



The Use of Foucault's and Schmitt's Theories and War Metaphors in the Political Narratives of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

In the case of the first surge of covid-19, the metaphor “we are at war” was immediately used insofar as it was understandable and easily adaptable to the sanitary emergency of the covid-19 pandemic and therefore determined an emotional predisposition, on the one hand, to abide by the restrictions; but on the other hand, it gave rise to a negative feeling of fear that in turn caused several collateral drawbacks: fear of the other, hunt for the “anointers” who spread the virus, spying on neighbours, lack of solidarity, and mental conditions such as anxiety, depression and phobias.

Starting with these premises, in this paper I will analyse the use of language and metaphors in the context of the covid-19 pandemic in connection to surveillance, state of emergency, and critique of values. I will attempt a critical analysis of two different perspectives that have been applied as interpretative models of the covid-19 pandemic: Schmitt's crisis of values and Foucault's surveillance, which I will integrate with Agamben's reflections on the state of emergency.

The article has two purposes: by analysing how Schmitt's and Foucault's texts and theories have often been referred to uncritically and applied to the pandemic mechanically, to support or challenge the political decision of introducing social restrictions, I will first explain why covid-19 narratives have often been confusing; and second, I will discuss the role that war-metaphors played in persuading people to accept the restrictions and diverting the attention from important political and social problems, such as the crisis of public health systems.

Keywords: Covid-19; Foucault; Schmitt; Metaphor and Covid-19; Political narratives of Covid-19

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The Use of Foucault's and Schmitt's Theories and War

Metaphors in the Political Narratives of the COVID-19

Pandemic

Metaphors have the special power of influencing opinions, which occurs nonetheless, whether a metaphor rests on reasonable assumptions or not, i.e. on argumentations that, despite their apparent formal correctness, are *de facto* false (D'Agostini, 2010). From the formal point of view, Aristotle was the first to produce an analysis of metaphor, which he describes as “the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy” (1932, i 1457b, 6-7).¹ He considers appropriateness one of the fundamental qualities of metaphors alongside “perspicuity, pleasure, and a foreign air” (Aristotle 1926, 303, §2 1405b). Perspicuity depends on the fact that a metaphor clearly shows the connections between two things and that its meaning can be apprehended easily and quickly without explanation. The “foreign air” depends on the fact that the metaphorical terms are not used accordingly with their general and usual meaning (in the example of “Achilles is a lion,” the latter term is commonly linked to an animal). And finally, the pleasure is in that we feel happy about achieving new knowledge every time we successfully grasp the meaning of a metaphorical connection. However, the fact that a metaphor is rhetorically well-made and adequate to its context is no guarantee that it will be used ethically.

In the case of the first surge of COVID-19, the metaphor “we are at war” was immediately used insofar as it was understandable and easily adaptable to the sanitary emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic and

¹ For deeper insight into Aristotle's discussion of metaphor's formalism, see “Persuasion: The Role of Metaphor in Shaping Opinion”, in Piredda (2022).

therefore determined an emotional predisposition, on the one hand, to abide by the restrictions. On the other hand, however, it gave rise to a negative feeling of fear that in turn caused several collateral drawbacks: fear of the other, hunt for the “anointers” who spread the virus, spying on neighbours, lack of solidarity, and mental conditions such as anxiety, depression and phobias, as Burnette (2022) writes.²

Starting with these premises, in this paper I will analyse the use of language and metaphors in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in connection to surveillance, state of emergency, and critique of values. I will attempt a critical analysis of two different perspectives that have been applied in political narratives as interpretative models of the COVID-19 pandemic: Schmitt’s crisis of values and Foucault’s surveillance, which I will integrate with Agamben’s reflections on the state of emergency.

By analysing Schmitt’s and Foucault’s theories, I claim that the use of the former is inappropriate to build a critical argumentation of COVID-19. As a matter of fact, Schmitt’s theory was often referred to uncritically and applied to the pandemic mechanically, to support or challenge the political decision of introducing social restrictions. Conversely, I claim that the use of Foucault’s theory is more adequate to a critical understanding of the complex scenario of COVID-19 crisis because his historical interpretation of the relation amongst power, discourse, and pandemics highlights that such relation is always intrinsically ideologically and that language of politics has always a manipulative function that must be critically deconstructed. For this reason I devote the last part of my article to analysing how the war metaphors were used to persuade people to accept the restrictions and to divert the attention from important political and social problems, such as the crisis of public health systems.

² The ineffectiveness of the use of war metaphors has also been demonstrated in other diseases such as cancer (Hauser, 2015 and 2020).

1 Beyond the System of Values: Schmitt's *Die Tyrannei der Werte*

Humankind, being a complex and organised system, aims to maintain social life within the state of welfare, which is to say homeostasis, to ensure that everyone may enjoy a good life. The aim of any agency does not, therefore, limit to preserving life but implies the effort of attaining happiness through the application of basic ethical principles. If, on the one hand, good health, peace, honesty, and solidarity characterise good societies and permit their members to live happily, on the other hand, disease, war, corruption, and egoism characterise evil societies, make life unhappy, and eventually cause society itself to crumble down. These couples of opposites determine, from the ethical point of view, a series of values on which the laws are based and that regulate behaviours and social practices.

All ethical decisions we make in diverse contexts of our lives are based on the values we believe in. This also happened during the first surge of COVID-19, when the population was called to their civic duty, which is based on beliefs and values that we call “objective”, in the sense that they are conventionally valid not only individually but for all those who belong in a given society. One of these values, in a democratic society, is the freedom to move and gather. However, if any disruption of normal social living – e.g. a pandemic – puts lives at risk, then the application of restrictions on those basic freedoms becomes reasonable as far as it is aimed at lowering the danger. During the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, one should not ask if social restrictions were just or necessary but rather if and to which extent such restrictions were or were not effective.

Several authors referred to the jurisdictional theories of Carl Schmitt (Steuer, 2022; Corradetti, 2021; Negroni, 2020; Kotzé, 2020; and Premoli De Marchi, 2012), to argue whether social restrictions were theoretically and legally justified and acceptable: in some cases, Schmitt's theory was used to approve the enforcement of the restrictions, in others to criticize that policy. However, they often referred to Schmitt's theory uncritically, without taking into account the historical context in which it was formulated and for what purpose. Schmitt's theory of the “tyran-

ny of values”, is indeed problematic.

In *Die Tyrannei der Werte*, of 1960, Schmitt makes a stand against Scheler’s ethics of values, which was used after the war to lay down strong moral fundamentals on which Europe and the Federal Republic of Germany should rest. Schmitt believed that the problem of values consists that values always depend on individuals. Therefore, values always exist in a “system of pure perspectivism” and there is no guarantee that they will be used ethically or even that they have any moral content. As Premoli De Marchi (2013, p. 141) writes Schmitt borrows from Heidegger (1950) the idea that values cannot be objective because any value is the result of an act of evaluation, which is always subjective. Since values are such only if actualised, they consequentially imply some degree of aggressiveness because they must be imposed on others – who may base their agency on other values – to become effective in reality.

However, Schmitt’s argumentation is flawed both from ideological and rhetorical points of view. One must bear in mind Schmitt’s involvement with Nazism. In his article, Zeitlin (2020) shows that *Die Tyrannei der Werte* offered Schmitt – who never abjured his Nazi ideological creed – the opportunity to carry on with his campaign for a full amnesty for Nazi war criminals. We must remember that Schmitt was indicted at the Nuremberg trials.³ In 1945 he wrote a defensive document for the trial of Friedrich Flick,⁴ in which he appealed to the principle *nullum crimen, nulla poena sine lege* (Schmitt, 2011; Jeutner, 2019). According to this principle, the charges against Flick had to be dropped as it was illicit to accuse a person of a crime that occurred before a specific law existed, which defined the act itself as a crime. He then defended himself in 1947 from “the denunciation *ad personam* presented by Karl Loewenstein, his former colleague, who emigrated in 1933” (Gnoli Volpi, 2003); and again in 1947, when he was questioned by Robert Kempner. In both cases, he was acquitted, although he was forbidden to resume his academic activity so he concentrated his activity on publishing books and articles in newspapers.

3 See the reports in Quaritsch (2000).

4 Flick was one of the most influential entrepreneurs in the German steel industry and an enthusiastic supporter of the Nazi party.

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Zeitlin (2020, p. 2) analyses some columns written by Schmitt but published anonymously in German and European papers, “advocating blanket amnesty for National Socialists accused of war crimes, crimes against the Jewish people and crimes against humanity”. Zeitlin highlights that the author of those columns meant amnesty as “forgetting,” and “also the strict prohibition [*Verbot*] against rummaging around in the past and seeking a cause for further acts of revenge and further claims of reparation” (Schmitt, 1995, p. 219).⁵ According to Zeitlin, the apology of former German officers involved in Nazi crimes continues in *Die Tyrannei der Werte*, where the author criticizes the values as objective and universal. Zeitlin shows that this critique is linked to the sentence of 1958, with which the District Court in Hamburg by referring to the “objective and universal” value of free speech conclusively stated Erich Lüth’s right to publicly call for boycotting Veit Harlen’s movie *Unsterbliche Geliebte* of 1951.⁶ In *Die Tyrannei der Werte*, Schmitt explicitly attacks the validity of the concept of an “objective system of values”, claiming that laws should not be based on a system of values insofar as these are the guarantee of nothing. Schmitt separates ethics and morals from politics and bases his conception of legality, as Apollonius (2014) writes, on the concept of the Hobbesian state, which in Schmitt’s case is historically reflected in the Nazi state. This separation inevitably leads to positions which, while rhetorically argued to sound convincing, are fundamentally biased.

In my opinion, any reflection on politics and laws cannot ignore ethics and its purposes. According to Aristotle, “every state is as we see a sort of partnership, and every partnership is formed with a view to some good” (Aristotle, 1944, 1, 1252a). In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines what good is and writes that there are different kinds of good (friends, health, pleasure, richness, and so on). But he wants to

⁵ Also in Zeitlin (2020).

⁶ Lüth called for a boycott of Harlen’s movie because he was the director of the anti-Semitic movie *Jud Süß* in 1940. Because Harlen had been declared free of all charges in 1949, he stated that Lüth’s claim was illegitimate, which was also stated by the Hamburg Criminal Chamber of the Regional Court in 1951, although this sentence was reversed seven years later when the District Court in Hamburg nullified Harlen’s claim by referring to the objective order of values (objektive Wertordnung), so extending “the applicability of basic rights, like freedom of opinion and expression, into the domain of private law.” (Zeitlin, 2020, p. 8).

understand which is the best and highest good, viz. *the good* that is “desirable for itself”, not “desirable for the sake of some other good”, and for the sake of which “all other goods are desirable” (Kraut, 2022). This good, which everybody agrees to call *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing), must be the object of politics. This, by the laws, determines which actions are allowed and which ones must be avoided to achieve happiness: “The aim of Politics, that is, what is the highest of all the goods that action can achieve Happiness, and conceive ‘the good life’ or ‘doing well’ to be the same thing as ‘being happy’.” (Aristotle, 1999, I, 1095a1-1095a2).

So, if one establishes that the good is the aim of ethics, then the legislation that regulates behaviour must also have the same goal. Consequently, an order of objective value is such only and only if it has as its goal the happiness of every component of society. In this case, objectivity does not have the same meaning as in science, that is, that it can be verified by experimentation, but it means that its rightfulness is so evident – as far as everybody can recognise if an action brings happiness or unhappiness – that it cannot be denied. Schmitt’s argument fails here and it would make sense only if considered from an apologetic point of view: it is a sophism to propose that a political system should not be based on values just because social groups can exist as far as they conventionally accept common values (like life, health, friendship, instruction) on which they found their rights and laws. It is important, therefore, to understand how values are used in political narratives, what kind of persuasion they are aimed at, and what their practical purposes are. Therefore, beyond the use that has been made of Schmitt’s theory by these authors to express their agreement or disagreement with the restrictions, in my opinion, in a context of democratic political culture, it is inappropriate to refer to a thinker who never denied his past Nazi membership.

I would like now to go back to the case of COVID-19 and analyse the concept of health to see what kind of definition was used in political narratives and what their purpose was.

2 The World Health Organization's concept of health: physical, mental, and social well-being

It is undeniable that health is an universal value and has an objective ground, even if its definition is quite complex. In the case of COVID-19, political narratives and decisions have been made based on a partial definition of the concept of health. The suspension of many rights derived as corollaries from the right of individual freedom, on which modern democracies are built, was made possible by considering health from a mere physical perspective, that is, the absence of the disease. In the case of the political decisions made about COVID-19, only the value of physical health was taken into account. Such a value caused many governments to impose regulations aimed at tackling the physical effects of the virus without taking into account other aspects of health, thus contradicting explicitly the Constitution of the World Health Organization, according to which “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”⁷ From this standpoint, the value of health implies the state of general homeostasis of the individual, including the mental state and the influence of social practices on the self-perception as a healthy person in a healthy society. In other words, if we talk about the value of health we must take into account the “perception that the individual has of his or her health insofar as such a perception influences the psychophysical well-being of which health itself consists: then it is not only the technical knowledge of medicine that exclusively defines the state of health of a given individual, but also what that individual feels concerning his or her state of health” (Negroni, 2020, p. 9).

The concept of health today is therefore not separable from that of the quality of life and perception of the individual: it is intrinsically linked to that of equality of opportunity (Kamm, 2001; Abatemarco et al., 2020). It is therefore objective and subjective since health is also influenced by the subject's self-perception. However, there must be a reasonable limit to the subjective perception of health, which must be subject to the ethical principle that individual well-being must not harm that of

7 <http://apps.who.int/gb/bd/PDF/bd47/EN/constitution-en.pdf?ua=1>.

others. Since within society the individual is always in a relationship with others, with whom he or she shares habits, beliefs, and norms, the definition of health that includes subjective self-perception must be linked to a system of bioethical values that can be summarized in the principle *primum non nocere*, which imposes the good of the individual and society as the end of all actions.

In the case of COVID-19, political narratives based on war metaphors – with which lockdowns were proclaimed and justified – were based on a partial definition of the concept of health as the mere absence of infirmity. The point is therefore not to discuss whether lockdowns, distancing, and social isolation are not useful to stop the spread of the contagion (the validity of which is evident), but whether these measures have been supported by an adequate health system and based on an adequate system of values concerning the sphere of health.

Before analysing the political narratives reported in newspapers, I would like to highlight the relationship between politics, power, and health, the risk of establishing “sanitary dictatorships” (as in the case of Hungary during the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic), and the concept of biopolitics by considering Foucault’s reflections.

3 State of emergency vs. state of exception

How was it possible to implement such restrictions that not only limited the freedom of individuals but also applied the concept of health in a restricted and partial way, thus creating a state of general social and individual malaise? Many articles by jurists and columnists refer to Schmitt’s (2006) definition of a state of exception, opposing it to the state of emergency, based on the fact that during the pandemic the constitutional rights that underpin the democratic system were suspended. Some authors refer to Schmitt to justify the political decision of suspending rights, the separations of legislative and executive political powers (for example see Scoditti, 2020), and the disproportionate use of decrees; others, instead, refer to Schmitt to criticize the suspension of

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rights, perceived as a violation of the ethical and moral principles of democracy (Pellegrino, 2020). One of the most important contributions to the debate was Giorgio Agamben, who reflected on the concept of “state of exception”, overturning Schmitt’s theory through the mediation of Benjamin’s philosophy, which describes in *Angelus Novus* (1995) the progressive normalization of the state of exception during the first decades of the twentieth century, and Foucault’s philosophy of biopolitics (2004). In *Stato di eccezione* (2003), Agamben sees the modern state as the result of the convergence between totalitarianism and democracy, and he claims that the modern state uses its power to create emergencies in order to maintain a continuous state of tension that can be managed by enforcing authoritarian policies. If this interpretation can be viable to understand certain historical events, such as the surge of terrorism in Italy during the 1970s, it is, however, inadequate to understand the state of emergency as it occurs during a pandemic.

Agamben published in July 2020 a post on his blog referring to Schmitt’s state of exception to reject the position of an anonymous jurist, who “tries to justify with arguments that would like to be legal the state of exception once again declared by the government” (Agamben, July 30, 2020). To Agamben, between a state of exception and a state of emergency “from the point of view of the suspension of constitutional guarantees, which should be the only relevant one, [...] there is no difference” (Agamben, July 30, 2020). Agamben, therefore, does not consider that in Schmitt’s definition of the state of exception there is an intrinsic moral danger since it foresees one “sovereignty, according to which the sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception: if there is some person or institution, in a given polity, capable of bringing about a total suspension of the law and then to use extra-legal force to normalize the situation, then that person or institution is the sovereign in that polity” (Vinx, 2019). This definition inevitably leads to dictatorship. At the beginning in 2019, moreover, Agamben’s claims that COVID-19 was no more than a normal influence and that governments caught the opportunity to establish a new state of exception and apply new forms of control, both of which have turned out to be false (Nancy, 2020). Nonetheless, it is difficult to deny that during the pandemic there was a “rapid expan-

sion of militarized forms of surveillance that cannot be fully accounted for as necessary measures to control the pandemic” (Delanty, 2020). Rather than the state of exception, it was then the state of emergency to be called on a global scale. This implies that any nation, in exceptional circumstances such as a war or a catastrophe (natural such as floods and earthquakes or human such as the explosion of a nuclear power plant) can suspend constitutional rights and implement extraordinary safety measures during the period. of the emergency. Thus, in a state of emergency, the balanced separation of political powers, which guarantees democracy, is momentarily blurred and suspended and the executive institution also becomes legislative. This happened in many states, for example, where the government went on producing decrees for months, thus imposing an unchallenged political vision and strategy to govern the nation during the pandemic.

4 From exclusion to reclusion: *Discipline and Punish* by Michel Foucault

To date, many studies refer to Foucault (2004) to analyse the techniques used by the politics of different governments to exercise their power during the COVID-19 pandemic and to evaluate their aims and effects (some examples: Makarychev, 2020; Horvath & Lovasz, 2020; Marinković, 2021, and Gjerde, 2021). In this part of the article, I focus instead on analysing Foucault’s historical-philosophical study dedicated to investigating under what conditions Europe was able to experience the transition from forms of government that based their power on the practices of exclusion to forms of government that instead practised mainly confinement, observation, and control. For Foucault, this transition is understandable if one observes the evolution of the treatment of infectious diseases, that is, from the politics of leprosy to the politics of the plague. In the chapter dedicated to Panopticism, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1991, p. 195) writes:

First, a strict spatial partitioning: the closing of the town and its outlying districts, a prohibition to leave the town on pain of

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death, the killing of all stray animals [...] Each family will have made its own provisions [...] If it is absolutely necessary to leave the house, it will be done in turn, avoiding any meeting [...] It is a segmented, immobile, frozen space. Each individual is fixed in his place. And, if he moves, he does so at the risk of his life, contagion or punishment.

Foucault (1991, p. 198) later shows how the management of the two most common forms of pandemic, leprosy and the plague, resulted in two different models of biopolitics and practices of control, surveillance and social punishment:

The plague as a form, at once real and imaginary, of disorder had as its medical and political correlative discipline. Behind the disciplinary mechanisms can be read the haunting memory of “contagions”, of the plague, of rebellions, crimes, vagabondage, desertions, people who appear and disappear, live and die in disorder.

As Kakoliris (2020, p. 4) notes,

the political dream lurking behind the management of leprosy is the dream of a pure “community”. On the contrary, what lurks behind the management of the plague is the dream of a “disciplined society”. It is the “dream” of a power, which, in the name of containment of the infectious virus threatening the population, is exercised in an exhausting and total manner upon the society as a whole.

In the case of leprosy, containment is achieved by isolating the patients from the rest of society. In the case of the plague, the strategy consists of controlling and isolating every citizen within a specific space where the individual can be controlled and punished by law. On the one hand, we speak of social exclusion; on the other hand, of social division:

If it is true that the leper gave rise to rituals of exclusion, which

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to a certain extent provided the model for and general form of the great Confinement, then the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects. Rather than the massive, binary division between one set of people and another, it called for multiple separations, individualizing, distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power (Foucault, 1991, p. 198).

According to Foucault, these two methods were unified in the nineteenth century, producing a socio-political system based on the idea that we can discern what is right and sane from what is wrong and unsanitary by imposing obedience and homologation through punishment.

Foucault sees the perfect example of this fusion of political and ideological strategies in Jeremy Bentham's thought and in particular in the Panopticon, the prison that he designed with his brother Samuel. The Panopticon is a circular prison projected in such a way that a guard placed at the centre of the building can see each prisoner without being seen. In Bentham's utilitarian philosophy, the Panopticon represents the ideal model of surveillance and social control since it induces "in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault, 1991, p. 201). Foucault concludes by comparing the politics of plague control to the politics of social control, however highlighting some differences:

In the first case [the plague], there is an exceptional situation: against an extraordinary evil, power is mobilized; it makes itself everywhere present and visible; it invents new mechanisms; it separates, it immobilizes, it partitions; it constructs for a time what is both a counter-city and the perfect society; it imposes an ideal functioning, but one that is reduced, in the final analysis, like the evil that it combats, to a simple dualism of life and death: that which moves brings death, and one kills that which moves. The Panopticon, on the other hand, must be understood

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as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men

(Foucault, 1991, p. 205).

Taking the analogy literally, therefore, leads to false judgments. In Western societies, in my opinion, no attempt was made to establish a state of dictatorship, as some conspiracy theories or extreme fringes of anti-vaxxers claimed (Ferreira, 2020; Fuchs, 2021; and Jolley, 2014). I do not mean to deny that during the first wave of contagion new techniques of control were applied. Jayasınche analyses for example how the UK government (but this is valid at least for all European governments), in order to govern and persuade citizens to follow the restrictive rules, used a set of new calculative technologies, which was a “tailor-made approach to target and prioritise specific population categories. Also, this ‘temporal environment’ required more self-governance principles for citizens compared to the past liberal governance rules; the COVID-19 governance in the United Kingdom stands out very much regarding the bio-politics implemented through authoritarian principles: self-discipline and punishment” (Jayasınche, 2021, p. 9).

However, it eventually became evident that the control strategies failed because they did not prevent the spread of the virus, even if they limited it. In these strategies, therefore, we can see a real attempt to tackle the pandemic but also the desire to divert public attention from another serious problem, namely the weakness of public health systems, which proved inadequate to contrast the pandemic at its peak: as Jayasınche (2021, p. 2) points out in his paper,

“with decades of neo-liberal encroachment through policy reforms and austerity measures, a succession of UK government has allocated inadequate funding and investment in the National Health Service (NHS). This has made them unprepared for high-impact healthcare emergency situations such as that created by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).”

One may therefore wonder whether the rightful call for the state of

emergency was not also used to adumbrate serious structural lack of the healthcare system that almost collapsed when it was no longer possible to grant the service to all citizens, as the epidemic reached its peak. In other words, one may ask if politics, whose aim is to guarantee constitutional rights for all citizens, used power to conceal years of failing public health systems, which has in the long run jeopardised the citizens' universal right to be cared for and cured if sick. Political narratives about the pandemic founded on a partial definition of health and built on metaphors of war, which were repeated *ab libitum* in newspapers around the world, have played a fundamental role in diverting attention and urging people to accept social restrictions.

5 The political discourse about the pandemic: the war metaphors⁸

When the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread in Europe, political discourse based on war-related metaphors was created. These discourses had a very strong echo in the speeches of the mass media (TV, newspapers, online news and so on) and were aimed at triggering the primary emotion that we feel when we think about an armed, violent conflict: fear, which is, as everyone knows, a powerful means of manipulation. The use of war metaphors reached its peak during those weeks. If one analyses the data collected in the English-speaking countries and gathered in *The Coronavirus Corpus* over the period March-June 2020, one will see that the word *war* was used 40,997 times, while in the period October-December 2020 it appeared 16,476 times, i.e. almost 60% less. The word *frontline* appeared 5,462 times in the spring of 2020 and 1,149 during the second wave (autumn-winter 2020-2021), i.e. almost 80% less.⁹ The main reason for this radical change is that, as happens with all metaphors, also the war metaphors lost their effectiveness due to habituation and the change of context. These metaphor has been extensively used all around Europe (and the world) excluding Germany, where the figures for casualties have been low, the media have used war metaphors as a means to talk about the pandemic only when political or

⁸ This part has been previously developed in (Piredda, 2022).

⁹ www.english-corpora.org/corona/.

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medical releases from other virus-stricken countries were reported. For example on March 4, the *Frankfurter allgemeine Zeitung* titled “Fight against an unknown foe” (*Kampf gegen einen unbekanntes Feind*) (Rüb, 2020) the news of the epidemic breakout in Italy; and on March 28, the editors of the *FAZ* reported Mr Trump’s words “war on Coronavirus” (Trump “im Krieg”, 2020). The only direct reference to war was made in Germany in the Easter speech on April 11 by President Steinmeier, who stated that “Coronavirus is no war” (*die Corona-Pandemie sei kein Krieg*) but rather a “test of humanity” (*Prüfung unserer Menschlichkeit*) (Steinmeier fordert, 2020).¹⁰ Amongst all the war metaphors that were employed (the virus *is* an enemy or an invisible enemy; hospitals and intensive care units *are* trenches on the frontline; Covid-19 *was* an atom bomb in Lombardy; heroes infected *are* invisible bullets) two were particularly interesting, namely those that represented healthcare staff as soldiers and heroes (e.g. Suárez, 2020; and Castaldo, 2020).

The first metaphor is inadequate because, unlike soldiers, healthcare staff do not kill. Their job consists of saving lives by all means. As a consequence, they do not engage any enemy and do not use weapons. The second metaphor, on the other hand, in itself might be adequate. Under the exceptional circumstances and due to the huge commitment required to carry out their duties, as well as considering the high risk of contracting the disease and dying, health care staff have been immediately called heroes. The definition has been so extensively used that on April 24 the *BBC* published an article by Josh Sims entitled “Will coronavirus change how we define heroes?” (2020). The definition of the hero is more or less the same in all dictionaries: “A person who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities” (Hero, 2020). Considering their efforts and courage in the face of danger and the extraordinary results that healthcare staff have obtained worldwide since the outbreak of the pandemic, I can say that the metaphor of the medic as a hero is the only good one that has been invented during the crisis. However, although adequate, it also had controversial

10 “Die Corona-Pandemie sei kein Krieg, sagte Steinmeier, ‘sondern sie ist eine Prüfung unserer Menschlichkeit,’ die das Schlechteste und das Beste in den Menschen hervorrufe. ‘Zeigen wir einander doch das Beste in uns.’ Seine Ansprache schloss der Bundespräsident mit den Worten: ‘Frohe Ostern, alles Gute—und geben wir Acht aufeinander.’”

collateral effects: on the one hand, it fed feelings of profound admiration and gratitude for medical staff among the population in all the countries examined in this article; on the other hand, it contributed to diverting the public from considering the real state of disarray and disorganization in which years of expenditure cuts have left the national health systems. This caused the health care staff to react critically and often reject the comparison with heroes.¹¹ Their testimonies speak against the abstract and mythical image of the medic that heroically sacrifices themselves for the nation's sake, as was proposed by politicians and media. Health care staff members individually tried and drew the attention of the public to the real problems of national health systems, often originating from policies of austerity and expenditure cuts. Nonetheless, as soon as the pandemic broke out, the same political administrations were ready to praise health care staff as heroes, without mentioning that their own policies had put them in danger. As to that, we must remember the appalling figures of deaths among health care staff in the most affected countries, like Italy and the UK, as well as the case of suicide of one PTSD-affected doctor in New York (Watkins et al., 2020).

In the most seriously disease-stricken European nations (France, Italy, Spain and UK), health care staff denounced the scarcity of equipment, from the basics—PPE—to technical supplies—ventilators—, and generally blamed politicians for the poor condition of hospitals. For example in France, *Le quotidien du médecin* published on March 21 several testimonies of medics, among which I quote: “Thank you, Mr Macron, but I am no hero. I just want to protect myself and my family with appropriate masks” (Long, 2020);¹² and on April 2, *la Repubblica* published the testimony of a freshly graduated medic who had just started his career as a “COVID-19 medic” and said: “We all agree and have a message: we don't want to be called heroes” (Strippoli, 2020).¹³ Over the whole month of March, several Italian papers denounced that health care staff were not receiving an adequate number of swabs to check if

11 Previously, I studied the use of war metaphors in connection to health, medical staff, and PTSD (2020).

12 “*Merci M. Macron mais je ne suis pas un héros, je veux juste pouvoir me protéger et protéger ma famille avec des masques adaptés.*”

13 “*Siamo tutti d'accordo e abbiamo un messaggio: non vogliamo essere chiamati eroi.*”

they had contracted the virus (example, *La Stampa*, March 17: “In Piedmont tests for politicians and footballers but not for medics” (Zanotti, 2020);¹⁴ *Il Messaggero*, March 24: “Coronavirus, the ordeal of the infected doctors: ‘Tests for footballers, not for us’ (Evangelisti, 2020).¹⁵

In France, *Le Monde* denounced on March 22 the scarcity of basic medical equipment: “Anger builds [...] because everyone is disappointed with the lack of masks and swabs. Masks should be available for everybody and tests for health care staff as well as for patients” (Mandard, 2020).¹⁶ In the UK the *BBC* published on April 21 the article “Coronavirus: NHS and care staff struggling to access tests” (Schraer, 2020). The same situation had been denounced in Spain on April 25, when the *Redacciòn mèdica* published the article “We are no heroes, we are precarious workers as we were before the Covid,” whose author exposed the dire conditions of the Spanish health system and stated that “the bass drum of heroism is romanticizing the since ever abnormal precariousness of the professional health system” (Redacciòn Mèdica, 2020).¹⁷ These examples of testimonies, of which I have given only part of the examples in this article, have been fundamental: 1) in countering the war metaphors’ emotional effect of fear and the consequent deviation of public attention from the latent problem of the scarcity of investments in public health in the countries I analysed; 2) in allowing the activation of the rational critical process by bringing public attention back to the real situation of hospitals and the working conditions of health workers.

6 Conclusion

According to Toscano, “pandemics need not be thought, by analogy with war, as biological arguments for the centralisation of power” (Toscano, 2020). Even if war metaphors were inadequate to represent the

¹⁴ “In Piemonte tamponi a politici e calciatori ma non ai medici.”

¹⁵ “Coronavirus, il dramma dei medici infettati: ‘Tamponi ai calciatori, a noi no’.”

¹⁶ “*La colère va encore monter [...] car il y a un grand ras-le-bol face au manque de masques et de tests. Il faudrait des masques pour tout le monde et des tests pour tous les soignants et toutes les personnes hospitalisées.*”

¹⁷ “Y con la matraca del heroísmo se está romantizando una precariedad asistencial y profesional que nunca fue normal.”

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actual state of affairs –i.e. the pandemic is no war, the virus is no enemy, hospitals are no trenches, and healthcare staff are no soldiers–, these metaphors attained nonetheless three major objectives: 1) making people passively accept “state-of-exception” political decisions based on questionable ethical principles; 2) creating new or exacerbating existing social disparities; 3) triggering harmful and unjustified feelings of fear, anxiety and suspicion that have often impacted negatively social behaviours.

In my opinion, in Western countries, therefore, no attempt was made to establish any “sanitary dictatorship”, but rather to divert public attention from serious political and social problems. The use of manipulating rhetoric based on war metaphors and the use of a partial definition of health had the practical purpose of hiding what the pandemic brought to light, namely the crisis of public health systems that had suffered from increasingly conspicuous cuts over decades of mismanagement. Such undermining of public health systems represents a grave danger for a democratic society because good health is one of the fundamental rights and a value that must be provided and granted to all citizens.

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