

Reading the COVID-19 emergency with and beyond Foucault: The liberal subject and everyday practices of mobility

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Abstract

Since the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, most analyses have used a Foucauldian perspective to investigate the disciplinary and surveillance mechanisms that (il)liberal states introduced to contain the spread of the virus. Focussing on the Italian context, I suggest that, despite the mobility restrictions, the government retained overall its liberal rationality. Italian institutions did not aim to create a state of police nor to transform subjects into docile bodies. By reading the COVID-19 emergency *with* Foucault, I suggest approaching COVID-19 restrictions through the concept of governmentality, and propose that Italian institutions, at different levels, structured people's fields of action by persuading, encouraging, and incentivising certain behaviours during the pandemic. However, I also suggest reading the COVID-19 emergency *beyond* Foucault by engaging with the work of Michel de Certeau and investigating the many 'antidisciplinary practices' through which people 'metaphorized' dominant (disciplinary) norms.

Keywords

de Certeau, governmentality, immobility, Italy, lockdown, quotidian practices

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Introduction

Since the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020, virtually all disciplines have scrutinised its impact. Within political studies, great attention has been devoted to states' emergency powers (Ginsburg and Versteeg, 2021; Spadaro, 2020); new modalities of governing (im) mobility and (un)freedom (Holwitt, 2021; Jagannathan and Rai, 2021; Shin, 2021; Wolff et al., 2020); technologies of control and surveillance (Bigo et al., 2021; Eck and Hatz, 2020; Sonn and Lee, 2020); border closures and new emergencies (Casaglia, 2021; Martin

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and Bergmann, 2021; Opiłowska, 2021; Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021); biopolitics and bordering practices (Chao, 2020; Ferhani and Rushton, 2020; Gamlin et al., 2021); political activism (Kowalewski, 2021; Pleyers, 2020; Pressman and Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2021); economic and social consequences (Schwab and Malleret, 2020; Ward, 2020); as well as liberal versus totalitarian responses to COVID-19 (Celermajer and Nassar, 2020; Degerman et al., 2020; Merrin, 2020). A great part of the literature has adopted a Foucauldian approach. At first sight, Michel Foucault's analysis of infectious disease management (2006), disciplinary and surveillance mechanisms (1995), as well as medical data collection and biopolitics (2009) seems to speak directly to our present (see Hannah et al., 2020). According to Philipp Sarasin (2020), Foucault's historical analysis of the management of leprosy, the plague, and smallpox provides a useful frame when investigating COVID-19, as it highlights the different approaches used for each disease: spaces of confinement for leprosy, disciplinary *dispositifs* for the plague, and liberal governmental rationality in the case of smallpox. While all three models, or a mix of them, were adopted in different countries in response to COVID-19, according to Sarasin, it is the smallpox model that European Union (EU) countries mostly privileged. The dominant rationality was not to impose disciplinary practices nor to create spaces of confinement, but to collect information 'to halt the epidemic' (Foucault, 2009: 10). EU states aimed *predominantly* at flattening the curve of contagion rather than eradicating it altogether through stringent laws (Sarasin, 2020).

I share Sarasin's assumption that the liberal approach has been the dominant approach in the EU, where governments have aimed not at creating a state of police and transforming subjects into docile and obedient bodies but to contain the spread of the virus. Looking specifically at the Italian context, I argue that the declaration of the state of emergency, on 31 January 2020,¹ did not introduce an *illiberal rationality* of government, even during the very first phase of the pandemic. The government did not attempt to deploy strict security measures aimed at disciplining, controlling, and surveilling the population. To demonstrate my argument, I read the COVID-19 emergency not only through the lens of "how" questions (Dean, 2010: 33) – that is, how immobility and unfreedom were governed – but also through the lens of 'who questions' (Puggioni, 2021): who were the subjects on whom the immobility restrictions were applied? Were they liberal subjects free to decide whether to accept, conform, react to, or evade immobility norms? Or were they docile bodies,² who simply accepted whatever restrictions the government decreed? I answer these questions by looking both at the emergency norms that limited mobility and at the everyday (micro) practices by which many people evaded restrictions.

By analysing both government's restrictive measures and people's minuscule acts of evasion, this article will contribute to the literature by shedding light not so much on the state of democracy but at the centrality of freedom – of choice, movement, and social life – during a pandemic which required people to give it up. More specifically, I suggest that, despite a long series of (temporary) restrictions and illiberal norms, both the government and the people maintained a liberal approach during the COVID-19 crisis. The declaration of the state of emergency did not *automatically* transform liberal subjects into docile and obedient objects at the mercy of governmental decisions. In other words, illiberal norms have not made 'illiberal' subjects. The pandemic required responsible subjects. As the then-Italian Minister of Health, Roberto Speranza, highlighted, 'caution and individual responsibility' are crucial elements for combatting COVID-19, as the 'coronavirus will not be overcome through an act of government', and it is the individuals' behaviour and 'not the security checks which will determine the outcome of this challenge' (Ministry of Health, 2020).³

I organise my argument into three main parts: (1) an analysis of governmentality and its *liberal* subjects; (2) an analysis of the Italian framework during the first months of the COVID-19 emergency and people's daily acts of mobility; and (3) a scrutiny of Michel de Certeau's (1984: xi) work, which highlights the many 'ways of operating' through which disciplinary practices are evaded, manipulated, or transformed through miniscule quotidian practices.

Governmentality and its subjects

In his 1977–1978 lecture series, *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault, 2009, see also Foucault, 1991), Michel Foucault elaborates on the concept of governmentality. Using a genealogical approach to governmentality, he highlights the different aims and power structures that dominated during four European historical contexts: the pastoral power of early Christianity; the *raison d'état* (reason of state) in the early modern age; the liberal art of government in the 18th century; and neo-liberal thought in post-World War II Germany, France, and the United States (Gordon, 1991). Foucault outlines not only the different modes of thought and approaches that dominated each political system but also the different modalities of subjection that each system presupposed: obedience in the *raison d'état* (sovereignty), discipline in the state of police, and freedom in the rationality of government. Thus, the technologies of ruling, commanding, and governing are all inspired by different mentalities, each of which entails a different process of subjection (Foucault, 2009). The recognition that each system shapes its subjects – and thus, that people adapt according to the particular approach of each system – should be taken into consideration also when evaluating the COVID-19 pandemic. An analysis of people's actions, reactions, and inactions is thus crucial for a deeper understanding of the modes of thought that dominated during the COVID-19 emergency. Starting from the premise that the government's political mentality, approach, and rationality should not be considered in isolation from the subjects upon whom they were applied, I approach Foucault's concept of governmentality through this prism.

Foucault does not use a single definition of governmentality. As William Walters (2012: 6) highlights, the concept of governmentality refers to three definitions. One refers to the modalities through which individuals and groups shape one another's conduct; another to the history of the art of government; and, finally, a third to the liberal art of government (Walters, 2012: 30). It is the liberal form of government that interests me here, and particularly, the modalities through which the conduct of individuals or groups can be shaped and directed (Foucault, 2001). Foucault's concept of 'conduct' (*conduit*) captures this process of shaping and guiding people's behaviours. Governing, contrary to commanding and ruling, refers to the 'conduct of conduct', that is, the mechanisms through which the government guides people towards a behaviour and seeks to 'structure the possible field of action of others' (Foucault, 2001: 341). In other words, 'the liberal art of government involves a particular set of relationships to freedom' (Walters, 2012: 31). More specifically, the rationality of government is articulated such that it encourages and persuades subjects to act *freely* through 'mechanisms of incentive-regulation' (Foucault, 2009: 354). Contrary to sovereignty, which 'acts to annul disobedience and rebellion, and [...] discipline [which] seeks to form and reform habits and comportments to produce docile, regulated and productive individuals' (Huxley, 2008: 1639), the rationality of government seeks to create free subjects. In short, to govern – rather than to command and discipline – is to develop, structure,

shape, and open up opportunities for liberal subjects to conduct themselves within a broad ‘field of possibilities’ created specifically for them (Foucault, 2001: 342).

The subject of governmentality is the active subject who participates in, shapes, shares, influences, and counters dominant technologies of control. Thus, the power relations that characterise governmentality operate upon the interplay between active subjects – who accept, conform to, or resist technologies of control – and a myriad of active and overlapping institutions that adopt, develop, and rework power technologies. The subject upon whom power is exercised is a free subject whose freedom is accepted and recognised as a key constitutive element. The subject of governmentality is always an acting subject who enjoys some freedom of choice. However, as Ulrich Bröckling et al. (2011) highlight in their edited volume, the aim of the liberal form of government is not to guarantee basic freedoms but to arrange ‘the conditions under which individuals can make use of these freedoms’ (p. 5). This is done through constant guidance that governs ‘individuals and collectives “through their freedom”’ (Bröckling et al., 2011: 13, emphasis in original). In other words, the aim is not to make free subjects but to create ‘indirect forms’ that facilitate ‘the contriving and shaping of freedom into a means of achieving governmental objectives’ (Dean, 2002: 121). Thus, liberalism is not concerned with freedom *per se* but with employing liberal principles through which to achieve political objectives.

According to Nikolas Rose (1999: vii), ‘psy disciplines and psy expertise’ play a key role in governing a population, or more precisely, in transforming people into ‘governable subject. In his book, *Governing the Soul*, Rose (1999: vii) argues that psy has been crucial ‘in contemporary forms of political power’, as it made it possible ‘to govern human beings in ways that are compatible with the principles of liberalism and democracy’ in which ‘autonomy and self-realization’ are central values. More specifically, psy has helped ‘organise and administer individuals and groups within schools, reformatories, prisons, asylums, hospitals, factories, courtrooms, business organizations, the military, the domesticated nuclear family’ (Rose, 1999: viii). This has been done not through ‘forms of regulation’ that ‘crush subjectivity’ but by fabricating ‘subjects [. . .] capable of bearing the burdens of liberty’ (Rose, 1999: viii). As Rose (2004: 94) highlights in *Powers of Freedom*, today’s politics of freedom do not so much relate to specific ‘ideas or concepts’, but indeed to ‘a set of practices, devices, relations of self to self and self to others’. By recognising that freedom is ‘always practical, technical, [and] contested’ (Rose, 2004: 94), Rose (2004: 74) highlights that the ‘government of freedom’ requires also the ‘deployment of technologies of *responsibilization*’ (emphasis in original). More specifically, according to Rose (2004: 93, 94, 177), liberal freedom nowadays refers not only to ‘autonomy and identity’, but to ‘a politics of life’, which makes individuals not only free but also personally ‘responsible for their conduct’.

To summarise, since the emergence of the modern European state, liberal modalities of governing have prevailed, and subjects themselves have structured their lives based on liberal principles. The ‘modern self’ has been made free to the point where the individual is ‘not merely enabled to choose but obliged to construe a life in terms of its choices, its powers, and its values’ (Rose, 1999: 231). This implies that liberal governments, when strategizing on how to govern people, do take into consideration the liberal approach, which permeates people’s ways of being, acting, perceiving, deciding, and moving. Thus, if European people are no longer docile bodies but ‘have become intensely subjective beings’ (Rose, 1999: 3), a look at how freedom of movement, however limited, was allowed, preserved or desired – even during a life-threatening pandemic which required immobility – sheds light on the kind of subjectivities that prevailed during COVID-19

crisis. More specifically, an analysis of the ‘mechanisms of incentive-regulation’ (Foucault, 2009: 354) enacted by the government, as well as people’s behaviours, responses, and attitudes towards COVID-19 restrictions, helps investigating not only whether we are confronted with a liberal approach – as this article suggests – or with illiberal practices, but also, and perhaps most importantly, the extent to which people have cooperated with the government. As Arjun Appadurai (2020: 222) observes, irrespective of their form of government, the state could not ‘face this crisis without the help of society at large, through practices of self-isolation, self-monitoring, mutual caring and self-reporting’.

COVID-19 in Italy: An overview

The past 2 years have been extremely difficult for everyone. The COVID-19 pandemic made us rethink our daily lives, priorities, and social interactions. Governmental decisions have not been immune to criticism, contestation, or even violent reactions (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 2020; *Il Mattino*, 2020; *La Repubblica*, 2020b). People opposed immobility rules, the partial or total closure of economic activities, the imposition of curfews, restrictions on social gatherings, as well as the imposition of a ‘green pass’, without which access to certain places, including places of work, was prohibited. It is, of course, difficult to make generalisations, especially when looking at a whole country, as there were major differences between and within regions, metropolitan cities, peripheries, and small villages; behaviours according to age groups; working environments that distinguish between essential/non-essential work and those that differentiate work done remotely or on the companies’ premises; personal economic conditions; areas that have children and other vulnerable people and those that do not; as well as in the nature of living spaces and access to private gardens, terraces, or second houses.

A scrutiny of official documents, statistical data, and newspaper articles⁴ suggests that there is a need to look at *both* the restrictions imposed by the government *and* the everyday practices through which some of these restrictions were countered, evaded, ignored, or resisted. Overall, it was the liberal rationality of government that dominated, both within institutions and in people’s daily practices. The declaration of the state of emergency should not be read as a new ‘state of exception’ (Agamben, 2020) nor as a return to the *raison d’état*. As a former official in the Italian Civil Protection Department clarified,⁵ ‘the pandemic has been managed at different levels’ by a variety of subjects using a cooperative approach. The ‘tripartite system of competences’ – shared by the government, the Ministry of Health, and regional representatives – was maintained even during the emergency. The decisions taken by the Ministry of Health were the result of coordination and dialogue with a variety of subjects at both the national and international levels.⁶ Within the Civil Protection Department, an ‘operating committee table was organised’, with representatives of different regions, local administrations, governmental departments, and political groups. On average, some 5–6 hours were spent daily on discussing and organising coordinated strategies.⁷

The following points should be taken into consideration. First, a look at statistical data suggests that the country did not effectively implement a full ‘lockdown’, as many categories were excluded from the immobility rules. Second, the lockdown measures were introduced gradually, taking into consideration the pressure from some key economic sectors, and televised communications were used to anticipate and clarify which restrictions were to be implemented. Third, an analysis of the wording used in legal documents

shows that the mobility restrictions were not as stringent as generally assumed but left open to a variety of interpretations. Fourth, contrasting interpretations led to different practices, to the point that local and regional representatives intervened regularly to clarify the rationale of the restrictions. Fifth, people took advantage of not only the legal vagueness of the rules but also resorted to a variety of tricks to evade immobility restrictions. Sixth, the many televised messages by the head of government, which were aimed at encouraging people to respect the rules, demonstrate the difficulties in implementing immobility, to the point that the government had to initiate a public campaign. Seventh, the limited security controls put in place, as well as the limited penalties imposed in case of non-compliance, suggest that the aim was not to surveil and punish people but to incentivise and induce them to respect immobility and social distancing rules. For instance, as clarified by a former high official at the Ministry of Defence, the deployment of the army during the COVID-19 emergency was restricted to ‘health support’, in light of its traditional ‘culture of defence during emergencies’, and it was certainly not deployed for security operations.⁸

The legal framework

The mobility restrictions in Italy go back to Sunday, 23 February 2020, when the Italian government enacted a decree law (no. 6),⁹ under which two northern regions, Lombardy and Veneto, were partially put under lockdown. Residents were requested not to exit those regions, and people were banned from entering select municipalities with a high infection rate. The government decided to shut down all commercial activities except those that were deemed essential. On 4 March, through a ministerial decree, all activities except those deemed essential were suspended in the whole country (article 1, DCPM, 4 March 2020). During the first 10 days following 23 February, many citizens largely ignored the ‘recommendation’ to stay home. People travelled within and outside those two regions, even reaching the southern part of Italy. Travel between regions was not controlled, and public transportation was still in operation. A look at commercial activities indicates that we can hardly refer to a full lockdown. The ISTAT report confirms these data. Overall, only some 45% of businesses temporarily shut down up to 4 May, and half of those still running were located in the north and north-east regions (ISTAT, 2020: 1) – which also had the highest death toll. During the so-called ‘phase one’ of the lockdown – 9 March–3 May – some 32.5% of businesses never closed down, which amounted to some 48.3% of the overall population working in the private sector, and, most importantly, producing about 60.9% of the national income (ISTAT, 2020: 2–3).¹⁰ In three north-eastern regions, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna, and Veneto, more than 60% of activities remained open (ISTAT, 2020: 4). Some non-essential activities remained open as well. Quite astonishingly, on 1 March, the government clarified that going skiing was permitted and that ski resorts could operate at one-third capacity (article 2.b, DCPM, 1 March 2020).¹¹ Bars and restaurants were also allowed to remain open but with the requirement that customers be seated further apart, a rule that was changed after 3 days. Only on 22 March (DCPM), the government decreed that all industrial and commercial activities should be ‘suspended’, except those deemed essential (article 1.a), and prohibited any movement outside the place of living (article 1.b). All these data are important as they provide a different picture: it was not a full lockdown but a partial lockdown, which greatly contradicts the narrative of a state of emergency in which immobility rules were strictly applied (see Algotino, 2021; Capano, 2020; Cassandro, 2020; Feltrin, 2020; Omizzolo and Sodano, 2022; Venanzoni, 2020).

In the month of March, the government continued to use non-mandatory language. For instance, the legal provisions on 8 March, which aimed to ‘contain’ the spread of COVID-19 within selected northern areas, stated that those with symptoms were ‘highly recommended to stay within one’s own domicile and to limit as much as possible social contacts’ (article 1.b, DCPM, 8 March 2020). The word ‘domicile’ itself became highly debatable. Many started travelling, claiming that they were travelling to reach their domicile from their places of residence. Only on 22 March – that is, a month after the first emergency decree – the government switched to mandatory language, prohibiting any movement from the place where one was, save necessity (article 1.a.b., DCPM, 22 March 2020). This prohibition was (again) transformed into a ‘strong recommendation to remain within one’s own domicile’ on 10 April (article 1.b, DCPM, 10 April 2020).

Immobility gaps

Given the large number of people who were still moving within and between regions, the government recognised that its recommendations were insufficient. A public campaign was organised under the #iostoacasa (#Istayhome) banner, which involved well-known music, opera, theatre, and television performers, who organised small performances within their private spaces and encouraged their social media followers to stay home. At the regional and local levels, governors and majors were especially active in urging the public to stay home and respect immobility rules. Many majors visited public spaces where people were known to gather and made them go home and/or used YouTube videos as a means to encourage people to stay home (*The New York Times*, 2020). These social media messages – articulated more as an exhortation to stay home rather than a strict order, and coupled with the many images of the deadly effects of COVID-19 broadcasted on TV – were aimed at incentivising immobility. The most impressive and shocking image was of a kilometre-long line of military trucks transporting coffins (*Ansa.en*, 2020). The government’s extra efforts to make people respect the rules suggests not only that the immobility rules were not accepted unproblematically, as often assumed, but also that the institutional approach was mostly based upon incentive-regulation mechanisms.

The following activities were mostly permitted: jogging; outdoor exercise next to one’s home; shopping in supermarkets, pharmacies, newsagents, and tobacco shops; going to work if working in key sectors; taking care of family members in need; and taking dogs out. While the general advice was to stay home – which was made mandatory only on 22 March – many people used all the available justifications to get out of their homes as much as they could. All of a sudden, people started shopping at supermarkets more frequently; the number of people wearing jogging outfits and pretending to be regular sports practitioners increased; parents started taking their children out more; and dog owners took their pets out for more walks and even lent them to others who wanted to go out. All these movements were noticed by security forces but were rarely penalised. The government, as well as the local authorities, intervened on several occasions to clarify what was permitted or what was not (*Corriere della Sera*, 2020). On 1 April, the Ministry of Interior clarified which mobility was permitted; this clarification was directed mostly at security personnel, who were themselves confused about whom to target (Ministerial circular, 31 March 2020). The confusion was not only due to the fact that two regions, namely, Lombardy and Veneto, were prescribed different rules – up to 3 April, after which all local legal orders (*ordinanze*) were to end – but also because the immobility rules themselves were unclear (*La Repubblica*, 2020a). The inaccuracy in information had an

impact both on the police forces, who were supposed to implement the restrictions, and on the people, who exploited this uncertainty. The government intervened again to clarify that stretching was permitted within a radius of 200 metres from one's home and that it had to be done alone; people were also allowed outside for the purpose of dog-walking. Walking with children was permitted but not as a family activity; only one parent was allowed, and they still had to remain within 200 metres from the home (*La Repubblica*, 2020a). Dogs could also be taken out, but only to meet their 'physiological needs' (*L'Unione Sarda*, 2020). As a newspaper article puts it, the clarifications were needed because of people's 'negligent and inattentive modality of going out' during the peak of the emergency (*La Stampa*, 2020). In the same article, it was clarified that, during the Easter weekend – between 10 and 13 April – the government did 'not authorise through decree the 'fresh air' walking of parents with children' (*La Stampa*, 2020). As the government anticipated increased mobility during the Easter festivities, police controls were reinforced mostly with the aim that they would be 'detectable to the citizenry' (Ministry of the Interior, 2020a). More specifically, local prefectures were asked to 'promote any needed initiative to ensure the respect of the expected restrictions to mobility', including the ban against travelling to second houses or to holiday destinations (Ministry of the Interior, 2020a).¹²

The fact that repeated clarifications of the immobility rules were required, especially with reference to walking with children and dogs, signals that these movements were visible, even if rarely penalised. The rapid increase in dog adoptions during the pandemic offers a clear indication of how dogs became a tool for getting out. According to a Coop Report, some 3.5 million Italians bought a domestic animal during the lockdown (Ancc-Coop, 2020: 74), closely mirroring the situation in the United Kingdom, where some 3.2 million households acquired a pet after the start of the pandemic (*BBC News*, 2020c). According to the National Association of Veterinarians, pets received far greater attention and care than on average. However, dogs – 'used' or even 'lent' to family members or neighbours – are now being 'thrown away' at cheap prices (*iO Donna*, 2021). Families no longer need a dog to justify being out of the home a few times a day.

To conclude, if we look at the legal provisions, the language used, the campaigns to encourage and induce people to stay home, the limited security checks as well as the number of people who were stopped and penalised,¹³ the claim that a politics of control and surveillance prevailed, even during the very first phase of COVID-19 emergency, seems unconvincing. The data I present here suggest that the government's overall approach followed the liberal rationality. People too maintained a liberal approach to the pandemic. This emerges when we observe the ways in which people used the gaps in the system and/or resorted to small tricks to conform to rules only in appearance, or to evade norms entirely, often under the premise that they were allowed to; and if they were not allowed, no one was going to notice; or that after all, no damage was going to be caused.

Everyday practices of mobility

As argued so far, despite the many restrictions, the overall approach was liberal. Even the process by which emergency decisions were made was inspired by the liberal approach. Decisions were not taken with the aim of transforming people into docile bodies through a politics of control and surveillance, nor did people alter their overall liberal approach to daily activities. This latter aspect emerges when we focus on quotidian, miniscule practices of evasion or apparent conformity. The work of Michel de Certeau (1984),

The Practice of Everyday Life, offers important insights. Some of the practices of evasion or apparent compliance discussed so far are not dissimilar from the less visible ‘antidisciplinary practices’ to which his work refers. Rather than looking at Foucault’s (1995) ‘microphysics of power’, de Certeau focuses on the modalities through which power is countered, resisted, and evaded. According to de Certeau, Foucault’s analysis tends to privilege ‘the productive apparatus (which produces the “discipline”)', while he is more interested in ‘discover[ing] how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also “miniscule” and quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only in order to evade them’ (xiv). This is done by developing what he refers to as ‘a *science of singularity*’, that is, a science that connects everyday practices with ‘particular circumstances’ (ix, emphasis in original). More specifically, de Certeau focusses not only on quotidian, miniscule practices – under the premise that the ‘logic of these “ordinary” activities comes to light only in the details’ (ix) – but also on the ‘users’ rather than on the ‘makers’ (xiii). The concept of users itself is extremely interesting, as it focusses not on the ‘makers’ of norms, restrictions, and controls, but on the modalities through which those subjected to them, the ‘users’, manipulate those norms, controls, and restrictions. By investigating this process of manipulation, it is possible, according to de Certeau, to ‘gauge the difference or similarity between the production of the image and the secondary production hidden in the process of its utilization’ (xiii). In other words, by refusing to identify users as mere consumers (xii), de Certeau investigates ‘the ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate’ (xi). It is their ‘everyday practices, “ways of operating” or doing things’ (xi), that interests de Certeau, particularly how ‘users reappropriate the space organized by technique of sociocultural production’ through a plurality of daily practices (xiv). De Certeau’s focus on miniscule procedures locates his work on the opposite side of Foucault’s. Although both ‘analyse the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures’, de Certeau is not interested in making clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of ‘discipline’. (xiv–xv)

What matters for de Certeau is not so much how everyday practices might challenge, resist, or subvert the system, but how ‘the users’ manipulate the system from within. What makes de Certeau’s analysis interesting is precisely the concept of ‘manipulation’, that is, how people use, adapt, and alter specific products, norms, and procedures in ways that modify and transform the original and intended aim. What emerges are not simply new quotidian practices but practices that alter the logic, rationality, and intent of specific norms, laws, and principles through strategies that conform to rules only in appearance. According to de Certeau, this process of manipulation is also possible under conditions of extreme control and subjugation. To illustrate this point, de Certeau looked at the way in which indigenous people manipulated colonial practices. Despite ‘the spectacular victory’, and despite their condition of subjection, the indigenous were able to use Spanish laws and practices in ways different from their intended aim. To use de Certeau’s own words:

the Indians often used the laws, practices, and representations that were imposed on them [. . .] to ends other than those of their conquerors; they made something else out of them; they subverted them from within – not by rejecting them or by transforming them [. . .] but by many different ways of using them in the service of rules, customs or convictions foreign to the colonization which they could not escape. They metaphorized the dominant order (32).

In short, the work of de Certeau highlights the importance of looking not exclusively at norms, controls, and disciplinary mechanisms, and also at how the recipients of those norms – the users, the common people – manipulate, shape, interpret, and re-invent alternatives through quotidian, miniscule practices. This is precisely what many have done in Italy to get out of their homes, respecting the letter of the restrictions but in clear contradiction of their spirit. The following are some of the strategies used: buying a dog or borrowing one from their neighbour; going to the supermarket more often or taking a longer route to reach it; declaring that some major disaster has happened in their second house; taking routes that were not patrolled; going to meet friends in the late evenings when fewer controls operated; organising home visits within the same residential building; ordering a drink and consuming it near the entrance of the bar while having a little chat with other clients instead of taking it home; going down to the building main entrance to smoke a cigarette; or wearing sportswear to justify a longer route. All these miniscule practices mostly aimed at maintaining some level of freedom and normalcy. These miniscule mobility tricks are not dissimilar from the small tricks captured, for instance, in the French movie, *Stuck Together* (2021), directed by Dany Boon. The movie focusses on seven families, living in the same building with a shared patio, who also resort to small tricks to evade immobility rules. Four scenes are worth noting: (1) the businessman takes his car out, and as soon as the two policemen go away, he drives to another city where his wife is staying; (2) at the beginning of the nice season, some members decide to organise a party in the common garden – as after all, they are not doing anything wrong; (3) once the police arrives, they receive no penalty but are requested to remove all the party arrangements; and (4) two children take a short run outside the perimeter of their building.

A look at the news in other European countries suggests that many practised *similar* evasion tactics. Going to the park to stretch one's legs was transformed to sun-bathing (Geng et al., 2021; *The Independent*, 2020); and social distancing norms were rarely respected when thousands flooded beaches in the summer (*BBC News*, 2020a, 2020b). In the United Kingdom, well-known figures evaded mobility restrictions, including Dominic Cummings, the key advisor to the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (Faulkner, 2021; see also House of Commons – Health Social Care Science Technology Committees, 2021); Dr Catherine Calderwood, Scotland's chief medical officer (*The Guardian*, 2020); and the Prime Minister himself, who organised Christmas parties at Downing Street (*The Independent*, 2021).

The preceding analysis suggests that we should read these quotidian, miniscule practices of mobility as indicating the presence of liberal subjects, that is, subjects who are left free to decide how to govern themselves in a situation of (collective) emergency. The Italian authorities governed (im)mobility and implemented restrictions not by transforming liberal subjects into docile and obedient bodies, but by encouraging people to govern themselves by acting responsibly. Even if the key message was 'stay home', this message was not given or interpreted as an absolute ban on mobility but as an exhortation to stay home and to go out only if strictly necessary.

Concluding remarks

In the preceding pages, I have suggested that COVID-19 analyses should neither simply focus on the many illiberal policies that were decreed nor on the security controls put into place. If we were to distinguish between ruling, commanding, and governing, and the

different approaches, mentalities, and technologies that each of them adopts, then, we should recognise that despite the many restrictions suggested and/or imposed, the overall governmental aim was not to transform liberal citizens into docile bodies. I show how citizens retained their ability to govern themselves by resorting to tricks and gaps in the system. As Foucault's analysis suggests, to govern means not simply to create, shape, and mould subjects but also to act upon knowable and known subjects. The Italian authorities acted, took decisions, organised public campaigns, and arranged security controls, taking into consideration the (liberal) subjects whom these actions targeted. The citizens themselves acted in ways consistent with their knowledge of their country's procedures, practices, and liberal culture. Thus, investigating COVID-19 immobility rules *with* Foucault is to recognise that the government structures people's field of action by persuading them to act, or refrain from acting, in certain ways. However, investigating people's 'ways of operating' *beyond* Foucault is to shed light on the way in which people 'metaphorize' dominant norms. This was done *also* thanks to the gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions opened up by institutional decisions, their ways of operating, and their inexperience in managing an unprecedented emergency.

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Notes

1. It was the Minister of Health who called for the declaration of the state of emergency (Deliberation of the Council of Ministers, 2020).
2. Here, I am drawing on Foucault's distinction between (18th century) 'docile bodies' and (20th century) 'liberal subjects', that is between bodies which are shaped and transformed through disciplinary and surveillance practices (1995), and free subjects who are shaped through mechanisms of incentive-regulation (2009).
3. Translation from Italian into English is mine.
4. For this research, I interviewed high officials from the Civil Protection Department and the Ministry of Defence; I also accessed the following data: legal documents, parliamentary debates, governmental reports, statistical data from ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics), security controls' figures from the Ministry of the Interior, the government's televised messages broadcasted on major public channels, as well as local and national newspapers articles. When reading ministerial decrees, I paid special attention to the language used and, whether it referred to recommendations or to non-derogatory norms.
5. Interview held online on 10 May 2022 in Italian.
6. At the international level, constant coordination was maintained with the EU Health Emergency Preparedness and Response (HERA) Department and the World Health Organisation.
7. A former high official from the Civil Protection Department, online interview, 10 May 2022.

8. Interview held in Rome on 29 April 2022 in Italian.
9. A decree law – which can only be adopted in case of urgency and necessity – is a law enacted by the government, which the Parliament has to convert into law within the following 60 days.
10. These data represent a national average, as commercial activities in five regions exceeded this figure, reaching 63.9% in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, 62.6% in Emilia-Romagna, 61.1% in Veneto, 58.9% in Liguria, and 58.6% in Basilicata (ISTAT, 2020: 4).
11. DCPM stands for ‘Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers’, that is, the Italian head of government, often (wrongly) identified as the prime minister.
12. During Easter Sunday, some 13,756 people were sanctioned out of 213,565 people stopped and controlled, including 19 people who moved out of their homes despite being COVID-positive (Ministry of the Interior, 2020b).
13. During March 2020, some 3,882,430 people were stopped and checked and some 144,557 sanctioned, which amounts to only to 3.72%. In terms of commercial activities, some 1,753,412 checks were carried out, and only 3309 were sanctioned and 86 activities shut down. Monthly data are available at the following: <https://www.interno.gov.it/it/coronavirus-i-dati-dei-servizi-controllo>.

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