



EDITORIAL:

Politics, Ideology, and the Discourse of Disease

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Concepts and notions formed in the fields of medicine have always been used in politics and ethics as metaphors to define good societal models, manipulate public opinion, consolidate prejudices, and gain power. The connection between political power, rhetoric and medicine is therefore ancient and profound. The concept of disease has been often used to attack domestic and foreign enemies, to criticise society as a sick “body”, and to legitimise political action (often repressive and violent) as a necessary “surgical” measure to remove the cause of the social illness. War has even been called the “hygiene” to clean the world, while otherness has been labelled in derogatory and judgmental ways aimed at legitimising others’ subjugation, correction, or even elimination. On the other hand, a broad debate on public health is key to the construction of good societies as far as health is recognised as a universal right. Although prevention, public education, and the ethical conception of medical treatment as a complex physic-psycho-cultural issue are acknowledged as pillars of a modern idea of health, these approaches are often far from being practised. The relationship between politics, ideology, and disease becomes then blurred and more profound insight into such a relation is a desideratum.

During the Covid-19 crisis, the political discourse on the pandemic developed worldwide. The first speeches were delivered by the then-Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, since Italy was the European country where the epidemic struck first and most violently in February-March 2020. Conte’s words triggered an avalanche of emotional speeches aimed on the one hand at informing about the gravity of the growing

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pandemic, and on the other hand at reassuring the population through slogans in favour of social distancing and restrictive measures, which in a few months became the most widespread practice in all countries affected by the epidemic. Slogans such as “I’m not afraid of the virus”, “I’m staying at home”, and “everything will be fine”, were then gradually borrowed, used, and integrated with new formulas in other countries.

Language and social practices are inseparable. The glue that binds them is made up of beliefs, prejudices, and theoretical-practical knowledge. In the present issue of *Interface*, we propose 4 articles that question the relationship between language and social practices by paying attention to various questions: in the event of a pandemic, what kind of relationship is established between language and practices? What role do metaphors have and what practical purpose do they have in political discourse and in the mass media? What role do ideology and critical thinking play in understanding the pandemic? How was the pandemic experienced and interpreted in the past? Do historical-literary representations from the past help us understand and manage the pandemic in the present?

Two articles reflect on the language used during the current Covid-19 pandemic. The other two reflect on the representation of the epidemic by analyzing some texts of the historical-literary tradition of early modern Europe by Shakespeare, Defoe, and Manzoni. The countries involved in the first two contributions are Germany, Italy, England, and Taiwan. Shakespeare’s and Defoe’s England and Manzoni’s Italy are instead the geographic contexts of the historical-literary analysis. The first two articles pay particular attention to the problem of metaphor in the discourses on Covid-19; the third article examines the presence of the plague in Shakespeare’s texts, and the fourth finally unfolds a comparative reflection on the relationship between narrative, politics and society during the plague of London (1655) and Milan (1630).

In the article **Wortschatz in der Coronavirus-Pandemie im Chinesischen und Deutschen: Lebensmetaphern, Kriegsmetaphern und die sozialen Bedeutungen**, Shelley Ching-yu Depner investigates the emerging vocabulary of the epidemic in Taiwan Mandarin and German.

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Mandarin and German data are collected from the *Taiwan News Smart Web* and the German *DWDS* database (*Das Wortauskunftssystem zur deutschen Sprache in Geschichte und Gegenwart*), respectively. The research questions are the following: (a) What metaphors are used in the new expressions and what are the underlying source domains of the metaphors? (b) What social meanings are revealed by these metaphors? And (c) what are the different impacts of the epidemic on Taiwanese and German societies? The results of the study indicate that the common source domains of the two languages are {war}, {daily life}, and {emotion}. Both languages make good use of various metaphors in their new words, such as ontological metaphors, structural metaphors, and metonyms.

In the article **Metaphors of Bubonic Plague in Shakespeare's Plays**, Iris H. Tuan analyses how the plague affects William Shakespeare's plays, not only as an event and experience that influences the practice itself of writing but also by penetrating the writer's style in form of metaphors of lovesickness and moral decadence. The plague hit London from autumn 1592 to May 1594, and when Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, around 1599-1602, he still remembered the terror. Moreover, when London theatres were shut to prevent the spread of the disease, Shakespeare oriented towards poetry by composing a relevant part of the corpus of his sonnets. By applying the methodology of close reading borrowed from New Criticism, the author argues that Shakespeare used the plague as a literary metaphor and expression at least in three ways: first, the plague as a metaphor for a curse and a literary expression of the fatal disease; second, not only as a description of the disease but also as a metaphor of moral decadence; third, as a literary expression of lovesickness. Shakespeare's commitment to writing even in times of uncertainty and seclusion provides us with a positive encouragement to keep optimistic attitudes by writing, especially for those who are involved in this activity as professionals, i.e. scholars, writers, researchers, and journalists.

In the article **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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Patrizia Piredda investigates 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. The author unfolds a critical analysis of two different perspectives that have been applied in the political narratives as interpretative models of the Covid-19 pandemic: Schmitt's crisis of values and Foucault's critique of surveillance, integrated with Giorgio Agamben's reflections on the state of emergency. By analysing Schmitt's and Foucault's theories, the author claims that 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, the use of Foucault's theory is more adequate to build a critical understanding of the complex scenario of the Covid-19 crisis. Foucault's historical interpretation of the relationship between power, discourse, and pandemics highlights that such relation is always intrinsically ideological and that language of politics has always a manipulative function that must be critically deconstructed. The last part of the article is devoted to discussing how the war metaphors were used to persuade people to accept the restrictions and to divert attention from important political and social problems, such as the crisis of public health systems.

In the article **Between Fiction and History: Telling the Plague in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Alessandro Manzoni's *Storia della colonna infame*** Davide Crosara and Gianluca Cinelli investigate two classical texts on the plague written by Daniel Defoe and Alessandro Manzoni, who represent two exemplary case studies of the European reflection about language, power, and pestilence in the context of Enlightenment. The aim of the article is to show that with their books, both authors intend to "fortify" their readers' moral strength by representing the legacy of previous outbreaks of the plague. Defoe explicitly enacts such purpose by anticipating a pestilence at its peak (he writes in 1722, when the plague is already raging in France) that would call Londoners to be brave, responsible, resilient, and to react to the threat as a collective body. Manzoni pursues a more theoretical end as far as his essay appears at a political standstill for northern Italy and the city of Milan, in 1840, a condition which makes it look somewhat

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anachronistic in its appeal to criticise the reckless abuses that political institutions (and their functionaries) may perpetrate in times of danger. Defoe and Manzoni offer a sharp and severe analysis of humanity before and after the plague. Their gaze illuminates the paranoid attitudes, the contradictions and the moral dilemmas generated by the pandemic event. The historic-literary example of these authors offers several suggestions to understand the present, from the psychology of conspiracy theorists to the experience of changing habits – in private and in public – by isolation, fear, social distancing, suspicion, and the abnormal perception of political power as a coercive force that pursues ends that often stand in open contrast with self-perception, social identity, and ethics.

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