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Get the Quacksalber!

Or the return of the infamous pillory in the time of digital quarantine

Laboratorio Occupato Morion

Translated by Enough 14

Venice. Italy. March 12, 2020. From the heart of the beast. The comrades of the Laboratorio Occupato Morion in Venice say: Social action instead of social distancing – Collectivity instead of isolation! Originally published by Global Project.

/ Preliminary note: In 1630 Milano, at that time under Spanish rule, raged with plague. 60,000 people died, about half of the city's population. In an environment of prevalent mistrust and superstition, one Milanese denounced the health commissar Guglielmo Piazza. She accused Piazza of having Gian Giacomo Mora, a barber, manufacture an ointment that he would slather on doors in order to intentionally spread the plague. Piazza and Mora were decried as "untori" – quacksalbers, greasers, dirty anointers. Under torture, the two confessed their supposed guilt and were cruelly executed. Mora's barbershop was destroyed, and in its place a memorial was built to serve as a warning, a "pillar of infamy" or column of shame. Two hundred years later, the Italian author Alessandro Manzoni remembered these innocent victims of a smear campaign and arbitrary justice in a city fallen to epidemic. Manzoni rendered the events in a historical essay, *La storia della Colonna infame* (English: *The column of infamy*), and more famously, in his major work *I promessi sposi* (English: *The Betrothed*), arguably the best known novel of Italian literature. In one scene of this book, the falsely accused protagonist is yelled at with the words "Dagli all'untore!" – "Get the quacksalber!" (Or, as in the translation of *The Betrothed,* "Get the dirty anointer!"). /

First premise. We are not conspiracy theorists. Second premise, just to avoid misunderstanding. We are aware of the current medical emergency and convinced that we need to change our habits. With this in mind, we have decided to cancel events and concerts, to do our part to prevent the situation from worsening in the face of an already ailing health system. We are also organizing a relief action for the most affected people in the city, especially the elderly. All this is okay, we know it and we are doing it. And yet... And yet we are a collective, a community consisting of men and women, young and less young, workers and scientists, students and precarious self-employed, heterosexuals, gays and lesbians, cisgender and queers. We are different, but we are all used to live together, not only to talk on the phone a lot, chat a lot, write a lot. Our life is characterized by gatherings, meetings, demos, actions, travels, occupations, joint breakfasts, lunches and dinners. We study (often together) and work (sometimes together to make our jobs more bearable). We love each other, we hate each other, we get along, we argue, together we did great things, together we did shit.

You will therefore understand our confusion in the face of a disposition in which the common good is equated with an increasing limitation of many forms of community life, especially those based on autonomous social cooperation. We are thinking here of the abrupt interruption – with the exception of some places of work and consumption – of any social life that is not mediated by digital technology.

Now you're gonna say, don't go overboard with your shit. We're talking about a month, don't make total idiots of yourselves. Okay, we get that, and we refer you to the second premise above.

You will understand, however, that we cannot simply pause at the level of the medically obvious, in the face of an epidemic in which the state of emergency does not function primarily (at least not yet) through repressive

enforcement, but primarily through the self-imposed life of isolation and the production of a widespread sense of blame and self-blame in the social sphere. This is a feeling that is mainly related to the "poisonous salves" and all too often forgets the systemic causes that have an incredibly strong impact on the current crisis. Of course, young people have a duty to be aware of their privilege in comparison to older people, nothing can be said against that, but privilege is a complex matter. Staying at home, for example, implies the privilege of having a home. Something that the migrants at the Turkish-Greek border do not have, who are rejected and killed by the military and fascist gangs with pushbacks. A home is something that neither the migrants in the deportation camps have (we don't know anything about the current conditions there) nor the local homeless. Nor the prisoners in the jails, who rightfully revolt, but who are condemned by digital public opinion, by people who don't give a shit about these weak and subaltern people from their comfortable sofas. The anger at those who do not stay at home seems disproportionate compared with the anger at those who have been dismantling our public health system for decades. And the difficulty with which any attempt at contextualization is associated seems significant to us. Why, for example, are we not so angry about the tens of thousands of deaths caused each year by air pollution? They are no less dead than the others, they are not virtual deaths.

Therefore, it is not a lack of awareness or, even worse, the privilege of youth that pushes us to further reflection, to the need not to stop at the first and simplest level of responsibility, isolation. It is a challenge that will pass and we adapt (we are not hypnotized by ideology). But this period of the coronavirus is, in our view, like a frightening prefigurative exercise. It anticipates a future that we can look into as through a window. A future where society is even more atomized, individualized, dematerialized, disciplined and self-disciplined.

This does not mean that the rulers wanted the corona virus, that they did not try to prevent its spreading. Nor does it mean that one should feel free from responsibility in the face of the disease. But, for anyone who sees with horror on the horizon a self-disciplined, socially atomized and hyper-productive, denunciatory and impoverished society, now is the time to act and think. We must find our social antibodies as quickly as possible to prevent too many elements of this dystopian image from being translated into reality after the emergency.

Anyone who visits social networks in today's world has a lot to worry about. Shitstorms in the social media are attacking any form of collective response to the corona crisis. Anything that is not compatible with the hashtag #iorestoacasa (#i-restoacasa) causes public dismay, the most contemptuous judgments are made, accompanied by insults and openly expressed wishes for a painful death. Above all, one criticizes the irresponsibility and arrogance of a privileged youth who would not take into account the weakest and elderly.

It's not easy for us to read the posts and comments, it's like being immersed in the digital molasses of our time, a social mixture made up of the supporters of a sovereign Italy: sexists, the moralists (left and right) of radical chic, and, let's not hide it, activists, militants and ex-militants who (obviously) became orphans of their former political community, and are now alone on Facebook with themselves. The corona virus has worked a miracle, in this digital sphere they all finally come together: the educated progressive and the sovereign, the flag bearer of science and the male chauvinist, the young "responsible" and those who use questionable meritocratic criteria for healing.

From a social point of view, the coronavirus produces two apparently opposite, poisoned fruits. The first fruit is the widely feared psychosis, the second (more worrying from an anthropological point of view) is a general self-discipline within an already highly atomized and individualized society. There is now a subtle boundary between the call to be responsible for collective health and the voluntary reduction of each of us to an individualized defender (even unconsciously) of reasons of state and national unity. In fact, we are experiencing a discouraging overlap of these poles of tension, and the best place to observe this are social media.

One could say that in reality there is no contradiction between the paradigms of bio-power and state of emergency. From a political perspective, we cannot ignore how the call to take collective responsibility for slowing down the rate of infection through isolation actually functions as a self-disciplining bio-power, in perfect harmony with the state of emergency that was imposed on us a few days ago in the style of an Italian farce. It is, however, a farce that leaves us less free than before.

While in the days of the pillory, the plague was still met with organized religious processions for the purpose of salvation, we know today that public gatherings are dangerous. One thing has not changed, however, and that is the ugly habit of pointing the poisonous salves by the multitude. In the 17th century, with the support of the ruling class, the processional community took over this task; today it is being transferred to the digital sphere. And the digital community is not as meaningless an expression as we are sometimes willing to assume. So let's go! "Grab the poison!" Grab those who meet, who discuss, who together with others are not paralysed by terror. In this narrative, the likely collapse of the public health system in Italy is attributed entirely to the figure of the deserter. At a time when the institutional language is becoming militarized, the traitor is not the one who disarmed the population, polluted the air for decades, undermined public health, but the one who sheds light on the political facts behind the medical dispositives and tries to find other forms of community life in the middle of the crisis.

Certain carelessness in our way of living (which we are now ready to change) and certain carelessness in our thinking are not the result of carefree ignorant stupidity; on the contrary, they constitute the political tensions in defence of a dimension of the collective, a gathering that affirms a dispositive of joy.

That of joy is an old Spinocist tool with which we describe the intensification of the ability to act and think. An intensification that takes place only in the encounter, in the affection for bodies, between bodies. Yes, because, in contrast to the bad conscience of social networks (which are a digital agglomeration with weighty anthropological effects), locked up in their condemnatory and inert modality, an echo of the public slogan, of the state of emergency, of the reason of state, we find the power to act, thinking together. The power that the ongoing epidemic of isolation has stolen from us.

How can we accept the reduction of the complexity of the discourse to medical discourse alone? At this moment, such a reduction means abandoning a libertarian and collective position. To resist such a reduction is not a frivolous choice (nor does it mean a lack of recognition of the great work of the staff in the medical sector), in our view it is a necessary choice.

Moreover, the mood in the social networks shows us that the responsibility of overcoming the public slogan, the interweaving of science and constituted power, cannot be assumed by digital individuals. They are too informed, too afraid, too diaphanous, stuck in the trap of constantly expressing themselves in self-complacency.

In 2003, at the time of Bush's "infinite justice", Jacques Rancière lamented that we had entered the era of an "ethical turn in politics". By this formula, he meant the end of politics as an area where different morals, different rights and even different powers were facing each other. The end of this era left space for a phase of indiscriminate rule, in which the neoliberal world order took over and abstractly confronted good and evil, justice and terror. Dissent, the salt in politics, was followed by a monolithic society based on consensus. Today, circumstances are very different, but the social effects are partly similar. The society confronted with the disease no longer consists of differences and opposites, but of a sum of individuals, in which the asymmetries are annulled, disappearing under the weight of the terror of the pandemic. Of course, popular opinion wants our elders to be defended against the indiscipline of our young people, but those who are "not ours", migrants, prisoners, the poor, suffer the most complete exclusion, the most complete invisibility.

In the time since Rancière's text, the state of emergency has not lost its global dimension, but we agree with the French philosopher that Agamben's horizon of messianic salvation at the end of an infinite catastrophe is insufficient. We are continuing to seek a possible practice of radical politics and dissent, even now, even here, from the centre of one of the red zones. Our imprudence is not the fruit of irresponsibility, if anything the opposite.

We have taken the responsibility to break this discourse which, aware of an exceptional situation, in the end not only protects the collective health, but also reaffirms the consensus and unification under the command and knowledge of the experts. We are seeing these days how all these elements are unfolding with incredible clarity.

So we address those who are not yet paralyzed by fear: What shall we do? Beat up those who organize, those who still go out? Or should we perhaps organize ourselves to protest in Venice, Milan or Rome (possibly with a mask and at a safe distance from each other), to demand that the ten years of disinvestment in the health sector has to be brought to an end?

The Veneto region, governed by the Lega Nord, has for many years contributed to exacerbating the situation. While the ministerial regulations stipulate that there is a right to 3.7 beds per 1,000 inhabitants, in order to comply with this directive, the President of the Veneto Region, Luca Zaia of Lega, has proportionally removed many more beds for those with statutory health insurance than for those with private insurance. In theory, private sector resources are available for public health in case of emergency, but are we using these resources to the maximum? Too little is known. Let us take Ministerial Decree No 70 of 2015, which, among other things, stipulates that the number of hospital beds must be set in relation to the number of inhabitants. This criterion is totally inadequate. Beds and services must also be defined according to other factors such as age (In average, Venice for example, is an "older" city) and the most common diseases. While it is true that quarantine was historically invented in the Venetian lagoon, today there is no epidemiological centre in the city.

Why did the mayor of Venice hide and not set up a task force to respond to the emergency? Why are there no people to help the famous "weaker ones", who are mostly elderly? Of course, we organize ourselves to help people in trouble (at least those in our neighbourhood) to buy food or medicine, taking care to always contact them safely, i.e. wearing a mask and gloves. In this respect, however, a shameful institutional vacuum remains. Should we not call for much more investment and immediate new recruitment in the field of public health, in addition to what the government has already done?

Are we therefore socially in a position, in addition to the demand for isolation, to implement a necessary change of course in health policy with a perspective for the next epidemic? Should we not then face the problem of opening (or re-opening) a political space in the field of biotechnology, a global market where it is normal to experiment with viruses and gene vectors in the name of the commercialization of life?

Finally, should we not be able, as proposed by the ADL (a grassroots union), to fight for a quarantine income for all precarious workers in all sectors affected by the blockade of public activities? And when all this ends, will the workers have to pay again? Everything to make the Confindustria employers' association happy?

We have provided the answers to these questions. The real problem seems to us that too many have not even asked themselves these questions.

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