

History and the Public Use of History

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I intend to explore the relationship between the history of historians and the public use of history. This relationship, in my opinion, is both conflictual and convergent. As we shall see later on, this assertion is anything but obvious; among historians the idea of a neat opposition prevails, with no possibility of reconciliation, between professional practices of history (the profession of historians) and the extremely vast and confused domain of its "public use."¹

Before undertaking an analysis, I must explain what I mean by the public use of history. I have adopted, at least initially, a purely extrinsic definition of the term. By the "public use of history" I am referring to all that is developed outside the domain of scientific research in its strictest sense, outside the history of historians which is usually written by scholars and intended for a very limited segment of the population. Public use of history includes not only the various means of mass communication, each with its own particularities (journalism, radio, television, cinema, theater, photography, advertisement, etc.), but also the arts and literature; public places such as schools, history museums, monuments and urban spaces, etc., and finally institutions, formal or otherwise (such as cultural associations, parties, and religious, ethnic and cultural groups, etc.), which, with more or less clearly partisan objectives, endeavor to promote a more or less polemic reading of the past as compared to the generally accepted common sense of history or historiography, a polemical reading based on the memory of their respective groups. Indeed, politicians have a large role in the most visible and most talked about manifestations of the public use of history and they have a particular responsibility in its degeneration (I shall return to this point in my conclusion).

In light of this extrinsic definition, the public use of history likewise figures in works conceived of and executed as scientific works and which nonetheless have a public impact beyond the scope of a circle of scholars. I refer to such works, to cite two Italian examples with very different significations, of the biography of Mussolini by De Felice and Pavone's book on the Resistance.² Professional historians are not exempted either; they make public use of history when they speak of mass media; this is evident in the case of the *Historikerstreit*, in the German "dispute among historians" with regard to Nazism.³

Before going any further and assessing the solidity of a definition so vast and yet so fragile, I would like to present a few reflections on the difference between this initial definition and the definition adopted by Jürgen Habermas during the dispute among historians.⁴ Habermas likewise initially chooses an extrinsic definition (by distinguishing clearly for example between that which is written in scholarly contexts and that which is conveyed by mass media), but he makes it more rigid with an opposition of principle. Making public use of history is anyone who "speaks in the first person" and proposes explicit politico-pedagogic objectives: establishing a consensus around a few fundamental values for civilian coexistence.

Habermas thus in effect presents an opposition between public use of history and scientific activity which, in the terms he uses to support it, is not convincing. On the one hand he develops in a coherent fashion the lesson of the Frankfurt school, which is inspired by a mistrust of the manipulation always lurking in matters of mass culture: "The critical public is supplanted," he writes in his *History and Critique of Public Opinion*, by the manipulating dimension."⁵ And he adds that the progress apparently brought about by the blossoming of public debates is contradicted by its reduction to a simple consumer commodity. On the other hand he proposes an idea of scientific and more specifically historical activity as a conscious choice of the "third person," characterized by a distance taken from the object under examination and the control of one's prejudices and personal predilections. I shall return to the second problem later on, in my third point. For the moment I shall limit myself to the observation that in Habermas'

argument the specificity and the enormity of the problem of Nazism for a German assumes a decisive weight; whence arises the invitation to historians to respect, for therapeutic and political reasons, the *prius* (primacy) of the moral condemnation and the uniqueness of Nazism when discussing the mass media, reserving for the domain of scientific research the more relative comparisons and the balances of responsibility (both topics broached, as we know, by Eric Nolte with respect to Bolshevism).⁶ This position is debatable when it comes to method, even if it may be shared with regard to the polemic against Nolte himself.⁷

As concerns the mass media, Habermas' detailed critical examination often attains its goal, but in my opinion it is reductive. The enlargement of the domain of the public use of history proposed here implies in effect that it is not identified as a political use in the strictest sense and even less as political manipulation. There are also, in mass media and elsewhere, manifestations of the public use of history that have no explicit intention but simply offer diversion or escape; and there are finally uses of the past which directly implicate individual or collective memory and which have in my opinion an entirely different significance and liberating potential.

In short, the public use of history is not a practice to be rejected or demonized on principle; it may be a ground for comparison and conflict involving the active participation of citizens, and not only scholars, on essential topics. It can reveal profound tears and memory wounds and bring them to light. It can on the other hand be a form of manipulation which establishes misleading analogies and crushes the present with the depths and complexity of the past.

Momentarily leaving aside the latter phenomena and those leading to a purely passive use of the past—which nonetheless probably make up the predominant tendency—I would like to limit myself to citing a few examples of the public use of history which have had a particular impact on the political and cultural life of Western societies—as points of comparison and conflict and, at the same time, instruments for the growth of the collective consciousness.

I am thinking of the emergence of Jewish memory and the French "repression" of Vichy, as shown in the fine study by Henry Rousso.⁸ The turning point in the perception of events as if from a great distance, and in the dissolution of repression, is tied to the

debate elicited by Marcel Ophüls' film *Le Chagrin et la pitié* and then stoked by the trials of former collaborators. The role that the media can play in such cases is immense: at times this is intended, as in this particular case, with perhaps some unforeseen effects; at times unforeseen and unintended, as was the case in Germany with the television airing of *Holocaust*, a mediocre production which was nonetheless capable of provoking questions and examinations of conscience in a vast public.

I am thinking of the phenomena of "public history" in the United States, as least in as much as it calls into question the processes of the triggering and construction of memory: for example, in situations of advanced deindustrialization, the reflection on industrial heritage; or on another level, and with consequences which are not always happy, the research into ethnic memories as instruments for the construction of an individual or collective identity.⁹

I'm thinking, finally, of the Italian debate on Fascism and anti-fascism, in which the repercussions are obvious in the political sphere and in the so-called transition to the "Second Republic."¹⁰

In short, this brief list is merely intended to underscore that it is opportune, when treating thematics at the frontier between historical research and the construction of public opinion, to proceed with care and humility, especially for those for whom history is a profession, in research or teaching.

It might be helpful to bring up a situation which accentuates the urgency for a reflection on the relationship between history and the public use of history for historians, and represents it as a sort of professional duty. Such a reflection, indeed, has been made more current by the ruptures and upheavals of the last few years, which have marked the end of the century—a diagnosis which has now become almost commonplace: from the fall of Communism to the Gulf war, from the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, to the crisis and the profound transformation of the Italian political system. In opening the newspaper or turning on the television, one encounters airy, superficial interpretations, often falsely iconoclastic, of the recent past, even if more serious reflections and accurate readings are not lacking. In both cases it becomes clear that the periods in which the public use of history becomes most demanding and intrusive correspond to phases of sudden transformation or profound historical discontinu-

ity which change the very way we situate the present in relationship to the past. One might then say—leaving aside the distinctions between and the distancing from the most instrumental forms of the public use of history—that we are dealing with, in a certain sense, physiological phenomena (and as I shall attempt to do in points 1) and 2), one should question oneself on the novelty, from this perspective, of the situation in which we live.)

For this same reason I find insufficient and erroneous the widespread tendency among professional historians to feverishly hunt down the current practices of rewriting the past in order to expose them and disparage the results. Before denouncing or exorcising the contents of such practices, one must analyze how they are concretely activated, and which stereotypes or unintended yet at the same time symptomatic mechanisms are put into play. Moreover a purely reproachful attitude and the mere activity of correcting errors and distortions with a blue pencil, however justified, will certainly never succeed in stemming or directing into the channels of philology the extremely rich flow of direct or indirect communications on history (called the “system of history”),¹¹ which cannot but escape the control of the guild of historians.

We are dealing with a task which calls for the recruiting of many people, and many have been recruited already: far from pretending to offer a serious panorama in the very rich domain of the public use of history, I shall limit myself here to exploring the relationship between the history of historians and the public use of history.

1. History and the Public Use of History: Contaminations and Conflicts

In making these introductory observations, I have already broached the topic. To confront it is far from simple because, in addition to the obvious oppositions which, as we have seen, absorbed the attentions of Habermas and hundreds of others with him, and to which we shall return, there also exist strong elements of contamination, interrelations, proximity or at the very least reciprocal influence. I shall thus proceed schematically, by points and successive approximations, without any pretense to exhaustiveness.

Meanwhile I must point out that, if we peruse the history of Western historiography, history and the public use of history do not become literally distinguishable from each other until recent times; they used to be one and the same thing.

I will not and cannot elaborate here; but we must stress the fact that the public use of history is its own justification, in as much as it is an activity which governs and defines the relationships between memory and oblivion, between what is worthy of being retained and what is not; and, in the definition of these relationships, the dominant weight is entrusted to the guardianship of the community, in other words to politics. Thucydides asserts that the object of his reflections is the Peloponnesian War, since he does not think that the events which preceded it, in the most ancient times, "are very important either in terms of war or in terms of other issues."¹² The history he tells is the history of the Greeks, as different and superior to the others, the Barbarians. The model of the Peloponnesian War, furthermore, must be eternally valid since, given the immutability of human nature, past or future events can never transpire in the same way.

Thus, in Thucydides and in all of Greek historiography, the emphasis is placed on the idea of development, continuity; this was equally a distinctive characteristic of Jewish thought, then of Christian thought, before becoming the patrimony of the historicism of the twentieth century. Continuity and development mean that the past makes us what we are in the here and now; it is the root of the importance that political power has always given to the control of the past as a privileged instrument for the control of the present.

The political function of historiography is to regulate memory and oblivion in order to shape the characteristics and the collective identity of a community and to distinguish it from others; and to construct, thanks to the past, a project and a prophesy for the future. Such are the visible and never completely abandoned connotations, as we see, of the historiographic enterprise up until recent times; and these are, at the same time, the strong elements of what precisely distinguishes the public use of history.

In the article on history he wrote for the Einaudi Encyclopedia, Jacques Le Goff illustrated the course of historiography in the light of these same parameters, placing particular emphasis on

the connection to politics. He brought up, for example, how in Renaissance Italy there emerged a historiography aimed at celebrating the past glories of the cities and how, in Venice, with the annals of Andrea Dandolo in the middle of the fourteenth century, we find what one could call, according to a symptomatic definition, the “*pubblica storiografia*” or “*storiografia comandata*” (public history or commanded history). In the France of Louis XIV, one sees the flowering of court historiography, drawn up, and here again the definition is symptomatic, by the “king’s historians.”¹³

There is, however, another element which distinguishes the historiographic enterprise and makes its scientific pretensions valid: the demands for freedom and criticism in its research. Indeed, one finds this explicitly articulated in the first pages of Thucydides work. In *Le radici classiche della storiografia moderna*, a posthumous work which appeared in 1993, Arnaldo Momigliano concludes a rich and complex analysis with a lapidary judgment: “If modern historiography is a critical product, it is Greek and not Jewish”—and not Christian one might add, for this is clear from other passages of the work.¹⁴ And yet modern historiography, which begins with Spinoza and is developed in the nineteenth century, the historical century, is not only a critical product; as Momigliano himself is quite aware, historiography is also the fruit of a continual “tension,” regularly put into question and eternally unresolved, which is the reason for the fascination as well as the damnation it arouses, a tension “between history, the future and prophesy.”¹⁵ It is a scientific activity *sui generis*, whose cognitive dimension touches and mingles with the affective dimension, which is steeped in values, predilections, and non scientific or pre-scientific choices.¹⁶

The difficulty encountered by historians in developing a strong scientific status: the use of a natural language which does not provide for, as in other disciplines, the passage of a threshold requiring special training; or, inversely, the difficulty of introducing to the general public works adopting more complex techniques and methodologies—not to mention the objective importance of its regulation for the functioning of society itself: it is perhaps for all these reasons that the domain of history is open to all types of inroads. It’s as if one admitted, to adapt a famous phrase, that history is too important to be left to historians.

2. Twentieth-century Innovations

In general terms, there is thus a close yet conflictual relationship between historiography and the public use of history. To explore and eventually unravel this tangle, it is thus necessary to delve deeper and then propose a few hypotheses of division by period.

One hears repeated on all sides, especially on the left, that it is precisely in the present time that the practice of the public use of history is the most continuous and the most invasive, and that its processes of revision are the most arbitrary. In his reflection on Togliatti and Communism, Gianpasquale Santomassimo, for example, has observed that at least in Italy, in keeping with a typical reversal with regard to the public use of history after the war, today people no longer seek a legitimization of present choices in the past. People legitimize—or rather annul—the past itself to respond to immediate political objectives.¹⁷

On the opposite side, Sergio Romano, referring to the way Germans and people from the Balkan countries talk of the mass graves of Katyn and the German-Russian pact of 1939, writes that “this is not historiography, but a no-man’s land where the past is only used if it serves to influence the present.”¹⁸

And one could cite other examples, beginning with the quagmire of the Second World War and the gross revisionism of which it has been the object these past years: this goes from the work of the German author who considers the conflict as a simple episode in the Soviet strategy aiming to control the world, to the recent essay by a French historian who defines the partisans, including Jean Moulin, as agents of the Soviet secret services, to new attempts to deny the extermination of the Jews.¹⁹

Should we therefore conclude that today we live in an exceptional period in terms of the public use of history?

The answer is rather ambiguous: not only because the manipulation of history and its use as an instrument have known otherwise somber moments during the course of the twentieth century,²⁰ but because today there arises, in a guise still which remains inexplicable, a paradox whose origins date far back. The paradox lies in the fact that two apparently contradictory phe-

nomena coexist today: on the one hand an accentuated and widespread eradication of the past, a total “bringing into the present,” so to speak and, on the other hand, a hypertrophy of historical references in public speech.

The premises of this eradication, tied in an obvious way to the processes of modernization, are situated, especially in Europe, at the true beginning of the twentieth century, at the time of the First World War: after its end, in the twenties and thirties, the relationship between history—understood here as *res gestae*—and the public use of history came to a decisive turning point. In essence there was an almost perfect temporal coincidence between this profound rupture and especially *the perception of it* by millions of Western men and women, and the appearance of technical conditions permitting the development of the means of mass communication. A grandiose work of modernization, occurring in the particular circumstances of a war of unheard-of proportions, and profoundly marked by them, set about settling accounts with history in a dramatic and radically new way; moreover, the emergence of the means of mass communication offered a powerful and new vehicle for its broad diffusion.

Nicola Chiaromonte has described with exemplary clarity and not without emotion the effects of this historical turning point: “Why was it,” he writes, “that the Socialist movement, which had undoubtedly constituted the most vigorous and intellectually rich attempt to promote the cause of justice and equality in Europe, was so overwhelmed by the explosion of the First World War that it never succeeded in reconstituting itself in a politically efficacious and ideologically convincing fashion?”²¹ Along with Socialism, Chiaromonte adds, other equally solid beliefs also lost their way: “The legitimacy of the appointed order, the supremacy of the will to reason, faith in change.” And he concludes: “How was an idea defeated by an event?” This question is simple only in appearance, and its echo comes down to our own time, which has known the defeat of a similarly large idea.

The event, that which has already taken place, thus dominates men and women and does not permit a return to the past. As Chiaromonte observes once again, “there is nothing more durable, in the world of men, than a common belief as to the nature of

things; but its duration has no other guarantee than the exterior of the state of things that are reflected in it and which itself is subject to the order of time. One turn of history's wheel—one event—suffices to destroy it, and when it is destroyed, no will to belief suffices to restore it."²²

There ensues a refusal of history, and thus nihilism; but also an openness to allow oneself to be captured by new promises on the part of anyone capable of setting in motion a sort of historical short-circuit. Thus it is no accident that Fascism/Nazism and Communism are so attractive to certain kinds of historicism: the former manipulates modernity by decking it out in the reassuring cloak of tradition, while the latter demonstrates a much more complex attitude toward the past. Communist historicism, indeed, combines the refusal of history and the beginning of a new history: it claims to have the inevitable course of history on its side, but at the same time it fights for the forgetting of the preceding history of human oppression because this is the condition for constructing a utopia—which seemed in fact on the verge of becoming reality after the success of the October revolution.

But the dominant feeling in the postwar years remained anxiety, the uncertainty between abandon and refusal, a constant ambiguity. Perhaps no one has expressed this ambiguity so adroitly as the English poet W.H. Auden, who writes, "Madonna of silences to whom we turn/ when we have lost control": this is addressed to history, to its silences, to all that is hidden behind its silences, the search for comfort, appeasement, self-pity. But it is a search whose results are far from certain; there is an enigma behind these silences, an end of the security of a linear, meaningful course of history. The questions addressed to Clio remain unanswered; but one can say "yes, like a lover," and thereby give in to her unpredictable course: "Your silence already is there/ between us and any magical center/ where things are taken in hand."

And historiography also makes a contribution to the closing of the circle, with the crisis of classic historicism in the Western democracies, and especially the now complete rupture with the figure of the nineteenth century historian, uncontested master of the public use of history, now challenged and pressured by the historiography produced by the mass media.

This is why the current situation does not seem at all new. If the public use of history assumes such flashy ways today, it is because history has changed again (as we said, the century is ended), and because, in certain ways, historiography has changed as well.

3. Conflicts

We can now return to the opposition between history and the public use of history according to the terms defined by Habermas: the public use of history would adopt the first person, historiography would instead express itself in the third person. I have already briefly alluded to the fact that historiography is not only a cognitive enterprise, but likewise an affective one, even if one of its ethical qualities, so to speak, is the control exerted on its own predilections and personal values; and even if, on the other hand, the rule every historian worthy of the name submits to, the guarantee of the scientific character of his work, is the philologically unassailable use of the sources he uses. But the differences can certainly not be overestimated: and they lie not only in the method, but above all in the criteria of selection of subjects and sources.

This is where the conflictual relationship between memory and history comes to the forefront. The selectivity of historiography lies within the logic of the discipline: it is precisely for this reason that nothing is foreign to the historian's eye. Collective memory and group memory, which is precisely that which sets into motion a large part of the public use of history and which is in turn influenced by it, works on the contrary alongside the obligatory and exclusive paths defined by unforeseen and discontinuous individual or collective emergencies. The opposition between collective memory and history is exactly the result of the process which led the historian to separate himself from the "organic life of the people," in refusing to transform memory into history, as they claimed to do in the nineteenth century.²³

The theme of individual and collective memory would require an in-depth study, especially with regard the selection processes of the past, and thus its relationship to oblivion and its contradictory ties to politics.²⁴ Suffice it here to say that such memory has dual

value: the reclaiming or redemption of a hidden or denied past, and the opaque expression of the distance of the past. As Michael Frisch writes, memory can effectively create a distance from the past in a paradoxical manner, because it interprets it by the light of the present and thereby crushes it: this is the context of the contemporaneity which attacks the structure of memory, if history does not come to its rescue and put the past into perspective and place it back into context.²⁵ A recent and heated polemic between two Jewish historians referring to the history of the extermination has however further complicated the terms of comparison: each maintains, for opposite reasons, the opposition between history and memory, and their conclusions raise important doubts concerning the advisability of conceiving of this relationship in dichotomous terms.²⁶

As for its relationship to politics, memory again plays an ambiguous role. In classical Greece, as Nicole Loraux has shown, politics begins where the memory of the past, with its atrocities and its divisions, ends: for the good of the community, it is advisable for the past to pass on, that the conflicts between citizens be erased and oblivion triumph (this is the problem raised today by the German revisionists); whereas the refusal to allow the past to disappear activates a critical memory and fosters a different politics, which elaborates a mourning based on this past.²⁷ As Agnes Heller writes, "one can only authentically forget what is first authentically remembered."

To return to the historians, I present two quotes. The first is by Paul Veyne: "Historians define history as the social function of historical memories and situate them as belonging to an ideal of truth in the pure interest of curiosity."²⁸ The second is by Piero Bevilacqua, who asserts that among historians, even among those who were the last to follow this course, the Italians, "the bond between ethics and knowledge has been broken."²⁹ These two converging quotes, which describe a process which has actually taken place in the international historiography of this second post-war period, together suggest a plan.

Our two colleagues are certainly correct if they wish to indicate the obsolescence of the figure of the historian as unique interpreter and sole builder of collective and national identities.

But their plan does not meet with the consent of all historians: one might even argue that there exists a relationship which is not fortu-

itous between the recent developments in research and the intensification of the public use of history. One need only look at how themes considered used-up, outmoded and henceforth impossible to propose, and which seem uniquely reserved for the public use of history, are becoming central to the work of historians: the themes of the nation-state, national and ethnic identity, cultures and collectively shared thought processes; and, above all, the way in which these subjects are all broached with a pedagogic and prescriptive intent. This reversion, which at times is presented in a neohistoricist guise, at times with more scholarly or more sophisticated instruments, such as deconstructivism or “weak thought,” can be explained in a number of different, if not alternative ways. These tendencies can be read: a) as the simple result of the *historical* developments in progress, which show the reemergence of movements having a national or ethnic base and of fundamentalisms of different sorts; b) as the simple reflection of a restoration on cultural grounds; c) as the rediscovery of traditional themes, after the attempt at “scientization” and parcellization of the historical domain (with the transformation of historiographical work into an esoteric enterprise or one more or less reserved to a restricted number of experts); d) as a symptom of failure, erosion, or refusal or at least the non-exhaustivity of analytic categories which define different types of belonging, first and foremost the category of “class”; e) and finally as the tormented arrival of the social history of a culturalist or oralist stamp (of particular relevance in this regard is the case of the German *Alltagsgeschichte*, some of whose representatives, in studying Nazism, have taken refuge in the consoling rediscovery of the *Heimat*). It is shocking in any case to find in the essay of a sophisticated aficionado of post-structuralism, the American historian David Harlan, an unconditional approval of a phrase of Richard Rorty, the most extreme of extremist “historicists”: that history should become an enterprise which is “more therapeutic than reconstructive, more edifying than systematic.”³⁰

4. The Politics of History

We shall now broach the problem of communication strategies and symbols particular to the public use of history, and especially

the public use of history directly or indirectly governed by political power. Herein, inversely, lies the greatest distance between the practices implemented and a historiography worthy of the name, but we should not be surprised to see historians appear among the divulgés. As is in fact the rule in the mass media, one finds men and women at the center of these stories, people who are preferably exceptional for one reason or another, or at the very least known by everyone: never or hardly ever does one find structures or contexts.

What seems particularly interesting to me is the relationship of many of these practices to legal procedures: figures from the past are asked a riddle and judged at "history's tribunal." I'm thinking particularly of the practice of "rehabilitations," a practice most useless for those directly concerned, those condemned and often physically eliminated, yet nonetheless fundamental for the holders of power because, in a solemn form and with a great symbolic impact, they convey a strong message to the public. Rehabilitation is, in appearance, a particular case of that rewriting of history which, as stated by a well-known proverb, is the task of each new generation. But in fact it corresponds to a demand for legitimization of determined systems of government and indicates the defeat of the group or regime which inflicted the original condemnation. Furthermore, it illustrates a parallel to the practices of penal justice, in the form of judicial error. And the protagonists here are not historians or intellectuals in general, who function more like the Napoleonic code or as simple executors. The examples are many and multiple and do not only concern totalitarian societies, which are the most skilful at stirring them up. One need think only of the rehabilitation of Bukharin by the Gorbachev's USSR. Does not the announcement made by the poet Yevtushenko of his intention to dedicate a poem to the most famous victim of the Moscow trials elicit some irony, or worse?

Rehabilitations can also be limited to indicating a change in *policy* of the institution which implements them, a change which necessarily involves a complete rupture with the past. I'm thinking of the rehabilitations which arose after the destalinization in the USSR in the nineteen-fifties, and especially in the Western Communist parties, which were administered as much by the groups in power as by the past. Or of rehabilitations that are impossible

by law, given the working mechanisms of the specific institutions, but which indeed took place (such as the way in which the Catholic Church revised the condemnation of Galileo).

In these supervised games of rewriting the past, the practice of reevaluation accompanies that of rehabilitation. It concerns figures who did not undergo formal condemnations from the judicial or political powers but who, for cultural or ideological reasons, were foreign to the foreseeable horizon of the dominant orthodoxy and are later paradoxically recuperated to illustrate or confirm specific political objectives and organize a consensus around a system, political movement or an ideal. We may recall the reevaluation of the image of Frederick II of Prussia in the former East Germany, or that of Peter the Great in Stalinist Russia, where the objective was to organize a consensus for these respective regimes. Or again to the *encomiastico* judgment pronounced by the secretary of the Italian Communist party, Palmiro Togliatti, on Giovanni Giolitti, in relation to the political polemic resulting from his confrontation with Alcide De Gasperi.³¹ In truth, reevaluation serves as a bridge with the work of historians and also sheds light on differences of strategy and objectives. Carlo Ginzburg extracts from the past, and in this sense “reevaluates,” a sixteenth-century miller condemned by the Inquisition: not, however, to exculpate him from the accusation of heresy, but to support a specific interpretation, in this case that of the circularity of culture.³²

5. Conclusions

Because of its open and provisional nature, this essay does not require formal conclusions. I shall therefore refer to two very different examples, which are situated at the two ends of the spectrum of the *feedback* that the public use of history elicits on contemporary society, in order to confirm the problematic and contradictory character of this field of study.

“While in the recent past men and women died ‘for their country,’—after 1945 they said that my grandfather also died ‘for his country,’ in Theresienstadt—in this *fin de siècle* they die, and they kill, for memory’s sake.”³³ This is a bitter judgment, which can be

applied, among other cases, to the use of memory by the national or ethnic identities in former Communist societies, in particular in former Yugoslavia where “invented traditions” functioned and function still as the cutting tools of ethnic conflicts coldly conceived and stirred up. Here we can measure the strategic importance and the tragic effects of the public use of history.

At the other extreme we find a case of the debate over the national past, one which grew out of all proportion in Italy between 1989 and 1993, during the crisis of a political system that had emerged after World War II. It is a crisis that presented itself as a pure and simple disintegration and transmitted these characteristic features to the manner in which history is used. In Italy, the paradox—already marked by a violent eradication of the past, in the forms described by Lanaro,³⁴ as well as by a hypertrophy of historical references in public speech—does not seem to be enough to activate the collective historical consciousness to build a consensus—and perhaps does not even wish to do so.

History is used above all as an instrument of the day-to-day political battle: but it is a dialogue that takes place strictly within the ruling political class. History does not appear here as the construction site of great coherent and ideological narratives or at least as constructions of meaning. It is more a pool in which people fish for more or less fortuitous examples, useful for the latest polemics. The object is no longer to educate a people but to reach an audience, through history but not only, with the spectacle of politics.

All the more reason why, then, is it necessary for the public use of history to be conscientious and critical, capable of questioning the opacity and the eternity of the past to redeem it from the tyranny of the present.

Translated by Sophie Hawkes

Notes

1. This article is a revised version of a paper given at a conference on “L’uso pubblico della storia,” held in Rome in March 1993 and organized by the Istituto romano per la storia d’Italia dal fascismo alla resistenza. The proceedings are in press and will be published by Franco Angeli, Milan.

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2. R. de Felice, *Mussolini*, vols. 1–4 (6 vols.), (Turin, 1965–1990) and C. Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità della Resistenza* (Turin, 1991). It is at any rate clear that the impact on the public of R. de Felice's historiographic hypotheses is more due to the criticisms (such as *Intervista sul fascismo*, ed. by M. Ledeen [Bari, 1975]) or the numerous interventions of a more direct political nature in the daily press or periodicals or on television during the last twenty years than to the weighty tomes of the Duce's biography.
3. I am referring to the Italian collection of this debate: G. E. Rusconi (ed.), *Germania: un passato che non passa. I crimini nazisti e l'identità tedesca*, (Turin, 1987).
4. See Habermas's criticism, *ibid.*
5. J. Habermas, *Storia e critica dell'opinione pubblica* (Bari, 1988), 213; published in English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).
6. Apart from his interventions in the *Historikerstreit*, cf. his work *Marxism, Fascism, Cold War* (Assen, 1982).
7. I have discussed Nolte's positions in N. Gallerano, "Storia, memoria, identità nazionale," in: *Passato e presente*, 20–21 (May–December 1989), 219–231.
8. H. Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy. De 1944 à nos jours* (Paris, 1990) (Orig. publ. 1987).
9. M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority. Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York, 1990).
10. N. Gallerano, "Critica e crisi del paradigma antifascista," in: *Idem* (ed.), *Fascismo e antifascismo negli anni della repubblica*, *Problemi del socialismo*, n.s. VII (1986), 106–133; *idem*, *La memoria pubblica del fascismo e del antifascismo*, in: AA.VV., *Politiche della memoria* (Rome, 1993), 7–20.
11. P. Ortoleva, "Storia e mass media," in the conference proceedings quoted in n.1 above.
12. Thucydides, *Histoire de la guerre du Péloponnèse*, I, 1 (Paris, 1966), 31.
13. J. Le Goff, *Storia*, *Encyclopedia Einaudi*, vol. XIII (Turin, 1981).
14. A. Momigliano, *Le radici classiche della storiografia moderna* (Florence, 1993).
15. Cf. the analysis of Momigliano's book in A.I. Iacono (ed.), *La talpa libri*, 5 February 1993.
16. Boddei, "Addio al passato: memoria storica, oblio e identità collettiva," in: *Il Mulino*, XLI, 2 (1992), 179–191.
17. G. Santomassimo, "Tradizione comunista e azzeramento della storia," in: *Passato e presente*, n.s. IX, 22 (1990), 9–18.
18. S. Romano, "Gli usi della storia," in: *Il Mulino*, XLI, No.2 (1992), 207.
19. I am referring to E. Topitsch, *Stalin's War: A Radical New Theory of the Origins of the Second World War*; T. Wolton, *Le grand recrutement* (Paris, 1993). As regards the "negationists," it suffices to refer to the works of P. Faurisson, recently—and unwisely—legitimated in parts at least by E. Nolte.
20. M. Ferretti has given an excellent description of the annulment of the historical memory in the USSR during the Stalinist era in *La Russia mutilata. La Russia ricorda* (Milan, 1993).
21. N. Chiaromonte, "Credere e non credere," in: *Il Mulino* (1993), 116.
22. *Ibid.*, 118.
23. Y. Yerushalmi, "Réflexions sur l'oubli," in: AA.VV. *Usages de l'oubli* (Paris, 1988).
24. P. Di Cori, "L'oblio, la storia e la politica. A proposito di alcuni recenti pubblicazioni sulla memoria," in: *Movimento operaio e socialista*, 3 (1990), 297–316.

25. Cf. M. Frisch, *op.cit.*, 12.
26. A. J. Mayer, "Memory and History: On the Poverty of Remembering and Forgetting the Judeocide," in: *Radical History Review*, 56 (1993), 5–20; O. Bartov, "Intellectuals on Auschwitz. Memory, History and Truth, History and Memory," in: *Studies in Representation of the Past*, V, 1 (1993), 87–119. I have commented on this controversy in "Memoria e storia: un dibattito", in: *Passato e presente*, XII, 33 (1994), 105–111.
27. N. Loraux, "Sur l'amnistie et son contraire," in: AA.VV. *Usages de l'oubli*, *op. cit.*
28. P. Veyne, in: Le Goff, *Storia*, *op. cit.*
29. P. Bevilacqua, "Sull'uso pubblico della storia," an account of the intervention in the debate on the subject, in: *Annale 1991* (Rome, 1992).
30. D. Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," in: *American Historical Review*, 3 (1989), 604. The quotation by Rorty is from his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 1980), 5.
31. P. Togliatti, *Discorso su Giolitti*, in: *Momenti della storia d'Italia* (Rome, 1963), 79–116 (but the text dates from 1950).
32. C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore, 1979). Subsequently Ginzburg has returned several times to the convergence and the difference between historians and judges with regard to the problem of evidence; cf., i.a., *Il giudice e lo storico* (Turin, 1993); "Just One Witness," in: S. Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation. Nazism and the Final Solution* (London and Cambridge, Mass, 1992).
33. A. Mayer, *op.cit.*
34. S. Lanaro, *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana. Dalla fine della guerra agli anni novanta* (Venice, 1992), in particular the reference to the "great transformation of the 'sixties", 223ff.