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Two Years of the COVID-19 Crisis: Anxiety, Creativity and the Everyday

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Abstract: Doubtless, the COVID-19 pandemic has been extremely challenging in all aspects. However, rather than looking at COVID-19 exclusively as a catastrophic event, which has generated insecurity, anxiety, panic and helplessness, I suggest investigating this insecurity and anxiety through the prism of existential philosophy. Drawing, in particular, on the work of Søren Kierkegaard and the literature on the existentialist anxiety of international relations, this study suggested looking at anxiety not in terms of insecurity but as “freedom’s actuality”. In other words, the attention was focused not so much on the many restrictions and bans imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but on the many quotidian and minuscule creative interventions through which people attempted to counterbalance, respond and react to them by creating new possibilities of freedom. Special attention was devoted to the distinction between normal and neurotic anxiety. This distinction is especially important, as it connects to two different and opposing subjectivities. While normal anxiety encourages a proactive approach to life—inspiring individuals to change the present through new daily strategies—neurotic anxiety prevents it, as it tends to replicate the ordinary, the known and the familiar.

Keywords: insecurity; Kierkegaard; existentialism; daily practices; Italy



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1. Introduction

The past two years since early 2020 have been extremely difficult for everyone. Virtually all countries were affected by the deadly consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has had far-reaching implications for the political, social, economic, legal, commercial, medical, relational and daily (liberal) aspects of our lives. It is not surprising that, given the changes and challenges that we have experienced since early 2020, many disciplines have scrutinized the impact of COVID-19 through a variety of lenses. Within political studies, attention has been mostly devoted to bordering practices [1–3]; emergency powers [4,5], the technologies of control and surveillance [6,7], liberal versus totalitarian responses to COVID-19 [8,9], new modalities of governing (im)mobility and (un)freedom [10,11], and the economic and social consequences of the pandemic [12,13]. Within this broad spectrum, the concepts of crisis, emergency and exception have overwhelmingly dominated the literature as well as public debates. Recognizing the major disruptions, shocks and challenges that COVID-19 had created worldwide, much attention has been devoted to its traumatic impact on individuals and collectivities. In particular, the “psy” disciplines have devoted great attention to the generalized fear, insecurity, anxiety, grief, anger and helplessness that have dominated our lives since the outbreak of COVID-19 [14–16]. These (negative) feelings arose not only because of the direct deadly effect of COVID-19 but also as a response to the many mobility restrictions imposed at that time. For months, our daily lives were put on hold. Traveling, working in offices, visiting family and friends, shopping, going out and eating out were greatly restricted, if not totally banned. In the European Union, restrictions on mobility were imposed virtually everywhere. Those who were infected, or whose family members were infected, experienced further difficulties. Social distancing and self-isolation requirements, and the ban on assisting hospitalized

family members and on arranging funerals and burials, especially during the first months of the COVID-19 emergency, added new layers to the already traumatic experience. Much attention has also been devoted to the medical personnel who faced an unprecedented risk to their lives and experienced great frustration and helplessness because of the limitations of the infrastructure and equipment, especially during the very first months, when hard decisions had to be made.

Given the broad literature on the feelings of uncertainty, fear, anguish and unfreedom that impacted all aspects of our daily lives, this study investigated the extent to which anxiety has stimulated and encouraged the emergence of creative daily practices. In other words, this study looked at anxiety as an important creative driver that inspired people to act in ways that countered, reacted to and/or softened the negative consequences of immobility. What was especially interesting to investigate is how people reorganized their lives in a time of widespread insecurity, uncertainty and uneasiness. Looking at the Italian context in particular, this study focused on the many modalities through which people adapted and, to some extent, reinvented their daily lives through minuscule practices of evasion, mobility and sociality. By examining people's quotidian practices, this study ultimately analyzed people's capacity to adopt innovative daily practices during the (traumatic) COVID-19 experience, by which they countered daily mobility restrictions. This was achieved by drawing on existential philosophy and, in particular, on the work of Søren Kierkegaard, who looked at anxiety as "freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" [17] (p. 42). Special attention was devoted to the concept of ontological (in)security and the connected distinction between normal and neurotic anxiety. This distinction is especially important, as the two presuppose different (daily) responses. As Karl Gustafsson and Nina Krickel-Choi put it: "the former enables change while the latter prevents it, or at least makes it unlikely" [18] (p. 888).

The argument is organized into four parts that examine the following: (1) the traumatic experience of COVID-19; (2) the question of insecurity in international relations; (3) viewing the issues of insecurity, anxiety and change through an existential approach; and (4) the Italian context, with special attention to acts of daily mobility and sociality.

2. The Traumatic Experience of COVID-19

Worldometer reported, on 3 January 2023, some 6.7 million deaths and more than 665 million cases of COVID-19 globally since the inception of the pandemic, and a new pandemic phase is expected in 2023 because of the increased infection rate in many countries, especially in China. The direct impacts of the pandemic—in addition to the subsequent job losses, economic precarity, the health effects of "long COVID" and psychological trauma—are no doubt shocking and unprecedented. Although pandemics have always existed, and some have been even deadlier than the current one, the past two European generations have not had to experience them.

COVID-19, similar to all life-threatening events, is a reminder of human vulnerability even in highly advanced and technological societies. The 1918 Spanish flu was even more deadly than the recent COVID-19 pandemic, leaving an estimated 50 million people dead worldwide over three successive waves [13] (p. 16). More recent cases of health crises, such as the 2002 SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic in China, the 2012 MERS (Middle East respiratory syndrome) epidemic and the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak in West Africa were experienced in selected countries to which the West paid little attention. Indeed, this was also the general attitude of many European countries when the first news reports and images from the city of Wuhan in Hubei Province were broadcasted.

The concept of quarantine is also not new. It goes back to the mid-14th century, when Italy introduced an isolation period of 40 (*quaranta*) days to contain the spread of the Black Death. At the time, people resorted to self-isolation to avoid direct contact with those infected. In terms of numbers, the Black Death was "the most devastating natural disaster in European history, ravaging Europe and causing economic, social, political, and cultural upheaval" [19] (p. 304). The COVID-19 pandemic has also been extremely devastating

and traumatic in the way it has impacted people's lives and their ability to respond to it. Needless to say, the trauma was not felt to the same intensity by everyone. The experience of those who were hospitalized or who experienced a series of mourning in the family—as well as the trauma caused by the suspension of funerals, difficulties in accessing graveyards and, worse, compulsory cremations [20–22]—was certainly very different from those who experienced the COVID-19 restrictions but not its deadly cost. Still different were the experiences of those who had been working in the health sector, particularly, the doctors who had to decide which lives to save, given the shortage of ventilatory support systems and oxygen equipment, and which lives to put on hold, such as, for instance, the care and treatment of non-COVID-19 patients, which were postponed [23–25]. Different yet again was the experience of those working in essential sectors—including caregivers, cleaners, drivers, food factory workers and essential shop workers—who had no choice but to go to work without, in many cases, adequate sanitary protective tools, which were often unavailable during the very first months of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic, together with natural disasters, violent conflicts, terrorist attacks, mass rapes, genocide, severe and widespread abuse and violence, and economic crises, has been classified as traumatic. All these events are considered traumatic because they radically disturb, interrupt and violate individual and collective quotidian practices. For instance, Jenny Edkins [26], drawing upon Maurice Blanchot's work [27], highlighted the limits of our linguistic tools for defining and describing traumatic events. Not only do they challenge our everyday lives and expectations, but they are also so shocking and unimaginable in that our language tools are inadequate. Referring specifically to the Holocaust as both "unimaginable" and "unspeakable", Edkins highlighted how "these epithets have often served as an excuse for neither imagining it nor speaking about it" [28] (p. 2). In other words, reality exceeds even our imagination to the point that not only are we unable to make sense of it, but we are also unable to articulate these events through the existing linguistic tools. It is this difficulty in making sense of reality that made Erica Resende look at the trauma of 9/11 through the concept of *aporia*, that is, as moments of undecidability, as moments in which emotions are "messy, puzzling, and undefined" [29] (p. 59).

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the first months, was beyond our intelligible and descriptive capacity, especially for the wealthy European Union countries, which have built not only a narrative of championing democracy, freedom and human rights, but also a reputation for offering relative security and protection [30–32]. The COVID-19 emergency, similar to other violent events, highlighted states' vulnerability and insecurity, not against other (enemy) states, but against invisible and imperceptible lifeforms. The COVID-19 pandemic, similar to other deadly threats, reminded us that states—no matter how democratic, liberal or wealthy—cannot provide security against all possible threats. International Relations (IR) security literature offers abundant analyses of this [32–34]. It is to IR's approach to (in)security and anxiety that attention will now turn.

3. IR and (In)Security: An Overview

Within political science, IR is no doubt the discipline that, more than the others, focuses on the issues of (in)security and international crises. Although this study drew mostly upon the existential anxiety literature, it is worth spending a little time on the approaches to security that have dominated the discipline. While state-centric analyses, whose major concern is state's security against military threats, dominated all the political and academic debates throughout the Cold War time, human-centric security approaches, which prioritize people's protection, are now dominant, even if, when it comes to concrete situations, the concept of human security is "too broad and vague a concept to be meaningful" [35] (p. 2). Notwithstanding, the paradigm shift helped connect the concept of human security with that of human development and of emancipation [36]. It was, in particular, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) that highlighted the devastating consequences that underdevelopment had on individuals' liberty and security. More specifically, for ordinary people, security meant not only security from traditional constraints, such as

wars and violent conflicts or the threat of them, but also from everyday constraints such as “poverty, poor education, political oppression and so on” [36] (p. 319). By reading security in terms of emancipation, attention was no longer, or not exclusively, focused on power and order, but on “those physical and human constraints which stop [individuals and groups] carrying out what they would freely choose to do” [36] (p. 319). By broadening and deepening the concept of security beyond military issues [37] (p. 4), not only have (critical) security scholars highlighted the relationship between security and freedom (freedom from want and freedom from fear [38]) but they have also prioritized the well-being of individuals over the security of the state.

More recently, attention has shifted toward virtual wars [39], technological innovation [40], disciplinary and surveillance mechanisms [41], as well as to “the potential catastrophic event—be it global warming, a terrorist attack or global pandemics—that cannot be prevented, neutralized or contained” [33] (p. 2). More specifically, Claudia Aradau and Rens van Munster suggested that new rationalities and forms of (security) knowledge have emerged alongside more traditional forms of knowledge (p. 2). These new rationalities are needed if we were to answer questions. For example, such as how “can we ‘think the unthinkable’, ‘know the unknowable’ or ‘expect the unexpected?’” (p. 2). According to them, “imagination and sensorial experience [which] had been disavowed in security knowledge, [. . .] now appear as essential supplements to more traditional forms of security knowledge” (p. 8). Drawing upon Immanuel Kant’s understanding of imagination, Aradau and van Munster read “imagination as a faculty involved in all cognition” (p. 70). More specifically, because “imagination deals with absences and non-actuality”, imagination is “the most adaptable faculty to tackle the uncertainty of an unknown future” (p. 70). While Aradau and van Munster drew upon imagination and sensorial experience to articulate a politics of catastrophe, I invoked the power of imagination as a tool for moving away from the images of catastrophes that continue to dominate IR security studies. By drawing upon the existentialist (anxiety) literature, I suggest that we should investigate how individuals use their imagination and creativity to counter insecurity and catastrophes. In other words, rather than looking at COVID-19 exclusively as a catastrophic event that has generated insecurity, anxiety, panic and helplessness, I suggest also investigating the power of creativity in responding and reinventing daily life¹ in response to a deadly pandemic. Special attention was paid to the ways by which normal anxiety elicits new creative daily modalities aimed at counterbalancing insecurity.

4. Insecurity, Anxiety and Change

The COVID-19 pandemic has, no doubt, impacted our daily lives, which have not been immune to feelings such as fear, uncertainties, anxiety, uneasiness, frustration and helplessness. Starting from the premise that anxiety also “potentially drives a politics of radical change” [42] (p. 1022), I suggest investigating anxiety not through the prism of security or psychology, but through the prism of philosophy. Existential philosophy offers a series of important insights that are worth exploring. To begin with, for existentialists such as “the ‘big four’—Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre”, existence precedes essence, meaning, there is “no pre-given ‘essence’ that determines who and what we are” [43] (p. 15, 12 ebook). We are always “a ‘not yet,’” (p. 12) in the sense that we are always in the process of becoming, and this becoming is due to the ways in which we live the present, make choices and take actions accordingly. By distinguishing between essence (I am) and existence (I exist), existential phenomenologists read human actions and perceptions not as motivated by rational thinking but by people’s lived experiences. By breaking from the Cartesian mind–body dualism, existential phenomenologists investigate, first and foremost, the way in which people live and perceive the surrounding world. By reversing the Cartesian formulation “Cogito, ergo sum” (I think, therefore I am) into “Sum, ergo cogito” (I am, therefore I think), existentialists highlight that the thinking subject does not pre-exist the subjective experience of the “I” [44] (p. 361). As Merleau-Ponty highlighted, in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, the “world is not what I think, but what

I live through" [45] (p. xviii), that is, the world is not an objective reality external to us but the result of direct personal experiences. This does not mean that rational thinking is unimportant, but that human action is not simply the result of a thinking mind but of a lived experience. Martin Heidegger's concept of Dasein precisely captures this perspective: the being can only be thought of as "being-in-the-world" [46], that is, as part of the unique and "inseparable relations with the non-self, the world of things and other persons in which the human subject always and necessarily finds itself" [44] (p. 376). As also highlighted by Kevin Aho, it is through "the visceral experiences of the individual" that we gain knowledge. Our feelings, moods and perceptions are crucial for making sense of the reality that surrounds us. Some moods are more important than others because they "shake us out of our everyday complacency and self-deception" [43] (pp. 13–14). Anxiety is one of these.

It was the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) who first discussed the concept of "*angest*", originally translated as "dread" in 1944, and as "anxiety" in the 1980 edition. Of interest is the way Kierkegaard distinguished anxiety from fear and connected it to the concept of freedom. As he put it: "I must point out that [anxiety] is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite, whereas anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" [17] (p. 42). Kierkegaard recognized freedom as the defining element that distinguishes the human from the vegetative and the animal. As Rollo May put it:

The distinctive characteristic of the human being, in contrast to the merely vegetative or the merely animal, lies in the range of human possibility and in our capacity for self-awareness of possibility. Kierkegaard sees man as the creature who is continually beckoned by possibility, who conceives of possibility, visualizes it, and by creative activity carries it into actuality. [. . .] this possibility is human freedom [47]. (p. 42 e-book)

For Kierkegaard, there is a direct link between anxiety and freedom, in the sense that anxiety "is always conceived in the direction of freedom" (p. 66). In other words, anxiety emerges when human beings are confronted with the "possibility of possibility" (p. 42), which is not simply "the ability to choose the good or the evil" but indeed the "possibility is to *be able*" (emphasis in original, p. 49). Anxiety is but an "intermediate term" between possibility and actuality (p. 49). Rollo May explained this concept very well. The "possibility of freedom"² refers to the transition from possibility—that is, "I can"—to actuality. Anxiety is located amid this transition, in the sense that anxiety emerges every time we engage with new possibilities, which are not known until we experience them. This means that there "is anxiety in any actualizing of possibility" [47] (p. 42). The actualizing of possibility creates a sense of anxiety precisely because of the impossibility of knowing beforehand what is going to happen. Kierkegaard used the image of the abyss before our eyes to describe the feeling of dizziness that anxiety creates. The dizziness that is felt when the eyes "look down into the yawning abyss" is the same dizziness that is felt when "freedom looks down into its own possibility" [17] (p. 61). Anxiety is thus "the dizziness of freedom" (p. 61).

However, as May explains, the anxiety that emerges due to freedom "is 'normal anxiety,' [. . .] not to be confused with 'neurotic anxiety'" that is an "individual's failure to move ahead in situations of normal anxiety" [47] (p. 42). Thus, while normal anxiety opens up new possibilities, "neurotic anxiety is a more constrictive and uncreative form of anxiety" (p. 42). This important difference between normal and neurotic has rarely been considered in IR analyses of insecurity.

Building upon the psychiatrist RD Laing's *The Divided Self* [48], Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi highlighted that the concept of ontological security featured in IR literature, where "ontological" refers to "the adverbial form of 'being'", was developed in reference to those individuals "suffering from a pathological condition" [18] (p. 881). What was especially problematic for Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi is that IR scholars (for instance, Huysmans [49] and McSweeney [50]) have been influenced by the work of Antony Giddens [51], who adapted Laing's concept of ontological security but not his distinction

between normal and neurotic anxiety [48] (p. 876). This distinction is crucial, as the subjects who informed the work of Laing were schizoid subjects, that is, subjects who were ontologically insecure. To quote Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi extensively:

They do not feel themselves to be real, alive, and whole, [. . .] they do not come to view themselves as independent and autonomous persons and therefore cannot relate to others as ontologically secure individuals can [48] (pp. 42–47). For them, every aspect of life, every personal contact poses a potential threat to their very existence, generating debilitating forms of anxiety [18]. (p. 881)

The concept of ontological insecurity, in Laing's work, refers to a pathological condition that is different from the (everyday) experience of common people, who do not experience anxiety as a "permanent and existentially threatening" condition, as in the case of neurotic individuals [18] (p. 882). The distinction between normal versus neurotic is important, not only because it is closely connected to coping strategies but also because ontological security and ontological insecurity apply to two distinct groups of individuals. Ontologically secure people and ontologically insecure people experience different kinds of anxiety that evoke different responses. While normal anxiety leads to creativity and (radical) change, neurotic anxiety tends to replicate the ordinary, the known and the familiar. This distinction takes us back to Kierkegaard's analysis, where (a normal sense of) anxiety is connected to not only new (unknown) possibilities but also to the human ability to actualize those possibilities.

In short, the distinction between normal and neurotic anxiety is crucial, as it helps in framing anxiety not only in terms of insecurity but as a catalyst for creative (re-)action. However, undoubtedly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially when the infection and mortality rates were high and mobility restrictions were stringent, the level of anxiety experienced by the general populace was beyond what was normal. However, it was not yet neurotic. The ability to envisage new and creative possibilities of freedom did not vanish. It was this creative ability to (re)act during a pandemic that was interesting to investigate, as the pandemic greatly challenged the quotidian, the normal and the known. The generalized ability of people to reinvent the everyday through daily practices of mobility, as well as to come up with new modalities of public engagement, shows that, despite a widespread sense of (normal) anxiety, the COVID-19 pandemic was also lived through creative (minuscule) daily activities. It is to these practices that attention will now turn.

5. The COVID-19 Emergency in Italy

The Italian case is especially interesting as it was the first European country to introduce lockdown measures, which, according to some, were the harshest in the EU countries [52]. In Italy, mobility restrictions were first introduced on Sunday 23 February 2020, when the government announced that Lombardy and Veneto, which were recording very high contagion rates, would be placed under partial lockdown [53]³. The government recommended that people in those regions should shelter in place and avoid traveling to municipalities that were reporting high infection rates. After a few days, on 4 March, new restrictions were imposed across the whole country: all activities, apart from those deemed essential, were suspended [53] (Article 1). During the first 10 days, despite the government's order, many did not respect the "recommendation" to stay home. Many traveled within and outside these regions, even reaching the southern part of Italy.

Statistical data from the official ISTAT⁴ reports suggest that a full lockdown was never implemented in the country. Even during the so-called "Phase one" (between 9 March and 3 May) some 32.5% of businesses remained open, which accounted for 48.3% of the overall population employed in the private sector, and generated 60.9% of the national income [54] (pp. 2–3). The fact that the government often used non-mandatory language (that is, it recommended that citizens stay home rather than making it compulsory) encouraged many to take the recommendations lightly. It was only on 22 March that "a prohibition of moving away from the place where one is, save necessity" [53] (Article 1.b) was implemented. This

prohibition was (again) reformulated into a “strong recommendation to remain within one’s own domicile” in the following month [55] (Article 1.b).

In April, security controls were ramped up, particularly during the Easter festivities, as many people were expected to travel and socialize irrespective of the restrictions. Local prefectures in charge of security were asked to “promote any needed initiative in order to ensure the respect of the expected restrictions to mobility,” including unauthorized visits to second houses or holiday destinations [56]. In general, during the months of March and April, the government intervened on many occasions to clarify which rules applied, especially since the rules were not only a mixture of recommendations and bans, but also because the legal provisions were often open to interpretation. While the general recommendation was to stay home or to carry a self-attested declaration justifying mobility, people tended to use all the gaps in the system and in the security controls to leave their homes as much as they could. The following activities were generally permitted: outdoor exercise close to one’s home; essential shopping, for instance in supermarkets, newsagents, pharmacies and tobacco shops; going to work if working in key sectors; taking care of family members in need; and taking dogs out. At some point, people started going to supermarkets more frequently and buying only a few items at a time; wearing jogging outfits and going out, pretending to be sports practitioners; and taking children out for walks, as well as using pets, especially dogs, as a reason to go out more often. At the beginning of April, the government intervened again to clarify what was permitted. This included stretching and taking dogs out or walking with children within a radius of 200 m from one’s home. These activities were not permitted as group or family activities [57]. As a newspaper article stated, clarifications were needed given people’s “negligent and inattentive modality of going out” during the peak of the emergency [58]. In the same article, it was also clarified that the government did “not authorize through decree the ‘fresh air’ walking of parents with children” during the Easter break [58].

6. Daily Possibilities of Freedom

Scrutinizing people’s daily behavior helped shed light on the emotions that prevailed during the pandemic years and, particularly, which actions, reactions or inactions people adopted in response to governmental policies. Especially interesting are the ways in which people used every possible loophole to maintain or recreate a sense of normalcy. This was achieved by reorganizing their lives inside and outside their home, rearranging their social lives, finding ways to protect themselves and inventing new modalities of public protest. In very general terms, it is the characteristic of the liberal and existential subject that emerged during the pandemic years—that is, the subject who freely chose whether to accept, resist or overcome restrictive norms [59]—as well as the subject whose decisions were elaborated from their lived experience of the pandemic.

Personal protection and security, before vaccinations were made available, were mostly determined by the individual’s ability to protect themselves and their personal judgments regarding how best to (and even whether) do so. Face masks, face shields, gloves and sanitizing gels were mostly unavailable to common people during the first few months of the pandemic, not to mention the shortage of equipment in hospitals. This implied that people, at the beginning of the pandemic, had to invent new strategies to protect themselves in the absence of the state’s protective tools. In general, mobility restrictions were countered, opposed or resisted through a variety of modalities, which might be categorized into the following three types: everyday minuscule practices of evasion and/or solidarity, acts of protest that conformed superficially with the restrictive measures, and acts of resistance that disregarded all the COVID-19 restrictions. All these acts should also be read as acts of mobility due to the general rule of forced or recommended immobility. Attention has been devoted to the first two modalities, as an analysis of acts of resistance, especially against the “green pass” system and compulsory vaccinations for certain (public) groups, deserves specific attention that goes beyond this article’s main argument.

To begin with, by daily minuscule practices of evasion, I refer to those modalities through which people evaded restrictions or conformed to the rules only on the surface. The following are some of the strategies people used to leave their homes as often as possible without violating the restrictions: going to the supermarket more often than usual or taking a longer route to reach it; buying a dog or borrowing one from a neighbor to justify being out three times a day; visiting vacation homes on the grounds that some major disaster had happened there; driving along routes that were not often patrolled; meeting family or friends in the late evenings when fewer patrols operated; going down to the building main entrance to smoke a cigarette rather than doing it next to the window at home; visiting people within the same residential building, quite often family members; ordering a drink and consuming it near the entrance of the bar instead of taking it home; and wearing a jogging outfit to justify being out. All these minuscule daily practices were used to maintain some level of freedom and normalcy on the grounds that it was permitted and, if it was not permitted, no police patrol was going to notice it or, finally, that it was not jeopardizing the well-being of other people.

Other small practices were invented to express solidarity. These included, for instance, posting messages and videos on social media on how to make cloth face masks; shopping for the elderly in the same building and leaving groceries at their doorstep; distributing food through voluntary organizations, as they could more easily obtain permission to do so; transforming bars with kitchens into spaces to cook for the homeless; or using religious networks to offer some help.

People also invented new modalities to make their voices heard in public protests. These events were designed to conform with the predominant restrictive measures. For instance, at the end of the first stage of restrictions, static protests were permitted, as long as the social distancing norms were respected and face protection was worn. Some public events were organized to protest the shutting down of various economic sectors, including kindergartens, the live entertainment industry, and selected shops and restaurants. These protests were mostly static and silent. Political messages were delivered through banners and ad hoc static performances. For example, performance workers wearing black outfits and standing next to some 500 sound boxes, positioned in the square opposite Milan's cathedral, made their 'voice' heard through the clapping of hands [60]. Dance teachers organized a performance opposite the parliament in Rome and demanded the reopening of artistic academies [61]. The denial of permission to hold Pride Week in the city of Pescara at the end of June 2020 did not prevent the citizens from organizing a flash mob event to gain visibility. Although dancing was prohibited, as social distancing was not guaranteed, the organizers asked participants to "strike a pose" at 6.40 p.m. and hold a colored sheet of cardboard as a symbol of their pride [62]. Another symbolic event was organized in the city of Rieti by bar and restaurant workers who opened up their premises and switched on the lights, even if no clients were present inside [63].

In addition to these daily (mobility) practices and static acts of protest, we should also consider that Italian people, on many occasions, used public spaces or the private space of their (outside) balcony to celebrate life and optimism by displaying white sheets with rainbows and the #andràtuttobene (#everythingwillbefine) hashtag; expressing their solidarity with those working in the health sector, for instance, by assembling at a certain time and clapping their hands; and by meeting with others and resorting to daily acts of evasion, as mentioned earlier. A similar positive attitude was also exhibited by the government, which becomes apparent when one looks at the ways in which the victims of COVID-19 are remembered and commemorated.

March 18 was chosen as the day to commemorate those who died of COVID-19. The date marks the day when the highest death toll was registered in the city of Bergamo in 2020. It was also the day when the government used military trucks to transport coffins out of Bergamo to new locations for (compulsory) cremation [64]. Because Bergamo experienced the highest death toll, it was selected as the location to install a memorial—a memorial that is unique. A remembrance park was created, the Wood of Memory, in

which 100 trees were planted in 2021, and some 850 are expected to be planted in total. The location of the park was not frivolously chosen, as the Wood of Memory is located just a few meters away from the local hospital. The decision to dedicate a park and plant new trees can be read as symbolizing a new beginning. The Wood of Memory aims to celebrate life, not death. The trees not only produce oxygen, which symbolically reminds us of what COVID-19 victims needed the most, but the trees are also a symbol of life. The Wood of Memory is not an installation to be observed and photographed, but a living space in which people can walk, gather and be peaceful. The (living) trees offer a different picture from other memorials. Inanimate objects such as white flags, black stones, painted red hearts, blue and white ribbons, portraits of doctors or the statue of a “weeping angel” have been featured in memorials in Washington, Buenos Aires, London, Johannesburg, Lima and Saint Petersburg, respectively [65]. The Wood of Memory was, from the beginning, thought to represent a “*monumento vivo*” (living monument) [66].

If we consider other European countries, Italy is not unique. Similar daily modalities of freedom were adopted in other countries. Coping strategies included the use of Twitter to build support and cope with social isolation [67–69]; exercising, meditating and gaming, sometimes mixed with maladaptive coping strategies [70]; as well as personalizing one’s personal protective equipment, not only as a tool to aid recognition but also to elicit some laughs to lighten the mood [71]. Minuscule mobility tricks have been captured, for instance, in the French movie, *Stuck Together* [72], directed by Dany Boon, which narrates the daily lives of the residents of a condominium in Paris. Germany and the UK reported that thousands visited parks and beaches at the beginning of the sunny season in 2020 without no consideration for social distancing. Going to the park for a walk was transformed into sunbathing [73] and thousands flooded the beaches in June 2020, and the security forces were simply unable to enforce the social distancing rules [74,75]. In the United Kingdom, well-known figures evaded mobility restrictions, including Dr Catherine Calderwood, Scotland’s chief medical officer [76]; Dominic Cummings, the key advisor to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was then forced to resign [77,78]; and the prime minister himself, who organized Christmas parties at Downing Street and, when initially caught, suggested that they were work events [79].

In short, despite the anxiety evoked by the constant messages reminding us of how deadly the COVID-19 pandemic was and how important it was to respect the immobility restrictions, people became very creative in inventing, adjusting and developing new opportunities (of freedom) for countering a very challenging time. This does not intend to suggest that people were always successful or that this attitude characterized every single day of the pandemic. It does suggest that, despite the “dizziness” that the COVID-19 “abyss” caused overall, people were also able to engage with it creatively.

7. Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic was, no doubt, extremely challenging for everyone and made us rethink security and freedom, as well as our sense of civic responsibility during a life-threatening event that required the cooperation of each of us. Rather than focusing on the difficulties, restrictions, illiberal norms and negative emotions that emerged during the pandemic years, and which have already received much attention, I suggest we should consider the COVID-19 time through the lens of the many creative mechanisms that people adopted to (re)appropriate their lives and (re-)create a new normalcy. The existential approach has been especially useful for highlighting alternative ways of engaging with questions of insecurity and anxiety and the ways in which they connect to freedom.

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Notes

- ¹ The attention here is on the everyday, even if IR scholars do not normally devote attention to it. However, as David Campbell had already noticed in 1996, the everyday is not “synonym for the local level, for in it global interconnection, local resistances, transterritorial flows, state politics, regional dilemmas, identity formations, and so on are always already present” [80] (p. 23). My attention to the everyday is consistent with the existential literature and its focus on lived experience. However, the concept of the everyday is inspired by the work of Michel de Certeau [81] (even if not explicitly mentioned) and his analysis of the “ways of operating” through which people manipulate the dominant norms, restrictions and mechanisms of control.
- ² The term “possibility of freedom” was originally used by Kierkegaard’s editor, Samlede Værker, in place of “the possibility of possibility,” which, for the editor, was a slip of the pen. Rollo May, in his book *The Meaning of Anxiety*, referred to the “possibility of freedom” [47].
- ³ A decree law is a law enacted by the government only under a situation of urgency and necessity, which Parliament has to convert into law within the following 60 days.
- ⁴ ISTAT is the National Institute of Statistics.

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