

CONTEXTS AND DEBATES

The invisible enemy: a historian's short tale of Covid-19 in Italy

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When on 8 March 2020 lockdown was declared in Lombardy, I had a national flag in a drawer waiting for 17 March – the birthday of unified Italy – to be hung down from my balcony just for one single day. Suddenly it seemed to me very natural to begin the ritual early, fixing it carefully and looking at it while it was moving softly in the mild evening breeze, amidst the surreal silence of the neighbourhood riven only by so many, too many ambulance sirens: a suspended time, a time of fear and resistance that I was sharing physically with my fellow citizens, and virtually, with my relatives, friends and colleagues living far away.

Being a commuter, based in Milan and working at the University of Pavia, I had quickly realized I was stuck in one of the most dangerous areas of the country, a very short distance from the Codogno-Lodi red zone where Italy's first patient came from, while *un mondo alla rovescia*, an upside-down world, was coming to life: northerners were becoming the undesirables in the eyes of authorities of Southern municipalities, while at Milan railway stations the assault on trains headed South offered an unprecedented scenario. Yes, quite an 'anti-historic' snapshot: in the first days/weeks of the emergency, media and social media offered the image of a peninsula split in two, the developed and cosmopolitan North brought to its knees versus a still uncontaminated, safe Centre-South, almost separated by a new version of World War Two's Gothic Line. It seemed, at the micro level of the urban environment I was used to – one energized by the 2015 EXPO experience and more recently by the award as host of the 2026 Winter Olympic Games – I was witnessing another phenomenon which went against the flow of the last decades: the re-emergence of a walking-distance self-sufficient world where those same little grocers and greengrocers stifled and overshadowed by the mushrooming commercial centres were now the safest hub for the socially diverse human beings silently lining up along the pavement. Would this be the post-global future? Would a reassuringly village-like life be *our* future? While sitting on our revalued balconies, looking towards the sun like figures in one of those Edward Hopper paintings so often evoked in these past months – but spread out and distanced, everyone enclosed by their reassuring fence – my neighbours and I were trying to escape the infection, the invisible enemy which had traversed history so many times.

My feelings as a citizen and as a professional historian in the past months will serve here as a kind of road map to follow the impact of the pandemic in Italy, at least from a Northern perspective.¹

A citizen in the Lombardy trench

'How are you doing in the Lombardy trench?' soon became the common question of attentive friends 'horrified' (as one wrote from England) by images such as those from the Bergamo area

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in which military trucks loaded with coffins travelled like ghosts by night from hospitals to crematoria outside the region. Yes, a trench indeed because it was a war against an invisible enemy which had succeeded in undermining the self-confidence of the most industrialized and business-oriented part of the country. Premature and even quite arrogant, the slogan *Milano non si ferma* (Milan won't stop) hastily conceived by the municipality was soon belied by the evidence of a pitilessly spreading infection. Milan had to stop in order to protect itself. Italy had to stop in order to cope with the unpredictable, fast changing virus. And when we knew that the hundreds of trains daily connecting Milan to Rome and other cities of the country had fallen to a few per day (high speed connections having been reduced by 98%), the isolation became tangible: the recently expanded high speed network was turning into the transport system of an earlier epoch. 'April is the cruellest month': as in a new waste land, when Easter came, the desert inside and outside St. Peter's basilica in Rome testified to the extent of the danger and the unfamiliarity of rituals at a distance. The country had become united again in the national lockdown, nevertheless the geography of the infection remained very aggressively centred in the Veneto-Lombardy-Piedmont area, with some branches reaching Northern Emilia-Romagna. Would the intensive care units in the North cope with the surge of patients (in some painful days, more than double the number of available beds)? Or would years of an underfunded public health system now seek revenge?

Such questions represented the daily nightmare for any among the ordinary people who were facing the risk of infection and of developing a severe form of the disease, but also suffering the numerous emotional blackouts imposed by the emergency: not being able to visit loved-ones, nor friends, neighbours, colleagues. Not being able to see them *alive* anymore. Only after many weeks some communities in the Bergamo and Lodi areas realized how many were missing: the forced quarantine also separated family members and left the destination and the destiny of people taken to the hospitals unknown. 'Why is it happening right here?': a shared sense of relentless aggression against the 'never sleeping' leading city of the country and its surrounding areas soon emerged and unified citizens from very different social backgrounds and occupations.

Before and after

Yet, as soon as anyone – from institutional leaders and opinion makers down to ordinary people caught while lining up outside the supermarket – started talking or writing of life before COVID and life after COVID, forecasting irreversible changes or just changes, I realized that 'before' and 'after' are the temporal dimensions a historian is most familiar with. Our professional efforts are mainly aimed at searching for and documenting discontinuities, turning points, epochal or singular caesuras in the flux of time. The biography of single individuals and that of communities, of nations and empires, their existential horizons and the interlacing of private time with public time is nurtured exactly by this question: when did the change occur, and how was it perceived? Therefore, I started wondering if as a professional historian I would be advantaged in shaping my own memory of 'before and after the epidemic'. Moreover: would I benefit from that 'emotion given by historical knowledge when the study of the past permits identification of deep layers coming to the surface amid the confusion and the noise of the present time' (Prosperi 2018, 29)?

Plague, typhus, cholera, smallpox, 'Spanish' flu, AIDS, Ebola: with their social impacts these epidemics ranging from ancient times, and from the 14th to the 20th centuries, have swept through and reshaped human societies. Immediately, in Italy as elsewhere, everyone was evoking them. Everyone, not just historians, was feeling that sharp sensation of living through a historical turning point. The Marshall Plan and the 'Spanish' flu, above all, entered the daily lexicon of newspapers and of media people, as if with their historical consistency those two historical facts could fix the

indeterminable present time to a widely known model, something familiar not only to specialists. The ‘Spanish’ flu, with its various waves from 1918 to 1920, provoked a kind of hecatomb in Italy, recorded in the written and oral memories of contemporaries: my grandmother, born in 1899, used to say that people ‘were dying like flies’, with 4.5 million infected, and 600,000 dead by the peak of Autumn 1918.

From that century-old lesson, politicians and the scientific world would learn a great deal. Nothing can be taken for granted. Warnings must be heeded early. In turn, we historians would learn how unbalanced the written history of that epidemic had been, at least in an initial phase: a technical history of a medically-oriented tale prevailing over the reconstruction of mentalities and practices so tragically affected by the global disease in a postwar era. In the aftermath of the current emergency a more complete history of pandemics would be welcome, a comprehensive tale including the effects of the collective trauma but also changes in governmental priorities, changes in the flux of global economic resources and in productive chains. Institutional and private memory eagerly awaits this new history.

The blackout of tangible sources

Matched with the loss of daily face-to-face encounters with students, of seeing them dropping in to the classroom smiling and noisily taking their seats, the loss of access to the folders I had waiting on a shelf in the Milan State Archive, provided stark evidence of what was in effect a blackout. Virtual reality soon became a surrogate for in-class teaching and departmental meetings. There can be no such surrogate for leafing through centuries-old papers, looking for and finding the needed document, drawing it out and finding its place as a tile in the larger mosaic which was taking shape. I remembered when as a young researcher I had read Arlette Farge’s *Le goût de l’archive* (1989), whose pages give voice to that feeling we historians know so well. Now I had the framework of an article ready, but it needed to be nurtured with some documentary evidence I knew exactly where to find. Would the shutting down of archives and libraries turn into an opportunity perhaps? Would it open my eyes to the ocean of digitized, open-access sources which, apparently, I had so far underexploited? And when thousands of people were struggling for their lives, and thousands were struggling to survive, was my professional concern legitimate at all?

This very question is at the centre of an ongoing debate in the Italian Contemporary History Scholars Society (SISSCO) mailing list and in other historians’ associations because the epidemic has opened a Pandora’s box at many levels, not only that of public health policies and investments (starting from underfunded Medical Schools). At the time of writing, the Italian historical community is facing the prospect of a partial reopening of the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato* in Rome (and of other local archives), according to frustrating rules that make research for non-Rome-based scholars nearly impossible. Years of spending reviews and deficits in turnover have severely affected the staffing in almost all Italian public archives and libraries. Together with the delay in digitization processes, such ancient flaws provide further evidence of the growing gulf between Italy and other national contexts – the UK situation represented by the National Archives at Kew serves as an emblematic contrast.

Early-career researchers are probably more concerned about this historical delay now highlighted by the so-called ‘phase 2’ restrictive rules. But their professional anguish is reinforced by senior researchers who have long called for greater political awareness about the availability and the consultation policies of public sources. If compared to the collateral damage suffered by other professional groups – shopkeepers, or transport and tourism employees, just to mention a few – such complaints could sound like the whining of a few privileged people. Nevertheless, the

professional status of scholarly research is at stake. Many say this is a time of opportunity. Opportunity. Certainly, the lockdown experience gave me unprecedented amounts of time to just sit down and think. To reset priorities. To re-open dusty folders with some food for thought which had sunk under the urgency of departmental tasks. Why then not take the opportunity to engage in improving the conditions of our work?

Taking care of memories

My 92 year-old father – my greatest concern during the epidemic wave – told me that in 1943, when he and the family were evacuated to the Romagna coast, his mother used to leave early in the morning by bicycle to get food (on the black market?). What she got was often just a few potatoes. Never, never would I have imagined that my opulent society, the society of the superfluous, of 24/7 connectedness and of global mobility, could overnight become a society in which the search for scarce items, the ‘out of stock’ syndrome, and ‘panic buying’ could predominate. That going out for food shopping meant entering hostile territory, watch in hand, on full alert. That the Italian region renowned for the excellence of its public health system could undergo such a shock, even if the invisible enemy was an unprecedented one.

All memories from this experience are precious. We historians care about public and private memory. My constant feeling since the beginning of the epidemic wave in Italy – and of its fast globalization – is related to the importance of properly recording and storing the perceptions of ordinary people and of the different generations affected by the collective and individual trauma of the past months. So many devices have captured fear, hope, anger, boredom, opportunities, rediscoveries or just discoveries: videos, videoclips, vocal messages, comments on Twitter and other social media are the audio-visual materials the historians of future generations will be able to use as their sources, and they should be protected and stored as soon as they can be. They are the diaries of the crisis. After social scientists have investigated fear and hope *in the making*, it will be the historian’s turn to work with stratified samples of this emotional season. I am thinking for the Italian 20th century history of repositories such as the *Archivio diaristico* in Pieve S. Stefano, a true mine for the investigation of history from below, for gathering the voices of so many unknown men and women who have traversed the major turning points which occurred in Italian society: the Great War, Fascism, World War II, the boom of the 1960s, and so on. Perception and self-perception, private time and social time matter. Historical sensibility is the only tool available to future generations, apart from the tragic dimension of the statistics, to recover the feelings which by then will be dormant under the layers of the following historical phases: the ‘restart’, the ‘reconstruction’, the ‘cohabitation’ with the invisible enemy. Social history, cultural history, the history of mentalities will pave the way alongside political history, which is better equipped to investigate the institutional response to the crisis. Photography will give a major contribution, too, thanks to snapshots which will speak louder than many written words. The archives of vocal, written, and visual memory are to be taken care of from right now because they will find their place in the narrative put into play by the governments, a narrative that historians will be asked to investigate as well.

New practices of neighbourhood solidarity, trans-generational advice and help, the ‘old’ becoming the ‘new’, the rediscovery of a lost Italy previously revived only in nostalgic commercials (courtyards with children playing while baskets are lowered from windows to collect shopping, balcony flash-mobs and choral singing): these snapshots deserve investigation at least as a kind of rediscovered national unity at a time of crisis. Even daily language offers us some evidence of transformation, for example the re-emergence of disused verbs, such as *sfollare*, which meant to

evacuate from towns to countryside or seaside villages to avoid bombings: the older generation has very naturally revived this colloquial expression when talking about relatives or friends who had managed to move to their holiday houses in safer locations, even if the 21st century displacement takes place in houses equipped with all comforts, wi-fi connection included. The historian, more than the citizen, knows how important time is. Lockdown, count-down, daily press releases with the figures of the ‘infected/hospitalized/recovered/dead’ have marked the rhythm of our days: all of this bombardment has produced an acute, forced recovery of the sense of time’s relentless march. We might lose it again. It cries out for analysis.

Meanwhile, my flag is still there. A symbol of hope, a memory of resistance.

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Notes on contributor

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Note

1. Italy has so far reached the figure of over 30,000 people dead, some 15,000 only in Lombardy.

References

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