



# Another Day in Dystopia. Italy in the Time of COVID-19

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To cite this article: Roberta Raffaetà (2020): Another Day in Dystopia. Italy in the Time of COVID-19, *Medical Anthropology*, DOI: [10.1080/01459740.2020.1746300](https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2020.1746300)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2020.1746300>



Published online: 26 Mar 2020.



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## Another Day in Dystopia. Italy in the Time of COVID-19

Roberta Raffaetà

It's 7 am and I have just woken up. As in past mornings, I wake up in the midst of a deafening silence. In many cities, this is broken only by the sound of passing ambulances. The silence will continue through the day: since Monday March 9, all of Italy is a red zone. We cannot exit our municipality, nor our home unless strictly necessary and motivated for reasons of work, clinic visits or the purchase of basic goods. In these cases, we have to carry auto-certification, stating our reason for travel. In the absence of this, or if found wandering around without reason, we are liable to prosecution. We stay at home, working if possible, watching the television news, reading, playing with kids, resting, engaging with others through social media and telephone, cleaning and undertaking minor home repairs, cooking that one last sophisticated recipe.

Until February 21, 2020, Italy was considered coronavirus-free. We were busy preparing for Carnival celebrations, but quickly moved from festive masks to surgical masks (Vietti 2020; see also Lasco 2020). The epidemic spread quickly and violently, especially in the northern regions such as Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia-Romagna. As I write this, on March 15, there are well over 20,000 detected cases, 1,672 in intensive care, and 1,809 deaths. Cases more than doubled in five days. Entire villages and cities, such as Brescia and Bergamo, are seeing their aged population dying in mass, their cemeteries closed through lack of space and the lack of capacity to accept new coffins or incinerate bodies. By 24 March, nearly 70,000 people were infected.

During the first week of the epidemic, Italy split between those in panic and those who minimized the risk. Positions, however, were not fixed. Media, politicians and scientists swung between extremes. One right-wing newspaper, *Liberio*, for example, on February 23, had equated the impact of the virus on the population with the experience of a massacre, yet four days later was claiming, "The virus, now it's all too exaggerated." Meanwhile, the numbers of cases and deaths rose dramatically. In the worst affected areas, exhausted doctors and nurses started to release interviews and videos illustrating the severity of the situation, with ICU wards on the verge of collapse.

Rapidly, however, the government moved from mild and at times confused measures of containment to very severe ones. As scientists and journalists passed from ambiguity and polemics to awareness and action, so citizens adapted. Until last weekend (March 7–8) people were still enjoying life at the seaside, at ski resorts, and having aperitivo (happy hour) with friends. At the same time, on that Sunday, with rumors of national lockdown, masses of people left by train from northern cities to join their families in the south, spreading the contagion. That evening, on a TV talk show,<sup>1</sup> the Health Minister Roberto Speranza called for collective solidarity, adding that Italians had to perform a "cultural jump" to act in light of collective interests – younger people less at risk included – because the value of a nation is measured by how its most vulnerable and aged persons are treated and because, after all, we are interconnected. The Minister's plea was a clear illustration of the fact that "culture" is not an abstract thing but has very concrete effects.

Italians responded promptly. Our cities, beaches and ski slopes are now deserted, and for the most part we are staying quietly at home. If we go out, we wear masks and, outside of shops, we stand orderly and distanced in queues. Foreigner observers are quite surprised. Probably, we were too: we

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**Media teaser:** What is it like in the heart of the pandemic? Roberta Raffaetà reflects on Italy's biopolitics of containment and speculates on the exceptional violence of the Italian outbreak.

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proved more cohesive than we believed possible. Solidarity and support are spreading also through social media. Through hashtags such as #iorestoacasa (I stay at home) people express their solidarity to the postal, grocery, security workers who do not have the option to stay home and most of all to the many health professional struggling to save lives at the expenses of their own health and, sometimes, life. National libraries and museums offer free virtual access and every evening at 6 pm, people assemble at the distance of their respective balconies and windows under the hashtag #andràtuttobene (everything will be fine) for flash mob singing. On March 13, “L’Italiachiamo”<sup>2</sup> lived streamed for 18 hours, bringing together the most prominent singers, actors, comedians and other celebrities to raise funds to support health practitioners in their heroic efforts. And Italian anthropologists are making their voice visible and public.<sup>3</sup>

We have options in how we react in times of emergency and crisis. During the first chaotic week of the epidemic, a number of people argued for the establishment of a temporary state of dictatorship. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben was quick to intervene and highlight the panopticon risks associated to a “state of exception”<sup>4</sup> (see Agamben 1998), but perhaps he was missing the ethnographic salience of what was happening. Theoretical anxieties aside, a state of dictatorship was clearly not viable: science itself has no certainties nor magic bullets, and it can advance only through trial and error and democratic debate. But what is most important is that democracy is a process and not a state: despite the horror of this epidemic, it allowed people to prove our capacity. We have the opportunity to take responsibility. As Jean-Luc Nancy<sup>5</sup> has observed, in response to his friend and colleague Agamben:

Giorgio states that governments take advantage of all sorts of pretexts to continuously establish states of exception. But he fails to note that the exception is indeed becoming the rule in a world where technical interconnections of all kinds (movement, transfers of every type, impregnation or spread of substances, and so on) are reaching a hitherto unknown intensity that is growing at the same rate as the population ... We must be careful not to hit the wrong target: an entire civilization is in question, there is no doubt about it. There is a sort of viral exception – biological, computer-scientific, cultural – which is pandemic. Governments are nothing more than grim executioners, and taking it out on them seems more like a diversionary manoeuvre than a political reflection.

The World Health Organization publicly acknowledged with appreciation the measures taken by the Italian government; most other European countries are affirming Italy as a model. But facts linger far from words as most EU countries and institutions continue to prioritize “business as usual” and minimize the risk to the health of their most fragile people. On March 12, Christine Lagarde made it plain that was not the duty of the European Central Bank to ease Italy’s financial troubles: “There are other tools and other actors to deal with these issues.” Rapid financial market breakdown followed. The day after, the President of the EU Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, tried to make amends by affirming that the EU was ready to help Italy as much as possible, because – she added – other European countries may need the same help. Yes, we are all interconnected and it is time for Europe to acknowledge this. If the refugee crisis was not enough to demolish nationalistic self-interest, maybe the virus will do so.

As Italians, we look with wonder and horror at the images of other countries keeping intact, for the most part, their lifestyle, only slowly realizing what is happening on a global scale. Others can learn from our situation and prevent mass contagion. The deaths are not rumors; By 24 March, nearly 70,000 people were infected. reality. And viruses depend on local socio-political conditions but they are also situated in a globalized, neoliberal world with no boundaries despite select measures of lockdown. Viruses have no borders, as expressed through the hashtag #covidhasnoborders<sup>6</sup> by the many Italians living abroad, frightened by the negative attitudes and weak precautions in their host countries.

Yet, the intensity of the epidemic seems peculiar. If Italy’s rates of cases and deaths are an expression of a specific “situated biology” (Niewöhner and Lock 2018), what then are its most significant features? Is it simply that, thanks to a robust public health system, we can trace more rapidly the people infected, while other countries are still at the point of battling with insurance companies about who should pay for tests? Is it because Italians were less politically strategic than other countries, and did not care about playing the role of the plague-spreader in the world arena?

Or because we cannot accept acquiring herd immunity through a cruel and barbaric “natural selection”? Or simply because Italy’s average age is high? All of the above may partly explain the current situation, but there could be more. Italian virologist Ilaria Capua, director of the One Health Center of Excellence at the University of Florida, warns that “these deaths are an anomaly that we have to study in depth with care and quickly.”<sup>7</sup> She brings attention to ecosystemic aspects, for example one hypothesis is that Italians are dying because their bodies are weakened by resistant bacteria. She asks “what if the problem lays not where we are looking for it – in a more aggressive microbial strain, for example – but in the existence of superbugs in hospitals, exacerbating the already complex health status of the coronavirus affected person?”<sup>8</sup> Italy, in fact, is the country with the most antimicrobial resistance in Europe, reflecting the broad use of antibiotics for both human and animal health. This is of course a hypothesis, but it is one worth investigating. This will be another story. Today, I am going to dive again into the deafening silence of fear and oppression, but with the hope and promise of a better future, for a utopia arising from this daily dystopia.

## Notes

1. During the talkshow *Che Tempo che Fa*.
2. “Italy called” is a passage in the Italian national anthem, see <https://www.litaliachiamo2020.it/>.
3. <https://osservatoriologiustadistanza.blogspot.com/>; [http://www.treccani.it/magazine/atlante/cultura/Storie\\_virali.html](http://www.treccani.it/magazine/atlante/cultura/Storie_virali.html); <http://fareantropologia.cfs.unipi.it/notizie/2020/03/1421/>.
4. Original source: <https://ilmanifesto.it/lo-stato-deccezione-provocato-da-un'emergenza-immotivata/>. For an English translation see <http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.
5. <http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>.
6. [https://twitter.com/hashtag/covidhasnoborder?src=hash&ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/hashtag/covidhasnoborder?src=hash&ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw).
7. “Lo dico con molto rispetto, ma senza alcuna remora: questi decessi sono un’anomalia che dobbiamo approfondire e studiare con cura e velocità”, my translation. From <https://www.fanpage.it/attualita/coronavirus-aver-preso-troppi-antibiotici-potrebbe-spiegare-perche-in-italia-si-muore-di-piu/>.
8. “Se, in altre parole, il problema non fosse dove lo stiamo cercando – in un ceppo virale più aggressivo, ad esempio – ma nella presenza di super-batteri negli ospedali che aggravano il quadro già complesso di un malato da Coronavirus?” from <https://www.fanpage.it/attualita/coronavirus-aver-preso-troppi-antibiotici-potrebbe-spiegare-perche-in-italia-si-muore-di-piu/><https://www.fanpage.it/>.

## Notes on contributor

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