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# S T S

ICUREZZA TERRORISMO SOCIETÀ

Security Terrorism Society

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL - Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies



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# SICUREZZA, TERRORISMO E SOCIETÀ

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL  
Italian Team for Security,  
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COVID-19 Pandemic

BARBARA LUCINI EDITOR

Milano 2020

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# The tower is burning. Real and symbolic violence between technophobics and techno-rebels of 5G technology during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

Durante un disastro si perdono i punti di riferimento spaziali e sociali, per cui è usuale che si possa cadere in un disorientamento individuale e collettivo, che poi viene elaborato e riasorbito in svariate modalità, compresa l’attribuzione di responsabilità. Attraverso il ‘processo di blaming’ la comunità disastrosa va alla ricerca delle cause della calamità e individua un responsabile, generalmente fuori dal proprio ambito o in qualche esponente interno difforme e non alienato. Ma cosa accade quando la scala di un disastro è planetaria e tutti gli esseri umani ne sono coinvolti? Lo stiamo sperimentando con la pandemia di COVID-19, che è un disastro sanitario globale che, a cascata, diventa disastro economico, psicologico e sociale. In particolare, durante il lockdown imposto in numerosi Paesi europei tra l’inverno e la primavera 2020, è andata crescendo una teoria secondo la quale il nuovo coronavirus sarebbe in qualche modo legato alla tecnologia 5G. Ciò ha avuto varie ripercussioni in manifestazioni di piazza di scettici della pandemia e di tecnofobici durante l’estate e, in alcuni casi più rari, a forme di vandalismo verso le antenne delle telecomunicazioni. Il paper indaga questo fenomeno attraverso la prospettiva e gli strumenti dell’antropologia culturale.

During a disaster, the spatial and social points of reference are lost, so it is usual that we can fall into an individual and collective disorientation, which is then processed and reabsorbed in various ways, including the attribution of responsibility. Through the ‘process of blaming’ the disaster community goes in search of the causes of the calamity and identifies a responsible person/entity, generally outside their sphere or in some dissimilar and unaligned internal exponent. But what happens when the scale of a disaster is planetary and all human beings are in-

volved in it? We are experiencing this with the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a global health disaster that, in cascade, becomes an economic, psychological and social disaster. In particular, during the lockdown imposed in numerous European countries between winter and spring 2020, a theory has grown according to which the new coronavirus is somehow linked to 5G technology. This has had various repercussions in street demonstrations by pandemic skeptics and technophobics during the summer and, in some more rare cases, in forms of vandalism towards telecommunications towers. The paper investigates this phenomenon through the perspective and tools of cultural anthropology.

## Keywords

COVID-19 pandemic, 5G technology, Conspiracy theories, Vandalism, Skeptics

## The invisible fear

Human beings do more than see, hear, feel, touch, smell; they do more than ‘record’ their environment: through bodily experiences, they interpret it. In other words, human beings do more than perceive the ecosystem, because they judge it, dream about it, imagine it, produce it and, therefore, elaborate further forms of knowledge. This takes on a peculiar character in the case of invisible stimuli such as microscopic objects and energy sources, of which it is only possible to perceive their effects and not their physicality. This absence is not due to a lack of information or notions, it is not due to a ‘cultural void’, but to a ‘block of meaning’ (Ligi 2009: 63) of the psychological and cultural devices with which one ‘orders’ one’s environment. From this perspective, the reactions to perceptive invisibility can be two, radically opposite. The first is a ‘cognitive invisibility’ that makes it particularly difficult to relate to a certain threat of which every bodily experience is missing, such as the nuclear contamination among Saami shepherds in Lapland after the radioactive cloud of Chernobyl (Henriksen, quoted in Ligi 2009: 61), or the risk represented by a dormant but densely urbanized volcano such as Vesuvius next to the city of Naples, Italy (Gugg 2017). The second possibility is the construction of a representation that explains and gives coherence to the anxiety generated by the lack of ‘expert knowledge’ (Jedlowski 1994). Since no human group is a compact and uniform, but stratified and heterogeneous social block, no phenomenon is interpreted in a univocal way and, indeed, it is normal that it is read in an articulated and complex way. This is particularly evident in the case of risks, i.e. in cases where the probability of an event occurring is a stronger characteristic than the certainty that it will happen.

Such indeterminacy leads to the disorientation that some people experience when faced with situations that “*escape perception, and are located in the sphere of physical and chemical formulas*” (Beck 2001: 28). An exemplary and

recurrent case is the radio wave. The term ‘radiophobia’ was first used in 1903 by Dr Albert Soiland at a symposium of doctors in Los Angeles (LAT 1903), but it was in the 1920s that numerous newspapers began to publish articles on the various faults attributed, without basis, to radio, including some collective disasters such as drought and earthquakes; this is an editorial phenomenon that lasted throughout the decade – and also in the following decades – in which radio was indicated as responsible for countless problems. Thanks to the online archive “Pessimist”<sup>1</sup> it is possible to easily retrieve these period accounts of “*pessimism, alarmism and technophobia throughout history*”. Here are some examples: on 24 March 1924 the “New York Times” suspects that radio waves killed a flock of hundreds of birds while they were flying over a farm; it has echoes in an article twenty years later, on 20 January 1945, when in the “Naugatuok Daily News” an article suggests that radio waves affect carrier pigeons; on 25 March 1928, on the other hand, “Argus-Leader” accused the radio of causing excessive rain in a small English town, where residents signed a petition to demand the suspension of broadcasts for a month; a similar argument is used a few weeks later, on 14 April 1928, on “Lebanon Daily News” where the radio is blamed for “*the crazy weather in the world*”, i.e. it is claimed that the excessive transmission of electric waves breaks the clouds, causes rain to fall and causes strong winds to blow that would be at the root of the anomalous weather conditions all over the planet; and, again, the next day, 15 April 1928, in “The Daily Sentinel” the radio is blamed for the growth of ocean storms, according to Captain WH Parker of the liner White Star Homeric; in other cases, however, the radio is blamed for the long droughts that devastate certain areas, as in the case of an article published in “El Paso Herald-Post” on 27 July 1934. The examples could continue for a long time to come and would also extend to social and political accusations, because there are those who claim that the radio waves influence the electoral vote or the attention of children at school and their civic behavior, or that they are at the root of disagreements in some marriages.

Recently, the journalist Stefano Dalla Casa (2020) also recalled the ‘death ray’ of Guglielmo Marconi, by convention the inventor of the radio. The reference is to the rumor that Marconi, before dying in 1937, was working for the fascist dictator Mussolini on a weapon that would change the fate of the war. Based on the invisible radio waves, he could stop the engine of an enemy vehicle at a distance, for example a plane or a tank. Of course, the ‘death ray’ is a weapon that never existed, and yet the legend was still nourished in the following decades, returning cyclically told in very different, sometimes opposite ways: to get rich, out of patriotism, or pacifism.

<sup>1</sup> The URL of the “Pessimist” radio archive is: <https://pessimists.co/radio-archive>.



Similarly, since the introduction of mobile phones, there has been the problem of the damage to health caused by their use. This is a normal and desirable concern, in fact studies on their safety have been carried out for years. The problem is that if there is a risk and it is very low, it is also difficult to determine; at the same time it is impossible to prove a zero risk. Dalla Casa (2020) also recalls that already in the first decade of 2000 the English, BBC, and Italian national television stations, RAI, broadcast reports that alluded to the damage of wi-fi and electro sensitivity, reporting cases of children who had felt sick after the installation of hot spots at school. Since then, the fear of the alleged problems caused by wi-fi has never gone away and, indeed, in some cases it has latched on to other fears, such as the one against “Haarp”, a research project on the ionosphere accused for at least two decades of causing disasters in various parts of the planet, at least until 2015, when the program was completely finished.

Similar fears have strongly resurfaced since 2018 with the arrival of 5G technology, the fifth generation of connectivity. First of all, this is the natural evolution of a nomenclature that had previously named 2G, 3G and 4G the previous generations and, according to the white paper of the “Next Generation Mobile Networks”, is a technology that *“is expected to enable a fully mobile and connected society and to empower socio-economic transformations in countless ways many of which are unimagined today, including those for productivity, sustainability and well-being”* (NGMN Alliance 2015: 9). The 5G perspective is to connect everything, offer high bandwidth and provide a low-latency service, so that immediacy will be the new standard, breaking down all time barriers and enabling remote controls that, to date, are not yet feasible. The concerns of skeptics are often similar among the various European countries and frequently concern the alleged absence of scientific studies on the harmfulness of electromagnetic waves in telecommunications, so it is easy to find engineering and medical explanations, in every idiom, that illustrate the details of this technology and studies on the effects of 5G on health. Everywhere scientific journalists and disseminators explain that health studies are there and that they agree that, beyond certain thresholds, electromagnetic waves do not cause any biological damage, and that the radio frequencies of 5G are not ‘unexplored’ but, on the contrary, have been known for a long time, so you can rest assured that *“5G will not ‘cook’ our brain like a microwave”* (Ronchetti 2020). However, in spite of this commitment, the fears of a part of the population have not diminished and, on the contrary, have grown along with the increase of posts on social-networks and videos on YouTube, whose contents are clearly fragile on a scientific level, even though they often give up the title of ‘counter-information’. The phenomenon was so significant that a pool of fact-checkers from five European countries (“Pagella

Politica” and “Facta” in Italy, “Maldita.es” in Spain, “Full Fact” in the UK, “Correctiv” in Germany and “Agence France Press” in France) monitored the media in their respective countries to analyse misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying some common issues, such as the false links between the virus and 5G technology (VV.AA. 2020).

According to the report, which analysed data from “Google Trends”, between the end of March and the beginning of April 2020, the number of searches worldwide for the term “5G” increased sharply, in parallel with that for the expressions “5G dangerous” or “5G coronavirus”. Although the fact-checkers have rather abruptly detected and refuted the most alarming claims, the catastrophic narrative was nevertheless born and in a few weeks it spread almost everywhere. A number of international organisations, such as the Bundesinstitut für Risikobewertung (BfR), the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), also intervened and wrote in the “Myth busters” section of their respective websites: “5G technology does NOT spread COVID-19”. Yet, first in the UK and then in other European countries, some citizens were so frightened or angry that they actually knocked down the signal towers. Therefore, the question is to try to understand why they pushed themselves into such violence, as I will illustrate in the following pages.

## Totemic towers

If there is one issue today that does not stop feeding debates, both in philosophy and in the other human and social sciences, it is certainly violence. What do we talk about when we use this term or do we refer to its semantic area? Undoubtedly to a broad conceptual whole, so it is delicate to handle, especially in multidisciplinary or disclosure fields. According to the most recent trends (Marzano 2011), talking about violence also means questioning the borders that exist between oneself and others and the ambiguity of its own existence. It is necessary, therefore, to have an overview of certain practices ranging from apartheid to torture, from self-flagellation to rape, from colonialism to terrorism, but also to address sexuality and unconsciousness, the transition to action and incest, work and death. These issues are very different from each other, but with a global approach they make it possible to renew our sight on the object ‘violence’.

For anthropology, violence is what is locally understood as such; i.e. it investigates the different ‘reasons’ for which some individuals or groups assume certain attitudes or implement behaviours that can lead to violence. The anthropological approach pursues a real immersion in the other social context, in order to grasp its point of view and to reconstruct the social process

of the legitimization – or not – of those who make some gestures. As it is clear from the social sciences, there are different forms of rationality, which are the horizon of each group that considers their choices as the right ones given the circumstances, but which instead appear more or less irrational from the point of view of the other groups (Ligi 2009: 148).

Among these ‘absurd’ behaviours (Morel 2002), during the COVID-19 pandemic, vandalic acts, if not real attacks, against 5G antennas, but also insults and intimidation of telecommunication engineers, stood out. The phenomenon has been recorded throughout Europe, North America and Australasia and is particularly dangerous and irresponsible because it has a direct impact on people’s lives, both for their physical safety and for interpersonal relationships that risk being more difficult or even impossible, especially during the lockdown decided by the state authorities due to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic.

Uscinski and Parent (2014) noted that the people most prone to conspiracy are also the most supportive of political violence, as also reiterated by Imhoff and Lamberty (2020), who verified that

a conspiracy-prone worldview does not only reduce trust in official versions and adherence to norms but is also linked to a stronger acceptance of violence” and that “people high in conspiracy mentality saw it as more defensible to use force and other illegal means to pursue one’s political goals.

This premise is necessary because in addition to the pandemic, in 2020 a particularly bizarre but effective conspiracy theory spread, according to which there are links between 5G technology and the new coronavirus. 5G conspiracy theories have existed for years, but the evidence for the pandemic has been reinforced and further extended to the health conditions of the whole of humanity. The basic version of this idea is that 5G degrades the immune system and that the dangers of this technology are covered by powerful forces in the global telecommunications industry. In other words, the frequencies of 5G would be ‘ionizing’ and, therefore, would cause internal damage to the human body which, weakened, would not be able to counteract the virulence of the coronavirus, which is why it would spread so widely and so rapidly on the planet.

Similar fears had already been expressed in recent decades during the introduction of 3G and Wi-Fi, when it was believed that these technologies, especially wireless, would cause brain cancer or induce mental control. Therefore, currently many suspects have simply transplanted to 5G when this technology began to be launched, around 2018, so in addition to cancer, skeptics fear that this technology will also kill birds and cause ‘electromagnetic sensitivity’, causing migraines and disorientation. With the arrival

of the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in fears, some have begun to circulate the idea that the new disease was linked to 5G. For example, Rebecca Heilweil (2020) identified the first link between 5G and the coronavirus pandemic in a French website called “Les moutons enragés” (“The angry sheep”), which in a post on 20 January wrote that “*the millimetre wave spectrum used by 5G and COVID-19 technology could be related*”. From this text, the idea would have passed into the Belgian newspaper “Het Laaste Nieuws”, which published an interview with a local doctor, who launched the claim that the epidemic would be linked to the 5G antennas installed in Wuhan in 2019. Although the article was removed after only a few hours, the theory still spread on Facebook, only to swell more and more in Spain, Italy and the UK (VV.AA. 2020), often accompanying it with any other fantasies: for some 5G causes radiation, for others it triggers the virus, for others the pandemic is a huge mass distraction operation to install the 5G towers. According to some versions, 5G and COVID-19 are phases of a strategy of depopulation of the planet, while for others the American agricultural multinational Monsanto is involved. More than anything else, the umbrella narrative that covers almost any theory during 2020 is undoubtedly that of QAnon (Lincos, Stilo 2020) which, over the months, has become a real international social phenomenon with important political repercussions; a “*fundamentally apocalyptic and violent*” worldview (Bianchi 2020) because, if you believe that a coven of Satanist pedophiles rule the world and drink the blood of innocent children, then physically eliminating them can be considered a viable solution.

Without going into such a paranoid and conspiratorial path, a certain amount of physical violence has been used: not against people, but towards the 5G towers, in an action which, beyond the practical aspects and its real effects, is full of symbolic dimensions, on the one hand because it recalls the ceremonial destruction of the tower to which Gérard Althabe refers commenting on the demolition of some suburban buildings in Naples (Althabe 2010), on the other hand because of the use of fire, which is the cathartic element par excellence (Buttitta 2002).

In early April 2020, in the UK a number of telecommunication towers were destroyed by arsons in Birmingham, Liverpool and Melling, then further damage was reported in Northern Ireland; and attacks multiplied across the country. On Easter weekends alone, 11 and 12 April, nearly twenty antennas were damaged or burned in the UK, while at the end of the month there were over fifty, not forgetting more than 80 attacks or attempts to intimidate telecommunications workers (Leloup 2020a). In the same period, at least 22 antennas were affected in the Netherlands, 3 in Ireland, 2 in Cyprus, 1 in Belgium, Sweden and Finland (Cerulus 2020). A few weeks later, at the beginning of June 2020, “Le Monde” had at least 22 antennas destroyed or dam-

aged in France since the start of the lockdown on 17 March (Leloup 2020b); this is twice as many as the total number of acts of vandalism committed in France against telecommunication repeaters in 2019. To a lesser extent, also in Italy, in the same months of quarantine, there were acts of vandalism against 5G pylons, or supposedly 5G pylons, as in the provinces of Caserta and Messina, where there were 3G and 4G antennas that provided the internet signal to thousands of families (Giordano 2020).

Despite the amount of vandalism and the scenographic visibility of the antennas fires, the arsonists are nevertheless anonymous and hidden; only a small minority of these acts are claimed and even less are those whose authors can be identified. Conspiracy theories often work by dividing the world into ‘us’ and ‘them’, with the aim of providing a scapegoat for people and institutions, and providing simple explanations for certain phenomena (Bonardi 2019). All this can have strong accelerations when an infodemic occurs (Manfredi 2015), i.e. when there is a wide and rapid spread of misinformation, as Ahmed and colleagues (2020) documented in their analysis of the “5G coronavirus” theme tweets between 27 March and 4 April 2020. In these days they noticed that conspiracy messages have grown in number and allowed the underlying thesis to self-seal itself, i.e. to resist other arguments and no longer be falsifiable or disputable. All this takes place behind a computer or a smartphone, but how can we find out more about individuals who actually vandalise technical equipment? As it is easy to guess, on a psychological, sociological and anthropological level it is very difficult to understand who they are, however we have some clues.

In the UK, a 47-year-old man, father of three children and owner of a car park company in Liverpool, was arrested for destroying a telephone antenna, and on 8 June was sentenced to 3 years in prison because he had numerous previous convictions for about thirty other crimes, including assault and possession of a firearm. The man admitted his guilt and that the act was premeditated, because he is convinced that 5G is harmful to health (Hadfield 2020).

In France, the anarchist blog “infoLibéritaire” claimed the first fire in Toulouse of a telephone antenna on the night between 5 and 6 May; in a post on 8 May, the anonymous author justified the fact with the following words: “*this new level of control [made possible by 5G technology] has angered us even more and induced us to act. Doing nothing meant accepting it*”, stressing that “*it was easier than we imagined*” (infoLibéritaire 2020).

Also very interesting is what emerges from a long journalistic report in Russia, where some of the anti-5Gs contacted by Roman Korolev (2020) declare that they are willing to “*fight against the towers*” to avert “*the global government’s plan to build a digital concentration camp*”. The people interviewed are all between 45 and 60 years old, claiming to have informed them-

selves in Facebook groups and with videos on YouTube and, according to the anthropologist Alexandra Arkhipova, consulted by the reporter, this indicates a generation gap: *“the old generation has difficulty coming to terms with the new digital reality”*. This is certainly an incisive element, but it is not the only one, because the aversion and skepticism towards 5G, especially during the health crisis of 2020, is transversal in every social context and can be traced back to many different reasons, sometimes even contradictory.

In this sense, the Italian case is particularly indicative because, despite not having many cases of physical violence against 5G repeaters and, above all, not having at the moment ethnographic data on the perpetrators of vandalism, we can certainly say that there is a widespread climate of aversion against 5G because as many as 600 municipalities, where 4.5 million people live, have issued local ordinances suspending the installation of antennas on their territory, as a precautionary measure. The motivation, repeated by all the mayors involved, is that which refers to the precautionary principle (Zorloni 2020).

## Conspiracy Entrepreneurs

Technophobic suspicions did not grow spontaneously on the web and on social networks, therefore in society, but benefited from the visibility provided by many personalities, also in this case very transversal, who, as “political entrepreneurs” and “moral entrepreneurs” (Vitale 2007), gather widespread discontent and channel it towards precise objectives and through effective watchwords, drawing visibility and consensus. Here are some examples: the Nobel Prize winner of medicine Luc Montagnier stated on TV that there could be a correlation between the pandemic and the 5G antennas in Wuhan, because *“it may have contributed to the pathogenic power of the virus”*; the Italian government consultant Gunter Pauli tweeted that *“Science needs to demonstrate & explain cause & effect. However science first observes correlations: phenomena that are apparently associated. Let’s apply science logic. Which was the 1st city in the world blanketed in 5G? Wuhan! Which is the 1st European 5G Region? Northern Italy”*; Italian Senator Sara Cunial has repeatedly argued, even in institutional forums, that *“5G is only a military and geopolitical issue”*, so *“we must stop saying that 5G is a problem of economic or technological advantage”*; US rapper Wiz Khalifa tweeted to his 36.2 million followers the following question: *“Corona? 5G? Or both?”*, creating a storm and becoming a Twitter hero of the 5G movement; French actress Juliette Binoche has published on Instagram that *“international financial groups”* use vaccines to *“implant a subcutaneous chip”*, so *“No to Bill Gates’ operations, no to 5G”*.

Cascading, a large number of minor characters have acted as corollaries and megaphones to such positions, fueling suspicion and fear both through mainstream media and on their personal social profiles and in self-produced videos on YouTube. For example, on 6 April 2020, the Italian national newspaper “La Stampa” published Benedetta Paravia’s article entitled “Il valore della salute e quello del profitto: il 5G” (The value of health and the value of profit: 5G), which raised strong complaints (Attivissimo 2020), to the point that the newspaper first changed the title to “L’opinione controcorrente” (The countercurrent opinion), then removed it from its website and the next day gave space to three editorials of the opposite denomination (Bella 2020; Decina, Minopoli 2020; Genna 2020).

Therefore, the responsibility for disinformation on this issue should not be attributed generically to the Internet or Social-networks, but also to the professional press, which, theoretically, should be respectful of the verification of the sources and contents it publishes. However, the propagation power of web tools is much higher, so the various online sharing platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.) function as powerful sounding boards for even the most incredible news. In France, for example, in early March 2020, the rumor spread that cocaine protected against the coronavirus and the Ministry of Health had to explain that this was a lie: “*Non, la cocaïne NE protège PAS contre le #COVID19. C’est une drogue addictive provoquant de graves effets indésirables et nocifs pour la santé des personnes*”<sup>2</sup>. In Italy, on the other hand, a singular phenomenon has happened: on 25 March a video of a popular science television programme, “TG Leonardo”, of 16 November 2015, began to circulate, in which a rather delicate experiment was presented: “*Chinese scientists create a lung supervirus from bats and mice. It is only for study purposes but there are many protests*”<sup>3</sup>. The film is 5 years old and has no correlation with the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 discovered in 2020, which is of natural and not laboratory origin, yet it circulated enormously on Italian social networks for a few days, and was also relaunched by leading politicians such as Matteo Salvini, whose party – the Lega, the first Italian party, although opposed by the current government – presented an “*urgent question to the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister*”<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> The French Ministry of Health on Twitter, the 8 March 2020: <https://twitter.com/Min-SoliSante/status/1236626510703968257>.

<sup>3</sup> The Italian press agency Ansa, 25 March 2020: [https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2020/03/25/coronavirus-il-caso-del-video-del-tgr-leonardo-2015-sul-supervirus-creato-in-cina\\_7adf8316-6ca5-42cd-96de-c18f7fb53595.html](https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2020/03/25/coronavirus-il-caso-del-video-del-tgr-leonardo-2015-sul-supervirus-creato-in-cina_7adf8316-6ca5-42cd-96de-c18f7fb53595.html).

<sup>4</sup> The Facebook account of Lega - Salvini Premier, 25 March 2020: <https://www.facebook.com/422703967772535/videos/683417012443620>.



Going back to the rumors about an alleged correlation between coronavirus and 5G, in Italy among those who support it there are politicians in regional and municipal institutions (for example the regional councilor of Lazio Davide Barillari or Franca Biglio, mayor of a small mountain municipality, but representative of the National Association of Small Municipalities of Italy), artists, media personalities, intellectuals and professional journalists. The latter category includes Fulvio Grimaldi, whose arguments show the complexity of the “anti-5G” galaxy. Grimaldi is a former face of national television and, from the content he publishes on his blog, currently seems to have political ideas that can be traced back to the area that Amselle (2014) calls “red-brownism”. Grimaldi is one of the promoters of the Italian national event “Stop 5G” held in Rome on 12 September 2020 and, although far from mainstream news channels for years, he continues to have a small visibility on the web, between his personal blog and YouTube channel. In recent months, his efforts have focused on 5G technology, which would strike children in particular for an evil plan of an obscure New World Order, which, financed by people like Bill Gates and George Soros, would oppose politicians like Lukashenko, Putin, Trump, Maduro, and “*other heretics of multiple thought*”<sup>5</sup>.

The reference to Grimaldi’s contents is only an example of how certain apparently distant positions can instead converge into a single anti-capitalistic, technophobic and more or less consciously Jewish-phobic attitude (and, in some cases, openly antisemitic, as will be seen shortly). In the universe of the skeptics of the pandemic and 5G, the names of Soros and Gates are recurrent, as targets of different conspiracy theories. In this particular declination it is above all Microsoft’s co-founder who has been turned into a real scapegoat, because he is accused of having created, spread or modified the virus in order to “*control the world*” and/or “*sell his vaccines*” (VV.AA. 2020: 14-15). In the case of Soros, on the other hand, the discourse easily degrades into antisemitism, a constant reflection of many conspirators who always see the ‘evil’ plot of some Jewish brotherhood; in particular, two British anti-5G activists have long campaigned against this technology using antisemitic arguments and encouraging the reading of the false historical “Protocols of the Elderly Sages of Zion”, gaining the result that the municipality of Totnes did not install the 5g towers (Davis 2020). This allows us to grasp how sovereign and libertarian positions, although apparently opposite and not at all homogeneous, manage to coexist and sometimes mix under the ideological umbrella of pandemic denial on the one hand and 5G aversion on the other (Mason 2020), however different prevalences can be grasped in individual European countries. In

<sup>5</sup> From the personal blog of Fulvio Grimaldi, 11 September 2020: <https://fulviogrimaldi.blogspot.com/2020/09/match-video-tra-un-pro-5g-e-me-il-5g-e.html>.



Italy, for example, there is a rather close proximity between the extreme right and the skeptics of the pandemic (Zitelli 2020): since the weeks of lockdown, the Italian neo-fascists of Casapound and Forza Nuova have urged citizens to not use masks and to violate the rules on distancing, they have also organized a parade on the occasion of Easter by exploiting Catholicism and, again, have helped to organize some demonstrations in Rome, such as the “no-masks” on 5 September and the “Liberation” on 10 October. In France, on the other hand, the evocation of radical anti-capitalists and anarcho-ecologists is more frequent, therefore a galaxy that refers more to the “ultragauche” (the extreme left), as in the case of the claims of some attacks on the 5G antennas mentioned above or the “Day of Action and Information against 5G” in Lyon on 19 September, centred on the criticism of a “technicienne” society of control, surveillance, consumerism and environmental degradation.

### The constellation of skeptics

If the anthropologist is “*the astronomer of human constellations*”, as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1958) claimed, i.e. the scientist in charge of discovering a meaning in very different configurations in the order of size and distance from those closest to him, then with regard to the galaxy of the 5G skeptics we must make an effort to observe more deeply, avoiding any too intuitive and superficial definition. Once again the Italian case can provide us with a cue for such a deepening, since the term “negazionisti” (deniers) has been spreading in public opinion, which however is controversial, both because in the Italian language it is strongly linked to the Shoah, even if not exclusively, and, entering into the merits, because it flattens the variety of “pande-skeptics” positions. As we have seen in the previous paragraph, the “conspiracy entrepreneurs” are many and differentiated, both for political-cultural background and for ideological-practical purposes; this is inevitably reflected in their listeners, in the people who take part in their marches, in the activists who follow their rallies or who, sometimes, take action by making vandalic gestures.

Considering the practical difficulty of carrying out ethnography in this historical moment in that specific ‘community’, an effective method to collect data and, above all, to listen to the reasons of these people, is to follow their public initiatives and rallies. From this point of view, an occasion of great interest was the “Stop 5G” event, a sort of relay of rallies lasting 3h30’, organised in Rome on 12 September by the “Alleanza Italiana Stop 5G”. The event was entirely streamed live at the same time by some YouTube channels and then the film was kept on that platform for anyone who wanted to watch

it again.<sup>6</sup> This has allowed the writer to make a small ‘netnography’ because, precisely, the full recording of that event has allowed us to get a closer look at a ‘human constellation’ which, also through the live comments to the film and further contributions of characters who orbit in the same area, presents many internal nuances.

Frequently branded as ‘imbeciles’, ‘madmen’ or ‘reactionaries’, the individuals present in the square and on stage show are aware of what they say and organize in the way they act. Although the event brought together just over a thousand participants, the media reverberation was broad and lasting, a sign that they know how to attract attention and how to make people talk about themselves and the theme they are committed to. Among the facts there is the composition of the square: certainly heterogeneous, but with an average age in the ‘middle age’ bracket, even if there was no lack of young people, perhaps more curious than militants. Apart from a few isolated subjects more ‘folkloristic’, everything and everyone seemed extraordinarily ‘normal’: families, old people, young people with signs and banners, just like in other political and social demonstrations. The afternoon in the central Piazza del Popolo in Rome is organized as a long collective request to the Government to suspend the “*dangerous experimentation of the Internet of things, which has obvious social, health, environmental repercussions and undermines personal freedoms and constitutional rights*”. Presented by two journalists, 16 speakers – politicians, doctors, biologists, actors, astrophysicists, writers – who, from different angles, are conveyed in a single complaint, that of the “*dark sides of 5G in the model of hyper-digital society*”.

The contents are the most disparate and alongside unfounded and incongruous arguments there are others worth reflecting on. Indicative, however, is the opening sentence of the event, solemnly proclaimed by the first speaker, the biologist Tonia Di Giovacchino: “*irradiated, ill, spied on, controlled, damaged in human rights and dignity. 5G, a thud in our lives, nightmare of the present future, electromagnetic tsunami that violates our bodies, engulfs our minds, desecrates the most intimate essence of humanity*”. Below I propose a list of the issues that have emerged: medical-scientific, political-environmental, educational-school, geopolitical and economic, legal-administrative, philosophical and socio-anthropological.

The most present theme is undoubtedly health. According to Dr. Ferdinando Laghi, president of ISDE (an international association of doctors for the environment), electromagnetism is “*potentially carcinogenic*”, so his

<sup>6</sup> On the YouTube channel “Border Nights” there is the 3h30’ video, dated 12 September 2020, entitled “national event STOP 5G: for the moratorium, constitution and digital self-determination”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHgKZ7mDAwI>.

association, since “*it is not prejudicial against technological development, but prejudicially against certain damage to health*”, calls for “*a 5G moratorium to ensure health effects*”. According to other speakers, 5G will lead to an “*electromagnetism overdose*” and this will cause a lowering of immune defences through “*ionizing radiation*” and, therefore, a spread of diseases, including the COVID-19 pandemic, because it would destroy cells and DNA. For others, the health risk of 5G is at the root of further medical problems, such as headaches, cancers and various forms of fatigue.

A second topic concerns the environment and the effects of 5G on the ecosystem. The actor Enrico Montesano states that during the lockdown, trees were cut down to install antennas (this is a fake-news, as many European sources attest), while the lawyer Luca Saltalamacchia<sup>7</sup> in a promotional spot of the event declares that 5G is an energivoral and risky technology for public safety.

There are those who are concerned about the school-pedagogical model of distance education, which would be favoured by this technology, such as the doctor Anna Rita Iannetti<sup>8</sup>, who denounces the “*total alteration of personality building*” of children “*forced at home in front of a monitor*” and far from their classmates and teacher, therefore from empathic and sensorial relationships.

Widening one’s gaze, the risk of 5G technology would also be geopolitical and military. This is supported by journalist Margherita Furlan, according to whom this technology was developed by the USA and China to make powerful remote weapons work, and echoed by journalist Danilo Ducci in a report for “ByoBlu”, a YouTube channel of ‘counter-information’, according to which this form of armament is the preparation of “*a future war that would mean the end of generations*”.

There are, of course, also important economic spin-offs, since 5G would consolidate a de facto global oligopoly, managed by telecommunications corporations. This is a narrative that has been known for years, which cyclically adapts to new needs, but whose structure always contrasts ‘free information’ with ‘strong powers’. The declination of the case in question is thus presented by the writer Marco Pizzuti:

All the big decisions, therefore not only 5G, are taken outside the Parliaments in exclusive private clubs, such as the Bilderberg Club; and it is no coincidence that the head of the task force for the [italian post-pandemic] recon-

<sup>7</sup> Saltalamacchia was candidate for the presidency of the Campania region for the “Terra” ecologist list in the local elections of 20-21 September 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Iannetti was candidate for the presidency of the Marche region for the “Movimento 3V” (Vaccini Vogliamo Verità) list, at the local elections of 20-21 September 2020.

struction is Vittorio Colao, member of Bilderberg, former general manager Omnitel, former CEO of Vodafone, current member of Verizon, colossus of 5G that is installing all its antennas around the world. Vittorio Colao has also worked with one of the world's largest investment banks, Morgan Stanley, so he is a trusted man of the elite.

Moreover, a young artist and activist of the "Our voice" movement highlighted the democratic risks, because 5G will favour video surveillance and facial recognition, so it is concentrating "*in the hands of the holders of this technology an uncontrollable power*". Among the speakers were also challenged the legal instruments issued by the Italian government to avoid the blockade by the mayors, such as the lawyer Giuseppe Cannizzo, according to whom these decrees are "*a serious violation of the principle of citizens' freedom*", who are "*cavies*": "*we are undergoing the greatest in vitro experiment in the history of mankind [...]; citizens have never been heard, involved, consulted; not even the weaker groups such as children and cancer patients*".

This leads to philosophical and social reflections, since 5G technology would lead to hyper connection ("*each of us will become a transmitter*"), therefore to isolation and atomisation. The writer Luciano Chiappa is of the idea that we must

distinguish well between 'social innovation' and 'technological innovation'. Social innovation is that which brings being closer to its own self-assertion, whereas 5G is the technical innovation which distances being from its own self-assertion, indeed it is the self-denial of being according to its own human nature.

At the same time, ethical issues arise, such as those on transhumanism raised by the teacher Annalisa Buccieri, from the School Observatory of the Italian Alliance Stop 5G. She said that the current Italian Minister of Education

hopes for the hybrid between man and machine; she explicitly invites us not to be afraid of transhumanist philosophy; I am afraid instead: I am a teacher, an activist and above all a terrified mother, a mother who will not send her son to school this year.

Further conspiracist positions on 5G as a project to decimate and/or enslave humanity should be pointed out, so in his long and concluding speech Maurizio Martucci, national coordinator of the Italian Alliance Stop 5G and organizer of the event, vehemently said:

we are in a techno-dictatorship, where the new oil is represented by data, our data [...]. 5G is not for us, it is for them to control us, to monitor us, to track us, to have us in their hands! [...] In full lockdown Bill Gates has registered

the patent “Microsoft 2020 06.06.06” with which he would like to insert in the human body a chip capable of monitoring the daily physical activity of a person in exchange for cryptocurrency, so our thoughts, our mind, our emotions, our identity, our body will be reduced to a bargaining chip, in exchange for cryptocurrency! [...] We will never allow the human being to be replaced by a hybrid!.

Finally, we have to consider the interventions with religious reflections (a form of ‘conspirituality’, between new-age and conspiracy, which Ward and Voas had already noticed in 2011), like that of astrophysicist Giuliana Conforto, who illustrated an almost messianic scenario:

Why are they in such a hurry to do 5G? Because an epochal event is happening that has been foretold by all the prophecies, and which is verified by scientific data: the earth’s magnetic field is about to reverse. This is made in the shape of an apple, it is called “Earth’s magnetosphere”, and the two poles, positive and negative, are about to reverse. This means that it passes through zero, i.e. the electromagnetic field is switching off; these are the famous “three days of darkness” that have been announced since all time. What we don’t know, but we are observing it, is that if we remove this “apple” we see what it was hiding, that is another Earth, an Earth visible only by space probes that has the shape of a child 4/5 times bigger than the spherical Earth that we believe is real. Instead this is a Matrix; we are part of a single organism.

The people mentioned in this paragraph are simply speakers at a public demonstration, so they should not be confused with vandals who used violence against 5G antennas. This quick but wide overview of anti-5G positions is useful to show how complex is the question of a unitary definition, which certainly cannot be the term ‘neo-luddism’, since only a small part of the galaxy presented above has actually committed violence against physical instruments. However, even in this case any definition that is too narrow is still imprecise, because not all of them are ‘technophobic’, indeed some of them call themselves ‘techno-rebels’ (from extreme right to extreme left) and, especially in France, they use for themselves the term ‘Amish’, from the Anabaptist religious community widespread especially in Ohio, as a mockery of power (in French the assonance is with the word ‘amis’, friends; therefore “*nous sommes les Amish de Macron*”, “*we are the Macron’s Amish*”, is an ironic way to identify and distance oneself).

According to a sociological report carried out by Antoine Bristielle on the French “no-masks”, the ‘typical’ profile of the pandemic skeptic (and, by adjacency, of 5G) would be that of a middle-aged woman, with a medium level of education, tending to be right-wing and very doubtful about political, health and media institutions (Bristielle 2020). However interesting and useful, the profile of the ‘average type’ does not explain why different people

live under the same flag. This would be a socio-anthropological study to be deepened with prolonged and repeated ethnographic investigations, but in the meantime may prove useful the concept of “conspiracy singularity” by Anna Merlan (2020), i.e. “*the place where many conspiracy communities are suddenly meeting and merging, a melting pot of unimaginable density*”. This is a fusion phenomenon that occurs when the conspiracy theory (or narrative, if you prefer) can be adapted to the purposes and, therefore, is able to attract very different people ideologically.

### For whom the tower burns?

Observing certain phenomena analytically, the social sciences try to precisely define their object (or rather, subject) of study, so as to be able to understand it and to trace the motivations and conditions for which certain events occur. Therefore, it is not the previous cultural differences that determine the conflict, but the logic of exclusion and the marginalization of certain social groups, as well as a political-media strategy of those who are its spokesmen, that produce the variegated galaxy of skeptics, within which some push themselves to acts of violence and vandalism. As Fabio Dei (2005) observes, the search for meanings and reasons for violence means framing it as a human activity that produces meaning and is governed by rules like all the others, but understanding it does not mean forgiving or flanking it. There is a high risk of speaking about certain phenomena with a language that is too contiguous to that of one of the parties involved, especially those who have more decisional and managerial power, if not in content, at least in the form of a certain discursive order. Therefore, the risk of complicity is real, not only symbolic, since the very fact of talking about violence is an integral part of the definition of the subjects involved. This has often led to fragmentary and discontinuous texts, more evocative than analytical, but without a doubt the best attempt is to seek forms of writing aimed at an analysis of the symbolic syntax of specific practices, and which adequately return the tension between epistemological, emotional and ethical aspects.

The “conspiracy singularity” allows rather different personalities, with sometimes distant motivations, to cohabit under the umbrella of the theories of the variegated ‘pande-skeptic’ universe. The key is in the mechanism with which such narratives work, which is similar to the one identified by Roland Barthes for astrology. This is not the evocation of a dream world, but the strictly realistic description of a precise social slice. Barthes says that “*astrology is by no means an opening to dreams, but a pure mirror, a pure institution of reality*” (Barthes 1957: 181-182). The French employee

and saleswoman of the 1950s in which Barthes writes read the horoscope to exorcise their daily life, to half-alienate and half-release themselves from reality. Similarly, the conspiracy theory – or in any case the narrative against 5G – works as a mirror of those who believe in it: it recounts the nightmare of daily life of oneself. As a speaker on stage in Rome effectively exposed,

we must defend ourselves and our territory, but the territory we must defend must be understood in broad terms: our territory is first and foremost our brain, that is, our thoughts; it is fundamental to defend our thoughts. Then we must defend our body, and finally our territory, that is, the place where we walk, where our children study and play, where we work, where we meet.

The ‘community’ we are observing is composed of individuals, in the sense of single people who are concerned, if not obsessed, with their own bodies, their own existence. They do not show particular empathy towards fragile and subordinate people – unless they are children, pregnant women and cancer patients –; they do not deal with political issues that propose a ransom or a subversion of order, but focus just on defending privileges that they would like to control even more. Theirs is an ego-centred conception of the world, incapable of connecting notions and building a perspective. In the speeches pronounced on stage and in the texts published on the web by the anti-5Gs there emerges a viewpoint that cannot be called ‘political’ in the strict sense of the word, because in reality it is emotional, like that of a horde that moves on the basis of feelings and not visions.

And yet, on a symbolic level, the fire of burnt antennas should be considered as a form of catharsis of one’s own life, to be burnt in order to hope to renew it. Therefore, beyond those flames there could be more than vandalism and rebelliousness as an end in itself, because – and this is a working hypothesis – there could also be demands, for example, for a rethinking of progress, hopefully without giving up technology (Sorgi 2020), for a collective advancement that is able to involve and include, to listen and to fill the gaps.

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