Pandemic: The Italian Way

'At the beginning we were mocked, abroad,' says Romano Prodi referring to the government's response to Covid-19, 'But now we hear people call it *the Italian way*: we dictated the rule. I believe that we saved Europe.' Former Italian Prime Minister Prodi's statements are often banal, but never casual. His point about dictating the rule is, if anything, an understatement: the Italian way has led not just Europe, but the world.

Although China is far more influential than Italy, its internal affairs remain those of an opaque and totalitarian country, and do not generate emulation. The Wuhan epidemic alarmed the world, but it has been the Italian reaction, a very strict lockdown at national level, that has demonstrated a method. And it is in the face of the Italian way, not the Chinese measures, that the rulers of democratic countries have feared accusations of letting their citizens die.

So, they largely adopted the Italian way, albeit often less rigidly than the original. Analyzing how it developed can therefore also shed light on a new phase of global politics. But, before doing so, it is necessary to illustrate who comprises the Italian political class, as well as its modus operandi in reacting to broader social facts, outside of the viral epidemic.

An eternal emergency

The Italian parliament has three political alignments. A sovereigntist one with openly racist tones, characterized by theories of ethnic substitution, according to which African migrants challenge the 'native' European. Migrations, the sovereigntists ridiculously claim, are financed and pushed by Soros (that in their narrative is not only referring to George Soros, but is somehow a codename for 'Jewish lobby' or other expressions that could sound too openly antisemitic).

A second parliamentary group is of a hyper-moderate and neoliberal left. During the years in which it ruled, it also approved tough measures against migrants. However, unlike the right, this group did not make migration an ethnic issue, but one of security. This security is not about the safety of those crossing the Mediterranean to reach Europe, rather it is an imaginary security against crime and even against non-criminal behaviours due to poverty (such as living on the street or begging), especially if performed by migrants. The unequivocal data on the constant decline in crimes in Italy does not affect this narrative: the political class requires it to identify a

scapegoat to the classes impoverished by neoliberalism.

Finally, a third of the seats in the Italian parliament are occupied by the Five Star Movement (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*), a party that declares itself neither right nor left, but which actually embodies the common-sense values of the right, coupled with a naive and fanatical technocracy. These parliamentarians are well aware that the success of the Movement in the last elections (2018) will not be in any way replicable in the future, and therefore it is much better for them that the current legislature lasts as long as possible. In this light, we could consider them sacks of potatoes available to occupy any of the weighing plates in the political balance: until August 2019, in government with the sovereigntist *Lega per Salvini premier* and, fifteen days later, with the left. The amazing thing – as Italian as transformism – is that the two governments have the same premier: Giuseppe Conte, an obscure professor of private law and devoted to the most 'pagan' saint of Italian Catholicism, [Pio da Pietrelcina.](#)

National 'emergencies' are not only pretextually linked to migrants, but are also constructed by the press. One such example is the 'children forgotten in the car', a media emergency which in 2018 prompted the Parliament still in office to unanimously approve compulsory anti-abandonment car seats – an obligation on families entailing an expenditure of 60-120 euros, against a state refund of only 30 euros. Despite only [eight children dying in this way in 20 years,](#) the second largest national newspaper, *La Repubblica*, wrote that the drama ['in recent years has affected many families',](#) and politicians speak of 'impressive numbers'. These early deaths are undoubtedly painful, but the numbers are modest compared to other fatalities affecting young children, on which public and private money and attention would have been better spent.

Why passing this law, then, unique in the world so far? Because as a fact, the *forma mentis* of the Italian political class is to induce fear. Going beyond the classic 'governing through crime', i.e. obtaining consensus by emphasizing crime, it gives way to a more penetrating 'governing through fear'. In the case of the anti-abandonment car seats, for instance, politicians suggest to parents that forgetting their child in the car is something that can easily happen. Passing the law, says a senator, 'represents a victory for millions of mothers and fathers who, in our country, accompany their children to school every morning between large doses of stress'.

Italy is therefore a country where the perception of danger is deformed by continuous imaginary emergencies. This is an important observation, because after thirty years of crying wolf, the arrival of a true wolf like Covid-19 has caught everyone unprepared. Had there been a track record of dealing with real emergencies, Covid-19 itself would have been less disastrous.

The unpredictability of the virus

In February, the outbreaks of the epidemic were located in some areas of the north, and in particular, Lombardy – the richest, most populous and polluted region of Italy. The territorial medicine of family doctors in the public health service could not handle it and melted down. Each family doctor was in charge of too many patients. This situation had been made worse by a leftist government reform in 2016, passed under the guise of greater efficiency and performance, which resulted in financial cuts (for example, to night medical emergency services). In addition, the health system of the Lombardy region, which is governed by the right, is among the most widely privatized, and therefore unsuitable for tackling a serious and rapidly spreading epidemic. Private health facilities earn on planned operations rather than on exceptional situations which require specialized personnel and equipment that are rarely needed under normal circumstances. This combination of factors has meant that, from the beginning of the epidemic, in Lombardy, the emergency medical wards were stormed. Witnesses reported people left to die because of the lack of intensive care beds in hospitals.

Faced with this, mainstream communications highlighted the 'unpredictability of the virus', whose exceptional nature would have caught anyone off guard. In reality, the collapse of Lombardy's emergency medical care was widely predictable: as early as January 2017 and in 2018, doctors and nurses' organizations from that region had denounced the emergency departments' incapability to cope with peaks of seasonal influenza. This crucial alarm from health workers was lost among the many cries of wolf in a country stunned by fake emergencies.

The progression of failures of the public health system, for which the right and left alike are to be accountable, prompted the media to taboo any comparison to the flu epidemics, despite the fact that the 2016/17 seasonal flu caused almost 25,000 deaths in Italy. Whoever tried (or still tries) to put Covid-19 into historical perspective is immediately accused of denying the gravity of the current pandemic.

Moreover, the preparation for pandemic events has been a declared objective of the European institutions for 20 years. Therefore, given the (shockingly) scant means that the richest region of the third-richest country in Europe had to deal with Covid-19, we would have expected demands for a "full reset" of the political class.

A threefold failure, and how to hide it

Covid-19 in Italy is a story of a threefold failure: of territorial medicine, of emergency medical facilities (especially in Lombardy) and of welfare assistance for the elderly who are not self-sufficient.

A significant number of deaths from coronavirus occurred in assisted-care nursing homes for the elderly (*Residenza Sanitaria Assistenziale*), where precautions against contagious diseases should have been normal practice. [Journalistic hypotheses](#) speak of 10,000 deaths in these nursing homes. Probably, not all of them are acknowledged as Covid-19 related deaths. However, if validated by actual data, the number of these deaths is proportionally very high within the total of Covid-19 victims in Italy (officially, as at [July 2020, about 34,000](#)).

How did the political class, faced with this disaster, divert attention from its responsibilities? As it usually does: by injecting large doses of imaginary emergencies into the real pandemic emergency. We will see how in a moment, but first, a necessary digression on internal racism.

In the north things work well

In the weeks leading up to the national lockdown, TV experts and politicians repeatedly communicated two basic concepts. First, that there are not enough intensive care beds to deal with the impact of Covid-19. While true, this was an avoidable eventuality as explained earlier. Second, that if the virus had appeared in Lombard proportions in the less equipped regions of southern Italy, the tragedy would have assumed an unimaginable scale.

The second concept is also true. But within that envelope of truth stir the unacknowledged thoughts of Italian politics. They are unconfessed in the proper sense because nobody gives them voice. In fact, since the Northern Regionalist Party (*Lega Nord*) created a national sovereign party (*Lega per Salvini premier*), northern racism has lost its political reference point. Yet its despicable influences pervade Italian politics. The League (*Lega per Salvini premier)* disguises them in requests for territorial autonomy, but currently favours the most unifying [racism against immigrants.](#) The left propagandizes northern efficiency by providing a [false and idyllic view of Emilia-Romagna](#) that has governed since 1970. Recently, [in partnership with the right](#), it has asked for greater territorial autonomy for this region – which simply means more selfishness in the distribution of wealth, leading to greater unevenness in welfare and public health.

The two political alignments therefore agree to aggravate the imbalance in the distribution of resources (in favour of the north) that has accompanied the Italian state since its inception 160

years ago. And they implicitly suggest that if 'things in the north work well' it is thanks to the anthropological characteristics of its ruling class and its citizens.

As a matter of fact, mafia and organized crime – still seen today as a typically southern feature – are well rooted in the real estate and financial sectors of the north, even in the acclaimed Emilia-Romagna region. And Lombardy, on the occasion of the pandemic, revealed the disaster that hides behind the glitter of its capital city, Milan.

There is therefore some resistance to acknowledging the specificity of the Nordic pandemic response fiasco, as this would mean recognizing a serious fault in the regions where 'everything works well'. This consideration does not obscure the rationale for a national blockade, but rather illuminates how it was conceived and implemented.

'Decorum' and contagion

On March 11, the national government declared a stringent national lockdown, which allowed leaving home only for buying food or if strictly necessary. Frequent roadblocks validated the reasons for mobility. Essential service workers were allowed to leave their residences only to go to work. This situation, from extension to extension, lasted until May 3.

It thus happened that Sardinia, a large island with rare Covid-19 cases and just over one and a half million inhabitants, implemented the same rules as in the metropolitan area of Milan, with three million inhabitants and half a million city users, mostly commuters from areas most affected by the virus. In the management of the emergency, the Conte government neglected all territorial levels of government (regions, municipalities, intermediate bodies, etc.), except for a pernicious detail: it left them the possibility of tightening, at their own discretion, the government restrictions.

So, mayors and presidents of the region, not being able or willing to articulate the measures according to the specific territory (more or less commuting, population density, etc.), did what they do best: 'governing through fear'. Thus, virus prevention is taken over by the most regressive instance of local politics (of both right and left): decorum. That is, in essence, the criminalization of non-criminal behaviours: youth gatherings in the street (already in the pre-Covid era), requests for alms, the simple visibility of social unease, especially if it concerns black immigrants. The tension that for years has pushed the mayors to sterilize urban life – which they would like to reduce to a series of restaurants for the wealthy and tourists – reached its zenith when urban life became synonymous with the possibility of contagion.

The already rigid decrees of the national government were forced towards greater closure. Individual sports activities were prevented; parks were closed; drones sent to monitor the woods; citizens invited to report anyone not abiding by the regulations; the use of bicycles prohibited; a further quarantine imposed on those found, during the lockdown, outside of their homes 'for no reason' (at the sole discretion of the police officer they happened to run into). And then, based on a viral Whatsapp audio from an unverified source that claims that 'the virus remains alive for nine days on asphalt', the mayors (again, right and left equally) deliberated disinfecting the streets with bleach – an absurd and polluting measure. For their part, the newspapers, during the phase of the lockdown when it was possible to go out only to buy food, published photos that created the (false) belief that there were too many people outside... going to the grocery store. As if starving at home had become a civic virtue.

Where does the Italian way lead?

The purpose of these measures was theatrical, and it succeeded. They slapped the monster on the front page, and the monster was the citizen who goes grocery shopping too often, who jogs, who walks in perfect solitude in a wood. The political class emerged clean and solid.

Now we would have to monitor if that political class will tackle the three issues that have become evident due to Covid-19: a net of family doctors in the public health service that promptly intercepts the needs of care, a sufficient number of beds in intensive care and the structural adjustment to the healthcare system in the South.

I use the conditional 'would have to monitor' because it is a purely theoretical hypothesis. In reality there is no group that is able to supervise, guide and possibly oppose government action. The Covid-19 emergency, and the total lack of analysis on how it was declared and carried out, has dissolved the critical capacity of the grassroots opposition networks. Only the sovereigntists (populists) remain, ready to poison public discourse with explicit racism and nationalism, far more incisive than the implicit ones carried out by the government.

Meanwhile, in decrees to 'restart' the country, the government accelerates construction, infrastructure and private mobility – three already saturated sectors, three direct and indirect sources of the air pollution that causes, according to European Union estimates, between 60 and 80 thousand deaths in Italy every year. And all without ever having thoroughly compared the map of the territorial distribution of Covid-19 cases with that of the most polluted areas in Italy. What are the links between pollution and lethality of the virus? What measures do we *actually* need?

After obtaining European funds to overcome this crisis, Giuseppe Conte has repeatedly spoken of 'changing the face of Italy'. Romano Prodi, the influential ex-premier from whose considerations we started, speaks of a 'turning point' which 'we must take advantage of'. Once again, among other banalities, Prodi puts emphasis on the themes of Italian and European neoliberalism, and primarily the dogma of growth. Yet the Lombard example testifies that economic growth (which in that area has never ceased) guarantees neither equity nor the functioning of welfare.

We should ask ourselves where this Italian way is leading us, whether out of a health crisis or into a neoliberal hell tinged with the authoritarianism tasted during the lockdown. One should wonder if there is anyone in Italy still capable of articulating this type of question.

Wolf Bukowski lives in Italy and collaborates with *Giap* (blog of Wu Ming collective of writers), *Jacobin Italia* and the magazine *Internazionale*, among others. His last books are about food industry and neoliberal storytelling (*La danza delle mozzarelle*, 2015), gastronomy and racism (*La santa crociata del porco*, 2017) and decorum (quality-of-life) politics in Italian cities (*La buona educazione degli oppressi*, 2019).