# Emerging Aspects in Technocratic Politics at the Time of the SARS COVID19 Crisis

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**Riassunto**

The purpose of this article is to analyse the role of experts in the current COVID-19 crisis with a focus on the lockdown phase. There are many ways and many perspectives in which to do this. Our standpoint will be based on technocratic theory. In other words, we wonder: 1. what is the impact of expertise and technique process on public-decision making? 2. Is a government acting on expertise and technocratic process changing the nature of the socio-political system? First, we will try to define technocracy and technocratic politics in general, after which we will analyse the socio-political characteristics of the pandemic crisis with a special focus on macro-social dimensions. In the third part we will focus on recent technocratic politics during the COVID-19 crisis: our main hypothesis is that a new ambiguous political technocratic configuration, next to traditional "enlightened despotism", is forming as a result of different emerging effects linked to a series of trends and tensions at a macro-social level during the lockdown phase.

*Parole chiave*: COVID-19, teoria sociale, tecnocrazia, post-democrazia

**Abstract.** *Aspetti emergenti nella politica tecnocratica al tempo della crisi del SARS COVID-19*

Scopo dell'articolo è analizzare il ruolo degli esperti nell'attuale crisi della COVID-19 con una speciale attenzione sulla fase del *lockdown*. Il nostro punto di vista sarà basato sulla teoria tecnocratica. In altre parole, ci chiederemo: 1. Qual è l'impatto della competenza e della tecnica sul processo decisionale pubblico. 2. Se un nuovo governo basato sulla tecnica e sugli esperti sta cambiando la natura del sistema socio-politico. Nel primo paragrafo proveremo a definire la tecnocrazia e la politica tecnocratica, in generale. Nel secondo analizzeremo le caratteristiche sociali della crisi pandemica approfondendo, in particolare, le sue dimensioni macro-sociali. Nel terzo paragrafo la nostra attenzione si concentrerà sulla politica tecnocratica ai tempi della COVID-19: la nostra principale ipotesi è che una nuova ambigua configurazione politica tecnocratica – vicina al tradizionale "dispotismo illuminato" – si sia formata, nella fase del lockdown, come risultato della combinazione di effetti emergenti legati a una serie di tendenze e tensioni al livello macro-sociale.

*Keywords*: COVID-19, social theory, technocracy, post-democracy

# 1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyse the role of experts in the current COVID-19 crisis with a special focus on the lockdown phase. The virus is not just a natural event. On the contrary, it should be considered a socio-political subject: in fact, being socially construed, it produces many socio-political effects resulting in social, economic, and political tensions and contradictions within a global system. Such a matter is particularly true concerning the fundamental link between politics and society. We are living in a new era which is radicalising both the impact and expert role of ICT (Information and Communications technologies) in governance dynamics, a trend that had already started in a pre-pandemic

world. In the first part of this article, we will try to define technocracy and technocratic politics in general, after which the socio-political characteristics of the pandemic crisis will be analysed. In the final part, we will focus on recent technocratic politics during the COVID-19 crisis: our main hypothesis is that a new ambiguous technocratic polity, next to traditional "enlightened despotism", has been forming as a result of different emerging effects linked to a series of trends and tensions at a macro-social level.

## 2. Defining technocracy

Technocracy is not a specific political system or regime but a relatively coherent series of structures and techniques (socio-technique system) based on the authority of expertise for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of: 1) public decision-making, 2) implementation of policies and 3) ruling class recruitment and selection at various levels (Antonelli, 2019). The first and second aspects particularly concern Western countries, the third, – under the name and ideology of "meritocratic system", is also an important element in countries such as the People's Republic of China, Singapore or Taiwan (Bell, 2015). In addition, technocracy is a means for constructing hegemony in society (Gramsci, 2014); its most important latent function. In fact, starting from lucubration by Saint-Simon (2012) and Comte (1851-54), passing to Veblen (1914; 1919), Scott (Segal, 2005), Burnham (1941), Galbraith (1967), Bell (1973) and Khanna (2017), technocracy has been represented as the rise of a new social (and ruling) class, based on more universal attitudes in governance than the "traditional" bourgeoisie: as Alvin Gouldner (1979) argued such a universal attitude should be based on:

the culture of critical discourse (CCD) is an historically evolved set of rules, a grammar of discourse, which (1) is concerned to justify its assertions, but (2) whose mode of justification does not proceed by invoking authorities, and (3) prefers to elicit the voluntary consent of those addressed solely on the basis of arguments adduced. CCD is centred on a specific speech act: justification […] The culture of critical discourse is

characterized by speech that is relatively more situation free, more context or field "independent." This speech culture thus values expressly legislated meanings and devalues tacit, context limited meanings. Its ideal is: "one word, one meaning," for everyone and forever (Gouldner, 1979, p. 45).


Despite these analyses, the matter is more ambivalent than it seems. On the one hand, both in industrial and post-industrial society, experts seem to have forged an alliance with different social classes and social élites, and they work to enforce the legitimation and effectivity of such classes to rule society: for example, if in "Thirty Glorious Years" (1950-1970) experts were allied with progressist and statist élites, nowadays globalisation is based on a serious of technocratic structures – in turn fuelled by neo-liberalist values and cultures, such as the IMF (International Monetary Fund), World Bank and ECB (European Central Bank) at international level or authorities and advisory committees at national level – supporting the hegemony of global business élites to rule and to transform the world on the basis of their own interests. On the other hand, hegemony produced by experts is not just ideological and political but also pragmatic: a technocratic-based hegemony works until it produces more effective solutions for public problem-solving; its crisis starts when such solutions stop being effective and new social problems arise. Thus, during "Thirty Glorious Years" experts and politicians have held a bias for myopic unsustainable policies, which have led to severe macroeconomic shocks since the 1960s. The solution to monetary instability and stagflation was the "independence of central banks", implemented since the 1980s. The change in policy was successful in counteracting inflation, which initially enhanced the credibility of neo-liberal technocrats. However, the recent financial crisis has diminished this credibility: it is in such a moment that reproduction of old fashioned scientific-based solutions, at first promoted on a "culture of critical discourse", degrade into ideology. New experts, new scientific-based solutions and, probably, new socio-political élites are called for in response to these new conditions.

One of the most prevalent misunderstandings is considering technocracy in opposition to politics: a widespread attitude initially supported by Habermas (1971) and other scholars such as Putnam (1977), Fischer (1990) and Esmark (2017). According to Habermas, the

Second World War period saw a "new or second phase in the rationalization process" which Max Weber had already comprehended as the basis for bureaucratic domination, defined by the "scientization of politics". In this technocratic model, the relationship between the professional expert and the politician appears to have effectively "reversed itself", making the latter «a mere agent of a scientific intelligentsia, which, in concrete circumstances, elaborates the objective implications and requirements of available techniques and resources as well as optimal strategies and rules of control» (Habermas, 1971, p. 63). Starting from such a perspective the "thesis of depoliticization" began to prevail in technocracy studies. Esmark – quoting Putnam's research – sums up the essence of depoliticization in six guiding principles:

1) The idea that the replacement of politics with technicians provides experts and professionals with an essentially apolitical role. 2) Skepticism and even hostility towards politicians and political institutions. 3) A more or less blatant disregard for the openness and equality of political democracy tending towards authoritarianism and absolutism. 4) The belief that social and political conflict is misguided or even contrived. 5) The interpretation of effective policy as a question of pragmatics, not ideology nor morality. 6) The notion that technological progress is good, and questions of social justice are unimportant (Esmark, 2017, p. 5).

Such a depoliticization logic is also recognized by other researchers as a crucially dynamic inherent in the transformation from government to governance, in a globalized era (Hay, 2007; Stoker, 2006).

Nevertheless, all these positions are not fully acceptable. Evidently, they seem to be based on a double misunderstanding: first, considering experts more powerful than they actually are; second, considering "politics" as a synonym of "democracy". Relative to Western societies, technocratic politics can be surely recognized as a means for reducing, limiting or, even eliminating the substantial role of representative institutions in public decision-making. Consequently, technocracy is not in opposition to politics on the whole but it is in conflict with democratic politics, if democracy is defined as formal and representative as well as based on the centrality of mass political parties and their typical

kinds of mediation and participation (Antonelli, 2019). On the contrary, technocratic politics is a politics based on various types of decision-making involving high-level bureaucrats, members of executive branches (e.g. ministries) and experts, seeking in the authority of techno-science both the contents and legitimation of specific policies – trying to produce hegemony in this way. Thus, if officials have to do with the "sphere of means", according to Weber's classic analysis (Weber, 1919), experts are generally involved in the "sphere of objectives" (Bifulco, 2017) and defining general standards of substantial rationality (Antonelli, 2019). On the same basis, technocratic politics can be seen as an opposite to neo-populism. As a "political style" (Diamanti and Lazar, 2018), neo-populism is based on a set of values completely different to technocracy: argumentative simplification, myth of popular absolute sovereignty, emotional communication and voluntarism. Therefore, if neo-populist politics is based on "ethics of conviction", technocratic politics is founded on "ethics of responsibility", in a Weberian sense (Weber, 1919).

If technocratic politics is now a mechanism of every day public life, how does it work in times of crisis and emergency produced by an "external shock" like COVID-19? What is the relationship between such a politics and public opinion? How have political configurations (polity) changed? In the next part we will try to formulate some hypotheses in order to answer these questions.

## 3. COVID-19 pandemic crisis between expertise, system tensions and public opinion

The first step of our analysis is to recognize the nature of the current crisis: it is a global health emergency. In such a case, the crisis is socially and politically constructed in relation to a natural event, although many analysts point out that the spread of SARS-COVID-19 and its spill-over from a bat to mankind is due to human irresponsibility[1]. If this is the case,

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[1]    It seems that mankind has heavily contributed to COVID-19 spill over and its incredible world-wide diffusion in a very short time in two ways: 1. By an excessive promiscuity among different animal species caught for commercial reasons. 2. Through the high speed of human mobility due to globalisation dynamics. For an analysis of both aspects see in particular Vidal (2020).

we are dealing with three fundamental elements: first, science (the biology and medicine) is essential to define the threat and how to manage it. Second, since the virus is unknown, there is no effective cure for the illness, a virus with (probably) a high morbidity rate and a relatively low (but not insignificant) mortality rate[2]. Consequently, the medicine proceeds through "trials and errors", based on a serious of subsequent systematic studies, through comparison with past pandemic dynamics and clinical practice. Thus, the medicine is in a learning process characterized by uncertainty, differing opinion, and heated discussion among experts. This situation seems to be typical of "risk society" (Beck, 1986): on the one hand, everyone depends on scientific authority and, probably, definitive answers are expected by experts, due to the strength of the science myth; on the other hand, the normal uncertainty of scientific debate, accentuated currently, comes to light. Thus, public opinion may be disoriented; an effect probably amplified by the dynamics of contemporary global communication, characterized by a systematic information overload, media over-exposure of experts and the multiplication of echo-chambers on social media. As Edgar Morin argues:

Ce qui me frappe, c'est qu'une grande partie du public considérait la science comme le répertoire des vérités absolues, des affirmations irréfutables [...] Très rapidement, on s'est rendu compte que ces scientifiques défendaient des points de vue très différents, parfois contradictoires [...] Toutes ces controverses introduisent le doute dans l'esprit des citoyens (Morin, 2020 cit. in Ghezzi, 2020).

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[2] As we can read on the influential *World Mapper* website: «Since 31 December 2019, when WHO was informed about the first cases in Wuhan, China, more than 2.5 million people are confirmed to have contracted COVID-19 (Coronavirus) from the SARS-CoV-2 virus and more than 175,000 have died (all figures last updated 23 April, 2020). There are now cases of COVID-19 on all continents, in 215 countries/territories. The highest mortality rates are found in the British Virgin Islands with 25% (one death in 4 cases), followed by Nicaragua (20%), France (18.1%), Saint Martin (15.5%) and Belgium (14.9%). Twenty-one countries have a mortality of 10% or higher. Of the larger countries with reported cases in the thousands, France has the highest reported mortality rate (18.1%) followed by Belgium (14.9%), the United Kingdom (13.6%), Italy (13.4%), Sweden (12.1%) and the Netherlands (11.6%). After correcting the number of deaths in Wuhan, China now has a mortality rate of 5.5% (up from 4%), only slightly higher than the United States (5%). Of the countries with many reported cases, Germany, Turkey and South Korea have a considerably lower mortality rate of 3.4%, 2.4% and 2.2% respectively)» (https://worldmapper.org/maps/coronavirus-cases-mortality, 26/04/2020). The problem is that the mortality rate is calculated on the formula: deaths/cases. Unfortunately, if different countries tend to record causes of death in different ways, the greatest bias in such statistics is the estimation of cases: as many studies argue (for example, Seth *et al.*, 2020) the number of COVID-19 cases is heavily underestimated in all countries. Thus, the real COVID-19 mortality rate should be much lower than it appears in official statistics and, on the contrary, morbidity rate much higher than it seems.

As a consequence, a partial immaturity of Western democracy not to fully include the typical dynamics of a "technical democracy" seems to come to light. In fact, according to Michel Callon, Pierre Lascoumes and Yannick Barthe (2011) rapid scientific and technological advances create uncertainty and bring about unforeseen concerns – a condition that is also evident in the Covid19 crisis. Thus, while the formation of "hybrid forums" (in which experts, non-experts, ordinary citizens, and politicians come together) are revealing the limits of traditional delegative democracies, there is a failure to include this practice in public decision-making (deliberative democracy) as well as public opinion and experts not joining such conversations in a constructive way.

Concerning Italy at least, it is possible to partially test these arguments utilising the findings of *Science in Society Monitor* by Massimiliano Bucchi and Barbara Saracino who have conducted a survey on this topic, in a representative sample of Italians, carried out on 6 April. Thus, we can deduce that «Almost half of all Italian citizens think that the range of advice publicly given by experts has created confusion» (Bucchi and Saracino, 2020) (fig. 1).

Thirdly, within the whole articulation of the pandemic crisis, we can hypothesize the presence of a double cultural and systemic tension due to the characteristics of modernity – particularly second modernity (Beck, 2000). The first tension is between the promise of the modern society to guarantee a condition of well-being for everybody, particularly in healthcare – for example in the World Health Organization's (WHO) Constitution. We can read that its main objective is «the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health» (chapter 1, art.1) – and political, technical and economic opportunities to respect such a promise.
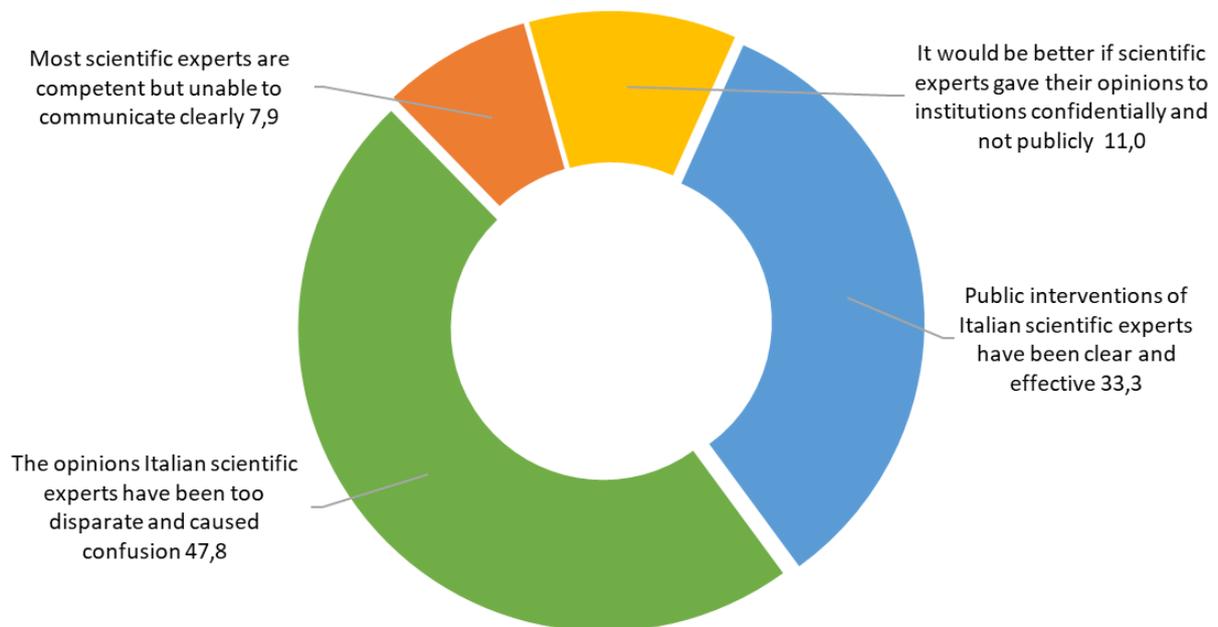
*Fig. 1 – Italian citizens' attitudes toward scientific experts' public interventions. Source: Bucchi and Saracino (2020)*

At a subjective level, this means that people expect a high standard of protection by society and government, on the basis of a sort of "total security and zero risk" myth (Bauman, 2006; Battistelli, 2016); an expectation depending on the characteristics of the political system (included citizens' rights) as well as cultural background but, at any rate, present in every modern society, even if not democratic – for example, as Bell (2015) argues in the People's Republic of China, the capacity of the party and the government to protect its people is a fundamental expectation of all. When a crisis or emergency with the characteristic of a "black swan" arises, such expectations dramatically increase, producing a tremendous overload on institutions (Taleb, 2007): clearly this has occurred in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

At a systemic level, correspondingly, the capacity to respond to this overload is based on available technical, organisational and economic resources, given the means of production and the need to protect them. Thus, such a situation produces a legitimisation, stability and governmental crisis that, according to Luhmann's social system theory, pushes the system to attempt a complexity reduction in order to save itself (Luhmann, 1984): national "lockdown strategy"[3] adopted by governments in dealing with the spread of COVID-19 could be seen as an application of that operation, as it does not just impose isolation and quarantine, but also the blocking of non-essential economic and social activities, in order to preserve the health of the population as well as the healthcare system itself. A first-time social experiment and measure that, surprisingly if we consider the normal behaviours of society and, in particular, those of democratic "open societies" based on the cult of Liberty (Bauman, 2000), have good support across all worldwide public opinion: according to the *Global Behaviors and Perceptions in the COVID-19 Pandemic* survey, conducted by Thiemo Fetzer and his research team in 58 countries and with over 100.000 respondents between late March and early April 2020 (fig. 2):

most respondents reacted strongly to the crisis: they report engaging in social distancing and hygiene behaviors, and believe that strong policy measures, such as shop closures and curfews, are necessary. They also believe that their government and their country's citizens are not doing enough and underestimate the degree to which others in their country support strong behavioural and policy responses to the pandemic (Fetzer *et al.*, 2020, p. 1).

In addition, such a survey highlights that even the mental health of people seems to improve when government introduces stronger measures of social distancing and control (Fetzer *et al.*, 2020).

A second kind of systematic tension is between such a safety need and the hyper-speed of

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3    A "lockdown" order (Europe) or a "stay-at-home" order (North America) or a "movement control order" (Southeast Asia) is an order from a government authority to restrict movements of a population as a mass quarantine strategy for suppressing, or mitigating, an epidemic or pandemic, by ordering residents to stay at home except for essential tasks or to work in essential businesses. In many cases, outdoor activities are allowed. Nonessential businesses are either closed or adapted to working from home. It is based on *WHO Country & Technical Guidance - Coronavirus disease (COVID-19)* (WHO, 2019).

the global socio-economic system, a fundamental imperative necessary for achieving increasing degrees of development. Thus, if the need for safety and protection requests the prevalence of medical and public order understanding and measures, the needs of hyper-speed leads to balancing those with economic and sociological knowledge in order to preserve, in a long term perspective, the reproduction system; including the availability of economic resources to support both public health measures and combat the increase of poverty, social marginality and unemployment linked to a massive reduction of social and economic complexity. Thus, even if an effective cure or vaccine against COVID-19 is far from being realized, the lockdown strategy on a national scale cannot be maintained in the long-term.
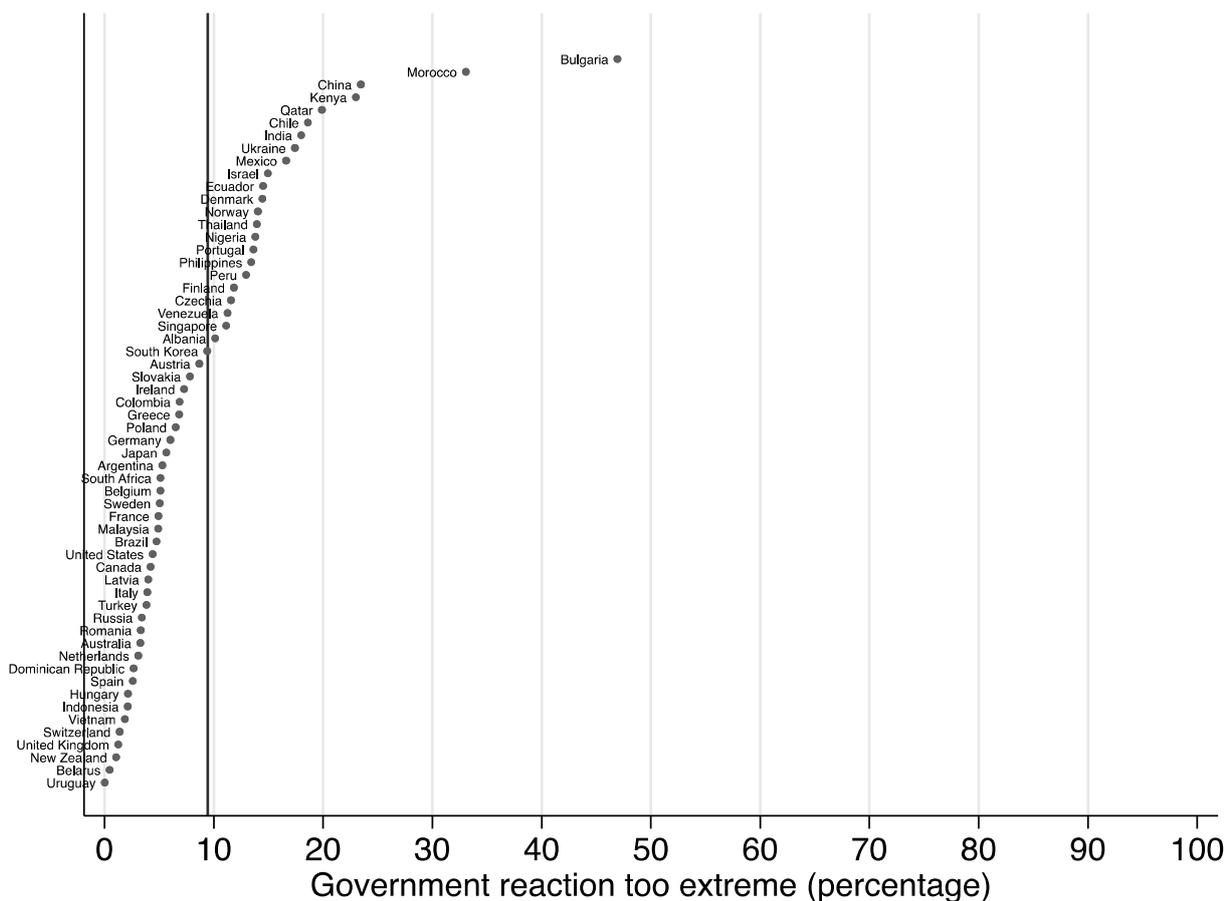


*Fig. 2 – Broad cross-country agreement that government response is not excessive. Source: Fetzer et al., 2020.*

On the basis of the "nature" of the current crisis, the observation seems to suggest that the development of a particular *technocratic politics* could be seen as a fundamental way to manage the crisis and, in particular, to manage the analysed systemic tensions within.

## 4. Changing political configuration: technocratic politics at the time of the COVID-19 crisis

As the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is a worldwide health emergency, it requires medical knowledge in order for it to be defined as well as managed. While the virus has been spreading worldwide – starting in Wuhan (China) – the power of medical experts has grown everywhere: without medical expertise a policy against the virus (including lockdown) would be unthinkable; and could not be justified to citizens. However, the power of medical experts is actually increasing as a consequence of the government's increasing role in controlling the economy and society; producing a radical deviance (a sort of "cognitive dissonance") from the *vulgate* of neo-liberalism. In other words, politics integrates experts and not the contrary. Thus, a question arises: «when and how have medical experts and medical expert structures been included within the new technocratic politics at the time of the COVID-19 crisis?». Despite regional and national variations, it is possible to identify a general pattern in answering such a question while more detailed studies identify cross-national differences.

Relative to the "when", starting from China to the USA, passing from Italy to the UK, everywhere signs of the spread of COVID-19 and their consequences are, in a first phase, systematically undervalued. Just ahead of the early severe effects, in terms of death and congestion of healthcare systems, governments started to react by involving medical experts and medical expert structures in decision-making. At the top level, starting with the World Health Organization (WHO), such structures have just had an advisory role: "suggesting" and "monitoring", rather than deciding, are their responsibilities. Different from structures like the ECB, they are weak technocratic institutions, depending on politics and its

discretionary power. Nevertheless, their role has been fundamental in pushing governments towards stronger containment measures, including lockdown strategies and, at the same time, justifying them to the public on behalf of the science community. Such action was a clear response to the first systematic tension (between the promise of the modern society to guarantee a condition of well-being for everybody and the political, technical and economic opportunities to respect such a promise) which we have already discussed: reducing socio-economic complexity in order to preserve both a functioning system and citizens' health. At this point, in any case, it is important not to overvalue the "wisdom" of medical experts in comparison to the "lightness" of political authorities in the early phases of the pandemic crisis: in fact, one of the most important factors that explains the delays in adopting measures, such as lockdown, in order to contain the epidemic, is in the weakness of the scientific community concerning this new phenomenon. According to Pietro Ghezzi (2020), beginning in the 1980s, health policies are determined on an evidence-based medical approach (EBM): every decision must be made based on scientific evidence and reliable data. Unfortunately, here this is not the case: SARS COVID-19 is unknown, and all relevant data is very incomplete. Therefore, this makes for weakness in medical experts' dealings with political authorities. The consequence is that both experts and ruling classes have learned the best responses step-by-step, resulting in a lockdown solution – recommended by WHO based on previous epidemic crisis rather than scientific evidence connected with SARS COVID-19. Nevertheless, following the declaration of lockdown, such technocratic politics based on a strong dialogue between government and experts with a progressive marginalisation of parliaments (post-democracy situation[4]), a massive expansion of public intervention towards society and the economy and the limitation of some fundamental rights (in particular the movement of freedom) seem to have established a particular political configuration (polity) next to the traditional "enlightened despotism" or "police State" based on technocracy.

Within our framework, "enlightened despotism/police state" is not a simple synonym of "absolute state" or "authoritarian state" even if a centralized political authoritarianism is one

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[4]    On the concept of "post-democracy", see Crouch (2000).

of most important characteristics of this socio-political configuration. Looking at it as a whole, such an expression refers to the original sense of practices and theory on police function, which is strongly linked to the rise of the Modern State between XVII and XVIII century: a phenomenon well-analysed by Michel Foucault (2004a; 2004b). In such a context, the "Police" is not just a public activity against crime (security) but a complex government activity based on the premise of achieving public wellbeing as a basic reason for the existence of the sovereignty; even if an authoritarian sovereignty seeks more power. As early as 1531, Thomas Elyot wrote an important book titled *The Boke named The Governour* where the ruler was compared to a medical doctor of the political body: "Police" is the name of this commitment towards a more general public and civic health. As Giuseppe Campesi argues «this kind of state had to take care of everything […] a right of interference that went further than the need to guarantee the survival of subjects, until taking charge of the whole material and moral social life» (Campesi, 2009, p. 126). According to the *Traité de la police* (1717) by Nicolas De La Mare «the police may be described in eleven matters: religion; way of life; discipline; public health; liberal arts and sciences; foods; public order and security; trade; manufactories; domestic servants; workers» (De La Mare, 1717, p. 4, author's translation). If we consider the whole complex of socio-political effects emerging due to the lockdown situation and, in general, the way of managing the struggle against the virus, it is possible to identify some similarities between the traditional police state and current political configuration; particularly the relationship between the state and its citizens:

1. The re-organisation of the whole state activity towards the aim of protecting citizens and to directly assure their well-being,

2. The need to regulate every aspect of social life, including social, informal relationships,

3. The reduction of many civil rights, particularly the right of freedom of movement,

4. The need for discipline and self-discipline as well as a more cogent informal social control to implement the rule of law as well as to protect public and individual health,

5.     A massive use of law enforcement agencies to control citizens' behaviour.

 Obviously, relative to Western countries, there are also more differences:

1.     a post-democratic situation rather than an authoritarian one,

2.     the official transitional nature of the current configuration,

3.     the conservation of several civil rights as "habeas corpus" and the freedom of expression.

 For such reasons we must speak in terms of "grey" situation rather than a full technocratic police state. In addition, we must underline that the use of digital technology and the role of experts – also beyond the role of medical experts – is a really interesting aspect within such a configuration:

1.     Similarly, to every contemporary state and society strongly influenced by a technocratic system (for example Taiwan or Singapore) the grey technocratic configuration is also an info-State, based on digital technologies in order to function (Khanna, 2017; Antonelli, 2019). A national lockdown itself as well as contact tracing for preventing virus diffusion is possible thanks to digital technologies and, in general, ICT: they enable the remote continuation of many public and private activities (e.g. smart working or school and university lessons), communicate in a more effective way, control virus expansion as well as citizen behaviour and so on. The famous Marx quote seems particularly appropriate: «mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve». An observation that includes a pandemic like this: for example, in the 1980s it would have been less likely as the speed of socio-economic contact was much slower than nowadays. On the other hand, if the SARS COVID-19 virus had spread in that time, without digital technologies, it would have been a greater catastrophe as a national lockdown strategy would have been unthinkable, given the technological limitations of that era.

2.     The dependence on data, data gathering and data processing to manage the situation in real time and take decisions.

3.     The role of experts and expert knowledge in managing and defining the situation,

including the legitimisation (or de-legitimisation) of decision-making as well as improving state efficiency. A factor that is leading governments – such as the Italian government – to involve new social science experts in crisis management, particularly for arranging the imminent post-lockdown phase and confronting the second systemic tension analysed in part 1 (the tension between safety and the hyper-speed of the global socio-economic system).

4. The dependence on scientists as well as pharmaceutical companies to develop a cure and an effective vaccine against the virus in order to end the crisis.

5. The dependence on global and regional technocratic structures (e.g. ECB) to guarantee all possible help with both the medical and economic effects of the current crisis; including the development of closer international cooperation among different national states; a mission that doesn't eliminate the emerging political economy of the pandemic and its geo-political effects, but rather includes them in a particular frame, more disciplined – one thinks of the European Union, for example.

## 5. Conclusion

Although our analysis is only an immediate, impressionist, and interpretative one based on incomplete data and a variety of journalistic sources, it provides some relevant indications in order to begin answering the questions which have been developed at the end of paragraph two as well as contributing to the enrichment of technocracy theory. Our first question was: «how technocracy politics works in a time of crisis and emergency produced by an external shock like COVID-19?». Technocracy seems to introduce a principle of rationality in governance which allows the tackling of systematic tensions exacerbated by the spread of COVID-19, and thus legitimising public decisions. It provides a general framework for the latter initially based on the culture of critical discourse (Gouldner, 1979), establishing standard objectives as well as a rational means to achieving them. Nevertheless, technocracy is an indispensable means for managing the crisis and is clearly subordinated to

the ruling class: in particular, the government determines "when" and "how" to utilize technocracy and not the contrary. In other words, technocracy is a way to enforce governability, in full continuity with a pre-pandemic world. At the same time, techno-science supporting the emergency is based on the extensive use of digital technologies, radicalising both the virtualisation of society and enforcing "digital platform capitalism" (Vecchi, 2017).

The second question was: «what is the relationship between such a politics and public opinion?». Both government and the public trust experts and techno-science in order to reduce uncertainty, to cope with threats and to manage personal and systemic stresses: for the first time in recent years, on a mass level, technocratic mechanisms have become a more public affair. Expectations were very high. However, techno-science has gradually revealed its internal divisions and conflicts and public opinion has become more and more disoriented. In other words, the COVID-19 crisis reveals immaturity between experts and the public in communicating with each other. Such a fact tends to reduce the capability of technocratic mechanisms in legitimising public choice as well as reducing the influence of neo-populist discourse in the long-term.

«How have political configurations (polity) changed?» is the third question. Our hypothesis is that a grey technocratic configuration next to the classic enlightened despotism/police state has characterized the "lockdown" strategy. This standpoint – which will need to be deepened by further empirical analyses – linked to what has been argued about the incommunicability between public opinion and experts, underlines the need to reintroduce scientific debate, concerning the social uses of techno-science, to a democratic environment. Contributing to change the authoritarian use of scientific knowledge in relation to politics, as technocratic mechanisms, can actually lead to social empowerment; a challenge particularly important in a post-pandemic world.

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