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## *A Social Anthropologist in Lockdown*

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Giuliana B. Prato's detailed invitation to contribute to this discussion on *City Life and Beyond in Times of Pandemic*, found my attention on the topic aroused by the combined significance of her open letter of 26 March 2020 on the COVID-19 pandemic (Prato 2020), my own observations in the UK and testimonies from the field, in Italy. What follows is a brief account of my professional experience while in lockdown in Kent, England.

As a classically trained social anthropologist, though wary of narrow empiricism, I have a 'natural' aversion to unjustified abstraction (Leach 1977: xvi ff.; Harris 1986: Chap. 1). In my research I have heeded the methodological imperative that the fieldworker needs to become involved in depth in local processes over an extended period of time (Pardo 1996, 2017). Experience during lockdown has undergirded this point. A separate essay will deal with issues of public health, individual freedom, the right to make a living and the politics of fear.

In Italy, I have done extensive fieldwork in the South — especially, though not exclusively, in Naples since the early 1980s — and more recently in Tuscany. Over the years, research in Naples was conducted among ordinary people and elite groups in the media, the medical and legal professions, business, banking, the trade unions and politics (Pardo 2017). Both in Naples and Tuscany, long-term field research continues to be based on participant observation and case studies of people, groups, situations and events. In both research settings, I have been lucky enough to meet and establish strong relationships with many 'Docs' (after William Foote Whyte, 1943), favourite informants from all walks of life who have helped me to orient myself in local dynamics. I am honoured that many of these relationships have grown into enduring friendship and collaboration. Alongside the human aspect — highly valued on both sides — this has meant that between field trips I have been able to keep in touch with local events via telephone, email and Skype.

Under COVID-19, these personal relationships came to a head in an exceptional way, integrating the points excellently brought out by Rutherford (2020) and Prato (2020) and currently debated in the anthropological community. Respectively, what to do when the field cannot be physically reached; and the convenient misrepresentation of COVID-19 as an 'indiscriminate hitter'. Let me explain.

On an early-March Sunday morning I received emails from a friend in Naples and from two friends in Tuscany. Worried that Britain was not doing so well under COVID-19, they enquired about my and my family's health. Those early exchanges started a process that has contributed to reflection on the shortcomings that, regardless of political colour, increasingly mar democratic governance as rulers are seen to be distant from and in conflict with citizens' interests, needs and expectations. In this respect, the Italian testimonies that I shall synthesize below were remarkably close to what I heard, while incarcerated at home, from my British friends and informants. Clearly, superficial differences of political colour aside — Britain is

under Conservative rule; Italy is under the Left, as for many decades have been Naples and its Region and Tuscany — rulers' rhetoric and the fractures in the relationship between citizenship and governance are in many ways interestingly similar, now with deadly consequences and dangerous ramifications. Here, I focus on testimonies from Italy.

That Sunday, I responded to my friends' emails and wrote to other friends in Naples and Tuscany to find about their and their families' health. All except one, a Tuscan, responded. They and theirs were fine. They were in lockdown, too, and described what they were going through. One email typified the others. It read:

'We can only take care, try to stay safe and hope for the best, you know. The reality is: A politician has a temperature? Test! Someone famous has a temperature? Test! One of us has a temperature? Call emergency and pray! My brother has all the symptoms of this virus. He has not been tested. One doctor talked to him on the 'phone with no results. Yesterday I drove him to the hospital. Couldn't get in. A sign on the door said "We are closed due to COVID-19"! Meanwhile, the government floods us with injunctions that contradict each other. What a deadly mess!'

Later the Tuscan friend who did not originally reply reported at length on his experience while his brother-in-law and a cousin were in intensive care with COVID.

Within a week, those initial communications grew into intense email exchanges, telephone conversations and Skype meetings, which continue today. The quantity and quality of information also grew, extending beyond personal experience, as accounts, also visual, of neighbourhood life flocked in. When Italians were eventually allowed to go out, my friends reported on life across their city; the Neapolitans noted in annoyance that their city continued to be dirty and dotted with uncollected rubbish.

While Naples experienced infections and deaths, which by July had grown respectively to 1.019 and 142 (mostly elderly and frail), the Tuscan urban setting where I do research suffered minimally from the pandemic: 14 were infected, of whom 3 died in their 80s (in the whole province, a little over 700 were infected and less than 100 died). One of the infected was my friend's cousin, who experienced the trauma of intubation and, then, went through a long but successful period of recovery. He, like most others did not like what the powers-that-be were doing.

Field reports brought out people's resentment of certain influential politicians' promoting a 'hug a Chinese' and 'all will be well' rhetoric. Having made clear that they have nothing against their Chinese neighbours, my friends asked why Chinese nationals who arrived in Italy were not quarantined and why the Chinese communities that, like the large one near Florence, chose to self-isolate should be opposed by local and regional rulers and sanctioned in the dominant government-friendly media. Resonating with their counterparts' anger in Europe and across the Atlantic, my Italian informants are angry at the complacency and arrogance of their rulers, which they see compounded by their government's progressive authoritarian drift and the shroud of secrecy that brands their style, as typified by the pernicious attempt to keep secret

the briefs and scientific reports which have purportedly inspired their questionable decisions (Bocci 2020). This, too, tallies with events in the UK.

My Italian friends' reports illustrate their rulers' politicking, chaotic actions and backfiring attempts to disguise incompetence. They described as unconscionable their conceited rulers' electioneering through late-night broadcasts on national television, announcing progressive limitations on individual freedoms that were received as illogical, contradictory, ambiguous and often at the very limits of the law. Governmental 'decrees' (legislation that is passed without parliamentary debate and approval) ranged from allowing people to drive in 'exceptional circumstances' a car with one passenger sitting in the back and both driver and passenger wearing face masks to making mandatory for people who went out to carry self-declaration forms that changed almost daily and were often in contradiction with each other; from closing public parks (very few Italian urban dwellers have private gardens) to keeping tobacconists open (Italy taxes heavily tobacco products); from allowing illegal immigration to continue (while legal residents could not move outside the council's territorial boundaries) to scattering infected immigrants across the country in overcrowded reception centres, including in previously virus-free Regions; from keeping schools shut to opening dance clubs and tolerating mass street-parties; from decreeing an end to social distancing in trains to reinstating it next day; and so on. When asked, my Italian informants expressed alarm though no surprise that their PM and 6 Cabinet Ministers should be under criminal investigation for the government's mishandling of the crisis (*La Stampa*, 13 August 2020; <https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2020/08/13/news/avviso-di-garanzia-a-conte-e-6-ministri-dai-pm-di-roma-1.39190314>).

Italy's government's continuing pro-EU rhetoric despite the humiliation from EU's indifference to country's cry for help during the hecatomb of March and April 2020 (Boffey et al. 2020) strengthened my informants' growing contempt for what they see as their rulers' incompetence, arrogance and abuse of power, which, they stress, was long-standing but exacerbated by the current crisis. These themes resonate among my friends in the media, who denounce their 'government's subservience to international powers' and the 'rampant *de facto* censorship', whereby, as one angrily noted,

'If you report that COVID-19 originated in China, whose authoritarian handling has allowed it to infect the world, you're branded as a racist. This is absurd, yet very real.'

Mirroring events across Italy, my Neapolitan friends diligently followed rules and stayed at home, venturing out only to buy food or in certifiable emergencies. Meanwhile, they had to watch bingeing, fighting and drug pushing in the streets beneath their windows and balconies and, particularly in the less affluent areas, immigrants freely peddling objects scavenged from dumpsters. Residents in an area of central Naples on which I have recently written (Pardo 2020) asked the leader of their neighbourhood association to write an open letter to the President of the Regional Council. The letter, widely reported in the media (Garau 2020), in essence reads:

‘As this Committee has repeatedly and vibrantly brought to the attention of the city administration, the entire area adjacent to the Garibaldi Central Station in Naples and the Vasto-Nolana district are invaded by non-EU citizens [...] These have been deaf to the rules and have continued with their gatherings, the small groups on the street, the groups who bivouac hanging around on the sidewalks, exchanging goods taken from the bins or of dubious origin. All this under the astonished eyes of the citizens who live here and can do nothing. Citizens who are locked down in their homes, respectful of regional and national rules, but who live this segregation as yet another hoax that is consumed against them, being unable to intervene or change this situation [...] Despite the great help that the police are giving these days for the implementation of the ordinances, the Committee believes that the situation is becoming very dangerous throughout the area [...] Therefore, the "Vasto-Nolana" Committee asks you, President De Luca, that the Army be scrambled as soon as possible to patrol the area round the clock in order to defend and protect the health of citizens [...]

As I have indicated in the cited publications, the self-employed and people who work hard to make a living informally account for a large part of the ordinary Neapolitans and Tuscans whom I have met over the years. They have never enjoyed income security and have no access to employment benefits. During the pandemic, none have received help or assistance — monetary or otherwise — from the government, while thousands of local and regional politicians have applied for the €600 coronavirus relief payment and several MPs have received such payment (Giuffrida 2020). Most local friends live in small apartments, only a few enjoy a balcony. Their experience exposes the political myth that the virus is ‘indiscriminate’ or, as some politicians dared say, ‘democratic’; it and its socio-economic (and political) consequences are neither.

A friend who in normal times runs a stall in Naples said:

‘How dare politicians say we’re all in this together when their fat wallets’re getting fatter and will get them through it all?! Market’s shut. I can’t work. No one is helping. Savings are dwindling. My children and wife are barely coping. Nerves are frayed. The neighbourhood is dirtier than ever. Yeah, we’ll be all right indeed!’ (here, he was referring to the ‘all will be well’ government’s mantra).

A stall-keeper, who usually sells food in Tuscany, said:

‘Since the government-imposed lockdown and banned street markets, we have all been short on money; many also on food. I am bartering my stock with fellow traders for essentials. Many friends and neighbours can’t put food on the table and their kids can’t eat at school anymore because schools are closed. It breaks my heart We help as many as we can. For how long, I don’t know.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This kind of solidarity, I learned, was widespread among neighbours and friends in both field sites.

Bringing to mind Prato's remarks (2020), their and their fellow precarious workers' struggle to survive across Italy and beyond, their plight, put to shame the irritating whining of some who are locked down, work from home and continue to enjoy a secure income and trade-union protection. Not to mention, of course, the dedication and sacrifices of a multitude of medical staff and 'essential workers' (this official bad choice of words raises the obvious question, who would be the superfluous workers?).

In closing, I bluntly note that for the sake of associated life in our precious democracy Western rulers would do good to work on restoring, urgently, the covenant with the ruled. They would do good to dispense with politicking, become accountable and truly honour the sacrifices made across the board by those who are helping us all to survive. However 'inconvenient' it may be for them, they badly need to lead responsibly, resist authoritarian temptations and effectively protect our hard-won freedoms.

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