

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

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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 narrative of frustration and impotence feelings.

At the end of February Italy had the first red zones in lockdown in some regions in the North. The period coincided with the Carnival holidays, so schools and universities were closed for an extra week. After that they did not open again: the situation quickly collapsed with a spike in covid-19 cases and the regional (Friuli Venezia Giulia) and national governments took a series of draconian (but necessary) decisions regarding movement and work restrictions. On the 24th of February, the regional government decided to prohibit all gatherings of people in public places or open to the public.

The same decision was adopted on a national level on the 11th of March. The only commercial activity left open were food shops, pharmacies and newspaper/tobacco shops while a selection of strategic factories were left open. On the 22nd of March a new national ordinance was adopted which prohibited all personal movements in a municipality except that for proven work needs, of absolute urgency or health reasons. Moreover, a further tightening on open activities, dividing them between unnecessary and necessary/strategic. In the beginning, these measures were intended till the 3rd of April but then they were extended several times till the 3rd of May.

On the top of that, the local regional government prohibited carrying out any physical or sports activities, as well as going for walks or in any case to entertain oneself in areas frequented by several people. Moreover, they made mandatory disposable gloves and masks (or in any case a protection to cover the nose and mouth) in food shops.

It seems to me impossible to believe that exactly on the night of the 24th of February I 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, the freedom to stay out with friends and comrades to debate and propose new ideas. After that, a blanket of silence fell 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 super happy to have both parents at home all the time. We had to change our routine and to adapt to the home segregation.

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I started to feel miserable, only concentrated 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 effective to help people, a very disempowering feeling. The only action that I was able to perform (with other comrades) was to rebut on social media the fake news 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 what may be the unique situation of social movements in Italy during the pandemic. Any movement or action is forbidden, there is almost zero possibility to do anything. There are few relevant examples: 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 had the recognition and support of Emergency, a humanitarian NGO that provides free medical treatment in conflict areas. Having the support of a legal entity, activists were able to organise different nine brigade neighbourhood based that delivery food and medicine to the people in need.

However this situation in a few big cities is very special; in most of Italy very little has been organised because of the strict lockdown laws: breaking them is a penal offence and you also get 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 contents 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 find the pandemic, on the other the impossibility of taking any actions.

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

The control is not limited only to the police surveillance of the territory but it has expanded to electronic surveillance. An application for mobiles called 'Immuni' - 'Immune people' have been developed by a private company and licensed to the Italian government without costs (Redazione ANSA 2020). The

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

aim of this app is to track the people in order to trace possible contacts of infected people. At the moment it is under test in some regions and its use is voluntary even if the government is expecting a massive use of it.

The current pandemic highlighted both a fundamental criticality, the lack of solid infrastructures for social change that can be activated for a medical emergency, and the State power to shut down effectively any possible forms of dissent.

Furthermore, when we started to organise online communication between activists other two critical issues emerged: technology literacy and the flaws of alternative online platforms. On one side, activists from all age groups are often 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 performances in a time of internet overload. On the top of this, many activists and groups started to use and recognise the importance of alternative online services only during the crisis. In a time of dire need the demand for these services have been suddenly skyrocketing during the crisis, 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.

Various unions have already denounced that from the beginning of the crisis the General Confederation of Italian Industry put pressure on decision-making bodies to delay the establishment of containment zones or asked for less stringent limits. From the 4 of May onwards the government is planning Phase 2, the phase after the lockdown, with openings in deferred time and various health measures. However employers are eager to open their business, 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 been for long a problem that need 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 phase of lockdown with acute numbers of infections will follow by many months of uncertainty before a vaccine or a cure will solve definitely this pandemic. What will happen during this period and the magnitude of the economic breakdown that is ahead of us are a question mark. 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