

Alienation, Ideology, and Power in the Metaphors Depicting the Economic Crisis in the Media

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In this article, I carry out a critical analysis of the two predominant categories of metaphors used in Western media to report the 2008 economic crisis: the metaphors representing the crisis as a disease and the ones depicting it as a natural disaster. First, I argue that these metaphors implicitly portray the markets as natural organisms, governed by their own laws and spontaneously tending toward equilibrium. Second, through reference to the philosophical concept of alienation, I show how they can be used to communicate an alienated view of the economy. Far from being innocent journalistic simplifications of complex issues, these metaphors can be very effective in ideologically presenting the neoliberal perspective and its account of the crisis as the only possible ones. By specifically examining the metaphors of the economic crisis as a disease and as a natural disaster, I also discuss how they convey a representation of the crisis which absolves some actors, blames others, and promotes as obvious the neoliberal account of the economy.

Keywords: metaphors, economic crisis, alienation, ideology, 2008

The financial crisis of 2008 ensued as a direct result of the subprime mortgage crunch in the United States. The repercussions of the burst of the U.S. real estate bubble extended globally, causing a relevant increase in the sovereign debt of many European countries, some of which risked economic default. Among the member states of the Eurozone most affected by the crisis were Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, as well as some countries outside the Eurozone. More than 10 years later, the economies of many European countries are still suffering the effects of what can be considered the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

In all Western countries, the crisis received extended coverage in specialized and mainstream media, and, for many citizens, the media have been the primary source of official information on the economic crisis. In the media discourse about the crisis, the use of metaphors has been pervasive. Metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain, are not mere rhetorical ornaments of language; on the contrary, they reflect the way our brain conceptualizes reality and are capable of influencing how reality itself is socially constructed: "Metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action, and only derivatively a matter of language" (p. 153). More specifically, Lakoff and Johnson (1999) claim that abstract ideas and conceptual domains are more easily understood by human beings in terms of concrete experiences involving

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bodily movement and sensations (sensory perception, motor activity, physical pain and pleasure, etc.); by functioning through subtle associations of thought, metaphors can instantly convey contents and emotions without the need for arguments and for conscious logical reasoning. Although not ideological in themselves, metaphors can also be used ideologically—that is, to the end of legitimizing the given social order by representing it as necessary or moral, while concealing its shortcomings and contradictions. Metaphors are in fact selective interpretations of reality, which emphasize some elements of it (those shared by the target and the source domain) while hiding others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

In this article, I focus on the two categories of metaphors that, according to the systematic review provided by Arrese (2015) and to several other studies (see Table 1), have been most frequently used in Western media to portray the economic crisis: “health and disease” and “natural events and disasters.”

Table 1. The Corpus-Based Studies on the Metaphors of the 2008 Crisis.

Paper	Region covered	Type of media	Name of media	Years covered
Álvarez-Peralta (2014)	Spain	Print newspaper	<i>El País</i>	2008
Arrese (2015)	Spain	Print newspapers	<i>El País, ABC, El Mundo, Expansión</i>	2010–12
Arrese and Vara-Miguel (2016)	Spain, Italy, Greece, Finland, The Netherlands, UK	Print newspapers	Spain: <i>ABC, El País, El Mundo, Expansión</i> Italy: <i>Il Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, Il Giornale, Il Sole 24 Ore</i> Greece: <i>I Kathimerini, To Vima, Ta Nea, Naftemporiki</i> Finland: <i>Helsingin Sanomat, Kaleva, Iltalehti, Kauppalehti</i> The Netherlands: <i>NRC Handelsblad, De Volkskrant, De Telegraaf, Het Financieele</i> UK: <i>The Times, The Guardian, The Sun, The Financial Times</i>	2010–12
Bickes, Otten, and Weymann, (2014)	Germany, UK, U.S.	Print newspapers and magazines	Germany: <i>Der Spiegel</i> UK: <i>The Economist</i> U.S.: <i>TIME</i>	2012

Breeze (2014)	UK	Print newspapers	<i>The Guardian, The Independent</i>	2012
Cardini, (2014)	UK	Print newspaper, online magazine	<i>The Economist, The International Economy</i>	2008–12
<i>Cortés de los Ríos (2010)</i>	UK	Newspaper covers	<i>The Economist</i>	2008
<i>Horner (2011)</i>	U.S.	Print newspapers	<i>The Washington Post, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal</i>	2008
<i>Joris, d'Haenens, and Van Gorp (2014)</i>	Belgium, The Netherlands	Print newspapers	Belgium: <i>De Tijd, De Standaard, Het Laatste Nieuws</i> The Netherlands: <i>Het Financieele Dagblad, NRC Handelsblad, De Telegraaf</i>	2010–12
Joris, Puustinen, and d'Haenens (2018)	Belgium, Finland, Germany, The Netherlands, Spain	Print newspapers	Belgium: <i>De Tijd, De Standaard, De Morgen, Het Laatste Nieuws</i> Finland: <i>Helsingin Sanomat, Kaleva, Iltalehti, Kauppalehti</i> Germany: <i>Handelsblatt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Bild</i> The Netherlands: <i>Het Financieele Dagblad, NRC Handelsblad, De Volkskrant, De Telegraaf</i> Spain: <i>El País, ABC, El Mundo, Expansión</i>	2011

<i>Lizcano Fernández (2008)</i>	Spain	Print newspaper	<i>El País</i>	2008
O'Mara-Shimek, Guillén-Parra, and Ortega-Larrea (2015)	U.S.	Newspapers (online editions)	<i>The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Times</i>	2008
Orts and Rojo (2009)	Spain	Print newspaper	<i>El Economista</i>	2007–08
<i>Porto and Romano (2013)</i>	Spain, UK	Print newspapers	Spain: <i>El País, El Mundo, ABC, Expansión, Cinco Días</i> UK: <i>The Guardian, The Mirror, The Independent, The Times, The Telegraph</i>	2009
Pühringer and Hirte (2013)	Germany, Austria, Switzerland	Print newspapers	Germany: <i>Der Spiegel, Die Zeit, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung</i> Austria: <i>Der Standard, Die Presse, Salzburger Nachrichten</i> Switzerland: <i>Neue Zürcher Zeitung</i>	2008–09
Pühringer and Hirte (2015)	Germany, Austria, Switzerland	Print newspapers	Germany: <i>Der Spiegel, Die Zeit, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Süddeutsche Zeitung</i> Austria: <i>Der Standard, Die Presse, Salzburger Nachrichten</i> Switzerland: <i>Neue Zürcher Zeitung</i>	2008–09

Rizzoli, Romaioli, and Contarello (2017)	Italy	Print newspapers	<i>Il Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, Il Giornale, Il Manifesto</i>	2007–13
Rojo and Orts (2010)	UK, Spain	Print newspapers	UK: <i>The Economist</i> . Spain: <i>El Economista</i>	2007–08
Silaski and Durovic (2010)	UK, Serbia	Print and online newspapers, TV stations	UK: <i>Financial Times</i> . Serbia: <i>EM-Portal, E-novine, Biznis novine, B92, Danas, FHM Serbia, RTV</i>	2008–10
Silaski and Durovic (2011)	UK, Serbia	Print and online newspapers	UK: <i>Financial Times</i> . Serbia: <i>Politika, EM-Portal, Glas javnosti, Blic, Věcernje novosti, E-novine, Biznis novine, Borba, B92, Dnevnik, Danas</i>	2007–10
Slintáková (2010)	Germany, Czech Republic	Print magazines	Germany: <i>Euro</i> Czech Republic: <i>Euro</i>	2009
Soddemann (2013)	Germany	Newspapers (online editions)	<i>Bild, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Der Spiegel, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Zeit</i>	2008–09
Steinert (2010)	Germany	Newspapers (online and print editions)	<i>Heute, Der Spiegel, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung</i>	2008–10
Wang, Runtsova, and Chen (2013)	UK, Russia	Newspapers (online editions), online magazines	UK: <i>The Economist, The Guardian</i> Russia: <i>Izvestia.ru, Newsru.com, informiruem.ru, ressos.info, eg-online.ru, fin-izvestia.ru</i>	2007–09

These two categories of metaphors depict the crisis, and the economy as a whole, as a biological body that can get sick and be affected by pathogenic organisms, or as a natural system in which storms, earthquakes, and the like can occur. I argue that these metaphors are not politically neutral, but, on the contrary, implicitly promote an idea—typically neoliberal and reflecting economic alienation—of the markets as nature-like entities. I specifically examine the metaphors of the economic crisis as a disease, while I then consider the ones representing the crisis as a natural disaster. In my conclusions, I discuss how these metaphors convey a representation of the crisis that absolves some actors, blames others, and promotes as obvious the neoliberal account of the economy and the markets.

Metaphorical depictions of economic crises as diseases and as natural disasters are not new: As Besomi (2011) shows, medical metaphors of the crisis were common in the 19th century. Not unlike now, they represented crises as illnesses originating from interferences, often of a political nature. Metaphors of the crisis as a natural disaster were also frequently used (Besomi, 2014): Crises were compared with tempests leaving behind them distress and devastation, but also to storms clearing the air from insolvent companies. Both usages, as we shall see, are still common today.

The Prevalent Metaphors of the 2008 Economic Crisis

Since 2008, several studies have focused on the metaphors of the last economic crisis. In Table 1, I provide a list (complete, to the best of my knowledge, although limited to papers published in English, German, and Spanish) of the studies that, through the analysis of media corpuses, present findings on the metaphors mostly used to portray the 2008 crisis.

The studies listed in the table above analyze publications as diverse as, for example, the centrist newspaper *The Times*, the left-wing daily *The Guardian*, the neoliberal newspaper *The Economist*; tabloids such as *The Sun* or *Bild*, financial newspapers as *The Wall Street Journal*, and lifestyle magazines as *FHM*; the cultural-geographic areas covered range from the United States to Southern and Northern Europe and the former Eastern bloc. Such heterogeneity seems to defeat, or at least make very questionable, our purpose to carry out a conceptual meta-analysis building on the results of the papers devoted to discovering the metaphors mostly used to depict the 2008 crisis. However, a recurring finding of these studies is a marked uniformity in the categories of metaphors used to represent the crisis. The metaphors of the crisis as a disease and as a natural disaster, in the vast majority of cases, were among the five prevalent categories of metaphors, often coming first or second, regardless of the geographic context or the kind of media analyzed: see, for example, Silaski and Durovic (2010, 2011), for Britain and Serbia; Wang, Runtsova, and Chen (2013), for Britain and Russia; Pühringer and Hirte (2013), for the German-speaking area; Joris, d'Haenens, and Van Gorp (2014), for the Low Countries, and, most notably, Arrese and Varas-Miguel (2016), for countries as diverse as Spain, Italy, Greece, Finland, The Netherlands, and Britain. We think, therefore, that the systematizing implications of our intent are justified, and even called for, by the fact that there is “an implicit logic of certain general categories that emerge as dominant,” as Arrese (2015; p. 25) observes in his extensive comparative analysis (the studies considered by Arrese’s review are the ones that, in the table above, appear in italicized text). Overall, the prevalent categories of metaphors, writes Arrese (2015), “are (1) health and disease; (2) natural events and disasters; (3) events around artefacts and constructions; (4) wars and clashes; (5) sports, games, and entertainment; and (6) actions

and situations of living beings” (pp. 24–25). Other studies not reviewed by Arrese (2015), listed in regular text in the table above, confirm his results (Bickes, Otten, & Weymann, 2014; Cardini, 2014; Pühringer & Hirte, 2015; Rizzoli, Romaioli, & Contarello, 2017; Silaski & Durovic, 2011). Because of differing methodologies and theoretical frameworks of reference, the data presented in all these papers cannot be quantitatively aggregated to determine with numerical precision to what extent the naturalistic metaphors that are the focus of this article prevail over the others. We are, nonetheless, dealing with a substantial quantitative dominance. The most marked differences, evident especially between Northern and Southern Europe, do not concern the categories of metaphors used in the media, but rather the more or less positive connotations of the images they evoke (e.g., as we shall see, natural disasters or diseases as unforeseeable events, versus the same events as deriving from culpable negligence).

Very few studies deal with the issue of possible variations in the use or weight of metaphors depending on the political positioning of the media included in their corpus. Usually, moreover, they only consider media holding moderate political orientations (from center-right to center-left), due to their higher diffusion, and leave aside the extremes constituted by the far-right and the far-left. From 2008 to 2013, the neoliberal narrative was hegemonic on the whole moderate political and media spectrum, while only being rejected by the political extremes (Mercille, 2015); hence, it is arguable that in far-right and far-left media, the naturalistic metaphors of the crisis—implying the neoliberal view of markets as natural entities—would be less common. However, only one study, to the best of my knowledge, also includes in its corpus a newspaper positioned on a political extreme (the communist-leaning Italian daily *Il Manifesto*). As this study shows (Rizzoli et al., 2017), *Il Manifesto* depicted the economic crisis as an illness much less frequently than its moderate counterparts, with the very close exception of *La Repubblica*. However, among the four Italian newspapers considered in the study (the other three were the centrist newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*, the center-right daily *Il Giornale*, and *La Repubblica*, whose left-wing orientation increasingly leaned toward centrist positions the more the crisis progressed), *Il Manifesto* ranked second, after *Il Giornale*, as to the use of metaphors representing the crisis as a natural disaster. Hypotheses to explain this ambivalent finding were not attempted in the study, nor can be formulated without accessing its unprocessed data. Overall, further empirical studies would be needed on the use or weight of metaphors depending on the political positioning of specific media.

Before proceeding to my meta-analysis, it must also be observed that both the media and the political context relevant to this article have changed remarkably in recent years: In the early years of the last economic crisis (which are also the focus of the studies considered here—see Table 1), the majority of political leaders and media adopted neoliberal narratives to explain the crisis and propose ways to address it (Mercille, 2015; Temple, Grasso, Buraczynska, Karampampas, & English, 2016). In the following period, up to today, the situation has partially changed in both the political and the media landscape. Although the neoliberal narrative is far from disappeared, public opinion is less and less convinced by it, as shown by the rise, from 2013, of antiestablishment political parties and movements sharing the opposition to neoliberal policies and to the political class that supported them. Generally referred to as populist, these new political forces are usually very heterogeneous, as Jones (2020) convincingly shows with reference to Italy and the UK. Their rise has gone hand in hand with the increasing diffusion of the Internet; recourse to Web-based communication has in many cases been crucial to the success of these new parties and movements. Unlike what was still happening in the period that is the focus of this article, nowadays the power of framing issues

and setting the agenda no longer belongs mainly to traditional news media, hierarchically organized, vertically oriented, and fairly homogeneous as to their priorities and orientations. As of today, new narratives and counternarratives are continuously built and diffused on the Internet, through a heterogeneous, broad array of communication sites, both horizontal and vertical (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2014). The “public agenda” gets transformed into “a world of agendas” (McCombs et al., 2014, p. 787), as audience members blend together media agendas from various communication sites, mixing them with their personal views and cognitions into a coherent picture of events (“agendamelding”; see Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2019, p. 182). Moreover, in today’s media environment, the themes and attributes that make up media agendas are not univocally ordered from above; as in a network, different associations between the messages that constitute agendas are possible, and content is often transposed from one agenda to another (“networked agenda;” see McCombs et al., 2014, p. 782). In this decentered context, it is much easier to construct and disseminate counternarratives: Consequently, political and economic narratives multiply, as well as the metaphors associated with them (Valdivia, 2019).

Naturalistic Metaphors, Alienation, and Ideology

The metaphors of the economic crisis deriving from the domain of natural disaster, as well as those originating from the domain of illness, imply a view of the economy as a natural entity. It can be portrayed in the terms of a biological body vulnerable to illnesses (e.g., “The *patient* is not responding. Liquidity *infusions*, co-ordinated rate cuts, state-sponsored bank bail-outs—nothing seems to be working. The London market is in *cardiac arrest*”; as cited in Silaski & Durovic, 2010, p. 135), or as an environment that may be subject to earthquakes, floods, hurricanes: “The Asian financial crisis acted like a *tsunami* in *swallowing up* many uncompetitive companies” (as cited in Silaski & Durovic, 2011, p. 237).

An understanding of the economy as a natural organism is typical of the neoliberal perspective. Neoliberalism depicts the market as “a neutral and natural institution, apolitical and ahistorical” (Chaudhry, 1993, p. 246), to the point that, in the writings of old and neoliberals, countless references can be found to the “natural laws of economics” (see Turner, 2008, p. 34). From the beginning,

the market was put forward not only as an expression of human nature but in fact as a manifestation of the natural world and its physical order. It was akin to gravity and operated in the same law-like way of the planet’s rotation. (Bloom, 2017, p. 166)

As Keith Joseph (1975) proclaimed, “Markets are a state of nature which has spontaneously evolved, and to disregard their rules is as pointless as attempting to ignore the laws of gravity” (pp. 19–20, as cited in Turner, 2008, p. 115). The role of human beings, in the face of markets governed by natural laws, is to study these unchangeable laws to better conform to them. According to neoliberalism, the natural laws of the markets should be left free to unfold so that markets can spontaneously reach and maintain their natural equilibrium; these laws prescribe maximum freedom of private initiative, private ownership, and competition. In today’s Western societies, letting the laws of the markets unfold freely means promoting deregulation, privatization, cuts in welfare and public spending, and increasing the role of the private sector in all areas of social life, even those furthest from the market, such as education and health. Every sphere of society should be brought under the control of the market, because only in this way every social domain

can be managed efficiently; or—as the critics of neoliberalism argue—only in this way from every social domain can derive profits for companies and individuals already wielding positions of structural advantage in society, usually to the detriment of the most vulnerable. The natural order of economics is, for neoliberalism, also a moral order. It presupposes, enhances and rewards the moral values of personal initiative, self-sufficiency, and industriousness. Economic success is the only proof, for the individual, of possessing these qualities. The unsuccessful are undeserving of help: Cuts to the welfare state are thus justified as cuts to assistentialism, because needing help is in itself disgraceful, while offering help means not stimulating others to autonomously take care of themselves (see Bloom 2017; Dardot & Laval, 2014).

The metaphors of the crisis deriving from the field of disease, as well as those originating from the domain of natural disasters, are based on a dualism: both contrast a state of “normality,” of calm and health, with a state of “deviation from normality,” turmoil or pathology (Pühringer & Hirte, 2015). Equilibrium is implicitly postulated as the physiological and natural state of markets, just like health is the normal state of the body and a temperate climate is normal at the latitudes of the Western world. The interference of pathogenic microorganisms causes diseases, and the arrival of cold currents from afar causes weather disruptions, just as external interventions on free markets cause crises and upset the existing natural and biological equilibrium. The only permitted—and even necessary—interventions are the ones finalized at reestablishing, in times of crisis, the lost equilibrium of markets through measures of a technical nature, prescribed by experts on the basis of their superior knowledge of the laws of the economy.

Markets, however, are not natural entities; they are human creations. Starting from Marx (see, in particular, Marx & Engels, 1988, pp. 53–54), the mainstream view of the economy has been criticized, not least as reflecting and furthering alienation. Alienation is the phenomenon whereby forms of social organization created by human beings to satisfy their collective needs, in front of their own creators, become extraneous forces apparently regulated by necessary and unchangeable laws, to which human beings cannot but adapt themselves. The products of human activity, susceptible of being modified and transformed by their creators, are then perceived

as if they were something other than human products—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. Man, the producer of a world, is apprehended as its product, and human activity as an epiphenomenon of non-human processes. Human meanings are no longer understood as world-producing but as being, in their turn, products of the “nature of things.” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, pp. 106–107)

The naturalistic metaphors of the economic crisis reflect the neoliberal perspective of markets governed by nature-like laws to which human beings must abide. To this understanding of the economy, with the deeply unequal distribution of power and opportunities it implies, it is possible to oppose an alternative view: The economy is a human cooperative enterprise, built to achieve ends for the benefit of everyone. As a means to the end of increasing the well-being of all, the economy can be directed, transformed, and modified to better adapt it to democratically determined finalities. These finalities, moreover, must coexist with a broader set of social values, including social solidarity and cohesion as well as responsibility toward the natural environment.

During the last economic crisis, however, not least through the metaphors that are the focus of this article, the neoliberal doctrine was presented to the public as *the* understanding of the economy. Through metaphors, specific narratives of a given phenomenon can be proposed, without the need to present arguments to justify one's perspective and, above all, without it appearing as *just one perspective* among others: "Conventional conceptual metaphors construct and reproduce ideologies, and justify or reproduce certain behaviours" (Goatly, 1997, p. 30). Alienation and ideology, in the metaphors of the crisis as a disease and as a natural disaster, go hand in hand: These metaphors implicitly communicate, as it were self-evident, an idea of markets as natural organisms, to whose laws human beings must adapt, without contesting either them or the power relations that they generate. Alienation and ideology, in turn, are the best allies of power: They conceal (by making them appear neutral, natural, and necessary) the socially generated power relations, shielding them from possible oppositions and objections.

The Economic Crisis as a Disease

The domain of illness is one of the most effective on which to model a narrative of the economic crisis to communicate it to the public through metaphors. Illness is a universal experience, and one that touches on our deepest fears and sufferings. Through metaphors of the crisis as an illness, the economic crisis is represented as a fearsome disease, full of terrible consequences, and at the same time impossible for everyone to neglect or ignore. The metaphors based on the source domain of health and disease, just like the ones representing the crisis as a natural disaster, were used in the media to convey two different narratives of the 2008 crisis. In the first narrative I will consider, the crisis is represented as an illness that strikes unexpectedly, a misfortune that hits without reason. Here, the ancient trope of the indifference of natural forces to human destiny is applied indiscriminately to the economic crisis. No one is to blame for the crisis—certainly not the economic system, whose physiological condition is that of equilibrium (health), but neither the political and economic ruling classes: Everyone was taken by surprise by a dramatic and unpreventable event. In this narrative, the causes of the crisis/disease are often left undetermined. All we know about it is that the pathology erupted suddenly and unpredictably: "The financial crisis was a *shock*" (as cited in Pühringer & Hirte, 2015, p. 617).

In this narrative, just like nobody is responsible, so we are all in this together: The crisis, like a disease, makes no distinctions, affects everyone, and everyone in the same way. Actually, in contexts characterized by structural inequalities, the most economically advantaged have a greater chance of defending themselves against financial crises and recovering from their effects (Dotti Sani & Magistro, 2016), and the same applies to illnesses (Budrys, 2010). Through the metaphors used in the media, also the decisions taken to face the economic crisis are narrated as if they were the necessary and inevitable results of an illness, affecting all in the same way and independently of human responsibilities: "Like in a *fever attack* . . . 650,000 people were thrown on the street" (as cited in Pühringer & Hirte, 2015, p. 616).

While this narrative of the crisis as a disease can present with such fatalistic coldness the dramatic happenings of hundreds of thousands of people, it sometimes makes room for a more compassionate treatment of . . . the markets: "The patient cannot usually be blamed for being ill. Preserved in the metaphorical mapping, this may serve as a convenient excuse for enterprises asking for injections of public capital" (Boers & Demecheleer, 1997, p. 124).

In a different narrative, the focus is instead on the reasons and the responsibilities for the crisis/illness itself. The economic crisis is depicted as an epidemic coming from afar, for which everyone should have been prepared and for whose eruption someone is responsible. Today, we are used to the recurring outbreak of global epidemics, among which the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is just the latest, most dramatic episode: The economic crisis, portrayed as coming from America or Asia, or Greece, is represented as yet another virus (Peckham, 2013): "It is like *an airborne virus* that can change direction with the wind, and *infect* countries that least expect it" (as cited in Bickes et al., 2014, p. 431).

In the context of this narrative, the metaphors of the crisis as an illness usually communicate that the free market economy, in itself, is healthy: "The *patient* is *robust*, simply because market economies are in general robust systems" (as cited in Pühringer & Hirte, 2015, p. 17). Any organism, however, if confronted with too powerful a virus that others have not strived hard enough to contain, can get sick. Of course, the fault is often of other states or previous governments that did not provide sufficient protection against a possible infection or that behaved in ways that, without further explanation or investigation, are condemned as unhealthy: "Policymakers tolerated and encouraged by their actions a massive surge in private and public debt and spending that *has now left the economy enfeebled*" (as cited in Silaski & Durovic, 2010, p. 134).

This message easily resonates with the collective imagery. The discourse on health today is increasingly focused on prevention: Not taking care of one's health is seen as irrational; not getting vaccinated is considered as downright immoral, since it endangers the health of others as well as one's own. Likewise, states that behaved "unhealthily" in the years prior to the crisis (e.g., through high public deficit spending), are now portrayed as irrational and immoral. They, weakened in their bodies, were easily infected by the crisis coming from afar, or, worse, they aroused it, thus becoming dangerous and contagious for everyone. The theme of "contagion" is recurrent: "Greece will need to restructure its public debt coercively, *with contagion to the rest of the eurozone periphery now a serious risk*" (as cited in Arrese & Vara-Miguel, 2016, p. 145).

In this context, it is easy for the political and economic elites to say that, if the infection has also affected their country despite all precautions, it is because the force of the contagion had by now become unstoppable. The actual causes of the crisis are not investigated in depth; the rhetoric of the infection functions, to all intents and purposes, as a substitute for explanation, which pretends to explain, but, in reality, explains nothing. According to this narrative, to provoke an economic crisis, it is sufficient to go against the laws regulating economic organisms, just as, to fall ill, it is sufficient to contravene the biological and natural laws regulating our body. Some metaphors of the financial crisis as an illness, therefore, imply that "organizations, enterprises, etc., should take care not to endanger their health. To convince them that certain policies are economically harmful, those policies can be likened to health hazards (e.g., alcohol)" (Boers & Demecheleer, 1997, p. 124). The hangover metaphor is common: "After the party comes the *hangover* and, as the market is finding out, the bigger the party, the worse the *hangover*" (as cited in Wang et al., 2013, p. 278).

Usually, however, the crisis is depicted not as a simple hangover, but as an unspecified serious, highly contagious disease. The metaphor of the economic contagion has spread in the media throughout the world in an epidemic-like fashion. The Eurozone's sickness, in particular, is depicted as originating from the so-called Greek crisis, so that "the metaphorical virus is presented as if it emanated from Greece and now infects the rest

of Europe" (Bickes et al., 2014, p. 431): "The greater risk facing Europe's financial system would be if *contagion* spreads beyond Greece" (as cited in Bickes et al., 2014, p. 431).

Controversial economic assessments have, at times, been combined with illegitimate and outrageous moral judgments of particular Eurozone states and their citizens, as it sometimes still happens in the case of people suffering from certain illnesses: these people are regarded as if "they have allowed themselves to fall ill; they have ignored the moral prescriptions of society and are paying the consequences" (Lupton, 2003, p. 98). While the political and economic ruling classes absolve themselves from every responsibility by claiming that they have implemented all the necessary preventive measures, the finger is pointed at the states (and often also at the social classes) hardest hit by the economic crisis, which are blamed for its outbreak or propagation. Such a narrative has been used—sometimes successfully—to evoke feelings of collective guilt in the citizens of the states accused of not having taken sufficient care of their economic health, and, in this way, to minimize opposition toward austerity policies (Kyriakopoulos, 2011).

Cultural stereotypes and prejudices are often associated with the accusation toward specific countries of having contributed to the propagation or the outbreak of the economic crisis: On the whole, not least through metaphors portraying the crisis as a contagious disease, discourses in European media about the crisis often "echo old stereotypes, with 'Northern Europe' assumed to be powerful, wealthy and virtuous, while the 'South' is stigmatized as poor, idle and potentially dangerous" (Breeze, 2014, p. 256). Occasionally, the metaphors used in some tabloids and newspapers of Northern European countries conjure the figure of the plague spreader: "A suggestion appears that exposure to 'Southern Europe' is itself dangerous: other countries have to recover from being 'exposed' to Southern Europe, and France and Germany run the risk of being 'dragged down' by contact with it" (Breeze, 2014, p. 256). In reaction to these stereotypes and prejudices, just as many stereotypes and prejudices against Northern European peoples have spread in Southern Europe (Bickes et al., 2014; Mylonas, 2012): All this, of course, seriously damages the cohesion and strength of the European Union.

There is no doubt that within the same economic area the markets of individual countries can influence each other. The reasons for the crisis, however, cannot be blamed on individual states, and especially on their ordinary citizens, abstracting thereby from the responsibilities of transnational economic and political leaders, banks, financial markets, and speculators. Nevertheless, the metaphors of the crisis as a disease have frequently been used to blame the states that had to pay the most dearly for the crisis. According to the neoliberal narrative of the crisis, those who have fallen ill through their negligence and moral fault, thus becoming agents of contagion, must be brought back on the right path with due severity. The drastic austerity programs imposed in particular on Greece, with their disastrous consequences on the economy and society of that country (Karanikolos & Kentikelenis, 2016; Mitrakos, 2014), are the best expression of the will to restore the natural order by punishing and moralizing the transgressors: "Illness comes from imbalance. Treatment is aimed at restoring the right balance—in political terms, the right hierarchy" (Sontag, 1978, p. 77).

Here, too, metaphors intervene to support the zealous doctors of the economy. Conceptualizing economy as a sick organism, maintains Charteris-Black, creates "an important illusion among economists that they have control over events, and this reflects in the doctor-patient metaphor system" (as cited in Wang et al., 2013, p. 275). The narrative of the crisis as an illness spreading through contagion, then, often also involves

the reference to the “doctors” of the economy, the experts designated to restore the equilibrium of the market in accordance with its laws:

Yesterday the ECB merely applied a *plaster* to the *wound*, thus stopping the *bleeding* for a short while. But that’s no more than *first aid*. To stop the *hemorrhage* once and for all a *more drastic intervention* is required. The *wound* needs to be *stitched*, the sooner the better, and that is a job for the European heads of government. Otherwise the *blood* will soon begin to *ooze* through the *plaster*. (as cited in Joris et al., 2014, p. 613)

The metaphors of the crisis based on the source domain of disease, differently from the ones representing the crisis as a natural disaster, often evoke interventionist policies of the ordoliberal kind (O’Mara-Shimek, Guillén-Parra, & Ortega-Larrea, 2015): In the face of illness, therapy must be administered to reestablish the lost equilibrium. Through metaphors, the patient’s instinctive trust in the doctor transitions to members of nonelected technocratic bodies, designated to prescribe remedies for the economic crisis. One must have faith in the therapies and not question them, however onerous they may be: “Yet without *painful surgery*, there is a real danger that the *arteries* of finance may soon clog” (as cited in Wang et al., 2013, p. 278).

Under the pretext of a serious disease and the need for urgent intervention, democratic procedures are often bypassed and, in this way, political alienation adds up to economic alienation: If markets are natural organisms regulated by their own laws, all that is needed is a technical knowledge of these laws. The economy, which *also* includes technical aspects, is reduced to a matter of *purely* technical choices. A technical expertise prescribes the measures to be applied, while portraying itself as neutral and objective (Habermas, 1971, 2015; Horkheimer, 1976). Political and economic oligarchies, therefore, get to decide fundamental issues for the lives of citizens, while ordinary people are left to pay for the responsibilities of economic leaders, governments, banks, and speculators.

The Economic Crisis as a Natural Disaster

Just like pandemics, natural disasters today are a global issue and a dramatic reality in the lives of many people. It is not surprising, therefore, that the second predominant metaphors of the economic crisis take as their source domain the sphere of natural disasters. Natural disasters evoke feelings of fear and helplessness. In recent years, the awareness of our vulnerability to the forces of nature has increased to the point that, in our collective perception, the paradigm of vulnerability to nature has replaced the one of challenge and domination of the natural environment (Furedi, 2007). With the growth of environmental consciousness, our awareness of human responsibilities for natural disasters has also become clearer and clearer. Like those based on the source domain of illness, the metaphors of the crisis as a natural disaster are used to promote two different narratives. In the first one, they are a device aimed at absolving the political and economic elites by presenting the crisis as a sudden and unpredictable event: “No one could foresee . . . that credit derivatives would kick off such an *economic tsunami*” (as cited in Pühringer & Hirte, 2015, p. 616). This narrative, just like the corresponding one carried out through the metaphors of the crisis as an illness, evokes the trope of nature’s indifference to human destinies. Its finality is to explain the crisis away as a natural event, of which, by definition, no one in particular can be held responsible, not even the market economy: Markets are equated to usually calm seas, that can be perturbed by the occasional storm.

One of the prevailing cognitive patterns in this narrative is the one called, in disaster studies, the scheme of trauma: "When we perceive disaster through the cognitive scheme of the trauma we focus on the wound (in Greek τραύμα, 'trauma') that the violent event inflicts on the human psyche" (Holm, 2012, p. 25). Through the metaphors deriving from the source domain of natural disaster, it is suggested that the crisis is going to cause pain and leave behind death and destruction: In this way, fear and resignation are instilled in people about what is going to happen, making it more difficult for social suffering to turn into protest and opposition. By the same token, the narrative of the economic crisis as a natural disaster often implies that we are, sometimes literally, all in the same boat: "The European Union risks becoming *like the Titanic*, with most classes of passengers drowning" (as cited in Bickes et al., 2014, p. 429).

This way of framing the issue is part of an ideological narrative aimed at concealing structural social inequalities and at making unpopular decisions more acceptable to people: These decisions are presented as forced by circumstances that are difficult and painful for everyone to bear, or as necessarily descending from events outside everyone's control. It is usually the poorest and most disadvantaged, however, who pay the hardest price for nature-induced destruction, as well as for man-induced crises (Hartman & Squires, 2006; Kahn, 2005). This narrative of the crisis often goes hand in hand with the prescription to weather the storm and wait for it to pass: "Anleger können im kommenden Jahr bestenfalls auf den Übergang von *rauer See* in *ruhigeres Gewässer* hoffen [At best, investors can hope for the transition from *rough seas* to *calmer waters* in the coming year]" (as cited in Slintáková, 2010, p. 68). The recurring economic crises are presented as facts of nature, to be accepted just as we accept changes in the weather: "Banks, insurers and building societies will have to dramatically overhaul how they assess their ability to *weather another financial storm* under proposals put forward by the Financial Services Authority" (as cited in Silaski & Durovic, 2011, p. 234).

Just like the metaphors representing the crisis as an illness, however, the ones deriving from the source domain of natural disaster also lend themselves to an additional narrative, aimed at blaming some actors while absolving others. The focus, here, is on prevention and risk management of natural disasters, while the cognitive scheme borrowed from disaster studies is that of risk, "relevant whenever we address disasters in terms of chance and precautionary principles" (Holm, 2012, p. 25). It is everyone's responsibility to be foresighted and ready to react, to safeguard themselves and others against natural disasters: "It's like an *avalanche*: it begins with a small *snowball*, but if you don't build a wall, the *snowball* becomes bigger and bigger" (as cited in Joris et al., 2014, p. 613).

The metaphor of the avalanche implies that the snowslide should have been stopped near its origin, before spreading devastation. The responsibility for the spread of the crisis, therefore, lies first and foremost with the states closest to its source, at fault for not having been provident and not having secured their economies. In this narrative of the crisis, the recurring trope is that of the grasshopper, improvident toward the coming rigors of winter, and the wise and hardworking ant. An economic journalist from *The Financial Times* even referred directly to Aesop's fable, making its modern protagonists explicit: "Today, the ants are Germans, Chinese and Japanese, while the grasshoppers are American, British, Greek, Irish and Spanish" (Wolf, 2010, para. 2). This framing of the economic crisis often also contrasts Southern and Northern Europe:

Although “Southern countries” are now “mired in recession” and “wrestling with debt,” we are also reminded that “Southern Europeans” formerly “basked in a sea of cheap credit,” thus activating associations of comfort, leisure and overindulgence liable to provoke envy and righteous indignation on the part of those who, by implication, have worked hard and spent within their budgets. (Breeze, 2014, p. 256)

A further cognitive scheme adopted from disaster studies is that of imbalance: “When we perceive disaster through the cognitive scheme of imbalance and sustainability, we focus on the imbalance between human and biophysical systems causing disaster” (Holm, 2012, p. 25). This scheme, initially developed by the ecological movement, is increasingly present in today’s perception of natural disasters and, of course, it is also transmitted to the domain of the economic crisis through metaphors: interferences in the markets by external actors (i.e., the state) cause imbalances, to the point that the economy, just like “nature fighting back,” reaffirms its laws and restores its equilibrium in a traumatic and destructive—but ultimately justified—way. Through this narrative, the markets are presented as natural entities governed by their own laws, the neoliberal doctrine of the minimum state is reaffirmed, the crisis resulting from private speculation finds its scapegoat in the public sector, and the suffering of the people affected by it is inscribed in a natural order rightfully administering punishment to the transgressors. Economically strong countries, as well as national and transnational political and economic elites, are often represented in the metaphors as rescuers from disaster, establishing “an image of heroic, good-natured, selfless and generous Euro countries showing solidarity and providing billions of euros out of their private capital to clear the debts of the needy and thus help the poor and helpless” (Bickes et al., 2014, p. 433): “Spanien soll den *Schutz des Rettungsschirms* EFSF anfordern—am besten schon am Wochenende [Spain shall request the *protection* of the EFSF *rescue umbrella*—best if at the weekend]” (as cited in Bickes et al., 2014, p. 433).

However, the rescue does not happen out of pure generosity. The rescued countries are asked to commit themselves to drastic austerity programs aimed at restoring the natural equilibrium of the market, at reaffirming political hierarchies and punishing their allegedly deplorable economic behavior. Austerity programs have had disastrous effects on the social and economic fabric of the “rescued” countries, as is by now recognized by several studies (Callan et al., 2011; Stiglitz, 2016). However, the citizens of the states subjected to austerity programs, who had to pay with their public money for the consequences of private speculation, had to find this out for themselves: More often than not, the effects of the crisis were presented, in the media, as the consequences of a nature-like event for which no one could be held responsible, or as the repercussions of a general lack of foresight toward nature-like disasters.

Conclusions

Metaphors, in political communication, are powerful tools. They, as we have seen, can frame issues so as to promote specific narratives and courses of action, and they can do so in an emotionally compelling way. Therefore, they can be used to communicate perspectives that promote justice as well as narratives aimed at deceiving and manipulating the public (Young, 2000). Metaphors are not the problem—the use that is made of them can be. To counteract deceptive and manipulative uses of metaphors, the only solution is to expose them, criticize them, decrypt them, reveal the narratives behind them, and finally to promote countervailing narratives, also (but not exclusively) through metaphors (Young, 2000). The present article

is intended as a contribution to this end. In it, I have undertaken a critical analysis of the two categories of metaphors of the economic crisis predominant in the media. I have shown that they implicitly communicate a particular view of the economy in accordance with the neoliberal perspective: The markets are natural organisms, the laws regulating the markets are natural laws; all that human beings can do is adapt their actions to these predetermined laws while being as farsighted as possible toward unexpected catastrophes. The naturalistic metaphors of the economic crisis are often used to promote an understanding of the latter that absolves political and economic elites, denies the responsibilities of banks, financial markets, and speculators, and legitimizes technocratic solutions to problems that should be subjected to informed debate and democratic decisions. Hence, they ideologically propagate an alienated reading of the economy, which favors the perpetuation of existing power relations.

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