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RESEARCH ARTICLE

How a Dehumanising Form of Language Can Impact Outgroups' Decision to Engage in Violence: An Analysis of the Italian Far Left

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ABSTRACT: Despite considerable scholarship investigating engagement in violence, literature has overlooked how daily interpersonal relations and the use of a moralistic form of language impact individuals' decision to engage in violence. Presenting my research findings, this paper intends to bridge this gap by examining personal stories of a group of Italian former far-left militants, operating during the 'Years of Lead'. It employs narrative analysis, using Rosenberg's and Gilligan's perspectives on violent behaviour as theoretical lens. This paper identifies a three-step process, resulting from human cognition and partly implemented through a moralistic form of communication: firstly, employing Manichaeic worldviews to make sense of society; secondly, the progressive dehumanisation of those falling into the negative side of these worldviews – outgroups; finally, outgroups' choice of engaging in violence. This paper finds that by promoting outgroups' dehumanisation, a form of language based on moralistic divisions significantly contributes to shaping outgroups' decision to engage in violence.

KEYWORDS: Dehumanisation, Engagement in violence, Far Left, Italy, Moralistic communication.

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1. Introduction

Why do some people engage in violence to achieve their socio-political goals? Aiming at comprehending individuals' engagement in political violence, in this study, I draw attention to how understandings and practices of interpersonal relations, particularly focusing on language/communication, can affect individuals' decision-making process regarding their commitment to violent political means. In doing so, I build on

scholarship examining social interactions in everyday circumstances and how these can affect individuals and groups to (re)act violently (e.g., Rosenberg, 2015; Mancini, 2017; Kleinewiese, 2022; Shafieoun and Haq, 2023).

Although a considerable number of scholars have investigated radicalisation processes and pathways to violence at both group and individual levels (e.g., Tarrow, 1989; Della Porta, 2013; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017; Ferguson and McAuley, 2020; Hogg, 2021; Altier, Leonard Boyle and Horgan, 2022), there is limited research on how understandings and practices of daily interpersonal relations can impact a person's decision to engage in political violence. Particularly, literature has overlooked the impact which a dehumanising form of language can have on individuals', especially outgroups', decision-making process.

Therefore, I look at how a moralistic form of interpersonal and intergroup communication, which Rosenberg (2003, 2015) defined as *life-alienating* and dehumanising, can lead some individuals to commit to political violence. In this study, I identify a three-step process resulting from human cognition, which contributes to shaping individuals' decision-making regarding the use of violence.

The first step consists of employing Manichaeic worldviews – characterized by mutually-exclusive dichotomies, such as 'good-bad', 'right-wrong', and 'friend-enemy' – to make sense of society and the surrounding environment. The second step consists of the progressive dehumanisation of those falling into the negative side of these dichotomies. Finally, the third step is the choice of engaging in violence. I will discuss this process, examining the impact of a moralistic form of language on step two and how this can affect step three.

Additionally, in my study, I specifically use the term *dehumanisation* rather than *infra-humanisation* as defined by Leyens et al. (2007). According to Leyens et al., while *infra-humanisation* refers to people's tendency of considering outgroups as "less human or more animal-like" (2007, p. 143), *dehumanisation* implies that individuals "are no longer protected by values such as morality; they may suffer anything from actors that have no moral restraints" (2007, p. 143).

As aforementioned, extant literature has given much attention to how dehumanisation processes of those identified as outgroups facilitates and can lead to mass atrocities perpetrated against them by those identified as ingroups (e.g., Kteily and Bruneau, 2017; Rai, Valdesolo and Graham, 2017; Vezzali *et al.*, 2022). In this regard, scholars have demonstrated that denial of humanity of outgroups can lead to ingroups' moral disengagement, which in turn can lead to ingroups' "complete disregard of life and extreme forms of violence" (Vezzali *et al.*, 2022, p. 216) against those identified as outgroups. Yet, little attention has been given to whether and how dehumanisation processes of outgroups can be themselves cause of outgroups' violent behaviour. This is the gap to which I intend to contribute.

At first sight, this nuance might appear trivial and even unnecessary to better understand dynamics that might lead some individuals to engage in political violence. Nevertheless, a closer examination reveals aspects of ingroup-outgroup dynamics that are either still unknown/unclear or so much taken for granted that they entirely disappear from the analyses, leaving them partial. Particularly, I refer to the fact that in ingroup-outgroup dynamics, everyone is simultaneously ingroup and outgroup, and that *this space* in which individuals are both ingroup and outgroup may reveal interesting and useful information on how decision to engage in political violence may take shape.

Yet, when processes of radicalisation leading to engagement in political violence are examined, both at the individual and group levels, this particular space tends to be considered only at the beginning of the study. Once the analysis moves to examining the moment when individuals or a group of individuals choose to engage in political violence, the ingroup-outgroup dynamics become either secondary explanatory factors or disappear entirely. This can be seen in important and influential research on radicalisation processes and violent

extremism, such as Thielmann and Hilbig's (e.g., 2023), Meloy and Rahman's (e.g., 2021), Della Porta's (e.g., 2013), and McCauley and Moskalenko's (e.g., 2011), among others.

Despite including ingroup-outgroup dynamics, these works end up emphasising the role of political/religious ideologies and/or individuals' personal circumstances – socio-economic, psychological, and similar – as main factors whereby understanding their decision to engage in violence, isolating it from the ingroup-outgroup context. This is precisely what I disagree with, as ingroup-outgroup dynamics can in fact reveal a great deal of how and why individuals make particular behavioural decisions, and how and why some individuals can choose to commit to violent political means.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I do not mean to deny the significant contribution to the field of radicalisation and violent extremism that extant research has made, as it is undeniable. I mean to bring the focus back on the impact that ingroup-outgroup dynamics have on individuals' decision to engage in violence, which I do not consider secondary as they happen daily and across all levels of daily life.

To this end, I examine personal stories of a group of Italian former far-left militants, who joined and/or found armed organisations during the time of political violence called '*Years of Lead*' between 1969 and the late 1980s, and a group of victims of the violence of that time. In this analysis, I employ narrative analysis as methodological approach, examining speakers' personal stories through the lens of Rosenberg's (e.g., 2003, 2015) and Gilligan's (e.g., 2001) perspectives on violent behaviour. Both scholars investigated the effects of employing moralistic language in interpersonal and intergroup communication on human behaviour from a psychological perspective. Furthermore, they examine how the social context, and interpersonal and intergroup dynamics affect human behaviour. This is why, in this article, I examine both former militants' accounts and victims' accounts, as looking at both sides, it is possible to get a better understanding of the contextual and relational dynamics that might have shaped former militants' decision to engage in political violence. Thus, the aim of my study is not to explain political conflict in Italy during the '*Years of Lead*'; rather, it is to better understand which factors contributed to former militants' decision-making process regarding the choice of political violence and how these factors contributed to it.

In this paper, I proceed as follows. In the next section, I will present the theoretical framework. Then, I will move on to presenting the methodology I employed, followed by the analysis section. Finally, I will end with a concluding and discussion section, emphasising the implications of the analysis for research on and prevention of radicalisation, (violent) extremism, and political violence. Ultimately, through this paper, I encourage for more reflection on how phenomena such as radicalisation processes, violent extremism, and political violence are deeply connected to interpersonal/intergroup dynamics and how these are performed in daily life.

2. Moralistic Communication and the Problem of Dehumanisation

Rosenberg (2003, 2015) and Gilligan (2001) provide crucial insights into the intersection of moralistic language, dehumanisation, and the propensity for violent behaviour, emphasising how daily interpersonal and intergroup interactions play a significant role in these processes. Both scholars note that everyday communication often carries a moralistic tone, wherein individuals are categorised and labelled according to judgements of right and wrong. Serving as simplifications, these labels and categories help individuals navigate their environments by reducing the complexity of social interactions and lessening feelings of uncertainty (Hogg, 2014; Ferguson and Halliday, 2020). While the act of categorising and labelling is not necessarily harmful, problems arise when moralistic judgements accompany these categories. Moralistic judgements are based on the metaphysical distinction between 'good' and 'bad/evil'. However, when these accompany

categories and labels, which aim to make better sense of the entities of the socio-political environment, they result in distinguishing between 'good entities/beings' and 'bad entities/beings' in a Manichaeian fashion (Džaferović, 2018; Gilligan, 2001; Rosenberg, 2015).

While such a dualistic distinction might work at the metaphysical level, when it is transposed to the empirical level, particularly the human level, it becomes more problematic, as it assumes that human beings can also be clearly distinguished between 'good human beings' and 'bad human beings'. This is precisely what both Rosenberg (2003, 2015) and Gilligan (2001) warn from, considering it dangerous. They explain that this form of moralistic language/communication is one key factor contributing to creating the environment for violence to erupt. It evaluates the very essence of individuals and not just their behaviours, effectively reducing individuals' identities to the categories or labels they are assigned. To better understand this process, it is worth noting how T. R. Sarbin (1986a, 1986b), a psychologist, illustrates it.

Sarbin (1986b) points out that once entities are classified, these inform how people interact with one another. Human interpretation and construction of events in both natural and social worlds are guided by what he calls 'root metaphors', which are fundamental categories that people use to give meaning to what surrounds them (Sarbin, 1986b). Lakoff and Johnson (1980) called these 'ontological metaphors'. These highlight similarities between different entities and events, and are linguistically recognisable through constructions like 'as if' and 'like' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Sarbin, 1986b; Sclavi, 2003). For example, a rectangular object with four legs might be seen '*as if*' it was a table. This interpretation, however, is just one of many possibilities. For instance, a table could also be understood differently, perhaps as a potential shelf if it was flipped and mounted on a wall.

However, Sarbin (1986b) emphasises that this cognitive flexibility often diminishes as metaphors and analogies become literal over time. The shift from using phrases like 'as if' to asserting that an object 'is' limits interpretation to a singular perspective, highlighting only one or a few aspects of it and reducing the richness of understanding (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 201). This reduction is precisely what Rosenberg and Gilligan find troubling in the context of moralistic communication. When metaphors evolve into literal expressions, they transition from flexible tools for understanding to fixed and unchangeable models, as table 1 demonstrates.

Table 1

<i>Scenario</i>	<i>Example of observation with evaluation</i>	<i>Example of observation without evaluation</i>
Henry and his sister were watching TV at home. Henry hit his sister.	Henry is aggressive	Henry hit his sister when she switched the television channel

Source: in Rosenberg, 2015, pp. 30–31, 34–35

In the table, the sentence 'Henry is aggressive' suggests that his behaviour stems exclusively from his identity, his nature, which is aggressive. Moreover, in the dualistic good-bad spectrum, being aggressive lies closer to the bad end, thus presenting Henry as a not very pleasant and even dangerous person. Conversely, the second sentence, 'Henry hit his sister when she switched the television channel', conveys a different situation. Firstly, the second sentence only describes what happened without placing evaluations on the identity/nature of neither of the actors involved. Secondly, as no evaluation was attached, the second sentence did not confine Henry within the boundaries of a rigid identity, nor did it confine him to the bad end of the dualistic good-bad spectrum. By avoiding the use of the verb 'to be', the second sentence allows for more inquiry into why Henry hurt his sister. Although, understandably, to the eyes of many, switching TV channels does not represent a reasonable enough pretext to hit a person, the second sentence pushes observers to look

for the cause of Henry's aggressive behaviour away from his identity, implying more complexity behind people's behaviour.

Furthermore, the process of sensemaking, as described by Sarbin (1986b, pp. 8–9, 15), is further reinforced when these categories and classes are interconnected, forming a cohesive narrative or plot. This interconnectedness not only helps individuals understand their environment but also dictates how they should behave within it (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, pp. 201–208; Grillo, 2025). For instance, once a specific type of mushroom is categorised as poisonous, this label carries with it a prescribed set of behaviours – e.g., avoiding the mushroom or removing it altogether to prevent harm. Similarly, social interactions are influenced by the categories into which people are placed. Individuals classified into specific categories are primarily understood and treated through the lens of these classifications (Rosenberg, 2015). This dynamics helps explain why societies often exhibit patterns of discrimination and social inequality; these inequalities arise because people are treated not as individuals but as representatives of the categories to which they are assigned (Kleinewiese, 2022; Shafieioun & Haq, 2023).

The unequal interactions stemming from such categorisations trigger a range of negative emotions, including guilt, shame, fear, and low self-confidence, which Rosenberg (2015) and Gilligan (2001) identify as being closely linked to violent behaviour. These feelings are exacerbated by the Manichaeian dichotomization of individuals, which assumes a clear, binary distinction between those who are inherently 'good' and those who are inherently 'bad' (Gilligan, 2001; Rosenberg, 2015). This stark division connects negative life experiences, such as injustice and wrongdoing, to those deemed 'bad'. According to Rosenberg (2015) and Gilligan (2001), this is the first step of a process that ultimately equates 'good' and 'bad' people with 'human' and 'non-human,' or 'less than human'.

As aforementioned, dehumanising others assumes that moral values do not apply to them (Leyens *et al.*, 2007, p. 143). Those labelled as 'good' are seen as deserving of positive outcomes and resources, and, thus, their suffering is to be prevented; on the contrary, those labelled as 'bad' are considered less deserving, or even entirely undeserving, of these benefits, and their suffering is considered either justifiable or inexistent altogether as they are seen as non-human or less than human (Gilligan, 2001, pp. 32–37).

To better show this reasoning, Rosenberg refers to some typical movie plots. In these, it is usually possible to distinguish between 'heroes' – the good people – and 'villains' – the bad people (Rosenberg, 2015, pp. 17–18). In this distinction, heroes' actions are always justified and deemed as positive and necessary, even if it means to kill, to threaten, and to exert force on others; villains' actions are instead seen as senseless and motivated by egoistic and malevolent motivations (Lakoff, 1992, pp. 6–7; Rosenberg, 2015, pp. 17–18). This results in an unequal relationship where those categorised as 'bad' are viewed as inferior, 'less human', or 'non-human' compared to those categorised as 'good' (Gilligan, 2001, p. 35). This dehumanising perspective generates profound feelings of uncertainty, shame, humiliation, inadequacy, and guilt, which can catalyse violent reactions among those subjected to them (Gilligan, 2001).

Gilligan (2001) further elaborates that the psychological drive behind violent behaviour often stems from a desire to eliminate these painful feelings replacing them with pride. The process leading to violence typically begins with an act of rejection, instilling a deep sense of shame and inferiority in the rejected individual (Gilligan, 2001, pp. 32–35). This emotional pain is followed by anger, which can escalate into violence if the individual sees no other way to alleviate their suffering (Gilligan, 2001, p. 32). In such cases, violence is perceived as the only viable means of rebalancing a perceived unequal relationship, where the violent actor feels wronged and humiliated by the other party (Gilligan, 2001, pp. 35–53; Rosenberg, 2015, p. 53). As Rosenberg (2003, pp. 15–18) notes, identifying individuals as the origin of pain or injustice in society is a direct consequence of attributing wrongdoing to perceived flaws in their character.

Connecting this back to the broader three-step process, it becomes clear that the adoption of Manichaean worldviews in everyday life creates an environment where violent reactions are not just possible, but likely. This understanding challenges the notion that only those who commit violence employ Manichaean perspectives. In other words, employing Manichaean forms of communication to distinguish between 'good people' and 'bad people' does not explain only ingroups' violence against outgroups. It also helps understand why outgroups can react violently when they are placed in categories lying in the bad end of the good-bad spectrum. Finally, this further elucidates the very ingroups-outgroups dynamics, illustrating how the boundaries between the two are more blurred than one might presume and how they are more related to daily-life interactions, rather than exclusively dependent on individuals'/groups' adherence to extreme and violent ideologies/narratives. Before delving into the analysis, I now turn to explain this study's methodology.

3. Narrative analysis and the Italian case of far-left violence

This paper presents a single-case interpretive analysis of how a group of Italian former far-left militants decided to engage in violence to achieve their socio-political goals. It focuses on how their interpretation of relationships within the socio-political environment influenced their decision to resort to violent political means. The Italian far-left operated during the 'Years of Lead' between the early 1970s and the late 1980s. This study examines secondary data, consisting of these militants' personal stories. During the 'Years of Lead', political violence was perpetrated by armed organisations from both the far left and the far right. The reason for focusing exclusively on the far left is four-fold.

Firstly, there is already a great deal of accessible data regarding far-left armed organisations, how they operated, and how they radicalised. This data exists in the form of (video-) recorded interviews and (auto)biographies. Secondly, and relatedly, most extant research examining this data has predominantly taken historical, socio-economic, and legalistic perspectives. Scholarship employing psychological approaches to examine this case is very limited (e.g., Della Porta, 2013) and, within this, phenomenological psychology, namely, this study's theoretical framework, has not been considered.

Thirdly, between 2009-2015, following the South African model of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, pp. 33, 220–250), some reconciliation processes between a group of former far-left militants and a group of victims of the 'Years of Lead' took place (a total of about 70 people). During this time, participants from both groups were able to tell each other their stories in a way that they would not have been able to if they had had to limit their answers to what questions asked (Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, pp. 9–29). Parts of these stories were eventually published in a two-volume book (Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, 2015b), and further developed in (video-) recorded interviews and meetings, for the most part accessible via YouTube. These reconciliation processes make up the most recent pool of data, essential to better understand why and how violent means can be(come) a political option. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to offer a comprehensive analysis of this most recent data. These sources provide insight into the militants' lives before and after joining armed organisations, shedding light on their decision-making process regarding engaging in political violence.

In the two-volume book, only twelve former far-left militants are identifiable, as per their request. These are: Maurizio Azzollini, Ernesto Balducci, Franco Bonisoli, Maria Campione, Andrea Coi, Adriana Faranda, Enrico Fenzi, Mario Ferrandi, Alberto Franceschini, Grazia Grena, Valerio Morucci, and Roberto Vho (Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, p. 79). These individuals were active members of different far-left armed organisations: the Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse*, BR), Front Line (*Prima Linea*, PL), Armed Proletariat for Communism (*Proletari Armati per il Comunismo*, PAC), and the Walter Alasia Column (*Colonna Walter Alasia*). The variation in their organisational affiliations and leadership roles, which militants held within their

groups, allows for a broader understanding of the generalizability of the findings, showing that the observed phenomena were not confined to a single organisation nor to a specific rank.

Similarly, in the book, only five victims are identifiable: Giorgio Bazzega, Lina Evangelista, Manlio Milani, Agnese Moro, Giovanni Ricci, Paolo Silva, Luca Tarantelli (Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, p. 118). Other members of the group of the victims remained anonymous as per their request.

Lastly, Italy's long-standing societal divisions, predating the Cold War and the 'Years of Lead', have influenced and shaped interpersonal relations. These divisions are not limited to ideological divides, but include regional, provincial, and urban-rural disparities. The influence of these deep-seated societal features makes this a good case for investigating the extent to which ideologies are to be considered key to understanding individuals' decision to engage in political violence, as literature suggests.

Regarding the selection of excerpts, interviews and autobiographical material from both before and after the 2009-2015 reconciliation processes cover various aspects of former militants' lives, which are not all directly related to this study's focus. Only those extracts pertinent to this study's purpose were considered. To avoid confirmation bias, these excerpts were repeatedly reviewed and cross-referenced with other accounts, which were not included in the analysis due to space constraints or different focus, as well as with other studies on the Italian case of political violence (e.g., Markiewicz & Sharvit, 2021; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012).

Moreover, older personal accounts, ranging from early 1980s to 2004, are also examined. These comprise accounts of those who later participated in the 2009-2015 reconciliation processes and accounts of former militants who pursued other forms of reconciliation with society and their victims, and whose participation in the 2009-2015 reconciliation processes is uncertain. By including these older sources, the study aims to clarify former militants' ambiguous and unclear statements, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their decision-making processes vis-à-vis engagement in political violence.

Additionally, some untapped emotional and psychological dimensions, relevant to the current study, are also traceable in pre-reconciliation accounts, suggesting that what revealed during the 2009-2015 reconciliation processes is important to understand their decision to engage in political violence. This also reduces the risk of fact distortions due to human memory having difficulty with recalling events occurred many years before. A final note on the language of the excerpts. Speakers' accounts are all in Italian and, as I am Italian native speaker, I translated them into English, avoiding having to rely on a third party.

Finally, I employ narrative analysis to examine former militants' accounts, which allows for "uncovering the complexity of stories and reconciling competing narratives through re-imagination and dialogue" (Graef and da Silva, 2019, p. 3). By examining the words and phrases which speakers choose to articulate their stories, I investigated the extent to which the choice of violence can be linked to moralistic categorisations and how these categorisations influence decision-making regarding committing to political violence. Narratives are speakers' selection and interpretation of events and personal experiences, constructed into a coherent and meaningful whole (e.g., Aspden & Hayward, 2015; Braid, 1996; Kohler Riessman, 2012; Sarbin, 1986a). Thus, by analysing speakers' narratives, this study aims to (i) comprehend former militants' sensemaking of their interpersonal and intergroup relations in their daily life; (ii) what role violence played in this sensemaking process; and (iii) how these perceptions and understandings influenced their decision to engage in political violence, before all this was filtered through the ideological lenses of the time.

4. Analysis

The analysis of speakers' personal accounts revealed different elements explaining how dehumanisation processes occur and how these can affect individuals' decision to engage in political violence. The analysis

also identified three interconnected ways whereby processes of dehumanisation occur: (i) the use of moralistic language to communicate with and refer to one another; (ii) the resulting moralistic classification of individuals based on the moralistic language employed; and (iii) the resulting separation of individuals/groups of individuals from each other, fuelling prejudice, fear, and resentment. Like in a cycle, each of these three elements reinforces and feeds back to one another, creating socio-psychological conditions for political violence to be seen as viable and sometimes even necessary.

4.1 Categories as identity and inescapable cages

Below, is an extract from a letter published in the post-reconciliation book (Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a), signed by twelve former militants and directed to the group of victims participating in these reconciliation processes:

“[...] These letters result from a journey, encounters, conversations, which have revealed pain and aspirations of each one of us, to the point of building an original community. If this happened, it is also because we privileged and shared human experiences instead of historical divisions: to meet each other, it was necessary to break the cage of our past identities, blocked by the roles and categories of belonging, and to go back to look at and listen to each other [...]. Together, we have discovered and experienced that the acknowledgement, stemming from the human value, from the depth of the encounter, can in turn generate a social value and become driving force and stimulus for a change [...].”

(Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, pp. 78–79)

This short excerpt describes the way whereby some former militants and some of the victims managed to create a community, which they call ‘original’. The fact that they call themselves ‘an original community’ is noteworthy. It seems that the reason for this is that this community comprises people that are usually separated. On the one hand, there are people who chose violence. On the other hand, we have the victims, namely, those who had been subject to and suffered from the first group’s choices.

Moreover, speakers talk about ‘historical divisions’, suggesting that such divides were not recent, but much more rooted. In addition, it is likely that speakers also referred to political divisions. Former far-left militants endorsed Communism and, particularly, Marxism-Leninism (e.g., Bonisoli, 2018; Ferrandi, 2020; Franceschini, 2020); conversely, the group of victims was politically more diverse. It includes moderate leftists to Christian-Democracy centrists and people who have never been politically very aligned (Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, pp. 71–72). Furthermore, those considering themselves as victims are not only those who survived far-left and far-right attacks, but also the families of those killed by both kinds of violence, and former far-left militants’ own families (e.g., Faranda, 1997, 2017; Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, p. 97; Bonisoli, 2018; Meroni, 2020, p. 186). Thus, these differences make it difficult for these two groups of people to be seen associated to one another. As the word suggests, a community is made of people who have something in common and the very fact that one side used violence changing forever the life of people constituting the other side makes them very different from one another. This might be why speakers consider their group original, unusual. From Rosenberg’s and Gilligan’s perspectives on dehumanisation and engagement in violence, this statement is rather revealing, especially if we examine the first two sentences, which seem in contrast with one another.

The first highlights how this original community has been built through encounters and conversations, allowing all participants to see that each of them had pain and aspirations. Both words, ‘pain’ and ‘aspirations’,

already recall terms which Rosenberg and Gilligan employ to explain how they observed individuals can turn to violence. In the extract, speakers seem to say that before they decided to participate in these reconciliation processes, participants' pain and aspirations were hidden behind the categories to which they belonged and by the distance between them, which was created and fuelled by these categories. This recalls Lakoff's (1992) and Rosenberg's (2015) references to the heroes-villains metaphor: the actions and feelings of the heroes are assumed to exist; to be justified and rational; and to aim at a higher cause. In contrast, the actions and feelings of the villains are almost inexistent, senseless, and always aimed at their own personal gain. To be able to realise that each group went through similar feelings and life experiences, they had to leave behind the category, namely, the lenses, whereby each one of them made sense of one another.

From this and other extracts in the post-reconciliation book, two elements surface. Firstly, participants' understanding and perception of each other was primarily based on the characteristics of the category to which they belonged. Secondly, this was not something limited to the 'Years of Lead' or to ideologically-driven social environments; rather, it was a more widespread relational approach. For instance, one of the victims, Luca Tarantelli¹, stated the following:

“[...] After all, violence, divisions, and the juxtaposition of different factions are typical features of the Italian society, representing, in my opinion, one of the elements that most negatively affected our country's civil and social development. The exes have been nothing more than the extreme expression of this way of being, which already existed within our society or, at least, in some of its parts.”

(Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, p. 99)

In these few lines, Tarantelli rewords the phrase 'historical divisions' mentioned in the letter to the victims, stating that former militants were not those initiating this practice after adhering to ideologies understanding society as divided into different and opposing groups. Dividing people and pinning them against one another already characterised Italian society and such a feature developed into its extreme during the specific context of the 'Years of Lead'.

To further understand this dynamics and how it transcends ideologies, it is interesting to consider what Franco Bonisoli (2018), another former member of the BR participating in the 2009-2015 reconciliation processes, stated at a post-reconciliation interview. In this extract, Bonisoli does not refer to the 'Years of Lead' as such, but it shows, firstly, how using moralistic categories to make sense of others and our surrounding environment, is embedded in our daily. Secondly, it also hints to two interrelated consequences: (i) how our behaviour depends on the meaning that we attach to the categories that we employ; and (ii) the implications of the behaviour that we adopt because of the categories that we employ.

“[...] I tell you about this meeting that we had in Milan [...] I remember there were 1200 youngsters, and we were telling them our experience. My wife was sitting in the front row and heard two young people behind her talking. One of them said, 'Well, but then if we hear what they say, I should now go to see that *jerk* (my emphasis) of my neighbour' – with whom he probably had an argument – 'talk to him and maybe even apologise'. And the girl next to him replied, 'Well listen, if they managed, you can manage as well' [...].”

(Bonisoli, 2018)

¹ Luca Tarantelli's father, Ezio Tarantelli, was professor of political economy at La Sapienza University in Rome. He was assassinated by two BR militants in 1985.

The relevance of reporting this episode, which is not directly linked to the 'Years of Lead', is to better show the psychological process leading former far-left militants to engage in violence. Moreover, this also illustrates how using categories based on moralistic judgements to make sense of other human beings is not confined within the boundaries of ideologies and the socio-political environments where ideologies play a more prominent role. This episode illustrates that using moralistic categories concerns our daily life in all its forms. Additionally, the extract also reveals how categorising and labelling affect individuals' behaviour. In the quote, one member of the audience considered his neighbour 'a jerk'. This category also told him how to behave towards his neighbour, to the point of even providing justifications for not apologising to him even if circumstances would have required it. Because his neighbour belonged to the 'jerk category', a category based on a moralistic judgement, what would be considered misbehaving is instead permissible.

This recalls Rosenberg's (2015, pp. 154–159, 185–193) claim on the danger of relying on moralistic categories to evaluate people's ideas, personality, and behaviour, once more speaking directly to the aforementioned heroes-villains metaphor. As Sarbin (1986a, pp. 3–21) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980) well explain, categories are simplifications of what/whom they try to describe and understand. This alone should already caution about relying on them to understand people, their behaviour in general, and people's decision to engage in violence in particular, as categories cannot consider all the components constituting a person and all factors influencing their decision-making process.

How do we move from categorising according to morality, to dehumanisation and violence? This is the question the next section will now explore.

4.2 Moralistic categories: dehumanization and violent reaction

The previous section concluded that the way we make sense of our surrounding environment shapes how we behave. What extant research overlooks is a comprehensive reflection on the implications of our attitude towards others, especially within the context of political violence. Particularly, how our attitude can affect others on the receiving side; how the receiving side can perceive and make sense of our behaviour; how the receiving side can react. In this regard, it is useful to consider a pre-reconciliation interview to a former member of PL, Mario Ferrandi, who eventually participated in the 2009-2015 reconciliation processes:

"[...] We did not manage to conciliate some facts, some circumstances, some faces, some shouts, which each of us perceived around us, with an ordinary life. It was like it condemned them/us to react in a strong way. But not finding a complete way to channel this tension, this strong aspect prevailed. We used any means to make our exasperated sensitivity and these facts be heard. I also believe that the armed struggle was simply a way allowing us to send strong messages. That is, not having the ability or the possibility of conveying this message through words, we conveyed it through these [violent] acts. [...] I always struggled to accept some parts of my personality that I could not channel through these instruments of interpretations, until all this exploded from the inside [...]. [A] process of schizophrenia in which one's own humanity and one's own particular visions of the world can only short-circuit. [...] I do not believe that words are understandable per se. They are understandable in so far as they are exchangeable and are integrated within a shared conception of the human being. I believe that some life journeys are destined to result in a dead end because some feelings, some tensions are even forbidden to be aired. [...] [I]f socially there is no space to deny this or to find an alternative, I gradually get crazy because I perceive my diversity growing inside me and I don't manage to find a way out for it, not even one possibility of communicating this, this, this cancer that slowly devours me [...]." (Ferrandi, 1990)

This excerpt is quite intense and for space reasons, I will cover only those aspects which I consider key for this study's argument. Ferrandi states that he and others among his companions perceived their choice of engaging in political violence as the only way to convey their message because, firstly, their ideas could not be channelled through the existing interpretive frameworks²; secondly, they also perceived it forbidden for them to express some of their perspectives, as they were different from those that society appeared to accept. Ferrandi tells that they needed means and categories of interpretation different from those available to them at that time. This point reminds of what Sarbin (Sarbin, 1986a, pp. 4–5) explained with regard to individuals' tendency of using known categories to make sense of entities and phenomena happening around them. Sarbin maintained that "when a person confronts a novel occurrence for which no ready-made category or class is available, the occurrence remains uninstantiated, unclassified, or unassimilated until a class or category is located or invented" (1986a, p. 4). However, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) maintain, one of the limitations of using extant categories or metaphors is that these never fully grasp the essence of what one tries to describe/express. This appears to be precisely the scenario that Ferrandi talks about.

From the quote, this seems to result in the formation of different groups of people and the increasing strengthening of inclusion-exclusion dynamics between them. Ferrandi tells that such a perception was experienced so intensely that he himself had difficulty with accepting the parts of his personality which did not fit society's models. This very part of his statement makes it clearer why Rosenberg defined a specific kind of communication/language as life-alienating, as it reaches the point of placing individuals against themselves and then, consequently, against one another.

Additionally, in this extract, Ferrandi talks about experiencing inner and physical pain, which is also mentioned in the excerpt from the post-reconciliation letter to the victims discussed in the previous section. Both Rosenberg and Gilligan highlight how pain and suffering, especially if experienced innerly, can be a potential trigger for violent behaviour. As aforementioned, Gilligan (2001, pp. 32–53) explains that human instinct is to identify the source of that pain and suffering and remove it altogether. When pain and suffering are identified as coming from another person/other people, the action of removal is directed towards that person/those people. According to Gilligan (2001, pp. 35–53), in his experience, violence has always been individuals' last resort. In Ferrandi's quote, elements of pain and suffering are recognisable through terminology and phrases such as 'exasperated sensitivity', 'explode', 'schizophrenia', 'short-circuit', 'get crazy', and 'cancer that slowly devours [him]'. The explosion, which Ferrandi talks about, might refer to the moment in which he decided to engage in violence to try to make the socio-political environment a place where people, who did not fit, could finally feel part of a community and part of society. The use of such terms as 'gradually', 'slowly', and 'growing' could instead hint to political violence as not being Ferrandi's – and, from his quote, also his companions' – first choice, but rather the result of a process, during which other options had been considered.

Ferrandi is not the only former far-left militant explaining their engagement in political violence as resulting – at least partly – from experiencing pain and suffering. Adriana Faranda, another former member of the BR, who also participated in the 2009-2015 reconciliation processes, also explains her experience in a similar way. Below, is an extract from a post-reconciliation meeting, which she held together with Agnese Moro, one of the victims participating in the 2009-2015 reconciliation processes:

² For more on interpretive frameworks and how they affect individuals' perspectives, understanding of the socio-political system, and their behaviour, see e.g., King *et al.*, 1994; Selavi, 2003; Grillo, 2025.

“[...] Dividing the world into two or several parts and distinguishing between good parts to save and bad parts to eliminate to have a better, more beautiful, and freer world, actually mean to deny that [bad] part its dignity and its being part of humanity. When one makes this division, it follows that love is directed only to some, to a part of the world, whilst the other part of the world is seen as not worthy of that love. And justice, and above all social justice, concerns only the part of the world whom you chose to be sympathetic with and fight for [...].”

(Faranda, 2017)

In these few lines, experiences of pain and suffering is also traceable. Firstly, although Faranda uses different words, she reiterates the theme of separation and division, adding that the purpose of dividing people into groups was to distinguish between the ‘good ones’ and the ‘bad ones’ in society. Ultimately, this aimed to make the world a better and more beautiful place by eliminating the ‘bad groups’. In her words, distinguishing and separating people according to a rather partial understanding of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, is understood and experienced as a form of dehumanisation, which she defines as deprivation of human dignity. Those identified as ‘the bad guys’ are ultimately considered expendable and not deserving the same benefits and life quality as the part of society seen as ‘good’. Particularly, she uses the words ‘love’ and ‘social justice’. Not all people could receive ‘love’ and ‘social justice’; only those whose human dignity is recognised can, and these ones were those identified as ‘the good ones’.

Though differently from Ferrandi, Faranda’s words convey a mind in turmoil, recalling Gilligan’s (2001, p. 14) considerations on the consequences of employing morality to categorise and define individuals. As stated, categories and labels are characterised by the use of the verb ‘to be’ in its indicative tenses. Consequently, a person, or whatever is being categorised, is constrained in their nature and they have little to no room for change (Sarbin, 1986a, pp. 3–21; Sclavi, 2003, p. 30). This would not be a problem if human beings were inherently unchangeable and if there was only one way of making sense of the socio-political environment. However, if we consider human beings to be intrinsically able to develop, adapt, and change, and if we argue that there can be different ways of experiencing and interpreting the socio-political environment, then, constraining individuals into static and unchangeable categories can be perceived and understood as a way of depriving individuals of their dignity as human beings. Faranda (2017) herself makes this point quite explicit somewhat ahead in that same interview:

“[...] I believe that [this] is the only way that can truly approximate justice, which means to give full humanity and full dignity back to people. [...] [N]ot to consider them as functions of something, as roles, like we did. Rather, to consider [people] as fully human beings. This is probably the most important thing: I am not an ‘ex’ anymore; I am Adriana. Agnese is not a victim; Agnese is Agnese, and she is also a victim, but she is not the category of victims, like I am not the category of exes. I am a person, who made terrible mistakes thinking that violence could have been a means to solve political conflicts. But I can go back to be a person. I am not [...] a grain nestled into a category. I am a person [...].”

Faranda problematises the practice of categorising as something that makes people unchangeable, although they are not (see also Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, pp. 117–118; Cavallina and Cavalleri, 2021). Therefore, giving people their dignity and consider them human mean to free them from the constraints of the category to which they are assigned. It is noteworthy that Faranda refers to this as a practice that former militants employed and that they themselves were subject to, challenging arguments seeing categorising individuals as typical of ideologically-driven groups. Thus, while confirming that dehumanisation processes

of outgroups facilitates using violence against outgroups, Faranda also emphasises that dehumanisation processes of outgroups play a role in shaping outgroups' perspective on violence and their decision-making process regarding whether reacting violently or non-violently.

These considerations are also reiterated in a letter that the group of victims participating in the 2009-2015 reconciliation processes wrote to the group of former militants. This is significant because Faranda's and other former militants' statements might be seen as a way to justify their choices and their actions, moving some responsibility from themselves to others. The fact that similar themes are also found in victims' statements, casts former militants' stories in a different light. Below, is an excerpt of this letter:

“[...] Acknowledging the negative effect of a logic based on juxtaposition, which, from the side of those who chose the armed struggle, led individuals to lose their critical thinking, and which, from the side of the victims' families, meant that we didn't manage to 'enter', so to speak, in others' pain, denying the existence of a shared humanity and perceiving ourselves as the good ones – irrespective of our behaviour – almost as if we were the only 'possessors' of the ability and ownership of suffering. [...] Dialogue and meetings allowed each of us to be welcome with dignity and deep respect, which rarely happens elsewhere. A condition allowing us to be acknowledged, firstly, as citizens and not as members of our respective 'categories'. We are deeply convinced that the definitive exclusion from civil rights – from which many of you still suffer – is deeply wrong and will only fuel social loneliness and feeling useless in relation to the future of the society in which one lives. Moreover, exclusion is not able to protect kids from the burden of their parents' choices, nor give them the feeling of belonging to a community, which, knowing how to include, also knows how to look at all aspects of its history.”

(Bertagna, Ceretti and Mazzucato, 2015a, pp. 117–118)

In this letter, the group of victims seems to explain this whole psychological process even more explicitly. Firstly, they also mentions how they themselves divided people into good people and bad people, illustrating that it is not something done exclusively by those who end up using physical violence. Secondly, recalling Rosenberg's (2015, pp. 17–18) and Lakoff's (1992, pp. 6–7) reference to heroes-villains stories, the group of victims also point to how this Manichean division between people led them – the victims – to deny those identified as bad their humanity. In their words, this translated into (i) considering themselves as 'the good ones' regardless of their behaviour; (ii) considering their hardship as the only extant hardship; and (iii) considering themselves as the only bearers of hardship. Through this approach, they were unable to see that opposite them, there were other people going through similar inner difficulty. Only when they withdrew those category and Manichaeian lenses, which fuelled inclusion-exclusion/ingroups-outgroups dynamics, were they able to see people instead of categories, distinguishing between action/idea and the person³, and avoiding equalling people to the categories in which they were placed.

5. Discussion and concluding remarks

In this article, I aimed to illustrate how dehumanisation processes of outgroups can influence outgroups' decision-making process regarding their engagement in political violence. I also intended to show how forms of dehumanisation of others occur daily, and are often subtle and practiced without realising it. Particularly, in this study, I examined how interpersonal and intergroup relations based on a moralistic form of language/communication can influence and shape individuals' perception of violence and their decision to

³ For more reading on this, see e.g., Fisher, Ury and Patton, 2011.

commit to violent political means. I did so by focusing on the Italian case of far-left violence during the Italian 'Years of Lead', between 1970 and the late 1980s. Specifically, I analysed stories and contributions of a group of former far-left militants and a group of victims, who took part in reconciliation processes occurred between 2009 and 2015.

In the first part of the analysis, I explored the connection between moralistic categories and identities, with speakers describing how categorising individuals equated to making sense of them through the lenses of the category in which they were placed. In the second part of the analysis, I examined how these categories were perceived to ultimately differentiate between human and non-human, corresponding to the Manichaean good-bad distinction and subsequently informing individuals' understanding of and behaviour towards each other. As seen, such a distinction makes it more difficult to empathise with people considered as 'bad people' or, in a dispute, with people that are seen as 'being wrong'. To reiterate what was stated in the quotes examined, relying on categories to understand and interact with others clouds their pain, suffering, reasons, and aspirations. To wit, it clouds human beings' complexity. Surely, this being a single-case interpretive analysis of a case of political violence, one questions how these findings can be generalisable and useful to understand other similar and more contemporary cases of political violence and conflict.

Firstly, while societal divides between 'good people' and 'bad people' are oftentimes explained as resulting from specific ill-conceived and ideologically driven policies, this analysis suggests that reflections on these phenomena need to take a broader and more comprehensive approach. This study has shown that the tendency of dividing entities and individuals between 'good ones' and 'bad ones' appears to be ascribable to human beings more broadly, and not just to politics and/or ideologies (see also e.g., Grillo, 2025). This also suggests that researching such phenomena as radicalisation and violent extremism requires investigating societal dynamics at all levels, both horizontal – citizens' daily life – and vertical – institutions-citizens dynamics (e.g., Sclavi, 2003; Popescu, 2014; Rosenberg, 2015).

Secondly, this backdrop provides a different way of understanding, researching, and eventually addressing, contemporary socio-political phenomena, such as increasing support for populism, and far-right and far-left political parties; violent incidents, such as the Southport attack in the UK at the end of July 2024 and the subsequent protests, which also included elements of violence; and society's increasing polarisation on a variety of socio-political matters, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic and the immediate aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and Israel's war on Gaza following Hamas' attacks in October 2023. What if the more aggressive and violent attitude of some individuals/groups of individuals were due to how these people and their needs are normally described, commented, and (dis)regarded? On this, investigating how different opinions on the aforementioned cases, among others, have been framed and labelled could be a possible research avenue to examine the generalisability of this study's findings.

Furthermore, would these considerations also help better understand why war and violence appear to dominate contemporary discourses in current inter-state relations? Given the current international political scenario, questions like this one are particularly pressing. More research on this topic would further understanding of how and whether micro-level and macro-level dynamics are effectively connected. Rather interestingly, during one of the many interviews released since October 7th 2023, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa (2024), the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem who has been living there since the mid-1990s, stated that one of the key problems affecting society in the Holy Land is that, broadly speaking, each of the communities there – i.e., Jewish, Christian, Muslim – believes that their own community is the only one going through pain and suffering, and that their pain and suffering is the most important. This statement resonates with the previously discussed heroes-villains metaphor, already pointing to another avenue for further research on this matter.

Some other topics requiring further investigation include, but are not limited to, the origins of categorising and labelling; why only some people, but not others, at times consider violence as viable and even necessary option; and why only some people would find some narratives more convincing than others. On these topics, as Mitton (2015) argues, more needs to be researched on human beings' psychological and emotional spheres, not to categorise them or stigmatise them, but to better understand how and why individuals would engage in acts of political violence against other individuals. Relatedly, we need more discussion on the concept of human dignity; what it means; what it consists of; what it means to harm someone in their dignity as human; and thus, what the consequences of such harm can be. This not-exhaustive list of research areas and topics brings back to the academic, as well as practitioners', table the need to discuss matters related to violence, conflict, and (international) politics from a more interdisciplinary perspective. Per se, this is nothing new, as academic bookshelves feature numerous humanistic and social-science studies that discuss human being-related phenomena from different approaches.

However, especially in the last few decades, there has been a tendency to keep social sciences and humanistic disciplines mostly separated from one another, resulting in analyses which I consider partial. Therefore, the 'novelty' of my study lies in putting some of these disciplines – i.e., conflict and terrorism studies, International Relations, phenomenological psychology – in dialogue with one another, encouraging fellow academics and practitioners to do the same. This will help better address causes of political violence and conflict.

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