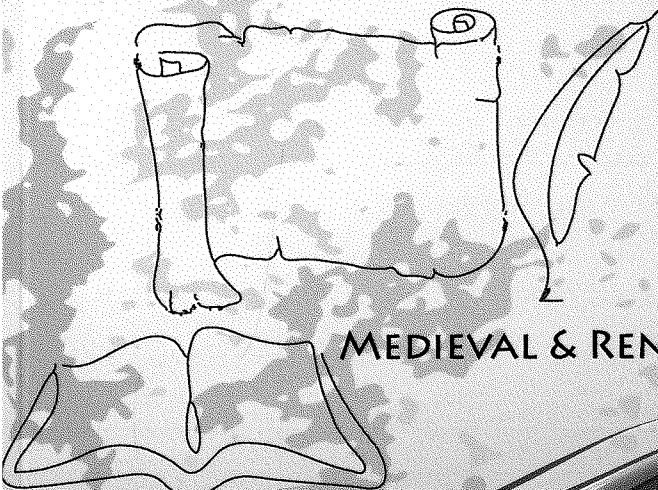


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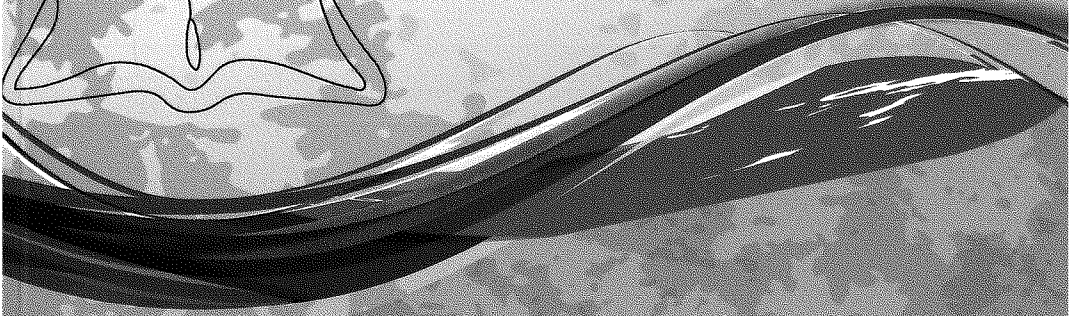
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THE HISTORISATION OF MEMORY: TESTIMONY AND HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to deepen the relationship between testimony and historical reconstruction putting particular attention around the process of historisation of memory. Testimony supposedly has preeminence among sources of historical knowledge in that it eliminates distance from the past, actualising it and somehow offering the possibility to 're-experience' it through the narrative medium (oral or written). Beyond the specific, ontological and epistemological problematic gap between the lapsed past and its representation in the present, testimony certainly may significantly influence the way we represent history. In fact, focusing attention on the feelings and the inner world of the actors and witnesses of past events rather than on the succession of actions and events tends to significantly affect the historical matter itself and the manner through which the historians understand, explain, and write about it. From another point of view, 'history is vaster than memory' and 'its time is layered differently'. However, on one side, 'history can expand, complete, correct, even refute the testimony of memory regarding the past' (Ricoeur, 2004), never abolishing it. From the other side, through its constant work to enrich, integrate, revise, re-modulate, and so on, the community of historians create a historisation of memory as part of historical knowledge, where the *re-presentation of the past* becomes a concrete and available scientific medium between memory and historical past.

Keywords: hermeneutics, historical past, memory, fact, testimony

INTRODUCTION

Testimony plays a fundamental role in historians' work, both as an essential element for the advancement in understanding, knowledge and explanation of a historical fact and as a precious instrument for the orientation and reorientation of a due (hypothetical, pre-determined or pre-judicial) interpretation. At the same time, testimony touches on and reveals a crucial methodological and epistemological problematic in historical knowledge. In fact, on the one side, testimony is one of the main sources of information and knowledge for historians; on the other side it is an uncertain, structurally-non-objective kind of knowledge and information. It reveals the procedural and epistemic aporia of all historiographical work, being subjective *and* concerning something of factual or objective, being experiential *and* at the same time personal, and being 'explanatory' and at the same time *interpretative*. The phenomenon of testimony mirrors both the essential theoretical-speculative dilemma around what historians' reconstruction of the past is and the problem to properly conduct a use of testimony as finalised to knowledge, explanation and understanding, instead of free interpretation, persuasion and pure re-narration. At the same time, testimony is essential and

unavoidable, because it directly concerns the human condition, experience and identity. In fact, we are *historical* beings, connected to, formed and forged (or vexed) by history.

Explicitly or implicitly, historians know, consider and treat historical facts in accordance with a due conception of humanity and (due) civilisations. Thus, their proper (contained or non-contained) uses of testimony reflects their personal vision on humanity and human civilisation. Beyond this discourse, by introducing the theme of testimony in historical knowledge the faithfulness of memory emerges as the first dilemma. 'How much of what the informant or witness report is recognisable as faithful, accurate and true?': this is the first dilemma; but it is a dilemma strictly related to the epistemological consistency of historians' work not only of particular informants and witnesses. And Ricoeur writes:

historians, little habituated to situating their historical discourse in terms of the critical prolonging of personal and collective memory, are not led to bringing together these two uses of the term "representation" in relation to what I have called a more primitive one, unless it is in the order of thematic reflection, at least as regards the constitution of the relation to time, that is, in terms of the act of remembering [...] Presence, absence, anteriority, and representation thus form the first conceptual chain of discourse about memory. The ambition of the faithfulness of memory would thus precede that of truth by history, whose theory remains to be worked out. [1]

This problematic can be primarily analysed from a perspective that intertwines both a theoretical-procedural approach and an epistemological one, exactly as Ricoeur does connecting the problematic of testimony to the problematic of representation and remembering Carlo Ginzburg's following words: 'The analysis of representations cannot abstract from the principle of reality'. [2] But Ricoeur's problematisation goes beyond Ginzburg's perspective, because he recognises that the appeal to the 'principle of reality' can be equally unilateral, distortive and ideological. He writes:

The thesis according to which the situation of the trial would present *de vivo* the sources of judgment common to the historian and the judge has its limits on the very plane on which it establishes its arguments: on the properly inquisitorial plane of the investigation. Did not the most fantastic hypotheses presiding over the trials for witchcraft long remain irrefutable, before the Roman Congregation of the Holy Office made the judges require proof, "objective confirmation"? And do not certain modern trials for treason, conspiracy, terrorism, share the same perverse spirit that reigned in olden times in the inquisitorial trials? But, in particular, our earlier reflections on the complexities of the representation of the historian should put us on our guard against an overly hasty recourse to the "reality principle". [3]

There is even an interconnected methodological level of problematic that must be treated considering the dissonance or difference between specific space where a fact happened and the non-strict determination in time and pace of a testimony as a product or fact of memory. Testimonies can be confronted and verified but with different instruments and by different ways, compared to objects and facts. Testimonies are neither ob-

jects but narrations; nor facts but emotional, subjective and past experiences; and, even when written they remain objects with a specific, partial status of objectivity. Ricoeur is right in remembering that 'passing through the door of archives, testimony enters the critical zone where it is not only submitted to the harsh confrontation among competing testimonies, but absorbed into a mass of documents that are not all testimonies'. [4]

Oral or written testimonies change the way we understand and represent history. But are they always objective representation? Does an absolutely objective representation exist? Philosophy recognises here a deep ontological problematic concerning the constitution or substance of the past as such and its representation. At the same time the problematic about how to correctly and truthfully connect a comprehensible and acceptable historical reconstruction and representation in accordance with what really happened in a due time is an issue that goes beyond its ontological investigation: it comes back to the epistemological and methodological problem of historical knowledge, its scientific strength, capacity and veritable description, explanation and reconstruction.

If on the one side memory is different and independent from history, and the past is past, where the work of memory always re-actualises the past, on the other side history is vaster than memory and its time is stratified differently. Memory can deny or transform history, but history, too, can limit, redefine and even refute the testimony. Ricoeur underlines this kind of dialectic as follows:

History is not only vaster than memory; its time is layered differently. History's greatest distance from memory was reached with the treatment of the facts of memory as "new objects," of the same order as sex, fashion, death. Mnemonic representation, our vehicle of our bond with the past, itself becomes an object of history. The question was even legitimately raised whether memory, the matrix of history, had not itself become a simple object of history. Having arrived at this extreme point of the historiographical reduction of memory, we allowed a protest to be heard, one in which the power of the attestation of memory concerning the past is lodged. History can expand, complete, correct, even refute the testimony of memory regarding the past; it cannot abolish it. Why? Because, it seemed to us, memory remains the guardian of the ultimate dialectic constitutive of the pastness of the past, namely, the relation between the "no longer", which marks its character of being elapsed, abolished, superseded, and the "having-been", which designates its original and, in this sense, indestructible character. [5]

However, through their constant work of writing and re-writing, historians and the community of historians create a historisation of memory that works as a bridge-field between historical facts and personal experiences. It also plays a role as a mobile, dynamic and dialectic field of intersubjective reconstruction of truth and mutual recognition and becomes as a constitutive part of historical knowledge.

There are different styles and conceptions of history, and sometimes it is a due conception that reinforced or stressed the centrality of testimony in writing history. For example, traditionally, an academic approach is considered much more related to a theoretical-speculative ideal of human progress and emancipation through history, or as connected to a causal movement or, reversibly, a Providential one and so on. In contrast, the approach of the ancient historian to history, like that of Plutarch, follows the line of a narration and *re-narration* of singular lives as an effective historical device. Historians like Plutarch believe that history is much more a matter of narration, experience and testimony instead of theorisation, explanation and general ideals. To continue, there are

others that strongly refer to oral or written testimonies because they are following a practical-moral ideal such as to thematise, describe and document the history of those who have been marginalised or are the hidden from history. By following this line of reasoning we understand how complex and deep is the role and problem of testimony in historical knowledge. In fact, it goes beyond the methodological and epistemological problematic spheres. However, it is the necessity of methodological and epistemological rigour that has to work as a general principle of orientation and limitation by establishing a reasonable limit in using ideological or unilaterally-practical uses and abuses of testimony, as well as the lack, denial or refusal to refer to such testimonies.

All Manichean positions or theses are always wrong. Memory cannot be ideologised as the only one source of the truth; the historical past cannot be ideologised as the only true and effective procedural reference to establish what really happened or to judge the validity, significance and effectiveness of a due testimony or historical narration or reconstruction.

History mirrors social, intersubjective, facts. They have been created by different people, for different reasons, by following different feelings and understanding, and by progressing towards certain specific goals, ideals and values. Historical truth and facts are mobile, and in addition history has to work together with other disciplines in order to grasp, absorb and summarise humanity's complex reality. In particular, an historian must have a significant knowledge of human psychology and behaviour, human social life, human possibility or capability to be 'oriented' and 'motivated' by different, in general contradictory, aspects like passions and reasons, causes (or drives) and motivations and the like.

Somehow, testimony crosses even this kind of problematic, contributing to define their significance in historical knowledge and contributing to make more difficulties in finding a uniformed and well established solution in terms of methodologic and epistemic equilibrium and rigour. What is certain is that, to have a better comprehensive approach on the importance to modulate an explanatory approach with an interpretative-narrative procedure in (re-)establishing or reconstructing historical past, we need to develop an intertwined theoretical-philosophical research between action, experience and memory on the one side, and between factuality, archive's documents and other material objects on the other.

The ideal domain for a work such this, articulated between theoretical and speculative discourse, is the domain of the theory of action. In fact, it summarises all the main questions: the dialectics between explanation and understanding, the question of testimony, the dialectics between fact (as realised by human actions) and narration of facts, the interrelation between behaviour and history, causes and reasons and so on.

TESTIMONY AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Generally speaking, epistemology seems to be not really interested in testimony as a source of knowledge nor as a key element for the understanding of the specific status and modus of historical knowledge. The underestimation of the importance of testimony touches other scientific areas too, like sociology and psychology. Historical knowledge shows a mobile and mixed epistemological structure, as Ricoeur recognised, by following and going beyond von Wright. For Ricoeur, history works between

explanation and understanding: it has a mixed epistemology and a mixed methodology. Actually, the epistemological course of his book on *Memory, History, Forgetting* 'embraces the three phases of the historiographical operation; from the stage of witnessing and of the archives, it passes through the usages of "because" in the figures of explanation and understanding; it ends on the scriptural level of the historian's representation of the past'. [6] Ricoeur explains:

I shall call the explanation/understanding [*explicative/compréhensive*] phase the one that has to do with the multiple uses of the connective "because" responding to the question "why?": Why did things happen like that and not otherwise? The double term "explanation/ understanding" is indicative of my refusing the opposition between explanation and understanding that all too often has prevented grasping the treatment of the historical "because" in its full amplitude and complexity. [7]

In addition, the historian's work has concretely and effectively to do with both scientific knowledge and common sense, material objects and immaterial contents, facts and narratives. History must work, sometimes forcibly, constantly coordinating, intertwining and harmonising description and interpretation, explanation and narration. (As will be repeated, no one consults an archive apart from some project of explanation, without some hypothesis for understanding. And no one undertakes to explain a course of events without making use of some express literary form of a narrative, rhetorical, or imaginative character. [8])

This mixed epistemology characterised Ricoeur's philosophical methodology as practised in his mature work. In itself, it constitutes a hermeneutical procedural model (called *arc herméneutique* theory), but it does not represent a unilateral or ideological approach to history, sociology or theory of action. In fact, Ricoeur's critical hermeneutics is at once a philosophical approach and a methodological-epistemological model for human and social sciences like history. This approach works by coordinating *explanation* and *understanding* under the rule of interpretation, in a way that perfectly mirrors the way of historians' work. As we are trying to demonstrate, in fact, historians must constantly work between objective and subjective elements, between factual and interpretative contents and so on.

ON THE VALUE OF TESTIMONY

Testimony plays always a significant role, sometimes essential or even unilaterally decisive for the establishment of truth, for the foundation of a certain knowledge and for to redefine a correct or full understanding. However, it has not an *a priori* absolute value. False testimony or sincere-but-distorted testimony is a matter of fact and represent a concrete possible 'dark side' of a testimony. Thus, the need for a cross-examination of testimony becomes essential in historical knowledge, as well as the attitude to investigation and investigative approach that a historian must develop. Unfortunately, to simply collect a series of testimonies is not sufficient for the establishment of true facts and historical facts, as well as is not sufficient to well harmonise all argumentative and non-argumentative contents of a series of oral or written testimonies into a coherent and *verisimilar* narration.

The adoption of the strategy of investigation as an essential aspect of the historian work has been recognised as historians like R. G. Collingwood. [9] For him, the understanding of the past is not a matter of analytical description or causal-connection analysis and explanation, but rather it essentially is an interpretative work and a work of investigation on human intentions and motivations for action. According to Collingwood, it is here that lies a particular, or even peculiar, justification for the autonomy of historians as rigorous scientists working towards fact. Historical truth is not primarily a matter of objective facts, but rather a matter concerning human nature, his or her intentions and reasons and drives for action. Almost, paradoxically, even elements like testimonies are of secondary relevance in achieving historical knowledge for Collingwood.

Scholars like Coday [10] and Brittan have productively used works like Collingwood's in their attempt to define, compare and evaluate different procedural models in historiography. Brittan, in particular, interprets Collingwood's motivational or 'intentionalistic' theory as a consistent alternative to Thucydides' classical model, which established the primacy of general coherence. [11] However, Collingwood's scepticism over testimony has found a more radicalised echo within the post-structuralists, who underline some aspects like the lack in knowledge of the exact background in which witnesses experience their lives. Similarly, the post-structuralists emphasise the substantial indetermination and relativity of all historical knowledge, fact, explanation and understanding based on testimony, investigation, interpretation and similar actions.

ON THE TESTIMONY AND ACTION

Interpretation is unavoidable in historical knowledge: it is the source of its strength and meaning, as well as of its weakness and potential negative and destructive functions. To consider the question of explaining and interpreting human action is to consider history as a critical-hermeneutics discipline, as a discipline that parallels its epistemological and methodological problems with a general dilemma concerning human identity and condition. In fact, we the humans are historical and cultural beings, that is beings forged by culture and history. Identity is not only biological or natural but social and cultural; our mind works to construct and reconstruct it as a complex conceptual, ideal, cultural, historical, practical and moral *representational* map. We constantly and structurally interpret and represent ourselves, our culture and our history. Thus, it becomes clear how to underline the strict connection between testimony and representation, memory and history, historical facts and the *re-narration* of facts go beyond history's epistemological and methodological dilemmas.

Von Wright and Ricoeur's theorisations of human and historical-social sciences as having a double epistemic structure, parallel such a complex, more comprehensive vision of the human beings and their personal identity structure. It is a complexity that has direct, significant, effect in the study of human action. Human action, in fact, is never a unilateral matter of causal-effect functioning, because feelings, drives and passions are mixed with and modulated by reasons and moral attitudes within human heart. Conversely, pure rational, logic and spiritual motivations are normally not verisimilar and sufficient in describing, explaining and understanding historical facts.

The articulation and distinction between explanation and understanding is fundamental in building a *theory of action*. And such a theory of action represents a significant

contribution for a comprehensive philosophy of the human being as well as for historical knowledge and the historian's work.

For von Wright, the historical-social sciences' main object of study is action, not historical facts or events. History has nothing to do with a stable state of affairs as in nature we observe and as natural states effectively are. Historical events are correlated with human action and so deeply connected to it that their description and understanding mainly depends on the explanation and understanding of human action. For von Wright, the key is to study human action from a teleological approach, conceiving historical and social facts as connected to a sort of system. [12] He sustains the idea that events correlated with or determined by human actions can be explained teleologically in a rigorous way exactly as are natural events. This teleological explanation, in fact, is a *causal* explanation, [13] where the varied, free and uncertain human determination in acting is balanced by the functioning of actions within a *system*.

In this way, von Wright's philosophy makes it possible to more strictly connect social and historical actions with a cognitivist and neuroscientific explanatory approach to human behaviour and with human intentionality as a middle-way phenomenon placed between body and mind, between drives and meanings, and between causes and reasons.

It is of a great interest to follow this new line of research in the theory of action because it helps to balance or better define mixed models, like that of Ricoeur. Such models aim to be interdisciplinary and value-neutral but, *de facto*, residually express and hidden 'spiritual' or 'hermeneutical' belief and view of the human being that is not scientific per se. Goldman's [14] and Davidson's [15] paradigms of causalism in action theory provide, for example, the useful counterbalance of such a tendency, because von Wright's naturalised action theory embraces a diametrically opposed vision (as another object of belief...). However, by following this new line of reasoning we go too far from the starting problematic point of departure that justified this work.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I thematised the relationship between testimony and historical reconstruction focusing particular attention on the process of the historicisation of memory and the dialectics between representation, personal identity and theory of action. Testimony purportedly has preeminence among sources of historical knowledge in that it eliminates distance from the past, actualising it and in some way offering the possibility to 're-experience' it through the narrative medium (oral or written). Beyond the specific, ontological and epistemological problematic gap between the passage of the past and its representation in the present, testimony certainly may significantly influence the way we represent history. However, it summarises and mirrors a complex series of aspects and problems: from the epistemological status of historical knowledge to methodology (and rigours in methodology); from dilemmas concerning the relationship between theoretical and speculative research in historiography and philosophy of history to theoretical and speculative dilemmas around the human being, their nature and condition; and, from dilemmas concerning the relationship between representation and theory of action to dilemmas related to non-scientific and non-explicit general and ideal approach of historians to historical facts and human behaviour.

It is interesting to note that following Ricoeur's approach, we go beyond the specific problematic of historians to embrace the general theoretical-speculative problems of the human and social sciences. In fact, history can productively make use of instruments from the other human and social sciences, especially sociology and social psychology. (Actually, Ricoeur's philosophy seems to provide a flexible theoretical-speculative and procedural approach generalisable for all the human and social sciences; [16]).

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