

## The Weeks that Could Have Changed the Pandemic Course: on the Conflict Between Health, Economic and Personal Rights

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*Based on the observation of the behavior of local and national governments during the pandemics and the underlying conflicts between different actors and visions, in this contribution I briefly expose some reflections on the necessary triangulation between health, economic and personal rights and the reasons of governments reluctance to implement the measures recommended by sanitary institutions.*

**Keywords:** coronavirus; late capitalism; governments; health rights; personal freedom

### The primacy of the right to capitalist accumulation

I live in Lombardy. In April, the month in which Italy experienced the harshest death toll<sup>1</sup>, Lombardy counted alone almost one-tenth of the global deaths due to coronavirus (and more than half of the total Italian deaths), with academic

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<sup>1</sup> Official data released by Italian Government. URL: <https://github.com/pcm-dpc/COVID-19> (accessed 23 September 2020).



research suggesting that the real death number of deaths to Covid-19 is much higher (Alicandro et al., 2020; Modi et al., 2020). The tragic primacy of Lombardy is the consequence of two epidemic focuses: the first centered in the province of Lodi, the second in the Val Seriana valley (province of Bergamo). The Lodi outbreak was promptly isolated, after the first ten cases, with 50'000 inhabitants under quarantine from the 21 of February. For Val Seriana, the 2 of March the Italian National Institute for health asked to apply an identical quarantine. However, both the local and national government remained inactive until the 8 of March, one week later, when the government decided to put all Lombardy (and the entire Italy only a few days after) under lockdown. It was too late. Meanwhile, the virus was already ravaging the entire region. The 19 of March Italians watched on television a long procession of military trucks full of coffins leaving the city of Bergamo to bring the corpses in other regions, as even the funeral industry had collapsed<sup>2</sup>.

If political authorities immediately decided to put Val Seriana under lockdown as they did with Codogno, that week could maybe have changed the pandemic course in Italy significantly, but they did not. Why? Val Seriana, unlike the Codogno area, is one of the most productive areas in Europe<sup>3</sup>. It has hundreds of factories and thousands of workers, many of whom come every day from all the province and beyond using public transports. These should be excellent motivations to make even more urgent the implementation of a lockdown. Instead, they became the main reason that hindered it. The Lombard president of the General Confederation of Italian Industry himself stated the 7 of April in an interview<sup>4</sup> that they firmly opposed it, in accord with the regional government. To sum up, we could say that a conflict between the right to health and to economic accumulation emerged, with governments delaying their choice.

Another week that could have changed the pandemic course, this time not in Italy but at the European level, happened shortly after. In the first half of March, while Italy was already greatly suffering from COVID19 outbreak and implemented the lockdown following the Chinese model, the rest of Western countries had the time to organize and prepare themselves. Instead, they developed a range of various strategies that had one common principle: to not act like Italy, to avoid the lockdown and its tragic economic consequences. Watching the news coming from European and American authorities powerless from my quarantine, I felt we Italians were like contemporary Cassandra: we knew what was about to happen, we knew they could avoid it, but we were cursed to remain unheard. We Italians tragically underestimated the plague, I thought, but we also were the first Western country to be hit by it. Before us, COVID19 was perceived as something far away,

<sup>2</sup> Coronavirus: Army takes Bergamo coffins out of Lombardy. URL: [https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2020/03/19/coronavirus-army-takes-bergamo-coffins-out-of-lombardy\\_6903e8f3-c6d8-4a1c-909b-f415acf1a2b9.html](https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2020/03/19/coronavirus-army-takes-bergamo-coffins-out-of-lombardy_6903e8f3-c6d8-4a1c-909b-f415acf1a2b9.html) (accessed 23 September 2020).

<sup>3</sup> La rivista il Mulino: Why here? URL: [https://www.rivistailmulino.it/news/newsitem/index/Item/News:NEWS\\_ITEM:5109](https://www.rivistailmulino.it/news/newsitem/index/Item/News:NEWS_ITEM:5109) (accessed 23 September 2020).

<sup>4</sup> "In Lombardia non si potevano fare zone rosse, non si poteva fermare la produzione": parla a TPI il presidente di Confindustria Lombardia. URL: <https://www.tpi.it/economia/confindustria-lombardia-zone-rosse-in-regione-intervista-presidente-bonometti-20200407580914/> (accessed 23 September 2020).

something belonging to the distant East Asian countries with the connected baggage of colonial stereotypes about poor sanitary and hygienic standards. However, now the epidemics were in the heart of Europe, showing all the fragility of a Western health care system and society to it. How could they not see the urgency to take the most severe measures to prevent the same outcome? Only a week later, the severity of the COVID19 diffusion converted in many cases the range of multifaceted strategies into a common lockdown, with a limited range of variation. Like for Lombardy, institutions implemented the lockdown only because the truth of the matter forced them to, avoiding it until they could deny the reality.

### **The necessary triangulation between health, economic and personal rights**

In both cases, a violent conflict happened between actors, to establish the priority of the governmental agenda toward the COVID19 crisis. A conflict played on the trade-off between economic interest and health rights. On one side employers, industrialists and part of the civil society pushed to reopen as soon as possible all the productive activities while on the other side trade unions, health officers and other parts of civil society pushed to maintain the productive lockdown for a longer period. This situation could be well analyzed as a re-edition of the Marxian capital-labor conflict under the pandemic phase, as well as a challenge for the hegemony in the orientation of the necro-political bio-power of the state (Braidotti, 2007) that divides those who should live from the “expendable” individuals.

Another discussion has been particularly active, mainly in the academic and political debates. This other debate centered about the risks posed by the extraordinary limitations to personal freedom and rights implemented in this period, in the name of the fight against Covid-19. To summarize, it discussed the possibility that the current state of emergency, framing the adoption of these severe limitations as necessary for the common good, will allow an authoritarian turn and an exacerbation of the contemporary “society of control” (Deleuze, 1992) by the state. In this case, another conflict became evident, one between personal rights and freedom and the legitimacy of the state to limit them in the name of health safeguard.

Both these conflictual rifts are still in evolution, and the debate arisen about them is rich in contributions and potentially relevant outcomes. However, quite surprisingly, they remain almost impenetrable one to the other. To the contrary, I claim that it is necessary to intertwine the two different debates, performing a triangulation between health, economic and personal rights. The analytical benefits of such an operation would be great both in the sociological and in the public domain. On one side, for those involved in the capital-labor conflict, it is necessary to acknowledge the risks involved in the advocacy of the primacy of the right to health above everyone else, even if instrumental to opposing the capitalist pretension of safeguarding profits first. On the other side, to denounce the strengthening of the society of control and the potential elevation of the “state of exception”



(Agamben, 2005) as the new norm, if not accompanied by the concern for the great offence played by economic actors against these same limitations, translates into an unwilling help to them.

To consider only one of the two fields in this pandemic conjunction exposes to fearful consequences: in the first case to sacrifice freedom in the name of health safeguard, in the second to renounce to health safeguard and to help the primacy of the right of capitalist accumulation in the name of the protection of personal freedom.

### **A gamble with citizens' lives on stake**

Another question that the two analyzed cases pose is why governments in many cases decided to delay the adoption of measures until they could. Indeed, far from being neutral actors' prey of the dominant forces in the conflict, governments are clearly active players, with their own agency and agenda. It becomes possible to answer this question only if the global scenario is taken into consideration with its contemporary developments. Many national economies have just recovered or are still recovering from the 2008 crisis, and late capitalism (Jameson, 1991) seems still in struggle to find a new productive paradigm capable of reaffirming its hegemony. In this context, the management of the measures to be adopted by governments became a gamble with their citizens' lives at stake: the winners are the ones capable of overcoming the pandemic contemporaneously avoiding to enact the most harmful measures for the economy, with a "bearable" amount of deaths. Governments abandoned this strategy only when it became clear that, without a lockdown or anyway stricter measures, the death toll would become unbearable. The gamble has shifted to a second timing: the prediction of the earliest moment by which it would become possible to reopen productive activities. These choices seem to be taken based on the awareness that economies are today fragile as giants with feet of clay and that, as everything suggests that this pandemic will accelerate the ongoing contradictions of late capitalism, the only way to mitigate the degree of demotion to be suffered in the international arena is to guess the best possible timing, following the ancient principle of transforming uncertainty into risk (Knight, 2012).

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о конфликте между здоровьем, экономикой и правами  
человека**

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Основываясь на наблюдениях за действиями муниципальных и национальных органов власти во время пандемии, автор обнаруживает конфликты, возникающие между различными акторами и их взглядами. Автор предлагает некоторые размышления о необходимой триангуляции между здоровьем, экономикой и правами человека, а также о причинах нежелания правительств соблюдать меры, рекомендованные санитарными учреждениями.

**Ключевые слова:** коронавирус; поздний капитализм; правительства; право на здоровье; личная свобода

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