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Day 57: life in Italy under lockdown. Machiavelli the juggler



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Lockdown liberalization, Phase II, begins tomorrow. As politicians have been warning us for more than a month, reopening has to happen in stages. Italy can't suddenly unlock all the doors of the economy simultaneously because different parts of the country and sectors of the economy have been affected in different ways by the pandemic; opening everything everywhere all at once won't enable the epidemiologists to pinpoint hotspots and take appropriate action.

Will new precautions in the factories avoid contamination? Will new spacing measures on public transportation reassure passengers? Will the wearing of masks in public make people feel safer? Will all the new measures being taken really reduce the spread of COVID-19? Politicians and pundits don't know, so they are tiptoeing gingerly into these waters.

Niccolò Machiavelli had something to say about this more than 500 years ago. *“There is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old institution and merely lukewarm defenders in those who gain by the new ones.”*

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has to juggle these conflicting interests, and so do the presidents of Italy's 20 regions, since they have latitude in implementing certain national rules and guidelines. Some sociologists and planners insist that the corona crisis should be the catalyst for a new system, because the system in which we find ourselves is unsustainable long-term. Our unbalanced relationship with nature (whatever is left

of it), our exposure to contaminants in crowded, noisy cities, our unhealthy diets, our income inequalities will doom us in the end, they say. On the other hand, “preservation” proponents can’t wait to return to the pre-crisis “normal” because their profits are based on the mechanisms of the status quo. We may not love all aspects of it but better the devil you know than the devil you don’t, they contend, right along with Machiavelli.

Other juggling involves the right to individual freedom versus the right to a safe environment for the collectivity. In the US, this is dramatized by recent conflicting positions staked out by Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) and Elon Musk (Tesla).

Zuckerberg mused to analysts that abolishing “shelter in place” restrictions too quickly would worsen long-term health and economic outcomes, and he cautioned the government to proceed slowly. Musk called such restrictions “fascist” and “an outrage” (using piquant language). . . and urged people to protest with as much civil disobedience as they could muster.

Most US protests (not Musk’s) are funded by ultra-right-wing groups including FreedomWorks, Convention of States Action, and the American Legislative Exchange Council. Italy, true to form, isn’t as well organized, although it does have its share of domestic extremist groups and interference from foreign sources as well.

Analysis of protests is more complicated because two of the regions hardest hit by the pandemic — Lombardia and Veneto — are both headed by politicians of the Lega, a right-wing

party. Granted their situations are different: Lombardia is the financial and industrial capital of Italy and tourism was not a significant revenue generator till recent years; Veneto relies heavily on tourism (hello Venice), though it does have some world-class companies.

Their approaches and results contrasted accordingly. The first two reported cases of COVID-19 were in Codogno, Lombardia, and Vo, Veneto, and the initial contagion rate in both small cities seemed similar at the outset. In fact, the speed of contagion seemed more rapid in Veneto, reports Lia Quartapelle, a parliamentarian from Lombardia. But the organization of healthcare in the two regions is very different. Lombardia has several medical poles of excellence, known throughout Europe for their high quality of expertise and research. “They became business generators, very remunerative for the region,” explains Quartapelle, but they were no longer people-oriented healthcare providers. Veneto is much more present throughout the region, more capillary, more home-oriented.

So when the first wave of infections occurred, people in Veneto contacted their doctors. Many stayed at home, where medical staff went to visit them with appropriate precautions. In Lombardia, many went to the big hospital centers. Since strict protocols weren't imposed at the outset (who knew about the asymptomatics?), hospital staff became infected and infected other patients. This led to more deaths, including deaths in the medical profession, exacerbating the crisis.

A lesson to be drawn is that political leanings may not be as impactful as managerial competence in achieving positive outcomes. Another lesson is that long-term business interests are best-served when long-term societal objectives weigh more heavily than short-term business interests. Machiavelli might not approve.

Conte and the regions are juggling yet another set of balls in the air: the need to emphasize the seriousness of COVID-19 (read: make people afraid enough to respect the rules — thumbs up from Machiavelli) against the need to encourage people so they will be optimistic about the future.

Machiavelli would not have understood the latter need, since he believed that men should “either be indulged or utterly destroyed.” Sorry, Niccolò. In today’s world, consumers are needed, and pessimistic customers do not revive *status quo* economies, much less enable the changes required for new ones.

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