
Pandemic Ruptures

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I live on the Kentish North Downs, 3 miles south of Canterbury (crow fly distance). The city centre can be reached by car in 10 minutes. A bus that passes through the nearby village (reachable on foot in 15 minutes) three times a day (non-festive) is the only public transport. Having been snowed-in on several occasions, I took to keeping food supplies and other basic necessities in the house. So, although I knew of the ‘panic buying’ that had occurred in other countries, when on Monday 16 March the UK Prime Minister advised people against ‘non-essential’ travel and social contacts and to work from home if possible, I did not hasten to the shops. I was working on a book on *Urban Inequalities* for Palgrave (Pardo and Prato eds, forthcoming 2020) mainly from home, and decided to keep my routine. The situation changed drastically in the next few days. Medical Practices moved to remote consultations and the NHS postponed non-urgent operations. Emergency financial packages were announced in support of the homeless and of job retention schemes. On Wednesday 18 March, the PM announced that schools would close from the coming Friday until further notice. The following day, a critical care nurse in tears made the national news; exhausted after a 48-hour shift, she had been unable to buy food from the supermarket. Her heart-breaking appeal to panic-buyers prompted supermarkets to give priority to NHS personnel, while also introducing early shopping hours for the elderly and the vulnerable. Measures to contain contagion were tightened the following Monday, including restrictions on freedom of movement that would be enforced by law.

Suddenly, the media chronicles of deserted cities and empty supermarket shelves made me feel like I was living in a surreal situation and that, ‘sheltered’ in the countryside, I was getting fragmented information on real life. I had to go into town and see with my own eyes.

Walking through Canterbury’s deserted streets, I remembered how I felt when I moved there from London in 1995. Having previously lived in big cities bursting with life until late at night, my heart sank when I experienced the city’s forlornness after the shops closure at 5pm; I thought I was going to die of boredom. As time went by, we decided that we would no longer endure the day-time touristic chaos and the evening urban desolation; hence, the move to the countryside. Much has changed since then; the contemporary Covid-induced emptiness contrasted with the ‘gentrified’ high-street life and the hubbub outside late-night entertainment venues constantly supervised by the police. Now, the city centre no longer offered entertainment; people were drawn to more secluded places and less frequented paths, like the footpaths leading to the university campus, now heavily populated. Long queues outside the supermarkets made me desist; it would be pointless anyway, I thought, to attempt any shopping until shelves were restocked. I could buy fresh products from local farm shops and did not need to buy antibacterial handwash or gel — I was using both long before the pandemic and had a sufficient supply at home together with bleach and various disinfectants. Besides, ‘anti-

bacterial' products do not kill 'viruses', or do they? Perhaps simple good hygiene and common sense precautions would suffice.

In the following weeks, usually up at 5 am, I enjoyed watching the spring revival of nature. At dawn, I could hear the warble of blackbirds and thrushes and the chirping of goldfinches, blue tits and robins. From my window, I watched the magpies in flight displaying the silky colours of their plumage (black, blue, purple, metallic green) against the pure white of their belly. I saw again the Yaffle (the English folk-name for the green woodpecker) who, I suspect, resides locally but used to see rarely. This time, it was not just one; I counted four as they ventured into my courtyard to explore the flowerpots before flying to the nearby trees and disappear among the branches, while a kestrel hovered in mid-air over the hill. In the evening, a vixen and her two cubs regularly left their den to venture in the surrounding fields where lambs were grazing. The unusual warm weather was awaking nature earlier. The woodland was changing and by mid-April the undergrowth was already covered by a lilac-blue carpet of bluebells. The copper beeches began to boast their new red foliage, which would turn deep purple in the Summer and, then, bronze in the Autumn. Beyond the hedge, the local Nailbourne (a watercourse fed by underground sources) that had been dormant for many years was running again.

However, living in the countryside has its drawbacks. Now, more than ever, I was faced with the poor broadband service in the area which, with more people working from home, had worsened. Undoubtedly, ICT is useful in one's professional and social life, but it is unreliable as its applications can be easily abused — one thinks of the 'tracking' and 'surveillance' applications, or the technical glitches that can destroy files in a blink. Nevertheless, now I had to rely on them for virtual work meetings and other aspects of my rearranged daily routine.

Communication technologies have allowed me to stay in contact with my mother in Italy. She had not had time to get used to living alone after my father's death (aged 98) when Italy went into lockdown — they had spent 65 years together. Before I left in January, she was planning things to do on my next visit and promised to come to Kent in the Spring. Now, Covid-19 was disrupting our plans. We also realized that I might not be with her on her 90th birthday. Mother is still an energetic and independent woman, so she could take care of herself during the lockdown. She had resolved to stay at home on her own; she did not want to be a burden for my sister, who lives nearby, and only accepted that she should shop for her. However, being an extrovert, she would most likely miss human interactions. Most of all, I knew that she would miss her visits to the cemetery. She could not understand why cemeteries should have been closed; traffic wardens — now free from their duties — could have simply been redirected to patrol them, she suggested. Throughout, imagining how lonely her days would be, I have been constantly in contact with her. During our long conversations we talked about her daily routine and the books she was reading, and commented on the Covid-19 news and emergency measures. The restriction of movements, she said, reminded her of the *Confino* (confinement) enforced during fascism. Originally introduced in Italy in 1863 as a 'security and public order' measure, this 'legal' practice of controlling people's movement gradually became an instrument of social and political control, which the Fascist regime enforced with special zeal. It was abolished in

1965 because it was in contrast with the ‘inviolability of personal freedom’ pursuant to Art. 13 of the Italian Constitution. Mother was also suspicious of the government guidelines instructing doctors to ‘prioritise’ their medical care to those who had the best chance of survival. Governments were using the ‘virus emergency’ to get rid of pensioners, she conjectured, because they are regarded as an unproductive burden for the Treasury and the health service. I asked her about past pandemics, in particular the flu of the winter 1969-1970, known in Italy as ‘Spaziale’ (Space flu). As the Covid-19 death toll in Italy surged, an old TV reportage began to circulate on the internet about that flu, which had caused 20.000 deaths in Italy and 1 million in the world (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXIrGeh93IM>). I did not recall any school closure but, given my young age at the time, my memory might not have been reliable. My mother did not remember any special emergency measure either.

The reportage on the Spaziale, titled *Cosa ci ha portato il Natale* (What Christmas brought us), was shot during the 1969 Christmas holidays. The voice-over described half-empty streets, offices and food markets; people shopped without wearing a face mask and walked without distancing while carrying bags full of gifts. Only nurses were pictured wearing surgical masks on the front pages of newspapers, which also reported that hospitals were full, the epidemic might last until January, and that several English hospitals had reached a critical point. The reportage quoted a say that circulated in the UK after World War II: ‘When Mao sneezes, the world gets sick’, implicitly referring to the fact that the flu epidemic had started in Hong Kong (at the time a British colony) in 1968, one year and a half before it hit Europe.

As feared, I missed my mother’s birthday. I sent her flowers and we met on skype. My sisters and their families were with her — in Italy, restrictions of travelling across municipalities and regions had been lifted.

In the UK, the phased easing of the lockdown began four weeks later. Canterbury’s residents gradually met in public places, many favouring the lawns of the Westgate gardens along the Stour river. The English have always loved picnicking. However, their attitude to shared public space seemed to have changed. Now, gathered in more or less big groups without social distancing, people were leaving behind empty boxes from take-away food, which attracted vermin. The rats that infest Canterbury’s river banks during the Summer had become bolder and now circulated unafraid among pedestrians.

Guidelines for the post-lockdown phase were as ambiguous as the ‘containment impositions’. When I could eventually travel to Italy in the Summer, the airline informed me that people had to wear disposable ‘surgical’ masks on all flights to Italy. Thus, my washable masks were no good. Then, I was asked to download and print (from the Italian government website) a five-page self-declaration form, and then fill it in and sign it. Two days before departure, I was informed that the form had changed (abridged to two pages) and I had to do the whole rigmarole again. In both cases, I had to answer questions that referred to Appendixes to the latest updates of an ‘emergency decree’. I searched the internet and found the decree and the relevant Appendixes (in Italian) further referring to separate legislation. On departure and on arrival, nobody checked or enquired about the Form. On the plane, passengers and flight attendants wore all kinds of masks and passengers were allowed to remove them to eat and

drink. There was no ‘social distancing’ between seats. For the return flight, I had to fill in an online form on the UK government site, then I was instructed to download the generated barcode on my mobile or print it. At the boarding gate, passengers were asked if they had done it. Now, we could all be ‘traced’.

In Italy, during my Tuscan stay, people enjoyed their evening *passeggiata* (stroll) through crowded streets, often forgetting social distancing and with their face masks either in their hands or worn below the nose or the chin, ready to be pulled up if necessary (face covering was mandatory in public places after 6 pm), to avoid being fined. In a sense, I felt sympathetic with ordinary Italians, for they had been inundated with contradictory rules and baffling guidelines, such as: ‘walking is forbidden, but “motor activity” [movement involving walking or jogging] is allowed’; or ‘swimming in the sea is allowed, but the use of the beach is forbidden’. More recently, the Minister for Education declared that ‘students who have a temperature but are unaware of it must not use public transport to go to school’ (sic!) and proposed to replace the double desks with single desks on wheels ‘to facilitate distancing’.

In the UK, people have been encouraged to go out to ‘help’ the economy recover, while continuing social distancing. However, locally organised open-air events have often made social distancing impossible. Perplexing university polices are now in place, including a mixture of in-person and on-line activities, and tracking people’s movement on campus.

Everywhere people wonder, ‘what’s coming next?’. Of course, people are aware of possible new peaks, but they do not seem convinced by the extended ‘state of emergency’ and the attendant containment measures, such as giving new powers to the police to invade citizens’ home privacy. Meanwhile people also ask ‘What has been done to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed again?’ It is not just new peaks of infection that loom on the horizon; Covid-19 and the more or less justified or induced fears are undoubtedly testing democracy.