



Allegro vivace... the Italian laboratory, for better or for worse

written by Alessandro Monsutti
April, 2020



This little essay was conceived wandering in the Swiss countryside. I'm on sabbatical leave and my whole work and travel program has been disrupted by the measures taken in response to the pandemic. In response to these responses, I walk every day for two or three hours. I rediscover the virtues for the body and mind of such an activity, celebrated by Aristotle or Kant.

Currently, my colleague Stefano Morandini and I are [conducting research](#)



supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation on the border between Italy and former Yugoslavia. We focus on a region mostly populated by Slovenian speakers, who were subjected to forced Italianization under the Fascist Regime and have faced a climate of widespread suspicion during the Cold War as potential Tito sympathizers. Our goal is to document how everyday life was dramatically transformed since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the integration of Slovenia into the European Union. People were at last free to cross the border and reactivate ancient social and economic ties. The demarcation between two erstwhile political worlds was almost eradicated from the landscape.

Then came SARS-CoV-2! Italy has emerged between February and March 2020 as the main site of infection in Europe. Within a few days, Slovenia closed its border. Small border crossing points scattered along the whole region were sealed with cement blocks or boulders, images never seen even in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s, when local people had laissez-passers allowing them to move to and fro. More important transit points again witnessed [forgotten scenes: lowered barriers](#), stringent controls, [endless line-ups](#) of trucks and cars. Stupefaction: it turns out that states are indeed big players in today's world politics. All over Europe and beyond, we observe a dramatic national reterritorialization. Tightening controls at national borders is quickly accompanied by quickly expanding measures of surveillance within nation-states.

In Italy, the first lockdowns were implemented in late February 2020 in Lombardy and some neighbouring regions to hamper the spread of the virus and further contamination. The Prime Minister's Decree of 8 March 2020, expanded the following day to the whole national territory, introduced strict quarantine measures including banning non-essential travel; limiting free movement, except in cases of justified necessity; shutting down almost all commercial and retail businesses; closing schools and universities. People who had to move (for reasons of work, health or assistance to the elderly) needed to compile a self-declaration form.



In a complex love-hate relationship with Italy, I tend to think – probably unfairly – that the country has often anticipated broader political developments, most of the time for the worst.

Mussolini came before Hitler, Berlusconi before Trump, not to mention the collapse of party politics that prevailed in Western democracies since the Second World War, and a few other treats. This time again, it seemed all of a sudden that the analyses of Italian philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito had become an everyday reality for their fellow citizens. Would Italy be the sad precursor of the political fate of Western democracies?

With exuberant zeal and total faith in their expertise, some medical doctors were vocal in demanding a very restrictive interpretation of the decree with, for instance, the ban on [jogging](#), even on one's own. Some leading journalists proposed to fight the pandemic using [cell phones](#) to track the movement of people and the physical distance they maintain among themselves, and eventually take measures against those who do not comply with the regulations. These experts do not walk but run in total *allegria* towards a society that might rapidly make Orwell's *1984* look like a rosy picture.

Some intellectuals propose an opposite perspective and contextualize the crisis. They argue that the pandemic's death toll is the outcome of years of bad political decisions. In a popular television broadcast, Massimo Cacciari, philosopher and former mayor of Venice, talks without mincing his words about the long-term responsibilities of the Italian political class and calls for structural reform. While the threat of pandemic virus was known, he denounces the weakening of the health system as a result of [€37 billion](#) cuts made in the past ten years. Another well-known philosopher, [Nadia Urbinati](#), wonders if the responsibility of institutions is now being made to fall on citizens in an increasingly repressive logic.

While Roberto Esposito kept a rather low profile, [Giorgio Agamben](#) ignited a controversy when he published a brief statement in the [Manifesto](#) in late



February 2020. His [argument](#) is well-known to people who read his work: the state of exception is becoming increasingly the normal government paradigm. After the so-called refugee crisis and the War on Terror, the pandemic contributes to a climate of widespread fear that is used to justify the limitation of fundamental freedoms in the name of [security](#). He was attacked for having downplayed the medical seriousness of the epidemic, but his substantive argument has hardly been addressed in public media.

Are we condemned to slowly fall – almost inadvertently – into a more authoritarian society?

For my former professor Fabrizio Sabelli, the epidemic is the sign that a certain threshold has been reached. He reminded me (in an exchange of emails) of Ivan Illich's concept of 'counterproductivity', which refers to a process that is supposed to be beneficial – like the production of wealth, to say – but is turning into a negative one. Could we wonder if the system based on the confidence in the endless growth of the capitalist economy might be about to collapse?

In Italy, we see a public polarization between those who candidly appeal for more surveillance and those who criticize the political elites and the institutions for their incapacity to have anticipated such an epidemic; between those who espouse with enthusiasm liberticide measures in the name of security and those who refuse to see the citizens pay exclusively the price of bad politics.

We need to ask ourselves what society do we want, while being aware of the possibility of both totalitarian surveillance and nationalistic isolation. People inspired by Agamben would insist on danger stemming from the normalization of the state of exception and the resulting suspension of fundamental rights and freedoms. But we could in parallel get inspired by Illich's notion of structural counterproductivity and hope the epidemic might offer the opportunity to trigger a profound transformation of what it means to live together and to project ourselves towards a different future.



I started this essay with the current trend of national reterritorialization. What does the rapid spread of the infection mean beyond and across borders, especially for the most vulnerable? Is such a pandemic and other essentially transnational issues (climate change, financial capitalism, migration, to quote just a few) manageable by states and even multilateral institutions? Let us hope that SARS-CoV-2 will open a space to be occupied by citizens; let us advocate a return to politics of a more militant nature.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to Antonio Donini, Norah Niland and Fabrizio Sabelli for their valuable comments and the exchanges that enriched this little essay.