

# The ‘Human Costs’ of Economic Crisis

## *The Social Construction of ‘Indebt Man’ an the Role of Mass Media in Italy*

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### Introduction

Since the fall of 2008, the world has entered into the deepest recession since the 1930s, and economic crisis has become a constant presence in our daily lives. Graphic representations are spread everyday as if they were certificates about illness or state of health of entire nations.

The global crisis has created serious consequences for the social structures of European countries changing the relationship between citizens and between generations increased poverty, Job insecurity, mental health problems and well-being (Degirmencioglu, Walker 2015). In particular, Austerity has increased insecurity in both work and welfare benefit payments. Instability has become an intrinsic part of many people’s experiences. Work is no longer a guarantee of stability.

In this context hegemony on the meaning becomes strategically important to impose economic policies, as austerity, to conduct citizenship to radical changes: identity, social lifestyles (Zamperini, Menegatto 2015). It is therefore important to analyze and understand the meanings of the crisis.

A horizon of meaning within which these changes are justified and favorites. Especially for the “debt construction” that represents an economic relationship inseparable from the production of the debtor subject and his morality. Debt produces a specific “morality”: the couple “effort-reward” of the ideology of work is doubled by the morality of the promise (to honor one’s debt) and the fault (of having entered into it). The concept of guilt is derived from the notion of debts, and the morality of debt results in the moralization of the unemployed, the users of public services, as well as of entire populations.

Starting from the spreading of speeches about crisis, in a prospective analysis of the theoretic framework of social representation (Moscovici 1989; Billig 1991), part of these studies specifically offers an unusual perspective of observation by analyzing the discursive forms of mass media as argumentative tools to impose a particular representation of the economic crisis and the “Indebt man” (Lazzarato 2011).

### Data Set and Method

We analysed the content articles of 3 main Italian newspaper (sport and economic newspapers excluded) related to public debt: *Il Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica* and *La Stampa* (FIEG Report, 2013) (See, Table 1);

The data-collection period was from January 2011 to December 2013;

Inclusion criteria: (1) The presence in the headline and the text article of these following words: “economic crisis”, “debt”, “austerity” and “sacrifice”; (2) articles that discuss societal or policy implications; (3) personal human interest articles related to a discussion of policy or societal implication; (4) stories about the economic crisis in Italy (e.g. we excluded those from the other European countries, such as the Greek and Spanish crises); (5) stories about people committing suicide because of economic debts.

Table 1. Number of articles per year of the data corpus

Newspaper	Year			Total
	2011	2012	2013	
<i>Il Corriere della Sera</i>	211	174	125	510
<i>La Repubblica</i>	75	81	57	213
<i>La Stampa</i>	61	88	50	199
Total	347	343	232	922

The data was analyzed using the Atlas-ti software. The research followed the principles of thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2006).

### Results

#### THE REPRESENTATION OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

##### 1. THEME: Economic crisis as a catastrophic event/natural disaster (63 fr)

- the epicenter of the earthquake, the perfect storm;
- a very dangerous situation, certainly it is a very difficult situation, the severity of the emergency, we are faced with a national emergency;
- the country is on the brink of the abyss.

#### SUBTHEMES

**1. Italy becomes a seriously ill “patient” (16 fr)** as the consequence of the disaster: seriously ill patient that needs care, because it is at the point of death, a patient who needs Monti’s care, a patient that otherwise will die.

**2. High level of risk (273 fr)** the risk of derailing, it is risking the future of the country, the risk of Greece contagion, risk of default, risk of social conflicts, loss of the welfare state, three Italians out of ten risk poverty, poverty and social exclusion risk, the risk of youth unemployment.

#### THE SPHERE OF ITALIAN DEBT

##### 2. THEME: Mesure of Debt (323 fr)

- Collective value: Italian, public, our, sovereign;
- A heavy public debt, to heal public debt, the Italians’ public debt is very large, the mountain of public debt, abnormal weight of public debt, maxi Italian debt.

#### LONGITUDINAL DEBT

- Pensioners
- Doctors and patients
- Workers
- Generational sacrifice
- Families

#### SUBTHEMES

**1. Guilt (80 fr)** The fault is of the Italians, who in the past have not given enough weight to the situation

**2. Responsibility (459 fr)** everyone is called to assume their responsibility, national responsibility, greater responsibility in common.

**3. Sacrifice (835 fr)** fiscal sacrifice, collective sacrifice, an immense sacrifice is what the government asks the country to make, the plurality of sacrifices we ask to Italians the sacrifices imposed on citizens.

### Discussion

The results show that from the core of the mass media discourses it emerges the unusual figure of “Indebt man”, a citizen of the present and the future called to make a life full of sacrifices trying to lighten its burden on the back.

In addition it emerged a traumatic storytelling of economic crisis focused on the empowerment of citizens, relying on fear, on his guilt and the idea of a necessary sacrifice, a form of government also called ‘government of emotions’. A disciplinary method in order to regulate and discipline society.

The analysis identified the main metaphors used to feel guilty citizen, for a past of which he is considered responsible, highlights the mutually supportive strategies of structural violence and symbolic violence that are enslaving citizens at the time of the economic crisis.

Lastly, from this argument comes the beginning of a new genealogy of modern slavery: the indebted man.

### References

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### Synthesis of the Aim of the Research

This study of the language of the mass media, aimed at identifying themes that establish the public performance of the economic crisis, highlighting the subordination of the person to the debt, as a new threatening totem in front of which one prostrates oneself and for which to sacrifice oneself.