

When Coronavirus Made Italy Go Insane

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Empty supermarket shelves and the spread of designer-brand face masks show that Italians are panicking about coronavirus. The spread of the virus demands a planned and coherent response — but the politics of fear are instead turning Italians against each other.

When Billie Eilish [wore a Gucci face mask](#) to the Grammys last month, it was clear that the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan was about to impact the world of fashion. Little could the organizers of Milan Fashion Week (February 18–24) have known, the North Italian city would itself be rocked by the virus. On February 21, Italy headed into meltdown as fourteen people were tested positive in parts of the Lombardy region surrounding Milan. Giorgio Armani's collection had to take the catwalk to [behind closed doors](#).

With the Milan city center near-deserted, one particular fashion item however began record business: face masks, supposedly acting as protective “filters.” Luxury brand Fendi, whose headquarters inhabit Benito Mussolini's imposing Colosseo Quadrato, listed masks for €190, and [Marcelo Burlon](#) for €70; both sold out within just hours. As pharmacies sold out of the item, even bog-standard versions traded on eBay for €50, with full protection kits (including disinfectant, gloves, and toilet seat cover) listed for €5,000.

The masks will do nothing to stop you from getting the virus. But with many who fear being killed, there's plenty of opportunity for those who want to make a killing. For Tommaso Monacelli, an economics professor at Milan's prestigious Bocconi University, [tweeted](#) that the spike in prices made sense, since it meant the masks would be allocated to infected people who really needed them (and were thus willing to pay), rather than the merely anxious.

This confident endorsement of market efficiency bore little relation to reality: and mask or not, the people who have tested positive for COVID-19 certainly shouldn't be walking around. Yet peace of mind is a commodity just as much as pharmaceuticals, and many of those *able* to pay feel that they can buy a little token of safety. It doesn't matter that the masks won't help: at Rome's Fiumicino Airport on Friday, I saw at least half a dozen people with them hung around their chins, not even covering their mouths.

Panic Takes Over

With twenty-one deaths at the time of writing (the youngest aged seventy-six), Italy is the worst-affected country apart from China and South Korea. By the end of the first week, the number of new cases per day had overtaken Hubei province, the original source of the global outbreak (with a similar population). Around a hundred thousand people live in the towns under quarantine; even in less-affected areas, there has been mass panic buying in supermarkets, with water and pasta disappearing from the shelves as well as disinfectant and, of course, masks.

One supermarket customer in Monza, a town near Milan famous for its Formula 1 circuit, headed

toward the [cash desk sneezing](#) before running off with his unpaid-for shopping; one now-famous clip (with 1.5 million views on Twitter) showed an elderly shopper lamenting that there is [more panic now than at the beginning of World War II](#). Aside from the panic buying and the shutting of bars and restaurants, there's also been mass cancellation of trains, a drastic fall in flight bookings, and school closures around the country.

One curiosity of the outbreak is that, coincidentally, the two hardest-hit regions, Lombardy and Veneto, are the main heartlands of the far-right Lega. Lombardian president Attilio Fontana, famous for saying that [immigration was destroying the white race in Italy](#), dismissed coronavirus as just like the flu, before heading into two-week quarantine [one day later when his own aide tested positive](#). His Veneto counterpart Luca Zaia, also of the Lega, said the crisis is unsurprising since "[we've all seen the Chinese eating rats](#)."

In Italy, health is controlled by regional governments, whose autonomy the Lega holds dear. But there has been sharp criticism of the initial handling of the outbreak, not least since in Lombardy the virus spread thanks to a patient who visited Codogno Hospital on February 16, but was not isolated or tested and thus infected dozens of others. When Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte (an independent) suggested the need for a uniform national response, the [Lega's leader in the Senate called this an "almost fascist"](#) assault on the regions.

Very little of the public debate has focused on health care provision as such. Hawkish neoliberal economist Luigi Marattin, famous for his Facebook posts damning "populism," insisted that Italy should have cut spending in the past so it could spend more on building hospitals now. Other than the curious implication that less should have been done to prepare in advance, this argument also falls down on the fact that [Lega-controlled Lombardy has cut many services, cutting waiting times by turning patients to private clinics](#).

As doctor Vittorio Agnoletto writes, [family doctors have been abandoned](#), following a logic that deputy Lega leader Giancarlo Giorgetti expressed last summer: "Who goes to their local doctor anymore? That world is over." Himself an alumnus of Bocconi University, Giorgetti is now a prominent actor in plans to form a "national unity government" to respond to the crisis, stretching from liberal centrist Matteo Renzi to Matteo Salvini's Lega — ousting current premier Conte and also allowing early elections.

Politics of Fear

If such plans are driven by electoral opportunism, it's also worth considering what the political effects of all this might be. With reports in even centrist outlets attacking "[slitty-eyed tourists](#)" walking around without masks, and widespread images of masked and armed soldiers blocking off roads, the crisis will fuel calls to harden borders. [Italy was the only European country to ban flights from China](#), but this may even have been counterproductive — forcing travelers to reroute via other countries and thus evade checks.

As [Israel turns away travelers from Italy](#), and Turkey and the United States [warn against "nonessential travel"](#), the sense of injustice has done nothing to slow calls for Italy to step up its own restrictions on arrivals from elsewhere. Discrimination against Italian emigrants never did much to foster Italian empathy for immigrants to their own country, and even as Marine Le Pen calls for a block on arrivals from Italy, her ally Matteo Salvini damns the Italian government for failing to clamp down on immigration.

[Thomas Piketty has noted that](#), in an age when nation-states have ever fewer levers (with economic policy and other issues transferred to Brussels or homogenized by globalization), political debate is

bound to focus on one thing they do still control: borders. This has been dramatized by coronavirus; while the response demands quarantine at a hyper-local level (not just national borders), the crisis feeds sentiments (constantly affirmed by the media) of outside danger, insecurity, and powerlessness faced with a global threat.

In this sense, it doesn't really matter if Lega regions have a poor record on health. The surging prices for useless masks show a mass privatization already underway: the individual who can't rely on the state to handle the crisis so finds their own "solution." The fact the patient zero hasn't been found doesn't just imply the disease may not result from tourism: it also feeds the sense that no one is in control, because no one knows. The effect is panic, distrust, turning in on ourselves: the kind of sentiments that the far right is bound to exploit.

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