

The re-enchantment of the world in the age of tribes

The aim of this thesis is to illustrate the original point of view of the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli. According to him, in a globalized world people tend to come together to survive in the jungle of the megalopolis. The author's main focus are the analysis of everyday life and the relations between human beings whose nature is empathic and emotional. To study this phenomenon though, it is necessary to understand the background in which it occurs: the shift from the modern age to the postmodern one.

The postmodern age has been described by Jean François Lyotard as the end of what he used to call the Great "meta-narrations" such as Idealism, Enlightenment and Marxism. It is difficult to define this epoch though, authors like Antony Giddens would argue that *postmodernity is modernity understanding itself*¹. However, a point with which the majority of the scholars agree, is that postmodernity refuses the previous ideologies and values considered to be misleading. One the main values that is discussed, is the one of authority. Authority is not anymore perceived as something positive that helps people grow, as in the Latin etymology of the word, but it is considered to be a limit. Our author would say that *la loi du père ne fait plus recette*² meaning that we are living in a society in which brotherhood is more important than vertical relations. Moreover, an aspect that is in discussion is the one concerning modernity and its trust of men towards their own reason, both in scientific fields and in philosophical fields. People believed that science would have always progressed and that there were no enigma that human reason could not solve, because there was anything transcendent and inexplicable. Max Weber would *post litteram* define this sureness as a *disenchantment*³ of the world. An example of this approach is Kant's philosophy: according to him men had to ask Nature to explain its mysteries at the same way a judge asks the criminal to confess his crimes⁴. The real significance of this metaphor is that there is no metaphysic riddle that humans are not able to unravel. Not only in the Enlightenment human reason was trusted, but also with Idealism, in fact Hegel believed in the eternal progress of History by means of the Absolute Spirit, that was by definition rational.

Nevertheless the history of the 20th century is full of events that show how trust in science and eternal progress was too optimistic. The relativity theory discourages the faith in the possibility to explain every phenomenon with precision and even Positivism fails in condemning everything irrational: Freud and his psychology prove that the analysis of unconscious could be scientific as well. Lyotard perfectly expresses these concept by arguing that if Hegel asserted that everything real was rational, the horror of Nazism

¹ A. Giddens, *Le conseguenze della modernità*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1994

² M. Maffesoli, *Le réenchantement du monde. Une éthique pour notre temps*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2007

³ M. Weber, *Science as a profession*, Milan, Mondadori, 2006, p. 27

⁴ I. Kant, preface of the first edition of the *Kritik der Reiner Vernunft*.

shows that although it was real a monstrosity as Auschwitz could not be rational. He continues by proposing the example of communism and its failures in Budapest 1956 and Czechoslovakia 1968 when the Soviets violently repressed insurgencies. So Idealism and its sons, Communism with Marx and Fascism with Giovanni Gentile, disappointed the postmodernity who stopped believing in those ideologies. According to Weber himself disenchantment had limits, in fact he had understood that science is and will never be able to explain the metaphysical problems that afflict human beings, such as the meaning of life and the fear of death. Accordingly, in Maffesoli's opinion, the postmodern age is looking for what he defines a re-enchantment, in order to find a sense to the existence.

Another element that has grown weaker nowadays is religion. The Jews and the Christians both believed that man was created by God, so his essence was given by the creation. If there is no otherworldly entity, then man has no essence *an sich* but he makes his own with his choices. This ontological modification has as a consequence that the individual becomes multidimensional and remains with no immanent essence, so he acquires a dynamic characteristic. This is why there is a link between nihilism and dynamism, because as Gianni Vattimo would argue, the problem of our age is in the refuse of accepting things in their eternal becoming instead of searching for a transcendent ontology. It is well known that Jean Paul Sartre, quoting the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, would say that if God does not exist, then everything is permitted. As a consequence, in a world with no religion there is no tension towards what S. Augustine called *Civitas Dei* and life must not be projected in the way to a far and perfect future. So we should accept the confusion of life and stop being stuck to a universal moral. According to Maffesoli, if the *élite* do not understand that this moral is dead, society becomes an entity that forces people to be something they are not willing to be. The new model of behavior then is not the one of a rational man that aims to gain Paradise, but the one of a *puer aeternus*, the eternal young boy who lives life moment by moment with detachment or, as our author would write, *being cool*.

Still, even if it would be interesting to continue in the analysis of these ideological factors, in order to understand postmodernity it is impossible not to focus on the new technologies. The new media and globalization concurred to connect people all around the world. David Held, an expert in the Globalization process, has underlined the importance of means of communication to spread ideas. The result is a combination of values and ways of thinking that, combined, will eventually create a new society with new principles. Our epoch seems to be confused because those different points of view are cohabitating in a polytheism of values without forming a unique new ethos. Everything is undefined because, as in every transitional time, the chaotic contradictions must find a balance to create a new order. Hence we are living a period in which every possibility is conceivable and in this frenzy consists the richness of our times. In spite of this we must know that we are assisting to a change towards something still indefinite that refuses

the old moral. This is why those who share certain values tend to create a smaller community inside the country, what Maffesoli calls tribes. We shall now explain how and why they are born.

The need to form a group is derived from what we can call a saturation of the principle of individualism. If the substance of humanity is none, man is not anymore an individual but a multiplicity of *persons*. It is curious that the idea of person comes from Latin and it used to mean "mask". At the same way, men wear masks in everyday life based on the circumstance in which they play a role as in a theater. In fact the main difference between the idea of individual and the one of person, is that individuals have a specific function in society whereas persons have a variety of roles to play. A function is needed in a stable and rational society but in a chaotic one, the mask helps the person to be integrated in the whole context. The postmodern man is like Dionysus, the Greek god with thousands of personalities: the tragic one, the ludic one, the ambiguous one. Ambiguity is the key word of postmodernity that does not accept anything defined. In fact the concept of definition implicates an *aut aut*, meaning that deciding what to be means deciding what not to be. If life is a dynamic flux it becomes impossible to trap it in a static form and we can find examples of this in the use that we make of words such as "meta" or "trans", both in fashion that becomes androgynous and in gender matters. So it is impossible to conciliate Dionysus and individuality since this concept does not permit to explain how the single loses himself in the mass. If individualism is finished, the single must find an extension of the self by grouping with the others.

What is restored then, is the idea of community instead of the one of society. The second one tends to projects to realize in the future, whereas the first one tends to a self-creating energy and to the joy of sharing feelings. The purpose of staying together is to live collective emotions in company, refusing political missions and being passionate in a Dionysian way. In these empathic relations we assist in the rise of the new tribes. Rituals are fundamental in those tribes because being repetitive helps the creation of social cohesion and helps to dispel those fears such as death. In his *Elementary forms of religious life* Émile Durkheim points out that living in group the tragedy of death not only is helpful, but it is indispensable. Without ritualizing those events, individuals would *renounce to exist*⁵. This aspect allows us to go deeper in our analysis. Rituals produce an ecstasy that must be interpreted in his existentialist meaning of ek-stasis. By using this term Martin Heidegger meant that human being always look for a way to transcend themselves, so they feel fulfilled in their social dimension. Ek-stasis means finding a realization of the self not by means of the others, but together with the others to create a mystic collective body. For this reason the group becomes more important than the single and this is why Maffesoli talks about *gruppisme*⁶ in

⁵ É. Durkheim, *Elementary forms of religious life*, Milano, Edizioni di comunità, 1971, p. 436

⁶ A. Berque, *Vivre l'espace au Japon*, PUF, Paris, 1982, pp. 167, 169. Quote in M. Maffesoli, *Il tempo delle tribù. Il declino dell'individualismo nelle società postmoderne*, Roma, 1988, p. 46

which its members care more about the interests of the group than about the interests of the self. The others are so important that human beings live and act to be approved by their peers. Even taking care of the body and following fashion is a way to prove to belong to a specific group and looking better becomes a way to live through the other's glance. Michel Foucault would talk about *souci de soi*, that means taking care of the self not to dominate the others looking more beautiful, but to please them.

It is obvious that the sharing of emotions is easier if the members are limited and this makes us introduce the key elements of tribes: the first is the religious one in its sense of making a bond between people and the second is proximity that helps the formation of small groups. Proximity is essential in the study of tribes. In the chaos of the inhuman megalopolis the anomic society needs some human kindness. The energetic flux of the mass feels restrained in the moral obligation and wants to live restoring its animal instincts. So the local dimension becomes the place where the person can escape from the hyper-rational State still tied to the modern logic. The small town, the bar of the block, the park, become urban totems that integrate the single in a holistic context, mutating into myth. Nature, as a primordial place that gave humans birth is celebrated as a divinity. An example is the New Age in whose philosophy every anecdote and element is as relevant as the others, being integrated in a whole amalgam. Even the perception of history changes. People are more interested in the small events of their lives instead of being concerned of the great events of a Hegelian History: stories against The Story. This is the reason why Maffesoli is more interested in the study of everyday life instead of the epochal events in politics, because sharing the memories of a certain place makes the community feeling stronger.

We are assisting then at an age who is not yet defined but whose elements are already known: esthetics, hedonism, sharing of feelings, importance of everyday life. All those elements combined contribute to form the so called "style" of the time. To define what we mean for style, we can employ a metaphor that Gilbert Durand, Maffesoli's Professor, has used to clarify it. An epoch is like a multiplicity of streams that flow into a unique river. Every stream is completely different from the others and at a superficial glance it might look like they have anything in common, but after they merge they all show a variety of aspects of the same age. The style is the *fil rouge* that links all the effervescences and in the postmodernity we can say it coincides with the search for affective analogy. If we have underlined that the main aspect is the refuse of modernity and its rationalism, the style will be oriented towards a-rationalism. It would be incorrect to talk about irrationalism since even there is a critic that proposes an alternative logic it doesn't imply that this new way of thinking is illogic. The new ethic is in contrast with the previous one, so even piercings and tattoos can be read as an attempt to shock and to show an unconventional way of behaving.

The new ethos then, is based on an apology of the foolishness from literature to cinema, whose characters live their passions without concerning about what would the common sense be. Even the ludic aspect of

life is reestablished as normal, and in this perspective we explain the proliferation of lotteries, crap games and slot machines. After all these games involve fortune, and there is nothing less rational than fate. Observing this return of the metaphysic, of the grouping of people that live rituals together, we can talk about re-enchantment of the world, in which the model to follow is the *puer aeternus*. However, this eternal young boy is someone who enjoys life with his perfect, young and androgynous body, but this stress on being eternally young hides a deep fear of death. Living day by day with pleasure is refuting the self into hedonism caring about fashion, eating organic food, consuming luxury goods. Then again this hedonism is not pure joy but it is a way not to think of the future. Michel Maffesoli cites Gianni Vattimo's example of the nuclear catastrophe. Enjoying life in this perspective is to try to benefit of every single instant as if it was the last day on earth to live and a calamity was approaching. Huizinga, in his study on the end of the middle ages, pointed out that in periods of crisis there are three ways of escaping reality. The first one consists in the projection towards a transcendent world. The second is through other people, donating in charity and showing solidarity whereas the third is an escape to an imaginary world dreamed as better than the real one. Coherently to this point of view it is possible to explain why fantasy novels are so popular nowadays. Therefore even esthetic changes and in the tribes we can observe how monsters and grotesque images are used to raise emotions and to exorcise those fears. Images are in fact symbols that create cohesion and connect the earth to otherworldly meanings. Nonetheless images can be also used as totems in everyday life as in concerts, rave parties, parades to make people vibrate together in a holistic whole. If we pointed out that postmodernity aims to live life at the moment instead on focusing on the future, it is clear that politics is diminished. People are increasingly less engaged into politics perceiving it as useless or as an instrument of power in the hands of the establishment. To defend themselves from abuses of the *élites* the mass does not react but uses irony to hide with affability the will to be independent. Nevertheless the paradox is that postmodernity stops engaging to build a better future, but this withdrawing to the ephemeral is a symptom of disappointment and anxiety in real life.

To summarize the position of Michel Maffesoli, the rigidity of the megalopolis and its chaos due to the globalization has caused a reaction of people that is willing to live without moral restrains. In the inhuman asset of the postmodern world there is the need to create new bonds based on empathy and sharing of common emotions. If modernity had been focused on ideologies and on a rational conception of human beings, postmodernity desires to embrace the Dionysian aspect of life grouping into tribes that restore the metaphysic that had been refused until the 20th century. This is how we can read the excitement of celebrating Nature, Fate or simply vibrating together during concerts or sport events, because they let the single exist and *ek-sist* in a holistic dimension.

