

THE POLITICS OF HISTORY

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Triest

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Abstract

The aim of this article is substantially devoted to explore which factors have, and have had, an impact on the way history is actually explained. The main topics are:

1. The fundamental passage from a monological interpretation of history to a “plurality of voices”, linked to post-modern culture. The complex debate about Post-modern culture is significantly marked by the disappearance of the monology (a great cultural uniting discourse) and by the emergence of different interpretations and visions. This process has a clear influence on the way history is now explained and the way the “official history” has been substituted by different narratives.
2. The meaning of collective memory. The role of collective memory has acquired a renewed significance today, scholars belonging to different disciplines have underlined its importance in the nation-building processes or in the re-affirmation of identity. For example, ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the passing of time is producing peculiar interpretations and alterations about the recent history of the former socialist countries. The history of these new democratic societies has been re-written, not in the oriented and “orwellian” way followed by the previous regimes, but through the subtle, complex and spontaneous work of the collective memory.
3. The political and ideological action oriented to “create” or to “erase” historical events, which can be functional to the elites legitimisation. Elites need a symbolic background to support their political action and to maintain the consensus of society. They are able both to create new myths or partisan visions that can undermine the legitimacy of a political system and to support real democratic societies.

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¹ Some friends have preciously supported me in this work. Therefore, I have to express my thanks to my parents for sharing their memories with me, to Vaclac Belohradsky for his useful criticisms, to Emilio Cocco for his detailed confrontation regarding the case of foibe, to Paolo Roseano for his suggestions about memory, to Anna Maria Boileau and Mitja Velikonja for their attentive remarks. Catherine Poidevin has been essential for her linguistic sensibility and support. Last but not least, many thanks to Franco Zorzon, young sophisticated book-lover and bookseller, whose passion for books has allowed me the access to forgotten memories.

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INTRODUCTION: THE COMMEMORATION ERA

Things with a past are not simple. Particularly in a time when we are witnesses and participants in a general trend of turning away from stable, 'hard' history in favour of changeable, 'soft' memory (ethnic, social, group, class, race, gender, personal and alien) and a new cultural phenomenon which, as Andreas Huyssen suggests, bears the ugly name of musealisation. Indeed a museal sensibility seems to be occupying ever larger chunks of everyday culture and experience. If you think of the historicising restoration of old urban centres, whole museum villages and landscapes, the boom of flea markets, retro fashions, and nostalgia waves, the obsessive self-musealisation per video recorder, memoir writing and confessional literature, and if you add to that the electronic totalisation of the world on databanks, than the museum can indeed no longer be described as a single institution with stable and well-drawn boundaries. The museum in this broad amorphous sense has become a key paradigm of contemporary cultural activities.²

A "commemoration era" seems to pervade the contemporary societies, on the East as on the West. A constant "musealisation" of our past seems to become the imperative of our cultural efforts. History is strictly connected with the evolution of societies. In fact, History is not only a set of schemas or meanings concerning the past, but it is intimately related to the proceedings of and expectations in the future.

The role of history, that of collective memory or the absence of memory have progressively become the articulated "key-words" for scholars and experts of different disciplines. But this commemoration era doesn't touch only the academic sphere, it concerns the political-institutional one, deeply influencing its symbolics. Therefore, the commemoration era affects also the cultural elaboration within the civil society.

The transfigured memory well corresponds to the anxiety of the present and to the loss of existential references. At the same time, history (or "the use of history") seems to provide the theoretical instruments to try reading the future, a future which is no more seen as a promise of unlimited progress but is now lived with uncertainty, fear and anxiety.

During the last twenty years, a renewed interest has involved the collective memory, concerning above all the national, regional or communitarian memory. This interest is testified by a lot of convergent situations:

— the importance attributed to the cultural background, also of recent formation;

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² D. Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies*, Phoenix: London 1998, pp. 221–222.

— the historical debates which today create a passion within public opinion and the media;

— the abundance of studies and essays oriented to make clear or to index the contents of national memory;

— the multiplication of museums or museal institutions, above all those addressed to collect materials concerning the local identities and everyday life;

— the dissemination of the “statuemanía”, or the “embodied”, “petrified” history in monuments, statues, etc.;

— the success of the “memory travels”, open to the great public.

More general ones, referred to the nature and the evolution of contemporary societies and the fall of the bipolarism paradigm, accompany these reflections:

The end of the economic, social, moral and mental trends, which have in different ways touched all the Western countries from the beginning of the Fifties to half way through and up to latter end of the Seventies and whose rapidity and deepness have had consequences on family life, the relationships between generations and so on the memory transmission, has pushed to re-establish the continuity, to remember the vanished world and to make known the memorial and material traces. Parallely, the end of the Cold War, which has carried to the opening of secrets until now maintained in the name of the security of the State, has left a great number of memories of actors or witnesses of the events.³

An important question immediately arises from all these thoughts, a question concerning the deeper level of society, that Sztompka⁴ calls the “reign of the intangibles and imponderables”:

Is this “commemoration era” the exclusive product of the great epistemological challenge represented by the Post-modern vision?

Is this phenomena intimately linked to the cultural and values’ production of every society, at every moment of its history?

Giving an answer is a very difficult exercise, because it implies the synchrony of the analysis on our present (our historical collocation in society) and the analysis of the use of the past. In other words, this continuous “recalling the past” can be explained by the referential needs and urgencies of the present.

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³ K. Pomian, *Sur l’histoire*, Gallimard: Paris 1999, pp. 266–267.

⁴ P. Sztompka, “«Civilizational Competence»: un prerequisite per la transizione”, transl. A. Pocecco, *Democrazia Diretta*, VII, 1992, no. 4, pp. 41–50.

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Our contemporary societies are forced to confront themselves with their past to maintain and actualise the bases of their social solidarity and cohesion. This process has for a long time been assured by the national identity and its complex constellation of symbols and myths. Today, we assist to the de-construction of the idea of nation as cultural, linguistic and territorial unity, conceived as fundamental reference for individual and collective subjects. Concepts as multiculturalism, fragmentation, dual identity, complicate the theoretic frame and conduct us to explore the political uses of history as an important moment of generation and actualisation of the societal links. So, history and collective memory are not “archaeological” interests: We study, analyse, explore, use, transfigure the past to give significance to the present in terms of common ideals, values, codes and — sometimes — mythologies.

FROM THE *GRANDE HISTOIRE* TO THE PLURALITY OF VOICES

Pouvons-nous aujourd’hui continuer à organiser la foule des événements qui nous viennent du monde, humain et non humain, en les plaçant sous l’Idée d’une histoire universelle de l’humanité?⁵

The complex debate regarding Post-modern culture is critically marked by the disappearance of the monology,⁶ a great cultural uniting discourse or *grand récit* according to the terminology of Lyotard: “For *métarécit* or *grand récit* I precisely mean narratives with a legitimating function”.⁷

Monology is a sort of large scale cultural integration, which eliminates or oppresses the differences for assuring the continual legitimisation and actualisation of its symbolic apparatus. In the name of a universal rationalising logic, every deviation from the “paradigm” constitutes an object of blame or social execration, if not something to be punished or eliminated. In this way, the “non-integrable events” are rejected, their multiplicity and originality are covered by a total identification with the monological interpretation.

Modernity has been notably marked by some monologies: The progressive emancipation of reason and freedom, the progressive (or catastrophic)

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⁵ J.-F. Lyotard, *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Galilée: Paris 1988, p. 39.

⁶ V. Belohradsky, “Polilogy: On Postmodern Public Space”, *The Annals of the International Institute of Sociology*, 1996, vol. V, pp. 264–266.

⁷ J.-F. Lyotard, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

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emancipation of work, the enrichment of whole humanity by the progress of technology, the constant positive evolution of human societies, etc.

The disappearance of monologies is simultaneous to the emergence of different interpretations and visions, because “their decline does not prevent the billions of stories, little or less little, to weave the tissue of everyday life”.⁸ The substitution of monologies by “billions of stories” has a clear influence on the way history is now explained and the way the “official history” has been substituted by different narratives. The “non-integrable events” acquire dignity and importance, their “peripheral” status changes: For example, the Occidental vision or Eurocentric vision of history has been replaced by the untold stories (the “non-integrable events”) of peripheries of the world. History is no longer the great adventure of humanity toward the best of futures, but the sum of individual existences in which everyone has played a historical role.

According to Lyotard,⁹ Post-modernity as “plurality of voices” “refines our sensibility and strengthens our capacity to support the incommensurable”.

 THE EXAMPLE OF COMMUNISM AS *GRANDE HISTOIRE*

The disappearance of a great cultural uniting discourse and the emergence of different visions and interpretations is meaningfully outlined in our days by the fall of communism. Communism has embodied more than a semantic pole, which has for long time structured our cognitive universe. It can not be liquidated just as an ideology joined with a praxis: It has oriented and organised behaviours, attitudes, beliefs and utopias. So, the fall of communism must be read as the disappearance of a meta-reference, for all of our contemporary societies. The greatest difficulties found in analysing the post-communism era derive from the impossibility of application of the usual interpretative models: We now need a “transit language” with its specific codes because the reality is marked by the “movement”, by the incessant circulation of other visions, other models. We need now to re-consider our categories, which have been once focused on artificial dichotomies of interpretation or polarities.

There is a deep crisis of centrality and unicity of the interpretations we have used and it generates other crises: The crisis of defining identities,

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⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ J.-F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, Les Editions de Minuit: Paris 1979, p. 8.

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the crisis of defining cultural values, the crisis of defining civilisations, etc. We have no more a “cognitive centrality” but a provisional centrality and we must be conscious of it. In a peculiar sense, it is true that the fall of communism has signed the end of history.

The fall of communism has been an epochal turn that has forced us to re-interpret our reality. More so: The fall of communism has exhausted the marker of the Twentieth century, it has exhausted the Modernity in its significance of unlimited progress, of constant proceeding. The paradigms of rationality are also deeply discussed because the soviet-type totalitarianism has emphasised the idea of a theological mission with a linear conception of history: The ending point would have been the triumph of the socialist society.

The transitional phenomena have broken every rationality, they have been a “solitary window, opened without permission, on the front of contesting its geometric order.”¹⁰ The transition has been a fracture in an imposed time, a discontinuity, a crisis, a caesura. “Transition” ethimologically means “passage” and sociologically means “challenge”: It opens a “historical course [...] subdued to the logic of discontinuous”.¹¹

The communist totalitarianism has symbolised the climax of the devastating scission between ideal and reality, between *grande histoire* (conceived as a final value) and human caducity (the main obstacle to its realisation). As the progress has represented the secularisation of the Christian eschatology, so the post-modernity represented the secularisation of every terrestrial religion. So, behind the intrinsic reasons of the fall of the totalitarian power, we must consider a process of bigger dimensions and influence, a movement referred to the general conceptions and conditions of existence.

THE *PETITES HISTOIRES* OR THE PLURALITY OF VOICES

The *grande histoire* is substituted by the *petites histoires*, by a plurality of episodes (no more events). Matteucci writes:¹²

The passage from modernity to post-modernity seems to be characterised by two conjoint phenomena which both affect communication:

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¹⁰ I. Ditchev, “Les ruines de la modernité”, *Transeuropéennes*, 1994–1995, no. 5, pp. 39–44, p. 40.

¹¹ J. Hamel, M. Sfia, “Sur la transition”, *Sociologie et Société*, XXII, 1990, no. 1, pp. 5–16, p. 8.

¹² I. Matteucci, “La storia degli eventi nella tarda modernità”, *Sociologia della comunicazione*, X, 1993, no. 19, pp. 133–142, p. 134.

A strong vacuum of reality and the elusion of linear time. These two phenomena together decree the end of history which really manifests itself in the refusal of reality by the events or in their ambiguity, and in the preponderant interest for the news of the day.

This plurality of episodes fragments the contemporary reality and the *petites histoires* cannot be assimilated to a unique matrix. This matrix could be recognised in the modernity at different levels: determinateness, cause and effect principle, transcendence or, in more detailed terms, collectivity, democracy, nation, European cultural supremacy. The great narratives are now decomposed with the consequent dissolution of the social relations and of the same modern idea of society as a whole. The subject — the Itself as Lyotard writes — is included in a network of relations, placed on knots of circuits of communication. The meta-language, cohesive element between individual and society, vanishes in a “cloud of linguistic narrative(s) elements, but also denoting, prescriptive, descriptive ones, etc., every one getting some pragmatic values *sui generis*”.¹³

The conditions of human existence change in a major complexity but also mobility of interactions. The horizon, both individual and collective, is marked by the incommensurability, by an “immemorial temporality”.¹⁴ The very forms of the past are fragmented, dispersed. The scientific knowledge, the very politics lose their exclusive legitimisation, they become languages close to other languages.

One of the most radical changes happens by the passage from a multi-racial society to a multicultural society.¹⁵ In the first one, the different origins of individuals could be integrated in the culture. In a multicultural society, no culture can be hegemonic, no one can affirm itself as unique custodian of the Truth against the new epistemological relativism.

A plurality of descriptions of reality substitutes a unique narrative. From that, the search of different social models, of new descriptions of citizenship which place the individuals in societies and the societies in the history. These models cannot be contemplated as criteria of interpretative rationality but as interpretations of Reason in a constant dialectics.

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¹³ J.-F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne, op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

¹⁵ V. Belohradsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 264–266.

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Cultural traumas of unusual depth reveal how the plurality of voices¹⁶ is substituting the monology. The consequent precariousness assumes the forms of a continuous debate, it does not bring about permanent or final solutions. The fragmentation is primarily expressed by a tumultuous coexistence of ethnic, religious, political and also ethical identities.

IS THE PLURALITY OF VOICES POSSIBLE?

Some criticisms must necessarily be moved to this idea of plurality of voices, criticisms concerning the equal possibility for different discourses, different voices, to articulate themselves and appear in public: Is the plurality of voices really possible? Some aspects of the Post-modern vision are too “optimistic” in this sense, they illustrate a sort of automatic liberation of every expression, immediately generated by the desegregation of the monologies and also guaranteed at the institutional level. The end of socialism and Cold War antagonism as meta-references didn’t bring the end of meta-references at all, but just transformed them, because many new appeared: Old ones really “died”, but many new emerged and still emerge.

For example, after September 11th new monologies appeared with the strong force of a simplistic vision of the world, a new meta-history created upon the dichotomy of Islam and the rest of the world.

We can’t relegate the plurality of voices only as product of a “wishful thinking”, but it is indubitably linked to the distribution of power in the society.

THE MEANING OF THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY

“The present is the great selector of memory”.¹⁷ The representation of the past shared by a collectivity is the product of the interaction between symbolic evocations and future projections. At the same time, this representation is an essential part of the social identity.

The role of collective memory has acquired a renewed significance today, scholars belonging to different disciplines have underlined its importance in the nation-building processes or in the re-affirmation of identities.

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¹⁶ M. Walzer, “Multiculturalismo e individualismo”, *MicroMega*, 1994, no. 3, pp. 31-41.

¹⁷ A. Cavalli, “I giovani e la memoria del fascismo e della Resistenza”, *il Mulino*, XLV, 1996, no. 363, pp. 51-57, p. 53.

Therefore, collective memory has a fundamental role in the expression of the plurality of voices.

Memory — linguistically expressed in spoken exchanges, oral history, survivor's testimonies and other textually mediated discourses — is the tool that gives meaning to our lives.¹⁸ Memory also depends on the ideological frameworks that shaped and dictated our access to that memory. So, there is also a “memory of memory”, because [as Passerini¹⁹ emphasises] it is not a simple and spontaneous memory, nor memory that stems from a need of vengeance.

Approaching the theme of the collective memory it is necessary to make some preliminary theoretical definitions or distinctions. A first observation concerns the fact that a limited existence in its own dimension cannot structure and elaborate itself, it needs a collective dimension. The vindication of memory is such a strong datum in the social configuration, because it “allows each one to place himself in the passing of time”.²⁰

The problems concerning the memory of a group, of a nation, present numerous facets, primarily the individuation of the different kinds of memory and their repercussions.

Each human group owns in itself a memory, because an identity without memory cannot exist. The need of taking root in the past, to define an ideal continuity with “what has been” represents a pressing and ineluctable exigence. This necessity is dictated by the will to maintain a common symbolic background and by the possibility to draw upon it, (to evocate it) when it is necessary.

The mechanisms and the representations of the collective memory cannot be reduced only to the traces of the past, because they are surely presence of this past but also relecture, reconstruction, “use of the past at the present”. In this way, one of the main purposes consists in the attempt of read memory as “actor of the history”, on its utilisations and utilizings, on its effects and roles. The memory is not something of irreversibly given, but something extremely flexible, its boundaries can spread or get narrower.

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¹⁸ R. Lentin, “Memory and Forgetting: Gendered Counter Narratives of Silence in the Relations between Israeli Zionism and the Shoah”, *RSC* 2001, no. 8, Mediterranean Programme Studies, European University Institute.

¹⁹ L. Passerini, *International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories*, vol. 1: *Memory and Fascism*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 1992.

²⁰ G. Bensoussan, *Auschwitz en heritage? D'un bon usage de la mémoire*, Mille et une nuits: Paris 1998, p. 20.

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The individual memory places the individual in a constant relationship with his past, his remembrances; gives him the references and the subjective instruments for interpreting reality. Individual memory is not entirely closed or isolated: "A man, to evoke his past, often needs to recall the memories of others. He refers himself to references out of him and fixed by society. More so: The working of individual memory is not possible without those instruments which are words and ideas, that the person has not invented but he has taken from his environment".²¹

The interaction between individual memory (or, as Halbwachs also calls it, internal memory) and collective memory (external or social memory) is extremely complex. They feed on symbols, conceptual frameworks, testimonies, "marks", present in both of them. But the dialectics between them does not exhaust itself in this way. The collective memory, constituted by a multiplicity of individual memories, does not often furnish a coherent summary, but it is liable to different fluctuations and accentuations around the chosen general lines.

If individual memory offers everyone the support of personal experience, collective memory furnishes common representations, which every member of a community can understand and share. Both individual and collective memories are techniques allowing to "make present" what does not exist anymore: The memory is the re-actualisation and the re-interpretation of the past because the remembrance is never the photographic reproduction of the reality.²²

The memory not only reproduces, re-creates but also "makes present". In the individual memory this "making present" remains a totally subjective action. In the case of the collective memory, this action gives life to a common feeling of solidarity and belongingness, which the cohesion of the group is based on.

An additional important aspect is constituted by the fact that social memory does not perfectly coincide with historical memory. Also the historical memory presents a lot of analytical difficulties. Although it is the result of an attentive analysis by some specific actors, historical memory is connected with the attempt to definitively clarify the gaps between

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²¹ M. Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, Albin Michel: Paris 1997, p. 98.

²² F. Ferrarotti, "Storia, memoria, identit", *La Critica sociologica*, 1996, no. 117-118, pp. 142-151, p. 142.

“historical truth” and “political truth”. This is not an easy operation because often or always influenced by specific interests.

On the base of these three elements, the history of a nation is not given only by the so-called official history, but by the progressive sedimentation of perceptions and self-perceptions of single actors and collectivity. The collective imaginary is a very strong force able to produce or destroy the national myths, to generalise the individual experience, to create new “habits of hearts”.

So, we can compare memory to a real battle-field, where opposite visions set themselves.

ABSENCE OF MEMORY VERSUS ABUSE OF MEMORY?

Another crucial aspect of an analysis about collective memory is represented by the dichotomy “absence of memory” and “abuse of memory”. The border between “absence memory” and “abuse of memory” is controversial and weak. The ideological uses of the memory constitute an usurpation of the memory of one group to the advantage of another.

According to Benasayag:²³ “Our ideology has produced the oblivion. The oblivion is not the pure and simple oblivion of the past, on the contrary today we do not cease to «memorialise» the past, to put it in archives, to resurrect it, to interpret it. The oblivion has been produced by the ideology, it is the elimination of the point of ontological anchorage of the past. [...] Nostalgia is fashionable [...] but at the same time, the work of the oblivion has never been so potent”. His consideration remembers the words of Renan, according to him forgetting is a central factor in the process of creating a nation.

“Absence of memory” implies the cancellation of episodes, events, which have had a great influence in determining the life of many individuals (at a subjective level) or the reality (at collective level). The “abuse of memory” corresponds to the instrumentalisation of this symbolic background, by the exaltation of some specific aspects.

Both these attitudes are dangerous. A perfect balance is necessary between a rational reading of the historical events and the in/conscious reactions they still provoke. There is a *devoir de mémoire*, which cannot be

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²³ M. Benasayag, *Parcours. Engagement et résistance, une vie*, Calmann-Lévy: Paris 2001, p. 188.

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reduced to the claim for justice but must be oriented to a critical knowledge and dissemination of the past.

But this will of “re-establishing the continuity” is not devoid of some negatives aspects. The “commemoration era” that affected contemporary societies makes banal the events, places all of them at the same level and so we misunderstand them because they are disconnected from their historical reality.

Memory still remains an important political aim: It can be transformed in “selective memory” or accompanied by a selective oblivion. The events are read with the purpose to extrapolate what is useful for the political interests, they are not interpreted in their globality.

RE-INTERPRETATION AND RE-APPROPRIATION

Ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the passing of time is producing peculiar interpretations and alterations regarding the recent history of the former socialist countries. The history of these new democratic societies has been re-written, not in the oriented and “orwellian” way followed by the precedent regimes, but through the subtle, complex and spontaneous work of the collective memory.

“Our past becomes more and more unforeseeable” said Deyanova,²⁴ underlying how the difficult process of re-acquisition of the past shows a discontinuous and inhomogeneous character.

For a long time, the former socialist countries have been artificially “frozen” by the ideological dogma, closed in an “eternal present”, excluded from historical trends. They became “unhistorical” societies. After ’89, these countries have “re-appeared” but the rapidity of the changes has been so great as to generate a lot of unforeseen consequences.

An image of our recent memory well describes these implications: After the destruction of the Berlin Wall, people came and went through the former border with such a phrenetic to paralyse the whole town.

In the former socialist countries, the re-acquired liberty has had this effect too: Reacquiring own identity, own history, own memories has been so inebriating to make us forget — initially — the causes of the triumph of democracy. Later, this perspective changed: From the enthusiastic affirmation

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²⁴ L. Deyanova, “La biographie passée aux aveux”, *Le Courrier de l’Unesco*, 1994, mai, pp. 35–37, p. 25.

of the victory of the democratic model we have had to pass to consider the reasons of the failure of the socialist model. The soviet-type regimes (by the repression or effacement of the civil society) generated a fracture between “social reality” and “power reality”, both guided by its own independent but parallel logic. The second one for its legitimisation has needed complex and sophisticated mechanisms of self-celebration and ritualism, embracing also the use of history and collective memory.

So, for a long time, the former socialist societies could not speak about their history in a true way. This history is today the object of a real battle, the “battle of the history” as Fejto²⁵ as called it.

What the German historians and writers called — after the nazism — a *passé insurmonté* is one of the great challenges for the new democracies. History represents an indispensable dimension of the individual and social conscience: “a sort of psychoanalysis which, in free societies, takes place automatically, unconsciously, it is part of the normality”.²⁶

If the soviet-type societies have developed a “re-interpretation” of each national history, today we assist to the “re-appropriation” of the national memories and identities. I define as “re-interpretation” the ideologically oriented use of some aspects of the collective events. It implies a set of complex mechanisms: From the application of a celebrative ritualism to the sacralization of some episodes, functional to the needs of the system of power. In this case, the historical memory is constituted by the political truth and becomes the compulsory guideline of the collective memory. For example, in the Soviet Union, the mendacity has been elected to “state industry” as Nivat says,²⁷ activating some sophisticated mechanisms such as the complete silence about whole towns, industries and gulag system and mutilating the past.

“Re-appropriation” means on the contrary the re-discovery of all the aspects of the past, even the negative aspects of what has happened. But — once free from the strong limitations of the ideology — the social memory tends to consider only what is “acceptable”.²⁸

So, in the former socialist countries, the collective memory maintains the preeminence on the historical reading of the recent past. This

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²⁵ F. Fejto, “La bataille de l’histoire”, *Libération* 7.02.1989.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ G. Nivat, “Qui a peur de l’histoire?”, *Reforme* 20.02.1997.

²⁸ G. Balandier, “Les recompositions de la mémoire”, *Le Monde* 22.06.1990.

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pre-eminence also discloses an unexpected form of re-interpretation, a sort of “commemorative obsession” [...]. As Ash²⁹ acutely writes, many Western politicians remember today as they foresaw the fall of the Berlin Wall. The dissent or opposition dimensions seem remarkably augmented, everybody seems to have been “dissident”, etc. These are the marks of a current and “inevitable” process within these societies. A more difficult and longer process than any analysts would have previewed.

RE-WRITING THE HISTORY ONLY ON THE EAST?

On 18 July 1990, the central communist temple, Georgi Dimitrov’s Mausoleum, was emptied. The mummy of the leader of the Bulgarian people was removed. After a long and exhausting ‘civil war of symbolic interpretations’. (‘Living symbol’ or ‘embalmed corpse’, ‘pantheon’ or ‘morgue’, ‘people’s teacher’ or ‘people’s killer’, ‘significant work of architecture’ or ‘urinal’, keep or demolish...).

That ‘civil war’ was also waged elsewhere — over the monument to Lenin, the monument to the Soviet Army, the monuments to killed antifascists [...] A natural process of the cooling, chilling of our symbols, desecration of the other’s symbols, shift of sacral places, names and dates, routinization of the charisma, rewriting of history. Yet also an unnatural non-passing of the past, fixation of memory on the dead — fixation in the Freudian sense, an impossibility of distancing oneself from the traumatic event experienced, the obsessive recurrence of the same — haunting — memories.³⁰

No doubt about it: The History of the East should be written again, as there is an unquestionable risk of falsifications. The debate about history and collective memory in the new democracies is essential because it involves the recent past, actors still alive, archives still closed or kept secret, etc.

Critically approaching this recent past also means to make clear some subtle concepts. For example clarify the difference among “passive resistance”, “active collaboration”, “indifference”, or “acceptation”. These terms are not only semantic elements but they are referred to real behaviours, to the responsibilities and choices of real people. So, a constructive analysis must be developed not only searching the guilty but also searching why there has been a guilt.

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²⁹ T.G. Ash, “Ten years after”, *The New York Review of Books* 1999, november, no. 18.

³⁰ L. Deyanova, “The Battles for the Mausoleums. Traumatic Places of Collective Memory, in: J. Coenen-Huther (ed.), *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, Nova Scientia Publishing House: New York 1997.

What Geremek³¹ calls a “condemnation without judicial condemnation” is the way to take the right distance from the past, not effacing it but understanding it. The ’89 “revolutions not-revolutions”³² have left unsolved the problem of managing the past. The collective memory is able both to create new myths or alterations which can make uncertain the legitimacy of the new political systems, as to support the creation of real democratic societies.

The question of re-writing history is not an exclusive problem of post-socialist countries. Not only the new democracies have to develop such attitude: Despite their political plurality, “Western” societies were also locked in some very strong and persuasive “ideological dogmas”. Cold War atmosphere and consequences must be analysed on both sides. Writing and re-writing history is an ongoing process.

CREATE OR ERASE MEMORIES

“Over the last two decades, it has become almost axiomatic that for the creation of a country democratic and humanistic future, it must confront the demons of its past”.³³ In this way, the assumption of Renan (according to him, forgetting is a crucial factor in the process of creating a nation) seems to be contradicted.

Processes called “National reconciliation” have recently demonstrated how history and collective memory are essential in the difficult effort to reconstruct the social texture. They are basic-keys to furnish a new value system, to resolve the fracture lines within a society and the unresolved heritage of the past. In this way, history and collective memory are no longer elements of theoretic speculations but they become influent factors of political stabilisation and social cohesion.

The political and ideological action oriented to “create” or to “erase” historical events is functional to the elites legitimisation. Elites need a symbolic background to support their political action, to maintain and actualize their consensus within society. They are therefore able to create new myths

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³¹ B. Geremek, “Un jugement moral du passé est nécessaire”, *La Croix* 24.02.1996.

³² T.G. Ash, “Ten Years After”, *The New York Review of Books* 1999, November, no. 18.

³³ L. Bickford, “Human Rights and Historical Memory — The Archival Imperatives”, *Human Rights Quarterly*, 1998, November (polyglot.lss.wisc.edu/workshop/litml/bickford/archival.htm).

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or partisan visions, which can undermine the legitimacy of political systems, or to support real democratic societies.

In fact, according to Todorov,³⁴ collective memory generally prefers to retain two types of situations in the past of a collectivity: The situations in which someone can recognise himself as a victorious hero or the ones in which someone can identify himself as an innocent victim. Both types of memories permit the legitimisation of the claims of the present: They generate a sort of blindness regarding the present, even if heroes and victims have really existed.

Dividing history in “victims” and “enemies” stories, the elites action coerces the whole cultural background of societies in an extreme simplified and simplistic scheme, in which only the first have the right to speak in public.

“Victims” and “enemies” are two traditional political categories, their utilisation allows a de-contextualisation of historical events, which are judged in a sort of artificial dimension, completely disjointed from composite factors and variables. This procedure conducts to a “history of regime” at the public and institutional level: For example, the way history has been taught during the fascist period in Italy constituted — too simply — a “school of patriotism”, of “devotion” to the models diffused by the regime. I want to stress here how dictatorial or totalitarians élites make use of some important agents of socialisation (like schools) to construct the values’ conformity they need.

The discourse changes and assumes a more sophisticated character when we speak of democratic societies. There is not a patent elites action to erase memories and stories in contrast with the official version of history, but some hidden mechanisms “to silence” them. The political purpose is not to create homogeneity and conformity, but to maintain the consensus about some themes conceived as essential for the national identification, social cohesion, social solidarity.

At the social level, this procedure engenders fractures and conflicts, creating “divided memories”.

The concept of “divided memories” usually indicates the presence of elements of collective memory, which generate different readings of the same historical events. Powerful instruments of political and ideological fight, they are normally confined in an artificial homogeneity, with the

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³⁴ T. Todorov, *L’homme dépaycé*, Paris: Le Seuil 1996, pp. 70–71.

hope of ending their internal opposition. But this action also corresponds to the creation of an history of regime, it is “the substitute of the ideologism of the past decennial, it has the same valence and the same integralistic aspiration”.³⁵

“The less glorious pages of our past could be the most instructive ones, if we only accept to read them wholly”:³⁶ This intent is very difficult, because political interests always affect a public analysis of the past and influence the fragile equilibrium between truth and lie, between memory and oblivion.

THE *DEVOIR DE MÉMOIRE*

Adopting the viewpoint of history and collective memory as important political goals, we have at least to consider the role assumed by the *devoir de mémoire*. When we speak about history and collective memory, we usually refer to some “traces” of the past and their elaboration. These traces characterise our relationship with a past in different ways: They give a particular emphasis to some representations or they activate oblivion regarding other ones. The *élites* intentionally create memories/traces of memory when they want to exalt some historical events transforming them in political topics. These procedures permit *élites* to affirm their superiority in front of the other political forces. In this way, history and memory are distorted, only some aspects of them are accented and others are marginalised or silenced.

A very actual and problematic aspect of collective memory is the *devoir de mémoire*, the duty of memory.

It is a concept with an ambiguous status, because it contains an emotional and moral character and an official and institutional one. The first has as its objective the knowledge of the past without reticences and the way history is taught: It primarily concerns historians and education. The second is inscribed in institutional and official texts of different Ministries,

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³⁵ M. Flores, “La perfida illusione della storia unica”, *il Mulino*, XLVII, 1998, no. 276, pp. 207–212, p. 210.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 71. Todorov also writes: “Un peuple doit recouvrer son passé non pour le ressasser. ni pour légitimer ses revendications présentes — entraînant ainsi le cycle interminable des vengeances et des présailles; les guerres balkaniques sont un bon exemple des désastres provoqués par une mémoire strictement littérale — mais pour y trouver une leçon en vue de l’avenir; pour tenter, méditant les injustices du passé, de ranimer l’idéal de la justice elle-même. Il ne reste pas moins qu’il faut commencer par connaître ce passé”.

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of veterans or survivors' associations, etc., so it involves the state and ITS "commemorating" apparatus.

There are some points that must be stressed in relation between collective memory and *devoir de mémoire*:

— the risk of denial of the differences between duty of memory and duty of knowledge. The notion of collective memory privileges the social shared representations of the past, not the polemic or strategic use of the past. Duty of memory and duty of knowledge are two distinct moments, they must be clearly distinguished;

— the risk of confusion between history and memory (seen in the recent *Affaire Papon*, in which the historians have become testimonies: An historian is not a policeman, nor a judge, nor a moralist);

— the implicit risk of a militant and official diffusion of memory that can be transformed into a juridical instrumentalisation of history (we cannot read or judge the past on the base of and in function of something present;

— the emotional approach that can abolish the weak border between duty of memory and duty of truth, denying the necessary distance to a historic reading of events;

— the risk of a refusal of the present (by continuously immersing oneself in the past).

THE CASE OF FOIBE

My research interests have been firstly marked by the study of the role of collective memory in post-socialist societies and its importance for the consolidation of democracy: The "battle of history", remembering the words of Fejto.³⁷ Then, the *Affaire Papon* has given me the possibility to explore the consequences of a juridical process that became an historical one because it has been the process to a period of French history, not only to a man. Therefore, it has allowed me to define the latent dynamics and fractures of history in a national identity: "Un passé trop présent", remembering the words of Rousso.³⁸ The successive attempt to construct a sociological frame of processes of national reconciliation has conducted me to clarify

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³⁷ F. Fejto, *op. cit.*

³⁸ H. Rousso, "Pour les jeunes, un passé trop présent", *L'Express*, 02.10.1997.

THE POLITICS OF HISTORY

the role and the dramatic consequences of forgotten or silenced memories: The “politics of truth”.

At this point I want to discuss the political use of history (the politics of history) by the description of an episode of the recent history of the region in which I live. This case appears to me emblematic not only because part of my personal background, not only for the possibility to have a direct access to historical information and testimonies/witnesses, but because it seems to me an articulate example of the politics of history.

Well conscious that the case of foibe is only one of the numberless episodes of violence that accompany every war, I want to stress it because it seems to me symbolise in an integral way the politics of history. So, it is not my interest to recognise victims and executioners, faults and responsibilities, neither to establish the precise dimensions of this historical event nor to try finding the “truth”. I don’t want to demonstrate the exact number of deads, it is not my duty: My sociological competencies address me only to read in this case the dangers and the effects of a political use of history.

THE POLITICS OF DEATH AND THE TRACES OF MEMORY

Foiba (plural foibe, from Latin *fovēa*, hole) is a typical rocky abyss, naturally formed in the carstic terrain, surrounding the town of Trieste. In spite of its simple geological definition, foiba has progressively assumed a very specific one: Foiba has a peculiar symbolic signification, constituted by political and historical characterisations. As the carstic terrain is the result of progressive calcareous formations, foiba is in the collective memory and history the result of progressive sedimentation of memories, oblivions, stories and political uses of history.

From the end of the Second world war, the last fifty years of the history of my region and of the neighbouring region of Istria have been very contradictory. I am therefore compelled to describe only some partial aspects, without developing the details.

During the autumn 1943, during the twenty months of nazi occupation and in occasion of the Yugoslavian military occupation of these regions, the foibe became the collective graveyard of thousands of persons. The Titoist army utilised the foibe to eliminate the enemies to the new regime it installed but also to practice a genocide against the Italian inhabitants of the region (Italian women, anti-fascists or simply public officers have been

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thrown in the foibe, not only well-know local representatives of the fascist party).

Foibe, for the populations of the Triestin and Istrian hinterlands were the places in which to dispose of garbage. To throw a man in a foiba meant treating him as garbage, implying a total reversal of values and behaviours. There have been two main lines of historical interpretation, which have been constantly modified during the last years but they remain as important analytical points: Through them, the historical memory has read and read the case of foibe. Through them and against them, for fifty years, collective memory has nourished divided remembrances, suffering and rancour.

According to the first one, foibe are the concrete manifestation of the willing of destruction of everything that was “Italian”; according to the second, foibe are the evidence of the anti-fascist justice, of revolutionary expression.³⁹

The first interpretation is the result of the conflict between Italy and Slavia (Slav populations) which began during the first half of the Nineteen Hundreds in the region. After 1945, the Cold War gave force and persistence to it, inserting it in the opposition between East and West. It is a sort of incurable conflict not only between two political and social models, between two ideologies but also between cultures and values.

The second interpretation raised immediately after the events. On June 9th — date of the Accord of Belgrade, the government of Belgrade sent a secret and reserved note to the American and English ones, in which it declared not to have effected deportations nor arrests out of the context of military security. At the end of 1945, answering to the English-American request about 2,472 persons considered vanished in May '45, the government of Tito defines the 90% of them as fascists, fallen during battle, or war criminals. This last interpretation has been the official version adopted. After the rupture between Tito and Stalin (1948), there was no longer any interest to contest or to re- consider it.

If this has been the historic or political position, completely different mechanisms were active in collective memory.

The thesis of the culpability of the dead was refused, because it was an argument of exclusive political nature and very fragile too: The typology of vanished people corresponded only in a minimal part to the official

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³⁹ G. Valdevit, “Foibe: l’eredità della sconfitta”, in: G. Valdevit (ed.), *Foibe. Il peso del passato*, Venezia: Marsilio 1997, pp. 15–32.

description of them — like war criminals, fascists, etc. The concept of popular justice seemed to be only a “truth of state”, not the real explanation of slaughters.

If we can understand the political reasons that have guided the attitudes of the Yugoslavian government, reasons that can be summarised in “real politik”, more difficult to understand is the position of the Italian government.

For a long time, the case of foibe has been officially not recognised. The memory has been silenced and the survivors or the witnesses were rapidly defined as fascists or ideologically factious. The subject became the exclusive theme of a political wing, not a civil and national one and it has been used to acquire consensus and legitimisation or to discredit the adversaries.

Only in Trieste the foibe have continued to be the specific object of strong ideological conflicts and historical debates, implying every political force. The language used has still had the terms and the connotations of the old ideologisms.

The Foibe were still “a past that doesn’t pass”. In the rest of Italy, nobody knew anything about it, history books have never spoken of this episode, political *élites* didn’t want to face it, because of its complexity and delicacy: It is “a story apart”.

A lot of sources explain the case of foibe as a wholly regional or micro-regional phenomena of ethnic violence, without considering other European areas which have lived the same climate of pain during the same period. On the contrary, it is not a chance that this episode has assumed a new importance at the same moment of a global change.

Only from the end of Eighties, there has been an important act by Italian authorities. The international scenario was changing, the Berlin wall would fall and open the doors to the archives of our recent past. The Italian political scenario was changing too: The Second World War began to be considered also as a civil war for Italy, with all the difficult implications of this assumption.

The Italian government gave an official acknowledgement of the Foiba of Basovizza as national monument. It has been recognised a symbolic place, “a traumatic place of collective memory”⁴⁰ but in reality the whole question of foibe has been acknowledged for the first time.

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⁴⁰ L. Deyanova, “The Battles for the Mausoleums. Traumatic places of collective memory”, in: J. Coenen-Huther (ed.), *Bulgaria at the Crossroads*, Nova Scientia Publishing House: New York 1997.

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Obviously, a lot of polemics accompanied this act, which has been exclusively read as a political view, functional to the present context. For the families of victims, it has simply been a duty of memory and respect.

The debate concerning the foibe continues. Probably, the truth will never be known, The persisting political and ideological conflict demonstrates that this is a past that doesn't pass but there is also a will not to let it pass. In other words, there is the will to maintain divisions and fractures utilising historical events, manipulating memories, The "sum of the dead" is the most sad aspect. In my opinion, only the new generations could objectively read the case of foibe: If they still will want to do it.

Polityki historii

Autorka z pozycji socjologa przedstawia kulturowe i społeczne uwarunkowania pojawienia się w postmodernistycznym świecie ery upamiętniania (*commemoration era*). Wskazuje na zmiany zachodzące w dyskursie historycznym i społecznej recepcji historii, przechodzącej od monologu odpowiadającego „Wielkiej Historii” (*Grande Histoire*) do wielości głosów, wprowadzającej wielość i różnorodność ujęć przeszłości oraz odpowiadającej „Małym Historiom” (*Petite Histoire*). Zastanawia się, czy wielość ujęć i odpowiadająca im wielość dyskursów jest możliwa. W tym kontekście podkreśla i rozpatruje problem wzajemnych relacji historii i pamięci, a także kwestię braku pamięci i zamazywania pamięci. W kategoriach wzajemnej relacji pamięci i historii omawia możliwości i niebezpieczeństwa tkwiące w reinterpretacji historii we współczesnym świecie zagrożonym terroryzmem po 11 września i w Europie po upadku muru berlińskiego. Szczególną uwagę poświęca teoretycznym i etycznym implikacjom reinterpretacji historii w Europie postsowieckiej. Wskazuje na etyczne aspekty kreowania i wymazywania pamięci, wreszcie określa powinności pamięci. Teoretyczny wywód egzemplifikuje studium przypadku, bliskim jej kulturowo, ale spinającym zarazem całość rozważań teoretycznych. Przypadkiem tym jest los mieszkańców Foiby w Istrii w czasie II wojny światowej.