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EDITORIAL

Politics During and After Covid-19: Science, Health and Social Protest

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ABSTRACT: Covid-19 represented a total social fact, especially for that part of the world (the so-called Global North and in particular its wealthier component) which is less used to face dramatic crises able to affect fundamental rights and provoke health threats on a daily basis. While acknowledging its enormous impact on individual biographies, political systems and socio-economic equilibria around the planet, however we contrast those interpretations that have tended to naturalize the pandemic event, reading it as unpredictable, unique, disconnected from the dynamics that guide the (mainstream) Western lifestyle and mode of production. On the contrary, the genesis and above all the management of Covid-19 are the result and the mirror of broader dynamics linked to modernity, colonialism, capitalism, in one word of the Capitalocene. For this reason, it is even more correct to speak of a syndemic, to underline the environmental determinants of health, and the social and economic inequalities (re)produced by Covid-19. We therefore

consider that interpreting the pandemic/syndemic (and its governance) as a state of exception is at least partial, being instead more useful to identify its unveiling function, able to make some latent or less visible dynamics manifest. Based on such premises, we focus on some nodes of the syndemic governance, highlighting how this contributed to give continuity and accelerate typical dynamics of a neoliberal governance and worldvision. We deal in particular with four key issues: the treatment of "science" by the media; the political history of "public health" and its relationship to the modern state; the construction of legitimate dissent vs. the constructed irrationality of "conspiracy theory"; the outcomes of social protests and in particular their pathologization in the mediatic and public debate. These are also among the main topics which are critically discussed in the thirteen papers that compose this Special Issue, from a variety of disciplinary fields, and with diverse epistemological perspectives and methodological tools.

KEYWORDS:

Covid-19 pandemic; syndemic; public health; science; conspiracy theories; vaccine hesitancy; social movements.

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1. Covid-19 as a Social and Political Object[1]

The Covid-19 pandemic has constituted a critical juncture for individual biographies, political systems and socio-economic equilibria around the world and especially throughout the Global North (see e.g. Aillon and Cardito 2020; Paulson et al. 2020). Commenting on its enormous impact, some have framed Covid-19 as an earthquake, a war, a sudden and unpredictable event (Sabucedo et al. 2020), or otherwise exogenous shock (Giones et al. 2020). According to this narrative, Covid-19 as an event is apolitical, even naturalized, disconnected from history, and it impacts a homogenous global population regardless of structures of social inequality. However, as many others have pointed out, even if we are in "the same storm", we are not all in "the same boat" (Albuquerque and Santos 2021; Sandbakken and Moss 2021). Here we prefer to follow Richard Horton (2020), editor in chief of The Lancet, who referred to Covid-19 as a "syndemic" to stress how the danger and virulence of the virus were related to non-infectious chronicle diseases, thus bringing to the fore the importance of primary prevention, environmental determinants of health, and the social and economic inequalities amplified by neoliberal social organization which significantly affected the outcomes and spread of Covid-19 (Paulson et al. 2020)[2]. The effect of social inequalities on the diffusion and impact of diseases has long been discussed in the field of popular epidemiology (Brown 1997).

[1] This Editorial was collectively co-authored; the first author of the first section was Niccolò Bertuzzi, that of section two Giampietro Gobo, that of section three Barbara Sena, that of section four Erica Lagalisse, that of section five Elisa Lello. Section six has been co-authored by all the guest editors.

[2] The word syndemic is the crasis of two terms: synergy= and epidemic. It indicates the set of health, environmental, social and economic problems produced by the interaction between one infectious pathology and two or more non-infectious chronicle pathologies, which entails different repercussions on the affected population. The original syndemic theory was developed by Singer (1994). From that initial theory, several different interpretations were developed: for a complete review, see Mendenhall et al. (2022). Even if endorsing Horton's interpretation, we use in this editorial the term "pandemic" as it is more familiar to a wider audience.

Not only is the Covid-19 pandemic not a "natural" disaster, to be constructed as exterior to social and political processes, but the global and local handlings of the pandemic have proceeded within established logics and socio-political orders. Following previous scholarships (see, for example, Alteri et al. 2021), we therefore work against flattened, apolitical constructions of the Covid-19 pandemic as a (naturalized) "health concern", but also invite readers to consider the handlings of the crisis as "states of exception" (Agamben 2008) that are in fact continuous with the colonial politics of Western modernity. After all, some of the conditions of pandemic life in the Global North have been restrictions and dangers that are accepted as normal for those living in the Global South – we now discuss middle class subjects "joining" migrants in their inability to travel (see also Goodin and Le Grand 2018; Aillon and Cardito 2020; Cole et a. 2021). Just as Aimé Cesaire (1959) cautioned that the Holocaust was merely colonialism come home to roost, and can be seen as a singular atrocity only by way of a racialized politics that measures white genocide differently than black genocide, we are inclined to caution both critics and fans of Agamben (2008), i.e. both those who would naturalize the pandemic and those who would politicize it as entirely "exceptional", to steer clear of ethnocentric analyses that depoliticize "public health" or place it outside the context of Western colonial history (see also Kaul et al. 2022; Carmody et al. 2020; O'Callaghan-Gordo and Antò 2020; Moore 2016). The history of the politics of "development" in the Global South (see e.g. Escobar 1991; Demaria and Kothari 2017) as well as the history of neoliberal reform in the Global North discussed below both constitute precedents and frameworks to understand the "exceptional" handling of the Covid-19 pandemic as in fact continuous with those of other biopolitical objects influenced by the dynamics of colonial capitalism and neoliberal reform. As Andreas Malm (2020) highlights, the Covid-19 pandemic appears exceptional because, as opposed to the case of climate change, during the pandemic crisis large numbers of people died or were infected earlier in rich countries than in the poor ones.

On a closer inspection, more than the exceptionality, it is in fact the continuity with some classic dynamics of a neoliberal world vision and model of governance that should be highlighted. We refer for example to the primacy of the economic/financial aspects over those relating to the protection of individuals, communities and ecosystems; the central role played by the large market players in the definition of global and national policies and politics; the centrality of philanthrocapitalism (Shiva 2022) and the use of science as a "weapon of truth" (Osimani, Ilardo and Castaldo 2020) which contributes to depoliticize any issues.

Like any great crisis, on the other hand, Covid-19 represented a danger for capitalism but was at the same time an opportunity for the renewal of capitalism itself. This applies especially to the digitalization processes (Cone et al. 2021; Amankwah-Amoah et al. 2021), already identified as the new key-element of late capitalism (Zuboff 2019). Similarly, Covid-19 acts as a further marker of the gap between the Global North and the Global South (Carmody et al. 2020; Hooijer and King 2022), underlining the unequal distribution of power at the transnational level, starting with the vaccination issue, but extending to humanitarian aids, the impacts of the war sector, and clearly the structural attack to biodiversity of which Covid-19 is a litmus paper and at the same time a further accelerator.

In the light of the elements discussed so far, Covid-19 has been defined as the first pandemic of the Anthropocene (O'Callaghan-Gordo and Antò 2020), but it would be even better to call it the first pandemic of the Capitalocene (Moore 2016), a concept which defines the current geological era as determined by the capitalist economic system, its power relations and its way of relating to (and actively constructing) nature. Beyond the nominal debates, Covid-19 can actually be read – both in its causes and its effects – as yet another manifestation of capitalism (Malm 2020) and developmentism (Kaul et al. 2022), which are themselves products of a colonial and anthropocentric world vision (Moore 2016).

In this special issue, we have specifically invited empirical studies and theoretical perspectives that foster critical reflection on Covid-19 as a biopolitical social construction in dialectic with neoliberal capitalism. As such we work to develop critical perspectives on diverse forms of 'common sense' that define the (post)pandemic political landscape, including the "black boxes" (Latour 1987) of "science", "public health", "conspiracy theory" and "populism". The remainder of this introduction is organized accordingly, attending in turn to the treatment of "science" by the media - and the particular dynamics and role of the media itself in the pandemic - the political history of "public health" and its relationship to the modern state, the construction of legitimate dissent vs. the constructed irrationality of "conspiracy theory", and finally some outcomes of the pandemic states of "emergency" for the politics of protest and analytical categories attending to these. As our own research and editorial experience working on this special issue has shown, any study of the dynamics of political protest following the Covid-19 pandemic today must attend to contention around these categories as subjective and objective categories of analysis.

The reader will note that we have made an effort to transcend disciplinary boundaries, and therefore present significant methodological diversity in the collection, wherein diverse research frameworks – even contradictory ones – are juxtapositioned in an effort at building dialogical knowledge across disciplines concerned with the politics of protest at this global political juncture. When considering its form and content, we invite readers to consider the strength, limits, and new methodological concerns, as well as political ones, that "social distancing" means for conducting social science research: beyond the practical question of access, how might we turn a research eye to beholding new post-pandemic relationships between what happens "online" and "in real life"?

The reader will also note that in our presentation of these diverse approaches, we have made efforts to avoid the forms of polarization and dogmatism characteristic of post-pandemic political discourse that we ourselves aim to study by inviting contributions by those who think governments should have done more in the name of "public health" as well as those who think that governments have exploited "public health" to justify repressive policies. We have sought work from those who organize against the damaging effects of "conspiracy theory" as well as those who resent being called "conspiracy theorists". We realize that many traditional social movement actors on the left are now faced with articulating effective anti-capitalist politics after a populist right capture of dissent in multiple global contexts, and have invited transnational contributions across disciplines with the hopes of fostering politically engaged social scientific conversations that attend to the Covid-19 pandemic as a political object.

Before knotting the main nodes of this Special Issue, let us acknowledge one specific limit among the others that possibly the reader will identify. As already anticipated and as will be discussed in the next pages, we invite to take a decolonial perspective on the pandemic, both to highlight the Western-oriented neoliberal logic that provoked and governed the crisis, and to relativize its uniqueness and exceptionality. However, among the considerable amount of papers' proposals that we received, almost none came from the Global South and/or tackled the pandemic in a decolonial perspective, considering geopolitical equilibria and/or analyzing case studies from non-Western countries. This can be due to several reasons, and first of all the personal/academic networks of us guest editors. At the same time, it should also be taken as an invitation for future research and reflections on this fundamental but still understudied dimension of the Covid-19 pandemic (with few notable exceptions: Bringel and Pleyers 2022; Milan, Treré and Masiero 2021).

2. The Social Production of "Science" during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The spread of Covid-19 made extensive communication of scientific knowledge via the mass media a practical necessity. As such, the scale of these communications has been unprecedented. Put differently, the circulation of the virus reconfigured the mechanisms of agenda setting, making both the statements made by scientists to the media, and reports of studies published in the draft archives (pre-prints) and in international scientific journals (Gazendam et al. 2020), highly "newsworthy" (Papapicco 2020). In this regard, several studies (Cinelli et al. 2020; Zarocostas 2020) and the World Health Organization itself (WHO 2020) have spoken of an "infodemic" (Rothkopf 2003), referring to both an excessive quantity, as well as the absence of careful controls prior to their publication: the metaphor suggests that an "information virus" contributed to raising the level of alarm in the population. Another important factor is the acceleration of communication flows typical of social media platforms and of the digital public sphere, within which complex messages are simplified, and algorithms favor the radicalization and polarization of opinions (Pariser 2011; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al. 2016; Sunstein 2017).

While a focus on social media platforms is important, it is also necessary to acknowledge that there are specific challenges to scientific communication in the language and code of mass media. First, these are subject to the constraints of TV formats which, by their nature, are not prone to deepening but rather "fast thinking" (Bourdieu 1996). A second obstacle is that the ever-increasing specialization of science makes its communication difficult: not only is there insufficient time for nuanced descriptions of phenomena within TV and radio spaces, but misunderstandings among experts from hyper-specialized contiguous sectors make smooth and integrated communication of the "facts" very fraught. Meanwhile, the differing views of infectious disease held by specialists, immunologists, epidemiologists, virologists, clinical doctors, etc., are all positioned as "the" science.

Therefore, some reflections are worth being considered. Firstly, disputes and conflicts (including personal ones) are constitutive of scientific processes even in situations of "normal science" (Kuhn 1962). It is therefore reasonable to expect that these would be exacerbated in a situation of cognitive uncertainty (a new, unknown virus) which, moreover, required effective responses in a very short time. It is significant here that conflicting scientists have sometimes interpreted the positions contrasting with their own as unscientific or not adhering to "facts". As Bucchi and Trench (2017) note, when scientists are called upon to express themselves as experts, disputes do not follow the traditional process of scientific discussion, but are expressed in real time and overtly. As suggested above, these processes are further complicated by the fact that a growing specialization of scientific knowledge necessarily leads to fragmentation among a multiplicity of sub-domains (Morin 1999), meaning both a multiplication of perspectives in the analysis of a phenomenon, and a growing incommunicability among scientists/experts. As a result, the differences in diagnoses, assessments, prognoses, forecasts etc. inevitably tend to be more and more marked. In addition, conflictual dynamics inherent in the scientific debate have been arguably amplified by the spectacularization processes of science that took place during the pandemic (Pedroni 2020). Although the public visibility of scientists is not an entirely new phenomenon, Covid-19 has given the scientific community unprecedented media exposure. In this context, some scientists have become media actors, celebrities (Fahy and Lewenstein 2014), wherein they are rewarded as media actors for assertiveness and shocking declarations, even to the detriment of information clarity, because this serves to increase the audience (Franck 2014).

Furthermore, during the pandemic, the topic of expertise has been positioned in new and shifting ways, such as in the assertion that only experts should speak. While this is already a problematic statement within

democratic societies for a variety of reasons, a particular problem arises as soon as we try to define who the experts are and how to distinguish them from who is not. To this end, some years ago, Collins and Evans (2007) aimed to build a normative theory of competence as something tangible, real, measurable. In so doing, they designed a variation of the Turing test (1950), which was used to determine whether a machine is capable of thinking – in this experiment, participants interacted with an invisible interlocutor and had to guess whether or not it was a machine. In *The Imitation Game*, Collins and Evans (2014) develop a test to encourage distinctions between charlatans or "ubiquitous experts" from two types of (real) experts: the "contributory" expert (one who is capable of doing) and the "interactional" expert (one who is able to interact with a contributory expert). At first glance this looks like a great selection tool. However, their approach forgets that there is also a political (and not just a technical) dimension to the assessment of expertise. For example, between 2020 and 2022, some physicians who would easily pass that test were labelled as charlatans or bad scientists (e.g. Nobel Prize in Medicine, Luc Montagnier). Collins, Bartlett and Reyes-Galindo (2017) might reply that however they are nonetheless "fringe" scientists in their disciplinary sector; yet being marginal is just an issue that has more to do with politics than with competence (Jasanoff 2017). One can become marginal for many reasons, such as by doing critical research or assuming dissonant public positions. Moreover, the charge of being "fringe" scientists may be used as a political weapon to purposely discredit uncomfortable points of view, as the following example shows.

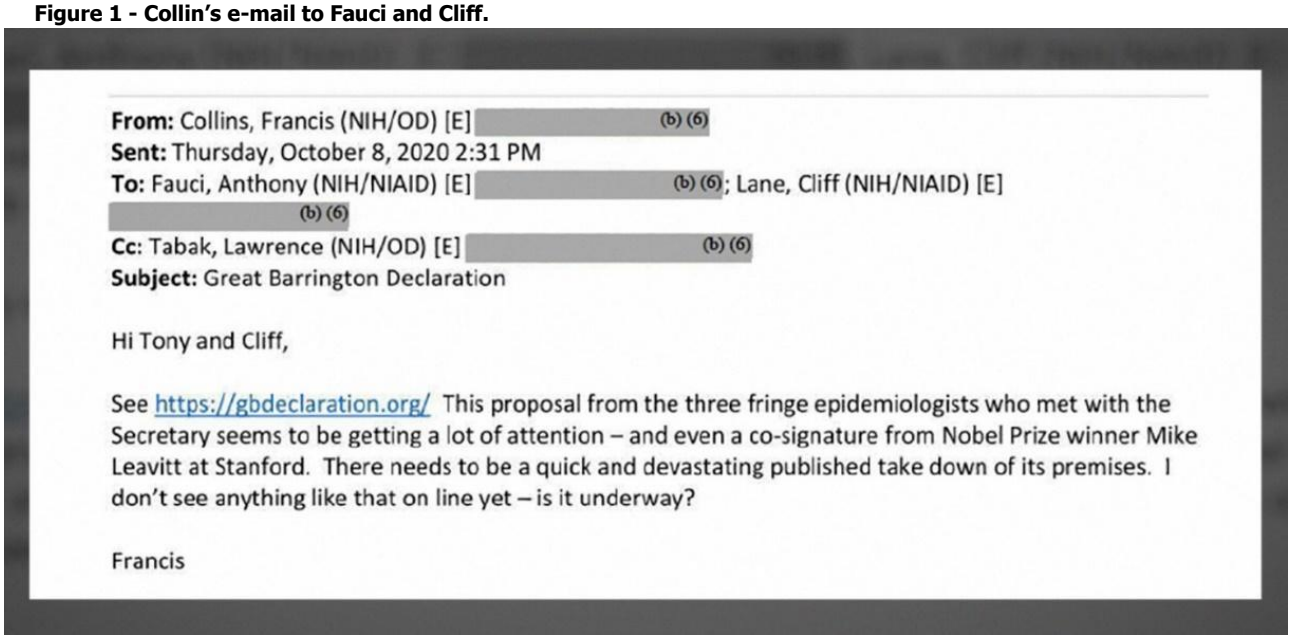
The extent to which politics and science can be intertwined is indeed shown by a recent event, precisely related to Covid-19. On October 4, 2020, some top scientists, such as Jayanta Bhattacharya (professor of medicine at Stanford), Sunetra Gupta (epidemiologist at Oxford), and Martin Kulldorf (epidemiologist at Harvard), wrote the Great Barrington Declaration (GBD), which advocated letting the virus spread in lower-risk groups with the aim of herd immunity, with "focused protection" of those most at risk.[3] A few days after its release, when the GBD began to receive media attention, it was immediately boycotted by two authoritative figures in public health in the United States (US), Anthony Fauci and Francis Collins.[4] On October 8, 2020 at 2:31PM, Francis Collins wrote an email to Anthony Fauci (in cc: Tabak Lawrence, deputy ethics counselor of the National Institutes of Health) suggesting the need for "a quick and devastating published take down" of the premises of the GBD. That same night (and in the following days) Fauci replied that this was already happening, pointing to a number of journalists and scientists who had moved in this direction. On October 10, Collins sent another email to Fauci (Fig. 1), boasting that he had defined the three promoters as "a fringe component of epidemiology" and "fringe epidemiologists who really did not have the credentials", as appeared shortly thereafter on *Fox News Sunday* on October 11 and in *The Washington Post* on October 14. Based on the publication of these emails, allowed by the Freedom of Information Act, on 21 December 2021 *The Wall Street Journal* accused Fauci and Collins of having "shut down Covid debate" by trashing the GBD to quash dissenting views from top scientists.[5]

[3] To date, this declaration has been signed by over 46,000 general practitioners and 16,000 scientists, some of whom are very famous, such as Alexander Walker (epidemiologist at Harvard), Sylvia Paulette Fogel (psychiatrist at Harvard), Laura C. Lazzeroni (psychiatrist at Standford) and Michael Levitt (biophysicist at Stanford and co-Nobel laureate in chemistry in 2013); Udi Qimron, Ariel Munitz and Motti Gerlic (microbiologists and immunologists in Tel Aviv), Eitan Friedman (geneticist at the same university), Jonas F. Ludvigsson (epidemiologist at Örebro University, Sweden), David L. Katz (epidemiologist at Yale) and Lisa J. White (epidemiologist at Oxford).

[4] Martin Kulldorff, Sunetra Gupta and Jay Bhattacharya had just met the Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and Scott Atlas, a neuroradiologist who has emerged as an influential adviser to president Donald Trump on the pandemic.

[5] https://www.wsj.com/articles/fauci-collins-emails-great-barrington-declaration-covid-pandemic-lockdown-11640129116

Figure 1 - Collin's e-mail to Fauci and Cliff.



From: Collins, Francis (NIH/OD) [E] (b) (6)
Sent: Thursday, October 8, 2020 2:31 PM
To: Fauci, Anthony (NIH/NIAID) [E] (b) (6); Lane, Cliff (NIH/NIAID) [E]
(b) (6)
Cc: Tabak, Lawrence (NIH/OD) [E] (b) (6)
Subject: Great Barrington Declaration

Hi Tony and Cliff,

See https://gbdeclaration.org/ This proposal from the three fringe epidemiologists who met with the Secretary seems to be getting a lot of attention – and even a co-signature from Nobel Prize winner Mike Leavitt at Stanford. There needs to be a quick and devastating published take down of its premises. I don't see anything like that on line yet – is it underway?

Francis

Source: Daily Mail, https://bit.ly/3WAngoR

Recalling the framework of Collins and Evans (2014), it is not clear what a contributory expert must be able to do in order to be considered as such. As a matter of fact, during this pandemic, biologists, infectious disease medical specialists, immunologists, microbiologists, virologists, anesthetists, pharmacologists, epidemiologists, clinicians, general practitioners, and other types of scientists intervened with diverse and incommensurable competence and expertise. A general practitioner or clinician can certainly do more to heal a patient (than a virologist or microbiologist); predicting the evolution of a phenomenon, on the other hand, is perhaps better done by statisticians and epidemiologists (than a general practitioner, clinician or virologist); a virologist or a microbiologist is more capable of modifying a protein (than a general practitioner, a clinician, a statistician or an epidemiologist). It is normal for every specialist to see the phenomenon from their point of view: for example, the virologist will be more focused on the virus, while the general practitioner on the disease and related therapies, yet how the media shaped the dynamics of debate made this incommensurability open to political exploitation.

What is scientific and who is an expert are much more open and complex questions than a technocratic view might have us believe (Raffini 2022). As medical historian James Colgrove (2006) wrote, and as we explore in the next section of this Editorial, public health is not a purely scientific or empirical issue, and its practice inevitably involves political and ethical debates.

3. "Public Health" in Historical and Theoretical Perspective

With "science" itself now understood as a political, socially constructed object, we now turn to the category of "public health". Below we explore how the Covid-19 pandemic has involved the growing role of public health as a policy tool with which to both manage and extend government power. In the history of public health, epidemics have always produced profound social, economic and political changes in the countries

affected (Porter 1994; 1998). By studying the spread of diseases such as typhus, yellow fever, cholera, smallpox, historians have explored how social, political and ideological responses to an epidemic have impacted the relationships between social classes, professionals, scientific communities and religious, democratic states and oligarchies, also influencing the processes of imperialism and colonization (see e.g. Rosenberg 1962; McNeill 1976; Pelling 1978; Coleman 1987; Berridge 2007).

In short, the development of public health has proceeded in parallel with the emergence of modern centralized states (Rosen 1958) and is thus fundamentally political. This link was made explicit by Michel Foucault (2014), who notoriously illustrated how in Western modernity power operates through new disciplinary and surveillance mechanisms linked to care of the body, this becoming a new foundation for protecting and augmenting the economic productivity of the state (Foucault 2008). Hence, we refer to the "biopolitical" management of public health, consisting of a growing diffusion of disciplinary mechanisms, aimed at restricting the spread of a disease, including both the isolation of the sick (quarantine), and expanding safety mechanisms through community interventions such as mass vaccination. Multiple epidemics in modern Europe have been dealt with by way of these tools. With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, the model has been updated: isolation and restrictions for the healthy as well as for the sick (Sylvia 2020; Højme 2022).

Neoliberal reforms since the 1990s have also produced other transformations in the management of public health in many nation states. A reduction of public spending, including in the health sector, and a resultant increase in private spending and market-oriented investment have reduced the control of many state governments on the health of populations (productive forces). At the same time, however, these reforms have also increased individual autonomy and responsibility on a subjective level in various areas of social life, such as education, work, private life, politics and healthcare (Dardot and Laval 2013; Rose 2007). This combination has produced a tension within the disciplinary and security mechanisms of liberal biopolitics, which may help explain sudden protests against government policies that are considered to unnecessarily restrict citizens' freedom of choice, such as in the case of vaccination campaigns (Blume 2006; Ward 2016; Gobo and Sena 2022).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the contradictions of neoliberal "public health" became glaring (Pellizzoni and Sena 2021). On the one hand, many governments – such as in Italy, France or Quebec – have reaffirmed themselves as guarantors of public health during phases of high contagion by resorting to the application of particularly strict disciplinary measures (e.g. quarantines, "shelter in place" directives, compulsory mask-wearing, vaccine passports, etc.) (*ibid.*; Simard and Cossette 2022). On the other hand, the plethora of recommendations about hygiene, self-protection and "social distancing", as well as voluntary contact tracing apps, commercial swabs to prevent Covid-19 contagion, have levered the neoliberal sense of individual responsibility and freedom of choice (or freedom to cure oneself). The result was a substantial unpreparedness with and among nation states to manage the pandemic "state of emergency" with global repercussions (Arminjon and Marion-Veyron 2021; Pele and Riley 2021; Amselle 2020; Pellizzoni and Sena 2021), and which induced an acceleration of the biopolitical interventions of government in contemporary society (Agamben 2021; Sylvia 2020).

It is also useful to consider the public health interventions around Covid-19 in light of a general trend in some other nation states – such as the US or Brasil – towards what might be called medical populism (Lasco and Curato 2019; Lasco 2020; 2022). While other forms of populism are built on cultural and economic insecurity, medical populism works by mobilizing perceived threats to the public's health and safety, by stressing the imaginary of "the people" as neglected victims of diseases due to governmental system's failures.

Considered in this way, the Covid-19 pandemic has strengthened an existing and growing tendency since the 1990s for populist movements to exploit health emergencies and foment "moral panic", pitting "the people" against failed and untrustworthy government establishments in spectacular ways (Cohen 2011). It is arguably not a coincidence that medical populism arises and develops in opposition to the state's "technocratic style" of positioning expertise of the medical establishment and expert communities as a way to control debate (Lasco and Curato 2019). Yet whereas a technocratic and governmental response positions itself as applying "measured" responses to maintain certainty and stability, medical populists seek power and consensus through spectacular and dramatized portrayals of crises (Moffitt 2016) that have the most effective impact on at-risk communities. According to Lasco (2020), during Covid-19 pandemic, medical populism became a strategy for political leaders in Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), the Philippines (Rodrigo Duterte) and the US (Donald Trump): governments in these countries shared certain features such as the simplification of the pandemic, dramatization of crisis, and invocation of knowledge claims to pit people against "others" to strengthen their governmental power (Rohlinger and Meyer 2022). While medical populism may be easy to critique, however, it is also arguable that, despite its dangers, it also serves as a reminder that within biopolitical governmentality it is important to manage people's trust in public health institutions. The delegitimization of the medical establishment achieved by medical populists during the Covid-19 pandemic in many countries gained resonance precisely because of broad public mistrust of the medical and political establishments due to their connection with the profit-driven pharmaceutical industry, and their general inability to govern the crisis (Lasco and Curato 2019).

4. On Conspiracy Theory as an Ethnographic and Analytical Category

Just as "science" and "public health" are always political, it is political when we designate certain forms of thinking as "unhealthy". Academics across disciplines as well as laypersons often relate the "conspiracy theorist" or "conspiratorial mind" to deviant psychology, and/or associate these with a lack of class and education and therefore rational capacity (see e.g. Swami and Furnham 2014; Keeley 1999; see discussion in Fassin 2021). Yet given that the current set of meanings associated with "conspiracy theory" itself emerged during the 20th century (see e.g. DeHaven-Smith 2013), one of our tasks as social scientists must be to notice the cultural and historical context of the emergence of the pathologized category "conspiracy theory" in popular culture, and be reflexive when adopting it as an objective category of analysis (see also Lagalisse 2019, Chapter 10).

The reader will therefore find that in the pages of this special issue, scholars mobilize "conspiracy theory" as both objective and ethnographic categories of analysis or move between these two analytical frames as a heuristic practice. García Agustín and Nissen (2022) suggest "conspiracism" alongside a tendency to prioritize individual freedom over community care as explanatory devices regarding the Danish movement against Covid-19 related social restrictions. In their study of "anti-vax" protests in Italy, della Porta and Lavizzari (2022) contrast progressive movements focused on social inequalities with protest movements against policies to control contagion, associating the latter with a "conspiracy mentality", concerned with how these movements have served to normalize a new radical right insofar as other actors participating in the protests were willing to share space with neo-fascists in new ways. Lello et al. (2022) on the other hand specifically question widespread charges of conspiracism and selfish individualism in media narratives around these protests, and Stocco (2022) studies the tendency in literature reviews to collapse conspiracy theory and vaccine hesitancy with recourse to notions of pathology. Morsello and Giardullo (2022) are similarly concerned to

show how vaccine hesitancy cannot be reduced simply to misinformation, anti-scientific populism or (irrational) "conspiracism". In short, the contributors to this issue themselves perform the range of semantic and political positions regarding "conspiracy theory" that they are concerned to study, and in this sense may be approached as primary as well secondary sources regarding social and political contestation over Covid-19 health policies in relation to the category "conspiracy theory".

A shifting research focus between "conspiracy theorists" and the people who call them that is a common heuristics in sociology and anthropology (see also Bratich 2008; Harambam 2020; Pelkmans and Machold 2011). Lagalisse (2019) in *Occult Features of Anarchism* also offers both an objective history of "clandestine revolutionary fraternities" and an ethnographic study of the "conspiracy theorists" who misunderstand them, as well as a study of the social theorists who help construct the category "conspiracy theorist" (2019, Chapter 10): from Foucault (2004) who highlights institutional constraints on elites, to Bourdieu (1984) who suggests elites act in their own class interest but misrecognize their own bids for distinction, chosen definitions of rationality and how one understands power may themselves be related to social positionality (see Lagalisse 2019: 108 *passim*). When Karl Popper wrote one of the first critiques of "conspiracy theory" in *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1966), he was talking about Marxists (see also Fassin 2021).

In this issue Drążkiewicz (2022) likewise approaches the category "conspiracy theory" as both cultural and historical while also mobilizing "conspiracy theory" as an objective category of analysis. Whereas in the past Drążkiewicz and Sobo (2021) have approached conspiracy theory around Covid-19 as a research opportunity to consider a "set of cross-culturally comparable conspiracy theories involving the state" (68), in this issue Drążkiewicz (2022) explores (among other things) specific political anxieties related to the structure of liberal democracies, and how they become expressed in shared fears about "conspiracy theory" – the comparative study is about people afraid of conspiracy theorists, not just conspiracy theorists themselves.

Didier Fassin (2021) similarly moves between approaching "conspiracy theory" as a category to study social scientists' anxiety about popular theorizing of power, and an approach honouring "conspiracy theory" as an objective category of popular activity sharing a family resemblance with witchcraft, urban legend, rumour and gossip (130-2). It is fair to critique certain objective patterns of paranoia in culture, while also noticing how the paranoia may be "within reason" (Marcus 1999). Todd Sanders and Harry G. West (2003) also draw a parallel between "conspiracy theory" and "witchcraft" as presented in the classical work of early anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard (wherein "conspiracy theories" are granted as a local sense-making activity avoiding any statement about their truthfulness). Like Carl Jung (1978) suggested in connection with the "flying saucer" craze decades earlier, anthropologists suggest that "conspiracy theories" tell us about the context of their development even if we disagree with them[6]. Rational or not, "conspiracy theory" signals distrust and perceived ruptures in social contracts (see also Drążkiewicz and Sobo 2021).

Sociological and anthropological approaches provide important counterpoints to those of psychology, yet also involve epistemological contradictions that are not easy to resolve. Anthropologists approach conspiracy theory the way they do partly because of their original disciplinary focus on colonial contexts, where corruption may be more rhetorically admissible and colonial paternalism extended toward the subject who offers an allegorical if not entirely accurate (irrational) analysis of power – Jean and John Comaroff (1999) rationalize belief in "occult economies" in relation to growing poverty and unemployment; Dingwall (2001) explores how

[6] Jung (1978) interpreted cultural production around "flying saucers" (indicating life on other planets) to be related to the new human capacity to destroy life on earth with nuclear technology (humans imagine life on other worlds being available to rescue us at the moment broad social anxiety develops about humans possibly needing such rescuing).

stories of organ theft in the Global South index colonial violence; it appears to be less common for scholars to discuss notions of vaccines "containing microchips" as indexing real concerns about growing surveillance technologies, even if these technologies are not actually implanted in our arms.

As Pagán (2004; 2008) points out, in ancient Rome "conspiracy" was considered normal part of politics. Modern calls for transparency by the governed are at least partly related to the fact that one of the features of liberal democracy is the expectation of transparency within and by the state – and yet the state sometimes reserves the right to act in secret (see Todd and Sanders 2003). As Fassin (2021) explores, the South African government really did have a biological warfare program that intentionally spread HIV (even if this was in no way the main source of the pandemic itself). Webb (2022) in this issue also reminds us that people of colour in the United States are perfectly rational to distrust state medical initiatives. Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule (2009) explore the utility of "cognitive infiltration of the groups that produce conspiracy theories" (218) by entering "chat rooms, online social networks, or even real-space groups" (224) to raise doubts about the "factual premises, causal logic, or implications for action" (225) of these theories (see also discussion in Fassin 2021, 133), effectively promoting conspiracy to end conspiracy theory. Gabriella Coleman's (2014; 2022) ongoing research of anonymous online chat boards also reveals conspiratorial behaviour among conspiracy theorists, who collaborate on "happenings", seeking to "meme things into reality", sometimes with a tangible effect on real world politics such as in the case of "Pizzagate".

In this sense, perhaps some of the most politically productive research on "conspiracy theory" focuses on the political work the phrase is made to do. In this issue, Webb (2022) looks at how construction of people of colour as "conspiracy prone" in U.S. government policy documents and practices facilitates ongoing structural racism in national vaccine allocation programs. Drążkiewicz (2022) explores how vaccine protest movements labeled "conspiracist" in both Poland and Ireland seek and acquire respectability within civil society by mimicking the practices and rhetorical constructions of NGOs. Meanwhile, left activists seeking to maintain respectability in Quebec continue to feel the need to rhetorically and practically position themselves against the "conspiracy theorist" - Lagalisse (2019) finds in her most recent fieldwork that left militants are concerned like della Porta and Lavizzari (2022) that populist movements against vaccination mandates include too many people willing to share space with far-right elements. Local militants complain in private that the [Quebecois] government "went overboard" when instituting an 8:00pm curfew, but say "if we critique it we appear to be supporting the anti-mask crowd", and "if we organize a demo, how do we make sure the conspiracists don't show up?" The stakes in charges around conspiracism have grown, as have conspiracy theories themselves, making it all the more important for social scientists to keep in view the political uses of "science" and "health" in researching current protest politics around Covid-19.

5. Technocracy and the Pathologization of Protest During the Covid-19 Pandemic

While media and neoliberal governance have mainly constructed this flattened, depoliticized - and depoliticizing - view of the pandemic, at the contrary, it is the role of the social sciences to call into question the categories used within public debate to justify health policies as well as those used to describe protests opposing them. To this purpose, some points acquire particular relevance for the analysis of protests and contentious politics (Tilly and Tarrow 2015) related to the pandemic.

As a first point, in many countries, during the Covid-19 pandemic, media organizations portrayed protests as anti-science, mainly informed by "conspiracy theory" and selfish individualism (Pellizzoni and Biancheri

2021; Shir-Raz et al. 2022). Here we see a return to psychologizing and/or functionalist approaches, which tended to read social protests in terms of deviance, and individual pathological behavior (Le Bon 1895), without taking into consideration the rational aspects of collective action. A similar recovery of outdated theoretical approach appears to be taking place also with regard to how scholars construct the relationship between science and society, wherein public resistance to technical-scientific innovations is read (only) as a reflection of ignorance and inability to understand the scientific method (Simis et al. 2016). Here an unproblematized science is mobilized against possible alternative values, transparency and critical debate (Shir-Raz et al. 2022; Lello and Bertuzzi 2022), as well as against recent critical approaches in the sociology of science and Science and Technology Studies (see also Goldenberg 2016).

Secondly, such a treatment of social protests related to pandemic policies is not entirely new but arguably accelerates a growing tendency to describe contemporary mobilizations as due to ignorance or "fake news" (Bertuzzi 2021; Calibeo and Hindmarsh 2022). As the responsibility for political decisions has been increasingly obfuscated behind their justification as based on scientific evidence - a simple carrying through of positive "facts" - dissent has been more easily identified with ignorance and falsehood (Hobson-West 2003; Wynne 2014; Pielke 2007). This trend can already be observed prior to the pandemic in the treatment of certain social movements in Western Europe, where activists engaged with ecological and LULUs (Locally Unwanted Land Uses) protests, as well as those involved within agroecology and "neo-peasantry" networks, are accused of bearing anti-modernist and anti-scientific positions and worldviews. But similar strategies are utilized in many countries of the Global South, where activists who oppose philanthrocapitalism-led agricultural modernization and industrialization programs (Shiva 2022) are accused of standing against science, progress, and "sustainable development" (Foucart et al. 2020; Kaul et al 2022). None of this is to say that contemporary critical positions towards pandemic policies are necessarily free from falsehoods, including illogical forms of "conspiracism", but to question whether their particular obviation reflects a narrowing of the radical imaginary that should itself be understood – and problematized – in political, economic and historical perspective.

Indeed – this being our third point – the identification of dissent with ignorance should in turn be contextualized within the progressive narrowing of the space for legitimate and practicable political options. This contraction has its roots in different but interrelated historical processes taking place during past decades. Among these, we can list: the progressive suffocation of the political conflict linked to the cartelization of parties (Katz and Mair 1995; 2009) and the consequent convergence of the traditional center-right and center-left parties, across Western European countries, on the neoliberal agenda, which has pushed to the margins alternative and critical positions, stigmatizing them as unrealistic and utopian; the sliding of the center of gravity of the identity of the parties, but also of the movements, which recognize themselves in the left, on the issues of civil rights, losing ground as well as the ability to embody alternatives and build conflict on economic, redistributive, social and labor rights issues (Kitschelt and McGann 1997); the transformations affecting Western representative democracies, which responded to the contraction of citizens' civic (conventional) engagement by strengthening the constitutional pillar at the expense of the popular one, thus contributing to a progressive erosion of popular sovereignty (Mair 2013); the trend, linked to the cited processes, towards technocratic styles of government, where the declining popular participation is compensated by a strengthened role of technicians and experts, who flank restricted bodies of power in decision-making, and increasingly base their legitimation on scientific evidence (Bickerton and Accetti 2021).

Furthermore, any complex and balanced treatment of the protests linked to the governance of the Covid-19 pandemic must take into consideration the strategies of (science) lobbyism and regulatory capture (Oreskes and Conway 2011; Saltelli et al. 2022). Our fourth point, thus, underlines the consequences – in terms of

semantic confusion and pollution of the public sphere – entailed by these processes, both within the Western world and in the Global South. Through semantic appropriation some of the traditional core values of the Left – such as support for public health, environmental "sustainability", and the enhancement of the role of science in public debate – are being increasingly emptied of their meaning and used to cover the interests of the industrial sector, including, sometimes, those of the most polluting and dangerous industries for human health and the planet (Foucart et al. 2020; Dentico 2020; Lello and Saltelli 2022; Hickel 2019; Kaul et al. 2022). But, if corporate interests are increasingly supported in the name of "ecological transition" and progressive values, it should not be surprising that those militants who struggle against glyphosate, nuclear power, GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms), and intensive agriculture are increasingly depicted as irrational, anti-scientific, right-wing populists, and radical-pessimistic. This semantic confusion has arguably been further accelerated by one of the most innovative strategies adopted by scientific lobbyism, namely "astroturfing" (Walker 2014). This consists in the highly specialized work of agencies serving industrial interests, that recruit micro-influencers (not experts but quasi-ordinary citizens) for the dissemination of partial scientific contents tailored to the interests of their clients as if they were indisputable, monolithic knowledge shared by the entire scientific community (Foucart et al. 2020). This practice creates the illusion of "grassroots activism" at the same time as (some) protests from below are denied their political character, and cast as ignorance and conspiracism (Lello and Saltelli 2022).

The processes mentioned above must be read not only in the context of the restructuring of *national* political systems in a technocratic key. To fully grasp their scope, they must be placed (fifth point) in a context marked by unprecedented levels of concentration of wealth on a planetary scale, where financial super-entities and global "philanthrocapitalism" (Dentico 2020; Shiva 2022) have indeed gained an ability to influence national governments and supra-national public regulatory agencies to a growing extent (Galli and Bochicchio 2016). Moreover, this pervasiveness finds support in the contextual transition from traditional inter-government multilateralism (the classic form of governance of supranational bodies, in which representatives of national states participate), to *multistakeholderism*, where private actors work alongside state representatives in the governance of leading supranational organizations such as the WHO or the World Bank (Missoni et al. 2019; Dentico and Missoni 2021).

As a final point, it is important to consider how these changes also deeply affect the arenas where global health strategies and priorities are defined. In this perspective, the adoption of sanitary strategies increasingly – or almost exclusively – centered on a pharmacological strategy (and in this case on the vaccine) is particularly perceived as *reductionist* by those citizens who support a conception of health and care where greater importance is attributed to primary prevention and aspects related to lifestyle, to environmental and social determinants of health (whose role, after all, has been brought to the fore by the conception of syndemic itself), and where there is space also for treatments based on epistemological assumptions different from biochemical medicine. In some Western countries such as Italy and France, on the other hand, the approach to the pandemic based primarily on lockdowns and mass vaccination has been perceived by these social components as nothing but the culmination of trends that have seen, in recent years, the intensification of (paediatric) vaccine mandates accompanied by scientistic and authoritarian approaches that have insisted on the orthodoxy of the paradigm of biochemical medicine, also through delegitimization and smear campaigns against complementary and alternative medicine (Attwell et al. 2018).

The pandemic must therefore also be read as a moment of acceleration, and generalization to society as a whole, of a conflict that concerns some crucial, but long unresolved tensions, between specific traits of contemporary Western society and certain evolutions that affect the health systems (corporatization,

privatization) but also the paradigm of biomedicine itself. Criticisms, in this second case, often call into question the increasing medicalization of society, the (perceived) excessively mechanistic and materialistic conception of the organism characterizing the (Western) biomedicine paradigm, its hyperspecialization, and little attention to patients' experience and competencies, as well as to clinic, as validation criteria, as opposed to mere epidemiological and statistical evidence (Cavicchi 2022; Lello 2020).

6. In this Special Issue

Based on a call for papers which was on purpose wide and open, the articles composing this Special Issue extend some of the arguments presented in the previous pages on science, public health, conspiracy theories and social protests, while also adding other elements for reflection. They do so through empirical and theoretical analyses, coming from different disciplinary fields, and using different methodological tools and epistemological perspectives. Hopefully, also thanks to this variety, this Special Issue can contribute to a crucial debate on the Covid-19 juncture, but even more to a discussion on the future of (social) science and democracy in times of multiple crises.

In the first article, **Fabio Lucchini** and **Michele Marzulli** focus on the relations between expert systems and public opinion, following an approach that describes how scientists' knowledge is questioned during serious globalized crises, such as epidemics and pandemics. Through a web-ethnography, the authors identify a typology of Italian and UK Twitter profiles in order to define the role of scientists in the debate around Covid-19, and to answer to what appear to be relevant research questions: What are the main scientific issues of the controversy? How is the multifaceted pro-vax front shaped? What image of science as an expert system emerges in the debate on Covid-19?

Confirming the relevance assumed by the debates on the Web during the pandemic (especially in some Western countries), **Federico Pilati** and **Andrea Miconi** in their article adopted digital methods to map the controversy raised in Italy from the adoption of the so-called "Green Pass". They consider the "voices" of the different actors involved in the controversy through a quali-quantitative approach, based on a collection of more than four billion tweets. The authors both reconstruct the structural relations in which the actors are involved by means of computational techniques, while contemporarily interpreting the discourses surrounding the controversy by means of content analysis.

Following a syndemic approach, **Enrico Campo, Matteo De Toffoli, Giampietro Gobo** and **Fabrizio Strata** inquire in their article why the possibility of early treatment of Covid-19 – arguably useful both for curing the disease and governing the pandemic – has been opposed by many governments and mainstream scientists, to the extent that some proponents of home therapies in Italy organized a political movement specifically to promote the integration of these within national health guidelines. It emerges from their analysis a clear example of the political dimension assumed by scientific debates, positions, and practices during the pandemic.

The article of **Silvia Cervia, Maja Sawicka, Barbara Sena** and **Mauro Serapioni** offers a comparative analysis of three exemplary cases on Covid-19 vaccination policies in European countries: Portugal, the country with the highest rate of Covid-19 vaccination; Italy, one of the most vaccine-hesitant Western European countries; and Poland, which with its vaccination rate well represents vaccine-hesitant post-socialist CEE countries. By combining different cultural factors, this study gives a social map with types of context-driven structures that proposes an interpretative key useful to understanding the complexity of vaccination

hesitancy problem framing and structuring in the Covid-19 pandemic era in different sociocultural and political contexts.

Sara Vallerani's piece analyses the case of a grassroots health care clinic in Palermo, whose campaign may be interpreted as a radical criticism of the state and health authorities concerning the government's management of the pandemic and vaccination campaign, but, at the same time, also as a desire to promote mass immunization in alternative ways. The author highlights that the primary goal of the "grassroots vaccine center" has been to safeguard the inhabitants of the district through a 're-territorialization' of the intervention and the valorization of elements such as relation, spatial proximity and "trust". Additionally, the involvement of the social clinic in the vaccination campaigns represents an unprecedented collaboration between the NHS and an informal organization.

Highlighting the racialized politics of public health, **Sophie Webb** studies the Covid-19 vaccine allocation frameworks created by Johns Hopkins and the National Academies in the United States to understand how they conceptualize the problem of vaccine hesitancy among people of colour, who are constructed as "conspiracy prone". She suggests that constructing people of colour as (wrongfully) mistrustful instead of (rightfully) distrustful of state medical initiatives facilitates ongoing structural racism in national vaccine allocation programs. Race is not factored into vaccine allocation programs supposedly because doing so would make (pathologized) "conspiracy prone" people of colour more (wrongfully) paranoid, yet in the process the public health needs of people of colour are once again neglected, making ongoing distrust of institutions rational.

For her part **Elżbieta Drążkiewicz** explores how vaccine protest movements delegitimized as "conspiracist" in Ireland and Poland mimic bureaucratic, scientific and expert knowledge in their public relations, either to gain purchase on the respectability of regular NGOs (even if not entirely complying with their rules), or to mock liberal civil society in a more intentionally disruptive way. She asks if this ability to destabilize the norms of the democratic order is what makes organizations such as ACI or Stop-NOP so scandalous, regardless of how low or high their following might be, thus exploring how public discourse on "conspiracy theory" is related to specific political anxieties related to the structure of liberal democracies. The study is of vaccine protest movements in both Ireland and Poland, wherein the comparative study is about people afraid of conspiracy theorists, not just conspiracy theorists themselves.

The contribution by **Elisa Lello, Niccolò Bertuzzi, Marco Pedroni,** and **Luca Raffini** focuses on the plural universe of vaccine hesitancy and the materialisations of conflict concerning vaccines and policies aimed to address the Covid-19 pandemic. While these protests have been mainly read, in Italy, as driven by selfish individualism, populism, and ignorance, the authors, relying on qualitative research, propose a more nuanced interpretation and one capable of recognizing the underlying processes of re-politicization. Also, institutional distrust, often recognized by the literature on vaccine hesitancy as a crucial explaining factor, is here interpreted as a consequence of a growing sense of estrangement, on the part of these citizens, towards a political and institutional system that is increasingly perceived as a threat, more than a guarantee, for the (alternative) sets of values and worldviews shared (to different extents) by most of them.

Keeping the focus on civil society at large, **Barbara Morsello** and **Paolo Giardullo** highlight in their contribution how vaccine hesitancy and the public contestation of vaccination policies represented alternative forms of citizenship during the Covid-19 pandemic. To do that, they first mapped the Italian anti-vaccine arenas and movements, and then conducted a multi-sited digital ethnography focusing on three free vax communities from January 2020 to July 2021. According to their analysis, vaccine-related mobilizations and

the frames of free vax communities are not only a matter of fake news and spread of conspiracy theories, but they also imply specific processes of knowledge-making.

In the next article, **Donatella della Porta** and **Anna Lavizzari** adopt some classic approach from SMS, analyzing two different waves of protest in the Italian scenario between 2020 and 2021 by means of a protest event analysis mainly based on newspapers' accounts and video content analysis. The authors acknowledge the heterogeneity and plurality of forms of action and diversification of actors, but specifically focus on far-right groups and conspiracy arguments. Further, they identify processes of radicalization, and an emerging role of the organizations during the second of the two waves they examine, confirming the dynamic and processual paths typical of most collective mobilizations.

Employing the same methodology, protest event analysis (but scraping data mainly from social movements' media accounts), **Óscar García Agustín** and **Anita Nissen** focus on three anti-restriction groups in Denmark, framing them as "populist counterpublics". On the one hand, the authors highlight that there were fewer protests in Denmark than in other countries, also because of less restrictive and shorter policy measures; on the other hand, they claim that these mobilizations resulted in a generalized failure, especially in terms of alliance building. Further, the authors analyze how protesters use global conspiracism as a diagnostic frame to blame the Danish government and international elites.

The Special Issue is closed by two more theoretical than empirical contributions. Through a philosophical, theoretical approach, **Emilio Gardini** focuses on crucial concepts in the dealing of the pandemic, such as public health, emergency, technocracy, technical rationality, biopolitics. He advocates the use of dialectical thought in order to bring back conflict into a political space that is being de-politicized by the increasing role of technical rationality, the "experts", and finally of technocracy.

Last but not least, **Nicola Stocco** proposes a critical review of literature reviews, putting into evidence the often-uncritical nexus which is made between conspiracy theory and vaccine hesitancy. Mainly relying on STS, boundary work literature, and ignorance studies, he underlines how this nexus is supported by a widespread tendency to rely on the pathologizing paradigm. A limitation of agency, in terms of epistemic possibilities, from the scientific discourse, as well as a lack of problematization about the role of capitalism, and, on the other side, demands for grassroots participation in the production of science, stand as the main consequences deriving from the application of such a framework.

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