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The Italian Laboratory – Rethinking Debt in Viral Times

Elettra Stimilli

[1] The Italian Version of this text was published in the website “Antinomie”:

<https://antinomie.it/index.php/2020/03/29/il-laboratorio-italia-ripensare-il-debito-ai-tempi-del-virus/>

Once again Italy has become the testing grounds for processes and experiences that have become global. The coronavirus has given rise to a completely novel phenomenon, which is not just a political or economic event in itself, but a pandemic whose ferocity and rapid transmission requires extraordinary measures. Italy has become the avant-garde of the West, the first to be fully implicated after the initial outbreak in China. Italy is the “laboratory” of the West.

It is no surprise that this absolutely exceptional situation has reignited the Italian debate concerning the “state of exception.” Giorgio Agamben reignited this debate with the publication of his article “The state of exception provoked by an unmotivated emergency” in the Italian newspaper *Il Manifesto* on February 26.^[2] He has since reasserted and defended his initial statements in a short piece entitled “Clarifications.”^[3] In his criticism of the government’s drastic containment measures, Agamben reintroduces, with a particular vehemence and determination, his famous critique of the paradigm of the state of exception. The greatest danger today, he argues, is not the virus itself, but the fact that politicians are exploiting this situation in order to introduce heightened security measures and deploy a range of exceptional technologies of power. These measures and technologies will be soon regularized by the “invention” of a new paradigm of power: pandemic domination. This is a point he further clarifies in his more recent French interview in *Le Monde*.^[4]



Book: In Freud's Tracks



spheres, the complexity of our moment, and the conditions in Italy right now, it is paramount that we move beyond the specificities of Agamben's words and reflect on the reception of his critical intervention – a litmus test for the scope and range of our public debate, which is decisive at this moment. One cannot help but notice that so many interventions, despite their critical intentions, tend to treat the disciplinary operations and social control measures as the effects of a more complex process, which is currently being communicated through the coronavirus. Thus, it is necessary that we rethink “bare life,” which Agamben continues to refer to as that form of life that can be sacrificed for the cause of mere survival. But, what are the stakes for the survival of bare life which is vulnerable?[5]

What this crisis is making clearly evident is the fact that vulnerable lives are not merely “naked,” because vulnerable lives are always involved in conditions where they are, at the very “least,” reproduced and taken care of. This reproductive and care work, always adjacent to survival, is completely negated by Agamben's theory. What is also emerging is the fact the virus cannot be treated as a purely biological phenomenon, unrelated to the context in which it is developing. We cannot forget how global capitalism has contributed to the ongoing ecological destruction. Environmental diversity and differences that would have previously interrupted the transmission of pathogenetic agents have been severely eroded. Our globalized modes have facilitated an ease of movement that COVID-19 has taken advantage of. Not only can pathogenetic agents be diffused today at speeds previously unimaginable, because they can also mutate and adapt at such accelerated rates that gives rise to more aggressive and lethal variations.

If it is possible to think that the extraction and exploitative processes that had up until yesterday seemed unstoppable, have come to a halt, even if perhaps for just a brief moment in these days of a general blockade – as described in a fascinating and imaginary “[virus monologue](#)” – then we must also move beyond our obsession with the restrictions of our liberties – which are nothing but the other side of lost privileges – and turn our attention to what is awaiting us, or rather what can be expected, when everything starts up again.

Italy alongside nine other European countries – amongst which France and the more indebted states of Spain and Greece stand out – have requested a “powerful, cohesive, and timely” financial-economic response from Europe. It is difficult to shake the fear of finding ourselves right back in the conditions that arose when we originally made concessions under the guise of “budget flexibility”: expanding our balance sheets by resorting to the market with the issuing of further debt. Countries that spend a lot of money today are at risk of finding themselves powerless against speculative assaults tomorrow. Until recently, the only certainty in Italy was the Save States Fund, or the European Bank loans to states, which would, in exchange, lead to accepting “blood, sweat, and tears” reforms. Even in our current circumstances the longstanding divisions in the European Union continue to thrive: the Northern states (especially Germany and the Netherlands) versus the Mediterranean states who are frightened by the prospect of becoming another Greece 2015. But there are changes as well. Some of the very Northern Axis states that took part in the 2015 Greek debt shenanigans, such as France, now find themselves asking for “solidarity measures” in order to manage this current crisis alongside other indebted states. No one wants to sign a “memorandum of understanding” in order to save their own public finances, particularly those that have already experienced these memorandums at their own expense. Is it possible to imagine Europe, especially Germany and Netherlands, have rethought its position? Is it really possible to imagine that the coronavirus has put a halt to those mechanisms that delivered Europe into its so-called “sovereign debt crisis” after the financial crackdown of 2007-2008?

In his article published in [Financial Time](#) on March 25, Mario Draghi stressed that we are “faced with unforeseen circumstances,” however, “the loss of income is not the fault of any of those who suffer from it” (as was argued during the sovereign debt crisis). Recalling the European suffering in the 1920s, he adds, “a change of mindset is as necessary in this crisis as it would be in times of war.” On the one hand, his proposed solution actually sounds like a radical shift. On the other hand, it mirrors the increases in public debt, only this time shared by Europe and financed by taxes. A problem of correspondence will become an issue between the introduction of massive liquidity and the exorbitant devaluation of capital: no real

value can correspond to the currency issued. This same issue arises during a period war and as with wartimes past it has also precipitated periods of reconstruction.

At this point, however, it is worth questioning whether today it is necessary to elicit war discourse, as Macron is fond of doing, to deploy an army against the virus, or as with Putin, who have joined efforts to send military troops to Italy in the form of humanitarian aid. What we are faced with every day while trapped in our homes is in reality, especially when thought about seriously, not simply an enemy but the proliferation of a life whose reproduction has been somehow facilitated by us. Rather than automatically, and presumably unconsciously, erecting security regimes by declaring states of emergency in the guise of self-defence, it is time to recognize that what spaces of political autonomy are also emerging, promoted by those who are looking for a voice, which is being demonstrated in our current public debates.

Today, in our suspended existence, together in fear and pain, we are perhaps also experiencing the profound force of singular lives. Due to many factors, that which we are living is not just a natural catastrophe, a state of exception, or a world war. We need new words. If our inescapable individual competition has prevented us up to this point from understanding, confining us to lonely and indebted existence, perhaps only collective cooperation will enable us to invent new forms of living together [*convivenza*]. No power from above can function in the battle against the virus without a mobilization from below that unleashes the strength available to everyone. We must find a collective mode that cares for and transforms the fears that form an integral part of our lives into a powerful expression of our voices and bodies, instead of paralyzing us in face of paranoid scenes of the phenomenon.

Translated from the Italian by *Greg Bird*

[1]

[2] English translation: <http://positionswebsite.org/giorgio-agamben-the-state-of-exception-provoked-by-an-unmotivated-emergency/>

[3] See: https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-chiarimenti?fbclid=IwAR2_SmWYbFJTk75vv515vJ1_Xej1uBeL-RLhUgAiHUxFkJZiwitmZZ-q9eY

[4] English translation: <https://non.copyriot.com/giorgio-agamben-normalising-the-state-of-exception-under-the-covid-19-epidemic/>

[5] This is a question I raised in an earlier paper “**Being in Common at a Distance**” that was published in a special issue of *Topia* on this pandemic edited by Greg Bird and Penelope Ironstone. Other essays in this collection, such as Greg Bird’s “**Biomedical Apparatuses or Conviviality**” or Stuart Murray’s “**COVID-19: Crisis, Critique, and the Limits of What We Can Hear**,” also deal with the relationship between structural vulnerability and bare life.
