

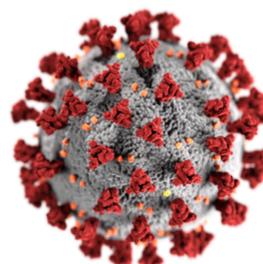
Essay

COVID-19, Discipline and Blame

From Italy with a Call for Alternative Futures

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The preventive measures implemented to contain the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy involve the self-isolation of the population. At the same time, I argue, an ethos of self-discipline is promoted, leading to ambiguous results. Although the pandemic may allow some people to imagine a different future, others have perceived it as the beginning of a war. And in this war, the most critical aspect is distributing blame and punishing the agents responsible for the contagion – the undisciplined ones who threaten social collectivity.

Since mid-February, the Italian government came forth with several pronouncements, starting with the shutting down of businesses in some areas of Northern Italy and ending up with declaring a whole region as a red zone whose borders were to be isolated. The crisis spiraled to the point that, on the 10th of March 2020, the government implemented a Ministerial Decree, including special measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the whole country. Among these, the population self-isolation was initially only suggested, but with many increasingly restrictive instructions, it eventually came to be imposed by means of fines and threats of charges for non-compliant individuals. For those who tested positive for the virus, even if asymptomatic, an absolute prohibition to leave home has been

imposed. But also, others' freedom of movement has been gradually limited to the point of being allowed out only in case of proven extreme needs. Every citizen who leaves home must bring a self-certification form, declaring the reason for his or her movement. Police officers and soldiers patrol the streets, collecting evidence and issuing fines when they consider the reason for moving outside the home as not justifiable. The penalties were initially meant to tarnish the offenders' criminal record; subsequently, given their high number, they became civil and financial penalties, ranging from 400 to 3000 euro. The self-certification form defines what the recognized essential needs for moving are: to buy groceries, to let the dog out, serious health reasons, to throw the garbage, to go to the pharmacy, or for work. These essential needs should always be met within a certain distance from one's residence. All productive activities considered not 'essential' have been suspended – most shops, gyms, cinemas, and so on – while, whenever possible, people have started working remotely, as in universities and schools. Many public spaces have been closed, like parks, and any large meetings have been forbidden. The self-certification forms have changed many times, following the ordinances, increasingly limiting the scope for citizens' interpretation of the directives to be followed.

'We are at War': Moral Attributions of a Pandemic

The measures taken in the name of an extreme emergency are extraordinary; a state of exception limiting individual rights that Giorgio Agamben ([Agamben 2020](#)) has immediately denounced. Agamben's article received a lot of criticism, inside and outside of anthropology. Some critics, for example, underlined that the risk of contagion is real, not invented ([d'Arcais 2020](#)), and others invited reflections on how the virus would produce a state of suspension that could productively encourage self-reflection and lead us to imagine a new and different future ([Favole 2020](#)). Isolation, according to others, would not only result in the denial of the Other seen as a plague spreader, but it could also allow for a form of self-consciousness encouraging care for the Other while waiting to fight again for a better society ([Volpi 2020](#)). These are insightful criticisms amid an already vast debate about the pandemic ([Dei 2020](#)).

However, Agamben was not the only one to approach this pandemic as a state of exception. At the early stages of the spread of the contagion, media communications in Italy about the risks and consequences were often confused and unsuccessful, moving on from reassuring tones to alarmist ones ([Saitta 2020](#)). Maybe as a result, politicians started framing the pandemic with discourses that evoked a Schmittian state of exception. Together with leading economists like Mario Draghi ([Draghi 2020](#)), political leaders have repeatedly depicted this as an extreme situation in which the government must allow 'war measures. There are no half measures' ([Zapperi 2020](#)). In television broadcasts, discussions often slip into the war script, and also some medical doctors, even when engaged with official state bodies such as the Ministry of Health, invite people to be ready for 'a long war' ([Skytg24 2020](#)). Every evening, the Italian civil protection broadcasts on the TV a bulletin with the updated number of deaths, infections, and recoveries. On

the 31st of March 2020, many municipalities in Italy hoisted their flags at half-mast in memory of the virus victims; not only the sick but also the fallen, the doctors, called by the press ‘angels in scrubs’ who fight at the front line in the war against the virus.

The SARS-CoV-2 is a virus that, as a lethal weapon, has produced a significant number of deaths in Italy; the containment measures adopted are based on data considered ‘hard’ by their proponents, sacralized by medical research and quantitative analytics. And yet, it is not the first time that a disease has been accompanied by metaphors of war, even among doctors. The ‘invasion’ of bacteria, or the ‘war’ on cancer, have been attributions of meaning and morality that often accompanied the appearance of illnesses that were little understood or too shocking because of their fatality ([Hodkin](#) 1985; Sontag 1990). If we are told that we are at war with the COVID-19, it is necessary to identify who threatens us from within a community once again imagined as united (Anderson 1983). Since anyone can carry the virus, perhaps without symptoms and without being aware, the difficult task of identifying the undisciplined ones leads, in some cases, to assuming a daily *habitus* based on suspicion. In a way that recalls Edward Evans-Pritchard’s (1937) work, one must beware of both the malicious ‘sorcerer’ and the involuntary ‘witch’. The virus is a biological agent without its own will, but the experience of the illness (inevitably, always) overflows with meaning, as anthropologists know well. Social scientists can contribute to highlight these less apparent aspects of the pandemic, if not through fieldwork (tricky in times of pandemic), at least through the extensive description of what happens around them. An example is an analysis of that which is conveyed through social media in times of self-isolation.

‘Everyone has to Shut Down’

Discipline, Morality and Ethics in a Neighborhood of Rome

Take the example of what life looks like in a working-class neighborhood in Rome, Torre Angela, at the times of COVID-19. Since the last Decree, many people devoted some of their time watching the streets from their balconies, focusing on those who, in their opinion, did not behave in a disciplined manner. Through stories spread via WhatsApp and Facebook groups, which soon took the place of other forbidden forms of gatherings, political representatives of the community reported those who did not comply with the rules. People behaving in ways that previously did not provoke particular reflections, such as going for a morning run around the neighborhood, started to be looked at with suspicion and resentment; they were those who, hedonistically, only thought about themselves, and did not care about others. It did not take long before, along the runners, other categories of disobedient citizens and behaviors emerged. Torre Angela is, indeed, a multi-ethnic neighborhood, with many spaces, commercial activities, and religious places, such as Christian Pentecostal churches, owned and frequented by foreigners of various nationalities, among which the Nigerian one dominates. When the shutdown of non-essential commercial activities was declared, Nigerian shops were promptly reported by community politicians, and the police shut them and

fined the owners ([Benignetti](#) 2020). Moreover, videos showing people of African descent moving in the street were widely shared ([De Leo](#) 2020), often commented ferociously by the neighborhood inhabitants (*‘the rules also apply to them!’*). Such initiatives, however, are far from being the exception. For example, a form is now available on a web page of the Municipality of Rome, inviting citizens to report defiant groups of individuals to the competent authorities ([Grassi](#) 2020).

If one wishes to recall Michel Foucault, as Agamben does, this longing for individual discipline seems to be based on the logic and knowledge of prevention to which individuals want to conform, adapting to what public discourses declare to be moral and proper (Inda 2008). However, not all the inhabitants of Torre Angela have reacted in the same way when prompted to adhere to self-discipline, becoming the inspectors of Others’ behavior. Instead, the spread of the epidemic meant that people were forced to reflect on practices that had been taken for granted; to decide, faced with an exceptional ‘moral breakdown’ (Zigon 2007), whether and how to become moral people, and what rules to follow; this is *the* ethical moment. Some chose to act for the common good through different social solidarity campaigns, which sought to take care of those who, for example, couldn’t ‘stay at home’ simply because they were homeless ([RomaSette](#) 2020). Others, as I have shown, participated in this war, as presented by the media, in the role of soldiers, identifying the enemies responsible for putting everyone at risk because of their selfishness. In this latter case, the ‘blame for disease turns into a crusade against those who are feared or who, by being different, are viewed as a threat to the established social order’ (Nelkin and Gilman 1988, 367). Often these accusations follow existing lines of conflict, as with migrants; part of the neighborhood was perceived as consisting of outsiders even before the pandemic. In other instances, the blame took the form of reprimands directed towards those who were not willing to sacrifice themselves as the others did. From individual comments to videos of these undisciplined bodies (one among many: *‘let’s punish them with a big dose of the virus!’*) one would infer that, along with the law, part of the population is still motivated by an ‘irrational’ passion for revenge in the form of punishment, ‘which arouses an ambiguous excitement at the sight of people suffering for their misdeeds’ (Fassin 2018, 85).

The Political and Economic Structures of a Pandemic

Within the national anthropological debate about the pandemic, issues of power and inequalities associated with the health emergency are emerging, showing how this collective crisis also represents a challenge for the authority of the state ([Beneduce](#) 2020; [Costantini](#) 2020; [Imbergamo](#) 2020; [Schirripa](#) 2020). Besides the moral dilemmas posed by the pandemic to the individuals, I want to suggest here that a comparative anthropological sight might prompt reflections on another aspect of an ethos of risk-management so reliant on individual discipline. Comparison with one example among many, although different in scope, time, and space from the current situation, can help us gain a deeper understanding of discourses about self-disciplining, so crucial in this moment, and their consequences. The example I

want to mention is the ‘War Against Indiscipline’ (WAI) launched in Nigeria in 1985, a program that made the fight against indiscipline its cornerstone.

WAI was a measure aimed at correcting (through public shaming and punishment) several individual behaviors considered at the root of society’s ills. Among the troubles caused by indiscipline, some were related to public health, such as failing to use rubbish bins and defecating in public. However, the government had never built an adequate infrastructure for the disposal system, and amid an economic austerity plan, the few public toilets had become fee-based. According to some scholars, by focusing on the individual, WAI exonerated the government from its responsibilities regarding the situation experienced by the population (Stock 2007).

Today, in the social groups of Torre Angela, one can notice popular and shared formulas such as *‘if it won’t go well, the fault is of those who weren’t able to control themselves.’* Even a well-known scientific television presenter, Piero Angela, stated that the problem is that *‘Italians are undisciplined by nature’* (Cauti 2020). I am not suggesting an alternative to the preventive measures already in place. My concern is that, as it happened with the WAI, reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic might place too much emphasis on individual responsibility, overshadowing the political and economic reasons behind the current collapse of the Italian healthcare system: the systematic underfunding of the public healthcare system, and the austerity measures in the last decade. This question is slowly emerging in the Italian press, which retraced years of expenditure cuts in the public healthcare system, which resulted in a reduced ability to face the pandemic; as in a shortage of medical equipment for the doctors and intensive care places (Affinito 2020). It is precisely in times of crisis that we must look critically at the system and the measures implemented in the name of the good, and the ways in which they can dramatically transform our societies and relations to each other; we should not let ourselves be seduced by the quick-fix solutions of increased control, punishment, surveillance, shaming and blaming of individuals. This is the opposite of a position of solidarity.

In Italy, the idea that the political, social, and economic crisis caused by COVID-19 might, in the end, lead to abandoning discourses of blame and instead reimagining our societies and our relationship with the environment is gaining terrain (Moreno et al. 2020; Moretti 2020). It is too early to know what the world will look like after the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps we will go back to the neoliberal and global ‘normal,’ or policies towards new extraordinary measures of control and discipline will prevail – with which individuals will have to engage – or we can take this opportunity to imagine new possible futures and break away from the ‘capitalist realism’ (Fisher 2009), and with it from the individualization of blame, instead aiming at structural change. Public intellectuals and anthropologists should contribute to imagining these alternative futures.

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