

*Blog post published on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2020 on Discover Society:*

<https://discoversociety.org/2020/04/08/we-are-in-this-together-covid-19-the-politics-of-emotions-and-the-borders-of-humanity/>

## **"We are in this together": Covid-19, the Politics of Emotions and the Borders of Humanity**

*Nicola De Martini Ugolotti*

**In a recent interview**, the virologist Ilaria Capua argued that epidemics are social rather than merely biological phenomena, and stated that "without a doubt we will carry the scars of this on our consciousness, more than in our bodies". Capua's positioning is noteworthy, especially as it comes from a leading representative of the "hard sciences", and in a context where the assessments on the nature and consequences of Covid-19 have been so far limited to inputs from a narrow range of scientific perspectives (when these are listened at all). Capua's words are also important to reiterate that epidemics do not just "happen", and the capacity of Covid-19 to do what it's doing is not only due to its "natural" characteristics. As it turns out, Covid-19 pandemic status has been enabled and accelerated by a number of economic, political, and socio-cultural factors, including, but not limited to the speed of the global transport infrastructure, national governments' approaches to public health, and the political and media narratives that shaped the virus as they represented it.

Considering epidemics as bio-social phenomena thus highlights social sciences' contribution in addressing the consequences that the current responses to Covid-19 will have in different contexts and social domains well-beyond the epidemiological dimensions of this crisis. In this post, I will address some of the emerging responses to Covid-19 in two countries, Italy and Britain, on which I focused my attention in the last weeks, mostly for personal reasons. Drawing on, and to an extent complicating Capua's remarks, I will engage with Sarah Ahmed's work to interrogate the political role of emotions in these two countries amidst the pandemic.

Ahmed's work is particularly relevant to explore this subject, as it challenged framings of emotions as a private matter coming from individuals' "within", by arguing instead that affective responses play a crucial role in the surfacing of individual and collective identities. According to Ahmed (2004), this process of individual and collective formation takes place by reading "others" as the source of an emotional response (e.g. Fear), and often works to bind together the subject to the nation. While Ahmed's work focused on the politics of emotions in relation to gendered, racialised and sexualised bodies, her arguments are relevant to interrogate the emotionally-charged narratives and reactions to what could be conceived as a body-less agent such as Covid-19.

The political and public responses to the virus in Britain and Italy have been quick to portray the efforts to address the epidemic **as a war against an invisible enemy**. While fitting to an extent the catastrophic scenarios and consequences of the epidemic, these widespread narratives have nevertheless two significant implications. Firstly, they provide Covid-19 with a supposed intentionality to invade and harm the nation, thus eliding the anthropic structures and political responsibilities that enabled and accelerated its spread. Secondly, the representation of the virus as a hateful, invisible enemy works to align together individuals in the common fight against it. Paraphrasing Ahmed (2004, p. 26), the affective tone of these narratives is "together we fight, and this fight makes us together". This message infuses also the solidarity responses in both countries, that in many cases include **forms of national pride** and aim overall to lift the **"spirit of the nation"** in the fight against the virus. However, while continuously reminding that "we are in this

together", war-like narratives and the emotional responses they elicit raise significant questions on who really is this "we" that they refer to. In fact, war-like readings of the pandemic seem to actually align the stake of this fight with the nation itself.

This rendering of the epidemic assigns membership to the collective "we" to those already belonging to the nation as citizens, and **only partially and contingently** to the foreign nationals *contributing* to this effort. Excluded and made invisible by these narratives and responses are those who are socially and spatially positioned at the margins of the nation, such as undocumented migrants, asylum seekers, but also prisoners and the homeless (with all these categories often intersecting). In this sense, the "unprecedented" political and economic responses that the British and Italian governments enacted to safeguard the population are illustrative of political and emotional alignments that distinguish not only the inside and the outside of the nation-at-war, but also what lives are "worth less" amid a pandemic.

In Britain, despite partial government provisions for vulnerable groups, charities claimed that up to one million asylum seekers and undocumented migrants **could go hungry** during the lockdown that significantly reduced the operations of community organisations supporting these categories. In the meanwhile, only legal action by migrant rights groups **forced the Home Office to release almost 350 detainees** with underlying health issues that made them more susceptible to the virus. On this, it is worth noting that there is no legal justification for migrants' detention due to widespread travel bans blocking deportations. In Italy, an emergency decree authorised approximately £300 billions worth of public spending to protect businesses, workers and the general population. Yet, the legislation **did not consider any measure for asylum seekers living in overcrowded reception centres**; nor it considered the thousands **who became undocumented from November 2018**, due to the previous government's abolition of leave-to-remain for asylum seekers who did not fit the "refugee" legal definition, but were still deemed in need of humanitarian protection. Furthermore, the current epidemic has provided the Italian government the justification to stop any humanitarian presence in the Mediterranean, thus denying non-governmental actors to monitor, denounce and counter **increasingly common practices of non-assistance** and unlawful *refoulement* of asylum seekers' to Lybia.

The omission of welfare, health and protection measures for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers in Italy and Britain does not point to the tragic, but "inevitable" strains to health and welfare provisions during an unprecedented epidemiological crisis. It shows the continuation of anti-migration policies and sentiments that have routinely dehumanised people seeking sanctuary in both countries from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While the Italian and British governments' (lack of) action have put **several categories of their own citizens at risk amid the pandemic**, these categories' rightful claims are widely recognised as public concerns on which the governments and the citizenry in both countries feel compelled to act. The same cannot really be said for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers. In this sense, while both Italy and Britain are witnessing widespread mobilisations to protect the most vulnerable in local communities, the almost complete lack of public concern for undocumented migrants and asylum seekers beyond human rights circles begs for further exploration.

To understand this, I consider relevant to observe that way before the arrival of Covid-19 other war-like narratives depicted Italy and Britain as under-siege, and urged the population in both countries to come together to fight the incoming threat. These emotional narratives depicting **"swarms" of aliens threatening the nation** did not just represent rethorical means that enabled the success of the Brexit campaign, **and the Northern League rise to the 34% in the 2019 election polls in Italy**. Rather, again paraphrasing Ahmed, the emotional responses that these narratives elicited

"did things" that went beyond normalising xenophobic language and hostile migration policies; They (re)constructed the boundaries of the nation and of local communities, **celebrated imperial nostalgias** and normalised **persisting colonial logics** and sentiments of differential humanity. Amongst pervasive "we are in this together" messages, comments from political and public figures explained the virus' origins and spread in terms of Chinese **cultural** and **political "backwardness"**, while mainstream media hinted that Covid-19 would not be as harmful to "African ethnicities" **due to supposed bodily and genetic differences from "Europeans and Asians"**. The emotional calls to "come together" amid the pandemic do not interrupt constructions of differential humanity embedded in xenophobic public sentiments and **necropolitical policies** regarding asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. Rather, emotionally-charged narratives and responses to the epidemic seem to *intensify* these effects. While the Italian and British governments are taking "unprecedented" measures to assuage the socio-economic impact of the epidemic on the population, and both nations seem to re-discover a sense of solidarity with the most vulnerable members of society, conditions of destitution, hunger and endangerment are simply more tolerable for some human beings than for others.

In this context, it seems more important than ever to support, join and make visible the **already present responses** that counter these processes, and call for the extension of residency rights to undocumented migrants and asylum seekers, **as already done by Portugal**. It is also worth to point out that while representing a thought-provoking consideration, Capua's argument ("we will carry the scars of this on our consciousness, more than in our bodies") misses to recognise *whose consciousness* and *whose bodies* we are talking about when assessing the scars left by this pandemic. At a time in which commentators discuss the potential for more equitable and just societies in the post-pandemic-world, the possibilities to realise these scenarios revolves also around the resolve to recognise and dismantle the hierarchies of human worth still embedded in "our" Western, democratic consciousness.

## References

Ahmed, S., 2004. Collective Feelings: Or, the Impressions Left by Others. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 21(2), pp. 25-42.

Mayblin, L., Wake, M., and Kazemi, M., 2019. Necropolitics and the Slow Violence of the Everyday: Asylum Seeker Welfare in the Postcolonial Present. *Sociology*.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0038038519862124>