

Part I: Diverging Government Responses

Editorial Introduction

The Cases of Italy and China

The cases of Italy and China make for an interesting comparison because they represent quite different governance approaches to the pandemic. These differences may be instructive for the in-depth comprehension of the nature and the impact of government approaches to resolving crises. The two regions notably do share common histories in the spread of pandemics. The first cases of COVID-19 in Asia and Europe were registered in China in December 2019, and in Italy in January 2020, respectively. The origins and initial epidemiological dynamics of the pandemic, though, are still unclear and are the subject of scientific discussion (Dou et al. 2021; Nadeau et al. 2021). In the thirteenth century, the spread of “the plague” (*Yersinia Pestis*) is assumed to have spread from the Asiatic steppes to Venice, at that time a powerful city-state with intensive transcontinental commercial activity into Asia through the Silk Road (Frankopan 2016). It is interesting to note that the socioenvironmental and ecological dynamics of the origins and initial spread of COVID are still unknown. As stated in the Editorial of this issue, this fact reads as an argument to pay ample attention to the interferences with the sociopolitical and legal, socioeconomic and financial, and sociocultural and welfare dimensions.

It is interesting to consider to what extent and in what manner comprehensiveness (by including intersections between the four societal dimensions) was achieved in the two analyses. Both in the case of Italy and China, the analyses were conducted by distinguishing the four societal dimensions. These distinctions themselves are clarifying, and signify an important step forward in comparative research. In the two cases, the analyses of governance approaches mainly concern processes and interventions from the political-administrative systems (politics, ministers, aldermen, governmental departments, etc.), both on the national as well as regional and local levels. They mainly were conducted in the sociopolitical and legal dimension. From there, the impacts in the other two dimensions were pictured. The political interventions in the sociocultural and welfare dimension basically concerned government strategies to change behavioral patterns in order to prevent spread. Interventions in the socioeconomic and financial dimension concerned the acquisition and/or production of medical provisions (e.g., treatment facilities, medicines, vaccines), as well as the financial support to cope with the economic damage.



Looking at the analytic approach, the two articles more or less expose the societal dimensions in a similar way. The outcomes though of the government interventions of the containment of the epidemic and its burdens on people and society are quite different.

In Italy—and nearly all other countries in the world—the relative morbidity and mortality was high compared to the number in China. At this stage, some hypotheses may be helpful for a first reflection on this difference. The first one is that the differences in political steering mechanisms played a decisive role. In Italy, “fragmentation” in many respects appears to be a core characteristic of society. Regional government authorities are relatively autonomous and have legal mandates on many areas. The diversity in sociocultural and socioeconomic circumstances between the regions is considerable. These governance circumstances caused difficulties for the national state when it came to realizing effective politics, policies, and approaches to cope with the crisis. The response needed was to rapidly design and ratify laws to ensure adequate and efficient measures in all regions and cities. The second hypothesis would be that the “fragmentation” resulted in a trial-and-error approach, exposing Italian creativity, inventiveness, and speed with often unpredictable outcomes. A third hypothesis may be that the outcomes gave rise to dissatisfaction among large groups of the population, which in turn complicated the operationalization of measures. In China, the governance approach is characterized as a “whole of government approach.” The political and executive powers of the national state toward the regions and cities are much greater. With great speed, the central government designed and implemented a very effective project management system to coordinate and steer functional units on the territorial, middle, and ground levels. New laws as instruments for change were designed and could be executed immediately. The approach resembles the modern logic of military operations. The inexorable responses to manifestations of the virus expressed a “zero COVID” politics, both regarding actors in the sociocultural and welfare dimension and in the socioeconomic and financial dimension. The governance approaches in China have been extraordinarily effective. In this country with around 1.4 billion people, only 5,000 deaths from the disease are to be counted.

The Chinese “whole of government approach” could not be more different than the Italian approach. In Italy, ancient political and administrative patterns and related attitudes and expectations do have a completely different character. The compliance of the people played a decisive role in the success of the measures that the government took. In Italy, feelings of dissatisfaction with the government approaches were widespread. In contrast, the population in China apparently had great confidence in their system of governance and applauded the outcomes. It was a source of national pride. The latter to a certain extent may be also explained by the specific Chinese governance strategy to intensively communicate and instruct people at the grassroots level. Thousands of grid clerks and other experts operated in communities to explain,

motivate, and control people in the context of preventing and coping with COVID-19. Through ICT devices, nearly the whole population could be approached, assisted, and controlled regarding their perceptions and behaviors.

In the case of Italy, the temporary “renaissance of the decisive role of the state” was clearly needed and appreciated. The control measures, though taken by the government in the sociopolitical and legal dimension, were in their execution confronted with cooperative, as well as counterproductive, forces in the sociocultural and welfare and socioeconomic and financial dimensions. In the case of China, the power of the government in the sociopolitical and legal dimension was clearly superordinated to the processes in the socioeconomic and financial and sociocultural and welfare dimensions. The focus in both contributions was not placed on how actors in the latter dimensions appreciated the processes initiated in the sociopolitical and legal dimension. In particular, the Chinese contribution was restricted to an exclusively descriptive presentation of the coping strategies used by the government. An in-depth analysis of the perceptions and interpretations of the initiated processes and outcomes would have required another study design. Such a design would—reasoning from social quality theory (SQT)—attempt to combine the analysis according to the procedural social quality framework with the social quality analytical framework, including the constitutional, conditional, and normative factors (see the Editorial). Such methodological approaches, based both on SQT and the SQA, would signify an interesting challenge for comparative explanatory research between countries in the future.

Indeed, the extraordinary success that China saw in combatting the pandemic raises intriguing questions about the adaptability of its large population. It is assumed that in Asia, from the perspective of the sociocultural dimension, people are oriented more toward “we.” In the West, people would be more oriented toward “I.” To understand this difference, we need to know what in Eastern and Western history the complementarity or antagonism between individualism and collectivism really means. The question of East and West is in itself not unambiguous. How to explain the immense differences between China and India? The posed questions refer to complicated issues: the utilitarian-individualistic pattern of thought; its connection with the concept of liberalism and contemporary neoliberalism; the concept and practices of democracy; and the specific ontology of humans as “social beings” elaborated in SQT (Herrmann et al. 2012: 86; Westbroek et al. 2020).

The contrasting cases of Italy and China with regard to their governance approaches show just how badly we need to initiate comparative research into the issues that constitute the foundations of societies and that can help ameliorate the social quality of people’s daily lives.

References

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