

Social movements' powerlessness at the time of covid-19: a personal account

Federico Venturini (24th June 2020)

This is a story about my experience as activist-researcher during the Covid-19 crisis in Udine, a small city in the North-East of Italy¹. This is not a happy story of actions and results but a narration of frustration and feelings of impotence .

At the end of February, Italy had the first red zones in lockdown in some Northern regions . The period coincided with the Carnival holidays so schools and universities were closed for an extra week. They did not open again afterwards as the number of Covid-19 cases spiked, and the Friuli Venezia Giulia regional and national governments took a series of draconian (but necessary) decisions to restrict movement and work. On the 24th of February, the regional government decided to prohibit all gatherings of people in public places. The same decision was adopted on a national level on the 11th of March. The only commercial activities left open were food shops, pharmacies and newspaper/tobacco shops alongside a strategic selection of factories. On the 22nd of March a new national ordinance was adopted which prohibited all personal movements in a municipality except those for proven work needs, or of absolutely urgent health reasons. Moreover, a further tightening of activities, dividing them between unnecessary and necessary/strategic. In the beginning, these measures were intended until the 3rd of April but then they were extended several times until the 3rd of May.

On the top of that, the local regional government prohibited any physical or sports activities, as well as going for walks or entertaining oneself in areas frequented by several people. Moreover, they made disposable gloves and masks (or in any case a protection to cover the nose and mouth) mandatory in food shops. It seems impossible to believe that on the night of the 24th of February I had participated in a panel on the Kurdish revolution in a public event with one hundred participants. I still remember that night as if it was yesterday, with the freedom to stay out with friends and comrades and to debate and to propose new ideas. After that, a blanket of silence befell on the communications with the outside world. As a teacher and researcher, I had to switch to smart working and I started spending all my days in front of the computer (even more than before). In my family, we are three, I, Margherita and Francesco, our four-month old baby, who is super happy to have both parents at home all the time. We had to change our routine and adapt to isolation at home.

I started to feel miserable, only concentrating on teaching or tedious online research work. I even had some health issues, maybe somatizing the difficulties of being isolated. Despite the severity of the crisis, I could not organise anything

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effective to help people, a very disempowering feeling. The only action that I was able to perform (with other comrades) was to challenge the fake news on social media regarding the pandemic, often spread by right-wing or populist websites.

Then a comrade abroad asked me to join an online conversation to share the experience in Italy. From then I understood the necessity of internal communication, eased by the flexibility of online communication. That call refreshed me and I started to coordinate various efforts with groups where I was previously involved.

At this point, I would like to clarify the maybe unique situation of social movements in Italy during the pandemic. Any movement or action is forbidden, and there is almost zero possibility of doing anything. There are few relevant exceptions, for example in big cities like Milan, Rome, Turin, Naples and Bologna, social movements based in social centers managed to organise a response, developing various forms of support, especially for the delivery of basic necessities (Merli 2020). In Milano local social movements organised the Brigade 'Volontarie per l'Emergenza' - 'Crisis Volunteer Brigades'² (Redazione Milano 2020). Crucially these had the recognition and support of *Emergency*, a humanitarian NGO that provides free medical treatment in conflict areas. Having the support of legal entity, activists were able to organise different nine neighbourhood based brigades that delivered food and medicine to people in need.

However the situation in few big cities is very unusual. In most of Italy very little has been organised because of the strict lockdown laws. Breaking them is a penal offence and you receive a fine, something very unique worldwide where forms of different solidarity were effectively organised. Compared to mutual aid efforts, social movements in this phase managed more easily to concentrate their efforts for generating content for alternative media, especially for online publications and radios. Unlike other crises where social movements have quickly managed to organize themselves, and generate empathy and mobilisation in society, this time they find themselves in a cul-de-sac: on one side respecting the health requirements to end the pandemic and therefore, the impossibility of taking any actions.

National and local police renewed their efforts to enforce the new regulations, using many checkpoints and patrols, using multiple modes of surveillance, using boats and helicopters, even drones are allowed to monitor, bypassing the strict regulations that were in place before the crisis.

The control is not limited to the police surveillance of the territory but it has expanded to electronic surveillance. An application to monitor mobiles called 'Immuni' - 'Immune people' has been developed by a private company and licensed to the Italian government without cost (Redazione ANSA 2020). The aim of this application is to track the people in order to trace the possible contacts of infected people. At the moment it is under test in some regions and

² More info at: [https://www.facebook.com/brigatevolontarieMilano/](https://www.facebook.com/brigatovolontarieMilano/)

the use is voluntary although the government is expecting a massive use of it.

Furthermore, when we started to organise online communication between activists, two critical issues emerged: questions of technological literacy and the flaws of alternative online platforms. On one side, activists from all age groups often are not familiar with effective online communications or platforms and they need training. On the other, alternative online platforms showed many limits, like not being user friendly or poor performance intimes of internet overload. On the top of this, many activists and groups started to useThe current pandemic highlighted both a fundamental weakness, the lack of solid infrastructures for social change that can be activated for a medical emergency, and the State power that can effectively shut down any possible form of dissent. and understand the importance of alternative online services only during the crisis. In a time of dire need, the demand for these services has suddenly skyrocketed , putting even more pressure on autonomous resources and highlighting critical issues of learning. However, the advantages of these platforms in terms of communication self-management and digital security are enormous, both in the short and long term.

Since the beginning of the crisis, unions denounced the way that the General Confederation of Italian Industry (the Italian employers' federation and national chamber of commerce) put pressure on the government to delay the establishment of containment zones, and to weaken health guidelines in order to keep production going. From the 4 of May onwards the government is planning the Phase 2, the phase after the lockdown, with openings various health measures. However the employers are eager to open their businesses, even at the risk of the health of their employees.

Social movements were caught by surprise by this pandemic, like everyone else, and they have been very slow in organising a response, because of the gravity of the crisis and the structural issues previously highlighted. Building lasting and effective infrastructures for social change have for long been a problem that needs to be seriously addressed, now more than ever. What we are trying to do now is to discuss online what will happen next. We are all too aware that a phase of lockdown with an acute number of infections will be followed by many months of uncertainty before a vaccine or a cure will definitively solve this pandemic. What will happen during this period and the magnitude of the economic breakdown that is ahead of us remain question marks. What is certain is that with this crisis the capitalist system has demonstrated for the umpteenth time its inability to live on the planet in harmony with nature (Bookchin 2005).

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About the author

Federico Venturini is an Research Associate at the University of Udine (Italy). His current research focuses on Zero Waste and sustainable tourism. In 2016, he earned his PhD at the University of Leeds. Focusing on the experiences in Rio de Janeiro between 2013-2014, in his research he explored the relations between contemporary cities and urban social movements, utilizing participatory/militant research approaches and through the lens of social ecology. He is been a member of the Advisory Board of the Transnational Institute of Social Ecology, and the International İmralı Peace Delegation, organized by the EU Turkey Civic Commission. He co-edited with Thomas Jeffrey Miley the book *Your Freedom and Mine: Abdullah Ocalan and the Kurdish Question in Erdogan's Turkey* and with Emet Degirmenci and Inés Morales the volume *Social Ecology and the Right to the City: Towards Ecological and Democratic Cities*. He can be contacted at federico.venturini AT uniud.it