

Valentina Pisanty



I GUARDIANI *della* MEMORIA E IL RITORNO DELLE DESTRE XENOFOBE



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THE GUARDIANS OF MEMORY

translated from the Italian
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WHAT WENT WRONG?

Two facts are there for all to see.

1) In the last twenty years the Shoa has been the object of widespread commemorative activities throughout the western world.

2) In the last twenty years racism and intolerance have increased dramatically in those very countries where the politics of memory have been implemented with the greatest vigour.

Are these unrelated facts, two independent historical threads, in the same way as there is no demonstrable link between, let's say, football hooliganism and progress in cancer research? Or is there a connection, and is it up to a society wishing to oppose the current wave of xenophobia to look into the reasons for this contradiction?

The reflections that follow were collected in the years spanning 2015 to 2019, a period that historians will have to interpret with the necessary detachment but that, seen from within, looks like a prelude to important changes of direction. Against the background of events that are all too real, the symbolic environment is saturated with narratives old and new in a struggle for supremacy. What is at stake is the power to control public perceptions and passions, endlessly conditioned by influential metaphors, argumentative structures and identitarian narratives deposited in an ever-changing set of commonly held beliefs. While in the decades when academics and the media were discussing the end of history the order of discourse seemed stable and unassailable (and too bad for those excluded), the 2010s ended with an unstable scenario that left citizens faced with an apparently ineluctable choice.

On the one hand the old liberal order, entrenched behind the values of democracy, invokes the memory of crimes against humanity – the Shoa in particular – to reaffirm the reasons for its irreplaceable permanence. On the other hand new political formations are pushing alternative counter-histories, a good many of which are based on latent memories, suppressed rancour and national myths once thought to be dead and buried,

but which now reveal an unexpected vitality. The positions of both sides – assuming there are only two – are run through with glaring inconsistencies.

The second grouping, which its opponents label ultra-nationalist, is split between a flaunted revolutionary drive (to demolish the system) and the reactionary collective imagination from which it draws consensus.

But the first grouping, which its opponents label variously (establishment, elite, Europe, Soros...), is not free of contradictions either. A discrepancy between ends and means seems to be its principal limitation.

The rhetorical armamentarium with which it legitimises itself – starting with the closely interrelated concepts of identity and memory – clashes with the much-vaunted project for an open, free, fair and progressive democracy.

The aporias emerge in various spheres of cultural life and not only in the commemorative area, but this is what we shall be discussing here. The fetishization of witness testimony as the sole kind of authoritative discourse. The privatisation of history as an asset to be spent on the public stage. The appropriation of the language of the Holocaust by those interested in cloaking their partisan arguments with universality. The political

use of criminal law as a shield against the thugs of memory. Such instruments of consensus are more suited to an authoritarian regime than a democratic project: it is no surprise that the surging right-wing parties have appropriated them in order to adapt them to their own purposes.

As in the martial arts, the xenophobe parties use their opponents' moves against them. They empty dominant forms of their historical content in order to surreptitiously take them over and by so doing play the persecuted victim of an establishment jealous of its own privileges; they flip accusations on their heads; they intercept traditionally left-wing positions in order to divert the awareness of the excluded and the oppressed and focus it on imaginary enemies (immigrants, Gypsies, the elite, Eurabia...).

They proliferate amid the chaos they contribute to creating. Where they come into power they implement discriminatory policies to the detriment of the new minorities while claiming to be the defenders of the majorities and their downtrodden rights; they spread fake news while they launch campaigns against disinformation; they nod to fascism while rejecting any distinction between left and right; they declare solidarity

with Israel while they rehabilitate the ancient calumny of the Jewish plot to take over the world.

It may be that the Enlightenment belief according to which human progress can be achieved only by exposing rhetorical deceptions and fielding a disciplined opposition – even when positions are violently opposed – has become outmoded. Those who still long for the promises of modernity wonder how to react before the rising tide of intolerance and despair of bringing the matter back within the bounds of civil debate, namely the kind of dialectical thinking that acknowledges ontological legitimacy even in theories it is preparing to demolish.

How to reaffirm democratic principles in a context of unbridled competition such as this, which works in favour of the most assertive and unprincipled bullies, just like some of the darkest examples of dystopian fiction in the cinema and on TV that have recently won over the public imagination? Of course, the rules of the game can be changed; of course, democratic principles are often twisted to favour the interests of those who appeal to them; and, of course, the lack of alternative political plans discourages the progressive front, sunk ever deeper in its impotency complex, obliged for decades to submit to the blackmail of the lesser evil, the cut-price

compromise, in order to avoid even more catastrophic scenarios.¹ But I can see no way out that does not pass through a vigorous promotion of critical thinking on every level of public life. Thinking that, by definition, should be brought to bear on one's own prejudices even before those of the adversary.

These few preliminary considerations serve to explain why I have chosen to deconstruct the rhetoric of memory notwithstanding the more urgent threats that crowd the semiosphere. Before lancing the boil of xenophobic nationalism, it is necessary to understand the setting it has taken root and flourished in. The first observation is the glaring failure of the politics of memory over the last twenty years, founded on the simplistic equation “never forget” = “never again”. The question is whether this failure was accidental (xenophobia is increasing *despite* the politics of memory)², or whether it is already inherent to the premises (because of the way

¹ For Hannah Arendt (ARENDT, 1963) the principle of the lesser evil was that which allowed totalitarian regimes to impose an exceptional line of action with the pretext of avoiding a greater injustice, but thereby accustoming the public to accept the inevitability of evil in itself. According to Eyal Weizmann the bogeyman of absolute Evil now serves to make any lesser evil acceptable: “in today's post-utopian political culture, the term [lesser evil] has been so naturalised and invoked in a series of incredibly diverse contexts – from individual situational morality to international relations, including attempts to govern the economies of violence in the context of the ‘war on terror’ to those of humanitarian and human rights activists to cope amid the paradoxes of aid – that the term [lesser evil] seems to have completely taken the place of that which was previously reserved to the term ‘good’” (WEIZMANN, 2009, p. ???)

² Cf. BURGIO, 2010.

the political premises have been formulated, they could lead only to the outcome they produced). The aim is to prepare to combat discrimination in an efficacious, incisive manner, which also means honesty, awareness and, where necessary, ruthless self-criticism.

The chapters

1. *The duty of memory.* The memory of the Shoa has filled the void left by the crisis of the great revolutionary utopias of the last century. Elected a cornerstone of the liberal ethic after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is the result of a “top down” project (led by the United States) aimed at uniting the scattered pieces of a Europe in search of an identity amid the unanimous condemnation of Nazism and, by extension, Soviet communism. Anyone can identify with the victims of absolute Evil. But this is the very problem: the aporias of “cosmopolitan memory” lurk in the contrast between the presumed universality of the core narrative and the inevitable specificity of the uses made of it. Suited to a vast range of historical contexts, the Holocaust narrative has shaped the political imagination of the last thirty years, reducing every conflict to the frame perse-

cuted vs persecutor (sometimes resulting in catastrophic blowback, as in the case of the wars in former Yugoslavia). Hence the competition between the victims and accusations of offences against memory hurled at rival groups. The Guardians of Memory – the people, associations or institutions appointed to conduct appropriate commemorative practices – manage these disputes to establish who, among the litigants, has more right to express their claims in the vocabulary of the Holocaust.

2. *The discourse of history.* The Guardians speak in the name of the victims. Witnesses of witnesses, they draw legitimacy from a kind of osmotic contact with those who “were there”. The assumption is that physical presence in the places of trauma is, per se, grounds for credibility and authoritativeness. Before analysing the circuits through which the Guardians are delegated, I shall enlarge upon the transformations that have beset witnesses since the time their words became charged with a truth value that transcends historiographical parameters. In contrast with the critical method historians employ to weigh, cross check and interpret their sources (while remaining aware of the margin of error that all testimony necessarily involves), the rhetoric of memory fetishizes witnesses, as if there were no cognitive or cul-

tural filters between the accounts they produce and the events of which they speak. And it sacralises them, as if the traumas endured had projected them outside history into some transcendent metaphysical dimension. The appeal to authority (“I believe it because she/he said so”) supplants the more cautious guiding principles of scientific-argumentative thinking. In this chapter I shall analyse some collateral effects of this changeover, while in the *Appendix* I shall discuss, in rather more technical terms, the epistemological status of testimony as proof or a sign that “something has happened”.

3. *Collective memories.* History is public, while memory always belongs to someone. As such, it reflects the concerns and the particular interests of those who direct it. Whereas historians aspire, in theory at least, to reconstruct events as objectively as possible (on the basis of publicly accessible documents), people who recall the experiences they have personally lived through hold full title to their reminiscences, even when they get confused or remember badly. But the question grows more complex in the shift from first-hand memories to the way in which a cultural community presents and perpetuates the image of its past for the benefit of and as a warning to successive generations. Who has the

right to establish formats, to the detriment of other possible representations? What happens to memories that cannot be translated into the terms of the dominant paradigm, and how do they re-emerge in periods of political instability, when power relations between dominant memories, the adversaries' counter-memories and the silent majorities are being reorganised? The irreducibly proprietary aspect of every memory is dealt with in chapter three. In particular, when the disputed memory still has potent effects on the present, as in the case of the Shoa, control of it is the prize at stake in bitter disputes aimed at undermining the primacy of the dominant representations, and the authority of the Guardians who set themselves up as their defenders.

4. *New cinema of the Shoa.* The formats of memory are particularly influenced by the cinema and TV, which pick up and amplify dominant commemorative attitudes. In the past, debates on the limits of representation have fascinated directors, intellectuals and public opinion, intent on squaring the circle regarding the "representation of the unrepresentable" of death in the concentration camps. In recent years the creative tension of cineastes has gradually flagged as the memory of the Shoa has settled on an ethical-aesthetic canon

that no critic, or almost none, is prepared to call into question anymore. What is the cause of this flattening out, and up to what point is it reasonable to consider it a symptom of a more general "memory weariness"? In chapter four I shall analyse four recent films, examining them in the light of a critique of so-called post-memory. The suggestion is that we are going through a crisis in the "Holocaustic" paradigm, not suited to take account of a diversely traumatic present that can no longer be reduced to the familiar schema *persecuted vs persecutor*.

5. *The spectacle of evil.* The palpable weariness of a memory that has become more and more ritualised, dried up and self-involved can be perceived in various areas of social life: from the disrespectful selfies taken by tourists on trips to Auschwitz to irreverent episodes on the subject of the Holocaust, especially on social media; from displays of racism in football stadiums to the outrageous language used by leaders of the new right to stigmatise the minorities they target from time to time. The impression is that such disrespectful and/or xenophobic behaviours do not happen despite the shield of memory, but on the contrary that the new racists have learned to encapsulate the responses of the Guardians within the rhetorical strategies they employ to drum up

consensus. If the narrative of the Shoa has lost its former incisiveness, what are the formats of contemporary storytelling from which the next great narratives might emerge? I shall search for them in the hypercompetitive worlds of the new generation of films for cinema and television whose global success suggests an identification far superior to that with which we currently bring to moralising narratives on the Holocaust. Characterised by the values of social Darwinism and the survival of the fittest, the new “win or die” TV shows face the viewer with a disturbing question that flips the meaning of testimony from the camps on its head: which of your fine principles would you be prepared to sacrifice in order to attain your goal?

6. *Denial and punishment.* The last bastion of memory is the law. Every legal system reflects the political will to mould a cohesive society thanks (also) to the inspiring example of past episodes. Usually legislative intervention is limited to the promotion of dominant narratives through scholastic curricula, national celebrations, monuments and other non-punitive measures. Only occasionally is the law mobilised to criminalise any commemorative behaviours deemed unacceptable, notwithstanding the evident conflict between such in-

tervention and the principles of freedom of speech. This is the case with the European framework decision of 2008 which decrees that all the countries of the Union must establish laws imposing sanctions on anyone who denies or minimises the most traumatic episodes of the twentieth century, starting with the Shoa. In chapter 6 I shall maintain that the anti-negationist laws – whose inefficacy is easy to demonstrate – do not aim so much at protecting the rights of the minorities to whom those denied memories belong, as to safeguarding memories per se, as if the perpetuation of historical traumas constituted an inalienable legal right, to be defended by any means necessary. But is it possible to catch a glimpse of a different agenda (with respect to the declared aim of its supporters, i.e. to combat racism) in the will to introduce exceptional measures to protect society from those who do not accept “shared common values”?

Valentina Pisanty The Guardians of Memory

I GUARDIANI DELLA MEMORIA

On the occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day, a critical voice speaks outside the box.

Valentina Pisanty's analysis is based on a painful, yet incontestable consideration: as the rhetoric of "the duty of memory" (of the Holocaust and other trauma) progressively establishes itself in Europe and United States, we are witnessing the exponential growth of racism and the return of xenophobic parties and movements. "Lest we forget" and "Never again" are expressions now reduced to mantras of commemorative rhetoric. It is time to face the reality of daily facts, about the re-emergence of racist violence, of references to Nazi symbols and negation theories. What has failed to work in the contribution given by Holocaust survivors? The author bravely looks into the abyss, analysing the stories of victims and witnesses with a critical eye, in order to help us understand what went wrong. And perhaps, how to fix it.

VALENTINA PISANTY is Professor of Semiology at Bergamo University, and has written several essays on interpretative semiotics, fables, humour, political speech, rhetoric of racism, and memory. Bompiani has published *Leggere la fiaba* (1993), *Semiotica e interpretazione* with Roberto Pellerrey (2004), *La difesa della razza* (2006), *L'irritante questione delle camere a gas* (1998, enriched edition 2014).



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