

We

If “I”, as consciousness of the self, is shaped when it's articulated as a subject of those enunciations that refer to it, we can say the same for “We”. The self-consciousness of the “We” will reflect the instances of that multiplicity of enunciations referring to it as a subject. The self, both for the “I” and the “We”, is then what keeps together the enunciations with which the past is remembered, the present is described, the future is envisioned. But, both for the “I” and the “We”, this operation is not sterile, antiseptic, but a rather spurious, circular one. In fact, while arising with the formulation of its linguistic subject, the self exerts a shaping influence on the its experience: the past is reviewed and interpreted according to structures of meaning that reflect and perpetuate the existence of the enunciating self. Likewise, the experience of the present is mediated not only by the memory of that self recognised as subject of past enunciations, but also by the light thrown from a hypothetical future by a prospective self.

As a constitutional part of identity, for both “I” and “We”, memory is selection. It is the result of a choice to keep. Or, at least, this is how it is normally understood: memory as keeping. What we constantly regard as the negative outcome of our limited mnemonic capacity, should instead be seen as the necessary counterpart of identity. The enunciations, that “I” or “We” fail to attribute to themselves, are those contradicting the integrity of the self they synthesise, those enunciations irrelevant for the unfolding of their self over the time categories, but also those enunciations that would diverge, deviate from the identity normativity, and imply other readings outside it. These enunciations are drowned into oblivion. Obvious enough, the more the self is compact, defined, circumscribed, the more enunciations will fall off from its integrity and be forgotten. Conversely, a less monumental identity allows for the acknowledgement of a more diversified experience.

An alternative approach to identity can subsequently come from a practice of complexity. If identity resists to complexity because of ideological boundaries, complexity, on the contrary, provides for narrative lines that allow for the deployment of the multifaceted overcoming internal contradiction.

In that sense, complexity is already everyday experience: we (!) are already ascribing ourselves (!) and our experiences to the one of the several groups we are part of. So we would use “we” to describe our experience within the family, thus doubling that “we” if we have created our own one; we are “we” within our friends group, with our work colleagues, we are “we” reading this very words. While we recognise the alterity of each “we” - contributing to it, sharing its practices and traditions, and therefore designing the line that separates inside from outside, we and other-than-we -, they are in no competition with each other, they don't contradict one another.

The structure of the enunciate allows for bearing the existence of the subject, while leaving its normativity behind: identity is illuminated as a consequence, not as the wellspring of the speculative, sentient being: I think, I sense, I feel, therefore I am. In the same manner we can postulate the existence of a “we” that accommodates a variety of memory instances, while not rejecting complexity for the sake of simplified identity.

Collective memory

Writing about collective memory, Aleida Assmann observes that the participation of the individual within the formation of collective memory is limited to a cognitive learning, because the collective past can't be remembered: “it has to be memorised”¹. While these conclusions can be correct for the remote past, they are not applicable to the recent one, the one for which the individual has first-hand memory material, and to which interpretation they contribute, especially for the current days. In fact, if for Halbwachs remembering events constituting collective memory meant to rely upon the memory of others, nowadays it isn't fully so anymore. Supported by audio/photo/video-recording, mass media before, social media after have upgraded our collective memory giving us access to – almost – first hand memory material, while at the same time merging public and private remembrance through the same language. Interestingly enough, my experience of the 2021 storming of US Capitol and the one of the first words pronounced by my niece living in Japan are based on the same medium, therefore they share a significant semantic horizon.

Furthermore, Assmann argues that institutions and larger social groups construct their memories through celebrations and objectification of these memories, which therefore are necessarily mediated one. But can't we say the same for the individual memory? Doesn't it stick to places, traditions, approaches (but also memory devices, such as photography) that mediate it? Isn't the same construction of a memory a mediated process? That selection process that Assmann attributes to the collective memory, isn't it reflecting the selection process that we apply on a daily basis on our

1 A. Assmann, *Transformations between History and Memory*, Social Research, Vol. 75, No. 1, 2008, p. 52

experience? How would we do this selection if not in the dialogue between what we retain relevant when we experience reality and what we retain relevant when we recall that experience as a memory? Aren't we in both cases witnessing the result of the influence of beliefs over the perception of reality? And over its representation as a memory? We all have experienced memory twists, we all have doubted the reality of a faded memory. We know how subtle the nature of remembering is and how reinforced it becomes when installed upon a larger structure of meanings.

If a remembrance is in very large measure a reconstruction of the past achieved with data borrowed from the present², the fabrication of collective memory as a mediated process does not affect the status of collective remembering as memories, because, once again, a similar process is to be observed also within the field of individual memory.

If that's true, then individual and collective memory are different because they arise from different sources, here a neuronic basis, there cultural objects; however, unless we admit that neuronic processes are primal to any experience, the difference cannot be identified in the degree of mediation.

History as institutionalised memory

Aleida Assmann separates social memory from cultural memory. The former is a heterogeneous phenomenon characterised by a bottom-up directionality: it is embodied and therefore intrinsically ephemeral. Conversely, cultural memory is an institutionalised form of memory, which directionality is top-down: it is disembodied and long-term. Through the cultural memory the institution transmits a message to a multiform population, encoding it with identity inputs that allow an indistinct mass to become a people. The relation between these two forms of memory is not stable, and the alternation in the roles of sender and receiver allows for periodical re-reading of memory; in fact, codified forms of cultural memory are not safe from future reinterpretations, that make them object of a re-embodiment process, and of a re-actualisation of their symbols.

However, if we accept J. Assmann definition of collective identity as social belonging become self-reflective, then we will recognise a circular movement of reciprocal production between social and collective memory, that won't allow to identify the emergence of a collective identity anywhere other than in the production of a linguistic subject. That means, while creating itself, the subject creates the rules for this creation.

Approaching the myth *Italiani, brava gente* in this light, it can be read as the foundation myth of the republican era, its main characteristic being the self-absolution resulting from a slavish removal of unpleasant memories and the distortion of those accepted within the narration. A commentary on that can be taken from Ernest Renan in the golden age of the nation-states: the historian argued that forgetting, or what he called historical error, is in fact instrumental to the shaping of a nation: "Indeed historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial"³.

If history has always been a tool for power to legitimize itself, apparently in the current days these frameworks have to be reinterpreted; apparently subject, object and medium of this legitimation are to be re-defined. History and memory have become an ethical battlefield: more than in a single narration itself, the universality of history takes shape in the trajectories represented. Or it aims at that. Remembering who we have been is widely understood as a way to grow our self-consciousness, or else, to be able to account for our own actions. To exert responsibility. For history and memory manifest their ethical charge when we retrieve memories of wrong we have done, not the one we suffered⁴.

So the question about Italian repressed is an ethical one: what is the nature of these history fragments? Are we loudly stepping onto the field of collective responsibility?

Collective responsibility

In her brief publication about Italian memory of deportation, Anna Rossi-Doria goes through the different stages of its narrative. Within a general consideration that sees deportation bearing the moral judgement of passivity and defeat, she highlights how different aspects of it have been instrumentally hidden or exposed in order to accommodate this or that social inclination: so, in line with the myth of the Resistance, the stories told were at first about political deportees; then, in the 70', the eclipse of that myth allowed for the discover of the Jewish genocide; lastly, it is only in recent times that research interest is rising around the topic of the so-called internees, those militaries of the Italian army who refused to join with the RSI. The overall current narrative appears to be dominated by an emotional approach aimed at stimulating an empathetic response based on an idealistic identification with the deportees. Motivated by the misunderstanding that an emotional communication finds its way to people conscience, this narrative comes with the overexposure to sorrow that has shown to provoke instead an instinctive, overwhelmed, reaction of repulsion. So, while in a context of far-right

2 M. Halbwachs, 1997, p. 69

3 E. Renan, *What is a nation?*, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha, 1990, p. 11

4 Paolo Jedlowski, in A. Rossi Doria, 1998, p. 6

radicalisation, racist, and for instance antisemitic, occurrences are no exception anymore, the moderate social layers are generally tired or bored of the topic. Topic that seems to have been already examined, investigated, told, described to even its tiniest details and aspects. It has become redundant⁵. And in fact it is. We have been flooded by an emotional voyeurism, an amount of sorrow that we weren't able to handle, for which we did not have suitable intellectual and emotional tools. Not disposing of interpretation frameworks that could have bore its weight, we have distanced ourselves from the topic as a whole.

In his work about the philosophical and ethical legacy of Auschwitz Agamben reminds us what the etymology of the word responsibility is: in ancient Rome it meant the act of guaranteeing for someone, to be their sponsor. At the turn of the *saeculum*⁶, our role in the intergenerational dialogue consists in allowing the continuation of a memory that is about to fade away together with its last witnesses. But to do so we have to understand what is it that we can transfer. And for sure this is not a cognitive experience that we haven't lived on our skin. So what is that?

With regards to deportation we find ourselves at some crucial historical crossway that marks the end of the witnesses era and the evolution of the communicative memory into the cultural one⁷. In the current day, when the generation of persecutors and victims is almost all gone, what stays behind? What is left of the abuse? Of guilt? Of forgiveness? One of the key functionalities of the myth *italiani, brava gente*, is its self-absolutive capacity that, preventing an interaction of a sort between parties, relieves persecutors from judgement and condemns the victims to silence. Or else, it condemns them to perpetuate an abstract and blurry representation of the abuse suffered, that stays detached from the historicity and factuality of that abuse: being a victim is an ontological category rather than a punctual outcome of power dynamics, in which Italians have played an active role. Victims of concentration camps have been repeatedly asked if they had forgiven, and a large majority has expressed the impossibility of any form of forgiveness, especially in collective forms, as a result of the subtle misconception of a forgiveness that can be granted through a third person. There is something intrinsically wicked in requesting forgiveness to them, to the survivors, to those who have been fighting their whole after-lager life to justify to themselves why they survived and not the many comrades they watch dying.

We accept that forgiveness died in the death camps⁸. There is no forgiveness, there is no redemption, there is no salvation and there is no reconciliation. If it wasn't possible before, when persecutors and victims were still largely alive, it won't happen now. We won't allow time to do what people couldn't. We won't take up the easy job of asking a memorial for forgiveness. The unsurpassable will stay unsurpassable the moment it is surpassed, says Derrida⁹. And we are right at that crossway.

Now, how to approach and what to take from this chapter of our history is possibly a matter of personal sensitivity and individual capacity. The universe of nazi-fascist devastation is so vast that each one of us can find a personal thread in it. And, I believe, that was the mistake in the approaches taken up til now. It was believed that chapter to be of universal significance, object of a uniformed perception and interpretation. While it's clearly not. For nazi-fascist concentration camps have been a rift opened on the chasm of our human nature. And as such, questions and answers can't be universal. They stem from our individualities, from our personal understanding of human nature, from our situated conflicts and perspectives. And, I think, we need to accept that in some cases, they won't emerge at all, so painful, so troubling is a glance in what Jankélévitch calls infamous secret¹⁰.

But for as long as we don't find ways to approach that rift, the chapter isn't closed and we aren't done with our responsibility. Which is the responsibility of indicating ways for a meaningful transmission of this memory.

Performing memory¹¹: a praxis of complexity

It is largely accepted that when the interest for the past exceeds the boundaries of historiographical research, this implies a shift in the public focus from the future to the past, and a subsequent detachment from a proactive shaping of the present. I believe this approach is the product of a ultimate yet simplistic way to shut the door to identitarian drifts. Given that memory is what produces identity; given that it does so because of highlighting collective traits and putting them on a timeline that reaches us today; given that these collective descriptions are used in a normative manner, so to identify those who belong to a certain group; and, finally, given that this normative differentiation is applied on a

5 It was as early as in 1971 that the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, in the preface of his pamphlet *Pardonner?*, notices a growing sense of detachment from the topics of deportation and resistance among the French population. See Jankélévitch, 1987, p. 44 "(...) our contemporaries may think it's been enough discussion around this topic, but it will never be enough! In fact has it been ever discussed?"

6 J. Assmann reminds us the etymology of *saeculum*, being in latin the word for generation. J. Assmann, 1997, p. 25

7 J. Assmann, 1997, p. 24

8 Jankélévitch, 1987, p. 40

9 Derrida, 2004, p. 81

10 Jankélévitch, 1987, p. 13

11 For the origins of the definition see L. Plate, A. Smelik, Ed., *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, 2013, p. 3

national basis as a political agenda; using a compressed analogical argument that squeezes all previous passages in a single one, if I reject the nationalistic propaganda, then I should reject the investigation on the past too, because its purpose is the establishment of a nostalgic, or rather nationalistic, agenda.

I believe this confusion is caused by a disorientation about objectives and their unjustifiable simplification. A celebratory praxis of memory is one thing, an analysis of the past meant to investigate its effects on the present, is something completely different. With a simplistic extension, we could say that, while the first praxis has high chances to develop identitarian drifts, the second one ideally prevents them.

To substantiate this position, we could borrow here J. Assmann's observations regarding the different connotations that a mythomoteur can take on, according to the historical force it is called to represent; J. Assmann claims that the same myth can be a founding or a counter-present one¹²; that means, this myth can justify and provide a foundation of the ruling power structure or it can question it and call for its subversion. These two uses of the same myth also provide an answer to the question regarding the need for memory, which, together with J. Assmann, we can formulate it in this way: since oblivion is to a constitutional element of human nature, we should ask ourselves not why we forget but why we remember, or, in other words, what function does memory fulfil. It will then be clear that the functions of memory are connected with the exertion of power, its legitimation, its subversion.

Additionally, if we understand collective memory as embodied memory, a further internal differentiation can be conducted in terms of practices. Opposite to the institutionalised forms of historiography, the embodied memory finds its realisation in collective practices, such as rites and feasts, that make the narration experienceable anew¹³, allowing for a re-conceptualisation of past events. Among the collective practices, arts are considered to be, likewise popular culture, an important vessel for these embodiment processes: in fact they both are able to reactivate a semantic context by re-enacting some of its parts. However there is a substantial difference between a medieval festival and *The Seventh Seal* that doesn't allow to compare them in terms of memory embodiment: their objectives are not convergent and so it's their language. On the one side we have the attempt to reproduce, to replicate; on the other side the past is a scenario in which universal dramas are played, one could say a *memento vitae*. In both cases the use of past is instrumental to the present, however in the first case it carries legitimation purposes, in the second one it becomes a mean for investigating the nature of human beings.

Drawing on the differentiation of objectives we can attempt a differentiation in the nomenclature of the praxis: we will have embodiment in the first case, performance in the second one. We can say that, while embodying memory comes with a significant degree of replication, performing, instead, is characterised by a critical reinterpretation; while the one seeks for the answer, the other pursue for a well-posed question; while the former aims at its justification in the past, the latter looks at the future through it.

Mnemomachia – Act I

Judas – Thirty pieces of silver

Thirty pieces of silver have been paid by Jewish priests to Judas for turning in Jesus. It is believed that these pieces of silver were shekels, the only coin accepted for worshippers' offers to the Temple in Jerusalem. It is believed that, at the time of Roman Empire, the market value of thirty shekel was the monthly salary of a worker, the lowest social category; one other interpretation refers to the market value of a slave. In both cases it was not a wealth. The Gospel of Matthew narrates that, after turning in Jesus, Judas was assaulted by regret and tried to return the shekels to the priests; they refused, so he threw the money in the Temple and went hang himself. With the money left by Judas, the priests, who could not allow money stained with blood to belong to the Temple treasure, bought a land where to bury foreigners¹⁴. According to Luke's version, with that money Judas both himself a land then rushing there, he fell and ripped his belly open, dying with his guts scattered on the soil¹⁵. In both versions the land becomes known with the name of *Akeldama*, the field of blood.

The rest of the story is well known: as a result of Judas betrayal, Jesus is captured, crucified, he dies and resurrects after three days, establishing the foundations of christianity. Subsequently Judas becomes the emblem of the contradictory filiation of christianity from judaism; or, in the long fortune of christian antisemitism, simplistically the Jew who rejected, betrayed and killed Jesus. And, despite being barely present in the Gospels, Judas becomes a central symbol for christians.

In his beautiful book about Judas, William Klassen tries to provide a critical approach to this figure, enriching his investigation with multiple sources and perspectives. He suggests that the reasons why Judas' briefly narrated role could not be forgotten, is because it left behind a number of fundamental, yet very unsettling, questions open: how comes one of Jesus' twelve disciples could betray his master? how is it possible that Jesus wasn't able to read into his intentions and correct them? if one of the closest supporter of Jesus had resorted to betray him, what is it to be feared from the rest of

12 J. Assmann, 1997, p. 52

13 A. Assmann, *Transformations between History and Memory*, Social Research, Vol. 75, No. 1, 2008, p. 55

14 Matthew gospel 27:3-7

15 Acts of the Apostles 1:15-20

humanity? can Judas be considered the scapegoat of christian communities, the one carrying the weight of their hate and retaliations against Jews?

These questions go way beyond the peculiarities of a cult. They summarize instead a set of problematics that this cult embodies, establishing the semantic foundation of the related culture while accounting for the oversimplification of the related answers.

Dualism - A self-made mask

The epitome of human simplification processes can be identified in the dualism. Understood as the definition for the relation occurring between two irreconcilable concepts, dualism is concisely represented by the opposition between good and evil. Dualism allows for a quick, yet final, categorization of experience, because it prevents doubtful hesitations on ambiguous fields. Duality establishes an unsurpassable boundary between identity and other-than-identity, while setting the theoretical ground for the annihilation of the latter. This annihilation however doesn't only take place in the space outside identity, it happens within identity too. In fact, as an extreme pursuit for coherence, duality demands purity, or the repression of those heterogeneous traits that could endanger an ordered, easy-to-be-told narration. Just, there is no identity outside the dialogue with the other and a certain degree of its permeation.

40 days - Walking alone

“Usually the uniqueness of human beings is portrayed as a matter of consciousness. Yet the human body is also unlike anything else on earth, and in some ways has shaped that consciousness. (...) The alternating long stride that propels us is unique, perhaps because it is such a precarious arrangement. Four- legged animals are as stable as a table when all four feet are on the ground, but humans are already precariously balanced on two before they begin to move. Even standing still is a feat of balance, as anyone who has watched or been a drunk knows. Reading the accounts of human walking, it is easy to begin to think of the Fall in terms of the falls, the innumerable spills, possible for a suddenly upright creature that must balance all its shifting weight on a single foot as it moves.” – R. Solnit, *Wanderlust*, p. 45-46

Buchenwald – Activism

There are two aspects that make Buchenwald peculiar among the many concentration camps. Following a naming routine by which the concentration camps would take the name of their location, its name should have been Ettersberg, like the hill where it's been located. However that name is related to Goethe's life and work, since the poet used to go and relax on the hill, so naming a concentration camp with its name could have created disturbing connotations. For this reason upon the nazi cultural community of Weimar, the lager took the more neutral name of Buchenwald, beech forest. And Goethe's oak incorporated within.

Buchenwald has been established in 1937 and was characterised by a large number of political internees. By the time Italian deportees arrive there from Fossoli, the German political internees had already taken over from the criminal prisoners the role of prisoner functionaries. They made use of political and party connection to build up an international network, the International Camp Committee, that would operate to protect the inmates, sabotage nazi infrastructures, collect firearms, establish intelligence with the US forces. The most evident result of their work has been the protection of 904 children between 4 and 15 years.

Fossoli – Art

The camp in Fossoli was built in 1942 from the Italian army to accommodate war prisoners captured in North Africa. With the turn of the armistice on the 8th of September 1943, being the camp in the RSI, the war prisoners have been deported to Germany and the camp has become the national concentration camp, until the front approached and the pressure from partisans increased. The internees have been deported to Germany and a new concentration camp has been opened in Bolzano.

In a backwards path that goes from the German camps to the Italian ones, Fossoli becomes the natural recipient of a work that intends to cross geographic and memory territories resulting, at the same time, a privileged interlocutor in the definition of fundamental aspects related to the development of the work.

Place of Memory and a centre for documentation and education, the Fossoli camp ideally extends to integrate the works of the Museo Monumento al Deportato, a project from 1973 born from a collaboration between Renato Guttuso and the BBPR studio that hosts, among others, works by Picasso, Longoni and Guttuso himself, putting them in dialogue with documentary material. Art acquires here an active and propositional role in social and historical dynamics. It contributes to offer interpretation-keys and proposals for the assimilation of historical processes. An aesthetic translation of what we can call active citizenship.