

An Army General to Lead a Vaccination Campaign.

The case of the Italian Extraordinary Commissioner in COVID-19 struggle.

A Strange Unconventional Situation or a Case of Civilian-Military Contamination?

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Abstract

This paper was inspired by the Italian situation at the beginning of 2021, which was that of a persisting COVID-19 pandemic emergency, after a longlasting emergency special legislation, since the end of January 2020. This situation gave rise to a political crisis in the national Government, and to an unconventional solution when vaccination began to be possible and considered the only definite solution, but only if a certain (very high) percentage of total population could be reached. Because of the very diverse legislation on Public Health System, based on 20 Regional Health Systems, great differences in efficiency among regions and in organisational and choice criteria were evident. The overall coordination model envisaged by the Extraordinary Commissioner at national level (at work since February 2020) began to be considered uncertain and substantially inefficient. Public opinion began to show cleavages and doubts about vaccination (Yes or No) and even about vaccine quality and possible dangers (the AztraZeneca controversy). On February 18th 2021 the political crisis finds a solution with the installment of the new Government with prof. Mario Draghi as Premier. On March 1^o Draghi substitutes the Extraordinary Commissioner and appoints the Army Lt. General Francesco Paolo Figliuolo as new Commissioner; Gen. Figliuolo was in charge as Italian Army Logistic Commander, and delivers his new Vaccination Plan on March 13th. In all the pandemic period a kind of war language began to be used. It was an only apparent military language, actually a more *civilian* lexicon about war, the war which kills civilians, and the war-like metaphore was evidently expressed «on the side of civilian unarmed victims». And when weapons arrived, the vaccines, it was difficult to organize coordinated actions at a national level. *Time* and *space* became the two main and critical dimensions. *Logistic* dimension, then, shows its fundamental importance. And where a logistic competence, a logistic organization at a national level can be found, already institutional part of the State? In the Armed Forces and in the Army in particular. It is not, to my opinion, a «militarization» of the vaccination campaign. It is a goal-oriented rational choice giving rise to a contamination between a civilian and a military culture, in the sense of professional competence and skills normally present in a military force, oriented in this case to solve problems of the civil society. It is a further «civilianization» aspect of the military profession.

Key words: pandemic emergency, civil-military relationships, military expertise, civil-military contamination, military civilianization

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1. Premise.

In the last two years when the pandemic became the “normal” condition where every aspect of our individual as well as social life has been inscribed, most of the public and political actions have been strongly affected by problems of organisational nature. Leaving aside strictly health and care difficulties, all daily life aspects (such as homelife, work, school, social life, folkways, food, leisure, affections) have been touched by a generalised and shared problem dealing with a *new organization* of ways, timetables, space and time sequencies in which to reset every single aspect. Even the various lockdowns, more or less long and severe, forced anyway to redesign daily maps, behavioral patterns and action chains, with a stubborn attempt to go on and maintain working as long as possible the automatic mechanism of our daily lives. The battle against the virus was fought in hospitals and homes where “the sick” were confined, like in a kind of battlefield where only a “minority of fighters” was directly involved. All the others had to redesign their life in order to stay safe, trying to avoid the battlefield staying in the rear. To reach these goals new action patterns should be performed, that is, *new organisational models* should be applied.

My viewpoint here is that such a situation was considered odd and unknown, and it led to unconventional solutions for unconventional conditions, considered as an emergency caused by the pandemic. But my point is that these new solutions can enlighten a more important change able to remain permanent.

What am I speaking about? I start from the title given to this paper: “An Army General to lead a Vaccination Campaign”. This choice was done in Italy after about one year of reaction to COVID-19 which was considered inadequate to reach a sustainable and quick recovery, but it is anyway strictly linked to an important political consequence of the pandemic year 2020: the Italian government crisis and the change of the political coalition sustaining the new cabinet led by Mario Draghi.

2. The Italian situation at the beginning of 2021: a persisting pandemic emergency

Since the declaration of the emergency condition on January 2020 in Italy, and the beginning of the first lockdown on March 10th (lasted 69 days), the sanitary as well as social situation at the

end of the year 2020 was considered even more critical than before², and it had already obliged to a second lockdown since November 6th (lasting –even though with frequent changes- until July 2021).

In the meanwhile, the perception that vaccination was possible (in December 2020 vaccines became a reality) created a new “emergency” as far as the organisation of an extremely important vaccination campaign was envisaged. It was something never happened before in that measure. And at the same time, the number of deaths and ill people was continuously increasing. At the end of 2020, more than 74.000 people had died, and 109.000 deads were counted three months later, at the end of March 2021. The so-called second and third waves (October 2020-January 2021, and 6 March 2021-June 2021) implied even harsher restrictions with a new lockdown and continuous curfew untill end of June 2021, and the practical impossibility to continue with that kind of solution became evident. But to function as a true wayout from the pandemic, vaccination should reach an very high percentage of population in a very short time.

Not simply for the above reasons, but strongly sustained by an objectively dramatic situation, a new government and a new premier seemed a solution, and on February 13th the new Cabinet led by Mario Draghi begins its travel. Among Premier Draghi’s first decisions, on March 1st the previous Extraordinary Commissioner, Domenico Arcuri was asked to resign, and immediately after there was the appointment of Lieutenant Gen. Francesco Paolo Figliuolo as *Extraordinary Commissioner for the realizations and coordination of preventive health measures to contrast COVID-19 pandemic emergency*. Gen. Figliuolo was in charge as Italian Army Logistic Commander, that is he was the highest responsible for the total logistic sector of the Italian Army. It is interesting to underline that Gen. Figliuolo is a military officer in service, who has remained in charge as Logistic Commander (being the appointment as Extraordinary Commissioner a temporary assignment) and he was able to deliver his new Vaccination Plan on March 13th. This is important because the appointment of a military officer on active duty to a “civilian” position never happened before, in the Italian Republic at least. There have been of course other military officers in civilian positions, but only when retired from the Armed Forces. Another peculiarity is that the new Extraordinary Commissioner has remained in charge in his position as Army Logistic Commander. These two characters are indicators of the type of choice done (as it will be discussed here later on): a *military servant, with specialized competence and top leadership role* in the armed forces is asked to lead an emergency structure *towards a common goal for the benefit of the entire civil society*. This is what I would call “a strange unconventional situation”.

² Taurino V., “Gli interminabili 69 giorni del lockdown. Una storia infinita o manca solo il finale?”, *Il Faro Online*, 2020, www.ilfaroonline.it.

3. A strange unconventional situation

The way towards such a decision was taken to solve an already difficult situation, where shortage of time went on together with an enormous number of people to reach. The size of the goal to be reached was evidently dramatic. Because of the diverse legislation on Public Health System in Italy, based on 20 Regional Health Systems with inevitable differences based on regional administrative autonomy, great differences in efficiency among Regions, and great differences in organisational criteria and choices were evident and well-known. The overall coordination model of the first Extraordinary Commissioner at national level, at work since February 2020, had already manifested its uncertainty and it was considered substantially inefficient. Moreover, public opinion began to show divisions and doubts about vaccination, and even about vaccine quality and possible dangers for various types of people, giving rise to the so-called NO-Vax movement, and causing a rather widespread uncertainty and true fear against some vaccine (the best exemplum has been the case of AstraZeneca) or any vaccine. At that time, in March 2021, the overall mood of the public opinion was really divided and dangerously ill-oriented towards emergency policies.

Some polls results and their trends can better show the situation at the moment of the Commissioner substitution and further: on March 16th only 29% of a representative national sample of adult Italian population (over 18-years old) declared a positive intention to accept any vaccine, 44% would have accepted to be vaccinated but not with AstraZeneca, 13% were definitely No Vax, 14% were “missing/don’t know” answers³. On March 30th the situation has changed: 52% are vaccinated or intentioned to do it, 28% are not sure to get vaccine, 11% are definitely against and 9% are “missing/don’t know” answers⁴. One week later those against and “no answers” have decreased to 8% and 7% respectively, and 65% declared to be already vaccinated or to be strongly intentioned to get it, 28% remain stable with some doubts about vaccination⁵. On May 18th, polls show a 35% of waiting for vaccine as early as possible, 34% are already vaccinated, but the most interesting data are the 15% of those declaring some doubts about vaccine, the number of those definitely against, which remains at 7%, and of “missing or don’t know answers” at 9%. These last two groups seem to remain rather stable even in further polls, indicating the existence of a so-called “hard core group”⁶. Just to give the last available data, on August 30th, 69.40% of Italians over 12-year are totally vaccinated.

³ IPSOS Polls, March 16th, 2021

⁴ IPSOS Polls, March 30th, 2021

⁵ IPSOS Polls, April 7th, 2021

⁶ IPSOS Polls, May 18th, 2021

Within two months the vaccinal situation has improved greatly, the number of vaccinations has increased strongly and rapidly, for a mix of intertwined reasons, such as vaccine availability, widespread desire to return to a “normal” life, and an evident organisational ability to cope with an apparent no solution problem.

The choice of the armed forces as an organisation and of a military officer as a leader seems then to have been the right one, but my question is: what are the reasons why a choice as such was done? Surely there was no special “militaristic” appeal on the side of Premier Draghi, nor a special preference for that “war metaphore” that was a diffuse linguistic habit in the public discourse and in the private as well since the beginning of the pandemic.

4. The war metaphore

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, a kind of war language began to be used, in the media of all kinds, radio-TV, newspapers, social networks and even in the scientific discourse when addressed to non-experts. Numbers of ill people, recovered and dead, were compared with those of a war, and in particular the First World War where less people died in battle than because of the terrific “spagnola” pandemic in 1918, to which the current infection was compared. According to a very recent study from the Italian National Statistics Institute (ISTAT) on May 2021⁷, in the course of the year 2020 Italy had an increase of 112.000 dead with respect to the previous year 2019, comparable with the 171.000 dead of the first year (1915) of the First World War. And considering the 129.000 dead since the beginning of pandemic until May 2021, scholars assimilate them “...to the dead of a new type of war, unconventional but similarly bloody, like a Third World War with comparable numbers of “victims”, against an invisible enemy causing fear, insecurity and strong limitations to our lives.”⁸. According to figures, COVID-19 victims in the 13 months since march 2020 to march 2021 are the same as the war dead and MIAs, military and civilians, in the 40 months of the Second World War since June 10, 1940 to Sept. 8, 1943, that is until the Armistice on 8 September 1943⁹.

Generally speaking, this war language was only apparently a true military language: it was not the military lexicon to be used, but the *civilian* lexicon about war and its disasters. The subject was the war killing innocent civilians, an invisible and shrewd enemy able to change its nature, spying and hitting in the daily life. An enemy against which civilian victims are helpless, practically

⁷ Gian Carlo Blangiardo, *Una terza guerra mondiale?*, Istat per il Paese, ISTAT, 31,5.2021

⁸ Gian Carlo Blangiardo, *Una terza guerra mondiale?*, Istat per il Paese, ISTAT, 31,5.2021, p. 2.

⁹ Gian Carlo Blangiardo, *ibidem*, Fig. 1, p.3

unarmed, without weapons. And when weapons arrive -the vaccines- it seems difficult to use them, coordination is problematic, regional and local diversities are hard to be overcome. And, what is more important, *time* and *space* are the two central aspects: a national space must be covered with vaccine in a very short time.

5. Draghi's Choice: a Weberian Goal-oriented Rational Action

Draghi's choice seems to refer to the following analysis: if it is a war, to have weapons and ability to use them is not enough, it is necessary to be able to use them according to two main dimensions, *time* and *space*. *Logistic* then shows its fundamental importance. And where a logistical competence, a logistic structure and organisation can be found at a national level? Ready and at disposal of a national government? Being an institution of the State? In the Armed Forces, and in the Army in particular. Draghi's choice shows its rational logic in the type defined by Max Weber (1922) as *Zweckrational* (goal-oriented rational action). The technical ability and expertise of a public organisation is applied to a national emergency not only "in support" to other institutions, as many times it was done in case of various national or local calamities (such as earthquakes, floods and the like...) but to apply rightly its specific and sole competence. The substantial difference in this case, when compared with all the non military activities already performed by Italian Armed Forces in case of natural disasters, is that a professional organisation like the military, with its knowledge, means, rules and specialised personnel, has been applied to a civilian goal and for the benefit of the civil society, exerting its full responsibility about choices and outcomes. This happens in emergency conditions, of course, and the apical role of the Extraordinary Commissioner is entitled also to the coordination with many and diverse actors, firstly the public health sector with all its national and local structures, and all those public or private organisations and corps usually active non only in emergencies (such as the Civilian Protection, the Red Cross, Third Sector voluntary associations...). But the novelty is the top leadership assigned to a *military civil servant*, and in this word pun there is its apparent contradiction.

But the "novelty" is not a new phenomenon at all! Just to remain confined to the international role played by Italian Armed Forces in all the many and diverse missions, since the Nineties we became accustomed with military operations other than war in many crises environments and among those in many humanitarian crises contexts. In those foreign and distant lands the armed forces are often entitled to play political and administrative roles, in substitution of the same, but missing,

civilian structures. These new roles played by a military organisation are considered almost normal when acting abroad. Why not to apply these expertises and competences at home?

6. To sum up with an hypothesis: a case of civilian-military contamination.

With the change of the Commissioner and the new organisation given to the vaccination program, “something military” can be found even in that “war methafore” already in use. I wrote before that the war lexicon used in the media and in the daily life was not a military lexicon. It was an expressive language used by civilians when speaking about war, it was the lexicon of the victims, in a pandemic condition never suffered before by the large majority of Italian civil society, where war at home was something more or less read in schoolbooks and seen at the cinema. In the “civilian war methafore”, the war is suffered and induce to look for defense; in the military lexicon the difference stands on the fact that war means primarily to fight against an enemy, possibly until victory. To lead a vaccination campaign like the one against the Corona Virus, this lexicon is used sometimes by the Commissioner, not only because of his military status but because of the mission assigned: vaccines are the right weapons, and they must be used in the proper way in order to win the virus. Plans and operative organisation are performed in order to gain a victory, as early and as definitely as possible.

But this does not mean at all a sort of militarisation of the civilian society. It is a case of contamination between civilian and military *cultures* (in a wide and general sense), giving rise to a *further civilianisation of the military profession*. In other words, military servants are anyway civil servants, many competences within overall military expertise can be efficiently employed in civil society to approach “civilian” problems. In the liquid society of our global times (Bauman, 2000), this contamination (Lyotard, 1979) is simply another sign of postmodernity.

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