Research article

Risk narrations and perceptions in the COVID-19 time. A discourse analysis through the Italian press

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Abstract: This paper explores how the risk related to the pandemic of COVID-19 was managed, narrated and perceived in Italy during the lockdown phase, from February until June 2020. To reach this aim, the study provides a discourse analysis of three main level: the official institutional discourses declaimed by the government and the health authority; the risk narration spread through the diaphragm of the Italian press, and specifically through two of the most-read newspapers in Italy (*Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera*) and their related weeklies (*Venerdì di Repubblica* and *Sette*); finally, the diverse reactions and perceptions to the risk coming from the most affected and most vulnerable subjects, communities and territories.

In order to record this narrative frame, our study started by looking for the more recurrent keywords through which the public discourse about COVID-19 emergency was spread in Italy. The examined words, together with a literary review about risk, disaster, and sustainability, give back, and allow to understand, the mirror of the risk management, perception, and narration in the pandemic society. According to the Foucault's thought, a constant theoretical reference has been the power control exerted in the plague city.

In this article we show in a nutshell some of the main elements emerged through this discourse analysis. Firstly, it comes to light how the world has been caught totally unprepared to manage collectively a pandemic of this magnitude. Secondly, two main emergency consequences emerged. Indeed, if on one hand the risk management created privileges and inequalities, on the other hand the risk perception led to communities' practices of solidarity and resilience. Finally, our research demonstrates what is depicted in the reported literary review: disasters are unevenly and differential phenomena.

1.   Introduction

The opening of the 21st century was really astonishing: the 11th of September is still impressed in our minds. Because of this beginning our biggest fears were focused on the concept of terror/terrorism. Governments and scientific studies have based their analyses on the control of Otherness as the greatest risk to our safety. Moreover, the mocking attitude on environmental issues of some political leaders around the world is the sign of a dated thought: the frontier economics' approach of the Sixties. Despite SARS in 2001, H1N1 in 2009, and MERS in 2012 should have created a worldwide state of alert, the geopolitical principal attention has been to create walls and fences. In the COVID-19 time, the construction of walls, which had the aim of immunizing the West from the Otherness, seems an illegible work in the new risk map. There is only one important feature in common between the 21st century epidemics: they are all zoonotic viruses. This century's real enemy is invisible and closely related to the progress of human activities in the green spaces of our planet.

The traumas of these last two decades, however, are not comparable to the pandemic we are experiencing now. COVID-19 appears as a virus that attacks our bodies both by taking our breath away and by subtracting us from the gears of the economy. Therefore, the dilemma for the governments has been whether to favor health or economic policies. How to balance the risk of the virus with that of the recession? How to slow down the acceleration of the neoliberal system? If we go back in time, we can see how this issue is not new. In 1998, during the *Open Forum on Emerging Infectious Diseases*, the U.S. Ambassador Wendy R. Sherman introduced her speech with these words: "Infectious diseases once thought to be controlled are re-emerging worldwide. They endanger the health of Americans and our national security interests. These diseases are the silent enemies of economic growth, national well-being and stability around the globe, as infectious diseases know no borders" [1]. This quote highlights the point of view of the US authority (but we could say of any country) that sees the inseparable combination: health—economic productivity. Another interesting aspect is the admission of the pointlessness of talking about borders in the case of the viruses. However, among the first actions to prevent the risk there is always that of closing the borders with the country from which the virus originated. Forgetting that, in our globalized world, the speed of movements has already spread the virus.

The attention to two possible and distinct strategies at the end of Sherman's speech is critical: "we can continue to react to the spread of infectious diseases through costly and imperfect ad hoc crisis measures that do little to solve essential problems, or we can combine our talent and our resources to strengthen awareness, prevention, surveillance and treatment" [1]. What is changed between the 1998 and today? Although numerous cases of epidemic risk have emerged, COVID-19 has caught us unprepared. In our imagery, the planet still derives from the Greek concept of *òikos*, that is the order of the dwelling, the domestic sphere. This concept assumes crises as inevitable moments that produce new orders: we move as if the earth were in a constant balance (and it is not).

It is interesting to note that contemporary society faces the possibility of risk with the request for the need for protection. We live in an era in which we must protect ourselves from Otherness, Nature, and Technology. After all, the idea of getting insurance becomes more and more refined as the world

becomes globalized. Prevention measures should safeguard us from risks. We must therefore understand risk as the measure of the probability of loss of value. At this point we must ask ourselves if value is only an economic question? The answer is easy, nevertheless we don't have any institutional speech, politics or actions that have not taken for granted the economy as the biggest interest of our life. The aporia between the environmental health and the economic productivity is still alive. We choose to think about viruses as a NIMBY effect, therefore our practices to deal with the epidemic are very similar to that described by Michel Foucault in the late 17th century. We too will overcome the epidemiological crisis, but the emergence of this virus has already irreparably changed our lifestyles, social realities, and geopolitical balances. The answer to the question—from when have the epidemics become arguments for cognitions capable of changing mentalities? —remains empty.

We must once again analyse the narrative of the emergency. What we will find out is that the words that determine the discourse of the coronavirus might seem new even though they are not, as the last pandemic is dated 1918–1920. Nevertheless, we think that through this new order of the authorities' discourse we will find the rhetoric, frictions and resistances that characterized the response to the Italian crisis. Our study offers an analysis of the discourses, practices and relationships by three points of view: the political authorities at all geographical scales (international, national, regional and local), the two most popular Italian newspapers and weekly magazines, and the organized citizens that work in the territory. Through *La Repubblica* and *Il Corriere della Sera*, the weeklies *Sette* and *Venerdì di Repubblica*, we will focus on the construction from above of the rhetoric of risk; in the same way we will highlight how the bottom-up responses were and are represented: the socio-economic and spatial effects of the crisis, the perception of citizens, the solidarity and resilience practices of groups and communities.

2.   Materials and methods: risk perception and management

Until the second half of the 20th century, disasters and risks were subjects exclusive to the hard sciences, analysed with quantitative methods and not considered as possible objects of socio-humanistic interest. Rigidly distinguished between natural and technological, disasters used to be studied in the perspective of a radical determinism as completely independent of human responsibility.

It was around Emilio Quarantelli and Russell Dynes in the *Disaster Research Center* in Delaware that the first group of social research on disasters emerged. The idea was that disasters are social phenomena, determined not only by physical factors, but by anthropic and cultural ones as well. These pioneering studies claimed for a radical "removal of concepts of naturalness from natural disaster" [2] and shifted the research from the hazard itself to the socio-territorial context involved.

The experience of the disaster research contaminated Europe in 1976 when a disruptive earthquake brought some American researchers to Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Since then, the European approach to disasters has changed too and risk perception and management have begun to be analyzed by psychologists, geographers, political scientists, statisticians and sociologists, as a very recent contribution demonstrates [3]. If in the late Seventies the idea that disasters—either natural, anthropic or technologic—were predisposed by social causes was argued for [4], since then the scientific debate has broadly evolved. A significant step was made in 2005 when the *Hyogo Framework for Action* (HFA) affirmed that the researches on hazards had to integrate an applied approach. Since then, disaster research has become a multidisciplinary field of research aimed at policy-making on risk perception and management.

Following this latest applied approach, in the last decades the research has moved its attention from the disasters to the risks: from the events to the contexts in which they take place. This shift has shifted the attention that research and policies have developed for the so-called "preparedness" of socio-territorial systems. The issue of preparedness to disasters has been one of the key points of the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction*. Released in 2015 by the *United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction* (UNISDR), the Sendai framework has been a real turning point in the recent policy-making on risk management. Globally, this agreement designs the tools to prepare communities and economic and social organizations to face disasters through measures to reduce their impact at all levels. In this document, achieving preparedness to risks means face and reduce the vulnerabilities that affect territories and communities. According to the UNISDR definition, the condition of vulnerability depends on social, economic, environmental and political factors.

As it is obvious, the preparedness of a community or a territory towards disasters depends on its general exposure to risks. As broadly discussed by the most recent research, vulnerability to hazards is keener among groups of population more exposed to socio-economic risks. In particular, the disaster research developed in the Italian sociological school [5] argues that in many ways poor people are more vulnerable to hazards. In fact, these live in exposed areas and substandard housing and have inadequate means to prepare for a recovery from shocks.

An important parameter used to evaluate the vulnerability of a certain territory or community is its capacity of resilience, considered as the ability "to resist, absorb, accommodate and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions" [6]. Coming from ecology, this concept has been more and more adopted by the social sciences at the point that some authors now highlight that it might have become an "umbrella term" with meanings—sometimes contradictory—related to different fields [7]. Generally, a community is considered resilient in relation to its elasticity, balance and stability: a set of qualities that make it possible to react to traumatic events while keeping intact the sense of community and its identity [8].

In conclusion, according to these interpretations of vulnerability and resilience, it is evident that risks—of every kind—are unevenly distributed. This perspective focuses on the differential impact of disasters and disasters' management. It is in fact interesting to notice that a certain part of the disaster research highlights how, at some conditions, even the disaster management policies end by deepening the pre-existent conditions of vulnerability. In this last very critical perspective, not only hazards, but the risk management procedures themselves can increase socio-economic differences [9].

In some ways, then, in the last years the discussion over disasters and risk management has intersected the issue of sustainability. Even if the professional and academic communities dealing with sustainable development and disasters have been separate for decades, in the past years significant progresses have been done. A turning point has been the year 2015: from the UNISDR framework signed in Sendai to the Conference of Parties of the UNFCCC (COP-21), this year can be considered crucial. Both the agenda for sustainable development and the UNISDR framework, in fact, state that sustainable development cannot be achieved without consideration of risk and vulnerability and that risk management needs to be planned in a frame of environmental, economic and social sustainability. In other words, international agreements and agendas seem to indicate as a matter of fact that reducing social, environmental and economic vulnerability requires a holistic perspective of sustainable development.

Once briefly drawn the evolution of the debate over risks in social sciences, this paper intends to focus on the specific risks related to COVID-19. In order to do that, we have looked at health risk narratives' literature concerning the previous pandemics of the XXI century [10,11]. As a matter of fact, the threat of an infectious disease outbreak on social life is surrounded by a range of collective narratives that socially define the disease and attempt to make it explicable [12,13].

This paper analyzes the representations of risk produced by the different voices that took the stage and built the public debate in Italy from the beginning of the pandemic until now. On the one hand, our analysis intends to identify—as far as possible through a descriptive methodology—the discourse that has accompanied the anti-COVID measures adopted by Italian government, Regions, political and medical authorities. On the other hand, it brings out the impact and reactions to these narratives of risk, highlighting the perceptions specific to different subjects, social categories and groups.

3. Health risk management and pandemic narrations

In this paragraph we analyze pandemic narrations from two different perspectives. On one hand, the institutional point of view determines norms and rules. Indeed, during the pandemic, interventions that were promoted by institutions for risk management had decisive effects on the population. On the other hand, we examine the pandemic narrations through the major and most-read daily newspapers and weekly publications in Italy. This led us to show how the population acted and reacted, through practices and discourses, to the epidemic discipline.

3.1. Management from above: the institutional discourse

In the political management of health and bodies, health authorities and the State play a central role. During the pandemic, interventions that were promoted by institutions for risk management had decisive effects on the population and testified a rigorous discipline. As Michel Foucault teaches (1975, 1994), this inflexibility is necessary when the chaos of death looms.

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 public health emergency of international concern. At the press conference of the same day, the Italian government presented the measures adopted and recalled that "from the early stages of the epidemic, inspired by the precautionary principle, airport controls were implemented in Italy for citizens coming from the area where the outbreak occurred [1] " [14]. Control, measurement, identification, and surveillance were the keywords of this first public communication and characterized the emergency management of the institutions.

The pandemic, declared in March 11, made WHO prescriptions more urgent, including: "Regularly and thoroughly clean your hands (…) Maintain at least 1 metre (3 feet) distance between yourself and others (…) Avoid going to crowded places (…) Avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth (…) Stay home and self-isolate even with minor symptoms" [15]. Cleanliness, distance, and isolation have marked and standardized human behaviour on a global scale. The hygiene rules were accompanied by precise rules on the use of the body, configuring new taboos, such as the ban on touching the nose and eyes and new ways of managing bodily acts, such as sneezing. These new physical incorporations of the norms have radically changed people's daily lives.

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[1] All the quotes are translated from Italian into English by the authors.

During COVID-19 lockdown, the population's movements were constantly monitored and recorded exactly like the "closed, exactly cut, supervised space" described by Foucault in the plague time [16]. Mobility was in fact limited to the supply of basic necessities whereas access to public spaces was prohibited and all places were subjected to police surveillance, which was authorized to report suspect cases and punish those who had passed the defined boundaries. This perfect society, where the space and all the events are disciplined, is at the same time a counter-city [16] in which institutions prevent any movement that can potentially lead to death. Individual freedom is limited to a defined space. Health, as a keyword, motivates and justifies all measures.

After reporting some of the main words of the risk narrative, it is necessary to analyse the political relationships at the various geographical scales. The first one is the international scale, which sees the government's relations with the WHO and the EU. We are facing the main aporetic pair of the pandemic: health and economics. On the one hand, through the words of the WHO, the President of the Council, Giuseppe Conte, presented health as a "primary objective" [17]. We can say that the continuous reference to the discourses of healthcare experts has highlighted a process of medicalization of politics. On the other hand, the economic aspect has once again shaken the relations within the EU. The European choices, in the complex debate on the ESM and the Recovery Funds, were presented by Conte as a personal victory. In this context, the approval of the financing plan has become synonymous with EU cohesion and solidarity: an adequate response had to be provided to a supranational crisis.

On a national scale, the most problematic relations have been between the State and the Regions. In fact, the first one has to determine the levels of assistance that must be guaranteed whilst the second one manages the Health Service. Although Conte has spoken of "a portentous institutional collaboration" [18], the management of public health caused a tough institutional conflict. The most emblematic case concerns contagions and deaths in rest homes, mainly in Lombardy. The Public Prosecutor's office has launched an investigation that has affected the President of the Lombardy Region; here are his words: "I look calmly to the outcome of the investigations, it was our technicians who made the proposal... and we adapted" [19]. Responsibilities are still under scrutiny and the investigation will serve to shed light on the roles and competences of the various institutions in the management of the pandemic.

On a local scale the role of the Municipalities has been central in controlling the daily life of citizens. Continuous information on hygiene rules and the severe "stay home" suggestion was transmitted through megaphones placed on Civil Protection cars.

As we have seen, from the international to the local scale, institutions have conditioned social life. These words, however, would not have had the same effectiveness if they had not been accompanied by the bulletin delivered by the Civil Protection: every day, at the same time, they presented data on the infections and deaths.

The totality of relationships described constitutes the outlined of a much more complex process in whose plot it is possible to grasp the role of all the actors involved in the pandemic narrative. Institutions have played a central role in risk management. Bringing back to the citizens the words of the supranational health authorities, the Italian institutions have built new times, establishing the succession of phase one, two and three, related to a progressive re-appropriation of individual freedoms. They also provided new representations of space, building contagion maps and redefining the spatial distances between others and us.

3.2. Discourses and practices: Italian press and territorial perspectives

In our research, mainly based on the editorials of two of the major and most-read daily newspapers in Italy (*Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera*) and their related weekly publications (*Il Venerdì di Repubblica* and *Sette*), we looked for the keywords the pandemic discourse in Italy was built on. As a main point, the language between editorials and weeklies clearly differs.

On the one hand, the editorials about COVID-19 in the two daily newspapers was focused on showing and analysing the political and institutional risk management approach. On the other hand, weeklies' articles stressed the risk perception of society and described how social distancing affected feelings, mental health, behaviours, relationships, welfare and daily life. The daily newspapers often used keywords (other than virus and COVID-19) such as democracy, freedom, Europe, politics, government, responsibility, State, citizens, power, emergency or (state of) exception. Whereas most recurring words in the weeklies were hope, fear, smart working, school, university, home and videoconference. This keywords research allowed us to identify three main narratives on which the pandemic discourse was built on in the Italian public debate.

The first one regards the recurring metaphor of war against COVID-19. This kind of narration aims both to reach a national cohesion against a common enemy coming from outside, and to ask the society for patience and sacrifice: "But this time the enemy is not a foreigner, neither a traitor who wanders among us. We ourselves are the bearers of an invisible enemy. Who would have ever thought that Milan and Venice would have been forced to live again wartime hardships and to be submitted to quarantine?" [20]; "In three months the world has turned upside down. While Italy, Europe, the United States go to war, waking up one after another from their illusion of immunity, China is coming out victorious" [21]; "(…) as those invisible workers (…) in trench as in the Carso 105 years ago" [22].

The second narrative is the one that concerns the plague, which has been a constant for a while, maybe because "since the Manzonian plagues that unmasked the inability of power and pushed the crowds to assault bakeries, the epidemic has always been a political weapon" [23]. In fact, many seem to be the convergences between the plague society described in *Surveiller et punir* by Michel Foucault [16] and the pandemic society of today, where the risk acts as a transformative spatial agent. An incredible resemblance regards the ritual of showing up at the window as a sign of being alive, as "in those days the modern rituals began, with concerts on balconies, flags, the cry *everything will be fine* and sheets with kids drawings. But the bell sound meant something deeper. At 7.00 p.m. you just read the daily bulletin on the numbers of deaths and infections, and just then you opened the windows. The bells said that the home walls were just a provisional border, that in all the other houses there were the same anguishes and hopes" [24].

As in the Foucauldian disciplined city, during the lockdown there was a constant state of visibility and control too, where the supervised society subjects were themselves part of a tip-off mechanism, as in the many cases in which runners were reported to the police or via social networks. Moreover, just as the panopticon is a sort of power and social laboratory, similarly, in the pandemic city, the emergency is "an ideal political and social context to experiment exceptional measures" [25]. A laboratory that nowadays could affect democracy, as "the issue is what the public power intends to do with this 'more' that the pandemic is transferring to it in terms of authority" [26] It could regard the acceleration of technology, with tracking app, smart working, online school and universities, because after all "This is the biggest experiment of smart working ever realised" [27] and "The emergency caused by the Coronavirus obliges us in a certain way to test the future" [28]. Finally, an experiment

about bodies and relationships, at this moment visible in the completely private dimension of the pandemic, both for the impossibility to say goodbye to the loved ones, and for the worsening of the mental health condition, as the risk perception is also a factor of fear, anxiety, stress, anguish, trauma.

The third big narrative is the one that we can summarise with the global slogans "everything will be alright" and "stay home". The main point of this rhetoric was the personal responsibility, depending on the individual moral behaviour. However, if at the beginning of the pandemic the narrative stressed that we were all the same in front of the virus, later, the extreme inequalities, exacerbated by the virus, came to light. Whereas public society was called to respond with sacrifice and heroism to a rhetoric of war, of an ancient evil as the plague, or of individual responsibility, the anti-COVID measures adopted by the authorities have had a significant impact on economy, welfare and citizens' wellbeing.

Therefore, this let emerge the diverse risk perceptions and reactions related to COVID-19. If, on the one hand, it was said that the country has done proof of "unexpected social cohesion" and "spontaneous feeling of community" [29], on the other hand, signs of the "great impoverishment" were evident and even spatially located: queues at the pawn shops, queues at the charities' canteens and growing requests for food packages. It suddenly emerges that "the virus is impartial, but we are unequal: and the pandemic accentuates our delays" [30]. In front of this crisis that appears economically and socially dramatic, citizens rediscover the need for the protection of the State: "the duty of government and system forces to protect the individual from the new universal emergencies" [31]. They rediscover "the importance of the health service, of public assistance for workers in crisis, of the school granted to our children" [32].

In order to reduce the impact of the economic crisis, the Italian government invested huge resources in social aid: the blocking of the dismissals, the introduction of bonuses for autonomous workers and exceptional lay-off funds. A big operation described by the newspapers and weeklies analyzed as necessary but still insufficient. From being a proof of civic sense and solidarity, the emergency becomes the umpteen evidence of the divorce of Italians from the State: a lack of collective antibodies that has accompanied the long-term dismantling of the welfare state [33]. Revealing deep and structural inequalities, it becomes evident that health, social and economic risks connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, are perceived and managed differently: "If we can stay at home, with the doors closed, waiting for the threat to be reduced, it is because a few million people leave the house every morning and take their place in front of the supermarket checkout, in the factory, in the truck, in pharmacy warehouses" [30]. A clear image of the differential impact of the risk on population is depicted: a risk that has varied depending on the social and working position of every citizen.

There are different kinds of vulnerability: some people are more exposed to the risk of contagion because occupied in the so-called essential works; others are at home without wages, not even the one underpaid; the last one are those who are imprisoned. On the 8th of March, after the news of the government's restrictive measures, in 27 penitentiaries protests erupted "for fear of contagion, for living conditions, for the suspension of meetings with family members" [34]. Dramatic episodes, dead prisoners, and very little information trespassed the thick walls of the jails: the further evidence of the prisoners' lack of rights. In this sense, the crisis induced by the pandemic starts to be considered as "the last decisive conflict of modernity, the one between work and health" [30]; that between social security and human rights.

Conflict is a recurrent concept implied in the newspapers discourse to describe the emergency management. Conflict between European countries, between North and South Italy, between Regions and the central government: but even between young and old people [35]. An inter-generational

conflict caused by misaligned conditions of vulnerability. On one side a group of population more vulnerable to the virus, on the other a group of population more vulnerable to the economic crisis [35]. Not only conflict and frictions: the newspapers and weeklies report stories of resistance, hope and solidarity as well. From the distribution of essential goods to crowdfunding, from the activation of anti-violence centres to psychological assistance: micro stories of self-help and mutualism networks in neighbourhoods that became practices of bottom-up resilience. If solidarity and mutualism reveal to be essential for those groups of population more exposed to socio-economic risks, more in general it is said that the feelings of hope have been essential for the society to react to the crisis.

Facing the frictions emerged from the inequalities that have characterized the crisis, the latest discourse about the emergency is tinged by the rhetoric of change. It is affirmed that the emergency imposes a new social pact: a shift in the welfare system in order to include all those excluded categories such as illegal workers employed in the essential sectors, agriculture in the first place. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic becomes a chance to critically rethink development, social justice and environmental sustainability: "it is not possible to talk about economics without talking about social justice, just as we can incentivize our businesses to become more competitive using a circular economy model, which would also reduce environmental degradation" [36].

4. Conclusions

The results shown in this article are part of a wider research still in progress. In this paper, we took in exam different kind of texts and specifically the Institutional official public discourses and the media narrations built by the Italian press. By means of researched recurrent keywords, we understood how the risk related to COVID-19 has been managed and perceived in Italy in these months.

As a main point, a dichotomy between public health and economy has been recorded: if on one hand the right to health seemed to be central in the institutional public discourse, on the other hand the economic value actually prevailed in the policy making.

The analysed corpus confirmed what has been discussed by the recent disaster research, and so that disaster is a typically contextual and relational phenomenon: according to the diverse contexts in which it happens, it is built in different ways. In Italy, as we noticed, the emergency differential aspect, strongly affected the more vulnerable subjects and territories.

In conclusion, we can see how the general picture about risk communication in Italy has changed. At the beginning of March, Italy was the second country most affected by the pandemic. In that moment, while the country was considered unable to manage the crisis at the international level, it experienced the empathy of the global "territories". When COVID-19 spread everywhere, the Italian communication completely changed, since Italy started to represent itself as the best managing model. Suddenly, the patriotic discourse became central in this new self-narration. The nationalistic rhetoric, shared worldwide, confirms the idea that pandemics are faced as domestic phenomena. Thus, the denial of the global and boundless nature of disasters emerged; the first rule that we have learned, the interdependence of phenomena, crushes in front of the dominant government politics.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest in this paper.

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