
Metaphorical landscapes of extremism: Rhetorical narratives in Italian radical far-right discourse during the Years of Lead

Flavio Foresi¹ & Ludovica Lena²

¹Paris 8 University, ²Xiamen university

foresiflavio@gmail.com, ludolena@xmu.edu.cn

The Years of Lead (*Anni di piombo*) encompassed a period of intense social upheaval and political violence from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, marked by far-left and far-right political terrorism and armed clashes. In this political context, extra-parliamentarian far-right groups such as *Ordine Nuovo* (1969–77) and *Terza Posizione* (1978–82) emerged as proponents of a “national-revolutionary” and “third-positionist” neo-fascist political ideologies, advocating for a subversive and violent struggle against state institutions, aiming to the overthrow of the democratic order (Ferraresi 1996). In this study, we compiled an historical corpus consisting of political texts and journals disseminated by these extremist groups to investigate the rhetorical application of conceptual metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) within their narratives. The analysis unveils the extensive use of metaphors (1) and (2) (Lakoff et al. 1991):

- (1) DANGEROUS BELIEFS ARE CONTAGIOUS DISEASES
- (2) SOCIETY IS A BODY

In particular, the source domain CONTAGIOUS DISEASE (*malattia, cancro, bubbone*, etc.), particularly in the form of **cancer**, is by far the dominant rhetorical device observed. In some instances, the enemy is also conceptualized as **poison**. Society, characterized by terms related to **wound** (*ferita, sangue, dissanguarsi, mutilazione*) and **death** (*decrepito, morte*), is portrayed as an AFFLICTED BODY. The discourse also features metaphors likening dangerous practices to **dirt** or **mud** to be purged from society (cf. MORALITY IS CLEANLINESS, Lakoff et al. 1991). The rhetoric employed by these groups has the aim, among others, of dehumanizing their adversaries through abstraction (see Périès 2001). This perspective ultimately validates their resort to violence within their ‘crusade’ against liberal democracy and communism, while simultaneously positioning themselves as caretakers and rescuers of a society afflicted by sickness. The preference for negative, destructive metaphors over positive and constructive ones capitalizes on fear, as in far-right narratives more generally (Wodak 2019). In conclusion, this interdisciplinary study reveals how extremist narratives manipulate public perception and normalize ideologies through specific rhetorical strategies such as the use of conceptual metaphors. The research deepens our understanding of how these narratives were propagated during a pre-social media era when traditional avenues like journals and printed materials were the means of dissemination. This contributes to a broader exploration of extremist communication strategies, with relevance extending beyond the specific historical context.

References:

Ferraresi, F. (1996). *Threats to Democracy: the radical right in Italy after the war*. Princeton University Press.

Périès, G. (2001). Du corps au cancer : la construction métaphorique de l'ennemi intérieur dans le discours militaire pendant la Guerre Froide. Partie 2, *Cultures & Conflits*, 43.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G., Espenson, J., & Schwartz, A. (1991). *Master metaphor list. Second draft copy*. University of California at Berkeley. [Retrieved from: <http://araw.mede.uic.edu/~alansz/metaphor/METAPHORLIST.pdf>]

Wodak, R. (2019). The trajectory of far-right populism – a discourse-analytical perspective. In Forchtner, B. (Ed.), *The far right and the environment: Politics, discourse and communication*, 21–37.