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Pandemic in Italy

Solidarity in the red zone

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The instruction to stay at home, the closure of schools and the lack of protection for some jobs has left many in isolation. A unique trade union helpdesk [in Milan] shows that there are hands that can reach out to each other even during a pandemic...

For two weeks now my daily routine has been totally disturbed and I still haven't found the way, or the strength, to get it back to some sort of normality: every morning I get up and try not to think about it, I go straight to put on my clothes as usual, and then have breakfast. I used to listen to the radio news while I drank my coffee, for some days now I have put this ritual on hold and I wait for the evening for information. During that time while reality does not enter my kitchen, I try to think that today is an ordinary day, when I could go to work outside the house but why not be comfortable working here. So I reach the biggest table in the living room, where the computers have been open since the night before, mine and that of my roommates. They are already sitting at the desk, earphones in their ears and eyes on their screens.

I sit down.

I sigh.

And only then do I admit to myself that no ordinary day is about to begin, because this is not my work desk and I have never shared it with these people, because there is a pandemic out there and the updated data has just been communicated on the radio news that I did not want to listen to.

Since the beginning of the lockdown, our living room has become a makeshift trade union helpdesk, which coordinates and organises solidarity between neighbours and develops forms of collective support including food supply, child care, the defence of labour rights, in the face of all the multiple problems resulting from the state of emergency. After having tested out a plan of work with a network of direct contacts, we just had to circulate a few posts on social networks and a few posters in front of the supermarket for the project to function. [\[1\]](#) For a few weeks now, the municipal council's switchboard has been referring the requests for help to the many self-organized groups in the area like ours.

The phone rings.

The phone has been ringing off the hook for ten days now.

It's Edith, a housekeeper. She hasn't been called to work since the Coronavirus emergency. Hers was the only salary at home, her husband has been unemployed for a long time. She asks me if any of the social security benefits provided by the government will apply to her sector or the unemployed like her husband. A similar question was also asked a few days ago by Luca, our neighbour, who was laid off during his probationary period in a bar, before the national redundancy fund was allocated and the ban on layoffs for 60 days was decreed. Maria, on the other hand, worked when there was work at the ticket office of a theatre, cash in hand. Pietro is an intern in a renowned restaurant in Milan. Chiara, on a temporary contract in a call center, had no broadband at home and could not work remotely, so she was left without work. I'm one of you, I'll answer. We are stuck at home like the others, with the worry of how much longer we will be in this situation, the constant worry about the infection figures that continue to rise, while nobody thinks about us.

I have a weight on my chest and shortness of breath. It's just anxiety. It's not a fever or a dry cough or any other symptom

But living without knowing what tomorrow will bring wears you down. At least we could delude ourselves that we were looking at a horizon. We were almost used to living like that.

When life is more important than profit

The effects of social disintegration are not new to anyone, but this situation means we cannot go on saying that we can still bear it, that there are still those who were worse off than us. The state of emergency, together with the fears, the drastic changes, the continuous and close relationship with the State and its agencies, has also given an urgency to many difficult situations that remain invisible in ordinary conditions - the collapse of welfare, the 'normal' isolation of the most fragile, of the everyday social distance from one another. The extraordinariness of the moment we are experiencing seems to have given new legitimacy to those who need to ask for help, to declare they themselves to be in a state of emergency. Because, in retrospect, Rita was disabled even before the pandemic, and dragging herself to the supermarket on foot has always been painful. Silvia has had an immune deficiency disease for years, yet only now that health is a collective priority does she ask for help in caring for her elderly aunt. Catherine has suffered violence from her lifelong partner and being able to ask for help in caring for her children was finally the way to talk to someone about what is going on at home. Alice was attacked by her employer while they were discussing the suspension of her work. What used to happen behind the bar counter now happens with the shutters open.

A health emergency on a global scale has blown up the foundations of a system based on the subordination of lives to the imperatives of economic growth and profit. Daily deaths at work, one femicide every three days and shipwrecks in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea have never interrupted 'normality'. Death of those who work three jobs at a time, lose their homes or give up their health has never stopped financial policies in favour of large companies and the banks. Today, a new - albeit contradictory - centrality of life and its protection gives an unprecedented legitimacy to the stories of those who had hitherto kept silent. The society of mutually indifferent individuals, called to make it on their own, to be ashamed of their needs and to call them failures, has ripped off its mask: there is no escape route for a few from an infected planet. We will not be cured until we are all cured.

Until yesterday, if someone was worse off than we were, we had a readymade pretext to avoid listening to ourselves but also to delude ourselves - that we were not last in the competition for survival. Today the race is suspended and that other person is at the top of the list of calls to make. A question comes out of the morass of those most affected and creates an unexpected bond: can I do something for you?

As alone as a heroine

"Hello?"

Sometimes I don't even have time to introduce myself in time, to give some elements to establish a trustworthy contact by phone between strangers who already have had their lives turned upside down by this emergency.

Claudia is a nurse in one of the many overwhelmed hospitals in the province of Milan, working day and night without gloves, masks or gown. Her roommate has tested positive for Covid-19 and the hospital has put pressure on her through every informal channel to convince her to change where she lives at her own expense. Claudia calls me from

the bed and breakfast where she moved, her voice breaking with anguish, she can't go on paying pay two rents, her family is far away, the hospital is placing all the burden on her, she feels on the verge of a nervous breakdown and abandoned by everyone. Nurses are the heroes of this dystopian present, as long as they do not create problems or as long as they don't cause additional expense: national responsibility stops at the door of a room at 40 euros per night. Claudia raises her voice with me on the phone, filled with all the frustration and sense of abandonment that she has kept silent for days.

I'm listening, I suspend my life for a few minutes and make room for this story that I wouldn't have known if I hadn't gone looking for it. I make it mine. We will get out of this nightmare together, I promise you. No employer can force an employee to move out. No one, especially not one on the front line in this emergency, must be alone in the collapse of a health care system that has been plundered for decades. A joint letter from the employee and the trade union will demand the employer does the right thing. In the meantime, a word-of-mouth solidarity network was organized to find Claudia a solution to her housing situation until the hospital would take on the costs it had imposed on her.

The isolated life of those who stay at home

The instruction to stay at home has left thousands of families and especially women in complete isolation. Their presumed natural predisposition to domestic and care work, which has always been convenient in order to cut the public funds of the welfare state as well as the health system, now legitimises a continuous burden on the shoulders of women within the four walls of their home.

Anita has three children, the oldest is suffering from cognitive problems, hyperactivity disorder and requires full-time care. She lost her job and consequently her home. shortly before the emergency broke out A friend offered them a limited temporary housing solution. When Anita calls to share her situation, she is in difficulty because even a conversation of a few minutes becomes very difficult, this mother cannot even take a break from child care for a phone call to ask for support. On her own, she can't even give her children an hour's break outside every now and then, and forced containment makes the older of the three explosive. Eleanor and her husband, cleaning staff at the hospital, have to leave the house every day to go to work: their 7-year-old daughter, the only one at home who speaks Italian as her mother tongue, risks being left alone to follow distance learning. The three children of the tobacconist's shop under my house, who have a separated father, are in the same situation. Diego and Tiziana, both doctors, with a 4-year-old son, have launched an appeal for someone to move into their home, as long as the emergency situation keeps them out of the house for very long shifts and they cannot ask their grandparents for support so as not to put them at risk. Thousands of children have been learning to read and write on their own for a couple of weeks now. Mario is a single father of two children, lives in the suburbs and works at the supermarket in the neighbouring municipality. Every day he has to find someone to take care of the children during his work shifts and the two hours he takes travelling to and from the supermarket.

While Confindustria (Italian bosses organisation) puts pressure on the government to ensure that production is not interrupted too much, the strict instruction to stay at home and avoid contact has instead isolated and abandoned these families. A baby-sitter bonus was announced in the "Cura Italia" decree, but the timing of its actual implementation is unknown. The decree of 22 March finally made it clear that domestic and care work is among the essential activities, but the state washes its hands of the management of a sector structured in informality (and off the books pay) and which is difficult to account for in the face of the request for self-certification for travelling to work.

The solidarity towards these families, by people who have made themselves available as babysitters and educators free of charge while waiting for state funds to be available, is the only thing that to date has allowed them not to become the "inevitable" collateral victims of this emergency. The solidarity sharing of care work, in a system that

devalues it to the point of transforming it into an invisible sacrifice, brings out the implicit premise that makes confinement within the home possible. Affirming "I am at home" is only possible if there are those who, on a daily basis, respond to the need for care.

Help me get out of this episode of Black Mirror.

Quiet. For about a month now, a new silence has surrounded us. Around and about, the few people exchange suspicious glances, from behind the mask that covers half of their face. An ambulance siren breaks the apparent silence, the sound gets closer and closer, the vehicle stops under the house. The neighbourhood leans out onto the balconies. They've come to pick someone up. We hold our breath. Before going out, although it shouldn't be necessary, it has become customary to print and fill out a self-certificate to declare the reasons for crossing the threshold of our home. In a very long queue in front of the supermarket people point the finger and accuse each other of having already done the shopping more times than necessary. A couple leave the house to get some air. A TV crew is pointing cameras at them while they are holding hands, the scene is broadcast live on TV. The journalist, microphone in hand, stops the couple asking them to keep a safe distance for everyone's sake. At the playground below the house, two people are sitting on the same bench. A neighbour spotted them, posted their picture on the neighbourhood facebook group and then called the police.

Every other day I get the feeling that I've fallen into a dystopian film, and it usually happens when those around me express feelings of serenity and confidence that "everything will be fine". But the widespread malaise is real and is beginning to shape our relationships at a safe distance. The anguish must find an outlet. The anointed one is the scapegoat for all epidemics and today he wears sportswear, he huddles in the parks together with those like him. And he doesn't understand, the fool, that one has to stay at home, or perhaps worse, he is aware and behaves irresponsibly. The rampant hatred makes me feel even more vulnerable and powerless. The fear is that we will end up killing each other if Covid-19 doesn't do it for us. When I'm overwhelmed with fear, I imagine my own hospitalization in intensive care and the neighborhood commenting on the neighborhood group: "she went looking for it".

But is it possible to self-impose imprisonment without getting eaten up by anger and frustration? Standing on the balcony, the hate pointed outwards, towards that overcrowded bench, maybe we are just protecting those who find themselves locked in quarantine with us from our reactions.

What if just a moment before capturing the wrongdoers, the image in focus waiting for the click, the phone rings? On the other end, someone ready to accompany you through the maze for access to social benefits, to queue at the pharmacy and take your medicine home, to do somersaults with your son while you are on duty at work, to take home a box full of seasonal fruit and vegetables, to build a solidarity box for all those excluded like you from welfare. There are hands that can hold each other while keeping a safe distance. There is a dense web of relationships of solidarity that can occupy the void, embrace, put a boundary to fear and limit the desire to destroy bonds given how difficult it is to build them.

On daunting days like these, marked by out-of-control numbers of virus admissions and deaths, governed without warning by increasingly strict rules and new fines to threaten offenders, to get out of the Black Mirror perhaps we need to find the space to give expression to our moods: incoherent, resigned, inappropriate, obsequious or dissonant as they may be. The strong commands that come to us from above to govern the emergency, affect all our communications. We do not ask questions but formulate exhortations or declarations with a peremptory tone about the behaviour of others. To rely on the sense of duty within our daily relationships, where strict regulations are present every day, produces something we are not accustomed to. What if we tried to suspend mutual injunctions to

make room for listening to what we feel we need, in this daily life already so marked by the demand for responsibility?

When the space of our relationships fill up with what one has to do or avoid, or with the correct way to react or think, it restricts the space for questioning. Of everything, asking for help is perhaps the most difficult thing to do. It means exposing oneself directly, revealing one's own weaknesses, running the risk of showing one's vulnerability to people who might take advantage of it. To tell the truth this has always been the case. But an invisible virus is revealing our hands and leaving us defenceless against all risks. Will it help us to escape this nightmare? While I am asking for help fear leaves me through that request and dissolves in the embrace of who is reaching out for me and that is how the nightmare can begin to end.

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Translated for **International Viewpoint** from [Jacobin Italia](#).

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[1] The post on the Facebook page of Ri-Make social centre [here](#).