COGITATIO

Article

Discourse and Social Cohesion in and After the Covid-19 Pandemic

Mario Bisiada

Department of Translation and Language Sciences, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain; mario.bisiada@upf.edu

Abstract
This conceptual article argues that class is a major factor in the social division and polarisation after the Covid-19 pandemic. Current discourse and communication analyses of phenomena such as compliance with measures and vaccine hesitancy seek explanations mainly in opposing ideological stances, ignoring existing structural inequalities and class relations and their effects on people's decisions. I approach social cohesion in the Covid-19 pandemic through the theories of epidemic psychology, which sees language as fundamental in social conflicts during pandemics, and progressive neoliberalism, which critiques a post-industrial social class whose assumed moral superiority and talking down to working-class people is argued to be an explanation of many current social conflicts. I argue that these theories construct a valuable theoretical framework for explaining and analysing the social division and polarisation that has resulted from the pandemic. Reducing non-compliance with mitigating measures and vaccine hesitancy to an ideological issue implies that it can be countered by combatting misinformation and anti-vaccination thinking and shutting down particular discourses, which grossly simplifies the problem. The impact that class relations and inequality have on political and health issues, coupled with the characteristics of progressive neoliberalism, may partially explain the rise of populist and nativist movements. I conclude that if social cohesion is to be maintained through the ongoing climate emergency, understanding the impacts of progressive neoliberalism and the role of contempt in exclusionary discursive practices is of utmost importance.

Issue
This article is part of the issue "Impact of Social Media on Social Cohesion" edited by Stefan Stieglitz (University of Duisburg-Essen) and Björn Ross (University of Edinburgh).

1. Introduction

The digital world we inhabit today has afforded many people considerable refuge from this "first truly global" pandemic (Keating, 2020). It has enabled lockdowns on an unprecedented scale and the social experiment of a public debate largely conducted digitally, through social media and newspaper websites, in a context of "post-normal science" (Waltner-Toews et al., 2020). Two years later, many European societies are strongly polarised and divided (Modgil et al., 2021; Neumann et al., 2021; Stjernswärd & Glasdam, 2021) and European integration has suffered a setback through movement restrictions (Devi, 2020) and "minimal support given to member states forcing each to take a unique approach,"

so that "national approaches dominated with some lesson learning only and few attempts to institute a global response to the pandemic" (Lilleker et al., 2021, p. 339). Paralleling the threats to the individual body with threats to the body politic, the prevalence of national approaches may reinforce nativist ideas and strong-border thinking and undermine the European community and integration (Bieber, 2020).

In this conceptual article, I argue that the Covid-19 pandemic is an inflection point for communication and discourse theorists and that, consequently, a theoretical framework appropriate to the disrupting ramifications of the crisis is needed if empirical studies are to truly understand this complex phenomenon. My article seeks to contribute to this through the lens of social cohesion,

focusing on the existing social division that has been exacerbated as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In this endeavour, I will mainly refer to and draw on examples from Germany and Spain, though I think that some discourses and arguments apply generally to European society. A theoretical framework to understand and study the social division resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic regardless of the country looked at should attribute a central role to language and discourse, according to the epidemic psychology model, as I argue in Section 2. In Section 3, I trace polarisation to what Foucault (1997) called "the discourse of perpetual warfare," identifying discourse as a site of struggle over discursive domination. I understand this polarisation to be part of what Fraser (2017) identifies as class struggle in progressive neoliberalism (Section 4). I conclude by arguing that class struggle is a neglected aspect of current rifts in social cohesion, both in and after Covid-19 (Section 5).

2. Discourse, Epidemic Psychology, and Social Cohesion

From the outset of the pandemic, opinions have been manifold, and the scientific community that was called upon for scientific views has reacted fast. Researchers across disciplines have rushed to study the pandemic and its consequences (Fassin, 2021), and research on various discursive and communicative phenomena that occurred from the start of the pandemic has been no exception. However, immediate endeavours to study a phenomenon that is still unravelling tend to be unreliable (Gadarian et al., 2021) and prone to being overly influenced by personal stance, while lacking the critical distance needed to provide a holistic view of the phenomenon (Simandan et al., in press). While I follow the view that neither discourse nor language, in general, can be studied as an objective matter (Davis, 1990, p. 16; Gee, 2011, p. 9; Todorov, 1984, pp. 15–16), recognising one's personal position in conducting research is far from a common practice (Baker, 2012). Discourse researchers shape discourse as they describe and observe it and thus are themselves part of the analysis. Thus, as "most Critical Discourse Analysis practitioners can be seen to adopt a broadly liberal or humanitarian philosophy and thus tend to target more conservative Discourses which…are perceived to be more dominant" (Hart, 2014, p. 5), there tends to be a certain bias against particular discourse actors that are considered generally legitimate targets of critique.

For instance, the idea that the Covid-19 virus may have originated in a laboratory initially received little credence, largely because it was supported by notorious conservative discourse actors such as Donald Trump, even though "when Avril Haines, President Biden's director of national intelligence, said the same thing, she too was largely ignored" (Wade, 2021). Scientists rushed to "strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that Covid-19 does not have a natural origin" (Calisher, et al., 2020). When recent enquiries showed it to be a plausible

explanation (Engber, 2021; Jäger, 2022; Wade, 2021), the damage to the credibility of science through expressions such as "scientists…overwhelmingly conclude" (Calisher et al., 2020, p. e42) and liberal values of the debate was invariably greater than it would have been if the lab leak discourse had been entertained with reservations rather than strongly condemned. Though the scientific community is right in identifying the infodemic aspect of Covid-19 as problematic, in its righteous attempt to contravene this it must be careful not to throw overboard scepticism, the benefit of the doubt, and the plurality of argument, which are the hallmarks of scientific enquiry and whose weakening will ultimately serve the very forces of intolerance and monologism it tries to counter.

Thus, rapid-response discourse studies of Covid-19 phenomena concentrated on "populist" and "right-wing" actors (Bar-On & Molas, 2021; Bobba & Hubé, 2021) and have certainly produced interesting findings. However, in a majorly disruptive event such as the Covid-19 event, political lines and partisanship are also likely to be stirred up while everyone is struggling to position themselves towards the new phenomenon. In addition, discourse studies are often conducted through a somewhat simplistic Marxist model where ideology is seen as a "negative process whereby individuals were duped into using conceptual systems which were not in their own interests" (Mills, 2004, p. 26), which over time leads to a static view of power relations and predefined originators of particular ideologies. A more nuanced view of discourse sees it as a site of struggle (Mills, 2004) and adopts a critical applied linguistic approach involving a constant scepticism of power relations and questioning of normative assumptions (Pennycook, 2021). For Covid-19 and its aftermath, approaches that base themselves on existing political categorisations and that do not conduct a thorough analysis of the significantly disrupted socio-political context might only confirm previously assumed biases and reify existing class conflict while potentially missing out on capturing the rare insights into deep social structures that disruptive events such as this pandemic lay bare.

My central argument is that one of these deep social structures that have been laid bare by the pandemic and that so far has been largely ignored is social inequality. I believe that the Covid-19 pandemic has transcended and temporarily destabilised existing party and ideological lines. Some evidence confirms this for the US (Gadarian et al., 2021, p. 128; Renström & Bäck, 2021, p. 869), a highly polarised society. It has also been a personal experience by me and many others that we agreed with people we used to disagree with and vice versa. While mitigation measures have differed across countries, most people would probably agree that talking about the pandemic to family and friends at some point became difficult and was best avoided. As this has been the first global crisis which we experienced primarily through social media (Lilleker et al., 2021, p. 339),

communication on these media necessarily plays a central role in the social division we observe.

Social media use has increased significantly during the pandemic (Aiello et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020). Social media provides the environment of commentary that maintains alive discourses that would normally disappear (Foucault, 1981, pp. 56–57). The continuous presence of those discourses may create the impression that particular ideas are commonly held or even accepted knowledge, which may distort and polarise views of society. Research has shown that "people are more likely to be affected by inaccurate information if they see more and more recent messages reporting facts, irrespective of whether they are true" (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 40), a situation that likely prevailed in this pandemic where we all started from zero knowledge and were thus subject to daily reporting and commentary. As the pandemic deeply affected most people, emotions influence public judgement (Bogliacino et al., 2021) and behaviour on social media: "Anger makes people less likely to distrust inaccurate information that supports their views, and more likely to distribute it; anxiety can have the opposite effect, prompting individuals to pursue accuracy rather than directional goals" (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 40). Focussing on the role of language and communication in this phenomenon is important to understand "the self-regulating processes that allow some social groups to maintain high levels of social cohesion under adverse and changing circumstances" (Friedkin, 2004, p. 422). As the climate emergency continues and future pandemics are certain to occur, maintaining social cohesion is a major challenge for our societies.

I understand social cohesion to refer to "the relationship between the individual and his or her community," but also "between groups in the wider society" (Coleman, 2015, p. 9) and where language plays a key role, either to strengthen social harmony or "as an element in marginalisation, discrimination and social tension" (Coleman, 2015, p. 4). Similarly, Strong's (1990) epidemic psychology model of early reactions to new fatal diseases, developed to analyse the "striking problems that large, fatal epidemics seem to present to social order; on the waves of fear, panic, stigma, moralising and calls to action that seem to characterise the immediate reaction" (Strong, 1990, p. 256) sees language as a key factor in this process. Human societies are complex and elaborately organised, but still always subject to fundamental change, "simultaneously massively ordered and extraordinarily fragile" (Strong, 1990, p. 256). If theories of social cohesion should take into account "the effects on network structures of interpersonal disagreements and the loss or addition of members" (Friedkin, 2004, p. 422), then a thorough analysis of the social divisions after this disruptive and largely digitally mediated pandemic is necessary (Bisiada, 2021). My account here is biased by the countries I lived in through the pandemic—Germany and Spain—so my observations have to be understood to be based on those countries' approaches, which diverged significantly over the course of the pandemic. While restrictions and measures have differed across countries, the discourse on vaccination has been led globally. Having established the notions of discourse, epidemic psychology, and social cohesion in this section, the following section discusses an example of discourse on Twitter as a site of struggle.

3. The Discourse of Perpetual Warfare

The discourse of perpetual warfare is "a permanent social relationship, the ineradicable basis of all relations and institutions of power" (Foucault, 1997, p. 49) and represents a "binary structure" running through society. Foucault (1997, p. 51) argues that there are no "neutral subjects" and that we are all "inevitably someone's adversary." This means that the rifts in social cohesion we observe these days can be explained by the very possibility provided by social media to be in constant discourse with others, to perceive a much greater part of the historic-political discourse of our times, and to take part in it. In this environment, "views polarise alongside the increasing certainty with which they are expressed, as if we are in a trench war where giving an inch risks losing a mile" (Davey Smith et al., 2020).

A case in point: On 15 March 2021, a range of governments worldwide announced a temporary suspension of the AstraZeneca vaccine after "a striking accumulation of a special form of very rare cerebral vein thrombosis (sinus vein thrombosis) in connection with a deficiency of blood platelets (thrombocytopenia) and bleeding in temporal proximity to vaccinations with the Covid-19 vaccine AstraZeneca" (Paul-Ehrlich-Institut, 2021) was observed by the Paul Ehrlich Institute. This news was received with widespread anger on social media.

Two interpretations were possible, which were directly opposed to each other: The first was that the decision is congruent with the zero-risk strategy evidenced by months of lockdowns due to an unknown mutation to the virus, and this strategy now led to a zero-risk approach on the vaccines and the (equally unknown) thrombosis it may cause. This approach did not invoke scientific argument because it had long accepted that the recent responses were not data-driven. The other interpretation saw the decision within a framework of full risk acceptance: It mentioned recent relaxations of measures as dangerous and responding to a neoliberal economic perspective in which opening business trumped protecting people's lives and saw the decision as unscientific and risk-avoidant (or rather, responsibility-avoidant). This approach cited the lack of evidence of a link between the vaccine and thrombosis, but thus opened itself to questions as to why the lack of evidence for other measures had not been taken into account.

The fact that in a range of posts on the issue the #VaccinesWork hashtag was used shows that these users' concern was not so much about the potential

health implications of this particular move but about the defence against a potential discursive gain for an envisaged anti-vaccination movement: The idea was that the complications should be played down to not give "ammunition" to the other side. This was argued explicitly in an article in the *Irish Times*, summarised by its author on Twitter thus: "Suspension of #AstraZeneca #vaccine may be well-intentioned, but it is not supported by evidence. And ultimately, it undermines confidence & bolsters anti-vaccine propaganda—precautionary principle it is not" (Grimes, 2021).

The AstraZeneca issue is a good example of interpretative polarisation (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020) as commentators lose sight of regular procedures and a communal effort to overcome a health crisis and just think in terms of factions. The physicist Sabine Hossenfelder summed this up quite well:

> Yeah, I know there are loads of vaccine enthusiasts on Twitter and trust me if I could get one, I'd take it immediately. But keep in mind: shit happens. Sooner or later a charge is going to be contaminated with something, somewhere. For this reason, I think, as much as I hate the delay, that governments in Europe who have temporarily suspended vaccinations with #AstraZeneca to investigate what's happening are doing the right thing. (Hossenfelder, 2021)

The struggle for epistemological and discursive authority around Covid-19 is one of the complex topics produced by this pandemic, but it may also be symptomatic of the way many public debates go off course as they proceed. Such phenomena should be the subject of inquiry if we aim to understand the power relations that obtain in late modern neoliberal societies and the dynamics that lead to increasing polarisation, even on issues that seem to have no polarising potential at first. An important factor in this polarisation that Foucault (1997, p. 51) described as a binary structure that runs through society can be sought in inequality, more specifically, in post-industrial class relations, which are the focus of the next section.

4. Progressive Neoliberalism

I follow Fraser's (2017) critique of what she calls progressive neoliberalism, a combination of "progressive recognition" (that is, a spoken orientation towards diversity, multiculturalism, and women's rights) and "regressive distribution" (that is, the politics of deregulation of the banking system, de-industrialisation, and the elimination of social protection; see also Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018). This movement defeated the approach of right-wing politics that relied on the same regressive distribution but coupled with reactionary recognition (ethnonationalism, anti-immigration, etc). In the wake of this victory, she argues, progressive neoliberalism destroyed the lives of the traditional left voters and thus alienated them, even as its defendants still maintained an ethos of recogni-

tion that was "superficially egalitarian and emancipatory, interpreting its ideals in a limited way compatible with neoliberalism" (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 203). Progressive neoliberalism thus diversified social hierarchy instead of abolishing it, all the time maintaining class constraints. A similar argument has been made recently for the German context by Wagenknecht (2021).

The victories of Trumpism and Brexit are often explained by vague reference to a resurge in populism, to the omnipotence of Russian hackers' meddling, or techno-deterministically to the polarising mechanisms inherent to social media. The critique of progressive neoliberalism seems more adequate to explain our current situation, as it emphasises the importance that recognition of class relations still has, focusing on:

> The very real self-assertion of a social stratum, whose ascension is based at once in the shift to postindustrial, cognitive, globalising capitalism and in its own self-understanding as culturally and morally superior to the parochial working-class communities whom those shifts have left behind. (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 205)

Similarly, for Wagenknecht (2021, p. 15), the "most important causes of dissolving cohesion and increasing hostility" lie in the fact that "people from different backgrounds have less and less to say to each other" because well-off urban graduates only meet the less advantaged in real life when they provide them with cleaning services, deliver their parcels, or serve them in restaurants.

While this rift existed before Covid-19, the pandemic disruption put it on clear display. A range of studies recognises that class conflict is at the heart of the social tension caused by the pandemic (Goudeau et al., 2021; Horton, 2020; Khazan, 2020; Lohmeyer & Taylor, 2021) and that this conflict may well increase long term dismay at supposed elites (Russell & Patterson, 2022). The dividing line seems to run between people (usually middle class) whose social situation allows them to stay at home and easily adapt to lockdown life and who want to save everyone from Covid-19 by any means necessary, and those who fear the long-term consequences of digital surveillance and states of emergency (Lehmann, 2022; Simandan et al., in press) and/or whose social situation makes it hard for them to quarantine themselves or even seek medical care (Gordon, 2020; Horton, 2020; Khazan, 2020). On Twitter, this division is reflected at a more extreme level, and each side seems to view the other with contempt, either at the conformist acceptance of unparalleled restrictions or at the egotistical rejection of scientifically supported measures. Whether social media such as Twitter accurately represent social dynamics or not is a contested issue (see Garcia et al., 2021), but the mere impression that they do reflect generalised contempt in society may have problematic consequences. At worst, according to the famous dictum by Camus (1956, p. 180), "Every form of contempt, if

it intervenes in politics, prepares the way for, or establishes, fascism.''

I see contempt as a key factor in explaining the division caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, as it is tied to progressive professionals' "confidence that they represent the advance guard of humanity's progression to moral cosmopolitanism and cognitive enlightenment" (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 208). This confidence has generated the "Bourdieusian strategy of 'distinction,' imbuing progressive neoliberalism with a superior 'tone,' which has devolved all too easily into moralising, fingerpointing, and talking down to rural and working-class people, with the insinuation that they were culturally stupid" (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 208). This explains the ressentiment felt by many towards the supposedly progressive, liberal, leftist cause, as "the insult of status hierarchy compounded the injury of class domination" (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 208) while many representatives of left-wing parties "poured scorn on the values, way of life, grievances and anger of their own voters" (Wagenknecht, 2021). This conflict around contempt is always brewing on questions of climate change, surged in some European countries, especially Germany, on the government's concept of *Willkommenskultur* ("welcome culture") and further escalated the social divide with the beginning of government measures and restrictions to control the Covid-19 pandemic.

A general framing of conflict was established by the authorities from the beginning of the crisis, addressing citizens as "soldiers" to rally them together to "fight" the "invisible enemy" (Lilleker et al., 2021, p. 341). This followed the classical trajectory of a framing that is initiated by the holders of power, amplified by media and communication, and that translates into a discourse in the population. Due to the constitutive power of language in epidemic psychology, "no social order can last long when basic assumptions about interaction are disrupted," when mutual fear is generalised, which gives pandemics the potential to create "a medical version of the Hobbesian nightmare: the war of all against all" (Strong, 1990, p. 258). While the use of war metaphors does not automatically and generally trigger sympathy for authoritarian and bellicose stances (Musolff, 2022), research has found that the metaphorical framing effect of the aggressive conflict metaphors on Covid-19 appeared to influence some individuals towards preferring approaches from that domain, specifically by "trigger[ing] sets of salient conceptual entailments via the activation of the relevant frame" and "affect language users' emotive states" (Panzeri et al., 2021). War metaphors can certainly have benefits, from a public health point of view, as in Bill Gates's (2020) statement that "this is like a world war, except in this case, we're all on the same side. Everyone can work together to learn about the disease and develop tools to fight it." From the discourse point of view that language constitutes society, however, war metaphors frame a situation as an aggressive attack by other bodies from out-

side our own body, an attack that may be personified by other humans. Authorities that nurture social antagonism by placing blame and that primarily engage in disciplinary interventions arguably counteract the idea that everyone can be involved in the response to the virus and may instead project passive rule-conformity or even imply the need to denounce potential enemies on the inside.

The war metaphors waned as quickly as they surged (Wicke & Bolognesi, 2021), but the neologisms ("covidiots," "maskholes," "covid deniers") and hashtags ("#StayTheFuckHome," "#Plandemic") of contempt for both perceived "sides" (Reyes, 2011, p. 785) in this conflict remained (for an analysis of terms from the German discourse, see Vogel, 2020, p. 23). Across European countries, politicians blamed the necessity of ever new measures on the "relaxation" of individuals, especially vulnerable groups such as youths (de Maya, 2020; Kosok, 2020; Tullis, 2020) or migrants, who in some cases were even considered to personify the virus (Hartman et al., 2021; Jetten et al., 2020; see also Adida et al., 2020). This scapegoat framing was again picked up by the press in what can be considered a "moral panic discourse" (Cohen, 1972/2002) and conveniently distracted from political failures. In an analysis of the UK, Ramsay (2020) argues that "the mostly pro-regime press has been hard at work, ensuring that the powerful aren't the subject of people's wrath, but that our so-called 'covidiot' neighbours are blamed instead."

An us-group of "moral entrepreneurs" is thus juxtaposed to a them-group of "scapegoats" (McEnery, 2006, p. 6) depicted negatively using nominal/referential and argumentative strategies (Wodak, 2001). The moral entrepreneurs campaign against the object of offence (socialisation, agglomeration, or other "irresponsible" behaviour), while the scapegoats propagate it. Following Foucault's (1980, p. 90) argument that power should be analysed "primarily in terms of struggle, conflict and war," analysts interested in critiques of power should pay close attention to situations where conflict is sown through language. Once started, the dynamics of a discursively created social other are self-perpetuating: "When persons are viewed as distinctly different, negative labelling can be accomplished smoothly because there is little harm in attributing all manner of bad characteristics to 'them'" (Kosloff et al., 2010, p. 384). Simply reminding subjects of the groups they belong to might enhance their likelihood of accepting false information about out-group members, even if the identity of such an out-group has not been made explicit (Tucker et al., 2018, p. 42).

To counteract such socially corrosive tendencies and political blundering would have been the press's task. Communication and media structures are fundamental for the proper functioning of society: In Breslow's (1997, p. 240) summary of Habermas's thought on this issue, he argues that for a public to function in "a rational-critical manner," it must be able to assess the government's

action, hence the importance of the media as "the watchdogs of government on behalf of the people" (Breslow, 1997, p. 240). In the Covid-19 pandemic, some newspapers seem to have inverted this role: Regional newspapers such as the German Tagesspiegel or the Catalonian ARA could be observed to dedicate themselves to announcing restrictions and denouncing those who flouted them (see also Brost & Pörksen, 2020, for a general critique of German newspapers in the pandemic), thus creating the false impression that many people did not stick to the rules (Reicher, 2021). German national news channels have been accused of avoiding critical interrogation of government actors and largely engaging in crisis maintenance (Gräf & Hennig, 2020). A comparative study argues that the German media was among the few that took a "uniformly supportive stance during the pre-lockdown phase, only criticising where governments vacillated or where measures were not implemented appropriately" (Lilleker et al., 2021, p. 338).

Few voices questioned whether it is correct that not following some government measures is generally discussed in terms of ideological choices, expressions of science denialism, or anti-vaccination stance. Communication and discourse studies that appeared immediately focussed mainly on "anti-vaxxers" rather than on the discursive absence of disadvantaged voices, reifying the generalisation that all the unvaccinated are a homogeneous camp of ideologically driven opponents to vaccines. Social inquiries, however, show that major reasons for vaccine hesitancy can be found in structural disadvantages based on race and class (Jetten et al., 2020; Pabst, 2021; Tufekci, 2021). This underlines the importance of campaigning for better ways of reaching disadvantaged and poor people, those that generally do not seek medical care or are wary of dealing with any government body due to past experiences. Moralised discourses on vaccination that imply that vaccine hesitancy is generally due to ideological opposition to vaccination, and thus can be solved simply by combatting misinformation, is symptomatic of generally ignored inequality, forms of discrimination and injustice that "are structural and deeply imbricated with class (and gender) domination'' (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 208). Understanding them in abstraction from such power relations, as mere "ideology," implies that they can be overcome by simply "doling out moral blame" (Fraser & Jaeggi, 2018, p. 208), by excluding or combatting certain "wrong" ideologies. In the course of that, those not recognised by this supposedly left-liberal project of emancipation become alienated and may seek recognition in alternative approaches such as populism and nativism.

Research in communication and discourse studies has gone a great length in pointing out the importance of language in shaping society. The cognitivist paradigm has tirelessly pointed to the conceptual level as the site where meaning and human activity originate. While this has brought with it great advancements in the interplay of discourse and society, it also led to an overestimation of the transformative potential of language, while simultaneously pushing aside the very real influence of class constraints on social behaviour. Fraser critiques that much of the current opposition to injustices such as racism, sexism, homophobia, or Islamophobia addresses them through the shallow and inadequate progressive neoliberal mode of moralising condescension, "grossly exaggerating the extent to which the trouble is inside people's heads and missing the depth of the structural-institutional forces that undergird them" (Fraser, 2017, p. 62). As I have argued in this section, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed structural inequality, which must not be ignored by analyses if we are to make sense of the divided societies we encounter as a result. Explanations, both academic and non-academic, must not be sought exclusively in ideologically misguided individual minds, but also in old and new class relations of (discursive) power obtained in society.

5. Conclusion

The Covid-19 crisis is in many ways an inflection point. The social division we are perceiving, at least when it comes to our capacity for rational debate, is critical. In this article, I have argued that the Covid-19 pandemic has showcased a binary line running through society, which can be sought in the ramifications of progressive neoliberalism, a concept that has so far reached little attention in society and academia. I hope it has provided a useful perspective to understanding some phenomena of the Covid-19 pandemic. As regards academic study, how can a class perspective be included in the study of discourse and communication? One way of doing this may be to reflect on the use of social media and on their use as corpora, which is increasingly a major basis for research. Do the discourses taking place on social media reflect and represent society, that is, could they also be found when studying discourses "out there"? Leetaru (2016) argues that, in the increasing popularity to study society through social media, we are "ignoring the critical questions of how well social media actually reflects societal trends." McGregor (2019, p. 1083) finds that social media expands notions of public opinion and gives "marginalised voices easier access to elites," but also presents "a more fractured sense of the public that is not comprehensive or representative." For Öhman and Watson (2021, p. 18), "the objection that social media data do not represent society does not make sense, because society increasingly takes place within social media." Answering this question will be the task of future communication, discourse, and social media research.

Many progressive liberals have been in favour of authoritarian political responses. The irreconcilability of supposed leftist thinking with authoritarian politics was apparently solved by the claim that a strict lockdown policy would be against neoliberalism because it enables a

quick reopening, while the "soft" lockdowns that actually happen protect the economy and only restrict private life. This approach, however, forgets that left-liberals themselves argue from the dominating class position: As beneficiaries of digitalisation, many of the Internet-ready, new upper-middle-class life has largely been unaffected by the measures, and many do not see their existence threatened, but have rather welcomed new opportunities as much of public life stumbles into newly digitalised areas. Members of this class have little notion of the lives of low wage workers, bar, and hotel owners, or culture producers whose very existence has already been precarious and is now threatened by the forced closure of their businesses. If those who dare to complain are met with morally self-righteous contempt on social media, more and more moderate people from that class may turn to populist and nativist actors who promise to take them seriously, which explains the rise of Trumpism, Brexit, and the recent surge in "freedom" movements around Covid-19 across countries. The winners of the digital shift envision their approach to be one of compassion, but the failure to understand the very real class divide coupled with a general lack of long-term protective measures against a climate disaster could lead to even greater social conflict in the climate emergency.

Understanding these processes, I believe, is necessary if societies are to stay cohesive in a world where every crisis seems to generate the potential for more polarisation of opinion. Increasing attention is given to issues of misinformation—in some aspects rightly so—but I have argued that not every social issue can be explained by (a simplistic concept of) ideology, and consequently not every problem can be solved if "truth" and "facts" prevailed. Late modern society is still based on structural inequalities, and these have likely been incremented by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has put the spotlight on a range of professions that are invaluable to society yet are not normally recognised as such. An awareness of the divisive potential of progressive neoliberalism, as I have tried to demonstrate in this article, is crucial to address humanity's major challenge—the climate emergency—together.

Acknowledgments

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

References

Adida, C. L., Dionne, K. Y., & Platas, M. R. (2020). Ebola, elections, and immigration: How politicising an epidemic can shape public attitudes. *Politics, Groups and Identities*, *8*(3), 488–514. https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2018.1484376

Aiello, L. M., Quercia, D., Zhou, K., Constantinides, M., Šćepanović, S., & Joglekar, S. (2021). How epidemic psychology works on social media: Evolution of responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *8*, Article 179. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00861-3

Baker, P. (2012). Acceptable bias? Using corpus linguistics methods with critical discourse analysis. *Critical Discourse Studies*, *9*(3), 247–256. http://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2012.688297

Bar-On, T., & Molas, B. (2021). *Responses to the Covid-19 pandemic by the radical right: Scapegoating, conspiracy theories and new narratives*. ibidem.

Bieber, F. (2020). Global nationalism in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. *Nationalities Papers*, *50*(1), 13–25. https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.35

Bisiada, M. (2021). Discursive structures and power relations in Covid-19 knowledge production. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, *8*, Article 248. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00935-2

Bobba, G., & Hubé, N. (2021). *Populism and the politicisation of the Covid-19 crisis in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bogliacino, F., Codagnone, C., Montealegre, F., Folkvord, F., Gómez, C., Charris, R., Liva, G., Lupiáñez-Villanueva, F., & Veltri, G. A. (2021). Negative shocks predict change in cognitive function and preferences: Assessing the negative affect and stress hypothesis. *Scientific Reports*, *11*, Article 3546. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-83089-0

Breslow, H. (1997). Civil society, political economy, and the internet. In S. G. Jones (Ed.), *Virtual culture: Identity and communication in cybersociety* (pp. 236–257). SAGE.

Brost, M., & Pörksen, B. (2020, April 13). Angesteckt: Warum der Journalismus in der Corona-Krise besonders gebraucht wird—Und vor welchem Problem er steht [Infected: Why journalism is especially needed in the corona crisis—And which problem it faces]. *Die ZEIT*. https://www.zeit.de/2020/16/coronavirus-berichterstattung-journalismus-information

Calisher, C., Carroll, D., Colwell, R., Corley, R. B., Daszak, P., Drosten, C., Enjuanes, L., Farrar, J., Field, H., Golding, J., Gorbalenya, A., Haagmans, B., Hughes, J. M., Karesh, W. B., Keusch, G. T., Lam, S. K., Lubroth, J., Mackenzie, J. S., Madoff, L., & Mazet, J. (2020). Statement in support of the scientists, public health professionals, and medical professionals of China combatting Covid-19. *The Lancet*, *395*(10226), e42–e43. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(20)30418-9-6736(20)30418-9

Camus, A. (1956). *The rebel: An essay on man in revolt*. Vintage Books.

Cohen, S. (2002). *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of mods and rockers* (3rd ed.). Routledge. (Original work published 1972)

Coleman, H. (Ed.). (2015). *Language and social cohesion in the developing world*. British Council; Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit.

Davey Smith, G., Blastland, M., & Munafò, M. (2020). Covid-19's known unknowns. *British Medical Journal*, *2020*(371), Article m3979. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3979

Davis, H. G. (1990). Introduction. In H. G. Davis (Ed.), *Redefining linguistics* (pp. 1–17). Routledge.

de Maya, S. (2020, July 18). "Relax, don't do it." *Treball*. http://revistatreball.cat/relax-dont-do-it

Devi, S. (2020). Travel restrictions hampering Covid-19 response. *The Lancet*, *395*(10233), 1331–1332. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30967-3

Engber, D. (2021, November 24). The lab-leak theory meets its perfect match. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/11/lab-leak-covid-origin-coincidence-wet-market/620794

Fassin, Y. (2021). Research on Covid-19: A disruptive phenomenon for bibliometrics. *Scientometrics*, *126*, 5305–5319. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-021-03989-w

Foucault, M. (1980). Truth and power. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977* (pp. 107–133). The Harvester Press.

Foucault, M. (1981). The order of discourse. In R. Young (Ed.), *Untying the text: A post-structuralist reader* (pp. 48–78). Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1997). *"Society must be defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*. Picador.

Fraser, N. (2017). From progressive neoliberalism to Trump—And beyond. *American Affairs*, *1*(4), 46–64.

Fraser, N., & Jaeggi, R. (2018). *Capitalism: A conversation in critical theory*. Polity.

Friedkin, N. E. (2004). Social cohesion. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *30*(1), 409–425. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.30.012703.110625

Gadarian, S. K., Goodman, S. W., & Pepinsky, T. (2021). Partisan endorsement experiments do not affect mass opinion on Covid-19. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *31*(Suppl. 1), 122–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2021.1924727

Garcia, D., Pellert, M., Lasser, J., & Metzler, H. (2021). *Social media emotion macroscopes reflect emotional experiences in society at large*. ArXiv. https://arxiv.org/abs/2107.13236

Gates, B. (2020, April 23). The first modern pandemic. *Gates Notes*. https://www.gatesnotes.com/health/pandemic-innovation

Gee, J. P. (2011). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Gordon, C. (2020, March 27). Corona: The inequality virus. *Jacobin*. https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/coronavirus-inequality-covid-19-work-education-health-disparities-poverty

Goudeau, S., Sanrey, C., Stanczak, A., Manstead, A., & Darnon, C. (2021). Why lockdown and distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic are likely to increase the social class achievement gap. *Nature Human Behaviour*, *5*, 1273–1281. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01212-7

Gräf, D., & Hennig, M. (2020, September). Die Verengung der Welt: Zur medialen Konstruktion Deutschlands unter Covid-19 anhand der Formate *ARD Extra—Die Coronalage* und *ZDF Spezial* [The narrowing of the world: On the medial construction of Germany under Covid-19 through the formats *ARD Extra—The corona situation* and *ZDF Spezial*]. *DFG Graduiertenkolleg*, *2020*(#COV-19), 13–20. https://www.phil.uni-passau.de/fileadmin/dokumente/fakultaeten/phil/lehrstuehle/sieber/Publikationen/Magazin__Cov-19__September_2020_.pdf

Grimes, D. R. [@drg1985]. (2021, March 16). *Suspension of #AstraZeneca #vaccine may be well-intentioned, but it is not supported by evidence* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/drg1985/status/1371748010435166209

Hart, C. (2014). *Discourse, grammar and ideology: Functional and cognitive perspectives*. Bloomsbury.

Hartman, T. K., Stocks, T. V. A., McKay, R., Gibson-Miller, J., Levita, L., Martinez, A. P., Mason, L., McBride, O., Murphy, J., Shevlin, M., Bennett, K. M., Hyland, P., Karatzias, T., Vallières, F., & Bentall, R. P. (2021). The authoritarian dynamic during the Covid-19 pandemic: Effects on nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *12*(7), 1274–1285. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550620978023

Horton, R. (2020). Offline: Covid-19 is not a pandemic. *The Lancet*, *396*(10255), Article P874. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32000-6

Hossenfelder, S. [@skdh]. (2021, March 16). *Yeah, I know there are loads of vaccine enthusiasts on twitter* [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/skdh/status/1371705016050925568

Jäger, M. (2022, February 20). Woher kam die Furin-Spaltstelle? [Where did the Furin cleavage site come from?]. *Der Freitag*. https://www.freitag.de/autoren/michael-jaeger/sars-cov-2-woher-kam-die-furin-spaltstelle

Jetten, J., Reicher, S. D., Haslam, S. A., & Cruwys, T. (2020). *Together apart: The psychology of Covid-19*. SAGE.

Keating, J. (2020, May 5). Covid-19 is the first truly global event. *Slate*. https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/05/covid-19-global-event-pandemic.html

Khazan, O. (2020, April 15). How the coronavirus could create a new working class. *The Atlantic*. https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/coronavirus-class-war-just-beginning/609919

Kligler-Vilenchik, N., Baden, C., & Yarchi, M. (2020). Interpretative polarisation across platforms: How political disagreement develops over time on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120944393

Kosloff, S., Greenbern, J., Schmader, T., Dechesne, T., & Weise, D. (2010). Smearing the opposition: Implicit and explicit stigmatisation of the 2008 US presidential candidates and the current US president. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, *139*(3), 383–398. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018809

Kosok, J.-J. (2020, October 16). Wenn das mal nichts mit dem System zu tun hat [When it has nothing to do with the system for once]. *Der Freitag*. https://www.freitag.de/autoren/jan-jasper-kosok/wenn-das-mal-nichts-mit-dem-system-zu-tun-hat

Leetaru, K. (2016). *Does social media actually reflect reality?* Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/kalevleetaru/2016/02/16/does-social-media-actually-reflect-reality

Lehmann, J. F. (2022, January 9). Aus dem pandemischen Jetzt [From the pandemic now]. *Der Freitag*. https://www.freitag.de/autoren/der-freitag/aus-dem-pandemischen-jetzt

Lilleker, D., Coman, I., Gregor, M., & Novelli, E. (2021). Political communication and Covid-19: Governance and rhetoric in global comparative perspective. In D. Lilleker, I. Coman, M. Gregor, & E. Novelli (Eds.), *Political communication and Covid-19* (pp. 333–350). Routledge.

Lohmeyer, B. A., & Taylor, N. (2021). War, heroes and sacrifice: Masking neoliberal violence during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Critical Sociology*, *47*(4/5), 625–639. https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520975824

McEnery, T. (2006). *Swearing in English: Bad language, purity and power from 1586 to the present*. Routledge.

McGregor, S. C. (2019). Social media as public opinion: How journalists use social media to represent public opinion. *Journalism*, *20*(8), 1070–1086. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919845458

Mills, S. (2004). *Discourse* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Modgil, S., Singh, R. K., Gupta, S., & Dennehy, D. (2021). A confirmation bias view on social media induced polarisation during Covid-19. *Information Systems Frontiers*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10796-021-10222-9

Musolff, A. (2022). "War against Covid-19": Is the pandemic management as war metaphor helpful or hurtful? In A. Musolff, R. Breeze, K. Kondo, & S. Vilar-Lluch (Eds.), *Pandemic and crisis discourse: Communicating Covid-19 and public health strategy* (pp. 307–320). Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350232730.ch-017

Neumann, T., Kelm, O., & Dohle, M. (2021). Polarisation and silencing others during the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany: An experimental study using algorithmically curated online environments. *Javnost—The Public*, *28*(3), 323–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1969621

Nguyen, M. H., Gruber, J., Fuchs, J., Marler, W., Hunsaker, A., & Hargittai, E. (2020). Changes in digital communication during the Covid-19 global pandemic: Implications for digital inequality and future research. *Social Media + Society*, *6*(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948255

Öhman, C., & Watson, D. (2021). Are the dead taking over Instagram? A follow-up to Öhman & Watson (2019). In C. Cowls & J. Morley (Eds), *The 2020 yearbook of the digital ethics lab* (pp. 5–22). Springer.

Pabst, Y. (2021, November 24). Wer sind denn nun die Ungeimpften? [So, who are the unvaccinated?]. *Der Freitag*. https://www.freitag.de/autoren/der-freitag/geruechte-ueber-ungeimpfte-und-warum-der-staat-die-falschen-prioritaeten-setzt

Panzeri, F., Paola, S. D., & Domaneschi, F. (2021). Does the Covid-19 war metaphor influence reasoning? *PLOS ONE*, *16*(4), Article e0250651. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250651

Paul-Ehrlich-Institut. (2021). *The Paul-Ehrlich-Institut informs: Temporary suspension of vaccination with Covid-19 vaccine AstraZeneca*. Paul-Ehrlich-Institut.

Pennycook, A. (2021). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical reintroduction* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Ramsay, A. (2020, March 28). Stop blaming ordinary people for the UK's pandemic failures. *openDemocracy*. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/stop-blaming-ordinary-people-for-the-uks-pandemic-failures

Reicher, S. (2021, January 15). Most of us are sticking to the lockdown rules, so why do we blame one another? *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/15/lockdown-rules-blaming-covidiots-compliance

Renström, E. A., & Bäck, H. (2021). Emotions during the Covid-19 pandemic: Fear, anxiety, and anger as mediators between threats and policy support and political actions. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *51*(8), 861–877. https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12806

Reyes, A. (2011). Strategies of legitimisation in political discourse: From words to actions. *Discourse & Society*, *22*(6), 781–807. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926511419927

Russell, J. H., & Patterson, D. (2022, February 17). The mask debacle: How partisan warfare over mandates became a central feature of the pandemic. *Tablet*. https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/science/articles/the-mask-debacle

Simandan, D., Rinner, C., & Capurri, V. (in press). Confronting the rise of authoritarianism during the Covid-19 pandemic should be a priority for critical geographers and social scientists. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*.

Stjernswärd, S., & Glasdam, S. (2021). Solidarity and polarisation regarding Covid-19 and related

risks—A thematic analysis of comments from an international survey. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, *4*(1), Article 100211. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2021.100211

Strong, P. (1990). Epidemic psychology: A model. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *12*(3), 249–259. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.ep11347150

Todorov, T. (1984). *Mikhail Bakhtin: The dialogical principle*. The University of Minnesota Press.

Tucker, J. A., Guess, A., Barberá, P., Vaccari, C., Siegel, A., Sanovich, S., Stukal, D., & Nyhan, B. (2018). *Social media, political polarisation, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature*. SSRN. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3144139

Tufekci, Z. (2021, October 15). The unvaccinated may not be who you think. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/15/opinion/covid-vaccines-unvaccinated.html

Tullis, P. (2020, June 5). Dutch cooperation made an "intelligent lockdown" a success. *Bloomberg*. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-06-05/netherlands-coronavirus-lockdown-dutch-followed-the-rules

Vogel, F. (2020). "Wenn Virologen alle paar Tage ihre Meinung ändern, müssen wir in der Politik dagegenhalten"—Thesen zur politischen Sprache und (strategischen) Kommunikation im Pandemie-Krisendiskurs ["If virologists change their opinion every other day, we in politics must steer against that"—Theses on political language and (strategic) communication in the pandemic crisis discourse]. *Sprachreport*, *36*(3), 20–29. https://doi.org/10.14618/sr-3-2020-vog

Wade, N. (2021, May 5). The origin of Covid: Did people or nature open Pandora's box at Wuhan? *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists.* https://thebulletin.org/2021/05/the-origin-of-covid-did-people-or-nature-open-pandoras-box-at-wuhan/amp

Wagenknecht, S. (2021). *Die Selbstgerechten: Mein Gegenprogramm für Gemeinsinn und Zusammenhalt* [The self-righteous: My counterprogram for solidarity and social cohesion]. Campus.

Waltner-Toews, D., Biggeri, A., Marchi, B. D., Funtowicz, S., Giampietro, M., O'Connor, M., Ravetz, J. R., Saltelli, A., & van der Sluijs, J. P. (2020). *Postnormal pandemics: Why Covid-19 requires a new approach to science*. STEPS Centre. https://steps-centre.org/blog/postnormal-pandemics-why-covid-19-requires-a-new-approach-to-science

Wicke, P., & Bolognesi, M. M. (2021). Covid-19 discourse on Twitter: How the topics, sentiments, subjectivity, and figurative frames changed over time. *Frontiers in Communication*, *6*, Article 651997. https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2021.651997

Wodak, R. (2001). The discourse-historical approach. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 63–95). SAGE.

About the Author

Mario Bisiada is associate professor in translation and applied language studies at Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona. His recent research focuses on cross-linguistic discourse studies of metaphors and hashtags. He has published on the emergence and use of the "homework" metaphor and on different framings of the #MeToo hashtag in German, English, and Spanish newspapers discourse. He is principal investigator of the Frames and Narratives of Migration and of Translation in Europe project, which investigates cross-linguistically existent discourse patterns on migration.