

# **The clash of technocracies**

## **The pandemic's episteme of the Italian Red Zone**

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## About the Special Issue: Discourse Studies Essays on the Corona Crisis

*Edited by Jens Maeße, David Adler & Elena Psyllakou*

This special issue seeks to collect ideas, reflections and discussions on the multiple aspects of the ongoing corona crisis from a discourse analytical and discourse theoretical point of view. We publish short work-in-progress papers (approx. 1000–3000 words) that take empirical, ethical, psychoanalytical, economic, political and everyday aspects as starting point for developing discourse analytical research ideas and reflections which can be further developed into full research papers at a later time.

# The clash of technocracies

## The pandemic's episteme of the Italian Red Zone

Gerardo Costabile Nicoletta

This contribution analyses different technocratic discourses emergent in the context of the Italian management of the coronavirus pandemic. It suggests that each of these discourses share a common conception of the population as irresponsible and potentially dangerous. The main unintentional outcome of such common epistemic terrain is the empowerment and the enforcement of administrative and police practices over territories and populations. Through this discussion, the paper sets out to highlight a paternalistic appeal which reconstitutes a 'responsible subject' for the post-covid era.

*Keywords: expert discourse; episteme; technocracy; global pandemic; EU discourse*

### The Italian exceptionalism in the global pandemic

The global pandemic declared by the World Health Organisation is the outcome of complex networks of geopolitical and socio-historical dynamics composed of environmental hazard and bio-warfare scenarios. In this complex tangle of geo-historical processes, one of the biggest hubs of the global value network in the north of Italy faced an intensified spread of the coronavirus. Initially restricted to northern areas, the Italian government extended the lockdown to the whole national territory: a national 'red zone' with severe quarantine measures was declared on the 9th of March. Throughout the spread of the coronavirus, the Italian mainstream media have narrated global pandemic through the authoritative utterances of specialists, the peril of a national health emergency and the fear of (a new) economic crisis. Scientific, economic and political aspects have meshed into the neuro-medial streams of the big media outlets, television programmes and newspapers, which often celebrate the Italian management of the coronavirus as a model for the other European countries. Questioning such Italian exceptionalism, having emerged among official narratives, I suggest that many contingencies constitute different, conflicting but still complementary technocratic discourses, which express specific transnational socio-political positions.

The paper selects three discourses from the media narrative nebula: the technical-scientific discourse, the economic-productivist discourse and the European-reformist discourse. I will first look at the parabola of technical-scientific expert discourses, embodied in the national technical-scientific committee, as the basis for the legitimation of executive power throughout the corona-crisis. Then I will refer to the economic-productivist discourse, which has framed the coronavirus crisis as an economic issue even when faced with high death rates and social catastrophe. Finally, I will address how both scientific and economic pressures are the basis for a European reformist discourse built on the needs of rescuing the economy with expansionary policies and common budgetary policy. The initial caution of the EU has shown once again its technocratic character with its politics of expertise. Indeed, the call for a new European solidarity has been curbed by the complex negotiation about the primacy of creditors and the preservation of financial asymmetries. As I will discuss, these discourses are linked by an implicit conceptualisation of the population as irresponsible and potentially dangerous. This discursive regularity represents the bulk of what can be considered as the pandemic's episteme. Orienting the monitoring practices, the shared technocratic mistrust towards the populations has produced new sites of affirmation for

governmental techniques in territories reconstituting a particular political subjectivity: the responsible.

## Scientists revival and its discontents

The declaration of the global pandemic brought scientific experts to the core of decision-making in the national executive once more<sup>1</sup>. Emergency decrees and scientists' discourses have been the pillars of crisis management: virologists, epidemiologists and hygienists have arrived at the centre of decision making and invaded public debate and social media. Framing targets, procedures, goals and offering solutions are the jurisdictions of the institutional-authoritative voice of the technical-scientific committee<sup>2</sup>, considered and represented as an a-political, pre-political entity. In this institutional and discursive setting, public scientific experts have been presented as life's technicians whose task is to prevent the spread of the virus through rational and efficient prescriptions. The emergency decrees of the government have been armoured by the technical guidelines of scientific experts throughout the 55 days of comprehensive lockdown despite the increasing discontents of various socio-economic interests. In the technical-scientific discourse, the distance between the expert and the population is clear: 'hard scientists' (try to) know, through specialistic expertise, the main features of the virus, whereas the 'ordinary people' – consciously and unconsciously – expose themselves to risky and dangerous situations by maintaining their aggregation and meeting habits.

In the wake of fear at the sight of a possible health tragedy, the technical-scientific discourse has initially represented the main frame through which the pandemic has been faced. For a moment, the (late) recognition of the disastrous neoliberal reason determined a revival of the scientific expert discourse and questioned the idea of

hospitals as firms organized around a principle of economic efficiency and cost reduction. In the latest decades, the national health system has been sacrificed in the name of the EU's economic constitution. In the post-crisis decade of 2009–2019 the budgetary policies of the European Union's governance have radically decreased the resources of public health institutions, thereby depriving them of the financial resources to meet balance adjustment. With the delocalisation of healthcare services' management to regional apparatuses and their political clientele, European austerity produced differentiated outcomes in territories, leaving high-performance health care systems in specific areas while decreasing the infrastructure and personnel in peripheral areas. With the growing special funds for the health system and the progressive re-opening of activities in the so-called phase 2, scientific-expert discourses started to be relegated to a guide-line provider task. The pressures for economic relaunch, spread and diffused by a vast range of professionals and economic interests, started to erode the scientific discourse perceived now as the pessimistic Cassandra of the public debate.

## The productivist orthopedy in the pandemic

The slow decline of scientific expert discourse has been pushed by the increasing pressure of economic interests. Whereas the former has produced binding rules and social protocols in the attempt of containing the spread of the virus, the latter fears the restrained economic activity and the declining of economic indicators more than the virus itself. The economic-productivist discourse signifies the coronavirus crisis first and foremost as a tragedy for 'the economy'. The stubborn industriousness of economic sectors has been variously translated in discourses which maintain the discipline of labour and the preservation of valorisation processes even amid a social and health catastrophe. While the white-collar employees of the service

- 1 In the Italian experience, the techno-scientific legitimation has been often used by executives to overcome socio-political conflicts, especially in the economic and institutional crisis management. In various contingencies, 'technical governments', composed by experts of national and international institutions, have re-aligned Italian political agenda with dominant transnational socio-political programmes. The explosion of the pandemic has revived this discursive-institutional pattern, freezing political tensions over scientific expertise and empowering expert authoritative positions. For instance, in 2018 the head of the most important public health authority, *Istituto Superiore di Sanità*, resigned to due to anti-scientific attitude of populist forces in the previous government, composed by the Lega and the Five Star Movement. *Il Corriere della sera*, Walter Ricciardi: "Lascio l'Istituto superiore sanità, il governo ha posizioni antiscientifiche". 19/1/2019 ([https://www.corriere.it/cronache/19\\_gennaio\\_01/difficile-collaborare-il-governo-4a6b4fba-0e01-11e9-991e-8333c5dc4514.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/cronache/19_gennaio_01/difficile-collaborare-il-governo-4a6b4fba-0e01-11e9-991e-8333c5dc4514.shtml)). In February 2020, the former head of the ISS and member of the executive board of the World Health Organization, became the advisor of the Ministry of Health.
- 2 The technical-scientific committee has been instituted by the decree of the Emergency Commissary from the 5th of February 2020. It is coordinated by the Protezione Civile (a national civil body with the task of prevention and management of emergency events) and it is composed by the presidents and general directors of national health departments, medical societies, academic experts as well as the Ministry of Health. On the 18th of April the composition of the committee integrated experts for specific needs to keep emergency management even in "the gradual recovery of social, economic and productive activities" (Ministry of Health [http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/news/p3\\_2\\_1\\_1\\_1.jsp?lingua=italiano&menu=notizie&p=dalministero&id=4544](http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/news/p3_2_1_1_1.jsp?lingua=italiano&menu=notizie&p=dalministero&id=4544)).

and administrative sector could afford to keep valorisation processes through smart-working, production and logistics became the object of competing discourses between technical-scientific guidance and industrial economic experts. With the alternate compliance of trade-unions, workers have often been treated as the object of a productive-technical discourse rather than a socio-political subjectivity.

Since the 'explosion' of the pandemic, industrialists, i. e. the Italian employer's organization 'Confindustria', have been reticent to apply a full lockdown to economic activity. Being located at the centre of one of the main hubs of the global value chain, northern Italian entrepreneurial interests called for a continuation of economic activities even at times when social meetings, funerals and jogging were forbidden. Initially, political forces in the regional and national institutions supported this productivist optimism, arriving at twelve days of total lockdown before interrupting 'non-essential' services. Even in the first days of the national red zone, the "the necessity to keep factories open" seems "indispensable"<sup>3</sup>. Later on, the (highly negotiate) productive shut down was considered as part of the Italian and European "war economy"<sup>4</sup>, and "the end of the Italian industrial system"<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless, agro-food supply chains, at the core the national competitive global economic strategy, remained active during the whole quarantine. Migrants continued to work in dangerous, dirty and demeaning jobs, living in informal settlements to supply labour to the 'supply chain' in the green corridor of European commodity. With the proposal of legalization of migrant workers (for six months), the government has de facto officialised that fundamental economic sectors in the global competition national strategy rely on an 'exceptional' migrant subjectivity. Disappeared for the first weeks of the pandemic, migrant subjectivities re-emerged in public debate. On the 21st of May migrants living in informal settlements and precarious conditions went on general strike to voice their demands for better living conditions and the end of exploitation beyond mere political propaganda. Their political re-composition of the agro-food industry as well as the increasingly apparent social tensions in the workplace start to highlight the cracks of the economic-productivist discourse.

## Red-Yellow reformistic negotiation with the technocracy in the EU

While the scientific expert discourse claimed more and more resources to face the health emergency, the forced interruption of productive activities created a need for liquidity not compatible with EU's economic governance. Pressures from economic interests and scientific apparatuses became in this way the trampoline for the reformistic invocation of the executive. Since the inception of the pandemic, the contradictions of a two-speed Europe have exploded, creating the discursive space to ask for a fiscal European policy, a common budget, Eurobonds and the end of blind monetarism. Interviewed by English BBC, the Italian prime minister repeated that "we are not just writing pages in the books of economics, we are writing pages in history books"<sup>6</sup>. The political alliance between the Democratic Party's European reformism and the domesticated populists from the Five Stars Movement consented to show a heroic position in challenging consuetudinary practices of EU economic governance. The politics of the Italian government tried to break the monetarist creed in order to sustain its own technocratic and paternalistic emergency machine able to prepare a new economic consensus towards the post-pandemic era.

Unfortunately, the call for a new European solidarity has not been translated into a broader societal claim but has (so far) remained framed in the old reformistic language of liberal-democratic politicians and intellectuals. The resistance of financial creditors and institutional apparatuses against the reformist ambush of the Italian government and its allies has once again attempted to crush European politics on a technical and specialistic level. The technical language of the European financial engineering and the complex system of governance has historically represented as an easy deterrent against any wider social participation in the European reform debate (as well as the object of cheap propaganda from right-wing nationalistic forces). The opening possibility to have a common European budget is still the object of slow and unaccountable negotiations rather than an impetuous social and political project. Such slow and contained reformism stay trapped in the limit of the European 'good governance'. This institutional caution refers again to a not-trustable population: if

3 Bonometti M., president of Confindustria Lombardia quoted in *La Repubblica*, Emergenza coronavirus, Confindustria Lombardia: "Lasciare aperte le aziende" 11/3/2020 ([https://www.repubblica.it/economia/2020/03/11/news/emergenza\\_coronavirus\\_lombardia\\_aziende-250928478/](https://www.repubblica.it/economia/2020/03/11/news/emergenza_coronavirus_lombardia_aziende-250928478/)).

4 Boccia V., former national president of Confindustria Italia, 31/3/ 2020, quoted in *IlSole24ore*, Coronavirus: Boccia, siamo in economica di guerra, serve un nuovo piano Marshall. ([https://www.ilssole24ore.com/radiocor/nRC\\_31.03.2020\\_15.33\\_48338778](https://www.ilssole24ore.com/radiocor/nRC_31.03.2020_15.33_48338778)).

5 Forchielli A., cosmopolitan entrepreneur and social media economist, interviewed by a regional newspaper (*Corriere Romagna* 25/3/2020) few days after the declaration of the productive shutdown. In the same interview, the entrepreneur defined Confindustria as 'a 'country club that moves too late' and invoked a new executive guided by the economist Mario Draghi (<http://www.albertoforchielli.com/che-errore-chiudere-le-impres-la-disoccupazione-arrivera-al-20/>).

6 *BBC*, *Coronavirus: EU could fail over outbreak, warns Italy's Giuseppe Conte*, interview 9/4/2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52224838>).

southern Europeans borrow money without any conditionality of structural reform they would threaten European financial stability with their bad and dangerous economic attitudes.

## Reconstituting the responsible subjectivity

On the eve of phase 2, the head of government, Conte, had to recall the platonic distinction between episteme, the true truth represented by the technical-scientific guide, and doxa, the opinion<sup>7</sup>. This philosophically informed communication strategy was meant to defend the executive in front of those parliamentary forces contesting the (perceived) too slow reduction of the lockdown. From a Foucauldian perspective, episteme is not merely scientific knowledge or legitimized rationality but it designates all the discursive regularities that can be found empirically between knowledge in a given historical period. In this sense, rather than Conte's platonic acceptance to justify a techno-scientific normative approach of the government, the episteme of the pandemic in Italy can be interpreted as the common terrain between scientific discourses, productivist orthodoxy and EU technocratic governance, in which operates a discursive denying of any autonomous capacity of the population in the management of health, political and (re)productive life. This common anthropological matrix is rooted in the ordoliberal social philosophy seeing the population as irrational, lacking civiness and, thus, potentially dangerous. Compared with other European anti-coronavirus measures, the exceptional emergency machine, which emerged in Italy, appears as a fickle and mutable product of contingent practices of disciplining the unmanageable behaviours of the population. These isomorphic elements of competing technocracies, which have informed the mobilisation of scientific protocols, administrative practices and police activities, have in turn widened the reach of control and monitoring of mobility, activities, meetings and habits. In this sense, the pandemic episteme is the expression of a governmentality relying on administrative procedures, charts, economic indicators, operative plans, scientific prescriptions, statistics and constant neuro-medial communication reconstituting a particular political subjectivity: the responsible subject. The responsible subject does not go on strike, does not question transnational creditor-debtor relationships and does not doubt science in the singular. S/he is always ready to control and to be controlled.

One of the main effects of the clash of technocracies in the global pandemic, thus, is the production of brand new sites of intervention on population and territories through the total mobilization of police and administrative resources in a permanent state of exception. In this context, responsible subjectivities are constitutive elements composing a diffuse and molecular quarantine in which each individual is considered an extension of an administrative and monitoring machine. This responsible subject, guided by statistical predictions, social management techniques and work ethic, is the main character of the mediatic celebration of the Italian comprehensive lockdown. In southern regions, where the pandemic had limited impact, a complex assemblage of discourses, administrative practices and police activities in the territories set up pervasive security mechanisms. The predictions of a possible 'hecatomb' (in the words of the governor of Campania region) in overpopulated territories, metropolitan areas and suburban belts, empowered a strong paternalistic approach by local authorities translated in an overproduction of legal devices for restrictions and control, with creative emergency decrees and their grotesque outcomes. Flying drones chasing solitary runners, police helicopters who signal people lying in the sun on solitary beaches, mayors who shout at people on city's seafronts as well as at regional territorial borders are just some spectacular effects of these discursive mechanisms. Secured behind the public health emergency and its scientific legitimation, city mayors and regional governors came to the international press attention<sup>8</sup>, often as examples of charismatic sheriffs in the spectacular moral struggle against the lockdown 'dodgers'<sup>9</sup>. Their increasing arbitrariness in the application and interpretation of the lockdown measures could be seen as an effect of a paternalistic appeal, as an isomorphic discursive element, within a governmentality composed by an original mix of security mechanisms and disciplinary measures. The epistemic terrain emerged in the clash of technocracies transformed important health issue in security question, where populations are always seen as irresponsible and dependent on the authorities' guidance. What will remain of the opaque clash between scientific, productivist and governance technocracies in the post-covid era are, in all likelihood, precisely these new sites of affirmation for the local and decentralized apparatuses of control and monitoring, which constantly and creatively reconstitute responsible subjectivities and exceptional spatialities.

7 Prime Minister parliamentary informative 30/3/ 2020 (<http://www.governo.it/it/media/informativa-del-presidente-del-consiglio-conte-al-parlamento/14549>).

8 The New York Times, *Comic Insults Aside, Mayors Act as Sentinels in Italy's Coronavirus Tragedy* 26/03/2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/world/europe/italy-mayors-coronavirus.html>).

9 The Guardian, *Go home! Italian mayors rage at coronavirus lockdown dodgers* 23/03/2020 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/mar/23/go-home-italian-mayors-rage-at-coronavirus-lockdown-dodgers-video>).