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The Language of War: Lexicon, Metaphor, Discourse  
Il linguaggio della guerra: lessico, metafora, discorso

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## EDITORIAL

The Language of War: Lexicon, Metaphor, Discourse. An Introduction <i>Anna Anselmo, Kim Grego, and Andreas Musolff</i>	5
An Unlikely ‘Traitor’ in the ‘War’ against Covid-19: Dr Anthony Fauci <i>Andreas Musolff</i>	17
WAR Metaphors and Agency: The Case of the COP27 News Coverage <i>Ilaria Iori</i>	35
Archetypes Geared for War: <i>Conversations with Leucò</i> by Cesare Pavese <i>Rodney Lokaj</i>	55
The Italic Race and Latin Eugenics: Scientific Terms for Persecutions and War in the Medical Literature of Fascist Italy <i>Anna La Torre</i>	73
Children in <i>The New York Times</i> ’ Israeli-Palestinian War Coverage: A Corpus-Based Critical Analysis <i>Laura Tommaso and Marianna Lya Zummo</i>	89
Voices from Conflicts: Voice-Over and Simil Sync in Italian Television News Reports <i>Valentina Di Francesco</i>	123

Militarized Rhetoric in the 2024 Indonesian Presidential Election Debate: Threats to Democratic Deliberation <i>Ari Musdolifah and Retnowaty</i>	145
Discourse, Conflict and Cognition: Construals of the Aimara Protesters' Representation within the Peruvian Press <i>Richard Santos Huamán Flores, Frank Joseph Domínguez Chenguayen, and Rosmery Cjuno</i>	167
<i>L'impoliteness</i> nei commenti online riguardanti il conflitto israelo-palestinese. Studio pragmatico <i>Mai Morsy Tawfik</i>	187
Authors	221

# An Unlikely ‘Traitor’ in the ‘War’ against Covid-19: Dr Anthony Fauci

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## ABSTRACT

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Dr Anthony Fauci, the Director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, received much public praise but he was also vilified by right-wing conspiracy theorists as a *traitor*. This accusation has been ‘trending’ on the Internet and in print publications and political statements for over two years. This article offers an explanation for its longevity by investigating the hypothesis that Fauci’s public persona fills a slot in the war metaphor scenario of the pandemic. On the basis of a US-UK media corpus, I chart the emergence and escalation of conspiracist accusations against Fauci in 2020-2022 and analyse their semantic-conceptual structure, using methods of cognitive scenario theory. The article concludes that the *traitor*-accusation was not just a polemical addition to the conspiracist war scenarios of the pandemic but was used to ‘prove’ their ‘truth’, and that Fauci’s vilification case is therefore of general significance for the analysis of conspiracy theories and war metaphors.

*Keywords:* conspiracy theory; Covid-19; Fauci; scenario; vilification; war metaphor.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: WAR METAPHORS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The pervasive use of war metaphors, especially in health/illness-related contexts has been prominently used and critically noted for a long time (Sontag 1978; De Leonardis 2008; Semino 2008, 175-189; Bates 2020). It arguably experienced a recent ‘boom’ during the Covid-19 pandemic

from 2020 onwards when politicians across the world (e.g. Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Xi Jinping) declared ‘war’ on the pandemic in speeches that aimed at gaining political support for coercive health-management measures, such as lockdowns, social isolation, masking and testing mandates (Castro Seixas 2020; Filardo Lamas 2021; Charteris-Black 2022; Musolff 2022a). Many of these analyses highlighted the problematic implications of using such ‘militarized language’, e.g. spreading fear or justifying illegitimate curbs on civil rights. Some media commentators and metaphor analysts suggested reframing the Covid-19 debate by avoiding or replacing war metaphors altogether (Craig 2020; Serhan 2020; Tisdall 2020; Olza *et al.* 2021; Semino 2021). However, it has to be borne in mind that metaphors do not come as isolated words or concepts but as parts of frames or scenarios (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Taylor 1999; Musolff 2016), in which they link up to mini-narratives and arguments and play the role of pseudo-proofs or lessons to be learnt. To describe an illness or pandemic as a war suggests that a *final victory* can be won, in which the *enemy* is *vanquished* once and for all. Insofar as such a triumphant scenario outcome appeals to the emotions and hopes of its recipients, it overrides their “epistemic vigilance” (Sperber *et al.* 2010) against ‘fake’ factual information. Entrenched and widely disseminated metaphor scenarios such as the war (plus victory) scenario are highly unlikely to be discarded by way of critical reflection, as has been confirmed by psycholinguistic research (Flusberg and Boroditsky 2011; Flusberg, Matlock, and Thibodeau 2018).

Like war metaphor scenarios, conspiracy theories (abbreviated as CTs from here on) gained hugely in popularity during the pandemic (Birchall and Knight 2022; van Prooien *et al.* 2022). Counts of Covid-19-related CTs vary depending on specific definitions and on the stage of public debate at time of analyses (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020; Islam *et al.* 2021; Hotez 2023a, b); broadly, however, three main groups of Covid-19 related conspiracy theories can be distinguished in terms of their focus on specific *culprits/conspirators*.

- (CT1) the claim, highly salient at the start of the pandemic, that Covid-19 was a ‘hoax’ or fake news, invented by US media and opposition (Democrat) politicians to discredit the Trump government;
- (CT2) the acknowledgement that Covid-19 was a ‘real’ pandemic whose cause, a newly detected virus, originated in China and was ‘unleashed’ (Trump 2020) from there in order to affect adversely the USA, Western countries and/or the global community;

- (CT3) the conviction that the public pandemic health management of most governments (from the lockdowns at the start to the vaccination campaigns after a vaccine had been made available in late 2020) has served to cover up the strategy of an international elite of conspirators to gain control over specific nations or even over the whole world.

All three types of CTs have ascribed responsibility for the suffering and damage relating to the pandemic and its management to *culprits* that had caused it to further their own ends. The CTs construed the pandemic as a conflict between 'normal', ordinary people (and their supposed representatives such as populist politicians like Trump) as *victims* and on the other side, their *enemies*, such as hostile media, supposedly 'powerful' minorities, nation states, or international 'elites'. The affinity between this conspiracist *pandemic as conflict* scenario and the PANDEMIC-AS-WAR metaphors in terms of the 'source domain' input (Lakoff 1993) is obvious; however, one important specification has to be made concerning the 'target' input: unlike the war metaphor scenarios mentioned earlier, which targeted the virus and/or the pandemic as the chief *enemies*, the conspiracist versions targeted individuals or groups (e.g. US enemies of Trump, China and its allies, or a global elite of which only a few members were known, e.g. Bill Gates, George Soros) as *enemies*. The lack of any direct evidence for this suspicion was 'explained' by the assumption that, as conspirators, these individuals acted under cover. Those who believed in the CTs saw themselves as heroic *freedom fighters* against that conspiracy who had taken the first step by becoming aware of it and exposing it in public and now had the task of liberating ignorant other *victims*.

However, in addition to *heroes*, *victims* and *enemies/culprits*, there was one further participant in this war/conflict scenario, i.e. that of the *traitor* or *internal enemy* who 'by rights' should be on the good side but who had, for selfish reasons, become an ally of the 'outside' conspirator-enemy (Ben-Yehuda 2001). Implausibly, the person cast by the conspiracists as the chief *traitor*-culprit for the pandemic and its consequences in the USA was the Director of US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), Dr Anthony Fauci. Fauci was by no means alone in suffering this vilification: in the USA and globally, scientists, health managers and medical practitioners were held responsible for the damage of the pandemic (Dobson 2020; Nogrady 2021; O'Grady 2022; Hotez 2023a, b). Arguably, Fauci was globally the best-known scientific leader in the *war* against Covid-19; his supposed *traitor* role in pandemic-related conspiracy theories can thus serve as an exemplary case.

When the Covid-19 outbreak started, Fauci had been NIAID Director for 18 years, with an exceptionally high professional reputation, having previously led the US public health management responses to viral diseases such as HIV/AIDS, SARS, Swine flu, MERS and Ebola (NIAID 2023). Serving under Trump, who had gained office in 2016, and continuing under President Biden until his retirement at the end of 2022, Fauci fielded detailed questions at Presidential Press conferences on Covid-19, gave interviews and issued press releases to explain and justify the government's health measures, which one commentator explicitly likened to wartime briefings by military leaders: "Just as generals take the lead in giving daily briefings in wartime, medical experts like Anthony Fauci are at the microphone to explain complex ideas like epidemic curves, social distancing and off-label use of drugs" (*BBC*, May 1, 2020). As the health/science-equivalent of a *general*, Fauci spoke with quasi-military authority, second only to the political commander-in-chief, i.e. the President. So, how could he possibly be cast as an *internal enemy/traitor* in the *war* against the pandemic?

## 2. FAUCI'S 'CAREER' AS A 'TRAITOR' IN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

This section charts the emergence and escalation of the conspiracist accusations against Fauci during 2020-2022 and analyses their semantic-conceptual structure, using methods of cognitive scenario analysis (Musolff 2016). The database for this study was originally compiled to document metaphor usage during the pandemic. It is a bilingual research corpus of public Covid-19 debates in the USA, Germany and the UK 2020-2023, which was manually assembled (Musolff 2022a, b; 2024). The 1.500.000+ word corpus is drawn from across the whole range of press media and news agencies' coverage of Covid-19 in the three countries during 2020-2023. Out of the overall 1101 texts in the corpus, about 10%, i.e. 115, English-language (91 US and 24 UK) articles articulate, report and/or comment on the vilification of Fauci. The sources used for this study are the online versions of US mainstream newspapers, magazines and news agencies/broadcasters such as *ABC News*, *Business Insider*, *CNN*, *Forbes*, *Fox*, *NBC*, *Newsweek*, *Star Tribune*, *The Atlantic*, *The Hill*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *USA Today*, *Washington Examiner*. Further sources were the extreme right-wing websites, *Breitbart News*, *Natural News* and *WyoFile*,

which made Fauci a favorite target of their attacks. For the UK, sources used were: *The Financial Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times*. The following sub-sections summarize this coverage; section 3 provides a qualitative analysis.

### *2.1. The stigmatization of Fauci as a scapegoat for the pandemic restrictions*

In the early phase of the pandemic, in spring 2020, most of the US press and news agencies reverentially referred to Fauci as the nation's "top infectious disease expert" (*NBC News*, February 26, 2020; *ABC News*, March 18, 2020; *Time*, March 19, 2020; *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2020). However, such adulation had its own dialectic: even slight changes of stance on the pandemic and the countermeasures in Fauci's statements were exaggerated into major policy U-turns. For example, early on in the outbreak, Fauci had maintained that a general mask-mandate was not (yet) required, due to a lack of scientific evidence about the infection channels and also taking account of an urgent mask shortage for medical staff (O'Donnell 2020). When it became evident that aerosols were the chief infection channel, Fauci updated the information by officially recommending a mask mandate for the whole population (Peeples 2020). Not only was he criticized for the 'delayed' new advice, but also accused of a 'flip-flop' or arbitrary U-turn, in order to cover up his own incompetence or, worse, to please the mask industry that had sprung up by now (Breitbart 2021b; Callahan and Jensen 2022, 209; Pamuk 2022, 571). The media-created image of his infallible authority turned into a tool for Fauci-bashing that would follow him for months.

As early as April 2020 death threats against Fauci emerged and necessitated full police protection for him as well as a public defense of sorts by the President: "[Fauci] doesn't need security [...]. Besides that, they'd be in big trouble if they ever attacked" (*CNN*, April 2, 2020). The background for such threats were claims by right-wing news platforms that (a) the Covid-19 mortality figures reported by Fauci and official sources were exaggerated and therefore lockdowns etc. unnecessary, (b) that in the absence of a targeted vaccine, disinfection chemicals or anti-malaria drugs could be used against a Covid-19 infection (*The Independent*, March 24, 2020; *The Guardian*, March 25, 2020; *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2020). Whilst Fauci never endorsed such rumors and explicitly refuted them (*The Guardian*, April 9, 2020; *The Daily Telegraph*, April 11, 2020), President Trump vaguely praised them as

“potential gamechangers” (*The Guardian*, March 25, 2020), thus providing a “superspreader” effect for fake news about ‘alternative’ remedies (Evanega *et al.* 2020; Callahan and Jensen 2022).

More gaps opened up between Trump’s and Fauci’s positions on Covid-19 over the course of late spring and early summer 2020: whereas Trump tried to strike an upbeat note by announcing a “warp speed” effort to develop a special vaccine and an impending “tremendous victory” (*The Guardian*, May 16, 2020 and July 4, 2020), Fauci warned that the so-called “first wave was far from over” and that the coronavirus was there to stay (*The Washington Post*, April 13, 2020 and May 14, 2020). He also opposed Republican-governed states in the USA departing from the national policy by independently lifting distancing, testing or masking mandates on the basis of optimistic local statistics (*The Guardian*, May 16, 2020 and July 7, 2020). Most significantly, he failed to endorse Trump’s ever more frequent and vociferous attacks on China as having caused the pandemic by allowing a ‘lab-leak’ from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which culminated in the President’s address to the United Nations in September 2020 (Trump 2020; Banco and Lipman 2021; Musolff 2022b). This ‘lab-leak hypothesis’ presupposed a deliberate engineering of the virus, which Fauci in his press statements repeatedly declared to be improbable though not absolutely impossible – his favored explanation of the virus’s origin was an outbreak from infected animals at a well-known ‘wet’ market (i.e. one containing live animals) in Wuhan (*The Hill*, April 3, 2020: “Fauci: It’s mind-boggling that China’s wet markets are still operating during coronavirus pandemic”; see also Maxmen 2022). This scientific assessment, however, started to be rejected not just as inaccurate or false but as maliciously misleading, construed with the aim to cover up an illegal cooperation of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), of which Fauci’s NIAID institute was a part, with so-called “gain-of-function” (GoF) research at the Wuhan laboratory (Breitbart 2021a, c; *Business Insider*, January 27, 2021)<sup>1</sup>. As NIAID director, Fauci had indeed been involved in international cooperation agreements going back to 2014, including GoF virus research in China. However, he disputed on scientific grounds both the contentions (a) that the specific research cooperation with Wuhan qualified as “gain-of-function research” and (b) that it had produced the viruses which were responsible

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<sup>1</sup> “Gain of function research” is used in US virology and epidemiology to denote genetic experiments that “[aim] at a gain of a desired [biological] function of the genotype and the resulting phenotypes” (National Academy of Sciences 2015).



for the Covid-19 pandemic (Kessler 2021; Olmstead 2022). Nevertheless, for conspiracy theorists who by now included scientists speculating about Covid-19 as a 'Plandemic' (i.e. as planned and instigated for profit by 'Big Pharma' companies) as well as journalists from the conservative US *Fox News* network and Republican politicians, Fauci became a favorite target to blame for the human and socio-economic costs of the pandemic management (*Natural News*, May 24, 2021; *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2021; *Forbes*, July 25, 2021; for analysis see Ohlheiser 2020; Lee *et al.* 2023). Their Internet 'influencers' even designed a special rhyming meme for his supposed crime: "Fauci lied – millions died" (Hoft 2021, for further anti-Fauci 'trending' Internet memes see Hall Jamieson 2021). Trump, reeling from (and denying) his November 2020 election defeat, refrained from fully endorsing the claims about Fauci's *culprit* status but vaguely suggested that he was "in the pocket of China" (Impelli 2021).

## *2.2. The vilification of Fauci as a 'traitor'*

By late 2021, Fauci, despite his own best efforts to stay 'objective' in his public statements (*National Geographic*, 2021; *Newsweek*, March 8, 2023), had become embroiled in the political confrontation between Republicans and Democrats, which had only increased in ferocity since the change of presidency in January 2021. His appointment as Chief Medical Advisor by the new President, Joe Biden, did not endear him to the Republicans either; on the contrary, it reinforced their suspicion that he had been involved in undermining President Trump's authority (Paun 2023). In their logic, it 'followed' that his explanation of the pandemic's origin in the Wuhan market was not just false but part of a conspiracy to help cover up his cooperation with 'establishment' figures and businesses (Bill Gates, 'Big Pharma') and with state-controlled Chinese institutions (Kennedy 2021, 2023; Paul 2023; Schumaker 2023). Whilst opinion polls still recorded a substantial majority of the US public trusting him (*The New York Times*, July 21, 2021), conspiracists such as a Republican Wyoming Senator Bouchard, a pastor from Florida and a *Fox News* journalist called for Fauci to be "ambushed", "waterboarded", and "tried and executed" for having "betrayed" the nation to China (*Wyofile*, September 10, 2021; *Newsweek*, December 4, 2021; *The Washington Post*, December 21, 2021). In November 2021 he was compared on *Fox News* to the murderous SS-doctor Josef Mengele from Auschwitz, infamous for cruel experiments on Jewish children; the comparison was

later endorsed by a Republican Congresswoman (*Newsweek*, November 30, 2021 and February 2, 2022). In 2022, a Virginia man was sentenced to 37 months in federal prison for having sent Fauci emails stating that for his “crimes” he and his family deserved to be “dragged into the street, beaten to death, and set on fire” (US Attorney’s Office 2022). Undeterred by the enormous accusations and violent threats that were encouraged by their vilification campaign, Republican Congress members such as Jim Jordan and Senators such as Rand Paul tried to make Fauci “admit” in parliamentary hearings that he had “suppressed” the lab-leak hypothesis (*Breitbart*, 2022, 2023; *USA Today*, November 14, 2022; *Newsweek*, March 8, 2023; *The New York Times*, July 11, 2023) and they even questioned the legitimacy of police protection for him after retirement (*Fox News*, July 17, 2023). As an explanation for such “bottomless loathing” of Fauci on the US political right, one journalist put forward their “need [for a] villain for the pandemic story” who could be held responsible for everything that had gone wrong during Covid-19 (*The Washington Post*, December 21, 2021).

Fauci was allocated a special slot in the *pandemic-as-war* scenario as the ‘enemy from within’, an *internal traitor* figure who was a secret ally of the main, official ‘enemy’, i.e. China. The fact that his preferred explanation of the virus (as coming from a Chinese ‘wet market’) was by no means an endorsement of Chinese hygiene standards or virus control (and that it attracted, predictably, pushback from the Chinese government, see *Financial Times*, May 5, 2020; *Washington Examiner*, November 27, 2021) did not matter to his detractors. The ultimate goal of their attempts to reveal Fauci’s alleged secret involvement with China was, after all, not criticism of China but finding ‘proof’ of the supposed conspiracy network at the heart of the US administration that could be linked with the further alleged hoax or ‘scam’ of Climate Change and even with the war in Ukraine (thought to be ‘really’ about virus engineering facilities in Ukraine, see Ling 2022; Birchall and Knight 2023, 190).

### 3. COMPARISON AND DISCUSSION

The vilification campaign against Fauci shows a dynamic of radicalization: at first, the detractors took the position of a seemingly reasonable skepticism *vis-à-vis* the majority assessment of Fauci as an *a priori* trustworthy authority. His apparent self-contradictions or ‘flip-flops’

in statements on masks, which reflected new scientific data, were exaggerated and reinterpreted as evidence of a deliberately duplicitous communication strategy. At the same time, Fauci's cautious, science-based stance of reserving or withholding immediate judgement about new developments and rumors was counted as obfuscation and secrecy, against which the 'skeptics' only exercised their civil rights by 'asking uncomfortable questions' or speculating about 'alternative' solutions.

In the second phase, the accusations of lying against Fauci were systematized and focused on supposedly 'proven' criminal activity such as his involvement in gain-of-function research, which were reiterated again and again to discredit him and to fit the larger narrative that he was part of a criminal conspiracy involving 'Big Pharma' and 'deep state' establishment figures. Fact-checking and -correcting statements by Fauci and other scientists and science-journalists (Mallapaty 2021, 2023; Maxmen and Mallapaty 2021; Petersen 2022) did not hinder the conspiracy propagators from insisting on the righteousness of suspecting Fauci of 'treasonous' actions. As the police records of threats and planned violent attacks on Fauci's life show, these supposedly merely fact-oriented suspicions were sufficient to motivate individuals or groups to 'act' on them.

Fauci's role as a 'traitor' or 'inside enemy' served not just as a focus to blame a supposedly dishonest individual but, as part of pandemic narrative, to explain (and blame him for) any apparent non-successes of the public pandemic management, such as delays in rolling out medicines, the failure of the first vaccination campaign to stop the pandemic once and for all, the cases of deadly side-effects, scandals about profiteering etc. The public's learning efforts (and achievements) in grasping the complexity of virus infection, e.g. the emergence of mutated variants with differential infection and fatality ratios, as well as the scientific efforts in developing diverse medicines and vaccines were summarily dismissed in favor of one simple war scenario:

1. The fact that the pandemic could neither be prevented nor quickly overcome is due to the nefarious *sabotage* by an *inside traitor* who has been acting on the orders of a wider conspiracy.
2. Only the removal of the *traitor* will stop this sabotage of the proper/natural solution.
3. Once the *traitor* has been removed/neutralized, the crisis will be resolved and the conspiracy behind it damaged or destroyed.

From the conspiracists' viewpoint, this narrative is the 'best case' scenario and it has the advantage of being 'straightforward' in practical

terms, compared with the complex, science-based pandemic management. The official health campaign, on the other hand, even if it was propagated figuratively with a 'positive' slant, e.g. as *putting out a fire* or *stemming a flood* (Semino 2021; Charteris-Black 2022), amounted in their view to the 'worst case' scenario of shutting down the economy and society. Fauci thus provided a perfect fit for a conflict/war scenario of Covid-19 because he fitted the slot of the *traitor* or *internal enemy*, i.e. of someone who should be on the good side but had, for selfish reasons, become an ally of the 'outside enemy', e.g. China or a secret world elite intent on erecting a dictatorship.

The suspicions of *internal enemies* or *traitors* have a long history in conspiracist thinking. One infamous conspiracy theory based almost entirely on the suspicion of internal enemies sabotaging the own nation in its hour of need is the 'stab in the back' myth that was used in Germany in the wake of World War I, which purported to explain the country's defeat by blaming Social Democrats, Communists and Jews for thwarting Germany's supposedly certain victory by organizing strikes, hindering armament and engineering mass desertion (Evans 2020, 47-83). The 'Dreyfus affair' in France in the 1890s (Hyman 2005) and the 'Red Scare' of the McCarthy era in the USA of the 1940s and 1950s (Hofstadter 1964; Gibson 1988), which were used to explain the feared superiority of an 'outer enemy' (i.e., Imperial Germany and the Soviet Union, respectively), were further famous cases of CTs built on alleged treason. In these cases, real wars or war threats provided the context for the conspiracist speculation. In the case of Covid-19 and of Fauci's supposed *traitor* role, the war threat was not real but its scenario was similar to that of a literal war, i.e. that of a *fight* between the *home* nation against an *aggressor/enemy*, with an absolute need for solidarity on the *home front*, and the concomitant condemnation of anyone who breached that solidarity. For the conspiracists the *pandemic war* was imminent, if not happening already, and it was necessary to stop a "global genocide" by "the new Nazis" (*Newsweek*, December 6, 2021 and February 2, 2022). It was thus seen as having the same moral-ethical justification and validity as the war against Nazi Germany. Hence, the stigmatization of Fauci as a "new Mengele" or as a traitor "in China's pocket" and the threats of his public trial and execution (see above) were no rhetorical exaggerations but followed from the logic of the *pandemic-as-war* scenario and, in its circular reasoning, served to corroborate it further.

#### 4. PERSPECTIVES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The accusations against Fauci went far beyond any legitimate criticism of mistakes that he might have committed during the pandemic management, and even beyond partisan, ideological opposition from the right that could have been motivated by his apparent distance from Trump and his political agenda. The death-threats against him and his family, the comparisons with Mengele and the baseless suspicions that he profited financially from cooperation with the Chinese government require a deeper analysis than the debunking of lacking facts or logical implausibility that many historical and political science-oriented studies of CTs have concentrated on for some time (Butter and Knight 2020). In terms of a critical analysis and counter-argumentation, an exclusively content-focused critique of incorrect factual details or non-sequiturs may even backfire: CT believers, such as the Fauci detractors, are experts in rejecting any fact-checking criticism as 'proof' that their opponents are part of the conspiracy itself (Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus 2022).

Rather than focusing on lacking facts, logical incoherence and plausibility deficits, the analysis of conspiracy theories needs to deconstruct their conceptual structure insofar as it contains certain elements in a particular, narrative order that appeals to the cognitive and emotional needs of the recipients, i.e. that makes it attractive – not just possible – to believe in them. The case of Fauci's vilification in pandemic-related CTs points to two conceptual constructs that deserve further investigation: (a) the *traitor* role, and (b) the *war* scenario in which it is embedded.

- a. For the conspiracist narrative to remain plausible, exposure of the *traitor* is a necessary part of any 'explanation' of why a particular crisis or catastrophe, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, has come about in the first place and why it is so difficult to overcome. The *traitor* not only helps the *enemy* but is capable, due to his *insider* role, of disguising and hiding the evidence of his sabotage. This makes him doubly dangerous and ethically dubious. The conspiracists' never-ending searches for a 'smoking gun' proof in Fauci's emails regarding suspected 'gain-of-function' collaboration with China or the 'lab-leak' origins of the pandemic were not driven by any *bona fide* interest in factual evidence but rather by the need to sustain a pseudo-argumentation through "conclusion-shopping" (Butler 2020), i.e. by fitting data into a pre-determined explanation. The calls for Fauci's trial and punishment by a cruel death should therefore be seen not as arbitrary

articulations of personal hatred but as fitting a model of exemplary extreme punishment of perceived traitors (Barron 1981), which has remained popular in the public imagination of a ‘just’ retribution (Foucault 1977).

- b. The scenario that the *traitor* role fits in prototypically is that of a *war* between a *home side* (‘us’) and the *enemy* (‘them’), which may be nationally defined but can also be imagined as sub-national or supra-national conflicts, as two CT versions connected with the pandemic have shown (i.e. CT1: an intra-US ‘people vs. establishment’ conflict, and CT3: a global ‘people vs. secret elites’ conflict). Whilst the general concept of treason is not restricted to the political sphere and encompasses social and ethical dimensions (Ben-Yehuda 2001), the betrayal of one’s home nation and its government (i.e. ‘high treason’) is the most prominent act of treason in discourses structured by CT scenarios.

Following these conclusions from the media data on Fauci’s vilification during the Covid-19 pandemic, we can interpret his case as an example of the war-based framing of conspiracy theories. Not only are CTs often attached to real wars or realistic war threats but they logically presuppose and narratively expound a war scenario in order to make their intended outcome, i.e. the exposure and punishment of the conspiracy, seem necessary to win the war. The exposure of *traitors* is part and parcel of this scenario and functions as (pseudo-)proof for the veracity of the conspiracy suspicion as it underlines the dangerousness and pervasiveness of the respective conspiracy. It links up with the metapragmatic structure of CTs, which allows to dismiss any critic as member of the conspiracy (and, if s/he seemed innocent so far, as a traitor). The precise nature of this link and of the *traitor*-function in CTs in general needs to be explored beyond the case of Fauci, in order to reach a better understanding of the communicative appeal of CTs and, hopefully, develop counterarguments to deconstruct them.

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