

FRANCESCO VACCHIANO

## On the proximity of distancing: notes on Northern Italy

*E fu questa pestilenza di maggior forza*

(Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*)

In Alessandro Manzoni's historical novel *The Betrothed* (1842), the inhabitants of Milan – the location of the main cluster of plague during the Great Plague of 1630 – resist recognising, against all evidence, that their town is actually hit by pestilence. Not too differently, when the news that a new zoonosis had appeared in Wuhan was broadcast in Italy, almost nobody could believe it would eventually infect 'us'. Although virologists had warned against a possible new pandemic, in the so-called Global North, AIDS has almost turned into a chronic disease and the major epidemics of the last 20 years (SARS, MERS, Ebola, Zika and avian flu), despite the alarm they caused globally, were mostly circumscribed to Africa, Asia and South America. This contributed to shape the comforting idea that epidemics are matters affecting other peoples and other times, in a sort of common-sense moral epidemiology in which our self-attributed status of 'modernity' would be a warranty of immunity. Eventually, the clash against the dramatic evidence of contagion and death 'at home' forced us to acknowledge, gradually and painfully, our affinity with the rest of the world. Simultaneously, we were reminded of our historical proximity with a not-so-remote past, a time when neither vaccines nor antibiotics could hinder infections and when distancing, often imposed, was the only available means of containment.


If, as we have learned, epidemics are diseases associated with Neolithic sedentarianisation, pandemics can be considered a result of global flows. Significantly, in response to the quick virus transmission along frequent-flier's routes, space and relationships have undergone a striking reconfiguration: while globalisation was scaling down, new experiences of locality were surfacing, as though the common condition of risk was urging a renewed sense of community. In Italy, this has become apparent in new needs of socialisation: some people came to know their neighbours for the first time, by playing music, singing or chatting on balconies; other started shopping for other families and shared hard-to-come-by masks and rubbing alcohol; many spent mealtimes with distant friends or relatives through newly discovered web resources; health professionals were praised for their role, understood by many of them as a concrete effort for the continuity of society. 'It is the first time we are really together', confessed a friend.

In the situation of rupture of the ordinary, in the liminality in which new rules replace the common ones, people have found in mutuality a primordial resource: distancing has been physical, not social at all. Unpredictably, after years of incitement to competitiveness and erosion of commons (public health in the first place), this dramatic

situation of *communitas* is showing us that the sense of being together is more resilient than we expected, as well as more needed than ever. Yet, in times of revival of communitarianism and nationalism, this renewed sense of locality also poses conceivable risks, being potentially mobilised for identity politics after the emergency. Local solidarity is therefore necessary but not sufficient, for a greater effort is still required to bring a comparable sense of common destiny to a wider level.

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# Teaching ethnographic methods under COVID-19

How should a methods and analysis class be taught under lockdown? When Mette Frederiksen, the Danish Prime Minister, announced on 11 March that the country was going into lockdown, answers had to be conceived extemporaneously. At the time, my class – third-year students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, all taking a year-long minor in anthropology – was preparing for fieldwork. We had two more weeks of planned lectures followed by three weeks of fieldwork. With the new regulations and the strong encouragement to stay at home and keep physical distance, it was clear that projects and sites had to be rethought.

Before the lockdown, our discussions of the pandemic were limited to a few comments and short exchanges over the breaks (we had 12 hours of class each week). But, when the first few cases were identified locally, I encouraged the students to take the opportunity to keep a journal, record observations of everyday life and reflect on their emotional reactions. When the lockdown hit, I decided to make this journal a collective project. In our (private) blog, students post snippets of their everyday lives, observations on public spaces, reflections on the lockdown, press conferences and legislation, and pictures, videos and soundscapes depicting ‘social distancing’. The instructions for