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Politics of struggles in the time of pandemic

Sandro Mezzadra

Translated by Yari Lanci

A prolonged wait at the pharmacy, a long queue before entering a supermarket. Experiences like this, today increasingly common, can help us to see how the spreading of Coronavirus is transforming our society. Yet, more precisely, the global pandemic, and the measures put in place by the Italian government to attempt to counteract it, are in fact merely exacerbating tendencies that have already existed for a while. Recent decades, dominated by the politics of fear, have left their mark. This can be seen in the current fear of physical contact, or in the suspicious looks that guard over the “security distance” between people. Undoubtedly, such an anxiety of control strengthens the powers dominating our lives, and it is worth remembering that once governmental measures such as these are taken they become part of the arsenal of political possibility. Yet, other images have emerged as well, ones with profoundly different connotations. People on the street smile at each other, music is played from balconies, and a sense of solidarity surrounds not only doctors and nurses, but also factory workers on strike to defend the health security offered via their working conditions.

Within the variegated realm of social movements and the Left, discussions seem to be focusing on the first aspect, namely, the sharpening of control devices in times of emergency. Even beyond the opinions expressed by well-known philosophers, who are turning themselves into experts on virology and epidemiology, a sort of scepticism seems to prevail about the actual severity of COVID-19. It seems to me that this attitude is misleading. Instead, a discussion should start from the fact that, put simply, the spread of Coronavirus poses a threat both to the health and life of millions of people (primarily the elderly and other individuals at risk), and also to the very survival of the health care system. I do not think there should be any doubt about this point. Yet, if that is the case, Coronavirus is a threat to something essential, to "the common". The ongoing epidemic shows the fragility and precarity of such a common (as well as our very lives), together with the need of "care" – something highlighted in particular by feminist debates of the past few years. But, without forgetting the heightened control of the present situation, it is this latter, equally essential, perspective that I want to develop in order to think about what is currently happening in Italy, Europe, and the World.

The economic effects of Coronavirus are unprecedented. For the first time in decades, a crisis whose origin lies in the "real economy" has violently hit global financial markets, resulting in unparalleled losses. With regard to global capitalism, a metaphor of "obstruction" seems to be the most apt in illustrating the present situation. As in a mirror, this crisis reflects the inverted image of capitalism, whose circuits of valorization and accumulation depend on the tireless movement of capital, commodities, and people. Supply chains, the links that constitute the logistic and infrastructural skeleton of capitalist globalisation, today appear to be blocked to a considerable extent. Stock market prices – which

for quite some time have steered the extension of supply chains and their connected web of corridors, special zones, and hubs – are being forced to register such a blockage.

It is not wrong to say then that the current pandemic has hit a point of no return in the development of global capitalism. I am in no way indulging in "crashing" or apocalyptic fantasies. Capitalism will certainly continue to exist after Coronavirus, but it will be profoundly different to the version we have seen in the recent past – though it was already displaying some radical changes that stemmed from the financial crisis of 2007-2008. I think one should start from this, with reference to a global level, in order to understand what is happening in Italy. At the moment, Italy is a "laboratory", although in fairly different terms than it was in the not so distant past.

At the risk of simplification, it could be said that nowadays there are two well-defined alternatives taking shape in response to the crisis. On the one hand, there is the "Malthusian" response – essentially inspired by social Darwinism – which finds its example in the Johnson-Trump-Bolsonaro axis. On the other hand, there is emerging an alternative response that aims at the requalification of the public health system as the fundamental instrument in order to tackle the current crisis – here, very different examples are provided by China, South Korea, and Italy. In the first case, thousands of deaths among the population are seen as a form of natural selection; in the second, for reasons that are in large part contingent, the issue seems to be that "society must be defended", with varying degrees of authoritarianism and social control.

To clarify: by no means I am endorsing the measures put in place by the Italian government. I am rather limiting myself to say that right now, globally, there is a conflict under way that will have

critical consequences not only for capitalism's future but also – which is the same thing after all – our own lives. This struggle affects countries like the United Kingdom, United States, and Brazil, whose governments endorse "Malthusian" solutions, as resistances are firm and rooted socially and politically. But it also affects countries like Italy, where such a struggle is expressed by the workers' refusal to accept the choices of Confindustria (the Federation of Italian Employers and Italian Industrial Federation) and sacrifice themselves to the supremacy of production. More generally, the management of Coronavirus appears as a crucial field of conflict. Only the intensification of social struggles, now and in the following months, can give way to spaces of democracy and "care" of the common. This applies to Italy no less than to the United States.

There are a number of scenarios that could emerge in the near future, and it's worth analysing the conditions that might allow them to take hold. The fundamental value of the public health system, that is to say the social right to health care, is an element which cannot really be questioned. This means that, at least for a while, it will be difficult to propose further cuts and it could rather be possible to begin a new season of investments, especially under the pressure provided by health workers. One hopes this would be the same with education as well, though of course it will be necessary to confront the changes that have occurred over the past weeks to stop them becoming permanent conditions (starting from the use of online teaching). Like in every crisis, the burden of care work falls mainly to women, yet even this circumstance creates spaces for new struggles and negotiations. The workers' strikes mentioned above point to the possibility of new horizons of unionisation, even socially, and the demand of a "quarantine income". Though paying an enormously high price, the recent

prison revolts in Italy determined a renewed visibility in a world that in the past years had become fundamentally opaque – they have nonetheless achieved some significant, if partial, results. This is also happening in detention centres (CPR), notwithstanding different times, where Coronavirus actually halted repatriations if not the holding.

To reiterate my point: what we are dealing with right now are scenarios that offer specific fields of struggle and not merely evolutions in governmental logics. From a methodological point of view, it seems to me crucial to start from there. Moreover, the virus has shown the entirely illusory character of sovereigntism and its fetishism of borders. This is a good condition to open up again a reflection on Europe. Of course, the European Union has not done much until now, it has moved in contradictory, if not counterproductive ways. However, how can we not see that the austerity regime is finally falling apart with its dogma of a balanced budget? Impressive also are the "objective" tensions that are being unloaded on the European Central Bank so that it will assume the role of lender of the last resort. They are indeed "objective" tendencies in that they are independent from a political intentionality, yet define the conditions for reactivating struggles on the European terrain. Perhaps better, they frame the circumstances at the European level of a re-entry of the struggles that will develop in many parts of the continent.

In conclusion, I think that the perspective advanced here might allow us to look at the ongoing pandemic by drawing the attention to the spaces emerging for different movements, social struggles, and to the Left itself. As I have already maintained, I am not underestimating the issue of control, the expansion of the powers of the state, and the further encouragement to the politics of fear. These aspects are evidently part of the current scenario. However,

how should they be opposed? My conviction is that, in order to invert the present sense of the “Italian laboratory”, one should start from that “care” of the common I referred to at the beginning of this piece. Furthermore, it is necessary to grasp, within the present situation, the existing occasions in view of shaping a more general politics of struggles in the time of pandemic.

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