially with regard to health, illness, and employment, which today constitute more frightening concerns than ever before.

In terms of managing savings, this ensemble of factors has translated into a lower propensity to invest: it is better to grip your money tight rather than spending it. Therefore, even though Italy has a high stock of household wealth, which has traditionally increased thanks to proper management, the flows are negative. They do not grow in the wake of a GDP and a real economy that does not reboot. Within this framework, it then becomes useful to outline how the wealth of Italian families and their financial portfolios have evolved, starting from a series of key variables for constructing the wealth profile of the different family types present in our country.

The starting point is the data on the median financial wealth of Italian households provided by the Bank of Italy. The general figure shows that in 2016 the median value of financial assets per family was €5,933, a negative differential of 13.9% compared to €6,888 in 2006. This substantial decline confirms what the portfolio data had already shown, but which certainly had a different impact depending on the characteristics of households.

While it is true that in the long term there has been a reduction in Italians' propensity to save (from 18.7% of disposable income in 1995 to 8.1% in 2018) and that since the crisis the share of families struggling to put money aside has increased, it should nevertheless be noted that Italians are still among the most prolific and stubborn savers. It is a kind of atavistic habit etched in the DNA of our society, which in the post-crisis phase and to this day has been able to benefit from the radical change in

the relationship with consumption, with the transition to a self-restraint that was unknown in other phases of our national history.

Since 2008, there has been a known and uncontrollable phenomenon of increasing liquidity in the portfolio, with increases in absolute value equal to or greater than the value of the GDP of important EU countries. Not to mention the total cash in household portfolios, which is even higher than Spain's GDP value. In any case, Italian families remain well capitalized, thanks to a trail of generations of savings accumulated over time and fattened by the results of good investments. This has become a kind of mass life jacket as well as an extraordinary resource for the country, which to date has been used badly and very little.

It is interesting to analyze the Italians' point of view on aspects that directly or indirectly concern savings, to understand what it is they expect from the money they are saving, and possibly which public actions are considered to be desirable and which are regarded with suspicion and even hostility.

A strong idea that is rooted in Italians is that savings in cash or on current accounts, and savings intended for financial investments should not be taxed more than those intended for investments in the real economy, from companies to infrastructure: this is what 76.8% of Italians believe, as opposed to 23.2%, and this majority opinion transcends social groups and territories.

This fact contains a warning: in a context in which the social mood is characterized by uncertainty, and the reaction of the masses (each according to their own possibilities) is to generate precautionary cash, Italians absolutely do not want to see this money taxed more highly than other options. For Italians, the attractiveness of investing in the real economy cannot lead to penalizing taxations. It is a very pragmatic approach and basically confirms a kind of mass sensitivity towards any form of taxation of cash savings that constitute a vital lifesaver for families on both a practical and a psychological level.

Any pressure into virtuously orienting savings towards the real economy could have a boomerang effect. At this stage, Italians would not see it as a positive choice for development, but rather as a penalty for savers who opt for cash precisely because it allows them to respond to their own needs, which are induced by widespread insecurity.

Declining consumption, precautionary savings, and Covid-19: how to give the middle class its confidence back?

Thinking about consumption today - especially in a forecasting way - requires a multidimensional approach. It is necessary to take into account:

- what occurred in terms of concrete impediment to the acts of purchase when Italians experienced the impossibility of reaching the shops and/or when the shops were forced to close down;
- the impact on household income due to loss of work, temporary or permanent suspension of activities, the application of ordinary and extraordinary 'Cassa Integrazione' (redundancy support fund), potential loss of rent, financial losses, etc.;
- the sentiment of households with regard to the future, the overall impact of the crisis and the impact on the specific economic and working conditions of households;
- forecasts regarding the possible and feared second wave of infections in the immediate future, in particular next autumn;
- impact of the anti-contagion measures (distancing, masks, etc.) that were planned for (or rather, forced on) consumers and retailers post-lockdown.

Regarding the latter, it is to be expected that there will not be a quick restart of consumption processes; some initial signs are already pointing in this direction.

It is very difficult to imagine that postponed and already available purchases will give life to a 'V bottom' type of consumption curve.

Italians entered the Covid-19 emergency with great uncertainty about the near future, and today they are coming out of it in fear. A fear that is two-pronged: the fear of contagion and the fear of an economic collapse.

Fear is certainly not an engine of consumption: in fact, at best it leads to excessive caution, discouraging people from spending. In a worst-case scenario, it turns into irrational seclusion and ultimately a source of unhappiness.

Fear is portrayed through relationships: demonizing places and patterns of consumption, alluding to the immorality of consumption as mere consumerism, expanding prohibitions and threats, announcing fines and closures, and intensifying police patrols to hunt down those who do not respect the rules. All this creates a climate that is opposite to what is needed, and inhibits the desire to spend as a result of custodial and emergency pressure on places and forms of consumption.

Fear blocks or inhibits everything outside of the home, and it is an illusion to imagine as a possible solution a perfect substitution effect between consumption which is domestic (or which became that way during the emergency) and consumption outside the home, as well as between purchases in stores and online purchases: woe to miss the decisive role of the atmosphere (the *air du temps*) and the hybridization between physical and online for food and non-food.

Even the most virulent crises have a destructive charge, pushing companies out of the market and onto the sidelines, but they are also extraordinary channels of new energies and accelerations of trends that are already in place, even if they are minority or niche.

As well as being a seal of quality, the Italian trademark has long been synonymous to consumption, from food to designer clothing, which embody a kind of mass glamour. It is no coincidence that in modern times the 'Made in Italy' label has been one of the most powerful vehicles for conquering the minds, hearts and wallets of consumers, both in Italy and abroad.

During and even before the lockdown, a new dimension of the Italian trademark emerged: a guarantee of safety, in line with the most protective of health norms.

"I buy Italian because I like to buy safe, first of all for my health": already in the early stages of lockdown, this mantra became prominent in the purchasing criteria of Italians. In fact, a Censis survey shows that, among Italians who have changed their habits due to the pandemic, 59.8% have done so by buying more Italian products, even if they are more expensive. In terms of food, as many as 55.7% avoided buying and consuming non-Italian products.

Alongside the idea of a safe Italian trademark is the preference for stores run by Italians. Stores run by foreigners are avoided by 35% of Italians who changed their behaviors during the onset of Covid-19. Yet, the neighborhood stores of Bengalis, Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese and other foreigners have long exercised an indisputable social and economic function, which is highly appreciated by Italians. However, fear causes mistrust towards what is diverse or notably different.

Such are the distortions caused by fear: consumer choices are not driven by emotions of satisfaction, but by an irrational search for safety in response to an indefinite fear.

The lockdown has focused the attention and purchases of consumers: in fact, the consumption of food has shifted towards retail supermarket chains and neighborhood stores, which have recorded excellent sales results. For goods and services, the medium of e-commerce has taken off.

Estimates of the incremental dynamics of e-commerce show a sales increase of 144.6% between February and May, with a weekly peak of +304.6% at the end of April. Because Italians were denied access to physical stores, it forced many of them into a kind of digital mass learning which was accelerated and concentrated over time. Buying on the web was a necessity, but for many it has become a positive experience to be repeated in the future.

It will therefore be necessary to examine whether (and to what extent) the new attitude towards e-commerce will continue in the coming months, or whether it will be partly reabsorbed by the return to shopping in the presence of others or by the use of hybrid forms such as 'click and collect'. What is certain is that e-commerce is here to stay, especially since many economic operators and consumers are now directly testing its usability and power.

Italians have already figured out that the overall impact of the Coronavirus on the country's economy will be greater than that of the global recession of 2008-2009 and the subsequent national sovereign debt crisis (2011-2012). Almost three-quarters of the population believes this will be the case. In addition, more than half of Italians (57.2%) is convinced that the blow suffered by our country will be stronger than in other advanced countries.

It is therefore not surprising that only 19.2% of Italians believe the support measures issued by the government will be able to effectively counteract the economic consequences of the health crisis. Assessments of the impact of the crisis on a personal and family level also raise some red flags: 37.8% are convinced that their family will be in a worse economic condition by the end of the pandemic. 15.2% Believe they run a real risk of losing their jobs due to the coronavirus. Italians also seem very skeptical about whether the country will manage to effectively bargain on aid with Europe: only 29.2% believe that our political weight is destined to increase. The only positive note in this large survey: 61% of Italians are convinced the pandemic has opened up possibilities for starting to 'live differently' thanks to the sudden spread of digital technologies.

In this context of uncertainty and pessimism, how will the purchasing behavior of Italians evolve between now and the end of the year? We can find a first clue in the purchase forecasts that Censis and Confcommercio release every year in the context of the Osservatorio Outlook Italia. The 2020 survey (carried out in March) confirms the hierarchy of the different types of goods. The forecasts seem to reward technological goods: about 30% of households plan on buying them.

This is the only type of goods that shows an increase, albeit a small one compared to 2019. In second place are household appliances (although they drop from 29.6% to 24.5%). This is followed by furniture (from 21.4% to 19.9%). Property renovation costs remained in fourth place, but dropped sharply (from 26.5% to 19.5%) despite the measures for tax deduction. Behind that are all other goods, each with a few percent less than in previous years.

The drop for the automotive sector is particularly noticeable: here, the intentionality of households goes from 18.1% in 2018 to 16.5% in 2019, and to the current figure of 12.1%.

Precautionary savings also increase during the lockdown. Liquidity in the portfolios of Italian households increased by €34.4 billion during the three blackest months of the epidemic (February-April): a figure almost equal to the Italian value of the ESM, which is much discussed today.

These resources are added to the €121 billion of additional liquidity accumulated over the last three years, before the explosion of the epidemic (+8.4% in real terms over the three-year period). When comparing historic values of money, this would be equal to nine times the resources of the Marshall Plan that was allocated to our country for reconstructions during the post-war period.

Fear, uncertainty and caution still make precautionary cash popular. It has been growing for some time as a familiar tool for self-control. If this trend continues at the same pace as the past three years, there will be an additional €135 billion in additional liquidity for households in 2023. For the foreseeable future, 34.1% of Italians consider liquidity to be the main instrument for their protection, together with the expansion of the public welfare system (34%) and the purchase of mutual, complementary and insurance instruments (18.6%).

The present is worrying, and tomorrow is more than uncertain. Therefore, fear penetrates into the most intimate meanderings of personal and professional life. That will be the summary of life after the emergency. However, the picture would be incomplete if we did not highlight that in the depths of Italian souls there is an extraordinary desire to live, despite perhaps being submerged in great anxiety.

This is better described as a 'fury to live', which was already reported as a resilient sentiment by Censis in their report on the social situation of the country in 2019 (*Rapporto sulla situazione sociale del Paese del 2019*), smoldering under sentiments of opposite polarities and ready to burst out at the right time, visible to everyone.

The current situation is very unstable, subject to change, and in many respects not metabolized in the public opinion. Moreover, for the first time in its history and for a long period of time, the country has been stuck with epochal drops in GDP, consumption, investment, zero turnover for entire sectors and for the budgets of entire social groups, including people who are historically unaccustomed to struggling with economic difficulties.

In this context, the configuration of moods described in this text co-exist within a psychological and material dialectic between:

- a cosmic pessimism induced by apocalyptic numbers, and the unreal situations of companies and entire sectors which are blocked or forced to operate with a very narrow gauge. The zero budget is a fact, and for now the recovery is a hope;
- a ‘fury of living’ that sees people tenaciously returning to their individual stratagems. Once anxiety turns into fury, no collapse will be possible.

The truth is that the collapse has already taken place, and now we need to rise again, even though we are conditioned by social distancing and fear. We must leverage the fury of living that is the profound engine of all resilience.

Angelino Alfano

Conclusion
*From the Season of Resentment
to a New (Reconstructive) Contract between the
People and the Elite*

The book *Beyond Rancor* originated from our will to delve into the historical and social roots of the 2018 elections, during which a solid populist and anti-European majority emerged. It definitely seemed that the country was taking the direction of criticism against the establishment. The text was printed in the early months of 2021, precisely in the weeks of the installation of a government presided by a man embodying competence and service to non-parliamentary institutions, given his past at the Department of the Treasury, the Bank of Italy, and the European Central Bank.

Such an evolution took place in less than three years: Mario Draghi's speeches to the Chamber and the Senate symbolically closed an imperfect circle. On one hand he reasserted the faith in the European integration of our country, our Atlanticism, and Italy's Mediterranean vocation, applauded at Montecitorio and Palazzo Giustiniani, also by the leaders of the previous yellow-green coalition. On the other, Draghi highlighted the vocation of the enhancement of enterprises, spoke out against tax harassment, and stressed the importance of meritocracy.

Beyond Rancor engaged us in a joint in-depth analysis of the basic processes which affected the evolution of the middle class from the birth of the Republic up to today, rather than a reflection about sheer electoral dynamics and their consequences on politics and policies. The issues of family, business, their developmental dynamics in the last decades, and children's lower and lower aspirations and hopes in the future compared with their parents' are of particular attention. The working of the main-springs and the brakes of the social elevator led us to outline the disruptive effects of the first two decades of the century: growing mistrust, rancor, indecisiveness, but a middle class looking for its own path of evolution and expression. A beginning of the century which saw an extraordinary series of factors of radical change in the social order and mood, as rarely happened in history and recent history. Indeed, the Italy and the Eu-

rope of the beginning of the century experienced a change in currency, the extraordinary impact of globalization, the digitalization revolution, the greatest international security crisis with terrorist attacks which also caused bloodshed in the European capital cities, the longest and deepest postwar economic crisis, the most shocking humanitarian crisis of migrants and refugees of the second postwar period and, more recently, with Covid-19, the most serious health crisis of the last one hundred years.

All these factors of transformation considered, a change was unavoidable. The extent and the latitude of these phenomena affected the economic position of all citizens, the sense of future of the new generation, the vulnerability of families, our individual perceptions in social, economic, and physical-territorial terms, determining a new relationship between self and community, self and family, and – unavoidably – self and the institutions.

This new subjective positioning did not simply provoke poverty, but also new richness; it freed from indigence millions of people, as never before in history. Still, rancor became consolidated like a layer of ice on a frozen lake, making resentment towards the elites, and more specifically the ruling classes, evident. The combination of economic malaise and fight against corruption became the fuel in the engine of the populist machine. On the other hand, the effects of globalization, strengthened by the complete demolition of all technological frontiers between countries, global and immediate communication, along with factors such as migratory movements, generated anxiety and need to protect the frontiers and the national borders; need for a sort of “closure.” Hence *souverainism*.

The main key by which we interpreted the society of the last years, in cultural more than political terms, has been undoubtedly the fracture between the people and the elite. This deep divide generated in the public opinion a refusal not only of the representatives of the elite but also of the same general notion of elite, up to the point the word acquired a generalized negative connotation.

Protest against people who hold relevant roles in a given field is a democratic driver of change. After all, Pareto, one of the first theoreticians of the sociological concept of elite, warned us against the risk of stagnant groups unable to renew themselves. On the other hand, the demand for a society which can completely do without individuals and groups capable of standing out and assuming a leadership function in processes can create incalculable damage. A democratic society cannot do without an elite, understood as an heterogeneous group of men and women capable of posing problems with competence and analytical skills, foresee processes, and welcome change as an incentive.

As we saw in the chapters of the book, the history of the Italian middle class is also the history of the country's moral endurance: Italy was built by the imagination, projects, and life stories of people and families whose way of life consisted in constant hardworking and creative growth. Still, at least from the beginning of the '90s, the failure of the social elevator did not regenerate the ruling classes and did not produce generational and group successions in the apical roles. Today the reduction of the middle class is thus a real social problem: it increased the distance between the people and the elites and provoked a widespread rancor whose roots are in the performances of the elites themselves. We cannot hide that the people-elite fracture was also due to the administrative incapability to widen the dream, the imagination, and the possibility of growth of more than half the Italian population.

Can the election of Draghi open a new phase, also from a social perspective? Does this new political phase of the country represent the end of the rancorous age? Or is it simply the cooling of feelings which will flare up again in the future? I would like to try to answer these questions with a comparison: there is a period of the republican history which is worth mentioning because of some equally interesting similarities and differences with the current one: the period which led to the birth of the De Gasperi IV cabinet.

On June 9, 1947 the democratic statesman spoke to the Constituent Assembly in order to give birth to the first government to break parliamentary unity between the political parties in the National Liberation Committee. The coalition, which excluded socialists and communists, had two main aims: facing the economic crisis generating trust in the business world and establishing a privileged relationship with the United States.

On January 3 of that same year, De Gasperi had fled to Washington with a delegation consisting of personalities of the caliber of the then Director of the Italian Foreign Exchange Office, Guido Carli, on the occasion of the "bread trip" – a name which conveys the extent of the gravity of the Italian situation in that period.

That diplomatic trip created the conditions for a *special relationship* between Italy and the United States, leading our country to be welcomed by international institutions even though it was the first among the losers of the war. But the main outcome of the mission were the economic aids which Italy received to develop its market economy, a process which would later grow stronger with the approval of the Marshall Plan, after the victory of Christian Democracy in the 1948 elections.

In terms of foreign policy, the consequence of such a stance was the gradual breach, personally encouraged by the American president Truman, between the parties of catholic and liberal orientation and those inspired by the socialist and communist doctrines.

After an intermediate phase during the De Gasperi III cabinet, which ended in May 1947 and was characterized by the “forced collaboration” necessary to approve the Peace Treaty, the first Christian Democratic majority government, supported by two liberal ministers and two independent ones, was born. Luigi Einaudi, liberal and then Governor of the Bank of Italy, was appointed to the Ministry of Balance.

The joint analysis of that historical phase and the one which we are going to experience offers interesting interpretations. In both cases Italy faces a crisis after a global event – the war at that time, the pandemic today.

In that period assurance of reliability was guaranteed by De Gasperi, a politician representing the parties’ ruling class. Today it is guaranteed by Draghi, a figure outside political factions.

In the postwar period, the establishment of a loyal friendly relationship with the United States provided the only possibility of recovery to a European country belonging to a continent which was torn apart and brought to its knees by the conflict. Today Italy’s main area of political action is the European Union.

Opportunities and tactics excluded, the discriminating factor which, as for politics at the time of De Gasperi, we could *ante litteram* define “Atlantic” is, for Draghi’s government, the adhesion to the European project.

Is it possible to equate the Marshall plan and the Recovery Fund as well? This is a risky comparison for many reasons. The former was a non-repayable grant guaranteed by a third country, which mainly ensured supply of goods, machinery, raw materials, and even foodstuffs. Today the Recovery Fund is indirectly funded by the states themselves and its aim is not the reconstruction but the transformation of the sectors, since its main guideline is ecological transition, an environmental variable which in the postwar period did not exist and could not affect development.

The times, the protagonists, and the conditions are different, but there are two constant factors. The first one concerns the processes’ geopolitical dimension. History evolves, the scenarios change, but we always find ourselves acting in a world of connections and relations. The second one involves the role of the ruling class and its capability to be up to the challenges. Those who are called to positions of responsibility must induce trust and work with discipline and honorably in order to perform their

duties. A discipline which becomes the conduct of the public power and not only of the people of who serve the institutions.

I want to quote verbatim here what Alcide De Gasperi meant to express in his speech to the Constituent Assembly on the occasion of the birth of his fourth cabinet:

This strict self-discipline which we, as a State Administration, impose to ourselves will set an example for a country which needs so much discipline, so that the special interests will not surpass the interests of the community and all will be coordinated to the common Good. It will mostly be a factor of trust for the institution itself and the eminent man at its head.

Italy, as a Country System, has always been able to produce, in all fields, excellencies capable of resisting a certain narration based exactly on the demolition of the elites, not only through their representatives but also through the same notion of the necessity of a ruling class. The symbols of such excellency are present in the most various disciplines and fields: from scientific research to business, from journalism to culture, from professions to the public sector.

Does the appointment of an economist, scholar, public executive, and bank official of international fame to a political-institutional role mark for our country a return to competence meant as a positive value wished for by the public opinion rather than simply acknowledged? I obviously hope so: it would imply the end of the season of resentment and constitute the best premise for national reconstruction. I think that the huge health, technological, social, and economic challenges posed by the pandemic currently represent an input in that direction.

Of course, it is important that the champions perceive the sacrifices of the team, always feel part of the match, set everyday an example with their dedication and talent. In short, they must be able to assume a leadership role, does not imply mere exercise of power, but capability to make an alliance and lead a group towards a common aim.

In conclusion, I also want to highlight an aspect which has been overlooked in the debate concerning the middle class and the Italian fractures: the possibility for a people to generate and regenerate an elite. A lively people, united by the things it loves, can reconstruct a ruling class: «nobody saves himself on his own, we can face big changes only together.» On December 15 professor Sergio Mattarella exhorted us with these words to «take care of the Republic». The care of the Repubblica concerns the suburbs, the most problematic metropolitan districts, the mountain ter-

ritories, and the little insular realities where millions of Italians face the greatest difficulties.

These are words uttered before the pandemic and upon which the virus confers more cogency. Because of those unpredictable changes with which historical circumstances sometimes face humankind, perhaps it will be exactly the pandemic to end the season of rancor and resentment. And probably the pain and the mourning for our dead will be the ethical and social foundations for a reconstruction, a pacified relationship between the people and the elite, in a pact for national reconstruction. It is too early to say if this will certainly happen, but not to express the most heartfelt wish that it can really happen.

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Indice

Lorenzo Malagola

Introduction

Scared, Sorrowful, Torn, but still in Search of Direction 5

Section 1

Retracing the Middle Class

Matteo Orlandini

The middle class, between illusions and historical evolutions 13

Salvatore Martinez

Family: a vital and experiential environment, foundation
of a new social order 35

Eoin Drea

The Italian middle class within a European context:
a case that is not unique, but particularly vulnerable 53

Luca Vitale

The elevator is stuck. Middle class, inequality, resentment.
How to start over? 73

Section 2

In the Footsteps of Change

Enzo Risso

Phenomenology of the middle class 97

<i>Enzo Risso</i>	
The middle classes. The social archipelago of a fluid class	141
<i>Andrea Toma</i>	
Projective analysis. What does today's middle class aspire to?	
Which traits will define the collective imagination in the future?	183
<i>Angelino Alfano</i>	
Conclusion <i>From the Season of Resentment to a New</i>	
<i>(Reconstructive) Contract between the People and the Elite</i>	215
The Authors	221

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