

Italy's Coronavirus Experience and the Challenge by Extreme Crises to Liberal Democracies

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Last September, the Global Preparedness Monitoring Board warned that the chances of a global pandemic were growing, and the world was “dangerously” underprepared to cope with such an emergency. Two months later, in Wuhan, China the Coronavirus outbreak began. In its early weeks, Chinese authorities attempted to cover this up, as the story of Dr. Li Wenliang demonstrates. In mid-January, they were still allowing mass events like the Baibuting banquets in Wuhan, in which thousands of families traditionally gather. Situations like these led to an explosion of the epidemic, and soon China had to take draconian measures, putting communities in complete quarantine and enforcing large-scale, invasive technological control to bring the outbreak under control.

In Europe, Italy became the worst-affected country. But, while what has happened there is partially due to some specific features and circumstances, it would be a mistake to think that the country is an exception. Italy is just ahead of the curve compared to what many more countries will also face in the coming weeks. Many of the difficulties that Italy has faced in coping with the Coronavirus are based in the features of pluralist, democratic systems: the impossibility of imposing quick top-down solutions, the need to build consensus over decisions, and the need to strike a balance between security and freedom. At the same time, this crisis has the potential to undermine most of the inner foundations of these systems if it is not handled carefully.

The Impact on Italy

Given the hyperconnected nature of the global geoeconomic system, it was just a matter of weeks before this emergency began spreading to the rest of the world. Around mid-February, Italy started recording its first cases in small towns in Lombardy. As this unfolded, the government struggled to build a coherent response. The ensuing weeks were characterized by conflicting public messaging, nurtured not only by politicians but even by experts. Some said it was nothing more than flu; others were more concerned. For example, Maria Rita Gismondo, head of the laboratory of clinical microbiology, virology, and bio-emergency diagnostics of the Sacco hospital in Milan, reiterated in early March that the coronavirus was a “problem just slightly more significant than seasonal flu;” an assessment highly criticized by the virologist and social media star Roberto Burioni.

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Social media also contributed to the confusion as fake news spread. Not surprisingly, Italians reacted by saying “life goes on.” Gatherings turned into cathartic moments to collectively exorcise this unknown menace. However, these also created the conditions for greater contagion. The hashtag #Milanononsiferma (Milan does not stop) was launched on February 27. The sharp increase in people who tested positive for Coronavirus over the past two weeks is due to what people did in those weeks. By the time it became evident that the virus was far more dangerous than previously thought, the situation was already out of control, with confirmed cases increasing exponentially. Italy also has a much higher mortality rate so far: the World Health Organization has estimated that the global average is 3.45 percent, but for Italy it oscillates between 5 and 7 percent.

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These features are due to peculiarities of the Italian response to the outbreak and the demographic and social characteristics of the country. Italy has tested far more people than any other European country, particularly in the early stages of the epidemic. Scientists are debating the country's higher mortality rate. Demographic features, social factors, and sanitary conditions likely play a role in it. Italy has the second-oldest population in the world. In most cases, older people live with their families and not in retirement homes, an element that likely facilitated contagion between younger, asymptomatic people and more fragile elders sharing the same living spaces. Italians of all ages also share a culture of public gathering—from doing aperitivo (happy hour) in bars for youngsters to play cards and bocce (bowls) for older people in cafes and other meetings places. These social habits likely also helped the infection spread quickly.

Some have also suggested a more medical-focused explanation: Italy is, along with Cyprus, the country that has the most antibiotic-resistant bacterial strains in Europe as the proportion of resistant superbugs grew at least tenfold over the past years. As for Lombardy, some even suggest that levels of pollution worsened the immunity and respiratory system of people living around the new epicenters of the crisis, Bergamo and Brescia. Francesco Le Foche, of the Umberto I polyclinic in Rome suggested that Bergamo turned into the new epicenter of this crisis as a result of the Champions League football match between Atalanta and Valencia on February 19.

The government tried to isolate the areas most affected by imposing a red zone on March 8 in Lombardy, Veneto, and Emilia Romagna. However, this was leaked and the same evening tens of thousands moved from the areas about to be quarantined to the south. This was partly the automatic consequence of a permanent Italian socioeconomic feature: many of those living in the north of the country are originally from the south and went back to their families. This feature is the result of the peculiar dualism characterizing the economy historically. The north is anchored to dynamic Mitteleuropean trade networks and the global economy. Meanwhile, the south—the so-called Mezzogiorno—suffers from chronic disadvantage in terms of capital availability and infrastructure. These longstanding features have historically nurtured the north-south movement of people.

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In the ensuing chaos, footage of railway stations assaulted by people and of prisoners revolting gave the impression of a country on the brink of collapse. International media seized the occasion to revive die-hard stereotypes about Italy. The New York Times wondered whether Italians were capable of “following the rules.” Haaretz called Italy the “Perfect Petri Dish” for a catastrophe. Others noted that Italy set the standards of “how not being ready for a global pandemic.” In Italy, there was outrage at a French satirical video of a pizzaiolo coughing on a pizza, creating thus a “Coronavirus pizza”. Adding to that, European countries blocked the exports of biomedical materials, and no EU partner came to rescue, deepening the feeling of Italy being left alone.

After all these troubles, however, Italy finally managed to implement extremely tough and unprecedented decisions. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte announced on March 9 that the entire country was in lockdown, a measure praised by the World Health Organization. Italy is now entirely in charge of what is happening. The population is largely abiding by the new rules, even exerting forms of social control toward those who do not follow them, although Chinese doctors who came to Italy kept saying that the amount of people still in the street is “too high.”

The Inevitable Chaos of Pluralism and Transparency

Despite its specificities, the difficulties that Italy has faced in adapting to this mounting and exponential challenge were not due to it being a messy, chaotic Mediterranean exception. Italy can be, in some cases, but in this context the problem was much more profound. Some of these difficulties were technical: for instance, Italy is struggling to cope with the demand for masks because—like many mature, industrial countries—it does not produce them anymore. However, many of these difficulties were ones that every liberal democracy would face in coping with a challenge requiring such a significant limitation of freedom.

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Crafting a quick and efficient response to a crisis while building consensus proves to be very challenging in an environment in which state power is constrained; in which political, institutional, and administrative pluralism is a value and not an obstacle, and in which interest groups and civil society actively participate in the political and institutional decisions. Italy has found itself having to deal with this problem before other countries in Europe and on the other side of the Atlantic, which are now also having to cope with this rising wave. France soon experienced the difficulties of discouraging public gatherings—from the Smurf festival to football supporters amassing outside Parc des Princes stadium in Paris for the game behind closed doors with Borussia Dortmund. In the United States, there was crowd chaos in airports and people queued outside gun shops—not respecting social distancing—as the virus spread. This shows that struggling to cope with these problems seem to be common among liberal-democracies and non-authoritarian states. What is more, these

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are actually examples of classic public-order situations and nothing comparable to the lockdown that Italy had to impose and that other countries are now getting ready to implement as well.

Many in Italy have praised the efficiency of the Chinese model for dealing with the outbreak. However, China could cope with this challenge by imposing top-down decisions without taking into considerations the opinion and the interests of intermediate and local levels of governments and civil society. It could use technology invasively, unchecked— ignoring privacy and personal limits, exerting control over people, and enforcing a tight control over the boundaries of the quarantined areas. Even the actions taken by democracies like South Korea and Taiwan, which relied on an intrusive use of technology to deal with the outbreak, would pose problems in transatlantic societies.

In making these decisions, the Chinese government neither needed a process, nor to persuade other actors, mediate with them, and bring them on board. In a liberal, pluralist democratic environment, this vertical process is impossible. In the past, before the information revolution, liberal democracies were slightly more capable of imposing top-down decisions. Now, with social media and reckless, bi-directional flows of information, it is almost impossible, as proved by the mass escape towards the south of Italy. Besides, the model praised was itself the cause of the epidemic: the Chinese authorities did not intervene at first—fearing the political, economic, and reputational impact of the outbreak—and tried to silence doctors that were reporting cases. They admitted the existence of the problem only when it was not manageable anymore.

Implementing decisions as radical as putting entire communities and regions in quarantine, with all the economic consequences (Lombardy and Veneto account for one-third of Italy's GDP) and the psycho-social consequences of the stigma for those considered “infected” must necessarily be incremental and gradual. They cannot be imposed in the blink of an eye: public opinion must be persuaded that it is the best way to proceed; interests' groups, trade unions, and different levels of local government must be reassured. In a country like Italy, whose economic landscape is composed mostly by small and medium enterprises that do not have the financial buffers of larger corporations to survive prolonged times of economic crisis, this process can be even more lengthy and complicated. Public health is a crucial public good and Italy clearly prioritized that over other considerations. Yet, this choice is not automatic in a pluralist environment.

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The exceptionality of the Coronavirus situation, and the tremendous risks associated with it, forced Italy to strike a new, dynamic balance between considerations of freedom and concerns of security. Yet, this balance is always fragile and poses perennial dilemmas. Italy's tortuous path to that point shows how imposing severe limitations to freedoms in societies for whom they are an integral part of their political DNA is difficult. Italians are now accepting and implementing them because they came to realize that these efforts are needed to stop the spread of this virus and help a public-health system that, despite the constant cuts due to austerity measures, has managed to cope so far with a tremendous challenge.

The painful and challenging Italian experience shows how these decisions cannot be imposed through a top-down process. To do so, transatlantic societies would have to sacrifice some of their fundamental freedoms and checks and balances. Doing so would mean they become something else than liberal democracies, and this would represent a price too high to pay. In this kind of situation, efficiency can never be implemented at the expenses of limits on the state's power and incremental processes taking into account all the interests at stake. As such crises are likely to become more common—the world is more connected and in a way thus also more fragile—the coming, vital challenge for liberal democracies is to find a new, dynamic balance between more efficiently coping with them without sacrificing their foundational principles.

The Coronavirus crisis is pushing the world into one of its worst global economic recession, and the consequences will be felt for years, if not decades. In addition, this crisis is instilling the virus of fear and anxiety, which can erode the fabric of the societies in which the disease is hitting harder. The toxic mix of economic distress and social anxiety might thus leave transatlantic societies more vulnerable to authoritarian temptations. As such, while science must search for an antidote for the Coronavirus, politicians on both sides of the Atlantic should find solutions to tackle these temptations.

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