



*Life in Time of COVID-19.
Disasters, Resilience, and Future*

CONTENTS

EDITORIALE

DE MARCHI B. - Societal Vulnerability and Resilience in the COVID-19 Crisis, 163-174

SAGGI

MANGONE E., ZYUZEV N. - Everyday Life “Turned upside Down”: Disasters, Future and Resilience, 175-193

BARBIERI A.S.A. - Men and Death in the West. Towards a New Interpretive Paradigm?, 195-209

SIMONOVA O. - Future of our Feelings: Sociological Considerations about Emotional Culture in Pandemic Era, 211-225

CIPOLLA C. - Sexuality at the Time of Coronavirus in Italy: A (Technological) Retreat in Itself?, 227-244

GIARELLI G. - The Governance of Resilience. How the Health Systems Have Coped with The Covid-19 Pandemic, 245-257

MARTINEZ-BRAWLEY E., GUALDA E. - Transnational Social Implications of the Use of the “War metaphor” Concerning Coronavirus: A Birds’ Eye View, 259-272

SCRIBANO A, DE SENA A. - The New Heroes: Applause and Sensibilities in the Era of the COVID-19, 273-285

DONATO S. - We, the European Union. Together but... far apart, 287-299



ESPERIENZE E CONFRONTI

GATTI E., STRIZZOLO N. - COVID-19 in China. The Great Wall of Technology, 301-314

NOVELLO PAGLIANTI N. - Rituals During Lockdown: The “Clap for our Carers” Phenomenon in France, 315-322

STEFANI C. - Humor During Pandemic in Romania on Facebook, 323-334

GRECO F., LA ROCCA G. - The Topics-scape of the Pandemic Crisis: The Italian Sentiment on Political Leaders, 335-346

GREGORI E., PERINO A. - The Challenges of Social Work in the Management of the Covid-19, 347-361

NOTE E COMMENTI

CIPRIANI R. - The Pilgrim Pope at the Time of the Contagion, 363-370

MAYO P. - The Corona Challenge to Higher Education, 371-376

PALAMARA G. - The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Fragility Factor within the International System, 377-382

IKWE H. - The Impact of Corona Virus on the Socio-Economic Life of Nigerians, 383-388

SCOCOZZA C. - Coronavirus Geopolitics. A Reflection on the Russian Case, 389-393

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- Peer Reviewed Journal

Note of Editor-in-Chief

This is the first Special issue of the journal *Culture e Studi del Sociale-CuSSoc*. The idea behind the special issue comes from this consideration: around the world, individuals are facing a critical moment, the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences require some reflections on many topics, often forgotten by scholars. This is the reason why many Italian and foreign scholars have been invited to give their contribution. Furthermore, now more than ever, it is crucial to share knowledge coming from multiple disciplines and that's why it was decided to write an entire issue in English.

For scientific and intellectual correctness, the contents of single articles refer to the situation as in mid-May 2020. It is necessary to clarify that because this Special issue was published when many countries were starting to reduce their emergency measures to cope with the pandemic.

Societal Vulnerability and Resilience in the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

Despite the possibility of a pandemic had been seriously considered in professional circles, most governments were taken by surprise by the rapid diffusion of the SARS CoV-2, from first reports in China (December 2019) to the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic by the WHO (11th March 2020). The same was true for the majority of citizens, unfamiliar with the word pandemic and its meaning. The nightmare scenario of a collapse of the health services and its consequences led to the adoption of measures that impacted very heavily on peoples' daily lives and required great efforts of adaptation with a high toll on the economic, social and cultural spheres. The paper focuses on some of the major vulnerabilities highlighted by the crisis, from the limited knowledge on the virus and the pandemic to the many uncertainties regarding the response of the human systems and their capacity to cope. Some positive short-term responses are identified, while long-term resilience remains doubtful, including the stability of democratic processes.

Keywords: COVID-19, Disaster, Crisis, Uncertainty, Vulnerability, Resilience.

1. Global vulnerability

Since the first report of its appearance in the Hubei province in China (December 2019) up to the declaration of the pandemics (March 11, 2020) by the WHO, and in some cases even after that date, the SARS-CoV-2 has shown the difficulty of our "advanced societies" to recognize a threat timely and consequently prepare for an adequate response.

As for many other hazards deriving from physical phenomena or human action (or a combination of the two) the possibility of a pandemic was acknowledged, and thoroughly discussed in "professional circles" (Graff, 2020), first of all at the WHO whose mandate includes monitoring of public health risks, setting international standards and guidelines and coordinating response to health emergencies. Yet, apparently a serious consideration of such eventuality was far from being a high priority on the political agenda of most countries, with a consequent lack of preparedness, let alone planning.

Of course, not even the experts can envisage in advance the specific features of a pandemic or the trajectory that leads from an outbreak to it, i.e. from the appearance of a pathogen in a specific geographical area to its uncontrollable diffusion to the whole world. Thus, even full previous awareness of a possible or even likely occurrence is embedded in many uncertainties, starting with the capacity to foresee or recognize where and when the first signals will appear. Such uncertainties illustrate the first of a series of vulnerabilities, which can be traced back to insufficient forecasting and monitoring capacities and, more broadly, a knowledge deficit at the onset of a crisis.

But even when knowledge starts to accumulate, in this case with the sequencing of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and greater availability of data and information on the COVID-19 disease, other types of uncertainties emerge regarding the institutional response from the health and political authorities at all levels, from the international to the state and local ones.

The memory of historical epidemics and the experience of recent ones should have alerted to the necessity of being precautionary and prepared, but this has hardly been the case. Previous threatening occurrences, in particular SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003 and MERS (Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome) in 2015¹ had stopped short of becoming pandemics also thanks to local effective measures of containment. Other outbreaks which struck some amongst the poorest countries didn't generate great global concern, thus leaving them almost alone to cope with the epidemics and their heavy toll in terms of loss of life, impaired health, diminished welfare, and socio-economic disruption². Instead of working as an alarm, such recent cases seem to have produced an attitude of false security among the leaders of the richer nations, with some of them dismissing the hazard as distinctive of "backward societies", thus underestimating the weaknesses of their own countries and the high interconnectedness of the world we live in. This difficulty in acknowledging the idea of being at risk can be considered as another major vulnerability, this time traceable to miscalculations of risk due to bias and failure to use available sources of information.

Despite the fact that some countries were faster and more efficient than others in putting in place effective measures of containment, the widespread delay in admitting the idea that the crisis was very serious and global triggered a chain reaction of delays. The result was the amplification of the overall vulnerability of the global system under stress, and required the adoption of more restrictive measures than those which would have been necessary with better preparedness and planning. All of the sudden, with the number of affected people growing exponentially in many countries, the possibility of the collapse of national health services became a very tangible nightmare scenario. Thus, the necessity to reinforce hospitals, in particular intensive care units, and to increase the availability of devices in short supply, in particular ventilators, became paramount together with the urgency of protecting medical personnel.

It was soon recognized that people's vulnerability to the virus and the national health service's vulnerability to the increased demands of the infection fed on each other, and together they amplified the vulnerability of the whole social system with a cascading effect. Consequently, lockdown became a measure widely adopted even by those countries which had first resisted it. Differences remained and measures were enforced in a mode consistent with each country's political culture, traditions and idiosyncrasies: command and control, technocratic management, nudging, patronizing, appealing to one's responsibility, in different combinations. Italian politicians and bureaucrats, for example, showed how ingrained is their predilection for forms, self-certifications, convoluted rules followed by even more incomprehensible explanations.

¹ The present pandemic as well as the 2003 and 2015 crises are caused by different coronaviruses, all of zoonotic origin.

² This is the case, e.g., with repeated Ebola outbreaks in Central and Western Africa since 1976. The name Ebola is taken from that of a tributary of the Congo river in Central Africa, despite the WHO recommends not to identify viruses and epidemics with geographical connotations.

As to the bulk of the general population, it is a fair guess that not only the possibility, but the very idea of a pandemic was a remote one. For the majority, even the word was an unfamiliar one, possibly recognized only through popular works of fiction with the usual script of a dreadful threat coming from a mysterious malicious agent uncovered and defeated thanks to the bravery and endurance of a bunch of extraordinary heroes rescuing humanity from a destiny of destruction and despair.

Although several countries had already adopted some measures to contain the spread of the virus, the official (and late according to some) declaration of a pandemic from the part of the WHO came as a game changer. At risk were no longer specific geographical areas or clearly identified populations, but the whole world and all its inhabitants. So, it was first necessary, similarly to what had been the case for the national authorities, to make space for a new, disturbing fact into the landscape of familiar ideas. Even before reacting in terms of acceptance, denial or any intermediate stage, the understanding of what a pandemic meant became paramount, in particular in terms of how it affected individual and collective daily lives.

Most emergencies and disasters are announced or accompanied by physical signs which, though occasionally of ambiguous significance, are perceived by our senses and alert our attention. This crisis instead was at first experienced – at least for those not yet directly affected – as a “second-hand reality” (De Marchi & Tesarini, 1991). Different from an earthquake, a flood, a fire in a chemical plant, at first the indicators of the COVID-19 pandemic consisted primarily of verbal declarations, announcements and warnings. In this respect the experience was similar to that of the industrial accidents of Seveso (De Marchi et al., 1996) and Manfredonia (Malavasi, 2020), both occurred in Italy in 1976 with the release of dioxin and arsenic respectively or the Chernobyl nuclear accident (Alexievic, 2015) in the then Socialist Republic of Ukraine (part of the former Soviet Union) in 1986, causing a radioactive fallout reaching out to very distant areas. In the case of a threatening agent that is not immediately perceived by our senses - a potentially deadly virus in this case - the instant reaction tends to be of astonishment, incredulity, even denial. In the accidents mentioned above, such attitudes were favored and even encouraged by those in charge. Indeed, both political authorities and technical operators downplayed the severity of the situation as long as possible, i.e. until even non-experts were able to detect some unequivocal signs of danger.

With the SARS-CoV-2 the situation was the opposite. The warning of an impending danger, and the invitation to act fast and in a precautionary manner came from the top international health authority and – despite criticisms, confrontation and delays – were acknowledged by states and regional authorities which laid down regulations and restrictions impacting heavily on citizens’ lifestyles. Thus, from a certain stage on, there was no alternative but to realize that a phase change had occurred, and that behaviors and habits perfectly normal and acceptable only a few days before, had suddenly become subject to sanction and stigmatized for putting oneself and others at risk. As to be expected, the reactions were quite diverse, ranging from preoccupation, fear, anxiety, dread to anger, outrage, protest and even cynicism and disbelief, in different combinations and temporal sequences. Yet, the great majority did comply based on a number of reasons: recognition of the appropriateness of the norms and the right of the political power to dictate them, willingness to show solidarity for those on the frontline (first and foremost medical personnel), concern about others’ judgment, fear of sanctions, again in different possible combinations and order of prevalence.

Recognition of the new state of affairs doesn't imply consensus, and indeed not only the measures adopted but the very urgency of the situation was and continues to be contested by many. This can be out of incredulity, skepticism, selfishness, naiveté or even fantasies about eccentric conspiracy theories. However, in many quarters there is a genuine preoccupation for the erosion of democratic rights when the power of the state pervades and penetrates the most private spheres of the lives of its citizens (Tallacchini, 2017). Thus, legitimate requests are made for openness and transparency on policy decisions and their rationale, be it scientific or other.

2. Much more than just a health emergency

At its onset the COVID-19 pandemic was addressed predominantly as a medical emergency: indeed, the spread of the infection and the resulting pressure on the health services were the main and most urgent problems to be addressed. With the notable exception of Germany, members of the advisory committees set up by most governments were selected almost exclusively from disciplines pertaining strictly to that type or problem framing³. Virtually everywhere, politicians claim that their decisions are based on scientific evidence and advice, usually equated with the bio-medical sector: virology, molecular biology, immunology, epidemiology, infectiology, public health, and similar. Indeed, legions of researchers have been mobilized in the present predicament, but while some light is gradually being shed on a few "known unknowns" (e.g. the complete genome sequence of the SARS-CoV-2 and its most likely source), deep uncertainties remain on key issues. Among other, the role of asymptomatic cases in the spread of the virus, its propagation speed, the degree to which those infected develop immunity, the time needed to produce an effective vaccine or cure and to make them available to the global population. Until then, and despite advancements in diagnostic capacity and treatment, the measures adopted are quite similar to those of historical pandemics: confinement, distancing, quarantine.

A key challenge for researchers is that the behaviour of the virus has to be studied in its interactions with humans, in their double nature of physical-biological and socio-cultural entities. In other words, it is necessary to discover and address not only the vulnerability of the human body to the pathogen, but also the capacity of response of individuals and entire societies to the pandemic. If the former is a problem difficult to solve, the latter is a puzzle with a huge number of pieces. Borrowing the fortunate metaphor that David Guston (2012) applied to emergent technologies, the question is: how many pieces will have to fit together before knowing whether the final image is a pumpkin or a tiger? The strategies adopted in assembling the different pieces will influence the rhythm of advancement toward the completion of the puzzle, but the picture that will finally appear remains outside our control and possibly beyond our imagination. Abandoning the metaphor, only the massive social experiment we are all involved in will provide a reality check for the effectiveness of the strategies to defeat the virus and overcome the pandemic without catastrophic losses or generalized collapse. Success will depend on the

³ In many countries, advisors were predominantly men, despite the presence of many accredited female scientists in the consulted disciplines, let alone on the frontline in the capacity of doctors, anaesthesiologists *in primis*, and nurses. In Italy, the PM seemed to notice only after several complaints, interrogations and even a petition. See: <https://bit.ly/3dzOTrI> See also: <https://bit.ly/3bvW0Vo> (both in Italian).

ability to design effective measures of containment combined with the individual and collective capacity and willingness to comply until the game can change thanks to a vaccine.

No doubt, mathematical models are useful tools for monitoring and forecast, but their limitations are significant for a number of technical and other reasons, not least the unawareness of such limitations or the unwillingness to acknowledge them (Pilkey & Pilkey-Jarvis, 2007; Saltelli & Funtowicz, 2015). Inescapably, modelers select certain parameters and leave out others, thus obtaining one of the many possible representations of the system they want to investigate. An ever increasing computational power has allowed the multiplication of parameters which can be taken into account but some theoretical and logical problems remain unsolved even with the increased availability of data on infections, recoveries, death rates etc., relating to different geographical areas and social settings.

And indeed, there is a big debate about the validity of models, starting from the quality of the data fed into them, leading to harsh confrontations even among members of the scientific establishment. These no longer occur behind closed doors but are aired publicly, shedding light on the real workings of science but in the meantime increasing the public's confusion. Particularly puzzled will be those with scarce scientific literacy or nourished with the dominant narrative of science as synonym of value-free and respectful debate among peers leading to consensus on the true and unique nature of reality. Those who demand "indisputable scientific certainties", be they anonymous members of the public or people in a political office⁴, are destined to be disappointed. Diverse assumptions, hypotheses and tentative explanations are part of the scientific endeavor, and even more evidently so in the present situation which perfectly fits the mantra of Post-normal science (PNS): "facts are uncertain, values in dispute, decision stakes high and decisions urgent" (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993).

This leaves room for honest dissent but also malicious attempts of manipulation or concealment, which are not always easy to tell apart from the former, while both accredited and self-appointed experts invade the communication arena, and while advisory groups, consultant committees and task-forces proliferate. Also, hubris, vanity and selfishness are not absent in the race to arrive first. In the pursuit of political gain or publicity, premature announcements are made not supported by adequate research, and without considering the often-uncritical resonance they have in the mass and social media (or perhaps precisely because of that). In any case, even leaving aside lack of integrity, the reasons why numbers are never certain are sound, manifold and plural. Ed Yong has thoroughly explored them acknowledging that "[T]he precise magnitude of the virus's fatality rate is a matter of academic debate. The reality of what it can do to hospitals is not" (Yong, 2020b).

Thus, while the experience of disease and death is no longer a "second-hand reality" (De Marchi & Tessarin, 1991), the need to understand what is happening, and where it will take us triggers a spasmodic and often chaotic search or information. An honest response should include a listing and clarification of the uncertainties of the present predicament, and a reasonable estimate of the possibility to overcome them: if, when, how. Further, it should acknowledge that new research and

⁴ On April 14, in an interview to the daily paper *Corriere della Sera*, the Italian Minister of regional affairs Francesco Boccia answered a question about the possible easing of the lockdown measures with the following statement: "Without any polemical intent, I ask the scientific community to provide us with indisputable certainties, and not three or four options for each theme". <https://bit.ly/3fKQNru> [translation mine].

additional experience may dispel some doubts whilst at the same time challenging previous certainties about known unknowns. The possibility of surprises should also be taken into account i.e. the encounter with unknown unknowns, to which the “black swan” label, inappropriately applied to COVID-19 pandemics, really belongs⁵.

Uncertainty and ignorance are impossible to eliminate precisely because reality doesn't stand still and the future that we try to foresee doesn't exist out there to be discovered, but is constantly shaped and reshaped by the combination of events totally out of our control. As mentioned above, models are powerful instruments but cannot take into consideration all the relevant parameters and their possible interactions, no matter how powerful they are. Moreover, and apart from that, they are of limited use when it comes to addressing some fundamental questions. Indeed, it is not the virus alone that decides the fate of those exposed. Decision makers, but ultimately the whole humanity, are faced with ethical choices which cannot be taken or justified by numbers alone, as they will determine who shall live and who shall die (Waltner-Toews et al., 2020).

With time, advice was sought for also from specialties other than medical ones, in particular economic and financial ones, while little space continued to be granted to the social sciences and the humanities and most notably ethics (Reisz, 2020). It would seem appropriate to look at the issue through multiple lenses but apparently it is difficult to accept that different perspectives must be combined to provide an overall picture. In other words, not all disciplinary groupings have the same remit, and each one seems to work intramoenia, i.e. with little exchange with the others.

In the national governments' list of urgent interventions, the economic sector comes next to the health sector with the urgency of designing measures to support companies and workers in distress and to reconvert some production lines in order to meet new needs, thus limiting the damage of the crisis. However, even if economic support reached all those in need, which of course is not the case, the crisis generated and amplified a series of demands which can only partially be met by loans, subsidies, bonuses, etc. Indeed, the measures of containment are such as to require immediate and considerable changes in lifestyles everywhere and for everyone. In the cases of complete lockdown, a total rearrangement of habits had to be accomplished virtually overnight, with practical as well as psychological and social costs, the most painful deriving from physical distancing which prevented the sharing of consolidated routines, customs, ceremonies, including lay habits and religious services for welcoming newborns and saying good-bye to deceased loved-ones.

3. Short- and long-term resilience

Decades of sociology of disaster research⁶ have shown the invaluable importance of pre-existing and emerging social networks in providing mutual support of

⁵ Many commentators applied Taleb's influential metaphor of the black swan (Taleb, 2007) to the pandemic, but the author repeatedly insisted (notably in his tweets) that it is not correct. Indeed, by no means can the pandemic be considered a totally unexpected or unpredictable event.

⁶ The sociology of disasters started to develop in the post-WWII years, but there were some notable precedents such as the pioneering PhD dissertation of Prince (1920) and Sorokin's (1942) seminal work (see Mangone, 2018). It would be impossible to recall even just the most important contributions here. Suffice it to mention some influential works that are not affected by the passing of time: Dynes (1974), Quarantelli (1987), Quarantelli (1998), Dynes & Tierney (1994), Mileti (1999), Perry,

both practical and emotional type in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. We can take the lockdown, rather than the declaration of the pandemic, as the time-equivalent of it, i.e. the time when something radically new occurs which imposes a rapid adjustment to a totally new situation, previously difficult even to imagine. But in this case, the blow came along with the restrictions of access to the resources of human solidarity which normally assist in absorbing it or at least limit its most devastating effects. Indeed, the norms devised for fighting the infection ran exactly in the opposite direction. Moreover, they were likely to deprive of necessary support precisely those most in need, such as disabled, sick or elderly people living alone, the homeless, and those trapped in precarious or even violent households.

Even apart from these “extreme situations”, new burdens were imposed on families, heavier still in overcrowded dwellings. Having children and teenagers permanently at home proved particularly challenging for couples and more so for single parents, most often women. Those with small children and working from home, even if in the liberal professions, had to rearrange their agendas, revise their priorities and, last but not least, adjust their sleeping schedules (Fazackerley, 2020; Minello, 2020).

Despite all difficulties, a very common response to physical distancing was social closeness, thus reviving the mechanisms of mutual help and solidarity described above for other types of disasters, by new means and through new communication channels also exploiting the possibilities offered by digital technology. Since the first days of the lockdown, creativity exploded generating a myriad of spontaneous initiatives: singing together from windows and balconies, arranging collective applause dedicated to those on the front line, rearranging spaces, inventing or converting devices to novel uses, sharing whatever knowledge, skills, competences, resources one could offer. Also, there flourished a number of individual and collective initiatives by artists, musicians, comedians, cartoonists as well as institutional endeavors by museums, theatres, orchestras sending signals of optimism and endurance from the world of culture, art and leisure. There were of course differences between countries, yet there were amazing “cultural contaminations” in the ways to manifest solidarity and support.

Never was label more misleading than “social distancing”, adopted in official jargon and uncritically taken up and diffused by the media to actually mean physical distancing⁷.

Public and private initiatives of support can be regarded as short-term palliatives to reduce fear, concern and anxiety, but they are not sufficient to dispel dread of a doomsday possibly approaching. Paradoxically negative feelings are somewhat necessary to maintain the alert on the seriousness of the situation, while premature optimism may lead to abandon early precautionary behaviours and increase the risk of a second wave of the infection. At the time of writing (mid-May 2020) this is the main concern in the countries that are starting to ease some restrictions regarding confinement and mobility.

Lindell & Tierney (2001), Dynes (2006). And of course, a long tradition of research on the human aspects of emergencies, disasters and crises exists in other disciplines as well including anthropology, economics, ethics, geography, history, law, political science, and psychology.

⁷ The expression “social distance” as originally used in psychology and sociology refers to parting (and possibly dislike) between groups based on education, income, sex preferences, ethnicity, etc. In my view, “social distancing” is an ambiguous and unfortunate label, which might suggest interpretations leaning on the one above.

However, there is by now a general awareness that a prolonged lockdown cannot be maintained without serious and possibly irreversible harm to the economy and society. Already at present, there is evidence that patients other than COVID-19 ones are not being treated properly, be it for overwork and pressure of the health services or even for fear from the part of patients themselves to request care, especially in hospitals. Precise quantification of premature deaths and worsening health conditions is difficult for physical illnesses and even more so for mental disorders, let alone pathological social phenomena such as domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, drug addiction, etc. which tend to remain hidden even “in peacetime”.

All this for the short-term, while long-term consequences are very difficult to predict and will remain very hard to assess. Undoubtedly, the idea that disasters make people more equal is totally misconceived, as the vulnerability to the hazard and the ability to cope are strongly dependent on socio-demographic and economic features. This has been confirmed to be the case by extensive social science research on all kinds of crises.⁸ The present one will be no exception, as some preliminary findings are already showing (see for example Prainsack et al., 2020)

The concept of resilience, largely utilized by social scientists, is derived from ecology and refers to the capacity of an (eco)system to respond to a perturbation by limiting damage and recovering quickly (Holling, 1973). It must be noted that recovery is not equivalent to a return at exactly the same state antecedent to the disturbance. Rather, as suggested by the associated concept of adaptive management, it implies the need for adjustment and change necessary to navigate the crisis while at the same time maintaining the key structures and functions which guarantee the system’s survival.

When applied to ecosystems, recovery may involve the selective sacrifice of parts of the population but, fortunately, such an idea arouses widespread outrage when hinted at – openly or subtly - as a strategy applicable to human systems (Hanage, 2020). In the current post-normal situation (Funtowicz & Ravetz, 1993; Waltner-Toews et al., 2020) the most sensible option is adaptive management (Holling, 1973), which consists in learning by doing, eliciting all resources and forms of knowledge available, acknowledging diversity of values and continually monitoring the results of decisions that cannot be postponed but may affect unequally the different components of the social system. Feedback is imperative in order to introduce the rectifications necessary to correct the unfair distribution of privileges and disadvantages.

An emergency situation almost inevitably shifts the balance of power and control in favour of the executive branch of the state. Governments expect citizens to trust their intentions and actions as being inspired by the interest for the common good. But to be trustful is not the same as granting a blank cheque. Governments must earn trust and be transparent about their decisions and related justifications. “They should not just be trusted but also be trustworthy” (Archard, 2020). Conversely, citizens must stay alert that democratic institutions remain accountable and that authoritarian temptations are rejected. Among other, caution is required about gadgets and digital applications which, presented as silver bullets for tracing the virus, may be more effective in tracking people instead, enabling a pervasive surveillance from the part of a restricted clique over the rest of the population. More generally and most importantly, alertness must remain high that provisional acceptance of limitations to one’s rights and freedoms doesn’t become critical acquies-

⁸ See note 5.

cence out of habit or fatigue, once the acute phase of the crisis is over. Similarly, discouraging and reporting irresponsible behaviour must not be transformed into a habit of spying on one's neighbours and look at all fellow citizens as potential villains.

If in the short-term top-down decisions can be temporarily justified, in the longer term the full involvement of the whole society is essential. Contributions must be extended to a variety of disciplinary fields and go also beyond research including practical knowledge and wisdom from those in the field, such as hospital staff, family doctors, nurses and care givers, volunteers helping homeless people, workers employed in the essential services of cleaning, garbage collection, and so on and on. Not less important will be records of previous pandemics (de Waal, 2020) and accounts of other types of disasters which can be provided also by witnesses who lived through them. In this respect, old people are a reservoir of knowledge and wisdom: hearing their personal stories can help anticipating which types of behaviours and social phenomena are likely to emerge during and after a crisis and be prepared to either encourage or contrast them.

In summary, in the present predicament nobody is just a spectator, and everyone must have the opportunity to contribute to the design and implementation of plans to enhance the resilience of individuals, communities and whole societies in the face of the present crisis as well as any possible future one, including the dreadful possibility of a new wave of the infection.

As discussed above, the lockdown has boosted ingenuity and inventiveness to an unprecedented degree. This is hardly surprising as experiences of participation and engagement of "lay people" in research and policy issues have by now a long-standing record in diverse areas of public interest, first and foremost in health and the environment. In the last decades, citizen science has been growing in its multiple expressions: from mere support to scientific investigation (e.g. data gathering) to full partnership with accredited experts in the definition and framing of research problems, constructions of research protocols, selection of methods of investigation, data collection and analysis (Hecker et al., 2018).

In the current state of affairs, plans for long term recovery cannot be top down but must be the result of processes of inclusive deliberation, i.e. the engagement of a wide range of societal actors, ideally all citizens. This must not be mistaken for a plea or an anticipation of harmony and generalized consensus, but is rather a claim for renewed political negotiation and compromise, the only alternative to violent confrontation. Although any crisis, including the present one is a motor for change, no palingenesis can be expected as a result.

Conclusion

Among the innumerable uncertainties, doubts and ambiguities in which the Covid-19 pandemic has plunged us all, one outcome would seem indisputable: the planet we'll land on (and possibly have already landed on) is not the same where we had been living up to now. Yet there seems to be a diffuse expectation that, once the crisis is over, we can go back to business as usual, though with some adaptations and changes, most of which had already been encouraged in response to other challenges, notably climate change and sustainability. However, the crisis has incontrovertibly shown that despite the abundance of knowledge and instruments at our disposal, prediction and control are just impossible. As Stirling has

effectively pointed out, “there really seems only one clear truth so far, [...] this truth is that *nobody knows* the historic implications of this moment” (2020).

Somewhat paradoxically, it is the simple structure of the virus, simpler than bacteria, which makes it so difficult to get the better of it given that there are “fewer vulnerabilities to exploit” (Yong, 2020a). To the contrary human systems, biological and social, are very vulnerable because of their overall complexity and the tight coupling between their components. Applying Perrow’s perspective, we can look at the pandemic as a “normal accident”, the inevitable result of “multiple and unexpected interactions of failures”. As the author specifies, the odd term “is an expression of an integral characteristic of the system, not a statement of frequency” (Perrow, 1984/1999: 5).

A new normality is “under construction” which can be neither predicted nor planned. The first important lesson to be learnt is that along our path we will encounter both gray rhinos (Wucker, 2020) and black swans (Taleb, 2007)⁹. As to the former, it will be our choice to recognize or ignore the threat, to prepare or to rely on chance. As to the latter, the only thing we can do is to acknowledge their possible existence and, so to say, be prepared to be surprised.

A second, connected lesson is that even if risk assessments can be improved with more and better data and with the aid of mathematical, statistical and economic models the ensuing predictions of the future are always “partial and conditional” because models inevitably simplify the complexity of reality and reduce it to a limited number of dimensions (Hulme, 2020). Consequently, we should invest our intellectual and physical resources not only on aspects of our experience which can be expressed numerically, but also in critically addressing key dimensions of our existence which are not so easily quantifiable and pertain to fairness, justice and ethics. This is equivalent to saying that we must be equally engaged in doing away with the pandemic and in strengthening the instruments of democratic governance, to avoid that the present state of exception becomes permanent.

Also, metaphors other than the bellicose ones dominant so far should accompany us on the path to the new normality. We need no heroes, be they scientists or health personnel, but people doing their part, as responsible citizens whatever their roles, offices and mandates. Scientists in particular have acquired high visibility in the present predicament and have been loaded with many expectations. While a few have worn the garments of omniscient prophets, very many have been transparent about the limitations of their knowledge, addressing technical, methodological and even epistemological uncertainties. It may well be the case that precisely these “precautionary” attitudes of openness and humility become the foundations of a relation of trust between peers, as opposed to uncritical subjugation on the one hand and prejudiced skepticism on the other (De Marchi, 2015; Marston et al., 2020)

Finally, for societies that attribute a disproportionate value to physical appearance, perpetuate the myth of permanent youth, health and beauty and dream of immortality, this crisis is a very timely *memento mori*, a reminder that, no matter what our private and collective achievements, the existence of any human being has a limited time-span. In addition, it is a powerful warning that the whole humankind is under threat.

⁹ Wucker (2020) chooses the metaphor of the gray rhino for threatening events that we can see coming and consequently allow preparation or defensive action. See also note 3.

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Everyday Life “Turned upside Down”: Disasters, Future and Resilience¹

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Abstract

Disasters change individuals and the social structure. Two categories are essential to study disasters: time and space. To these, we should add risk that is a cultural object resulting from interpretation. Its representations are subjective and they stem from the socio-cultural framework of reference. In the article, we will apply to the COVID-19 epidemic in Italy the four risk-related issues emerging by the interplay between the degree of knowledge (certain/uncertain) and that of consent (contested/complete) as in Douglas and Wildavsky. We will describe the four types of problems about the evaluation of the consequences concerning this health risk and we will consider the role of institutions. Since disasters disrupt the regularity and predictability of everyday life, the temporal dimension individuals experience is flattened onto the present. Our conclusions reflect on the possibility to counteract this and on available tools to foresee when constructing a future after a disaster.

Keyword: Disasters, Risk, COVID-19, Future, Resilience.

1. The disruption of everyday life: Sorokin and disaster studies

We will start from the idea that, in the current time, disasters are recursive. In addition, they impact greatly on many aspects of everyday life, from forms of thoughts to behaviours and from social life to societal cultural processes. Sociology is not new to disaster studies. The 1950s saw the publication of Sorokin's *Man and Society in Calamity* (2010 [1942]), in which disasters (wars and revolutions, plagues and famine) were defined and identified with the historical period.

Today, the lexicon has changed (preferring the term “disaster” to “calamity”) but their effects, regardless of their nature, have not. While scholars disagree on which events should and/or can fall into this category, they all concede that disasters upset the regularity of individuals' daily lives. The category “disaster” is a very large container which includes many events; not just wars, plagues and natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, health emergencies, etc.), but also events yielding a wide range of effects, changing individuals' and societies' normal flow of everyday life (Mangone, 2018a, 2019). Should not also a cyberattack, a terrorist attack or the thousands of migrants who continue to die in the Mediterranean, or on the border with Turkey, or the thousands of deaths due to the spread of viruses, be considered disasters?

Sorokin defines the “typical effects” that occur every time disasters of the same type strike. He affirms: «The life of any society is an incessant fluctuation between periods of comparative well-being and those of calamity. [...] Sooner or later this

¹ This article is the result of active collaboration among the authors. In the final version, Emiliana Mangone wrote paragraphs 2, 3 and 4, and Nikolay Zyuzev wrote paragraph 1.

phase is succeeded by a new stretch of well-being, which is replaced, in turn, by a further period of calamity. And so this alternation goes on, throughout the entire duration of society in question” (Sorokin, 2010[1942], p. 13). The Russian-American sociologist then clarifies: «I would stress the general principle of the *diversification and polarization of these effects* in different parts of population. By this principle is meant that *the effects of a given calamity are not identical - indeed, often are opposite - for different individuals and groups of the society concerned*, since individuals and groups differ from one another biologically and psychosocially» (Sorokin, 2010 [1942], p. 14). This also depends, of course, on the degree of exposure to the disaster. Different categories could be exposed to risk in varying degrees. Let us consider two examples: war and an epidemic particularly affecting the elderly population. In both cases, different categories experience the fear of dying in different degrees. In the case of war, the military and the population experience and face the same type of disaster, but differently (Gillespie, 1942) and the former fear of death is much higher. Similarly, in the case of a pandemic, the elderly will fear death much more than the younger population.

The effects are not only on emotional aspects, such as fear, but also on the cognitive processes of representation, memory, imagination and structuring of thought. The first change in this sense is «in the tendency of all the cognitive processes to be concentrated more and more upon the calamity and the phenomena *that are directly and indirectly connected with it, together with increasing insensitivity (beginning with sensation and perception) toward extraneous elements*» (Sorokin, 2010 [1942], p. 28). The second important change is: «*in a tendency toward disintegration of the unity of our “self” and of mental functioning. It manifests itself in an increasing incapacity to concentrate on objects unrelated to the calamity, in a growing dependence of our thinking upon fortuitous external influences; in a decreasing autonomy and self-regulation of our thoughts, independently of external stimuli; and, finally, in an access of various forms of mental disease. In brief, calamities promote the growth of mental disorderliness and disorganization*» (Sorokin, 2010 [1942], p. 35). These effects often weaken the self that tends to become amorphous and self-doubling, creating dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and different behaviours in the part of the population directly or indirectly involved in the disaster.

What Sorokin stated in the 1950s is still valid when describing the dynamics that occur in societies subjected to disasters. The crisis caused by disasters is not to be considered *sui generis*: it represents a normal moment in the life-flow that allows for the recognition of the characteristics of social systems that might not otherwise remain clouded, since the calamity generates social change and consequences on both life and the socio-psychological regulatory mechanisms.

The final chapter of *Man and Society in Calamity* is dedicated to the future (*A Glance into the Future*) and to what could be the means to exit the disaster-induced crisis (wars and revolutions, famines and pestilences) but also to the anarchy of values that can only be overcome with their greater integration and rooting. Consequently, thinking about the future during or after a disaster cannot be separated from the existence of a community (Mangone, 2018b), or grouping of individuals that is configured as such, since it is from the relationships established within the communities, in themselves positive, that will stem the planning and the reconstruction of the identity outfits and new system of needs and values.

Therefore, we need to highlight that the law of diversification and polarization of the effects of calamity is still valid today, and that, in disaster-prone communities, regardless of their nature, there is always a “before” and “after” (Van den

Eynde & Veno, 1999). Addressing the problem of overcoming the emergency becomes a priority. To this end, we should outline the dynamics characterizing the populations when a new order is being established (Mangone, 2018b).

Disasters disrupt the networks of social relations making the definition of the social structure chaotic, a process that becomes a powerful factor of socio-cultural change. Among the many examples are the occurrences in enemy-occupied territories; those – such as those hosting refugee camps – that become the destination for the part of the population that migrated to escape the harmful effects of conflicts, famine, epidemics; those contaminated by chemical agents with the consequent effects on the population. More directly related to our topic, the quarantine of part of (or all) the population to reduce the effects of an epidemic. Disasters change greatly both individuals and the social structure. They generate the need to start again, to reconnect the life-threads of individuals and the community, thus trying to imagine a possible future, looking for a project that can bring out the whole community from a crisis (unbalanced) situation and channel it towards a new equilibrium.

To understand the real consequences of a disaster for a community, beyond the victims and material damage, we should not stop at the actual moment of the disaster but go further (to the “after”) and observe what happens in later years through various paradigmatic and disciplinary lenses. We should consider the persistent sense of uncertainty for the future experienced by people affected by the calamity, their regret for the loss of both assets and loved ones, their disorientation due to forced separation from everyday habits and the inability to recognize themselves in a given historical and cultural context.

After many years, the lexicon has changed, preferring the term disaster to calamity but the effects that perturb the regularity of the daily life of individuals – on their thought, behaviour, social organization and cultural life – of the events that we call disasters have not. This is true even though scholars not always agree on which events should and/or could fall into this category².

Sorokin’s general principle thus anticipates the research approaches for studying disasters from the 1980s, based on the closely interrelated concepts of social vulnerability (Phillips *et al.*, 2010) and resilience (Manyena, 2006). As Sorokin maintained, the effects of calamities (disasters) are not the same for all individuals and their communities, and not just for the different direct or indirect involvement of individuals but also for the different types of disasters they are involved in.

In light of Sorokin’s idea that «The life of any society is an incessant fluctuation between periods of comparative well-being and those of calamity» (2010[1942], p. 14) and the subsequent *law of diversification and polarization of calamities' effects*, we can affirm that, to study disasters and their effects, time and space are two essential social categories. They are also two distinctive and constitutive elements of the phenomenology related to disasters and the everyday lives of the individuals involved in them. These phenomena can be studied in their continuous unfolding, as they flow into the unity of the individual experience and situation; or they may become the subject of a subsequent reflection if we reflect on them after they have been experienced. In the first case, personal history coincides with experience and cannot be separated from it; in the second, instead, reflecting on past actions means

² Disasters are usually divided into two broad categories: natural disasters (including epidemics) and man-made disasters. The latter, in turn, are divided into a) accidental, due to human error (*e.g.* derailment of a train due to driver error); b) intentional, such as murder and mass violence (war and terrorism).

that they are treated as something disconnected from personal experience. In this way, time is no longer unitary, and being aware of this means that individuals are oriented in their actions/interactions by the temporal and spatial dimensions (social and historical context).

In the 21st century, disasters have become much more complex than they previously were – although Sorokin had already highlighted the complex nature of these phenomena and the multiple consequences on the personal, cultural and social level. Consequently, we venture to formulate the following reflections: 1) all the disasters that occurred in the last decades and continue to happen have taught us that vulnerability is increasing (both for the transformations in nature – such as the effects of pollution – and for individual risk-seeking), which is why it is necessary to set up prevention and early intervention actions at a local, national and international level; 2) the category of “disasters” should be considered virtual in the sense that it cannot encompass only events that are defined as disasters according to common sense (natural disasters, wars, terrorism, etc.) but also all those events entailing conjunctions of physical conditions and social definitions of human harm and social disturbances (Kreps, 2001) such as epidemics.

2. Disasters and risk: a symbolic-cultural reality

Disasters and the development of humanity guide our reflections – necessary for a sociological reading of socio-cultural phenomena – towards the “risk culture” and the awareness of the risks taken to “colonize the future”. Giddens (1991) insisted that these dynamics lead to the individualisation of life. Personal identity has become a reflexive project to be realized in its social environment, characterized both by strong technicality and moral dryness. We add, therefore, another element to the above-considered time: risk. By combining risk and time, we determine an idea of future in global society linked to the concept of uncertainty. Individuals have always tried to find sources of knowledge that would allow them to expand their degree of certainty (security), but this need often remains unsatisfied. And it is precisely being besieged by fear that conditions individual decisions and often pushes people to fall back on sub-optimal but possible (more controllable) solutions rather than taking “risks” (less controllable).

If social action is the key to understanding society, attitudes towards risk and the future do not appear to be dominated by purpose-oriented rationality. Rather, they appear to be dominated by a logic based on the search for a balance between cultural “goals” and “means”, starting from the selection of “cultural goals” on a hierarchical scale.

There is no unequivocal definition of risk, nor there is a single approach for its analysis (Barbieri and Mangone, 2015): several disciplines have dealt with this issue, each basing its contribution on its own peculiarities. When social sciences decide to study the concept of “risk”, three authors come to the mind of researchers, and especially of sociologists: Luhmann (1991), Beck (1986) and Giddens (1990). To these, scholars who prefer approaches more focused on socio-cultural dimensions and context add Douglas (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983). These are reputed to be key authors for the development of the analysis of this concept.

The various definitions coined over the last few decades have not managed to make this concept clear, and it remains very ambiguous. On the one hand, people are attracted by risk or even fascinated by it; on the other hand, they are wary and fearful. The reason is that this concept is highly dependent on some aspects, among

which two stand out: on the one hand, the influence of culture and context, on the other, its inextricable link with other concepts (risk, uncertainty, confidence, security, modernity, globalization, etc.). This indissoluble bond with other concepts underpins the reflections by contemporary sociologists on this theme, starting from Luhmann (1991), who compellingly links risk to the ideas of probability and uncertainty, differentiating it from the concept of danger. It is not possible to talk about risk when the result of an act is certain, and therefore primitive cultures had no knowledge of this concept. Hence the idea that risk is typical of modernity and should not be confused with hazard or peril. Rather, it indicates risky choices that are actively pursued in view of future possibilities (Giddens, 1990). What is considered risky (behaviour, practices, environments, etc.) depends on what Beck (1986) called “relations of definitions”. This means that every society, at a given time, determines its risk hierarchy; however, the perceptions (underpinning the construction of said hierarchy) do not always correspond to objectively measurable risks, nor they are generated by individual decisions. This is mainly because the attention of the public has shifted towards needs related to the quality of life, due to both the influence of mass media and the overall increase in wealth. We thus shift from an approach reducing risk to its mere economic aspects to one considering the overall interactions between these and other important social and cultural variables.

Culture is often overlooked in risk studies (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983), as it is not considered a problematic aspect of society but rather an “accident” in the regular course of social events. In such a complex scenario as the contemporary society, relationships (at different levels) play a dominant role in both social phenomena and the processes of *social construal* of risk – meaning how people perceive, understand and interpret the world around them (Douglas 1997).

It is thus easy to understand how the concept of risk has changed (and is still changing) in contemporary society, following the latter’s transformations. The transition from local to global society has generated the idea of “global risks”, which in turn has prompted the statement that this is the “risk society” (Beck, 1986). We have adopted the idea that risk factors are not hidden only in nature anymore, but also in humans, their behaviours, their freedom, their relations, their association, the whole of society (Ewald, 1993). In the following pages, our attention will be focused on key elements of everyday life that must be considered when dealing with the processes of construction, identification, and selection of risks. Supported by the meso-range theories³ (Collins, 1988) developed in recent decades, that studied the relations between social system and lifeworld, we will therefore try to describe the links between risk, culture and social relations.

Culture is a fundamental dimension of everyday life and it is necessary to understand it in relation to the various situations of the social world, including those defined “risky”. In this way, we can theorize paths aimed at improving the relations and forms deriving from culture, through which we express the interactions among people as well as those between them and the other elements of the system.

This interpretation of the relationship between risk and culture draws a complex scenario, in which the world and the people in it constitute an endless web of relationships based on events that intersect, overlap, influence each other – and that can also often be discordant (Festinger, 1962). The everyday sequence of events, through definition and elaboration, allows for the reproduction of “meaning” through “symbolic mediation”, which favours the interpretation and, more impor-

³ The *meso* dimension, focused on the relationships between social system and lifeworld, where the latter is understood as the set of meanings and representations of culture.

tantly, the very construction of reality. Social reality – and, therefore, also the construction, identification, and selection of risk – stems not only from the social meanings attributed to a certain phenomenon (cultural object) but also from the products of the subjective world of people. People’s patterns of action and relationships are built according to the meaning that they attribute to daily existence. In other words, individuals achieve a world of meanings and events that become real for them as conscious and perceiving “social beings”.

Risk is a reality for people, deriving from the relations that people establish with others and that are manifested through everyday roles. In general, risk can be considered *a social problem* because it stems from the relationship between “fact” and “structure”, it results from interpretation and therefore it is a cultural object. And precisely because risk is interpreted as a culturally defined social problem, over time its shared forms of representation can either increase or decrease. In such a scenario, risk representations express both the subjective sense attributed to this category and the cultural and social reference framework available at a given time and space (Schütz, 1932): construction and representations of risk exist both in the micro-everyday scene and in the macro-institutional one.

On these premises, Mary Douglas (1985) argues that culture is a “mnemonic system” that helps people in calculating risk and consequences and shifts the focus from the idea of individual risk to that of collective risk. Of course, Douglas’ cultural theory of risk should be seen in the broader context of her studies on primitive thought and taboos (Douglas, 1966), some of which are developed by linking them with modern human behaviour in risky and dangerous situations. This interpretation is based on the principle that in every place and age the universe is interpreted in moral and political terms (Douglas, 1992) and the concept of risk becomes paramount in this sense. In modern societies, however, risk does not perform the same function that danger covered in pre-modern ones. Contemporary societies typically replace “sin” with “risk”, because the processes of globalization have helped in establishing cultural systems able to integrate ever-larger communities – whose vulnerability, however, has increased precisely because they have become “world systems”. Douglas’ cultural-symbolic analysis is not limited to attempting to explain the influence of culture on the concept of risk: in her book *Risk and Culture*, co-authored with political scientist Wildavsky (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983), she also deals with the issue of knowledge by stressing knowledge of risk(s) is never exhaustive. The scholar highlights four risk-related issues emerging by the interplay between the degree of knowledge (*certain/uncertain*) and that of consent (*contested/complete*).

These connections generate four types of problems concerning the evaluation of the consequences when faced with a risk (Tab. 1). While three of them can be solved through specific actions, one remains unsolved.

In the first situation, if we have certain knowledge and complete consent – among “laymen” rather than scientists – the problem is “technical” in its nature and can be solved by calculating the probability of the event, then choosing the alternative that produces the greatest positive effects. If we have uncertain knowledge and complete consent, instead, the problem is “informational” and therefore the solution is the search for further knowledge. Finally, if we have certain knowledge but controversies (contested consent), it is a problem of “disagreement” that must be solved through either coercion or discussion.

Tab. 1 – The four Problems of Risk

		<i>Knowledge</i>	
		<i>Certain</i>	<i>Uncertain</i>
<i>Consent</i>	<i>Complete</i>	Problem: <i>Technical</i> Solution: <i>Calculation</i>	Problem: <i>Informational</i> Solution: <i>Research</i>
	<i>Contested</i>	Problem: <i>(dis)Agreement</i> Solution: <i>Coercion or Discussion</i>	Problem: <i>Knowledge and Consent</i> Solution: <i>???</i>

Source: Douglas and Wildavsky (1983, p. 5)

In the last situation, we have both uncertain knowledge and a dispute by the “laymen”, *i.e.*, non-experts. In this case, the problem is no longer widening knowledge, but of how to create consent around it, considering that the perception of risk is a social process that depends on the combination of “trust” and “fear”. Therefore, there is no solution to the problem of combined uncertain knowledge and lack of consent because we face with a further problem concerning policies: the cultural approach can show us how the consent of the community in selecting certain risks is oriented by the public interest according to the strength and direction of social disapproval. This also shows how this selection changes together with the community or social organizations in general, and how individuals who belong to different social organizations are willing to face some risks rather than others. As Douglas and Wildavsky write, «In risk perception, humans act less as individuals and more as social beings who have internalized social pressures and delegated their decision-making processes to institutions. They manage as well as they do, without knowing the risks they face, by following social rules on what to ignore: institutions are their problem-simplifying devices» (1983, p. 80). In their everyday lives, individuals try to avoid harmful events. To this end, they base their reasoning not on precise economic or probabilistic calculations but rather on conditions that allow them to overcome the crisis by identifying objectives that are tangible and flexible at the same time, often delegating this function to social organizations (including the institutions).

Although it appears static, the cultural-symbolic approach allows us to define, through the general cultural theory, the conceptual boundaries (Tansey and O’Riordan 1999) within which we can then review and redefine the *social construal* processes. By doing so, we can add new tiles to the mosaic describing and interpreting the reality of the social dynamics connected with risk. However, the four issues posed by Douglas (1992) as the starting point for a comparative study of risk perception remain of primary importance. These are a) the influence of risk on the goals of the individual perceiving it; b) whether the original community is part (integral or not) of the individual’s goals; c) understanding the influence on the individual or collective good of the risk depending on the type of community; and finally, d) classifying the various communities based on the support, commitment, organization, and boundaries defined by their members.

Summarizing, we can state that the cultural approach helps us to understand the perception of risk by non-experts through a systematic view of the range of objectives that an individual may try to reach. In other words, risk should not be consid-

ered a technical problem but rather a problem of everyday life for which we must take into account political implications and people's positions in relation to both individual and collective objectives.

3. The four problem of the COVID-19 epidemic risk in Italy

In the previous pages we have highlighted the theoretical and methodological elements needed to study social dynamics and the symbolic-cultural reality with regard to how individuals combine certain aspects that permeate daily life, the idea of the future, uncertainty, risk, and, last but not least, the disasters that disturb the already precarious balance between all these aspects.

From now on, we intend to correlate what previously said to the problems stemming from individual action during an epidemic, considering the risk factors that they involve for people's health. The case examined will be the SARS-CoV-2 virus or COVID-19 which is the name of the disease (better known simply as coronavirus). We will pay particular attention to Italy, the pandemic epicentre in Europe.

On 8 December 2019 the World Health Organization (WHO) ascertained the first case of a patient infected by a new virus akin to SARS (*Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome*). The latter spread between late 2002 and early 2003, representing the first major pandemic threat to the Western world in the 21st century, this virus caused serious respiratory crises and pneumonia and currently knows neither therapy nor vaccine. To the disease of new virus (SARS-CoV-2) will be given the name COVID-19, from the words *coronavirus* (COVI) and *disease* (D) and the last two digits of the year of its spread (2019). A few months later, it will be discovered that China's "patient zero" in the Hubei province was far from being the first case, as the virus had most probably started circulating in the region since mid-November. When China raised the alarm on December 27, the spread in the Hubei province had already taken the form of an epidemic: hundreds of thousands of individuals had already become infected. Nevertheless, the situation was underestimated and a few months later the virus will reach Europe with the first European (Italian) patient certified on February 21, 2020 (in the previous month, Italy also recorded two other cases concerning a couple of Chinese tourists). The thousands of infected people and the ease of transmission meant that, when the WHO declared the pandemic status on March 11, 2020, the countries involved have become 114 worldwide.

The reality outlined in the first months leads to the hypothesis that both individual and institutional actions lack awareness on the COVID-19 problem in terms of the *pandemic emergency* and the health risk run by the population. After the first cases in Europe, governments and institutions acknowledged the need to address the problem in a decisive manner and switched to "risk-aimed" communication⁴ to contain the contagion. The most urgent issue is to build up knowledge for both "experts" and "laymen", to affect their behaviour and attitudes. This can be achieved only by interweaving objective scientific information and training in self-

⁴ We should distinguish between a "risk-themed" communication from a "risk-aimed" one. This distinction refers not only to the content but also to the relationship. The first, "risk-themed", refers to the *object* of the communication, while the second, "risk-aimed", to its specific *recipient*. To simplify, we could distinguish the communication event referring to risk by identifying two moments: the first of an *informative* nature ("risk-themed", information process) and the second of a persuasive-preventive-participative nature ("risk-aimed", communication process).

responsibility (perception of oneself and others. These targeted interventions aim at building the foundations for a safe and responsible coexistence between all generations, regardless of their degree of vulnerability to the virus. These interventions cannot then be left to the media, which often aim at “sensationalist” information – sick-blaming and circumscribing the problem to certain categories or social groups, while nurturing in others the perception of being somehow shielded from the contagion. Such an attitude of denial is usually problematic and particularly in this specific case. This brings us back to communication. In a situation in which emotions run high and values and socio-cultural resources are deeply involved, communication cannot be limited to mere informative interventions, as active changes in behaviour and lifestyles are necessary to reduce the risk of contagion.

To better understand, we will apply to the COVID-19 epidemic what Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) said about the problem of knowledge: that about risk it is never exhaustive. We will also refer to Simon’s principle of bounded rationality (1983).

As mentioned above, the scholars had identified four problems related to knowledge and risk by crossing two dimensions: the degree of certainty/uncertainty of knowledge and the degree of consent (contested/complete). We will apply this model to the COVID-19 epidemic in Italy, declining the four types of problems concerning the evaluation of the consequences in dealing with this health risk. In addition, we will take into account the role of institutions. Our analysis is divided into three phases, consisting of five timeframes: phase 0 (the initiation phase of the infection), phase 1 (the phase of full emergency with the growing number of infected individuals), phase 2 (phase of slowdown of infection and gradual exit from the emergency) - however, this phase as conceived here does not correspond to the second official phase of the Italian government which was implemented in early May. The last two phases (phase 1 and phase 2) are both divided into a first stage and a second stage. As we are writing (April 2020), the phase 2 is considered partially hypothetic trying to foresee the situation and the measures implemented, because when we has finished to write this article in Italy the emergency was not yet finish and the entire country was been in lockdown from 11 March to 4 May (in fact on March 11 the nation was proclaimed “red zone” – or “protected zone”, as the Prime Minister, Antonio Conte, rather puts it).

In relation to the COVID-19 in Italy, for easier reading, we will propose two tables (Tab. 1 and Tab. 2), distinguished by the dimension of “complete” an “contested” consent. Our discussion will be general and all-encompassing, as some stages see the juxtaposition of several problems at the same time. In the phase 0, for example, the condition of certain knowledge and complete consent (referred not to “experts” but to citizens) was never reached. Rather, in this phase there was a “problem of knowledge and consent” (uncertain knowledge/contested consent), as the uncertain knowledge led to oppositions among both “experts” and “laymen”, different stakeholders and local governments. It should be noted that the spread of the virus in Italy was initially recorded in the North-East of the country (Lombardy and Veneto) with the identification of two “red zones” (Codogno in Lombardy and Vo’ in Veneto) which were completely quarantined for two weeks (14 days is the incubation period of the virus according to virologists) suspending all activities and mobility from/to the two towns. Following Douglas’ scheme, this case presents an unsolvable problem from the point of view of risk. The actions must aim at creating consent around the existing knowledge since the perception of risk is a social process that depends on the combination of “trust” and “fear”. It follows that we are faced with a further problem concerning policies: Douglas’ cultural approach

shows us how the consent of the community in selecting certain risks is oriented by the public interest according to the strength and direction of social disapproval.

Tab. 1 – Relationship between the degree of certainty/uncertainty of knowledge and complete consent

		Knowledge	
		Certain	Uncertain
Complete Consent	Phase 0	-----	-----
	Phase 1 (first stage)	-----	<p>Problem: Informational Citizens confused by the lack of clarity in institutional communication</p> <p>Solution: Research Search for information on the risk of contagion and possible negative consequences for the population</p>
	Phase 1 (second stage)	<p>Problem: Technical Need to contain the infection</p> <p>Solution: Probabilities calculus Calculation of the contagion rates among the population and consequent containment actions</p>	-----
	Phase 2 (first stage)	-----	<p>Problem: Informational Information to the population are insufficient and unclear about the future</p> <p>Solution: Research Search for appropriate shared actions and policies for the recovery of the country</p>
	Phase 2 (second stage)	-----	-----

In the next phase (phase 1, first stage), more than one of Douglas’ conditions occurred simultaneously: there is both a “problem of disagreement” and an “informational” problem. On the one hand, there was “full consensus” about the virus’ extreme infectiousness, with requests for quarantine. On the other hand, local institutions and stakeholders disagreed, favouring profit and productivity over reducing risk of contagion. As a counterbalance, the vast majority of the population was beginning to express consensus on actions to contain the contagion, despite the lack of clarity in institutional communication.

Tab. 2 - Relationship between the degree of certainty/uncertainty of knowledge and contested consent

		Knowledge	
		Certain	Uncertain
Contested Consent	Phase 0	-----	<p>Problem: Knowledge and consent</p> <p>Lack of clarity from the “experts” on the dangerousness of the contagion, leading to opposing positions on both the institutional and the scientific side.</p> <p>Solution: ????</p> <p>Underestimation of the risk of contagion with no decision taken.</p>
	Phase 1 (first stage)	<p>Problem: (dis)Agreement</p> <p>Request for risk containment actions by “experts”.</p> <p>Opposition by the citizens (deprived of their freedom) and local institutions because of the possible economic repercussions.</p> <p>Solution: Coercion or discussion</p> <p>Establishment of “red areas” in some regions of Italy.</p>	-----
	Phase 1 (second stage)	<p>Problema: (dis)Agreement</p> <p>Lack of agreement on the establishment of the “red zones”.</p> <p>Soluzione: Coercion or discussion</p> <p>Further implementation of coercive action.</p> <p>Proclamation of the whole of Italy as a “protected” or “red zone”.</p>	-----
	Phase 2 (first stage)	-----	-----
	Phase 2 (second stage)	-----	<p>Problem: Knowledge and consent</p> <p>Lack of clarity on the part of the European Community and national political institutions on the actions to be taken for recovery.</p> <p>Solution: ????</p> <p>Implementation of the appropriate policies for the economic, social and cultural recovery of Italy.</p>

The “technical” problem emerges in the second stage of the phase 1, as it is now clear to all parties involved that the virus is highly contagious and dangerous, especially for the weakest among the population. The solution translates into the simple

calculation of the probability of virus spread in order to allow the choice of the best alternative for its containment that produces the greatest positive effects for the entire population. In this same phase (phase 1, second stage), however, there is also a further “disagreement problem”. Although the consequences and the pattern in which COVID-19 spreads are now clear, the first containment action have been ill-received by part of the population, who saw their freedom of movement curbed. Faced with these forms of dispute, the authorities had to resort to coercion and force compliance with directives through checks by the police or the army. It was in this stage that the whole country was proclaimed a “protected zone” (red zone).

As anticipated the phase 2 – being the phase of slowdown of infection and gradual exit from the emergency – is here considered hypothetically for the reasons specified above, still taking into account what happened in the previous phases. Also in this case, a first and a second stage can be distinguished: in the first stage, an “informational” one (uncertain knowledge and complete consent) basically due to a high degree of uncertainty for the future perceived by the population (the actual moment of the recovery of social and economic life is not yet known), also because the institutions are lacking or ambiguous in transmitting information - especially on the emergency closure times. In this case, being maximum confidence in the institutions because, given the situation - there is no alternative, the solution of the problem and the search for actions that can reduce the sense of uncertainty of the population. In this case, as confidence in the institutions is high (since, given the situation there is no alternative), the solution to the problem is to seek actions that can reduce the sense of uncertainty of the population; in the second stage, instead, the problem is that of “knowledge and consent” since there is (as is physiological) lack of clarity on the part of the political institutions on the actions to be implemented for the recovery. This is true for both the European Union (the first signs of this were recorded with the opposition of some countries to the issuance of Eurobonds to cover the heavy debts faced by some states to counter the epidemic), which will have to face a generalised economic crisis (as well as crisis of other nature), and national government. We are no longer talking about risk but about crisis management. Therefore, the solution is adopting the appropriate policies for the economic, social and cultural recovery of the nation.

These dynamics show how the same social problem (the Coronavirus-related risk) is perceived differently by the community or social organisations in general even with respect to time, and how individuals who are part of different social organisations (*e.g.* stakeholders, such as industrialists or commercial operators who base their activities on profit) are willing to take some risks rather than others. Individuals try to minimise harmful events, first for themselves and then for others – as the survival instinct is first individual and then collective. To do this they do not rely on economic or probabilistic calculations, but on conditions that allow them to overcome the crisis situation by identifying tangible and, at the same time, flexible objectives, often delegating this function to institutions.

The model presented is obviously an artifice to simplify the dynamics of social construal experienced by an entire population during the complex process of construction, identification and selection of risks, as well as how to deal with it. In synthesis, we could say that with the help of the cultural approach – presented in the previous pages – we can understand how the “laymen” perceive the risk by offering a systematic vision of the very wide range of objectives that the individual tries to achieve. The various social parties (stakeholders) produce different social representations (world ideas) and, therefore, different cultural reference systems become the frames within which to interpret attitudes towards risk and the attribu-

tion of responsibility.

In other words, risk and health risk in the case of COVID-19 cannot be addressed exclusively as a technical problem, but rather as a problem in the daily life of individuals for which we should consider both the political and economic implications and the positions of individuals with respect to individual and collective goals.

4. Future, community, and resilience

The sociological reflections here presented starting from Sorokin’s theories have highlighted that the daily experiences of individuals in emergency or risk situations can be perceived – and therefore studied – in their continuous unfolding, as they flow within the unity of the individual experience and situation; or, they can become the object of subsequent reflection when reflecting on them after they have been experienced. In the first case, personal history coincides with the experience and cannot be separated from it; for disasters it has been said that there is a “before” and an “after”. In the second case, instead, reflecting on past actions means that they are considered disconnected from personal – for example, the survivors of a disaster. In the case of the COVID-19 in Italy, at the height of the emergency the number of deaths had already exceeded the total number of victims recorded in China at the end of the emergency. On March 21, 2020, 793 deaths were recorded in a single day, with an average age of 80 years, a sort of “generation gap” that the virus created (almost all the victims were over 65 years old). Thus, time is no longer unitary and becoming aware of this means that individuals are oriented in their actions/interactions by the temporal and spatial dimension (social and historical context).

In the case of disasters, the temporal dimension and in particular the idea of the “after”, the future, the life of the survivor is of considerable importance, whether they are natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, typhoons, epidemics, etc.) or produced intentionally or accidentally by humans (wars, terrorist attacks, chemical accidents, etc.) whose primary effects are the destruction of material goods as well as human lives. Thus, after a disaster causing widespread destruction (as is the case for COVID-19 in Italy), the question that everyone asks is: can there still be a future?

Some years ago, the anthropologist Marc Augé, published a pamphlet entitled *Où est passé l’avenir ?* (2008), in which he asked what had happened to the future, highlighting its main paradoxes. The question posed by this scholar had no reference to disasters, trying instead to find an answer to the prevailing idea of contemporary society living on immanence. Our purpose is to start from the paradox that every individual exists in a time following their birth and preceding their death (finite and infinite) to arrive at the idea that, despite their finitude, individuals can still imagine a future dimension of time and consequently act – or not act – consequently even after having experienced a disastrous event accompanied by the need to grieve.

Time is a polysemic concept and is inseparable from individual actions. And yet, for many years it has been considered an unproblematic aspect of everyday life (Adam, 1995, 2004). The scientific traditions that addressed time are, on the one hand, philosophy, with the idea of the linear or circular time (individual times), and, on the other hand, the physical and natural sciences, up to Einstein’s relativity

and quantum physics (natural times). Between these two lies the sociological research, that tried to mediate between the minuteness of the first and the magnitude of the second (Ricoeur, 1991) by focusing the attention on “social or collective time”, which is linked to all aspects of everyday life (psychological, social and cultural ones). However, a social reading of time in the global society requires the analysis of temporal cultures.

It should be pointed out that there are different social models and practices inherent to time. According to philosophical tradition, there is a chronological time (Chrónos), consisting of a measurable triad that represents its quantitative aspect: past (yesterday), present (today) and future (tomorrow). In the case of disasters, this conception is reduced almost and exclusively to the present because in the immediacy one only tries to get out of the social and institutional emergency determined by the disaster as soon as possible and then tries to activate actions of the community aimed at re-constructing its future and that of individuals. Uncertainty in the biographies of individuals who have escaped a disaster leads them not to design a long-term project, thus to a contraction in the “duration” of the temporal horizons (Leccardi, 2014) which makes individuals focus on the present.

Kairós (time of action) consists instead in the opportunity that can happen at any given time, the so-called “right time, opportune time, time for”. If Chrónos represents the “time of truth” and the quantitative dimension (measurability and duration), Kairós represents the qualitative dimension of time, related to the search for meaning in human action (“time of action”). In ancient times Kairós was dominated by fate, but if stripped of this magical halo it allows the understanding of many dynamics of contemporary society. Kairós allows us to state that, both in individual and collective experience, time is not uniform: it does not have the same value at different moments and junctures, nor over the same day. This impacts on everyday activities and on the forms that individuals adopt to communicate. This fragmentation and temporal acceleration that characterize contemporary society (Rosa and Scheurman, 2009) – starkly evident in the case of disasters – entails the need to redetermine the relationship between biographical and social times in a community whose imminence is to escape the emergency, flattening everything out onto the present. It follows that the experience of time not only differs from individual to individual and from society to society in their everyday activities but is also different for those who survived a disastrous event.

If one can imagine a future dimension of time by individuals who survived a disaster, these two models of temporal cultures (Chrónos and Kairós) merge. This because Chrónos refers to the present, to a “forced culture of immanence”, which in turn brings individuals back to the ancient idea of Kairós that bound them to fate. While it is true that individuals act with respect to the future based on instrumental rationality, they very often give in to fatalism. In other words, the experiences of time (temporal cultures) in everyday life – beyond common aspects such as its measurement – affect individuals differently because they are a symbolic mediation between society and individual subjectivity, outlining, time after time, new time horizons on which to base the decisions for future projects.

Trying to draw conclusions from the above reflections, we can say that: *a)* the dimension of time – in a social context that has experienced a disaster and is still experiencing its effects – should be reordered in its cultures (Chrónos and Kairós) in relation to the disrupted everyday social life (*e.g.* the many irresponsible Italians not complying with the order to stay at home to minimize the possibility of contagion). The relevant aspects of a process of this magnitude mainly involve the social

and individual dimensions – see Beck (1986) when he underlines the aspects characterizing the individualisation of human life. On the one hand, there is a dissolution of pre-established forms of social life and, on the other, new institutional claims, controls and constraints for individuals; *b*) individuals tend – for their own preservation and reproduction – to look for ways to reduce the uncertainty that flattens the dimension of time to the present, shortening the “temporal horizons”. Social relations, in their daily unfolding, contain both relations with the other and relations with the institutions; the picture emerging from the above reflection (including the example of the social construal of the COVID-19 epidemic in Italy) shows that individuals are conditioned by the perception of the condition they are experiencing.

If these are the conditions of the individual trying to escape the emergency situation, the theory of rational choice is not applicable to the dynamics connected to “future time”. Rather, they could embrace a model of choice closer to that of bounded rationality (Simon, 1983). The bounded rationality model holds the following aspects as its general scheme of execution: *a*) individual decisions do not concern the whole of human life, but consider only limited areas of it; *b*) when individuals make a choice, even a very important one, they do not consider future scenarios but look at the present and at most to possible perspectives; *c*) the very fact that the individual is seeking the solution to a problem, causes her to focus on certain aspects of his life rather than others; *d*) a major part of the individual’s efforts in a choice is absorbed by frantically collecting information and facts about the decision in question (problem of knowledge).

In the bounded rationality model, individuals do not project themselves in time indefinitely (the future time horizon may be longer or shorter). In the everyday reality of an individual experiencing an emergency and health risk situation, as in the case of COVID-19, or who survived a disaster, the environment in which they live is divided into separate and distinct problems. To apply the bounded rationality model, the individual needs to be able to focus his or her attention to the factors that deserve it from time to time. The ability to acquire knowledge of the situations and environment in which individuals live is necessary both to facilitate the creation of alternatives and to estimate the possible consequences, allowing the individual to preserve the image of that part of the world involved in his decisions and to set her decision (action) on the basis of that image, which should aim not at his or her own well-being but to the well-being of every individual in the community. The latter which is re-evaluated in the case of disaster-stricken territories.

In recent decades, when reflecting on how communities overcome disasters, the focus is not only directed to the lacks and losses, but also to the ability of individuals and communities to adapt and grow despite the critical conditions.

The concept of “community”, which seemed to be abandoned, is being greatly revived as regards the possibility to explain the changes and the interventions in a territory. Today a new form of community, understood as collective intelligence, must be rebuilt if you want to start escape routes from a disaster in a territory. This is because collective intelligence has to be intended as a form of intelligence distributed everywhere, constantly improved and coordinated in real time, leading to a real mobilization of resources and competences of a specific context. It is based on people’s acknowledgement and mutual enrichment, not on the worship of “fetished” communities (Lévy, 1994). Policymakers who aim to start a territorial sustainable development have to facilitate and enhance the creation of “communities”, as they are fundamental structures in which it is important “to think about”: they represent the “factory” of a territorial human and social capital (territorial intelli-

gence).

Therefore, the word “community” in a global society does not have a negative sense, as the community considers individuals in their plenitude and not in one of the roles they have to play in the society. It is a whole of experiences and thoughts, tradition and engagement, participation and willingness, and at the same time it enhances the social dimension of the existence, the sense of belonging to a common destiny - the case of the COVID-19 epidemic is just one of these moments, the whole community belongs to a common destiny without any distinction from individual to individual.

The key concept is that of resilience (Manyena, 2006) which is generally defined as the ability of an individual or group to return to their normal life after catastrophic events (Bonanno, 2004; Bonanno et al., 2006). This can be considered on two levels: a personal level (how the person is and how he or she responds to the events), and a situational one.

The situational level turns the spotlight onto the community and, in particular, the concept of resilient communities (Norris *et al.*, 2008) that is bound to the concept of social capital and the meaning the latter takes in the process of building resilience along with other components that contribute to the adaptation to a disturbance. Through the community are affirmed social commitment, respect of rights and freedom, the balance between needs and civic responsibilities as well as the reconstruction of satisfying relationships among individuals. These features would allow for defense from exclusion processes: the resilient community becomes an instrument of action if it is considered as an “open space” in which environmental and social networks are interrelated, to ensure sustainable development initiatives and social protection. According to Norris and colleagues (*ibidem*) resilience stems from resources in the community: a) economic development; b) social capital; c) information and communication; d) the competence of the community. And in this sense, the role that social capital assumes becomes of fundamental importance. This concept, due to its interconnections with many other elements of society, contributes to a greater extent to the construction of a community that is the protagonist of its rebirth.

This new model to govern and manage the community to escape from the emergency situation in the aftermath of a disaster can be put into effect only by mobilizing social resources, relations and opportunities. In other words, this process depends on and needs the *social capital* of such territory. The term *social capital* was introduced by Loury (1977, 1987) who meant by it all the resources existing within family relations and the community social organization that come to be useful for individuals’ development- even Bourdieu (1979) saw it from this perspective. Despite that, we should stress that we owe the most important contribution to the definition of the concept of social capital to Coleman (1990), who argues that it «is created when relations among people change in ways that facilitate action» and it is not tangible because «it is embodied in the *relations* among peoples» (*ibid.*, p. 304). Such relations can be seen as forms of capital because like other capitals they produce material and symbolical value; in fact, the value of social capital is inherent in the fact that it «identifies certain physical objects by their function, disregarding differences in form, appearance, and construction. The function identified by the concept “social capital” is the value of those aspects of social structure to actors, as resources that can be used by the actors to realize their interests» (*ibid.*, p. 305).

In the last decades, analyses of territories have relied mainly on the explanation based upon the concept of social capital. This is because such concept has no clear-

cut boundaries, since social capital is made up of trust relations (strong and weak, extended and interconnected) apt to improve the ability to recognize and understand each other, to exchange information, to help each other and to cooperate for common purposes. Such formal and informal reciprocity relations are anyhow regulated by norms that define the form, contents and boundaries of exchanges in a more or less flexible way and are made effective by sanctions for the individual that are either inner or outer. This relations network is the intentional or unintentional product of social investment strategies oriented towards the establishment and reproduction of social relations that can be used over time, namely lasting and useful relations able to yield material and symbolical profits. Such relations improve the capacity for action of the individual and collective actor and, if extended enough, even the social system’s capacity for action.

Social capital inherently contains a view of development that is not confined to economic aspects but is linked to the degree of *civicness* (Putnam, 1992) and community freedom and above all to adopting correct behaviours based on trust (Fukuyama, 1995). All these elements refer to belonging and reciprocity. The social capital, by involving directly social actors in exiting a crisis, stimulates individuals’ urge to be at the centre of attention through actions leading to a shared path towards a common objective (well-being). Social capital appears to be a “multiplier of the possible”: it has a meaning only if it is aimed at ‘multiplying’ its potential, that is, at producing and reproducing itself.

It could be said that the social, value-related, cultural, relational component can represent the multiplier of well-being without which any piece of work, structure, service and so on is sterile or perceived as unimportant. Within this perspective, acting *with* becomes paramount. In this way, the community in its territory is not merely an abstract notion: it is a place of production and produces itself. The community assumes its identity through the social capital that constitutes new reciprocities between individuals and territory.

The social capital for its intangibility and it is generating of collective benefits it hasn’t to be considered a property of actors, but it has to be considered as a “public good” (Coleman, 1990) and therefore it must be protected as such: to build up social capital instead of wasting it one path only must be followed to strengthen social ties through trust and empowerment; this is the only way in which even territories that may seem, at a superficial glance, “hopeless” would become productive locations and producers themselves of development processes allowing the community to survive and to improve its quality of life.

In conclusion, a world free of disasters is not conceivable, but we can imagine a world in which the negative consequences of these events are minimized or even avoided starting from the assumption that collective damage requires collective strategies. As Sorokin argued, the future of mankind and its development are in the hands of mankind itself (1958): neither law nor education, nor religion or the economy, or science – even though the latter has a specific role in accompanying the processes of improving the lives of individuals and communities – can be enough for this task. This task is assigned to the whole of mankind, and therefore to its communities that can exist only if they have certain characteristics: «A peaceful, harmonious, and creative society can exist only when its members possess at least a minimum of love, sympathy, and compassion ensuring mutual aid, co-operation, and fair treatment. Under these conditions, its members are united in one collective ‘we’ in which the joys and sorrows of one member are shared by others» (Sorokin 1948, p. 57). Acting on the community means acting on multiple levels (individual, family, institutional and social), and it is the whole community the object of since a

normalization process of the community needs to be undertaken by reinforcing the existing networks and structures, reestablishing the previous ones and creating new ones.

Of whatever nature and origin the disasters are, they face humanity with a dilemma still to be resolved: “By the mysterious forces of destiny mankind is confronted with a stern dilemma: either to continue its predatory policies of individual and tribal selfishness that lead it to its inevitable doom, or to embark upon the policies of universal solidarity that brings humanity to the aspired for heaven on the earth. It is up to everyone of us which of the two roads we prefer to choose” (Sorokin, 1954, p. 489).

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Men and Death in the West. Towards a New Interpretive Paradigm?

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Abstract

Up until recently, contemporary Western society seemed to voluntarily ignore death, wrapping itself in a silent cocoon. Death disappeared from the public discourse unless it was spectacularised and mediatised. While ‘true’ death receded from individual lives, ‘fake’ death was omnipresent – widespread and thus anesthetising. After being one of the great taboos of our time, it is now becoming visible again. Three aspects, which can be framed as individual civil rights, have promoted this change: bioethics (which forced the public to ponder challenging topics), cultural pluralisation (which introduced novel ways of thinking and experiencing death) and a tendency towards the creation of institutions attentive to a new humanisation of death (e.g. pandemics give rise to *pandethics*, with the need to harmonize individual and community rights). We are perhaps at the beginning of a cultural turning point, though punctuated with many ambivalences and contradictions. To better understand it, we should look at its antecedents and at the history of the death-related imaginary in the West. We will consider Ariès (1975) schematization of four subsequent phases in societal attitude towards death and hypothesize the beginning of a fifth stage: *death postponed* but also *rediscovered* (even if not yet truly *reconciled*).

Key word: Death, Social practices, Western society.

1. The debate on death today: from the removal to the recovery of emotion

Death is the ultimate universal and irrefutable event: the only thing we are sure of – even if we ignore the day and time, the whys and hows – is that we must die (Thomas, 1975)¹. As Augustine of Hippo said: *Incerta omnia. Sola mors certa* (Everything is uncertain. Only death is certain).

And yet, in the face of this unavoidable certainty, we delude ourselves that death can be forgotten, excluded from our horizon, that society can ‘pretend that’, and live ‘as if’ death did not exist. As if we could understand the meaning of a story – any story, first and foremost our very one – regardless of how it ends. As if the way of dying and of conceiving death did not influence individual lives or their idea of society. Indeed, contemporary societies have cultivated this illusion with conviction and wide deployment of means.

This cumbersome absence – a deafening silence – is reflected in sociology². It is no coincidence that the entry ‘death’ is often missing from its manuals and dictionaries. It is not mentioned and even less analysed.

The individuals constructed and imagined by sociology are, or appear, immortal: their only task is living, never dying. A considerable absence in a discipline

¹ Thomas, one of the founders of Thanatology, prompted the rediscovery of death but was also a severe analyst of its removal in Western societies (1975; 1978; 1988).

² A science which, by definition, is concerned with analysing society (particularly advanced Western societies, for which sociology is both expression and means of self-reflection).

aimed at reading and interpreting society – and, indeed, it is beginning to be questioned, albeit timidly. Conversely, other humanities (anthropology and philosophy, for example) have never forgotten it and/or are today refocusing on its study. So strange is this absence that it deserves our searching for a plausible explanation. We will not find it in sociology, but upstream and further back, in a cultural climate that comprises it and yet goes far beyond it, leading Edgar Morin, who analysed this aspect of the social construction of reality, to define ours as an “amortal society”³.

In recent decades (but stemming from an older trend dating back at least to the Enlightenment), death has been one of the great taboos – the last, perhaps, and the most inconvenient⁴. Man is the only animal that knows to be mortal – at least culturally, while biologically speaking other living species most certainly hold the same knowledge. Furthermore, we are speaking of the contemporary Western man: not so in other epochs and cultures. And yet, in the face of death, man often prefers to abdicate his cognitive abilities. While we lavish vast resources and enormous scientific, cultural and financial capital to lengthen life, improve its possibilities and duration, slow down the ageing processes, soothe pain, heal or at least contain previously inexorable diseases, when we are faced with this last barrier, we still prefer neither knowing nor investigating. The meagreness of our discourses on death does not match the scientific progress around life – and this not only for scientific discourses but also philosophical and religious ones, although religion is one of the few areas in which the discourse on death is still ‘allowed’ as if only its language could find words in the face of the unspeakable.

Nowadays, things are somehow changing. Death is becoming visible again, even in medical-scientific discourse and hospital practice. It is returning to be what it cannot help being: evident. We are perhaps at the beginning of a cultural turning point, though punctuated with many ambivalences and contradictions. To better understand it, we should look at its antecedents and at the history of the death-related imaginary in the West.

We must understand why Western society, which seems to enjoy (and indeed shows vocation for) breaking all taboos, has long erected an impenetrable barrier around death. We must also understand why things are slowly but progressively changing; or rather, why there are countertrends which do not however deny or contrast other long-established tendencies in society. We will start from the premises.

2. Man and death in the West: short history

While the average life expectancy has increased considerably, the traditional difference between men and women is still confirmed across all ages: men die earlier than women. These tendencies exist since the Renaissance in the West, while in other latitudes and cultures the opposite is still true. The differences are due to social roles and the related lifestyles and are now decreasing. The longer life expectancy is considerable progress, if we consider that in the 1850s only 5-6% of the population was over sixty years old – just a tenth of today’s share. Considering the

³ Morin (1951) in the introduction to the Italian edition (2002) of his text, largely ahead of its time.

⁴ This interpretation has prevailed for at least forty years in the reflection on the theme. It probably dates to the rapid and deliberate oblivion of the Second World War and the optimistic years of reconstruction and the economic boom

more economically developed part of the world, and particularly the West, we could say that death is increasingly postponed: the race against time undertaken by medical science in the name and on behalf of society is successful. We do not die as we did before. Every society produces its 'right' ways of dying. And death, like everything else, has a history⁵.

Demography and statistics provide important information, reminding us that in the Middle Ages, even before the great plagues, the average life expectancy in Europe was 30 to 35 years and 40-50% of the population did not live to be twenty years old. Life expectancy did not increase much until recent times, even until the last century – if it is true, as Vovelle reported (1974; 1983), that it still amounted to 25 years in France in 1795 and 32 years in the Netherlands in 1816.

Unlike in contemporary society, death was at that time mostly violent, caused by the brutality of either men (wars, violence, working conditions) or nature (epidemics⁶, famines, illness and childbirth, but also storms or animal attacks, dangers now surviving only in fairy tales or horror fiction). The latter, however, are mostly events with social causes and, despite the rhetoric about equality before death, often hit rich and poor differently.

But beyond these considerations, how has the attitude towards death changed? Ariès (1975) proposes to distinguish four different phases, which he summarizes as follows.

The first phase is that of *domesticated death*. Death is somehow part of the landscape, it is “natural”, obvious. The prevailing attitude is resignation, and the living and the dead habitually coexist; both belong, so to speak, to the same world, they share it. Death is awaited as an accepted destiny, and it is organized as a public ceremony with relatively simple rites, devoid of any drama and almost even of emotion.

From the Late Middle Ages, there is a phase of death of the self, of the *discovery of individual death* and its drama. The *artes moriendi*, the manuals of good dying, spread, and art proposes themes such as the *danses macabres* and the triumphs of death (such as in the cemetery of Siena in Italy). Their morbid description of decomposition of corpses and skeletons reveal a strong love for life and the fear of its loss. Death emerges as the place where man becomes more aware of himself. We also witness a ‘personalization’ of the very figure of Death, which becomes somehow independent from God and no longer His instrument. With time, thanks also to the ‘invention’ of purgatory, the investment in heaven through legacies increases, at least for the nobles. In 1438, a specialized institution was created in England, the All Souls College, whose main purpose was celebrating masses and praying for the soul of King Henry V and those rich who could afford it, a practice charged on destitute schoolchildren. From the 1200-1300, the rich also start enjoying ‘living’ representations of the dead in painting and sculpture – the “standing dead” (rather than lying down) as Panofsky calls them. Gradually, with humanism, there is a re-evaluation of life and love; one faces death, but does not insist on it: Cardinal Balduino will summarize this with the aphorism “he who lives well dies well, and he who lives badly also dies badly”.

The third phase, the *death of the other*, began in the 18th century. Death is

⁵ This is not the place to reconstruct a history of death in the West. Others have done so in a heated discussion on its interpretation (see Ariès, 1975; 1977; Vovelle, 1974; 1983; Lieutenants, 1957; Kellehear, 2007).

⁶ Including the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 or COVID-19, which started spreading at the end of 2019 and, by the end of March 2020n had infected 178 countries in the world and made thousands of victims.

dramatized, dominant, but, through the romantic conception, we overcome self-contemplation to observe the destiny of others: we mourn their death, we question it and suffer for it. It is the death of ‘you’, of the beloved, within a stronger family sensibility. And the idea of death, even that of others, moves us, sometimes with complacency. Death becomes secularized, it loses many of its religious characteristics – in Vovelle’s words (1974), it becomes de-Christianized. The cult of the dead is spread through monuments and celebrations, in a new civil religion linked to the budding nationalism and the emphasis on the collective glories of the State⁷. The cult of the tombs, the attention to our dead, the daily, intimate dialogue with them, is born.

The fourth stage, the current one, is that of *forbidden death*, and it begins roughly after the Second World War. Death disappears from the social panorama, an object of shame and prohibition, “because by now it is generally accepted that life is always happy or must always look like it”. The rites remain the same but emptied from within of their pathos and dramatic charge. We no longer die at home among our family, but in a hospital and often alone, surrounded at most by a few family members rather than by the extended circle – up to neighbours and friends – which characterized the previous phase. Death is removed, it disappears from both the social and the individual horizon. It is no longer seen or thought of: Ariès (1975) speaks of this “death throes” as a “brutal revolution”, an “unprecedented phenomenon”.

This schematization has been criticized by many, even from a historical viewpoint, accused of excessive rigidity and drawing questionable conclusions. We are not interested here in the historiographic debate but in some of the sociological indications that we can draw from it. We will take note of Vovelle’s observations (1974), who spoke of an “irreversible turning point” as early as the 18th century, with “the end of the plague, which concludes an entire cycle of the history of death in Western Europe” and when the population doubled.

This period witnessed a significant increase in life span and, consequently, a lower degree of insecurity. On the cultural level, we see the beginnings of the *philosophes*’ demystification and almost trivialization of death, for which it is now considered a natural phenomenon rather than divine punishment: “nothing but limit, accident”. Not a fatality, but a natural law to fight against. We can date back to this era the birth of the modern gamble against death, to be ‘beaten’ rather than accepted as a given.

We also observe the emerging habit for the dying to have a doctor at their bedside, who first flanks and then gradually replaces the priest. There is, therefore, an explicit attempt, if not to eliminate death, at least to understand and fight it. The secularization of last wills, the lesser emphasis on masses and the reduction in religious aspects, including the presence of religious figures, are all clear signs of this changed mentality. From a ‘technical’ point of view, we see the introduction of the coffin and a progressive ‘exile’ of the dead in the name of public hygiene. It is another form of desacralization: death is no longer linked to a holy place (such as the parish cemetery, situated around the church), visited and traversed daily, integrated into the urban and sentimental panorama, but to a place outside the city, ‘outside the walls’, less and less visible, visited only occasionally.

From a social point of view, given that the city population enjoys fewer direct ties, specialized ‘announcers’ are created, ‘angels of death’ who will progressively

⁷ The glorious death interpreted by the motto *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (it is sweet and fitting to die for the homeland).

also be put in charge of organizing funerals – the ancestors of today’s funeral parlours⁸. Mourning attendance is introduced, to communicate a death of which otherwise there would be no news.

For what concerns the burials, family graves start to become established, thus marking a switch from individual burials. Memory and remembrance take on another statute, a civic value, almost a ‘lay’ incentive to a life spent for the common good; as Comte (1851-1854) said: “to live for others in order to survive through and in others”. Remembrance, memory, commemoration have a reassuring role: we will die, but others will remember us. This certainty, however, is being lost in the progressive decrease of visits to cemeteries, even in dedicated days. Finally, in several European countries, death-related activities, which have always been considered impure, are increasingly delegated, like other dirty jobs, to others, to *strangers*. Perhaps we should reflect on what it means for a society to leave to others, not fully considered its members, the functions linked to memory, remembrance, tradition, rootedness – in sum, to its history. The dead are a link with the earth and a very concrete one at that.

Finally, cremation practices are beginning to gain a foothold in society. One of the first such-aimed groups in Europe was founded in Milan in 1875, although the practice spread mainly in Protestant countries, while in Catholic ones it still enjoys little support. These are all signs of the end of the Christian monopoly on death, which, however, is not yet as overturn as it would seem at first sight. We can still see today the centrality of religion in many European countries: birth, marriage and other rites of passage are secularized – but in the face of death one still seeks, often, the church, the synagogue, the temple, and a religious sense, sometimes only because there are no others available.

The fact remains of the radical change undergone by life expectancy, which in the West rose from 30 to 50 years during the 19th century, and then again from 50 to 80 years during the 20th century: fifty more years on average in everyone’s life, in just two centuries! A real revolution, more decisive than many others. It is a simple fact but overwhelming in its impact on society, culture and the death-related imaginary.

So, it is true, we seem to be witnessing a progressive removal of death, of which we will analyse some signs further on. But this is also because death has become a rarer, less frequent phenomenon, and one that is much more difficult to encounter, so to speak, ‘live’.

3. Death in contemporary societies: ambivalent signals

Socially speaking, the outward, visible signs would prompt us to say that we are accustomed to this paradoxical social fiction: that death does not exist. And that, even if we suspect it does exist, we should not talk about it – least of all with the dying and even less with the children. The society of information and knowledge has in this case voluntarily chosen to ignore, hide, silence. With major social and individual costs.

“*Der Mensch ist zum Tode*” [Man is his death] (Heidegger, 1927), he carries it with him from birth, he begins to die from the day he is born (*quotidie morior*), as philosophy teaches us – from Epicurus, with his well-known “sophism of the non-

⁸ The expression derives from the Baroque age, which theatralised death in elaborate and sumptuous (pompous, hence the Italian *pompe funebri*) ceremonial events, for the rich and above all the nobles.

existence of death”, onward, from the Latin Stoics to existentialism. But this observation, far from becoming individual awareness, risks being only a dead phrase – pun intended. The intellectual approach to death is too cold and distant to touch sensitive strings. The only approach is the one rooted in feelings: the death of someone we know, someone we love. This is the only death that questions us personally, about *our* death, and perhaps also about the meaning we give to our life. Even if society can lull itself into the illusory tranquillity of concealment, the individual, alone, has to deal with the “extreme enemy”. True, she does not know when, but she knows it will come: *Mors certa, hora incerta*.

The concealment, the removal of death, appears therefore harmful for the individual precisely because it takes away their opportunity of coming into contact with what will ultimately be their future, and therefore to take stock: themselves, their feelings, family, work, existential goals achieved or missed – in short, the meaning of their life. A famous iconography of the *memento mori* from the Middle Ages is precisely that of the dead who say to passers-by: “We were what you are. What we are you will become” – they warn them, in essence. For the modern man, who lives in the illusion that death does not exist, and who in any case no longer meets it, “death comes only as a catastrophe” (Scheler 1957). It is something senseless and alien that we do not understand and that leaves us shocked, speechless and adrift. Death always surprises and amazes us, we never consider it natural. Indeed, when faced with a dying person, even an old one, if we do not ask “who killed them?” in so many words, we still ask “what did they die of?”, which amounts almost to the same thing. As if it were impossible and unheard of to think that one could die of *natural* death: simply because one ceased to live, because ‘their hour had come’. Someone once said that “death is a detective story in which you have to find the culprit” (even if those who die, if they are aware of it, are often more interested in the meaning of their death than in its cause, more or less objective or that can be made objective). This is demonstrated by the increasing diffusion, in the more economically advanced world, of the autopsy, to *explain* (e.g. in the case of sudden deaths) and not only when it is necessary for judicial (or, more often, insurance) reasons. Almost a desire to explain what we unconsciously consider inexplicable.

Of course, we are continually confronted, at least theoretically, with various forms of death. For example, the threat of death as an instrument of political struggle (from the arms race to terrorism, from nuclear deterrence to tribal wars, from capital punishment to genocide). Or social death, be it in the form of disability and exclusion, degenerative diseases or life in a hospice – which is both an example of social death and its most refined instrument of uselessness, of lack of a social role (the dead is the *de-functus*: devoid of functions). But for most people, these are abstract, metaphorical images of death, until they are experienced personally.

Conversely, we are not sufficiently confronted with what we call *natural death* – a meaningful expression indeed. It is not by chance that today, like *death by old age*, it has disappeared from the classification of causes of death.

After years with the slogan *let's take back our life*, some people suggest to also *take back our death*: to take it away from doctors, nurses, and even priests, to take it back home, in our family, in our thoughts, in our discussions – in short, in our life.

For example, we could start again to organize it. It may seem strange, and yet thinking about death was in the past also the occasion to make a will, which meant not only “to divide the spoils”: it was the occasion to motivate choices, to give advice. To teach something to those who remain, perhaps, and say one last *strong*

word, including to the children: Ariès (1975) mentions that until the 18th century there were no images of a dying room without children. Conversely, today's silence likely reflects other concerns than the supposed "good of the children". As Norbert Elias (1982) points out, adults who avoid talking about death to their children fear, perhaps rightly, that they may communicate to them their anxieties and fears. But in doing so, the child is raised "like an immortal in an immortal world" (Yonnet, 2006).

Death is not only an individual fact: it is also a social fact, which speaks volumes about the societal structure and its inequalities. The greatest and most radical inequality, and the most obvious of the injustices, even if it is strangely less perceived than others, lies in the differences in life expectancy: *differential mortality*. It differentiates rich and poor within a country and is also projected on a global scale: between rich and poor countries. Moreover, it discriminates between social categories, sexes, ethnicities, etc. To a lesser extent, this is also true today in the West. It is enough to allude to the accidents and death in the workplace, whose real numbers are, at least in Italy, unknown if not deliberately hidden. Not to mention the effects of living conditions (income, food, housing) on mortality in the various social classes, or the availability and accessibility of medical and hospital care and their different efficiency in the various areas of the country. The mortality rates by educational attainment, occupational status and socio-economic family characteristics show that individual qualification is a highly predictive indicator of mortality (it is three times higher among illiterates than among graduates), as is occupational status (again, mortality among the unemployed is three times higher than among active workers, and the difference is even starker when considering suicides). However, few people are interested in these of statistics or grasp their power as indicators and symbols of social issues.

Similarly, the recollection of the dead is a source of difference, as having a past is often a form of luxury. The memory of the most "prestigious" dead lasts longer, if only for 'technical' reasons: long-lasting marble statue and sarcophagus for the nobleman vs. a burial in the bare earth with a wooden cross for the poor man, destined to rot like their remains. But there are also social consequences and cultural costs caused by today's removal of death.

The social convention wants death not to be talked about, not even mentioned. It must be wrapped in a smokescreen of metaphors, which hide reality rather than explaining it. In this way, people delude themselves to erase and negate it. This practice of denying illness and death belongs to the whole of society and translates into the language used *not* to mention it: from journalistic communication (no one ever dies of cancer, but always *after a long illness*) to the technicalities of medical-hospital jargon, to the hypocritical delicacy of everyday language (no one ever dies: at most, they are *lost*, as if they got lost along the way) to the demure wording of funeral agencies (for which death has become *passing*, the relatives *grieving*, the grave a *burial*, the funeral service *exequies*, the coffin the *casket*, the corpse the *remains*, etc.).

It is as if society does not wish to know it has to die, lulling itself into an illusion of eternity – and the same goes for its members. What is true for nature, and for the individual of a species, society also wants for itself. The community, with its social removal of death as a topic, seems to want to claim this privilege as well. As if society could not function were this axiom questioned. Society, Morin (1951) noted, does not work despite and against death, but for, through and within it, almost as a consequence of it. The very existence of culture acquires depth and meaning precisely because older generations die and the collective heritage of

knowledge must be relentlessly transmitted to the new generations: it has no sense but as a reproduction, a term that acquires its full meaning because of death.

There are many more examples of social removal and it is not just a matter of ‘not saying’ or linguistic hypocrisies. A form typical of modernity is the division of work: creating specialized institutions to deal with death (to hide it), thus freeing the rest of society, starting with the relatives, from the obligation to even think about it. The fact that fewer people die at home, among their family, and that we go directly from the hospital to the cemetery, makes us strangers to the very fact of death. But we also pay a price for this: ‘hospitalized’ death also becomes depersonalized death, because the hospital institution takes charge of the disease rather than the individual – something that struck with great force in the dramatic days of the CoViD-19 pandemic. As Elizabeth Kübler-Ross pointed out (1969), the overload of bureaucratic and technical work risks that, in this increasingly elaborate system, the sick person becomes less important than their electrolytes, even for nursing staff. Death, and with it everything that can remind us of it (old age, illness, pain) is increasingly ‘privatised’ and hidden, perhaps also for structural reasons, as Elias (1982) suggests, but mainly for cultural ones.

As mentioned, fewer people are now dying at home among healthy, *normal* people. The funeral is held in the church⁹; the funeral procession in the neighbourhood disappears, and less and less symbols (*e.g.* decorations, vestments) are seen. Even the most noisy existences discreetly pass away, with the notable exception of the VIPs, Edgar Morin’s *olympiens*, whose death becomes news and collective ritual – *e.g.* the death and funerals of Diana Spencer, but also, almost at the same time, of quite different characters who died in completely dissimilar circumstances, such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Gianni Versace, or, more recently, John Paul II¹⁰. Except for dramatic events, notification is entrusted to newspapers’ obituaries: the last possible fifteen minutes of fame in a society where an event, if it is not shared by the media, does not exist. The extreme masterpiece of a society that devotes colossal energies to desperately trying not to grow old, prolonging life at all costs, if only by one minute, and thus to remove pain and death from the social landscape: “it is not polite” to die in public, just as it is unseemly to express sadness and weeping. A society that has rightly been called “analgesic”.

3.1. *And yet... the paradox of the mediatization*

Görer’s first pioneering research in the 1960s (1965) showed that about 70% of the people interviewed had never seen a burial, and the children had not even been allowed to attend the funerals of their closest relatives.

In contemporary society, death is “burdened with communicative inhibition”. In a culturally advanced society, it is the silent witness of our backwardness; it is in a sense, “the most primitive sector of industrial society” (Fuchs, 1969). It cannot be talked about. We spend more and more resources hiding it. In front of it, we remain

⁹ When it is not, as in the U.S. and increasingly elsewhere, a special funeral home, an example of the American way of death, a specialized institution that serves essentially to hide and disguise death, and, literally, even the dead, dressing and making them up to give them back colour and pretence of “life” – so much so as to make plausible, on the style of Waugh’s (1965) mockery of these behaviours, expressions such as: “beautiful, he looks alive!”.

¹⁰ It is as if the death of celebrities has a cathartic role, becoming one of the few cases of *allowed death*, or rather of *allowed discourse on death*. One can – and indeed must – speak about it openly, albeit in a bombastic and rhetorical way, not reflective but only descriptive, also a spectacle.

speechless: “as silent as the grave”. But then death, the pain it causes, the funerals, are seen on TV. So what is the meaning of this concealment? Why is death hidden?

Linguistic hypocrisies are but one of the many deceptions and self-deceptions around death. The other, even greater, concerns the mass media, which desacralized death and, at the same time, “replaced spectacle with ritual” (Thomas, 1978). Paradoxically, this concealment occurs in a society in which we are surrounded by death, or rather by a spectacle of it, which is the other side of the removal: its trivialization.

The society of the spectacle has turned death into an everyday and everyday display – mostly, but not exclusively, fake. Famous suicides or live executions remind us that these are followed and well-paid media events: a photo or video of a tragedy is worth money and generates it. It is the ‘real’ death, which, however, is not experienced ‘directly’ but by means of television screens. In the case of a famine or a terrorist massacre, death enters our homes through the evening news, at dinner time. Now it is the privileged object of entire programmes based on death-centred *voyeurism* (e.g. the various ‘Real TVs’, or the sale of accidents or terrorist massacres DVDs).

The ‘fake’ deaths are even more widespread and, consequently, anaesthetizing. Like drugs, they are addictive: death has to be ‘big’, or it is no longer effective. We can learn from Hollywood, where long and profitable careers have been built on this ‘genre’. Death becomes serial, like the *Natural Born Killers* and the protagonists of various *pulp fictions*, B series *splatter* movies, or horror films. The latter cover a vast, profitable but little-analysed share of the film market, from *Nightmare* to the various *Halloween*, *Saw*, *The Hole*, *Hostel*, etc., not to forget George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* and following, with the many zombie epigones, the vampires *Dracula* and *Nosferatu*, the most intellectual horror film à la Stephen King, and many others, such as the catastrophic trend of earthquakes, damaged planes, hurricanes, fires, up to the ironic and kind necrophilia of the Addams family, today a cartoon for children.

The medieval macabre dances had an educational role, they contained a teaching – *memento mori*. Cinema and mass literature somehow perform the same function, as do youth necrophilia (Giovannini, 1998), dark rock music, comics, manga and wearing symbols of death (for example, skulls, as pleasant, cute and *kawaii* as they may be). It becomes a reflection precisely where reflection and verbalisation had been expelled, perhaps a semi-conscious response to that very removal, perceived as false, hypocritical and perhaps dangerous – indeed, deadly. Leaving aside a detailed analysis of the contents of these modes of communication, we want to underline a significant social fact: the gap, almost a form of social schizophrenia, between the substantial disappearance of the ‘true’ death from people’s lives and the massive diffusion of the ‘represented’ death. One might say it is the unconscious response to a need.

4. The beginning of a fifth phase?

As mentioned, Ariès (1975) spoke of the fourth and final phase in the history of death in the West as the *forbidden death*. We are perhaps today at the beginning of a fifth phase, although with strongly ambivalent features. Death is no longer denied nor forbidden. The discourse on death exists and is of increasing interest: but for two opposite reasons. On the one hand, it is explicitly addressed, but to defeat it: *death postponed*, we might say. On the other hand, we are witnessing a progressive

acknowledgement of death as a natural occurrence, to be accepted, sometimes even to be searched for, even despite and against that medical science that tries to postpone it by technological means. In any case, it is to be humanized: *death rediscovered*, perhaps (even if not yet truly *reconciled*).

Again, on the one hand, we have the powerful technological push towards a *postmortal society* (Lafontaine, 2008), what Remo Bodei (2010) calls “the age of anti-destiny”, characterized by the cultural obsession, pursued with a gigantic deployment of economic and scientific means, to technologically postpone death, living without ageing (or to reduce to the point of annulling, and not only on an aesthetic level, its consequences, following media-imposed models), prolonging life indefinitely. This is the concrete answer to the perspective imagined by Condorcet (1795), today pursued by technoscience at various levels: from preventive to curative medicine, from genetics to regenerative medicine, from nanotechnology to transplantation, pursuing immortality. This research is supported by a vast scientific-industrial complex¹¹, endowed with immense resources and a vast cultural consensus, at least in the West. It is a struggle, not by chance often characterized by war metaphors that, from the advertising of anti-ageing products to the vulgarization of research (whether to fight ageing, declare war on pain or vanquish death tout court), pervade this entire sector. This war has built its mythology: from biotechnology to cyborgs¹², from *cryony* to widespread transplantation, from cloning to DNA interventions through nanotechnologies, accompanied by the relative mystique of the gene, this mythology carries us – without us realizing it – into an imaginary where the man/machine and body/technology fusion to fight, postpone, and finally overcome death becomes possible and even obvious, somehow a paradoxically *natural* outcome of current evolutions. And for the new generations, it could indeed be so: just as it is obvious and natural for them the infinite availability of energies and the permanent connection, directing society, in both culture and practice, in the direction of rejecting the very idea of death, not only of its continuous and effective removal.

On the other hand – in the face of this very powerful and pervasive tendency – we are witnessing the emergence of a new reflection on death, and its progressive neo-humanisation: its return, so to speak, to the bedrock of the thinkable – indeed of what *must* be thought – and, even more important, of the experiential, what is felt and lived, collectively and not only individually. In short, a countertendency to the one outlined.

There are at least two reasons for this countertrend. The first is the emergence in the public space of the bioethical debate, also through highly mediatized and politicized individual cases. This forced a large part of the public opinion, though personally unrelated to the events, to ponder challenging individual choices, according to the classic mechanism of identification: what would I do if I were in their shoes? The second is the ongoing cultural and religious pluralisation of society, with the return to the public sphere of ways of feeling and thinking that biomedical culture, which had influenced the general *zeitgeist* up to religious culture and, had previously managed to marginalise. This biomedical culture is based on the official Western medicine, with its boundless presumption, technological firepower and aspirations to cultural hegemony – or even exclusivity. Today, it evokes dissatis-

¹¹ We deliberately choose a metaphor akin to the ‘military-industrial complex’ at the origin of the gigantic war effort that characterized the Cold War and the nuclear race.

¹² It is no coincidence that the dying man intubated in increasingly complex machinery seems to become the ideal type of cyborg (Hables Gray, 2002).

faction and, to some extent, discredit or even fear, bringing to the surface desires of different kinds of knowledge and with social practices from the various realities now visible in our societies.

As far as the bioethical debate is concerned, some individual cases have been pivotal, such as the Welby and Englaro cases in Italy or the Schiavo case in the USA. These stories have become almost social psychodramas, with political and religious interventions, directly opposing individual consciences rather than scientific reason. They showed that, as death becomes something that can be decided, it also becomes utterable again, and is bitterly debated. Beyond individual opinions, they have highlighted that modern medicine confronts us with a series of problems somehow opposite to the horizon promised by the progress of science – an assumption of mass awareness that should not be underestimated. Indeed, far from distinctly separating the space of life from that of death, the border between the two has become evanescent, doubtful, spurious, making them more and more interrelated and confused. So much so that modern science and technology, through the mechanical excrescences that surround and invade the body, have been able to invent an unthinkable paradox: “a dead person with a living body”. Besides, these innovations highlight that – at least in the developed western world, and for some groups of patients (creating questions about internal and international inequalities) – the problem today is not to *start*, but to *suspend* therapy. This implies new definitions of life and death, and attempts to sacralise and desacralize it, which divide public opinion.

The other aspect refreshing the reflection on death has been the progressive cultural and religious pluralisation of society. This affects more specifically hospitals and funerary and burial practices. It forces a direct and, so to speak, face-to-face comparison with death, and above all with different ways of seeing and experiencing it, which strongly clash with Western biomedical science’s single thinking. This pluralism is produced by both internal and external dynamics: on the one hand, the increased cultural and religious diversity (e.g., for Italy, the reduction of the Catholic monopoly); on the other, migration, which strongly accentuates its visibility in public space.

This new cultural and religious pluralism, which incorporates different beliefs and social practices in the face of illness, birth, body, death, forces a new reflection that, despite its modest numbers, has very relevant effects. The main reason is that it impacts first and foremost on hospital facilities and routines, and the hospital has become the final place and horizon of the death of an increasing number of individuals. These are practical problems, but with strong ethical correlations and bearers of significant religious resonances, and they have been paramount in giving visibility to the issue of death in structures that had grown more and more accustomed to hiding its presence (starting with the progressive concealment of the terminally ill, and then the corpse). Their effect, deconstructive at first, prompted us to further reflection.

Among the “upstream” effects, so to speak, there are also important consequences at a systemic, feedback and cultural crossbreeding level.

An ideal-typical pattern of cultural feedback in the health field, due to the presence of migrants (but also of indigenous minority cultures), can be described as follows:

the sick (and dying) foreigner (or from a different culture), with its different understanding of the body, health, illness, death, is confronted with the

→ *native doctor*. Who starts a

→ *reflection on cultural diversity* in the face of disease and death, which, in turn,

can lead to a

→ *new conceptualization*, which may include heterochthonous elements (*i.e.* belonging to another culture). This new conceptualization is manifested first in the doctor himself, as a sort of internal “resonance” (new, unexpected questions begin to arise), but it can subsequently translate into a

→ *collective reflection*, with colleagues engaged in the same kind of research, which can go as far as the

→ *elaboration of a new interpretive paradigm*, at the same time opposing the previously dominant paradigms and seeking synthesis and mediation. The existence of a growing market for different ways of conceiving the body, the dying, the death (of a cultural and economic *threshold*, therefore¹³) is, of course, a powerful help in developing this process.

As it is an ideal-typical model, it can accommodate many empirical variants, up to the very inversion of the actors (native sick/dying individual and foreign doctor), and to the production of this same process from below (the cultural change occurs in this case in the sick and dying, and in general among the users of medical knowledge, even before its producers).

These two aspects (bioethics and cultural pluralisation) – which we can frame as individual civil rights – have greatly increased the reflection on death and, concretely, on the sick and dying. To them we should add another element: a tendency, which they certainly influenced, towards the creation of institutions focused on a new humanisation of death. The latter can also be seen in the context of collective civil rights: *e.g.* pandemic deaths (HIV, SARS, H1N1, H5N1, Ebola, Mers and Covid-19) give rise to *pandethics* (pandemic ethics) with the need to harmonize individual and community rights in the face of a high mortality rate widespread in different countries. In the case of COVID-19 in Italy, *pandethics* has developed in two directions. On the one hand, more attention has been paid to the needs, relationships and affections of the sick and potential patients. On the other hand, the Italian Society of Anaesthesia Analgesia Resuscitation and Intensive Care (SIAARTI) drafted in March 2020 the document *Clinical Ethics Recommendations for the Allocation of Intensive Care Treatments in exceptional, resource-limited circumstances*, which clarified that “An *age limit* for the admission to the ICU [Intensive Care Unit, N.d.A] may ultimately need to be set. The underlying principle would be to save limited resources which may become extremely scarce for those who have a much greater *probability of survival* and life expectancy, in order to *maximize the benefits* for the *largest number* of people. In the worst-case *scenario of complete saturation* of ICU resources, keeping a ‘first come, first served’ criterion would ultimately result in withholding ICU care by limiting ICU admission for any subsequently presenting patient” (SIAARTI, 2020, p. 5). This attention goes as far as reflecting in a new way also on the *afterwards*: whether it is the individual destiny or, more banally, the destiny of the corpse, and the sense and the way of managing the cemeteries, and more generally caring for the memory of the deceased.

Conclusions: “Normalising” death?

There is no doubt that there is a positive side to the restrictions on the arbitrari-

¹³ We deliberately pursued the assonance with that of the ethnic threshold, which allows immigrants to reproduce culturally, speaking a common language, etc.

ness of death that man has been able to establish, particularly through advances in hygiene, medicine and science. The progressive extension of life span, the defeat of many endemic causes of death (we should not forget that a disease that has repeatedly decimated the European population, the 'Black Death', has become a symbol of death itself – indeed, it was also called 'The Great Mortality'), today's therapeutic wonders, all testify to the titanic aspect of this fight against death, this Promethean rejection, this knife fight to steal life one day after the other.

But this progress, on the social level, has so far been paid for by what Elias (1982) defined as the progressive *loneliness of the dying* – a mirror of other widespread kinds of loneliness – with the “silent exclusion of senescent and dying individuals from the human community”, with the cooling and almost cessation (through hospitalization) of relations between living and dying, causing a further detachment from the affections and places that give meaning and security to life, and also the desire to live. This cost, however, does not seem to be ineluctable.

Among the topical moments of life, birth and marriage tend to be, for most of the population, increasingly separated from religion. Conversely, death still finds its 'natural space' in so-called sacred places (the number of religious funerals tends to be much higher than that of other rites of passage), as if religion (today, religions, plural, but also secular cultures attentive to the dignity of dying) were among the few to have words to say death or at least one of the few areas in which it is not denied. Perhaps this could be considered an unconscious response to the cultural evolution detailed above. As Ariès (1975) reminded us, the cult of the dead is the only religious manifestation common to believers, non-believers and unbelievers¹⁴; and there is more “tolerance” towards a religious way of understanding it even in environments and among people individually perhaps not inclined to linger on religious questions, even in the hospitals themselves and in the medical corps.

Although almost always unconsciously, the extreme farewell to the dead before their 'journey', is saying goodbye in its etymological sense¹⁵: an entrustment to God, although a God who is often vague and indefinite, of whose existence we are not certain.

Perhaps it is only a matter of cultural survival, destined to decrease. It is significant, however, that it is today returning, proposed, in atypical forms, by the very dynamics of a multicultural society, by the different visions of death and life which other cultures propose to us, and with which hospitals have begun to deal with. But beyond the religious aspects traditionally understood, the process of 'normalisation' of death – considering it a natural occurrence and, therefore, not ignoring it; recovering the courage to 'look it in the face' – also affects other cultural spheres.

We do not know if our body is the chrysalis that frees the butterfly with death, as Kübler-Ross (1969; 1974; 1995) maintains after years of “physical” closeness to death and the dying. We know, however, that our attitude in the face of death is not irrelevant compared to our attitude in the face of life.

Perhaps man is not the only animal who knows he is mortal, but he is certainly the only “animal who buries his dead”; and the only one, too, who remembers them. As Thomas points out:

¹⁴ We find a beautiful literary testimony of this aspect in Henry James' (1915) short story: the only form of worship and the only way to find meaning in history and a place in the memory for a man who does not believe in much else.

¹⁵ The expression 'goodbye' dates from the 1590s. Together with its other forms (good bye, good-by), it derives from 'godbwy' (1570s), itself a contraction of God be with ye (late 14c).

among all living beings, man represents the only animal species to which death is omnipresent throughout his life (and even if only at the level of ghosts); the only animal species that accompanies death with a complex funeral ritual rich in symbols; the only animal species that has been able to believe, and often still believes, in the survival and rebirth of the dead; in short, the only species for which biological death, a fact of nature, is continually overtaken by death as a matter of culture (Thomas, 1988, p. 96).

It is, therefore, possible that even the current ways of seeing (or rather, of not wanting to see) death, are subject to cultural fashion, and may change: just as, at least in certain sectors of society, there is a tendency to recover a more natural diet, life hours not subordinate to working hours, a new culture of childbirth, a different conception, more holistic and natural, of illness, the body, health. The concealment and removal of death (or the gladiatorial combat against it) is certainly a societal 'long trend'. However, it could be hypothesized that, in the face of it, society is capable of producing antibodies, in the form of individuals and social groups capable of seeking a better 'quality of life', and correlatively also the awareness of the importance of an adequate 'quality of death'. After all, they go hand in hand and recall each other. This is not a luxury, but a necessity that we think of as vital.

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Future of our Feelings: Sociological Considerations about Emotional Culture in Pandemic Era¹

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Abstract

The article is devoted to some aspects of the emotional culture of the late modern society, which will evidently undergo changes due to the new virus pandemic. The author draws on the opportunities that belong to the sociology of emotions, because emotions by their nature and function are related to overcoming of uncertainty of the future. The purpose of this essay is to review the main *imperatives and contradictions of the emotional culture*, identify some feelings that are a socially “sensitive” answer to the current circumstances. The future changes will probably become clearer, if we observe how the contradictions of the modern emotional culture will be resolved; for example, what development the simultaneous “emotionalization” and rationalization of social life will undergo. In the situation of crisis connected to the pandemic all the feelings will be involved, emotional norms and strategies of emotion management will be modified. The author believes that the moral individualism of modern societies will draw attention to the matters concerning social solidarity and moral guidelines, which could be viewed through the concepts of care, human sufferings and feelings that lie at their heart: anxiety and fear for other people, empathy, sympathy and compassion.

Keywords: Sociology of emotions, Emotional culture, Emotional capitalism, Emotional imperatives, Sympathy, Compassion, Care.

The situation of the pandemic in a globalized world causes major social changes, formation of new normative orders, drawing of new symbolic borders between groups, categories, societies, as well as reconfiguration and a sort of review of the existing and traditional social institutions. At the moment, it is quite difficult for a sociologist to talk about the future, about the likely consequences, which socio-cultural configurations will be established, and which won't. The future and its images in the late modern societies were already a problem to some extent from the point of view of social consciousness and sociology (Jacobsen, 2019; Urry, 2016; Barbalet, 2019; Gudkov, 2017). Under the socio-cultural circumstances, the present is more frequently viewed through the past, which is much more available (although there are risks and uncertainties here too). The beginning of a “new sensitivity” epoch or a new emotional culture with increased attention to the emotional sphere, “emotional capitalism”, is considerably related to it (Karppi *et al.*, 2016; Illouz, 2007; Simonova, 2019). While it is quite difficult to foresee, predict and perceive the future completely rationally and scientifically, it is beyond calculation, one can anyhow worry about it, treat it on the basis of emotional reflexivity (Holmes, 2015), relying on sentiments, senses, emotional anticipation, which at

¹ This work was supported by the RFBR grant 20-011-00870 «Social Inclusion in the System of Bases of Integration of Russian Society: Comparative Analysis of Values and Practices in Institutional and Informal Contexts».

least gives some opportunity to trace, outline the future of the complicated modern world (Barbalet, 2019; Gonzalez, 2017).

The current world situation intensifies even more the already existing emotional culture particularities: what will happen to the norms to which emotion management in public and private spheres adheres? What will happen to emotional capitalism that, to a great extent, was based on the commodification of feelings in service industry in the pandemic situation? Which emotions will be cultivated, which will be limited?

The opposition of “irrational passions” and “dispassionate rationality”, according to many experts, is currently not relevant anymore (Patulny *et al.*, 2019). Emotions and feelings are also included in the evaluation of the current developments and serve as guidelines for actions, including moral ones. Even before the crisis many people and scholars believed that the existing world order was destructing, and the situation was getting worse and expressed pessimism (see, e.g. Bauman, 2017; Hookway, 2013). The indeterminacy of the world perceived by everyone (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 2000) grows in the age of the pandemic (as a liminal phase); feelings of fear for the future of humanity, anxiety, frustration, pessimism increase, affectively charged rumors, forecasts and dystopias constantly emerge. It occurs against the backdrop of rethinking of human sufferings, both individual and collective, the topic of which became relevant again in social sciences and, in particular, in sociology (Wilkinson, 2005; Williams, 2008; Boltansky, 1999). Hence the feelings of alienation, grief, sympathy, empathy, compassion become a kind of moral guideline in social life, where various forms of solidarity integration and inclusion are put into question.

What gives us an opportunity to speculate about emotions and thus approach understanding of social reality and, in particular, the present and the future? The sociology of emotions in general is devoted to social dimensions of emotions, among which the following can be included: (1) their evaluating dimension, signaling function and marking function (emotions as marks of important events in social and personal life); (2) their focus on and sensitivity to social expectations; (3) their “contagious” ability and ability to manifest at a collective level; their ability to be shared and increase collectively; (4) communicative and expressive functions (including digital forms of communication), which are also connected to formation of new designation of emotions (Bericat, 2016; Patulny *et al.*, 2019). In view of this, sociologists observe growing realization of complex emotionality in the modern world, as well as growing tension between collective and individualized emotions, increasing mediating, communicative and expressive role of emotions (see: Patulny *et al.*, 2019). It appeared that both in scientific sphere and in public and private spheres of social life emotions seem to explicitly “require” constant reflexive monitoring, management at an individual (construction of identity), as well as at a global (coping with global processes and events) level (Barbalet, 2019). It becomes important for politics, solution of the problems of social inequality, migrations, construction and support of the already existing and new forms of social solidarity.

In this respect, the sociology of emotions is a rational attempt to comprehend the main human emotions and feelings that in a certain way “inform” and “signal” to people about the present and the future. One of the purposes of the sociology of emotions in the study of emotional culture is to relate the undergone experience of people in different contexts at a micro-level to wider social and cultural structures of the late modern society at a macro-level (see, e.g. Barbalet, 2019; Lyng, 2018). It is in feelings and society’s attitude towards feelings where one can grasp the con-

tradictory nature of the modern society and its culture, the problematic character of the future.

1. Late-modernity emotional culture, its imperatives and contradictions in the context of the current situation

The modern society, often called late modern or late capitalist, is characterized by a special emotional culture (Simonova, 2019) or special characteristics that mainly define human emotionality. For the general characteristics of the late modern society culture many specialists apply the term “affective” or “emotional capitalism”, meaning that emotional experience is commodified, can itself produce economic effects, a contemporary person values it and aims at it, is willing to pay for it (Karppi *et al.*, 2016; Illouz, 2007). We called emotional culture a characteristic for a certain type of society configuration of notions of feelings and social norms with regard to their undergoing and expression in different social contexts or situations that manifest in behavior patterns, experience, practices, speech expressions, special emotional regimes or orders (see Simonova, 2019). One of the ways to describe the modern emotional culture is to identify its emotional norms, in which notions of feelings and norms of their expressions are also reflected. From our point of view, the most interesting are the norms that we decided to metaphorically call “*emotional imperatives*” in order to create special optics for description and research of the modern society. We have chosen this metaphor in order to highlight the main characteristic features of the modern emotional culture and create a theoretical basis for analysis of the subsequent social changes.

Special norms-requirements, indisputable and moral prescriptions about what and how should be felt in a certain socio-cultural context (or situation) refer to the emotional imperatives. The emotional imperatives enable cultivation or avoidance of certain feelings. Emotional imperatives are compulsory, they serve as orders that people address to themselves and others, however, they are not always viewed as a burden and are presented as a result of free choice. They are *compulsory* not only because they are requirements for behavior, but also because people consider them extremely important. People believe them to be something *natural, necessary*, and worry when they are absent, for example, in case of positive feelings (happiness, love, affection etc.), or when they are present, mainly in case of negative feelings (guilt, shame and so on). Such imperatives are perceived by people as intimate, deeply internal, as soul movements, as innermost desires and aims. These imperatives appear due to the common social processes that are characteristic of the late modern societies: first of all, in the age of globalization, consumerist culture, commercialization of virtually all aspects of life, neoliberal system of control, deep individualization of social life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Barbalet, 2019).

We will identify some emotional imperatives that, from our point of view, most vividly describe the emotional culture of the late modern societies, as well as the main contradictions that are and will be resolved by certain ways. One of the most important is the *imperative of rational emotion management*, according to which people aim at rational management of feelings (for example to achieve success and self-realization). This imperative is connected to commodification of emotion management and, consequently, to notions of necessity of working through “negative” feelings, development of emotional intelligence, emotional competence and inner emotional self-control. Spread of notion of necessity to rationally manage emotions is connected to characteristic features of late modernity, where fast-paced changes,

segmentation and uncertainty of the world, its “liquidity”, globality of events and corresponding understanding of risks, increase of fears and anxiety, concern about the future cause aspiration to cope with this situation by means of rational control over feelings (Gonzalez, 2017; Bauman, 2017; Beck, 2000).

The imperative of emotion management can be interpreted as a sign of “a vital link between larger social contradictions and private efforts to manage feeling” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 202). Emotional labor and emotional consumption culture established in the late modern societies have an impact on labor ethics and practices, because it combines commodification of emotions, their rational management with the purpose of gaining of profit, income and pleasure. In the current situation inquiry of emotion work with feelings will also be in demand; for example, how to cope with anxieties, fear and at times grief, how to express them? To what extent will emotional practices be rationalized? Every day links to resources, where everyone can individually learn to manage and cope with one’s own emotions, appear in social media².

The imperative of “*authentic feelings*” is related to the above described imperative. It is connected to the notion that it is *necessary* to treat one’s own feelings with respect, because during the process of commercialized and rational management of emotions there emerged the notion of value of one’s own feelings that should be preserved, protected and, in some cases, followed. One of the main contradictions of the emotional culture manifests here: high control over emotions and simultaneous necessity to experience them, effectively manage them and simultaneously “be true to oneself”, express one’s authentic feelings (Reckwitz and Pakis, 2020), simultaneous commercialization of control over feelings, when one needs to suppress one’s feelings, and necessity to display one’s own feelings, one’s own authentic self.

According to Jack Barbalet, the late modern society is characterized by a combination of emotional complexity and instrumental attitude to one’s own emotions (Barbalet, 2019, p. 6). Individuals are focused on their own emotions, the so-called *ego-emotions*, i.e. emotions directed to oneself, one’s own well-being, satisfaction, self-expression and self-esteem, rather than to others, their evaluations and opinions (Barbalet, 2019, p. 9). Barbalet notes that ego-emotions are a result of alienation and rational individual control over emotions in bourgeois societies, while the growth of them in human life causes specific social consequences: maintenance of large collectives of people (corporations), in which everyone is individualized and shut in one’s own world of emotional experience. Inconsistency of combination of rational emotion control is manifested in the display of “emotional neutrality”, detachment and even coldness and simultaneous deep anxiety, search of authentic feelings and desire to experience them, to “get excited” (Lyng, 2018). In other words, there is a coexistence of individuation and ego-emotions, concern for one’s own peace, well-being, pleasure and simultaneous suffering from weakening of social connections, loneliness, constant search of love and happiness (Illouz, 2007; 2012).

The most important emotional imperative is a maxim or cultural purpose “*to be happy*” (“do what makes me happy”) – *the imperative of pursuit of happiness*. This

² Emotional Well-Being and Coping During COVID-19. Available from https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/coronavirus/coping?fbclid=IwAR29EJPOUCP2hZAYQabqnudnJBVPyfbhwGqCnkyGyW_BFSuxMXRuOQe2woA#main-content (Accessed, April 20, 2020).

imperative refers to persistent inquiry of individual happiness (however it could be understood) and is oriented to consumption of some objects, material and symbolic, that “guarantee” this happiness (see Ahmed, 2010; McKenzie, 2016). To this imperative also relates *the imperative of “romantic love”* that “a person should encounter at least once in a lifetime”, which is also connected to persistent pursuit of happiness and conviction that these feelings should be present in human life and lead to happiness (see Illouz, 2012). And also, *the imperative of avoidance of (certain) “negative feelings”* (for example, shame, grief), this imperative is connected to the previous ones and oriented to escape from anything that causes negative emotional experience, focus on completion of periods of painful feelings, reduction and avoidance of experiencing them (see, for example, Berns 2011).

The following contradiction: persistent requirement to constantly experience positive emotions, happiness and actual impossibility of this, pursuit of positive emotions and their simultaneous rationalization and commercialization, a specific gap between demonstrated, mainly positive, emotions and actually experienced negative and other feelings (Reckwitz and Pakis, 2020). Hence intensive emotionalization and overload with it (and with these gaps: with the simultaneous wish to experience authentic feelings and to control them) is accompanied with obsessive search of tools for work with negative experience, widespread address to psychology, trainings, development of emotional intelligence and emotional competence (Simonova, 2019).

The imperative of “individual guilt”, when an individual should feel individual guilt for everything that happens “wrong” in their life. Guilt can be viewed as a “negative feeling”, however useful at that, helping an individual to cope with failure, be constantly oriented to success and happiness. This is an example of emotional experience that Barbalet, taking cue from other experts, calls ego-emotions and that forms part of social control in large contemporary collectives (Barbalet, 2019). Special emotional regime of capitalism bases on the notions that an individual is first of all responsible for their failures, one’s problems can be resolved individually, and one can resolve them, and if not, it is one’s own fault. Ego-emotions reflect the process of individualization at the extreme, when social problems are mainly perceived psychologically: as personal inadequacy, feeling of guilt, anxiety, conflicts and neuroses (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

The imperative of sympathy/compassion and/or individual loyalty is connected to the previous ones: in order to achieve success and happiness it is necessary to express a certain amount of sympathy, compassion and loyalty in different kinds of relations and first of all in subordinate relations (see, for example, Clark, 1997; Barbalet, 1999). It means that relations are subject to specific socio-emotional economics: exchange relations regarding display of sympathy as affection and sympathy as commiseration, which people tend to rationally manage.

The imperative of nostalgia or longing for the past, the future and the present that constantly “changes”, “slips away” is connected to fast pace and changes in social life, segmentation, uncertainty and risks. This imperative is not evident, however its persistence manifests in search of memories and notions that provide determinacy, stability, protection (Bauman, 2017; Jacobsen, 2019a; Jacobsen, 2019b). Zygmunt Bauman notes the general inconsistency of feelings, their fast interchange, transience and, at the same time, longing for them; such are, for example, “liquid” fear, love, anxiety (Bauman, 2003; 2006). In this context spreading and persistence of nostalgia becomes an attempt to achieve stability, confidence, trust in fluctuating modernity or fast-paced world. It is noteworthy that Bauman writes about “global epidemic of nostalgia” (Bauman, 2017, p. 18), which will

probably also be of importance in the post-viral age. Rationalization as a social process, about which sociologists talked, partially determined *nostalgia for live emotions and feelings* (Gonzalez, 2017), as well as for the past times and even moments. That is to say, virtually at any given moment one may begin to feel nostalgic for something irretrievable and something that can never be returned. Perhaps, this feeling starts to increase much more in the situation of the pandemic, because people feel that it is not possible to go back, while the future is extremely uncertain, that is why a turn for utopia, about which wrote Bauman (Bauman, 2017), would be relevant here, as well as different kinds of escape to fantasy worlds in order to cope with anxiety about the future. On the other hand, it actualizes various kinds of the film industry and art, gives an opportunity to develop technologies that allow to immerse in digital worlds and interactions that recreate past life, i.e. tendencies, which were already present in the modern societies, will increase even more.

Obviously, this list could be continued, each imperative can be explored through specific examples, typical modern mundane notions and even some branches of modern psychology. It should be noted once again that not the whole world of human feelings is implied here, but the aspects that are considered deserving, worthy of being aimed at, important, valuable (in the modern society). Therefore, *in the modern emotional culture one can observe an emphasis on (positive) feelings (for example, happiness and pleasure), their authenticity and spontaneity together with an emphasis on rational means of their achievement*. Needless to say, an attempt to express and search these feelings or emotions may result in failure, impossibility, inaccessibility of these states. Hence, from our point of view, various social consequences are possible, however, disruption of personal social connections, avoidance of different kinds of social relations, loneliness, feeling of alienation, frustration and depression, emergence of anxiety and fear, suppression of really important (including negative) for social life feelings, formation of different kinds of collective solidarities, for example, irrational communities as shelters from failure, misfortune, absence of love, etc., become evident.

Even before the pandemic these tendencies were observed to different extents in the late modern societies. However, the forecasts themselves were different: some sociologists wrote about post-emotional society, where emotions become an object of manipulation, fabrication from economic and political structures, rather than appear spontaneously, “happy emotions” for the masses (Mestrovic, 1997); other authors see in emotions emergence of a new “moral agent”, drivers of moral choice, building blocks of identity (Bauman, 1993, p. 67); the third ones observed emergence of affective attachments to new social associations (“identity tribes”) (Maffesoli, 1997), collectives that require individual obedience or attachment and are directly connected to emotions of each one (Barbalet, 2019, pp. 5 and 11). In the institutional context of neoliberalism, we have a paradoxical mixture of individualization and social solidarity. Emotions reflect relations with market and large organizations, corporations and political figures, supporting the power of the latter.

Moral individualism and its social consequences under the conditions of the viral and post-viral age become the key topic in this respect: if emotional culture as such enabled weakening of personal human connections, individualization and new forms of solidarity of atomized individuals, then how these tendencies would be interpreted under the new conditions of the global epidemiological catastrophe? It is also important to understand how rational instrumentality in relation to emotions and their commercialization will “overlap”, enable or counteract current circumstances, events, affect human behavior. In any case, in the viral age all the feelings

will be affected, socio-cultural dimensions of each socially significant feeling will change in close interconnection with general socio-cultural conditions and situations.

Considering the above, it may be stated that one of the most important and interesting researches will be a research of the feelings that are related to human sufferings, the topic that has already been raised in sociology (see, e. g.: Wilkinson, 2005; Wilkinson and Kleinman, 2016). Sociological reflection of types of sufferings and their social consequences may become one of the key topics in sociology, and accordingly, transformation of the most important emotional states – empathy, sympathy and compassion, that are “micro-social” forces of social solidarity and can play a certain role in the situation of decline of sensitivity to feelings and sufferings of other people, emotional coldness and focus on rational management of emotions (Bauman and Donskis, 2013; Illouz, 2007).

2. Sympathy, compassion and care in the modern societies and in the context of the global epidemic

We would like to draw attention to the essential feelings that perhaps will define human connections and solidarity forms on a global scale under the conditions of the pandemic, because catastrophic events intensify not only selfish fight for resources, but also various forms of altruism and solidarity (Batson, 2011). It is coping with personal and someone else’s sufferings that will highlight emotional work with psychological pain, anxiety, grief, fears, alienation. Coping with suffering, healing from it relates to sympathy and compassion, which in general strengthen social connections, weaken alienation, motivate various kinds of care for other people, supporting common solidarity and moral order, weakening discrimination, inequality and other kinds of social exclusion. How may special aspects of the emotional culture of the late modern societies affect displays and manifestations of sympathy and compassion? What limitations and opportunities are contained in these sentiments?

Jonathan Turner and Jan Stets classify such moral emotions as sympathy and empathy as connected to sufferings of others, emerging in response to distress of others, which can as such initiate various emotional states (including those that are considered negative) (Turner and Stets, 2007, p. 550). These states serve as a significant component of social interactions, support social solidarity, because they act as motivating force for provision of help to individuals in a difficult situation (Turner and Stets, 2007, p. 555). They ease interpersonal relations, postulating altruism and suppressing aggression (Clark, 1997; Eisenberg and Miller, 1987). If we refer to the definition of sympathy, in the most well-known sociological work on sympathy culture Candace Clark defines it as a range of emotions directed to others and connected to their pain, anxiety and suffering, it is a feeling of sorrow or sadness and anxiety regarding people in trouble, in distress (Clark, 1997, p. 44). Sympathy includes empathy as a necessary component, conscious sympathy sentiment and its display (Schmitt and Clark, 2007, p. 467), i.e. it is an acceptance of others’ role, their sentiments, anticipation of their emotions and actions. Empathy is classified as bodily (physical sensation of others’ sentiments), emotional (experiencing of others’ feelings, understanding of others through emotions, for example sadness or anxiety) and cognitive (realization and understanding of another person’s state). Sympathy sentiment is connected to the type of empathy, emotional empathy mostly enables emergence of sympathy and compassion (Clark, 1987, p.

295). Sympathy display is the most important element of this feeling: “Without display, the emotion is a social outcome, but not a social force” (Clark, 1997, pp. 56-57), that is why “a sympathy display serves as one of many “little offerings” that affirm the recipient social worth, smooth human interaction and strengthen social bonds” (Schmitt and Clark, 2007, p. 472). For example, men and women usually follow different rules of sympathy display. Women to a greater extent “specialize” in sympathy, perform the corresponding sympathy work and care for others (Schmitt and Clark, 2007, p. 473).

Empathy as such does not necessarily cause emergence of sympathy that usually motivates helping behavior and care for another person (Davis, 1994). From the sociological point of view, it is interesting to note that between empathy and feeling of sympathy and correspondingly its display (which more likely motivates person’s helping behavior and care for another person) people can make judgements related to cultural notions, purposes, moral norms, as well as ascribe to somebody or something reasons of their own sentiments, make judgement related to situation, status, calculate profits and costs of their potential actions. It means that sympathy and compassion are not spontaneous, they are directed by emotional culture, which, in its turn, depends on general socio-cultural conditions. According to Clark, sentiment and display of sympathy is directed by rules and logic of “socio-emotional” economy (Clark, 1987). Sympathy is regulated by cultural rules and logic of social exchange that define the rules of reception and display of sympathy, and also sympathy can be used for achievement of one’s own purposes, status or power over others (Clark, 1997, p. 113). People estimate and in a certain way should estimate whom, when, how and to what extent to display sympathy, what are time and context, for example to a stranger on the day of commemoration of their dead relative (Schmitt and Clark, 2007, p. 473).

In other words, sympathy display complies with the cultural purpose of control over emotions (the imperative of emotion management), as well as (capitalist) logic of social exchange, and under these conditions sympathy can be seriously deficient resource. However, all of that does not mean that sympathy is only a “product”, logic of exchange can be different, for example, either proceed according to the beneficence principle, when another person deserves sympathy as a gift, or base on the principle of complementarity, as between relatives, or follow the principle of reciprocity – equivalent exchange of feelings. These principles can also be combined and contradict each other, for example reciprocal beneficence is the most probable form of sympathy exchange with a wide circle of strangers (Clark, 1997, pp. 134-140).

Clark speculates about sympathy etiquette or “micropolitics” of sympathy, the common rules of sympathy display that are conventional in the American society (Clark, 1997: 159); for example, not to perform insincere sympathy displays; not to display too much sympathy or accept it with too much willingness; return sympathy, if it was displayed by other person, etc. Also, by means of using economic metaphors, Clark identifies agents that direct sympathy exchange: those are sympathy entrepreneurs and sympathy brokers (Clark, 1997, p. 42). Entrepreneurs and brokers act on behalf of different communities and individuals (including Internet communities) and determine which misfortunes and sufferings deserve sympathy. Sometimes sympathy becomes successful business or political action, when used to someone’s benefit, for instance, social movements for the protection of indigenous rights (Schmitt, Clark, 2007, p. 473). These social agents of sympathy attempt to evaluate, influence and manipulate judgements and emotional display of those who feels or should feel sympathy. For example, they frequently define representatives

of which age, gender and status categories, as well as which problems and troubles deserve sympathy in people's minds (Clark, 1997, p. 82).

On the basis of the above, Clark identifies the main principles of sympathy display, for example, the special deprivation principle, which indicates that those people or groups that are deprived deserve sympathy, for example, disabled persons; the vulnerability principle: the weak deserve sympathy; as well as the potential principle: those who didn't have a chance to use opportunities, for example, children, deserve sympathy; the special burden principle that claims necessity of sympathy display to those who perform important social activities, for example, firefighters or doctors (Schmitt and Clark, 2007, p. 472). In this list of principles one can also find negative principles that specify those who don't deserve sympathy – privileged groups or people according to the balance of fortune principle, as well as those who consciously expose themselves to the risk (special responsibility principle), for example, smokers. Persons who are of value for the whole society or embody the key values (social worth principle), for example, Mother Teresa, deserve special sympathy. Obviously, these principles can also be combined and even contradict each other, depending on a social situation and cultural context.

In general, it can be said that sympathy display is regulated according to certain norms that reproduce economic and social exchange principles. Moreover, empathy is portrayed as spontaneous and innate feeling or emotion, while sympathy is social; therefore, empathy is more affected by social factors: on the one hand, increasing social differentiation, social and geographic mobility, urbanization, as well as emphasis on the values of success, impede display of empathy, because they narrow down the possibilities to see sufferings of others and thus to feel sympathy (Schmitt and Clark, 2007), and on the other hand, some institutions and organizations “promote” empathy and sympathy, for example religious and humanitarian organizations.

The following important issue remains unclear: do sympathy and different forms of its display enable social solidarity? Considering the pandemic situation, socio-emotional economics and sympathy politics will manifest in a peculiar manner. For example, digital capitalism will play bigger role, and consequently sympathy and compassion will be displayed through Internet mediators, and even bigger competition for platforms, where groups determine who and how should be sympathized more, is also possible. It is understandable that actions speak louder than feelings, however, the “work” of sympathy, even with the help of Internet mediators, as a result appears to be functional for the participants of interaction (Brownlie and Shaw, 2019). The issues of cultural differences in sympathy display and ways of combination of above-mentioned sympathy culture principles are also important.

Compassion is a more intense feeling than just sympathy and empathy, which even more likely motivates helping behavior: “It is a profoundly moral emotion” (Wilkinson, 2019: 73), aimed at coping with sufferings of other people and related to the notion of the common good. In some institutional orders this feeling is actively cultivated, for example, in the health care professional environment compassion is viewed as a part of emotion work that facilitates healing and recovery of patients (Neff and Vonk, 2009); also, for example, in teaching compassion and sympathy may enable learning efficiency, development of self-confidence, successful socialization (Zembylas, 2013). Compassion is a part of notions of social justice, ideologies of social movements and strategies of their activists. Liberalization was accompanied with the growth of compassion to vulnerable people and groups (Wouters, 2007), nowadays there is a widespread cultural attitude that people

should be compassionate, that it is an integral human quality (Wilkinson, 2018, pp. 81-83).

However, taking into account the emotional imperatives and above-mentioned cultural contradictions, one can say that in the late modern societies the observation of the so-called compassion fatigue at a micro- and macro-level of society (see, e.g. Figley, 2002; Sprang et al., 2007) becomes perfectly understandable, i.e. the established socio-cultural conditions destroy human kindness and disposition to care (Wilkinson, 2019: 75). As was already stated above, nowadays we live under socio-cultural conditions, in which inconsistency of experiencing and display of various feelings intensifies, and likewise compassion may increase and simultaneously decline (Wilkinson, 2018: 79). Human sufferings become a part of infotainment environment, disrupting moral sensitivity (Kleiman and Kleiman, 1996). On the one hand, there is a cooling of feelings, compassion fatigue, on the other hand, there is an emergence of opportunity of compassion to all the people across the globe, anywhere in the world, as well as to those who haven't been born yet. Nevertheless, a sign of the times is also compassion fatigue, burnout in combination with anxiety and worry, frequently the position of "detached observer" (Boltansky, 1999) increases moral insensitivity and consequently causes absence of specific actions in response to sufferings of other people.

Thus, empathy, sympathy and compassion are of great importance in the global pandemic situation, because they become a response to sufferings of other people, play role in support of social solidarity, helping behavior, motivate implementation of care for different categories of population. Experiencing and display of these feelings are influenced by socio-cultural conditions and aren't spontaneous but directed by socio-emotional economics. Sympathy and compassion are affected by contradictions of the emotional culture of late modernity and manifest unevenly, may increase and decline under the influence of new forms of communication, and moreover, are an object of manipulation from different interest groups.

In the current situation, it is quite important to implement care at every social level, whereas feelings of sympathy and compassion can be called "fuel" for the realization of effective care in every area of social life. However, even before the pandemic experts mentioned a "crisis of care" as a general characteristic of the present-day situation in the area of practices and relations of care (see Borozdina *et al.*, 2019: 9-12), which manifested itself in the crisis of traditional female roles, deficiency of care in private and public sphere, etc. This crisis was partially the consequence of total commodification of care, including its emotional component, and introduction of neoliberal management principles. Which feelings motivate care at the moment and what modification will they undergo in the present and in the near future? This is the question that is important for confrontation with global processes initiated by the new virus pandemic. Here compassion is an ethical category and morally right and necessary emotion (Pulcini, 2017).

We have already mentioned that empathy, according to the opinions of various experts (Davis, 1994), represents an important component of sympathy or compassion (as key action motivators regarding care), but is a morally neutral feeling in relation to care. In the course of analysis of different sources Elena Pulcini classifies care as personal or private, when it is based on love, affection or family relations; as professional care in private and public sphere of society, when it is implemented by professionals and various kinds of specialists for people who are not relatives or significant others; and also a new kind of care that can be called global, which is care for strangers who may be far away, anywhere in the world (Pulcini, 2017, p. 66). The latter kind of care is especially interesting, because, to a certain

extent, it reflects global mutual dependence and universal human identity, and most importantly, the recent events reflect this close global interdependence and common problems, threats and turmoil. Global measurement of care, compassion, spreads through space and time to distant other and future generations.

However, Pulcini notes the same inconsistency that is established in the modern emotional culture: compassion is increasingly more displayed through mediating role of media, where emotions are manipulated, where we become spectators of affective performance and rhetoric instead of real feelings, which lead to helping behavior and care (Pulcini, 2017, p. 69). The researcher believes, taking cue from Luc Boltanski, that it is important to apply “politics of pity”, which is able to counteract moral individualism and atomization of the modern societies, compassion fatigue and activate and support compassion to distant other and “empathic fear” for future generations, far from us in time, feelings that emerged due to global interdependence of all the people across the globe. That is to say, the modern emotional culture is extremely contradictory, and it is not known whether the sentiments that became active in the pre-viral and viral age would lead to new kinds of solidarity in the future, solution or escalation of the crisis of care. Besides, we would like to add that in this context *one more kind of care is also important – it is self-care* that paradoxically reflects the pandemic situation, under the conditions of which this care is effective along with self-isolation, as well as individualism and moral ambiguity of modern people, who have to make many decisions in various situations and choose for whom to care first: for themselves or for the others.

In other words, it is important to understand how socio-emotional economics and sympathy politics will change under the conditions of the global pandemic and, accordingly, already digital emotional culture and capitalism. Probably we will have to be effectively compassionate online, all the more so, because the imperative of rational emotion management remains in place, and Internet resources emerge, where you can learn the ways of compassion display³.

Conclusion

From our point of view, the crisis connected to the pandemic may facilitate a certain manner of resolution of paradoxes and contradictions of the modern emotional culture. Moral individualism became the principal guideline system of the modern world. However, the second key factor was a global event – a catastrophe in the form of the pandemic, when actually a revision of social norms and connections takes place. In which manner will cultural configurations be constructed? Will the imperatives of the late modern emotional culture remain the same? The emotional imperatives cause social consequences in terms of spreading of different behavior types, characterize the state of social connections, etc. That is why during and after the pandemic people will probably follow, for example, the imperative of rational emotion management: for instance, they will search new ways of coping with anxiety, fears, stress, addressing specialists and corresponding literature. It demonstrates “effect” of emotional culture, because, for example, it is not always functional to cope with anxiety, since it indicates indeterminacy, risks and mobilizes. It is also connected to the imperative of happiness, avoidance of “negative”

³ Compassion in Action: 15 Easy Ways to Spread Kindness by *Sara Schairer*, Founder and Executive Director of Compassion It. Available from <https://chopra.com/articles/compassion-in-action-15-easy-ways-to-spread-kindness> (Accessed, April 20, 2020).

emotions. From this point of view, it is interesting to know how constant communication with significant others during self-isolation will affect the kinds of emotion work in private sphere.

Perhaps the excessive emphasis on happiness, pleasure and positive emotions will not only become obsolete, but just impossible in the context of common disaster. On the other hand, moral individualism can't disappear in an instant: moral difficulties with sympathy and compassion demonstration, implementation of various kinds of care, including self-care. At the moment, many societies probably face a moral dilemma: either to leave behind economics of high consumption, comfort, pleasures and care for other, not only those who exist now anywhere in the world, but also for future generations, or to follow one's individual desires, maintain extreme autonomy and detachment, pursue one's own interests without care for others, encourage one's own insensitivity and fatigue with feelings to other people. Some forecasts on the future after the pandemic sound optimistic: there may be emergence of new forms of solidarity, strengthening of moral rules of mutual aid, etc. Indeed, the pandemic enables review of moral rules, however, in such a case, it increases their indeterminacy. For example, the crisis of care and moral individualism, which developed even before the pandemic, now escalate. Whom to care for, how and whom to express sympathy and compassion? For example, self-care is an undoubtedly important moral prescription, because when we care for ourselves in the current situation, we thereby care for the others. On the other hand, if we do NOT at least be compassionate, sympathize and at most care for any human, we will face great problems and sufferings, because the pandemic has showed to what extent we depend on each other on a global scale. This moral ambiguity probably leads to formation of new moral notions of how to be compassionate, sympathize and what to do in a such complicated modern world.

Therefore, it is possible to formulate the following list of questions in the context of the topic of this article (regarding emotional culture) that deserve attention and are important for study by the specialists from different branches of science, who are involved in the research of emotions. Firstly, it is absolutely unclear what emotional capitalism will be like, what kinds of commercialized emotion management will there be and how emotion consumption will change technologically. How will manipulation of consumers' emotion modify? Secondly, it is important to study changes and transformations of norms that regulate emotion management, because this kind of interaction reflects the state of social connections and has functional consequences for social order in general. Regarding the previous question: will there be new forms of commercialization of emotion work, for example, with anxiety and fears? Will rationalization and coldness in relation to feelings remain an important tool for achievement of cultural purposes? Hence, how will emotion work change in close relations and other spheres, as well as in digital communities?

Further on quite difficult for sociology topic becomes relevant: the topic of human sufferings, their collective comprehension and partially cultural construction are important resources for coping with current difficulties and development of the future prospects. As for separate specific emotional sentiments, it should be noted that there will be important topics connected to emergence of new forms of solidarity and care for other people at every level of social structure and, accordingly, the respective feelings, such as empathy, sympathy and compassion. How will the contradiction between naturalness and necessity of these feelings and their rational management, burnout, cooling of these feelings, characteristic for complex mass societies be resolved? Will compassion become the most important imperative?

It is necessary to continue the studies of such complicated feeling as nostalgia (the imperative of nostalgia), because this feeling may be functional in relation to search of means of coping with the challenges of the current situation, indicate those that were effective in the past. Grief also becomes highlighted, because it is connected to sufferings and the way in which society regulates experiencing and display of feelings related to grief and mourning. Moreover, the global social crisis is connected not only to the feelings of compassion, but also to the emergence of righteous indignation at various kinds of injustice, which may result in political consequences in the situation of emergency quarantine and isolation. Other questions can undoubtedly be raised. What will the future be like? What emotional norms will establish first of all? The fate of solidarity, new forms of inequality, conflicts and mass behavior from the perspective of research of emotions as a form of the comprehension of the future will at least partially allow to overcome uncertainties and complexity of the modern world.

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Sexuality at the Time of Coronavirus in Italy: A (Technological) Retreat in Itself?

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Abstract

Our contribution aims at unravelling the knot between sexuality and the web in Italy during the coronavirus pandemic. Sex-related online practices intensified, due to health concerns and lockdown measures, and access to pornographic websites skyrocketed. What is the cultural, relational, and psychological impact of this? We identify two main outcomes: *widespread solipsism* and *dissolution by excess*. It is, to the best of our knowledge, an unexplored territory. Sociologists did not address previous pandemics, nor have they provided extensive and methodologically satisfying work on sexuality in Italy. Given the delicate nature of the topic, and the unreliability of traditional sociological research methods, we chose to fully carry out our research online. We will examine online prostitution, webcam girls, user-produced pornography and dating sites, in addition to touching upon other topics such as sexting. We will, to the best of our abilities, try to mark a path in the wilderness of human sexuality in the digital era and in these unprecedented circumstances. We believe that the link between online and offline sexuality will be consolidated and define this relationship as *differentiated integration*: a reciprocal adaptation covering the most diverse places and ways. To study this web-integrated society, we propose the *eclectic approach*.

Keywords: Sexuality, Web, Italy, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Digital.

Introduction

To address *coronavirus* – or, rather, the effects of this unprecedented pandemic on human sexuality – in a scientific (non-journalistic) way is a complex sociological task. The idea of embarking in this adventure hails from this journal editor-in-chief who decided to devote an entire issue to coronavirus², interpreted in a sociological perspective. We will scrupulously stick to hypothetical logics, without any pretence of going further and hoping for future theoretical and research contributions from others. After all, also the virologic and epidemiological field now see about twenty groups around the world that are experimentally trying to understand what this virus is, what can be its moves and what our countermoves. It is a preventive and competitive eclectic approach (Cipolla, 2013; 2019) which we hope will soon come to some socially useful re-compositional or selective results.

As far as we are concerned, there are no precedents whatsoever. The 1347/48 plague which caused (more or less) 30 million deaths out of 100 million infected people in Europe could not have affected us for obvious age reasons, while the much more recent Spanish Flu of 1918, which infected around 1 billion people with about 20 million estimated deaths (around 2%), has not been studied by any sociologist, or no records of such research remain today (Chiaberge, 2016; Collier,

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² The acronym *cv* will henceforth stand for *coronavirus*.

2005; Tognotti, 2015³). It was a strain of flu which caused in Italy between 300 and 600 thousand deaths (mainly young males), and which found the “noble art” powerless in the face of this pandemic, which has remained in history as a sudden and fulminating pneumonia (Fava, 2018). So, to the best of our knowledge (Cipolla & Ardisson, 2015), sociologists did not address this infectious disease that, together with the Great War, contributed to change the world (Spinney, 2017). Yet, the calamity was evident, as can be seen in the data on illness-related deaths in the Italian army during 1918/19 and even 1920 (Fornasin, 2018, pp. 267 *et seq.*).

Alongside the lack of social research on pandemics, a further absence can be found on the theme of sexuality, understood as a social fact *par excellence* or as an obligation to otherness (Cipolla, 2005). Due to cultural conditioning, sociology has started to address this topic quite late and rather problematically, if we see the issue through today’s sensibility (see Adorni, Migliozi & Suzzi, 1996, p. 35 *et seq.*). In Italy, some relevant research on the issue was recently carried out without underpinning theoretical reflections and with rather condescending methodologies (Furlotti, 1996), focused mainly on homosexuality (both male and female)⁴ and youth⁵. A more general and very broad-spectrum survey of 2010 followed highly extrinsic, predictable, and even mannerist canons, without accounting for technology and the web society. Its outcomes were, therefore, easily foreseeable and, for our purposes, rather useless. It is within this barren national panorama that we advance in writing this short essay. It is too easy to grasp how this makes our line of interpretation even more cautious, as our field observations are almost all online analyses. Sex must be captured indirectly and with adequate and honest methodological cleanliness especially as regards minorities, the “perverse”, women, understood in a general sense⁶, and men, especially regarding specific issues⁷. Privacy in the field of sexuality is a border which is very difficult to cross: its intimacy is only its.

1. Sexuality almost dissolved into the web: *pro tempore*?

This *cv* pandemic, treacherous and invisible, obviously changes the life *of* and *in* society. Being forced to stay at home, except in special cases, for months (but hopefully less) undoubtedly affects many aspects of our relationships. How could such a constraint not change them, whatsoever they may be? If we reflect and look around us, we cannot help but consider that the *cv* impact depends on one’s work and family relationships. In the first case, we range from those (like ourselves and colleagues) who keep studying and writing almost like before to those doomed to tediousness, being unable to perform any kind of task from home. As far as the affective sphere is concerned, we can distinguish between couples not living together; people carrying on clandestine relationships, now entrusted to mobile phones and almost impossible to sustain; happy couples whose good relationship is reinvigorated; unhappy couples whose bad relationship is now overflowing; those who are victims of their spouse (usually women) and suffer abuse and violence

³ This is perhaps the most comprehensive and penetrating text on this topic.

⁴ Technology (obviously) does not appear in the studies by Barbagli & Colombo (2001) and Saraceno (2003). All their representativeness appears to be “convenience” and their interpretation (open to transgender people) is cultural rather than sexual-technical.

⁵ See Garelli (2000), keeping in mind the above remarks. There is no methodological note.

⁶ Let us consider as an example a direct question on masturbation. How reliable are the answers – assuming that the questionnaire or interview is not promptly abandoned or interrupted?

⁷ As above, regarding, for example, frequenting prostitutes.

(even in its lighter forms, if there is such a thing as a lesser form of violence). The list could go on because family conditions are the most diverse (*e.g.* singles living alone) and involve very different individual emotions. However, a common psychological status tends perhaps to link these segregation statuses together: boredom.

This emotion was masterfully highlighted by Heidegger (Cipolla, 2018, p. 276), who always manages to surprise us with his eclectic ductility, which leads him to philosophise about a jug as about God (*ibid.*, p. 85). According to his thought, boredom is a filling of time, a situation that does not let it pass, does not allow it to go away, and that never makes it disappear from the mind. Boredom, for him, is a value in emptiness, living in the nothing that works for us, the boredom of one's being. It is destitution, dismay, astonishment. To leave it is to open oneself to the world, to see it in a more immediate, direct, pertinacious way.

If this is, in broad terms, the context in which we find ourselves (as we will for a while longer), how does it change eroticism⁸? The theme is extremely complex, and it affects couple and gender relationships, as well as the bonds and transitions of finding oneself between off- and on-line. This is the real social innovation brought on by the web society (Cipolla, 2015a). In other words, how do relationship and connection reposition themselves with respect to – and into – sexuality in these calamitous times? The bond of exchange between man and woman is very complex and its ritualistic manifestations change in time and space (Goffman, 1977). Small exhibitions, within a framework, a structure, a schematic synopsis, can be adaptations to the context, affirmations and negations, expressions of an identifying style, multiple and optional demonstrations, referrals to something else (wider) shown in a more or less conscious way. But if we reverse the course of our intimacy (Greco, 2014), deciding no longer what we can make public, as opposed to private, but choosing, online and then offline, what we think is right and we want to keep private, what happens to all the above? In all this, in this constant interconnection, where does intimacy (also sexual) find its boundaries? (*ibid.*, p. 242).

If we move from abstract hypotheses to concrete sexual behaviours, we can get a general idea on the topic, even if riddled with restrictions and gaps. Concrete sexual behaviours will not be derived from sample interviews, which suffer major biases (as seen in the previous paragraph) and, therefore, do not enlighten us on reality (indeed, they rather distort it) but from “objective” indicators, not addled by expressive respectability. Given that researches carried out online do not in themselves lead to credible and different results from offline ones (Scarcelli, 2015), we will start from some basic premises concerning sexuality in or through the web, which is not (nor can it be) similar to face to face relationships or to the sexuality that has been historically handed down to us.

There are very few studies on sexuality in the past and they certainly fall outside sociological research. We would like to point out one we co-authored (Cipolla & Malacarne, 2006) on love and sex at the time of the Gonzaga, based on official and unpublished documents. During the Renaissance, the themes most frequently addressed are: the sexual adventures of priests, friars, nuns and pilgrims, whose chastity, therefore, was rather problematic (Ottaviani *et al.*, 2006, p. 152); the “whores” in all their manifestations both as troublemakers and victims; the behaviour of husbands both as “cuckolds” and adulterers and, finally, sexual violence, harshly punished in an ostentatious and exemplary manner. But it is from the con-

⁸ Eroticism is a constitutive part of sex, together with the procreative one.

fessors' manuals⁹ (Cipolla & Malacarne, 2006, pp. 27 and 30) that one understands which were considered the gravest sins and the repressive spirit enveloping sex. Basically, except for the "missionary", almost everything was forbidden¹⁰, with sodomy (especially for women and more seriously at an older age), bestiality, incest with close relatives (save for the case of a mother laying with a pre-pubescent child, considered less serious) and relationships with nuns¹¹ at the top of the blame. Therefore, a world which, even though it is at the beginning of modernity, appears morally extremely far from us, although, in some respects, such as recurrent behaviour, it appears at the same time rather close.

Over time, sexual practices have become secularised and evolved in favour of women. They led, in Italy, to the closure of brothels in 1958, although certainly not to the disappearance of prostitution. And then along came the digital revolution¹², which significantly affected human sexuality. It assumed two parallel faces, placed between real and communicational, between online and offline (Molinari, 2015), in an increasingly fluid perspective of sexuality (Ruspini, 2015) and, in their way, increasingly transsexual (Agnoletti & Scanu, 2015). So why and in what way does the connective approach¹³ today makes available to us online sexual practices that were unpredictable and even unthinkable in the past and are now within everyone's reach? How has the web made it possible in our current digital society to enjoy sex in a direct or indirect, relational, or personal, pornographic, or simply erotic way? We will now try to synthetically outline these aspects, taking advantage of the few (serious) sociological contributions available on the subject¹⁴.

Human sexuality in the web society can be characterized and qualified as follows, taking for granted that we are dealing with the innumerable forms of eroticism that can be enjoyed (in the broadest sense) online:

- a) *accessible*: thanks to our smartphones, except for particular cases, we are always erotically connected to the world and this connection can always be activated, especially from home or even in wild or remote contexts (if they still do exist);
- b) *free of charge*: almost all online eroticism is free of charge, as it pays for itself with advertising or with personal data that we, more or less consciously, provide;
- c) *prosthetic*: since our "mobile" moves around with us, it is a body appendix that, like glasses, always accompanies us and can be enjoyed in any social context;
- d) *free from time and space*: what has been mentioned, implies the observation that sex, in these aspects, is always condescending to our desires without geographical or hourly obligations;

⁹ One can deduce the gravity of the action from the severity of the corresponding penances. Sexual pleasure was essentially denied. Sexual acts with animals, which involved up to perpetual penances, were assimilated to those with Jews or infidels. The rape of prostitutes or commoners found alone was not punished. There were, however, many other punishments.

¹⁰ The "cowgirl" position, with the woman on top, was the most condemned because it was deemed to hinder conception and it made the woman independent during the act. Fellatio was punished with 7 years of fasting (but who confessed it?).

¹¹ This was always considered an aggravating circumstance. Even kissing, wearing skimpy clothes, or conducting sensual dances was a sin, but in this case, the penance was limited to 20 days of fasting. The same as for priests who had spontaneous seminal pollutions. A veritable social obsession...

¹² The book edited by Cipolla (2015b), particularly the introduction, conclusions and the chapter written by him, takes up again many phenomena that are completely emerging and proper to the web society.

¹³ On the comparison-difference between relationship and connection, see Cipolla (2015a, p. 156). Today, one should always argue about *relational connectivity* or, vice versa, about *connective relationality*.

¹⁴ In a psychological-clinical key see Cooper's pioneering work (2002).

- e) *anonymous*: the use of (and exposure to) any kind of erotic communication can be made without our name being public. Secrecy is always possible and guaranteed (except fraud);
- f) *available*: one of the most relevant features of the erotic web is that it knows no thematic boundaries, covering all types of sexuality that can be hypothesized and all forms of sexual perversions existing in this world, and gambling – and, we suppose, even those that exist only in its (and our) imagination;
- g) *satisfying*: given the above, it seems to me that sexuality in *the online towards the offline* becomes filled, satiated by physical exhaustion and pleasure, in the opposite way to what happens to (almost all) drug users who self-destruct by overdose, not because they are satiated;
- h) *safe*: sex practised through digital excitement is the safest there can be, even (and perhaps most importantly) during cv. This includes its complements (e.g. dildos) if properly treated;
- i) *pleasurable*: it is quite clear that sex, so understood and practised, lives on its pleasure and has nothing to do with its consequences (possible and excluded here) of a generative nature, which follows other digital paths;
- l) *do-it-yourself*: the eroticism intrinsic in digital processes is very self-directed and mostly exempt from third parties and even from the web itself, which, in this case, appears powerless due to an excess of very different offers obsessively competing between them. Subjective autonomy? (Illouz, 2014);
- m) *(personal) sovereignty*: through the web, desire reverses its identity. Unlike love (*ibid.*), it does not imply a loss of sovereignty towards the other. Being able to choose everywhere and for every propensity on the web, it ultimately depends on nothing and no one. Desire can be satisfied every time, without paying any duty.

This kind of digitally based eroticism advances in the web society under the looming of the *cv* pandemic. The fear, the various ordinances, are unlikely to prompt young people to have more children, but they can encourage the population to overcome boredom, to fill the void (as already mentioned). And this can only concern the erotic sphere with its old (mentioned) rituals and new opportunities.

Let us start by noting that the digital revolution brings male and female practices closer, in this field as in many others. Perhaps, compared to the past, the male hetero-direction that led women to “racier” sexual practices prompted (or forced) by the existence of objective ties with their partner is decreasing and it mingles with the above-mentioned anonymous autonomy. The latter, however, is sunk in that historically deep-rooted feminine “expressive respectability” still latent among us.

With “stay at home” orders in place, there can only be a reduction in crimes of all kinds. Indeed, in Italy during the last month, crimes have fallen by 60% on average, and those related to sexual violence almost disappeared (-70%). The social desert seems to hinder deviance. Conversely, as documented by the postal police, it favours people’s permanence in front of the screen and, therefore, more intense and continuous use of the net. With the pandemic, the web society becomes even more so. In our need and desire of the other, we dive into the digital world and we direct it according to our status and desires. Where do we lead it in this increasingly unbridled fruition? Here we will suggest a few brief flashes that we have caught here and there.

In sites where pornography reigns undisturbed, *i.e.* explicit sexuality aimed at perpetrating and increasing itself, the demand for free accounts has skyrocketed. It is an indicator that speaks for itself, but we will return to that later. Furthermore, all

kinds of dating sites are more active, particularly those aimed at sexual minorities (or “perverse”, or according to our way of understanding). Besides, we cannot ignore the fact that the sale of sex toys has soared, and it is women who use them the most¹⁵. It should be noted, however, that this behaviour can lead, on the one hand, to private and personal masturbation, limited to one’s pleasure, while, on the other hand, it can be a couple’s erotic game which pleases one and excites the other, therefore turning into a double pleasure. If we add to this the security inherent in these erotic practices, it is hardly surprising that they are on the increase (even if not studied or explicitly admitted)¹⁶.

Besides these, we have other contextual data that can help us delve deep into the bedrock of what is happening as we write these simple notes. I am referring above all to sex crimes, essentially regarding child pornography¹⁷, and to other related crimes and scams. This erotic life, more and more online, manifests itself in its inexorability, in its everyday life, in its willingness to go in any direction it is led. On my own, I have all the sex in my mind and hand when and how I want. I am almost omnipotent, and I am that always and everywhere. But what cultural and psychological path does all this take? We identify here two, in our opinion the main ones. The first can be defined as *widespread solipsism*. In it, the individualistic, but reserved, component is associated in online sexual practice with its opposite, which is represented by the extension, by the diffusion on every behaviour, by an effusion without constraints of any kind, by diffusion without limits and boundaries however detailed and meticulous within all the different forms of sexual orientation. What are then the consequences on sexuality in general and on its various expressions within and from online?

Based on various previous reflections (Cipolla & Canestrini, 2018), we think that in this communicational context sexuality is losing much of its value. It overturns the historical repression on itself. It becomes a kind of liberation by excess, a rebellion by disinhibition, an insurrection derived from technological availability. We can do everything (apart from violence and exploitation of minors) without having to account to anyone and without paying any price. But does not this freedom, this constant availability, this possibility of drawing on every erotic behaviour contribute to cheapening these practices? And does not this depreciation become a galloping devaluation, social devaluation, debasing of the complete orientation of all that is involved? But, given that, where does it end up, how does it transform human sexuality? Our hypothesis, and also the second path we have identified, is that it dissolves in its exterminated and analytically punctuated excess (*dissolution by excess*), that applies to every type of sexual desire one want to act or imagine. Therefore, we will find ourselves in a historical evolution that disintegrates sexuality out of unbridledness, out of an excess of possibilities to manifest itself, which dissolves it in its social explosion.

¹⁵ For a well-documented essay see Canestrini (2018, pp. 302 *et seq.*). We will not go into the substance here, being too complex and long. We merely observe that in this field digital reality can also be said to be “virtual”, in the sense that it can immerse a subject in a world that does not exist. The digital, its type of communication-action is anything but virtual (normally) and we personally never use this term.

¹⁶ According to newspapers and data provided by the manufacturers, their sales would have increased between 50% and 100%. A doubling that we think needs no further comment and is worth much more than many “respectable” interviews, mentioned above, which, although unfathomable, should always be treated with methodological shrewdness.

¹⁷ For behaviours not so widespread and known see (Mondaini, 2015, p. 377 *et seq.*). But we could mention many more. We will just point out the changes that have occurred in BDSM practices (Porro, 2018, p. 173; Rota, 2015, p. 179 *et seq.*).

Our suppositions clash with (and go far beyond) all the research we have mentioned about human sexuality and will need further findings to be corroborated. Moreover, this position pays for the omnipresence of the web: it has no deterministic claim (which would be impossible), it does not deal with the moral aspects of the problem, which we have mentioned, but which in any case in our western societies are in a phase of clear containment. Having thus added to our arguments both the *widespread solipsism* and the *dissolution by excess*¹⁸ of sexuality in the web society, we will now briefly analyse some areas of extrinsic eroticism in the current *cv* pandemic¹⁹, always in conceptual agreement with the prospects outlined.

2. Which erotic areas are affected by the pandemic and how?

What an erotic area is and how it is defined is neither simple nor obvious. And the question is likely to become even more complicated in our digital society, where sexuality and pornography no longer know limits (Witt, 2018) and visually manifest the enormous variety of human inclinations. In comparison, the classifying hypotheses of old psychoanalysis or psychiatry seem laughable at the very least. We will skip the former, overwhelmed by the speed of the digital world and with uncertain scientific status, and dwell instead on the latter which, coming from the medical world, makes clear claims of procedural scientificity. Its bible is the Manual of the American Psychiatrists Association, now in its fifth edition (APA, 2013)²⁰. In this text of international reference, homosexuality was classified as paraphilia until 1974, then transformed into suffering and discomfort and, finally, eliminated in 1997. In our opinion, this sheds a light on the psychiatrists' historical-social conditioning on scientific-sexual thought. What is not "normal" sexual activity, is called paraphilia. Strictly speaking, it is an anomaly, deviance, a perversion, a disturbance in one's search for sexual pleasure. It is a sexuality that goes beyond normal coitus²¹ and investing in a companion for pleasure. In any case, it takes sexual violence and paedophilia (both ascribed to sickness) for granted. These erotic paraphilias are eight, namely exhibitionism, fetishism, frotteurism²², paedophilia, masochism, sadism, voyeurism, as well as many other forms such as bestiality (Agnoletti, 2005; Francolini, 2015).

Let us now switch to the digital world and try another path to understand the hidden sexual inclinations of mankind. We are referring to user-produced pornography posted, that is, visible, on a pornographic site (Cappoia and Forti, 2018) according to self-defined categories. Since pornography is intended to stimulate the eroticism of others by affinity with one's own, *i.e.* by sharing, we maintain that it provides a good likeness of the sexual orientation of a given population. This analysis, here addressed with great approximation due to *force majeure*, shows that the categories that can be deduced from the site (*Slutporn*), obtained by crossing gender (hetero – homo – trans) with six other defining variables (*ibid.*, pp. 234-

¹⁸ We believe that this oxymoronic logic, based on apparently incompatible contradictions that yet exist together at a societal level, is characterizing the digital society that is breaking free (or already has) from modernity, be it the first or the fourth (as theorized by some, with our disagreement).

¹⁹ In its diversity and our ignorance lies its radical sociological otherness, which we have kept and still keep well in mind, working almost in methodological suspension.

²⁰ Already outdated? Pre-digital?.

²¹ What is not normal is perverse. What about anal sex, for example? (Benvenuto, 2003).

²² Achieving sexual stimulation or orgasm by rubbing against a person without their consent.

235), can be estimated around one hundred, of which the vast majority can be considered deviant, if not perverse or paraphiliac. If we associate all these behaviours with their structural component (living together or not and so on), psychological attitude (couple relationship), relational attitude (partner), communicational (online, in physical co-presence), connected to age, gender, procreation (Cremonini, 1996), as well as any political implications, we well understand that sexuality in its being simultaneously the maximum of intimacy and the maximum of sociality is also, and intrinsically, the maximum of complexity. And, otherwise, it turns out to be a hyper-sociality denied to itself in its intimacy, which cannot be crossed. Not by chance, its radical and blatant alternative can only be pornography.

Before embarking on a necessary shortcut, we will consider the number of users who have browsed the website's categories²³, obtaining the following results for erotic areas (aggregated for obvious needs). Considering that the visits to gay clips are much lower than those for heterosexual ones, even if they far exceed those dedicated to "lesbians" and, even more so, to transsexuals (Masullo & Gianola, 2018), we can see a rather consistent and articulated scale of fruition. In a context in which hardcore rules undisputed, the most popular films seem to be those oriented to sexuality practised by teenagers (*teen*) in all their various forms of expression, even the most extreme. These brunettes, almost babies, clearly surpass milfs or mature women, which nevertheless represent a recent turning point in the affective, sexual, and aesthetic field (Atzori, 2015; Morolli, 2015). A second substantial block of pornographic users watches mainly oral sexual practices (*blowjob*), particularly ejaculation on the woman's face. Then there is the anal sex category, endured or desired by women (and more generally the sexual value of the backside), in all its possible and imaginable aspects. Immediately afterwards, the undisputed realm of big cocks, ginormous members usually belonging to young black men²⁴. Outdistanced we find group sex or women possessed by many men (gang bang), as well as hand games²⁵. We will now stop and, within this endless world, mingled with digital and palpable, we will try to extrapolate some areas that seem to be more affected by the *cv* pandemic in our web society.

One of these areas, a clear sign of the times, is prostitution, which falls within the erotic practices autonomously assumed by citizens. It is a long-standing behaviour that changes significantly over time, from one edict to the other (Lolli, 2005). Today, the situation is much changed and prostitution has extended to the exchange between women (Fasano, 2012), men for women (Rossi & Ruspini, 2012), homosexuals (Rinaldi, 2012) and transsexuals (Obert, 2012), with criminal organizations exploiting and trafficking women (Lolli & Lombi, 2012) and minors (Cifaldi, 2012). In an era of sexual facilitation and devaluation, prostitution has become increasingly invisible in various ways (Cipolla & Ruspini, 2012), ranging between erotic vocations and the latent trade in erotic practices (Canestrini, 2012). Above all, prostitution has moved, it has changed location and place. It has become cyberprostitution or online prostitution (Strizzolo, 2012), where it lives on (paid) ads posted on dedicated sites and is practised in apartments, far surpassing street prostitution (in the present but even more so in the future). A robust indicator of a flourishing prostitution activity (at least until yesterday) (Di Tommaso, 2012), are

²³ It is an estimate based on data from 2017.

²⁴ Maybe as a counterbalance, there are the tits – the bigger they are, the more they seem to attract men.

²⁵ Including fisting (anal or vaginal penetration with one's hand, up to the wrist), or the vast world of fetishism, which finds its most frequent and widespread online manifestation in feet, although it is difficult to circumscribe it adequately. For example, where to place ephebophilia? (Bonomo, 2018).

online ads, which could involve many of the existing sociological theories on the subject and give us interesting profiles of the identities and drives of customers, almost always kept in the shadows (Bertolazzi, 2012; Danna, 2012). Unable to pursue these goals, we will merely look at their most recent evolution. As far as we are concerned, our reference website is the most relevant, at least numerically speaking²⁶. We have followed its evolution for a month. It is for women who offer very detailed sexual performances to men, with a minority (although not completely marginal) of transsexuals. I checked and followed the site in five cities: Bologna, Mantua, La Spezia, Trento and Syracuse. In each of these provinces, there were hundreds of ads. Today they are practically zeroed out. Some remain for video-chats²⁷, massages (real?), serious and lasting relationships and that's it. The pandemic has reset the phenomenon to zero. Prostitution seems to have disappeared due to the parallel disappearance of its customers. Given the current impossibility for street prostitution, it becomes technologically mediated, turns into sex-online or takes one of the many other possible ways (autoeroticism?), since human erotic drives can be influenced by pandemics but they certainly do not depend on them, nor are by them cancelled. In real life, therefore, fear and the pandemic dampen or diverts paid-for human sexuality along other paths. The online world takes on the guise of social prevention for increasingly protected sex. Condoms evolve in a preventive defence, in a guaranteed safeguard that, however, does not give up its goal, which is to reach orgasm.

This social shift can take different structural and relational paths. For example, it can rekindle a couple's love, if there are no latent conflicts. It can bring partners to move in together. It can encourage a retreat, even a radical retreat in oneself, for a sexual autarchy independent from everything, not finding adequate functional substitutes – or, in any case, none that are considered feasible. However, the more diffuse and pursued reaction seems to be another, especially in the younger generations. This reaction differs between men and women²⁸: the alternative or complementary paths that intersect the online in a boundless horizon.

Let us now briefly review some of the paths hypothesized, starting from pornography. In its digital version, it has invaded the world (Bennato, 2014) and has become normal for almost everyone, from teenagers to the elderly, to the point of reading it as a potential widespread “addiction”. Quarantine, as all the available indicators show, accentuates the consumption of erotic material, at all hours of the day and night. We can thus assume, as mentioned, a specific and more generalized internet addiction, further favoured by discounts, free or premium subscriptions offered by the same porn sites. Boredom looms and digital is the closest and easiest solution, as well as cheap and pleasant. Moreover, before the cv pandemic, Italy was already the European nation with the longest stay on porn sites – with an average of 11 minutes per day – and with Lombardy in the lead (bitter irony) for the number of accesses²⁹. Porn was at the top of internet use, competing with Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia. It seems to be confirmed what we mentioned earlier, even if the big data show a slightly unpredictable nationalisation of tastes. Italian users prefer Italian women (including porn actresses), in the same way as in India or Germany, China or the USA, with some greater inclination towards teen or

²⁶ It is the website *Bakecaincontri*, active in almost all Italian provinces and specialized in the search for escorts.

²⁷ The banner is immediately visible: “News! Many girls are now waiting for you in video chat”.

²⁸ This information is derived from telephone interviews, online analysis, friends' references, various readings. Nothing more.

²⁹ With 2.54% of the world's traffic, Italy holds seventh place in this special ranking.

novinha (Brazil) and without ever forgetting the milfs. But at this point, the usual chasm opens up, without sides or walls, and we must stop here³⁰. In short, more intense use of pornographic sites does not seem to change its orientation, except perhaps to make it more extensive and meticulous for obvious reasons of time and analytical personal inclinations. What remains in the background without showing its new face is the user of these images. What does the *cv* pandemic change in this perspective? What and who does quarantine-induced boredom lead to the shameless expression of any kind of sexuality? Do people indulge in their desires? Do they learn new things? Do they let their imagination run wild? Do they aim for undifferentiated excitement for masturbatory or copulation purposes? Are they dragged by simple, available, almost self-propelled technology to directly satisfy their sexual “obsessions”? Do they stun themselves falling prey of internet sex addiction (almost impossible)? (Prati, 2015). Lacking verified knowledge, we can suppose that several or all of these and others are the driving causes, even more so at this moment. But who are those who, especially in these times, follow this path in search of physical or even psychological pleasure? Since the phenomenon is enormous (as mentioned) the social influx can only be rather variegated and with wide and dispersed origins in terms of gender, age, economic and cultural status. We can, with no heuristic pretension, advance some hypothetical lines. We believe young men to be the most likely target. It may be that young and jaded women also follow this trend, obviously denying it and making it almost indemonstrable. We will also place middle-aged males, especially if carrying some specific “deviance”, along this line. For what concerns more mature women, we consider them likely to be in this field, especially if dragged here by their partners. At an older age (if healthy) we deem it likely that pornography replaces the disappeared external sexual attractions for a return to masturbation, in this way solicited and sustained even at a late age and among women. It is evident, however, that having very targeted and “anomalous” vocations can, in these calamitous times, only lead to the sexual autarchy (Rossetti, 2005) which we shall now deal with.

Masturbation, in past centuries subject to sharp moral condemnation, is individual behaviour that leads to orgasm through physical self-stimulation. In it, the other appears sublimated as both stimulus and outcome. Masturbation transcends gender differences and shared social representations and goes where it deems most appropriate without binding itself to any relationship and without taking on the perennial guise of the pathology. As mentioned, during the lockdown, onanism tends to grow among both men and women (the sale of dildos has soared), and among couples as an erotic game. What we described above gives a good account of this and justifies it amply. No longer sinful, reduced to everyday action, open to every fantasy, cleared for couples’ erotic games, providing full (re)assurance as far as health is concerned (Gurioli, Mosconi & Perino, 2005), available for every fantasized relationality, independent from structural constraints, masturbation seems to have become the erotic queen of web sex. It is of no consequence if masturbation stems from ex-prostitution, normal couple social relationships (long-term or not), minority or sexually deviant behaviours, a fearful withdrawal in oneself, or any other source. Everything leads to advance the hypothesis of this return in oneself, even in the technologically mediated constant openness to the other, always reachable in all

³⁰ Some examples: in Morocco, they prefer Moroccan (after Arabs), in Sweden, anal and milf; in Russia, anal and teen; in Great Britain, the Indians; in Israel, skinny and lesbian; in Ireland, gang bang and drunk; in Iceland, oral sex and BDSM; in South Africa, emo. We go no further and do not comment.

directions. And without this leading to the disappearance of the search for new hypothetical relationships projected towards the future, as we are now going to see.

Online dating (Bertolazzi and Esposito, 2015) has developed exponentially in recent years in all the most advanced nations. It has covered all forms of love and sex imaginable: from classic³¹ to homosexual, from swinging (couple swapping, Esposito, 2015; Petrillo, 2018) to women finding a man online (Moroni Grandini, 2015). The list could go on and on, along a path of specialization and continuous differentiation over time. The websites in question erroneously expand the audience of the “searchees” according to personal inclinations, even if at the same time people still tend to follow offline-inspired affinity criteria³². As almost always happens in the sexual field, innovative experimentation tends to prevail over iterative experimentation, with a greater impetus (but not numerical) on the female side (more privacy?). Some empirical research (Laporta, 2018) show the collective tendency to “neutralize” gender relations or to understand them in an “impersonal” way (Bertolazzi & Esposito, 2015), breaking many social conventions. During this pandemic, there is little doubt that these digital practices are being increased, even if they remain at a theoretical and prospective level. Therefore, we can think of reaching the paradox that freezing, on the one hand, concrete eroticism within traditional canons corresponds, on the other, to transgressive sexuality, virtual for now, suspended in its hypothetical implementation over time. It is easy to understand how we are on a bridge connecting a possible agreement with what could turn into a burning disappointment.

This situation cannot but concern two other expressions of web sexuality, namely erotic WhatsApp groups and sex-aimed video chats. In both cases, we are dealing with variously hidden groups that orient themselves within them, self-selecting and being accepted by their peers on specific issues, such as exhibitionism (Prodi, 2018), but it is obvious that, even in this case, we are facing the most absolute diversification. On the side of erotic chats, instead, it is possible to find with extreme ease and extension various types of video chat, public and friendly, that compete with each other, for a fee, or more often for free, ranging from fetish to BDSM, from those for swingers to those for single women, from those for love to those for sex, from those for dating to those for cheating, from those for mature women to those for married women. And the list could go much further. What the reader has already understood is that in this case we have physiologically slipped into the world of erotic-based webcams where a subject can interact in a pornographic way with real girls who indulge his desires, even the most perverse.

One beautiful and unique research on Italian webcam girls (Esposito, 2015b) based on specific video chat platforms (showcase sites), shows that the prices charged per minute vary from 1 euro for vaginal or anal masturbation without dildo to 5 euro for playing the slave. In between, we can find obscene language, domination/humiliation, fetishism, pissing, and much more. In short, you can ask for anything, even if it is not always satisfied by the girls. These are between 16 and 50 years old, with a concentration around 24/28 and belong to the lower social classes. Mostly they do not consider themselves as prostitutes, because their role lacks physical contact, there is no health risk of any kind, there are no forms of violence. In short, the web-escort activity cannot be superimposed to real-life prostitution – although we are not fully convinced of that. The clients are almost all males (if not

³¹ Where does “addiction” appear today? (Molteni, 2012).

³² This also during processes of identity mutation (Di Cesare, 2015).

exclusively) middle-aged, married or cohabiting, educated, who prefer to connect during the evening hours.

If we reflect and try to reconnect these websex worlds, despite their differences (for example where to place whatsapp?), we see, once again, how real sex enters into the communicational one and then exits it, after the appropriate and targeted excitement, having enjoyed physical satisfaction. Men and women, in this case, play profoundly, though not exclusively, different roles that reproduce, with the usual differences, some concrete or, in any case, imagined social relationships. What all these practices have in common is health-related safety which, in these areas, is never questioned for obvious physical reasons. Apart from overcoming boredom and having more free time, believe that this health guarantee is, with other aspects not to be forgotten³³, the most important element that has led in the last period (general feeling and objective feedback) to a considerable increase in these online activities with an erotic background and this concerns all the actors on stage on the crowded stage of adjective-free sexuality³⁴. In the context of the digital society, the theme of online safety concerning eroticism has many other components, as we are going to mention presently.

We will mention just sexting or revenge porn. The first is a very common practice, particularly (but not exclusively) among young people, consisting of sending sexually explicit images via the web. The aim may be to stimulate pleasure in the partner, to stimulate their attention in a broad sense, to produce a simple entertainment or to express one's way of being (Marino, 2018). In this case, women send more images than men, perhaps out of exhibitionism or narcissism. What we want to emphasize about this practice is its dangerousness or the risks that are inherent in it. These can converge in non-consensual pornography (Marastoni, 2018) or in the narrower category of revenge porn that involves the disclosure of sexually manifest images of one or more people without their consent. Although those who practice such modes of communication do not see such links, the two modes of expression are in the online or network rather close and intersected. In these specific contexts³⁵ emerge various processes of victimization, which take the form of digital harassment, cyberstalking, abuse of various kinds, defamation and solicitation, and the usual inexhaustible child pornography, with all its ambiguities, also in other areas that we must and can consider similar, such as the sexuality of people with disabilities and their relationship with the digital network. The risks are therefore neither few nor easily surmountable, as demonstrated by the many suicides (attempted or successful) by victims of these traps – ploys that are generally helped, apart from imprudence or love-inspired excess of confidence, by what can be defined a sort of “partial computer illiteracy”, where men are normally more experienced and prepared and tend to victimise women. It is the domestic violence that, in its way, moves into the net. The world, as we well know, is not full of roses and, in any case, these have thorns. The web society does not shirk this rule, nor can it expunge it from its sexual sphere, as amply demonstrated by the latter modes of expression of online sexuality. It must be said, however, that even in a context in which sexting and consensual private pornography are increasing, there is no parallel increase in the above-mentioned criminal deviance. This frankly surprised me, be-

³³ Like the various functional substitutes mentioned, the weight of friendly relationships and so on.

³⁴ We include in these “protagonists” also the customers of the various services or erotic opportunities offered that remain, especially on the female side, a black hole difficult to shed light on.

³⁵ We have not addressed online forums because they are collateral to our main purpose and of difficult interpret.

cause usually and logically the two tendencies should proceed together. But why is this happening during a pandemic? We will try, as usual with a great deal of circumspection, to come up with some minimal answers. One reason can be that the greater flow of sexual material is due above all to those who, already experienced, today amp up their web presence. A second reason can be that in the face of so many erotic opportunities only the safer ones are pursued. A third cause can perhaps be found in the hypothesis that the enormous increase in digital flows confuses things a bit, distracts us, and complaints are left to their own devices. Finally, one could also imagine that, with a monster behind us and the increasingly pliable sexuality around us³⁶, more tolerance emerges inbound (misbehaviour) and outbound (lawsuits and various notifications) than in the communicational behaviour in question.

To close this paragraph, we can argue that the arrival of this pandemic in Italy has significantly affected sexuality³⁷ in both quantity and quality, greatly increasing its digital component. Websex seems to have usurped the scene, almost cancelling out an indestructible phenomenon such as prostitution. The transfer of entire blocks of social practices from one world to another, from offline to online, changes the configuration of a given society. It shifts and swings morality. Pleasure takes other variously tortuous and understandable paths. The increasingly consistent and necessary (for the time being) affirmation of websex only confirms the increasingly marked propensity towards the already resumed *widespread solipsism* accompanied by a latent *dissolution* of sexuality due to the surplus of opportunities. Web eroticism proposes everything and more according to a path of invention and differentiation that never seems to end. Driven by the pandemic process, it takes a path that is an infinity of paths, lost in our lives without ever presenting us with an insurmountable limit to our needs and without ever giving us the ineluctable sense of the epilogue for our, more or less greedy, research.

3. What next?

On the rather trivial observation for a sociologist that, after this pandemic, nothing or almost nothing in the social sphere will remain as before, we believe there can be little doubt. The real question is how and where our world will change, that is, in what direction and how quickly. We shrink from beating this too ambitious road, yet we cannot exempt ourselves from hinting, as a simple and hesitant supposition, at some evolutionary trace in this historical moment. In short, what will become of eroticism at the end of this pandemic? Let us try to wade the quicksand of ignorance, hoping at least to keep it in check. We pursue, so to speak, a regulatory ideal (Cipolla, 1997, vol. 3) of epistemological nature, well-aware that we are quite far away from it.

Let us begin by assuming that there is no going back. Many practices and tendencies of sexuality during the pandemic will be almost completely abandoned, but many areas will not see a return to previous reality. Some styles will leave the door, others will enter through the window even though the house has been on lockdown for a long time. Let us try to hazard a perspective interpretation.

³⁶ One of the few sociological texts on these topics is Giddens' book (1992) which, in its way, was overwhelmed by the web society which is something different from globalization.

³⁷ Unfortunately, it is much more than the dramatic deaths and the collapse of the economy and invades many other aspects of life, sometimes light, but sometimes profound.

In our opinion, the *dissolution by excess* of sexuality will be more contained as time goes on, but it will remain significantly within our social relations. This will imply, not so much a return to continence, unthinkable and impossible, but the obsolescence of current sexual morality, circumscribed and bound, on the one hand, to the denial of all violence (no means no and yes means yes)³⁸ and, on the other, to the condemnation of all erotic relationships with children, not yet aware and responsible for such behaviour.

From this first hypothetical evaluation, it follows almost mechanically that the link, enormously consolidated during this phase, between online and offline (in the flesh) sexuality, will remain changed over time. We believe that this relationship can be defined as *differentiated integration*, where the first term leads to a reciprocal adaptation, a reunification by relative autonomies, while the second makes us understand how the places and ways of this reciprocal completion are and remain the most diverse³⁹. We are fully aware that all this can also mean confusion, chaos, impossibility of visible and verifiable causal implications, given the nuance of eroticism and the disappearance of the “two” (Žižek, 2008). Given that we are in the consolidated field of socio-cultural explanatory keys⁴⁰ and acquired Bauman’s idea (2001) that the consumerist commodification of life has “unglued”, or detached, love and eroticism (only today?), how to respond methodologically to such a situation of overwhelming opportunities and ever-changing behavioural practices around us in their unceasing diversity? This is the challenge of the web society for all scholars, to which we can react in many ways. We will limit ourselves to pointing out two of them, which we have already drawn on: the big data (Deriu, 2020) and the eclectic approach (Solieri, 2018).

We will not dwell on the former, that has invaded our lives in every way and that is very technical-operational, but still within our sociological world. We will instead allude, as a cognitive sketch, to the latter. We previously argued that there must be some kind of relationship between the object of study and the eye of the scholar, proposing the methodological theory of the “Cardan joint” (Cipolla, 2013; 2018). If we transpose these considerations into our current topic, what is the result at the heuristic level? We have already argued about the many paths (with what outlets?) that eroticism undertakes in our historical period in the web society, its dissolution by superabundance, its isolation by dispersion, its withdrawal in itself by explicit outside of itself. The “two” is missing. The *n* rules unchallenged. The change makes up for permanence. So, which theories do we chase? Which do we advance? What empirical evidence do we draw our interpretive sap from? Given all this, we can perhaps resort to the eclectic perspective. Eclectically-based sociology does not accept any kind of qualification. It shirks eclecticism. It embraces, in its cognitive style, the integrating perspective, based on procedural re-compositions, relative autonomies, new and surprising openings, mutualistic pluralism respectful of otherness, the overcoming of prejudices, a final theoretical over-determination, limited, temporarily, in time and space which represent the defined boundaries of its validity (Cipolla, 2013, p. 61 et seq.). And this with a further cognitive aggravating factor.

³⁸ This applies in a broad sense but also to visual confidentiality about to erotic gestures.

³⁹ We have already seen that the digital society often experiences social facts based on contrasting phenomena or characteristics, at least according to old established logical criteria. Logic is many things, but the one that owns or connotes the web society can be considered contradictory, if not antithetical, or incongruous or, at least, ambiguous.

⁴⁰ In this sense Foucault (1984) is always interesting, but where do the “subject acting” views end up in this reading?

We have already mentioned that one of the distinctive characteristics of sexual behaviour during the *cv* pandemic is represented by what we have synthetically defined *diffuse solipsism*. This image is immediately transformed into a sort of individualism that is dispersed throughout the world. It chases itself in the net. It chases any kind of horizon while remaining itself in its immense drives, satisfied in an even more unlimited and immeasurable way⁴¹. As is quite evident, one withdraws from public eroticism, in need of physical otherness, into the anonymity and privacy of the net, of the digital universe. This, then, is the configuration of a *deflagrant refuge* (or an explicit retreat) that only the web society makes possible and practicable.

Sexuality, on this basis, would crouch on itself, expanding explosively beyond itself, thanks to the presence of digital technologies (Cipolla, 2018) and the incredible and contemporary invasion of the bio-social pandemic by COVID-19.

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⁴¹ Barnao (2015), means the impersonal web sex, a non-place (à la Augé) for a fluid identity that is removed from all judgment. I agree in principle, as we have seen, but personal and impersonal do not split up, but are co-founded in sex, even when this does not refer to any name or face.

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The Governance of Resilience. How the Health Systems Have Coped with The Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

After considering the reasons why pandemics are destined to remain also in the near future in our late industrial societies, a conceptual framework for the analysis of governance of resilience of health systems is described and then applied in details following its main four dimensions to the ways various health systems have coped with the pandemic of COVID-19, with specific reference to the Italian National Health Service. In the conclusions, an overall assessment of the ways in which the health systems have responded to the pandemic of COVID-19 is traced on the basis of three different levels of resilience governance and their implications.

Key word: Pandemic, Governance, Resilience, Health systems, COVID-19.

1. Back to the future: why societies will continue to cope with pandemics

In recent decades, epidemiologists and medical historians have explained to us that what Omran (1971) called the 'epidemiological transition' - or the passage from the prevalence of infectious and acute pathologies that still characterized the era before to that of chronic-degenerative (oncological, cardiovascular) pathologies - had already been accomplished for late industrial societies, starting from about the middle of the last century. In reality, Omran identifies three phases of this supposed long transition: the 'age of the great plagues and hunger', which from the Middle Age continues until the threshold of the modern era; the 'age of declining epidemics' that spanned the first two industrial revolutions during the nineteenth century until the two world wars; and, precisely, the 'age of degenerative and man-made diseases', which would coincide with the contemporary era. Subsequently, two other epidemiologists (Olshansky and Ault, 1986) believed that, by virtue of the progressive decline in mortality rates due to chronic-degenerative diseases in late industrial countries, it was appropriate to introduce 'the fourth stage of the epidemiological transition: the age of deferred degenerative diseases'.

Only now, in the midst of current COVID-19 pandemic, do we realize that we have deluded ourselves with the belief that 'the age of the great plagues' was only a reminder of a more or less distant past: in reality, if we observe the historical trend of the great pandemics of plague, cholera, smallpox, typhus, TB, flu, etc. (Jones, 2020), we discover that they repeat cyclically due mostly to zoonotic viruses, that is, originating from an interspecies contagion from animals to humans. Not only that: the frequency and virulence with which pandemics occurred in the course of the twentieth century and to date appear significantly increased compared to past centuries, from the terrible 'Spanish' of 1918 with 100 million deaths to the 'Asian' of 1957 which killed over a million people mainly in China, to the 'Hong

Kong flu' which in 1968-69 made more than 250 million infected with almost a million deaths worldwide, at H1N1, called 'swine flu', which in 2009 caused up to 400,000 thousand deaths.

That pandemics are therefore destined to remain also in the near future is confirmed by the new pandemic of COVID-19, which has occurred only a little over a decade from the previous one with such virulence that, as we write, it produced something like 4,962,707 cases of infection confirmed worldwide since the outbreak and 326,459 deaths (official figures, probably underestimated)¹. Among the factors that can explain this persistence, those of environmental nature have been increasingly recognized as being among the most important ones. Epidemics and pandemics² are an expression of environmental stress and an alteration of the balance between the human species and its living environment. Viruses and bacteria are part of the natural environment as well as mankind; in our organism at least 10 million billions of foreign microorganisms coexist, which participated in our evolution, helping to shape our immune system; they are part of our genetic heritage and of our life of relationship with the outside world.

Several studies have recently been published which have related the spread of coronavirus to exposure to air pollution and, in particular, to emissions of particulates, or climate-altering gases (Setti *et al.*, 2020; Xiao Wu *et al.* 2020). Every year, at the global level, the atmospheric particulate alone is responsible for about 7 million deaths; in Italy the premature mortality attributable to particulate matter (PM2.5), ozone (O3) and nitrogen dioxide (NO2) has been estimated at more than 80,000 cases/year, without considering the effects of all the other pollutants (European Environment Agency, 2015).

The causal link is also known between air pollution and many diseases that are the collateral cause of severity in Covid-19 (cardiac, vascular, respiratory diseases); the depressing action of the immune system and of normal development of respiratory function in children by air pollution (European Respiratory Society, 2010); the increase of risk of respiratory diseases and acute infections of the lower respiratory tract particularly in vulnerable individuals, such as the elderly and children. Another feature of air pollution, and in particular of peaks in pollution levels, is the phenomenon known as the 'harvesting effect': that of causing an increase in premature deaths of the elderly population and of other subgroups of the most vulnerable population as affected by one or more chronic diseases, the same population most affected by COVID-19 (International Agency for Research on Cancer, 2016).

Climate instability and, in particular, extreme climatic events (extreme heat and cold waves, floods, hurricanes, fires) can also have serious impacts in potentially more susceptible populations such as the elderly, causing mortality by cardiovascular, cerebrovascular and respiratory diseases, asthma and COPD, ischemic heart disease, arrhythmias, and arterial thrombosis (IPCC, 2013). Particularly, climate change affects the geographical spread of vectors (latitude and altitude), the seasonality (risk periods) and the incidence of disease; they affect animal reservoirs of influenza viruses and bird migration patterns, spreading viruses to new locations and to a wider range of bird species (Wu *et al.*, 2016). Greater opportunities for pathogens to spread across the oceans arise also by the continuous melting of sea ice. Climate change can also cause or strengthen safety problems during all stages of

¹ Source: WHO, *Health Emergency Dashboard*, May 22, 2020 (<https://covid19.who.int/>).

² The difference between epidemic and pandemic consists in the fact that the second has a greater degree of diffusion (intercontinental) and severity in terms of morbidity and mortality compared to the first.

food production and supply, such as microbiological contamination of food (mycotoxins) or water.

Air pollution and climate change are therefore the main causes of the persistence of epidemics and pandemics and of their occurrence at increasingly frequent intervals: and they are both largely attributable to the action of man. Some other human activities that also cause air pollution and climate changes, such as intensive animal husbandry, have been identified as possible causes of the increased risk of mutations in pathogens and the spread of new epidemics. The concentration of many garments in small spaces and feeding with feed containing antibiotics favor a strong selective pressure on viruses and bacteria, which quickly change towards more aggressive strains and types also towards the human species, as it has happened with avian and swine flu.

Deforestation is also among the activities with the greatest environmental impact and at risk of favoring the spread of new viruses. With the shift of urban borders increasingly close to forests and the inevitable downsizing of the living space for wild animals, contact between them and the human species has been facilitated, which has always shared planet earth with wild animals but keeping the right distances. Without considering the habit of capturing and selling them in markets characterized by both promiscuity between several wild species and from crowding of humans. Finally, the urbanization models of the megalopolis that have concentrated millions of poor individuals in suburbs and in shanty houses without the minimum essential services together with the frantic movement of goods and people from one part of the planet to the other due to globalization, also favor the spread of epidemics and pandemics.

The fact that all the above phenomena are attributable to the action of man and his indiscriminate exploitation of the environment has led some natural scientists to qualify the contemporary geological era of history of the planet as 'Anthropocene' (Crutzen, 2002). Some social scientist think that this term is inadequate as a means of understanding the environmental changes to our planet in recent decade, suggesting as a much more appropriate alternative 'Capitalocene', as the 'age of capitalism', and calling for a different conceptual framework which places global change in a new, ecologically oriented history of capitalism (Moore, 2016). What is certain in this debate, is the need to quickly change the industrial development model by a transition towards renewable energy sources, de-pollution of the territory, of the air and of the groundwater, and rebalance of the ecosystems: under penalty of a future that is already present, reserving us new viral pandemics more serious than the coronavirus (hemorrhagic fever viruses), super-infections with bacteria resistant to any drug treatment, or extreme weather events for which it will not be possible either to discover new drugs or develop new vaccines.

2. A conceptual framework for health systems resilience governance

Once we have outlined the general scenarios within which human societies – and, particularly, late industrial societies - are moving, we will now focus on the role of the health system in coping with them. In this respect, since 2014 at the time of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, the international debate among health care systems researchers has been dominated by the concept of 'resilience'. There is wide consensus that building or strengthening more resilient health care systems is an indispensable necessity if we want to face the above described scenarios. But the problem then becomes to define what resilience means, since it is just an un-

brella term under which various scientific paradigms and policies can be accommodated. Since this term has often been used improperly and abused in various areas, it is first of all necessary to clarify what we mean by ‘resilience of a health system’. Drawing on the resilience literature, a group of British medical and social scientists of the Department of Global Health and Development of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and of the Institute of Development Studies of Brighton has tried to clarify the meaning of this concept:

Strengthening the capacity of health systems to manage resilience is critical to effectively continue delivering essential preventative and curative healthcare services to populations. This requires adapting and transforming the structure and properties of the health system to move it away from undesirable risk situations. However, how do we recognize situations of risks? How do we know what properties of the system are better adapted to certain circumstances? What are the potential effects of alternative routes? Who makes decisions on the directions of the health system? (Blanchet *et al.*, p.431).

To answer these critical questions about the management and governance of resilience on how to manage the capacities of health systems, the group of authoritative scholars adopted a definition of resilience based on system thinking, environmental studies and complexity theories:

We see resilience of a health system as its capacity to absorb, adapt and transform when exposed to a shock such as a pandemic, natural disaster, armed conflict or a financial crisis and still retain the same control over its structure and functions (*ibid.*).

The reference to the pandemic as one of the possible shock factors of a health system is particularly relevant to the current reality and makes the definition the researchers propose consequently quite significant for analyzing the methods of response to this event and their concrete implications in terms of health policies. On the basis of the above definition, the group developed a new conceptual framework (fig.1, adapted from Lebel *et al.*, 2006) of the dimensions of resilience governance of health systems ‘to help researchers dialogue with each other and generate more studies in this field’ (*ibid.*)

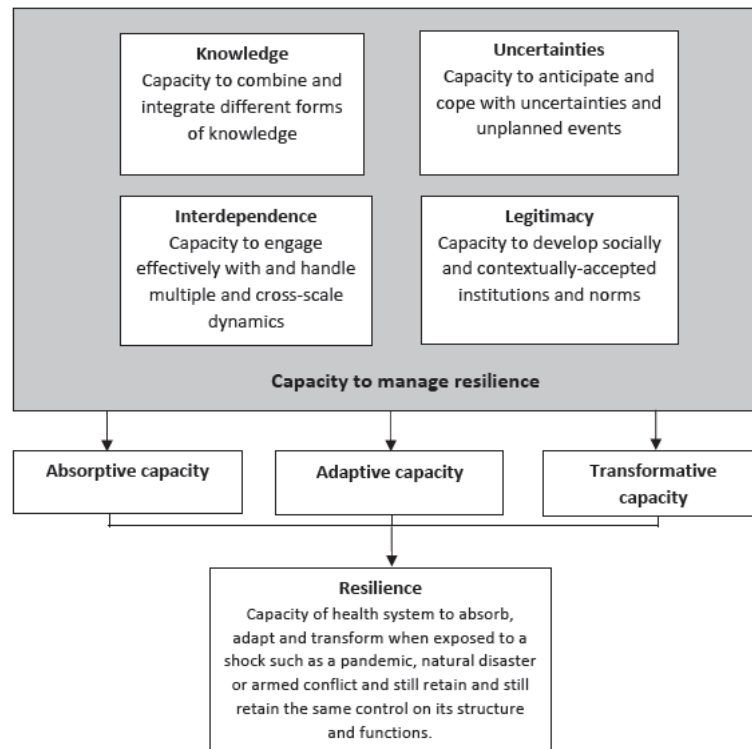
According to this framework, the four dimensions interlinked with each other that characterize the governance of resilience of health systems are:

- *Knowledge*: it refers to the capacity of health system and the mechanisms through which their actors collect, integrate and analyze different forms of knowledge and information, as well as the way this information feeds into complex decision-making processes.
- *Uncertainties*: the strategies health systems actors may adopt to anticipate and cope with uncertainties and unplanned events such as pandemics.
- *Interdependence*: the capacity of health systems to manage interdependence with other systems and the environment, to engage effectively with and handle multiple and cross-scale dynamics and their feedbacks.
- *Legitimacy*: the approaches through which health systems develop socially and contextually acceptable institutions and norms.

This comprehensive framework integrate different approaches to resilience in health systems thinking into one single approach for use by researchers, practitioners and policy-makers. Below we will apply these four dimensions to the analysis of how the health systems have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in the inter-

national context with specific reference to the Italian National Health Service, ultimately seeking to evaluate their outcomes in terms of levels of resilience.

Fig. 1 – A conceptual framework of the dimensions of resilience governance



Source: (Blanchet et al., 2017, p.432).

3. First dimension: public health intelligence

Being able to anticipate shocks and events like a pandemic requires a functional surveillance system capable of informing health service managers and policy makers in good time about the onset of the disease and the state of its spread. This should allow them to assess whether existing resources in terms of services, staff and equipment are able to intervene early enough to isolate the infection as soon as possible, or it is necessary to fill any gaps or weaknesses.

Furthermore, decision-makers should be able to monitor risks and threats that may lie beyond the direct realm of the health system, involving other sectors (economic, social, political, etc.). For this purpose, the nature of the knowledge that needs to be collected and processed needs to extend beyond the sphere of health systems: having access to such different types of knowledge implies the capacity to engage with different social actors belonging to different spheres of society. Social network analysis (Borgatti et al., 2009) has identified the role of ‘social brokers’ in this respect, referring to individuals in a health system who may help coordinate actors in time of crises or shock and build bridges between different groups within the system and beyond it.

The general practitioner (GP), where it exists, is certainly one of such figures, being able to act as a gatekeeper between the people and the health care system, and as a go-between the hospital and the community health services in the territory.

His role is particularly significant in the initial phase of a pandemic, since it is in this phase of onset that precedes full recognition (Rosenberg, 1989) that its subsequent course is largely played out. In fact, at this stage, the population tends to ignore or remove the signs that indicate that something strange is happening due to a desire for reinsurance or for economic interest, that only the acceleration of contagion and mortality will force towards recognition. In this process, the role of the GP is crucial in identifying the sign of the outbreak and in motivating people to act accordingly. Moreover, he can involve social workers, volunteers, pharmacists and other people in enhancing public health ability to identify and respond to health events of potential pandemic proportion (Kahn *et al.*, 2010).

The new emerging component of public health defined as ‘public health intelligence’ (French and Mykhalovsky, 2013), consists in the detection (possibly even anticipated) of critical health events when they occur in order to disseminate the information needed to prepare for the emergency and raise public awareness of the preventive measures to be implemented. They are those ‘sentinel events’ which, if promptly identified, allow early detection of a pandemic in order to predict its possible progress.

From this point of view, we can say that the Italian National Health Service (SSN) has shown itself to be very deficient overall, probably also due to its fragmentation at the regional level, since it has not been able to catch in advance the signs of the dangerous virulence of the new coronavirus. Although, in this, it was certainly in good company internationally, since we could quote the Darwinist statement such as ‘herd immunity’ of the British leader Johnson and the hundreds of thousands of deaths that he would have caused if he had been followed, destroying what little remains of the glorious British National Health Service; except a little over two weeks later, now positive for the virus himself, to turn towards more restrictive measures by addressing a letter to British families with a peremptory appeal: ‘You must stay at home’.

Even Trump’s twists and turns appear sadly unconscious, with constant head-to-head compared to the indications previously given and hyperbolic oscillations between wicked underestimation and unusual rigidity, in a country like the USA that now boasts the unenviable record of having overtaken China, the United Kingdom and Italy in first place in the world ranking of coronavirus positives and deaths³; while the dire predictions of the immunologist Anthony Fauci, who has led the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases since 1984, that the pandemic could have reached between 100,000 and 200,000 deaths, with millions of people infected in a country without a system adequate public health have unfortunately proved to be well founded.

Returning to the Italian case, what did not work specifically in this dimension was the network of regional and Local Health Authorities (ASL) epidemiological observatories, whose staff was often cut or sometimes even canceled, reducing them to mere bureaucratic bodies; as well as the Public Hygiene Services, often deprived of their ability to collect data and information useful for guiding consequent and timely actions. To this we can add that the National Center of Epidemiology, Surveillance and Health Promotion (CNESPS), established in 2003 at the time of the avian and swine flu pandemics, was closed in 2016, victim of the cuts of the austerity policy following the post-crisis economic and financial situation of 2008.

³ 1,547,973 cases of infection and 92,923 deaths (source: WHO, *Health Emergency Dashboard*, May 23, 2020).

4. Second dimension: coping with uncertainties

Even when managers and political decision-makers have adequate and relevant information at their disposal, the decisions to be taken regarding the most appropriate strategy to be adopted are still complex: and this essentially depends on the uncertainty and unpredictability regarding the spread of the infection. Here then, in the face of the limits of any technocratic rationality, considering the need to take preventive action as quickly as possible, the best strategy becomes to involve the actors and services most directly facing the pandemic process: territorial medicine and proximity, primary care.

This is clearly possible only if one has an adequate network of territorial integrated health services (social-health districts, health centres, dispensaries, etc.) and health and social professionals (general practitioner, pediatrician, family and community nurse, community midwife, social worker, social-health worker, community pharmacist, etc.) able to act as a two-way communication channel between the health system and the population: detecting critical events promptly and consequently disseminating the necessary information. This network also becomes essential to have primary health care services capable of filtering any emergency hospitalizations appropriately when really necessary, without overloading unnecessarily secondary hospital care.

The difference between what happened in Italy in different regions is paradigmatic from this point of view. In Lombardy Region, all the territorial community health and socio-health services, from nursing to rehabilitation, have been outsourced and privatized. Family medicine has been partly protected by the national category contract, and Lombard citizens were able to continue to choose their GP. However, the organizational structure of the territory was weakened considerably and there have been repeated attempts over the years to make it more precarious and inefficient. In 2011 the Lombardy Region established the *Chronic Related Groups* (CReGs), a project whose declared objective was to improve the living conditions of citizens suffering from chronic diseases; in reality, the undeclared one of reducing the role of GPs in the general management of chronic patients: opening it to any other type of provider, in particular private providers able to manage complex care paths remunerated through a flat-rate budgeting system similar to hospital *Diagnosis Related Groups*, DRGs (Maciocco, 2020).

The project failed, but the Lombardy Region tried again a few years later with a new project entitled 'Taking charge of the chronic patient', always based on the idea of replacing the family doctor (GP) with private providers and complete the original primary care network annihilation project. But the project once again failed for two main reasons: private providers showed no desire to take on the assistance of chronic patients poorly paid and poorly qualified for centers of excellence such as theirs; and chronic patients themselves, who have the choice of indicating the provider to trust, refused to bring their disease to the market and decide not to choose. In the meantime, the most fragile elderly and chronic patients without adequate community care flocked to private nursing homes, the *Residenze Sanitarie Assistenziali* (RSA), of which Lombardy has the Italian record for number of structures and beds: and it is right there that most of the over 15,000 Lombard deaths caused by the pandemic from Covid-19 occurred, a figure certainly underestimated, as shown by data of the joint report by the National Institute of Statistics and the High Institute of Health (ISTAT & ISS, 2020).

It is in this way that the network of General Practitioners and of social-health districts, crucial in intercepting a patient at the onset of symptoms and avoiding

that degenerates, has been dismantled over the years in Lombardy. Moreover, with the 2015 regional reform that transformed the Local Health Authorities (ASL) into ATS (Health Protection Agencies) - bureaucratic bodies with mere administrative control of the activities of the hospitals, poorly equipped and skilled in public health - the mortification of the fundamental role of gatekeeper of the general practitioner and the privatization of most of the territorial socio-health services, as well as of the hospitals, was completed.

Things have gone quite differently in other Italian regions with much lower infected cases and mortality rates such as Veneto, Tuscany and Emilia Romagna, where territorial medicine has instead maintained a fundamental role in both prevention and primary care, and the organization of the health care is based on the principles of a comprehensive primary health care with multidisciplinary primary care teams strongly linked with a specific territory and with the community. A fundamental role has been played here by the USCA (Special Units of Continuity of Assistance) in guaranteeing an early management of the infected and their care at home; as well as adequate coordination between the territory and the hospital that would allow avoiding the fragmentation of services and the overload of hospitals due to improper or late hospitalizations in intensive care; which is what happened instead in Lombardy, producing the clogging of intensive care and the wicked choice to build useless (temporary?) hospital structures which were then largely unused.

Something similar to what has happened in Lombardy is currently replicated in USA, not casually the reference model of Lombard healthcare: even due to the absence of an appropriate public health network, initially president Trump heavily underestimated the risks of spreading the epidemic, opting for a natural diffusion policy also under the pressure of the economic lobbies strongly concerned about the consequences on the economy that a lockdown could have produced. Then, when faced with the spread of the contagion and the growth of the dead, this choice appeared politically unpopular in view of the forthcoming elections, Trump declared the national emergency very late only on March 13, when COVID-19 was widespread in 49 out of the 50 states. At that point, Vice President Mike Pence, official pandemic manager, said the government strategy would consist of a public-private partnership with health insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies and private laboratories to make the diagnostic test available, otherwise not guaranteed by public facilities. That this was not enough, it is demonstrated by an American Medical Association statement complaining about the insufficiency of the diagnostic resources put in place and the protests of many doctors without protective devices, as well as the insufficient possibility of access to MEDICAID⁴ for the infected poorer.

5. Third dimension: the management of interdependence

A health system is inextricably horizontally embedded within the other subsystems of the society (political, economic, judiciary, social, cultural), and across scales at the different vertical levels of the supranational, state, regional and local institutional structures. All this implies the need for a governance of the dynamics of multiple inter-sector interdependencies and institutional multi-levels which is somewhat complex but necessary if one want to keep under control the different

⁴ The public insurance for the poorest people in USA, differently managed by each state.

factors and actors that influence the functioning of health systems as well as the health of citizens. This also implies recognizing that a pandemic is not only a health emergency problem, since its impact will involve all the above aspects in their complex interactions.

The absence of a capacity to handle effectively multiple interdependence dynamics has been dramatically exemplified by the case of USA, where the clash between the logic of the economy in a neoliberal perspective of minimal state intervention and that of the health emergency - which would have required a decisive public health intervention since the beginning of the pandemic - has appeared immediately evident. Confirming the fact that it is once again the poorest and most marginalized people who pay the consequences of (non) political choices: while the probability of coronavirus infection of an African American was 5 times compared to a WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon protestant), that of an Hispanic was 2 times. At the macro-level, the US economic growth trend has reversed, the number of unemployed in the US has jumped to 36 million in a few weeks, leaping to 14.7% of the workforce, effectively deleting all the new jobs that were created after the 2008 financial and economic crisis. If we consider that, in a health system like the US in which the private health insurance is based on the workplace, whereby losing the job also means losing health coverage, we understand what this means in the event of a pandemic.

Moreover, the decentralized and plural nature of the US federal political system has not only prevented any adequate multilevel governance, but has triggered a strong institutional conflict between the White House and the states with democratic governors such as California, who have opted for much more rigorous lockdown containment policies, criticizing the confused and contradictory messages that have followed one another from the federal government: and in response they have seen to foment armed revolts against the lockdown by white supremacist and neo-Nazi extremists supported by the White House.

If we focus on the vertical multilevel governance in the Italian case, the clear disarticulation that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted (if it was still needed) among the different institutional levels of the NHS immediately emerges; and, in particular, between the national and regional governments. The process of devolution from the central State to the Regions that followed the modification of Title V of the Constitution (l.cost. 3/2001), with the *de facto* transformation of the NHS into 21 Regional Health Services (SSR), in recent years has especially become an occasion for increasingly frequent conflicts and indeed open institutional clashes between the State and the Regions, especially in the context of the State-Regions board, which should have been the instrument of conciliation of divergences and compensation for inequalities that the so-called 'federalism' (in reality, an accentuated regionalism) has inevitably produced.

The trend toward an increasingly weaker role of the State compared to an ever stronger one of those Regions (Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna) which, by virtue of the economic weight they represent, have come to claim the so-called 'differentiated autonomy' - that is, the request for a further greater devolution by the State only to them, with the acquisition of exclusive power over various matters including health - has done nothing but throwing further fuel on the fire of the institutional clash now open between the stronger Regions (those of the Center-North with devolution), the weakest Regions (those of the Center-South and Islands, most of which, besides, under recovery plan by the State due to their mismanagement in the health sector) and Central State, sanctioning the *de facto* end of any effective unitary and universalistic national health service.

The ups and downs of claims and of blaming each other between the various institutional levels (Regions and State) that has occurred at the time of Covid-19 has thus patently made clear among public opinion what had so far emerged only in institutional settings as the true price to pay for all this: that is, a situation of increasingly clear differentiation and inequality of Italian citizens with respect to the possibility of access to treatment and to the same probability of survival (see impossibility of access to intensive care). All this has begun to put on the agenda the need for an overall rethinking of the institutional architecture of the Italian National Health Service and its possible (partial?) re-centralization.

6. Fourth dimension: building legitimacy between consensus and control

The final important component of resilient health systems relates to the necessity of community trust, of building a trusting relationship with populations: ‘This can be built through an inclusive consultation process engaging communities meaningfully as the users of the health system in the development of policies and management of healthcare services where patients are placed at the centre of the system. ... (*This*) requires trust and accountability to exist or be built at every level of the health system: from the patient, to the community health worker, the nurses at the health centre, to medical and managerial staff at higher level’ (Blanchet *et al.*, 2017, p.433).

In the Asian cases, this problem of legitimacy has appeared less important. In China, the first country where the pandemic started on December 2019, the monocratic structure of the Chinese one-party system reacted to the first signs of the occurrence of the coronavirus in two stages: first trying to deny the event by arresting the doctor who first identified it, covering up his diagnosis and the alarm, since it would have discredited local authorities in the eyes of the central government; then, when the spread was such as to no longer allow any cover-up, with the adoption of draconian lockdown measures of the entire population of the city of Wuhan first, then of the surrounding province of Hubei and of major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, with the closure of all production activities, the limitation of public transport and non-essential commercial activities, and the carrying out of mass compulsory diagnostic screening. The Confucian cultural tradition, recently officially resumed in the last congress of the Chinese Communist Party and included in its political strategy with the idea of ‘social harmony’ and an ethics of virtues which includes respect for state authorities, has formed the dominant value background which has legitimized such restrictive political choices; however, reinforced by an efficient action of rigid social control implemented by the local police (night curfew and limited possibility of leaving the house) also with the aid of technological digital contact-tracing devices. The absence of riots, public demonstrations or any other significant event of dissent seems to have confirmed the firm control by the government authorities of the social processes induced by the rigid containment strategy adopted.

The same choice of a policy of strict containment of the pandemic was also effectively followed by other Asian countries, of which another most exemplary case is that of South Korea. Despite the significant difference in political and institutional contexts compared to China - South Korea is a liberal democracy - it has adopted a rigid containment strategy very similar to the Chinese one, with two particularities. In addition to a more limited lockdown and a voluntary social distancing, mass driving diagnostic screenings were carried out for hundreds of thousands

of people in a few days, mandatory for groups considered at risk; and geo-localization by contact-tracing via mobile networks of the infected ones, use of their credit card transaction data, and the publication of their movements on blogs characterized this type of strategy in a hyper-technological sense.

In the Italian case, the transition from a softer strategy of underestimating the pandemic problem to a more difficult (albeit fairly late) one of social containment, involving forms of 'social distancing' and domestic segregation of citizens, has clearly led to the need to legitimize at the media level these measures that seriously restricted privacy and personal freedoms in the name of security and collective health, against a public opinion traditionally reluctant to such forms of social control. It is therefore understandable that all this raised a serious problem both in terms of privacy and of more general social control, which is still open to various solutions, including the recruitment of volunteers to control the movements of people and dissuade any dangerous gatherings due to the non-respect of social distancing measures.

A problem to which public health at international level has historically responded by oscillating between the two opposite polarities of the pre-eminence of individual freedoms (neoliberal policies of the English-speaking countries) or of public constraint (authoritarian policies of surveillance capitalism in Asian countries). If in the first case we have witnessed the substantial impotence of the policies implemented by the British and US governments based on the mere persuasion of citizens, in the second case the policies banning all freedom of movement of the Chinese government or the geo-localization ones through the traceability of mobile networks and other personal information from the South Korean government have certainly proven to be more effective.

Therefore, is there no alternative to the opposition between ineffective freedom and authoritarian but effective constraint? That the risk is also, in the second case, of having public health reasons offered by the pandemic underway to implement forms of 'authoritarian democracy' such as that of Orbán in Hungary assuming full powers for an unlimited time with a special law, closing the parliament and gagging the opposition, is an additional element that must make us reflect before marrying the 'Asian way' as the only possible one: 'The indefinite and uncontrolled state of emergency cannot guarantee respect for fundamental democratic rights', sentenced the Council of Europe.

How to avoid, then, that the sacrosanct measures from the point of view of public health of 'social distancing' at the time of the pandemic of COVID-19 become the instrument to experience that 'state of exception' of which Agamben wrote (2003), meaning the suspension of the current constitutional order made by the same state authority which should normally guarantee the legality and its respect? Here it is a question of balancing two rights: the right to collective health and to the life itself of people on the one hand; and the civil rights of freedom, movement, expression and association on the other.

The connective element between collective health and individual freedoms can be traced in considering solidarity the interface capable of combining and reconciling those two rights that are only apparently conflicting, but in reality both to be pursued even in exceptional emergency situations such as the pandemic. And what is solidarity if not the most complete expression of the founding principles that are at the origin of the so-called European social model (Ferrera, 2005)?

Conclusions: three levels of resilience

At the end of this reflection, what conclusions can we then draw on the overall assessment of the ways in which the health systems have responded to the pandemic of COVID-19? In the conceptual framework that we initially adopted (fig.1), three levels of increasing resilience are envisaged according to the response capacity of a healthcare system (Blanchet *et al.*, 2017, p.432]: *absorptive*, *adaptive* and *transformative*. In the first case, the system limits itself to being able to neutralize the impact of the shock produced by the pandemic simply by trying to continue providing the same qualitative and quantitative level of care and people protection despite the shock by using the same resources and capacities. Since this often proves impracticable, the other two possible outcomes remain.

In the case of *adaptive resilience*, the health system recognizes the need to practice some form of adaptive change (which could be both improving or worsening, depending on the point of view) that still allows it to survive with fewer and/or different resources, which requires making organizational adaptations without substantial changes. On the other hand, the case of *transformative resilience* entails a substantial structural and functional change of the system itself (also potentially improving or worsening, depending on the point of view adopted) to better adapt to the change that has taken place as a consequence of the shock.

In the Italian case, an initial phase of absorptive type which tried to keep the functioning of the system unaltered by underestimating the pandemic problem has then been followed by a second adaptive phase which involved a significant reorganization of the system. with the re-functionalization of hospital wards to COVID-19 wards, recruitment of new medical and health personnel, strengthening of intensive care. If, in the coming months, all this may also entail the further transition to a form of transformative resilience by virtue of an overall restructuring of the NHS (e.g., with a partial re-centralization), it is still too early to say.

On the other hand, in the Asian case we have witnessed an effective transformative capacity of health systems such as the Chinese and South Korean ones, which have been able to change the structure and function of the health system to respond to the covid-19 shock. However, the function of these health systems has become predominantly of strict social control, not guaranteeing respect for individual civil rights and freedom.

Finally, in the American case, the absorptive capacity of the healthcare system allowed it to continue operating as usual, without any substantial specific adaptive and even less transformative change. However, this has been achieved at the cost of maintaining and, indeed exasperating, the same profound iniquities on which this private system is based: the image of President Trump returning to play golf in his estate while the pandemic victims is now close to exceeding one hundred thousand deaths is a plastic representation of the cynicism with which the logic of profit is seasoned.

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Transnational Social Implications of the Use of the “War metaphor” Concerning Coronavirus: A Bird’s Eye View¹

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the force of the *war metaphor* primarily in Spain and the U.S. Examples from other countries are included. Methodologically, it utilizes the literature (journals and newspapers) and Twitter research. The paper addresses the impact and pervasiveness of English language translations in electronic communications. A bird’s eye view of how the *war metaphor* spread during the pandemic is presented. Additionally, the paper discusses idiosyncratic differences, cultures and histories in an Anglo-Saxon country and a Latin one. The topic of how leaders in different countries used the *war metaphor* to regulate the activities of citizens and manage their own political realities is reviewed. The situation of immigrants during the pandemic is discussed. The paper includes manifestations of those differences in celebrations, and mourning relating to the pandemic. Recommendations for future research on the *war metaphor* and its effects on solidarity and the economy of nations are put forward.

Keywords: War metaphor, Coronavirus, Pandemic, Spain, USA, Sociopolitical and linguistic comparisons.

Introduction

Winston Churchill, a masterful speaker and a well-known combative personality stated in 1920:

For good or ill, right or wrong, in war you must know what you want and what you mean and hurl your whole life and strength into it and accept all hazards inseparable from it (Churchill, 1920, in Roberts, 2018, p. 125).

As a society we may not be as clear as to what we wanted in relation to coronavirus when it first made its appearance— was it containment of a virus, destruction, or even distraction —was flattening the curve a diversion? Was it only immediate survival while we tried to understand how viruses work? Was it all of the above? Regardless of our conscious goal/s, all nations may not yet have clear or identically articulated goals. What was it that made the metaphor so popular and meaningful to political leaders and the public? For there should be no mistake, the metaphor would not have taken roots so quickly had it not been for the public’s reaction to it. The public felt the effect of the metaphor; it was a serious *war* or *call to arms*, whether or not it served as *full mobilization* of the citizenry. This was a worldwide phenomenon. Why did people who, largely, would not entertain bellicose language, agree and rally around the war metaphor in what were relatively peaceful times?

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This paper will reflect on the force of the metaphor primarily in Spain and the U.S.—although examples from other countries are also included. English has become a pervasive language in journalism, academia, Twitter and many social media throughout the world and, for fortune or misfortune, the language is also a superhighway for dissemination of terminology, action and ideas. Because of the pervasive use of English language translation and new, fast electronic communication, the *war metaphor*, whatever was its first language of utterance in relation to coronavirus, soon became a common rally cry in many countries.

1. A brief Note on Method

Methodologically, this paper utilized the literature, primarily the newspapers and popular and academic journals, both in print and online. It also used direct observations by the authors and a strong *word of mouth* system brought to the authors' attention information in the media, tweets, messages, etc. The pandemic events had to be understood utilizing new and even unusual but verifiable means of data collection that are often not considered by many academic journals. Nevertheless, the immediacy of the material and the constantly evolving information made alternatives unrealistic.

One important source of information has been the automatic collection of Twitter data regarding key hashtags well known internationally such as 'COVID-19', 'COVID19', 'COVID_19', 'coronavirus', 'pandemic', and their equivalents in other European languages (Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese). To collect Twitter data from January to May 2020 *Optimized-modified-GetOldTweets3-OMGOT* tool in Irekponor, 2020, was used. The very extensive final dataset was filtered with the help of *Tableau* software and *Python* programming language. As already mentioned, the Twitter information supplemented the newspaper and journal reviews and vice-versa.

2. The War Metaphor and Lexicon. A bird's eye chronology

The World Health Organization (WHO) began its efforts in January of 2020 and developed tests that were broadly disseminated to many world laboratories. Few countries appeared to have responded immediately (Wallach and Myers, 2020). Politicians, however, picked up the war metaphor with great vehemence from the very early stages of the virus. It appears that it was started by Chinese President Xi Jinping who called their epidemic a "people's war". In France, Emmanuel Macron declared that France was "at war" with COVID-19, while Donald Trump was calling himself "a wartime President". In Italy, the government called for the country's "anti-virus czar" to "equip itself with a war economy" to confront the disease (Mulder, March 26, 2020, p.1).

Beginning with the first White House Coronavirus Task Force briefing in the U.S., on January 27, 2020, the executive began putting into motion "response procedures already on the books" (Wallach and Myers, 2020). The first briefing was carried out by Secretary Azar of Health Education and Welfare and a group of scientists from the Center for Disease Control (CDC). Dr. Redfield, from the CDC, stated that the purpose of the briefing was to update the public on the situation of the "novel coronavirus." "First though", he suggested, "I want to emphasize that this is a serious health situation in China, but I want to emphasize

that the risk to the American public currently is low. Our goal is to do all we can do to keep it that way.” (The White House, Healthcare, 2020).

Neither President Trump nor the war metaphor, which was already circulating, appeared during that briefing. Although the security forces took part in the presentation, stressing border controls and limitations on flights and migration, which project a war-like tone, the word itself was not used. The meeting still ended with Secretary Azar reassuring the public of low risk (The White House, Healthcare, 2020).

Quite immediately, while the health authorities attempted to be sober in their speech, the war metaphors continued to overtake the discussion. Government in the U.S., as in other countries, came out in an attempt to control the narrative. But President Trump proposed in his White House briefing on March 18, 2020, that “we [the citizens of the U.S.] were at war with the virus”. According to reporters from *Politico*:

When asked whether he [Trump] considered the U.S. to be on a wartime footing, he added, ‘in a sense, a wartime president. I mean, that’s what we’re fighting.’ We’re leading a campaign to fight back against this disease (Oprysko and Luthi, 2020).

In England, Prime Minister Boris Johnson did not use the war metaphor in his first official statement on March 16, 2020, either. His language was incredibly measured, with little or no overstatements. He only had one statement towards the end of the official transcript: “We’re leading a campaign to fight back against this disease” (Johnson, 2020). The term *fight* against a disease is a common way to refer, in the English language, to campaigns against deadly diseases (e.g. fight against cancer, or diabetes, etc.), so his language in the official transcript was not surprising. This was an interesting first move for such an ebullient speaker; it may have been an effort to come close to the measured language of other ministerial speakers in the past. However, by April 1st 2020, *The Guardian* newspaper reported: “Boris Johnson, another man who never wore a uniform, suggests that the country is fighting a second battle of Britain. *Cringeworthy* newspaper headlines summon up the ‘blitz spirit’, recycling 1940s propaganda” (Tisdall, 2020).

In Spain, the government declared a *Estado de Alarma* (State of Alarm) (Real Decreto n. 463, March 14, 2020) establishing the clear responsibility of the President, Pedro Sánchez, and his Ministers (*Sanidad, Interior, Defensa y Transporte, Movilidad y Agenda Urbana*) in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Spanish Committee for the Technical Management of COVID-19 included, under the axis of the ministries, representatives from the Armed Forces, National Police, and the *Guardia Civil* (a part of the security forces under the Ministry of the Interior and Defense). The decree established a daily reporting to the public by members of that committee. This level of organization made it clear to the public that the government had taken control of the war and that its orders had the force of emergency. The tone was the same. Those who analyzed the metaphor were concerned that it was addressed to an unseen and vague enemy that came, like all wars, with a suspension of liberties, massive economic consequences, and other unforeseen penalties for society.

Circumstances have begun to show that what was seen initially as *hype* by many may not have been exaggerated and that people were anxious about the lack of known courses to take against the virus; perhaps the image of total war was, in many ways, not ill chosen. In spite of journalistic warnings that the language of war divides communities, many countries took up the war language quickly because it was useful for them. At the initial stages, the people who heard their

role defined as soldiers in a fierce battle and were quick to follow government directions. The effect, judging by the literature across linguistic and national identities and idiosyncrasies in the U.S and many European countries, seems to have been similarly rousing of spirits rather than politically too contentious in the eyes of a trusting public at the beginning. But it was soon to change.

On April 5, 2020, *El País* published, under President Sanchez' signature, an opinion piece entitled *Europa se la juega* (Europe is gambling), in which he appeals repeatedly to the war metaphor, in the same way, that he had already used it with other audiences. But this time, he had a more politically charged message for the E.U.

Europe is facing a war different from the ones we have avoided in the last seventy years: a war against an invisible enemy that is testing the future of the European project ... Europe must set up a war economy and promote relief (economic resistance to the public debt caused by the virus), reconstruction, and recovery for the European Union (Sánchez, 2020, para. 2 and 6, translation by the authors).

The Spanish President was highlighting the potential political and economic implications of the fight against the virus.

On May 7th, MSNBC reported in the 11 o'clock news that President Trump was now referring to the fighters in this war as those workers who went to work aiding *his open up the country again* slogan even though the health authorities were not always in agreement. The dangers of the war metaphor were becoming apparent. What were those who followed the health authorities' mandates and did not go to work but stayed home? The public question might be whether they are cowards, a very debatable matter. Doubts began to appear about the sustaining capacity of the war metaphor.

In regards to idiosyncratic behavior, agreement about the use of specific war terms was less universal in the U.S. and Europe than in countries like China or South Korea, where the people accepted lockdown (*confinamiento*) with little rebellion, perhaps because it was less shocking to the culture, idiosyncrasies and governmental structure.

A recent article in the New York Times aptly describes differences between the lexicon and behavior of the parties reporting daily about coronavirus in the U.S. and the U.K. The paper comments: "This is Britain's answer to the White House's daily coronavirus briefing—and except for the starting time, Downing Street's genteel exercise is the antithesis of the fiery, freewheeling spectacle presided over by President Trump across the Atlantic" (Landler, Britain Dispatch, 2020, para.3).

In this crisis, the vocabulary has also been highly influenced by public health experts. We have seen already how terms of containment affected the language. Different populations needed more or less enforcement vis-à-vis those measures, but overall, terms like quarantine, social distancing, and self-isolation and even pandemic became part of everybody's language (Fiorillo and Gorwood, 2020).

While the war language brought to the fore fear, it also brought forth determination to fight, positive reactions, cheers for the heroes and *esprit de corps* among those who felt attacked by the invisible enemy. Newscasts were filled with calls for solidarity and recognition that *we were all in it together*, whether the together referred to a small town, a county, a state, a nation or the world. Yet on the other side, "for every volunteer supplying food to the elderly, there are legions of panicked shoppers stripping supermarkets in a particularly stupid bid to preempt wartime rationing." (Tisdall, 2020). In rural France and certainly in the U.S., wonderful manifestations of solidarity were often followed by signs warning

strangers to go home. Was a populist and xenophobic layer making an ugly appearance in this virus war also? We will be discussing the immigration measures taken by some countries under **Immigration and Coronavirus**.

3. Other Idiosyncratic Implications of the war. Beyond the metaphor

Beyond the terminology of *lockdown*, another unique term emerged with a less warlike tone but equally or more impactful, and that is *social distancing*. “And many see social distancing to be the greatest pandemic-era addition to the vernacular yet” (Sedensky, 2020). This term was made very popular by the health authorities. This phrase, like *flattening the curve*, was an easily understood term that communicated exactly what people needed to do. The idiosyncrasies of the citizenry and the country played a big part in the selection of words and phrases. The terms used within the war metaphor differed depending on the historical and political experiences of each country. The examples are numerous and will continue to appear added to dictionaries all over the world in years to come. For example, informants tell that the terms lockdown did not become popular in Argentina. It sounded, they suggest, too much like terms used during the government of former military groups. But, preferences for terms vary according to personal feelings and political ideologies and experiences.

Nevertheless, in general terms, the war metaphor encouraged or warned people in different countries that the situation was severe and required serious attention. The general effect of the metaphor among the population was noticeable. People stopped going to crowded spaces and streets became sometimes almost deserted. Many undemocratic “compromises” of government mandates or even suggestions were made in various countries amidst anxiety and fear. The war metaphor had created a certain ambience of acquiescence towards authority given what was happening. For example, in the U.S. churches, mosques and synagogues were closed with little protestations. Under normal circumstances, the U.S. public would have severely objected to what could be viewed as interference with freedom of religion. But this was a war, even if an undeclared one in conventional terms.

In the Vatican, news about Pope Francis’ public liturgy, under the rain, in empty churches during Holy Week offered indelible images to the world. In Spain, the *Estado de Alarma* affected people greatly because all rituals around death were interrupted and people who came from close Latino families were unable to mourn. In Spain, a future official mourning was announced on May 6 (Sánchez Castejón, 2020) in an effort to have solidarity with those who lost friends and relatives, parents and children. The same was registered in other countries where death rituals were very traditional, never to be thought as solitary events. The notions of cadavers in the streets in Ecuador (León and Kurmanaev, 2020), of burial grounds with open tombs in Brazil (Watson, 2020) and such similar images created a deep sense of public anxiety reminiscent of plagues of olden days.

Congress in the U.S and Parliaments in other places deferred much urgent work. Elections were postponed but it was apparent that the war against coronavirus was viewed as sufficient explanation. The stock market suffered incredible loses (Ozili and Arun, 2020; Krugman, 2020), but it was not until the unemployment numbers escalated and the government had to pass special legislation, that investors and the public in general began reacting with serious concern. Critics of the U.S. administration pound on the mishandling of this war.

While the United States has poured \$3 trillion into relief from the effects of Covid-19- money that will run out soon and that hasn't prevented young children in one in six households from not having enough to eat—the nation hasn't invested nearly enough in science and in scientific tools like testing, vaccines, therapies and research to combat it. (Kristof, 2020, para.12).

In fact, in the same article, Kristof praises countries like Spain and Italy that he believes have handled the outbreak better and have ripped the benefits of their more responsible handling.

The economic consequences of coronavirus have only just begun to emerge amidst lockdowns for business and the public. Economic predictions indicate that the benefits of the free market will be easily wiped out with the crisis. It would take another article to begin to address these issues, but the Press in U.S. and Spain have started to focus on the precarious balance between health and economy. Bennet (2020) quoted the prime minister of Finland saying “It gives people freedom when you have a strong welfare state” (Bennet, May 8, 2020), something that Europeans generally profess. But such statements will enter the American dialogue with greater ease now that capitalism has been seriously challenged by a virus.

4. Misinformation and Disinformation

From an international perspective, a major concern that emerged due to the speed of information flowing from country to country was the increase of both ‘misinformation’ (fake news) and ‘disinformation’ around COVID-19. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, problems at the European Union and certainly in the U.S. due to misinformation and disinformation had been already reported.² Cuan-Baltazar et al. (2020, p. 9) suggested that the “excess of poor-quality of information without scientific support” offered by the internet, had consequences that can be devastating, as “panic shopping, buying medical supplies or drugs, and, even worst, taking drugs without a medical prescription spread uncontrollably.” (Cuan-Baltazar et al, 2020, p.9). Other researchers should pursue the topic of misinformation. It became a minefield of questions, conspiracy theories, anxiety and permeated the most apparently solid sources. For example, the U.S. President’s conversation during a press conference about the possible value of research on the ingestion of disinfectants, ultra-violet lights, etc. which shocked the country (Rogers, Hauser, Yuhua and Haberman, 2020), and even the world (BBC News, 2020). As suggested by Bavel et al.,

Conspiracy theories emerged shortly after the first news of COVID-19 and have continued to persist... It is not surprising that conspiracy theories have flourished at this time. Research suggests that people feel the need to explain large events with proportionally large causes and are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories about events with serious consequences and in times of crisis (Bavel et al, 2020, p. 5).

² Disinformation is the “false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or profit”, and “misinformation” is the “misleading or inaccurate information shared by people who do not recognize it as such” (High-Level Expert Group on Fake news and Disinformation, 2018, p. 10). This is directly related to recent research results on the dissemination of news about COVID-19.

In the U.S. and Spain, the term first responders or *primera línea* became ubiquitous to refer to doctors, nurses, ambulance personnel and other people with direct patient contact. It was the heroic behavior of the first respondents and emergency personnel in hospitals that inspired visions of heroes in this war. As we shall see soon, the metaphor continues to offer material for action and solidarity.

5. Emerging Heroes

Like in all wars, not all that developed was addressed to generate further chaos and fear. Popular movements emerged focusing on the heroes of the war. These social manifestations have great mental health value for people whose lives had been overturned overnight. This review can only offer the start of many efforts by citizens who are longing for normalcy. Well disseminated artistic examples appeared in tweets, YouTube etc. #StayHome, #QuédateEnCasa or #Fiqueemcasa (stay at Home) claims were followed by very different kind of behaviors around the world, well associated to different cultural backgrounds. In Spain, for instance, characterized by a Latin sense of sociability, confinement at home (*confinamiento*) has been reinvented as a creative opportunity for a “together” one. So, there has been a wide list of social events or encounters developed in balconies, or through internet video calls among different groups of people, as a secure way of managing social distance.

It is possible to find on YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and other social networks light-spirited videos such as Flamenco Dancing (sevillanas) in balconies. During sacred holidays, one could see believers attempting to lift spirits by celebrating symbolically what would have been processions. In several countries Opera singers and other artists, including members of symphony orchestra, offered their neighbors video concerts over a glass of wine. There were many other expressions of support such as free calls offering storyteller for entertaining families or children (Vazquez, 2020).

An old song *Resistiré* [I will resist] from the *Dúo Dinámico*, a very famous group in Spain, was brought back into fashion during COVID-19 and became a kind of anthem which is heard several times after the giving of applause to health providers at 20:00 hours, or in hospitals. (Progressive Spain, 2020). YouTube versions of the song is found below.

The Independent, (Lovett, 2020, ‘You are our heroes’) documented the celebratory phenomenon of the heroes in an article worth examining in full because it shows a genuinely European old city phenomenon of commemoration. Thousands express support and gratitude from homes following social media appeal. Similar manifestations of gratitude were spread very fast around the globe lifting the spirits of the public. They were followed with lesser or greater intensity depending on the urban-rural context of the country and the idiosyncrasies of the population. A sociological phenomenon to be explored in depth by further research.

Here, it is befitting to end this *birds-eye review* of a phenomenon with some meaningful songs that can be found and enjoyed universally by connecting to either

YouTube³; or by reading an article in a popular magazine that compiled many cross-country examples (Hernández, 2020).

6. The War metaphor and Immigrants

In the U.S., the immigration restrictions under President Trump that were already controversial got again exacerbated by country-specific prohibitions and testing at U.S. entry ports. Arrivals from Wuhan China first tested U.S. airports on January 20, followed by Proclamation 9984 "suspending entry for foreign nationals who had traveled in mainland China. On February 10, 2020, an additional regulation in the U.S. requires airlines to collect data on their passengers and crew arriving from foreign countries. (Wallach and Myers, 2020).

There was great contrast in the handling of immigrants in the various countries involved in this war. In the U.S., not for profit charities continued their efforts to help those people without documentation but the gaps were revealed every day. The situation continues to be problematic (ASU Lodestar Center, 2020, May 12, 2020). In contrast, in Portugal the government published a *Despacho n° 3863-B-2020 (Diário da República, March 28, 2020)* for the regularization of all immigrants who had pending requests in the *Serviço de Estrangeiros e Fronteiras* (the immigration and borders service) during the *Estado de Emergência Nacional* (the state of emergency). The permit issued functions as a temporary residence permit that includes access to all public services such as the National Health and other social support. Asylum seekers were also covered. Eduardo Cabrita, *Ministro da Administração Interna*, stated in *Público*:

In a State of Emergency, the priority is the defense of health and collective safety. In these moments becomes even more important to guarantee the rights of the most fragile, as is the case of migrants. Ensuring the access of migrant citizens to health, social security and the stability in the job and housing is a duty of a solidarity society in times of crisis (Gorjão Henriques, 2020, translation by the authors).

Also, Spain introduced special COVID-19 integration measures regarding the integration of migrants and asylum seekers, suspending administrative deadlines for the duration of the pandemic guaranteeing the rights of vulnerable immigrants (Secretaria de Estado de Migraciones, 2020). This includes "The temporary suspension of refugees and asylum-seekers' obligation to have valid documents in order to continue receiving aid covering their basic needs" (European Commission, 2020).

In Greece and Croatia, other European countries which, like Portugal, have a reduced number of deaths and infected people by COVID-19 today (John Hopkins University, 2020), the success seems associated with the quick responses to coronavirus (Delauney and Kallergis, 2020, May 4). This is not to say that these European countries have solved all their challenges regarding migrants and refugees (United Nations, 2020). The Migration Policy Institute states in its letter of communication of May 12, 2020 (@migrationpolicy.org) that "Governments will also have to rethink their border and travel processes in key ways, with a focus

³ The songs can be found from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hl3B4Ql8RtQ> (accessed, 14/5/2020); or from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gert3f3xPR4> (accessed, 14/5/2020); or from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5CrScIHAuE> (accessed, 14/5/2020).

on digitization and automation’ (p.1) as countries try open borders and attempt normalize movement across the world.

7. Country specific political meanings of the metaphor

While in the U.S. the initial war lexicon may have been intended to vilify the unseen enemy and perhaps render political advantages for the forthcoming Presidential elections (Sedensky, 2020), the reality is that most politicians and even scientific experts seem to have resorted to war language to describe the situation. Was the description of war chaos and uncontrollable forces at play what politicians wanted to convey either to keep the population busy with its peril? Nobody is likely to know for sure.

Claiming to be bolstering safety yet feeding fear, politicians cite a vast threat from an invisible enemy. As in actual war, they deem collateral damage to be unfortunate but inevitable (Tisdall, 2020).

Sources of chaos and threat diversified as soon an ‘infodemic’ became another important enemy. We have already referred to this issue as a matter worthy of future research. In a speech at the Munich Security Conference, 15 Feb 2020, Dr. Tedros Adhanom, WHO Director-General, declared: ‘But we’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous’. As a consequence, added to a scale-up response, there is a key demand to the international community of countering this infodemics as dangerous as the virus (Adhanom, 2020).

The war metaphor persists over time in speeches of public figures maintaining the idea of a dual war. A tweet by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, ‘*Our common enemy is #COVID19, but our enemy is also an ‘infodemic’ of misinformation*’ elaborated on this point (Guterres, 2020, March 28). Fake news and misinformation about COVID-19 have proliferated widely on social media, with potentially dangerous consequences (Cuan-Baltazar, 2020; Bavel et al. 2020). The politics of coronavirus have become as pervasive as social media.

Another disjuncting issue was variations in the political organization and distribution of power in different countries and the involvement of the central and more local units in the ‘war’. In the U.S., for example, the constitution states that the federal government possesses only those powers delegated to it by the United States Constitution; and that all remaining powers are reserved for the states or the people” (Art.10). Discrepancy between the two levels was important from the start in the use of “the war lexicon”. For example, Governor Cuomo from N.Y, who took on a leading role in communication, avoided using the term “lockdown” or “shelter in place” because, in his assessment, it brought forth images of the Cold War, when little children were asked to shelter themselves from atomic fallout. Yet, the Mayor of N.Y. city did not avoid the term. It was clear that there was no agreement on the lexicon, and unlike a formally declared war, where the whole country would have responded to Federal Government decrees or leadership, this war provoked struggles between levels of government (the cities, the state and the federal) tied to constitutional issues but also to political persuasions. Additionally, a different use of terms might be exemplified in Puerto Rico, where Spanish language and legal systems distinguish the Commonwealth from the mainland. Governor Wanda Vazquez moved quickly to shut down schools, beaches and businesses on the island by establishing a “nighttime curfew” (Scher, 2020) very

much a military-related, wartime term. But perhaps the use of the qualifier *nighttime* was purposeful because in English the impact might be milder than lockdown. *Curfew* is used often by parents to limit young people's time before returning home after a party. Perhaps the Governor of Puerto Rico was aware of the heightened sensitivities of a people who had gone recently through two hurricane disasters and may have been even more panicked by lockdown.

Similar tensions that those in the US exists in Spain between the central government and the *Comunidades Autónomas* (autonomous regions according to the 1978 Spanish Constitution). Before the pandemic the Catalan debates around Catalan independence or self-determination were capturing great attention, but since beginning of the State of Alarm there have been different kinds of tensions between the State and the regions. Conflicts that go from the claim for masks, respirators and other health materials to tensions about the de-escalating process to return to normalcy. At this point, regions try to regain greater autonomy in decision-making. Central government is confronted with the problems of how to arrive at the *nueva normalidad* (new normal) that will have to be managed at a regional level.

At any rate, the war metaphor seems to have served governments well to capture the attention of citizens and by-and-large to rally them to comply with different directives which were deemed important by public health authorities. The problem was that the metaphor was also open to much exaggeration and, as we have seen, misinformation. When the situation became grave and the number of victims increased exponentially, the war metaphor became less rallying and the language of solidarity, social discipline and responsibility became more intense. This language of solidarity was very observable not only in the lexicon but in the actions of citizens. In Spain the language of solidarity and unity has been promoted from the beginning by the government through each official communication. Thus, each tweet from the Government, the Ministry of Health, the National Police, or other ministries or bodies has included the hashtag #EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos (#WeWillStopThisVirusTogether), providing a strong sense of common fight, common enemy, etc. At the same time, solidarity and responsibility have been found to be important strategies to fight against coronavirus.

In Argentina, research done by Nieto and Ferreyra (2020), monitoring the conversation around the hashtags #CoronavirusArgentina and #CoronavirusenArgentina, show differences between those who prioritize community values during the pandemic (#SomosResponsables, #Noscuidamosentretodos, #EstadoPresentePreviene), and those in opposition. Those in opposition claim repressive slogans (#EstadodeSitioYa, #ToquedeQueda, #SuspendanlasClasesYa). As in Spain with the #EsteVirusLoParamosUnidos, the official discourse is around the idea of #UnidosPorArgentina, as a way to strengthen national identities (Nieto and Ferreyra, 2020)

In many states in the U.S., the role of the not-for-profit organizations increased. These community-based, not-for-profit organizations, providers of community help, had historically been an American characteristic (De Tocqueville, 2002). In Phoenix, AZ, for example, more spontaneous shows of support were found in sidewalk writings and poetry appearing in erasable chalk. But in a characteristic U.S. style, many efforts at mutual support focused, on commerce, for example, on neighborhood restaurants that were suffering financially because of the "stay at home" measures. Not only did these restaurants increased delivery, but advertisements appeared on T.V., on flyers and texts supporting those businesses to keep them afloat. Business-oriented responses in the U.S. were ubiquitous, another

idiosyncratic way in which citizens take almost personal responsibility for the survival of small businesses, perhaps a product of a strong belief in the power of individuals to improve with the basic tools of a capitalistic economy. *Eat your local pizza, buy your local hamburger, get your salad from a local vendor or truck* were common messages. Similar experiences were found in Spain where some NGOs and companies that were forced to close their normal activity, changed their products to help the most vulnerable citizens.

However, solidarity also raised political criticism. The language of war often got turned against the government, which was viewed as inefficient in solving the problem. The many errors of a very late “declaration of war against the pandemic” in the U.S. became the object of much derision. Press coverage critical of President Trump, who was already facing serious political difficulties, became commonplace. His actions against his own health advisors, his threat and dismissal of many who did not agree with him, added to the public anger but also to the public demonstrations of support by his “base”, which continued to be rallied and fed, often with less than factual information.

Final reflections and comments

Le Guern suggested that the metaphor can be considered "the queen of poetic figures" (1990: 9), and judging by its strong power of communication, this particular war metaphor conveyed a great deal in short. Our very panoramic observations of its development, dissemination and spread suggest that it played an important role encouraging and even pushing citizens to social distancing, social discipline and other measures destined to follow confinement at home.

We have tried to convey some subtle idiosyncratic differences in different countries, with different cultures, histories and peculiarities, one being an Anglo Saxon country and the other being a Latin one. Perhaps given the rapidity and universality of current means of communication including social media, those differences did not manifest themselves as too pointed or significant. Yes, celebrations had a different tonality in Spain or Italy than in the U.S. and the sense of solidarity was perhaps expressed somewhat differently. Old balconies with their romantic architecture were more impressive in old countries like Spain and Italy and the level of gaiety introduced into the daily routines was different between cultures. However, even those manifestations of gaiety with singing and dancing were treasured and caught on in Anglo Saxon environments. They were an antidote to the tragedies that surrounded newer cities and even the countryside. Children in neighborhoods followed suit and painted sidewalks with messages of encouragement to accomplish similar outcomes. Nevertheless, the war against this novel virus was a baffling phenomenon that frustrated everyone. Resiliency was brought forth in most of the countries, with people prepared to face this unseen and unknown enemy with great determination.

We also observed clear commonalities among different countries and political leaders when resorting to the war metaphor to serve their respective causes. Political leaders all became concerned about *infodemic*, as an expression of a globalized culture. While misinformation and disinformation have been around in all wars, the ease with which they can be spread now is unmatched. There is a fundamental challenge for all leaders to control this harmful new development. Most people were familiar with the disinformation of the old wartime of human

spies, but this new menace of ‘fake news’ is more ubiquitous and elusive to combat.

Finally, the *war metaphor* has given license for an unprecedented level of control of the daily lives of citizens. Has the metaphor given justification to an era of technological interference with people’s freedoms for the sake of survival? Can democracies withstand a proliferation of similar means of controlling future pandemics? Many offer dire predictions. The press is not very encouraging and the health authorities must be very parsimonious. But others realize that society has changed; that habits and even beliefs are unlikely to remain the same. Yet, more optimistic individuals prefer the songs of *Resistiré*, as we have heard them, which have become a symbol of universal resistance. In reality, the future is still ahead and people must look at it with hope.

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The New Heroes: Applause and Sensibilities in the Era of the COVID-19

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Abstract

Since the implementation of preventive and compulsory social isolation, every night at 9:00 p.m. thousands of Argentines applaud the health system personnel from their patios, balconies and windows in support of their daily tasks. The purpose of this article is to present a critical analysis of the applause that the Argentine population offers as an emotional support for workers in the health sector in times of Covid-19. To achieve this objective, the following argumentative strategy is followed: a) the relationship between heroes and spectators in a spectacularized society is described; b) second, a series of videos of different cities with structural diversity (social class, scale) from the virtual ethnography will be analysed; c) third, applause as an emotion is analysed according to the contexts of its production from the perspective of the sociology of bodies/emotions. Finally, the paper concludes with some questions about the relationship between public health and sensibilities in the post-Covid-19 era.

Keywords: Applause, Sensibilities, Public health, Sociology of emotions.

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic has become an event that has modified a set of social practices on a planetary scale. In some weeks during the past three months, more than 3,000,000,000 people were complying with various social isolation regimes, beginning to wear masks on a daily basis, and distancing themselves from other human beings by at least 1.80 metres. The big cities "closed", the planes did not fly, the passenger ships tried to return to port, the schools, temples and places of entertainment were temporarily closed. The health system, the security forces and all those services that were considered "essential" in each place were the only activities that did not stop and, moreover, increased their volume of activity, presence and social consideration.

In the aforementioned context, the custom of clapping on balconies, at the doors and on the patios of houses was established, thanking the work of all those who are caring for the victims of the virus. In the face of the enormous efforts of the people belonging to the health system (in some cases poorly paid and not valued) who care for the sick, and among whom many have died, citizens perform this gesture of approval, support and ovation every night: they are people who give their lives for others.

Argentina was not an exception, with an obligatory isolation since the first cases of contagion were known, and Argentines imitate the aforementioned gesture that was already common in Italy, Spain and England.

The objective of this article is to take a critical look at the applause that every day the Argentine population, from their windows or balconies, offer as an emo-

tional support to the health sector workers in times of the coronavirus. For this, the relationship between heroes and spectators in a spectacularized society is described. Then a series of videos from different cities (with different social levels) will be analysed through virtual ethnography. Thirdly, applause as an emotion will be analysed according to the contexts of its production from the perspective of the sociology of bodies/emotions.

A central aspect of what we presenting here is the methodological strategy used: virtual ethnography. For social research from different perspectives (both theoretical and disciplinary) the Internet is today a widely used source. Many processes, strategies and tools are implemented currently through the Internet: investigation through blogs, virtual ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and the use of YouTube, just to mention a few. As we explained in section 3, our strategy consisted of an ethnography through the use of WhatsApp with a snowball-type sampling.

The article ends by advocating the urgency of maintaining a critical gaze regarding the possible transformations that the pandemic is producing, but also and especially evaluating the opportunity to observe the appearance of new practices of association and reception of the other as close.

1. Society, heroes and applause

In this section we synthesize some of the dimensions of the problem addressed, as considered from the perspective of a sociology of bodies/emotions that tries to conceptually contextualize the social structural processes that have taken place prior to 2020.

1.1 Society, enjoyment, and spectacle

For some time now, we have been confirming the consolidation of normalization in immediate enjoyment through consumption in Argentine society. In this framework, we have explored, in various spatial and temporal contexts, the consequences of the structuring processes that were instantiated during the last twenty years.

The current situation of capitalism on a planetary scale, and emphatically in the Global South, is characterized by the existence of a large predatory machine that expropriates water, air, earth and, especially, bodily energy; the design and management of social support mechanisms and devices for regulating sensations framed in and through ghosts and social fantasies; and a global apparatus of repression, not only the military/police but also, and fundamentally, the one operating in everyday life: racialization, femicide, mass expulsion, etc.

Within this framework, in our investigations, we have confirmed the concreteness of what we have called the neo-colonial religion (Scribano, 2013, 2014). This amalgam to mimetic consumption, resignation and “diminished humanism” as dogmas that explain and “make sense” of a political economy of morality that socializes the pastoral in terms of a “sociodicy of frustration” is expressed in both apraxia, ataxia and social synaesthesia

Normalization can be understood as stabilization, compulsive repetition, nomological adaptation and contextual disconnection of the set of social relationships that the practices of individuals acquire in a particular time/space. In the sense of what has been affirmed and within the framework of the objectives of the present project, it is possible to understand how the normalization of the social is a conse-

quence, but at the same time also a generator, of the repetition in time of the social bearability mechanisms and the devices for the regulation of sensations. However, to properly characterize the “state” of the aforementioned societies, it is necessary to clarify the experience of immediate enjoyment as a privileged axis through which the elaborations of the possible normalizations pass. The operating centrality of the connections between consumption, enjoyment and normalization becomes a key to understanding the political economy of morality today. In direct relation with what we have indicated for normalization with respect to compulsive repetition, immediate enjoyment is the device by which the various and multiple ways of generating substitutes, replacements, and satisfiers through consumption are updated as a mechanism for the reduction of anxieties. The connections between consumption, enjoyment, and objects acquire the procedural structure of addictions: there is an object that releases moments of containment/adaptation to a specific state of sensibilities with such power/capacity that its absence demands its immediate replacement/reproduction. Without these objects, a break in the always undetermined emotional frames is verified in such a way that a lack is experienced, an experience that induces/produces the need for a new and immediate consumption of the referred object. It is in this sense that enjoyment can be understood as the complex and contingent resultant experienced as a “here-now” parenthesis, as continuity in time and that produces a state of subjective de-anchoring.

Thus, today we live in societies normalized in immediate enjoyment through consumption. We attend a permanent restructuring of the political economy of morality through the aforementioned enjoyment. Credits for consumption, subsidies for consumption, and “official” incentives for consumption intersect and overlap with the consolidated state and in the continuous development of capitalism in its contradiction of predation/consumption. Therefore, structured societies are produced/reproduced around a set of sensibilities whose elaboration context is the continuous efforts to “continue consuming” (Scribano, 2015). In this context we want to emphasize the follow structural components of society:

1. It is true that capitalism has been tied to consumption since its origins, and that the so-called consumerist society has been taken to its paroxysm in what are called post-material societies. What we intend to emphasize is that the politics of life, the inner experiences and intimacy are now not only objects of purchase and sale, but instead the sensibility regime is gaining the public status of religious belief. All social (and public) policies regenerate devices of sensation regulation that in their affective-cognitive imprint develop a public registration of mixed and mystified subjectivity of participation in a hypostatized totality through consumption.

2. It is also true that abstinence and ascetic saving processes have crossed the history of capitalism and that its opposites such as transgression and waste have occupied a central place in its reproduction. But in the current situation it is the sacrificial structure as a form that gains relevance. This is sacrifice neither as collective or individual effort to overcome scarceness, nor as a parameter for reciprocal exchanges: sacrifice is put at the centre of the scene of everyday life as a rite through which atonement of guilt, mystical participation in/of the totality and death are threaded. Trespassing its previous meanings, capitalism has emptied the meaning of death, defining it as necessary sacrifice and a constitutive part of the reproduction of life in consumption. The victims of the sacrificial structure turn into mediations for the reproduction of life. A life lived on the edge of death. These victims are both the billion human beings that experience expulsion and dispossession, as also the environmental assets that are preyed upon in the sacrificial pyre of progress understood as consumption of the few.

3. In the same direction, the processes of crisis and metamorphosis of capitalism have been associated to staging and spectacularity. From the Paris Fair of 1910, through the Hitlerian concentration camps, to NASA's launches, capitalism has always shown its power through public spectacles. Today, in the Internet era and live broadcasts for billions of subjects, the spectacularization takes (and re-takes) other features to gain importance and centrality. All that is lived must be represented in public, massively transmitted and recognized/approved by "many". The everyday of spectacle implies the appearance of a "reality show"-spirituality, where distances between Big Brother and the subjects that watch are annulled in direct relation to what we have argued above in 1.

4. Consistently, and as a consequence of what we have exposed, one of the most important features of the current metamorphosis of capitalism is to re-transform it into a Cultic Economy. This implies that the stabilizing profit rates of the mega-corporations have, in the spectacular sacrifice of exposed and coagulated lives, not only a "place" that assures its reproduction, but also a more appropriate modification of its political economy of morality.

Intimacies for sale, wholes theatrically presented, individuals and environmental assets sent to the fires and sacrificial altars of progress, consumption practices turned Decalogue for action are just some of the consequences of the changes and re-elaborations of neo-colonial religion as a current structure of the political economy of morality.

1.2. Heroes and Applause

Hundreds of works have been written about heroism, it has generated many theoretical and empirical inquiries, and it has been the subject of various disciplines and theoretical views. Just as a very brief review let us recall some classic contributions.

Perhaps in one of the best-known studies on heroism, Thomas Carlyle approaches the figure of the hero in his first pages as follows:

We have undertaken to discourse here for a little on Great Men, their manner of appearance in our world's business, how they have shaped themselves in the world's history, what ideas men formed of them, what work they did;—on Heroes, namely, and on their reception and performance; what I call Hero-worship and the Heroic in human affairs. Too evidently this is a large topic; deserving quite other treatment than we can expect to give it at present. A large topic; indeed, an illimitable one; wide as Universal History itself. For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realization and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these (Carlyle 2001, p. 5).

A "great man" with a task, some ideas, possessor of special skills, a role model, someone to imitate, a creator and leader. The hero is social by "nature".

From another perspective, Otto Rank in his quest to clarify the "universal" connections between myth, hero and society in the field of psychoanalytic inquiries, described one of the ways of understanding the "hero's journey":

The standard saga itself may be formulated according to the following outline: The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth, and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative). As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or by an humble woman. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in a highly versatile fashion. He takes his revenge on his father, on the one hand, and is acknowledged, on the other. Finally he achieves rank and honors (Rank 1914, p. 22).

It is a circuit that starts from lost parenthood, goes through difficulties, until it reaches honours. The hero triumphs over adversity. In his well-known work on the hero, Joseph Campbell writes:

The hero is the man of self-achieved submission. But submission to what? That precisely is the riddle that today we have to ask ourselves and that it is everywhere the primary virtue and historic deed of the hero to have solved. [...] Only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be—if we are to experience long survival — a continuous "recurrence of birth" (palingenesia) to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death (Campbell 2004, p. 15).

A central characteristic of every form of hero appears here: one is born dying. The hero must give his life to be such, but this is only possible if he is born recurrently; with the hero the entire "social body" is born and moves away from death.

Despite the multiple responses and the various responses in the second half of the 20th century, the theme of heroism has been a recurring topic. In 1954 Orrin Klapp wrote an essay entitled "Heroes, Villains and Fools, as Agents of Social Control" where he begins by systematizing social epithets for each of these figures for the hero, among which we can highlight: champ, big shot, smart operator, father of his country, protector, emancipator.

Among the various forms of messianisms, authoritarian and/or charismatic leadership, fascism, national socialism, and the multiple versions of populism that developed in the 20th century are clear examples of the "new" forms of heroes.

Already in the 20th century, and not long ago in the context of "natural" catastrophes, great fires, the global presence of terrorism and the failures of "expert systems" (sensu Giddens) translated into different types of accidents, heroism moved with force practices such as those of firefighters, nurses, etc. In their work "Lay perspectives on the social and psychological functions of heroes" Kinsella, Ritchie and Igou systematize the results of three studies carried out by them:

Independent coder analyses of lay conceptions (Study 1) revealed 14 perceived functions provided by heroes, for example, to inspire, to protect, to guide, to instill hope, and to motivate. Another sample rated each of the 14 function categories in terms of importance (Study 2). CFA established that our predicted three-factor model, including the factors protecting, enhancing, and moral modeling, fit the data well in comparison to a poorly fitting one-factor model. In Study 3 we asked participants to rate heroes, role models, or leaders across all 14 hero functions. The results illustrated that heroes were perceived as more likely to help, to save, to protect, to make the world better, and to do what no one else will (Kinsella, Ritchie and Igou, 2015, p. 8).

Re-emerging protection, example, the role of guide, and hope emerge as traits of heroic practice. In a similar vein, very recently Kristian Frisk in his article "What Makes a Hero? Theorising the Social Structuring of Heroism" debates four leading outlooks in the sociology of heroism: the study of great men; hero stories; heroic actions; and hero institutions (Frisk, 2019).

As is easy to see, there is a clear connection between hero and social approval, between heroic life and heroic practices, between the life of the hero and the life of those who identify, approve and follow him. It is here that the applause plays a relevant role that links theatrical representation with the hero's course.

The Cambridge dictionary defines applause as "the noise or action of people hitting their hands together to show they have enjoyed something"¹, making visible the connection between applause, emotion and approval.

The applause, understood as a practice of expression of emotions that motivates the action of another person, is a key component of normalized society in enjoyment where the spectacular and sacrifice are one of its keys.

Along the same lines in these societies, the place of heroes in the context of sacrifice and the scenes of legendary struggles, especially in recent years due to the "Marvel effect", occupy a privileged place in the politics of sensibilities. The Covid19 pandemic has given rise to a set of practices that reconnect applause and heroes. In the first place, for the use of a warlike rhetoric to designate sanitary actions, and secondly for the high degree of spectacularism that such actions imply.

In the social sciences and humanities there is a long tradition of studies on applause; let's synthesize only very few of them.

There are numerous investigations of applause, its meaning, diversity and scope. Aesthetics, rhetoric, sociology just to name a few, have dealt with this phenomenon. For example, Pam Wells and Peter Bull (2007) carried out a study that sought to identify the key similarities and differences between the affiliative behaviours of the audiences with political speakers and comedians through the rhetorical devices used.

Another of the studied aspects is the influence of the proximity/distance of those who applaud on the beginning, development and intensity of the applause, trying to investigate the weight of the contagion. Mann and his colleagues report that:

Unlike studies focused on visual information, where local transmission of information is between local neighbours, we find in our experiments that spatial proximity is not important. This is probably the result of attention to a less localized acoustic cue (i.e. the volume of clapping) instead of the behavior of local neighbours. While the individuals were found to be increasingly likely to stop clapping as their clapping duration increased, we find that overall, global social influences appear to be more important than internal information in the decision to stop clapping (Mann, Faria, Sumpeter and Krause, 2013, p. 4).

From another point of view, Heritage and Greatbatch suggest that:

Recent work in conversation analysis suggests that audience responses to political speeches are strongly influenced by the rhetorical construction of political messages. This paper shows that seven basic rhetorical formats were associated with nearly 70% of the applause produced in response to 476 political speeches to British party political conferences in 1981. The relationship between rhetoric and response is

¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english-spanish/applause>

broadly independent of political party, the political status of the speaker, and the popularity of the message. Performance factors are found to influence the likelihood of audience response strongly (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986).

Another feature of the applause that interests us is linked to its history in the theatre as a massive and anonymous “approval management” about a performance, in that sense can be read on a website about the theatre:

In comparison to vocalizing approval through speech, clapping is easier, louder, and more anonymous especially in crowds. You can't tell much about a person through their clap, like whether they're male or female, or where they're from. Clapping is even considered more democratic, since stomping your feet can be too disruptive, and not everyone can snap their fingers. Taking it way back to 6th century BC, lawmaker Kleisthénés of Athens made it so that audiences would have to clap in approval of their leader, since there were too many people to meet individually. Through this came the “applause”, the unified voices of all these people in the form of clapping together in admiration (Theatre in Paris, 2020).

As we have advanced, the applause is the emotional expression that confirms the acceptance of the practice of another or other people. In the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic the approval, ovation, and encouragement in and through the applause to the health personnel globally became one of its characteristic signs. In order to analyse the applause practices in Argentina of the Covid19 we will establish, in the next section, as an informative outline some basic features of the Health services in the country in both scenarios.

2. The pre-pandemic scenario

The Covid-19 Pandemic operates as a large magnifying glass, as a lens that allows us to see in detail the situation of previous social processes, it is a factor that makes the pre-existing structures emerge with full force.

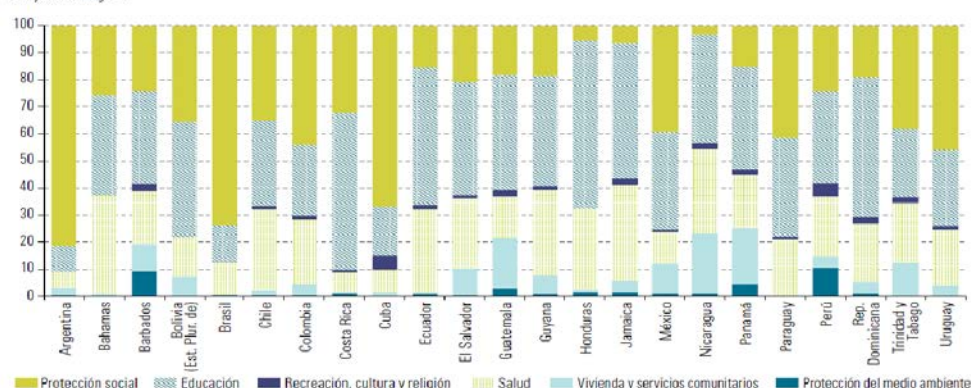
The applause that we will analyse occurs in the context of a narrative of war against the virus, and in a scenario whose components are the result of long years of neglect and delay. Doctors, medicine, and the Argentine public health system that enjoys international prestige and is one of the most extensive in its coverage in Latin America, have suffered from endemic neglect.

Regarding Total expenditure on health for the year 2015 as a ²percentage of gross domestic product, among Latin American countries, in Argentina this stands at 6.8%, well below Brazil with 8.9%, Uruguay with 9.2%, and Cuba with 10.9%, and above Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) with 3.2%, or the 4.2% of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines; and similar to Haiti with 6.9% or Colombia with 6.2% (CEPAL, 2019b). In this vein, it is possible to notice the distribution of spending in Argentina: 81.1% corresponds to spending on social protection, 9.7% to education, 6.0% to health, 2.8% housing and community services and 0.4% protection of the environment, as seen in graph 1.

² WHO, Global Health Observatory data repository [online] <http://apps.who.int/gho/data>. a Estimates have been computed to ensure comparability across countries; thus they are not necessarily the same as the official statistics of the countries, which may use alternative rigorous methods

Graph 1 - Distribution of central government social spending by functions in Latin America and the Caribbean

América Latina y el Caribe (23 países): distribución del gasto social del gobierno central, por funciones, 2018^a
(En porcentajes)

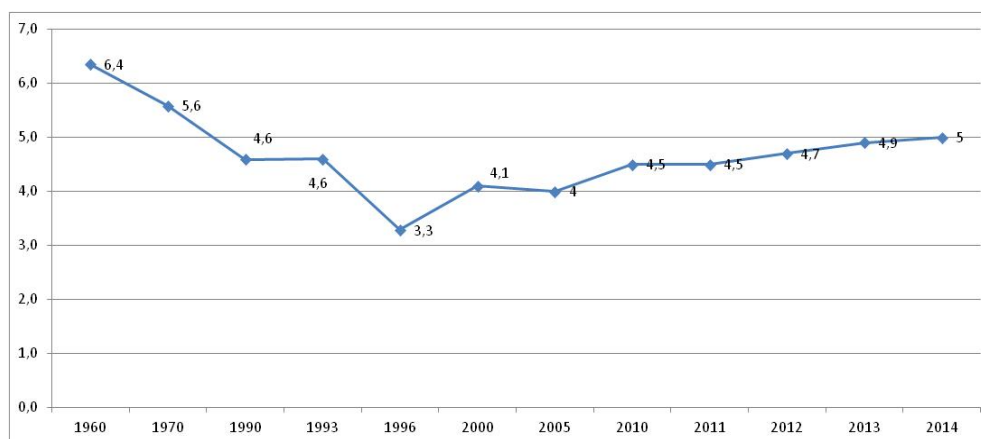


Fuente: Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL), sobre la base de información oficial de los países.
^a Los datos de Bolivia (Estado Plurinacional de), Guyana y Panamá corresponden a 2017. La cobertura del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia corresponde a administración central y la del Perú a gobierno general.

Source: ECLAC, 2019^a, p. 137

Following the World Bank information³, the number of hospital beds (per 1,000 people - graph 2) available for hospitalizations in public, private, general and specialized hospitals and rehabilitation centres⁴, in Argentina between 1960 and 2014, a steady decline is observed. In 1960 it had 6.3 beds per 1,000 people, yet for the year 2005 the smallest number was registered with 4 hospital beds per 1,000 people, later increasing to 5 for 2015. Thus, according to information provided by the Institute of Latin American Studies, the COVID-19 pandemic found Latin America in general, and Argentina in particular, in an unfavourable situation in terms of resources in the health system (Table 1).

Graph 2 - Number of beds per 1,000 people in Argentina



Source: Own elaboration based on information from the World Bank

³ Retrieved from https://datos.bancomundial.org/indicador/SH.MED.BEDS.ZS?end=2014&locations=AR&name_desc=false&start=2014&type=shaded&view=map&year=1960 (Accessed, April, 20, 2020).

⁴ In most cases, both beds for acute care and beds for care of chronically ill patients are included.

Regarding health professionals, a report from the Federal Observatory of Human Resources for Health (RHUS) indicates that the number of doctors per inhabitant remained constant between 2013 and 2016, in the case of nurses, although the number remains low, their level of training has been improved.⁵

Therefore, they indicate that

The total number of doctors as of December 31, 2013 is 166,187. The ratio of doctors to population in Argentina is 3.94 doctors per thousand inhabitants. In the international comparison, it appears positioned at the same level as several European countries such as Spain, Switzerland, Italy, and also Australia. In relation to the other countries of the American continent, with the exception of Cuba that heads the list of the number of doctors and Uruguay, Argentina is in a very advantageous situation in the region, doubling the number of doctors for every thousand inhabitants that Brazil has, for example, and almost quadrupling those of Chile and Peru, according to the information provided by WHO for the year 2013 (MDS-RHUS, 2015, p. 7).

Table 1 - Health systems indicators for select countries in the Americas

Country	Health spending per capita in US \$ *	Health spending as percentage of GDP (Public) **	Health spending as percentage of GDP (Private) **	Physicians (per 10,000 people) **	Nurses (per 10,000 people) **	Hospital bed density, per 10,000 people (2012) ***	Ventilators per 100,000 people ****
Argentina	1,325	5.6	1.9	39.9	6.7	47	13.05
Brazil	929	3.9	5.2	18.9	12	23	25.23
Canada	4,755	7.7	2.8	27.2	79.5	27	
Chile	1,382	5	3.5	9.1	6.9	22	9.63
Colombia	459	3.7	2.1	21.1	12.7	15	12.83
Costa Rica	869	5.6	1.9	30.7	23.9	12	
Cuba	988	10.9	1.3	84.2	54.5	53	
Dominican Republic	433	2.8	3.3	14.1	3.5	16	
Ecuador	518	4.3	4.1	22.2	12.9	15	
Mexico	495	2.9	2.6	25.5	29.2	15	12.96
Panama	1,112	4.8	2.4	15.9	14.4	23	
Peru	333	3.3	1.8	8.2	10.5	15	5.12
USA	10,246	14	3.1	26.1	145.2	29	
Venezuela	94	0.8	2.4	17.3	20.1	9	

Source: Institute of Latin American Studies. Retrieved from <http://ilas.columbia.edu/>

*data from WHO Global Health Expenditure Database;

** data from PAHO Core indicators 2019, health trends in the Americas;

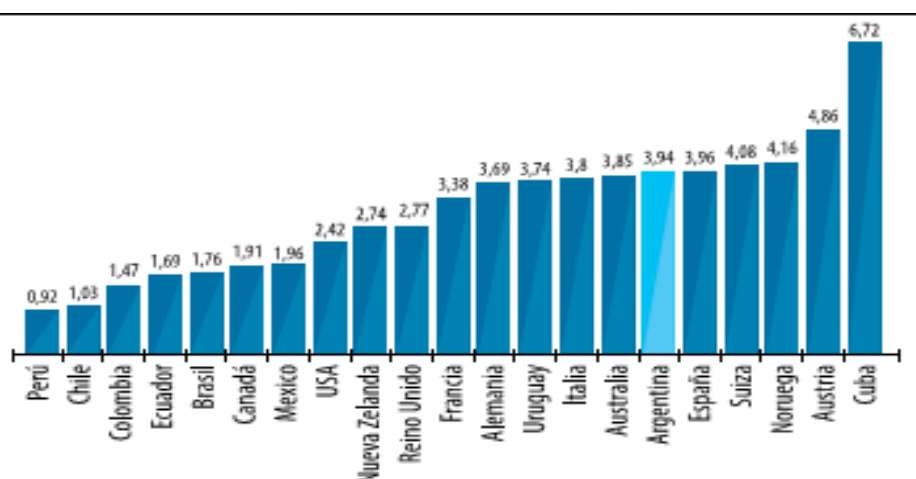
*** data from WHO Global Health Observatory data repository;

**** data from Americas Market Intelligence (AMI) Report on How Prepared is Latin America to do Battle with Covid-19

As it is possible to notice, the situation prior to the “arrival” of the pandemic was not the ideal, and this is the scenario in which we will now see the behaviour of the public and the context of appearance of the new heroes.

⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/salud/observatorio/datos/fuerzadetrabajo> (Accessed, April, 20, 2020).

Graph 3 - Medical rates per thousand inhabitants. Year 2013. International comparison



Source: MDS-RHUS, 2015, p.7

Table 2 - Number of doctors and nurses of active age in Argentina

Profession	2013		2014		2016	
	Quantity	Rate per 100,000 inhabitants	Quantity	Rate per 100,000 inhabitants	Quantity	Rate per 100,000 inhabitants
Total doctors	166,187	39.3	No data	No data	172,502	39.6
Total nurses	179,175	42.4	183,370	42.7	192,829	44.2

Source: Own elaboration based on RHUS report

3. Applause for the new heroes

In Argentina, as in other countries, every day at 9:00 p.m. the population is invited to go out to their balconies, terraces, room simply at the door of their house, to applaud the health personnel who are working in the times of coronavirus. The origin of the event lies in social networks through which a "campaign was launched to support all Argentine doctors, nurses and auxiliaries in their fight against the pandemic (...) the anonymous national initiative, which was also disseminated through WhatsApp, (...) for March 19 (...) invites all citizens to applaud from home"⁶. In this context it was decided to make a video of that moment (between March 27 to April 9, with a duration of 1 to 2 minutes) in two provinces of Argentina: Buenos Aires and Córdoba. In Buenos Aires they were taken in the City of Buenos Aires (in different neighbourhoods) and in Greater Buenos Aires. Then in the city of Córdoba and Gran Córdoba. In total, 50 videos were produced. For analytical purposes, we have classified cities according to the following criteria: a) by size (large, intermediate and small cities), b) degrees of urbanization, taking into account access to infrastructure and health services such as electricity, gas, means of transport, sewers, internet, nearby hospitals, paved streets, among other indicators (high and medium/low) and c) by type of demonstration.

Large/intermediate cities with medium and low levels of urbanization are located in Greater Buenos Aires, the most populated area, each of the municipalities

⁶ This is reported by the newspaper Clarín. Retrieved from, https://www.clarin.com/viste/coronavirus-argentina-convocan-aplauto-masivo-apoyo-profesionales-salud_0_NyCrU3JX.html

has 182,000 to 1,800,000 inhabitants (INDEC, 2010). 23 videos were taken considering the north zone (Vicente López, San Isidro, San Martín) with better socio-economic conditions and the south zone (Berazategui, Quilmes, La Plata and west (Hurlingham, La Matanza, Tres de Febrero) with worse socioeconomic conditions (INDEC, 2020). The Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, capital of Argentina with 2,700,000 inhabitants, and the City of Córdoba, capital of the province with 1,400,000, were considered as large cities with high urbanization (INDEC). In the City of Buenos Aires 23 videos were taken in the different neighbourhoods (north, south and west) and in the City of Córdoba 4 videos were also taken in different neighbourhoods

Table 3 - Type of expression and manifestations in type of cities

Type of expression	Large cities high urbanization	Large/intermediate cities with medium and low levels of urbanization
Sustained applause with intensity	Nuñez, Parque Patricios, Villa Lugano, Palermo, Recoleta, Flores, Belgrano, Boedo, Retiro, San Nicolás, San Cristóbal, Caballito, Villa Lugano, Montserrat. Nueva Córdoba	San Isidro, Vicente López
Applause	Montserrat, Liniers	San Isidro, San Martín, Tres de Febrero, San Justo, Vicente López, San Justo (La Matanza)
Applause and National Anthem	San Nicolás	
National Anthem	Recoleta, Olympic neighborhood Villa Soldati	González Catan (La Matanza)
Applause, National Anthem, screams, whistles	Recoleta, Palermo	
Silence	Barrio San Vicente and center of the City of Córdoba.	Berazategui, Hurlingham, Vicente López, Tres de Febrero, Quilmes, Gonnet (La Plata), Virrey del Pino, Villa Luzuriaga, González Catan (La Matanza)

Source: Own elaboration

The first feature is that the variety of ways of “applauding”, the ovation, support, the expression of approval, transcends the clapping of hands - other means of “making yourself felt” are incorporated, such as the national anthem, shouts, whistles, etc.

As it is possible to observe, the different performances are connected with the types of cities and neighbourhoods, from which it follows that there is a geopolitics of the applause where the “bigger” cities, and perhaps more “pressed” by the effects of the Pandemic, are the most active with “sustained applause with intensity”

A third element is that sustained applause is homogeneous throughout the city where there is a high degree of urbanization, all neighbourhoods applaud equally, they are not differentiated by “traditional” class barriers.

Finally, silence: it is “stronger” in the poorer areas of the metropolitan area and in the Province of Buenos Aires. A hypothesis for our strong criterion is that the intensity and presence of applause vary according to the degree of urbanization.

In the framework of the warlike narrative, of the mass media presence (and in the social networks, of the death threat) and the contagion effects associated with the situation of isolation, the applause varies according to the “degree” of urbanization.

An important element is anonymity: applause (which is always anonymous) is

also offered to someone anonymous: they have no face, no name, they are the people of the health system.

4. Final Opening

When we were finishing writing this work, the news came out that Banksy, the famous street artist, had drawn a tribute to the heroes of public health. The artist turns an NHS nurse into a superhero in a black-and-white work that he has gifted to Southampton General Hospital. In this context, a good part of our conclusion was modified because we consider that this work offers a unique opportunity to exemplify some of the central components of what we intend to discuss here.

The work consists of a kneeling boy who holds, in a gesture of the typical game of “making dolls fly”, a nurse with his hand extended forward (almost like Superman), wearing the characteristic uniform of the profession with a cape that by his movement and shape gives the feeling that it was flying. Below and to the left of the drawing is a garbage can where you can see the Batman and Spider-Man dolls. Game Changer. as it appears in the work by way of identification, obviously has millions of likes given that Banksy is followed by more than eight million accounts. The drawing has more than interesting details that for reasons of space we do not address here, where we only want to rescue the following: a) The game is changing, the sensibility of billions of people has accepted that “we are at war”, b) the heroes of the normalized societies in the immediate enjoyment through consumption are displaced by a “simple nurse”, c) The health system is more heroic than the superhero productions of Marvel, and d) a child plays with his gaze fixed on that character, he now embodies your admiration and identification process.

It is precisely this tension between gratitude and identification and handicap and dependency; it is the contradiction between spectacle and passivity that this applause leaves, which, before the deserved, shared and necessary gratitude, express the construction of new heroes that allow shifting responsibilities and autonomy.

The applause celebrates that someone replaces us in a battle that we are too weak to fight, and said replacement must have at least some form of spectacularity and sacrificiality according to the “game” that Banksy perceives has changed. The new heroes bear witness to what the war metaphor contains as a strategy for managing information and sensibilities: there are others who die for us on the “front line” and our tribute is to applaud as in the theatre, given that we witness it in the mass media and via social networks.

The applause speaks of a part of the old game where the participation was that of the spectator, the commitment of the consumer and the values of the number of people who attend the show. Marvel never thought that what was forming was the “claque” of the health system. The applause is ultimately what unites us to the heroes, linking us to the war when we came out of the confinement to applaud, as an Italian meme aptly put it in the first days of the confinement: “our grandparents were asked to go to war, we are us we are asked to stay on the couch.”

Now, there is a level of understanding of the applause that is beyond what is expressed: the need to recognize the anonymous caregiver and incorporate him as a neighbour emerges strongly. The people to whom the applause is addressed took care of our loved ones before dying, saved the lives of many of them, comforted everyone in moments of despair, all were operators of different, more radical and profound “sensibilities”: this changing who we call the other.

The correlations between health policies and politics of sensibilities that are be-

ing verified may be possible traces for a world with other ways of understanding those around us.

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We, the European Union. Together but... far Apart

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Abstract

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be an issue, the retaliations on nation-states' political, socio-cultural and, more than ever, economic structures are deemed to be- or are they yet- dire. The paper aims to broadly discuss the reaction of European leaders to the emergence of COVID-19 and the undercurrents in terms of power and discourse on the European Union -EU-. The first part introduces chronologically the diffusion of the virus from China to Europe and, specifically, Italy. Later, it focuses on the first reactions of EU politicians to the growing epidemic until the international recognition of the emergency as global pandemic. It, then, moves to the second most damaged country inside the EU sphere, Spain. It lastly compares the state's reactions by methodologically employ comparison of units and discourse analysis as pillars for this research. The final aim is to explore patterns in the EU leaders' communication of emergency due to COVID-19 within the framework of the Union and bearing in mind the differences between the EU as a Union and the EU as a compound of sovereign nation-states.

Key word: EU politics, Covid-19, Political emergencies.

Introduction

It's easy to talk when there's nothing to cover up for. Starting to write this article on the 27th of March, when the leader -Boris Johnson- of the new ex-EU nation-state has been tested for COVID-19, and has resulted positive, is a compelling and, unexpected in its nature and reactions, task to endure.

The emotional backlash this pandemic brings to us, citizens of the world, is no doubt immense. Presidents, Prime Ministers, leaders and people in a position of political power across the world are showing their strengths and weaknesses all at once. More than ever in the recent history of Europe, discourse pervasively changes our perspective on issues and emergencies. Contingent words to ordinary and, mostly, extraordinary events shape multiple cultural environments. Language molds it all (Foucault, 2005).

Some International Relations scholars would argue that despite time has passed since the world wars at the beginning of the last century, state-centered politics and the role of nation-states to create, and maintain, stability is still there, stronger than ever and leading as always. Others would -perhaps-see the different actors on the scene, the presence of the civil society and non-governmental actors to intertwine and shape current socio-political scenarios. Still, others would be agnostic in understanding the power of values and ideas in shaping contemporary global politics and world (Mazzei, Marchetti and Petito, 2010). Where the truth resides, is still unclear.

In detail, aware of the chronological radar of the events, and by adopting a socio-political perspective of priorities, the first paragraph of the article presents a brief overview of the virus and its spread from Asia to Europe. The second part deepens the reactions of EU leaders and major politicians to the pandemic. A spe-

cial section of case studies focuses on Italy and Spain, the two most affected countries by the pandemic in Europe. The last paragraph before the conclusions, briefly presents some of the reactions of other European leaders to the COVID-19 emergency so as to provide an overview of conglomerate of emotions, political discourse and practical policy scenarios around Europe.

For the methodological part, we employ a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) to explore the way politicians reacted to the spread of the pandemic all over Europe, specifically the European Union. Furthermore, we consider discourses as corpus of statements which, engage discontinuity over time and space in order to foster the problematization of the issue in terms of technology of power (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008; Foucault, 1981, 2000).

1. Background of the emergence of COVID-19 - January 2020

In January 2020, people were freely taking trips around the world, moving from one corner of the world to the other. Or, for those who experience adventure in other ways, they were enjoying alternative walks to free themselves in post-modern or pre-modern ways (Le Breton, 2000). We could, no matter if we wanted it or not, leave our houses and see the outside.

However, things changed very quickly and they are completely different now.

February 2020 saw the explosion and the tragic diffusion around the globe of the first cases of COVID-19 which, stopped from being a Chinese issue and became an Italian first, and later an EU emergency. News announced that most of the cases started in one region of Italy, that of Milan (Lombardia), in the north of the country and, then, spread first to the nearby regions and, later, to the vast majority of the national territory. Both Italy and Spain reported the first cases at the end of January. However, there are some differences in the places where cases appeared, the Canary and Baleares islands in Spain and Lombardy in Italy. The true common point is its fulcrum of the movements of tourists that were proceedings from China in the first place and, then, from Italy to the Spanish exotic islands.

This is the publicly known version of the events.

Nevertheless, as argued by Fuchs (2020), some insights into the communication of the ideology behind the context of coronavirus can be revealing of future international scenarios. For instance, media coverage of the event was only following the main pathways of transmission and media were predominantly giving the fault to specific targets. In the beginning, it was the Chinese people and, then, the Italians. As time passed by, it was also the Spanish people. Never have we ever heard of the Middle Eastern people of Iran as “*untore*”. Indeed, it was never the Iranians, who are harshly suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic, they were already outside of our western cultures and societies. War regimes, as a visa in their passports, a permit of entrance and residence, are its distinctive mark, a mark that only quarantine allowed us to speculate on and empathize with, now, at the beginning of the new decade (Teller, 2015).

So China, Iran, Italy, Spain, the USA. How did leaders react to the spread of the pandemic in Europe? Where are we now? Shall we talk about a globalized world? An EU environment? Or shall we look for antagonistic/egoistic lanes, remain in our neo-realistic vision and opt for nation-states priorities inside the structure of the international system?

Before presenting the EU reactions to the spread of the virus, we introduce some of the references about the challenging events related to the COVID-19 pan-

demical that we consider significant in the narratives based on discourses made by different leaders around the globe. Specifically, one statement made by the current President of the United States of America and the other two made, respectively, by the president of France and the Prime Minister of Spain.

We have been in frequent contact with our allies, and we are marshalling the full power of the federal government and the private sector to protect the American people (President Trump, USA - March 11, 2020)¹.

Jamais la France n'avait dû prendre de telles décisions - évidemment exceptionnelles, évidemment temporaires - en temps de Paix (President Macron, France - March 16, 2020)².

Para combatir esta emergencia de salud pública, haremos lo que haga falta, donde haga falta y cuando haga falta. Y juntos superaremos esta crisis (Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, Spain - March 10, 2020)³.

The sentences quoted above present different elements: *the warfare language and framing* used in the first case (Pillar, 2020); similar discourse narrative in the second declaration which, although it seems the opposite because the French president quotes the word *peace* is analogous to the first statement's imaginary. However, the intentions might be different since for geopolitical reasons- as we have been witnessing throughout history- peace, contrary to war, does not make noise (Kupchan, 2012). And this might be true also when the *crisis* is different, and the *enemy* is the COVID19 pandemic. Last, but not least, the importance of *resilience and social solidarity, welfare state, and spirit of communion*, as in the last sentence with reference to the Spanish case.

The narrative and narratives are important for the FDA analysis of this article. Indeed, although often considered far from the field of political science and International Relations, the narrative, with all its implications, bases its power on the fact that, most of the time, he/she who builds the story, is the same to tell it (Patterson and Monroe, 1998). Technologies of power, and self, intermingle in the analysis of discourses, body of knowledge based on relations between things (Foucault, 1988). Additionally, in its two forms of *mode of knowing* and *mode of communication* (Czarniawska, 2004)⁴, the narrative has inherent a very high degree of rhetoric (Polletta, Chen, Gardner and Motes, 2011; Polletta and Lee, 2006). The choice of specific forms of communication certainly accentuates it (Fuchs, 2019) and the narrative has the role to promote debate on a specific issue. However, it puts in place a sort of selection, it does not cover all the issues that echo the pandemic and certainly not all the places.

¹ Retrieved from <https://fr.usembassy.gov/covid-19-presidential-declaration/>

² Retrieved from <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/16/adresse-aux-francais-covid19>

³ Retrieved from <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/presidente/actividades/Paginas/2020/100320-comparecenciasanch.aspx>

⁴ Narration presents two forms: *mode of knowing* (a set of meanings and interpretations that the individual processes and attributes to the data and information collected in the context in which he or she lives); and *mode of communication* (a system of symbols and meanings shared by a certain community that thinks of itself and the surrounding world through these symbols and meanings).

2. First EU reactions

The European Union, as a Union, despite the differences, of diverse but *united* nation-states, was the first its citizens expected to react. Unfortunately, it did not happen. EU leaders, and chiefs of the most relevant organizations of the Union, absorbed the issue and the speeding out of the epidemic in a way that we could refer to as *thought-provoking mediatic frames with despairing consequences*.

Ranging from underrating the dimension of the issue to the culprit tactics and 'leave them isolated' quite long-term strategy, we were, and are, witnesses of the way language interacts, and combines, with the world and humans in expressing its true essence of social phenomenon (Bo, 2015; Iyengar and Kinder, 2010).

On March 12th, Christine Lagarde, the president of the European Central Bank, made a very controversial and unanimously criticized declaration. In contraposition to what her predecessor evangelized during his mandate, she opened the debate on the issue by recognizing the impact that the spread of the Covid19 has on the economic activities of the countries inside the Eurozone. She later added that:

We are not here to close spreads, this is not the function or the mission of the ECB. There are other tools for that and there are other actors to actually deal with those issues⁵.

She retreated her statement in a subsequent interview by admitting she misspoke and she did not want to promote fragmentation inside the Eurozone. However, such a declaration, made by the main authority of the ECB, and considering the way markets work, meant that in one day the Italian bond yields reached the highest pick as never before in history. The event was internationally relevant and it triggered the immediate reaction of both the Prime minister and the President of the Republic of Italy, respectively Giuseppe Conte and Sergio Mattarella. They both reassured the Italian people but they also reinforced the bonding ties with the EU and the Eurozone, by acting beyond the logic of global solidarity over national isolation.⁶

The second reaction we consider relevant for the present investigation is the one made by Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission. She was definitely more cautious than the president of the ECB in her statements. Already in march 10th she proposed 25 billion euro initiative in order to fight COVID-19 and called upon coordinate action among, and between, member states. Nevertheless, what appears clear is that she underestimated the undercurrents of the virus and focused on specific matter in a compelling diplomatic way. After having criticized Trump's decision to stop EU-USA connections because of the "*foreign virus*"⁷, she proposed to other countries of the EU to close up flights and connections, as well as travels which were not intended as fundamental, as a first measure to stop the pandemic to grow stronger. Nevertheless, she stressed for the need and the willingness to repatriate all Europeans who were resident outside the Union or in another country. On March 26th, she made a very communal speech by repeating "*Europe owes you all a debt of gratitude*" to all Europeans⁸ and she added a very EU note by asserting:

⁵ Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/11ab8f84-6452-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>

⁶ Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75>

⁷ Retrieved from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-trump-foreign-virus-anti-migrant-policy-blame-china-europe-2020-3?IR=T>

⁸ Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_532

We must look out for each other, we must pull each other through this. Because if there is one thing that is more contagious than this virus, it is love and compassion. And in the face of adversity, the people of Europe are showing how strong that can be.

She adopted the strategy of shared responsibility and resilience among EU member states and launched “*the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative to help direct EUR 37 billion mitigate the impact of the crisis, to save lives, jobs and businesses*”. She focused on shared values and she concluded: “*Let us do the right thing together – with one big heart, not 27 small ones*”.

Employing a FDA, we can grasp at some of the ways discourses are set of rules and practices that create narratives of realities about one body of knowledge (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Foucault, 1981, 2005). The two protagonists of the segments analyzed express relations of force in terms of technology of power and self, considering their position when they opt for specific words to pronounce. Indeed, as leaders of two different European institutions they both use contextualized power relations to express their personal position, abiding by the one of the institution they represent, respectively the ECB and the EC. By doing that, they produce two diverse narratives and communicate opposite messages in the historical developing of their discourses about the role of the European Union during the pandemic. Both reactions are economy-led but the attitude of superiority of Christine Lagarde wins over the one of declared solidarity and sense of community made by Ursula von der Leyen. Their words create a contrasted idea of the Union, unable to make its own bodies to talk, and therefore, work jointly.

These were the two main declaration the EU leaders made at the beginning of the pandemic in the Union. We will now focus on the Italian case, the first hardest-hit country in the pandemic.

2. The Italian government’s reaction to Coronavirus

Giuseppe Conte, the Italian President of the Council of Ministers, reacted with a very decisive statement. He took position by approving a decree of law and isolated one region first and, then, the whole country. He took strong measures from the beginning of the epidemic and in march 1st he declared the state of emergency⁹. Decrees by decrees the situation in Italy has become very complicated, economically and socially speaking (Fig. 1). The words of the premier as “*torneremo presto ad abbracciarci*”¹⁰, and similar declarations are reassuring the people of the Italian peninsula, but only partially. Since March 10th Italy is suffering from enduring moral, physical and emotional pain and the pandemic doesn’t sound like it’s beginning to stop. Despite in April 1st some media announced that Italy reached its peak, bewilderment seems the password to our lives as people populating the earth.

Considering statements as units of analysis, as in the logic of Discourse Analysis (Foucault, 2005; Hall, 1997; Laclau, 1997), the speech approving the quarantine¹¹ gives a good example of what discussed in the introduction on the power of language, and the dissemination of ideas about realities made by individuals.

⁹ For updates on the COVID-19 emergency see: <http://www.governo.it/it/media/dichiarazioni-alla-stampa-del-presidente-conte/14274>

¹⁰ In English: “*We will hug each other again, and soon*”.

¹¹ Retrieved from: <http://www.governo.it/it/media/dichiarazioni-alla-stampa-del-presidente-conte/14274>

Figure 1- Premier Giuseppe Conte signs the decree on measures to fight COVID_19 9/20/2020



Source: <http://www.governo.it/it/articolo/firmato-il-dpcm-9-marzo-2020/14276>

During the discourse, Conte urged for the need to renounce to things, together as Italians, in a collaborative way. The Prime Minister used pervasively strong words by announcing: “Italy protected area/zone” in its totality. He called upon the need to act together and to make efforts in order to stop the pandemic, to stop its spread out even more. The motto he pointed out was, consequently, clear thanks to the hashtag: “#iorestoacasa”¹².

In his declarations, Conte did not make direct reference to the damage of the social fabric. In Italy the choice of general measures of domestic nature prevails in words more than action, especially in the beginning of the pandemic, the emergency hit the country in an unexpected way. Indeed, in the first weeks, there were no visible measures of international cooperation, the power of Conte was in its domestic appeal and in the usage of some war references to get the attention of the online audience. For instance, during the first discourse on quarantine he stated that we should all thank our “*medici in trincea*”¹³ and, in a few sentences before this one he was ‘condemning’ young people will to moments of sociability, to “*fare aperitivo*”¹⁴ and whatsoever, by later stating “*we need to give up to something for a higher good, the one of our country*”. The Italian Premier used scenarios of death and life as huge contraposition. He also embraced the concept of responsibility and mutual responsibility, moving from individuals to national levels. For instance, he declared:

Oggi è il momento della responsabilità, il futuro dell'Italia è nelle nostre mani, che devono essere responsabili.¹⁵

By listening to the words composing the discourse on quarantine in Italy, we notice that they reflect some of the elements inside Foucault’s view. Among them,

¹² In English: “I stay home”.

¹³ In English: “doctors in trenches”.

¹⁴ In English: “enjoy a pre-dinner drink”

¹⁵ In English: “Today is the moment of responsibility, the future of Italy is in our hands, which must be responsible”.

the usage of contrapositions in order to deliver a message of emergency to a specific audience, in this case to the people of the country, clear in the exact moment when the leader declared the emergency. In a certain way, Conte gives his personal, the one of his cabinet and the broader presidential perspective, on the situation of pandemic inside the country and, by precisely doing that, he produces new knowledge on the issue (Foucault, 1988).

Using specific words and sentences he portrays a certain vision of the nation to two different listeners: the insiders- in the hearts and minds of the people of Italy suffering from the disease and its spread to every corner of the territory; and to the outsiders- those who do not live in Italy- by depicting a dramatic situation of the country thanks to his dialectics. Specifically, he starts by choosing a framework of war language in combination with the present and then moves to peace imaginary and future perspectives of solidarity. Significant to mention, Conte represents the personification of its country and his speech means truth and reliability to institutions. In this context, words become practices and they produce a snapshot of the historical power-political moment which, in turn, can change only if another discourse comes into play.

Certainly, in the overview of the discourse in terms of *Foucauldian discourse analysis* (FDA) and construction of reality by means of language and power, polymorphism should not be a stranger. As a matter of fact, this brief paper presents only one way to read into EU leaders and their speeches from a socio-political perspective.

3. The Spanish government's reaction to Coronavirus

Among the conundrum composing the Spanish case, political power positions had a significant role in the decisions which lead to the proclamation of “estado de alerta¹⁶” on March 14th. And, no doubt, all political forces in Spain underestimated the situation.

Indeed, there is something to notice in the way Spain reacted to COVID-19 pandemic. Its fulcrum it's the “it's not my business” attitude from Madrid and the Palace of Moncloa. For example, considering, the escalation of the emergency already in the beginning of March, and having as a reference the Italian, one point to discuss is: Why manifestations were not suspended, as the 8M (Feminist demonstration during Women's Day, 8 March) or the strikes all over the country? - For example, protests by the farming sector in Zaragoza. However, we could only speculate on the reasons behind these decisions and point out that the UpToDate situation demonstrated that Madrid has the majority of cases in the whole country¹⁷.

It was only on Saturday the 13th of March, that the President of the government declared the state of emergency and locked down the whole national territory from Sunday the 14th of March. Let's see what were the focal point of his address to the Spanish nation-state.

During his speech (Fig. 2), the Spanish prime minister defined the *enemy* of the country. He said:

¹⁶ In English: “State of emergency”

¹⁷ Reference to real-time and visible data on the institutional website of the Spanish Government (<https://www.mscbs.gob.es/>).

...Our true enemy is the pandemic and the virus, it's an enemy of everyone and our collective task is efforts and sacrifices and what we need to do is to lower down the evolution of the pandemic and reach collective achievements...

Figure 2 - Declaration of the lock down in Spain (13/03/2020)



Source: <https://www.lamoncloa.gob.es/multimedia/galeriasfotograficas/presidente/Paginas/2020/130320-declaracion.aspx>

Moreover, he clearly mentioned the economy since the beginning and he focused on the prevention of future pandemics.

He continued with insightful words on the meaning of solidarity and community:

Estos días aparecen mensajes inspirados por la confusión, por la rabia y por la angustia. Y es comprensible, porque no hay nada más que dañe el ánimo de una persona, que la amenaza de lo desconocido es una reacción humana. Pero debemos actuar con unidad, con responsabilidad y con disciplina social. Como presidente del Gobierno os pido vuestra colaboración. Sé que la tengo... Paremos los bulos, las especulaciones, las FIGC News con información contrastada. Actuemos con responsabilidad, con disciplina social y con sentido de comunidad. Sé que somos capaces de hacerlo unidos. Sabemos que en cada casa de España ahora mismo se necesita un mañana, una certeza de que mañana esto habrá pasado. Y así es... "unidad, responsabilidad y disciplina social—os pido vuestra colaboración y paremos las fake news- con sentido de comunidad—se necesita un mañana"¹⁸.

The Spanish leadership faced Covid-19. To in different ways. In a discourse analysis context, we can start by commenting on a few elements of the main body of words used by Pedro Sánchez.

In the main discourse to the nation announcing containment measures to face the pandemic, sense of community- evident in the hashtag #estevirusloparamosjun-

¹⁸ In English: "These days messages appear inspired by confusion, anger and anguish. And it's understandable, because there is nothing more damaging to a person's mind than the threat of the unknown being a human reaction. But we must act with unity, with responsibility and with social discipline. As President of the Government, I ask for your collaboration. I know I have it... Let's stop the hoaxes, the speculations, the FIGC News with contrasting information. Let's act with responsibility, with social discipline and with a sense of community. I know we can do it together. We know that in every house in Spain right now a skill is needed, a certainty that tomorrow this will have happened. And so it is... "unity, responsibility and social discipline - I ask for your collaboration and let's stop the fake news - with a sense of community - we need a tomorrow"

tos¹⁹-, resilience, union, solidarity and language of humanity by the president of the government came as front-line items. Pedro Sánchez choose neither war language, nor dichotomies, nor criticism of the current lifestyle. His discourse merged together power and self when narrating the new reality caused by the pandemic (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008; Foucault, 1981, 1988, 2005).

This is already a huge different if compared to the reaction of the Italian prime minister. For sure, they both opt for the main idea of protection, summarized in the hashtag #mequedoencasa²⁰, but if we compare these two different leaders we can argue that their styles, and the consequences of their words, were different.

In the speech announced by the Spanish prime minister, the rhetoric of war is a latent element, as for the warfare frame. Pedro Sánchez and the whole Spanish government, have directed their campaign against the virus by mostly focusing on social policies. In a globalized world, the sense of community by the Spanish presidency plays a very important role and this is clear since the first statements and declarations of Sanchez and his ministers (Sarason, 1974; Tartaglia, 2006).

The situation continues to be dramatic in the country. However, there seems to be some light at the end of the tunnel. The focus on social services and people's needs is strong in the vision of the present Spanish government and the usage of metaphors is an efficient linguistic device in this context. It allows Pedro Sánchez to deliver a specific message inside a flow of touching narratives, narratives that have a great amount of empathy and desire, followed by concrete actions, to get out of the current, shared dramatic situation. It seems a narrative of hope for a better tomorrow because we all need "a tomorrow".

4. Comparing and merging experiences - What keep us together? Are we really?

Europe has been through a lot with the spread of coronavirus and the European Union- both as a Union and a compound of sovereign nation-states- saw variegated reactions. We briefly present other cases which, followed the reactions of Italy and Spain and help toward the understanding of the strategies and tools of communications employed by single states in the broader context of the European Union.

The President of the French Republic, Emmanuel Macron, with his discourse on the lockdown in France declared war on the new enemy. He clearly defined the enemy to be the coronavirus and took example from Italy and Spain on what to do next. He choose a warfare language and gave to the French people one very clear image of the situation, one which was similar to the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015 (Romania and Tozzo, 2017). Contrary to others EU leaders and members, he recognized the gravity of the issue since the beginning and reshaped his words creating different power relations and, therefore, social realities on language and practices. These latter ones gave him strength as both the representation of the nation and as a demonstration of self- relation to the spread of coronavirus.

On the other side what Boris Johnson, the UK leader, did was to reject the spread of the pandemic and opt for a diverse strategy of language and power. In the first place, he adopted a laissez-faire approach (Fuchs, 2020). He commented by saying:

¹⁹ In English: "we will stop this virus together"

²⁰ In English: "I stay home".

We have all got to be clear, this is the worst public health crisis for a generation....It is going to spread further and I must level with you, I must level with the British public: many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time.

He did not react by taking precautionary measures since the beginning. He truly made us ponder-again- on these words by Harari,

In this time of crisis, we face two particularly important choices. The first is between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. The second is between nationalist isolation and global solidarity (Harari, 2020).

In Germany, Angela Merkel had a public national address to the nation where she clearly demonstrated her level of concern by stating “Es ist ernst” (This is serious). She mentioned German history, present and offered a concrete plan of action to deal with the future. She focused more on shared responsibility and the willingness to act together as a country. The leader of Germany asserted that in order not to experience, again, lack of freedom, as for moving and travelling, like it was in Germany from the second world war to the east-west Germany division during the Cold War, we all need to act as a collective body. Mentions were mostly focused on a national level and this has sparked some forms of criticism by other EU countries. The latter ones have criticized Germany of being too egoist and to look for hegemonic power in the region, in times of grief for the Union. It should be noted, however, that the national level of interest is present in all leaders’ speech. One might argue that this is just a manifestation of the still in vogue neo-realistic approach to globalized regions. Adopting FDA, we could argue that the usage of power, technologies and relationships allows Angela Merkel’s discourse to employ ‘history to portray a new story’ and to set up the variables of new social realities in Germany, and inside the entire EU (Foucault, 1981; Kickbusch *et al.*, 2020).

Last but not least, on March 30th, the Hungarian parliament gave full powers to Victor Orbán, an escalation of populism and nationalism. A thin centered-ideology and a stronger bulk of theories came together again in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and became practice (Kaltwasser, 2014; Mudde, 2004, 2016). Indeed, the decision of the country was to give Orbán total, indefinite power to manage and take all types of decisions as commander in chief, without any limit, without any date of expiry. This event expresses a hegemonic view and the domination of the debate on the topic by only one part of the society, actually one person which, in turn becomes the only “true”, reality (Foucault, 2000; Waitt, 2010). Hungary does not fear or listen to the EU discussion and reaction on the issue and appears in a similar situation to the one a country might experience during terrorist attacks (Romania & Tozzo, 2017) or the migration crisis.

So what about the EU?

Thanks to this brief overview, we argue that differences and higher desire for a better world made up of cooperation and measures of collaboration. And to answer the second question mark in the title of this paragraph: “Yes, we are!”.

Kissinger’s words in “Who do I call if I want to talk to Europe?” were and, still are not, an explanation of the EU dilemmas and internal issues of responsiveness to problems and, in the present case, emergencies.

Moreover, in plenty of domains where the EU has power, actions are in progress. For instance, when discussing implementations in the health sector, the Union is putting forward measures to finance scientific research, to invest in public

funds, to buy government bonds and to use funds in situations of emergency and programs to avoid the same.²¹

Joseph Borell, High Representative of the European Union, used the expression “battle of the narratives” debating on what the media are reporting about EU actions compared to China or Russia, supported by conscious-unconscious media and communication. Moreover, Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, on March 26th said: “*stop egoism*”²². She aimed to create a more collaborative environment for the Union to act as such, respecting also the European Union made up of different nation-states.

On the same path, Antonio Costa, the current president of Portugal, stressed the importance for Europe to act together or the fears it will soon end could become a reality.

As the time being, it seems necessary that the EU should have a well-planned and effective strategy of communication in order to keep the Union safe and hamper already existing pro-exit movements. With the spread of the pandemic, renewed discourses on the EU and its range of possibilities for both single-nation states and for the Union are historically, politically and socially decisive.

Conclusions

After all, the desire for a resilient European home which is worth living in is something that unites us all: North and South, East and West²³ (President von der Leyen - 26 March, 2020).

These words are a good way to start the conclusions of this brief article. In this paper we have argued that politicians play a pivotal role in framing segments of history, their words, their gestures, their mistakes. Their speeches have enduring effects, they are expressions of power which, dominates language and structures policies and politics.

Furthermore, we have focused on how narratives and its rhetoric modify meanings and cultural-attached circumstances in a collective way. They grasp on and feed one narrative instead of another (Entman, 1993; Snow and Benford, 1988; Turner, 1982).

And, in this paper, FDA helps to compare warfare language and communal/solidarity language in the broader understanding of how, within collected statements about one issue, a piece of knowledge becomes dominant and begins to be part of common sense (Waitt, 2010). This produces a silencing of all other interpretations of reality, as the one about cooperation among EU countries, beyond the mere rhetoric of single nation- states which, seem to be in constant attention of the “social” security dilemma.

In the end, through speeches and statements of different EU leaders, the paper reminds us of the fact that: “Language is studied for what it tells one about society, and linguistic method should be open to theoretical insights into the structure of societies” (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000, p. 459).

We have seen the importance of national politics and domestic constraints in shaping reality and we have compared different units of analysis. But what about

²¹ Retrived from https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response_en

²² Retrived from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_532

²³ Retrived from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_532

the EU? What is it then? What's its future? It's us and we should support it for the future and for the present of our communities and as a protection against far too reaching nationalisms. EU actions are pivotal in this historical moment to stop the emergence of populists, which base their claims on the nationalist blaming of the distanced decision-making process at the EU level (Lovec, 2019).

To conclude, we should all wash our hands in these times, but the EU should not wash its hands of the COVID affair when it comes to acting together and jointly. More than ever we are reminded of one of Dickinson's poems "Forever – is composed of Nows" and We (EU member states) will soon meet again.

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*COVID-19 in China. The Great Wall of Technology*¹

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Abstract

China is the first country to have faced an extensive contagion of Covid-19. The response it has given, in terms of prevention and control measures, has been effective in eradicating the virus, even though not completely. Those measures were based on an extensive and widespread use of technologies. The strategies adopted were not the result of improvisation: the social, cultural and technological structures were already in place well before the epidemic took place. In light of the news and the media theory, the present contribution draws upon the anecdotal experience of one of the two authors, who lives in China and has been there during the epidemic. Though the Chinese approach was, indeed successful, we argue that it is doubtful that such a model can be exported to countries with different history, culture and socio-political background.

Keywords: COVID-19, New media, Space, Time, Chinese media, WeChat.

Introduction

At present, since the pandemic emergency is still going on, it seems impossible to us to propose observations supported by data and methodology. Extensive generalizations, also because of the lack of homogeneity in the way available data have been collected, make comparisons particularly hazardous².

The only certain fact, which is the common thread of our contribution, is that China was the first country to act against the spread of COVID-19. Therefore, it was a trailblazer of the problematics that have emerged, the response of which has, obviously, been declined on the basis of the different characteristics of the countries involved.

We are aware of a sociological undecidability risk in the post-modernity (Platt, 1989). Today more than before, catching a phenomenon in its speed of unfolding is one thing; bringing a deeper understanding on it, also through the collection of data, in the direction of the heuristic of an explanatory model is another thing. The research results of the second might come long after the conclusion of the observed phenomenon.

¹ Although the contribution is the result of reflections shared by the authors, paragraphs: Introduction, 1, 2, and Conclusions are to be attributed to Nicola Strizzolo, parts 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3 to Emanuele Gatti.

² Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/31/china-coronavirus-case-numbers-cant-be-compared-to-elsewhere-economist.html>. There are presently numerous calls, from the academic environment, for a statistic sampling of the population through medical buffers (i.e. https://web.uniroma1.it/memotef/sites/default/files/Proposta.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2TBaSIazE7mSmvsj8hAMamBcWVF86_PuI99RjGmiNOFm2aWpzZK_EaXN0, di un utilizzo più radicale delle tecnologie; https://www.repubblica.it/economia/2020/03/19/news/coronavirus_1_appello_dei_docenti_utilizzare_a_fondo_la_tecnologia_per_sconfiggere_prima_il_male_-251744520/). Unfortunately, as we discussed in the introduction, due to the present lack of data we are compelled to use news reports and grey literature. Unless differently specified, URLs quoted in the text have been visited during the last week of April 2020.

Some recommend an integration between journalistic and scientific methods, even though with all the necessary reservations (Gans, 2018). With this approach, our argument, discursively illustrated by one of the authors, is that China was able to set up particularly effective measures of lockdown and isolation, with excellent results in containing the first wave of the virus, because it already had, culturally and technologically, an adequate background structure.

In this case it is more appropriate than ever the definition of Colombo (2003) and Rehingold (2003) of communication tools as social technology: social technology is not just the instrument per se but the fusion of shared practices and cultures in the use of the medium, such that allows people to form a new way of participating and acting, collectively, in the society.

1. The technological context (compared with the world and with Italy)

In order to better understand the Chinese testimony of the co-author, a description of the technological context is opportune.

In China, the information and communication technologies (ICT) have been a major catalyst for economic development, although their distribution is not yet homogenous. It has been claimed that ICT and economy concurred to the amazingly rapid development of the country (Xu, 2019; Song et al., 2020).

China has the largest number of Internet users in the world, with 772 million people connected to the web. By number of Internet hosts, 53.3 million, it is second only to the USA (Song et al., 2020).

China is also among the top two nations in the world for the number of mobile phone users (CNNIC, 2018).

«According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), China is the world's largest telecommunication market in terms of the number of mobile devices, and fixed-telephone and fixed broadband subscriptions, as well as being the leading exporter of ICT products (ITU, 2017)» (Song et al., 2020, 2).

At the prefectures level (excluding Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao), there is still a certain generational digital divide. The areas with the greatest digital penetration and diffusion are the administrative capitals, coastal areas and central and western regions, major cities and surrounding areas (Song et al., 2020).

«Core regions of ICT development are identified, such as the Pearl River Delta, Yangtze River Delta, and Bohai Rim. In other words, there are strong regional contagion effects, whereby the diffusion of the technology in a prefecture is affected by the diffusion in neighbouring prefectures» (Song et al., 2020, 10). The variables that determine the digital divide are income difference, higher education, providing access and training to digital skills (particularly for the gender gap; Song et al., 2020).

China has an Internet penetration of 59 % (six from last place in the global ranking; Italy, with an 82 % penetrations, is twenty-sixth; Global ranking of We are social, 2020³), although it represents the second largest growth in absolute data (+ 25,459,000 corresponding to an increase of 3.1 %), after India.

On average people aged 16 to 64 spent 5 hours and 50 minutes a day on the Internet (the world average is 6 hours and 43 minutes, with the Philippines at the top with 9 hours and 45 minutes and in the queue Japan with 4 hours and 22 minutes), just below Sweden, Canada and Italy (6 hours a day). Of this time, 3 hours

³ The data that follows in this paragraph comes from this source.

and 22 minutes are spent on mobile appliances (seven positions above Italy with 2 hours and 42 minutes; data were collected before the Covid-19 pandemics).

A very significant figure is the average of the connection speed, which places China fourth in the world behind South Korea, United Arab Emirates and Canada (Italy is 20th between Romania and Honk Kong).

China is above average, ninth between South Africa and Canada, for content streaming (Italy is below the average, fifteen places behind China).

China ranks first (55 % of 16- to 64-year-old users) in the use of voice commands on technology devices, the world figure being 43 % (Italy is fifteenth with 35 percent of users).

In home automation (use of smart home devices) China ranks third, after the UK and the US, with 15 % of Internet users between the age of 16 and 64, compared to 11 percent worldwide (Italy is at 25 % with a penetration of 8 percent).

If UAE holds the first place of social network usage with 99 % of the population, China is in twelfth position with 75 %. The worldwide spread is 49 %, Italy is at fourteen places from the tail, with 58 %. China, however, is second in the world, behind India, for the absolute increase of people using at least a social media: plus 15 million users compared to 2019, corresponding to a 1.5 % increase).

On average, social networks are used 2 hours and twelve minutes every day (Italy back with 1 hour and 57 minutes).

On average, every Chinese citizen, aged 16 to 64, has 9.1 social accounts, exceeding the average of 8.6 (below Italy with 7.8).

China ranks 14th in using social networks for work, with 43 % of internet users between the age of 16 and 64, the world figure is 43 % (Italy 12 from the queue, thus means 31th from the top, with 31 %).

With a 74 % of network users between the age of 16 and 64 who bought online in the last month, China is at the 11th place (same as Italy). However, for mobile commerce (mobile purchases), it is in fourth place, with 64 % of online users between the age of 14 and 64, above the global value of 52 % (Italy is 20th with 40 percent).

In average terms, per spent money by online shopping in 2019, China is eighth with 1,021 dollars, first South Korea with 1,441 US dollars, with a world average of 499 dollars (Italy is 25th with 401 dollars). Concerning the e-commerce consumption, China ranks first with 10.4 percent of annual per capita income (2019), the global average being 4.4 % (Italy is at the 38th place, seventh from the end, with 1.2 percent).

China ranks third for mobile device payments, with 37 % of 16- to 64-year-old users of mobile payments methods, the global figure is 27 % (Italy is at the 32th, with 16 %).

China is seventh in the world for using ride-hailing apps (apps for using a transport company's vehicle), a third of Internet users in the court 16-64 years, above the world value (24 %; Italy is at 37th place, sixth from the last one, with 5 %).

In addition, China is extremely ahead in the technology and mass application of facial recognition, from payments of subway rides to the approval of loans by banks (Porro, 2019; Cuscito 2019). In addition, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology has promoted a law in force since 1 December 2019. According to this law, each person, at the time of signing a new contract for internet or mobile phone, must undergo a facial scan (Porro, 2019; Cuscito 2019).

Finally, both in research and implementation, China is at the top of the world for AI, using big data and tracking the population, competing with Russia and the US (Valori, 2019).

2. A first-hand experience in China

The first-hand experience illustrated hereafter has as its theatre the city of Shenzhen, a metropolis geographically located in the continental area facing Honk Kong, and administratively placed in the GuangDong province.

Officially Shenzhen counts 12 million inhabitants⁴. However, this number does not take into account the huge number of migrant workers, which brings the population in the area of 20 million people, similar to the population of the entire North of Italia (Piemonte, Valle d'Aosta, Lombardia, Trentino Alto Adige, Veneto e Friuli Venezia Giulia)⁵, and the double of the population of countries such as Portugal or Sweden. This data is even more impressive when considering that Shenzhen used to be a fishing town with a population of just 3,000 in 1950⁶, and that it has been for years the city with the fastest growing population. The city is now particularly modern, with design skyscrapers, cutting edge face recognition technologies with a widespread road-camera system, and very new and still growing infrastructures and transport networks.

In Shenzhen there are the headquarters of some of the world's largest technology companies, including Huawei, Tencent (which is the owner of WeChat) and DJiang (which manufactures drones). There is also a big office of Baidu (which is China's equivalent of Google).

Tencent runs WeChat⁷, a chat system that many compare to Whatsapp but which in fact offers many more functions, including groups, pages, articles, and a paying system, and which covers a good percentage of the Chinese web. Tencent owns a futuristic skyscraper, but just one of the many that characterize and visually preside over the modernity of this metropolis.

A surprising aspect and an evidence of modernity for a citizen of any European or Mediterranean country is the widespread use of e-payments: while there are still payments in cash, this is useless in Shenzhen if you have a mobile phone. Every economic exchange in every store or service can take place through the smart phone, and the majority of transactions are supported by WeChat. Even the poorest of the street vendors, in Shenzhen (and in many other areas of China), has a QR code so that people can pay with their mobile phones directly to their mobile phone accounts. Obviously, the fact of not having to use cash reduces the possibility of spreading germs through banknotes and coins – what may have been helpful during the pandemic –. Smartphones are used also to enter museums, underground stations and so on, through the QR code scan function. As the smartphone is an instrument of absolute necessity, taxi drivers, shopkeepers, bars reequipped with portable charging devices or mobile phone charging wires.

Another example of modernity is the technology of tracking people through facial recognition. Either one likes it or not, in Shenzhen there are cameras everywhere, and they do work. If you try to enter the subway, for instance, without paying the ticket, you would be immediately identified and tracked by an incoming camera and an outgoing camera, and receive a message on your mobile phone asking to pay the amount corresponding to your route. It is clear that we are in the future with respect to Europe (just think of how primitive our subway systems in Mi-

⁴ Retrieved from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/shenzhen-population/> (consulted on May 6th, 2020)

⁵ Retrieved from <http://www.comuni-italiani.it/regionip.html> (consulted on May 6th, 2020)

⁶ Retrieved from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/shenzhen-population/> (consulted on May 6th, 2020)

⁷ WeChat, with 1,151 millions users, is the 4th social platform in the world. Data report 2020. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3678jBL>.

lan or Rome appear in comparison). Of course, this is not just the result of the use of cutting-edge technology, but of the integration of systems (Marx, 2002; Arthur, 2009).

As WeChat is the most popular chat for interpersonal communication, but also a widespread system for payments and for a whole host of other functions, it is ubiquitous: you cannot imagine a Chinese deprived of his mobile phone, because a Chinese without his mobile phone is deprived of a whole series of working tools, communication tools, and systems that allow to move freely and carry out a range of services. The smartphone, therefore, is a fundamental part of the life of the urban Chinese, possibly one that contributes to define his or her identity.

It is reasonable to think that we will slowly go in this direction also in Western countries, even though we have resistances due to privacy issues. Such resistances to be traced and tracked are evident now, when apps for tracing people in order to contain the spreading of the virus have been received with scepticism and diffidence.

From the technological point of view, at present China is very inhomogeneous; Shenzhen is an almost unique reality, particularly because it is also a so called special economic area, which made of it a place suitable for finance and import-export business, and most of all, a very rich municipality, capable of continuously investing in new services and infrastructures.

Generally speaking, the Chinese government has been promoting the adoption of 4G or 5G, installing masts also in the countryside. While many areas in China are still developing, the coastal urban areas may take advantage of an ecosystem of integrated technologies which has few pairs in the world. This has been made possible by the fact that many areas pass from absolute lack of technologies to state of the art technologies once the government invest in such areas. In China, the modernization skips all the intermediate passages it has faced in Europe.

2.1. The advent of the Covid-19

The first public news about a new coronavirus were spread in China at the beginning of January. When the authorities started to take measures to contain the then epidemic, hundreds of millions of people, both Chinese and expatriates, were travelling in China and abroad, taking advantage of the three weeks of holiday for the Chinese New Year. This is a very important holiday, comparable to the Christmas one in Italy, and traditionally is a moment for families to get together. During this period there is a significant shift of the population, with people moving back to their hometown. In such a context, the toughest quarantine in history began: people in Wuhan were placed in lockdown on January 22nd⁸, and the following day some kind of lockdown measures were ordered for the entire country, managed at a regional level. Given the population of China (presently around 1,4 billion people), even considering that not all provinces were affected by the pandemic in the same way, it is safe to say that many hundreds of millions of people were in lockdown.

In China cities are divided into levels. At the first level there are the few really huge metropolitan areas, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and few others. These are also the cities where lockdown measures were more stringent, requiring different isolation measures. Commercial and industrial activities, as well as transportations, were initially closed, leaving open only the essential ones: pharmacies,

⁸ Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-health-who-idUSKBN1ZM1G9> (consulted on May 11th, 2020).

supermarkets outside of shopping malls, post offices, and most importantly delivery services.

2.2. *WeChat: three stages, three forms of communication*

We can ideally split the quarantine into different stages, according to the kind of dominant messages spreading on WeChat groups.

The initial stage was characterized by people finding themselves either forced or highly recommended to stay at home. In Shenzhen during the first weeks people were allowed to go out for about an hour per day, keeping the safe distance from other people, which in China is 4 and a half meters, and strictly using face masks. However, also due to the memories of the SARS in 2003, many people were afraid and did not go out at all if not necessary. This led, particularly during the first two weeks of quarantine, to the unusual sight of a Shenzhen almost deserted.

WeChat became one of the main communication instruments, to stay in touch with other people and to keep informed. WeChat allows the creation of discussion groups of up to 500 members. In such groups, as well as in personal chats, it is possible to share all kind of contents. Therefore information, both official and unofficial, spread rapidly.

With everyone at home, mainly not working, and a definitely high level of anxiety due to the lack of information, at the time, about the level of danger posed by the new coronavirus, the majority of people tended to use information as a way to sooth their bad feelings. In this scenario, rumours and fake-news easily spread. Parallel, a lot of official information spread in the form of scientific articles or data extrapolated from scientific articles. As such scientific articles were the first ones about the new coronavirus, data were templatised, but many people started to debate on them, in an effort to understand what kind of threat they were facing. So some fake-news took the shape of fake data.

In order to drastically limit the spread of misinformation, a few days later, on January 26th, the Chinese Government issued an ordinance prohibiting the spreading of any kind of fake news. “Severe punishments”, including detention, would be committed to those who would create and or spread fake news. The administrators of the WeChat groups were considered liable for the content published on their groups. In China issues related to information must be taken very seriously, so the combined repressive action of the government and self-regulation of WeChat users led to a dramatic decrease of fake news in just few days. People started to be asked to mention the source of the data they were spreading, and if this was not an official source (either a Chinese or an internationally recognized one) the data were not taken seriously by the readers. While it is dubious if some kind of similar action against fake news could ever be adopted in a Western democracy, it doubtless was effective and helpful, as *users and groups’ administrators were given responsibility for the contents they were publishing*. Moreover, it helped direct people’s attention towards official information resources, particularly the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Chinese Centre for the Prevention and Control of Diseases. While other information sources were not obscured by the government (which has the technical means to do so), these started to be considered less trustworthy – in what can be read as an increase in critical thinking.

A second phase can be identified in the appearance of videos by professionals of all kinds offering services in a volunteering form. It may be argued that such services were initially given by professionals as a form of self-promotion rather

than as providers of a service to the community, or that at least there were mixed intentions behind the profusion of free services that made their appearance: this is another aspect of the pandemic that would benefit from some structured research.

The first tutorials were of coaches encouraging people to do gymnastics at home. The very first one that's been circulating perhaps was that of an Australian coach, whose message in a nutshell was: "People in China, I feel close to you and I want to teach you how to exercise at home". These kinds of contents were spread on WeChat, for this reason they are not available online anymore.

Then the language lessons came, and the cooking ones, and of course the coaching. Few professionals offered free counselling sessions or meditation practices (this is one of the co-author did in Shenzhen, offering free counselling support group and mindfulness practices).

Another service that people took advantage of from home was online purchases, with an increase in sells of different goods, from food to fitness machines.

If in Italy the distribution system in big cities has been overwhelmed (Redazione Food, 2020) and reached the collapse⁹, and even worldwide Amazon suffered strong delays and difficulties in complying with all the deliveries¹⁰, in China the system held up well. This success can be explained in two ways. First, the door-delivery system in big cities is extremely widespread and efficient. Food is cheap, so Chinese people routinely eat outside or ask for food delivery at home or at their offices. Given the dimension of the Chinese main cities, shops are compelled to provide home deliveries. This led to the burgeoning of an immense delivery industry. An anecdotal example will illustrate to what extent Chinese people rely on such industry: for the 70th anniversary of the Communist Party, which was held in 2019, a huge military parade was organized, following by a parade of coaches representing the peoples (ethnic groups) of China and the main jobs that make China a great country. The last of such coaches was the one dedicated to the personnel in the delivery industry, and a joke on WeChat rapidly circulated at the time saying that it was "the save-my-life coach". The second reason to explain the capability of the Chinese home delivery services to keep up with the increased demand was a prompt shift of workers from other industries, particularly waiters who were not working due to the closing of all restaurants, to the delivery industry. This was facilitated by an agreement between the government and the behemoth Alibaba. Of course, such an industry is also made possible by the relatively low cost of manpower. In fact, the delivery personnel is among those categories which work frantically, without any career perspective; delivery people are usually male, young, and they often are migrant workers¹¹.

As mentioned above, it is not just a matter of technology, but of the integrated system between technology, economy, society and culture: in the Chinese case, having a lot of manpower at a sustainable price has facilitated the maintenance of the home delivery system.

The third period was that of the return to work.

The festivities were exceptionally extended due to the coronavirus, and officially ended on February 10th. At this point, in Shenzhen only few companies were actually ready to open, and many were able to comply with the prevention meas-

⁹ Retrieved from <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/04/03/sono-le-venti-nove-siti-per-la-spesa-online-in-tilt-in-tutta-italia-ordinare-e-diventata-unimpresa-e-le-consegne-sono-a-15-giorni/5758624/> (consulted on May 11th, 2020).

¹⁰ Retrieved from <https://tech.fanpage.it/i-tempi-di-consegna-potrebbero-essere-piu-lunghi-amazon-avvisa-gli-utenti-di-probabili-ritardi/> (consulted on May 11th, 2020).

¹¹ "Visible and vocal", *The Economist* (international edition), 03/04/2020.

ures imposed by the authorities only weeks later. So, even though a common date for all the Guangdong province was set, the return to work was actually gradual. It is worth noticing that in Shenzhen schools only partially opened on April 27th, and a date for the reopening of kindergartens has not been set yet¹².

So at mid-February a phase of teledidactic and smart working begins. Here, too, China has been leading the way for the remote working and studying experience that is now common to so many countries in the world.

One of the coauthor working as a mental health counsellor, he had the opportunity to counsel both international teachers (from English speaking countries) and international university students from almost all the continents¹³.

Both teachers and students found particularly difficult to cope with the different time zones. The majority of them had returned to their home countries and were mostly unable to go back to China. Many found themselves having to teach or to follow an online class in the middle of the night – which shows both the rigidity of the teaching system and the limits of the current approach to teaching online, which is basically just a transposition of the usual activities on an online platform, without all the necessary adjustments.

Another problem for both teachers and students was to develop a new routine which did not include going to a work place or to class, but rather doing everything at home. This is challenging not just for the easily understandable issue of having to work and study with potential distractions around (mainly represented by children, younger siblings, or the activities of the other family members), but also because of the function that we attribute to places: our houses are usually places characterized by their main specific functions related to rest and leisure, not work.

Such difficulties are reflected in the Italian experience with study and work from home, about which many are currently discussing (the most authoritative sociologist currently trying to understand if and how the remote working will survive the pandemics is, perhaps, Domenico De Masi¹⁴).

In China during the quarantine and later on the majority of people were with their family, while in Italy, also due to a different family structure, many people were isolated. This shows another weakness of remote working: offices can be places of truly abhorrent desolation, spaces that are not meant to live in, yet they are the places where we spend most of our day; however, offices also are made of people and in an office one may get to know those who then become partners or lovers, or even the next employer (due to the well-known strength of weak ties, Granovetter (1973). Moreover, in the office we exchange information through informal communications. If we were to move all this into remote working, either it all would get lost, or we would need to find ways to establish informal communication flows in our remote working activities. Of course, remote work allows to save all those inessential business meetings and business trips held somewhere different from our offices, which are so common in multinational corporations and in European funded projects, but also for small businesses. However, very often people want to make the effort to go somewhere, even at great length, to have a meeting, either because certain issues are still better discussed face to face, or because it is a

¹² At the date of May 8th.

¹³ The experience that emerged in the form of life narratives of this experience and its reflections will be the subject of a subsequent publication.

¹⁴ See his interventions, for the time being in the form of articles on LinkedIn and Facebook, or of interviews. See for instance: <http://www.donnainaffari.it/2020/04/telelavoro-intervista-al-sociologo-de-masi/> (consulted on May 11th, 2020).

way to create a stronger bond with people, or else because it allows to escape the usual routine and make an experience visiting a different place.

In addition, remote work may lead to a lack of motivation: when we go to the office, we are compelled to do things. At home this may turn to be harder, because of the many competing and more pleasant activities that surround us. While remote work as a huge potential, the experience during the pandemic clearly showed that it cannot be used as a way to transfer at home the same activity people do in the office is exceptional, but it will have to be combined according to the needs of different professional realities.

We can make a comparison with experimental situations: remote working appears to be similar to such psychological or social experiments carried out in laboratories, and completely lacking any ecological validity. The entire dimension of non-verbal communication goes lost – and it is missed¹⁵.

2.3. *Space and time*

We cannot understand the potential of new media if we do not reflect on the concept of space (Colombo, 2003), but we must be careful because this word has different meanings (Martina, 2016). We're going to look at two of them.

The first meaning is that of distance: with telecommunications, distances are cancelled, and its measure, strangely, becomes time – that of time zones. The other meaning of space we refer to herein is that of place.

Thinking about remote working: we move from one space-place, usually our home, to another, the office. The space in between is an irrelevant distance, a crossing space that we are usually not interested in and that it is often plagued by congestions of cars and people. Communication media allow us to skip the process of crossing the distance, but at the same time they keep us in our space-place and only allow people to enter it with their image and voice.

However, space, we argue, is never neutral (and in fact Marc Augé famously called the spaces that he considered to be flat, neutral, anonymous “non-places”; Augé, 2009). The space at home is usually the theatre of our interactions with our dearest ones; the space where we collect the symbolic and material objects which represent our passions and hobbies; the space for intimacy and privacy. Moreover, this space is often shared with other people, possibly with children – what may be extremely taxing for our selective attention and concentration. Not all houses have a space such as a studio, where people usually work.

Indeed, before the pandemic we already knew that it is possible to keep relationship in the distance and through the distance: how many love stories continue to unfold between people living in different countries, people who see themselves physically only once in a while, yet they keep feeling as somehow “being together”? Thanks to smartphones and social media, it is possible to spend an entire day being “together in the distance”, seeing what the other does, talking, etc., almost as if the other were there (Athique, 2013).

One of the major problem with this practice comes when the two people are in time zones very far one from the other. Distance becomes determined not by the amount of space between two people, but by the amount of matching between their routines.

This became immediately apparent during the epidemic in China. Although Beijing adopted a single time zone for the whole county, Chinese big cities are very

¹⁵ See for an example: “Low resolution”, *The Economist* (international edition), 30/04/2020.

globalized and host foreign nationals who come from all continents (up to before the coronavirus, Chinese authorities tended to issue work permit more easily to highly rather than poorly educated foreigners, in a policy of attracting talents and know-how). As we explained, the virus hit during a long holiday, when many people take the chance to visit travel abroad or go back to their home country. The same people, when they did not lose their jobs, may have been asked to work during the night. In March, for instance, the Italy-China Chamber of Commerce organized an online conference, where one of the co-author was invited as a speaker. The person who organized the conference, who normally resides in the Guangdong province, had returned to Italy and was therefore compelled to routinely get up at two in the morning to keep up with the Chinese schedule, which was 7 hours ahead. This problem well illustrates one major risk linked to remote working: the blurring of the boundary between private and professional life. When remote working is accompanied by a policy of working by results, that is, being free to manage one's own time as long as results are achieved, people may feel motivated to exchange an increase in freedom with some sleepover. When remote working, on the contrary, becomes an excuse to ask employees to be constantly available, because after all they are at home, people may easily get burnt-out.

There is another aspect of time that deserves some attention: the time dedicated to relationships. From the classic productivity point of view, all the time not directly allocated to production is considered wasted time. This is, of course, a heritage of the early industrial age, when the only time that counted was the time a worker spent at the production chain. It is highly arguable that this is the case also with intellectual professions. The time spent at the infamous coffee machine in every office is important because it often translates in time for human relationships. A person can let go his or her thoughts about a project with a colleague; what sometimes may seem just a release of bad feelings may throw light on existing problems and give birth to creative solutions. Companies are constantly looking for ways to decrease their operating costs, but very few companies, including the ones boosting a most modern internal culture, have shifted to remote work. How is that so? It is reasonable to think that there is a relational dimension of work that somehow has its own function within the organizational system itself, in terms of motivation, knowledge, social capital, all dimensions highlighted by both Mitchell (1969) and Granovetter (1973). It is often said that companies do not want to give up control on their employees; this may well be the case, but the need for the relational dimension of work must also play its role.

Moreover, human beings are intrinsically social beings: we do not bond only on the basis of rational considerations, but rather and mainly on the basis of affective elements – which would get lost with remote work. Are we sure that we are ready to give up the time for the relationship? This is a fundamental question that the adoption of remote work would certainly end up raising. Observing the ways that communication is transformed when it runs on social media (here McLuhan's lesson that the media is the message echoes prophetically), there are reasons to worry that eliminating the interpersonal aspects of work relationships may dramatically change the perception of the work environment and the nature of relationships inside of it. As usual, technologies offer us new possibilities, but we should not make the logical mistake of thinking that new also means desirable. The adoption of new technical solutions should stem from perceived needs rather than from the fact that technologies simply are there. As Richard Sennett convincingly showed (1998), innovation for the sake of innovation may not lead to improvements.

Finally, despite the image of a youth perfectly at ease with carrying on their communications mainly through media, anecdotal experience with young adults in China let us think that young adults are those who actually may be most vulnerable to isolation.

Human beings, compared to other animals, need an apprenticeship in life composed of socialization, formal and informal training. In the psychosocial component, it is very important to learn to manage emotions, and these are based in the body (Izard, 2010). Indeed, we feel emotions because we have a body. When we talk about presence, we talk about body, physicality, even unpleasant smells, people who willingly or unwillingly touch each other, sensations that we feel in our body; interestingly, in Italian we say that we like or not a person on our skin (“a pelle”), while in English we say that “it’s just a feeling” or “we follow our guts”. Isolating young people has meant interrupting their on-going process of socialization on emotions through their bodies, and emoticons on mobile phones cannot replace the richness of face to face human communication. Ericsson’s researchers have highlighted how corporeity should be one of the user’s digital experiences (Ericsson, 2018). The same world of virtual games is moving in the same direction¹⁶. And of course, China, too, had already made research on this¹⁷. Even though we are making research to replicate all 5 senses in immersive virtual reality, we are still far from succeeding. And even if one day we did, it may resemble a Philip Dick’s dystopia.

Conclusion

In this contribution we have set out the contextual premises of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, which then spread to the rest of the world. China appears to have controlled and then defeated the virus, with the death toll zeroing in and Wuhan’s isolation ending on April 8¹⁸, even though the issue of the imported cases still worries the authorities and impedes a full return to normality. Other countries are now addressing the spread of the disease and responding on the basis of their health, political and cultural situations, political and economic priorities, and demographic characteristics. In every country, even the ones considered particularly advanced such as, for instance, Sweden, the coronavirus is revealing fragility and contradictions, but also unexpected strengths and resilience capabilities.

Several sources report that China’s strengths have been:

- the widespread dissemination of technology for citizen control, the traceability of their movements, the analysis of big data released by citizens’ activities;
- machine learning for analysis and decision based on all the information collected;
- the rapid implementation of these technologies in health monitoring and tracking movement systems (Berti, 2020; Biagio, 2020).

It is unthinkable, however, that a country’s technological substrate and the use of technology is disconnected from its cultural, political and economic approach to its use and to society as a whole.

¹⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/11/new-game-takes-virtual-reality-beyond-sight-and-sound/> (consulted on May 11th, 2020).

¹⁷ Retrieved from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/10/c_138215213.htm (consulted on May 11th, 2020).

¹⁸ Retrieved from https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2020/04/07/coronavirus-in-usa-altri-1.150-morti-in-24-ore-_71bf48bb-7dbf-434a-9b2e-41a7522fe8b8.html (consulted on May 11th, 2020).

Technological advances developments, at least in our perspective, are intersystem (Mattelart, 1998; Brigs, Burke, 2009).

For this very reason, it is controversial to argue that the Chinese monitoring system or any other policy adopted in China to curb the pandemic can be transferred to other countries *tout court*, without considering the necessary changes due to culture, history, politics and economy in those countries. Every innovation (ideas, artefacts or organizational systems) needs to take hold of adequate conditions, otherwise it risks of being immediately rejected (Rogers, 1962).

An illustrative example of what we are affirming is offered by the recent attempts in Western countries to adopt apps for tracing potentially infected people. In Italy, for instance, the government proposal that the public use the app Immuni has come with an impressive debate about its potential risks for the privacy (Lisi, Sarzana, 2020). People are reluctant to provide information about their geographical movements, even though such movements can all the same be followed by tracking individuals' mobile phones, electronic purchases, public cameras, and so on. People are also resistant at the idea of sharing information which can be used to reconstruct their routines and social activities, even though they may then publish detailed pictures of those same activities on social media. At the institutional level, the Ministry of Health committed to deliver to the Guarantor of Privacy ('Garante della Privacy') a report about the app, but then did not do it, possibly waiting for another report from the secret services which apparently hasn't been delivered either (Carli, 2020). Moreover, the same Ministry did not make sufficiently clear the way the app Immuni was chosen among others available, and this caused the same choice to be welcome by polemics and criticism.

China, on the contrary, is among the first countries in the world for what concerns the use of control technology in the private and public spheres. For instance, WeChat has an agreement with the government to make available to government scrutiny all the activities undergoing on the platform, and big cities are crowded with cameras for face recognition. Moreover, the massive use of online purchases and virtual money transactions is another way the authorities may easily track individual activities.

We suggest that the relatively uncontested adoption of technologies for the control of citizens in China may be due to a number of historical and cultural contextual factors. China has a strong Confucian cultural background, which is paternalistic and promotes an undiscussed respect for the authority – be it that of the parents or the government (Bell, 2008; Scarperi, 2015). This cultural background, together with the rapid adoption of technologies and the lack of a public discourse about it has allowed the government to proceed basically undisturbed in the adoption of control technologies, which many Chinese have seen as a sign of progress and received favourably. On the contrary, the Italian sociopolitical system faces the need to discuss publicly the main technological advances adopted. The present resistance to the creation of a 5G network, with attacks to masts and municipalities issuing orders against the construction of the infrastructures in their territory, clearly exemplifies the nature of difficulties of imposing a new technology with a top-down approach, rather than through a deliberative one.

China has also historically enclosed itself inside its own borders, as the construction of the Great Wall testifies. The same Great Wall is now technological: it has the form of the great firewall that divides the Chinese Internet from that of the rest of the world; and it has the invisible shape of the control technology in place everywhere.

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Rituals During Lockdown: The “Clap for our Carers” Phenomenon in France

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Abstract

The article will analyse the emergence of the applause for health workers to health personnel, a practice widespread in France since the first day of lockdown. We examine the meaning of this ritual that was first promoted on the web and then adopted by the social actors themselves in the semi-private space of windows and balconies. We will investigate the relationships and the meaning of this practice both on the web and in the social space.

Keywords: applause, ritual, community, clap for our carers

Introduction

The unusual period we are now facing brings out several issues that, on closer inspection, are not new after all, but they seem to reappear more directly on the social scene.

The health crisis caused by the Covid-19 virus makes us rethink, directly or indirectly, the social organization on which the various states have based their functioning: from education to work, from trade to social life. Victor Turner (1993 [1986], p. 19. Personal translation) points out that: “through calamities, we can examine the functioning of the crucial principles of the social structure and their relative preponderance at particular later moments”. During a crisis, we can reflect on the importance of certain social ties which perhaps appear less evident in so-called “normal” situations. These times bring out the basics of conflicts and interests, clearly showing their meaning.

This health crisis sees the emergence of new forms of sociality which at first appear as one of the many solidarity initiatives announced by the media: restaurants providing meals to health care workers in hospitals, teachers going to students’ homes to help them, grocery shopping for people with mobility or physical difficulties, cooking for sick neighbours, bakeries preparing cakes decorated with supporting sentences for front-line workers, etc. These are, in general, concrete acts carried out with the specific aim of helping less equipped and disadvantaged or at-risk people. Indeed, as the sociologist Francois Dubet (2020) maintains, the health pandemic further increases existing social inequalities, so that the lockdown brings out those “petites inégalités¹” exacerbating the competition between social classes. “Le pouvoir ignore les plus fragiles²”, claims the economist Michaël Zemmour (2020), who sees the French state’s support for companies and workers as a major exclusion of the unemployed and more generally of the precariat.

In this article, we will analyse a contemporary example characterising an impor-

¹ “Those small inequalities”.

² “Power ignores the most fragile”.

tant aspect of “making community”: the applause rising every evening at 8 p.m. from the balconies or windows of French houses.

We will start with this small gesture, which remains minimal compared to the greater acts of solidarity mentioned above, and yet with its own merits. First, it raises the question of its definition: what is it? Is it a ritual? Is it a practice? Is it an individual or collective gesture? This poses a problem from the very beginning. The second interesting aspect is its continuity or stability. From its onset until today, this gesture is punctually repeated, suggesting that it may well possess a “common sense” in C. Geertz’s meaning of “a relatively organized set of pondered thought” (1988 [1983], p. 93). A third issue is that it hails from social networks. It is difficult to pinpoint its specific origin (which, as we shall see, is not its most relevant aspect) but it remains a worldwide event that says more about the human nature than about our cultural differences.

1. Clapping for who and for what: the French context

This initiative appeared for the first time in Italy, as one of the first countries in Europe in which lockdown measures were drastically applied (24 February 2020). Since the first day, the initiatives supporting health workers have multiplied. The Facebook group “Applaudiamo l’Italia” (Clap for Italy) promoted a round of applause from people’s homes on March 14, after the success of the day before – a musical moment at 6 p.m., the closing time of the few food stores open and before the evening bulletin reporting the number of contagions and victims. Hashtag as “#Iorestoacasa” (I stay in, the Italian equivalent of the British #StayingInSavesLives), “#Grazieallefamiglie” (thanks to the families) set events such as the choirs on the national holiday (April 25th) or those of May 3rd at 6 p.m. with the aim of applauding the common effort to stay at home, etc.

The applause seems to be contagious and spread abroad. In France, the hashtag #on applaudit³ has conveyed the spread of this phenomenon. From the first day of lockdown the date was set daily for 8 p.m. Clémentine Autain (2020), member of the left-wing party “France Insoumise”, encouraged the State to “dégager urgemment des moyens inédits pour notre système médical⁴”. MEP Raphaël Glucksmann and numerous other political figures have also encouraged the population to join this unprecedented movement of solidarity. “Dire notre reconnaissance, notre admiration et notre soutien à celles et ceux qui bravent le danger, la fatigue, le manque de moyens pour nous soigner⁵” is, according to R. Glucksmann, the ultimate meaning of this collective gesture⁶.

The press has not been indifferent to the phenomenon. Since the official start of the French lockdown (17 March at 12 noon), the media have taken an interest in this initiative.

For example, on March 18th “Le Figaro” wrote: “Applaudissement au balcon en plein jour: un nouveau lien entre voisins⁷”, referring to the changeover to daylight saving time and therefore to the light characterizing the evening applause. The LCI

³ We find the same hashtags in several countries, such as #restezchezvous, #jerestechezmoi, #jerestealamaison, #ensemblealamaison.

⁴ “Urgently release exceptional means for our health system”.

⁵ “Express our gratitude, our admiration, our support to those that brave the danger, the fatigue, the lack of resources to care for us”.

⁶ For both quotations, see LCI Editorial Board (2020, March 18).

⁷ “Applause from balconies in broad daylight: a new bond between neighbours”.

television channel, belonging to the TF1 group, dedicated a special edition to this practice entitled “La France des balcons⁸” (March 22nd) illustrating this new experience that shows a united and supportive French people. From 18 to 30 March 2020, from the national press such as *Le Progrès*, *Le Nouvel Obs*, *Les Echos*, the *Huffington Post*, to the specialist press such as *Challenges*’ and the regional press such as *La Dépêche*, *La Nouvelle République*, *Ouest-France*, all the newspapers are reporting the same event: a gesture of solidarity for our health workers.

If this gesture seems to have a general meaning, the reasons given by the people interviewed by the newspapers are broad: “On se demande comment ils tiennent. J’applaudis aussi pour tous ceux qui ont perdu quelqu’un dans cette épidémie. Une chose est sûre, ne faudra pas les oublier après⁹” or “On n’a pas hésité à le faire, en se disant que si on commençait, cela entraînerait le mouvement de la résidence. A deux, on se motive, et ça fait plus de bruit. Dans nos familles respectives, nous avons des infirmiers et personnels de la grande distribution qui vont travailler. On applaudit pour eux, bien sûr, et pour tous les autres¹⁰”, writes *La Nouvelle République* (2020, April 11). “Merci de nous sauver¹¹”, writes *La Dépêche*.

Figures such as doctors and nurses are seen as heroes of the moment but “déjà fatigués, déjà atteints, déjà... alors que la situation, elle, va durer encore de longues semaines¹²” tells Madeleine Lhote (2020, March 28), doctor at the *Maison de Santé Pluriprofessionnelle* in Paris, to the *Huffington Post*.

Charlie Hebdo’s cartoonist Vuillemin (2020, March 27) drafts ironic cartoons on the risks of looking out onto the balcony without falling and *Mediapart*, a news website, is one of the rare voices against this gesture of global support (Portais 2020, March 23). They question the meaning of the applause that represents support for the health workers’ sense of sacrifice, given that both the lack of funding and the privatization of the health system have been going on for several years now. The “heroes in white suits¹³”, as the President of the Republic E. Macron calls them, are those who suffer budget cuts by the current government.

In any case, applause, an ephemeral and precarious gesture, is a subject worthy of amateur videos on microblogging such as Twitter to which the accounts of official institutions such as the *Necker Hospital* in Paris (@hopital_Necker) or the *Assistance Publique-Hopitaux de Paris* (@AP-HP) respond with thanks for their support to health care workers. On YouTube, one can find videos and songs made by medical staff to thank for the solidarity that emerged from the evening applause¹⁴.

A Facebook page entitled “Applaudissons nos services publics de santé¹⁵” has been created and promoted to encourage participation in this daily appointment.

To conclude this brief media review, television networks have dedicated short stories to the applause. National television channels (*France TV*, *France 3*, *France bleu*) showed the extent of the phenomenon. From Paris to Marseille, passing

⁸ “The France of Balconies”.

⁹ “We wonder how they’re holding up. I also applaud everyone who lost someone in this epidemic. One thing’s for sure, we mustn’t forget them later”.

¹⁰ “We did not hesitate to do it, telling ourselves that if we started, we would create a whole movement within our building. Two people get motivated and make more noise. In our respective families, we have nurses and other key workers. We applaud for them and for everyone else”.

¹¹ “Thanks for saving us”.

¹² “Already tired, already affected, already ... but the situation will last for many more weeks”.

¹³ Statement by Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on the COVID-19 epidemic, delivered on 12 March 2020. The full text is available at <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/273869-emmanuel-macron-12032020-coronavirus>

¹⁴ For example, the song www.youtu.be/frUwIFaXZGw

¹⁵ “Clap for our public health services”.

through Caen and Lyon, France looks out the window to applaud, sing, shout, make music with improvised instruments such as pots and ladles, or with guitars, pianos, violins and wind instruments and percussions. DJs, singers, entertainers, and musicians encourage musical moments shared between terraces and windows.

From its official website, the Municipality of Nice (2020) openly spurs its inhabitants to show up at the balcony: “À 20h, on vient applaudir! Rendez-vous sur vos balcons et à vos fenêtres pour applaudir ensemble celles et ceux qui sont mobilisés pour le bien de tous¹⁶”, a gesture of collective support towards health workers.

2. Applause as a contemporary ritual

Having understood that, ephemeral though it may be, this applause is for the time being firmly installed in social practices, let us try to understand its meaning. To answer our first question, if the applause was a real ritual, we will start by mentioning the meaning that Kertzer (1989) attributes to it: “a set of formalized, expressive acts, bearers of a symbolic dimension inserted in a specific space-time and using objects, languages, signs, systems of behaviour whose meaning is recognized within the group”. As M. Segalen points out, we are now talking about profane rites that can be found especially outside of work, in leisure time, sports activities and performances, commemorations, political and initiation rites. Following Bessin (2002) “La ritualisation s'accommode en effet du changement social, car les sociétés qui se transforment renouvellent les manières de marquer des moments forts et d'entériner des différences¹⁷”. In our society, applause is found in ceremonies that are sometimes part of more complex rituals that mean approval, acclamation, collective support for someone or something. In any case, applause underlines a common and shared consensus. This dimension of sharing seems to be the symbolic force of this gesture. Individuals are united for a collective cause that is supported by a larger whole. It is no coincidence that, in politically motivated demonstrations by the opposition, applause is excluded except for electoral rallies – showing, once again, agreement. After all, applause expresses the collective dimension by appearing as a non-verbal, transgenerational and intercultural sign of direct expression of an otherwise silent consensus. From the small approval to the more global ovation, what is reinforced is a group cohesion, a unity that is created thanks to the unison reproduction of the same gesture. There is no need for specific symbols of recognition or belonging, but simply of the body, a primary sign of so-called “natural” equality.

For its social aspect, we are interested in the boundary zone – the threshold, if we follow Van Gennep's (2012 [1909]) ritual structure in which the ritual can be divided into rites of separation, passage, and aggregation. Applause as an aggregative rite, a sign of belonging to a community, shows its public dimension: looking out the window or balcony. People confined in their own home show themselves in their private sphere which becomes public the moment they appear on the edge of their private space, on their threshold (as when the door of the house opens). The moment we show ourselves outside together, we make ourselves visible to our neighbours, to the small community around us. The applause is mostly performed

¹⁶ “Clapping at 8 p.m. Rendezvous at the balconies and windows to clap for those striving for the good of all”.

¹⁷ “The rite goes hand in hand with social change because societies that continue to evolve renew the ways of highlighting important moments and of consolidating differences”. Personal translation.

either in the inner courtyards between neighbours or outwards, towards the street as a public space. The importance of visibility is typical of the characteristics of the ritual. As in theatre: “a drama is not really complete until it is staged, *i.e.* acted on some kind of stage in front of an audience” (Turner, 1993 [1986], p. 83). Showing up at the appointment, even though it can be interpreted as a form of social control, suggests the need to appear as a part of a community and, therefore, confirm one’s own existence and being recognized as an individual.

3. Individual presence as a moment of sharing

Our second question concerned the continuity of this action. Why, after two months, do we still meet every night with people we may no longer see? Because every day one meaning of the ritual is tacitly renewed: the sharing that remains a collective dimension and not an individual one. Each person will interpret the gesture of applause with their own meanings, but the shared meaning is the will to mean together, to speak, to exchange a greeting, a gesture. It is no coincidence that the applause has created friendships, basic conversations, acquaintances, and flirtations. When the life-stage becomes a private balcony, people show themselves as they can and as they want – *impromptu* concerts, unsuspected singing skills, aperitifs between balconies, community dinners between windows, etc. After all, not everyone lives in front of a hospital, the ultimate and true recipient of applause. Few health workers will hear it, but they will know it is going to happen. The intention is worth more than the gesture, as they say...

We wonder, therefore, if, after all, we are applauding a bit also for ourselves, so as not to miss these rare moments of collective encounter that give meaning, albeit differently, to the various societies.

We must not forget that “rite, carnival, drama, show, have in common a temporal structure that interweaves constant and variable characteristics and gives space to improvisation and spontaneous invention during each performance” (Turner, 1993 [1986], p. 82).

The ritual, therefore, allows for variations: all kinds of music, disguises, musical and other instruments, dances, and sports. The structure of the ritual is given by its beginning, by its call often made with a bell or a stadium horn that places individuals in the temporality of the ritual, the beginning of something. The end is left to the dissolution of the ritual, to the return to private space, but with the awareness that the next day will be repeated. One should not underestimate the performative force of the ritual in implementing something unique but at the same time reassuring for its repetitive dimension. The neuropsychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik (2020) recalls it in this period of lockdown: “Depuis que les êtres humains sont sur Terre, ils font des sépultures, ils font des rituels du deuil. Toutes les cultures en ont, et là on sera obligés de ne plus en faire¹⁸”.

¹⁸ Interview on radio *France Inter*, 25/03/2020. “Since humans have been on Earth, they have been practising burials and performing rituals to overcome their loss. All cultures have them, but now we cannot do them anymore”.

4. From social networks to everyday life

This phenomenon seems to gather significant proportions at international level. As for previous years, on 5 May (2020) the “Giving Tuesday”, an international fundraising campaign to finance social causes, was organized and promoted on Twitter, aimed at expressing solidarity with various causes. Giving one’s time, commitment, money or labour all the expressions proposed for this initiative. Created by the UNF (United Nations Foundation), this event has spread throughout Canada and Europe. The hashtag #GivingTuesday followed by the initials of the European country participating in the initiative has been a major online trend during this period¹⁹. In France, several organizations have mobilized to contribute to hospitals and health facilities in support of the health workers in view of the Covid-19 emergency. The hashtag #Vousêtesformidables was highly popular on Twitter.

Responses of thanks and solidarity from the health sector were not long in coming: the Fondation Hopitaux de Paris, the Hospitalier Centres of the city of Béziers, the FEHAP (Fédération du secteur privé solidaire en Santé), Médecins du Monde, Centre Hospitalier de Genève/ Annecy, the Ligue against cancer, Alzheimer Recherche, etc. In all, more than 350 solidarity initiatives have taken place in the French country.

On the same date, the World Health Organization also launched the #SafeHands Challenge: an invitation to a worldwide applause at midday to thank health workers and recognize their fundamental role in hygiene and prevention²⁰.

Contemporary Street Art artist Banksy donated a pencil drawing titled “Game changer” to the Southampton Hospital in England, a facility particularly affected by the spread of the virus. A few words from the artist accompany the gift “Thank you for everything you do. I hope that this drawing will illuminate this place even if it is in black and white”.

All these episodic forms of solidarity have one thing in common: their creation and diffusion online. What role do social networks play in the construction of the applause? First, we see the creation of the phenomenon online: people publish an initiative, others propose it and spread it, and so on and so forth. In any case, these processes are given meaning by the individuals powering them. Other similar phenomena have appeared in previous years: such as the “Facebook aperitifs”, organized in 2010 via the social networks that have seen European squares invaded by young people with bottles of alcohol until late at night²¹. Our focus here is in the discussion of these events on social networks and their concretization in a well-defined space: the real public space (or semi-private, in the specific case of the applause). In a contemporary society in which “one to one” (Cardon, 2019) communications are not only about the private sphere and “one to many” communications are no longer only about the public sphere, an osmosis is now operating between the two realities. The values and cultural codes of these two realities, networked or not, are now in dialogue and in continuous definition. Individuals extend their *self* without radically differentiating between that which belongs to the network and that which concerns daily action.

¹⁹ 2020 saw the participation of England, France, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Denmark, Poland, etc.

²⁰ We will also mention the Italian applause promoted on Facebook by the group “Applaudiamo l’Italia” (Clap for Italy) on March 14, 2020, which prompted people to clap from their balconies at 12 noon for health care workers. Over 300.000 people joined the group proposing flashmobs, performances, flags *tricolore* and singing from their windows or roofs.

²¹ See N. Novello Paglianti, 2016.

Individuals who are members of a community also belong to others, perhaps virtual ones, but they invest in these “weak” (*i.e.* virtual) ties as much as in face-to-face ones. As Casilli (2010, p. 227) claims, “un ‘équilibre s’installe entre les liens forts et réels et les liens faibles et virtuels, chargés de la même intensité”. The aim of the social actor is to preserve her social capital, which is expressed in different ways, both concrete and virtual. Free access and participation seem to have become synonymous, where the former is often used instead of public, visible, and participatory. This also explains the diffusion and impact of internet-born initiatives in the everyday public space. What is the difference between launching an appeal online, promoting it on the streets and then publishing it online? A line of continuity seems to be built that does not prevent the citizen from living among these different spaces. Especially in a situation of imprisonment like the one caused by the current health crisis, the complementarity between these public and virtual realities is even less felt. All it takes is a video, a photo, a message, and the visual joins us with other realities in which we can participate indirectly. Everyone can show “her own” applause, creativity, invention based on a gesture that finds meaning in a shared collective and cultural basis. Furthermore, applications such as Instagram and Snapchat favour the sharing of images of oneself and nourish the exchange between private space and public dimension.

Showing oneself physically at the window to express the same gesture as one’s neighbours is a sign of existing, of being here, of presence at a time when real visibility is little affirmed and above all little confirmed by the Other. We do not meet, nor we see each other, and only in a few moments the presence of the alter ego allows a collective confirmation of social existence. As Dacheux (2008, p. 76) claims: “les médias contribuent néanmoins, et fortement, à l’élaboration des perceptions culturelles communes”.

Conclusions

In France, the lockdown was lifted on 11 May 2020. The start of phase two allowed the free movement of people and meetings with families and friends (within a 100 km radius) resumed their “natural” course. In regions still considered at risk²², restaurants and bars remain closed. The phenomenon of applause has decreased but continues to be discreetly felt through urban chaos. Collective, face-to-face meetings have resumed their role: mutual recognition of social actors, exchange and “community building”. The recovery of wider and diversified interactions reduces the importance of that gesture that made the individual feel part of a neighbourhood collective. People regain the possibility to choose their social interactions and take up those they have built and in which they have invested over the years.

It should not be forgotten that the applause remains linked to the world of the stage and show business in general. In a society where spectacularisation and self-valorisation have now become the norm, the individual is aware of participating in yet another representation of seeing and being seen, as E. Goffman would say. No one questions the gesture of solidarity for a noble purpose in this health crisis. The hope is that this apparent solidarity is not only a pretext behind which once again to

²² Four regions are considered in the “red” zone due to their high number of contagions: Ile de France, Alsace, Borgogne-Franche-Comté e Hauts- de France.

just express oneself, but a conscious appreciation of the health risk caused by the epidemic.

A final relevant aspect of this phenomenon is the recipient of the message: the health workers. The applause is addressed to a social category of actors that remains abstract but united in their work and at different levels on care. Is this a manifestation of trust in the institution? Or in the value of a group? The next few months will provide some answers....

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Humor During Pandemic in Romania on Facebook

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Abstract

During the pandemic, finding coping mechanisms for anxiety, stress and isolation is critical. In Romania, humor has always been a way to overcome anxiety and insecurity and is present in all dramatic situations. The purpose of this study is to analyze the content of humorous messages, the topics addressed, their characteristics and their dissemination. The method used was the content analysis of the messages broadcast on the social network Facebook during March - April 2020 in Romania. The results obtained show us that the main forms of diffusion of humorous messages is the Power point humor, photos, written messages followed by video material with one or more protagonists in domestic contexts and poetry. The main topics covered are: the threat, the protective measures, quarantine, the efficiency of the health system, the changes in the lifestyle and their implications. The main way to spread is to roll messages on networks from the initiators of conversations. The main purpose of the messages is to neutralize the threat in the collective imaginary and to regain the symbolic control.

Key words: Pandemic, Facebook, Meme, Humor.

Introduction

Humour has been present in human society since its inception in various forms and styles and has been constantly modified and adapted in response to social, cultural and technological trends. Today, the Internet has become a major player in the production and distribution of humour. Countless platforms are dedicated to humour and huge email traffic containing humorous messages congests terminals all over the world. Many humorous messages enter, with the exception of the authenticated ones on the contrary, under the incidence of creative commons license, with the possibility of free distribution, thus becoming the newest type of folklore. The oral character, as well as the collective one, of the traditional folklore is replaced and ensured by the circulation on the Internet, through interactivity and implicit globalism, and the syncretic character is promoted by a meta-feature called multimedia.

The Internet has restored - through various applications, from chats and emails to the comment option offered by social media, a part of the power that the written word has lost in the last century (Shifman, 2007), loss enhanced by the invention of photography and then images in motion, technologies emerged in the 19th century, but propelled to table level especially through television.

1. What is humour?

Humour is a complex, difficult-to-define phenomenon for which there is no generally accepted definition. Humour is generally considered to be the tendency of experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement. The term is derived from ancient medicine where the moods, body fluids were considered responsible for the health and emotions of the individual. The operationalization of the term is

difficult because it is challenging to quantify what is funny and what is not and the attribution of this quality is dependent on the way of receiving the audience. According to Dr. Chaya Ostrower (2000), humour has three components: wit, mirth and laughter. Wit is the cognitive experience, Mirth the emotional experience, Laughter the physiological experience. Another problem is that we often equate laughter with humour, but there are many instances of laughter (tickling, nervousness, etc.) that clearly have little to do with humour (Sultanoff, 1994).

In the present research, we considered as humour those contents distributed on Facebook for the purpose of personal amusement or for the amusement of the other users who represented the audience.

1.1. History of humour in romanian society

As in any society, in Romania humour has always been present in all circumstances of social life, fulfilling various functions.

One of the funniest phrases in Romanian literature refers to an episode during Caragea's¹ plague. Ion Ghica² quotes, in a letter to Vasile Alecsandri³, a note from a report: "*Today we gathered 15 dead, but we could bury only 14, because one ran away and we could not catch him*".

During the communist period, humour had an official and a popular component. Official humor, political humour served to protect the communist utopia that could not be suspected of imperfection, all the shortcomings of society being attributed to human imperfection (Jacob, 2019). Humour was focused on satirizing the defects that manifest in society, being considered a tool for improving man and society, and it was just a corrective element. Favorite topics were: corruption, nepotism, laziness, bribery, etc.

The popular humour of this period has a sharper sense of history and a relentless irony. Its main function was to discredit the utopia by attacking the regime and identifying all the hotspots of society. The anecdotes in circulation contain the major concerns of the population, most of which are related to meeting basic needs. In contrast to the regime's vision, they were seen as the first obstacle to progress. The British sociologist Christie Davies (2007) argues that more and more specific anecdotes in denouncing severe social neuralgia anticipated the collapse of the regime in 1989.

After the collapse of the communist regime, amateur humour groups belonging to in workers 'or students' clubs (often underground) began to be broadcast on television. Some of them have become popular as was the case for groups like Diver-tis, Vouă, Mondenii or Vacanța Mare. In the conditions of the disappearance of the limitations that stimulated their creativity in the past, they had to adapt to the new realities and expectations of the public.

Speaking about Romanian humour, advertising specialist Bogdan Naumovici (2018) points out that "Romanians prefer to have fun than to revolt". The presence of humour in public events became stronger in the post-2000 period. This was especially evident during the anti-corruption protests of 2017 and 2018 when, unlike the protests of the 1990s, which were full of outrage and violence, they had a completely nonviolent character, the dissatisfaction being creatively expressed through irony and sarcasm. During this period, social networks were flooded with a lot of

¹ Ioan Gheoghe Caradja, ruler of Wallachia, 1812-1818.

² Ion Ghica, Romanian economist, former prime minister of Romania, 1859-1960, 1866-1867, 1870-1871.

³ Vasile Alexandri, Romanian poet 1821-1890.

critical but humorous posts (Stoicescu, 2018).

With the expansion of social networks and the expansion of the social life of individuals in the virtual space, the jokes from the group of friends changed within the group, also moved to the groups on Facebook. Bulă, a beloved character from the Romanian popular humour, has become a status on Facebook.

The various events with public impact have also generated an increase in humorous posts on social networks. Such an event was represented by a naval accident in which a Romanian ship carrying sheep accidentally sank a small Russian military ship in the waters of the Bosphorus. The event provoked an explosion of humorous posts on Facebook, a potent factor being the historical animosities between Romania and Russia.

Another significant increase in humorous posts was the 2008 crisis that affected Romanian society. Given these developments in the manifestation of humour in the virtual space, it was natural to expect that the quarantine established as a measure to prevent the spread of COVID 19 infection, which was taken unexpectedly, caused a shock in the Romanian society which pushed to find its expression in the posts on the social network, Facebook.

1.2. Theories of humour

Humour occurs when our cognitive system gets stuck in information that is inappropriate for others. *"It's a kind of mental candy that evolution has given us to overcome strange situations. If we look at the people who joke during this period, we might find positive psychological traits that help them get over the crisis, to see beyond the immediate present"*, says Radu Umbreş (2020), university lecturer at SNSPA and doctor in social anthropology at University College London.

For the founder of speech therapy, Viktor Frankl, (2006), "Humour is a weapon of the soul in the struggle for self-preservation." In his book "The Man in Search of the Meaning of Life", the Austrian author talks about his time in prison in several Nazi extermination camps and refers to the importance of humour in increasing the chances of survival. Making jokes about a situation that is anything but funny helps you to distance yourself a little from the current state of affairs. Humour lifts you, for the moment at least, above the threatening reality and prevents it from taking over you completely.

1.3. Relief theory

The main assumption of this theory is that humour is a homeostatic mechanism through which psychological tension is reduced. Laughter results from this nervous release (Buijze, Valkenberg, 2004; Meyer, 2000). From the perspective of this theory, humour is a means of overcoming socio-cultural inhibitions and expressing suppressed desires (Buijzen, Valkenburg, 2004). In times of fear and insecurity such as in the quarantine situation, humour can serve to reduce fears and regain control over an unstable situation. In a simple formulation, laughter occurs when an initially tense situation suddenly relaxes. Because of this, humour thrives on sensitive topics. Usually, the recipe is as follows: the tension accumulates when the joke goes head-on and at full speed to break the taboo, but the situation suddenly relaxes when the joke makes an elegant pirouette around the sensitive subject.

1.4. Superiority theory

The theory of superiority is inspired by the writings of Plato and Aristotle and Leviathan by Thomas Hobbs. The basic idea is that a person or a group laughs at another person or group because his or her bad luck asserts their superiority amid

the defects of others (Mulder, Nijholt, 2002). The feeling of superiority is based on certain characteristics of the target group or deviations from the norms of society (Goldstein, Jeffery, 1976). Superiority theory focuses on the social implications of humour in the way a joke appears at the intersection of us and others. Through laughter, we express our superiority over others or over an older variant of ours which we have overcome. Our theory helps us better understand why we make so many jokes about politicians who manage the medical crisis. The clumsiness of some politicians like Boris Johnson or Ludovic Orban (Romania's prime minister) fuels some of the humour of the quarantine period, because obviously we would not make their mistakes and we would do better. It also helps to understand where the problematic jokes about groups vulnerable to the virus come from.

1.5. Incongruous juxtaposition theory

The incongruity theory states that humour is perceived when achieving the incongruity between a concept involved in a given situation and the real objects thought to be in some relationship with the concept (Mulder, Nijholt, 2002). From the perspective of this theory, humour is a "*temporary derailment of meaning*", involving the suspension of systematic thinking or the violation of laws or customs (Chivu, 2020). From this theory perspective, laughter is the result of the perception of incongruity. The first formulation of the incongruity theory is attributed to the Scottish poet Beattie (Timothy; Hickey-Moody, 2017). The best known version of the incongruity theory, however, is that of Kant, who argued that the comic is "*the sudden transformation of a tense expectation into nothing*" (Timothy; Hickey-Moody, 2017). Arthur Koestler argues that humour results when two different frames of reference are set and a collision is created between them (Koestler, 1964).

But the judgment whether or not two things are incongruous is made from the position of common sense, which is not the best judge. A bear on a bicycle may be an unusual and funny image, but so was the idea in the 19th century that a woman could vote or be voted for. This shows that common sense is often misleading and can lead to conservative jokes, which block the progress and emancipation of certain categories.

Common sense can put us on the wrong track even now. After all, the coronavirus pandemic has spread exponentially, and such increases are not exactly intuitive. On March 25, the virus killed 21,000 people. For some, it doesn't sound very worrying. It's just that the exponential progression involves doubling the number in just a few days. As of April 10, there were already 100,000 dead.

1.6. Defense mechanism theory

According to this theory, humour is the product of a set of automatic psychological processes that protect the individual from anxiety and awareness of internal or external dangers or stressors. People are often unaware of these processes as they operate. Defense mechanisms mediate the individual's reaction to emotional conflicts and internal and external stresses. The individual defense mechanisms are conceptually and empirically divided into related groups which are called defense levels (Ionescu, 2002).

2. Research on humour on internet

The Internet and its various social functions have been a subject of intensive research for a decade, but humour has been investigated since antiquity, being a topic of interest to ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato or Socrates. However, the presence

of humour in the virtual space was a subject less approached by researchers.

Studies have explored how humour constitutes and maintains communities on social networks such as Facebook or Twitter. These include a range of approaches from psychology, applied linguistics, to language learning. In their early work, Hubler and Bell (2003) show that humour plays a critical role in online communities. According to them, it is a virtual group ethos. Baym (2004) also argued that the presence of humour in social media communication is an important factor in creating online social meanings. Baym's study of members of a newsgroup shows how their humour is influenced by closer or paternal relationships between group members. He concluded that group solidarity is the main mechanism for establishing individuality despite common ways of acting in a group.

Few studies have been conducted on the nature and role of humour in the interactions and chats of Facebook users. Far from being an ephemeral appeal to the emotions of an audience, the humour on Facebook brings a persuasive argument. However, it is important to note that humorous visual texts on Facebook fulfill specific rhetorical functions.

The conceptual framework of this research is represented by the idea that humour broadcast on Facebook is not value neutral but transmits the dominant values and attitudes in society or in certain subcultures within it (Taiwo, Odebunmi, Adetunji, 2016). As these social networks continue to grow quantitatively and qualitatively and with them their influence on society increases, it is necessary to study the deeper functions of these contents of humorous messages. The content circulated on social networks practically ridicules people and institutions by capturing snapshots from social life in a way that fulfills special functions for the users of these networks.

Purpose of the study

The aim of the research was to investigate the forms of expression and types of humour used by Facebook users in Romania during the quarantine of COVID 19 pandemic prevention measures. The research questions were:

1. What were the most important ways to express humour?
2. What topics were addressed in the content of the humorous posts?
3. What were the reactions to the humorous posts?
4. Is there a typical form of humour for the quarantine period?
5. What functions did humorous posts perform during the quarantine period?

Theoretical and practical assumptions concerning the importance of humour and the various functions it fulfills in stressful situations were the starting point for this study. It follows Ziv (1984), who classifies the functions of humour into five main categories:

1. The aggressive function of humour which includes two types: a. Humour stemming from a sense of superiority; b. Humour stemming from frustration
2. The sexual functions of humour
3. The social functions of humour
4. The functions of humour as a defense mechanism which contains two types: a. Gallows humour; b. Self humour
5. The intellectual functions of humour

Methodology

In order to reach the research goals we used the method of content analysis having a quantitative component and a qualitative one to capture the main forms of humour manifestation within facebook groups, the topics addressed, the reactions

to them but at the same time the context and functions of these manifestations. The analysis unit was represented by the facebook groups specialized in broadcasting humorous productions and the observation units, the posts within them. We selected for this research the first ten most popular facebook pages and groups in Romania. The analyzed period was March 12-May 14, 2020.

Research results

According to ZeList, the social media monitoring and analysis service and on-line media, in January 2019, in Romania there were 9.8 million Facebook accounts and 83,097 pages being the most used social network. Instagram has 700,000 users and Twitter 377,568. During the mentioned period, 1.65 million posts and 4.38 million comments were registered (ZeList, 2019). Regarding youtube, in the same period there were 858,795 accounts and 130,717 users that uploaded at least one video.

On the Facebook network there is a wide variety of pages and groups for humour and entertainment purposes that address a wide range of user needs. In this research we selected the 10 most important groups and Facebook pages according to the number of members or followers (Tab. 1).

Table 1 - Facebook groups and pages

	<i>The name</i>	<i>Number of members or followers</i>	<i>The group / page profil</i>
1	Times New Roman (page)	609 382	Provides humorous answers to everyday news, passed through the imaginative filter of people who see things in a slightly different tone than most.
2	New Jokes (page)	446 282	New jokes on the themes of the day and funny photos.
3	Maxim I said (page)	325 595	Specializes in pearls collected from politicians, artists or other public figures, humorous photos and videos.
4	Interesting or not (page)	331 732	It is a page addressed to lovers of unique situations, captured in images, screenshots or videos. Even if the posts don't always make you laugh, it offers a different perspective for those who want to see things a little "differently".
5	Strong jokes and uncensored images (group)	253 314	Broadcasts a wide range of humorous, sometimes sexually explicit, humorous or sexy photos.
6	Jokes, humor, satire and laughter (group)	207 066	Jokes, funny texts, funny photos, videos, memes.
7	Laugh with us (group)	167 268	The group broadcasts a wide range of jokes, humorous photos, short films and memes.
8	Jokes (group)	92 838	Jokes, funny texts, funny photos, videos, memes.
9	Romanian jokes and umor (page)	72 922	Broadcasts predominantly filmed sequences from Romanian comedies, videos from comedy shows, humorous photos and jokes.
10	Ilariant (page)	38 530	It offers quality humor mainly in the form of quite long and tasty articles.

The analyzed groups represent mostly the primary source for the humorous contents broadcast on the Facebook network in Romania. The pages are created by journalists or artists who use them to promote their productions while the groups are created by Facebook users. The analyzed groups and pages have a well-defined

profile that did not change during the quarantine period but only adapted its contents. The humour offer is varied and adapted to the tastes of all categories of users. In addition to professional productions, articles or various multimedia materials, the pages and groups broadcast amateur-produced material, short films, personal comments or jokes.

Forms of expressions of humour

The first objective of the research was to analyze the forms of expression of humorous content in Facebook groups. In order to describe the forms in which the humor disseminated by the groups and pages analyzed we used the typology developed by Driesen (2004) which distinguishes between old and new forms of humour expression (Tab. 2).

Old type

1. *Joke*: a short story with a punch line;
2. *Home video*: a slapstick-based video that captures people in embarrassing /surprising situations;
3. *The comercial*: advertisements which are created in order to be circulated via e-mail from person to person;
4. *Comis lists*: lists of definitions, rules, typologies or advice;
5. *Cartoon*.

New Type

1. *Interactive humour*: A humorous text which requires from its receiver the performance of an activity that is additional to reading, watching or hearing;
2. *Funny photo*: a photograph that conveys a humorous message, often accompanied by a funny written text;
3. *Maniphoto*: an explicitly manipulated photograph that is usually combined with other visual forms;
4. *Phanimation*: a crude animation of static photos (Phanimation stands for photo+animation). This is the moving version of the maniphoto;
5. *Celebrity Soundboards*: collections of digitized celebrity sound bites taken from movies, radio and TV, which are presented on the Internet to facilitate prank calls;
6. *PowerPoint humour*: a humorous text that takes the form of a PowerPoint presentation.

Table 2 The main ways of expressing humorous content

<i>Nr. crt.</i>	<i>Form of expression</i>	<i>N.</i>	<i>%</i>
1	PowerPoint humor	840	20
2	Funny photo	714	17
3	Maniphoto	672	16
4	Phanimation	588	14
5	Joke	420	10
6	Interactive humor	294	7
7	Celebrity Soundboards	252	6
8	Home video	128	3
9	The comercial	127	3
10	Cartoon	125	3
Total		4200	100

From the total of posts on the 10 "hubs" of humour, I identified for the analyzed period 4200 posts with a humorous character. The other posts had other characteristics and were not taken into account. We also excluded from the analysis old movies or recordings from older shows because they do not reflect the situation from the period of interest. It can be seen (table 2) that most of the humorous content belongs to the new forms of humour expression, adapted to the digital age (67 %). PowerPoint, Funny photo, Maniphoto and PowerPoint Phanimation were the most popular forms of humour on Facebook. Jokes, a form preferred by the Romanians during the communist period, remain popular, being adapted to the context with contents that reflect the current situation in society. The more popular forms in Western societies such as home video, the commercial, are less used and even cartoons are no longer popular.

Topics covered in group and page posts

In the analysis of the topics of the posts we used the typology proposed by Limor Shifman (2004). Thus, we identified in research many topics (Tab. 3).

Table 3 -Topic distribution of humorous posts

<i>Topic</i>	<i>Subtopic</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Covid infection		840	20
Preventive measures	Efficiency and justification of the rules imposed	630	15
	Violation of quarantine rules		
Politics	The prime minister: Ludovic Orban	588	14
	Health Minister: Nelu Tătaru		
	Minister of the Interior: Mircea Vela		
	Head of the Institute of Epidemiology: Alexandru Rafila		
	Head of Emergency Department: Raed Arafat		
	The leader of the opposition: Marcel Ciolacu		
	Others		
	Total		
Romanians abroad		420	10
Conspiracy		294	7
The qualities and defects of Romanians		210	5
Habits		210	5
Roma population		210	5
Sex	Heterosexual / Homosexual	168	4
	Not specified		
	Total		
Gender	Marriage	168	4
	Men		
	Women		
	Other		
	Total		
Animals		168	4
Parents, childrens, teenagers	Parent-child	168	4
	Other		
	Total		
Sports		42	1
Transportation, travels		42	1
Workplace		21	0,5
Profesion		21	0,5
Total		4200	100

The themes addressed in the humorous posts on the Facebook pages and groups during the quarantine period underwent changes compared to the previous period where family life, sex, education, work or profession were much more present (Smaradache, 2016). For the quarantine period as expected, attention was focused on the infection, preventive measures and the work of politicians or other officials involved in managing the pandemic. Special attention was paid to Romanians living abroad who were accused in the Romanian press and on social networks as being responsible for bringing the infection in the country. To this, the theme of conspiracies was added, which was ironized by an important part of the users. The qualities and defects of Romanians, an aspect present in many humorous productions in Romania, was put in this context in relation to the pandemic and the confrontation with it.

The analysis of the humorous productions posted on the social networks during the quarantine period in Romania showed an evolution of the attitude towards the disease. If in the early days of the pandemic, when the number of infected and dead was relatively low, the attitude towards it was an underestimation of its danger, after a few weeks it changed and the emphasis was shifted to adapting to the situation.

Reactions to humorous posts

In general, the reactions to the posts on the analyzed humour hubs were positive, registering a significant number of likes and redistributions to personal groups and networks. There were also different situations. Thus, in a few cases, they gave rise to controversy and divided the audience of social network users into antagonistic groups. One such case was represented by the posting of a political scientist of Romanian origin from the University of Maryland, United States, Vladimir Tismăneanu who posted a photo on his account with a racist comment. The post was distributed on humour groups and pages. The photo posted represents 3 crows perched on a fence and the comment was "*Tandarei (a town in Southern Romania with an important Roma community), all flights canceled*". The comment alluded to the problems registered in this region where the inhabitants did not respect the quarantine and the intervention of the law forces was necessary in order to impose it. The crow is also a bird associated with the Roma ethnic group. Some of the internet users appreciated the humour, another part condemned the racist attitude.

Another incident was a parody made by a journalist from Suceava, the county in Romania where the most cases of infection were registered against a local businessman, Ștefan Mandachi, who initiated a fundraising campaign in favor of the Romanian Red Cross. The journalist Silviu Gherman ironized in the broadcast parody that not every problem can be solved with money. Some users liked the joke, others said that such initiatives cannot be the subject of a joke.

In general, the humorous posts present on the analyzed Facebook pages and groups reproduce the ethnic or sexist stereotypes existing in the Romanian society, but they did not arouse reactions from the internet users. This can be explained by the high degree of tolerance that exists towards such attitudes. The public scandal came at a time when well-known public figures were involved and there were complaints from civil society organizations.

Functions of humorous posts

In order to analyze the functions performed by the humorous posts on the internet, we used the categories proposed by Ziv (1984). The findings indicate that hu-

mour in the posts made during the quarantine period fulfilled all the functions of humour, but especially that of Defense Mechanism, including its sub types.

Tabel 4 - Utterances and Episodes frequency in each Humor Function

<i>Functions</i>	<i>N.</i>	<i>%</i>
1. The aggressive function of humor:		
a. Humor stemming from a sense of superiority	840	20
b. Humor stemming from frustration	924	22
1. Total aggressive function of humor	1764	42
2. The sexual functions of humor	126	3
3. The social functions of humor	924	22
4. The functions of humor as a defense mechanism which contains two types		
a. Gallows humor	210	5
b. Self humor	840	20
4. Total functions of humor as a defense mechanism	1302	31
5. The intellectual functions of humor	336	8
Total	4200	100

The content posted on the groups and Facebook pages showed that they fulfill a series of functions for users, among which the most prominent were the expression of superiority over socially marginalized groups, especially Roma but also politicians who committed a series of clumsy actions. There were also frustrations related to movement limitations or other types of deprivation.

The laughter is used as a defense mechanism used to guard against overwhelming anxiety caused by the quarantine situation. Laughter often diminishes the suffering associated with deprivation and restriction of freedom of movement.

Humour may also be primarily cognitive. Intellectual humour present in some posts offered users, groups and pages a momentary freedom from the tyranny of logical thought, allowed them to escape the bounds of reality and helped them to indulge their capacity for originality and creative. We can say that the contents of many posts were related to overcoming present social taboos, he took the opportunity to criticize a number of negative aspects of society such as the case of health system deficiencies and the organization of prevention measures. Last but not least, it provided an opportunity to strengthen group solidarity. An example of this was the attachment to certain jokes that supported common beliefs about the group's subjective representations.

Conclusions

The humour broadcast on social networks in Romania during the quarantine period for the COVID 19 pandemic represented a legitimate response to the situation of fear and uncertainty faced by users. The purposes of these humorous messages had a double value: on the one hand they helped alleviate anxiety and restore control over reality but on the other hand had negative aspects related to the social devaluation of those affected by the pandemic or socially excluded groups. This is the main negative aspect of humorous posts on social networks.

During the quarantine period, the expression of humor in the posts on the groups and Facebook pages kept the same forms and functions, but the contents, the topics approached were adapted to the new social realities. The new forms of expression of humor were imposed in the online media but at the same time some old forms have been preserved, such as jokes and their traditional characters. This

seems to suggest that they play a role in maintaining social solidarity. Also for this purpose, it seems that series of recordings with older comic scenes were broadcast, which did not match the quarantine context. In support of this idea are the comments on these contents that express in unison a nostalgia.

Overall, the data collected show that humorous posts were a coping mechanism through which users tried to integrate and better understand the pandemic experience with all the anxieties and uncertainties it generated. They made the feelings of sadness or despair experienced by quarantined users tolerable.

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Webography

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The Topics-scape of the Pandemic Crisis: The Italian Sentiment on Political Leaders¹

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to identify themes, actors and mood of the tweets shared by users in the period from March 25 to April 3, 2020 in Italy. It seems an extremely delicate and complex period, because it corresponds to the first phase of the lockdown, introduced following the Covid-19 pandemic. It was a period characterized by emergency and crisis, with nuances related to fear and uncertainty. We assumed that this situation could have influenced and produced effects on the ideologically oriented digital language practice. Taking this background into consideration, we have scraped the messages containing the surnames of the Italian Premier and the one of the opposition leader from Twitter, in order to identify the debate connected to them and to the crisis. To achieve this goal, we performed a computational linguistic technique, Emotinal Text Mining. The first result reconstructs the landscape of the debate. Arising topics-scape drawn by: the leader, the players, the economy, the entertainment, the politic, the skill, and the guilt. Then, representations were identified and sentiments measured.

Keywords: Emotional Text Mining, Pandemic, Political Debate, Twitter.

Introduction

In times of crisis, the language of political leaders and citizens may change, following rules dictated by emergency and fear. We could therefore modify what has been defined as “language ideological debate” (Blommaert, 1999), and which represents a key concept for sociolinguistic investigations, which explore the ways in which what often seem to be only linguistic disputes are, instead, expression of different concerns, such as: economic, political, social (Stroud, 2004; Blackledge, 2005; Johnson, 2005a, 2005b; Milani, 2007; Milani and Johnson, 2008). Political communication scholars and political scientists have worked extensively on these issues, underlining how concepts such as “hegemony” and “normalization” are fundamental. They did so because their interest is represented by understanding how the visions of language – which are of particular origin – in the end they are perceived as common sense (Milani and Johanson, 2008, p. 2), thus reaching a state of normalization (Blommaert, 1999; Bourdieu, 2000).

In truth, the ideological language of the political debate is not the fulcrum of the work that is undertaken here, instead, the object of our interest could be defined as an ideologically oriented digital language practice in times of crisis, with the aim of drawing and then interpreting the panorama of the topics of this first debate. Our crisis is represented by the recent pandemic.

¹ The article is the result of a joint work but, for the sole purpose of the award, the following paragraph division can be considered: Francesca Greco, paragraphs 1, 2 and 3; Gevisa La Rocca, introduction and paragraph 4.

It all started on December 31th, 2019, when China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) of the existence of a new virus whose origin was unknown both to scientists, and workers and visitors to a wet market in the city of Wuhan. Wuhan and its wet market are the city and the place where it all began. On January 9th, 2020, Chinese authorities identified a new type of pneumonia belonging to the Coronavirus (2019-nCov) as the causative agent of the disease. This is the SARS-CoV-2 virus (acronym for Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome - Coronavirus-2) also Covid-19 – declared a global pandemic on March 11th, 2020 by the WHO – which suddenly projected us into a situation completely new and unexpected. Lockdown policies also forced us to renounce part of our rights, the freedom to go out, to be with friends, to see family members. There has been a reduction in our autonomy, our freedom of action in favor of safety and the protection of public health. Citizens all over the world are suffering from a historical health crisis due to the coronavirus pandemic, which is also accompanied by an unprecedented economic and social crisis. In fact, as Morin defined it, it is a threefold crisis (Scaloja, 2020). The aim of this work is to reconstruct – through linguistic statistics techniques – what happened in the debate within digital media in the period from March 25th to April 3th, 2020 in Italy. The chosen observation point is Twitter. The social media are already studied in terms of: creating *ad hoc* publics (Bruns and Burgess, 2015), networked publics (Boyd 2010), spreaders of social and political activism (e.g., Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Rambukkana, 2015), an environment for sharing opinions and emotions (e.g., Tettegah 2016; Döveling *et al.*, 2018; Boccia Artieri and La Rocca 2019).

1. Emotional Text Mining and public perception

The issue of citizen security has become particularly important in recent years and particularly, during this pandemic. Even before the emergency, it was a topic of systematic discussion on media and social media, assuming centrality also in the political and public debate. The debate about the security in Italy is not new but reappears cyclically in particular historical phases. In fact, it had already appeared in the press pages during the period of the latest terrorist attacks (see also La Rocca and Martínez-Torvisco, 2017).

Among other factors, media and social media play a relevant role in influencing public perception. Agenda-setting, priming and framing theories help to understand how the increase in media coverage levels can increase the relevance of a specific topic making it more important to the public. In fact, agenda-setting theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) states that publishers, newsroom staff and broadcasters play an important role in shaping reality, choosing events considered “newsworthy” and manipulating the space and relevance attributed to them through a mechanism referred to as “salience transfer”. By operating in this way, the media can transfer a topic from a private agenda to a public one, influencing the audience. Moreover, in contrast to past modes of communication, social media, has become massively popular and now represents the preferred platform for expressing politically incorrect sentiments. The reason why political propaganda is flooding social media platforms is that they increasingly fulfil the function of communication, not only enabling millions of users to share information daily, but also funnelling citizens’ comments, opinions, and feelings on a wide range of topics.

Therefore, the social media data availability represents one of the primary

sources to explore people's opinions, sentiments, emotions and life experiences. Therefore, social media messages can be analyzed in order to detect public perception and explain and/or anticipate the dynamics of different events, potentially producing useful results applicable in different contexts. For this reason, social media have started to play a growing role in understanding the social phenomenon, and sentiment analysis is increasingly used in order to explore people's opinions and feelings (e.g., Bollen *et al.*, 2011; Ceron *et al.*, 2013; Fronzetti Colladon, 2018; Gloor, 2017; Greco and Polli, 2020a; Zhao *et al.*, 2019).

Sentiment analysis is a field of study that analyzes people's opinions, sentiments, evaluations, appraisals, attitudes and emotions towards entities. It is also called opinion mining, since, frequently, the sentiment is considered a personal belief, or judgment, which is not founded on rational reasoning, but on a subjective emotion. The use of a text mining approach to classifying the sentiment of a text has been largely discussed in the literature, (e.g., Balbiet *et al.*, 2018; Bollen *et al.*, 2011; Liu, 2012). Most methods are based on a top-down approach, where *a priori* coding procedure of terms, or text, is performed focusing on the manifest content of the word. Nonetheless, it is not sufficient to classify the sentiment lexicon to perform a sentiment analysis because a term, classified as a positive or negative sentiment word, may have an opposite orientation depending on the context (Liu, 2012).

Emotional Text Mining (ETM) (Greco, 2016a; Greco and Polli, 2020a) is a text mining procedure that, employing bottom-up logic, allows for context-sensitive text mining approach on unstructured data, which constitutes 95% of big data (Gandomi and Haider, 2015). ETM is an unsupervised text mining procedure, based on a socio-constructivist approach and a psychodynamic model (Greco, 2016b). According to this approach, the sentiment is not only the expression of a mood but also the evidence of latent and social thinking process that sets people interactions, behaviour, attitudes, expectations and communication. Thus, according to semiotic approach to the analysis of textual data, ETM allows performing social profiling. This has already been applied in different fields (Cordella *et al.*, 2018a; Cordella *et al.*, 2018b; Greco *et al.*, 2019, Greco and Polli, 2020b; Laricchiuta *et al.*, 2018) and, particularly on the analysis of political debate in order to profile social media users and to anticipate or explain their political choices (Greco *et al.*, 2017; Greco *et al.*, 2018a; Greco *et al.*, 2018b; Greco, 2019; Greco and Polli, 2019). While the mental functioning proceeds from the semiotic level to the semantic one in generating the text, the statistical procedure simulates the inverse process of the mental functioning, from the semantic level to the semiotic one. For this reason, ETM performs a sequence of synthesis procedures, from the text pre-processing and the selection of the keywords to the multivariate analysis, to identify the semiotic level, starting from the semantic one.

2. Methods

In order to explore the representation and the sentiment on the two political leaders in Twitter communication during pandemic, we scraped all the Italian messages containing the word "Conte" and "Salvini" along ten days, from March 25th to April 3th, 2020. Data collection was performed with the *retweet* package of R (v.0.7.0; Kearney, 2020) that provide an interface to the Twitter web API.

All the messages up to 300 retweets were collected in a corpus, and two lexical indicators were calculated: the type-token ratio and the hapax percentage, to check

whether it was possible to statistically process data (Giuliano and La Rocca, 2010). According to the large size of the corpus, both lexical indicators highlight its richness and indicate the possibility of proceeding with the ETM.

First, data were cleaned and pre-processed with the software T-Lab (v.2018, Lancia, 2018) and keywords selected. We used lemmas as keywords instead of type, filtering out the words of the low rank of frequency (Greco, 2016a). Then, on the tweets per keywords matrix, we performed a cluster analysis with a bisecting *k*-means algorithm (Savaresi and Boley, 2004) limited to twenty partitions, excluding all the tweets that did not have at least two keywords co-occurrence. To choose the optimal solution, we calculated the Calinski-Harabasz, the Davies-Bouldin and the intraclass correlation coefficient (ρ) indices. Then, we performed a correspondence analysis (Lebart and Salem, 1994) on the cluster per keywords matrix, and we measured the sentiment according to the number of messages classified in the cluster and its interpretation. We choose to measure two type of sentiment: the classic one (Positive vs negative) and the trust and distrust in the government.

The interpretation of the cluster analysis results allows for the identification of the elements characterizing the representation of the political leaders, also in terms of positivity or negativity, while the results of correspondence analysis reflect its cultural symbolization setting social behaviors. The advantage connected with this approach is to interpret the factorial space according to words polarization, thus identifying the emotional categories that generate leaders' representations, and to facilitate the interpretation of clusters, exploring their relationship within the symbolic space. Moreover, as representations are a system of values, ideas, and practices.

3. Results

The name of the Italian prime minister allowed to collect 327,042 messages (sample_C), while the name of the *Lega* leader allowed to collect as smaller number of tweet (n= 228,043) (sample_S) and most of the messages in both samples(79%) were retweet. In the high rank of frequency of the first sample the name of the Prime Minister stand alone, while in the second samples the name of the Lega leader was associated with two other politicians. The frequency of the leaders' name in the two sample of tweets was different: *Salvini* has a 1:19 ratio with the word *Conte* in the sample_C, while in the sample_S *Conte* has a 1:14 ratio and the *Meloni*, the leader of *Fratelli di Italia* party, has a 1:7 ratio with the word *Salvini*.

The texts selection and the corpus preprocessing determined a loss of 10% of the messages (n= 433,353; n_{sampleC} = 264,112; n_{sampleS}= 169,241) resulting in a large size corpus of 11,921,450tokens. On the basis of the large size of the corpus, both lexical indicators highlighted its richness (TTR = 0.009; Hapax = 39.9%) and indicated the possibility of proceeding with the statistical analysis, which was performed with the 2086 keywords selected.

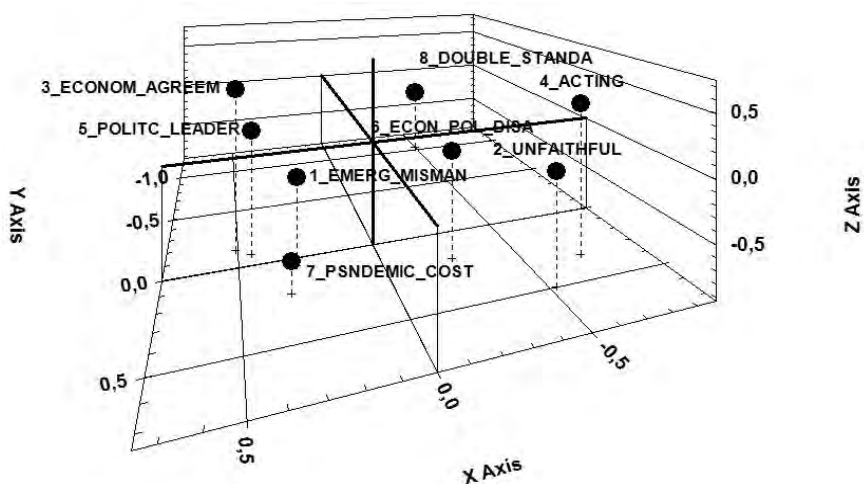
Table 1 – Correspondence analysis results

Factor	Eigenvalues	Inertia (%)	Cumul. %	Factor	Negative Pole	Positive Pole
1	0.2067	23.8	23.8	Leader	Opposition	Government
2	0.1801	20.8	44.6	Players	Politicians	Population
3	0.1253	14.4	59.0	Economic Issue	Municipal	European
4	0.1170	13.5	72.5	Media	Entertain	Inform
5	0.0980	11.3	83.8	Politic	National	International
6	0.0764	8.8	92.6	Information	Scientific	Political
7	0.0641	7.4	100.0	Guilt	impunity	Shame

The results of the cluster analysis show that the keywords selected allowed for the classification of 99.8% of the tweets. The clustering validation measures indicated that the optimal solution was eight clusters. The correspondence analysis detected six latent dimensions, and the explained inertia for each factor is reported in Table 1.

In Figure 1, we can appreciate the factorial space of the two politicians emerging from the Italian tweets. It shows how the clusters are placed in the factorial space produced by the first three factors, explaining 59% of the inertia.

Figure 1 – Factorial space



As shown in Table 1, ultimately, the Twitter users symbolize both politicians by means of seven main categories: the leader, the players, the economy, the entertainment, the politic, the skill, and the guilt. These are the themes that design our topics-scape, that is, a group media landscape produced by the discursive-textual interaction of Twitter users, and reconstructed through a retrospective analysis process (La Rocca, 2020).

The first factor in our topics-scape distinguishes the leaders: the Premier, *Conte*, from the opposition leader, *Salvini*; the second factor distinguish the players, pitting those who have the power to rule, politicians, against those who are ruled, the population; the third factor categorize the economic impact of pandemic pitting the health emergency against the market emergency. Pandemic posed an impossible choice between saving lives promoting the national house confinement, solving the immediate health problem but causing a future loss in productivity, and saving the economic productivity, solving the country from a huge economic crisis entailing an unbearable price of human lives.

The fourth factor distinguishes the aim of media, distinguishing the entertainment from the information; the fifth factor pits the national politic against the international one; the sixth factor calls for the need of knowledge differing the scientific knowledge and the political one; finally, the seventh factor focuses on the person of power guilt, distinguishing impunity, which rises citizen's anger and powerlessness, from shame, which evokes astonishment and punishment satisfaction.

The interpretation of the factorial space highlights the symbolic categories by which people, in general, emotionally categorize the leaders, and support the cluster interpretation according to their location in the symbolic space (Table 2).

Table 2 - Cluster location in the symbolic space

Cluster	Tweet %	Factor 1 Leader	Factor 2 Players	Factor 3 Economic Issue	Factor 4 Media	Factor 5 Politic	Factor 6 Information	Factor 7 Guilty
1	11.4	Premier					Political	Impunity
2	11.1	Opposition	Population		Inform		Scientific	
3	15.1	Premier		European		International		
4	9.1	Opposition	Population	European	Entertain			
5	13.0	Premier				National		
6	16.2	Opposition					Political	Shame
7	12.5	Premier		Municipal		International		
8	11.6	Opposition	Politicians					

The eight clusters are of different sizes (Table 3) and reflect different leader's representations. In the first cluster, the premier is held responsible for an emergency mismanagement, 85% of the tweets of this cluster belong to the sample_C, and therefore it mostly addresses the Premier decisions. The home confinement and the increase of death are represented as the evidence of the government incompetence in managing the pandemic impact:

It is not enough for him to have reduced us to a morgue thanks to his delays, this cialtrone is also leading us to total economic disaster)
Amateur buffoons who insult the dignity, honor and security of the whole of Italy.
They must go! ... The first who must go is Mattarella

The second cluster concern mostly the opposition leader as 86% of texts belong to the sample_S, and it represents the leader as someone who is striving for rising is visibility and consensus participating in the media show, sometimes rising extremely negative reactions. Then, his communication as well as his behavior is unreliable because they are fakes:

Who votes Salvini # Salvini # Piazzapulita A hit I see pizza Teresanna who says it is very good and like when Salvini spoke of excise duties, the same.
salvini in # piazzapulita goes to tell some bullshit Lies lies all lies
PiazzaPulitaSalvini's video of 27 February? Go Home!

In the third cluster 90% of texts belong to the sample_C and it represents the leader difficulty in finding an economic agreement for receiving support to face the pandemic cost and consequences. The level of uncertainty is also the results of the multiple, discord information:

MES but not MES. In short, TAV method. So, let's recap the Premier # Conte's position on # MES. 1 week ago at FT use all MES firepower. 4 days ago in Cons. EU MES old tool. 3 minutes ago yes at MES if new. Let's prepare for yes # MES but not MES. In short, TAV method.

The fourth cluster, in which 83% of texts come from the sample_S, represent the politician's participation in media entertainments as the play of an actor, who aims to raise consensus and visibility. As an actor he is not allowed to disregard some "cultural value":

Things we would have preferred not to see on TV: Barbara d'Urso and Matteo Salvini recite the Eternal Rest. The eternal rest of reason!

the problem is that #D'Urso prays live with #Salvini because someone is watching her !!! Gentlemen viewers who watch it but are you not offended by all of this???

Table 3 - Cluster analysis results

Cluster	Tweet	Label	Lemma	Sentiment	Government	Sample
1	11.4	Emergency Mismanagement	casa morto governo soldi governodellavergogna	Negative	Distrust	Conte 85%
2	11.1	Unreliable	contedimetiti piazzapulita salvini formigli laboratorio bufala virus	Negative	Distrust	Salvini 86%
3	15.1	Economic Agreement	MES UE gualtieri merkel coronabond	Neutral	Trust	Conte 90%
4	9.1	Acting	strumento D'Urso preghiera recitare salvini pregare	Negative	Distrust	Salvini 83%
5	13.0	Political Leadership	salvini sciacallo presidente conferenza pasquetta nuovo proroga	Positive	Trust	Conte 95%
6	16.2	Useless Opposition	allentare Meloni condono INPS guerra proporre	Negative	Distrust	Salvini 74%
7	12.5	Pandemic's Costs	comprensibile milioni sindaco difficolta stanziare speranza emergenza	Negative	Trust	Conte 78%
8	11.6	Double Standard	Orban poteri parlamento democrazia dittatura differenza	Negative	Trust	Conte 57% & Salvini 43%

In the fifth cluster 95% of texts come from the sample_C, the Twitter user seems to call for a resolute guidance in time of pandemic, a political leadership able to take the right decisions and to communicate with the population, taking care of citizens' sentiment:

Conte's measures - lockdown signed until April 13th. If we relaxed now all efforts would be in vain
#coronavirus #Conte #CONTE DIMETTITI The Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte will land a press conference at Palazzo Chigi at around 19. 20. The sources of the Prime Minister announce it.

The sixth cluster, in which 74 % of messages come from the sample_S, the political opposition is represented as useless, since they are unable to propose useful solution to reduce the emergency impact. The opposition is perceived as unable to solve problem compared to the ruling leadership. Their decision and propositions are interpreted as the political opposition needs to raise consensus which is unbearable during pandemic:

#Salvini #Draghi #COVID19 2019: Salvini chases Boers and puts Tridico in charge of INPS. 2020: Salvini invokes the resignation of Tridico. Sipario Coronavirus, Matteo Salvini: Referendum on leaving the European Union?

if he is cured, the life-long cage with herpes awaits him .. and Berlusconi Gori LapoBambaTajaniSalviniMeloni[...] Soon you will see Salvini flee to Hungary with Meloni.

The seventh cluster reflects the pandemic's costs and 78% of texts come from sample_C. The government's commitment to provide financial support to municipalities is represented as ineffective and its results as paltry

Conti: 4, 3 billion for municipalities. Plus 400 million tied for the expense of families in difficulty. In Italy there are 26 million families; 50% in difficulty. Then 400 million 13 million = 30 for family unit, half dinner.
 Coronavirus, Giuseppe Conte and the mystery on the extension: no announcement, but signs a DPCM of aid to the Municipalities

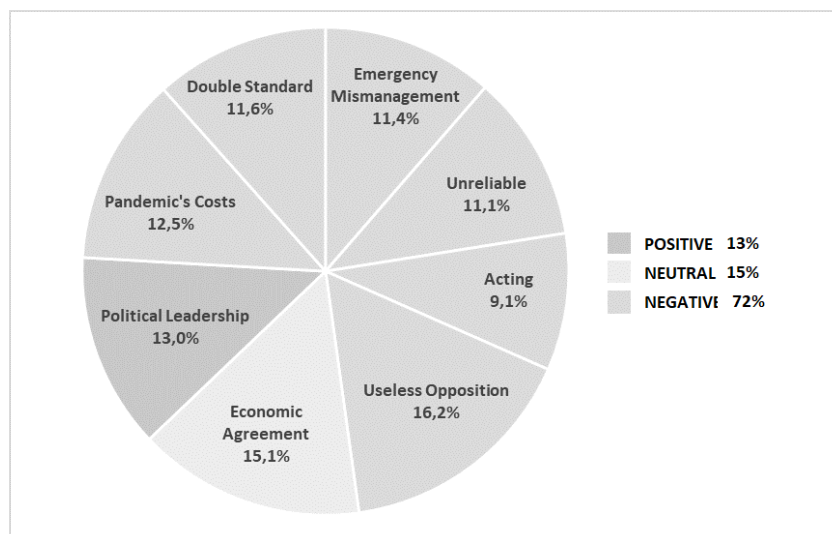
In the eighth cluster the texts come almost equally from both sample (Table 3), the political powers of Conte are compared to the Hungarian Premier ones, and the issue of democracy vs dictatorship is discussed:

Everyone is scandalized by Orban's full powers in Hungary. Well. A question. What is the difference between the full powers of Orban and those of Conte in Italy? .. If you go to see they are very similar. But a difference is In Hungary, Parliament voted. Here not.
 Conte cannot indict journalists, Orbanyes. Conte can be disheartened, Orban no DPCM have time limit, full powers Orban no Conte cannot suspend elections, Orbanyes Conte cannot change, suspend laws, Orbanyes I f I was # Conte I would not resist the temptation to call Salvini at 2 a.m., to tell him I have assumed full powers,

The two examples highlight the ambivalent need to have a strong leader who take all the decisions and ,at the same time, not to give up to freedom. The leader differences are then represented as a double standard evaluation.

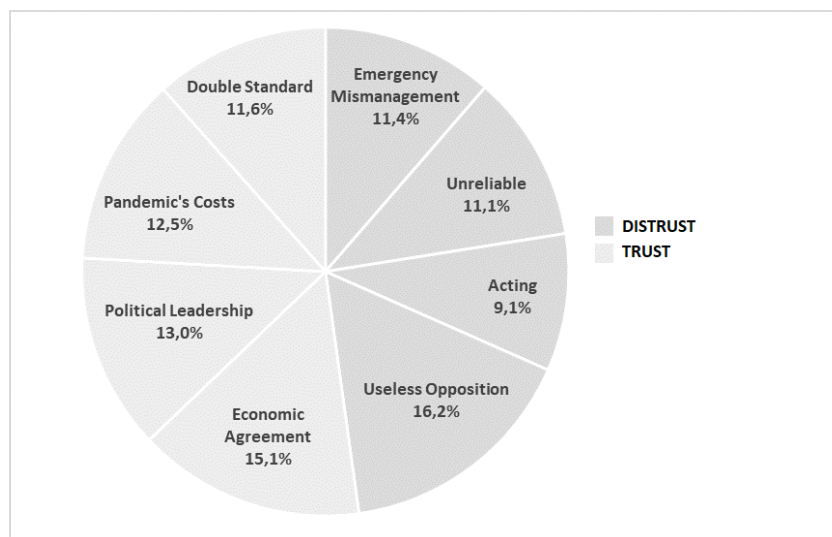
From the interpretation of the clusters, we detected eight different representations of the political leader. Since all the representations seem to be mainly negative, we grouped the sentient in two ways: according to their positivity (Figure 2), and according to their level of trust in the government choices (Figure 3).

Figure 2 - Sentient



We have considered all the representations negative (72%) unless the *economic agreement* (15%) that was considered neutral and the *political leadership* (13%) that was considered positive due to its trust in the government management (Figure 2). Not surprisingly the high majority of messages in the emergency period are negative but if we consider the sentiment from a different perspective the result is particularly interesting. Half of the representations (52% of texts) are confident with the emergency management of the government. We have considered *political leadership*, *economic agreement*, *pandemic's cost* and *double standards* as confident with the government choices. Even though in the *double standards* the focus is on the level of freedom connected to the political power, the emergency management is not an aspect of the discussion but rather who has got the power to decide. On the other hand, we considered *emergency mismanagement*, *acting*, *unreliability* and *useless opposition* as distrusting representation in the political leaders.

Figure 3 - Government Trust



4. Discussion and conclusion

The first image we get from the analysis of the tweets sees opposites between them: themes and actors. The first contrast inside the actors is between the politicians: Conte and Salvini; the second sees the holders of power on the one hand and the citizens on the other; around them a polarized debate develops, from which arise the themes: the protection of public health and the fear of the economic crisis produced by the lockdown and by the decrees issued by the Premier Conte (D.P.C.M. of 23 February 2020; D.P.C.M. of 4 March 2020; D.P.C.M. of 22 March 2020).

The leitmotiv of the pandemic crisis emerging from the background is the uncertainty. The latter clearly linked to not knowing what will happen next and therefore to the perception and feeling of bewilderment, but also connected – in a more or less latent way – to the relationship between the public and private spheres, which emerge like a Hamletic doubt, still today the subject of debate, between the interference of the State in terms of public health and the need for economic recovery.

On it, then, are inserted: the comparison with the containment measures adopted by other States and the recommendations that come from the world of science, represented by virologists and epidemiologists who have become new opinion leaders. Until this first reading, the landscape would seem varied and confused, but if you go into the analysis of emotions and sentiments, the situation becomes clearer, something emerges from the fog. He is the figure of Giuseppe Conte. In fact, although 72% of the sentiment is collected within the “negative” label, reversing the perspective it is found that half of the representations (52% of the texts; see fourth paragraph) have trust in the management of emergencies by the government.

If we consider that “images of linguistic phenomena gain social credibility and political influence” (Gal and Woolard, 2001, p. 7), we have the opportunity to consider how this discursive construction of publics, achieved through form of digital textual mediation – formed by social actors/users more or less autonomous and/or homogenous groups (Johnson and Ensslin, 2007, p.15) – have created processes of representation politically relevant because they are linked to the legitimation and trust of governmental measures.

The legitimacy that emerges from these measures –through the analysis of the digital practice of ideologically oriented language – gives back information that is important, and just not a bit. Especially in consideration of the recent debate that has arisen in the Italian press and in some fringes of public opinion on the action of the Premier, who adopted/imposed these measures through his own decree and not through a legislative decree. The group-scape that arises, from the analysis of the first period of diffusion and discussion of the pandemic in Italy, is certainly characterized by climate that oscillates between uncertainty and trust. Uncertainty for an unknown situation and trust in the choices of those who govern us.

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The Challenges of Social Work in the Management of the Covid-19¹

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Abstract

The discipline and profession of Social Work, concerned with the social change of individuals and entire communities, the solution of problematic situations, as well as the increase in the well-being of citizens, also appears to have a specific role in dealing with emergency situations (earthquakes, catastrophic events, industrial accidents, epidemics and pandemics). The aim of the article is to describe, starting from the results of two investigations carried out in Italy, the responses of social and social health services to the Coronavirus emergency, and the challenges faced by social workers. The main result is that social services have responded to pandemic by developing strategies that have enabled to deliver essential performance and to strengthen the internal cohesion of services, during a critical situation.

Key word: Social Work, Sanitary emergency, Social services, Social policy.

Introduction

The aim of this study is to describe the challenges faced by Italian social services from the moment the pandemic generated by the Covid-19² exploded, when the Italian Government declared, on 30 January 2020, the state of emergency for six months and entrusted to the head of the Italian Department of Civil Protection the co-sorting actions necessary to deal with the health emergency (rescue and assistance to people infected, checks in port and airport areas, return to the homeland of citizens who were in the countries at risk).

There are not specific therapies to deal with the disease and since the transmission motions are identified in close contact with symptomatic or infected persons, forms of control have been pre-identified in actions of social distancing, sanitation of environments and individual protection (from the use of personal devices to quarantine).

Several regulatory provisions have occurred over time in order to cope with the spread of the epidemic; all decrees issued have confirmed the need to ensure the operation of public services through “agile” work.

What happened to social services?

If, in general, the role of the professional Social Work and the entire service system is particularly important in emergency situations, it has been called upon to continue to guaranteeing - and strengthening-the situation «(...) services that can contribute to the best implementation of government directives and to maintain

¹ The article is the result of the collaboration of the two authors. However, paragraphs 1, 2, 3 and 4 can be attributed to Emilio Gregori, the introduction, paragraph 5 and the conclusions to Annamaria Perino.

² On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organization declared Coronavirus as an international public health emergency and, later, on 11 March 2020, as a pandemic disease (WHO, 2005).

maximum social cohesion in the face of the challenge of the emergency» (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2020). Particular attention is given to those who – because of the emergency – are in a fragile state, and to the need to guarantee the essential levels of social benefits, in line with what is established by law 328/2000.

The circular mentioned hopes that the Social Work will be able to play a role in coordinating all the realities operating in the social on the individual territories, connecting with the Municipal Operations Centres (COC)³ and highlighting the areas of intervention and the targets of citizens to pay special attention to. In fact, the importance of: maintaining telephone interviews with those in charge is crucial; do not neglect users followed at home (especially if there are other family or context vulnerabilities), work for homeless people and those who are victims of domestic violence; keep the focus on vulnerable situations for women and minors who need urgent protection and support measures.

In the light of this, the local authorities, who hold the social-welfare function, are called to ensure services and social benefits, focusing on the activities that are of priority and trying to optimize and coordinate the activities implemented in the individual territories⁴.

In general, it can be said that there has been no suspension of the activities of social services but rather their re-modulation, also thanks to the allocation of resources to the crucial areas of intervention, following the procedures to ensure the protection of the operators and beneficiaries of the services.

If we define the emergency as an unforeseen circumstance that can lead to dangerous situations «if we do not take into account the conditions that generate it and the elements that characterize it, in order to act appropriate and immediate interventions, even extraordinary, to return the situation to normal» (Samory, 2015, p. 3), we realize that the professional Social Work has a specific role in the management of the same. The social needs that affect individuals and entire communities in emergencies such as the one currently in place require relevant actions, organized so that they can cope with the needs that arise from it (getting sick, suffering bereavement, losing their job, facing economic difficulties, etc.). This is confirmed by the new Social Worker Deontological Code (2020) that states: «the social worker makes available to the competent authorities his professionalism for programs and interventions aimed at overcoming the state of crisis in case of disasters or major emergencies. In the different areas in which he operates, or as a properly trained volunteer within the Civil Protection organizations, the professional contributes to the support of people and community and the restoration of normal conditions» (Article 42). Taking into account the fact that the Code also underlines the professional duty to «promote, develop and support integrated social policies, aimed at improving the social well-being and quality of life of community members, with particular reference to those who are most exposed to situations of fragility, vulnerability or at risk of marginalization (...)» (Article 39), the role of protecting the profession for people at risk, including the effects of health emergencies, is clear.

If it is true that in these cases are called to cooperate different professionals (doctors, nurses, social and health workers, firefighters, police forces, logistics ex-

³ These are operational centres in support of the Mayor, civil protection authorities, through which the management and coordination of the emergency services and assistance to the population in the event of a disasters are carried out.

⁴ Some regions, connecting with the Crisis Units activated in local contexts, have issued specific directives precisely with the aim of linking the activities implemented at the local level.

perts, professional educators, social workers, etc.), some recognized as being part of the emergency network and in them perfectly integrated (health professionals and police forces), others less recognized (social professions in general), it is equally true that social workers have ample potential in this area. Potentials that can be expressed both in the phases of first intervention and in the later phases that lead to the return to normality. The needs that people affected by extraordinary events present involve not only the provision of aid aimed at containing/satisfying the primary needs but also to cope with the disorientation resulting from the event itself, the physical and psychological suffering that they achieve, as well as the management of the anxiety and fear associated with it. These activities are consistent with the mandate of the Social Work (empathetic listening, personalized help, psycho-social support, etc.), although they require revisions aimed at their recognition and placement in a wider area of social welfare and are projected to collaboration between health and social services. In these situations is necessary to prepare operational structures that work on the emergency in close collaboration with the other services present in the territory, trying to ensure the integral management of the person and the involvement of the community (Brolis, Maccani and Perino, 2018).

The following pages will show the results of two researches – one quantitative and one qualitative – conducted simultaneously (April 2020) on the Italian territory, that look at the responses that social services have activated to deal with the Coronavirus emergency. In describing the organizational and professional changes that have affected the Italian social welfare and social-health services, we will try to highlight the criticalities and strengths associated with them.

1. Social services in the emergency

In Italy, nowadays, the role of public sector in producing social services is more and more restricted. Social services are usually provided by private organizations (NGOs and nonprofit organizations, foundations, volunteering organizations, social enterprises, etc.) directly to the final beneficiaries, according to specific contracts with the public authorities, normally municipalities (Bertin and Fazzi, 2010).

The local public sector institutions, in particular municipalities or consortia of municipalities at social district level, keep nevertheless crucial functions in the provision of social services. The main are the following:

- financing the system;
- planning and programming social policies, funds and types of services to be provided;
- defining rules, guidelines, protocols, and standards about how services must be provided;
- engaging and contracting the private providers (call for tenders, concessions, enrolment in certificated registers of qualified providers, partnerships, etc.);
- defining criteria for accessing the services by the users and the share of the price they have to pay according to their means (by covering the provider with the remaining part);
- assessing the needs of a person or of a household, drafting and implementing the individual plan of intervention, which includes the services to be provided;
- allowing financial benefits, in several ways, to frail or disadvantaged persons and households.

In normal situations, this approach, has shown to be more effective and efficient, as for the specialization of the care and the separation between regulators and providers (which reduces conflicts of interest).

But during an emergency, of any kind, when the social needs of people inevitably increase (and each kind of emergency always causes a social emergency (Phillips *et al.*, 2016)) as the public authorities do not have immediate and full control of the provisions of social services, a very urgent and prompt revisiting of the entire system is required.

In particular:

- rules, protocols and guidelines must be adapted to the new situation: consider the case of an elderly person using home care services, that must leave his/her own house damaged by an earthquake;
- contracts with the providers must be updated, because of the change of conditions related to change of rules, protocols and guidelines, change of laws, change of settings, change of users' needs;
- needs of beneficiaries may change or increase and renegotiation mechanisms of contracts with providers are very likely to require greater resources, that should be found through fund raising campaigns, involvement of volunteers, going into debt if possible, be ready to quickly receive and manage State ad hoc funds (which is not so obvious for public officers and institutions during an emergency).
- It is quite clear that these changes are much more affordable, timely and effective if an emergency plan is defined before the crisis and ready to be used during the emergency.

2. The pandemic Covid-19

A paradox of the present emergency is to guarantee the provision of larger amounts of social services, as for the crisis, but reducing as much as possible the physical contacts between the social workers and the users.

In Italy, since the beginning of the lockdown in order to contain the infection in early March, the Italian National Authorities have excluded from the suspension all the working activities related to the so called public essential services⁵, that include social services; only nursery schools and semi residential services for disabled and elderly people were locked. But the social workers of the municipalities and the administrative staff of the social services in public administration were forced to work at home: in mid-March, the so called decree-law "Cura Italia"⁶ stated that "in distance" working is the compulsory ordinary way for public employees of carrying out their activities, according to the smart working or remote working approach of organizations⁷.

Therefore, the managers of social services, the administrative staff and the social workers must timely carry out the challenging functions mentioned in the previous paragraph just staying at home, or, at least, as much as possible.

In late March, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies sent a special newsletter⁸ containing some recommendations about what local social services should pay

⁵ According to the National Law number 146 issued in 1990.

⁶ Decree-Law number 18 of March the 17th, 2020.

⁷ The smart working approach in the public administration was introduced in 2015 with the Law number 124, based on a volunteer request by the employee.

⁸ Circular number 1 of March the 27th.

attention to during the emergency. The document points out in fact the following new forms of social need emerging from the crisis and that are nowadays on the agenda of municipalities:

1. because of the lockdown, many households, non yet in charge of the social services, with members outside the traditional labour protection measures, such as small entrepreneurs, artisans, shop keepers, some categories of self-employed, personal assistants, temporary workers, irregular workers, fell in poverty: a serious food emergency exploded at the end of March, leading the National Government to urgently put in place an intervention at local level (which is the topic of next paragraphs);
2. if not fallen in poverty, many households have experienced anyway a reduction of their income; households living in rented flats are at risk and need financial subsidies for paying the rent;
3. persons affected by Covid-19 are quarantined even if in good health conditions: if they leave alone or if they are the only caregiver for a disabled or non-self sufficient relative, municipalities must guarantee the provisions of food and medicines and other social supports⁹;
4. users of semi residential services, locked just to avoid contacts and infections, are still present and must be satisfied¹⁰;
5. households with parents still doing their job in smart working and children attending in distance school lessons, or that usually are held by nurseries (nowadays locked such as schools) can face severe work life balance problems and lack of appropriate ICT devices;
6. the lockdown exposes potential victims of domestic violence to huge risks of victimization;
7. the situation is particularly stressful for persons in need of psychological support, in particular those experiencing hospitalization or death of a relative without the possibility of visiting or holding a regular funeral ceremony respectively. Same restrictions apply for relatives of elderly guests in residential care facilities. Moreover previous psychological frailties can lead to severe mental illness problems;
8. homeless people and marginalized migrants are highly exposed to the infection and without help;
9. children with both parents hospitalized for Covid-19 (luckily a rare situation) must be cared by the child protection system, in very complex situation that must take in consideration the quarantine procedures, the foster care and the health conditions of the child in the meanwhile.

3. Mapping the strategies of municipalities: the case of food emergency

One of the main issues that the local social services have to face during the pandemic, is food emergency that comes from loss of economical resources for many households, because of the lockdown.

Even the Italian government put in place a wide system of allowances for employee persons and self-employed professionals, but certain kind of persons have

⁹ The national and regional governments set an organisational system that foresees a strong collaboration at a local level health authorities, Civil Protection, municipal social services, GPs.

¹⁰ The decree-law number 18 foresees that social and health authorities, in accordance with the owner of the structures, should try to convert some of the activities in order to provide a set of services at home.

remained excluded or have received less than needed and fell into poverty, they are mainly:

- small entrepreneurs, in particular in all the fields related to construction (the anticipation of costs for commissions received before the lockdown and the impossibility to carry out the work and being paid have caused a severe loss in cash flow);
- artisans, shop keepers, self-employed professionals with high fixed costs (rent of working places, in particular);
- temporary workers, that cannot get new contracts;
- housemaids, personal assistants and private caregivers of elderly persons, that are not recognized as employee and that have lost the job because of the safety measures of social distancing;
- irregular workers, not enrolled in the social protection system;
- households with a relevant number of members.

Food emergency raised national authorities attention at the end of March, as a consequence of (luckily) very limited cases of assaults to groceries.

The Italian government decided to anticipate, as compared to the usual cronoprogramme, the transfer of 4.7 billion of Euros of the so called “Solidarity Fund”, addressed to the municipalities, in order to ask them to face the social and food emergency in particular. Moreover, the head of the civil protection issued an ordinance for distributing to the 8,000 Italian municipalities an extra fund of 400 million of Euros. The usual “Solidarity Fund” mechanism of distribution was applied, by using as a reference the overall population and the official poverty thresholds. The amount is equivalent to almost half of the total amount of the Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD) that Italy have received by the European Commission for the period 2014-2020, and exactly 16 times the amount of the FEAD distributed for local projects (at regional or social district level).

The ordinance of the civil protection was announced by the Prime Minister and the President of the Italian association of municipalities (named ANCI) on Friday the 27th of March, generating high expectations among people in difficulty, but it was issued only on Sunday the 29th.

The ordinance has permitted the suspension of some legal institutes to speed up the procedures, such as public procurement and statistic fulfilments. Moreover very few and generic indications were given to municipalities about how to manage the granted fund:

- 1) the aid should be addressed to households in economic difficulties because of the lockdown;
- 2) the aid can consist in allowances addressed to households in need for food purchasing (such as cash or vouchers) or in the form of direct food delivery;
- 3) priority should be given to households not yet receiving other public allowances;
- 4) needs’ assessment has to be provided by municipal social services;
- 5) municipalities are invited to involve and capitalize the existing networks of volunteers not for profit organizations active at local level and already financed by the FEAD mechanism(e.g. Caritas).

This has forced the municipalities to a very urgent and hard organizational work to promptly provide the allowances to potential beneficiaries:

- meeting the needs and setting appropriate criteria in order to size and customize the allowance according to specific parameters such as household conditions, number of family members, economic situation, etc.;
- defining the provision mechanism, i.e. type of aid, access requirements, priority criteria, amounts, etc.

- contracting food providers (grocers, non profit organization of volunteers, etc.);
- defining preventative measures to avoid or at least reducing potential frauds;
- advertising the measure to their citizens and in particular among targeted households;
- collecting requests from citizens and checking their eligibility;
- managing the service provision.

In order to explore how municipalities have responded to the social and food emergency, specifically, the Italian social research institute Synergia, based in Milan, carried out an independent survey on a sample of 206 municipalities, balanced for the regional distribution and the population size, representing 19.1% of the Italian population.

Data were collected from April the 20th to April the 29th, based on the information reported in the announcements published on the websites of the sampled municipalities, according to a specific questionnaire:

- general issues (advertising, requiring procedure, involvement of the social district, involvement of volunteers);
- aids provided (type, amount, scaling on the number of household members);
- priority criteria and management;
- characteristics of the household considered for eligibility, prioritizing and determining the overall amount of the allowance (unemployment; loss of job because of the pandemic lockdown; household's economic conditions based on the National Indicator of Equivalent Economic Situation; other income conditions; other net worth conditions; presence of children in the household; presence of disabled or non self-sufficient elderly family members in the household; presence of household members afflicted by Covid-19; social services assessment; presence of household members with dietary restrictions);
- check against frauds.

The results reported in the following are weighted for the population size.

Before presenting the results, two specifications about the Italian system are required.

In 1989 Italy introduced an indicator of equivalent economic situation called ISEE, for means tested social services; it can be computed for each person, by applying different methods according to the type of service that is required by the beneficiary; in general terms it is a ratio between an additive index of the family income and net worth and a second index which accounts for the number of members, called equivalence scale (an increasing scale with diminishing marginalities). In 2001 the Italian constitution was reformed with the introduction of the devolution of social services to the local level of government (regions and municipalities) and of the legal institutes of the minimum standards of social assistance (in order to guarantee equality)¹¹. In 2013 the ISEE indicator was reviewed and was defined as a minimum standard: at each level of governance (national, regional, municipal) for any means-tested social services, it is compulsory the use of ISEE for assessing the economic conditions of requiring beneficiaries¹².

Moreover, after several and long-time experiments, in 2019 Italy introduced a guaranteed minimum income (Baracchini, Gregori and Viganò, 2019) called "Reddito di Cittadinanza"¹³. Regardless the attempt of the last experiment to unify all the national subsidies in only one, the minimum income measure overlaps with a

¹¹Constitution of the Italian Republic, Article 117, second clause, point m.

¹² Decree of the Italian Prime Minister number 159, Article 2, first clause.

¹³Decree-law number 4, 28th of January 2019, confirmed by the Law number 26 of March the 29.

wide range of monetary allowances still in place. The amount of the minimum income is determined in accordance with the number of household members, based on a different equivalence scale (starting from 1 and adding 0.4 points for each adult member and 0.2 for each child)¹⁴.

4. The results of the quantitative research about the food emergency

In one month from the national ordinance, an initiative to fight the food emergency by using the civil protection fund was put in place by 99.9% of the municipalities.

Almost four municipalities out of four have advertised the initiative on the home page of their websites.

Only in 2.2% of cases, the initiative was launched in cooperation with the social district. According to the suggestions of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (finally reported in the national social plan 2018-2020¹⁵ municipalities tend to manage the provision of social services more and more in consortium, at the level of the social district. The fact that only 2.2% of municipalities decided to do this for the provision of food aids could be mainly related to four issues:

- everything was carried out in a hurry, with very little time for a district level coordination;
- the fund was distributed directly to the municipalities (and not to the social districts, as usual for the social services financing scheme);
- the ordinance of the civil protection was addressed directly to the municipalities (and not to the social districts, as usual for the national acts concerning social services);
- the majors are the first civil protection authority and they are part of the civil protection system; as the financing came from an ordinance issued by the national head of the civil protection, majors decided to play their role.

Among the very few suggestions, the chief of the civil protection pointed out the opportunity to involve the volunteers from the not for profit organizations of the FEAD network, but only 12.3% of the municipalities mention in their announcement the support of volunteers (Tab.1).

*Table 1. General actions carried out by the municipalities
(number of municipalities carrying out the action out of 100 municipalities)*

<i>Action</i>	<i>%</i>
Initiative put in place	99.9
Involvement of the social district	2.2
Announcement of the aid in the home page	79.2
Involvement of volunteers or not for profit organizations	12.3

As mentioned before, regarding the eligibility criteria, the civil protection only recommended to give priority to households excluded by other subsidies, among which, the most relevant is the guaranteed minimum income: 84.8% of municipalities have met this recommendation (Tab. 2).

¹⁴ Up to 2.2 for household with one or more disables and 2.1 for the others.

¹⁵ Minister Decree of November the 26th 2018.

Table 2 - Distribution of municipalities by treatment of households not yet receiving other allowances (%)

<i>Type of procedure</i>	<i>%</i>
Giving precedence	84.8
No precedence	15.2
Penalising	-
Total	100.0

The application mechanism is generally twofold: applicants are expected to submit their requests before a specific deadline set by the public authority or the same authority allows requests just up to the depletion of the available funds. But to guarantee the priority mentioned above with the aim to timely respond to applicant households, other ways, can be considered: e.g. accepting only requests from households in precedence by a given deadline and then from any household. Only 1.1% of the municipalities adopted this mixed approach; 65.5% decided to set a deadline to submit applications; 16.2% have allowed the aid just up to the depletion of the available funds. On the other hand, one thing that is quite negative in terms of fairness and transparency is that 17.2% of municipalities have not mentioned any kind of procedure about the end of the acceptance of requests (Tab. 3).

Table 3 - Distribution of municipalities by admitting procedure of requests (%)

<i>Type of procedure</i>	<i>%</i>
Deadline	65.5
Depletion of fund	16.2
Mixed approach	1.1
Not mentioned	17.2
Total	100.0

One of the main issues, is concerned with the fact that the procedure for submitting the request for aid must comply with the lockdown safety restrictions. 58,7% of municipalities allowed beneficiaries to send the request by a simple email; 42,7% have adopted an on line submission mechanism; 25,4% allowed applicants to present their requests with a simple phone call. On paper format was excluded by the majority of the municipalities (Tab. 4).

*Table 4 - Ways of presenting the request for aid
(number of municipalities foreseeing the way out of 100 municipalities)*

<i>Way</i>	<i>%</i>
By simple email	58,7
On line submission	42,7
By phone call	25,4
By certified email	5,2
On paper	3,8
A form delivered by a courier	0,9

On the other hand, conditions declared by the beneficiaries in the request should

be verified through evidence, in order to avoid frauds, in a complicated situation as for the urgency: 11.7% of municipalities decided to do this before providing the allowance, rather than 20.1% decided to postpone the check; 17.7% of municipalities have checked some of the declared issues before the provision and the rest after. But more than 50% of municipalities do not foresee any kind of control (Tab. 5).

Table 5 - Distribution of municipalities by check of beneficiaries declarations (%)

<i>Type of check</i>	<i>%</i>
Only before the provision	11.7
Partially before and partially after the provision	17.7
Only after the provision	20.1
Not foreseen	50.5
Total	100.0

In terms of type of subsidy, 79.1% of municipalities decided to provide a voucher to be spent at a grocery, only 0.6% adopted the delivery of food directly to the household.

The amount of the allowance is subjected to a relevant variability. 26.0% of municipalities have given a fixed amount to each household, regardless the number of members; 56.8% of municipalities have given an amount proportional to the household size; the rest of the municipalities have foreseen other adjustments for considering the number of household members (among them 3.2% used an official equivalence scale).

The minimum amount for a single-person household is not declared only by 7.5% of municipalities: the average value is equal to 131.44 Euros and the median 150 Euros (lower quartile: 100; upper quartile 150).

The information asked to the applicant households in the request for aid, and analysed to provide the subsidy, are quite different. The most relevant items analysed are the loss of a job because of the lockdown (both as employees and in terms of turnover reduction for self-employed workers), retained by 82.0% of municipalities, income conditions (75.4%), unemployment conditions (68.0%): this features are mainly considered as criteria for precedence. Less than a quarter of municipalities have foreseen particular access requirements.

Approximately only one municipality out of ten have determined the precedence of particular households according to the assessment by the social services, therefore the great majority of municipalities did not meet the recommendation of the civil protection ordinance.

Another crucial issue is about the ISEE indicator. As for the definition of the allowance given by the civil protection in its ordinance, this is clearly a means tested social provision; therefore at local level the use of the ISEE index is compulsory to identify the household economic condition and only 10.1% of municipalities have retained it in the analysis of the requests. Moreover, a percentage of municipalities equal to 71.3% have irregularly decided to condition the provision to other economic parameters instead of using the ISEE indicator. This is concerned with the fact that the documentation certifying the ISEE indicator must be required to the national social protection institute by the applicant and attached to the request, a procedure that is quite difficult and time consuming during a lockdown. Nevertheless the use of the ISEE indicator is a minimum standard and therefore a constitu-

tional right and the national authorities should have advised the municipalities (for instance, asking a self-declaration by the applicant about the ISEE indicator with the request for aid and then, at the end of the emergency the submission of the certification): nowadays this situation exposes the irregular municipalities and the government to a huge number of appeals by penalized households (Tab. 6).

*Table 6 - Items of analysis considered for allowing the subsidy.
(number of municipalities considering the item out of 100 municipalities)*

<i>Item</i>	<i>Retained in the analysis</i>	<i>As access requirement</i>	<i>As precedence criterion</i>	<i>For determin- ing the amount</i>
Unemployment	68,0	25,7	37,4	5,8
Loss of job as for the pandemic lockdown	82,0	24,1	54,9	5,8
ISEE	10,1	5,2	3,5	1,5
Other income conditions	75,4	15,9	59,8	1,6
Other net worth conditions	24,8	9,6	15,2	0,9
Children in the household	42,6	4,4	31,4	9,1
Disables or non self-sufficient elderly members	42,1	7,0	32,0	4,1
Family members afflicted by Covid-19	17,9	0,1	17,7	-
Social services assessment	19,3	11,3	11,2	2,3
Family members with dietary restrictions	0,4	-	-	0,4

5. Quality research and its results

In order to complete and enrich the data that emerged from the quantitative research, 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out with officials of social services (No. 5), social workers and professionals of socio-health services (No. 10) in different intervention areas (minors, adults, mental health, addiction, palliative care) of some Italian regions (Lombardia, Trentino Alto Adige, Toscana, Emilia-Romagna, Lazio, Puglia, Sicilia). They were asked about the changes affecting the organisation of work, the impact these changes had on the users, the reflections on the responsiveness of services, the reporting of good practice and/or suggestions for improvement.

Despite the differences between the territorial areas of reference and the different areas of intervention, what all respondents have in common is the fact that the social distance that has become necessary to avoid contagion has forced all services to revise their organizational models and to introduce corrective measures that allow to operate “at a distance”, avoiding – if and where possible – contact with the user. The introduction of smartworking or “agile work” was the novelty that affected all areas of intervention (from the minors area to disability, from mental health to addictions, from the elderly area to palliative care), although its use has been differentiated according to the characteristics of the user and of the services. Service

providers such as Ser.D¹⁶, Mental Health Centers, Hospices and other residential facilities (housing community, RSA¹⁷) continued to work even in the presence of professionals, although by adopting restrictive measures for the access of users and/or family members of the same (priority to emergencies, triage at entry with body temperature measurement, hand disinfection, surgical masks distribution, respect for distance)¹⁸, while the work of home-in-house assistance with the elderly and disabled and that in semi-residential facilities for minors, the elderly and disabled has been significantly reduced, having been decided to close the structures.

What is striking is that the working from home because of dramatic change (removing the operator-user contact), after the disorientation and the initial difficulties, has even turned into an opportunity for the services and professionals. Indeed, professionals in addition to engaging in innovative and creative activities, have managed to take note – in some cases – of the ability of the user to reorganize in order to deal with the traumatic event and the moment of difficulty without availing the help of the service.

In some areas there has been a decrease in requests for help, although problems (this is the case of mental health and palliative care services) have not disappeared, in others (Ser.D and municipal services) there has been an increase in requests. Local authority officials and social workers, in particular, complain about the difficulty in handling food stamp requests, food and medicines deliveries at home, requests for economic support and bonus babysitters. The closure of businesses, factories and other work activities, brought to social services people who had never asked for help before.

The fear of contagion and the confusion generated by the information that has been massively disseminated seem to have discouraged the users: only the most urgent requests come to the services, those that involve immediate responses; the least urgent needs are managed at home, considered as a privileged setting of care, even when there may be other possibilities¹⁹.

Organizational changes have therefore been accompanied by unavoidable user changes (increased in some services, stabilised or decreased in others), which has become accustomed to making new demands and in a different way.

Although some respondents complain of little clarity in the directives and delays in the delivery of protective equipment²⁰, it can be said that everyone agrees that the services they work for have responded effectively and widely to the needs of users, producing – despite the fatigue²¹ – positive effects on the communities of reference. A social worker from a Trentino's *Comunità di Valle*²², for example, claims that the pandemic has given the Social Work the opportunity to make itself

¹⁶ This is a social-health service of the ASL (Azienda Sanitaria Locale) set up to address the problems related to pathological addiction.

¹⁷ This is a residential health-intensive facility, which host for a period ranging from a few weeks to the indefinite time people who are not self-sufficient.

¹⁸ Some facilities have chosen to close to external visitors, precisely in order to avoid the spread of contagion.

¹⁹ This is the case with hospices, which have experienced drops in access requests.

²⁰ This was most evident in public services, less so in those managed by the third sector.

²¹ All respondents talk about increased workloads and difficulties in adapting to new remote working modes.

²² The “Comunità di Valle” are the local territorial authorities of the Autonomous Province of Trento that form the intermediate institutional level between the municipalities and the autonomous province. They are formed by a membership structure, which is obligatory for municipalities in each territory deemed appropriate for the exercise of important administrative functions. These include social services.

known to those who have never turned to it, strengthening its image; a social worker of a Puglia's municipality declares that the management of the Covid-19 has made possible the enhancement of community work, thanks to the involvement of all stakeholders present in the territory; an official of a municipality in Lombardy believes that the emergency has made new experiments by social workers possible and highlighted the latent potential of social services.

Suggestions for improvement include: better organization of information flows; a more careful direction in the organization of the emergency (there are delays in the activation of smart working and the provision of tools to practice it, delays in the disposition of personal protective devices, as well as in the execution of tampons to operators and the quarantine of those at risk); management more attentive to the support of operators, who felt in many cases, alone; attention to "after-emergency".

The information from the interviews highlights territorial and intervention background differences and show specific gaps and problems that cannot be addressed here but should be analyzed in a specific paper.

What is considered useful to point out is the fact that the respondents, agreeing on the difficulty of returning to normal, suggest the adoption of new practices, based on the renewed capacity for collaboration between different actors and the implementation of actions that allow to deal with the "after-emergency" by re-launching the practices of these services, practices that can not evade from the integration of different policies (health social, educational, work, etc.).

Conclusions

The unprecedented emergency (by extension, speed and fallout) that health and social services have faced as a result of the pandemic generated by covid-19 has brought back to the center of attention the issue of health protection, understood –at the same time – as a global well-being and as the right/duty of every citizen and forced us not only to reinvent social relations but also to rethink the structures in which they are realized, emphasizing inadequacies and vulnerabilities.

The tests to which citizens and service operators have been forced to face the so-called "invisible enemy" have generated repercussions at different levels: think of the availability of beds in hospitals and the grueling shifts to which health workers have been subjected, the economic problems arising from the slowdown in production, the need for supporting people in isolation and/or vulnerable people, the re-adjustment of health and social services.

Based on the findings of this research, it is clear that Social Work did not stop during the Coronavirus emergency, despite the lack of a clear view of the social impact of the pandemic which, has created many difficulties to jointly design interventions between the social and health sectors (Pasquinelli, 2020).

The case of food emergency has shown that local social services are facing the challenge with extreme promptness, breaking past schemes and adapting the procedures to the difficulties of beneficiaries, although lacking of specific indications by the central authorities.

Although social workers complain of a lack of attention against them and the fact that they feel isolated²³ and particularly exposed to the risk of contagion²⁴, it is

²³ This is particularly evident for social workers in the municipalities who do not have the opportunity to confront and consult with multi-professional teams.

evident that they have actively engaged not only in the guarantee of essential services but also in the relationships of care and support to families with difficulties and people in fragile social situations (children and young, disabled, elderly, single people, sick people, people discharged from hospitals, etc.), although with remote contact management and with frequent telephonic availability.

The lack of coordination between social and health services activities emerged in some realities suggests the need to identify solutions that can network all available resources, a kind of social first aid that, collaborating with health care and other services – public and private – can work to provide answers to the needs of the people in situation of emergency.

It is comforting to know that social workers have responded to the pandemic by developing strategies that have enabled to deliver essential performance and to strengthen the internal cohesion of services. The adoption of smart working – often alternating with work in presence – testifies the flexibility, resourcefulness and creativity of the operators and highlights the potential of a profession often considered too rigid and bureaucratic (Cellini, 2020).

The results of the quantitative research showed that the social services have responded to the crisis with courage, flexibility and wisdom, with a good equilibrium between the need of limiting frauds and the need of urgently help the increasing amount of population fallen in deprivation and frailty.

Creative and proactive attitudes in social and social-health services lead us to rethink the expendability of the profession and to recover its deepest identity, the one that puts the person at the center and the values associated with it and that aims to enhance all the resources available, acting as a bridge between the different interlocutors and as a catalyst for integrated social-health interventions.

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The Pilgrim Pope at the Time of the Contagion

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Abstract

The author tries to understand if the act performed in Rome, Sunday, March 15, 2020, by Pope Francis, who went on pilgrimage to the basilica of St. Mary Major to venerate Our Lady *Salus populi romani* and the church of St. Marcellus al Corso to pay homage to the Crucifix, is to be ascribed to the category of devotional or penitential pilgrimage. In communicative terms, what Pope Francis did in Rome is not an irrational, unconscious, impromptu action. Pope Bergoglio does not seem to put his person in the foreground. His constant conviction is to address everyone, without distinction of faith. His choice to go alone to St. Mary Major and St. Marcellus and his act of veneration of the *Salus populi romani* and the St. Marcellus Crucifix in St. Peter's Square on March 27, 2020, respond to the same project of wide-ranging evangelization, which does not distinguish between believers and non-believers.

Keywords: Pope, Pilgrimage, Contagion.

Introduction

In the popular imagination of the past, the figure of the Pope was something that appeared distant and confined in a separate reality. Even the Sunday apparitions from the window of his study, on the top floor of the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican, maintained a certain character of remoteness, so much so that to see him better one had to look at the maxi-screens installed in St. Peter's Square or it was necessary to use binoculars. Pope Francis, on the other hand, greatly reduced the distance and did so immediately, not only with his simple and familiar "good evening" greeting, addressed on March 13, 2013, immediately after his election as Pontiff, but also with a personal farewell, as a good parish priest, to over a hundred faithful (leaving the church), who had attended the mass celebrated by him in the Vatican parish of St. Anne on March 17, 2013, even before the inaugural celebration of his papal ministry (which took place on March 19, 2013).

1. The *Salus populi romani*

Francis had made another unpredictable exit, already the morning after his election. He had gone to the Roman basilica of St. Mary Major to pray and bring a bouquet to the painting of Our Lady which is in the Pauline (also Borghese) Chapel and is called *Salus populi romani* (salvation of the Roman people). As Pope, he thus inaugurated a custom that would later lead him to make the same gesture more than eighty times, especially before and after his numerous apostolic visits. That first time the flowers were taken from a table in the Pope's lodgings at the Casa Santa Marta. Later they were prepared by the Spanish Cardinal Santos Abril y Castelló (formerly apostolic nuncio to Argentina from 2000 to 2003 and archpriest of the basilica of St. Mary Major until 2016), by Polish Cardinal Stanisław Ryłko

(who succeeded Abril Castelló) and by the Franciscan friars of the Immaculate Conception, who work at St. Mary Major and choose flowers in the colours of the nations to which the Pontiff goes. During the Pope's visits, the basilica remains open to the faithful, who can thus see the testimony and prayer of Francis (first on his knees and then sitting for the recitation of the rosary). Often, after the visits, the Pope places on the altar of Our Lady tickets, letters and objects received in the visited countries. In the same basilica, there is also the altar on which Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits and therefore of the order to which Jorge Mario Bergoglio himself belongs, celebrated his first mass on Christmas Eve 1538.

The Virgin Mary with the title of *Salus populi romani* is known because she saved Rome from the plague, so, as it is said, in 593 Pope Gregory the Great decided to place her painting in the church of St. Mary Major. The image has also been erroneously attributed to Saint Luke, while, in reality, it is a Byzantine work, probably dating back to the 13th or even the beginning of the 14th century. Careful studies have not been able to determine its date, also because of various pictorial restoration interventions. Therefore, the period fluctuates between the fifth and thirteenth centuries. What remains proven is the style, which even if it is not purely Byzantine at least is inspired by it. Consequently, it could not have been carried in procession more than six hundred years earlier. Most probably, in the 7th century, there were processional rites routed to St. Mary Major to ask for salvation from the plague, but certainly not bearing the picture of the present-day *Salus populi romani*, which, by the way, was probably called *Regina Coeli* in the 13th century, according to a document of 1240.

On the other hand, the event of 1837, when Pope Gregory XVI invoked her to ask for the end of a cholera epidemic, is more relevant. The Virgin Mary *Salus populi romani* was also proclaimed by John Paul II protector of the World Youth Days. It should also be noted that the icon is privileged by the religious institute of the Jesuits for the spread of Marian worship.

2. The document of Aparecida

On July 24, 2013, Pope Francis went to the Shrine of Aparecida, on the occasion of World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro, and said: "How much joy it gives me to come to the home of the Mother of every Brazilian, the Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida! The day after my election as Bishop of Rome I visited the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome, to entrust to Our Lady my ministry as Successor of Peter. Today I wanted to come here to ask Mary our Mother for the success of World Youth Day and to put the life of the Latin American people at her feet. I would like to tell you one thing first. In this shrine, where six years ago the Fifth General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin America and the Caribbean was held, a beautiful event occurred which I was able to see for myself: to see how the Bishops - who worked on the theme of the encounter with Christ, discipleship and mission - felt encouraged, accompanied and, in a certain sense, inspired by the thousands of pilgrims who came every day to entrust their lives to Our Lady: that Conference was a great moment of Church. And it can be said that the Aparecida Document was born precisely from this interweaving between the work of the Pastors and the simple faith of the pilgrims, under Mary's maternal protection. The Church, when she seeks Christ, always knocks on the Mother's house and asks: 'Show Jesus to us'. It is from Her that one learns true discipleship. And this is why the Church always goes on the mission in Mary's wake".

It is certainly no coincidence that the Aparecida Document itself addresses in some points (from No. 258 to No. 265) precisely the theme of popular piety: “Christ himself becomes a pilgrim, and walks resurrected among the poor. The decision to leave for the sanctuary is already a profession of faith, the walk is a true song of hope, and the arrival is an encounter of love. The pilgrim’s gaze rests on an image that symbolizes the tenderness and closeness of God” (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 2007, No. 259).

3. The *Evangelii Gaudium*

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (nos. 20-24), on November 24, 2013, the Argentine Pontiff explicitly spoke of an “outgoing Church”, an idea already in the final document of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops (held in Aparecida, Brazil, May 13-31, 2007). It was drafted by a commission presided over by Bergoglio himself, who had a considerable influence in the last drafting of the text, which took place at night - on May 30, by four people, including Bergoglio (Fernández, 2007). The Aparecida document took up, among other things, the contents of the homily given on May 16 by the then Archbishop of Buenos Aires, who had hoped for a Church not self-sufficient and self-referential but open to the human periphery. The final text referred, not by chance, to a “new missionary stage” (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, 2007, Nos. 547-554).

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 20 recalled the biblical “exits” of Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah to highlight “the ever new scenarios and challenges of the Church’s evangelizing mission”, so that “we are all invited to accept this call: to come out of one’s comfort”; No. 21 spoke of “the dynamics of exodus and gift, of coming out of oneself, of walking and sowing again and again, always beyond” and No. 23 of “an itinerant intimacy” and of communion that “is essentially configured as missionary communion”. But above all No. 24 made explicit the fact that “the ‘outgoing’ Church is the community of missionary disciples who take the initiative, who get involved, who accompany, who bear fruit and celebrate. *Primerear* - take the initiative: please excuse me for this neologism”.

Precisely the linguistic gamble of the Pope, who uses the Spanish verb *primerear*, deserves special attention, because it transforms the concept of being first, of arriving before others, into a positive idea, that is, in becoming enterprising, to anticipate the moves of the adversary, of evil.

In the text of the *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis, at Nos. 69 and 70, it speaks specifically of popular piety and then at Nos. 122, 123, 124, 125 and 126 its evangelizing power is praised. But already as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, on 19 January 2008, he had clearly expressed his thoughts on the subject, stating, among other things, that “the mission of the Church presents itself as the tireless effort to unite in a single message the transcendent with the immanent, the eternal with the daily, and in this popular religiosity as a certain and sensitive expression of the faith, born in the shadow of many sorrows, has much to tell us” (Bergoglio, 2008).

4. The Pope’s pilgrimage

It seems dictated by the logic of *primerear* the sortie made in Rome by Pope Francis, on the afternoon of Sunday, March 15, 2020, with his pilgrimage, partly

on foot, to go both to St. Mary Major to venerate Our Lady *Salus populi romani*, and the church of St. Marcellus al Corso to pay homage to the wooden Crucifix of the fifteenth century kept there. The latter is known to have been carried in procession through the quarters of Rome, from 4th to 20th August 1522, until reaching St. Peter's basilica, and to have averted the plague, which had already claimed victims. From the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, on the occasion of the Holy Years, the Crucifix of St. Marcellus was systematically transferred to the Vatican basilica for veneration by pilgrims who had come to Rome.

Both the image of the *Salus populi romani* and the Crucifix were taken, without any procession of the faithful, to the main entrance of St. Peter's basilica on 27th March 2020, the fourth Friday of Lent, on the occasion of the singular celebration wanted by Pope Francis, to invoke divine intervention to ward off the contagion of Covid19, which was raging in many parts of the world and particularly in Italy.

To fully understand the gesture of Pope Francis, who went on pilgrimage first to Saint Mary Major and then to Saint Marcellus al Corso, it is necessary to enter into the perspective of his conception of pilgrimage: "going pilgrims to sanctuaries is one of the most eloquent expressions of the faith of the people of God, and manifests the piety of generations of people, who with simplicity believed and entrusted themselves to the intercession of the Virgin Mary. This popular religiosity is a genuine form of evangelization, which needs to be always promoted and valued, without minimizing its importance... In sanctuaries, our people live out their deep spirituality, that piety which from the beginning of their life has been a source of spirituality. Let's think about how intense in some of these places the prayer to Christ Crucified, or the prayer of the Rosary, or the Way of the Cross... the pilgrim brings with him his history, his faith, lights and shadows of his life. Everyone carries in their heart a special desire and a special prayer... Eyes fixed on the Crucifix or the image of Our Lady, a prayer made with tears in their eyes, filled with confidence" (Address of Pope Francis to the pilgrimage workers and rectors of shrines participating in the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, 21 January 2016).

In the text of the speech from Bergoglio, the reasons that led him to become a pilgrim, in a private, almost solitary form, in a city with very little traffic, on the day of the Lord, are clearly understood: faith, piety and religiosity, or the same reasons as in any other pilgrim. But then he also speaks of profound spirituality, simple yet eloquent devotions, as was his act. All this for a prayer to Christ depicted in a crucifix or to turn one's eyes fixed on an image of Our Lady. These are gestures (Muolo, 2017) that he could have done well in the Vatican or St. Peter's basilica or in St. Martha's Chapel. And instead, he preferred to send a strong signal: like any other person, the Pope also faces the path, despite his limp and the weight of 83 years of age and the burden of the Pontiff, who must continually face problems that are not simple. In the background, however, there is the *Leitmotiv* of mercy, not by chance evoked in his coat of arms and strongly re-proposed in the call of the extraordinary jubilee year of mercy, which has seen millions of pilgrims come to Rome to cross the Holy Door.

Not only that. There is another profound sense to highlight: "the pilgrimage is a symbol of life, it makes us think that life is walking, it is a path. If a person does not walk and stays still, it is no use, it does nothing... A soul who does not walk through life doing good, doing many things that must be done for society, for the help of others and also who does not walk through life looking for God..., is a soul that ends up in mediocrity and spiritual misery. Please: do not stop in life!" (Audio-message of Pope Francis to the participants of the 37th pilgrimage on foot Macerata-Loreto, 8 June 2015). The pilgrimage is for Pope Francis a metaphor for life

and becomes even more so when people run the greatest risk, that of losing it, suddenly and for an uncontrollable cause, as in the case of viral contagion.

5. Between devotion and penitence

It is to be understood whether the action performed by Pope Francis is to be ascribed to the category of devotional or penitential pilgrimage. On closer inspection, both characteristics can be found in the fact that was performed by the Pontiff. The devotional aspect is perfectly in line with the previous experience of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who was used to frequent suburban environments, to know the ways and contents of popular religiosity and to become its interpreter and protagonist (just think of his predilection for the Madonna who unties the knots, an image he knew during his brief stay in Germany). The penitential dimension, instead, belongs to a whole tradition that is based on a character at the same time petitionary (ask to obtain), expiatory (suffer to serve guilt), substitute (suffer instead of others) and compensatory (suffer to have). Other connotations can also be added to the Pontiff's pilgrimage: the meditative aspect, which corresponds to a mental process of reflection on the events in progress, and the conversational perspective, which has to do with the dialogue between a human subject and the divine being. Well, all these factors can be found both in the Roman pilgrimage of the Bishop of Rome, who went to two churches in his diocese, and in the devotional acts addressed to the two images of the Crucifix and Our Lady and repeated a few days later in St. Peter's Square, with postures and behaviours quite similar to those already done by other Pontiffs, for example by John Paul II, during Lent of the Holy Year 2000, on the Day of Forgiveness, Sunday 12 March, when he kissed the feet of the Crucifix coming from St. Marcellus.

Another consideration can be made about Pope Francis' pilgrimage: in the past, going on foot by pilgrims was in practice the obligatory way, in the absence of modern means of transport. Even today, however, there are still pilgrimages on foot, the most famous of which is the pilgrimage to St. James of Compostela in Spain, in great demand lately, especially by young people and also by sceptics and agnostics. But we can also mention those to the shrines of the Madonnas of Częstochowa and Piekary in Poland, to Our Lady of the Arch in Campania, as well as to Aparecida in Brazil and Nuestra Señora de Luján in Argentina. It was in Luján, not far from Buenos Aires, that Archbishop Bergoglio went several times on foot, like a simple believer, praying the rosary and then confessing.

In communicative terms, what Pope Francis did in Rome on the third Sunday of Lent in 2020 is not an irrational, unconscious, impromptu action. If we read the episode well, we find in it a whole weave of conceptual categories (outgoing Church, mission, communion, itinerant interiority) that is intertwined with the warp of specific objectives (witness, openness, trust, mercy), showing great reciprocal interchangeability of the elements of both weft and warp, but always within a single programmatic plan of evangelization.

Pope Bergoglio, in doing so, does not seem to put his person in the foreground. He follows, once again, a line of conduct that places him in a condition of desired subordination to the divinity. This happened on the very evening of his election when he decided to make an emblematic gesture: first of all, he asked the Lord to bless everyone. Something similar also happened on 27 March 2020: on foot he reached Saint Peter's Square, almost continuing the pilgrimage of 15 March, and then he did not give the blessing *Urbi et orbi* with his hands but preferred to let the

Lord do it once again, in the Eucharistic form enclosed in the monstrance, raised to every part of the world.

These are signs, these, which do not remain circumscribed within the sphere of Catholic membership but extend to other contexts of believers and non-believers. Pope Francis' constant conviction is to address everyone, without distinction of faith (or not). In short, these were moments in which the message conveyed was clear: an attitude of strong and intense reflection on a dramatic moment of the whole of humanity.

Nor can it be said that Francis usually limits himself to an exclusively spiritual approach. His vision of reality takes into account concrete situations, so it is not surprising to see his *primerear*, his playing in advance, as one can see in his saying that "people are beginning to see people who are hungry" (in his homily on March 28, 2020, in St. Martha) and that there are serious risks due to the crowding of prisons (which he spoke about during the *Angelus* on Sunday, March 29, 2020), thus signalling to the rulers and people of the Church the need to intervene, to reduce the consequences of the contagion and the closure of almost all activities. This too is fully in line with his line of thought, centred on attention to the last, the most disadvantaged.

Conclusion

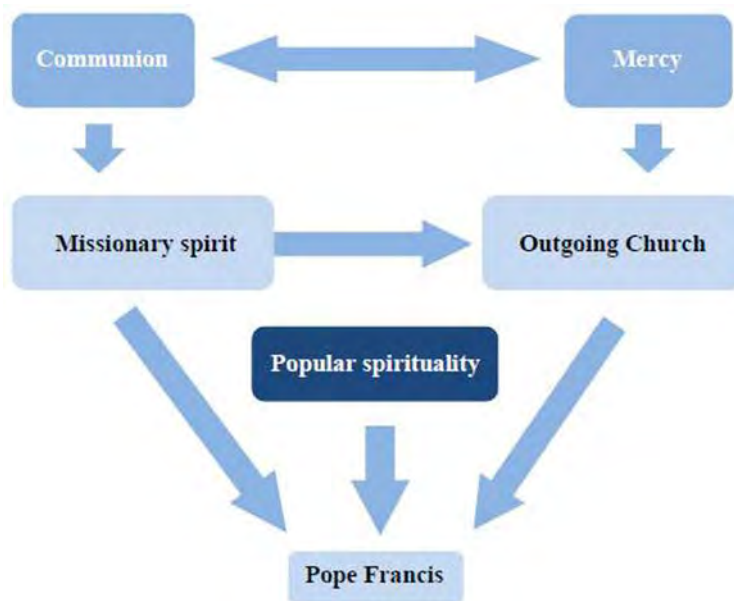
The Roman pilgrimage of Pope Bergoglio is the fruit of various components and is the last historical precipitate of a whole series of elaborations that took place during several decades, thanks also to a continuous pastoral and social experience in the field. It is faced with a conception of reality that has been built little by little until reaching its current status.

Analyzing the pronouncements and behaviour of the Argentinean Pope, two concepts can be seen as the source and matrix of the other principles that distinguish the world view that lies behind the choices made and the performative interventions implemented. They are true and proper performances that can concern the choice of the liturgy, the wearing of a vestment, the option of a free speech without following a prepared written text, the accomplishment of an action that one would say is not appropriate for a Pontiff but that makes him acquire credibility otherwise difficult to achieve. Well, the two key terms are communion and mercy. The second is more obvious since it belongs to the usual language used by Francis, who besides all that has inserted it in the very motto of his coat of arms (first episcopal and then pontifical): *miserando atque eligendo*, an expression of the venerable Bede about the choice of Matthew made by Jesus. That *miserando* even before exercising mercy would mean turning a loving gaze, considering other people as brothers. The other term, communion, is less frequently used in Bergogliian discursiveness but is no less relevant since it is closely linked to the idea of "missionary communion" (at No. 23 of the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*). From this comes essentially the expression "outgoing Church" that so characterizes the magisterium of the Pope. In the background, however, there is a valuable theology such as that of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who spoke of the "drama of the communion of saints" (von Balthasar, 1980, It. trans. 1986, pp. 377ff.; 1976a, It. trans. 2012a, 370ff.; 1976b, It. trans. 2012b, 215ff.) and referred to the priestly role, in particular, writing that "the inclusion of believers in the body and therefore in the action of Christ has the necessary consequence that they... receive part of his for-us... At this point, they also carried the statements of Scripture on the priesthood of the

faithful (1 Pet 2, 5.9; Rev 1, 6; 5, 10; 20,6), since the priest is precisely defined by his being for men (Heb 5, 1)” (von Balthasar, 1980, It. trans. 1986, pp. 377-378). All this is about the mystical body and the priesthood of the faithful, but we include the priesthood of Christ for people, and that of the priest for other people, and of people who “exercise that priesthood in receiving the sacraments, in prayer and thanksgiving, in the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity” (Dogmatic Constitution of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 10).

It can be said that the quadrilateral that serves as a platform for pontifical teachings is based respectively on communion, missionary spirit and outgoing Church, but with mercy to act as a link for the functioning of the inter-conceptual flow (Fig. 1). On the contrary, all things considered, mercy is the lemma that acts as a hinge. The whole acts as a critical mass for the self-sustaining system of thought in Bergoglio. As for popular spirituality (an expression preferred to that of popular religiosity of sociologists or popular piety used by Paul VI and especially by Giuseppe De Luca, founder of the *Archivio Italiano per la Storia della Pietà*, Italian Archive for the History of Piety), there is considerable appreciation on the part of Pope Francis, which emerges on several occasions, for example when he recalls the experience of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate at Aparecida in 2007, with the bishops comforted by the mass of pilgrims visiting that sanctuary: they were “inspired by the thousands of pilgrims who came every day to entrust their lives to Our Lady”.

Fig. 1 - Theoretical framework of conceptual flows in Pope Francis



To tell the truth, however, the discourse on non-liturgical religious modalities, unofficial so to speak, would deserve a broader discussion on the theoretical and doctrinal level. It would be worthwhile to make a special study on the relations between the religiosity of the people and the “Argentine theology of the people and culture”, advocated by Bergoglio himself, a good disciple of the Jesuit Juan Carlos Scannone (2019). Not to mention a theoretical-empirical verification of the possibility that this theological proposal is, in fact, an alternative to the liberation theology of the Peruvian Dominican Gustavo Gutiérrez (1971).

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The Corona Challenge to Higher Education

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Abstract

Covid-19 poses a number of challenges to Higher Education. It has turned the day to day world of academic life on its head. University alternatives offer tenured academics a relatively safe adjustment to the changed scenario in stark contrast to other people for whom the current situation presents a choice: exposure or starvation. Precarious academics working part-time and according to definite contracts and students coming from humble backgrounds also face problems in this age of Corona. Furthermore, within the relatively safe 'middle class' context of secluded and virtually-mediated academic work and transaction, there are still issues to be considered bearing in mind the future of Higher Education itself.

Keywords: Academia, Precariat, Social Class, Ethnicity, Virtual Learning, Blended Learning, Community, Study-environment.

Introduction: Phantom city?

Higher education is constantly being exposed to several challenges in this day and age. The Covid-19 pandemic has offered a series of challenges which have plunged many in the academic community, tenured/non-tenured faculty and students alike, into modes of delivery and interaction, that differ considerably from the hitherto established norm. As I will argue in this paper, University alternatives offer academics a relatively safe adjustment to the changed scenario (some have been attuned to this for quite some time before the outbreak) in contrast to other people for whom the current situation presents a choice: exposure or starvation. Even within the relatively safe 'middle class' context of secluded and virtually-mediated academic work and transaction, there are issues to be considered with regard to the future of Higher Education itself.

Desperate attempts to curtail the spread of the Corona Virus are said to have been turning many localities in different parts of the world into seemingly phantom cities. For some this is a spectre of an 'unreal city'. For others it lays bare the clear and unadulterated design of the city itself, city centre or square. There are those who hailed city vistas, including open spaces, as 'things of beauty' untrammelled by such paraphernalia as ticket booths, market stalls, coffee tables, chairs and umbrellas. Others underline the eeriness of the site – a setting in which strange matters can unfold and which fuels the imagination.

1. University, middle class jobs and the class/ethnic divide

University and other higher education campuses have not been immune to this process. They are 'closed' institutions with administration reduced to skeleton staff and academics urged to seek alternative ways of interacting with students. As Donatella della Porta underlined in a Facebook remark, middle class work allows

for such contingencies as being able to work from home, a possibility not allowed to many working class and certain service-oriented middle class professionals, the latter, I would add, including medical doctors, nurses and pharmacists. “The pandemic has complicated the class divide, by singling out a privileged class of those who can work from home in a secure labour condition.¹” (Della Porta, 2020). She raises an important sociological question for those engaged in exploring the nature of class stratification in this day and age: “...who is producing and distributing all those products that keep those who can [be] comfortable at home...”? (Ibid.) We might therefore argue that these centres in the city and adjacent streets are not as barren as certain pictures shown on the social media and newspapers would have us believe. There are moments when they are full of people scampering around as their livelihood depends on this. This is a time when abuse and exploitation of those engaged in the informal economy, necessary in certain countries or regions to keep the formal economy afloat, reach an unprecedented level (Borg, 2020). The ‘realm of necessity’ has not receded into the background for certain people. There can be mental health issues arising from living in a restricted room or two, or outside sleeping under cardboard covers, in shacks or beneath bridges (Rosa Luxemburg’s most tangible form of ‘barbarism’ today) – all this in contrast to the palatial settings of certain dwelling places.

This in effect represents a demarcation with regard to those who can work safely and continue to live and survive the virus and those who have had their odds on doing so lengthened. Social class and, I would add, ethnicity become important variables in the chances of overcoming or succumbing to the virus, especially in the area of menial and intermittent, often clandestine, work carried out by immigrants especially undocumented immigrants. One would have to add here the intersections of social class, ethnicity, gender, citizenship/non-citizenship (including *sans papiers*) and age. Elderly people without help or assistance and living on their own are particularly vulnerable in this regard, and one has to see how older adulthood intersects with many of the other variables.

The choice for these is between exposure and starvation; and people who have risked the vagaries of the desert, the anarchic state of Libya and the ocean, are most likely to be ready to risk exposure to the virus. Some were less fortunate as the pretext of Corona prevented their hitherto resilient bodies from entering Southern European ports, a number succumbing to the fatality of dehydration or drowning – a sad and tragic end to a brave but doomed saga. This is compounded by the stubbornness of uncompromising governments intent on forcing a bigoted, self-interest driven European Union to share in the responsibility of taking migrants. At a time when a pandemic increases the call for cooperation and compassion, giving the lie to Maggie Thatcher’s mantra “There is no such thing as society”, there are those who persist in a ‘dog eat dog’ mentality. Self-interest lies at the heart of not only individuals, under neo-liberalism, but nation states as a whole.²

¹ Retrived from <https://www.facebook.com/donatella.dellaporta>. She reminded me, through personal correspondence, that not all ‘smart work’ is ‘middle class’ and not all ‘middle class’ work can be carried out from home.

² So much for the so-called receding of the nation state through the intensification of globalisation (Mayo, 2019)

2. All into proper perspective

All this is to place the travails of Higher Education, in the time of Corona, into proper perspective. In many respects, universities are privileged places. Of course there are some noticeable exceptions: students surviving the fees regime and other Higher Education conditions by the skin of their teeth, living in crowded spaces where the tranquillity of online learning and home study in general is a luxury 'devoutly to be wished' but difficult to realise - all this assuming that they can afford a computer and its accessories, some, at best, sharing one computer among several family members.³ There is then the case of adjunct faculty often paid at piece rate. They cannot benefit from the time and space afforded their full time colleagues for research as they are overburdened by excessive teaching and marking loads. Some need to juggle university teaching with other jobs. Adjunct faculty, working in precarious conditions, are an increasing feature of contemporary Higher Education in many parts of the world - the first casualties of crises-induced cuts. This is how the post-1968 mass university or HE institution copes with increasing student numbers.

These are important considerations that have to be taken on board when exploring Higher education alternatives during Corona and after. My guess and fear is that all this will continue to be given short shrift. Higher Education, and especially university education, by and large still accommodates a middle class viewpoint. Despite laudable and interesting experiments among peasants in Latin America⁴ (Santos, 2017; Connell, 2019; Mayo 2019; Mayo and Vittoria, 2017) and also in Western Europe (Neary, 2014, Earl, 2016), the institution as we conventionally know it, and in which most academics work, remains a bourgeois institution with an unmistakably bourgeois ethos. Many institutions have come a long way since the exclusive and exclusionary days of old, though the few elite bastions that survive and thrive on endowments, elite residues from that period, persist in their social selection - your *Grandes écoles* and Oxbridge colleges. The general ethos, however, as with the whole competitive educational ethos, remains what it was when we were undergrads. What follows therefore can come across as carping by a relatively privileged commentator. And yet there are issues to be raised with regard to these institutions' future, the epistemological foundations of the knowledge they promote (Santos, 2017) and their chances of engaging wider communities (Walcott, 2020), in short their greater, genuine democratisation.

2.1. Standard Corona Response

During this period of Covid-19, academics have been urged, if not compelled, irrespective of their training for this purpose, to place their courses and carry out their teaching online. This has led many to herald the 'brave new world' of online learning as the panacea for the crisis. There are those who would consider the present period as the potential watershed in establishing this already widely practiced mode of delivery as the dominant form of teaching in Higher Education. This reaction, couched in phrases such as "every cloud has a silver lining", is to be expected and falls in line with the neoliberal tenets that have been underlying most

³ Indebted to students in my University of Malta MA Adult Education class ACA5001 for this point.

⁴ These include higher education institutions connected with social movements as is the Escola Nacional Florestan Fernandez connected with the Landless peasant movement (MST) in Brazil and the UNITIERRA in Chiapas, Mexico.

common sense thinking about mass-oriented Higher Education. I argue for caution in this regard.

The history of education is full of episodes when necessity, through crises in the form of occupation, led to ingenuity. Under Nazi occupation, Polish universities went underground; material moved from one place to another. This echoed the earlier 'flying university' of the Partition period, when Marie Curie (Puiu, 2020) and Janusz Korczak were among the students. It was innovative and attested to the resilience of the Polish academic community (students and professors) involved. It resurfaced when Poland was under Soviet control.

The present crisis makes those who are resistant to modern digitally-mediated technology take the plunge, whether adequately trained for this purpose or not. Many academics from Greece, Italy, Cyprus and the UK revealed that online learning is a new experience foisted on unprepared academics. It might enable them to transcend archaic ways. It is common knowledge that most universities throughout the world have placed their courses and are delivering their teaching online. Some universities already had adequate preparation for this as a good percentage of their students are distance learning students. It is likely that the teachers involved have had adequate training. A former tutor at the UK's Open University, which backs distance learning with a variety of other approaches, including tutorials carried out by academics ensconced in different parts of the country, spent a year's preparation period before joining the university staff. The present crisis however recalls, in certain cases, the situation during the immediate post-revolution literacy campaigns in Latin America and elsewhere when young literacy workers were rushed to the field without adequate preparation (Arnove, 1986).

This mass scale online learning approach can have the same effect. It can extend beyond a crisis response as the institution begins to see the lucrative side of it, a means of spreading one's net far and wide. Now it would be foolish to overlook online learning's positive aspects reaching communities at the furthest remove from universities and centres. It reaches communities with problems of physical access and time.

Once the dust settles, however, will there be space for critical reflection regarding how technologically-mediated delivery complements what is good about 'face to face' delivery and adequate teacher-student human interaction? It is claimed that online learning can address mass students anywhere and at any time throughout the world. Academic staff, therefore, really need to think about the appropriate pedagogical approach to take and how to use most modern technology in appropriate ways. Development of good learning environments requires specialist skills and is a team effort based on collaboration between academics, communities and learning designers. There is also the danger of surveillance especially when the sessions are recorded ostensibly for the benefit of those who could not gain access in real time. The fear of recordings and of outside parties gaining access to the conversations might make participants hesitant to talk freely in the virtual classroom sessions, especially foreign students hailing from countries abroad with a poor track record when it comes to human rights and civil liberties. They would fear the extent, real or imaginary, of the home country's intelligence operations.

To what extent is online learning part of the blended approach which reserves space for different forms of interaction including human to human and human to earth interaction? The push for a lucrative share of the global education market can easily make institutions forget the 'face to face' aspect of the blended learning approach. Meanwhile elite schools continue to enjoy a monopoly in the latter type of university learning.

2.2. *Consumer Product or Public Good?*

How do we strike a happy medium between online and ‘face to face’ teaching? Will online learning continue to drag higher education further along the business route (Giroux, 2014)⁵ or will it play its part in an overall conception of education as a public good? And if it is to be part of education as a public good, what provision is to be made in conditions of ‘normality’, that is when higher education institutions reopen their doors, to ensure that all students have access to the resources necessary for a genuinely good quality higher education to which they are entitled (face to face or blended)? To strike an optimistic note, as hope springs eternal, I reproduce the words of one of the US’s most prominent critical educators, Ira Shor: “Critical teachers who question the unequal, toxic status quo will deliver critical education no matter the delivery system” (Shor, in Mayo, 2020).

3. COVID-19 and Neoliberalism

It is the uncritical educators, those who go with the flow, ever so eager to embrace new fads, who are of great concern to me. There is a terrible and unequal world out there that needs to be confronted. Covid-19 has shown the true face of neoliberalism as years of renegeing on and shredding of the social contract have finally taken their toll with few public resources available to counter such a calamity. Hopefully, the much professed newly rediscovered sense of solidarity among certain academics will enable them to rethink their mission as people who not only *interpret* the world but contribute towards *changing* it. To do this, the genuine human factor in research and thinking remains paramount. The virtual classroom might be serving its purpose as a contingency during the crisis. Once the crisis is over, would it be only part of a more holistic approach that foregrounds ‘face to face’ encounters? My feeling is that the educator’s approving eye contact (difficult to occur online) can be enough to encourage shy or hesitant students to express what their facial gesture suggests but which would otherwise remain suppressed. The holistic approach would also include engagement with communities (Walcott, 2020) and ever changing communities at that – migrants are important agents here (Mayo, 2019). This applies to all disciplines for as a science student is on record as having said, during the pandemic, “...now, when the world’s attention is on a virus – a topic I’ve spent my whole adult life studying – what I think about most are social structures, inequality, and sacrifice. I think about people.” (Quizon, 2020). This might place the onus for societal relevance on the Humanities and Social Sciences but, I would argue, that it should apply to most university and higher education areas as they all impact on society and the rest of the environment.

⁵ Quite interesting here is the development of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). Do they represent a case of ‘testing the waters’ for a business approach to Higher Education? Sarah Speight (2017) indicates the gradual mainstreaming of MOOCs. They are becoming a feature of degree courses offered at a considerable financial cost. Speight argues that MOOCs target people with a good education and familiar with basic learning modalities. They are those who can afford the ‘state of the art’ facilities that enable them to cope with the online provision – a case of giving more to those who already have? Is this a CPD (continuing professional development) outlet? The fee structure for courses is steep, according to Speight (2017). MOOCs are considered a key feature of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4th IR) (Xing and Marwala, 2017).

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The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Fragility Factor within the International System

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Abstract

This paper addresses the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the international order. The analysis focuses mainly on the role of China, the country where the epidemic originated and the main protagonist of the global transformations of recent decades. Among the possible future scenarios, our reflection contextualizes the role of the Asian giant in the framework of an international order already affected by major processes of political and economic rebalancing.

Keywords: International Relations, Covid-19, China.

1. The pandemic. A new variable in an already precarious order

How – and how much – will the spread of Covid-19 change the world order? Many international relations experts and professionals have tried to answer this question in recent months. Since the virus has crossed the frontiers of China, its country of origin, conjectures about the changes that the epidemic will bring to the geopolitical balance have been relentless, almost on a par with the extent of the contagion. The question is not an easy one if we consider that the coronavirus crisis erupted at a time of great international fragility. Since at least the beginning of the new millennium, the retreat of the United States, increasingly incapable of continuing to dictate the rules of the international game, and the growing importance of China are the main agents and originators of the progressive decomposition of the political, economic and institutional system established after the Cold War. The unknowns engendered by this decomposition have already affected all the dimensions of the world order, from the distribution of power and international prestige to the geographical scale of relations, from the strategies between the actors to their level of cultural and institutional similarity (Colombo, 2011, p. 4). The changes occurred in these dimensions have fuelled worrying cohesion conflicts which, after having definitively revealed the decline of the West, anticipated by well-respected theoretical approaches (Bull, 1984), now risk finding an additional detonating fuse in the geopolitical impact of the coronavirus.

Articles, essays, speeches and editorials are thus giving rise to a plurality of interpretations, ranging between two opposing narratives. On the one hand, those who announces radical transformations for the international system, marked by the strengthening of individual States and an increase in tensions both inside and outside them. All this would exacerbate the antagonisms of world politics, by its nature already conflictive, to the detriment of those forms of cooperation that in recent decades have wished to present globalization as a mutually beneficial process for all those who embrace it. On the other hand, there is the narrative that sees the challenges of the pandemic as an opportunity from which to build a global infrastructure of multilateral cooperation. Once they have overcome an obvious phase of closure, dictated by the vulnerability to which they are exposed, the countries

would reopen to a new kind of internationalism, to the benefit of the entire world order¹.

Among those who foresee radical scenarios of de-globalization and those who imagine new dynamics of interdependence, there seems to be only one certain point: the diffusion of the coronavirus has proved to be an event of enormous historical importance, able to invest all the areas of interaction between the subjects of the international system. It would not be the first time that an epidemic has changed the terms of geopolitical relations. The Spanish flu, which broke out during World War I, has already shown how the spread of a disease can become a political phenomenon and affect the management of international processes (Spinney, 2017). Covid-19, qualified as a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, has now crossed the boundaries of the mere global health emergency and its impact on economic, political and even cultural dynamics at the international level will depend on its duration, intensity and dissemination.

The consequences of Covid-19 on the international order will also arise from countries' responses to the crisis and how States decide to redesign their constraints. While internally, the emergency has gradually become a stress test for national health services and governments' ability to restrict certain personal freedoms, externally, what has attracted the most attention has been the fragmentation triggered by the pandemic. Measures such as the closure of borders, the exaltation of traditional borders, the restriction or any kind of exchange and flows, although justified by the need to contain the contagion, have reinforced processes already underway such as the reappearance of heated nationalism, the rise of authoritarian sovereignty and the return to rigid forms of economic protectionism.

2. The Dragon's Disease

For obvious reasons, those who wonder about the possible outcomes of the pandemic have turned their eyes chiefly to China. The Asian giant is not only the centre from which the new viral strain has spread, but it is also the actor that in recent decades has contributed most to the transformation of global dynamics, to the point of becoming the main peer competitor of the United States (Colombo & Magri, 2020). The health of the Chinese economy depends to a large extent on that of the international economy. Indeed, since China was admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, its economic fate and that of the world, especially the western world, have been closely intertwined. The Dragon is today an essential supplier of intermediate goods for many sectors, it is the world's first customer of raw materials and, as if that were not enough, the economic progress of large regions, from Asia to Africa and Latin America, is subordinate to Beijing's investments (Sterling, 2017).

However, the crisis caused by Covid-19 has affected China's prestige and some of its efforts to achieve superpower status. The initial management of the epidemic,

¹ On these different interpretations, see, among others, the *Financial Times* editorial, "Coronavirus has put globalisation into reverse" (<https://www.ft.com/content/9393cb52-4435-11ea-a43a-c4b328d9061c>), the article in the British journal *New Statesman*, "Far from making nations more insular, the coronavirus outbreak will transform globalisation" (<https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/coronavirus/2020/03/far-making-nations-more-insular-coronavirus-outbreak-will-transform>) and the analysis by some renowned international relations experts published on *Foreign Policy* on March 20, 2020, (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/20/world-order-after-coronavirus-pandemic/>).

with the authorities' attempt to hide the severity of the virus, cast new shadows on a regime still far from recognizing transparency as pivotal for government action. At the same time, the issue has tarnished the image of modernity with which China seeks to project itself at the top of world power. After Sars – pneumonia that in 2003 spread from small mammals to people – Covid-19 is the second epidemic of Chinese origin that jumps from animals to humans. These transmissions undeniably clash with the modern-country profile that Beijing is struggling to project; rather, they highlight the delays still to overcome (Dassù, 2020).

It is equally certain, however, that after its late reaction, China has responded to the epidemic with extraordinary initiatives. It is almost automatic to imagine with what “nonchalance” an autocratic regime manages to limit personal freedoms in order to impose drastic quarantine measures on millions of people to contain the contagion. But it is less obvious to take for granted the use of a surprising technological superiority pursuing the same objective. It is no coincidence that the images of the hospital built in just ten days to accommodate thousands of people have travelled around the world as an unusual example of organisational capacity and innovation level.

The adoption of these measures has favoured the construction of a regime narrative aimed at extolling successes against the virus. While part of the international community has renewed its criticism of Beijing, accusing it of concealing the true number of infections, China has shown the world the results of its measures. The rate of contagion in the country has been steadily decreasing and the authorities have proudly announced the closure of all temporary hospitals built to deal with the emergency. On March 10, President Xi Jinping officially visited Wuhan, the city in Hubei Province from which the virus had originated. Xi Jinping's visit was laden with meaning: as proof of the beginning of China's victory against Covid-19 and a sign that the Dragon was now convalescing. As proof of the recovery, the gradual reopening of economic and productive activities after about two months of paralysis was also decreed. The “Wuhan model”, with the rigid measures adopted to contain the spread of the disease, began to be celebrated by the government press and flaunted to the world as the example to follow to overcome the pandemic.

Apart from the regime propaganda, Beijing knows that the fight against the virus is not yet won and will last at least until a vaccine is available. However, while many governments, especially Western ones, are still struggling with critical contagion curves, China is showing that it wants to recover its ascending trajectory to the rank of superpower. The accusations of responsibility for the pandemic and the concealment of the number of infected have made this path more difficult; but with the worst (presumably) behind them, Chinese officials are determined to turn the crisis into an advantage and the national response to the coronavirus into an opportunity to relaunch the People's Republic as a trusted and responsible regime.

3. The Restart of the Asian Giant

In line with the main purpose of China's foreign policy – to build a human community with a shared future (Zhang, 2018) – Beijing has also flaunted its willingness to cooperate to overcome the pandemic. A first and important example in this regard came in mid-March, with the decision to provide Italy with one hundred thousand high-tech masks, twenty thousand protective suits, fifty thousand diagnostic kits, one thousand lung ventilators and two million face masks. Together

with this health material, partly offered by Beijing and partly paid for by Rome, China also sent Italy a team of qualified doctors.

Support for the Italian government is an action full of significance, as well as unknowns. At the beginning of March, Italy became the country with the most coronavirus deaths in the world after China and the first western state to decree a full-scale lockdown. But for Beijing, Italy is paramount for its plan for infrastructural and global economic expansion. The Peninsula is involved in the new Chinese vision of the ancient silk road (the *Belt and Road Initiative*) and one of its ports should allow the transit of goods from the Mediterranean to northern Europe. In March 2019, Rome and Beijing signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the promotion of the *Belt and Road Initiative*. On that occasion, many European partners criticized Italy's opening to the Asian giant and warned that China would increase its influence throughout the continent. The People's Republic aid to Italy in its fight against coronavirus, therefore, took on a deep political and strategic significance. The support, moreover, arrived precisely when Italy was feeling abandoned by the other European countries which, in the same days, were either closing their borders or rejecting Rome's requests for health equipment. The Chinese decision to help Italy has thus also highlighted the differences with which the European Union has dealt with the spread of contagion among member countries and the debate on the aid to be given to Community countries to contain the economic repercussions of the epidemic.

After Italy, the Dragon has also assured its support to other States, bringing aid to over eighty nations around the world. Even the United States had to accept China's assistance, thus enabling the country to exercise soft power across the Pacific and demonstrate its willingness to take world leadership in responding to the coronavirus. This hypothesis would naturally give new lustre to Beijing's international consequence and appears strategically consistent because of a dynamic that in recent years has affected the holding of global geopolitical balances and that the current pandemic seems to have only further confirmed: the United States' relinquishment of a leading role in world politics.

It is known how Donald Trump, now grappling with various re-election pitfalls, has accelerated US disengagement from crucial regional contexts and global challenges. The extemporisation and contradictions that have characterized Washington's international behaviour over the past four years have confirmed the "imperial fatigue" of the United States and the extent of its prestige crisis. This is a decline, experts point out, already evident after the disastrous decision of the war on Iraq in 2003 and aggravated by the ineffective instruments then put in place by Barack Obama's administration to remedy his predecessor's failures (Colombo, 2018). Nevertheless, in the face of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, the United States did not give up its leadership role, suggesting measures and political responses to the international community (Wulzer, 2017; Del Pero, 2017). This attitude was lacking, however, in the face of the pandemic. Washington initially minimized the severity of the virus, then backtracked in the face of soaring contagion and death rates, thus confirming that it prefers to focus on its borders and national interests rather than promote an international action plan. The White House has even managed to cause a stir among its partners, first by unilaterally deciding to suspend flights from the European Union, and then by offering millions of dollars to a German pharmaceutical company in a clumsy attempt to secure a monopoly on a Covid-19 vaccine.

The American withdrawal in the face of their hypothetical leadership against Covid-19 is confirmed by the importance with which traditionally less influential

subjects have found themselves pointing out to the world an alternative political-health strategy to the Chinese one. The representation of a “democratic model” of tracking contagion and isolating the populations, has been assumed by countries like Taiwan or South Korea, while the United States seems to have been satisfied almost exclusively with exasperating diplomatic tones with Beijing. The formulas that Trump and his Secretary of State used to refer to the pandemic (“the Chinese virus” and “the Wuhan flu”) have irritated the Chinese without bringing anything to the competition with the Asian giant, neither in terms of the public image nor in terms of leadership in the face of the crisis.

Beijing can, therefore, see in these errors and in the progressive disengagement of the United States opportunities with which it can recover the ground lost after the spread of the epidemic. The challenge, even in this case, is far from simple because it depends on a plurality of factors. Among the most important variables is, above all, the complex international economic and financial situation (aggravated, last March, by the disagreements between Russia and Saudi Arabia on the price of oil) which Beijing must look at with worrying forecasts on its growth estimates². The above-mentioned 2008 crisis, however, has already shown how China can combine an exceptional availability of resources with an authoritarian state structure to transform difficult moments into advantageous opportunities (Villezca Baccerra, 2015). To these, we can add an effective communication strategy that portrays the People’s Republic as a leader in the world fight against the coronavirus. If in this fight – or “war for health”, as some governments have rhetorically called it already (Jean, 2020) – the Chinese laboratories were to beat those of competing countries and announce an effective vaccine first, not only would the international image of Beijing be definitively strengthened, but the Dragon would most probably completely overtake the West, marking the beginning of an international system very different from that known so far.

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The Impact of Corona Virus on the Socio-Economic Life of Nigerians

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Abstract

Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered corona virus that can be transmitted through droplets from cough and sneeze. People who are infected can experience mild to moderate symptoms and can recover without requiring special treatment. However, aged patients and those with respiratory disease can develop serious illness. Maintenance of high standard of hygiene through frequent washing of hand, use of hand sanitizer and social distancing has been recommended as ways of slowing down the transmission of this disease that has been declared a global health emergency. This study examines how the coronavirus pandemic which is sweeping around the globe affects the socio-economic life of Nigerians. The study reveals that the effect of the pandemic on the socio-economic life of Nigerians is enormous due to the peculiarity of the Nigerian system and economy which depends on close social contact that hinges on the theory of communitarianism, a theory that supports the fact that a person's personality or identity is molded by the society. Hence, a total lock down in Nigeria is not sustainable over a long period of time.

Keywords: COVID-19, Socio-economic life, Nigerians.

1. The economic effects of covid-19 on the masses

History has recorded the outbreak of several plagues such as the circa in 3000 BC that wiped out a whole village in China, Plague of Athens in 430 BC, Antonine plague of AD 165-180, plague of Cyprian AD 250-271, Black Death 1346-1353, Russian Plague 1770-1772, Spanish flu 1918-1920, AIDS 1981, the West Africa Ebola epidemic 2014-2016 and the Zika virus epidemic of 2015 (Jarus, 2020).

Ebola Virus Disease which is a recent epidemic broke out in West Africa with 15,261 confirmed cases and 11,325 deaths was first reported in December 2014 as an 18 month old boy from a small village in Guinea is believed to have been infected by bat. The disease then spread to Conakry Guinea's capital and further to border countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. Other countries affected by the epidemic are Italy, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The first case of Ebola Virus was recorded in Nigeria on 20 July 2014 when an infected Liberian passenger arrived Lagos by plane. The man, who died in hospital five days later, through a chain of transmission infected a total of 19 people, of whom seven died of the disease (WHO, 2014).

The Coronavirus pandemic which the globe is grappling with was first discovered in Nigeria on 27th February, 2020 when an Italian who works in Nigeria just returned from Milan (NCDC, 2020). As at 3rd April, 2020, there were 184 cases recorded in Nigeria with about 20 recoveries and two deaths.

The index cases of corona virus across the country stem from people who visited parts of Europe that were worst hit with the virus and the spread to other affected person is as a result of direct and indirect contacts with affected persons.

As at 22nd of April, Nigeria has recorded 873 confirmed cases of Corona virus, 28 deaths and 197 recoveries and efforts to contain the further spread of the disease has taken a toll on the economic and social lives of Nigerians.

Nigeria is a country in which many people struggle everyday to earn a living and its private sector, including its informal sector, employs more than 80% of the country's workforce (AfDB, 2012, p.10). The lockdown is affecting the masses because there is no absolute structured social welfare package for citizens even before the out break of Corona virus. Solomon Chikan a Life Coach in an interview on Silverbird 93.7 radio (2020) said that citizens need to be alive to achieve their dreams and that government is helpless in this current situation. He emphasized that:

Neighbours should help one another, those who are well off should help one another, people should save for the rainy days and learn from the situation. Our systems are not working, people who need the palliatives the most cannot be reached because most don't have bank accounts and those who may be entrusted to reach the people will not reach them.

Since Nigeria got her independence from the British in 1960, corruption, nepotism and mismanagement have been the bane of governance and the masses are at the receiving end of these vices despite the fact that Nigeria is a country rich in crude oil (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019).

2. The African system/Nigerian approach of handling corona virus challenge

Nigeria like most African societies operate in a close knitted setting in which people are their neighbours' keeper and there is a close social relationship with one another. This close relationship is a common feature in most African cultures which can be compared with a living network of relations almost like that between the various parts of an organism (Etta, Esowe & Asukwo, 2016). This feature of the African cultures and societies is further supported by the theory of communitarianism that attach importance to the social realm and "maintains that society should articulate what is good - such articulations are both needed and legitimate (Etzioni, 2003).

Nigeria the most populous black country in the world is barely left out in most global event. According to WHO, Nigeria (2020), "any disease outbreak in Africa's most populous country is never taken lightly and with the gravity of the global situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Nigerian Government had to move fast and mobilize all resources for the outbreak response".

At the wake of the the out break of the Corona virus in the Chinese city of Wuhan, Nigeria took some steps to ensure that the virus does not encroach the coast of the the country by putting in place checks on passengers from countries that were epicentres of the virus. However, with the discovery of the index case of the virus in Lagos, Nigeria and the rapid spread to other parts of the country, a stringent measure of partial lock down to total lock down were being imposed in some states of the federation. The Federal government of Nigeria imposed a total lock down on the Federal Capital Territory Abuja and in Lagos and Ogun States which were the worst hit in Nigeria. Some State where governors imposed a lock down include Kaduna, Plateau, Rivers and Delta.

Many arguments have however ensued from many quarters as to the justification of the Federal Government of Nigeria imposing a lockdown on some

states considering the communal social setting of Nigeria which is a determinant factor in the economy of the informal sector of the nation.

Some people are of the opinion that the lockdown is necessary to contain the virus while many in the informal sector are opposed to the lockdown as it is a set back to their businesses. According to an article in the guardian news paper (Ebiri, *et al.*, 2020) states that:

While the majority of the respondents agree that the extension is a child of necessity and sacrifice that must be paid, they also appeal to the Federal Government and the 36 governors to earnestly put measures in place that would see the country out of the economic and social quagmire the lockdown will engender while also providing palliatives.

2.1. Measures put in place by Nigeria's Government as palliative

In a bid to curb the spread of the Corona virus in Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari in his address to the nation on March 29th 2020, imposed a lock down in the Federal Capital Territory Abuja, Lagos and Ogun States. This implies that many Nigerians who depend on daily income for their livelihood cannot meet up with their financial obligations.

The lock down decision imposed by the Federal government was however greeted by many criticism as many people involved in the informal sector are faced with reality of being unable to fend for themselves amid the lock down and no concrete palliatives have been rolled out by the government to cushion the effect of the economy crisis facing the masses.

President Buhari in his address to the nation on extension of the lock down for another two weeks stated that:

No country can afford the full impact of a sustained restriction of movement on its economy. I am fully aware of the great difficulties experienced especially by those who earn a daily wage such as traders, dayworkers, artisans and manual workers. For this group, their sustenance depends on their ability to go out. Their livelihoods depend on them mingling with others and about seeking work. But despite these realities we must not change the restrictions. In the past two weeks, we announced palliative measures such as food distribution, cash transfers and loans repayment waivers to ease the pains of our restrictive policies during this difficult time. These palliatives will be sustained. I have also directed that the current social register be expanded from 2.6 million households to 3.6 million households in the next two weeks (CNBC Africa, 2020).

Many Nigerians are however dissatisfied with the criteria set for the beneficiaries of the palliatives of \$52 conditional cash transfer per household as the Minister for humanitarian affairs Sadiya Farouq stated Nigerians who recharge airtime of 24 cents and those who have \$13 and below in their bank accounts are entitled to the palliative. Whereas there is a popular opinion that the cash transfer should be done based on the 38.5 Million bank accounts linked to Biometric Verification Number- BVN (Market Watch, 2020).

2.2. Government's oil based economy

Nigeria in 2018 was estimated at 195,874,740 in population¹. Nigeria despite being the Largest economy in Africa is heavily indebted and mainly dependent on crude oil as a major revenue source(Terwase, Abdul-Talib & Zengeni, 2014).

¹ The datas on Nigerian population are available on website of World Bank: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=NG> (Accessed, 21st April, 2020).

Crude oil market has however been adversely affected crude oil price as the crude oil price in the international market drastically dropped. According to OPEC, “the price of OPEC basket of thirteen crudes stood at \$21.19 a barrel on Wednesday, compared with \$22.67 the previous day” (OPEC, 2020).

Adegbite and Abu (2020) examining the situation noted that:

Nigeria, like many countries, has been adversely affected by the pandemic— from the slump in the crude oil price to disruption of supply chain as a result of the lockdown in China, which is a major trading partner with Nigeria. The Nigerian economy is now heading for the second recession in less than four years.

Business AM, one of Nigeria’s economy newspapers on 23rd of April, 2020 reported that:

Nigeria has not stopped producing crude oil but a persistent crash in oil prices may lead to a halt in production, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation has declared. On Tuesday, global oil price benchmark, amid the demand collapse caused by reduced economic activities, Brent, against which Nigeria’s crude oil is priced, fell by \$6.34 to \$19.23 per barrel. Nigeria recently slashed the oil price benchmark for its budget to \$30 per barrel from \$57 per barrel, but oil prices kept crashing since the outbreak of coronavirus as demand plunged.

2.3. Funds and resolutions towards curbing covid 19

There have been many contributions geared towards fighting COVID-19 in Nigeria from international organizations and private individuals in Nigeria.

The UN in Nigeria, through the Basket Fund, mobilized and deployed over USD \$2 million from the UN system for the procurement of essential medical supplies that will boost the efforts of the Nigerian Government in containing COVID-19 and caring for those confirmed cases in need of serious medical attention (United Nations, Nigeria, 2020).

Under the Coalition Against COVID-19 (CACOVID) led by Aliko Dangote, according to *Africabusiness* (2020), a total donation to the CACOVID relief fund totaled over \$55.7m as of April 6, with Dangote and the Central bank donating \$5.1m each was realized. Other private contributors include Segun Agbaje (Guaranty Trust Bank), Jim Ovia (Zenith Bank), Herbert Wigwe (Access Bank), Tony Elumelu (United Bank for Africa), Abdulsamad Rabiou of BUA Group, Folorunsho Alakija of Famfa Oil Limited, Oba Otudeko (First Bank), Femi Otedola of Amperion Power, billionaire businessman Mike Adenuga of Globacom and the Nigeria Deposit Insurance Corporation have provided \$2.59m each.

The Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) alongside some oil companies has pledged \$30m to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control to improve patient care, medical supplies and equipment.

President Buhari in one of his addresses to the nation said the number of testing laboratories in the country have been increased and testing capacity has been raised to 1,500 tests per day, while over 7,000 Healthcare workers on infection prevention and control have been trained and many State Governments have also made provisions for isolation wards and treatment centres. .

Other resolution on containing COVID-19 revealed by the president in his address to the nation on 27th of April, 2020 after consultation with the Nigeria Governor's Forum (NGF) include providing hazard fee and procuring insurance for health workers in the front line, gradually relaxing the lockdown from May 4th to

resuscitate economic activities, imposing the compulsory use of face mask, imposing curfew from 8pm to 6am, banning of non-essential inter-state travels and social gatherings.

There was however an imposition of a two-week total lockdown in Kano State, Northern Nigeria where only 77 confirmed cases of COVID-19 was recorded amidst several mysterious deaths which is not unconnected to COVID-19 (Guardian Newspaper, 2020).

2.4. Findings

At the end of the research on the effect of coronavirus disease on the socio-economic lives of Nigerians, the study found out that

I. A total lock down to contain COVID-19 cannot be sustained in Nigeria over a long period of time

II. Nigeria's economy depend majorly on the informal sector that heavily relies on social setting to thrive

III. Lack of social security structure reveals the weakness of the system especially in times of dire need like the situation posed by COVID-19

IV. Nigeria have to move away from overdependence on crude oil and diversify to other sector to boost the economy.

Conclusion

Nigeria like many African societies is a close knit of social entities that affects its economy, enforcing a total lock down for even a short while has devastating effect on the economy. Considering the fact that Nigeria has no concrete social structure that supports the poor in the land and the prevalent hardship that average Nigerians go through to fend for their families, Nigeria should avoid the bait of extensive lock down practised by buoyant economies of the world that can conveniently cater for its citizens.

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Coronavirus Geopolitics. A Reflection on the Russian Case

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Abstract

The current pandemic has shown that, over and above the more immediate consequences to be tackled, such as the health emergency and the economic crisis, there are long-term effects that will require reflection at a global level. In this article, we will analyse how the fight against coronavirus has become an interesting test of whether the Russian Government can enjoy comparative advantages over Western democracies. In particular, we highlight how the global health emergency is being used by the Kremlin to fuel the Russian narrative on an energetic and resolute country, against a divided and weakened West, and to loudly invoke a different world order where Moscow could find new centrality.

Keywords: Russia, Coronavirus, Geopolitics.

1. Russia between paraded and retracted calm

In a recent article on *The Wall Street Journal*, Henry Kissinger notes how the Covid-19 pandemic could have serious effects on the current world balance, risking irreversibly undermining the social contract between rulers and governments, both nationally and internationally. “When the Covid-19 pandemic is over, many countries’ institutions will be perceived as having failed” (Kissinger, 2020). It would seem that countries are striving not only to save the greatest number of their citizens and contain an economic crisis due to an unprecedented paralysis of the productive sectors – undoubtedly a priority – but also to preserve the legitimacy of their governments and the reference values guiding their political choices.

Putin’s Russia is not exempt from this challenge, having shown a rather contradictory attitude, flaunting calm first and then surrendering to the evidence of the facts.

In mid-March, when the global scale of the emergency was becoming clear, all the Kremlin was concerned with was confirming the national referendum on constitutional reform on 22 April, which could potentially extend Putin’s presidency until 2036. At that moment, it seemed that the president’s aim was mainly to save himself, rather than the country, perhaps to the point of exploiting a virus that could distract from the questionable political reforms inaugurated in January with the resignation of Medvedev’s whole government.

One could have rightly guessed that Putin would have capitalized on the critical situation by silencing internal oppositions, also through the cancellation, for alleged security reasons, of a series of events, including the demonstration planned in Moscow on 22 April against the constitutional reform. However, with time, and despite the government’s attempts to minimize the extent of the crisis (going so far as to declare, on March 20, less than 200 infections in a Federation housing about 144 million people), the progressive restrictions showed that the country was preparing for a situation far worse than the one feared (Figuera, 2020).

While Western leaders were beginning to impose lockdown measures, Putin was trying to follow the official agenda by going to the Crimea on March 18, the day after the Constitutional Court gave the go-ahead for the proposed amendments, to celebrate six years of the annexation of the peninsula and open the election campaign that was to carry him smoothly to the April referendum.

It seemed, therefore, that the coronavirus had been an unexpected ally in Putin's path towards "bulletproofing" his power without arousing too much sensation at the international level and with the least possible internal unrest. But if during the trip to Crimea, the president still did not hesitate to depict the situation as "under control", the urgent construction of a hospital for infectious diseases and the exemplary punishment for those who violated the quarantine – up to 5 years in prison – elucidated about the real internal situation.

It is important to note that the Russian strategy was characterized by an initial attempt to minimize the extent of the problem, so as not to hinder the projects aimed at strengthening internal stability with the referendum. The further ambition was to project the image of a strong country to the outside world thanks to the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazi-Fascism – to be grandiosely celebrated on May 9. At the same time, the global health emergency has been used to fuel the Russian narrative about an energetic and determined country against a divided and weakened West. To this end, the government has also facilitated the spread of tales according to which the virus had been created by the US military, to be used in the trade war against China. The destabilizing scale of the virus in the year of the U.S. presidential elections represents an unmissable opportunity to promote anti-Western propaganda around which to compact domestic public opinion, demonstrating the alleged superiority of "strong" governments – Russia and China in the first place – in addressing this exceptional situation compared to the questionable choices of the Trump presidency (Milosevich-Juaristi, 2020).

In this way, the Kremlin makes misinformation and conspiracy theories a valuable tool to capitalize both on the ambiguity of Washington's politics and on the weakness shown by the European Union in managing the crisis. The aim, not too hidden, is the definitive questioning of the supremacy of the existing liberal order.

In general, we can say that the news about the actual number of contagions and the decisions taken by the government appear unclear and unlikely to be truthful, particularly if we consider the permeability of the immense borders shared between Russia and China. Moreover, the accusations that the Kremlin was playing down the real extent of the problem were confirmed by the government's actions, culminating in Putin's decision to address the nation with two speeches just a week apart. With the first, on 25 March, it became clear that the image of an almost-immune country was no longer viable, as the first deaths were recorded. The president thus announced the now inevitable postponement of the referendum until a date to be set, and a week of paid national holidays, encouraging Russians to stay home (Putin, 2020a). With the second, on April 2, when the number of cases had reached 3500, he surrendered to the evidence by declaring a state of emergency, extending the quarantine to the end of April and implementing economic and social measures to help the population (Putin, 2020b).

2. Coronavirus and authoritarian governments: a likely alliance?

It cannot be underestimated that the health crisis has called for an extension of government powers, necessary to implement decisions as quickly as possible. As the

controversial Hungarian case shows, the exceptional measures that have restricted individual freedoms in the interests of public health have also ended up legitimising the weakening of democratic institutions and the progressive silencing of opposition. If such a risk exists in all authoritarian countries, or those with weaker democracies, in the Russian case the trial had been going on for a long time and was further accelerated at the beginning of the year. The amendment proposed by Valentina Tereshkova – approved by Parliament and ratified by the Constitutional Court – to eliminate the two-mandates cap for the presidential candidacy is emblematic in this regard; Putin, who had excluded this possibility on previous occasions, accepted the proposal, citing, among other things, precisely the “complex, if not turbulent” global situation that seems to require “stable, decisive and consistent policies”¹.

It is conceivable that in exceptional situations (*e.g.* calamities), such as the one we are experiencing, authoritarian governments can even come out strengthened thanks to a decision-making capacity which allows them to face problems more quickly and in the absence of interlocutory opposition; moreover, their control of the media allows them to convey a strong and decisive image of government action, even if this does not necessarily correspond to reality.

Coronavirus can thus become almost a resource to further legitimize a strong power, presented as the natural aspiration of citizens seeking stability and protection. However, economic prospects are very different. If they appear dramatic at world level, they can have a truly devastating impact on Russia. The country is already facing increasing unemployment and both the rouble and oil prices nosedived. All this against the backdrop of a general economic crisis, where the lack of agreement between OPEC and Russia has brought the price of crude oil to its lowest level since 2003. It is therefore difficult to predict Russia’s economic resilience, but it seems that its projects to contain the consequences of the coronavirus are quite ambitious and risk being put to the test in the event of a prolonged emergency.

In any case, faced with the growing number of contagions, which by mid-April has exceeded 20,000 cases, the president had to revise his initial positions by adopting lockdown measures and economic policies in an already precarious context. Since the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, the country has tried to increase its economic sovereignty and decrease interdependence with other economies, with positive consequences in agriculture but much worse outcomes in more advanced sectors. In the face of a crisis like the current one, the situation could only worsen. Furthermore, it seems that Putin wants to delegate the internal management of the pandemic; on the one hand, the mayor of Moscow Sobyenin and the new prime minister Mishustin are on the front line, and on the other hand, the regional governors are being asked to deal with the emergency in their respective territories.

3. Covid-19, Russia, and the crisis of the liberal order

One could almost speculate that the President wishes to turn down responsibility for a pandemic which, internally, can cause serious and unpredictable consequences, focusing instead on foreign policy. Indeed, coronavirus can represent an opportunity at the international level to gain prominence in the West after years of relative marginalization.

¹ See the article published on March 12, “Kremlin: Putin accepts idea of removing presidential term limits amid global challenges”, <https://tass.com/politics/1129349>.

The fight against coronavirus becomes, therefore, a test of whether the authoritarian Russian government can enjoy comparative advantages over Western democracies. Although the results can only be seen in the long term, there is no doubt that Putin is willing to invest in this direction, especially since “the fragility of globalism has been underscored as the international community grows more fractious and the liberal order recedes” (Trenin, 2020). From this perspective, while governments have been called to manage the crisis at the national level, and international organizations developed internal rifts, unable to act in unison and solidarity, it would seem that the Russian position, favouring the central role of the state against uncontrolled globalization, often translated into the pursuit of the interests of a few, can regain vigour.

We agree with Andrew Foxall, director of the Russia and Eurasia Studies Centre at the Henry Jackson Society, in claiming that democracies have not been more effective than authoritarian governments in coping with the crisis and, on the contrary, have had to expand their powers and reduce individual freedoms in the face of the dramatic emergency. This has led to an almost paradoxical situation in which “in contrast to the early post-Cold War period when many believed that Russia would become more like the West, in the coronavirus crisis the West has become more like Russia” (Foxall, 2020).

The weakening of democratic cohesion, generalized chaos and internal divisions can thus confirm Russia’s vision of an international system where countries are guided by the defence of their own interests and national demands prevail over global dynamics. In the face of the crisis, the West has shown his more illiberal side; it seems then inevitable to revise the international order based on its reference values. Russia can, therefore, reappear on the international chessboard as the bearer of a geopolitical mission, in defence of the inviolability of national sovereignty and a multipolar world, which, starting from the “conservative turning point” achieved with Putin’s return to the presidency in 2012, resists the homogenizing influence of Western liberalism (Robinson, 2020).

We can read in this perspective also Russia’s activism of recent weeks. From the assistance to Italy to the plane sent to the United States, these actions are in line with the foreign policy of recent years. Faced with problems that transcend national borders (*e.g.* after September 11 or in the war against the Islamic State) Putin has always offered his help in favour of international alliances. These choices should not be interpreted as Russian adherence to Western standards, but rather as an opportunity to set aside more controversial issues in the name of a common cause that can help to relax relations between the parties.

Once again, a global crisis becomes the means to radically change the global agenda. Sending aid to Western countries seems consistent with this project; taking advantage of the vacuum left, particularly in the initial phase, by the United States, deaf to its partners’ pleas, Russia and China choose to intervene, aware that in this way they would easily steer international public opinion (particularly changeable in the absence of clear reference points) in their favour.

As Trenin warns us, “In international relations there is no goodwill without some calculus (...) There is a propaganda element, certainly” (see Dixon, 2020). The Russians are aware of this and, after the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 and the sanctions imposed by the West, they can demonstrate not only that they are no less than Westerners, but even potentially superior: after years of violent criticism and detrimental actions, they still offer their help, apparently unconditional, to the United States that, in evident difficulty, receive it “gratefully”.

It is clear, therefore, that humanitarian aid has become another geopolitical instrument in this parallel war that is being played out at the same time as the fight

against the coronavirus. From China to Russia, there are many powers that, taking advantage of western divisions, compete for world leadership by proposing alternative models of development and defending the existence of different centres of power. Every war or event of global significance brings radical changes and imposes a new world order based on “a set of commonly accepted rules defining the limits of permissible action and a balance of power imposing control when the rules are broken” (Kissinger, 2014, p.11) While it is obvious that we are living in a momentous juncture, the definition of how the pandemic will change the current international scenario is still uncertain.

Russia is certainly reacting to the crisis in line with the nature of its authoritarian system: lack of transparency on internal management; disclosure of conspiracy theories that foster a sense of opposition to an external enemy, thus strengthening internal cohesion; political and geopolitical opportunism that helps to spread the image of a strong and resolute country (Pipes, 2006). Whether such strategies will be useful in questioning the current international order is still difficult to predict; much will also depend on the response capacity of Western leaders and institutions who, after an understandable moment of difficulty, will have to show that they can effectively manage this crisis in the name of supportive and responsible globalization. The success or otherwise of this action will also affect the ongoing process of “de-westernisation”, a process from which Russia has much to gain.

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