Elena Liberati

“Finally, yet importantly, we should keep an eye on how isolation affects the mental health of researchers.”

Rome, Italy, 27 March - 28 April 2020

Elena Liberati



Improvised home working station on the balcony to enjoy the sunshine during

"Finally, yet importantly, we should keep an eye on how isolation affects the mental health of researchers."
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/the-mental-health-of-researchers/

lockdown, Rome, Italy. Image taken by the author.

My name is Elena, I am 29 years old and I am a Ph.D. student in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam. In February, I moved back to Rome, the city where I was born and raised, after six years I have been living elsewhere in Italy and in Europe, in order to start the data collection phase of my doctoral research about civil society's initiatives in support of migrants and refugees.

Less than two months after my arrival, the corona crisis began to escalate. I did not manage to start my field research yet, when the lockdown was imposed. Luckily, I had the time to move from my parent's house into a new apartment, which I share with my sister and a flatmate. However, both of them left temporarily due to the corona situation. My flatmate was the first to go: when the state of emergency was declared in the country, she decided to go back to her hometown, to be closer to her family and friends. Whereas my sister moved to her boyfriend's place few days ago. Therefore, these days I am living alone.

At the time of starting this diary, it has been 18 days since the state of emergency was declared all over the country and restriction of movement and isolation measures applied to all citizens in order to contain the epidemic.

I hereby declare I have taken care of a sufficient anonymization of the data in such a way that all described persons are sufficiently protected or have given their consent.

All the pictures included in this diary were taken by the author herself and are, therefore, her property.

27/03/2020

Tonight I dreamt about being stopped by the police in the street while I was going back home from my boyfriend's house, which according to the new measures would be an unauthorized movement. While the police officers' attitude seemed quite benevolent, they asked me many questions about the reasons why I was outside. After they finally let me go, I was not able to remember whether or not they gave me a fine. I was very upset and embarrassed by this latter detail in my dream because it put into question my very mental health stability.

This dream mirrors my concern for the intensification of police controls on citizens' movements. Although I am trying to keep informed, I struggle to understand precisely which movements are allowed and which are not and the exact amount of the fines. For that reason, I try to stay home as much as I can. I just go out to do grocery shopping and take out the trash whenever I need to. However, since I am living alone, for me is very important to be able to keep seeing my boyfriend, who lives nearby and comes to visit me at my place every other day. He is not in the position to move in with me because he wants to spend some time with his family as well due to the circumstances. My boyfriend and his mother are working from home these days, while his brother is a student and, since universities are closed, none of them has reasons to go out daily and be in contact with many people. For that reason, I think this is an acceptably low risk situation. Apart from my boyfriend I just see my parents every once in a while. With all the other friends and relatives, I am in contact through phone and video calls, SMS, and WhatsApp messages.

While writing, I am waiting in line at a popular online travel agency call centre, trying to make sure I can obtain a reimbursement for my cancelled trip to Cuba. It was many years now I did not have enough money to invest in an expensive holiday, therefore my boyfriend and I were longing to it. At first, we were very disappointed by having to renounce to the trip, but as the corona situation escalated in Italy and became quite serious in Cuba as well, it looked more and more as an inevitable – and almost petty – collateral damage. After the first period of confusion and

contradictory directives, cancellation policies are now extraordinarily open and generous, so we should be able to get a refund. However, I do not even remember how many hours I had to wait in line trying to reach the travel agency or the three different airline companies we made our bookings with. Being forced to spend entire days at home with the soundtrack of those super annoying melodies adds to the feeling of frustration. Luckily, this should be the last time I need to call.

"The virus can hit everyone regardless of race, class, and gender. While this is true in theory, in practice different people have different resources to protect themselves."

My boyfriend, who is smart working from my house today, pops up in my room showing me a news article: English Prime Minister Boris Johnson tested positive to coronavirus. We could not resist an ironic remark since Johnson was among those leaders who underestimated the impact of the virus until a few days ago. It seems weird to me when preeminent politicians are infected by the virus as if I unconsciously expect their social status will protect them from harm. All of a sudden, their lives seem as fragile as "ordinary people" ones. This is the novelty of this sanitary emergency: being a non-human originated threat, the virus can hit everyone regardless of race, class, and gender. While this is true in theory, in practice different people have different resources to protect themselves from infection or to treat the disease, or even to lead a serene life in quarantine. However, this is exactly why that this situation is shedding a new light over long-lasting inequalities, which are at the heart of our societies.

Today in Italy, the highest number of deaths has been reached since the beginning of the emergency, 969 people. The number of new infections (4.401) is stable though, or even slightly decreasing compared to yesterday's figure (4.492). It is difficult to interpret it as a positive sign, but authorities says that the effects of the isolation measures should be apparent only in the medium term.

28/03/2020

This morning, as soon as I woke up I watched two different news broadcasts. I usually do not do that every day, but now I feel that in this situation of generalized insecurity I need to stay informed as much as I can on what is going on around me. It gives me the perception of staying in control.

Apparently, the government is working towards a 15 days-extension of the security measures in the country after the first term of 03/04. This news did not come unexpected at all, to be honest, I was already used to the idea this situation would last much longer than the one-month time the first decree contemplated. The proposed two weeks extension, instead of a full month, already sounds like encouraging news.

There is also some debate about the extension of citizenship income both as "quarantine income" for those people who have lost their jobs or are unable to work during those months of isolation and as a measure to face the inevitable economic recession once the sanitary emergency will be overcome.

Watching the news a question comes to my mind "Why nobody talks about migration issues anymore?" This may be dictated by my research interests, however, I cannot help but notice that from a month on the so-called "refugee crisis", which used to play an important role in the news and the public debate has almost disappeared from the media, completely overtaken by the new corona situation.

This afternoon I practiced a one-hour yoga routine watching a YouTube tutorial. I felt a little bit dumb while doing it, but afterwards, I was really satisfied. I led a quite sedentary lifestyle even before isolation measures to be honest, but right now I definitely spend too much time sitting behind a screen. I think doing some physical activity once in a while is necessary to compensate for it.

Later on my sister texted me on WhatsApp that she read the news of a 102-year-old woman who has healed from the virus. The nephew of the lively old lady, who responds to the iconic name of Italica, declared that his grandmother loves Freddy Mercury and Valentino Rossi, the popular motorcycle champion. This news really cheered my sister up and we both laughed at how life can be unpredictable at times.

29/03/2020

> "Being able to waste an entire day depressed without any consequence is still a luxury that not everybody can afford."

This morning I had an argument with my boyfriend as soon as we woke up. When I joined him in the kitchen to make breakfast, I found the tv already on and, being invested by a sequence of bad news, I felt suffocated and burst into tears. Despite having my own reasons to be mad at him, I also think that the increased level of isolation is putting too much pressure on our relationship. As for a mixture of personal and external reasons he basically represents the whole of my social world right now, I guess I fail to put the problems in our relationship in perspective. Maybe

if I was less strict and go out more often to take a nice walk this would help refresh my thinking. However, today I felt I did not have the energy to do anything productive. Since my boyfriend left, I spent the rest of the day in bed, smoking and drinking wine while reading a novel. Although I was in a very dark mood, I recognize that being able to waste an entire day depressed without any consequence is still a luxury that not everybody can afford.

In the evening, my parents video-called me. My father owns a small company, which operates in the sector of biomedical research. My mother is a midwife working in family counselling (something like a basic healthcare municipal clinic). They are both still working, although at a reduced pace. Slowing down the rhythms of production means a considerable loss of income for my father's company, but he is already lucky he did not have to close down because of the specific sector they work in. My mother, being a public employee does not risk losing her job, but the services the clinic offers were reduced and she was asked by her boss to take some days off. Luckily, she has some free days per month granted by the law n.104/92 to assist disabled relatives (in this case, her mother), that the government increased consistently due to the sanitary emergency, so she will not have to use her holiday leave. However, since today is Sunday they both spent the whole day at home cooking and making several Skype calls with their friends.

Since the beginning of the lockdown, my parents have been constantly in touch with relatives and friends all around the world, from Germany to the US and Australia. A few days ago they even made my grandmother video call an old friend of hers who emigrated in Australia during the '60s. The two old ladies have been in contact on a regular basis all this time, but have not seen each other for many years now. Since my grandma is 90, she struggles to understand the very possibility of video call a person at the other end of the world, nevertheless, she was very happy when she recognized her friend. She kept saying to my mother "Yes, that one is Carmen!" pointing to the image on the screen almost in disbelief as if she was assisting a magic

trick. Once she recovered from the initial shock, however, she went on telling her friend that she looked really old, much older than she remembered, which made everybody laugh because insisting on that topic did not sound the most polite way to start a conversation! Furthermore, time has surely been passing for my grandma as well. My mother is worried for her, because she is less and less autonomous and, especially during those months of increased isolation, she would need a person to take care of her on a daily basis, but now is not the right time to hire a new caretaker. However, the forced increase in isolation is making my grandma more and more depressed and inactive and that reflects poorly on her health and wellbeing.

When I told my mother I committed to writing this diary, she recommended taking into careful account virtual communications unfolding on social media and instant messaging platforms, because in her words “this was more real than real life” now. She reported that most of her daily interactions take place in the virtual domain, even more than in everyday household routine, which can be nice but also boring at times. As far as she knows, her acquaintances spend their time cooking and cleaning their houses. At the very best, someone is taking the chance to do small renovations at home, but nothing more exciting than that. It is worth noting that a good share of my parent’s friends is already retired by now.

The fact that most of the everyday social interactions these days take place online is somehow true also as far as my experience is concerned. However, I guess that for my parent’s the contrast is starker as they are not digital natives. As far as my experience is concerned, people belonging to their generation tend to be quite enthusiastic about the use of new technologies of communication. My mother told me that, since the beginning of the lockdown, the WhatsApp groups she is part of are storming with messages of any kind, although the epidemic is the main topic of conversation. The contents people are sharing reflect their beliefs about the origin of the virus and how to overcome it. In the group of her colleagues, some people are starting sharing religious contents (like “God will save us”), in other groups, mostly

circulate complot theories about the origin of the virus. She also told me that she often received the same viral videos circulating in several different groups. My father, instead, is proud to be one of the last persons on earth who purposely choose not to have a WhatsApp account or any other instant messaging app. He has always preferred not to be constantly reachable and to be left outside what he considers a purposeless and excessive amount of communication. Nevertheless, with the time passing, he is starting admitting it has many useful sides as well.

In our chat, they were gossiping about the change in attitude that some of their friends underwent during the past weeks. Apparently, while until few days before the state of emergency was declared those friends were making fun of people who were scared of contagion, now they have changed their mind, but pretend that they were cautious from the onset.

Then, they told me that a German friend who lives in Rome, when the state of emergency was declared in Italy, moved back to Germany to spend some time with her son. She drove all the way to Munich with her car and rented a nice house with a small garden near her son's. However, when the neighbours saw the car with an Italian licence plate parked on their alley, started panicking at the idea that there could be an Italian person living there. We commented that it is weird to be considered an "infected" population that raises suspicion in people from other countries. My mother observed that this will help some people understanding what it means to be treated like immigrants are treated by Italians. Here it is important to notice that the term "migrants" is mostly used in Italy to refer to poor labour migrants or asylum seekers from the global south or Eastern Europe, it hardly ever applies to highly-skilled labour migrants, foreign university students, and residents from richer countries.

Continuing this parallel, we end up commenting the fact that the German and the Dutch governments were among those within the EU that strongly opposed the idea of creating "Eurobond" or "coronabond", that is creating financial debit to help out

those countries in which the epidemics created more damage, such as Italy and Spain. My parents were not positioning themselves, however, they reported that people around them are starting to blame those countries for their lack of solidarity. They concluded that their poor German friend, due to her transnational position was caught in the middle of this fight and did not attract the sympathies of Italians and Germans alike in this particular circumstance, although for opposite reasons.

30/03/2020

Today, I had a long video-call with one of my closest friends. She is a telecommunication engineer working for a consultancy firm. During this quarantine, she is always very busy because while working from home she is attending an online specialization course at university. In addition to that, since she started smart working, she often has to complete her tasks after working time.

In our conversation, besides discussing personal issues, we touched upon current events. My friend was raising an interesting question: why Cuban, Chinese and Albanian governments were the only ones to send aids and doctors to Italy? She wondered if the fact that the three countries have been under communist rules have some relevance in their behaviour in terms of socialist heritage. Although we did not have a precise answer, we concluded it must be a mix of economic interests (at least for China, which economic influence is expanding in Europe) and international prestige. The fact that they are three communist regimes might have a bearing on the fact that they see this crisis as an opportunity to regain the international prestige that the socialist world has lost in recent decades.

Furthermore, we discussed the fact that several people we know are posting on social media asking to boycott the instrument predisposed by the government for private citizens to denounce inappropriate or risky behaviours happening around

them (like unauthorized movements, gatherings or lack of sanitary protection devices or interpersonal distances). She did not understand the reason for such a protest, since the violation of prevention rules may pose a threat to the community as a whole and wanted to know my opinion in that respect. As far as I know, the idea behind the contestation is to promote a different model of social cohesion based on solidarity instead of mutual suspicion. Most of the time in contemporary urban societies you do not know what kind of circumstances are there behind other people's choices. Maybe a person is forced to leave home to work (even in unsafe sanitary conditions) because he or she doesn't have a social security net that would allow to observe the exit ban or is trying to escape domestic violence instead. Even if they were just looking for an excuse to go out as much as possible, if they are engaging in potentially harmless activities (like taking the dog out three times a day just to take a stroll), this would not be a big deal after all. There are more important systemic issues that require our attention. Until few days ago, the government was reluctant to close big factories, while crowded workplaces were among the places where the majority of infections took place. This reluctance was motivated not only by an understandable concern for the effects of a sudden stop of industrial production on the national economy, but also by an effort to avoid upsetting the interests of big industrial corporations. In this context, the input for citizens to watch for each other behaviours and report suspicious activities to the authorities looks like the search for a scapegoat, a *divide et impera* strategy to move the focus away from present structural inequalities and the conduct of the government itself. Nevertheless, I recognize that there can be specific cases, like the one my friend was reporting, in which direct harm is caused to people involved and reporting to the authorities may be justified. One of my friends' relatives who lives in the province of Bergamo (maybe the most critical area in Lombardy as far as COVID spread is concerned), was forced to take a holiday leave because one of his colleagues refused to wear a protective mask at the workplace and their boss, despite repeated request, refused to impose the respect of protective measures. However, respect for health security in the workplace should be granted and monitored by designated bodies

and not left to the initiative of individual workers.

31/03/2020

This morning my sister came back home. At first, when the state of emergency was declared we had been living together with her boyfriend for a couple of weeks. The night the Prime Minister gave the speech announcing the beginning of the lockdown, he was staying over at our place and they decided to stay together because he lives far away from our house and, without owning a private mean of transportation, it would have been difficult to see each other. They are both students and since universities are closed, they had no particular obligations in their everyday lives that could make it difficult to move together overnight. Around 10 days ago, however, an old heat pipe of our building broke at the height of our apartment, causing an intense leakage down to the neighbours' ceiling. Therefore, it was necessary to call some technicians to open a breach into our bathroom's wall and repair the pipe. It was difficult for the apartment block administrator to find someone willing to work in a private house at this time. The first time they gave us an appointment that later was cancelled due to the lack of personnel. This unexpected accident created a little bit of chaos in my family. Especially my sister and her boyfriend were scared about this sudden intrusion into our apartment and proposed that we all leave the house for the duration of the works and leave the keys to the doorman of the apartment block. I was not on the same page because I did not want to move from my house as I had no better place to go. I thought that if I could maintain an appropriate distance with the workers and we both wear protective masks and gloves the risk of infection was not so high. Furthermore, I considered inappropriate, under the circumstances, to charge the doorman with a task which is not among his ordinary duties. For that reason we decided to split up: I would stay in the house and they would move to my sister's boyfriend house. They left the morning after: my mother picked up my sister in her car, while her boyfriend had to go by bike because it is not allowed to drive

more than two people in the same car.

Then, my mother insisted to come helping me at home, even though I assured her I could handle the situation by myself. When the workers came, all of us had to produce an auto-certification stating that we were not positive to Covid-19 nor we were undergoing a period of quarantine ordered by healthcare authorities. We were all equipped with protective masks (the ones with filter FFP-2) and disposable gloves. We did not offer them a glass of water nor a coffee as good manners would have suggested under normal circumstances and they did not ask for it. While on the one hand, we were all super cautious about touching the same surfaces or objects (we even used different pens to sign the auto-certifications), on the other I noticed that when we were distracted by other thoughts we inadvertently slipped back into our usual gestures.

From behind our masks, we had a chat with one of the technicians. He was the only Italian one. The other two were more quite, they spoke good Italian for what I heard but did not throw themselves in such passionate monologues as the first one did. I could not guess his face very well under the mask, but his figure was tall and robust, he was a middle-aged man with a navigated attitude and a strong roman accent. He started complaining about the fact it was the company he worked for which was forcing him to undertake emergency fixing in private houses; otherwise he would have avoided it with great pleasure. If that was not enough, the clients sometimes were even rude to him, as if they were disturbed by a stranger's presence in their homes, showing poor consideration for his professionality and his personal wellbeing. From that, he started a long parallel between the spread of the bubonic plague within Middle Age rural societies and the new coronavirus. The man had an uncommon knowledge of medieval costumes. Apparently, he practiced medieval theatre in his free time.

When the workers left, my mother and I cleaned the whole house (including door and windows handles) first with disinfectants, then with regular detergent and we

kept the windows open for some hours to aerate the house. In my opinion, this was a little bit too much but I thought that these days is better to be safe than sorry so I accepted to carry out the complex purification ritual.

My sister and her boyfriend in the meanwhile were not received very warmly by his flatmate, who was not happy with their return as it represented in his eyes a risk in terms of potential infection. The flatmate is a nurse and he made them undergoing a strict decontamination routine consisting of changing their shoes and leave their jewellery at the entrance of the house. However, yesterday he invited some friends over for lunch. Although he said he would sanitize the kitchen afterwards, my sister and her boyfriend were seriously worried about having unknown guests at home. For that reason, my sister texted me that they were coming back home. There, we had a small argument because, at first, I did not think it was a good idea. More than anything because I found the underlying reasoning disturbing in principle. If you think you might have been exposed to infection, the most counter-indicated thing you can do is moving from place to place with the risk of further spreading it to other people. I suggested her to talk to the flatmate and convince him that this was not the right historical circumstance to host gatherings in the house and stay put. However, the flatmate did not want to hear reasons as he was convinced that they had been the first ones to commit "a crime" moving there in the middle of the quarantine. The argument ended up in a fight between my sister's boyfriend and his flatmate. At that point, I let go because I realized that the cohabitation between them was becoming more problematic than the remote chances of infection and insisted for them to come back as they initially wished. My sister's boyfriend, however, decided to stay at his place because he did not want to represent a risk for my family's health and my sister came back alone.

02/04/2020

Elena Liberati

My Ph.D. research is about civil society initiatives in support of refugees in Italy and the way they interact in bordering processes with official asylum policies and societal narratives about (forced) migration. In fact, Rome is not only my hometown, but it will also be my primary site of research

I did not manage to start my field research yet when the isolation measures were imposed. I have been struggling to keep on with my work in the past weeks because the healthcare emergency was in constant evolution and I was quite disoriented about how to handle it. Then, two weeks ago, I made a conference call with two other Ph.Ds. of my department, exchanging information on respective national contexts and ideas on whether and how it was the case to carry on with our field researches. We decided to turn this into a weekly appointment and more people are joining every week. This gave me new energy and convinced me that I should try not to give up completely my field research during the lockdown. Not only because this emergency is likely to last longer than expected, but also because it is bound to have long-lasting effects on the field and add new dimensions to my research. For instance, it will be interesting to find out around what values solidarity is built in the context of corona crisis, whether coronavirus epidemics is preventing or enhancing solidarity towards refugees in Italy and whether and how the economic recession will affect the allocation of resources to both the governmental refugee reception system and civil society's solidarity initiatives towards refugees.

However, restriction of movement and isolation measures due to current corona epidemics pose important challenges to social research in general and qualitative ethnographic research in particular. Imagining to keep on working under these conditions necessarily means for most of us to switch to a different methodological toolbox from the one we devised for our projects, and the one the discipline is traditionally more comfortable with. I believe that in a context where everybody is isolated online communication and sociality occupy an even bigger space in the everyday lives of people until the point where virtual interaction becomes the main

way of interaction, anthropology should be able to inhabit this virtual space. Furthermore, pragmatically speaking, I guess this is the best option we have right now not to give up our work over an indefinite time and observe this huge social change in the making. However, this choice needs to be coupled in my opinion with an ongoing reflection on the way online research methodologies make sense within the anthropological discipline and the way they affect the observational and reflexive capacity of anthropologists. Maybe an integration of our knowledge of media studies could be useful here. Finally, yet importantly, we should keep an eye on how isolation affects the mental health of researchers.

I would like to arrange some skype interviews, maybe starting with personal acquaintances to make the process smoother and more feasible. I already started interviewing a friend of mine who is part of an informal group distributing food to homeless people. It was a pilot, unconventional interview consisting of a phone conversation on three different occasions. Today I dedicated most of the afternoon transcribing this interview and I hope to start learning something from it.

03/04/2020

Today I woke up very late, the sun was shining and it was very warm outside. I gave up all my work plans and just went out for a long walk with my boyfriend. You could see quite a lot of people around but not nearly as much as usual. Most of the shops were closed, except for supermarkets, pharmacies and grocery stores. It felt like a Sunday morning in August when the city is empty and lazy. Being nearly a month now I didn't have a first-hand experience of how the city looked like beyond the immediate neighbourhood I looked at it with new eyes. It was full of national flags hanging from the balconies and drawings of a rainbow with the corona resistance

motto “andrà tutto bene” (“everything will go all right”) made by children. We got lost in the streets with great pleasure. I even discovered some new places in my neighbourhood I had never been to.

04/04/2020

This morning I woke up very early and I decided to read some articles I had been bookmarking these days and did not find the time to read yet. While I was reading an article published by the Guardian on the explosion of social differences in India under corona, some lines particularly caught my attention:

“The crucial difference is that the poor have no buffer, no reserves of anything, whether money, food or medicines. Life is lived on the edge. While we can talk with our loved ones in other cities or countries on video calls or Facetime, they won’t have smartphones or won’t have the money to pay for packages with enough bandwidth.” (The Guardian 2020)

Two sets of reflections sprung from that quote. First, if the corona crisis has bent the knees of the more solid economies of the world it would be a disaster for poorer countries or countries affected by long conflicts (such as Syria, Libya and Yemen, just to cite the most well-known ones). However, considering the structural differences between European and African countries for instance (in which the latter are generally poorer, characterized by higher levels of informal economy, no welfare state apparatus and pre-existent endemic diseases), it appears reasonable that the reading of this pandemic and also the kind of solutions devised to contain infection should not necessarily be the same in different contexts.

The second thing that traversed my mind was that probably poorer people will not have enough resources to engage in public forms of storytelling – I am thinking of participating in a project like this one for instance. Therefore, their experience risk

not to be recorded, as usual, in the history books and collective knowledge.

05/04/2020

From the beginning of the lockdown, every day at 18 hours there is music resonating in my neighbourhood as a kind of flash mob. Usually, they play classics of Italian songwriters from the past decades (from the '70s to the '90s) and sometimes even the national anthem. I wonder if there is any kind of organization behind or if it is just a spontaneous initiative of some private citizens.

I have the feeling that with the decrease in the number of new cases, complicit the beginning of the spring with exceptionally good weather, people are starting relaxing and taking the lockdown less seriously. From my window, I see less tense faces passing by, more people walking in pairs, more cars circulating. I myself feel more relaxed and confident we are going towards the end of the lockdown.

A political satire tv show called Propaganda Live produced a mini-series of the popular Italian cartoonist Zerocalcare. The comic series, called "Rebibbia Quarantine", is an autobiographical account of life under lockdown. Rebibbia is the name of the neighbourhood in the North-Eastern periphery of Rome where the cartoonist was raised and lives. Being close to the neighbourhood where I live and grew up myself more or less in the same years, I can totally relate to the situations it presents. The last episode of the series closes with the reflection that, although we are all "crushed" in our own particular way by this lockdown, there is a though lingering on the back of our minds. I could translate it (very freely) as: "How could we be able to bear our isolated, precarious and unaccomplished lives when quarantine will end and we won't be able to blame it on the virus anymore?" This part of the video made me smile but also hit me vividly because it felt bitterly true in my experience. The fact that several friends of mine quoted this passage of the cartoon

on Facebook while others expressed similar feelings even before seeing made me aware this was a feeling shared by many. In a way, this lockdown is the accomplishment of a process of precarization and social atomization that we have been undergoing (more or less consciously) during the past decades. It is almost comforting that this time that condition is shared and legitimized by a concrete threat, which finally provides a collective meaning to this experience of uneasiness and lifts us from bearing the sole responsibility of it.

06/04/2020

I have been reading that racist attacks aimed at Asian people in the US are on the rise. In Africa, instead, attacks are aimed at white people. What all these cases have in common is the fact that the victims of the attacks were considered responsible for spreading coronavirus in the country. The fact that entire racial groups were targeted (and what is more, different ones in different countries were targeted makes the situation quite absurd in my view and reveals the arbitrariness of those actions.

I also read an article on Al Jazeera that there was some debate in France after two renowned doctors, guests in a tv show, suggested that a possible new vaccine against corona should be tested in Africa. Apparently, the reason for this choice was that, since in most African countries there are not enough medical facilities to treat the infected population, this would be their only acceptable chance out of the epidemics. Predictably, the declaration attracted criticism from different associations and public personalities, who claimed that African people are “not the guinea pigs of Europe”. Personally, I agree with those criticisms. I think the proposal was simply appalling insofar as we are not talking about distributing an already validated vaccine to African countries first but *testing* it in an area were the sanitary consequences would be as dire as possible if the test fails…I just wonder what guinea

pigs would say if they could speak…

After all these articles I happened to read about Africa and corona, I decide to write to a Kenyan friend, to check if he is ok and how is the situation in Nairobi. He told me he is fine but worried about things getting worse and measures undertaken by the government to be insufficient. In his opinion, the authorities reacted too late and the curfew they imposed is useless if people are still allowed to meet, and potentially infect each other, during the day. In addition, he told me that, as the alarm is spreading, more and more people are moving from Nairobi, which is supposedly the hotbed of the epidemics in the country, to their rural homes with the risk of spreading the infection in a wider area. I answered reporting the information I had been reading about African countries being unable to afford total lockdown. I suggested this could be the reason why governments are hesitant to apply stricter measures and that the international community should finance those interventions more consistently. However, after sending the message I started wondering whether the suggestion they should once more rely on external aid could sound paternalistic…

07/04/2020

Today I read that in Selam Palace, the biggest migrants' housing occupation in Rome in the neighbourhood of La Romanina, three confirmed positive cases of COVID-19 have been found among the inhabitants of the community. Apparently, since the building hosts around 400 people, the authorities fear that it might turn into the first corona hotbed in the city. The tenants of the squat underwent testing and the army intervened isolating the building. I reported the news to my best friends. Since one of them coordinated a network of Italian language schools and had a direct relationship with the organization of the squat, I thought she would like to know. I commented that this was very unfortunate, first and foremost for the people who

got infected, but also because the very idea of new hotbeds' formation in our city is not reassuring at all. My friends agreed, but they were equally worried about the future of the squat. "This is a squatted place, right? I guess it is not a coincidence that the army intervened…" one of them commented. "Can you imagine the resonance that this will have in the news?" replied the other.

> "The usual suspects are back to hit the headlines."

Later, as I was writing down the news about Selam Palace in this diary, my mother texted me: "Watch the reportage Striscia La Notizia[1] is airing right now. Channel 5. Tiburtina station. Association helping a group of Africans sleeping at the station". Typical parent's message, urging you to watch stuff on the TV they would like you to see. Normally you are not interested in the topic of conversation, you programmatically do not watch TV and maybe you do not even have one. I guess that for my generation it is a kind of outdated device. I did not have a TV since I moved out of my parents' house after my bachelor's and none of the people I used to hang out with had one. This time, though, I have a television. Actually, I even have two, because the apartment my sister and I are currently living in was my great-aunt house. She was very old and during her last years, she could not do any physical effort around the house, therefore watching tv was one of her favourite pastimes. I am also interested in the matter so I rush to the kitchen just in time to see the last few minutes of the reportage, which was called "Assembramenti alla stazione Tiburtina a Roma" ("Gatherings at Tiburtina station in Rome"). A quick analysis of the title already reveals that the choice of words here is not random. "Assembramenti" means "gatherings", but maybe it could better translate into the English "assemblage"

due to its formal register. This detail is significant because many people in Italy did not even know about the existence of this word before the beginning of the corona emergency. Many others are still misspelling it as “assemblamento”, which sounds as a derivative of the more common term “assemblare” (meaning “to assembly”), but actually does not exist at all, as the correct form in this case would be “assemblaggio”. As proof of the fact this is a very widespread concern, you can find several recent articles on the web trying to settle this linguistic conundrum.[2] For that reason, “assembramenti” is not a neutral term, but one that is closely related to the health emergency in the imaginary of most people. If that was not enough, its connotation is unmistakably negative as it represents the forbidden *par excellence* during the corona crisis: voluntary gatherings of people. The use of such a sophisticated and “technical” word, on the one hand, makes the ban sound more authoritative, while on the other helps to conceal the fact that the object of the ban is nothing but being among other people after all. This is of course not to say that the prohibition is not a reasonable one, but words are important in my view. In this case, the use of the term “assembramenti” to describe the situation of a group of homeless people forced to live on the street despite the corona emergency implicitly points to the responsibility of the individuals who are not respecting security distances, rather than to the failure of municipal government in assuring basic living and health standards to its population. And this is basically the tone that characterizes the whole service. With one notable remark: as anticipated by my mother’s message, all the homeless portrayed in the reportage are black people. Young male sub-Saharan Africans, they match exactly the dominant profile of the asylum seekers in Italy, who were at the centre of pre-COVID societal debates in Italy. This adds a different layer of meaning to the analysis: those who are not respecting the rules, representing a threat to citizenship as a whole, are once again “them”, the “others”, the non-citizens. The usual suspects are back to hit the headlines.

Many commercials in mainstream TV have changed since the beginning of the lockdown to include references to the present situation. Not only there is plenty of

“Finally, yet importantly, we should keep an eye on how isolation affects the mental health of researchers.”
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/the-mental-health-of-researchers/

disinfectant and sanitary products advertising, but also other kind of commercials from dairy products to sofas are making references to the "need to stay at home", "the times in which will be able to hug each other again" or "the heroes out there fighting the virus". I do not remember another occasion in which advertisement was so explicitly connected to contemporary historical circumstances.

I am reflecting on the words we are using to describe the present situation. There are recurrent terms and some of us are already familiar like "emergency", "crisis". I am usually cautious to use those terms because of my studies on securitization dynamics and humanitarianism, but it feels that right now we have not developed an alternative vocabulary to talk about it yet.

Tonight an ex-boyfriend of mine contacted me after many years we did not hear from each other: "When quarantine will end we should meet" we proposed, almost mechanically. Out of reciprocal curiosity of course, but also out of habit, as an expression of good manners. It is what we keep repeating each other between distant friends these days: "Can't wait for all this to pass so we can meet again". Despite knowing in this case it was just a coincidence he contacted me, that reminded me of an article by the queer philosopher Paul B. Preciado, posted by a friend on her Facebook wall, I read yesterday night. At first, I was not so impressed by the reading, however, with the passing of time, the main thesis of the article, evoked through narrative images, began to sink in my subconscious: What if the social world as we know it would be permanently modified by the virus crisis? According to the author, "[t]he mutation would manifest as a crystallization of organic life, as a digitization of work and consumption and as a dematerialization of desire." He goes on asking himself whether life under these conditions would be worth living and conclude with a great deal of irony, that the virus could be originated by a complot among all the losers in the world (among whom the author include himself) to get their ex-partners back. For sure, in our everyday relational sphere the lockdown and the fear of the virus, entail a conservative turn in the

development of our (sentimental) relations. I also found myself putting an extra effort in strengthening pre-existing bonds and hindered at the thought of creating new ones.

08/04/2020

Today my boyfriend showed me an episode of a Dutch tv show which was reported by +31mag, the online magazine of the Italian community in the Netherlands. This episode of the comedic show, in which the host comments satirically on the news of the previous week, was dedicated to the recent complaints by Southern European countries on the lack of solidarity showed by the Dutch position on communitarian economic response to the crisis. In a sketch called "Is Wopke Hoekstra een lul?" ("Is Wopke Hoekstra a prick?"), pretending to look for a *super partes* answer to this question, the host made a counterfactual analysis by which he demonstrated that refusing to come to terms with such pretentious and incorrigible requests it is everything but unreasonable. The underlying argument was that those countries, with an explicit reference to Italy, deserved their faith because they failed to manage their economies with due effectiveness in the past. What I found most insulting was a passage in which the presenter explained that the unilateral economic aid predisposed by the Dutch government – which was criticized as being "not enough even to buy an ice cream" – amounted in fact to 16 euros per Italian inhabitant, more than enough for each of us to buy a very big ice-cream. In the background, a colourful image of a giant, leaking ice-cream cone was displayed. Far from being funny, such a display of insensitivity is indicative, in my view, of poor understanding of the level of the debate nor the extent of the current crisis. Although even for an Italian citizen like me, is difficult to predict what the long-term consequences will be for the country, current information suggests it is likely that many people would not be able to find a job or afford a livelihood anymore. I speak from a privileged position because I do not think this crisis would determine a dramatic change in my lifestyle,

at least in the short term. However, having invested in an unpaid Ph.D. position, I feel more insecure than ever about my future. Luckily, I can rely on my parents' income at the moment, but they will not be able to provide support for a long time as they are already in their sixties and soon they are going to retire. Let alone the fact that my self-esteem is suffering from this situation, as being able to afford an independent living is an inescapable component of self-accomplishment in our societies.

I find this representation of Italians as tolerated economic parasites so much annoying as it touches me personally, for several reasons. First, because I encountered it myself many times as a palpable perception during my stay in the Netherlands. Second, while on the one hand, I recognize that doing my Ph.D. in the Netherlands is a great opportunity for me to build cultural and social capital on the other, I have been working for free for Dutch university for more than one year now. And by self-funding both my research and my livelihood, I have injected thousands of Italian euros in the Dutch local economy without having any material return. Therefore, I suggest that real-life situations are usually characterized by a complex mix of factors and do not easily fit stereotypes.

Back to the point, this is of course not to suggest that the Dutch government should take care alone of rebalancing the treasury of the Italian state, but to devise a common response to this unprecedented crisis is a must if the European Union has ever had any sense at all.

09/04/2020

Today I followed the live streaming of an online public assembly called "Tempo di camminare sulla testa dei re" ("Time to walk on kings' heads"). It was launched by several political collectives all over Italy and various interesting personalities of the

radical left-wing movements and scholarship. Different realities were trying to come together under the motto “We don’t want to go back to normal, because ‘normality’ was the problem”. They discussed worries about the economic effects of the crisis, its management by the government and the way the Capital was reorganizing to maintain its power under the new circumstances, the lack of international solidarity within the EU, and the threat represented by the tighter control measures implemented by the government under the emergency, which might be going to last longer than the emergency itself.

This rough summary doesn’t give justice to the complexity of a three hours-long discussion among tens of people (there were around 60 different interventions), but it was encouraging to see people finding a way to come together, although at a distance, and try to build bottom-up new thinking about the present situation.

10/04/2020

Prime Minister Conte gave a speech tonight. The lockdown is prolonged until 03/05. Some productive activities will reopen (among which sylviculture and forestry, stationery shops, and shops for babies). He said that there is a panel of experts working on new security rules on the workplace to be applied immediately in the reopened activities. Insisting on the fact that this crisis would entail a long-lasting change in the organization of work. Then he engaged in a heated debate with the forces of the opposition. He openly addressed Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni, leaders of the right-wing parties of Lega Nord and Fratelli d’Italia, whom he accused to circulate fake information about the government negotiating an unfavorable agreement on aid from the EU. This is quite unusual for such a solemn and representative occasion.

Conte repeated several times that he considers the EMS (European Mechanism of

Stability) an inadequate instrument to deal with the current economic crisis and it will not sign any agreement. However, voices are already circulating among the media that the most probable outcome of the negotiation would be a compromise on a new line of credit within the EMS, with an opt-out from the conditionality attached to it if the funds are invested in the healthcare system at the very best.

11/04/2020

As the lockdown continues more and more solidarity initiatives are created to help those who lost their jobs and cannot afford to buy basic goods or those who are sick or old and cannot leave their houses to go shopping. Most of the initiatives I know were put in place by pre-existing local squats, churches, or neighborhood associations. Also, NGOs which used to operate in international cooperation or rescuing migrants at sea are shifting more and more their activities to help with the corona crisis in Italy.

Furthermore, various local shops and supermarkets are organizing food collection in the form of “spesa sospesa” (“suspended grocery shopping”). In the picture, a banner at the entrance of a mini-market near my house that says “here you can donate your ‘suspended’ grocery shopping”. It means that customers can buy some food or basic goods, which can be collected for free by people who can’t afford to buy themselves.



Minimarket adhering to the food donation initiative "Spesa sospesa" in

"Finally, yet importantly, we should keep an eye on how isolation affects the mental health of researchers."
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/the-mental-health-of-researchers/

Rome. Image taken by the author.

Those organizations act as a sort of informal welfare system in the retreat of the welfare state. This is not a new situation but maybe the present crisis is making it more evident and needed. The COVID crisis has seen a fairly massive intervention of the state in providing economic subsidies, reversing to some extent the trend towards the dismantling of the state welfare system that has been witnessed in recent years. Nevertheless, this intervention has been largely either insufficient or, at least for the time being, only promised.

I feel I should participate in one in one of these activities, but I do not know exactly where to start from because I did not manage to rebuild a network of contacts here in Rome yet and I feel hindered to connect to new people under the circumstances. Furthermore, I am not sure that my family would approve my engagement in social activities because of the risk of infection. However, this could as well be just me over-worrying. I guess that if I can show a strong motivation to do that, they would understand.

12/04/2020

Today was Easter Day and I spent it at home with my sister. Although this year we were not going to celebrate as usual, I tried to cook a nice meal for us and our mother brought us a homemade pie she baked for us on her way to my grandmother's house. My parents went to my grandma's house as we always used to do for family reunions because she needs somebody to take care of her, but this year it was just the three of them. During Easter lunch, my sister and I watched half of a popular kid's movie from the '90s we already saw countless times – as it typically is when it comes to national holidays TV programming. When we celebrate festivities with our family we never watch TV. When it happens that someone turns it on to kill

time while we wait for everybody to arrive, there is always someone saying: “Come on, turn that thing off! For once that we are all together…” It is considered a shame not to entertain a proper conversation. While on the one hand, it felt strange to me to break this tradition, on the other, it was somehow relieving to handle the celebration in a more casual way.

> “It was nice to find a way to get together despite the distance.”

After lunch, we arranged a zoom meeting with my enlarged family: there were all my cousins and uncles’ families. The call ended up being a little messy because most of our relatives were not familiar with the zoom programme and some of us did not have a good internet connection. Therefore, communication was fragmentary and we spent a lot of time trying to get back the signal, still, it was nice to find a way to get together despite the distance.

13/04/2020

Nearly a week ago the government announced the closure of its ports for asylum seekers in distress in the Mediterranean with the motivation that Italy does not represent a safe country anymore due to the sanitary emergency. This way the right to claim asylum is, as a matter of fact, suspended indefinitely in the country. The NGO Sea Watch accused European authorities to have neglected their requests to help four dinghies adrift in international waters, one of which was later spotted upside-down. Apparently, the 85 persons who were on board were left to die at sea

on Easter Day. The Italian Coast Guard, however, denied the truth of those allegations, declaring that the wreck found by Frontex had drowned weeks before the indicated date. In any case, shipwrecks in the Mediterranean are still happening among increasingly generalized indifference. Moreover, the closure policies pursued by the current government show a continuity with the political line initiated by the previous PD (Democratic Party) centre-leftist government in 2017 and later worsened by Salvini's extreme right wing government. The only difference is in the justification given for the closure of the ports. Right now, the usual claim is reversed: they are not doing it to protect Italian citizens from the threat represented by refugees, but the other way round. As if drowning at sea or being tortured daily in a detention camp in Libya was better than running the risk of catching corona.

After some weeks in which I felt inspired to engage in new projects, tried to stay updated, and productively reflect on the social changes the crisis is producing, I feel increasingly depressed again and retreated in an individual dimension. I feel right now, as if I was "trapped" not only in this city but also in my nuclear family and the social environment I grew up in. In the present circumstances, the freedom to choose my own lifestyle, explore different kinds of relationships and ideas of collective is severely restrained. This makes me feel as I am thrown back in time to different stages of my life I spent a lot of effort in leaving behind me.

14/04/2020

An old friend of mine texted me, saying that today he is working close to my house and proposed to come to visit me during his lunch break. He is normally working as a receptionist in a private university, but since universities are closed now, he is performing surveillance tasks for other clients of the agency he works for with a reduced working schedule. He told me he would have liked to see how I settled down in my new apartment he remembered from the times my great-aunt was living there.

However, I did not think it was safe for him to come in, but I did not want to refuse to see him either so I proposed him to meet downstairs. He tried to insist but I was firm in my resolution and he eventually concluded that he was joking. It was nice to see him after all those years but I somehow felt uncomfortable with his behaviour disregarding security distancing. As soon as I arrived, he kissed me on the chicks and I was not ready enough to refuse. After all, what was the point of not meeting at home if we had to be in close contact nonetheless? I noticed that two women passing by stared at us insistently while we were kissing, making me feel uncomfortable.

Apart from my boyfriend and my parents, he was the first person I am not living with, that I have been meeting in person after the beginning of the quarantine. The mixture of excitement and uneasiness I experienced during this encounter made me reflect on my expectations about going back to sociality. I realized I ingenuously thought that the quarantine will be lifted when it would be all over and all of a sudden we would go back to meeting people exactly in the same way we used to. This encounter might be a glimpse at what sociality in the so-called “phase two” will look like.

15/04/2020

With time passing, it is becoming increasingly difficult for me to keep a regular diary. I struggle to make an idea for myself of what is happening in the world around me and this makes me feel weary. This may be due to the fact that, striving to keep up with an increasing workload, I have less time to dedicate to other activities. I am now preparing an application for a scholarship, while simultaneously trying to reshape my research proposal and methodology to accommodate current changes in my field of investigation.

Elena Liberati

My boyfriend and I had a fight over the organization of time at home today. We are both working from home in a way, but while he has a formal paid job as a security analyst, I am doing an unpaid Ph.D. That implies he has a fixed work schedule, while I organize my work autonomously. Since his family is respecting quarantine very strictly and prefer not to have guests at home these days, he stays over at my place and works from here every other day. Although I guess that such an arrangement does not completely prevent the risk of contamination between our respective family units, I respect it, as long as it makes everyone feel safer. However, as we are always meeting at my place it's mostly me who has to take care of going grocery shopping for both of us, even though he tries to contribute (both economically and materially) every time he can. Furthermore, since I do not have fixed working hours and he only has half an hour's lunch break I am the one cooking meals and cleaning everything afterwards. In addition to that, during these first weeks of lockdown, I made an extra effort in preparing elaborate dishes. This was partly because everyone around me seemed to be taking this chance to engage in high-quality cooking and partly to reward him for overcoming the discomfort of home working outside his usual environment to spend time with me. However, after a while, I noticed these apparently simple tasks are very time consuming and their performance is distracting a lot of mental energy from my own work. Therefore, I began to feel increasingly resentful because I considered this arrangement unfair and I felt that my time was not valued as much as his. Eventually, we agreed that we will see each other only during his free days from now on. This way, we will spend more quality time together and both of us will be able to arrange our working day schedules as we prefer. I am still not so enthusiastic about this arrangement because that means we will see each other less frequently than we used to. However, since this was becoming an element of tension in our relationship I think this decision will be for the best.

17/04/2020

A common friend who lives abroad had invited me and my boyfriend at his wedding this summer. Today I learnt, however, that not only he had to postpone the wedding to next year but also he lost his job due to the corona crisis. Since he is now looking for a new job in various EU countries there are chances that he would move away from his girlfriend for a while. It is not the first case of international couples that are going through unusual challenges due to the restriction of movements or economic recession caused by the virus.

Since my fridge was awfully empty, my boyfriend and I agreed to order a pizza for dinner. This is only the second time I order food from a restaurant during the quarantine. In the beginning, not all restaurants were prepared to perform deliveries. Moreover, there was widespread suspicion towards the idea of buying a cocked meal (cocked by whom and how?). Now, as most restaurants assured they took the required measure to cook in security, I started ordering food again. Nevertheless, home deliveries are still a controversial issue to me. On the one hand, riders working for big companies such as Just Eat, Deliveroo, and Uber Eats were carrying on battles against their unsafe working conditions, but on the other hand, small businesses desperately need to keep working during the lockdown, otherwise, they risk going bankrupt. Therefore, I am not sure whether or not it is morally right to order food right now. With these thoughts in mind, I opened the door to the delivery boy, I paid the dinner and I was waiting for him to give me change when my boyfriend came and told him to keep it. Although it does not solve the problem, giving riders generous tips may be already a good compromise to compensate for their poor working conditions.

18/04/2020

Elena Liberati

My boyfriend and I went out for a walk today. We took the habit to take a long walk in the neighbourhood more or less once a week. Usually, we make a longer route on our way home from the supermarket because we would not be allowed to do that, so we need an excuse for being out in case we are stopped by the police. Although according to regulation you should only go to the nearest supermarket, since we are not causing harm to anybody, I hope they would not be too strict.

Last time we discovered a passage in a park along the sides of a river that runs near my house. We returned there because it feels good to be in the middle of nature and it was also very isolated so it didn't represent a risk for infection. This time, however, we met several people who had our same idea to escape from the cement: parents biking with their children, two couples walking and some men walking their dogs. We sat on a bench along the riverside to eat a sandwich we bought for lunch. The bench we were sitting on had a curious graffiti on it saying "Coronavirus (with the symbol of anarchy instead of the A)" and on the other side, which is hidden in the picture: "Meglio morire liber* che vivere in gabbia" ("Better to die free, than live in a cage"). The asterisk in the original stands for a gender-neutral use of language since Italian adjectives can be declined in feminine and masculine form.

Elena Liberati



“Finally, yet importantly, we should keep an eye on how isolation affects the mental health of researchers.”
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/the-mental-health-of-researchers/

Park bench with graffiti against corona lockdown measures in Rome. Image taken by the author.

While we were sitting there, a civil protection car passed near us. When the car stopped and the two officers came towards us I was pretty sure they were going to question our presence there, instead they just took some pictures of the water and got back in the car.

We decided it was better to continue our walk along the river and after a few meters, we started hearing music from the distance. We could not see where it came from because the view was hidden from the vegetation. We followed the music until the point where there was a clearing among the bushes. There we climbed down a steep passage just to the river bank. There we saw a strange campsite with black tape delimiting the area around an old colourful sun umbrella and the remaining of a fire. Then we met Nisam the "owner" of the place. The young man was unexpectedly cheerful despite our intrusion and showed us around. From his appearance, I guessed he was possibly from India or Bangladesh but I did not ask. He explained to us he was building a wooden house on the river (as can be seen in the picture below). Faces are obscured because for privacy reasons I prefer not to show recognizable pictures. He told us that he cannot find work anymore due to the corona crisis and therefore cannot afford a house. He found himself on the street and decided to try and build himself a house in this isolated place along the river. However, being alone he was scared to sleep there until the construction was finished because he was scared of wild animals. He told us he heard hauling and once also a person crying in a sinister way during the night. He was proud of his construction work and allowed me to take a picture while he was showing my boyfriend how solid the skeleton of the house was. I was sincerely admired by his skills because if I had to build myself a wooden house I would not know where to start.

Elena Liberati



“Finally, yet importantly, we should keep an eye on how isolation affects the mental health of researchers.”
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/the-mental-health-of-researchers/

Wooden shelter by the river under construction in Rome. Image taken by the author.

However, the loud gipsy music we were listening to was coming from the other side of the river, where there was a bigger, better-equipped campsite, partially hidden by the bushes. While we were leaning towards the river trying to see the camp better I noticed that we were in turn observed by two people squatting in the bushes. I waved my hand to say hello and they did the same while dancing at the rhythm of the music. Nisam explained that a group of Rumanian people leaves there. However, he was not reassured by their presence because if something happens at night they could not help him anyway as they are on the other side of the river, which is wide enough to be dangerous to cross. He visited their camp sometimes but he told us he does not enjoy their company because they talk too much and he struggles to understand what they say. We wished him good luck and promised to go back in some days to see how the construction work is going. I hope he will not be evicted at the end of his effort.

On my way back, I bought another plant. I am developing a deep fondness for plants, especially since the quarantine began. To be completely honest I never had a green thumb, but I am putting a lot of effort into it because I love to see them growing and slowly by slowly filling the rooms of my house. I consider it a visible mark of the passing of time countering the immobility of the lockdown.

Walking back towards my block around 18 o'clock, I finally found out where the loud music I hear every day from my window comes from.

Elena Liberati



Daily music flashmob during the lockdown in Rome. Image taken by the author.

19/04/2020

Political debate is arising from the proposal to regularize around 600.000 irregular migrants. The proposal was launched by the Minister of Agriculture and endorsed by various members of the ruling coalition denouncing the dire conditions of irregular migrant workers employed in a vital field for the provision of food supplies in the

country, worsened by the health emergency. However, the opposition resists the approval of this measure, arguing that the government should take care of the high rate of unemployment among the Italian labour force, instead of privileging the employment of foreign workers.[3] Such a position is highly controversial in my opinion as it deliberately conceives that the matter under discussion is not to create schemes of international recruitment, but instead to confer civil rights to people already employed (and exploited) in a sector that has been long-time deserted by local workforce due to the existing poor conditions of employment.

The health emergency and related social crisis are determining a deadlock in my private life, as most of my expectations about returning to Rome have been inevitably disregarded. Some are small problems like my new house still to decorate, while others are more serious matters as my job-seeking activities on hold and my intention to build new friendships and professional networks severely limited. I am postponing those plans for the time when the exit ban will be lifted, shops will reopen, and everyday life will go back to flow as it used to. However, as time goes by, I deem most likely that the so-called "phase two" all the media are talking about will be characterized by a progressive reopening (until the finding of the vaccine for COVID-19 at least) and we will have to cope with restrictions for a long time. Therefore, I think I should take initiative and cut out a space of agency for myself despite the unfavourable circumstances.

21/04/2020

I cannot sleep very well at night, therefore I wake up awfully late in the morning. Although I like to wake up late, having such unstructured days make me feel alienated in the long run.

Today I woke up at the sound of the doorbell ringing very loudly. It was our

"Finally, yet importantly, we should keep an eye on how isolation affects the mental health of researchers."
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/the-mental-health-of-researchers/

neighbour upstairs, a dear friend of my late grandmother, who came to give my sister and me some vegetable soup she prepared for us. Yesterday afternoon she had called me to say that she wanted to cook "minestrone" but the effort was not worthy if she had to make it just for herself and asked if she can give some to us. I told her we would be pleased to "help her" eating the soup, which was amazing by the way, because she is a great cook. Every time I speak to her, she ends the conversation reminding me that whatever help my sister and I may need we can always address her. Now, given that she is well beyond 80 years old and we are in the middle of a world pandemics that mostly kills the elderly, I would expect us to be the ones who help her and not the other way around. In Italy, especially if you are not married, have no children and you do not even earn your own money you can be considered a child forever, even if you are 45. This lack of recognition of my adult status usually makes me suffer a lot. However, in this case, her paradoxical offers are too sweet to be rejected. I would never dare out respect and affection. All in all, allowing her to take care of us every once in a while is a way of indirectly help her by making her feel useful. Especially for women of their generation who have been used to take care of every single aspect of their family lives, this feeling of being indispensable to others is a reason to live.

I spoke with a friend of mine from Bologna and she told me that, together with her neighbours, they have been starting a collective rent strike. The whole building they live in is property of a business company and the apartments are rented out to students and young workers. Since most of the tenants are unable to work at this time, they proposed to halve the price of the rent during the lockdown. As the property refused, they responded launching this rent strike. The initiative had some resonance on the media.

23/04/2020

The first time I had a video chat with my fellow PhDs, more than one month ago, Italy represented the very earth of the European COVID crisis. In a way, it still is, even though Spain has currently more cases and France is closely following. During that conversation, I was asked why Lombardy has had such a concentration of cases compared to all the other Italian regions. I did not have a clear explanation to give them at the time. I only remember reading about the higher level of industrialization compared to any other Italian region, which favoured the spread of the virus at the workplace. Since then I kept this question in mind. Recently, I was advised by an acquaintance to watch an episode of Report, a TV programme of investigative journalism, which last month dedicated a long reportage to the subject. It showed that too few tests have been made in earlier stages of the epidemic, along with the involvement of Confindustria (General Confederation of Italian Industry) in pressuring local politicians as well as the government in order to avoid the proclamation of red zones in the region and keep the factories open.

Changing the subject, I read that request for help from women victims of domestic violence raised by 75% in March 2020 compared to the same period in the previous year due to the exit ban. My boyfriend, who does research on Latin American countries for his work, told me that in Argentina the rate of domestic violence was so high that the government made a special exception on the exit ban for women who needed to denounce physical abuse.

24/04/2020

Today my boyfriend forwarded me a news article, written by an acquaintance of his, according to which a COVID hotbed was discovered within the “Università Salesiana”, a catholic private university whose campus is located in our district. It is very close to my parents’ house, around 15 minutes walking. The exact number of positive cases is not confirmed yet: it is estimated between 15 and 30 people, but the

campus hosts more than 200 people. According to what I have read, compared to the case of Selam Palace (the migrants' occupation I was mentioning some days ago), the news was handled with much more discretion, and the army was not involved. Not surprisingly at all, because the Catholic Church still represents one of the most powerful social actors you can find in Italy.

Today I finally found time to retrieve the credentials to access my Instagram account. I knew I created one, years ago, but immediately afterwards I forgot the password and never accessed it again. I lost interest because I am not very good at taking pictures, therefore I did not have anything impressive to post for myself and I was not willing to engage with the process of virtual identity construction of my real-life acquaintances. It is not exactly that I was not interested but although I was sure that there was much more in the lives of all these people beyond the stories told by the pictures they publish, it made me sick to navigate all those apparently perfect lives of extreme fun, exotic holidays, perfect makeups, etc. While on the one hand, I found it superficial and unrealistic, on the other I was still feeling that my life was not as exciting as the ones I was seeing on the screen and that undermined my self-esteem. For that reason, I decided that I did not need to get involved in other social media, Facebook was already enough. Now I decided, however, that I may need to incorporate some social media content analysis in my research, and in this case, using only Facebook would be reductive.

25/04/2020

Today is Liberation Day in Italy, the national holiday celebrating the anti-fascist resistance in Italy and the end of the Fascist regime. In time, it has become a divisive date for Italian representative politics, with right-wing politicians trying to undermine the role of this commemoration, and centre-leftist ones opposing little resistance to this operation. This year, however, there was also an intense debate

internal to Italian antifascist movement on whether or not it was the case to go out to the streets and celebrate. The factions in favour of organizing a commemoration parade argued that there was a distinction between "staying home" in the figurative sense of refraining from the sites of gathering for work or consumption purpose in order to take care of collective health and the literal meaning of "staying inside one's home", cut out from the outside world at all costs. In this view, in the name of the health emergency too many abuses have been already perpetrated by police forces, which are likely to result in breaching of collective freedom that may last after the end of the virus crisis. In this sense, they stressed the need to find safe forms for the movement to re-appropriate of the streets and accused those factions that were not in favour of an in-presence parade of having lost their critical thinking, lending ear to fear discourses made by the government and amplified by mainstream media. On the other hand, the other part of the movement replied that they did not deem necessary to organize a street parade to remember the recurrence of the Liberation because they intended this not as commemoration but as an ongoing struggle that they tried to honour with their behaviour every day of the year. Furthermore, they claim they did not abandon the streets. On the contrary, they deemed more useful to organize solidarity activities, such as the collection of basic goods and distribution among their territorial networks, than a demonstration that may indeed present some risks in terms of further infections, not only according to the government but also to those among their comrades who are medical staff or researchers.

26/04/2020

The Prime Minister gave another speech today. Starting from 04/05 it will be allowed to visit relatives within the same region and to move more than 200 meters from one's domicile to do physical activity. While from 18/05 shops will start re-opening. I followed the speech on TV together with my sister and in the end we were quite disappointed because the transition out of the lockdown was much more

gradual than we were expecting. However, the most controversial point to me was the lift of the exit ban only in order to visit relatives. While Italy has been traditionally characterized by a familistic social organization, this time the concept has gone too far. First of all, because issuing such a measure equals publicly disqualifying every kind of affective or sentimental bond which is not a blood or legal relationship. Why should I care more about meeting my second cousin than my best friend? Why am I allowed to meet my stable partner only if we are legally married? I do not think that the government has a right to intrude so much in the private lives of citizens as to tell us *who* (instead of *how*) we can meet.

I turned off the TV, got ready and went to my boyfriend's house for the first time since the beginning of the quarantine. I even did my makeup for the occasion. It was such a relief to change environment for once and meeting his family again. At the same time, it was weird to realize how excited I was for this simple thing that until two months ago I would have probably have considered a boring plan for the night.

"Protective masks are becoming part of our cultural experience, even a "cult" item somehow."

28/04/2020

Protective masks are becoming part of our cultural experience, even a "cult" item somehow. I saw a lot of people on social media who start posting selfies with the mask. I did it myself at the beginning of this diary. Today, I have even found an article on an online fashion magazine, which, taking inspiration from the looks of famous

actresses and influencers, explained what kind of eye makeups matches well with the protective mask! I found it hilarious but also extremely interesting.

Contagion – I stumbled upon this movie by chance while scanning the offer of my boyfriend's on-demand TV account. I did not watch the movie yet, however I was intrigued because it is about a global pandemic originating in Asia, engendered by a bat, which spreads worldwide. Since the epidemic gets out of control, national authorities set out a total lockdown, the use of protective masks becomes compulsory etc. What is astonishing about such a familiar scenario is that the movie has been shot in 2011! Making some research I found out that the creepy resemblance with current events had already become a media case. Therefore, it was not by chance that the on-demand TV platform was re-proposing it. Without resorting to conspiracy theories, the explanation for such a strange coincidence is that the screenwriter had been joined by a famous virologist who had helped him reconstruct a plausible global epidemic scenario. However, it still absurd that while such a scenario was already considered plausible 10 years ago among the scientific community, not nearly enough research or prevention activities have been carried out by governments to prevent it from becoming reality.

Footnotes

[1] Striscia la Notizia is a popular Italian social satire TV show, based on a mix of comedy sketches and investigative reports.

[2] See for example: https://metropolitanmagazine.it/assembramento-assemblamento-coronavirus-italiano/ and https://comesiscrive.it/dubbi/assembramento-o-assemblamento/. Accessed: 11/04/2020.

[3] see

http://www.vita.it/it/article/2020/04/18/regolarizzazione-immigrati-bene-bozza-decreto-ma-non-solo-per-agricolt/155087/, https://www.iltempo.it/politica/2020/04/19/news/coronavirus-migranti-emma-bonino-regolarizzare-clandestini-campi-agricoltura-bellanova-minniti-1317258/ and https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/generale/2020/04/19/news/subito_permessi_mirati_ai_lavoratori_stranieri_in_autunno_il_decreto_flussi-254487677/ and https://tg24.sky.it/cronaca/2020/04/16/coronavirus-bellanova-migranti. Accessed: 19/04/2020.