

Against the Coronavirus and the Opportunism of the State

Anarchists in Italy Report on the Spread of the Virus and the Quarantine

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Introduction

From one side, our lives are threatened by a new virus; from the other side, our freedom is menaced by nationalists and authoritarians intent on using this opportunity to set new precedents for state intervention and control. If we accept this dichotomy—between life and freedom—we will continue paying the price long after this particular pandemic has passed. In fact, each is bound up in the other, dependent upon the other. In the following report, our comrades in Italy describe the conditions prevailing there, the causes of the escalating crisis, and the ways that the Italian government has taken advantage of the situation to consolidate power in ways that will only exacerbate future crises.

At this point, the strategy of the authorities is not aimed at protecting people from the virus so much as controlling the pace at which it spreads so that it doesn't overwhelm their infrastructure. As in so many other aspects of our lives, crisis management is the order of the day. Our rulers don't intend to preserve the lives of everyone affected by the virus—they already wrote off concern for the destitute long before this crisis began. Rather, they are determined to preserve the current structure of society and their perceived legitimacy within it.

In this context, we have to be able to distinguish between two different disasters: the disaster of the virus itself and the disaster wrought by the ways that the existing order responds—and *does not respond*—to the pandemic. It will be a grave mistake to throw ourselves at the mercy of the existing power structures, blindly trusting that they exist to save us. On the contrary, when our rulers say “health,” they mean the health of the economy much more so than the health of our bodies. Case in point: the Federal Reserve just allocated \$1.5 trillion to prop up the stock market—\$500 billion for the banks—but most US citizens still can't get tested for coronavirus.

Let's be clear: though Trump and other nationalists worldwide intend to use this opportunity to impose new controls on our movements, this pandemic is not a consequence of globalization. Pandemics have always been global. The bubonic plague spread worldwide several hundred years ago. In introducing a ban on travel from Europe while continuing to try to preserve the health of the United States economy—rather than directing resources towards preserving the health of human beings within the US—Trump is giving us an explicit lesson in the ways that capitalism is fundamentally hazardous to our health.

Viruses don't respect the invented borders of the state. This one is already inside the US, where health care is much less widely and evenly distributed than it is in most of Europe. All this time, as the virus spread, service industry workers have been forced to continue putting themselves at risk in order to pay their bills. To eliminate the pressures that coerce people into such dangerous decisions, we would have to do away with the system that creates such drastic inequality in the first place. The poor, the homeless, and others who live in unsanitary conditions or without access to decent health care are always the worst hit by any crisis—and the impact on them puts everyone else at greater risk, spreading the contagion further and faster. Not even the wealthiest of the wealthy can isolate themselves completely from a virus like this, as illustrated by the circulation of the virus in the upper echelons of the Republican Party. In short—the prevailing order is not in *anyone's* best interest, not even those who benefit from it most.

This is the problem with what Michel Foucault called biopower, in which the same structures that sustain our lives also constrain them. When these systems cease to sustain us, we find ourselves trapped, dependent on the very thing that is endangering us. On a global scale, industrially produced climate change has already made this situation very familiar. Some have even hypothe-

sized that, by reducing pollution and workplace accidents, the industrial slowdown that the virus has brought about in China is saving lives as well as taking them.

Liberals and leftists are responding by criticizing the failures of Trump's government, effectively demanding more government intervention and centralized control—which Trump, or his successors, will surely wield for their own benefit, not only in response to pandemics, but also in response to everything else they perceive as a threat.

Fundamentally, the problem is that we lack a discourse about health that is not premised on centralized control. Across the political spectrum, every metaphor we have for safety and health is predicated on the exclusion of difference (for example, *borders, segregation, isolation, protection*) rather than the aim of developing a positive relationship with difference (for example, extending health-care resources to all, including those outside the borders of the US).

We need a way of conceiving of well-being that understands bodily health, social ties, human dignity, and freedom as all being interconnected. We need a way of responding to crisis based in mutual aid—that doesn't grant even more power and legitimacy to tyrants.

Rather than placing blind faith in the state, we must focus on what we can do with our own agency, looking back to previous precedents for guidance. Let no one charge that anarchistic organizing is not “disciplined” or “coordinated” enough to address an issue like this. We have seen over and over that capitalist and state structures are at their most “disciplined” and “coordinated” precisely in the ways that they impose unnecessary crises on us—poverty, climate change, the prison-industrial complex. Anarchism, as we see it, is not a hypothetical blueprint for an alternate world, but the immediate necessity of acting outside and against the dictates of profit and authority in order to counteract their consequences. While the current models of “addressing the pandemic” that states are carrying out are based on top-down control that nevertheless fail to protect the most vulnerable, an anarchist approach would focus chiefly on shifting resources such as medical care toward all who require them, while empowering individuals and communities to be able to limit the amount of risk they choose to expose themselves to without tremendous negative consequences.

There are precedents for this. We recall Malatesta returning to Naples in 1884, despite a three-year prison term over his head, to treat a cholera epidemic in his hometown. Surely our antecedents have theorized about this and taken actions that we could learn from today. Just a few years ago, some anarchists set themselves the challenge of analyzing how to respond to the ebola outbreak from an anarchist perspective. We entreat you to think and write and talk about how to generate a discourse about health that distinguishes it from state control—and what sort of actions we can take together to help each other survive this situation while preserving our autonomy.

In the meantime, we present the following report from our comrades in northern Italy who have been living through this crisis a few weeks longer than we in the United States have.

Pandemic Diary, Milan: Love in the Time of Corona

1918–1920: Already shaken by the First World War, the world faced a more insidious foe: Spanish flu, a catastrophic pandemic that infected 500 million people, killing as many as 50 million or more—twice the number of casualties as in the War.

2020: COVID-19, a new pandemic infection, is spreading all over the world. As of this writing, according to the World Health Organization, over 125,000 cases have been confirmed, with over 4,600 deaths. In Italy, there are 12,000 infections, with at least 827 deaths.

Here, we'll focus on Italy, asking a couple of questions about how to face COVID-19. The first step is to refuse to take the corporate media narrative for granted and—above all—not to give in to the prescriptions and impositions from above, all of which are getting more and more oppressive.

We begin from the most obvious facts. This outbreak highlights the need for international solidarity and cooperation so that people can join forces to cope with the difficulties and achieve common goals. But in the current system—in which every nation takes advantage of others' tragedies and every "crisis" paves the way for profiteering—that's not possible.

However we approach the question, we arrive at the same conclusion: capitalism and imperialism point out the need for a radical shift from the current state of things.

But let's step back and concentrate on Lombardy, going back to the day that the Italian government signed the first Decree attempting to control the spread of the infection.

Lombardy, February 16

On this day, the Italian government signed the first decree attempting to control the spread of the infection.

Milan, 7 pm: The worry that all schools and gathering places will be closed spreads quickly, along with a panic that takes hold among people, creating pseudo-apocalyptic moments. Supermarkets are stormed as if we were on the brink of war, people buy huge quantities of breathing masks and hand sanitizer (thin paper masks have become a totem representing safety), we hear screams, we see people weeping, we experience mass panic.

Following the rumors about restrictions, Milan, the great Milan, the city that never stops, was paralyzed with fear. But it only took a few hours to return to liveliness. In fact, the morning after the announcement, what was stirring all over the city wasn't fear of the virus but fear of not being able to live the "Milano da bere." Bars and pubs were closed from 6 pm to 6 am—clearly, the viruses clock in to work at night like proletarians on graveyard shift. Restaurants were not—apparently, you get ill if you drink, but if you eat, the virus, on the contrary, respects you. At the same time, we saw the closure of all schools, universities, and other gathering places.

Late February

A week passes and Milan, this provincial wannabe New York, doesn't stop. Likewise, the virus advances, causing further panic. There are more infections, more deaths—even if, granted, the victims include many older people suffering from existing cardiovascular diseases. Once again, everything is locked down—schools, cinemas, theaters, kissing and hugging—but not bars, restaurants, malls, or public transit. Meanwhile, Beppe Sala, the city mayor, tries to give strength to the poor Milanese afflicted by this appalling virus that preys by night and only if you meet for drinks. Employing his beloved social networks, he posts a video with the hashtag #MilanoNonSiFerma (Milano Doesn't Stop).

Technically, the video is flawless—bird's-eye shots with bright colors, catchy tunes—yet it's as phony as a three dollar bill. No doubt about it, it has been promoted by the Unione dei Brand della Ristorazione Italiana (Union of Italian Catering Brands). Milan doesn't stop. But in this video, we

don't really see Milan, the real Milan—the Milan I love not because it is the center of *movida* but because it is traversed by revolutionary shivers, even though they tried to bring her down through fascism and xenophobia, even though it has fallen asleep politically over the last twenty years. The video presented by Sala seems to step out of the 1980s when the advertisement for a very popular liqueur was broadcast: Amaro Ramazzoti, the liqueur of the “Milano da bere.”

The real Milan isn't depicted in those images. The real Milan is the one expressed crudely but sincerely by Collective Zam in a video parroting the one of a Mayor that—within days—backs out of the statement he has asserted, resorting to a false narrative on the media; a false narrative where xenophobic class rhetoric is constantly and continuously served up, making this city living off precarious workers and outsiders that every day has to struggle against racism, patriarchy, gentrification, neglected suburbs and capitalism.

The virus isn't the heart of the emergency. The *real* emergency, patient zero of this “cosmopolitan” city, is the economic precarity that inflicts despair upon the workers who are forced to fight against the rising cost of living and exploitation that, in the last weeks, has occurred in the new form of “smart working,” never used before in Italy and that, surely, will become next year's trend to further enslave through subcontracts and outsourcing. Many employers in Northern Italy's red zones are forcing their employees to take sick or administrative leave without taking into account that this will further destabilize an already precarious state system and, above all, hit all those precarious workers who have to fight every day to put food on the table, who keep their heads above water by taking low-paid jobs, who endure awful work schedules in worksites without any sort of security measures. Just to give you an idea, from January 1 to February 6 this year, there have been 46 workplace deaths.

If we study the two videos, we notice that, not by chance, the media keep focusing responsibility for everything that happens on the individual, from work to the displacement of people and the movement of goods.

In short, there have been three stages, which we can summarize as follows. The first stage, now impossible to maintain, is to conceal the problem. The second stage is the so-called “media terrorism” that is still in progress, wavering and oscillating between mass panic and illusory calm. In the third stage, the current one, dramatic changes are imposed in society under the cover of a combination of panic and social consensus. Meanwhile, decrees are introduced that will have a considerable impact upon our future, denying us the right to protest, to go on strike, to gather on our own terms.

What will happen now that the decree signed by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has appeared in the *Official Journal*? Additional restrictions and measures to contain the virus in Lombardy will be extended until April 3. We will need special permission to travel in and out of a region and also within it; people are urged to self-quarantine; all schools and universities are closed—we all know studying is not important, so why not seize the opportunity to drag parents and students, already exhausted from years and years of budgetary cuts, into the mess? Bars and restaurants can remain open from 6 am to 6 pm as long as customers can keep a distance of at least one meter between each other; theaters, gyms, ski resorts, and discotheques are shut down, but all major sporting events can take place behind closed doors (that's Italy—you can't live without football); all public gatherings are banned; no weddings and funerals; medium-sized and large malls are shut down, but only during weekends and bank holidays.

In short, fear of contagion is sparking mass panic and, in the name of a supposed security, these new restrictions dangerously restrict freedom, justifying the state of emergency regardless

of the impact it will have on small retailers and on family-run business. But the real danger, the one we should really be concerned by, isn't so much about a contagion, but the one bound to the ignorance of a government that has leaked a draft decree that, as underlined by the virologist Roberto Burioni, "panics people." Basically, these drastic measures ban people from working and impose "smart working" for a large proportion of workers, limit freedom of motion in some areas, pressure people to stay at home, and ban all public "gatherings" (inside or outside). Every right is more and more restricted or denied. All of this, amid the consequent mass panic and social isolation of millions of people.

And now, two of the biggest "social" issues appear on the horizon. The first, the sphere in which we Italians are undisputed sovereigns, is the "espertite" of many, resulting from information saturation, as a result of which everyone is "the greatest expert," often ignoring issues such as how rapidly the virus spreads. This is clearly the result media and authority aims to achieve. The second issue is the consequence of the various specialists—doctors, virologists, biologists—raging on television, on the radio, in newspapers, and, especially, on the internet. These people are introduced, in bad or in good faith, as being able to provide some sort of resolution inasmuch as they are "neutral" experts—as if science were neutral and the experts analyzing it, doctors included, lack personal preconceptions. But that's politics, anyway! If we don't keep this aspect in mind, we will end up reaching erroneous conclusions even if we do our best.

What does the average Italian do to fight back against these controls and restrictions on his freedom? He doesn't realize that he is *already* constrained by a wide range of restrictions imposed by control—via the media, surveillance cameras, and the like—and compelled to rush constantly to keep up with the wealthiest, even at the cost of taking out loans and starving just to buy an iPhone, paying loan shark rates for months just to be "worthy," drooling after influencers who refuse to take a position when it's time to shelter "outcasts," but always ready to post a selfie wearing the latest model of shoes. He acts like Pulcinella, panicking because he can't get back to the South; he rushes to board trains and buses; he couldn't care less if this behavior could spread the virus to Puglia, Calabria, Sicily—all of the regions that were still considered "safe" as late as March 8—along with the quarantine in effect in Northern Italy. Tonight [March 9], hundreds of people stormed train stations and bus stations trying to escape from the red zone, compelling the railway police (POLFER) to intervene to keep people calm. Unable to understand how it was possible, Conte says: "*The publication of a rough draft has created uncertainty, insecurity, confusion, we can't accept it.*"

So why not give police special powers, enable them to stop people and demand to hear where they are going, while bars and restaurants still remain open? A cause leads to an effect; in this case, it'll lead to the intensifying of pent-up anger and racism, obviously enough. And who knows—sooner or later, it wouldn't be surprising to read that someone began shooting Chinese, Moroccan, or Romanian people, or whomever else, on the pretense of seeking to avenge the death via COVID-19 of his cousin or neighbor or acquaintance. There have already been assaults on some Eastern Europeans living in Italy.

The Italiot doesn't think about others; he just focuses on feeling good, because what really counts is the pursuit of his own satisfaction. Who cares if the world around her falls apart? The apple doesn't fall far from the tree; an excellent example of why the average Italian couldn't give a damn is embodied by former Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini, the right-wing populist and anti-immigrant politician leading the Lega party. It seems only yesterday, but almost a month has passed since he was snarling, as always, that the government didn't block boats loaded with

migrants, wondering if the government had underestimated the coronavirus by “allowing the migrants to land.” Who cares that he wants to close Italian borders except to keep the borders open towards the United Kingdom. Just days before the decree was signed, he was able to go to London, challenging all common sense, spreading his nationalist and racist thoughts across Europe—the plague that precedes coronavirus.

Now we must ask ourselves some other questions that may be hard to answer. The first one is how we should react to what’s happening, taking into account all the objective difficulties connected to the bans (for example, punishments for violators including up to three months in jail or fines of \$225), the continuous “media bombing,” the feeling of constant uncertainty.

On one hand, we see an over-emphasis on individual responsibility, especially for those suffering from the coronavirus, and on the other hand, the state using the excuse of an emergency to impose new rules. They don’t talk about cuts to public hospitals (45,000 in the last ten years), about the situation of workers in the front line (especially, doctors, nurses, and the like), about the negative effects on the health sector—such as the interruption of regularly scheduled medical examinations including dialysis and the treatment of diabetics and others with serious medical conditions, who have seen their minimal rights denied by the diversion of economic efforts towards this “emergency” without ever taking them into account. Hypocritically, Italian politicians—the same ones who attacked the public health sector and its workers—heap praise upon our public health system, never mentioning all the profit-driven privatization.

So what will happen now? What will be the historical consequences of these “emergencies?” In recent years, we can see clearly that a set of repressive rules has been created in Italy that didn’t disappear even when each “emergency” ended, whatever type of emergency it was.

In this country, the creation and exploitation of emergency has created serious problems for us. On the pretext of making war on the Mafia and so-called “terrorism,” the authorities passed “special laws” such as the one stipulating a maximum sentence of 30 years (because, even in formal bourgeois hypocrisy, punishment should be “re-educational” and aimed at social reintegration); but in 1992, they introduced life without parole. This is perhaps the most obvious example of the more and more aggressive authoritarian tendencies of bourgeois democracy. To broaden our analysis, we should study how, over the past few decades, it has been possible to criminalize and repress the poor, and the struggling, and all who try to oppose the status quo in any way. This has led to hard punishment, with exceptions only when we are able to repel the attacks of the state.

For example, earthquakes have served as an opportunity to introduce anti-social regional laws on the pretext of opposing “looting.” The earthquake in L’Aquilas illustrates this—even if, in that case, they had to face a very combative grassroots response.

Likewise, the “anti-hooligan special laws” that, since 2006, started addressing the most “unpresentable” part of the movement (from the point of view of the police), the organization of youngsters from the poorest suburbs, often prone to fighting against the police and to breaking the rules they impose. Those laws were supposed to target “dangerous hooligans” from organized football clubs, but in the years since they were passed, they have been used to repress strikes, mobilizations, and pickets as well. We can see the consequence in political struggles that are targeted with fines and the well-known “daspo,” an order banning access to sports events that has also been imposed in a “preventative” form against other targets without even going through courts, with the pure arbitrariness of the police. Many organized football clubs’ efforts could be summarized as a form of protest against modern soccer (that is, against the deprivation of so-

ciality in order to maximize profit) and as an organized mobilization that recognizes the danger that the “anti-hooligan special laws” pose to all organized movements. The anti-repression slogan “special laws: today for hooligans, tomorrow for the whole city!” is relevant here, too. First, they’ll target us, but eventually they’ll extend control to everyone.

This brings us back to the decree that has been passed almost in silence, the above-mentioned “Conte Decree” that has hurriedly implemented a law reducing employees’ rights regarding “smart working” while increasing the bosses’ leverage. Even in ways that are not clearly connected to the coronavirus emergency, they are laying their hands on the rights of millions of people by means of such decrees.

But this kind of repression can also generate revolt. In response to the government taking away a variety of prisoners’ rights (including visitation and recreation), prisoners rioted. As of March 9, more than 50 had escaped in the riots, though six more had been killed. Criminal trials were continuing even during the outbreak, though prisoners are prohibited from attending, supposedly out of fear they will contract the virus and spread it to those trapped in the prison system.

Despite all the threats and risks, on the first day of the national lockdown, a few dozen protesters converged on the empty streets of central Rome outside the Ministry of Justice to elevate the demands of prisoners across the country in revolt.

March 11

New stricter measures have been imposed on those who falsify the self-certification to go out: you can be arrested *in flagrante delicto* and serve up to six years in jail. Furthermore, those who violate quarantine can be charged with “manslaughter against public health,” while those violating quarantine who exhibit COVID-19 symptoms such as fever and cough, causing the death of elderly people or subjects at risk, could be charged with “voluntary manslaughter” and jailed up to 21 years. The same applies to those having contacts with COVID-positive people and maintaining social relationships or working with them without taking the necessary precautions or inform the others.

March 12

Everything except malls, drugstores, and convenience stores are closed for two weeks. We are on lockdown and the quarantine isolates us from the world. Call me a catastrophist, but what comes to mind is the fate of Prince Prospero hiding in his fortified abbey:

“And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.”

—The Masque of the Red Death, Edgar Allan Poe).

But we will survive, despite the quarantine imposed upon us.

March 13

The whole of Italy, brought to its knees, finally seems to be moved by a rebellious spirit. We are not talking about the singing flashmob scheduled for today at 6 pm—the call to go out on your balcony to sing and play music, to let the world know that “we can do it” and that everything will be all right. This is something else. “Irresponsible strike,” say the masters. Safety measures are lacking in the workplaces, say the employees. “We are not expendable”—“We are not cannon fodder.” These are the chants coming from Italy’s factories. From north to south, unions and workers are making a show of force and stirring things up with spontaneous strikes calling for measures to safeguard health. That, at least, is something.

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