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The "*Invisible Other*": Social Representations of COVID-19 Pandemic in Media and Institutional Discourse

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This paper thematizes issues of "*otherness*" in the representations of the COVID-19 pandemic in the media and institutional discourses. The emergence of unknown infectious disease represents a threatening event, intensively discussed in public and private communication. The pandemic crisis spread from China on a global scale and refocused the media agenda, transferring citizens' attention from immigration to health risk, superseding the racially connoted immigrant with an "*invisible other*". At first, Italian citizens were exposed to an institutional communication aimed at reassuring the population: "no more than a flu". Once the pandemic emerged as a public concern, alarm was used as a prevention strategy, legitimated by the recommendations of scientists: *awareness stage.* Successively, communication entered the *divergence* stage: multiple discourses emerged, both across scientists and politicians, and between lay people and experts, increasing uncertainty about the situation anchored into dilemma of health versus economic priority. Conjointly, representations of the disease offered in public discourses appealed to lay belief patterns: coronavirus was explained as result of either the unhygienic contiguity of the Chinese people to animals, or the interests of hidden powerful groups pursuing their goals (e.g., the conspiracy theories concerning 5G or

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lab-based viral weapon). Notwithstanding, the invisible infectious disease also increased awareness of human vulnerability on a global scale, engendering concurrent representations of *otherness*, which refer to humankind as the common ingroup. This process - contrary to the "*othering"* occurring in the projection of the disease cause onto devalued outgroups - implies the assumption that the "*other may be me/us*".

Keywords: infectious disease, pandemic, COVID-19, institutional and media discourses, otherness.

THE *INVISIBLE* OTHER: COVID-19 SCALING UP VULNERABILITY AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL

In two months (February-March 2020), the new coronavirus – which emerged in China officially in December 2019 (more precisely 17 November) (Ma, 2020) and was until the end of January 2020 centered in Wuhan – turned from epidemic to pandemic according to the WHO (World Health Organization, 2020). The infected areas were later identified in limited spaces, such as cruise ships. In a few weeks, 'red zones' were extended to South Korea, Hong Kong, Japan, Iran; then, small towns in the Italian Northern areas were contaminated, and later entire regions and shortly the entire 'beautiful country' was hit by the pandemic.

Italians – followed by people all over the world – faced an unexpected event, initially perceived as being very far and confined within the Chinese borders. In a few weeks, it arrived at home, despite the locked direct flights with China. It was clear that, in such an interconnected world, no border could be completely locked, and no country could act as an isolated happy kingdom or island. In a very short time, the 'invisible' coronavirus contagion has become an opportunity of awareness of human vulnerability on a global scale, and the infected Chinese in a few weeks became Italians and then Spaniards, Britons, French, Americans, and finally of all nationalities. Despite this worldwide dissemination, the US President Trump still continued to stigmatise it as the "Chinese virus". This racialised representation of the virus (Viala-Gaudefroy & Lindaman, 2020) provoked on 25 March 2020 the APA's (American Psychology Association, 2020) *Calls for Destigmatizing Coronavirus*, that condemned the use of language that promotes bias and xenophobia.

In this article, we label COVID-19 as 'invisible other' under a double profile: (a) as an element of reality (a virus is really invisible); (b) as a metaphorical-paradoxical move (although

invisible, its power is all the more extraordinary, as it cannot be recognised, neither through racial elements – Asiatic, African, western, black, white, etc. – nor through elements of visible disability, nor even in the majority through the symptoms of the same disease it produces, given that some of the infected – who in turn produce even fatal infections – are asymptomatic). In the course of the article, we illustrate various ways of making the invisible visible, through processes of *racialization* (the Chinese virus), *anchoring* to already familiar elements inserted in the collective memory or current times (viruses from previous epidemics or simple flu viruses occurring each year), or *objectification,* transforming the abstract into an image (see paragraph 2.2.). This characteristic of being invisible (and at the same time devastating on a global scale) is so marked that it often recurs in the multi-voices and multi-agents discourse of experts (as evidenced by the title of articles published in scientific journals; for instance, among others, Chen, 2020) or of art direction of companies, like McKinsey & Company (Wilson & Frey, 2020). The reasons for associating the trait of being *invisible* to the *othering* process (as in our article) is well summarized in this post:

> Seeing, or the inability to see something, is political. In a world, which has tried to make all things visible, the natural history of viruses has been a history of visualisation fuelled primarily by fear. If the source of fear lies in the virus' monstrous ability to mutate, multiply, invade, and in some accounts, carry the threat of foreign or alien chemical contagion, its fiercest weapon is its cloak of invisibility – its ability to do all of this unseen by the human eye (Chatterjee, 2020, para. 1).

Indeed, we have discovered that the label of 'invisible' associated to the virus and even in the *othering* version of 'invisible enemy' has been largely employed even at top institutional levels, like the US President Trump calling himself a 'wartime president' in battle with 'invisible enemy' (Guardian News, 2020), the US *Department of Homeland Security Sciences and Technology Directorate* (2020), and the US Air Base Wing Public Affairs (2020, April 1). In Asia, the label has been used by a media player (CNA, March 27, 2020) and by scientists (Wanjari & Sawarkar, 2020). An incredibly rich gallery of images and videos from all over the world is available on the web at the link 'COVID-19 invisible enemy', expressing the need to make visible (and therefore to objectify) the invisible enemy by multiple societal agents (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1.

A gallery of images of the Covid-19 selected from the web link: ‘COVID invisible enemy’.

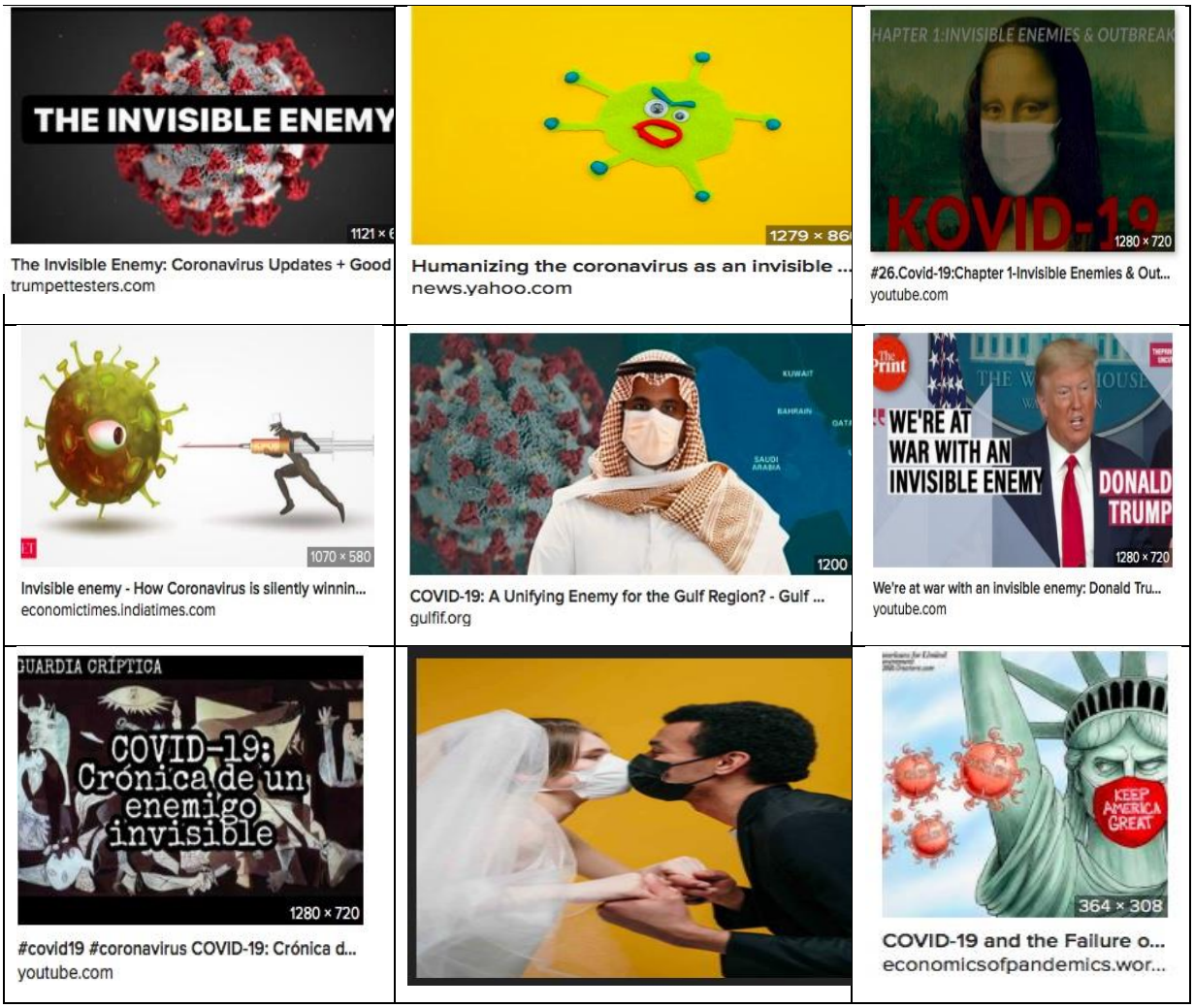

Figure 2.

Battling the invisible enemy: Lockdown, personal narrative (Srivastava, 2020)

COVID-19 has become a planetary event, causing discontinuity in lifestyles and worldwide economy as a turn in the history, marked by "before/after" (de Rosa, 2007, p. 148; Luhmann, 1984). The pandemic has rapidly dismantled the myth of scientific, technological and economic omnipotence, thus exposing our humanity to a forgotten vulnerability, accustomed for centuries to an increasingly intrusive dominion of nature. In this regard, Moscovici's vision (1972/1994, 2002a, 2002b) of the triadic relationship between society (culture), nature and science, was prophetic. In his view, nature cannot be reduced to the environment, like a sort of box in which men are enclosed, because there is always a dynamic relationship between society and nature.

> *"There is [also] this idea of having always looked at the progress of science and society as a distance from the state of nature and of having thus always believed that we were going to live in a completely artificial world, electronic, computerized, medicalized, etc. The fantasy of curing all illnesses is still present. Behind this idea of progress, the problem as posed, I would say, anthropological, is knowing when we are going to pass from the state of nature to the state of society. My idea on the question is extremely simple: we will never pass it. Just as we will never find a kind of exhaustion of diseases; there is no knowledge and technology that can tear itself*

away from the determinism of the natural world." (Moscovici, 2002a, pp. 36-37, English translation of the French original edition, emphasis added)

Indeed, the nature-society (culture)-science (and technology) relationship is an interrelated triangular dynamic that has re-emerged in a dilemmatic way in the social representations activated or generated in the relationship with the unknown 'host' to find explanatory anchors.

The sudden thud from the arrogance of the unilinear conception of progress, and the increased awareness of human vulnerability at the global scale, was prompted by the primordial force of a parasitic virus, that was capable of infecting in few weeks (as 26 April 2020) more than 2,9 million people on the global scale reaching 4,444,670 and causing 302,493 deaths in mid-May, and in few months (as of mid-July) increased to 13.579.581 confirmed cases and 584.922 deaths (John Hopkins University, 2020). Our 21st century citizens' agenda and lifestyles, which until the beginning of 2020 were modeled on an interconnected global arena (for exchanges of people, goods, industrial components, co-production etc.), were rapidly confined in 'red zones': the entire social scenario was reshaped, and with it many values and meanings that underpin our daily life.

WHY WE NEED SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY TO APPROACH PANDEMICS

What can Social Representations Theory (SRT) (de Rosa, 2013, 2019; de Rosa & al., 2018; Emiliani & Palmonari, 2019; Jodelet, 1989a, 2016; Lo Monaco & al., 2016; Moscovici, 1961/76, 2000, 2001; Sammut et al., 2015) offer to the understanding of the social construction and psychosocial responses to this new infectious disease, which only partially echoes the epidemics occurred in the last decades as for scale and contagion rate?

Our paper revolves around four key points that constitute the scaffolding of our reasoning and are addressed in the following sections:

1. First, a social representations approach highlights how the genesis of the public understanding of threatening and disruptive events, their emotional impact, the evocation of past traumatic events and shaping collective memories are forged by and lie in communicative processes, which are at the same time the source and the target of social knowledge, the infrastructure for creating semiotic resources but also for undermining them (de Rosa, 2007)

2. Second, such a perspective offers an interpretation of how people respond to threatening events that is grounded in collective meaning making processes (instead of individual needs, motives and cognitions), thereby shedding light on the semiotic forces that drive collective behaviour (Salvatore et al., 2018).
3. Third, this approach reveals the multi-vocality and the dynamic and tensive nature of meanings and representations, across and within social groups and categories, highlighting the reciprocal, but non-linear connections between societal practices, communication exchanges, and the endless process of knowledge/culture production in particular in health domain, that – due to its metaphorical value (Sontag, 1978) – has been one of the main thematic research areas of social representations since its inception (de Rosa, 1987; de Rosa & Bocci, 2013; de Rosa & Dryjanska, 2017; Herzlich, 1969; Jodelet, 1989b).
4. Finally, based on the previous points, in the concluding remarks we argue that SRT can provide insights in approaching crises in a non-individualistic perspective.

Communication at the core of the Genesis, Circulation and Change of Social Representations

Communicative practices are key in the formation, circulation and transmission of social knowledge, in all the different forms available: micro-interactions (i.e., everyday talk, either face-to-face or computer-mediated conversation), advertising, norms, public and media discourse. Specifically, the dynamics that connect science and common sense through multichannel communication are at the core of social representations. The dialogue between experts and lay people, science and common sense, is at the genesis of the SRT, rooted in the analysis of the communicative dynamics between reified knowledge and lay people's knowledge trough interpersonal, intergroup, institutional and media communication. Since the *Opera Prima* of Serge Moscovici (1961/1976) and the follow-up and research extension recently conducted in two European countries (de Rosa, Fino & Bocci, 2016), many studies have been conducted in the domain of the public understanding of science (Bauer & Gaskell, 2002; Castro & Gomez, 2005; Christidou & al., 2004; Uzelgun & Castro, 2015).

Since the 1960's the scenario of communication has changed enormously: the progressive digitalization and technological developments, which have made synchronic and interactive forms of communication possible, have enlarged the traditional communicative one-to-many flows to multiple many-to-many exchanges, and have enabled millions of people to

communicate on almost everything through social media networks and instant messaging systems. Among all other social objects, science too has become a key point of interest in the new communicative scenario of the network society and multichannel social media (Castells, 1996, 1997, 1998; Castells & Cardoso, 2005), improving access to an impressive amount of information. At the same time, these are difficult to be processed not only by lay people, but also by scientists, in some cases fascinated by *data driven science*. leading to assumptions like "the end of theory: the data deluge makes the scientific method obsolete" (Anderson, 2008, para. 1). The new scenario of the *society of algorithms* (Knorr Cetina, 2009; MacKenzie, 2019), where many aspects of contemporary culture (finance, worldwide control of flights fluxes, political elections...) are driven by technology and Artificial Intelligence, has also contributed to generate the so called 'dis-information society' (Marshall, 2017; O'Connor & Owen Weatherall, 2019), fake news phenomena (Riva, 2018) and suspicion for scientists as epistemic authorities in a world of post-truth. Indeed, great numbers of people follow science-related pages on social media (Hitlin & Olmestead, 2018) and even more engage in lay conversations on scientific issues. Moreover, for recent emerging infectious diseases (EIDs), Twitter has been one of the primary means through which people disseminated information (Ahmed et al., 2019; Chew & Eysenbach, 2010) and also the most studied social media, followed by YouTube, Facebook and blogs (Tang et al., 2018).

Due to its popularity also among world political leaders, social media are often used for direct announcements to citizens, once subjected to careful mediation of the institutional and diplomatic apparatus. On the basis of a content analysis of viral tweets attracting a minimum of 500 'likes' from G7 political leaders on COVID-19 in the period 17 November 2019–17 March 2020, Rufai and Bunce (2020, p. 515) concluded that Twitter represents "a powerful tool for world political leaders to rapidly communicate with citizens during public health crises".

> In this pandemic crisis, on the one hand the fear of the coronavirus as 'invisible' enemy has led to re-discover and re-value the power of experts against a diffused anti-science view that has dominated in the last decades (Holton, 1993), as revealed by the vivid example of the vaccine hesitancy phenomenon and its pandemic risk, due to viral misinformation (Larson, 2018). Yet, on the other hand, COVID-19 has also been the target of this anti-scientific or non-scientific type of communication, resulting in knowledge that is not based on the validation process followed in reified universes and science dissemination. An extensive empirical investigation of the differential diffusion

> of all of the verified true and false news distributed on Twitter from 2006 to 2017 has proved that "falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information" although the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about science (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018, p. 1147).

Examples of this type of knowledge are exemplified in both the circulation of conspiracy theories and fake news. Conspiracy theories, especially those revolving around the malevolent action of evil elites, have been classically invoked as lay explanations for the origin of a great variety of infectious diseases (Eicher & Bangerter, 2015). Current COVID-19 related conspiracy theories mostly concern the genesis of the virus, as in the following examples (Viola, 2020): a 'deliberate invention' of tycoons such as Bill Gates so as to make money from the vaccine; a 'form of cancer' provoked by the new 5G antenna installations, that would cause symptoms similar to those associated with coronavirus; a 'bacteriological weapon' produced in a laboratory to trigger an economic and social crisis; 'a fortuitous leak from a Chinese lab', engaged in experimentation which started years ago and accidentally got out of hand; and so on.

Fake news, which is constitutively part of the information (or disinformation) society (Marshall, 2017), has proliferated on social media, making it difficult for the public to distinguish reliable sources of information (van Bavel et al., 2020). The border between fake news and reliable information as the genesis of controversial social representations becomes even more dilemmatic if, within the same scientific community, a well-known scientist confirms the creation in the laboratory of the coronavirus as the result of manipulation genetics: this is the case of the interview released by the French virologist Luc Montagnier, Nobel Prize winner in 2008, who said that there had been a manipulation on the classic virus, which comes mainly from bats, but to which VIH [Human Immunodeficiency Virus] sequences have been added (...) (CNEWS, 2020). This hypothesis was then denied in the following days by other scientists, who called for people not to automatically take for granted claims that discredit healthy science (Acerbis, 2020).

While we will clarify in the successive section the function of such ill-informed explanations, we want to emphasize here that misinformation exemplifies the case in which science and common sense are at odds, and in which communication generates semiotic barriers along with semiotic resources.

Making Sense of Threatening Events in the Health Domain

Research on emerging infectious diseases (EIDs) inspired by a social representation perspective has highlighted that when a new threatening virus appears, people make sense of it by *anchoring* the new object to a pre-existing object that can be retrieved from collective and social memory, and by *objectifying* through materializing the abstract *invisible*, as an invader, immigrant, enemy (de Rosa et al., 2020; Mannarini & al., 2020).

Anchoring also operates in the public understanding of almost all the most recent infectious diseases such as AIDS, Ebola, mad cow disease, SARS, avian flu (Joffe & Haarhoff, 2002; Idoiaga Mondragon & al., 2017a), with few exceptions (as in the 'hospital superbug' case; Washer & Joffe, 2006): just to provide some examples, 'flu-like', 'cousin of the common cold' were the anchors used for making sense of the mad cow disease when it first appeared (Washer, 2006). In the early stages of COVID-19 diffusion, a similar anchor was used in the political discourse, with the aim of reassuring populations and downsizing the severity and gravity of the virus contagion and its effects.

According to the canonical principles of Social Representation theory, the process of anchoring serves the primary function of *familiarization*. However, in the current pandemic the familiarization with a new object that has threatened life, economy, transportation, and knowledge at a global scale has paradoxically led to the prescription of de-stabilizing and *de-familiarization practices:* staying affectively close, while being physically distant; protecting others, while increasing the distance from them.

Strategies of *de-familiarization* alongside of the processes of *objectification* and *anchoring*, by using semantic dissociation and mixing elements from different categories perceived as opposites and the rhetorical use of visual/perceptual, chromatic and metaphorical/symbolic contrasts provoking a semantic short-circuit and generating polemical social representations, have been identified in an extensive research program on the shocking Benetton advertising campaigns (stages 2, 3 and 4 of Oliviero Toscani as company's art director) investigated as a unique social experiment for social representations and communications studies (de Rosa, 2001; de Rosa & Smith, 1998). Remaining on the same research area of this article on the dialogical dynamic between social representations and communication about the unexpected pandemic COVID-19, in a forthcoming article (De Rosa & Mannarini, in press) we have more extensively argued about the concept and meaning of de-familiarisation in particular regarding *the relational spatial-emotional closeness*:

> "The COVID-19 has not only dictated where we can go, whether and how we can work and who we can meet and at what distance but has also induced the virtualization of social relations ('neighbours from afar', 'together but divided') and of working and socio-recreational activities confined at home (smart working, virtual Museum tours, at home concert, biking at home....). The fast re-definition of the functional use of the spaces and places imposed by the lockdown measures (some of them, like smart and flexible working, even as an irreversible or at least long term prospective beyond the lockdown phase) has widely generated a psychological impact on common sense and social practices, generating controversial social representations facing to the *de-familiarisation* of the relation spatial-emotional closeness through paradoxical semantic antinomies, like 'spatial distancing – affective proximity', 'close from afar', 'together but divided'. Such antinomies are counter-intuitive respect to the symbolic systems learned in any culture and species, where *love* means in general *proximity* and *closeness*" (de Rosa & Mannarini, in press).

Objectification serves the function of making sense of EIDs through making them tangible and concrete. Personification, that is associating the threatening event to a face, a body, a colour, a race, a group, or a collective (portrayed as *heroes, villains, victims*: Mayor et al., 2012; Páez & Perez, 2020; Wagner-Egger et al., 2011), and anthropomorphism, are a way to represent the 'invisible other'. Racialization, for instance, is clearly exposed in the definition of COVID-19 as the 'Chinese virus'. These communicative and discursive strategies substantiate the *othering* process, which implies the self and other categorization, identification and differentiation. Old, new and renewed representations of otherness are not unique to response to EIDs, since they offer a general key to define a sense of who we are and who we are not, and to simplify the complexity of life in few simple affective dichotomies: us and them, good and bad, normal and deviant, friend and enemy, innocent and guilty, autochthonous and foreign (de Rosa et al., 2020; Mannarini, et al., 2020; Salvatore, 2018).

Indeed, the self-other thema seems to account for the prevalent major response of the public to risks and threats (Jodelet & al., 2020; Smith et al., 2015), and studies of social representations of EIDs confirm that marginalised outgroups are frequently blamed for these outbreaks (Eicher & Bangerter, 2015): this was the case for syphilis, cholera, and typhus, as well as for recent EIDS such as the bird flu (Joffe & Lee, 2004; Washer, 2004). Not unlikely the avian flu, the unhygienic practices of Chinese people and their contiguity to animals were represented as being at the origin of the catastrophes in one of the early lay explanations of

COVID-19's outbreak. As conception of 'others' change, the externalization of the threat can also target majority or high-status groups (i.e., upward blame), such as health institutions and governments, blamed for being ineffective in treatment or even responsible for a deterioration of the epidemic (Joffe, 2011; Washer, 2006).

Othering is a general defense mechanism against threat, and a way to control anxiety and confirm identities and the underlying worldviews (Mannarini et al., 2020). This is such a strong mechanism that fear of contagion is largely evoked even in the imagined or experienced contact with mentally ill or 'mad' persons (de Rosa, 1987; Jodelet, 1989b), also activating archaic mythological or criminalized social representations of madness, empirically confirming 'cognitive polyphasia' (de Rosa & Bocci, 2013). The reactions to the pandemic and its uncertainty are highly emotional, and fear of contamination is key in the social representations of many threatening or disturbing phenomena (such as 'madness'). The more threatening the event, the more intense the emotional response, which results in an 'enemization of the other' (de Rosa et al., 2020; Salvatore et al., 2019). This effect, which is well known in social psychology prejudice research, has pragmatic consequences, as it incentivizes intolerance towards outgroups and legitimates discrimination. Not by chance, media have reported increased racist attacks in March-April 2020 against people of Asian descent, even in tolerant countries (Asingh, 2020).

By extending to a global perspective our analysis on COVID-19-related discourses from different sources (national, international and local press, press agencies, news channels, institutional website/documents, and social media networks) to ten worldwide countries from five geo-cultural contexts (Europe, Asia, Africa, North and Latino America), we found – among other results – that

> "outgroup blaming and stigmatization occurred almost everywhere, with different and multiple targets depending on the context: in the early phase external and diverse groups were targeted, such as the Chinese people, irregular immigrants, foreign travelers bringing the virus 'home', and then, as it became clear that everyone could be infected and infect others, closer groups were blamed and considered responsible for the contagion (e.g., infected people, rich people). The racialization of the virus as 'Chinese' as well as 'White European' (as in the South African case) or personified as 'the invader immigrants" [...] witnessed how the othering process is ubiquitous and can be reversed according to different cultural and socio-geo-political positioning. At the very beginning the Coronavirus has played the role of catalyst of racism, deviating media attention from

the traditional targets of prejudice (immigrants, blacks, Asians, ...) to the 'new invisible other'. However - almost everywhere - and especially in the countries where the fear for the stranger has continued to be exploited by sovereignist leaders for personal strategic power goals in exchange of citizen protection from risks – the two media target (i.e., the new unknown stranger COVID-19 and the well-known outgroups) have been associated, often denying the first one to re-focus attention on the traditional targets of fear and hate" (de Rosa & Mannarini, in press).

Multivocality and Dynamism in Social Representations

The co-existence of multiple and even contradictory way of reasoning is acknowledged in SRT as inherent to the knowledge created in human spheres. Indeed, the seminal Moscovici's (1988) classification of different types of social representations (i.e., hegemonic, emancipated, polemical), as well as the notion of *cognitive polyphasia* account for three qualities of social representations: the fuzzy nature of social knowledge, its fluidity and variability, and the possibility that different forms of knowledge meet and contaminate each other even within the same groups and even individuals (de Rosa & Bocci, 2013; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Moscovici, 2000).

Polemical representations, multivocality and antinomies are the conceptual drivers of our illustrative analysis of media, institutional and lay people communication. Indeed, the goal of our examination is to highlight how divergent discourses and antinomies have characterized the social representations of the COVID-19 pandemic in all the different phases and across reified and consensual universes. Although we did not engage in a systematic comparative analysis of different communication systems, it will be apparent that the boundaries between science and common sense are more blurred than ever, and that discourses from different sources have not converged into a univocal representation in the considered period of time.

Indeed, collectivities that attempt to make sense of a new phenomenon engage in a collective symbolic coping activity (Wagner, Kronberger & Seifert, 2002), which is aimed at developing an understanding of the novel object. Media, as well as expert and institutional communication, trigger this process, which develops in four stages: (1) *Awareness*. In order to raise the public's awareness, the new phenomenon is communicated as relevant and as challenging some taken-for-granted habits or rules. (2) *Divergence*. A set of alternative interpretations is proposed so as to adapt the pre-existing repertoires of knowledge to the understanding of the novel phenomenon (so that in this stage different interpretations, images

and metaphors emerge in public discourses). (3) *Convergence*. Gradually the different interpretations tend to converge towards one or a few shared interpretations, that are accepted by a majority of people. Divergent or minoritarian interpretations retreat. (4) *Normalization*. Finally, one or a few interpretations consolidate, with inventive and alarming images progressively fading.

Our illustrative analysis reveals that the attempts of the public to make sense of the 'invisible other' that is, the symbolic collective coping, seem to shift from the awareness to the divergence stage, and then to linger on that stage, without moving towards the establishment of dominant images.

The Italian communication of experts, politicians, and journalists (January-May 2020)

In the period going from the beginning of January and the first half of May, the communication of experts, politicians and journalists on the pandemic developed along two major phases, that we conventionally defined as follows. The early phase (phase 0) covers the initial period of the virus diffusion, at the onset mostly in China, and then progressively in other countries and in Italy with the first confirmed cases and the outbreak of the virus. It goes from the beginning of January to March 11, the date on which the Italian government (Council of Ministers, 2020a) established lockdown measures on the entire national territory starting from the following day. The following phase (phase 1) corresponds to the period in which the lockdown and the restrictive measures were in force and includes the debate developed in the last part of this phase on the approaching phase 2. The lockdown period runs from March 11 to May 3, date on which the first restrictions were lifted (Council of Ministers, 2020b) and some economic activities resumed, while the transition to phase 2 covers the short period between May 3-17, when the complete lifting of restrictions was proclaimed (Council of Ministers, 2020c).

Phase 0 (January 1st–March 11): The progressive diffusion of the virus from China to 'home'.

At very beginning (December 2019; although some sources backdate the first cases in November 2019), the discovery of COVID-19 was just news in the media, confined in Wuhan in the very far China. News of the first two cases in Italy spread on January 30 (Ziniti, 2020) with the identification of two infected Chinese tourists in Rome who were immediately hospitalized and treated, and the Government announcing the immediate interruption of flights to and from China (Ente Nazionale per l'Aviazione Civile, 2020). The story fueled the already creeping stigmatizing reactions towards the Chinese communities in Italy, as witnessed by the

President of the Union of the Italian-Chinese entrepreneurs (Cretella, 2020), who denounced the circulation of Whatsapp chain messages recommending to avoid contacts with Chinese people and Chines restaurants and retail stores. At the political level, League's party leader Matteo Salvini (2020) on FaceBook contributed to the anti-immigrant sentiment by associating the virus outbreak to the immigrants disembarking in the Italian ports, playing on the juxtaposition of closing the borders to the virus and opening them to immigrants (Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Picture from Matteo Salvini official Facebook page (January 29, 2020)

Once again, as in previous epidemics, the blame for the disease was attributed to a stigmatized outgroup, and stigmatization served as a semantic barrier though which this polemical social representation rejected dialogue with alternative discourses (Gillespie, 2008).

On February 21 the news of "patient 1" (ANSA Speciali, 2020), an Italian citizen with no direct contact with China, was released, definitely attesting that the virus was no more 'Chinese' but had invisibly and silently turned into '*one of us*'. In this awareness phase of the process of collective symbolic elaboration, Italian citizens were exposed to a communication that, while posing the threat was aimed at reassuring the population. Italian Prime Minister addressed both Italians and the European countries saying that "Italy has adopted a set of precautionary measures that are the most effective in Europe and perhaps even internationally. Therefore, Italian citizens must remain calm and tranquil, we are facing the situation with the utmost sense of responsibility" [1] (ADNKronos, 2020, para. 1). The binomial *threat-reassurance*, which fits with previous studies (Ungar, 1998; Washer, 2004), characterized the early phase of the institutional communication on the developing pandemic.

[1] All translations are the work of the authors of the article.

The scientific debate was pluralistic since the very beginning, and in this phase revolved around the *dangerousness-safety* divide. Indeed, it underwent a polarization process that grouped scientists in 'alarmists' and 'optimists', triggering a dispute on the traditional and social media that since then never completely ceased. On February 23, Maria Rita Gismondo, Director of the Virology Lab at the Sacco Hospital in Milan, minimized the peril of the virus defining COVID-19 as "an infection a tiny bit more serious than a flu" (Zappa, 2020, para. 2), providing an anchor for the symbolic elaboration of the threat that echoes the findings of previous EIDs studies (Washer, 2006). At the opposite end of the spectrum, other scientists emphasized the seriousness and gravity of the situation and accused Gismondo of spreading fake news and anti-evidence-based information (Patto Trasversale per la Scienza, 2020).

Phase 1 (March 12 – May 3): Implementation of the lockdown measures.

Shortly political communication used the alarm as prevention strategy, legitimated by scientists' recommendations. In this phase, *war metaphors* dominated the communication landscape:

> "A tyrant has turned our lives upside down, and it's called a coronavirus. We will stand and fight anywhere, in homes, workplaces. Helping the weakest and sacrificing ourselves for a better tomorrow. And then we will make up for it. Coronavirus, you won't win. We've hunted worse" (Burioni, 2020).

So tweeted virologist Roberto Burioni (2020) a few days before the beginning of phase 1, collecting more than 4,000 retweets.

War language surfaced in portraying doctors and health professional as "soldiers at the front", as Pope Francis among others referred to them (Castellano, 2020, para. 1); in the isolation of the contaminated "red zones" (a reminiscence of the French "zone rouge" in World War I: Thornton, 2014); in the strict quarantine prescriptions for the infected and their relatives; in the immediate closure of schools, industries, cinema, theatres, churches, museums, stadiums, auditoriums; in the behavior regulations ordering people to stay within the 'safety bubble' and respect the 1 meter of minimum interpersonal distance, and wear masks and gloves; in the curfew summarized in the command 'stay home'; and finally, in the impressive pictures of 70 military vehicles carrying the bodies of the virus victims outside the Lombardian Region, because there was no more place in the crematoria of the cemetery in Bergamo (Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Military vehicles carrying the bodies of the virus victims outside the Lombardia Region (Berizzi, 2020)

Elements of ambiguous and paradoxical communication seemed to mark this phase, questioning the hypothesis of absolute 'convergence': on the contrary, a 'multi-voices' discourse was already evident at this stage, although in more dormant forms, depending on whether the focus on health or economy prevailed. For example, in focusing on health protection devices, the Head of Civil Protection Angelo Borrelli replied to the journalists: "protective masks are only for the carriers of the virus, not for healthy people" (Jakhanagiev, 2020) and in fact he did not wear it (thus also inducing a stigma perception of those who wore masks on the street independently of any contagion). Similar declarations were made by Walter Ricciardi, WHO member and adviser to Health Ministry: "Gauze masks - he reiterated - do not serve to protect the healthy, they serve as a precautionary measure" (Giornale di Sicilia, 2020, para. 1) for those who are sick and for doctors. On the contrary, neither the State or the Regions had sufficient masks even for doctors and nurses, who died in impressive number (up to April 15, 120 doctors and 30 nurses had died (AGI, 2020); numbers have further increased since then (Federazione Nazionale degli Ordini dei Medici Chirurghi e degli Odontoiatri, 2020).

On the economic side of the pandemic crisis discourse, the political debate focused on how big the investments for the economic recovery of the country should be. Italian Minister of the Economy Roberto Gualtieri first hypothesized 6 billion investments (ANSA Economia, 2020), whilst Matteo Salvini from the opposed right-wing League party claimed for 24; later the Italian government reached 25 billion, then 55, and obviously the oppositions never tired of saying that it was not enough and continued to ask for more. Such a multivocality was bound to explode in the final part of this phase.

Indeed, at the beginning the evidence of the infection had put fear at the center for the unwanted and silent killer guest, leading to the enforcement of lockdown measures. Despite the emergence of a multi-voices discourse, the 'war-like' situation and related focus on *fear*

for life served as a unifying frame for public response, and prospect of death and the terror of contagion made Italians disciplined enough to accept and abide by the restrictions for almost two months. For a certain period, fear also generated a transient solidarity between the political forces involved in addressing this unexpected and devastating event.

Transition to phase 2 (4-17 May)

With the implementation of the partial and progressive re-opening, divergences exploded even within the same institutions. In the Parliament conflicts increased, both within the majority and the opposition: Matteo Renzi, leader of the political party Italia Viva in the governmental coalition, attacked Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte for his lack of vision (Vecchio 2020). Within the opposition, Matteo Salvini, the leader of right-wing League, competed with Giorgia Meloni, leader of Fratelli d'Italia, for the best street protest against the government (La Mattina, 2020), while Silvio Berlusconi, leader of Forza Italia, remained distant from his allies, very polemical against the EU bailout funds (TGCom24, 2020).

At the same time, unity among the Regions' Governors decreased, as some of them were critical of the government's measures and some even tried to adopt different measures, as in Calabria (Sfregola, 2020). A clash between the Regions and the State (Lamberti, 2020), and between the mayors and the Region Governors also occurred (BariToday, 2020) in the two weeks before the issue of the 17 May law-decree that lifted all restrictions.

Moreover, a variety of positions on the reopening were expressed on traditional and social media by different economic actors based on the specificity of their activity (entrepreneurs, trade unions, retailers and craftsmen, restaurant and bar owners) (Il Nordest Quotidiano, 2020), by football clubs (Vendemiale, 2020), and even by the Episcopal Conference of Bishops for the delay in re-opening churches to religious rites (Il Faro, 2020), urging the Pope's call for unity and common good beyond controversy (Grana, 2020).

This polyphonic choir heightened cognitive and existential uncertainty and simultaneously elicited the search for symbols of unity able to counterbalance, at the emotional level, the almost chaotic landscape of information. The most symbolic leaders of national unity and humanity were recognized in moral authorities, to whom everyone turned for appeals: the President of the Republic and the Pope, symbolically represented alone in mythical deserted places: Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square for the Mass of the Palms and President Mattarella in Piazza Venezia for the Altar of the Fatherland ceremony on Liberation day (April, 25). Both

these public figures embodied a leadership able to give people a sense of shared identity and collective hope (Haslam & al., 2011).

In the communication context of the approaching phase 2, polemical social representations that were previously focused on *fear for life* shifted towards *fear for poverty* (*pandemic* versus *famine*), under the pressure of big and small economic actors and politicians (especially from the opposition, but not exclusively) who exploited the basic needs of ordinary people in an attempt to overturn the current government. As the editor of a right-wing newspaper said on a TV talk on April 18, "We're torn between two alternatives, starving or dying of coronavirus" (Libero, 2020, para. 1).

Simultaneously, more nuanced and non-binary speeches, that continued along the *dangerousness-safety* line emerged in the early phase, were offered in scientists' communication, who warned that "the devil is in the details" (Matarese, 2020, para. 2) and induced caution in reopening and in restoring an impossible normality, also prospecting the possibility of a second wave of infection. In the same vein, trade unions celebrated the possibility for workers to go back to their production activities, yet they expressed a major concern for safety conditions on workplaces.

To sum up, the symbolic elaboration of the pandemic across the two phases seemed to coagulate mostly around polemical representations, based on opposing priorities and dictating responses that reflected a political positioning. Such a positioning was in some case very polarised and even contradictory within the discourse of the same political leaders, leading in response to symbolic acts by leaders representing the national unity. A few more examples to support this claim: (a) in the early phase, the leader of the League Party Matteo Salvini, criticizing the decision of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to close some 'red zones' in the traditionally most productive Lombardia Northern Region, led by a Governor of the same political party League, claimed for 'opening everything', then 'closing everything' within a few days, animating polemical representations (Mari, 2020). (b) As symbolic anti-stigma act and as a sign of symbolic inclusion, in reply to Salvini's claim for closing the schools to Chinese children (pointed at as potential infecting agents), President Sergio Mattarella visited a school in the Esquilino multicultural district in Rome, populated by many Chinese (Il Corriere della Sera, 2020). (c) In phase 2 polemical representations exposed opposite antinomic priorities – economy versus health – and demands – 'opening everything immediately' versus 'opening step by step with prudence'. As stigmatization, rigid oppositions are one more way

for social representations to prevent dialogue with *alternative* representations (Gillespie, 2008).

The polarization of the discourse was evidently strongly related to the positioning of political leaders. As it happened in the past, populist leaders used polemical social representations to stimulate fear in the citizens, thus inducing the need for being reassured by strongmen (de Rosa et al., 2020). During the pandemic, in Italy this role was mainly played by League party leaders, but media reported many international examples of leaders taking advantage of frightened people to consolidate their power (Rachman, 2020) .

CONCLUSIONS: APPROACHING CRISES IN A NON-INDIVIDUALISTIC PERSPECTIVE

The illustrative analysis of the Italian communication landscape in the first few months in which the 'invisible other' spread all over the world with dramatic impacts at the psychological, social, economic, and political level, revealed the coexistence of multiple systems of knowledge and a multi-vocal discourse on the pandemic. Multivocality is intrinsic to consensual universes, yet in this pandemic crisis it seemed to affect also the reified universes of science, making the boundaries between the two knowledge's systems more and more blurred. Specifically, it highlighted the emergence of polemical and polarized social representations, enacted through communication systems that convey both information and disinformation, semiotic resources and semiotic barriers.

As a final remark, it is time to highlight what our perusal can bring to the understanding of crises and to the management of crisis intervention. At a general level, focusing on symbolic systems sheds light on how the communication processes orient people's feelings and behaviour, and also affect institutional measures, moving beyond the traditional psychological approach based on treating crises at the individual level. At a more specific level, our scrutiny brings to the fore the need for reducing discourse polarization and promote unbiased information.

Indeed, during a pandemic, polarized polemical social representations of the disease can lead different social groups to draw different conclusions about the threat and how to respond to it. The forced reduction of face-to-face interactions decreases the odds of 'knowledge encounters' (Jovchelovitch, 2007), while the eco-chamber phenomenon (Bakshy & al., 2015) and the related self-selection of the sources of information tend to confine people into like-minded bubbles, diminishing the opportunity to be exposed, let alone to dialogue, with

alternative representations and to elaborate a shared understanding. Moreover, affective polarization decreases social trust and social relationships (Hetherington & Weiler, 2015), and activates defensive mechanisms that enliven derogatory representations of otherness. However, the global nature of the threat contains a possible antidote to polarization, as it can promote interdependence and a sense of common fate able to overcome partisanship and to support overarching identities. In this respect, if leaders engaged in bipartisan arguments to COVID-19 related prescriptions, they could help reduce polarization (Bolsen & al., 2014).

Misinformation too, at the core of ill-informed knowledge, has detrimental consequences in terms of social behaviour, leading people to self- and other-harming actions, such as refusing protections or hyper-protecting themselves, questioning medical treatments, mistrusting health professionals and expert knowledge. Communication research suggests that misinformation can be contrasted through fact-checking, inoculation (i.e., exposing people to small doses of misinformation so as to trigger a critical response) and nudges for people to reflect on the accuracy of news and information (van Bavel et al., 2020 for a review). However, the amount of unreliable information produced during a crisis such as the pandemic is so huge that all the three strategies are likely to prove ineffective. Moreover, these models of intervention are based on an individualistic-rationalistic paradigm, that neglect the social processes underlying the way the public knows, judges, perceives, feels, and behaves.

Finally, in times of high uncertainty, affective responses tend to dominate and to prevail so as to make sense of the unpredictable, thereby falling in the trap of dichotomous reasoning (Salvatore et al., 2019) that resonates with the logic of polemical social representations. Although multivocality may be confusing, it is part of the diverse and pluralistic world we live in: during emergencies, the challenge is not to reduce multivocality to univocality, but, on the one hand, to help people and institutions develop the capability of tolerating uncertainty, and, on the other hand to foster encounters of knowledge and encounters of people so as to combat exclusionary social representations and behaviors.

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