
Introduction: Pandemic Emergency, Solidarity and Brutus Tactics

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In late December 2019, the official news circulated that cases of pneumonia of unknown aetiology were detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan — the virus was later identified as a SARS-CoV-2 (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2) and became widely known as Covid-19. People worldwide were told not to be alarmed. The World Health Organisation (WHO) did not recommend specific measures for travellers and advised against the application of travel and trade restrictions on China (WHO 2020). Only in late January, as deaths surged, the Chinese authorities advised against travelling to Wuhan (BBC 2020).¹ Concomitant with this news and media reports that the new virus outbreak was reaching global proportion, on 30 January 2020 the WHO declared a state of public health emergency. Another month and a half would pass before the WHO declared the outbreak a pandemic on 11 March.

Amid rumours of initial cover-ups, some national governments adopted a mild approach, and began to implement measures to contain contagion only after the ‘sudden’ surge of infections and the piling up of coffins in their country; others put their hopes in the so-called ‘herd immunity’.² Some cited selected evidence from past flu pandemics.³ More generally, decision-makers preferred to ignore lessons from history, seemingly oblivious that today’s world is more interconnected and interdependent than ever; it runs fast but viruses run even faster. Contradictory statements followed: the *ad hoc* justification was that this was a new virus about which there was little scientific knowledge. However, research soon confirmed that Covid-19 was a mutated, and more virulent, strand of the coronavirus that caused the 2002-2004 SARS-CoV-1 epidemic (Shi et al. 2020) which had been relatively contained.⁴ Significantly, the SARS-CoV-1 outbreak had prompted a new approach to the management of epidemics, leading to worldwide cooperation among virologists and epidemiologists under the aegis of WHO to explain why this atypical pneumonia, which

¹ As it has gradually emerged, the Chinese authorities had failed to report the start of the epidemic and, in December 2019, ‘silenced’ Dr Li Wenliang and other whistle-blowing doctors (Keck 2020). In early January 2020, staff at the Wuhan laboratory were ordered not to disclose information on the disease (Birrell 2020), including the results of the new virus gene sequencing (Shi et al. 2020).

² Only South Korea and Japan acted immediately.

³ For example, the three flu pandemics of the twentieth century: the Spanish influenza (1918-20), the Asian flu (1957-58) and the Hong Kong flu (1968-70). Allegations of conflict of interests in mounting a ‘campaign of panic’ to sell vaccines led to controversies on whether the Swine flu of 2009-2010 should be considered a pandemic, too (Godlee 2010). Virologists, however, do not classify Covid-19 as an influenza virus (Shi et al. 2020).

⁴ SARS-CoV-1 epidemic lasted about 8 months, causing between 8,096 and 8,107 cases, 774 to 811 deaths in 26-33 countries; the cited ranges are due to the fact that different sources, including the WHO, provide different ‘probable’ cases. Of these, 5,327 cases and 349 deaths were registered in mainland China (WHO 2004).

generally causes mild illness, had become so lethal (Abraham 2007). Undoubtedly, scientific discoveries may be refuted by subsequent evidence. However, one wonders what findings the 16 years of research had yielded and how they had been used.⁵ Interestingly, in 2018, the WHO adopted the term ‘Disease X’ to indicate unknown pathogens that could cause future pandemics. In February 2020, several virologists speculated whether Covid-19 was ‘the first’ Disease X (Jiang and Shi 2020, Daszak 2020).

Amid global incertitude and guesswork, one certainty seemed to be shared by governments across the globe; that the new virus was hitting the poor and the rich indiscriminately — which, as real life showed, was partially true and perhaps only on a strictly ‘biological’ level.

In an open letter that I published in March 2020 (Prato 2020a) I reflected briefly on how the apparently ‘egalitarian’ virus and the attendant emergency policies were affecting different sections of the population. For a while, I had been meditating on the impact of the stay-at-home policy on people’s life — depending on their job, or lack of it, their income, their housing situation, and so on. As observed in the Introduction to *Urban Inequalities* (Pardo and Prato 2020), the pandemic has not only brought out how disparities render some people more vulnerable than others, but has also both exacerbated existing inequalities and generated new injustice.

The letter started as a simple message to inform the readers of the CUA Bulletin⁶ that the planned events might be rescheduled because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

At the end of March, Italo Pardo, convenor of the second IUS Workshop on Legitimacy⁷ had consulted with the participants on whether we should wait and see how the situation unfolded or postpone the workshop to the following year. The topic of the 2020 IUS Workshop could not be timelier: ‘*Legitimacy – The Right to Health*’. However, given the continuously evolving situation, we all agreed to reschedule the event to 2021 (<http://www.internationalurbansymposium.com/events/2020-2/>). Italo Pardo encouraged us to consider expanding our original ideas and include in our analysis pandemic-related questions relevant to our specific ethnographies.

In the following weeks, infection rates and casualties surged globally. Meanwhile, several colleagues had reacted to my ‘open letter’ sharing their experiences of the lockdown emergency in their countries. Stimulated by these reactions, I resolved to edit this Special Issue on ‘City Life in the Time of Pandemic’. The colleagues with whom I had corresponded joined the project and suggested that I should circulate an open Call, including my letter.

In order to contextualize this special issue, it is worth reproducing the letter that triggered the Call. It read:

‘These are trying and worrisome times for everybody. Covid-19 is creating uncertainty for all across the world. Undeniably, however, some people are affected more profoundly than others.

⁵ Dr Shi — who is considered a world’s leading expert on coronavirus — had warned of the possibility of a new SARS-like outbreak 11 months before the Covid-19 epidemic erupted in Wuhan.

⁶ Commission on Urban Anthropology: <https://www.facebook.com/commissionurbananthropology>.

⁷ IUS-International Urban Symposium: <http://www.internationalurbansymposium.com/>.

In a recent correspondence with some colleagues we reflected on how very fortunate academics are; as one of my colleagues noted, academics are, after all, “extremely privileged”. Not only can they continue to work remotely; most of them enjoy a stable job and regular income; others, though on part-time or temporary contracts, can also enjoy a degree of security (at least in the immediate future). I know that not everybody in the academic community sees it that way. Alas, complainers can be found everywhere, even when there is no real need to complain, especially in such exceptional times.

There are those who complain that working from home is stressful; or that some emergency measures restrict their freedom; or that it has become difficult to buy flour and baking powder. All these complaints and other self-victimising attitudes not only show the vacuity of some problems; they also hide the tragic reality that the stay-at-home policy is not the same for everybody; its effects on people’s mental and physical wellbeing vary greatly depending, just to mention a few factors, on the square metres of one’s house, on having access to private open-air spaces (e.g., a terrace, a balcony or a garden), on having access to a PC and unlimited internet for the children’s home schooling and the household entertainment, on being able to have the fridge and larder well stocked. The list could go on.

So, let’s pause for a moment and ponder to what extent Covid-19 and the attendant consequences are hitting humankind “indiscriminately”.

Let’s think of those who are losing their livelihood and the homeless. Let’s spare a thought for the “essential” workers, who have to venture out to make sure that our necessities are satisfied and our life is safe, and for the volunteers who are selflessly helping people and their community. Above all, let’s direct our thoughts towards the Health Service personnel around the world who daily and tirelessly are risking their lives. I salute them: They are the true heroes of our time.

Take care and, however stressful this exceptional time can be, stay as much as possible on-course. Most important, as human beings, do support in practical ways your local community and, when you can, volunteer your help.’

I was of course aware that not all people cope well under stress and some might feel overwhelmed and helpless under ‘special’ circumstances. At the same time, I hoped that those more fortunate would step out of their cocooned life, dispense with self-victimisation and, especially, show solidarity.

Over the following months, profound changes in every aspect of social and public life were enforced across the world. I found initially annoying people’s complaints about some containment measures: stay at home, avoid mass gatherings and partying, along with prophylactic guidelines similar to those adopted in 1918.

Over time, however, more restrictive policies were enforced that were blatantly inimical to civil liberties. Governments across the globe — whatever their ‘colour’ — began to bring in extreme ‘emergency’ powers and, while democratic parliamentary sessions were suspended, got into the habit of ruling by decree. Unsurprisingly, their autocratic and secretive ruling has weakened people’s trust and raised questions on the legitimacy of their actions (Pardo 2000, Pardo and Prato 2018).

Some people acquiesced with their government’s impositions, accepting uncritically every single word uttered by their rulers. Many others received with growing scepticism the often contradictory ‘scientific truths’ provided by the experts. Rulers’ actions have been marred by ambiguous guidelines, statistical comparisons between countries often based on incomparable variables or imprecise data.⁸ Above all, people were outraged by reported evidence of double standards in the application of the emergency measures — what was imposed to the wider population was blatantly disregarded by members of some privileged groups, who cunningly circumvented rules using loopholes to excuse their actions.⁹ Other infringements were opportunistically overlooked and went unpunished. Increasingly, the question was asked, Was the pandemic being used once again as a means of social control?

Between Solidarity and a Brutus Approach

The 2020 pandemic emergency has brought out a shared sense of civic responsibility, which manifested in several forms of solidarity. I am most familiar with the British and Italian situations. In the UK, thousands of people volunteered to help local authorities in delivering food and services to the elderly and vulnerable who were advised to ‘shield’. Others, joined Charities in on-line fund-raising activities and helped them to deliver their services. Empty hotels accommodated the homeless. In Italy, neighbourhoods engaged in self-organized mutual aid. In a town in the province of Brindisi (where I did fieldwork) a university student involved local shopkeepers into raising money for impoverished families. In some areas of central Naples, people lined their *vicoli* (narrow streets) with boxes of food and other necessities for destitute households, or left filled baskets (traditionally used to shop from passing street vendors) permanently hanging from their balconies with a note that read: ‘If you have, give. If you don’t have, please take’. Still others expanded the practice of ‘*spesa sospesa*’ (literally ‘suspended shopping’) usually applied on the occasion of festivities like Christmas and based on the same principle of the daily practices of ‘suspended coffee’ or

⁸ Statistics’ unreliability is not new. Not surprisingly, official reports on previous pandemics give figures on both confirmed cases and suspected cases; confirmed deaths and estimated deaths; estimates of deaths directly caused by the virus and those that might have been caused by secondary complications, etc.

⁹ Examples abound. In the UK, the cases of the PM’s senior adviser Dominic Cummings, the Labour MP Rose Duffield and the government scientist Neil Ferguson are emblematic; all three broke lockdown rules but the news emerged only much later (James 2020, Pidd 2020, Mikhailova et al. 2020). In Italy, several politicians have been caught partying in private villas or holidaying on private boats without face covering and disregarding social distancing, while most Italians were facing hardship under strict rules (IlGallo 2020, Huffpost 2020).

‘suspended bread’. When shopping, customers pay for an extra coffee or food, so that those who cannot afford to pay, can have for free what they need. Internationally, people (including anthropologists) have donated money to help build new hospitals, or raised funds to buy much needed equipment.¹⁰

The intervention of several national governments in support of the slumping economy can be seen as a form of ‘interested altruism’, of the kind described by Attali in 2009. New fiscal policies have been implemented and public spending earmarked for wage subsidies, guaranteed loans for business, support for the self-employed and so on.¹¹ Across Europe, some governments have been more successful than others in fulfilling their promises. The most affected hoped to receive help from the EU, which after much pressure eventually responded with an ambiguous show of solidarity.

The new economic initiatives and other emergency measures have, however, sparked a Brutus-like approach in several fields. Similar to Brutus in the Shakespearian tragedy *Julius Caesar*, several people — in politics and elsewhere, individually or as lobbies and interest groups — have tried to use the ‘pandemic emergency’ to their advantage. Let me explain.

In urging his comrade Cassius to seize a fleeting opportunity in the conflict against Octavian and Antony, Brutus states:

‘There is a tide in the affairs of men.

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune [...]

And we must take the current when it serves,

Or lose our ventures.’

(W. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Scene 3: 218-19, 223-24).

The above quote is often used by politicians to justify Machiavellian measures in trying to solve problematic situations, as if ‘riding the tide’ of opportunities would be a commendable action. Most often, however, it is applied in the attempt to reverse unfavourable circumstances and win potentially losing battles, or gain privileges to which they would not otherwise have access. Some of these grabbing attitudes have been low-key; others have made the headlines as outright unscrupulous and contemptible. Examples vary from businesses demanding to have access to job retention schemes (though they were not immediately in need of it) to employed individuals (including politicians) and jailed criminals claiming benefits and basic income, while unemployed people were denied help because they owned the house in which they lived (Cosenza 2020); or the request directed in April to the EU that ‘unconditional basic income should be paid out for at least three months both to those who are currently employed and the unemployed, directly to their bank accounts’, with the

¹⁰ The case of the centenarian Captain Sir Thomas Moore in the UK has become exemplary. A retired army officer, he walked laps of his garden with the aim of raising £1,000 for ‘NHS Charities Together’. In less than a month, he raised £32.79 million.

¹¹ The initiative of some UK vice-chancellors to take a six-month pay cut (from August) could be seen as a form of ‘interested altruism’. However, in 2018-19, their salaries ranged between £350.00 and £410.000 a year. A campaign continues, asking that vice-chancellors’ salaries should not be higher than that of the Prime Minister (whose standard salary is around £150.000).

justification that ‘bureaucracy is the enemy of the vulnerable’ and that there was no time for income verification (Markiewicz 2020).¹² One thinks of the new president of INPS,¹³ the Italian National Institute for Social Security, doubling his salary in the face of millions of his fellow citizens’ losing their jobs and getting empty promises of help (Barone 2020). Or, in view of forthcoming electoral ballots, local authorities spending 41.5 million Euros on the production of useless face masks to be distributed first to the health personnel and, then, to the local residents.¹⁴ Some, have hijacked the ‘climate change’ agenda, arguing in favour of a continued lockdown as booster of environmental sustainability. Paradoxically, ongoing studies show that, while the reduction of carbon monoxide has been minimal, the plastic waste pollution generated by protective equipment, hand sanitiser bottles and more food packaging has become a serious concern (*Innovationnews* 2020).

Most worryingly, governments appear to be using the ‘state of emergency’ as a political strategy to establish new forms of control, while skirting their responsibilities. Of course, governments know that, as Dominique Strauss-Kahn points out (2020), they are to be blamed for their delay in responding to the epidemic and allowing their health systems to be overwhelmed. And yet, as early as April 2020, some have attempted to pass decrees that absolve them of civil, penal, administrative and financial responsibilities (Nava 2020). Moreover, since September, several governments have extended the state of emergency until Spring 2021. As I mentioned earlier, this illegitimate exercise of power may have been (more or less cleverly) disguised with experts’ arguments and declarations on the protection of public health, but it has in fact established a new ‘biosecurity’ regime fuelled by fear.

The ‘New Normal’: Presage of a Dystopian Future?

Since the implementation of the ‘state of emergency’, there has been growing reference to a ‘new normal’. The obvious question arises, ‘if this is an emergency, why should humanity embrace the containment measures as a permanent “normal” way of life?’

Undeniably, technologies have helped people to work remotely. Among the benefits, one thinks of those new remote workers who have joined their families who resided elsewhere (sometimes, even abroad). Online teaching, webinars and remote conferencing have helped to avoid a total freeze of academic life and scientific events — though attendees say that they have missed the ‘sparks’ and stimuli from ‘informal’ socializing exchanges. ICT has allowed researchers to stay in contact with their field and people to stay in contact with friends and families, organise fund-raising events, skype parties, and so on. Obviously, in the immediate future ICT will be fundamental for the continuation of many activities. There is, nevertheless, a disquieting aspect of this apparently positive use of technology that needs attention.

¹² Signatories included intellectuals and politicians who enjoy fat salaries and lucrative ‘extra’ income from various sources.

¹³ INPS (*Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale*) is under the supervision of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies.

¹⁴ In March 2020, a group of Tuscan doctors denounced the Region’s Governor to the judicial authorities for attempted massacre (Tosi 2020).

Humans are social beings and their sociality includes in-person physical encounters; it is made of symbolic interactions and sensory experiences, which extend to the natural world. So, what does ‘the new normal’ mean? Is it perhaps not a coincidence that the recommended ‘physical’ distance to avoid contagion has been called ‘social distancing’?

While mulling on these questions, the 1968 controversial sci-fi film *Barbarella* came to mind. Roger Vadim’s film depicts a new futuristic morality. *Barbarella* — a representative of the ‘United Earth’ government — travels through space to find a scientist who, she is told, could destroy humanity. *Barbarella* symbolizes a future society where technology is everything and people have no emotions, individual personality or independent psychology; a future which is epitomized by Earth’s new ‘advanced’ virtual practices in interpersonal relations, such as replacing physical intimacy with ‘taking a pill’. In light of the biopolitical projects that are peddled today, the representation of that futuristic society does not seem so far-fetched.

In 2009, during the swine flu epidemic, the influential French technocrat Jacques Attali examined how a possible pandemic could be ‘used’ for ‘laudable’ (in his opinion) political purposes. In an article published in *L’Express* (2009) he wrote:

‘History teaches us that humanity only evolves significantly when it is really afraid: it then first sets up defence mechanisms; sometimes intolerable (scapegoats and totalitarianisms); sometimes futile (distraction); sometimes effective (therapeutic strategies, setting aside all previous moral principles if necessary). Then, once the crisis is over, it transforms these mechanisms to make them compatible with individual freedom and include them in a democratic health policy. The beginning of the pandemic could trigger one of these structural fears.’ (my translation).

Attali also warned that, once the structural fears are established, ‘prevention and control mechanisms’ should be put in place ‘before the — inevitable — next [pandemic]’. He added:

‘For that, we will have to put in place a global police force, global storage and therefore global taxation. Then, much faster than the sole economic reason would have allowed, we will be able to set up the bases of a true World Government.’ (my translation).

Attali is not alone in considering pandemics as a useful instrument to ‘solve’ some of the world problems, including overpopulation. The ‘benefits’ of a ‘necessary’ depopulation have been described as ‘shrink and prosper’ (Weisman 2013).

In May 2009, a group of billionaires secretly met in Manhattan to discuss plans ‘to curb the world overpopulation’. Why the secret? Because they did not want newspapers to paint them as an ‘alternative world government’, they argued. They agreed on a strategy that tackled population growth as a potentially disastrous environmental, social and industrial threat and economic burden (Frank 2009). They also trusted that new technologies would be key in such an endeavour.

Since April 2020, politicians have encouraged expert analyses on the potential of smart technology to help people adapt to new ways of living in post Covid-19 cities. It is argued that technologies will facilitate business operations and make people more independent. Meanwhile, ‘track/test and trace’ technologies are ushered in to allow governments to harness data on people’s life; this new form of surveillance is presented as the ‘price worth paying’ in the name of ‘safety’.

To raise concern about these biopolitical projects (allegedly on behalf of ‘the greater good’) does not mean to question the role of science or medicine, or underestimate the risk of the virus; it is rather a matter of questioning how science and medicine are used.

The Italian philosopher Agamben has recently criticized the ‘techno-medical despotism’ of the Italian government, justified in the name of the ‘common good’, but in fact resulting in the suppression of political and civic freedoms, of human rights and dignity (Agamben 2020). Internationally influential in the social sciences until recently, Agamben has lost the support of the Italian ‘radical’ intellectual establishment because of his position on Covid-19 and his criticism of the government. With punctual descriptions and denunciations, he describes the government’s action as a ‘gigantic operation to falsify the truth’ and points out how Covid-19 pandemic has been exploited as an opportunity to bring in authoritarianism and a new political rationality centred around biosecurity.

Agamben refers to Zylberman’s discussion (2013) of the process by which health security was becoming an essential part of international political strategies. Zylberman warned that the creation of a sort of ‘health terror’ could be used to strengthen citizens’ maximum adherence to the institutions of government. Similarly, Agamben reflects on the Great Transformation underway in western bourgeoisie democracies. He argues that, in the name of biosecurity and health, the democratic models of government with their parliaments and declarations of rights are everywhere giving way to a new despotism in which citizens are asked to accept unprecedented limitations to their hard-won freedoms. How long, he asks, will we be willing to live in a ‘state of exception’ that is continually extended?

City Life and Beyond in the Times of Pandemic

The Call for Contributions for this special issue was circulated towards the end April. It was a time when some countries were planning to ease their lockdown measures, while those who had been hit later were strengthening theirs. As I noted in the Call, it was clear by then that the impact of the pandemic — and of the related policies — would unfortunately stay with us for a long time. I suggested some ideas for reflection on the ongoing situation, but also as stimuli for future analysis. Suggested ideas included:

Changes in the private daily life (new routines, home schooling); work & work disruptions (e.g., home/’smart’ working, mix of ‘smart’ working and partial but compulsory use of annual holiday entitlement, workplace safety); unemployment and/or loss of income (permanent/temporary/partial, furloughing and other job retention schemes); the role of ‘essential’ workers; the impact on the work of medical and health service personnel; community support (spontaneous or

organized; volunteering, fundraising, donations); homelessness and ‘emergency’ shelters; housing situation (including condominiums and shared spaces, access to open-air spaces, gated-communities, slums); disruptions in access to medical care; physical and mental health; social and family relations; communication (old and new technologies, social media, formal and informal news); security, safety and monitoring (the increasing use of drones, policing; privacy and tracking apps on people’s movement and health; uses and abuses of access to individual digital footprint); mobility, infrastructure and services (including ‘virtual’ services, shopping, leisure, transport, urban waste); changing use of the urban space (including built up and natural space; parks and other public spaces).

Of course, some topics would inevitably overlap. Also, contributors were encouraged to reflect on any other aspects or issues they had come across, or thought to be relevant but were not included in the suggested list. The initial title was later expanded to convey more immediately the fact that city life moves ‘beyond’ the strictly physical urban space. Not all the listed aspects are addressed in this special issue. Also, most regrettably, some initial proposals by professionals in the health sector and other relevant fields were withdrawn from publication for fear of retaliation in their work place, including the real danger of losing their jobs — which raises the new question, Besides health, to which other spheres of life will the state of fear expand?

In the 1950s, Hannah Arendt wrote that people seemed to be divided between those who believe that they are omnipotent and ‘think that everything is possible if one knows how to organize masses for it’ (1951: vii) and those who experience powerlessness (and fear) in their everyday life. One may ask whether history is repeating itself, but with a new twist, whereby a superrich lobby is trying to establish their plutocratic control over the political process. Should the biopolitical project succeed, an alarming and disastrous outcome might be a society moving downhill, producing a ‘proliferation of bandits’ — with overtone of ‘stupidity’, in Cipolla’s sense (1976, see also Prato 2020b) — to be put in power and rule over an increasing helpless humanity. The 19 short contributions that follow span Europe, the USA, the Near, Middle and Far East. They offer empirically-informed views on an evolving situation that far too often appears to have been used by unscrupulous, self-interested rulers to breed powerlessness and fear at the expense of democratic rights and liberty. They expose the toll that Covid-19 is taking — not only in terms of loss of lives but also of human suffering and justice. They also raise hopes that humanity is not yet defeated, as long as we will exercise our right to be free from fear.

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