

Covid-19

**THE YEAR OF SAD PASSIONS: A SECOND
LETTER FROM NORTHERN ITALY**

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A few weeks after the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, I was kindly invited by the Editor-in-Chief of the *British Journal of Psychotherapy* to write a subjective piece describing the situation in Northern Italy, the hardest hit Italian area at that time, in which the atmosphere was completely different compared with other parts of the country (Facchin, 2020; Scott, 2020). I decided to condense my overwhelming emotions in a cathartic letter, and words came out easily. Writing this second letter one year later is much more complicated: my perspective is changed, along with my feelings and concerns, and the regional specificities are no longer significant.

In March 2020, when Italy went into its first lockdown, the air was filled with a mysterious virus, death, and a variety of promising new beginnings: ‘We will get through this together’, ‘It will make us better people’, ‘We will learn to value our time and relationships’. For over a year now, Covid-19 bulletins have been bringing hundreds of dead into our home on a daily basis. During the first months of the pandemic, everyone was shocked by the number of deaths, the highest since World War II. One year later, people are still dying, but that does not seem to make the news anymore. Where are we now, with more than three million global deaths due to Covid-19?¹ What happened to the ‘everything will be all right’ rainbows, to honouring healthcare heroes with songs and applause, to the so-called ‘quarantine baking’ that led thousands of Italians to raid supermarkets searching for yeast and flour?

Since the very beginning of the pandemic, the containment measures imposed by the Italian Government – like governments around the world – involved spending a huge part of our lives online, including work. During homeworking, we got used to videoconferencing platforms, which became our window on the world. For a few months, the situation was under control, and there were indeed some advantages, but then we found ourselves trapped in our apartment with endless work hours, suffering from the consequences of an excessive proximity to our partner and children, or vulnerable to a sense of isolation if alone. For many people, these working conditions – which were supposed to be *smart* – turned out to be dumb and associated with a new form of exhaustion that became well known as Zoom fatigue (Wiederhold, 2020).

Psychotherapists are exhausted too. During supervision, R. – a young psychologist who has been training to become a psychotherapist – recounts her difficulties with

patients, especially during online sessions. Her partner is currently working from home, the schools have been closed again, and her child needs support with remote learning. This young woman, who recently lost two close ones due to coronavirus, feels completely exhausted, and she is worried that her fatigue could compromise the quality of her work. She does not want her patients, as well as her child, to notice how tired she is. Her feeling of exhaustion challenges the superego injunctions that force her to act like she is always fine and able to please the others. Supervision reminds her that clinical practice involves making room for humanity in all its manifestations.

At the same time, our complaints about homeworking may sound quite ridiculous, if one considers that a Covid-19 redundancy fund procedure has been set up for millions of workers, and thousands of people lost their job. As reported by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), 101,000 jobs were lost in December 2020. Of these newly unemployed, 99,000 were women. The unemployment rate rose to 9.0% and to 29.7% among young people (ISTAT, 2021). The pandemic has been exacerbating pre-existing socioeconomic inequalities, and women and youth are bearing the brunt of this crisis, not to mention the global increase in domestic and gender-based violence (Barbara *et al.*, 2020).

The lockdown, although necessary, enclosed us in a confined space with an unbreathable atmosphere, especially for children and adolescents. Remote learning has been revealing dysfunctional family dynamics, as recounted by T., a high school teacher, who has been stressed by parents' intrusions during online lessons. On the other hand, symbiotic mothers celebrated lockdown as a unique chance to *enjoy* their children by spending most of the time together, whereas others (like R., the young psychologist) have been wondering if they were monsters for feeling overwhelmed by parenting. A huge amount of suffering to deal with, in both scenarios.

In this year of sad passions (fear, rage, resentment), the virus has been shrinking our horizon of projects, hopes and expectations, and social uncertainty is turning into a sense of the precariousness of our own being. Unfortunately, the media – at least in Italy – have been feeding people's incandescent feelings of insecurity, anger, and exhaustion with clickbait and misleading articles, especially regarding vaccines. Communication became chaotic and distressing. Such a perfect breeding ground for conspiracy theories.

This ethical crisis derives from the subjugation of knowledge and information to the logic of contemporary capitalism. The capitalist discourse is based on the idea that the market provides solutions to all types of human problems, so that everything is possible, including a life with zero risks. This deceptive illusion, in which illness and death are no longer an option, has been tragically exposed by the pandemic: our existence is not guaranteed. In other words, everyone – and in every part of the world – now has to confront the limited nature of humanity. During the pandemic, we had to deal with the traumatic encounter with the absence of guarantees, and some people tried to protect themselves from the unbearable anguish deriving from this experience by becoming Covid deniers.

Psychoanalysis is now called on to explore and treat the long-term consequences of coronavirus (which are still unknown), and to link them to the contemporary

forms of discontent of our civilization. The pandemic contributed to further highlight the inner connection between the individual and the sociopolitical register, which should guide psychoanalytic investigation and clinical practice.

The storm is not over and there will be no rainbows at the end of this devastating pandemic. It is no longer time for songs and dances, it is time for action. There is much to be done for our wounded humanity. In these difficult times, the precious tools offered by psychoanalysis may help us to turn chaos, rage, and fear into an actual transformative experience for the subject and the community. This is my message of hope.

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NOTE

1. At the time of writing (9 May 2021).

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