

We Were Swept Away by a Landslide. A New Metaphorical Representation of Covid-19

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The metaphors of war

On March 17, 2020, at the beginning of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, all French and foreign newspapers reported the war declaration of President Emmanuel Macron, “*nous sommes en guerre*”, which was followed on March 19 by that of the previous American President Donald Trump, who described himself as a “wartime president” (BBC editorial view on Trump’s reaction to the pandemic). Those first steps, which politicians and newspapers around the world would henceforth follow, triggered the rush to applying metaphors of war during the early stage of the Covid-19 pandemic. Metaphors were intensively used to talk about the pandemic, along with the scientific explanation of the symptoms and consequences of this particular infection. Can we, therefore, say that the use of metaphors was necessary to describe the *in fieri* experience of Covid-19? *Stricto sensu* the answer is “no”: one could just have used assertive language to say how things actually were, i.e. that an unknown and particularly aggressive virus spread – most likely – from a market in Wuhan to the world and was rapidly expanding, and that it was, therefore, necessary to take immediate action to tackle the virus and deal with the emergency. However, there is no doubt that during the first months of 2020 we were experiencing something new, something that our present society, so comfortably used to freedom, was not expecting and was not ready to deal with. Although the existence of viruses and pandemics is no unknown event, our society accustomed to individual freedom of movement and behaviour was completely new to the restrictions that were suddenly strongly limiting that freedom.

Metaphor is particularly appropriate for expressing those experiences that are so unusual that we find it difficult to describe and communicate them through our daily linguistic practices and concepts. An example of an unprecedented experience is the painful condition of captivity in Nazi concentration camps: Primo Levi – who throughout his life dealt with the problem of recounting his experience in Auschwitz – writes that the concepts of cold and hunger felt by the prisoners in the camp do not correspond to those that we usually employ because “just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say ‘hunger,’ we say ‘tiredness,’ ‘fear,’ ‘pain,’ we say ‘winter’ and they are different things.

They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born" (Levi, *If This Is a Man*: 144). So, how can we communicate an unusual experience? In the case of Auschwitz, Levi found the use of metaphors more appropriate than using concepts, which paradoxically risked to create confusion instead of clarity. Communicating without manipulating was for Levi an ethical attitude aimed at making things plain as they are in reality. Therefore, the use of metaphors must serve the purpose of clarifying by making things accessible to common imagery, which is the reason why Levi invented such metaphors as *Auschwitz is a gigantic biological and social experiment* (99) or *Auschwitz is Anus mundi* (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*: 65). The clarity in communication is essential to recognize errors and possibly not to repeat them, because it involves the realization that something in the system that we assumed to be stable is actually much more uncertain and fragile than we thought, and that some of its mechanisms must be questioned. However, Levi also knew that metaphors are not always perspicuous and do not automatically make things plain. Depending on the context in which they are used, metaphors can create confusion and can consequently have a bad influence on our perception of reality.

Metaphors can be either perspicuous or confusing and influence the perception of reality because, depending on the diverse language-games (and given practical contexts) in which it is used, produce different effects: one of these effects consists in activating emotions. This capacity of the metaphor was already known to Aristotle and has been confirmed by various cognitive experiments in the last twenty years (Thibodeau and Boroditsky, *Metaphors We Think with*). Such a capacity essentially consists in creating an image – by connecting words – in which characteristics of the first member, and the feeling connected to it, are transferred onto the second one.

In the case of Covid-19, using metaphors to communicate and explain what was going on, and how to deal with the emergency, was a good linguistic strategy. However, this strategy had some flaws that eventually wound up causing havoc. The problem lies, therefore, not in the use of metaphors per se, but in the type of metaphors that have been used.

Many articles and studies have been published over the last few months, whose authors argue that the extensive use of war metaphors to represent the emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic was not a good language strategy (Semino, "Not Soldiers but Fire-fighters"; Nerlich, *Metaphors in the Time of Coronavirus*; Piredda, *Reality vs. Propaganda*; Di Paola and others, *COVID-19*; Hoffmann Pfrimer and Barbosa, *Analyzing*

Jair Bolsonaro's COVID-19 War Metaphors; Connolly, War and the Coronavirus Pandemic). From a logical and rhetorical point of view, several significant connections exist between the two related domains – the fight against Covid-19 and war. Therefore, the metaphor *we are at war with the virus* and all the metaphors derived from it (e.g. *doctors are heroes, the virus is the enemy, intensive care units are trenches*, etc.) have been formally adequate. However, from the ethical and emotional points of view, these metaphors have not been adequate because they do not produce that perspicuous clarity about which Levi spoke: they highlight some aspects of the situation while concealing other, such as the gravity of the structural weakness of public health systems in many countries worldwide. From the ethical point of view, then, war metaphors appear problematic because they arouse the same emotions felt by those who live in a state of war, which does not make the case of the Covid-19 pandemic. The limitations of individual freedom, which represented an absolute novelty for citizens, recall those that are usually imposed during a war (curfew, reduced accessibility of public places, etc.) and also activated the same feeling that is basically linked with war, namely fear (followed by anxiety and stress). This, combined with the limitation of freedom – including the prohibition of social activities and physical expressions of affection, isolation, and so on –, caused psycho-physical problems in many people.

The metaphor of the landslide

Many scholars have argued whether different metaphors than those of war should have been used to avoid the spread of fear, anxiety and anguish.¹ Elena Semino, for example, analyses the wide range of fire metaphors used in different languages and proposes them as suitable metaphors for the Covid-19 (Semino, *“Not Soldiers but Fire-fighters”*: 52). In addition to the motivations proposed by Semino, I believe that one of the reasons that make this metaphor effective in the case of Covid-19 is because it is drawn from nature and therefore belongs to the domain of necessity, rather than that of free ethical choice. Unlike war, which is a purely human activity, fire is, like the virus, a fact of nature and as such it does not involve any moral judgment. War metaphors, conversely, imply moral judgments aimed at fuelling feelings of fear and guilt, which for example, in the case of Covid-19, have led people to isolate and to consider the infected as “invisible bullets”, that is, potential killers.

¹ The collective initiative “#ReframeCovid” explores, collects, and promotes non-war-related language practices to talk about Covid-19. <https://sites.google.com/view/reframecovid/initiative>.

I propose another metaphor borrowed from nature that can be used in addition to that of fire: the landslide that triggers a chain-reaction of further landslides, just like the virus that manifests itself in several waves. The metaphor I propose is *Covid-19 is a landslide*, extensible to the double metaphor, *Covid-19 is a landslide that compromises the mountain on which we live*.

Like in the case of fire, landslides are also natural phenomena, are part of our collective imagination and are often used in metaphors to indicate disastrous events. And like in the case of fire, the landslide is not static but evolves both in time (beginning, unfolding, end) and space. And finally, like fire, the landslide produces irreversible effects.

Landslides are natural phenomena that occur when, on a steep surface, the gravitational thrust of a mass of rock or debris exceeds the breaking point and releases itself from the wall rolling downwards, overwhelming everything along its path. A landslide is devastating because in a very short time it accelerates, triggering other chain-collapses, and its destructive force is directly proportional to both the speed with which it develops and its expansion in space. However, from the point of view of nature, that is, non-anthropocentric, a landslide is an irrelevant phenomenon with respect to the existence and continuity of life on the planet, just as a virus is since both are facts of nature. The situation appears different to us when we assume the perspective of particular forms of life that are in the path of the landslide.

Living on a mountain implies interferences in its environmental balance, i.e. through deforestation, land exploitation for agriculture, diversion of waterways, construction of dams and roads, and extraction mining in quarries and mines. The fragile ecosystem of the mountain can thus be altered unpredictably by human activities. When the land reaches the breaking point, landslides can overwhelm the humans who live in the mountains. A virus is an organism that exists in nature and is transmitted by given forms of life concentrated in limited geographical areas of the planet. However, if human intervention brings animal species into contact with each other, and possibly with humans, the virus could change and infect other life-forms that otherwise would have remained indifferent to its existence. It has been hypothesised that the Covid-19 pandemic originated precisely from the unnatural promiscuous combination of different animal species – carriers of the virus – and that this promiscuity allowed the virus to transfer into humans. In both cases, therefore, that of the landslide and the Covid-19, we have two examples that can be explained within the theoretical horizon of

the Anthropocene, i.e. can be attributed to the invasive effects of human activities on the ecosystem (Steffen and others, *The Anthropocene*).

The first landslide occurred in March, when the epidemic overwhelmed the health systems in many nations, bringing them to the brink of collapse and forcing medical personnel to work in conditions of fatigue, stress and danger, as well as to apply traumatizing forms of triage to prioritize treatments, thus implicitly deciding which patients would be saved and which would die. The fear of the collapse of health systems urged politicians to suspend or even disrupt economic and institutional activities (schools, universities, tribunals, culture, etc.), imposing severe restrictions on mobility and individual freedom and causing widespread socio-economic disruption.

However, if after the emergency caused by the landslide, instead of strengthening the ground and protective structures to prevent further collapses, one resumes normal activities, the risk that the ground will collapse again is high. This is what happened during the summer of 2020. After the first wave, as the epidemic slowed down people resumed their lives almost like before, with the only precautions of wearing protective masks and avoiding gatherings (with relevant exceptions, though). Health systems in many countries were not strengthened, nor were upgraded public transport and school facilities, which should have been undertaken before the epidemic returned in the autumn. Thus, just like the early autumn rains infiltrate the ground made fragile by previous collapses and causes new landslides, in the same way, the return of the cold and permitted the virus to regain its strength, which triggered the “second wave”. The new landslide found health systems unprepared and therefore led many governments to impose restrictive measures on citizens’ freedom once again.

I propose here a short analysis of the landslide metaphor, by providing some examples of its possible use.

Primary metaphor: **Covid-19 is a landslide.**

We were swept away by a landslide: this metaphor represents the beginning of the epidemic.

The speed of the landslide is increasing: this metaphor represents the expansive phase of the virus. The landslide increases its speed exponentially: the more it expands, the

more difficult it is to contain its destructive power. Similarly, it is increasingly difficult to stem and tackle the destructive power of the expanding virus.

We must shelter from the landslide: this metaphor represents the need to avoid public spaces to decrease the possibility of contagion.

Doctors work day and night to save the people hit by the landslide: this metaphor represents doctors who work in demanding shifts to save the Covid-19 patients, like rescuers who fight against time to rescue people buried under the debris of the landslide. The patients are those who have been swept away by the landslide and who, in turn, could overwhelm someone else during their descent.

The Covid-19 landslide is transforming our society: this metaphor connects one characteristic of the landslide with the impact of Covid-19 on society. Like landslides transform the surface of the planet, Covid-19 triggers major changes in our society: from the invasive use of the internet to the search for new ways of coexistence among humans and with other animals; from the re-evaluation of the economic, educational, health and transport systems, to the reconsideration of lifestyles.

We need more means of rescue to save those who have been overwhelmed by the landslide: this metaphor represents the real need for stronger health systems, including more facilities to admit patients; effective mechanisms to hire and grant turnover for healthcare staff; and the purchase of protective gears and equipment.

A way has been found to contain the Covid-19 landslide: this metaphor represents the discovery and delivery of the vaccine, which slows the spread of the virus.

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