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THE USE OF METAPHOR IN DEFINING THE PANDEMIC PHENOMENON

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ABSTRACT

Although pandemics are perceived as scientific and technical problems, their multi-layered political implications trigger an ideology-laden debate. In this paper, we argue that in the face of the upheavals caused by Covid-19, a considerable part of the political and media systems has used narratives rooted in neo-nationalist and neo-liberal ideologies. On the one hand, neo-nationalism is visible through the portrayal of stereotypical « others » in mainstream media. On the other hand, the health emergency has tested and will continue to test institutions and their ability to find and implement solutions that minimise harm without restricting individual freedoms. Those entrusted with the institutional and political responsibility to inform the public once again communicated on the event using the primal rhetorical figures. First in China, then in Italy and Europe, and finally throughout the world, politicians, journalists, doctors, economists and opinion leaders have defined the health emergency as "war". The metaphor of war has been used and abused from the beginning, and the first and most vocal disseminators of the term « war » and its associated concepts have been politicians. This paper proposes an extension of the concept of

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Orientalism as a possible key to understanding the construction of stereotypical representations of Covid-19 as the ‘enemy’ and the pandemic as ‘war’ during the lockdown. Furthermore, it is argued that political positions and conflicts over pandemic measures are not random and nor do they depend on the idiosyncrasy of individuals. Rather, they represent certain material interests and socio-cultural and ideological backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian tragedy caused by Covid-19 has evolved from a legitimate (and healthy) fear of contagion to a kind of moral panic and, consequently, a demand for greater security (Dryhurst & Schneider 2020). The pandemic has tested the resilience of the institutions of neoliberal democracies in the West and other forms of states and regimes in other parts of the world, challenging their ability to find and implement solutions that minimize the spread of the virus without unduly restricting individual liberties. Our analysis focuses primarily on the first phase of the pandemic, the most uncertain phase, when decision makers and policy makers faced three urgent challenges related to institutional communication: first, how to communicate to people what was happening, or what narrative to construct and deliver to their publics (Burawoy 2005, 2021); second, how to maintain the consensus necessary to successfully manage specific emergencies and, most importantly, to reach the next electoral round with the hope of being validated by voters; third, how to maintain relations with the scientific community when translating and manipulating the language of science, on the one hand to facilitate understanding of the messages, and to reassure the public, and on the other hand to hide the initial uncertainty of the scientific community about the nature of the contagion and its eradication: a situation in which the reactive nature of politics do not coincide with the reflexive processes of science (Moura et al. 2021; Lemus-Delgado 2020; Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros 2020).

The pandemic has led to the frequent use of metaphors to describe the virus and the actions of governments and institutions to combat it. In the case of Covid-19, the following types of metaphors have been used frequently: “geographic” metaphors, which describe the virus as an anthropological feature of a nation or people; the metaphor of ‘invasion” or “invader,” which is used to try to construct the image of a real enemy to divert public attention from the real difficulties; and the metaphor of ‘war,” which is often used to convey a sense of

urgency and mobilize people to a common cause. Such metaphors can be employed for a variety of purposes: for example, to remind people to take the pandemic seriously and act to protect themselves and others; to raise awareness of the need for government action to combat the pandemic; to emphasize the need for solidarity and social cohesion and to lead collective action to combat the virus; and to encourage people to donate money or time to support those most affected. However, the use of metaphors can also be very problematic, as it can reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to feelings of anxiety and fear (Ferrari 2021; Lakoff & Johnson 2003). For example, it can legitimize othering processes and reinforce the idea that certain groups of people are responsible for spreading the virus, which can lead to their discrimination. It can also lead people to believe that the only way to defeat the virus is to restrict and limit individual freedoms through coercive measures and the eventual use of violence, which can make people feel subordinate, overwhelmed, and hopeless. In this paper, we will examine the use of metaphors in defining the pandemic phenomenon through the lens of the concepts of othering and orientalism, and, in particular, see how world political leaders have used them in functional and instrumental ways, sometimes naïve and paroxysmal, almost always exclusionary.

1. Giving Form and Substance to the Virus: The Representation of the Other through the Reflection of Orientalism

In politics, as in warfare, it is very easy to construct one's own narrative (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012: 301) in contrast to the other side, taking into account the preferences of one's constituency (Kagedan 2020; Mountz 2009; Campani & Lazaridis 2017). However, with the advent of Covid-19, the problem of representing the 'other' or the "invisible other" as opposed to an "us" has arisen. In addition to defining and protecting oneself and one's own group (in-group), the construction of the "other" has the function of maintaining and reinforcing relations of power and domination or/and subordination vis-à-vis the out-group or, in Gramsci's words, the subaltern social groups (Gramsci 2021). This plays a crucial role in the process of collective identity formation. This active function of the concept of the "other" is well expressed in English by the term "othering", which is widely used in the social sciences (Dervin 2012; 2016: 45; Brons 2015).

In sociology, amongst others, othering refers to differentiating discourses that lead to moral and political judgement of superiority and inferiority between 'us' and 'them'. In this understanding of othering, power is always employed in representing other and self. The other is also often described through a deficit framework, a view that she is not as good or capable as 'we' are, that leads to stereotypes and other forms of representation (Dervin 2016: 46).

This attribution of inferiority to certain social groups often takes place in the media, public discourses, and even in scholarly work (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012: 307). Othering thus describes the process of constructing social, highly stereotypical representations, the "objectification of another person or group" in which "one creates, artificially constructs the other", represents a social group in terms of radical otherness and leaves aside or ignores the complexity and subjectivity of the individual (Dervin 2012: 187). Finally, othering refers to the social and/or psychological ways in which one group excludes or marginalizes another group (Ashcroft et al. 2013: 188).

In studies of social representations of infectious disease, the use of concepts such as othering is now well established in the social sciences (Anderson, 2014; Crawford, 1994; Joffe, 1999; Lupton, 1994; Sontag, 1991), as it is in postcolonial approaches that aim to decode ideologies and practices of economic and cultural domination toward groups that are stigmatized for some reason (Ashcroft et al. 2013). The projection of illness onto others outside of one's reference group serves a dual function. On the one hand, it allows us to reduce the sense of helplessness we feel in the face of severe morbidity and epidemic events and reassures us about the lower possibility of occurrence and contagion in our own communities, as opposed to in other "unhealthy" and culturally inferior parts of the world. At the same time, it can activate mechanisms of responsibility assignment, stigmatization, and blame, reinforcing the dynamics of domination and subordination across countries and cultures (Douglas, 1992)

A specific application of othering is Orientalism, a category introduced by Edward Said (2013). According to the Palestinian-American writer, "the Orient" is an entity constructed by Western culture in general, and European culture in particular, to assert its own identity and superiority over an "other" culture, identified primarily, but not exclusively, with the Arab and Muslim worlds. Orientalism is essentially a subtle form of racism that designates another part of the world (traditionally the East for Europeans) as the realm of the picturesque, exotic, pre-modern, and barbaric. If we take the liberty of expanding Said's already historically and geographically well-defined concept, we use Orientalism as a prototype of an essentialist and generalized view of a

group and space reduced to mere articulations of an imaginary aggregate and characterized by real or presumed anthropological traits.

Faced with an "invisible enemy" like a respiratory virus, the priority for the world of politics and media was to construct a representation of the "other" that was more "tangible" to the public. The cross-cultural distance that still separates the peoples of the earth, but also the perception of Europe, which in a Eurocentric and ethnocentric view is still considered the "cradle of civilization," became evident in this matter. Thus, one can use the concept of Orientalism, reinterpreted outside the traditional East/West logic, as a possible key to understanding the emergence and development of stereotypical representations of social groups that are themselves described as "different" from what is considered to belong to one's community, as well as to understanding the dynamics of opposition and hostility that such Orientalism tends to generate. In this context, one might say that there is always a "South of the South" and a "South further South" where the dominance of the global North persists (Connell 2007). To give visual texture and materiality to this otherness, policymakers and the media have drawn extensively on a range of metaphors since the early days of the health emergency: primarily the geographic metaphor, the metaphor of invasion or invader, and the metaphor of war (Clark & Altin 2022; Schoeneborn et al. 2022; Ferrari 2021).

Political leaders who had the institutional and political responsibility of explaining and communicating what was happening, inevitably resorted to the most basic and communicatively effective: metaphors. (Musolff et al. 2022; Castro Seixas 2021; Ferrari 2021).

2. What is a Metaphor? Rhetorical Tool of Instrumentalization or Heuristic of Thought?

In the public debate that developed around Covid-19, something swift to emerge was the dominance of the hegemonic cultural narrative (Gramsci, 2021) of medicine, epidemiology, and especially those sciences concerned with the management and analysis of Big Data and the use of data to transmit and communicate information (Diana, Ferrari & Dommarco 2021; Hua & Shaw 2020; Ienca & Vayena 2020; Tian et al. 2020; Bansal et al. 2016; Lazer et al. 2014) . The historically grounded authority of this knowledge, combined with the authority of political institutions, dictated the agenda of solutions to end the global chaos triggered by the pandemic and created what Gramsci calls "common sense" over Covid-19 (Gramsci 2021). The sheer volume of complex

and potentially overwhelming data produced daily flooded the symbolic imaginary of everyone, including insiders, and this led to the state of emergency being expressed through a "repertoire of rhetorical devices common to epidemics" (Galatino 2020: 18).

From a semiological point of view, metaphor is far from being the most basic rhetorical figure; in fact it can be the most complex and derivative. Yet, as Umberto Eco argues, metaphor is the tool that makes it possible to better understand the code (the theory): this is the kind of knowledge to which the skillful use and understanding of metaphor gives access (Battistelli 2004a: 191; Eco 1980: 234).

The linguistic importance of metaphor has also been emphasized in other disciplines, such as the philosophy of science, for which metaphor is one of the most important tools that enables the constant adaptation and modification of our language in the face of the continuous and sudden socio-cultural changes of postmodernity or late modernity (Hesse 1970). According to the American physicist Gerald Holton, there are three main reasons why a scientist cannot do without the use of metaphors: First, they are able to support theoretical reflection when recourse to more traditional logical and inductive tools is insufficient; second, metaphors enable the creative imagination of scientists to move between the scientific world and the world of everyday life; and finally, they enable scientific language to keep pace with the rapidly changing nature of theories (Holton 1998)

Regarding the use of metaphors in organizational research, Gareth Morgan sees a metaphorical nature in any kind of conceptualization, since the data must be represented in some way and not speak for themselves. Thus, he rejects metaphors as rhetorical gimmicks to embellish discourse (Morgan 2006: 4-5; Battistelli 2004a: 190-191; 1997: 96; Lakoff & Johnson 2003). Morgan argues that

> As illustrated in Images of Organization, I believe that metaphor is the process that drives theory construction and science, generating metaphors that create theories and associated research that always have inherent strengths and limitations because of the creative insights and distortions that characterize the very nature of the metaphorical process (Morgan 2011: 463).

For Morgan, therefore, the use of metaphors implies a way of thinking and seeing that permeates our understanding of the world as a whole (Morgan 2006: 4). The most important thing in using a metaphor is to understand the intentions of the person introducing it. He may have "good" intentions or

"bad" intentions. This is true for any rhetorical device: metaphor is a linguistic and logical device that can either prove very useful or be exploited and contribute to the confusion of the masses[1] (Alvesson 2002; 1995). Thus, everything depends on its use. When it comes to using metaphor as a kind of energy boost, for example, to convince an audience, certain individuals, or an entire country to mobilize, the tool works. The crucial question is: mobilize and mobilize for what? If the goal is to hold together in an emergency situation, such as when a house is on fire or a boat is sinking, then the collective appeal makes sense and is legitimate. If, on the other hand, the goal is to create the conditions for an autocracy, the declaration of a state of emergency, and the concentration of all power on a small group of decision-makers or on an individual, then of course this possibility must be rejected and fought. In politics, the possibility often lurks that the second intention, the instrumental one, will gain the upper hand (Battistelli 2004a: 226-227).

3. The Use of Metaphor in the Communication of World Leaders

3.1. The Geographical Metaphor and That of the Invader

The Covid-19 pandemic was entirely new in its characteristics and in the severity of its consequences. Humanity shared the first "transversal and prolonged experience of planetary simultaneity" (Giaccardi & Magatti 2020: 58), that of lockdown. We are witnessing a "cosmic catastrophe" that, recovering the intense and illuminating expression of Ernesto De Martino (1977), renders our actions and relationships highly vulnerable and unstable and which, at the same time, through the interruption of daily routines, fuels reflection on the meaning of our being together and on the deep meaning of our social relations (Diana, Ferrari, Dommarco 2021: 14). However, the Covid-19 pandemic was no exception in terms of activating othering processes. Although the World Health Organization took special pains to find a name for the new infectious disease that would "minimize the negative impact" on economic activity and not "offend" certain national or cultural ethnic

[1] Mats Alvesson lists four problems with the use of metaphors: One may encounter bad metaphors that are denotative rather than connotative, rhetorical rather than theoretical; one may be seduced by them and consequently misuse them; one may choose them superficially; and inappropriate use may lead to the simplification of complex phenomena.

groups[2], the virus that began in Wuhan often took on names with geographical and national connotations in the language of politicians, journalists, and ordinary people. Particularly sensational were the designations that U.S. President Trump blatantly instrumentalized. He has often preferred to use the "metaphor of invasion" and "invader" and to speak of "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus" or "Kung flu". The leitmotif of the geographical characterization of a disease is evoked this time to establish a link between the disease and an external enemy that must be fought[3]. Indeed, it is easier to focus media and public attention on a flesh-and-blood threat than on a specter. So we are dealing with the construction of the "other," with the activation of the process of othering, spiced with Orientalism. By blaming China and the Chinese, Trump attempted to deny any responsibility for the questionable responses to the pandemic during his presidency and his denialist stances. (Cassandro 2020: 8).

In research published in Frontiers in Communication in 2021, eight expressions were identified that Trump used to relate Covid-19 to China in the period between March 13, and September 15, 2020: China flu, China plague, ChinaVirus/China virus, Chinese plague, Chinese flu, Chinese virus, Wuhan virus, and Kung flu (Kurilla 2021: 4). In total, Trump used such expressions 319 times in public, and none of the terms had been used prior to this time period. The expression "China virus" was used 228 times, "China plague" 43 times, "Chinese virus" 25 times, "Chinese plague" nine times, "Wuhan virus" five times, "Kung flu" four times, "China flu" three times, and "Chinese flu" twice (Kurilla 2021: 8). "China virus" appeared first on April 9 and later became the most frequent expression. The first expression used was "Wuhan virus" that subsequently was only used four more times. "China plague" appeared first on June 5 and was used 42 times thereafter. The sharp rise in Trump's use of these designations, starting in mid-June, resulted partly from the increase in his public appearances in the context of his election campaign and the fact that he resumed regular press conferences on Covid-19, which had been suspended before. Just

[2] Specifiche indicazioni e best practices per la denominazione delle nuove malattie infettive erano già state emanate dall'OMS nel 2015. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/163636/WHO_HSE_FOS_15.1_eng.pdf.

[3] In the history of infectious diseases, pandemics have often been named after the place where the first cases or outbreaks occurred. This is the case, for example, with *Asian flu*, *Hong Kong flu*, and *Gallic disease*. The situation is different for *Spanish flu*. Here, it is not the location of the first contagions that is cited, but the fact that Spain, as a neutral country, did not subject its newspapers to wartime censorship during World War I in 1918. For this reason, the Spanish press was the first to report on this pandemic, while the governments of other European countries wanted to avoid panicking the population by distracting them from war propaganda (Cassandro 2020: 12-13).

at the beginning of this rise in use, Trump employed "Kung flu" three out of a total of only four times (Kurilla 2021: 8).

Nor were other countries exempt from the labeling and stigmatization practices used against the Chinese (both outside and inside national borders) or, more generally, against Asians, all of whom were squeezed into a single, undifferentiated "other," potentially "threatening" category. Not surprisingly, the concept of Orientalism applied to the origins of Covid-19, was widely used internationally to interpret the distrust and intolerance of Asians that manifested itself, particularly in the early stages of the virus' spread (Banerjee, Kallivayalil & Rao 2020; Zhang & Xu 2020), in order to divert public attention from what was at the heart of the pandemic: the contagion, the death toll, the inability of institutions to manage the health crisis, and the embarrassment of policymakers who had failed to provide immediate and effective responses to the population.

China, as the country immediately identified as the source of the virus, was not alone in being subjected to labeling and stigmatization. Italy, which, although located in the West, was subject to discrimination and stereotyping due to socio-cultural and economic factors (Ferrari 2021; Von Vossole 2016; Capucha et al. 2014). Initially in Italy, before the first cases were identified in Codogno near Milan, the same stigma - of the 'China flu' designation – was used to "brand" and socially isolate Chinese immigrants in the country (Villa et al. 2020)[4]. However, Italy would soon after suffer the same ridicule and discrimination by other northern European countries (Ferrari 2021; De Vries et al. 2020; Mondino et al. 2020). In early March, when northern Italy was already in lockdown, a skit was broadcast on social media channels of a satirical Canal+ program in France that showed an Italian pizza maker taking a pizza out of the oven and repeatedly coughing on it without covering his nose and mouth while the announcer proclaimed, "Pizza Corona. The new Italian pizza that will travel around the world"[5] (Custodero 2020). This episode, like many others, caused great indignation in Italy, expressed at the time even by the highest authorities of the State.

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[4] Emblematic of this process of generalized categorization is the news of an instruction from the director of the Santa Cecilia Conservatory in Rome informing teachers on January 29, 2020: "Dear colleagues, due to the known events related to the Chinese epidemic, classes for Oriental students (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, etc.) are suspended." https://roma.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/01/29/news/roma_conservatorio_di_santa_cecilia-247107490/

[5] A few days later, on March 8, 2020, 3,500 Frenchmen dressed as Smurfs gather in Laderneau, Brittany, to set a Guinness World Record by shouting, "We smurf the virus!"

3.2. The War Metaphor

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a lively debate about the use of the war metaphor in political, social, organizational, and strategic contexts, and this debate has primarily revolved around several issues: first, its appropriateness (Clark & Altin 2022; Hanne 2022; Piazza 2022; Panzeri et al. 2021; Ferrari 2021; Battistelli & Galantino 2021; 2020; Farruggia 2020); second how we can also use it to measure the state of democracy in our countries; and third, its impact on international geopolitics (Musolff 2022; Schnepf & Christmann 2022; Schoeneborn et al. 2022; Diana, Ferrari & Dommarco 2021; Ferrari 2021; Martinez-Brawley & Gualda 2020). Initially in China, then in Italy and Europe, and finally throughout the world, politicians, journalists, doctors, economists, and experts have referred to the health emergency as 'war." From the beginning, the metaphor of war has been used and abused,

> and the first and most vocal propagators of the concept of war (and its associated terms: battle, enemy, front, trench, bulletin, etc.) have been politicians. [...] From a sociological perspective, the war metaphor already appeared in the context of a health emergency that bears striking similarities to the current one: the SARS epidemic of 2003 (Galantino 2020; 2010). It was only a matter of time before the bearers of public discourse rediscovered the simplest of metaphors (Battistelli 2020d).

Over the course of February and March 2020, in the face of the rapid spread of Covid-19, almost all world leaders were compelled to address their nation and declare war on the disease. Invariably this was a difficult announcement to make, communicating news that no citizen wanted to hear, and especially problematic if elections were imminent, political consensus was elusive, or after numerous assurances in recent weeks that the pandemic would not touch their borders.

Reference to the war metaphorwas shared by the leaders of the right, the left and the center. The first to speak along these lines was the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, on January 28, 2020, a week after the first death in China from Covid-19. He addressed the Chinese people by declaring that "the epidemic is the devil" and then spoke of "total war" against "the viral invader" (Feng & Hu 2022; Yu 2022; Ferrari 2021; Farruggia 2020). On February 11, 2020, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director General of the World Health Organization, warned:

> Viruses can have more powerful consequences than any terrorist action […] we have to do everything today using available weapons […] The world must wake up and consider this enemy virus as public enemy number one[6].

In France, after the March 15, 2020 local elections, Emmanuel Macron used the term 'war' six times in his address to the French people, each time to define the health emergency and underscore the gravity of the historic moment. A gravity that had been ignored in France until the previous day in order to allow some 22 million French citizens to leave their homes to go to the polls (Ferrari 2021: 82-83; Cassandro 2020: 6). The President of the French Republic declared:

> We are at war, and a health war at that. We are not fighting an army or another nation, but the enemy is there, invisible, untouchable, on the march, and all this requires our general mobilization[7].

On March 17, 2020, Boris Johnson described steps being taken in the UK

> that are unprecedented since World War II […] We must act like any wartime government and do whatever it takes to support our economy. […] Yes, this enemy can be deadly, but it is also beatable – and we know how to beat it […] And however tough the months ahead we have the resolve and the resources to win the fight[8].

On the same day, Giuseppe Conte, the former Italian prime minister, published a post on his Facebook page calling on Italians to be

> united, responsible and courageous [...] the state is us: 60 million citizens fighting together with strength and courage to defeat this invisible enemy[9].

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[6] The statements were made in front of 400 scientists and experts at an international meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, convened to address the health crisis (Boseley 2020).

[7] The full text of the French transcript was published by Le Monde on March 16, 2020. (Authors' translation from the French). The video of Macron's speech was also recorded in Italian and published and subtitled by many Italian newspapers, including La Repubblica and La Stampa. Interestingly, on such an important occasion, a gross translation error from French into Italian distorted the meaning of the above passage. While the French president says, "Nous sommes en guerre, en guerre sanitaire certes. Nous ne luttons ni contre une armée ni contre une autre nation, mais l'ennemi est là, invisible, insaisissable, et qui progresse"; the Italian subtitles read "nor against our own nation" instead of "nor against another nation."

[8] The excerpts published here are from Johnson's March 17, 2020 press conference on coronavirus. A partial transcript was published by *The Guardian* (Rawlinson 2020).

[9] Post published on March 17, 2020 on the Facebook profile of Giuseppe Conte.

On April 3, Conte wrote in a letter to the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, which became public:

> When you fight a war, you have the duty to support all the efforts necessary for victory and to equip yourself with all the means necessary for reconstruction[10]. (Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers 2020).

World Health Organization Deputy Director Ranieri Guerra, commenting on Conte's April 26, 2020 speech, went so far as to compare it to Winston Churchill's "tears, sweat and blood" speech[11].

In the March 18, 2020, press conference, Trump claimed he was "a president at war," adding that

> Now it's our time. We must sacrifice together, because we are all in this together, and we will come through together. It's the invisible enemy. That's always the toughest enemy, the invisible enemy (Oprisko & Luthi 2020).

Even Mario Draghi, former president of the European Central Bank and then prime minister of Italy from February 13, 2021, to October 22, 2022, stated unequivocally in an article published in the Financial Times on March 25, 2020, titled "We face a war against coronavirus and must mobilise accordingly", that

> Faced with unforeseen circumstances, a change of mindset is as necessary in this crisis as it would be in times of war (Draghi 2020).

The urgent tone struck by leaders in these declarations is in sharp contrast to earlier delusional claims of control or of untouchability. Until the previous day, most governments and political leaders, were proponents of so-called "herd immunity" (with the exclusion of Chinese and some other Asian governments). Briefly, in this situation, three positions of the new global right began to crystallize: "right-communitarianism" (Miller 1998), "neoliberalism" (Harvey 2007) and the "extreme centre" (Serna 2019; Mushtaq & Ahmad 2018; Tariq 2018; Deneault 2016;).

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[10] Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers. *Letter from Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen*, 3 April 2020.

[11] This occurred during the May 2, 2020 episode of the television program Otto e Mezzo, which aired on the Italian television station La7. The allusion refers to Churchill's first speech in the House of Commons of the Parliament of the United Kingdom on May 13, 1940, during the French campaign, after he had received the post of Prime Minister from the King the previous day. Churchill said, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat".

Faced with the pandemic phenomenon, right-communitarians (Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, Vladimir Putin in Russia, Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, Benjamin Netanyahou in Israel) tended to be more alarmist, while neoliberalists (Donald Trump in the USA, Boris Johnson in the UK, Jair Bolsonaro in Brasil, Stefan Lofven in Sweden) were more reductionist, or rather, they were alarmists to others and reductionists at home.The neoliberalists had a "denialist" approach that tended to downgrade Covid-19 to a mere seasonal flu and deride as catastrophists and apocalyptists those who sought to warn institutions, the media, and the public about the viral load and ease of transmission of the new coronavirus. In those "denialist" attitudes the aggressiveness of the virus was underestimated or deliberately downplayed, for example by leaders like Donald Trump, who used to say that the virus was little more than a seasonal flu and that the U.S. would not be touched by the pandemic, or the attitude of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro who made light of the risks of Covid-19 and maintained that there was no need to wear masks.

In contrast, the actions of extreme centrists (Emmanuel Macron in France, Sophie Wilmès in Belgium, Angela Merkel in Germany, Pedro Sánchez in Spain, Alberto Fernández in Argentina, Giuseppe Conte and then Mario Draghi in Italy) were characterised by balance, equilibrium and fairness in the management of public affairs, but which at the same time involved numerous policy u-turns. On 6 March 2020, for instance, a few days before the announcement of the severe restrictions on individual freedoms in France and with schools already closed in Alsace, Macron and his wife went to the theatre without wearing masks, in order "to incite the French to go out despite the coronavirus" (Kerber & Wahnick 2022: 137), as Macron had done several times in recent years following terrorist attacks (Ferrari 2021: 85). The French president emphasized his position with the statement: "Life goes on, there is no reason, except for vulnerable populations, to change our outing habits" (Kerber & Wahnick 2022: 137).

All these positions of the new global right, with all the different nuances, were especially clear at the beginning of Covid-19, when the proportions and possible consequences of the contagion were not yet evident (Battistelli & Galantino 2020) and the risk of economic and financial collision were very high. For many politicians, starting with Trump and Bolsonaro, "the first speeches on coronavirus" (Amossy & Wahnich 2022) meant an inexorable decline, marked by the spread of the pandemic and millions of victims in their countries. It is indeed amazing how quickly politics and politicians have changed course on this issue.

3.3. "Illness as War"

In the "Covid Era", the representation of everyday life is transfigured into a new collective imaginary, conveyed primarily through language and, especially in the first phase, through the use of metaphors in general and the metaphor of war in particular. The metaphorical argument "illness is a war, and we must fight it" is a heuristic of thought to indicate urgency of action, and as such was occasionally used by physicians or scientists. In an essay published in Current Sociology in late August 2019, five months before the Covid-19 pandemic broke, Battistelli and Galantino argued that

> Infectious diseases, that in recent decades have been the focus of a renewed attention by experts, health authorities and public opinion, can be included (from an analytical standpoint) in the semantic space of danger because virus may appear independently of human decisions and intentions. However, as in the earlier case of AIDS, and more recently of 'mad cow disease', SARS, avian flu and swine fever, in media narratives and among the general public the concept was ascribed to the threat category. Specific biological agents (pathogens, but obviously not intentionally so), or rather an anthropomorphic representation of them, became an enemy that 'threatened' us, 'attacked' us and, finally, 'killed' us. Consequently, a 'war against the virus' became the interpretive metaphor and the narrative frame for understanding the threat itself and mobilizing material and symbolic resources to fight it[12] (Battistelli & Galantino 2019: 72-73).

However, the same metaphor of fighting a war against an illness can be misguided and even hateful for a very sick person (Frezza 2016: 22). Susan Sontag pointed out this controversial aspect of using the metaphor of war to describe a disease in Illness as Metaphor (Sontag 1978). In the early months of the pandemic, many considered it inappropriate to use terms borrowed from military language to explain the pandemic to the public. This observation should be considered in the context of a more nuanced view that makes some distinctions in interpreting the portrayal of the disease as an enemy (Battistelli & Ammendola 1997). This does not change

[12] On the metaphors of viruses, infectious diseases, and epidemics that prevail in media discourse, especially in Italy, and how they help construct and sustain public discourse about them and the policies to combat them, Maria Grazia Galantino had already commented presciently, in light of the events surrounding Covid-19, in her book on the different kinds of harm - dangers, risks, threats - that threaten our societies. We refer to this text for further insights into the use of global pandemic metaphors and the way in which, on the occasion of SARS in 2002-2003, the international governance network was organized (Galantino 2010: 81-126); see also Battistelli & Galantino 2020.

the fact that war as metaphor has its practical efficacy. In this sense, it can even be very insidious because of its potentially opportunistic use (Battistelli 2020c). In Macron's speech to the nation quoted above, after saying that France was at war, the president explicitly referred to the suspension of a very important reform that had caused the government problems, namely the pension reform:

> All governmental and parliamentary action must be directed immediately toward combating the epidemic, day and night. Nothing must distract us from this goal. For this reason, I have decided that all ongoing reforms will be suspended, starting with pension reform[13].

The instrumentalization of the war metaphor to justify the blockade of all reform projects indeed could be interpreted as undermining democracy, even if it is only temporary. In some cases, however, we should equally not dismiss the possibility of a non-opportunistic use of the war metaphor to convey the idea of an emergency that threatens people's safety, health, and lives by "showing" potential victims a means to build critical mass to meet the actual emergency (Battistelli 2020c).

At the same time, from an analytical point of view, there are some objective aspects of similarity between a war and a natural disaster or a pandemic, and which thus justify the use of the metaphor. Few phenomena other than war, in fact, evoke notions as serious as the Covid-19 pandemic: destruction, suffering, deprivation and, above all, threat to people's physical safety to the point of loss of life (Battistelli & Galantino 2020). However, the differences should also be emphasized, because in the vast majority of cases a true military war is intentional (or the causes that brought it about were intentional), while the pandemic or natural disaster, which is of natural origin, is not.

CONCLUSION

In the discourse of political leaders, the virus has been humanized and anthropomorphized, portrayed as an enemy and described as such in its behaviors: It threatens our health, our economy, but also the usual course of our social life. Taken as a whole, the political leaders we have mentioned can be considered conservative politicians and, in most cases, representatives of

[13] See footnote 6.

neoliberal economic policies and ultra-right sovereigntist and supremacist ideas on social issues[14]. We have used the categories of right-communitarianism, neoliberalism and the extreme centre. The different nuances of the metaphor have been reflected in this distinction between the three new global rights In ordinary situations, this strategy is effective, but it reaches a crisis when, as in the case of a protracted global pandemic, insecurity becomes a physical condition and the rhetoric of narratives is eclipsed by the harshness of facts.

It has already been said that Orientalism is a subtle form of racism that locates in another part of the world the realm of the picturesque, exotic, pre-modern, and barbaric from which the greatest threats to the existing status quo and the integrity of a self-proclaimed Western identity emanate. In this sense, Orientalism and Othering represent a glossed version of chauvinism and racism. They manifest the neo-nationalism voiced by the political leaders discussed here, and often adopted by a segment of the conservative press and media, through soft rhetoric that disguises the denigration of other nations in order to secretly glorify one's own. Similarly, the neoliberalism of politicians hides in what is often disguised in public discourse as threats, when in reality it should be counted among risks, a category for which policymakers are largely responsible (Battistelli & Galantino 2021; 2020).

In the end, we can say that and the metaphor once again

> fulfilled the function of bringing the new closer to experience and making understandable what seemed incomprehensible. At the same time, they helped to increase anxiety, fuel uncertainty, and probably feed fears and anxieties (Galantino 2020: 18).

In any case, it is very important to distinguish a health emergency (even if it is of global proportions and lasts for years) from an event of war. In both cases it is possible and necessary to intervene in the 'prevention' phase with a completely different, even opposite strategy. Instead, in the case of diseases, especially those that make the leap from species, from animal to human, prevention or containment is necessary and possible, in a way that is very different from the chaotic way we have seen in recent years in several international and European cases.

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[14] Some scholars use the category of populism to distinguish between right-wing populism (or exclusionary populism), left-wing populism (or inclusive populism) and valence populism (or hybrid populism) (Zulianello 2020; Caiani & Graziano 2019). However we decided not to use the concept of populism because in the last years it has been overused and abused and it has became a sort of umbrella term.

The use of the war metaphor in medicine and health care is certainly not without consequences, as we have seen: it conveys a sense of urgency and mobilizes people to a common cause, but it can also be very problematic, as it can reinforce harmful stereotypes and contribute to feelings of anxiety and fear (Ferrari 2021; Lakoff & Johnson 2003). To echo the words of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003), metaphors become embedded in our linguistic constructs over time, find their way into common usage, become concepts, and eventually guide our perceptions, thoughts, and actions. Like all heuristics of thought, metaphors tend to operationalize concepts quickly, if only superficially. This includes normalizing what presents itself to human eyes as occult, mysterious, unknowable, uncertain, and therefore threatening, resulting in a mediation between what is ignored and what is known. But this normalization lacks depth and critical perspective, so the knowledge that emerges from metaphorical intuition often creates distortion and dissonance. Metaphors, however, participate in the game of social construction of reality to co-construct new realities. That is, they serve to respond to society's demand for immediate descriptions of new realities that can provide guidance to individuals and communities in the face of adversity. This symbolic process inevitably leads to the creation of a new reality or realities that are different from the previous one.

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