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INSTITUTIONALIZED CELEBRATION AND MONSTERS OF MEMORY

Roberto Vecchi

Does memory, as the poet Julio Castañon Guimarães puts it, in a well-known single-versed poem “have its days numbered”?

In Italy, memory has its own special celebration, the ‘Day of Memory’, on the 27th of January. The day commemorates the Shoah and marks the moment in 1945 when the Red Army liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp as part of the Vistula-Oder Offensive’s inexorable advance on Germany. In 2005,



the UN General Assembly resolved that the 27th of January would be a day of commemoration for the victims of Nazi extermination.

In anticipation of this decision, Italy decreed in 2000 (by the Law 2011 Colombo-De Luca) that the 27th of January would be a day of memory. This admirably prompt decision had a high symbolic value, but provoked much discussion and controversy. The Italian case shows the immanent fragility of constructing public commemorations. More than anything, it shows the slippery logic of political deployments of the past. Ideological freight meant that what could have been an occasion to fix a shared memory about the greatest genocide of the twentieth century became a dispute over the need to celebrate different tragic pasts. The extermination of European Jews was put side by side with the Soviet gulag or the foibe massacres. What could have been a chance to denounce the horror of a lucidly planned genocide as well as racism and its technological advances more broadly, crumbled.

The core of the issue, as David Bidussa noted, is how memorials can be established so that they open out to a shared universalism rather than dissolve into a set of singular claims within the infinite map of horrible massacres of all signs, ideologies and religions. The institutionalization of commemoration plays a crucial role in the articulation and construction of new forms of citizenship. Consider, for example, how important “memorial days” can be in education and for schools. Nevertheless, at the same time, the solemnity of these days confirm the inherent fragility of memory itself; the mutable, neuralgic and often tragic character of its being and transmission. In the age of the witness in which we live, only direct experience of the past is seen to guarantee an understanding of events. But if this is the case, what will happen when the last witness of a tragic event has died?

The duty of memory - which is inescapable, a just claim to institutionalized memory - will fragment and dissolve, if this duty does not transform itself into a critical knowledge of history. Such a transformation would be an urgent act at a moment of danger. No such duty can bear up under the vacuum of consciousness. Especially when the current asymmetry between memory and history creates a risk that the past will be destroyed without trace once sources of individual memory have been exhausted. I refer here to the Shoah, but also to numerous other problematic cases, such as the experience of colonialism in Portugal, France or Belgium - to name the three contexts central to *Memoirs*. Collective memory, for all that it is sometimes construed as a collective contract about a controversial past, will not automatically converge. Resurging revisionism and denial will creep into the voids of consensus about the past.



The risk of a memory threatened by repurposing of the past finds its frightening celebration in the form of evacuated public celebrations. Think of the tired celebrations of historical dates that, year after year, become ever more exhausted: the end of the Great War, the 25th of April in Portugal and in Italy, and so on. Either such celebrations succeed in maintaining their critical depth, or they risk rapidly transforming into faded rhetorical exercises, discourse without reference.

This future dystopian landscape of a post-memory of manipulated memory, or what will happen after the last witness leaves, is masterfully addressed in a recent novel by the Israeli author Yshai Sarrid. *Il mostro della memoria* is a powerful and frightening book published in Israel in 2017 (the Italian translation appeared in 2019, as is happens on the 'Day of Memory' itself). The novel is a long letter that the narrator writes to the director of "Yad Vashem," the museum in Jerusalem about the painful memory of the Shoah. By biographical accident (he was not selected to be a diplomat, as he had hoped), the narrator gets PhD funding and decides to begin an ambitious thesis project. Amid the endless literature about the holocaust, he is able to find a specific angle to suit his interests. He decides to reconstruct – meticulously, obsessively – the camps' lethal way of working, their technics of extermination. The thesis has the eloquent title *Analogies and differences in the mechanisms of extermination in the German Lager during the Second World War*.

The narrator of *Il mostro della memoria* begins work in Poland as a tourist guide in the camps, accompanying groups of students, visitors and the curious. When faced with the traces of mass destruction, these people repurpose that past: wrapping themselves in flags and singing the songs celebrating the surviving greatness of Israel. Next to the narrator is an elderly witness, Eliezer, who survived the massacre. The narrator is the specialist, with knowledge and erudition of the past, but not the experience; the witness brings the whole dramatic dimension of personal experience. After Eliezer drops out, the narrator tries to find other survivors, however, they are either very old, or still living with trauma, and do not want to return to the places of horror. Thus, the doctor-guide is left alone with his greying collection of knowledge, catalogued and well prepared, but fake, in the camps of central Europe.

His success grows. He is sought as a consultant by a video game company who aims to produce a game that "simulates" the conditions of detainees in the camp; he brings important Israeli politicians to Poland who want to use the traumatic history to strengthen their public image as devotee cultists; he



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helps organize a military event that “simulates” an occupation and liberation of a camp by the Israeli army; and he accompanies a German film director who plans to produce a film about the holocaust. However, his professional success corresponds to his growing personal decline. He suffers an abysmal loss of confidence. This is the destruction of a person who can no longer bear the weight of their own highly-trained but hollow and empty narrative, and of a person living the turmoil of knowing that no posthumous justice is possible.

Thus the dead begin to appear to him from the ruins of history. In his vision, any representation is false: “Concentrate, listen, they are here, around us, part of nature. [...] All those people are here in this field, and they scream.” The words dry up, becoming the empty simulacrum of impotence. This engenders a deaf and uncontrollable anger that dissolves the professional guarantees of the “specialist of the Polish death camps”. The sacrificial monster of memory destroys the impossible salvation of the past by witnesses, the impossible narration of the past only through the indirect knowledge of specialists, however refined.

As in the case of ‘Memory Day’, only human compassion transformed into historical consciousness can save an irreversibly lost past, not, as the narrator’s meltdown suggests, technical knowledge. This critical historical consciousness is still to be built, but is the only antidote capable – temporarily at least – of keeping the monster of a brutal and silenced past buried in its horrible lair.

Translated by [Alexandra Reza](#)

[Roberto Vecchi](#) is a professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Literature in the Department of Literature and Modern Cultures of the University of Bologna. He has recently published, with Vincenzo Russo, *La letteratura portoghese. I testi e le idee* (2017). He is an associate researcher with the project *MEMOIRS: Children of Empire and European Postmemories* (ERC n. 648624).

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