

Teaching Terrorism in Italy: Towards a Politics of Nonreconciliation

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Abstract

Although more than 30 years have passed, Italy continues to struggle with the difficult memory of the 1970s, a decade marked by an extreme intensification of political violence. The problematic memory of the 1970s in Italy is immanent in school manuals, one of the primary sources in processes of memory construction, which furthermore play a fundamental role in the diffusion of collective and national memories of the past. In this essay, which will focus on the representation of national political violence in the 1970s in school manuals, we shall see how these tend to reduce their account of the 1970s to stereotypical images of political violence, thus contributing to the maintenance of a ‘defensive amnesia symptomatic of an experience of psychological trauma or wound’ (Glynn 2006, 318) which impedes any serious, historical reflections on the political violence of the 1970s. More precisely, I shall analyse - through an empirical analysis of some thirty manuals published between 1980 and 2008 - exactly what historical narratives have been produced and to what extent these narratives have contributed to or rather obstructed processes of national reconciliation.

Keywords

Terrorism; Italy; history education; collective trauma; 1970s.

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Although more than 30 years have passed, Italy continues to struggle with the difficult memory of the 1970s, a decade marked by an outburst of political violence which has become known as the ‘years of lead’.¹ Despite the fact that important social and cultural developments have *also* marked the 1970s, the numerous violent incidents that occurred in those years continue to dominate the collective memory of this part of modern Italian history. This form of oblivion is immanent in historical analyses of the 1970s, in particular school manuals, the majority of which tend to reduce their account of the ‘years of lead’ to stereotypical images of political violence. One reason for this is the fact that most of the authors of these crimes were absolved on the basis of lack of evidence, and thus few judicial truths have ever been established, hence the difficulty for historians to give an objective account of these events.

Secondly, polemics and debates regarding the culpability of the suspects may also have contributed to a certain reluctance to discuss these topics. In fact, there is an increasing public and political use of history, as a result of which historiography nowadays has to ‘compete’ with other sources of (often pseudo-) information which increasingly undermine the exclusivity of historiography as an instrument of knowledge and conservation of the past. The media, in particular, reduce the historians’ discourse to one of many discourses that offer different interpretations of the past, thus complicating the construction of a collective, national memory of the past.

Finally, many of those that embark upon writing or teaching a history of the 1970s in Italy still have a ‘living’, painful memory of this period, which renders the task of analysing the 1970s particularly difficult. In other words, the ‘years of lead’ constitute an open wound

¹ This definition was derived from a celebrated German movie on terrorism by Margarethe von Trotta, *Die Bleierne Zeit*, presented at the Venice Cinema Festival of 1981 and subsequently translated as ‘Anni di piombo’ (‘Years of lead’), a title which refers to the use of fire arms (‘piombo’ or ‘lead’ is a metaphor for bullet).

which has resulted in an apparent memory loss that impedes any serious reflections on the political violence of the 1970s. In this essay I shall analyse how these forms of violence have been transmitted through history education, and to what extent these representations have contributed to processes of reconciliation. My focus will be on school manuals, since these play a fundamental role in the formation of collective and national memories of the past. An empirical analysis of 29 manuals published in the period ranging from 1980 till 2008, consisting of a quantitative and a qualitative approach, will help us understand how history education in Italy interprets 1970s terrorism, and what its role is in processes of reconciliation.²

1 The ‘accessibility’ of the past

If the main function of historiography is to offer a narrative description of past events which contributes to the creation of a collective identity for a specific community, as historian Nicola Gallerano has it, education primarily has the task of diffusing this identity among the members of that community (Venturoli 2007, 226). In Italy, however, no more than 2% of the school manuals that deal with 20th century Italian history are dedicated to the period ranging from the 1960s to the 1980s (278), and it is therefore not surprising that younger generations of Italians suffer from an excessively poor public knowledge of the 1970s.³

² With some exceptions, all manuals have been written or edited by different authors and published by different publishing houses. The choice of manuals was determined by the manuals’ availability and the ‘notoriety’ of their authors or curators. I consulted the Library of the Historical Department of the University of Bologna (Italy) and the LANDIS association (National Laboratory for School Education). See the appendix for the results of the quantitative analysis.

³ Two opinion polls held in 1999 and 2006 among high-school students resident in the three Italian cities where the most aggressive terrorist attacks of the 1970s occurred, demonstrated that knowledge of these events had decreased considerably over time. Whereas in 1999, 96,6% of the students in Milan claimed to be familiar with a massacre that had struck this city in 1969, in 2006 this number had gone down to 81,6% (Venturoli 2007, 260-262). Furthermore, almost half of the students identified, in both occasions, a notorious left-wing terrorist group as the authors of the attacks, ignoring the simple fact that this group did not yet exist at the time (262).

But are these events really forgotten? Or have they simply never been told? As historian John Foot observes, ‘[y]ou can’t forget what you have never learnt’ (Foot 2001, 213, my translation). Furthermore, forgetting does not necessarily mean that something is lost; it merely becomes temporarily inaccessible.⁴ This implies that certain traumatic events of the 1970s have become ‘less accessible’ to younger generations of Italians. If anything, there is a *local* memory which relies on the presence of the so-called ‘sites of memory’ (Nora 1984), i.e. monuments or commemorative plaques, which allow us to archive and thus preserve our past in a more secure - or so we believe - manner.⁵ In what follows we shall see exactly which facts have been selected in the analysed school manuals, and which have, instead, been ‘forgotten’.

1.1 Recurrent themes and ‘forgotten’ memories

Apart from political violence, the main themes proposed in most of the manuals I’ve analysed include important social developments and political changes, in particular the attempts of the Italian Communist Party (hereafter, PCI) to enter the government through political alliances with parties of the opposition.⁶ Other themes related to the countries’ political and economical

⁴ For a discussion on the implication of ‘forgetting’ as a problem of ‘relative accessibility from a larger store of available memory’ (Singer and Conway 2008, 279), see issue number 3 of the 2008 volume of the *Memory Studies Journal*. In my analysis of ‘forgotten’ events, I have furthermore consulted Paul Connertons essay ‘Seven types of forgetting’ (2008), *Memory Studies* 1 (1), 59-71.

⁵ In fact, the opinion polls also demonstrated that the memory of a specific bomb attack depended strongly on the place of residence of the interviewees. Thus, students in Milan were most familiar with the incident mentioned earlier on (96,6%), while they were much less informed about two subsequent bomb attacks that occurred in two other cities, Bologna (62,8%) and Brescia (55,8%). Students in Bologna, in their turn, were much more familiar with the Bologna bomb than with the incidents in Milan or in Brescia; 50,6% against 12,8% and 8,9% respectively (Venturoli 2007, 260-61).

⁶ I’m referring to the so-called ‘historical compromise’, a project launched by the PCI’s secretary Enrico Berlinguer and which implied a coalition with the party’s main opponent, the Christian Democratic Party (DC). In the manuals, this project is at times used to explain the intensification of left-wing terrorism in the second half of the 1970s, as we shall see further on.

situation include the oil crisis of 1973 and financial scandals, though these are much less elaborated.⁷

The dominant theme in the history of the 1970s is however political violence. Obviously, not *all* violent incidents can be included in the school manuals, which therefore offer a selection of events, where omissions may be motivated by reasons of brevity or comprehensibility. Nevertheless, they imply a choice which reveals something about the ‘narrative’ the historian wishes to put across. Quantitative analysis has demonstrated, for example, how only very few references are made to a series of incidents which - although they may not have had a great impact on the collective imaginary - reveal much about the national and international politics of post-war Italy. In fact, their omission may be explained as a form of ‘prescriptive forgetting’, that is a type of forgetting that helps restore cohesion in civil society and ‘re-establish the legitimacy of the state’ (Connerton 2008, 62). Very few manuals mention, for example, the two bomb attacks that occurred in 1972 and 1973, both perpetrated almost beyond doubt by a neo-fascist terrorist organization. However, hypotheses regarding a left-wing ‘trail’ were pursued for a long time, demonstrating an explicit desire to put the blame on the Left. In one case, investigations that could have revealed the truth were furthermore systematically obstructed, while in the other case it is very likely that the secret services of the State were involved.

A second type of forgetting which reveals a specific (political) choice may be defined as ‘humiliated silence’.⁸ This is imminent in the case of an airplane incident of 1981, mentioned in only two out of 29 manuals and which was - for a long time - put off as a simple

⁷ Manuals mention mostly the famous Lockheed bribery scandal, which implicated international political and business leaders as well.

⁸ In the article mentioned earlier on, the author of *How societies remember* proposes a total of 7 forms of forgetting, among which forgetting ‘as humiliated silence’; this implies a desire to forget a collective shame which brings about a form of ‘humiliated silence’ (Connerton 2008, 67).

technical failure.⁹ Perhaps it did not fit well into a strictly ‘terrorist’ narrative of the 1970s? However, investigations eventually revealed how the tragedy was actually caused by an (unauthorized) military intervention involving foreign aircrafts; it was therefore more than a simple incident, which furthermore strongly embarrassed the Italian State.

Obviously, such cases of cover-up schemes, throwing off tacks and obscure involvements of the State complicate the task of historians to construct a national and collective identity which rejects any form of terrorism and which relies on the capacities of the State to defend the nation from and condemn these acts of violence. Accounts of left-wing terrorism directed against the State, on the contrary, seem to fit much better into a narrative of political violence in the 1970s, and in the following paragraph we shall see how the ambiguous and selective use of definitions of political violence has served this purpose.

2 Defining political violence

The theme of political violence is a difficult one, which is partly due to the lack of a common vocabulary that defines the various acts of violence that mark these years. In this paragraph I shall address the way political violence is defined in the school manuals.

2.1 The ‘strategy of tension’ and *stragismo*

The most frequently used definitions are ‘strategy of tension’ and terrorism. The notion of ‘strategy of tension’ appeared for the first time in 1969, in an article on *The Observer*, where the journalist insinuated that the various bomb attacks that struck Italy in those years were part of some sinister strategy that aimed at increasing the fear of a revolution in order to

⁹ The so-called ‘Ustica tragedy’ occurred when an aircraft heading towards Sicily mysteriously went down and crashed near the island of Ustica. All 81 passengers died.

justify an authoritative response which would bring an end to the social upheavals of 1968 and 1969, and eliminate or weaken the power of the Left in general (Biscione 2003, 242).

Two days after the publication of this article, the ‘strategy of tension’ manifested itself in Milan, killing 17 people and wounding 88. The manuals all present the so-called Piazza Fontana massacre as the first in a series of massacres that constitute this ‘strategy of tension’; this is, however, not entirely correct. A number of similar violent incidents - which involved the State, either directly or indirectly - preceded and may very well be related to the ‘strategy of tension’.¹⁰ These incidents can be connected on the basis of an ‘intrinsic goal of the political violence to bring a stop to or, at the least, slow down the emancipation of subordinate classes’ (Rapini 2001, 199), which threatened to disturb the international relations the Italian nation had developed in the wake of the Second World War (200). Thus, by ignoring any relation between the previous incidents - which again represent ‘uncomfortable’ memories that do not contribute to the creation of a national narrative - and the more ‘obscure’ massacres of the 1970s directed more explicitly against the Italian nation, the manuals strongly simplify the situation and undermine the possible existence of a more complex, longer lasting political project of the Italian State during the Cold War.

With regards to the definition of the ‘strategy of tension’, most of the manuals adhere to the widely accepted explanation of the strategy as a sort of universal conspiracy.¹¹ However, the multitude and heterogeneity of the different elements behind the strategy excludes the idea of a clearly outlined project, and we should rather consider the ‘strategy of tension’ a political climate of fear and alarm provoked by a variety of right-wing

¹⁰ These include the repression of labourers by police forces in the Sicilian town of Avola in 1968 (two deaths and 48 wounded); an attempted neo-fascist coup d’état in 1964; the 1960 protests against the government, which was supported by the fascist party MSI; and we may even draw the line back to the massacre in the Sicilian town of Portella della Ginestra in 1947, when gun fire was opened on a group of peasants marching through the town in celebration of the International Workers’ Day.

¹¹ In the right-wing milieu, however, the ‘strategy of tension’ is rather considered as an invention of the Left (Venturoli 2007, 236).

organizations who, while attempting to put the blame on the left-wing milieu, tried to legitimate a turn to a more authoritative, right-wing government (Venturoli 2007, 235-36; 31).

Historian Cinzia Venturoli's assumption that the massacres of the 1970s were committed by right-wing terrorists is confirmed in most of the manuals analysed here, although the authors at times choose their words carefully, underlining for example the fact that it is only in 'public opinion' that the right is held responsible.¹² Venturoli's description of the scope of the strategy, that is to create a situation of alarm and panic among the Italian population, also finds consensus in the majority of the manuals, though again choice of words may differ and the gravity of the situation is not always acknowledged. Some authors use, for example, very restrained words, bringing the situation down to a case of destabilisation or disorientation, which obviously weakens the impact and the undemocratic character of these massacres.¹³

A notion that is linked to that of the 'strategy of tension' is *stragismo*, a word derived from *strage* ('massacre') and which implies some sort of uncanny terrorist-like 'practice'.¹⁴ It is used very rarely in the manuals, although historian Anna Cento Bull considers it a key notion in relation to the 'strategy of tension'; Bull describes *stragismo* as part of a wider conspiracy which included the secret services of the State (Bull 2007, 7). However, there is not yet consensus on the existence of any such coalition, and so again this concept is perhaps considered still too controversial and compromising to be analysed thoroughly in the manuals.

¹² Although it is true that many of the presumed perpetrators of these massacres have not received definite prison sentences, investigations have produced 'a clear and convincing picture of the responsibilities of the neo-fascists from the Veneto and Lombardia regions' (2003, 240, my translation), and denial of the neo-fascists' involvement in the massacres therefore reveals a certain manipulation of the 'facts'.

¹³ In the following statements, for example, the 'strategy of tension' is presented as an almost legitimate political action which was created to 'draw the moderate opinion's attention to the re-establishment of order, even if this meant damaging democratic liberties' (Finzi 1990, B38, my translation), or which aimed at the disorientation of 'Italian public opinion in order to promote, if necessary, changes in the institutional order' (Galasso 1994, 723, my translation).

¹⁴ According to the De Mauro dictionary, 'stragismo' may be defined as a 'terrorist practice which recurs to massacres and acts of violence, with the aim of intimidating or destabilising the political situation, used by extremist groups or deviated organs of the State'. *De Mauro – Il dizionario della lingua italiana*: <http://old.demauroparavia.it/115531>.

In fact, references to the role of the secret services and of the State are rarely elaborated, and historian Luigi Cortesi confirms this ‘scarce attention of Italian historiography [...] to the Italian State as subject/object of international, military and nuclear politics, and as subject of violence’ (Venturoli 2007, 240, my translation). Similarly, an essay on the role of the State in the ‘strategy of tension’ demonstrates that only ‘an average of 1% of the texts dealing with the history of the Italian Republic since 1946 [is] dedicated to these themes’ (239). Thus, contrary to right-wing terrorist groups, whose culpability in acts of *stragismo* is more or less acknowledged in the manuals, there is little known about the role of the State.¹⁵

2.2 Terrorism

‘Terrorism’ is used much more frequently in the manuals. In general, the manuals make a rather indistinctive, undifferentiated use of the notion, dividing it into two poles; right-wing terrorism, on the one hand, usually connected to the ‘strategy of tension’, and left-wing terrorism on the other, represented mainly by the most notorious left-wing terrorist organization, the *Red Brigades*. Especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, the two ‘terrorisms’ are represented as two sides of the same coin with one and the same goal, that of destabilizing the Italian democratic system.¹⁶ Consequently, any ideological, moral differences between the two types of violence are eliminated, which is however incorrect, since left-wing terrorism generally attacked single, selected individuals, while right-wing terrorism aimed at large masses of people.

¹⁵ Francesco M. Biscione observes that, ‘while [...] the investigations of the 1990s [...] have produced a clear and convincing picture of the responsibilities of the neo-fascists from the Veneto and Lombardia regions in a countless number of attacks [...], elements to describe the political and institutional role in these events are still too scarce and hypothetical to be of any significance’ (Biscione 2003, 240, my translation).

¹⁶ ‘[R]ed or ‘proletarian’ terrorism [...] accomplished, objectively, the same results as black terrorism’ (Camera et alii 1987: 1384, my translation); ‘left-wing terrorism [...] contributed, along side terrorists of opposite colour, to the creation of an increasingly dramatic situation in the country’ (Salvadori 1990, 593, my translation).

Often this division is backed up by a temporal differentiation, as the manuals tend to allocate right-wing terrorism in the very first years of the decade, while left-wing terrorism is connected to the second half of the 1970s. Although the *Red Brigades* were active from the early 1970s, after 1975 their actions did become more frequent and violent, a process which most manuals attribute to the PCI's 'historical compromise', which was unacceptable for the groups on the far Left.¹⁷ However, to separate the two 'terrorisms' in such a simplistic way is not entirely correct, as right-wing terrorism continued throughout the 1970s.¹⁸ Thus, rather than to bring everything down to a simple (chronological) opposition between two 'types' of terrorism, it is perhaps more sensible to distinguish between developments in forms of violence *within* the groups themselves.

Furthermore, the manuals tend to underscore the role of right-wing terrorism in the 1970s, while descriptions of left-wing terrorist groups - the *Red Brigades* in particular - overflow.¹⁹ Thus, right-wing terrorism is perceived as something secret, while the culpability of the Left is much more explicit, for example when the manuals omit information about attempts to blame violent incidents on the Left through cover-up schemes and throwing off tacks, as we have seen earlier on. Similar omissions suggest that the predominance of the extreme Left in the collective memory of the 1970s is not the natural outcome of events, and

¹⁷ The strong media coverage of the more 'spectacular' actions of the second half of the decade, which no longer limited themselves to relatively unknown company managers or union leaders, but involved representatives of the State and other public figures as well, may also have contributed to the frequent references to left-wing terrorism in descriptions of the late 1970s.

¹⁸ With regards to the Right, we could in fact consider two 'phases'; a first phase which covers the major massacres of the early 1970s, while the second phase features a different, new type of extreme right which aimed more at the state and the nation (Venturoli 2007, 44-45; 55). In fact, Anna Cento Bull observes how there is a 'clear-cut break' between first and second generations of neo-fascist activists (Bull 2007, 119), and I would therefore suggest a distinction be made between *stragismo* on the one hand, and a different form of neo-fascist political violence perpetrated by younger generations of right-wing advocates and which continued throughout the decade, on the other.

¹⁹ The 'fame' of the *Red Brigades* is due in particular to the abduction and assassination of an important statesman, Christian Democrat leader Aldo Moro, in 1978. Other victims that are mentioned include the assassination of a Public Prosecutor in 1976, the first premeditated killing which is thus seen as some sort of breaking point, and the abduction of their very first hostage in 1972. A photograph of the latter was circulated, after the abduction, which may well have contributed to the predominance of the *Red Brigades* in the collective memory of the 1970s. Finally, the fact that many former left-wing terrorists have published autobiographies or novels about their experience, may also have contributed to their gaining public visibility and notoriety.

that a highly distorted, manipulated representation of the past characterizes Italian history writing and education.

Conclusion

We might thus say that history education in Italy has failed in offering a thorough, impartial analysis of the ‘years of lead’, as well as a common vocabulary with which to describe these years; we have seen, for example, how hardly any of the analysed manuals offer information on the role of the State in the *stragi*. At times the almost certain responsibility of neo-fascists is furthermore ignored or underestimated, while the manuals overflow with information on the *Red Brigades*. Bringing the political violence of the 1970s down to a simple division between left and right-wing terrorism further undermines the complexity of the decade. Although this incapacity of history education to create a more complete, ‘sharable’ and impartial national narrative of the 1970s is partially a result of the failure of the Italian State to bring justice to the victims of terrorism, this does not absolve the discipline from a certain responsibility in processes of national reconciliation.

2506 words

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