

GIORGIO BORRELLI

Pandemic and Ideology.
For a Semiotics of Racist Discourse in the Pandemic Crisis

1. *Introduction*

In this section, I will start from the concept of ‘ideology’ as elaborated by the Italian semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1921-1985). Criticising the traditional Marxist-Engelsian meaning, Rossi-Landi¹ did not understand ideology as a mere state of ‘false consciousness’: rather, he highlights both its verbal-discursive character as well as its practical-teleological perspective. Particularly, starting from the semiotic model of Charles Morris (1901-1979), Rossi-Landi showed how ideological discourses operate on the ‘semantic dimension’² to structure the validity claims of their arguments, putting in place specific strategies of constructing truth. Analysing the relations between ideology, discourse and argumentation, *Critical Discourse Analysis*³ seem to have developed an approach convergent with that of Rossi-Landi⁴.

Furthermore, I will illustrate how Rossi-Landi’s semiotics of ideology can be completed with Colette Guillaumin’s (1934-2017) sociology of ‘race’; the reason of this research proposal lies in the fact that Guillaumin⁵

¹ See F. ROSSI-LANDI, *Ideologia*, Meltemi, Roma 2005² [Mondadori, Milano 1978¹].

² See C.W. MORRIS, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, in *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, ed. by O. Neurath, R. Carnap, C.W. Morris, vol. I, t. 2, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1938, pp. 1-59.

³ From now on CDA.

⁴ In this regard, see N. FAIRCLOUGH, *Language and Power*, Longman, Harlow 1989; M. REISIGL, R. WODAK, *The Discourse-Historical Approach*, in *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies (Introducing Qualitative Methods series)*, ed. by R. Wodak, M. Meyer, SAGE Publications, New York 2015, pp. 87-121; R. WODAK, M. MEYER, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, SAGE Publications, New York 2021.

⁵ In this regard see, C. GUILLAUMIN, *L'idéologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel*, Mouton, Paris-La Haye 1972; EAD., *Racism, Sexism, Power, and Ideology*, Routledge, London-New York 1995.

understands racist ideology – including racist behaviour – as a sign-system produced by social interpretative processes. From this perspective, Guillaumin's theses can provide a concrete scope of application for Rossi-Landi's theoretical framework.

Hypothesising a dialogue between Rossi-Landi's semiotics, Guillaumin's sociology of 'race' and CDA, this contribution will focus on the rhetorical-argumentative operations put in place by racist ideological discourse in the narration of the Covid-19 pandemic, with a particular reference to the African continent.

2. Rossi-Landi's materialistic semiotics and Critical Discourse Analysis

A general convergence between CDA and materialistic semiotics emerges on analysing the interrelation of two fundamental concepts: 'ideology' and 'discourse'. First of all, both approaches agree on the fact that ideology is characterised by a preeminent verbal dimension. According to Rossi-Landi, «ideology is false consciousness which has become *false thinking* by virtue of its translation into (verbal) *language*»⁶. Ideology is always present when a 'meaning making process' takes the shape of a certain theory or – more generally – the shape of a certain discourse⁷. This thesis seems quite similar to what Fairclough affirms in *Language and Power* (1989), when he maintains that «ideology is pervasively present in language»⁸.

⁶ F. ROSSI-LANDI, *Marxism and Ideology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1990, p. 130. *Marxism and Ideology* is the English translation by Roger Griffin of Rossi-Landi's monograph *Ideologia* (1978).

⁷ In this regard, a terminological clarification seems appropriate. Rossi-Landi adopts the noun 'language' – or the adjective 'linguistic' – referring to verbal sign systems, but he clarifies that such a term could refer implicitly also to non-verbal communication and nonverbal sign systems. Indeed, Rossi-Landi believes that verbal and non-verbal sign systems are both 'primary modelling systems', i.e. two manifestations of the human 'syntactical capacity' (see T.A. SEBEOK, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, University of Toronto Press, Buffalo-Toronto-London 2001, p. 149), the human capacity of generate, communicate and interpret meaningful signs in general (hence, non-verbal signs also). In this regard see, SEBEOK, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, cit. From such a perspective, the verbal and the nonverbal dimensions should be gathered under the umbrella-concept 'semiosis' – i.e. the general meaning-making process. Therefore, every 'linguistic' – i.e., 'verbal' – process should be necessarily understood as 'semiotic', but not every semiotic process is necessarily 'linguistic' – i.e., 'verbal'.

⁸ FAIRCLOUGH, *Language and Power*, cit., p. 3.

According to Rossi-Landi, ideology possesses a practical character: ideology is not mere contemplation, but it is «a purposeful project, a ‘teleological activity’ which affects the constitution of society as a whole»⁹. Therefore, ideology – considered at a general level of abstraction – is the ‘social teleology’ through which a society designs and justifies its own form of reproduction. More specifically, it is through peculiar forms of discursivity (i.e. religion, science, law, literature, and so on) that ideology organises everyday social interactions. Nevertheless, such an assumption does not exclude the possibility that ideology can present itself in certain non-verbal (e.g. artistic) forms (such as painting, sculpture, architecture, cinema and so on).

In a similar way, Fairclough underlines that the concept of ‘discourse’ presents a practical and teleological dimension; indeed, the term refers to all the «semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world (physical, social or mental) which can generally be identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors»¹⁰. Furthermore, according to Fairclough, CDA focuses on the «relations between discourse and other social elements (power relations, ideologies, institutions, social identities, and so forth)»¹¹.

In the light of all these assertions, it seems possible to affirm that both approaches agree on the fact that discourse and ideology are almost inseparable, being two connected aspects of the structuration of the social order.

It is possible to develop this theoretical convergence considering a further similarity: CDA and materialistic semiotics are both interested in analysing how certain (ideological) discourses establish their validity-claims, i.e. in analysing those meaning-making processes through which ideological discourses claim to assert the ‘truth’. In this regard, both approaches seem to converge on this background thesis: to justify its specific goals, and to persuade a certain audience of their validity, every ideology must structure its discourse according to specific argumentations. Indeed, no validity-claim can be raised outside an argumentative structure.

⁹ ROSSI-LANDI, *Marxism and Ideology*, cit., p. 281.

¹⁰ N. FAIRCLOUGH, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 2012, p. 4, available at https://www.academia.edu/3791325/Critical_discourse_analysis_2012_.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 1.

3. For a semiotics of ideology: Morris and Rossi-Landi

In the light of these considerations, it seems appropriate to introduce – very briefly – some fundamental assumptions of Rossi-Landi’s semiotics. Starting from his seminal monograph, *Il linguaggio come lavoro e come mercato* (1968)¹², Rossi-Landi developed a twofold line of investigation. On the one hand, he considered the Marxian dialectical method as a kind of semiotics *avant la lettre*. Although Marx did not elaborate a fully-fledged semiotics, his writings contain numerous references to fundamental concepts in semiotics such as ‘sign’ and ‘language’ and they anticipate certain theses developed by contemporary language theories. In a passage from *The German Ideology* (1846-1847), for example, language is defined as a constitutive element of «practical action»¹³, which lends itself to reinterpretation and re-elaboration in the frame of recent theories of linguistic performativity and communicative multimodality; or, again, in *Grundrisse* (1857-1858) Marx alludes to the impossibility of non-linguistic thought¹⁴, which is an assumption that can also be traced in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)¹⁵; another example is traceable in *Das Kapital* (1867), where Marx repeatedly emphasizes the ‘sign-like’ character of the commodity and of money¹⁶.

¹² For an in-depth analysis, please see the English translation of this Rossi-Landi’s monograph: *Language as Work and Trade. A Semiotic Homology for Linguistics & Economics*, Bergin & Garvey, South Hadley 1983.

¹³ «Language is as old as consciousness, language *is* practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it also exist for me». K. MARX, F. ENGELS, *The German Ideology. Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets*, in *Collected Works. Volume 5* (1976). *Marx and Engels 1845-47*, Lawrence & Wishart Electric Book, London 2010, p. 44.

¹⁴ «Language does not transform ideas, so that the peculiarity of ideas is dissolved and their social character runs alongside them as a separate entity, like prices alongside commodities. Ideas do not exist separately from language». K. MARX, *Grundrisse. Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by M. Nicolaus, Vintage Books, New York 1973, pp. 162-163.

¹⁵ «When I think in words, I don’t have ‘meanings’ in my mind in addition to the verbal expressions; rather, language itself is the vehicle of thought». L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, Blackwell, Oxford 2009 [1953¹], p. 113.

¹⁶ «Every commodity is a sign [*Zeichen*], since, as value, it is only the material envelope [*sachliche Hülle*] of the human labour expended on it». K. MARX, *Das Kapital. Volume I. Fourth Edition* (1890), trans. by H.G. Ehrbar, p. 191 (translation slightly modified by me), available at <http://content.csbs.utah.edu/~ehrbar/cap1.pdf>. For an in-depth analysis of this topic, see G. BORRELLI *Commodity-Form as Oppositional Structure. The Versus of a Social Relation*, in «Versus. VS», 127, n. 2, 2018, pp. 323-344; ID., *Ferruccio Rossi-Landi*.

The other line of research is based on an inverse path and consists in the possibility of reading Marxian categories through a semiotic lens. In particular, the semiotic model to which Rossi-Landi refers to is that of Charles Morris, inspired by Charles Sanders Peirce's (1839-1914) theory. And it is precisely the conceptual network forming the Marxian theory of ideology that will constitute for Rossi-Landi a field of application for Morrisian semiotics. Therefore, before analysing the semiotics of ideological discourse proposed by Rossi-Landi, it is appropriate to dwell – very quickly – on Morris's model.

Foundations of a Theory of Signs (1938) is the essay in which Morris elaborates the main theses of his model: the semiosis model. Semiosis is «the process in which something functions as sign»¹⁷. To describe such a process Morris constructs a set of special or technical terms, such as: 'sign vehicle', 'designatum', 'denotatum', 'interpretant', and 'interpreter'. Each of these terms expresses a relational property that a certain thing assumes «by participating in the functional process of semiosis»¹⁸. None of these terms refers to an ontological property, i.e. no object involved in this process is in itself a sign vehicle, a 'designatum', a 'denotatum', an interpreter or an interpretant.

Semiosis is an interpretative process which takes place every time a subject – the interpreter – infers that a certain object (a sign vehicle) is 'related', under a certain aspect (e.g. based on a causality relationship), with something else (a 'designatum'). In this case the first object is a sign vehicle of the other object. This particular relationship structures the 'semantic dimension' of semiosis. The interpreter generates an interpretant when he/she 'takes account of' the relation between the sign vehicle and the 'designatum'. This relationship defines the 'pragmatic dimension'. Finally, the 'syntactic dimension' coincides with the structure of logical and formal relationships between different sign-vehicles¹⁹. More specifically, this latter dimension accounts for the fact that every sign vehicle can be or – in all likelihood – is connected in some way with another sign vehicle; and since every sign vehicle is a part of the sign totality, syntactics can be said to be the dimension that concerns the way in which «potentially, if not actually, every sign has relation to other signs»²⁰. These three dimensions

Semiotica, economia e pratica sociale, Edizioni dal Sud, Bari 2020.

¹⁷ MORRIS, *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁸ See *ivi*, p. 4.

¹⁹ See *ivi*, pp. 13-21.

²⁰ See *ivi*, p. 7.

are contemporaneously involved in every process of semiosis, that is, every time a sign is generated and interpreted. The ‘meaning’ of the sign coincides with the system of relations between the three dimensions.

Taking account of the connection between sign vehicle and ‘designatum’, the interpreter expects that every time a certain sign vehicle appears in front of him/her, that vehicle should designate a class of certain objects²¹, or events. If the interpreter detects one member of the class at least, the sign vehicle has its ‘denotatum’. As Morris said, «to the degree that what is expected is found as expected the sign is confirmed»²². In this case, it can be possible to affirm that «signs are ‘true’ in so far as they correctly determine the expectations»²³ of their interpreters.

An example can clarify this latter assumption²⁴. Let us consider the utterance «there is a cat in the kitchen» as a sign vehicle. Let us assume that this utterance is syntactically correct: the sign-vehicles – and, at a higher semiotic level, the sign-totalities composing the utterance – are connected observing the formal rules of a given linguistic structure – in this case, the syntax and grammar of the English language. There is a possibility that a cat could actually be in the kitchen; such a possibility constitutes the ‘designatum’ of the utterance. Connecting that utterance (sign-vehicle) with that possibility (‘designatum’), the interpreter ‘expects’ that a cat could be in the kitchen, and this expectation coincides with the interpretant. If the interpreter finds a cat in the kitchen, then his/her expectation will be satisfied, and there will be a ‘denotatum’ for the possibility ‘designated by’ the sign vehicle. From such a perspective, the utterance should be considered as ‘true’.

In his 1978 monograph, *Ideologia [Ideology]*, Rossi-Landi applies Morris’s semiotic model to the study of ideological discourse, showing – as I mentioned in the introduction – how ideological discourses operate on the semantic dimension to structure the validity claims of their arguments, putting in place specific «self-validating strategies»²⁵, i.e. semiotic strategies of construction of ‘truth’. Starting from this consideration, in what follows I establish a connection between Rossi-Landi’s semiotics of ideology and

²¹ See *ivi*, p. 5.

²² See *ivi*, p. 33.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Rossi-Landi gives this example in a footnote (note 99, pp. 136-137) of the Italian translation (1954) of Morris’ *Foundations of the Theory of Sign*. Rossi-Landi is the Italian translator and editor of this work by Morris. See C.W. MORRIS, *Lineamenti di una teoria dei segni*, ed. and trans. by F. Rossi-Landi, Manni, Lecce 1999.

²⁵ ROSSI-LANDI, *Marxism and Ideology*, cit., p. 297.

Colette Guillaumin's sociology of 'race'. The reason for this theoretical proposal is the following: in her essay *L'idéologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel* (1972), Guillaumin defines the category of 'race' as a 'sign'; more specifically, race is the result of a social interpretative process. Reading Rossi-Landi and Guillaumin together, the concepts of 'sign', 'ideology' and 'race' circumscribe a research field for socio-semiotic analysis.

4. Rossi-Landi: ideologies as 'social teleologies'

As already said, ideology for Rossi-Landi is a linguistic-verbal and discursive phenomenon; ideology is discourse and does not exhaust itself in a purely contemplative or speculative attitude: rather, ideological discourse is a 'social teleology', «a purposeful project, a 'teleological activity' which affects the constitution of society as a whole»²⁶. Therefore, ideology – considered at a general level of abstraction – is the 'social teleology' through which a society designs and justifies its own form of reproduction.

Starting from this assumption, Rossi-Landi identifies «two basic types of social teleology which would appear to be irreducibly and implacably opposed to each other: the innovative or revolutionary type, or the conservative or reactionary type»²⁷. These two types of ideologies can be distinguished according to the way in which «they assert the validity of their discourse with respect to rival ones»²⁸.

Each social teleology aims to endow its discourse with a metalinguistic and self-referential character: to assert «its exclusive validity by making itself out to be more important, more objective, more representative than all other discourses»²⁹, each social teleology must establish a relationship «between the discourse and *reality* (whatever it is)»³⁰. Particularly, what distinguishes the two teleologies is the relationship they establish between discourse and the historical process: this relation «must be expressed either as something which transcends socio-historical conditioning or as something which does not yet exist but will come about in the future»³¹.

Conservative social teleologies obviously favour a static vision of his-

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 281.

²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 276.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ivi*, p. 306.

³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 307.

³¹ *Ibid.*

torical time, basing their discourse precisely on the preservation of the past: a society is designed to be removed from the historical process and «in order to justify or mystify this subterfuge that conservative ideologies are forced to behave as if they were at least partially non-ideological»³². Society is imagined as an «ultimate end»³³ determined by its own laws, an 'end' that would not need any form of design or planning to realise itself. Thus, conservative teleology bases the validity claims of its discourse on extra-historical reasons.

On the contrary, innovative teleology considers it impossible for any society to be realised independently of specific programming. The ideological discourse based on extra-historical reasons is countered by the idea that a different society can only be founded 'infra-historically', i.e. founded «not on what has been but on what could be if we succeed in evolving a new social teleology and in realizing it by means of appropriate programmes of social transformation»³⁴. From this perspective, Morris's semiotics allows Rossi-Landi to show how conservative and revolutionary ideological teleologies, by establishing a relationship between 'discourse' and 'reality', operate differently on the semantic-denotative dimension of semiotic processes, constructing different strategies to present the 'objects' of their discourse as 'true'. Particularly, the relationship between discourse and reality is established through certain semiotic operations: the removal from socio-historical conditioning or the reference to the future.

By adopting Morris's conceptual framework, Rossi-Landi explains that a given social teleology can carry out these 'removals' or 'references' by operating on the 'semantic dimension' of discourse, that is, «by operating on the relationships between the semiotic carrier and the 'signified' (in the technical semiotic sense, not in the generic one of meaning something), between the semiotic carrier and what it denotes, and furthermore, between the signs and their connotations»³⁵.

From a general point of view, operating on the semantic dimension means establishing «the conditions in which the named and described objects exist»³⁶ and presenting «the very objects of the discourse [...] as removed from the sphere of socio-historical conditioning»³⁷. Thus, the

³² *Ivi*, p. 276.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 277.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 307.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

semantic removal of the constituent objects of discourse from social-historical conditioning is an obligatory step for any kind of design. The point is to understand how discourse proceeds from that removal: it can stop, or it can compensate for it. It is this different operation on the semantic level that distinguishes conservative from revolutionary design. I try to explain this assumption.

Conservative teleology semantically removes the objects of its discourse in order to affirm their extra-historical, i.e. «solely natural or supra historical»³⁸ – namely, metaphysical or transcendent – foundations; conservative ideology wants to affirm «that there are denotative meanings of words which have been arrived at, and hence are valid for ever more; it thus means, ipso jure, the ‘really existing’ objects denoted in the discourse have somehow transcended the sphere in which external condition factors operate»³⁹. Conservative social teleology, therefore, does not merely stably construct «a clearly delimited discourse or a special language within the framework of which it is possible, by carrying out rigorous and repeatable operations, to identify particular objects of thought»⁴⁰; instead, conservative social teleology posits those same objects as «the ultimate objects and objectives, the building-blocks of the reality, of something which is supposed to be independent of any discourse and special language»⁴¹. In this way, conservative ideology eliminates the interpreter from the process of semiosis.

There is no need for an interpreter who takes account of – that is, who interpret – the relationship between sign vehicles and designata, because there is no need to verify the possibility of a certain denotation: denotation is always ensured, because conservative ideology posits its signs as self-denotative. The utterances of conservative ideology do not refer to something ‘possible’ – i.e. ‘potential’ – but to something transcendent, i.e. something ‘true’ irrespective of what the interpreter can verify; these utterances derive their validity directly from this transcendence; thus, the utterances of conservative discourse are not subject to possibility or uncertainty.

On the contrary, revolutionary social teleology understands the semantic removal as a subtraction of discourse «from the conditioning influence of the past»⁴²; the validity claim of discourse is projected towards and «belongs

³⁸ *Ivi*, p. 308.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 309.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 308.

to the future»⁴³. Discourse is «not yet conditioned»⁴⁴ by self-denotative signs and ultimate objects. In this case, semantic removal constitutes only a preliminary operation: discourse can find its foundation, its ‘completion’, in a ‘reference to what is to be done’ – or, ‘verified’. Rossi-Landi calls this type of self-validation «*infrahistorical* because it is free from any impulse to take refuge in the solely natural or the supra historical. In this context there are no ultimate objects to be juggled away from the process of history – or rather the ultimate objective is only one in the provisional sense of belonging to the future»⁴⁵. In the next paragraph I introduce the fundamental theses of Guillaumin’s critique of racist ideology. In paragraph 6, I illustrate how Rossi-Landi’s semiotic model can contribute to frame Guillaumin’s analyses in a semiotic perspective.

5. *Guillaumin: race as sign, racism as ideology*

In *Caractères spécifiques de l’idéologie raciste* (1972), Guillaumin outlines her interpretation of ideology: «ideology [...] is the mode of apprehension of reality shared by a whole culture, to the point where it becomes omnipresent and, for that very reason, goes unrecognized»⁴⁶. In this regard, a point of convergence with Rossi-Landi’s theory can be identified: according to Guillaumin, ideology coincides with the «realm where behaviour patterns have not yet evolved beyond being simple mental schemata, the realm in which, well before any explicit theory (which is only the final stage in the process), the specific organization of perceptions within a given culture comes about»⁴⁷; therefore, the ideological level does not restrict itself to a purely speculative – i.e. theoretical – attitude, but it «covers the complete set of meanings, whether empirical or doctrinal, which direct social behaviour»⁴⁸. Thus, we can assume that ideology constitutes a set of meanings orienting behaviours and practical actions.

Still there are further points of contact between Guillaumin and Rossi-Landi. Guillaumin defines ‘race’ «not as a biological reality, but as

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ GUILLAUMIN, *Racism, Sexism, Power, and Ideology*, cit., p. 35.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 32.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

a biological form used as a SIGN»⁴⁹. Though Guillaumin does not offer an explicit definition of 'sign', based on her discourse I think it's safe to assume that her reference is to the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure who identifies 'difference' as the constitutive character of the 'sign'. Indeed, according to Guillaumin, racist ideology posits the category of 'race' as a 'mark' and as a 'difference': more specifically, as a 'biological difference'. The 'signifier' – another concept deriving from Saussurean linguistics – 'race' is «altero-referential in nature»⁵⁰; this means that the term 'race' defines the spatial-temporal presence – and, consequently the same existence – of 'the other' by means of its being 'different'; and this dissimilarity is postulated as 'purely biological' and – moreover – 'genetical'.

The latter assumption indicates further common points with Rossi-Landi: indeed, by «absolutizing every observed or presumed difference»⁵¹ racist ideology 'biologizes' a social interpretative process. Hence, far from being a biological reality, race is a 'sign' codified in a specific «sign-system»⁵² constituted by racist theory and practice; namely, race is a 'social phenomenon' because of its sign character. In addition, considering 'race' as a sign implies that «the specificity of human conduct, i.e., the fact that it is meaningful»⁵³ should be acknowledged even in the notion of 'race' and in the racist behaviour. In his turn, Rossi-Landi affirms that every human conduct is meaningful because it is based on a sign system; this theoretical and analytical standpoint is evident when he affirms that «a piece of social behaviour, even of the most rudimentary form, takes place within the framework of a semiotic system, and thus always expresses meaning as a signifier in its own right, independently of the intentions of the actor»⁵⁴.

Furthermore, by comparing Guillaumin and Rossi-Landi, it is possible to affirm that racist ideology is based on a hypostatization of the 'natural' – in general – and 'biological' – in particular; more specifically, the notion of 'race' demonstrates «the social fact that, in our present civilisation, reference to the biological has taken the place of reference to the sacred and the theological»⁵⁵. Indeed, according to Guillaumin,

A society in which the notion of 'cultural' was more important

⁴⁹ GUILLAUMIN, *L'idéologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel*, cit., p. 3 (my translation).

⁵⁰ EAD., *Racism, Sexism, Power, and Ideology*, cit., p. 29.

⁵¹ EAD., *L'idéologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel*, cit., p. 4 (my translation).

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 61 (my translation).

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 9 (my translation).

⁵⁴ ROSSI-LANDI, *Marxism and Ideology*, cit., p. 96.

⁵⁵ GUILLAUMIN, *L'idéologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel*, cit., p. 9 (my translation).

than that of 'biological', and in which the cultural therefore took precedence over the biological, would probably be profoundly different from ours in terms of racism. What is at stake in present-day racism, in fact, is the level at which the social investment that once concerned the sacred is situated. Since the 19th century, Western society has shifted this affective investment onto the biological⁵⁶.

This latter argumentation allows us to frame racist ideology – as thematised by Guillaumin – into the criteria of reactionary discourse as identified by Rossi-Landi; in this regard, 'racist discourse' structures its validity claims on a 'solely natural' – i.e., biological and genetical – denotation. In this regard, important to underline is that Rossi-Landi explicitly defines 'racism' as «biologistic metaphysics»⁵⁷. A similar consideration is made by Guillaumin, when she states that 'race' is a «symbolic object carrying a biological meaning»⁵⁸.

Connecting Rossi-Landi and Guillaumin, the sign 'race' can be analysed from a semantic and pragmatic perspective; from a semantic perspective, 'race' designates both a difference and an identity. According to Guillaumin, the contemporary notion of 'race' arises in Western culture when white people select certain somatic traits – such as the colour of the skin – to designate 'others' or – if one prefers – the 'dominated'. Nevertheless, such a physical difference exists «insofar as it is designated as a signifier by a given culture»⁵⁹. Therefore, far from being something natural, racial difference is a semiotic artefact – i.e., the product of a specific social interpretative process. Furthermore, the designation of racial difference is not necessarily understood as a conscious process; rather, 'race' is an 'immediate perceptive effect' consisting in a «non-separation between social and physical characters»⁶⁰. In this way, difference is inscribed in a natural order, and this order is adopted to justify *segregation* [*mise à part*] of the subjects considered 'different'; an artificial 'natural' difference is posited as the cause of a social discrimination: 'physical difference' is a «semantic value perceived as a causal value»⁶¹. The 'truth' of race merely consists in this rough perception; as Guillaumin states «“Identity” is the word which better defines this perceptual process: a single word (“race”) refers

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* (my translation).

⁵⁷ ROSSI-LANDI, *Marxism and Ideology*, cit., p. 194.

⁵⁸ GUILLAUMIN, *L'idéologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel*, cit., p. 9 (my translation).

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, p. 67 (my translation).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* (my translation).

⁶¹ *Ibid.* (my translation).

to a single reality (physical-socio-mental)»⁶². Therefore, from a semantic point of view, the sign 'race' has its meaning in a specific classification, a categorization: indeed, «race is a category that refers to both somatic aspects and cultural traits»⁶³.

From a pragmatic perspective, the difference – coinciding with and established by the sign 'race' – generates a specific effect on the interpreters: the difference itself is perceived as an «immutable difference»⁶⁴. To conclude, the difference established by the sign 'race' will generate an ensemble of actual perceptions – and prejudices – in the different social interpreters. In this way, specific expectations – i.e. specific interpretants – are generated by an artificial – i.e., social, cultural or, in one word, semiotic – difference perceived as purely natural, somatic, biological and even genetic; and all these perceived differences are nothing but products of the same semiotic process.

6. *Some examples of racist ideological utterances*

I believe that both Rossi-Landi's and Guillaumin's theoretical frameworks provide tools for analysing concrete utterances characterizing racist conservative ideology. In this regard, I propose to consider a typical elementary statement belonging to this kind of discourse: «human races exist because there are different skin colours». In this case, the «different skin colours» constitute the denotation of 'races' – constituting the sign vehicle, designating a certain class of possibilities. A conservative ideology may claim that the term 'race' has its self-denotative meaning in this 'undeniable' difference. More specifically, this denotation is posited as a given, an ultimate object arising from an evident difference established in nature, or from a divine will: in short, from an extra-historical dimension.

Let us now consider an elementary utterance that the Covid-19 pandemic has added, at least in its initial phase, to the typical repertoire of 'conspiracy theories', narrative forms with which – it is worth remembering – conservative ideologies have always had an affinity. The statement is «people with black skin are immune to the virus». In this case, «immune to the virus» constitutes the denotation of the term 'black-skinned people'

⁶² *Ibid.* (my translation).

⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 58 (my translation).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* (my translation).

(the sign vehicle designating a certain class of possibilities). A conservative ideology may claim that the statement «people with black skin are immune to the virus» has its self-denotative meaning in the ‘indisputable’ absence of SARS-CoV-2 infection in African populations. Again, denotation is posited as a fact – resting in its turn on the ‘obvious’ extra-historical and ‘natural’ difference given by the ‘different skin colour’.

One might think that these statements – and the system of inferences connected to them – were only common in conspiracy circles or, in any case, not in the institutional conservative area. But this is not the case: on 25 March 2020, the official Facebook page of the party *Lega per Salvini Premier* shared the front page of the conservative newspaper «Libero», which titled in big letters: «Il virus scansa gli immigrati. Probabile che gli africani abbiano un fattore protettivo al Covid» [«Virus dodges Immigrants. Africans are likely to have a protective factor at Covid»]⁶⁵.

Obviously, we are well aware that there is no natural – much less divine – connection between race and skin and, consequently, that the entire conception of human races (in the plural) derives from a purely arbitrary association, established by historical subjects in specific historical circumstances: a conception that is the product of specific historical-interpretive processes. Similarly, no natural – much less divine – connection can be established between immunity and African people (or people of African descent); consequently, the link between ‘immunity’ and ‘black-skinned people’ also derives from the same kind of arbitrary association. In short, even in the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, conservative ideologies – in their different manifestations – refuse to acknowledge that the only true fact is the historical nature of their conceptions. Furthermore, the racist rhetoric implied in this kind of assumptions would seem to overturn empirical evidence. Indeed, as Vargas, Mora and Gleeson underline in their sociological inquiry, «racialized minorities feel much more at risk and vulnerable to the virus compared to whites – even when ideology, social status, and risk exposure are accounted for»⁶⁶.

Interestingly, a similar consideration recurs in some analyses of racist discourse developed within the CDA. For instance, starting from Ruth Wodak’s discourse-historical approach⁶⁷, Herzog and Lance Porfillio

⁶⁵ See https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier/photos/libero-africani-hanno-fat-tore-protettivo-al-coronavirus-lo-conferma-il-virologo-/3073222472720658/?_rd.

⁶⁶ N. VARGAS, G.C. MORA, S. GLEESON, *Race and Ideology in a Pandemic: White Privilege and Patterns of Risk Perception during COVID-19*, in «Social Problems», 70, n. 1, February 2023, p. 11.

⁶⁷ In this regard, see REISIGL, WODAK, *The Discourse-Historical Approach*, cit.; R. WODAK,

emphasised how racist discourse has its centre not in a ‘conscious’ speaker – we could say, an interpretive subject with an active role in the processes of semiosis – but in a self-denoting discursive structure founded on a syntactic – and paradigmatic – organisation of the type ‘we VS they’, ‘me VS other’, where this ‘they’, or this ‘other’, semantically designates a set of human beings endowed with essential, natural – or, paraphrasing Marx ‘social-natural’ – qualities; qualities such as ‘dirty’, ‘criminal’, ‘dependent on public subsidies’, or simply ‘too many’⁶⁸.

Consider again the two statements «races exist because there are different skin colours» and «people with black skin are immune to the virus». Thanks to developments in genetics, scientific investigation has critiqued the conditions of possibility and certainty of what – historically – seemed a given: the connection between skin and race; as well as the concept of race itself. The fact that a subject’s race is not even determined by a specific genetic heritage implies that the idea of different human races cannot have a biological basis and that, consequently, this difference is in no way determined in nature. Therefore, by establishing a new inferential process, scientific investigation has criticised the conditions of possibility of an extra-historical hypothesis, showing that there is only one ‘race’: the ‘humankind’, species ‘sapiens’. According to Rossi-Landi, the main feature of innovative social teleology is – or, at least, should always be – the awareness of its own semiotic-inferential processes and, consequently, the adoption of this scientific attitude.

Starting from these considerations, we can identify two semantic operations of self-denotation put in place by the racist ideological discourse to ‘narrate’ the African continent. Obasuyi emphasises how the various surveys conducted under the auspices of the World Health Organisation have shown that the populations of the African continent are by no means immune⁶⁹. Contrary to what the conservative right claims, the spread of Covid has assumed dramatic proportions in African states: suffice it to think of the exemplary case of South Africa or the exponential growth

Critical Discourse Analysis, Discourse-Historical Approach, in *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*, ed. by K. Tracy, C. Ilie, T. Sandel, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken 2021, pp. 275-288.

⁶⁸ See B. HERZOG, A. LANCE PORFILLIO, *Talking with racists: insights from discourse and communication studies on the containment of far-right movements*, in «Humanities and Social Sciences Communications», 384, n. 9, 2022, pp. 1-7.

⁶⁹ O.Q. OBASUYI, *Corpi estranei. Il razzismo rimosso che appiattisce le diversità*, People, Gallarate 2020.

of cases recorded in Kenya, Tanzania⁷⁰ and Somalia⁷¹ during the various ‘waves’ of the disease.

The fact that a limited number of cases was recorded in the first months of the pandemic was – in all likelihood – due to the difficulties in conducting mass tests to gather information on the course of the disease and to ensure the tracking of contagions⁷²; difficulties exacerbated by structural problems in the healthcare systems of many African countries; suffice it to think of the technological and organisational difference between hospitals in rural centres and those in large urban centres – a difference exacerbated by the concomitant infrastructural deficiencies⁷³. Further confirmation of the unfoundedness of the link between ‘immunity’ and ‘skin colour’ can be found in the data on the sudden growth of infection among African-American populations. Data – in this case – available since the beginning of the pandemic.

Starting from these considerations, we can identify two semantic operations of self-denotation put in place by the racist ideological discourse to ‘narrate’ the African continent. First, the dominant narrative speaks of ‘Africa’ and very hardly considers African states with their political, economic, cultural, etc. specificities⁷⁴. Thus, the sign ‘Africa’ has the effect of designating a ‘country’ and not a continent. Secondly, this continent with no state entities would be perpetually in need of the ‘White Saviour’⁷⁵; thus, the sign ‘Africa’ ends up designating an entire continent incapable of looking after itself.

But the ‘denotative reality’ is not subsumed by this monological

⁷⁰ For an in-depth discussion, see the article in *The Guardian* available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/mar/26/covid-third-wave-threatens-african-healthcare-who>.

⁷¹ For a more detailed discussion see <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/5/5/whos-afraid-of-covid-19-somalias-battle-with-virus>.

⁷² These hypotheses seem to be confirmed by the study Seroprevalence of anti-SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies in Kenyan blood donors, conducted by a research team in Kenya and published in «Science» in January 2021, which can be found on the journal’s website at <https://science.sciencemag.org/content/371/6524/79>. The hypothesis of an underestimation of cases seems to be confirmed by the study Covid-19 deaths in Africa: prospective systematic post-mortem surveillance study, conducted by another research team in Zambia and published in the British Medical Journal in February 2021, also available on the journal’s website at <https://www.bmj.com/content/372/bmj.n334>.

⁷³ For a more detailed discussion, see the «New York Times» article available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/26/world/africa/africa-coronavirus-pandemic.html>.

⁷⁴ See OBASUYI, *Corpi estranei. Il razzismo rimosso che appiattisce le diversità*, cit., p. 52.

⁷⁵ See *ivi*, p. 47.

narrative; in fact, by positing a self-denotation of the relationship between ‘immunity’ and ‘skin colour’, the «stereotypical narrative»⁷⁶ of racist discourse has left out a fundamental fact of reality: namely, the fact that African states may be able to cope with the pandemic thanks to the efficiency and preparedness of their health systems – as the case of Senegal demonstrates⁷⁷.

7. Conclusion

To conclude: assuming a convergence between Rossi-Landi’s semiotics, Guillaumin’s sociology and CDA, I have attempted to demonstrate how conservative – or, as Rossi-Landi would say, ‘reactionary’ – and conspirative theories are intertwined in racist ideological discourse. This theoretical and methodological connection allows us to frame a fundamental characteristic of this type of conservative ideology: racism structures narrative modalities based on naturalised – and thus, self-denotative – representations of the ‘body of the Other’ or the ‘skin of the ‘foreigner’’. This kind of self-denotation strategy – based on contradictory cultural paradigms and biased categories of thought – seems to persist in narrations of the pandemic in the African continent. In this regard, critical approaches to semiotics, sociology and discourse analysis can contribute to deconstructing this form of crisis discourse.

⁷⁶ See *ibid.*

⁷⁷ See *ivi*, pp. 55-56.