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Pandemics and Philosophy

Last February 22nd, the CNR (*Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche*) publicly declared: “there is no Sars-CoV2 in Italy.” The CNR acknowledged the outbreak of an infectious flu which could cause mild symptoms in 80% of the cases. It added: “It is possible that pneumonia may develop in between 10% and 15% of the cases, but the evolution of the illness will be benign in the absolute majority of cases. One may estimate that only 4% of the patients will require intensive therapy for their recovery.” On that same day 79 infected patients were reported in all of Italy.

On February 26th, when the number of the infected rose to 470, the eminent philosopher Giorgio Agamben published in *Quodlibet*, a column bearing the following headline: “The Invention of an Epidemic.” Quoting the CNR declaration, Agamben denounced “the frenetic, irrational and wholly unmotivated emergency in response to a supposed coronavirus epidemic.” He blamed the authorities for spreading a climate of terror and of “provoking a true state of exception which included strict limitations on the right of movement and a suspension of the normal functioning of the conditions of life and work.”

Agamben critically added that governmental declarations of states of exception have become a normal occurrence. In the present situation, he fears that the “invention of an epidemic” will lead to a “militarization” of communities and regions. For that to happen it is enough that the sources of the infection in one ill person remain unknown. A vague and undetermined declaration, such as this one, may be broadened to cover many regions and this may lead to “a serious limitation of freedom.” Implied too are restrictions to the right of assembly in private and public places, disrupting cultural, religious and sports events. It may also prompt the suspension of classes in schools and universities, and the imposition of quarantines.

According to Agamben, there is an obvious disproportion here. What are needed are measures to deal with a seasonal flu. What lies behind this attempt to intervene constitutes an “ideal pretext” to widen the limits of the exceptional. For this reason a collective panic has been generated which is meant to force people to embrace the state in search for protection. In addition, the state stimulates a fear of proximity and urges us to maintain distance from each other. This will lead to the abolition of fellowship and the extinction of solidarity, a vicious circle which the state takes advantage of in order to increase its power over us.

It seems clear that in his repeated references to states of exception, Agamben attempts to exorcise the famous German jurist Carl Schmitt and his idea of a strong executive state. Schmitt ties state sovereignty to the exception. In Agamben’s distrust towards the state one can also see his indebtedness to Foucault. The metonymy “cutting off the king’s head”, which implies the marginalization of the state, is the way Foucault summarizes his distrust of authority and all its embodiments. His idea of a microphysics of power explores all nooks and crannies wherein may hide the authority of the bureaucracy, the legal system, armies, schools and hospitals. He seeks to expose authority and bring to light how those institutions are connected, in one way of the other, to the macrophysics of the state.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault includes a section in which he describes the application of authority during plagues and epidemics. Just as philosophers and jurists have come up with the idea of a “state of nature” in order to explain rights and laws, rulers have dreamt of a “state of plague” to imagine perfect disciplinary schemes, and in the case of leprosy, forms of exclusion. “The plague is met by order,” a political order which “lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power.”

These are the images that inform the dangerous and lamentable philosophy of Agamben. In his response to Agamben, Sergio Benvenuto, also an Italian philosopher, affirms that, in the fight against this pandemic, distance brings us together, and that a fear strategy may be the best way to ensure neighbourly and friendly distance. Benvenuto writes: “to spread fear may be wiser than to think philosophically.” And he adds: “sometimes to fear requires courage.”

One should also note that Agamben’s reading of Schmitt is incomplete. Schmitt’s authoritarianism espouses the idea of a strong executive state which decides on the exception. He does so as a way to countervail the administrative state promulgated by the Weimar constitution to advance social democratic policies abhorred by Schmitt. The measures enacted in Italy to fight the pandemic are not, as Agamben intimates, the result of the authoritarian instinct of the ruling elites who appear ready to find any excuse to decide on the exception. On the contrary, the measures adopted by Italian authorities to deal with the pandemic are the ones that an administrative state should take in order to respond effectively to the needs of the people.

Donald Trump, a defender of a strong executive state, is also a declared enemy of the administrative state, which he calls the “deep state”. His anti-statist campaign, his phobia towards the administrative state, is directly responsible for the epidemiological chaos that we witness today in the United States. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that producers and distributors of medical supplies necessary to save lives, “lack guidance from the federal government about where to send their products, as hospitals compete for desperately needed masks and ventilators to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus.”

Rear-admiral John Polowczyk, in charge of the distribution of those medical supplies for FEMA (*Federal Emergency Management Agency*), has declared that some members of Congress have suggested the need to nationalize the production of those supplies, and to centralize their distribution. Polowczyk opposes this idea because doing so would activate the administrative state, whose demise has been a key objective of the Trump government.

We face here a misguided philosophy, one that jeopardizes the government’s ability to preserve the lives of thousands of citizens. This philosophy is neoliberalism, which is akin to the one that inspires Agamben and Foucault. It is a philosophy that instills state phobia, not a phobia against the state in general, but one directed specifically against the administrative state. This is something these authors share with Schmitt. Foucault credits the state with “an intrinsic tendency to expand”, and whose aim is the invasion of civil society. In his lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, he identifies “a sort of genetic continuity or evolutionary implication” between “the administrative state, the welfare state, the bureaucratic state, the fascist state and the totalitarian state.” Without naming him, Foucault reproduces Schmitt’s distrust towards democracy, which he finds to be comparable to totalitarianism. He also reproduces Hayek, who agrees with Schmitt in that respect.

It seems to me that the alternative is a republican politics, a politics which conceives the state as a promoter and defender of the common good. Republicanism is plainly opposed to libertarian politics for its main purpose is not the maximization of individual freedom, but the good of the community. Like Foucault, republicanism encourages the need to mount guard constitutionally over the guardians, to discipline authority, but never to seek its anarchist destruction. If one tries to guarantee, at all costs, an abstract and sacralised individual freedom, and philosophically promotes state phobia, it will become impossible to unify citizens around the task of mitigating and overcoming this pandemic scourge. A politics of the common good requires a professional bureaucracy, ruled by moral principles, that fosters a balance between solidarity and subsidiarity. Subsidiary associations will flourish under the cooperative solidarity afforded by a strong

state authority that protects the weak against epidemics and pandemics, and other economic and social scourges.