

*Vincenzo Ruggiero (Middlesex University, London)**

INEQUALITY AND POWER AT THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC

1. Introduction. – 2. Money from misery. – 3. Positional consumptions. – 4. States of exception. – 5. Power and civil war. – 6. Conclusion.

1. Introduction

This research note attempts to identify an area of theoretical and empirical enquiry into the social, economic and political effects of the current Covid-19 pandemic. The questions such an enquiry will pose revolve around the extent to which the traits of societies around the world are being altered, how the different sectors of the economy are being affected, and whether social groups are paying a differential toll for Covid-19. The research will look at the opportunities afforded to powerful offenders and at how the distribution of wealth and power is being changed by the current pandemic. This research might choose to focus on one national context or opt for a comparative perspective involving two or more countries.

2. Money from misery

Lockdowns around the world caused a sharp increase in domestic violence and mental health. Confinement at home, of course, results in different sets of outcomes depending on the home in which one is confined: quarantine in comfortable and large dwellings, equipped with fast internet and full fridges, differs from quarantine that leads to unemployment and hunger (M. D'Eramo, 2020). For some, to wash their hands multiple times a day, see a doctor if feeling ill, and maintain social distancing may prove a huge challenge. In brief, research should ascertain whether coronavirus will translate into further separation and 'bunkerization' (D. South, N. South, in press) and assess its disproportionate impact on a range of disadvantaged groups, including people from an ethnic minority background.

Immigrant doctors and nurses of color are being racially abused, while extreme-right, white supremacist organizations are attempting to stir up hatred across the world. Some are calling on individuals with 'pure blood' to wield a civil war for the extermination of those who are infected (S. Sodha, 2020).

* Professore ordinario di Sociologia presso la Middlesex University di Londra.

The pandemic, on the other hand, shows our need for other people's work, but also testifies to how those we are most dependent upon are treated worse and are excluded from the enjoyment of dignified salaries and decision-making processes. With the distribution of risk becoming increasingly unequal, and despite the recognition that unskilled workers now tend to coincide with essential or key workers, research will have to establish whether the emergency is exacerbating the ills caused by social injustice.

In Camus's 'The Plague', while the rich become richer, poorer people starve. In the novel, the profiteers move in to take advantage of shortages, and as a result the gulf between rich and poor widens. Even death fails to act as a great equalizer (A. Camus, 2002; J. Rose, 2020). Similarly, examples of profiteering emerged immediately after the pandemic struck.

Growing numbers of fake medicines linked to coronavirus were on sale in developing countries. In Africa, counterfeiters exploited growing gaps in the market due to the lockdown imposed on India and China, the major world producers of medical supplies. As a consequence, fake medicines risked causing a parallel pandemic (S. Piranty, 2020). Chloroquine, used for preventing and treating malaria, was for sale on the dark web, where 200g of the medicine would cost \$500 against its market price of £6 (R. Majumdar, 2020). Ineffective disinfectants also invaded the markets, with bottles produced in 1989 being relabeled and marketed across Europe. Fake Covid-19 tests were intercepted at Los Angeles airport in a package that had come from Britain (D. Campbell, 2020). At the beginning of April 2020, more than 500 coronavirus-related scams and 2,000 phishing attempts exploiting widespread fears were reported in the UK. Some of the fraudsters posed as health service employees asking for donations, others phoned elderly people asking them to pay fines purportedly incurred by illegally leaving their homes. Profits derived from such scams were estimated at £1,6m (M. Townsend, 2020).

This brief anthology mainly refers to conventional criminality enacted by individuals or groups, who swiftly moved into promising new areas of illicit business. However, Covid-19 is offering numerous and more remunerative opportunities to white-collar and powerful offenders.

In some countries, protective masks disappeared, in others they multiplied. In the UK, government failed to buy crucial equipment to deal with a pandemic, as the country stockpile had insufficient numbers of gowns, visors, swabs and body bags. Staff was put at risk because of the shortage of personal protection equipment (PPE). Items were left out of the procurement and warnings by advisers were ignored. There were 33 million masks stocked in 2009, but only 12 million were distributed, and the government refused to explain how the missing 21 million had volatilized

(BBC News, 2020). Considering the public-private partnerships developed over the years in the UK National Health System, with services contracted out to private entrepreneurs, those missing masks were ‘somehow’ owned by some businessperson who could now sell on the precious items at non-competitive prices. Forced to purchase new respiratory masks, the British government paid Purple Surgical £45 million for items that were never delivered, as the company claimed it had been defrauded by its own supplier operating in the British Virgin Islands (M. Harris, D. Pegg, 2020).

The UK government ditched the usual competitive tendering practices, allowing companies to freely bid for work. Tory donors and companies linked to the Conservative Party were most successful under the emergency procurement rules. Policy and research firms owned by associates of Cabinet Office ministers followed suit (Open Democracy, 3 August 2020). Overall, the British government failed to disclose the details of contracts valued at more than £5 billion, openly breaching transparency rules (P. Geoghegan, 2020).

In Italy, there was an overabundance of masks: an entrepreneur cashed in 15,8m euros after fraudulently securing a contract that committed him to provide 24 million of them. He did not deliver the goods, claiming that the items were blocked on account of bureaucratic red tape at international Guangzhou Baiyun airport in China. An inspection in the warehouse of that airport did not find anything there (M.E. Vincenzi, 2020). Former President of the Chamber, Irene Pivetti, was also investigated for her role in the import and marketing of masks from China: the products marketed did not comply with the essential safety requirements (Teller Report, 2020).

Managers of a home for the elderly in Milan, the Pio Albergo Trivulzio, were investigated for manslaughter after seventy guests died during the month of March only. The victims were kept in abysmal hygienic conditions and staff downplayed the risk of infection. Similarly, in the Madrid region, where more than 3,300 elderly died at nursing homes, troops were sent in to disinfect buildings. In late March, they made a shocking discovery, finding residents living in squalor among the bodies of people who had died of Covid-19 (Associated Press, 2020).

In the US and elsewhere many financial operators were found guilty of insider dealing, as they sold shares after acquiring privileged information that markets would plummet over the coronavirus crisis. On March 2020, the federal Reserve made the historical announcement that, in response to the coronavirus economic crisis, it would provide loans to non-financial corporations in industry. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) set aside \$46b to be shared between passengers and cargo airlines, leaving \$454b for the political authorities to distribute to

the fortunate corporate recipients they would select. The monitoring of the disbursement was deemed inefficient and unlikely to work (R. Brenner, 2020).

In the UK and elsewhere, a large number of employers pocketed the furlough money destined for their employees. In sum, most business sectors stopped believing in the miraculous properties of markets and started invoking and exploiting state intervention. Finally, governments around the world face a wave of lawsuits from multinational corporations for loss of profit experienced during the pandemic. The legal actions might be launched under Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS), with claims being heard in highly secretive and ad hoc tribunals (The Observer, 16 August 2020).

3. Positional consumptions

While the initial effects of the pandemic are visible, those likely to follow can, for the time being, only be hypothesized. Will the near future exacerbate social inequality?

Some economic sectors show declining profits, particularly the automobile, oil and energy industries, while the pharmaceutical and food industries are experiencing substantial growth rates. The sectors of large distribution and electronics are growing exponentially. Recovery in the declining sectors will require specific strategies, identify the goods to be offered and the precise consumers to be targeted. The following is a scenario that can be depicted if we adopt the established distinction between absolute and positional needs.

Absolute needs are universal and independent of the relationships we establish with others; they consist of eating, drinking, dressing, having a roof. Once these needs are satisfied, people aspire to gain positions which place them above the others. Underlying this aspiration is the widely-shared assumption that what constitutes wellbeing is the acquisition of privileged positions and conditions. It is an aspiration fostered by positional needs.

Bearing this distinction in mind, and drawing on the lucid analysis provided by Nicolò Bellanca (2020), let us now hypothesize the possibility of choosing between two types of societies. In society A we live in a three-bedroom house while our neighbours' houses have four bedrooms. In society B we have a two-bedroom house while our neighbours have only one bedroom at their disposal. In absolute terms society A would be the best option. However, many would prefer society B, where the absolute size of their home would be smaller but its relative size would be larger. The value of the home, therefore, depends heavily on the conditions of others and on the type of home they possess. Society B epitomizes the functioning of contemporary market societies, where individual wellbeing coincides with the acquisition

of privileges, consisting, for example, in occupational prestige, quality health care and the enjoyment of exclusive goods such as a holiday in a select resort.

I will return to the effects of the coronavirus after a short stay in the realm of exclusive holidays. In the pre-pandemic period, a holiday in a tropical island was accessible to portions of the middle and high-middle classes, according to the respective availability of funds and the range of packages offered. After Covid-19, health security becomes paramount, and, as a consequence, the number of holiday-makers assembled in resorts will have to be reduced. The ensuing selective process is likely to produce a substantial rise in prices, so that those who take the holiday will also pay for those who cannot afford it (N. Bellanca, 2020). This requires higher levels of inequality among the potential customers. In brief, in a market economy, polarization of economic conditions are advantageous, larger inequalities more so than minor ones. The pandemic, therefore, may hail the arrival of a new 'leisure class' which consumes conspicuously for the mere desire to show status and success, a behaviour equated by Veblen (1924) to a relic of a predatory, barbarian past.

4. Sates of exception

Pandemics often trigger institutional adjustments and innovations in the exercise of power. Camus' pestilence is at once blight and revelation, as it allows hidden corruption to surface. 'The Plague' thrusts up the filth that has done its work internally, showing the disease of an apparently healthy system (A. Camus, 2002). The revelation, however, is not followed by collective initiative for change, but by the shaping of novel tools for the conservation and empowerment of the system. In the seventeenth century, plagued cities witnessed the strengthening of the 'sanitary police' and pandemics seemed to be 'politically necessary', as they encouraged the restructuring of law enforcement agencies and the judicial system. Daniel Defoe's description of the plague in London offers examples of how municipal powers regrouped and authorities found revitalization. The plague that erupted in Milan in 1630 gave rise to new experiments in torture, inflicted on those suspected of spreading it (A. Manzoni, 1964; V. Ruggiero, 2003). In brief, it does not take conspiratorial minds to note that, with pandemics, social control becomes less haphazard and citizens are faced with agencies that promise security and immunity in exchange for a quantum of liberty.

In the current pandemic, conspiracy theorists may inspire attacks against mobile phone masts, implying that the latest 5G technology is the real cause of coronavirus. They may detect genocidal intentions on the part of the elite to kill huge numbers of people and enslave whoever is left. The effect of conspiracy theories, however, may consist in discouraging people from

political action, leaving the field clear for the cynical and the fatalists. At the same time, it may divert attention from how emergencies and states of exception fuel other mechanisms that restructure power and its practices. But the fact that state agencies are likely to benefit from the pandemic does not justify conspiratorial paranoia (J. Meek, 2020).

Sovereign power brings the entitlement to declare a state of exception, to suspend the law, it gives the right to suspend rights in the name of protecting the state and its population from sudden or excessive risk. In states of emergency citizens are dealt with as bare bodies, as barely worthy of living. The coronavirus emergency has proven that thanato-politics does not limit itself to causing death, but extends to the domain of making profits out of it, resulting in something we can call necro-economics. As noted above, there is money in misery, but also in death. What remains to be analyzed is how new forms of power can spring from the increased inequality being caused.

5. Power and civil war

In his lectures collected in *The Punitive Society*, Michel Foucault (2013) sets off with the statement that laws are made by people for whom they are not intended and applied to those who did not make them. Referring to the Hobbesian 'war of all against all', he argues that such war does not characterize the primitive stages of human development, nor does it constitute an archaic phase of societies. War is constantly fuelled by distrust and competition, which for Foucault turn into latent or manifest belligerence. The appearance of the sovereign, in other words, does not bring the war of all against all to an end. Latent and manifest belligerence, for Foucault, are varieties of civil wars that do not engage cut-throat competition between individuals, but collective entities constituted around kinship, clienteles, religions, ethnic groups, linguistic communities, classes and so on.

It is always through masses, collective and plural elements that civil war is at once born, unfolds as is carried on... Furthermore, civil war not only stages collective elements, it forms them (*ivi*, 28).

Civil war, from this perspective, does not signal the return of societies to the state of nature or the forceful abdication of the sovereign, rather it fuels a process through which new social groups are forged. Foucault refers as examples to the peasant class that found unity in the civil wars of the Middle Ages, but also to the *sans-culottes* during the French Revolution. In brief, civil wars do not destroy power, they feed it, confiscate or transform it. They

lead to the appropriation of portions of political force and of the processes and rites that accompany it.

This may be one of the effects of the current pandemic, that Foucault would assimilate to a latent civil war encouraging the appropriation of political and material force by specific social groups. The superior position thus achieved by such groups will not simply permit the enjoyment of goods, but will also provide the foundations for the acquisition of further power and yet larger resources in the future. This relational, relative notion of power suggests that only by increasing the distance from others will the powerful avoid or defeat challengers.

6. Conclusion

The pandemic fosters exclusive attention to medical issues, showing our failure to respond to the emergency through the provision of universal health prevention and care. However, the right to health should be located against the background of obsessive notions of economic development that turn into destructive growth (V. Ruggiero, 2013). Intrusion into risky natural habitats is among the causes of the current predicaments. This country-centered or comparative research will attempt to reveal the effect of the pandemic on social inequality and on the distribution of wealth and power. As Pulitzer Prize-winner Thomas Friedman has contended, Father Greed may win over Mother Nature, loose cultures may evolve into tight cultures, namely bottom-up power be increasingly replaced by top-down power (India Today, 7 May 2020). Hobbes remarked that, when social groups achieve increasingly superior positions they are rewarded with respect and glory: it is to be hoped that the groups gobbling misery and death will be dealt with less kindly.

References

- ASSOCIATED PRESS (2020), *Europe's Nursing Homes in Spotlight for Unaccounted Virus Dead*, Associated Press, 7 April, in <https://www.thisismoney.co.uk/wires/ap/article-8197741/Europes-nursing-homes-spotlight-unaccounted-virus-dead.html> (accessed 29 April 2020).
- BBC NEWS (2020), *Coronavirus: UK Failed to Stockpile Crucial PPE*, BBC News, 28 April, in <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52440641> (accessed 29 April 2020).
- BELLANCA Nicolò (2020), *Pandemia e nuove disuguaglianze*, in "MicroMega", 4, pp. 16-28.
- BRENNER Robert (2020), *Escalating Plunder*, in "New Left Review", 123, pp. 5-22.
- CAMPBELL Duncan (2020), *Blitz Spirit? It's Another Bonanza for Spivs and Thieves*, in "The Guardian", 28 March, in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/28/blitz-spirit-its-another-bonanza-for-spivs-and-thieves> (accessed 29 April 2020).
- CAMUS Albert (2002), *The Plague*, Penguin, London.

- D'ERAMO Marco (2020), *The Philosopher's Epidemic*, in "New Left Review", 122, pp. 3-8.
- FOUCAULT Michel (2013), *The Punitive Society*, Picador, New York.
- GEOGHEGAN Peter (2020), *The Tories' Outsourcing of the Pandemic Response*, in "London Review of Books", 5 November, pp. 9-12.
- HARRIS Mark, PEGG David (2020), *£45m Deal for NHS Masks Collapses amid Fraud Claims*, in <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/03/45m-deal-for-nhs-masks-collapses-amid-claims> (accessed 3 November 2020).
- INDIA TODAY (2020), *Full Transcript: Thomas Friedman on the World after Novel Coronavirus Pandemic*, in <https://www.indiatoday.in/e-conclave-2020/story/full-transcript-thomas-friedman-on-the-world-after-novel-coronavirus-pandemic-1675194-2020-05-07> (accessed 28 October 2020).
- MAJUMDAR Romita (2020), *Coronavirus: Fake Covid-19 Drugs, Vaccines Thrive on Dark Web* *livemint*, 22 April, in <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/dark-web-criminals-peddle-fake-covid-19-vaccines-as-a-front-for-malware-attacks-11587390740238.html> (accessed 29 April 2020).
- MANZONI Alessandro (1964), *The Column of Infamy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- MEEK James (2020), *Red Pill, Blue Pill: On the Conspiracist Mind*, in "London Review of Books", 22 October, pp. 19-23.
- OPEN DEMOCRACY, 3 August 2020, in <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/revealed-tory-linked-pr-firm-given-3m-covid-19-contract-without-tender/> (accessed 22 August 2020).
- PIRANTY Sam (2020), *Coronavirus Fuels a Surge in Fake Medicines*, BBC World News, 9 April, in <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52201077> (accessed 29 April 2020).
- ROSE Jacqueline (2020), *Pointing the Finger: On «The Plague»*, in "London Review of Books", 7 May, pp. 3-6.
- RUGGIERO Vincenzo (2003), *Crime in Literature*, Verso, London-New York.
- RUGGIERO Vincenzo (2013), *The Crimes of the Economy*, Routledge, London-New York.
- SODHA Sonia (2020), *NHS Heroes... and Targets of Racists*, in "The Guardian", 5 April, in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/nhs-heroes-and-targets-of-racists> (accessed 29 April 2020).
- SOUTH Daniel, SOUTH Nigel (in press), *Bunkerization: Elite Preparedness and Retreat in the Anthropocene*, in CARILLO J. et al. (a cura di), *City Preparedness for the Climate Crisis*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
- TELLER REPORT (2020), *Coronavirus: Mask Fraud, Investigated Irene Pivetti*, Teller Report, 28 April, in <https://www.tellerreport.com/news/2020-04-28-coronavirus--mask-fraud--investigated-irene-pivetti.H1zvkfUYI.html> (accessed 29 April 2020).
- THE OBSERVER, 16 August 2020, in <https://www.theobserver.com/law/2020/aug/15/global-law-firms-expected-to-sue-uk-for-coronavirus-losses>.
- TOWNSEND Mark (2020), *Fraudsters Exploiting Covid-19 Fears Have Scammed £1,6m*, in "The Guardian", 4 April, in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/04/fraudsters-exploiting-covid-19-fears-have-scammed-16m> (accessed 29 April 2020).
- VEBLEN Thorstein (1924), *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Allen & Unwin, London.
- VINCENZI Maria Elena (2020), *Coronavirus: truffa su mascherine: arrestato per turbativa d'asta l'imprenditore Antonello Ieffi*, in "la Repubblica", 4 April, in https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/04/09/news/mascherine-253536821/?refresh_ce (accessed 29 April 2020).

Abstract

INEQUALITY AND POWER AT THE TIME OF THE PANDEMIC

This research note attempts to identify an area of theoretical and empirical enquiry into the social, economic and political effects of the current Covid-19 pandemic. The questions such an enquiry will pose revolve around the extent to which the traits of societies around the world are being altered, how the different sectors of the economy are being affected, and whether social groups are paying a differential toll for Covid-19. The research will look at the opportunities afforded to powerful offenders and at how the distribution of wealth and power is being changed by the current pandemic. This research might choose to focus on one national context or opt for a comparative perspective involving two or more countries.

Key words: Plague, Power, Civil War.