

# Meet the Philosopher Who Is Trying to Explain the Pandemic

Giorgio Agamben criticizes the “techno-medical despotism” of quarantines and closings.



By Christopher Caldwell

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Stumping for regional candidates in Tuscany this month, Italy’s former interior minister Matteo Salvini waved around a surgical mask — and pointedly did not wear it. Covid-19 has taken more than 35,000 lives since it struck Italy in January. But now the daily death toll is typically in single digits, and Mr. Salvini, the leader of the anti-immigration League party, wants to put the country back to work. “Italians are being held hostage, kept at a distance, masked,” he hollered, “and meanwhile they let thousands of lowlifes land their boats and do what they want, go where they want, spit, infect. Enough is enough!”

People cheered. But half of them kept their masks on.

This is a common pattern in the Western countries (and American states) where Covid-19 fatalities are dwindling. The arguments for freedom may be strong — but they are put awfully crudely. The arguments for discipline and prevention may often be resented — but they have a lot of scientific authority behind them, and they carry the day. Better safe than sorry. Late last month, Italy’s parliament voted to extend the government’s state of emergency until Oct. 15.

In a society that respects science, expertise confers power. That has good results, but it brings a terrible problem: Illegitimate political power can be *disguised* as expertise. This was a favorite idea of the French philosopher Michel Foucault, who used it to explain how experts had expanded definitions of criminality and sexual deviancy. One of Italy’s most celebrated thinkers, Giorgio Agamben, has recently applied similar insights to the coronavirus, at the risk of turning himself into a national pariah.

In late February, Mr. Agamben began using the website of his publisher, Quodlibet, to criticize the “techno-medical despotism” that the Italian government was putting in place through quarantines and closings. Mr. Agamben, 78, is a philosopher of language, art and meaning. Since 1995, he has focused on what he calls the “archaeology” of Western political institutions, devoting a monumental nine-volume work, “Homo Sacer,” to excavating their hidden logic. Some of his earlier work was translated by Michael Hardt, the Duke professor and co-author of the radical campus classic “Empire.”

The part of the Italian intellectual establishment that calls itself “radical” has been Mr. Agamben’s milieu for half a century. His position on the coronavirus has cost him its support. Paolo Flores d’Arcais, the influential editor of the bimonthly *MicroMega*, accused Mr. Agamben of “ranting.” The newspapers *La Repubblica*, *Corriere della Sera* and *Il Foglio* all called him a *negazionista* regarding the coronavirus, using a word generally reserved for those who deny the Holocaust happened. Just as unexpected as these repudiations was the sudden receptivity to Mr. Agamben’s recondite philosophy in the pages of *La Verità* and *Il Giornale*, newspapers more often sympathetic to Mr. Salvini’s League.

Last month, Quodlibet published Mr. Agamben’s collected posts in an expanded volume called “Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics.” (That’s a rough translation; the book does not yet exist in English.) In hindsight, Mr. Agamben missed a few things in the first days of the coronavirus. For instance, he relayed the National Research Council’s description of Covid-19 as a kind of influenza — true enough in most cases, but far from the whole story. Today, however, with the Italian crisis receding, and with a measure of calm restored to the public discussion, we can see his book for what it is: not a work of scientific crankery or crackpot policymaking but an on-the-spot study of the link between power and knowledge.

Mr. Agamben’s name may ring a bell for some Americans. He was the professor who in 2004, at the height of the “war on terror,” was so alarmed by the new U.S. fingerprinting requirements for foreign visitors that he gave up a post at New York University rather than submit to them. He warned that such data collection was only passing itself off as an emergency measure; it would inevitably become a normal part of peacetime life.

His argument about the coronavirus runs along similar lines: The emergency declared by public-health experts replaces the discredited narrative of “national security experts” as a pretext for withdrawing rights and privacy from citizens. “Biosecurity” now serves as a reason for governments to rule in terms of “worst-case scenarios.” This means there is no level of cases or deaths below which locking down an entire nation of 60 million becomes unreasonable. Many European governments, including Italy’s, have developed national contact tracing apps that allow them to track their citizens using cellphones.

Wars have bequeathed to peacetime a “series of fateful technologies,” Mr. Agamben reminds us, from barbed wire to nuclear power plants. Such innovations tend to be ones that elites were already agitating for, or that align with their interests. Epidemics, he suggests, are no different. He believes that the fateful inheritance of the coronavirus will be social distancing. He is puzzled by the term, “which appeared simultaneously around the world as if it had been prepared in advance.” The expression, he notes, “is not ‘physical’ or ‘personal’ distancing, as would be normal if we were describing a medical measure, but ‘social’ distancing.”



Nurses practiced social distancing while protesting for better working conditions following the coronavirus pandemic in Rome's Piazza del Popolo square, in June. Alessandra Tarantino/Associated Press

His point is that social distancing is at least as much a political measure as a public health one, realized so easily because it has been pushed for by powerful forces. Some are straightforward vested interests. Mr. Agamben notes (without naming him) that the former Vodafone chief executive Vittorio Colao, an evangelist for the digitized economy, was put in charge of Italy's initial transition out of lockdown. Social distancing, Mr. Agamben believes, has also provided Italy's politicians with a way of hindering spontaneous political organization and stifling the robust intellectual dissent that universities foster.

The politics of the pandemic expose a deeper ethical, social and even metaphysical erosion. Mr. Agamben cites Italians' most beloved 19th-century novel, Alessandro Manzoni's "The Betrothed," which describes how human relations degenerated in Milan during the plague of 1630. People came to see their neighbors not as fellow human beings but as spreaders of pestilence. As panic set in, authorities executed those suspected of daubing houses with plague germs.

When a society loses its collective cool this way, the cost can be high. Rich, atomized, diverse, our society has a weak spot, and the coronavirus has found it. "For fear of getting sick," Mr. Agamben writes, "Italians are ready to sacrifice practically everything — their normal living conditions, their social relations, their jobs, right down to their friendships, their loves, their religious and political convictions."

In fact, "the threshold that separates humanity from barbarism has been crossed," Mr. Agamben continues, and the proof is in Italians' treatment of their dead. "How could we have accepted, in the name of a *risk* that we couldn't even quantify, not only that the people who are dear to us, and human beings more generally, should have to die alone but also — and this is something that had never happened before in all of history from Antigone to today — that their corpses should be burned without a funeral?"

Mr. Agamben has always been fascinated by such instances of common customs or historic institutions getting emptied out of their long-held meanings. In books less punchy and direct than the present one, he has described this process with the word *inoperosità*. It means "idleness," but idleness of a kind that can generate new systems of belief and new dangers. Whatever it is, it has made itself felt not just in Italy but in all Western societies in recent months, perhaps in the United States most of all.

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