From sociality to social distancing: reversing values of solidarity in Italy

In March, as many countries vacillated in their response to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic, Italy emerged as the ghost of a dystopian future. Healthcare workers and ordinary people took to social media with dire warnings about the virus and reports of lives under strict lockdown. ‘State a casa’ (stay at home) quickly coalesced into a moral imperative. An act of self-preservation for the elderly and other vulnerable groups, for the young and healthy staying at home has become an act of solidarity.

This new iteration of solidarity and ethical citizenship comes on the heels of profound transformations of the Italian welfare state through three decades of neoliberal reforms. These reforms have sought to shift the burden of social responsibility from the state to citizens (Muehlebach 2012; Molé 2012). The logic of the gift has replaced that of redistribution in a new welfare model that relies on citizens’ own relational energies and sociality (Muehlebach 2012; Marchesi 2020).

In 2017, as I conducted research with new social work professionals and volunteers in Milan’s peripheral neighbourhoods, I saw how administrators, community organisers and officials adopted a logic of investment in local social relations, funding or enacting projects that sought to stimulate citizen participation and sociality. Community organisers used multiple strategies to invite participation and the reclaiming of neighbourhood streets in the hopes of addressing multiple familial and social challenges. As part of the impetus to stimulate citizen sociality, home was often recast as an asocial and even pathological space in which solidarity turned inward is denied to society (Marchesi 2020).

In a sudden reversal of public policy, the meaning and praxis of solidarity, and of public and private, has been inverted. In March, the mayor of Milan advised citizens ‘to reduce sociality’. A video of Italian mayors scolding citizens evading quarantine measures has gone viral. While being out in the streets is now selfish and irresponsible behaviour, staying at home is a matter of life and death credited with reducing the spread of the virus and preventing the collapse of a national health system weakened by decades of cuts.

What does this reversal foretell about transformations in social citizenship in a post-COVID-19 world? Is the recasting of what constitutes good citizenship likely to endure? Anthropologists are well positioned to track whether and where one of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will be to renew the role of the welfare state, refiguring the territory of government from ‘community’ to a new rebirth of ‘the social’ (Rose 1996).
Milena Marchesi
Department of Anthropology and Development Studies
Radboud Universiteit 6500 HE
Nijmegen
Netherlands
M.Marchesi@maw.ru.nl

References