

The Memory of Fascism and of the Anti-Fascist Resistance among Italian Youth

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This paper discusses the reasons why Italian young people today are not in a position to develop a memory of their own regarding the fascist regime of the recent past. Neither families, nor schools and media, could transmit experiences and provide learning opportunities that enables young men and women to construct an adequate image of that period of their historical heritage. Fascism has become the object of a process of collective removal.

Anti-fascism and the ‘Resistenza’ have functioned for almost half a century as the foundational myth of the Italian Republic. The ‘Resistenza’ emerged out of that mix of moral, social and political forces that contributed to the fall of the fascist regime and to the creation of the first true democracy based on universal suffrage in the history of the country. During the crucial years of its foundation, from 1945 until 1947, the social pact which made possible the creation of democratic institutions was based on the fascism–antifascism cleavage. The idea that the Republic was ideally connected with the values of the struggle against fascism was assumed to be unquestionable for half a century, even when, after the beginning of the Cold War, the unity of the anti-fascist forces was broken.

The almost inevitable assumption of anti-fascism and the resistance as the cement of the Italian social pact, and its celebration as the foundational myth of republican institutions, had serious consequences. The first of these was the widespread acceptance of the dominant interpretation of fascism as a ‘dark parenthesis’, a ‘barbaric degeneration’, a ‘moral fall’ in the course of a process of democratic development that was rooted in the ‘Risorgimento’. Referring to this foundational myth of the nation state, someone spoke of the resistance as a ‘second Risorgimento’. Once the parenthesis of fascism was closed, the problem became how to resume the broken path, to reconstruct the historical continuity between the Italy before and the Italy after fascism. This interpretation tended to disregard the ‘deep roots’ and the continuity between pre-fascist and fascist Italy.

The second consequence was obliviousness to the fact that many Italians were committed fascists and that the regime enjoyed a considerable degree of consensus; almost as

many others accepted the regime without enthusiasm, but also without strong signs of opposition. The resistance certainly was a 'people's war', which involved masses of Italian citizens, but it has also been a phenomenon of active minorities.

Since the mid-1990s' rise to power of a renewed right-wing government – the so-called Berlusconi era – the foundational myth has been more or less explicitly questioned. One of the largest parties of the winning coalition in the 1994 elections (called 'Alleanza nazionale') defined itself no longer as neo-fascist but as post-fascist and therefore beyond the old fascism–antifascism cleavage. These elections signalled the start of a new era, as for the first time in the history of the Republic a post-fascist party could enter a 'democratic' government. This change met with surprise and even indignation exactly because it challenged a myth – something that cannot be questioned without casting doubt upon the whole foundation of the social pact.

Over the last 30 years, the debate over fascism and the resistance movement has involved restricted circles of historians and intellectuals. In other words, it has not extended to public opinion and the common people – not even to that large but still minority stratum of the population that at least occasionally becomes involved in direct political participation, takes part in the actions of parties or movements, is interested in politics, reads the newspapers and takes stands at least on the occasion of electoral competitions. To this stratum belong many young people aged 15 to 30, born between the end of the 1980s and the late 1990s. This part of the younger population asks questions about the public sphere and about the processes leading to the present situation. Beyond that stratum is the large 'silent majority' that never feels the need to examine the present or the past.

I would like to discuss here the following question: what does the fascism–antifascism dichotomy mean for these young people? How, in other words, is the dividing line determining the political identity of the generations that gave birth to the First Republic still capable of contributing to the formation of the political identity of younger generations? The question relates to the transmission of historical memory from generation to generation.

I would like to stress from the beginning a point that I think is crucial: historical memory is something that is always in the making. Memory's horizons are steadily moving; they can become enlarged or restricted, deepened or thinned, via the metabolic process through which old generations exit and new ones step onto the scene. Each generation works out its own version of collective memory on the basis of two components: (1) its own historical experience; that is, its way of taking part in the constellation of problems, situations, and conflicts that characterize the time span in which it entered the public scene; and (2) the heritage handed down by previous generations.

The fact that the formation of memory is a process tells us that nothing is definitively acquired and that the contents of memory are continuously modified. We cannot wonder that young people do not share our memory. Did we share the memory of our parents' generation? We should care that memory does not extinguish itself, not that it gets modified.

Each generation is a daughter of her time. As is the case for historiography, the following is also true for historical memory: for the representation that human beings produce of the past, of the social unity to which they develop a sense of belonging, the

starting point is always the present. The present is the great selector of memory. Something very similar happens at the individual and micro-social level: each individual rewrites or rereads his/her own biography at every turning point in his/her life course. The selective factor is the set of tasks that has to be confronted in the present. Each couple reinterprets its history in function and based on the present relationship between the partners and the prospects for its future developments; each association defines its identity by rereading its own past with a look at its present and future.

Memory is therefore a representation constructed in the present in view of future tasks, and it constitutes an integral part of the actor's identity (whether individual or collective). What is not recognized or perceived as relevant for the construction of the actor's identity is inevitably doomed to disappear from memory. Memory is therefore a piece of identity.

Identity is a twofold construction: on one side are the components of individualization (that differentiate the Ego from any Alter); and on the other are the components of identification (which constitute a collective 'we'). It is with reference to the 'we' identity or identities (we Lombards, Italians, Catholics, workers, socialists and so on) that an individual recognizes him/herself and is recognized as belonging to social entities with a past and a future (a history) transcending the individual existence.

Through the acquisition of the 'we' components of personal identity, individuals are able to localize themselves in socio-historic space and to identify the coordinates of their place in the world. The process of identity construction has at the same time emotional, moral and cognitive dimensions; all of these dimensions, however, are social insofar as they are part of the repertoire of images of the world, of society and history present in every society (Germans speak of *Weltbild*, *Gesellschaftsbild* and *Geschichtsbild*). These representations or images can be more or less sophisticated according to the degree of differentiation of mental and cognitive maps and the degree of development of criteria of moral judgement.

Studies on the representations of history, for example, have shown that at a low level of cognitive development, history is seen as the product of the actions of 'great men' or of anthropomorphized collective entities (acting as if pushed by motivations and feelings that are typically human); whereas at more sophisticated levels, more complex and articulated narratives and explanatory models come into play.

To sum up: history becomes memory only if it becomes 'actualized', only if a meaningful connection between past and present/future is established. Historical memory concerns the process of identity construction of the subjects involved, their social-historical localization (the Germans would say '*gegenwartsbezogene Standortbestimmung*'); this localization depends upon the subjects' degree of development of cognitive and evaluative capacities.

After these general considerations, let us return to the problem of the historical memory of fascism and anti-fascism. Today, more than three quarters of the Italian population were born after the fall of fascism and therefore have no direct experience of the period in which the fascism–antifascism cleavage was formed. Moreover, for young people now in their 30s, who started to localize themselves in socio-political space at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the period of fascism is located at a considerable distance.

We have only very few inquiries into the image of fascism and the resistance movement developed by young people, or the lack thereof. From time to time, newspapers report on instances of sheer ignorance by young people of information about actors and facts relating to contemporary history; some years ago, many were scandalized because a group of students of history could say nothing about the events leading to the Badoglio government in September 1943. Instead of being surprised, we should ask ourselves how young people could possibly construct an image of fascism and the resistance. In fact, the process of memory's construction does not take place without the action of someone in charge of transmission; if it is true that each generation works out its own memory, it is also true that to do so a certain amount of material must be made available.

Possible sources for this material are: the family's memory, the teaching of history, mass media messages and political participation. Families are vehicles of memory's transmission if vertical communication between generations takes place. The parents of young men and women in their 20s or 30s were born just several years after the Second World War (largely between 1950 and 1960); grandparents were born at the time of the First World War or shortly thereafter. The only generation with direct experience of living under the fascist regime is therefore that of the grandparents.

We know very little about the frequency, intensity and content of communication between grandparents and grandchildren; we can presume, however, that communication has been scarce in all dimensions and, in any case, variable according to the type of experience that grandparents had during fascism. The 'silent majority' of those who accepted fascism without enthusiasm but also without opposition has probably kept silent with their children and grandchildren even after the fall of the regime. The 'active minority' of those who were committed fascists has also probably kept quiet, since they were the losers and no one wants to highlight failure. The fraction of that generation of actors that probably transmitted a 'strong memory' was the 'active minority' of militant anti-fascists. There are serious doubts, however, that this happened in all cases. It is known that not every 'partigiano' was willing to talk about his or her experience during the crucial years between 1943 and 1945. Thus, I would hypothesize that family memory was a vehicle of transmission of historical memory only for a very limited part of the younger generation.

Where schools are concerned, we know very little about the actual teaching of history, and whether and how fascism and the resistance are actually discussed in classrooms. Educational programmes issued by the Ministry of Education foresee the teaching of contemporary history in the final year of each school cycle. In fact, however, in many classes, history instruction stops before the Second World War and sometimes even just after the first. Many teachers would preferably avoid touching on these 'delicate' subjects, finding it objectively difficult to address controversial topics with their pupils: was the 'resistenza' a 'war of liberation' (the 25th of April is celebrated as the 'feast of liberation' from the German occupants), or a 'civil war'? Or both? Facing situations that produce embarrassment, silence is again a common strategy.

During the last five decades (after the 1968 movements), many educational initiatives have been promoted for the teaching of contemporary history (in each region, for example, there is an institute for the history of the liberation movement). I have the

impression, however, that these initiatives have involved only a minority of teachers and students; they were not spread over the totality of the national territory or the entire spectrum of secondary schools.

The ruling class that has governed the country during the last 70 years has not been concerned with the task of entrusting schools to educate future citizens in the spirit of a democratic consciousness. One has only to think of the very marginal position that so called ‘civic education’ occupies in the curricula. It is therefore very likely that young Italians have not received, either from their families or from their schools, enough input to construct their own historical memory of the fascist period.

Let us turn to the media as a source of memory. A proportion of young people (we do not know how many) has very likely been exposed, at least once, to the horror-images of the concentration camps, or to the ‘huge gatherings’ staged by the Nazi regime. It is hard to say how these fragments of visual memory have been processed and interpreted, and whether or not they have resulted in the construction of categories of historical judgment. One may suspect that young people, besieged by a continuous stream of images, do not always develop the ability to distinguish reality from fiction. The images clearly contain enormous educational potential, but they are probably inert and mute unless accompanied by categories that allow them to be processed. What has been missing, I think, is a didactic use of the visual material: the material has been produced and disseminated and has reached its target, but it has not found a general educational project that can enhance its value. This leaves the state memory composed by fragments stacked together with other fragments; but it cannot be ordered and organized in the mind and thus become a piece of personal and/or collective identity. Again, without a plan, intentional and explicit, to educate future citizens to democracy, the memory of fascism and the resistance movement inevitably runs the risk of extinction.

Some young people who have had experience with political organizations in the field of anti-fascism may have been able to meet, in one way or another, with this historical heritage and therefore integrate it in their memory. But, as we know, this is a minority and, above all, a decreasing minority due to the crisis and almost disappearance of the traditional parties in Italy.

Thus, the memory of fascism (and anti-fascism) has not been, except very partially, transmitted to the young generations born after fascism’s fall; they have not been given the material with which to develop ‘their own’ memory. Instead, the celebration of the resistance as a founding myth of the First Republic has produced a sort of ‘monumental’ memory. Once ‘monumentalized’, memory loses the opportunity to be processed, to become the object of an unceasing course of redefinition in which people build and transform their collective identities. Gradually, the monuments lose their meaning and remain in the landscape as archaeological finds.

My thesis is the following: fascism, in its historical roots and its forms of authoritarian and totalitarian regime, has been subject to a process of collective removal. It may seem risky – and to some extent it is – to use a psychoanalytic concept to describe a collective phenomenon. I will find another occasion for a deeper theoretical reflection on this analogy, but let me try to argue this thesis. Removal is the unconscious refusal of memory processing: at the individual level, those memories whose presence poses a

threat to the integrity of the ego, and whose elaboration would require a slow and laborious redefinition of identity, are removed.

The development of the historical memory of fascism and anti-fascism would require a rethinking (I use this term to avoid being accused of 'revisionism') of certain problematic knots. I list some of these knots without deepening their meaning.

- (1) The liberal-democratic political culture would require the rethinking of the elements of continuity between the Risorgimento and Fascism and the abandonment of the interpretation of fascism as a 'dark exceptional period'.
- (2) The political culture of Catholics would require rethinking the role that the Church played in encouraging the establishment and consolidation of the regime.
- (3) The Marxist political culture would require rethinking the role of the Bolshevik challenge in triggering undemocratic reactions in Europe and therefore favouring the rise to power of the fascists in Italy and National Socialists in Germany.

In fact, there is no great political tradition that has not had its share of responsibility in the advent and consolidation of the Fascist regime. Without detracting from the responsibilities of the 'fascists', one cannot deny that fascism in Europe has emerged and gained victory in Italy and Germany as a result of the crisis of democracy, a crisis in which the forces that would eventually become anti-fascist all played their part. The fact that all recognize themselves in the celebration of the Resistance (in what I earlier called a 'monumental process') has allowed each of them to remove from memory the historical responsibilities of their political group.

So it is not surprising that a former prime minister could safely say that fascism – at least up to a certain point in its history (the date can be discussed) – achieved some good, and that an authoritative exponent of the same government considers Mussolini the greatest statesman of the century: after all, fascism was able to make the trains run on time! These are widespread ideas that reflect and interpret the status of collective memory, especially of the young.

It can be argued that during the Berlusconi years, on the celebration of the 25th of April, a large mass of people – among them many young people – showed their willingness to 'never forget'. The signal may be encouraging: the perception of a threat to democracy has demonstrated its capacity to activate the memory, to save the resistance from the rigidity of 'monumentalization'. These ritual celebrations, however, are not enough. If we really do not want to forget, we must have the courage to dig mercilessly into memory for all that has been removed.

About the Author

Alessandro Cavalli, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the University of Pavia, has done extensive work on the history of social thought, youth, education and collective memory. He is presently engaged in research on social and economic dualism in Italy, Germany and the European Union.