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Fear of politics or politics of fear? The construction of exception

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This paper describes and analyses the reponse to the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy, tracing its roots in the hyper-neoliberalism of the right and the repressive attitude of the Italian left, developed since the 1970s. It explores the emergency measures enacted against the backdrop of the pandemic and examines how the neoliberal hegemony of the last 40 years has infiltrated common sense to such an extent that even critical thinkers take for granted the role of the state in regulating social relations on behalf of a fully-fledged market economy. This passive acceptance of the 'state-market match', the article suggests, not only accepts the restriction of liberties and the extreme privatisation of life, but also provokes the withering of a critical thinking that could promote alternative policies, as well as outlining long-term prospects of political and social change.

Key words pandemic • Agamben • COVID-19 • repression • state-market • neoliberalism

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Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a significant reshuffling in the political stances of Italian public opinion. On the one hand, the more right-wing populist political forces, such as the League and Fratelli d'Italia, opposed the decrees of emergency issued by the government since March 2020 to control the spread of the pandemic. This opposition has been expressed in different ways: denial of the virus, political rallies, and meetings emphasising the violation of civil liberties caused by the governmental restrictions.

On the other hand, almost all the left-wing parties, movements and intellectuals, who were in the past engaged in a Foucault-based critique of governmental control on individual bodies, advocated the enforcement of the strictest measures possible, siding with the current government, on the grounds of the unprecedented pandemic. Citizens were active in reporting the violations of restrictions, also encouraged by some left-wing local administrators. Giorgio Agamben, the radical philosopher who had been inspirational to much of contemporary critical thinking, was stigmatised by the left because of his radical position on the governmental restrictions. Agamben,¹ in articles published on his website, as well as in the many interviews he gave, argued

against the state of emergency introduced by the Italian government to tackle COVID-19. In his view, the sanitary-based emergency brought about a serious limitation of both civil and political liberties, thus reducing human life to a mere biological life, devoid of any subjective content. Agamben even invited academics not to teach online, as he considered such acceptance to be an updated version of the oath of allegiance the fascist regime requested of Italian academics.

This paper aims to describe and analyse this reshuffling of positions, tracing its roots in the hyper-neoliberalism of the right and the repressive attitude the Italian left had developed since the 1970s. It includes a genealogy of the emergencies the Italian republic has experienced since the onset of the pandemic. The uprising of Modena prison in March 2020, which ended with the death of 14 detainees, is also discussed in relation to the main topic of this paper. By using the reflections of Agamben, an attempt to outline a model of coping with pandemics without using the state of exception will be made.

The purpose of this work is to demonstrate how the neoliberal hegemony of the last 40 years (Harvey, 2007) has infiltrated common sense to such an extent that even critical thinkers take for granted the role of the State in regulating social relations on behalf of a fully-fledged market economy. This passive acceptance of the 'state-market match' is worrying, inasmuch as it not only accepts the restriction of liberties and the extreme privatisation of life, but also provokes the withering of a critical thinking that could promote alternative policies, as well as outlining long-term perspectives on political and social change.

This article is divided into distinct subsections: the first one aims to show how the sedimentation of emergency culture made it possible for Italy to develop the politics of fear. We will then draw on the case of Giorgio Agamben to emphasise how the culture of emergency has been so powerful as to marginalise dissent. We will finish by mentioning the case of the revolt enacted by the inmates of Modena prison to show how the marginalisation of dissent has serious consequences for civil liberties.

The dialectic of fear and its theoretical foundations

The construction of fear underlies a dialectical process between power and the governed (Althusser, 1973), where moral panic, or the perception of insecurity, spreads following an unexpected phenomenon within the social fabric (Cohen, 1971). The apparatuses of power, not only economic, but also political and ideological, transform the magmatic matter of panic into the material through which to deploy the strategies of control and subjugation. It is obviously not a question of outlining a synoptic model, but of analysing these dynamics in relation to the specific context within which they take place.

For example, in the case of the health emergency triggered by COVID-19, the politics of fear are articulated above all on a political and ideological level. The economy, in fact, has shown itself to be divided. While some economic interests, such as those of so-called Big Pharma, can benefit from the development of vaccines and therapies, other economic actors, for example the manufacturing sector in Italy, showed reluctance towards the containment measures undertaken by the government, until the push for reopening. In the Italian case, which we will analyse as a paradigm of the politics of fear, the position of the business world has served as an argument to compact the most critical and enlightened public opinion around the lockdown measures launched by the government. The freedoms of movement guaranteed by the

Constitution have been relegated to the background by respect for the right to health guaranteed by the fundamental Charter itself. The sceptical part of public opinion has been silenced, accused of supporting entrepreneurs. This is because Confindustria, or the Confederation of Italian Entrepreneurs, requested that factories remain open in order not to disrupt the economy. Various centre and right-wing politicians, such as the former premier Matteo Renzi and the League leader Matteo Salvini, also requested a slackening of restrictions.

In this article, I intend to deepen the process of building the politics of fear, understood as the declination of the state of exception and contemporary bio-politics. Giorgio Agamben (2017), drawing on the ideas of Carl Schmitt and Michel Foucault, defines the state of exception as the core of sovereign power, as all the liberties are suspended and the power of decision is devoted to the institution in charge. In the context of the state of exception, the possibility either of dissenting or of differentiating oneself from the decisions the sovereign makes is not conceded, because of the risk of undermining the enforcement of the measures decided by those in power. The state of exception is usually justified by a specific emergency, which could be economic, political or sanitary. Its consequence is the depiction of the emergency as enemy, so as to mobilise the population in such a way as to increase the consent for the sovereign. As a consequence of this, those who are sceptical about the way the sovereign operates are deemed to be on the side of the enemy. The Italian case proves interesting, as Italy, since the end of World War II, has covered the whole spectrum of emergencies available.

Italy or the country of permanent emergency

The national emergency for the coronavirus was declared by the Italian government on 31 January 2020, for a duration of six months. The first emergency measures, however, were applied on 23 February, with the blocking of sporting events and the closure of schools. On 8 March, decree number 11/2020² ordered the closure of all activities, except for essentials such as pharmacies, grocery stores, and logistics. Movement was restricted within residential areas, requiring presentation of a self-certification form providing justification. If a first reading of the data – since Italy was, for a month, the second country in the world for the number of coronavirus cases – justified the launch of these drastic measures, a more careful reflection, in the presence of other elements, raised more than a few doubts. For example, from the beginning it was clear that the spread of the virus was concentrated in specific areas of the country, such as Val Brembana and Val Seriana, east of Milan³, and that there was a strong imbalance between northern and southern Italy in terms of infections. An investigation by the judiciary found that the army had already been deployed in the most affected areas, only to be immediately withdrawn. The non-use of the army to guard the most affected areas, in addition to having increased the spread of the virus, justified the subsequent closure of the whole of Italy. This was also due to economy-led considerations: as Lombardy is the most industrialised area of the country, as well as the bulwark of the League, its cordoning off would have disappointed some major entrepreneurs. Moreover, the gulf between the *giallorosso* (that is, a coalition between the Five Star Movement and the moderate left) government led by Giuseppe Conte and the traditionally League-led Lombard areas would have widened even more.

Probably these were the reasons that led the Italian government not to implement such an emergency measure as that of isolating the most problematic areas of Lombardy.

Furthermore, the statistics provided by the competent ministries⁴ show how the virus, in addition to focusing on the geographic areas, focused on specific age categories and on people with multiple pathologies.

Emergency in Cold War Italy: from anti-communism to anti-terrorism

To question the choice by the Italian government to implement such drastic containment measures, one can only respond by creating a genealogy (Foucault, 1976) of the operational strategies that underlie the action of Italian governments. The category of emergency, in republican history (Ginsborg, 1992), has always functioned as the cornerstone of the legitimacy of various governments. The political, social and cultural divisions that cross the country have been addressed by leveraging the emergence of a danger, external or internal, which endangers national life. Consequently, the divisions must be postponed in the name of collective mobilisation to face and defeat the danger. The first emergency was the anti-communist one, which began immediately after the end of World War II, culminating in the era of armed struggle in the late 1970s. In the name of the threat to democracy, the dismantling of the fascist-style criminal sanction was avoided, the state apparatus appointed under the previous regime was maintained (Franzini, 2008), special laws were passed, such as the reward legislation for legal collaborators (the Legge Reale (Reale Act, 1975)⁵ that allows the police to shoot at eye-level in demonstrations in case of danger (Moroni and Balestrini, 1998), and the torture of members of armed organisations was overlooked (Prette, 1994).

There are two different stages in the enforcement of the anti-communist emergency. In the first stage, from 1948 to 1973, the centre-right governing forces enacted a massive marginalisation of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), that is, the two main working-class parties. Under the ideology of the reconstruction, entrepreneurs were encouraged to increase working hours and to do everything possible to contain the cost of labour. As a consequence of this, the most active members of the left-wing unions were marginalised in the so-called *reparti confino* (confinement lines), where they were forced to do a disproportionate amount of hard labour under the strictest surveillance of former members of the fascist secret police, *Opera Volontaria Repressione Antifascista* (OVRA) (Volunteer Action Squads for the Repression of Antifascism) (Guidetti Serra, 1984). At the same time, millions of southern peasants migrated to the north to work as unskilled and underpaid factory workers, thus causing an internal division within the Italian working class. The police forces were not demilitarised until 1981, for the State Police (PS), whereas the Carabinieri remained part of the army. The famous *reparto celere* (rapid squad) of the PS, based in Padua, which was created by the Christian Democrat Minister of Interiors Mario Scelba in 1948 (Della Porta and Reiter, 2003), killed more than 100 workers between 1948 and 1953, that is, one-third of the victims of state repression before 2000. The 1960s marked a watershed in Italian history. After July 1960, when widespread protests against the participation of the neo-fascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) (Italian Social Movement) party in the national government forced the police to pull back (Dal Lago and Quadrelli, 2003), new social subjectivities

broke into the public scene. Youths, women, students, and workers (Panzieri, 1971) advocated massive social and political change, very often to deal with not only the police repression, but also the attempt by the ruling groups, through an instrumental use of the neo-fascists (Ligini and Di Giovanni, 1970; Ferraresi, 1993), to provoke an authoritarian upheaval. The attempted coups of 1964 and 1970, the bombing of piazza Fontana in Milan in 1969, as well as the bombs in Brescia in 1974 and Bologna in 1980, are part of this story.

The economic crisis of 1973 provoked inside the Italian left a rift whose consequences were profoundly negative. While the PCI decided to pursue a strategy of collaboration with the Christian Democrats, promoting those governments of national solidarity that laid the foundation for the neo-capitalist restructuring, the extra-parliamentary left, particularly those groups revolving around *Autonomia Operaia* (Caminiti, 2006), claimed the need for a revolutionary break. As unemployment and social marginality spread across the country, spontaneous acts of *mass illegality*, such as the occupation of empty flats, the *self-reduction* of utility bill prices, and the *proletarian shop* in supermarkets became more and more common, combined with robberies and open confrontation with police forces. Under this widespread mass unrest, the Italian parliament passed, with the explicit consent of the PCI, laws that limited the right to demonstrate and allowed the police to shoot demonstrators at point-blank range. Under this law, the homicide of young activists Francesco Lorusso and Giorgiana Masi were allowed, and provoked the reaction of the radical left, whose slogan became *mai più senza fucile* (never again without a rifle). Ninety-two left-wing armed groups were active in Italy in the late 1970s (Della Porta, 1997), the Red Brigades becoming the most dangerous and organised among them, and the kidnapping and killing of Aldo Moro (Galli, 2003) was their most famous action. The PCI welcomed the repression of the radical left, as a means of facing the double emergency of the economic crisis combined with that of political violence. In 1979, the PCI federation of Turin circulated a questionnaire among its members (Revelli, 1993): communist militants were asked if they knew, among their friends, relatives and colleagues, anyone who was a suspect member of either the Red Brigades or any other terrorist organisation. At the end of the questionnaire, they were invited to report any suspect either to their branch secretary or to the police. This reporting policy had tragic consequences, notably the case of the homicide of Guido Rossa, a Genoa steel worker who was a PCI and trade union member, who had reported a colleague to the police for circulating Red Brigade leaflets.

New repressive measures, such as the introduction of special prisons, the reduction of punishment for the *pentiti* (repentants, that is, supergrass), and the augmentation by one-third of prison terms for such crimes as *banda armata* (membership of armed groups), were enforced. The Codice Rocco, that is the penal law named after the fascist minister who had drafted it in 1930, had never been repealed under the Republic, and made it possible to enforce such harsh repressive measures.

Anti-mafia and corruption: the new emergencies since the 1980s

In the 1980s, the Mafia phenomenon rose to the rank of a new national emergency, which started in 1982, with the homicide of the *prefetto* of Palermo, Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa (Santino and Chinnici, 1989), and reached its peak following the massacres in Capaci and via D'Amelio, when the most famous anti-Mafia judges,

Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, were killed in two separate bomb attacks by the Mafia, on 23 May and 19 July 1992. The existence of the Mafia has been known to Italian public opinion since the heyday of independence (Benigno, 2015), but it took more than 100 years, until 30 January 1992, when the Italian Supreme Court confirmed the sentences of the Maxi Trial, to reach a penal sanction against the notorious Sicilian criminal organisation. The protection the Mafioso enjoyed from Sicilian politicians, the anti-communist role Cosa Nostra played after World War II, and the anti-Sicilian prejudices of Italian investigators that confused them about the nature of the Mafia (Santino, 2017), made it difficult to confront a parallel, dangerous and powerful power structure, which helped the Sicilian bourgeoisie to suppress the vindication of Sicilian workers (Mineo, 1953). In the early 1980s, also due to a ruthless Mafia war that provoked more than a thousand murders between 1981 and 1984, the vacuum of terrorism was filled by the new emergency of organised crime. The attention of public opinion became focused on the Mafia, within the context of an anti-southern mood that went hand in glove with the birth and rise of the Northern League. Southern Italy, and Sicily in particular, was depicted as an emergency for the whole nation, because of its underdevelopment and alleged lack of 'legality', or the conformity of its inhabitants to law. The anti-Mafia emergency, though, was not fully displayed until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when the loss of importance of the Mafia, because of its anti-communist stance, combined with a massive economic and political crisis.

The anti-Mafia emergency coincided with the legitimacy crisis of the Italian political system following a corruption scandal, best known as Tangentopoli (Nelken, 2002). Apparently, the scandal was linked to an unprecedented corruption of the political system. In reality, the scandal represented an opportunity to redefine the internal structures of the Italian production system, with the cessation of state intervention in the economy (Bonzanni, 2020), as well as the moment from which the proportional electoral system was abolished in favour of a majority system. Under the pressure of the emergencies of corruption and organised crime, neoliberal economic restructuring was carried out and political representation was reworked, so as to reduce the possibility of subordinate social groups being represented (Losurdo, 1993). In addition, the implementation of criminal populism began: Parliament passed a law that required the achievement of a qualified majority for the launch of amnesty measures. The restrictive laws on immigration followed, as well as a literal application of the legislation on drugs that made the number of prisoners soar from 25,000 in 1990 to 60,000 today.⁶ Besides this, Article 41bis of the penal law enforced severe punishment for detainees serving sentences for organised crime and terrorism. Corruption, the fight against crime, and security, became the battle horses of a political class increasingly devoid of social references and long-term planning (Pavarini, 2007).

COVID-19: a reshuffling of cards?

The COVID-19 emergency is on a par with the other emergencies. Criminal populism has long hegemonised Italian society and politics, and culminated in the success of populist forces such as the Five Star Movement and Salvini's League. The two political forces shared their responsibilities as government partners for more than a year, until autumn 2019, when the center-left Democratic Party (PD) agreed to govern with the Grillini. Whereas the League had leveraged insecurity, promoting the

approval of decree laws that authorise the self-defence of citizens and penalise migrants and refugees, the new coalition lacked a glue based on fear and insecurity, which it translated into a low level of political consensus on the part of public opinion. The health crisis caused by COVID-19 provided new security material with which to fill the void of consensus. In May 2020, a DEMOS poll showed that 72% of Italians agreed with the government, while CISL, a Catholic-inspired union, launched a survey that showed that 76% of Italians complied with the lockdown.

Among the social networks, some left-wing activists expressed their concern in this way. In some cases, support for the government was compared to an ‘anti-fascist’ mobilisation! The following content was found on Facebook, selected from the pages of some of my social network friends. In order to protect their right to privacy, I have anonymised their comments. On the other hand, since these comments were written to be made public, I think they can be reflected upon without raising any major ethical concern.

I’d put it in the simplest way as possible: we are divided in two sides. On one side, we have a part of humanity who has rejected and denied coronavirus. This part of humanity refuses to understand the concept of human suffering. I don’t want to deal with them. They have nothing to do with me, they are just unhuman, as they are disgusting, narcissistic and cruel, and I refuse to have them among my Facebook contacts. [X1]

We are facing a new fascism, that is the fascism of negationism, the rejection of pandemic as a new threat to our lives we should face together, with a new anti-fascist mobilisation, similar to that against fascism 80 years ago. [X2]

Neoliberalism has driven many people insane. They gave up the idea of sacrificing themselves for a higher, common good. Staying home means respecting the others and develop a new public ethic.

Consent was also expressed through intense reporting, with citizens intent on photographing the alleged offenders and blocking them through special block-based teams, and then calling the police. Special pages were created on social networks, where photos of the alleged offenders were posted and accompanied by insults by the subscribers to the page.⁷ The legacy of the 1970s PCI, with its invitation to report on alleged Red Brigade members, seems to be reflected in these practices.

The practice of mass delation, a violation of civil liberties within a condition of suspension of the same, has been actively encouraged by the mayors and local administrators, some of whom, like the mayor of Messina, recorded their voice on drones that were eventually sent around the city to invite the reprobates to return home. Criminal populism thus provided a robust humus for public consensus for lockdown. However, this process would have been unthinkable without the production and circulation of a ‘contentivist’ ideology, which has circulated both in the mass media and among intellectuals. In newspapers and magazines, alongside news relating to the violation of the lockdown, interviews were published with ‘experts’ in various fields, namely infectious disease specialists, epidemiologists and virologists, who used the danger of the virus to justify the government’s measures and make the public accept the lockdown. Following the anti-Mafia and anti-corruption magistrates and

journalists, Italian public opinion has witnessed the birth and rise of a new category of technocrats, rising to the rank of authoritative experts while sometimes expressing contradictory and discordant opinions. Their opinions have played a significant role in convincing public opinion, supporting the government, and attracting even the most critical part of Italian public opinion to support the lockdown. For example, *Il Manifesto*, for 50 years the newspaper of the Italian radical left, after having hosted, at the beginning of the pandemic, several articles by Giorgio Agamben that invited the public to reflect on the risks of a new emergency, disavowed the philosopher's article and its positions. Indeed, at the beginning of May, a group of intellectuals signed an appeal for support to the government in the same newspaper, under the banner of the alleged 'denial' of the pandemic expressed by sectors of the right and the business world.

The articles written by Agamben about the pandemic were gathered in an instant book, in which the author insists on the concept of 'sanitary dictatorship', or a deterioration of the state of emergency as a consequence of the pandemic (Agamben, 2020; 22). Following his distinction between bio-politics: a social life that is organised, complex, and articulated; and zoo-politics: that is, a bare, biological life, Agamben expressed his concern about the way governments across the world, and in particular the Italian government, were dealing with the pandemic. Through the use of fear due to the sanitary emergency, Agamben argues, governments are depriving human beings of their most natural prerogatives. Meeting, moving, having physical contacts, are inherently human behaviour. The so-called 'social distancing' enforced by sovereign powers across the world, Agamben argues, is therefore repressing the most intrinsic aspects of humanity. Pandemics have always happened and, according to Agamben, a limitation of civil liberties is not the most obvious solution. The positions of Agamben were unexpectedly echoed by *Avvenire*,⁸ the newspaper of the Italian Catholic Bishop Conference, whereas it became quite unpopular among his traditional radical left audience. For example, a journal of left-wing intellectuals⁹ compared Agamben to a militant of QAnon, as he was denying the existence of coronavirus! Other intellectuals called him 'rubbish', or defined his thought as 'a mere delirium', or an 'a-little per kilo-opinion maker', whose opinions are 'similar to those who argue the earth is flat'.¹⁰ On the other hand, it was the newspaper of the centre-right intelligentsia, *Il Foglio*, which advocated a reading of Agamben to understand the flaws of the dominant approach to COVID-19.¹¹ Another unexpected form of solidarity with Agamben came from the right-wing tabloid *Libero*,¹² which adopted a communitarian approach to encourage its readers to understand how the pandemic is hiding the problems related to financial capitalism.

The point Agamben made, at first sight, might appear to be a little too strong, particularly when he argued that the lecturers who accept online classes should refuse to do so, or they would resemble those Italian lecturers who vowed, in 1926, their allegiance to fascism,¹³ inviting mass disobedience. While one can appreciate that Agamben made a strong case, a few things need to be clarified. Firstly, as an intellectual, Agamben needs to be provocative, in order to challenge the certainties and stimulate a reaction, both from other intellectuals and from the public. As strong as its claims might be, his provocative stance still represents a necessary exercise of intellectual freedom, which should be rebuked with other intellectual provocations, rather than with insults. More importantly, it is necessary to remember that Agamben *never* denied the existence of the virus. Once again, as an intellectual, he followed

the philosophical path he has been following for decades to challenge and analyse the current politics of social control that have been developing around the alleged need to face the pandemic.

Whereas, on the one hand, it is important both individually and socially to face the sanitary emergency, on the other hand, in a society marred by growing inequalities and injustices due to the neoliberal hegemony, one cannot dodge the issues around the relations of force and civil liberties. In the first instance, we have been dealing in the last 40 years with an overwhelming neoliberal hegemony (Harvey, 2007), which has seen the dismantling of welfare, the privatisation of every aspect of every domain of our lives, and the hypertrophic use of repression against political and economic dissent. It is incredible to see how the pandemic left the vast majority of critical thinkers incapable of facing this problem, and how anyone who attempted to do so was heavily stigmatised and marginalised. Despite the unreal situation humanity has been living in since February 2020, it is the duty of intellectuals to challenge the way reality is both perceived and dealt with. Recent developments suggest that everything is taken for granted and passively accepted. For example, the discussion about the relation between the pandemic and neoliberalism has barely started at all. Whereas one cannot foresee the outbreak of a pandemic, it is nonetheless legitimate to interrogate oneself about the ways to face it. How would COVID-19 have been faced if the National Health System had been entirely public, and had allocated the same amount of resources as 40 years ago? Would more doctors, more nurses, more hospitals, more beds, more medicines and machines have made things different? Nobody has asked this question, taking for granted that lockdowns were the only solution to the pandemic. Moreover, another aspect to be explored is related to the amount of resources available. Neoliberalism, through its monetarist approach, circulates the idea that public expenditure must be kept under control. This assumption remained largely unchallenged throughout the pandemic, whereas critical thought should have suggested the possibility of seizing empty flats and houses, levying on high-ranking income to face the emergency of the pandemic, so as to hire more staff, buy more machines, hospitalise more people, fund more research. Such an approach would have sounded natural 40 years ago, whereas nowadays is not even considered. More than this, probably, such an alternative approach may have underpinned less restrictive measures and continuation of a relatively normal life, although with some limitations. In any case, it would have questioned the way this pandemic has been dealt with. Nothing like alternative approaches to the pandemic, as suggested by Agamben, has appeared to date.

In the Italian situation, the provocations of Agamben might sound like an accusation, both in the political and the intellectual left-wing context. Since the late 1980s, with the crisis of the Soviet bloc and the growing neoliberal hegemony, the Italian left has given up any alternative project for society. The ex-PCI leaders, such as Massimo D'Alema and Walter Veltroni, have adopted the neoliberal approach and radically rejected their communist roots, by implementing conservative policies which span from the bombing of Serbia in the Kosovo War of 1999 to the definition of Silvio Berlusconi's Fininvest as 'an Italian wealth'. D'Alema's idea of Italy as a 'normal country' (D'Alema, 1997) consisted of a moderate neoliberalism, based on wide-ranging privatisation, on a first-past-the-post electoral system and on a generic 'solidarity' provided by those cooperative organisations owned and led by ex-PCI members. Moreover, this new Italian left has never really fought against the neoliberal

hegemony, whether in the domain of crime or security. Immigration Removal Centres were first enforced through the Turco-Napolitano Act (1996)¹⁴ under the centre-left government of Romano Prodi. D'Alema, as prime minister, increased the powers of the Carabinieri, the military branch of the police, while a centre-left government, in 2000, created the *Gruppi Operativi Mobili* (GOM) (Mobile Operative Groups), special squads vested with the authority of repressing prison revolts, and approved the so-called 'security packet', a wide range of repressive measures intensifying punishment for street crimes.

The centre-leaning tendency of the left provoked the blurring of political differences, so that there are no significant differences between the main political parties. This ideological and projectual vacuum has been filled by populist forces, such as the Northern League and the Five Stars Movement, two parties that make an abundant use of law and order rhetorics in their political programmes. This populist context, coupled with the absence of the left, provided the background for the new sanitary emergency related to the pandemic. On the one hand, we have been faced with the most typical instruments of the emergency, namely the government decrees that culminated in the lockdown of 8 March 2020, and the deployment of police forces on the territory aimed at repressing any violation of the lockdown. The emergency was exploited by the incumbent government to increase its awareness among the Italian public. On the other hand, on the ideological level, we find the metaphor of war acting as a hinge between politics and public opinion. The virus is a threat, to be countered by any means, even at the cost of fundamental freedoms. Around this war, there has been an attempt to compact public opinion, in two stages. The first is to deploy specific knowledge: epidemiologists, virologists, infectious diseases specialists, dominating the limelight of public opinion, justifying and legitimising the choices of the government in the name of a pandemic that risks decimating the population. Secondly, according to the Durkheimian model (Durkheim, 2000) re-proposed by several authors in recent years (Garland, 2003; Bauman, 2006; Simon, 2007), scapegoats are created through a strategy of criminalisation. In this case, exclusion and stigmatisation are not concerned with marginal groups, but rather with those sectors of public opinion that question both the appropriateness and the effectiveness of the lockdown measures. This is the case of Giorgio Agamben, as of citizens suspected of violating the lockdown and reported to the authorities. The politics of fear, consequently, has its opposite, namely the fear of politics, understood as a negotiation and decision-making activity undertaken by individuals or groups at the risk of conflict with other actors.

The consequence of this latter aspect relies also on the reinforcement of stigma against traditionally stigmatised groups, such as prison detainees. Prisons have been hotspots of COVID-19, due to the concentration of their populations, as well as the high number of detainees who suffer from serious diseases. A series of revolts broke out in Italian prisons, as the inmates requested better life conditions and, possibly, an amnesty for those with light sentences or with a less than one year to serve. On 8 March 2020 a revolt broke out in the prison of Sant'Anna, in Modena.¹⁵ The revolt followed the widespread unrest in Italian prisons, and the appeal by a part of Italian civil society¹⁶ to the government for an amnesty or a pardon to be enforced. The outcome of the revolt was tragic, with 14 inmates dying and many others beaten. Some were eventually moved to other prisons, where they were beaten again, and one of them, Salvatore Piscitelli, died. Also, in this case, we faced a reshuffling of positions.

Whereas it might be expected that the right-wing groups and parties stigmatised the revolts, public opinion close to the centre-left coalition had an even harsher reaction.¹⁷ News circulated that there were no such things as spontaneous revolt, but that it was rather the case of instrumental uprisings. Mafia bosses were supposed to have been the ones who organised and started the revolts, with the purpose of gaining some benefits. This was because a couple of Mafia bosses had been granted home detention because of their health conditions. Despite the fact that the granting of home detention is perfectly legal, the reaction by public opinion was explicitly inspired by a punitivist mood, and led to the resignation of the national director of Italian prisons. Once again, the emergency set the standard of political actions. In the name of legality, not only is it impossible to be sceptical about the decisions made by the government, but one also risks being depicted as a supporter of the Mafia if one advocates the enforcement of civil liberties and promotes a measure to make prisons more humane than they were because of the pandemic. Emergency has brought about the destruction of any political dissent and reduced the freedom of speech, in the name of public health.

If it is true that, on the one hand, the most reactionary forces have developed conspiracy theories against the virus, and that entrepreneurs were among those most opposed to closure, on the other hand it is legitimate, in a society that defines itself as democratic, to wonder in relation to the pandemic: is it normal to suspend fundamental freedoms? Are we sure it's the only possibility? If the pandemic is so serious, why did they prefer to close everything rather than requisition the assets and vacant housing to create the resources necessary to deal with them? If the pandemic was concentrated in some areas of Italy, why close the whole country? What are the social and political consequences of the long-term lockdown? How reliable is the data reading? These, in my opinion, are some of the questions that intellectuals and political forces should have asked themselves and posed to the government and public opinion, in order to stimulate a critical reflection that, in such a delicate moment, would have been more necessary than ever. Instead, there has been a real 'fear of politics', or an uncritical flattening of government positions, and the marginalisation and criminalisation of voices against the choir, justified by the pandemic. The politics of fear has been successful.

Conclusions

In this article we have seen that the politics of fear is divided into two parts: the elaboration of emergency measures is combined with the production of a security discourse, which makes use not only of the media, but also of the contribution of technocratic figures. In the case of Italy, these two parts combined because the culture of emergency, developing in the last 50 years, has provided them with the breeding ground that made it grow.

The growth of emergency provokes the cancellation of any possibility of dissent from the dominant ideology and practice. If, as has been said by many, the pandemic created the conditions for a massive restructuration of work, this was certainly profitable. In addition to producing a reconfiguration of production structures, for example with smart working, the experiment also showed how a health emergency, even more than wars or crime, can cancel dissent and devitalise public opinion. This, in the long term, is the most pernicious legacy that the virus leaves us. For this reason,

it becomes necessary for us to follow the provocations of Agamben, or maybe to be even more provocative than he was. Our civil liberties are at stake, and it is not possible to give them up.

Notes

- ¹ See <https://www.quodlibet.it/una-voce-giorgio-agamben>
- ² See www.governo.it
- ³ See www.corriere.it
- ⁴ See <http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/dettaglioContenutiNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?area=nuovoCoronavirus&cid=5351&lingua=italiano&menu=vuoto>
- ⁵ See <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/1975/05/24/075U0152/sg>
- ⁶ See www.associazioneantigone.it
- ⁷ See www.espresso.it
- ⁸ See www.avvenire.it
- ⁹ See <https://www.rivistastudio.com/no-mask-covid/>
- ¹⁰ See <https://kuriakhin.altervista.org/il-filosofo-delira/>
- ¹¹ See <https://www.ilfoglio.it/prehiera/2020/08/11/news/si-legga-agamben-per-capire-dove-falliscono-stato-e-chiesa-330726/>
- ¹² See <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/news/commenti-e-opinioni/23751282/antonio-socci-terrorismo-sanitario-finanza-cancellano-borghesia.html>
- ¹³ <https://accademiaunidee.it/it/il-jaccuse-di-agamben-alla-didattica-a-distanza/>
- ¹⁴ See <https://web.camera.it/parlam/leggi/980401.htm>
- ¹⁵ See <https://www.carmillaonline.com/2021/02/12/verita-e-giustizia-per-la-strage-di-santanna/>
- ¹⁶ See www.osservatorepressione.it
- ¹⁷ See <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2020/05/01/rivolte-nelle-carceri-e-boss-ai-domiciliari-il-capo-del-dap-francesco-basentini-si-e-dimesso/5788314/>; https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/07/22/news/diecimila_i_ribelli_delle_carceri_e_i_pm_antimafia_indagano_sui_boss-262581321/

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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