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## 2. Accounting and accountability for pandemics: Emerging themes and future implications.

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### **Abstract**

This chapter provides a conceptual framing to the chapters that follow and identifies the key issues surrounding accounting at times of great crisis, most especially during pandemics. It does so by analysing the main perspectives, themes and theoretical approaches that have been employed by accounting scholars in investigating accounting and accountability matters when humanity had to engage in a fight against the spread of disease. The chapter then focuses on an important emerging theme, namely the biopolitical properties of accounting and the ways in which they have been activated in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy as a state of exception, when unprecedented limitations have been imposed on how individuals could conduct themselves. The chapter also offers potential avenues for future research.

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic is a multifaceted phenomenon that had health, socio-cultural, economic and political implications. As one of the biggest crises since the Second World War (WWII), the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the entire world population, with over 767 million cases and more than 6.9 million deaths as of July 2023 (World Health Organisation, 2023). The destructive force of the pandemic has led to the adoption of extreme measures by States to slow the spread of the virus, with a significant impact on the lives of individuals and the economy. Loss of jobs, business failures, psychological problems and increasing poverty are just some of the consequences of the pandemic and the associated response measures (Leoni et al., 2021). Such a disruptive phenomenon has drawn academics from all disciplines around the world, including accounting, to work on solutions and new ways to deal with the emergency. Accounting academics have been engaged in multi-disciplinary contributions to explore accounting and accountability practices during the pandemic, discussing opportunities and challenges (Leoni et al., 2021).

Accounting scholars have focused their attention on four main issues. These include the evolution of accounting and accountability practices in response to the much changed socio-political context during the pandemic (Crovini et al., 2022; Landi et al., 2022; Parker, 2020; Sian and Smyth, 2022; Yu, 2021). Studies have also investigated the role of accounting in the

achievement of sustainable development goals, which the devastating effects of COVID-19 have made extremely difficult (Andrew et al., 2022; Cho et al., 2022; Gilbert and Guénin, 2022). Furthermore, alternative perspectives on the use of accounting in the management of different types of organisations in response to the recent challenges emerged (Free and Hecimovic, 2021; Huber et al., 2021; Kober and Thambar, 2021, 2023; Passetti et al., 2021). An important, growing body of literature investigated the role of accounting as a technology of government in the pursuit of strategies adopted by governments to tackle the pandemic (Antonelli et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2021; Ahrens and Ferry, 2021; Bui et al., 2022; Ferry et al., 2023; La Torre et al., 2021; Sargiacomo et al., 2021). Amongst the latter studies, an innovative perspective has started to shed light on how the biopolitical properties of accounting can be used by those in power during an emergency to influence the behaviour of individuals, consistent with State priorities. Informed by Giorgio Agamben's understanding of biopolitics and states of exception, this chapter provides an initial exploration of this innovative perspective. At times of crisis, the State can create a state of exception, in which the government has almost unlimited powers and frees itself of the usual checks and balances which characterise democratic life. These powers are used to impose severe restrictions on the way in which individuals can conduct themselves, potentially reducing them to 'bare life', that is mere existence, devoid of all civil rights (Agamben, 1998, 2005). Accounting practices, which are often perceived to be neutral and reliable techniques (Cooper, 1995), can be a useful biopolitical instrument through which the government can justify significant, enduring interventions in people's lives (Antonelli et al. 2022). The chapter develops a critical reflection on the biopolitical properties of accounting activated in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. It explores how accounting as a biopolitical tool had an impact on the lives of Italian citizens and provided justification to penetrating interventions by the government. The chapter also identifies how the use of accounting as a biopolitical tool varied during the pandemic when government priorities evolved. Lastly, the chapter offers suggestions for future research into the place of accounting in the context of emergencies.

### **Accounting and accountability for pandemics: what have we done so far?**

A substantial body of work has explored the role of accounting as a technology of government in the pursuit of strategies adopted by States to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic (Antonelli et al., 2022; Ahmad et al., 2021; Ahrens and Ferry, 2021; Bui et al., 2022; La Torre et al., 2021; Sargiacomo et al., 2021). Studies drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality have shed light on the power of accounting in shaping a government's pandemic response by making risks and uncertainties knowable, thus enabling informed decision-making (Ahmad et al., 2021; Sargiacomo et al., 2021). Ahmad et al.'s (2021, p. 1372) study of the UK government's COVID-19 testing policies reveals that testing and associated accounting practices were the "fulcrum of power for the government's action" against COVID-19 and enabled the government to act on distant sites, such as communities and businesses. Other studies have investigated accounting practices as a technology that supports a government's communication strategy (Ahrens and Ferry, 2021; Antonelli et al., 2022; Bui et al., 2022). Accounting has been seen as a tool that can provide legitimisation to government decisions and ensure acceptance by the population of unprecedented limitations to their freedom (Ahrens and Ferry, 2021; Antonelli et al., 2022). While some governments have sought to justify their decisions by spreading fear and uncertainty through accounting numbers (Antonelli et al., 2022), others have appealed to emotions, sense of belonging and urgency (Bui et al., 2022). Although these strategies have worked in the short term, to ensure ongoing acceptance of restrictive measures governments need reliable accounting information which supports their decisions and makes them look rational to the public (Bui et

al., 2022). The functioning of accounting in promoting acceptance of government measures has been analysed by La Torre et al. (2022), who focused on the socialising effect of accounting practices. Not only does accounting help to legitimise restrictive measures, it also acts as a persuasive technology that fuels collective responsibility and channels people's collective actions towards a common purpose. Research has also highlighted the limitations of accounting in furthering governmental strategies designed to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on what can be measured and counted, accounting practices may provide an incomplete representation of a complex phenomenon such as a pandemic, thereby misleading government responses. This was exemplified by the calculative practices associated with emergency food allocations in the Italian city of Turin, which denied visibility to several categories of people in need, such as immigrants (Sargiacomo et al., 2021). The power of accounting in supporting pandemic strategies depends on how accounting is integrated with a country's social structures, and on the relationships between politicians and different categories of practitioners, including doctors and accountants (Mitchell et al., 2021). Moreover, constitutional mechanisms are needed to ensure public accountability and supervise governments as they use extraordinary powers to face emergencies (Ferry et al., 2023).

Studies have investigated the evolution of accounting and accountability practices in response to the significant societal impact of the pandemic (Crovini et al., 2022; Landi et al., 2022; Parker, 2020; Sian and Smyth, 2022; Yu, 2021). The spread of COVID-19 has fuelled fear and anxiety among the population, exacerbating conflicts between social groups and reinforcing the need to build a sense of community and solidarity (Landi et al., 2022; Yu, 2021). Scholars have discussed alternative forms of accounting and accountability which give priority to ethical and moral values, such as kinship, reciprocity and the value of life, thereby opening up relationships between individuals (Landi et al., 2022; Yu, 2021). Yu's (2021) study of accounting for death in Wuhan during the pandemic suggests a new conceptualization of accountability, namely 'accountability as mourning', which enhances the sense of belonging to a community. Landi et al. (2022) have focused on the use of dialogic accounting by local governments through social media, which opens a dialogue between different social groups and fuels interaction between citizens and those in power. Accounting and accountability practices have evolved during the pandemic also because of new information needs of stakeholders. The implementation of new mandatory routines in the workplace, including social distancing, led to the implementation of new practices, with risk reporting a valuable tool in responding to these new information needs (Crovini et al., 2022). Furthermore, Parker (2020) identified the reorganisation of companies' physical spaces as a form of accountability through action, which can serve as a powerful form of disclosure of compliance with community expectations and government requirements. Work by Sian and Smyth (2022) focused on the erosion of public accountability and transparency as a result of government exceptional powers, and on the emergence of external forms of accounting by civil organisations to raise awareness about the consequences of government choices and the misuse of resources.

Interest in the evolution of accounting and accountability practices during the pandemic has also resulted in analyses of the effects of COVID-19 on sustainable development and its implications on the role of accounting in the achievement of sustainable development goals (Andrew et al., 2022; Cho et al., 2022; Gilbert and Guénin, 2022; Larrinaga and Garcia-Torea, 2022; Tregidga and Laine, 2022). The devastating effects of COVID-19 have exacerbated social inequalities and made it even more difficult to achieve sustainable development goals, most especially ending poverty and protecting the environment to ensure

that all human beings can enjoy a prosperous and happy life (Cho et al., 2022). Studies have focused on the limitations of traditional environmental accounting approaches, shedding light on how these practices can be improved (Cho et al., 2022; Larrinaga and Garcia-Torea, 2022; Tregidga and Laine, 2022). This includes embracing a system approach aimed at capturing the interconnection between the ecosystem and society and making accounting students aware of the ethical and social implications of their work (Cho et al., 2022; Larrinaga and Garcia-Torea, 2022). It has been emphasised that the same urgency and rapidity showed in the fight against COVID-19 must inform changes to accounting in addressing the current environmental crisis (Tregidga and Laine, 2022). Additional studies have turned their attention to how accounting can help address rising social inequalities (Andrew et al., 2022; Gilbert and Guénin, 2022). COVID-19 has resulted in the growth of the wealth and power of the protagonists of the capitalist system, such as the owners of global tech industries, while it has increasingly impoverished the more vulnerable social groups. Gilbert and Guénin's (2022) critical reflection on public debt showed how accounting can enable a more equitable reconfiguration of relations between social groups through the understanding of how power operates in society. COVID-19 will leave society with high levels of public debt and accounting practices can expose that these are not the result of social investments, as contended by politicians, but are due to policies from which big companies have benefited (Gilbert and Guénin, 2022). Studies have explored how accounting can erode capitalist ideology and help a more equitable redistribution of wealth from top to bottom. Andrew et al. (2022) identified wealth tax as an 'equalising force' that can help redistribute wealth in favour of those most affected by the pandemic.

Another strand of literature has focused on specific organisations and discussed the use of accounting in the management of the recent challenges (Free and Hecimovic, 2021; Huber et al., 2021; Kober and Thambar, 2021, 2023; Passetti et al., 2021). Organisations had to adapt their decision-making process to an ever-changing environment, respond quickly to any changes, comply with strict regulations aimed at health protection, and at the same time ensure financial sustainability of their operations (Kober and Thambar, 2021, 2023; Passetti et al., 2021). Studies of supply chains of for-profit organisations have shown that accounting information, in the form of risk management and reporting, performance measures, strategic supply chain mapping and calculation of inventory functional levels, is a valuable tool for managers and stakeholders to increase transparency and resilience of supply chains and support appropriate decision-making (Free and Hecimovic, 2021). Scholars have also focused on social enterprises, such as cooperatives (Passetti et al., 2021), health organisations (Huber et al., 2021) and charities (Kober and Thambar, 2021, 2023). These studies have investigated a wide range of accounting practices, such as management control practices (Passetti et al., 2021), budgeting, forecasting and corporate reporting (Kober and Thambar, 2021, 2023). Accounting has the potential to allow these organisations to problematise prior arrangements, make uncertainties plannable, monitor not only financial performance but also social interventions, and inform organisational decision-making (Passetti et al., 2021; Huber et al., 2021). Accounting has also been framed as a communicative device, which can support financial resilience when traditional accounting practices are combined with 'accounting talk' that encourages discussion among managerial actors, thereby fostering problem-solving and decision-making (Kober and Thambar, 2021, 2023).

### **Biopolitics and the creation of states of exception**

Agamben's reading of power in modern society emphasises how, increasingly, States are intervening in the way in which citizens conduct themselves. The use of tools such as

compulsory vaccinations and bans on smoking in public places shows how biopower, that is power exercised over life, has a benign appearance for it seeks to protect life and, ultimately, boost the productivity of a population. Nevertheless, Agamben believes that biopolitics is not limited to the mere protection and production of life, rather it extends to the end of life itself and has significant negative potentialities.

Drawing on the Greek concept of *zoe*, Agamben explains that all living beings have ‘bare life’, which represents their mere existence. Having bare life does not entail the presence of any rights for it simply represents a creature’s ability to exist (Agamben, 1998). Only those who have *bios* can enjoy social and political rights, and the protections granted by a State’s legal system (Agamben, 1998). A State can therefore create a *caesura* within its population by discriminating between those whose life has value and meaning, and those who are simply living beings and whose life can be forfeited without any consequences for the killer. This *caesura* was obvious in Nazi Germany with the discrimination and attempted extermination of Jews (Funnell et al., 2022). Building on his concept of bare life, Agamben (2005) notes how at times of emergency a government can declare a ‘state of exception’, which means that the normal legal framework is suspended and citizens are exposed to the State’s unmitigated power, which may reduce them to bare life and significantly curtail their rights (Agamben, 2005).

To Agamben (2020a), government by means of the declaration of states of exception still characterises modern society. In democratic States the creation of a situation of urgency and emergency is essential if the population is to accept restrictions on their traditional freedom which greatly augment government prerogatives. This, reminds Agamben (2020f), was recently exemplified by the ‘war on terror’ which was used to justify penetrating controls of the behaviour of individuals designated as ‘the enemy’, including torture. According to Agamben, “once terrorism was exhausted as a justification for exceptional measures, the invention of an epidemic could offer the ideal pretext for broadening such measures beyond any limitation” (Agamben, 2020a). Controversially, to Agamben (2020a, 2020c) the Coronavirus emergency has been grossly exaggerated. He notes how in democratic States the creation of a never-ending situation of emergency represents a way to exercise power, one which significantly increases the power of the government by freeing it from the traditional limitations imposed by a democratic legal system. Agamben (2020g) stresses how generating in the population a perception of grave danger by adopting the logic of the ‘worst case scenario’ enables the government to use the creation of what constitutes a state of exception to become a normal paradigm of government. This, in turn, means that citizens’ rights, and therefore *bios*, are often significantly affected. People become so accustomed to the continuous rise of new emergencies that they “don’t seem to notice that their lives have been reduced to a purely biological condition, one that has lost not only any social and political dimension, but even any compassionate and emotional one. A society that lives in a permanent state of emergency cannot be a free one” (Agamben, 2020c).

The exploitation of a ‘worst case scenario logic’ requires the provision of data to construct a situation that justifies significant interventions by the government into its citizens’ lives, to which accounting data can provide important contributions. This is because accounting is normally seen simply as the provision of factual, neutral, value-free information in numerical format. As observed by Cooper (1995, p. 184) this traditional, widespread vision “has the effect of making it extremely difficult to question the discourse of accounting because to do so would also mean questioning our historical traces. Our ‘common sense’ tells us that accounting must be ‘right’”. Individuals therefore tend not to question accounting

information or interrogate themselves about the reliability of such information in depicting social phenomena. This effect is then further reinforced by the provision of accounting information by experts in the form of physicians, virologists, but also accountants thanks to their professional competence and alleged independence (Rose and Miller, 1992). The combination of numerical information and professional expertise is an effective tool to ensure that citizens comply with government instructions, with individuals no longer having a right to health but an obligation to health, which Agamben labels 'biosecurity'. By appealing to an individual's will to live, biosecurity ensures ready acceptance of restrictions and associated surveillance, with the ceasing of any political and social activity becoming the highest form of civism (Agamben, 2020f, 2020g). Modern society has "divided our life, which is always inseparably bodily and spiritual, into a biological entity on the one side and our emotional and cultural life on the other" (Agamben, 2020e). The creation of states of exception means that, increasingly, individuals are ready to sacrifice their social relationships, work, political and religious beliefs to protect their bare life (Agamben, 2020c).

### **Managing the pandemic in Italy through accounting 'numbers'**

The Italian government declared a state of emergency on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020 following the detection of COVID-19 in the country. The rapid increase in cases led to the imposition of a lockdown on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2020. So restrictive were these lockdown measures that most of the rights enjoyed by citizens were removed, which in turn reduced them almost to bare life. Citizens could only satisfy their primary needs for they were allowed to leave their home just to buy food or medicine. All other needs and activities that characterise an individual's life, including physical exercise, culture, work, social relations, travel and purchase of non-essential items were forbidden or greatly curtailed. Lockdown measures were enforced by means of an unprecedented use of police forces and technology, including drones. Police were expected to patrol cities and perform checks on those who were found outside. The dramatic situation was epitomised by the iconic video of police chasing a solitary jogger on a deserted beach (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lipVg-St79s>). Nevertheless, enforcement of these strict rules would have been extremely challenging if the entire system were to hinge solely on repression. The Italian government's strategy to win over its people was based on a vast campaign that was meant to make the Italians aware of the existence of a crisis which could have threatened their very existence, thereby convincing them that following the rules issued by the government was the only way to protect their life and tackle the spread of COVID-19. The campaign was based on an extensive use of numerical information, both financial and non-financial.

The most important tool to influence Italian citizens' perception of the pandemic was the daily Civil Protection Department (CPD) conference, which was broadcasted at 6pm by all main TV channels. During 'Phase 1' of the pandemic, when the country was fighting against a virus the nature of which was almost unknown, the conference followed the same structure. First, the number of new cases, deaths, healed individuals, along with beds occupied by COVID-19 patients in intensive care units, in other wards and who were still ill at home was reported. Also revealed was the running total of those who caught COVID-19, which showed the significant speed at which Coronavirus was spreading. Although this information did not feature as regularly as that about the spread of the disease, often communicated was the amount of donations received by the CPD on its current account, which testified to the generosity of the community who sought to offer their help in the fight against COVID-19. Moreover, information on the number of new beds added in hospitals, on the number of those who volunteered to help treat COVID-19 patients and on new ventilators and personal

protection equipment purchased was often reported, which was meant to show the citizenry how the government was seeking to create an infrastructure which would enable the treatment of all patients but, at the same time, to highlight the significant difficulties in doing so should Coronavirus not come under control by means of the new conduct expected of the Italians. An example of the information provided in the CPD conferences at the height of ‘Phase 1’ is provided in Table 2.1.

<Table 2.1 here>

As the government started to prepare for ‘Phase 2’, which meant easing some of the restrictions in May 2020, CPD conferences began to provide more detail on the efforts by the State in securing enough medical devices to treat the severely ill, protect doctors and nurses and safeguard the population by making face masks widely available at an affordable price. Face masks, which were in short supply at the peak of ‘Phase 1’, were seen as one of the most important means to curb the spread of Coronavirus, with their use compulsory in many settings. By showing how face masks were now widely available at a price set at €0.50 each and that infrastructure to treat those with COVID-19 was now sufficient, the government was seeking to communicate to citizens that it had created the conditions to slowly restart normal life, although the threat was still very much present and individual behaviour was still a key part of the fight against Coronavirus. The presentation of data on the development of the pandemic was delivered first by the Head of the CPD, Angelo Borrelli, and then by the Commissioner for the Emergency, Domenico Arcuri, who had been appointed on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2020 to coordinate the government response to the crisis and support the CPD. Crucially, both Borrelli and Arcuri are professional accountants. They were perfectly positioned to communicate and interpret accounting numbers, thereby adding to the message an aura of respectability and truth provided by their professional credentials. Neither of them commented on the epidemiological side of the pandemic, which was taken care of by a doctor in the second part of the press conference.

The data presented in the CPD press conferences were then echoed in the press and in news programmes. New TV programmes were also broadcast which focused on the pandemic and amply referred to the information provided by the CPD. An example was the programme called “The Numbers of the Pandemics”, which for an hour every day offered comments on the CPD data and detailed re-elaborations of the latter, with tables and graphs with highly evocative colours, such as red and black for new cases and deaths and green for the healed. In the first stages of the pandemic, these graphs were dominated by red and black, which offered a highly impactful overview of the seriousness of the situation. The message coming from the ‘numbers’ was then amplified by the rhetoric used both in the press conferences and in the media, which equated the pandemic to a war. Press conferences were called ‘bulletins’, which in the Italian imagination immediately recalled the ‘war bulletins’ in which the armed forces communicated the number of fallen combatants in WWII. Mr Arcuri compared the number of deceased in the city of Milan to that of the victims of bombings during WWII (Ansa, 2020), whilst politicians often described the lockdown as a situation of ‘war economy’ whereby the habits of the Italians had to change for the greater good. Information and the way in which it was communicated in ‘Phase 1’ had the clear intent of proving to the Italians that only by adopting a greatly diminished lifestyle could they save their lives.

With the advent of ‘Phase 2’ in May 2020 the government started to ease some of the restrictions, although the pandemic was far from over. The press conference started to be held twice a week and from 25<sup>th</sup> June 2020 ceased to be broadcast, with data only made available



on the CPD website. It was clear that by then the bulletin had served its purpose and a new stage in the way in which the CPD and the government used accounting data had begun. With strict lockdown measures having taken a significant toll on both the economy and people's mental health, especially younger individuals (Gaslini Hospital, 2020; Osservatorio consumi di mercato Confimprese-EY, 2020), the government sought to introduce a closer monitoring of the pandemic and a more targeted approach to restrictions. New weekly reports prepared by Ministry of Health started to be published on the latter's website. Initially, information included in the reports was mostly that which had characterised the press conferences, although, together with the COVID-19 mortality rate, new indicators were used and popularised, especially the number of cases per 100,000 inhabitants and the  $R_t$  index<sup>1</sup>. Data on each region was calculated and published online to avoid a blanket approach for the entire national territory. The first reports included a simple table presenting the total weekly number of cases per region and the rate per 100,000 inhabitants, along with a visual representation of the estimated  $R_t$  index for each region and its likely range, as shown in Figure 2.1.

<Figure 2.1 here>

The range of measures used for monitoring purposes was greatly augmented from the end of October 2020. The reports now offered a very detailed summary table on page 1, which provided information on the current situation of the pandemic and its likely development. As shown in Table 2.2, for each region the number of new cases and the rate per 100,000 inhabitants were still recorded, along with a visual representation of the weekly trend. The report included the  $R_t$  and its range, and its likely evolution according to four scenarios<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, an evaluation of the impact of the forecasted evolution of the pandemic on the regional health systems was also offered, with an indication of any events that may have put the latter under strain. The table was closed by an evaluation of the overall risk for the region concerned. This table was then linked to others in which more detailed indicators and the way in which they had been calculated was presented.

<Table 2.2 here>

These reports offered a wealth of information that would enable central and regional governments to intervene in a more accurate and informed way. In turn, this led to the creation of a 'colour system' which would characterise the Italian response to the pandemic in 'Phase 2'. Based on the monitoring performed by the Ministry of Health, Italian regions were classified into four colours (white, yellow, orange and red) characterised by increasing levels of restrictions. In white regions no restrictions to freedom of movement were imposed whilst red regions would be *de facto* under lockdown. In the first few months of the implementation of the system, the Ministry decided which colour should be allocated to each region based on an overall assessment of the situation as emerging from the data, but with Decree Law 15/2021, clear thresholds were established for each colour to make the system more objective. From March 2021, another table was added to the reports produced by the Ministry of Health which included for the first time a new measure that would become very

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<sup>1</sup> The  $R_t$  index measures how fast a disease is spreading. An  $R_t$  of 2 means that, on average, each person who contracted COVID-19 will infect another two.

<sup>2</sup> The four scenarios provided an estimate of the value of the  $R_t$  index over time. If in scenario 1 the  $R_t$  index was estimated to be above 1 for less than a month, in scenario 4 it was estimated to be over 1.5 for well over a month.

popular in Italy, the ‘positivity rate’. This was the ratio of positive cases over the number of swabs tests performed. This new measure, which is very easy to interpret and more reliable than the mere number of cases, which depends on a country’s testing capacity, became an important, improved means to show the citizenry the development of the pandemic. The last modification to the system, with the introduction of more data, was the issuing of Decree Law 65/2021. The thresholds used to implement the colour system were soon perceived as too strict, with many regions unnecessarily subjected to damaging restrictions. Consistently, the ‘indicators for decision making’ shown in Table 2.3 were introduced. More importance was given, along with the evolution of the number of cases per 100,000 inhabitants, to the ability of the local health system to withstand the pressure generated by the disease. Accordingly, the percentage of beds occupied by COVID-19 patients in all wards and in intensive care units for each region became crucial in determining the colour allocated to the said region.

<Table 2.3 here>

It is interesting to notice how, even if they were publicly available, the reports very rarely featured in the news beyond indication of the Rt index, the number of cases and the positivity rates. This did not amount to a full-blown strategy aimed at impressing people daily with a wealth of data, even if the quantity and quality of data had significantly improved.

### **The biopolitical properties of accounting in the context of a pandemic**

Accounting provided significant contributions to the Italian government’s response to COVID-19. In the first stage of the pandemic, the so-called ‘Phase 1’, the government faced an unprecedented situation and a virus which quickly showed its high transmissibility and deadly potential. The government’s priority was to curb the spread of a disease which, if not stopped in time, could have ended in a high death toll and in the national health system becoming overwhelmed. Strict rules that significantly restricted personal freedom were issued. Nevertheless, control of individual behaviour by means of repression alone was unthinkable. Consistently, the government started a far-reaching campaign which aimed at instilling in the population a sense of unmitigated danger and insecurity. The use of statistical and financial information was pivotal in constructing a reality that was consistent with the government’s goals. This use of accounting information was particularly potent as such information was spread by means of televised press conferences: individuals tend to accept uncritically news provided by the media (Agamben, 2020h), especially if this takes the form of statistical and financial data. Numerical information is often unconsciously perceived as correct and unquestionable, for accounting data are believed to be neutral, value-free tools that depict an objective reality (Cooper, 1995). This effect was boosted by the fact that information was provided by professional accountants, Angelo Borrelli and Domenico Arcuri. Their professional credentials meant that they were seen by the population as neutral ‘experts’ (Rose and Miller, 1992) whose main goal was to provide an objective evaluation of the data and the phenomena that they sought to represent.

The daily flood of data was meant to impress profoundly Italian citizens, who were shocked by the ever-increasing number of deceased and the rising mortality rate. This happened even though data used were not contextualised and often subject to estimates which affected their reliability. Especially in ‘Phase 1’ experts questioned the accuracy of the data provided during CPD press conferences (Cataldo, 2020), and even the Ministry of Health admitted that the reported mortality rate was overestimated as “there is a focus on diagnosing the more

serious cases, which means that the denominator of the fraction [the number of cases] is underestimated” (Ministry of Health, 2020a, p. 6). At the same time, the number of deaths was not compared to the average number of deaths for similar periods, and many deaths were declared to be virus-related even if the main cause of death may have been an underlying condition (Agamben 2020f). The main comparisons offered were with other national disasters, such as the bombings of the city of Milan and the number of casualties during wars, which meant that citizens perceived the threat of COVID-19 to be as serious as that of a war, so much so that Agamben (2020c) noted that “it is unsurprising that we are talking about war. The emergency rules are forcing us to live under curfew”. Nevertheless, “what mattered was not the accuracy of the data used in depicting the situation, but rather the unconscious impact that these had on the feelings and minds of individuals” (Antonelli et al., 2022, p. 127). The sense of extreme danger spread by means of ‘unquestionable’ accounting numbers meant that the State was able to influence the way in which citizens conducted themselves, from simple routines such as washing hands more often to avoiding leaving one’s home, even to visit friends and family in need. Ultimately, a *hiatus* was created between individuals’ *zoe* and *bios* as citizens were prepared to follow the new, highly restrictive rules imposed by the State, thereby giving up most of their freedom to protect their bare life (Agamben 2020g).

The use of accounting information started to evolve during ‘Phase 2’, when the government reduced limitations on personal freedom and the economy as the country started to prepare to ‘live with COVID-19’. By the end of May 2020 more was known about the virus and the way in which it spread, and lockdown measures seemed to have borne fruit whilst research was underway to produce a new vaccine. The government was seeking a new, more targeted approach to the crisis. To this purpose, a search for more reliable measures started which would enable the government to better understand and manage the development of the pandemic. New measures such as the  $R_t$  index for each region were introduced to avoid nation-wide lockdowns. A new dashboard of indicators was produced on a weekly basis, with more detailed information and measures developed by the Ministry of Health. These reports also presented the methodology behind the calculation of each ratio and provided notes to ensure comparability. This dashboard was then used to make decisions regarding restrictions in each region, which were normally communicated to the citizenry via the media before the weekend and took effect at the beginning of the following week, to give citizens enough time to prepare whilst in ‘Phase 1’ decisions were made and enforced at very short notice. The dashboard was then updated consistent with government priorities, such as when less restrictive thresholds were set to avoid an unnecessary spread of red zones that in mid-2021 were often driven by improved testing capacity, which in turn made the rate of cases per 100,000 inhabitants less reliable than in the past. Unlike in ‘Phase 1’, most of this data was not channelled into a consistent strategy to impress the population, but selected data was used to provide evidence for the government’s decisions.

The chapter has contributed to studies that have investigated the impact of accounting practices in different settings during COVID-19 (Leoni et al., 2021). It has done so by focusing on how the role of accounting evolved in the different stages of the Italian government’s response to the pandemic. Accounting was enlisted by the government first to instil a sense of insecurity which was deemed essential to ensure that people would comply with rules, then to inform the targeted action taken at the local level in the face of an emergency. The chapter has shown how the biopolitical properties of accounting can be activated to influence people’s behaviour consistent with the shifting priorities of those in power. Far from being merely a tool that depicts reality in an objective manner, accounting practices can be mobilised to give visibility to selected aspects of such reality in a way that

benefits governmental programmes. Although accounting practices are often associated with highly (and deceptively) desirable concepts such as efficiency and reliability, their meaning and contribution to the creation of ‘truth’ are never fixed. Rather, the use of accounting by the Italian government during the pandemic demonstrates that accounting is an extremely malleable tool that can serve different purposes as government priorities evolve, including influencing the way in which individuals conduct themselves. The use of accounting for political purposes is notable in democratic States, where the consent of the population is crucial. A biopolitical use of accounting can facilitate the exercise of power by democratic States by convincing people to act in a way that is consistent with the goals of the government, even when this requires individuals to give up part of their freedom, which may have enduring effects.

Consistently, Agamben encourages us to be aware that measures initially introduced to tackle an emergency can have long-lasting outcomes. Agamben (2020c) notes that:

what’s worrying is not so much the present, not only the present at least, but the aftermath. In the same way as the legacies of wars on peacetime have included a whole range of nefarious technologies, from barbed wire to nuclear plants, so it is very likely that there will be attempts to carry on pursuing, even after the medical emergency is over, many of the experiments governments hadn’t been able to implement.

The widespread use of decree laws and administrative acts for suspending Constitutional rights and establishing what is in fact a state of exception remains controversial (Agamben, 2020e). This was clear during the pandemic, when the government needed to act quickly to curb the spread of the virus. However, the constant use of these tools as justified by more or less stringent emergencies, which suspends parliamentary scrutiny, is extremely harmful to democracy. Another dangerous legacy could be the rise of suspicion towards fellow citizens who endanger the community with their ‘reckless’ behaviour and must be reported to the authorities, which is a way of blaming citizens for the results of political errors, such as the lack of funding for the national health system (Agamben, 2020b, 2020f). Similar issues may rise with the risk of seeing gatherings and other forms of social interaction which cause a ‘political contagion’ curtailed, with the exchange of digital messages as the main means of communication, which in turn would generate “masses that are... particularly solid and passive” (Agamben, 2020d). This can tear the social fabric for, as noted by Agamben (2020c), “bare life - and fear of losing it – is not something that brings human beings together, but blinds and divides them”.

Agamben (2020c) observes that we “live in a society that has sacrificed freedom to so-called ‘security reasons’”, with the constant declaration of ‘exceptions’ causing people to become used to living in a situation of continuous emergency, which in turn means that it is easier for those in power to ensure that individuals meekly accept increasing levels of control by the State. Technological advances and the digitisation of human life have fuelled an unprecedented spread of control of internet traffic, mobile phones and the use of cameras and facial recognition software, all of which is implemented to ‘keep citizens safe’. Provocatively, Agamben (2020f) claims that control by the State has reached a point that was not touched even under totalitarian regimes. Consistently, research into the place of accounting in the context of emergencies should not be limited to investigating how accounting practices facilitate or hinder the management of a crisis, but should also ask ‘wicked’ questions by digging deep into the role of accounting in justifying measures that

have an impact on human life. Emergencies are a crucial site for studying the biopolitical properties of accounting, for during crises exceptional measures are often introduced that significantly influence how individuals behave. These measures, as noted by Agamben, can have long-term implications that need to be analysed, along with the way in which accounting can be used to sustain them. Another promising future avenue of research could be studying the use of accounting information by different actors involved in making decisions (or opposing them) during emergencies. Although in a power network there will always be actors that are more powerful than others, none of them is usually completely powerless (Foucault, 1978), which means that accounting information could be used by government departments, public bodies or even citizens to support different strategies or enact counter-strategies. The role of accounting professionals in producing and conveying information that has biopolitical implications could also be the focus of future studies. Comparative studies could shed light on how accounting has been mobilised during the COVID-19 pandemic or other emergencies in the pursuit of different government priorities.

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