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Covid politics – Calling Leaders' Bluff: The Covid-19 Outbreak and Power Relations in European Societies

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Matteo Antonini, La Source School of Nursing, HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland, Switzerland

The year 1346, southern Crimea: the city of Cafà (today Fedosia) is under siege from the Golden Horde, a Mongolian-led empire stretching between central Asia and modern-day Ukraine. For months, the Mongols have tried to conquer the city held by the Republic of Genoa, facing both an unexpected resistance from the city's defenders and a plague ravaging their troops. In an effort to solve both problems, the Mongols catapult their dead soldiers inside Cafà using the corpses as a biological weapon [1]. The following year, the city surrenders and the siege ends. Merchants and other civilians flee to Europe and, in the winter of 1347-1348, they arrive in the Italian peninsula. Soon after, the plague appears in Genoa, Venice, Pisa, and other cities. In the face of a gradual expansion of the plague, European rulers take countermeasures, such as imposing a quarantine on incoming merchants [2]. Nevertheless, it is already too late. The Black Death spreads through Europe, killing millions

The Black Death period marked a turning point for social relations on the Old Continent. The plague started a slow economic transition, creating fertile ground for the Italian Renaissance [3], and, arguably, the kick-off of the early stages of capitalism [4]. Given the gigantic death toll, the new structure of post-plague demographics created a scarcity of manual workers that increased the bargaining power of the subordinated classes over the ruling classes [5]. In the space of a few years, such an altered socio-demographic situation made idle any threats from the ruling class. Should a farmer refuse a noble's work conditions, there would be no alternative supply of manual workers for the nobles to employ, and any attempt to resort to violence would just exacerbate the social conflict and further reduce the available workforce. As a consequence, the subordinated class feels comfortable in testing the real force of the ruling class [4], and, suddenly, an idea that was unthinkable just a few years prior takes root: it is possible to change the status quo.

The year 2020, Europe: we observe signs that a similar process may occur due to the current Covid-19 pandemic. In the present day, a large loss of lives over a short period of time (by contemporary European standards), and the resulting economic instability, may show the weaknesses of the status quo. In the minds of many, a doubt may appear: *what if the ruling class is not as strong as it seems?*

We like to think that the sceptre is not any more the club of an authority based on violence, but a symbol of a more refined power, rooted in a social pact and on the democratic negotiation of concurring interests. We like to forget how much force, as physical and psychological violence (or their implicit threat), still plays a central role in the macro-level organisation of contemporary European societies [6]. It clearly appears in most civil rituals of today's European countries: they are no more than a demonstration of force. Revolutions, battles, and other warlike events are celebrated, as far as they serve to lend (symbolic) support for the current social order. They are a periodic reminder that the ruling class has already proven its force and would be ready to accept the challenge of any other group wishing to contest its authority. Nevertheless, these celebrations often refer to events which happened decades or centuries ago. Thereby, the doubt cast could be cemented by saying: *after all this time, what if the force of the ruling class is no longer real, nor strong, but rather just a bluff?*

Revolutionaries and coup leaders award themselves the role of testing the limits of authorities' exhibited force. Nevertheless, this is a risky manoeuvre. No rebel wants to become the new Robert Catesby, and every rebel wants to be the new Lenin. This innate dread is one of the main

protections for the established power. Revolutionary movements fear taking the first step, daring to test the violence of the ruling class. But what if this test is no longer needed? What if leaders' bad management of an epidemic exposes the weaknesses of the current status quo?

Again, history rattles the sociological imagination: during the Plague of Athens in 430 BC, Thucydides observed that one of the major effects of the epidemic was a widespread rejection of Athenian laws and institutions [7]. The rule of the dominant class that just before then appeared to be unquestionable, suddenly appeared weak. The failure of the dominant class to manage the epidemic crisis spread doubt about its strength and, consequently, its legitimacy. Athens survived the plague, but its society changed [8]. Managing the consequences of large-scale epidemics requires an organisational effort and the ability to impose unpopular decisions that can test the stability of any social order – this was as true in the fifth century BC as it is today. The Covid-19 pandemic seems no exception to this rule, and the importance of this test is clearly, even if sometimes only subconsciously, perceived by both Europe's authorities and its citizens.

Throughout the crisis, democratic governments across Europe have been careful in wrapping their practical communications with calls to national unity and requests to support local institutions. Let us take Italy, the country that is paying the heaviest toll in terms of lives in the European scenario. During the initial weeks of the pandemic, the Italian president, who holds a non-partisan role, has regularly spoken in national broadcasts, something that normally is rare. Similarly, the president of Switzerland, the European country with the highest rate of infected people relative to the population, has given reassuring messages, repeating the call for unity in the four national languages, a procedure that, again, is almost never applied. Even Queen Elizabeth II addressed a televised message to UK citizens, an event which has occurred only four other times in her 68 years of royal office. The implicit message is always the same: despite the crisis, the institutions are still strong. There is no reason to doubt the current social order.

However, comments in online newspapers and social networks seem to indicate increasing doubts as to the legitimacy of the current social order. It is too soon to draw scientifically accurate conclusions, but it is possible to discuss some hypotheses. Given its forerunner position in this crisis, the Italian situation shows elements that may appear later in other countries. Looking at the Italian public debates over the current situation, the presence of doubt as to the current democratic regime and the requests for a more authoritarian solution are clear. As shown by Umberto Eco [9], Italian culture has authoritarian elements that appear more explicitly in times of crisis. The tip of the iceberg of these collective feelings involves, among others, the fears expressed by minister Giuseppe Provenzano, the subversive call by "commander Alpha", and the declarations of left-wing intellectual Corrado Augias. Giuseppe Provenzano is the "Italian Minister for the South" and, on March 27th, explicitly expressed his fears for Italian democracy during an interview: "there are fragile areas of the country that are exposed to any adventure" [10]. His fears appear as something more than a routine call to national stability when we consider the declaration of a former Carabinieri commander, and right-wing opinion leader, publicly known as "Alpha". Less than a week before Provenzano's interview, he published a Facebook post in which he declares that "we are at war" and attacks the current government and left-wing intellectuals. Subversive statements clearly appear in the text, especially when he affirms that Italy needs to "mobilize the army, impose a curfew, close the borders and the ports, seal our country from Europe that has left us alone and made fun of us without that any of our governments has ever helped us" [11]. These ideas of an authoritarian turn are not limited to local right-wing opinion leaders. Left-wing intellectuals are also seemingly fascinated by this solution. For example, the well-known writer and journalist Corrado Augias stated during a televised talk show: "I'm willing to have severe limitations to my privacy, all the limitation needed, obviously only for the time needed [...]. To give an even stronger example, during the Roman Republic... the real one... the ancient one... during exceptional crises [...], the *consules* were put aside and a *dictator* was put in charge. We do not have to consider him a dictator [in today's terms]. It was an institutional role that received full powers [...]. What was the limit? Time. The *dictator* remained in charge only up to the end of the crisis" [12].

Do these elements suggest that we are about to witness a coup in Italy? Probably not. But the Coronavirus outbreak is revealing the weaknesses of the current institutional order, and it is opening up windows of opportunity to challengers. As in the past, health epidemics call leaders' bluff. In this case, the ruling classes of Europe in the 21st Century may well be forced to demonstrate how strong they really are, for the legitimacy of the current social order to be accepted after the crisis ends.

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Authors

Matteo Antonini

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