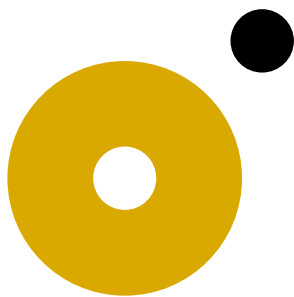


MEMORIA SCOLASTICA



The School and Its Many Pasts

edited by Juri Meda, Lucia Paciaroni and Roberto Sani

MEMORIA SCOLASTICA

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Narrating the School of the Past and the Future. A Preliminary Analysis of the "Educational Memories on Video" (MEV) Database

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1. *Memories, intertemporal and school*

In everyday language, history and memory are often used interchangeably, whereas it is well known that these two forms of processing the past possess fundamental underlying differences. In essence, history constructs narratives based on information drawn from a number of sources, which are duly criticised, interwoven and contextualised. Memory, on the other hand, relies on an inherently subjective point of view and on collective representations – elements that are not necessarily substantiated or supported by sources. Memory thus sometimes tends to generalise or simplify a subject of study – the past – which is, in reality, highly complex. An accurate reconstruction of the past, beyond the nuances of the relationship between history and memory, which we will discuss later in this paper, must instead adopt a rigorous historical method.

Nevertheless, the confusion between history and memory is strongly reinforced in public discourse. Indeed, in public discourse, the task of interpreting and recounting the past is frequently entrusted mainly to memory, which is considered more empathetic and comprehensible than history, which is instead perceived as dry and impassive. Such an approach is, of course, scientifically inadequate, but nonetheless ends up being privileged over the historical method.

Judgements formulated in the public debate on phenomena that occurred in the past are thus often constructed on the basis of memory rather than historical analysis. Memory is, however, conditioned by a number of factors of an individual and collective nature, including culture, the choice to remember or to forget, power, politics, religion, and even historiographical production itself.

"Official memory", recalls Giovanni De Luna, "is essentially 'cultural' memory. Beyond any 'biological' points of reference, it can therefore only be created artificially, according to the principle that the past does not establish itself naturally but is a cultural creation, whereby those who construct memory deliberately choose which aspects of the past need to be brought to life in the present. The state, in particular, does so by using

a multitude of tools: history books, school textbooks, monuments, toponymy, public holidays and political rituals¹.

However, the influence of the imagination on conventional wisdom also plays an important role in the construction of individual and collective memory. In other words, a personal memory is conditioned as much by the imagination as by direct lived experience. For example, Italian individual and collective memories of the “Swinging Sixties” of the 20th century are undoubtedly influenced by the complex collective imagination of the “economic miracle”, mediated as is well known by cinema, fashion, memorics, new means of transport, electrical appliances, etc.²

In short, stereotypical readings of past phenomena, which populate the imagination in abundance, can therefore condition individual memories.

School memories are certainly no exception. Indeed, school, as a widely shared experience in the lives of so many people, is perhaps particularly susceptible to these influences, to the extent that it could even be read as a category of imagination in itself³. School memory understood as an evocation of a shared school of the past⁴. We shall discuss this in more detail later, however.

This contribution thus seeks to promote a reflection on stereotypical views of the school of the past and their interrelationship with memory. In particular, we will focus on certain features of the school of the past, including educational rigour and the selective nature of education, which are sometimes cast in conventional wisdom as indices of quality. Such indices of quality are, however, often supported more by memories alone than by scientific evidence.

In the following pages, I will therefore examine some recurring debates and opinions in the public debate on schooling and then try to match them, or at least compare them, with the memories and imagination that emerge from the testimonies of ordinary people collected in the “Educational Memories on Video” (MEV) database, hosted on the portal www.memoriastorica.it.

The paper will thus also be an opportunity to describe, albeit briefly, the MEV database, to the creation of which this author has contributed together with the University of Florence research unit (coordinated by Gianfranco Bondini) for the project “School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation (Italy, 1861–2001)”, coordinated as national level by Roberto Satti of the University of Macerata⁵.

¹ C. De Luca, *La Repubblica del debito. Le memorie di un'illusione divina*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2015.

² G. G. G. G., *Ami di nati e di grandi cose. Il boom economico fu indagine e costruzione*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011.

³ J. Meak, *Le memorie delle civiltà: tra rappresentazione collettiva e narrazione del passato*, in S. Pirogelli, G. Zappalà, *L'esperienza della storia. Memorie e narrazioni*, Lecce, Tivoli Multimedia, 2011, p. 38. A. B. Fontana, *Ma chi del passato del presente la cosa non memorizza? Storia e didattica*, vol. XV, n. 53, 2011, pp. 10–30.

⁴ J. Meak, A. Viani, *School Memory: Transgenerational Relations and Memory Preservation*, in C. Vanni-Cabrera, J. Meak, A. Viani (eds.), *School Memory. New Frontiers in the History of Education*, Cham, Springer, 2011, p. 1.

⁵ R. Satti, J. Meak, *School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation: an Innovative Research Project with a Strong International Focus*, *History of Education and Children's Literatures*, vol. 17, n. 1, 2022, pp. 9–26.

Lastly, I will attempt to offer some brief observations on the extent to which individual and collective memories of schooling may condition or have conditioned the choices of policy-makers on the future of education.

2. The obsession with memory

Memory has only recently become a topic of study in a historical-educational context, owing to the pioneering research conducted at the beginning of the millennium in Spain and Latin America, culminating in the key turning point of the Seville conference in 2015⁶, which also provided a solid foundation for the Italian line of research, now firmly established. There is no need here, however, to reiterate the stages of this historiographical development, on which timely and in-depth contributions can be found in this volume. Among the various historiographical perspectives that memory has opened up in the field of education, I would like to recall here at least its contribution to the study of collective representations and the imagination (through, for example, research on film and literary production) and to the study of collective civic education processes (through research on public monuments, works of art, philately, honours, etc.). The study of memory, then, allows us to shed light on everyday school life and to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics within classrooms through the analysis of the schools’ “black box”. These perspectives were investigated in detail and as a whole by the research groups involved in the project “School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation (Italy, 1861–2001)”, in the context of which the publishing initiative that includes this paper was also initiated⁷.

In short, venturing into school memories means entering a field of research that is full of opportunities, but also pitfalls and challenges.

Memory is, in fact, a highly complex subject of study, which requires an endless bibliography spanning various disciplines: from history to philosophy, from neuroscience to linguistics, from psychology to ethology, from anthropology to sociology, and so on. These are, however, just a few examples of disciplines that reflect upon the past, and by no means circumscribed, universe that is memory. Indeed, on the contrary, memory studies are currently being further expanded.

To use Patricia Vialli’s incisive summary, our epoch is obsessed and permeated by the thought of memories. Beyond the aspects investigated by cultural studies on memory and its relationship with history, in recent years, again in Vialli’s words, after discourse on memory [has progressively grown], with an explosion of memory-related phenomena, which multiply in every field – from the proliferation of commemorations and remembrance days, to the incessant opening of new memorial museums, from

the frequency with which artists work on the subject, down to the more frivolous [...] phenomenon of the nostalgia for the past that runs through much of our culture, from design objects to television series, – and leads us to think of an authentic cultural consumption of the past⁸.

In short, the field of *memory studies* is currently being spurred on by stimuli that were, until recently, unheard of, and is undergoing continuous qualitative and quantitative evolution.

In this context, the relationship between history and memory – a relationship that, moreover, is already in constant evolution and the subject of much historiographical discussion in itself – has also become more dynamic. It would be impossible to recall these discussions in their entirety in these pages, but in essence, they have moved from an initial phase in which the dividing line between the two forms of processing the past was clear-cut, to a reading in which the boundaries between history and memory could be drawn less sharply⁹. As Marcello Flores has recently so lucidly pointed out, –today, the relationship with the past – of memory and history, often without the possibility of making a distinction between them – is an increasingly central element of public life, but in an interwoven, contradictory and confusing way¹⁰.

In short, the growing need for a past expressed by our society – that obsession that we have already mentioned – has encouraged an osmosis between history and memory. However, this osmosis, to stay with the metaphor of liquids, has resulted in a solution that is complexly unbalanced towards memory, which, ostensibly, but only superficially, seems to be able to respond more effectively to the processing of the past.

Thus, with this complexity of the culture industry and the mainstream media, memory has provided a firm foothold for those interpretations of the past that have favoured a moral or political approach, without having to risk confronting the sources and reconstructing the causes of various phenomena. This use of memory serves the needs expressed by the dominant power of the day, but is far removed from seeking to understand the phenomena and problems of the present and risks rendering the field of history entirely barren.

In reality, however, this prominence of memory also offers an opportunity to rise to a challenge and rethink ways of approaching history, i.e. the role of the historian. A history that does not renounce methodological rigour, but is able to confront the evolution of society. A history that is more sensitive to popular aspects, open to new technologies and, above all, attentive to the participatory processes of research and to public engagement – the real strength of memory¹¹.

⁶ P. Vialli, *Paraggi della memoria. Il memoria è guerra*, in *Italia*, Milano, Bompiani, 2014, p. 18.

⁷ R. Satti, *1861. Cento anni di memoria. I suoi destini e i suoi usi nella ricerca storica*, Roma, Carocci, 2013, pp. 32–38; C. Pivano, *Primo lezione di storia contemporanea*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2007; M. Habermas, *La memoria collettiva*, Milano, Utet, 2001, pp. 123–66.

⁸ M. Flores, *Crucis memoria. Parole d'acqua viva: i conti con la storia*, Bologna, Mulino, 2021, p. 102.

⁹ C. Bondini, *Tempo e storia per la storia. Le memorie della scuola. History of Education and Contemporary History of Education*, in C. Bondini, S. Ottolenghi, F. Bianchini, J. Borras, *La Public History nel mondo: teorie e pratiche. Una introduzione quantitativa*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2022, pp. 75–110.

but, on the contrary, recounts it only to exalt the great life lessons delivered by his beloved teacher, at the mention of whom he is moved to floods of tears.²⁰

In cases where the most explicit punishments, i.e. corporal punishments, are recalled, we often hear episodes recounted with the same emotional participation with which the witnesses describe other school incidents, without implying any judgement. Indeed, there are video testimonies in which the punishments incidents are even recounted with a certain glee. For example, one of the eyewitnesses describes with hilarity how, also in the late 1960s, the school caretaker led him to his chair with a rope due to his misbehaviour... All in all, what emerges from the video testimonies is that a certain strictness in teaching and educational methods was undoubtedly more than tolerated and judged by the eyewitnesses to be normal practice – or even appropriate, as a sign of the school's high standards.²¹

In the eyewitness' accounts, the dialectical relationship between the authoritarian methods of teachers and academic quality (and thus also the quality of the teachers themselves) seems almost to have become a category of their imagination. The teacher is the absolute protagonist of the educational and didactic processes, while the pupil is always a subordinate.

The undisputed authority of the teacher, gained through their authoritarianism, was also confirmed by the families. Indeed, recurrent reference is made in the interviews to an absolute trust in teachers and, above all, a widespread recognition of their authority. As far as my parents were concerned, I was always strong, so my own strictness, yet the account does not appear at all resentful, rather, the judgement is largely positive, due to the unconditional respect their parents showed for the teachers. In short, there is hardly any critical assessment of the cultural, intellectual and social subordination that many people suffered at school up until the late 1970s. There are, moreover, no concerns about the behaviour of the parents.

Instead, a representation of school as ontologically strict, austere and selective dominates the interviews – a stereotype that is decidedly entrenched and difficult to oppose.

More generally, the video interviews reveal the conviction that schools of the past were better than schools of the present, precisely because they were stricter. So, they were better, because the teachers were firm and the pupils were also more ruthless.

This prejudice is so difficult to oppose that, to some degree, we can even find traces of it in a video testimony, also collected in the MEV, by Agostino Barbei, a pupil of Don Lorenzo Milani, who famously made the fight against class-based schooling his life's

calling.²² The memories of this eyewitness, which are worthy examining in more detail, are consistent with those of others regarding the judgement of corporal punishment. The methods used by the Prior of Barbiana are, however, well known and widely discussed in the historiography.²³ There is, on the other hand, an interesting passage in which Barbei describes the disillusionment of the pupils at the School of Barbiana in conducting their research in the classroom, comparing them, however, with pupils of today rather than the pupils of the time, as would perhaps have been more straightforward: 'you young people of today, says Agostino, believe everything they tell you on the internet and no longer understand what is the truth and what is fact the truth. In other words, young people of today are superficial. It is evident, however, that this is not an opinion that is actually reflected by Barbei and the other eyewitnesses interviewed, i.e. arising exclusively from the reflections of the eyewitnesses interviewed for the MEV database, but rather appear to be collective representations that have become crystallised.

5. School memories and prejudices in the public debate

On the other hand, this prejudice about the alleged superficiality of the pupils or young people of today compared to young people of the past, often finds its way into the public debate, due in part to the support of authoritative figures. In Italy, the statements of prominent intellectuals, such as Umberto Galimberti or Ernesto Galli della Loggia, on the limited knowledge of the youth of today and the relative responsibilities of schools are fairly well known.²⁴ Such statements are, however, based mainly on the collective imagination and personal memories rather than on specific studies.

Indeed, the public debate on schools in Italy in recent years has been fuelled by stereotyped judgements not infrequently built on individual and collective memories. These memories are themselves conditioned by pedagogical models that were prevalent in the past, most notably the Gentile model.

In 2021, for example, *Il giorno scolastico. La scuola progressista come macchina della disuguaglianza* (Educational Damage. Progressive Schooling as a Machine of Inequality), a pamphlet co-written by two authors, received considerable media attention. The title already states beyond a shadow of a doubt the position of the authors, who are indeed quite well known for their stringent criticism of Italian state schooling.²⁵ The book makes

abundant use of the authors' individual recollections, on which detractors' arguments about mass democratic schooling often rest, to argue for the irreplaceable excellence of the selective school: a serious, austere and therefore high-quality model. The method adopted in the book, in other words, places memory above history, and almost inevitably ends up making generalisations or judgements that are poorly supported by rigorous historical or scientific investigation. Ultimately, the incontrovertible desire that arises from the memories of the two authors is that the schools of yesterday were better than the schools of today.

This idea of schools of the past has thus been re-emphasised by the media and seems to have conditioned the school memories of many ordinary eyewitnesses, or rather seems to have conditioned their reading of those school memories.

It is, however, an intertwining between a certain idea of schooling and the construction of collective memory, which is by no means confined to the work of Mastroluca and Rocchi, but can be found, as we have seen, in numerous instances in the public debate and even in educational reform projects.

A case in point, which we would regard as emblematic, is the so-called *Buona Scuola* (Good School) reform project promoted by the Renzi government (during the 17th Legislature) between 2014 and 2015. Needless to say, we cannot dwell here on the political line of the Renzi government and its idea of schooling. Suffice it to say that the Good School reform project, and to some extent even the approved law (Law no. 107 of 2015), essentially insisted on a neoliberal school model.²⁶

The Italian Prime Minister invested heavily in school reform, a reform that on several occasions – in line with his well-known communication style – he presented and publicly defended in person, bypassing the Minister of Education (Stefania Giannini), who almost always remained in the background.

Among the numerous occasions on which the Prime Minister presented the reform project, a famous video from 2015 is particularly relevant to the reflections we propose in this paper, in which we find various school stereotypes reflected in the collective memory and supported precisely by the individual memory of the Prime Minister himself.²⁷ In this video, Matteo Renzi explains his reform using a date blackboard – an object that is in itself evocative, as it is imprinted in the school memories of Italians of all generations. Thus, to describe the support that, in his view, the Good School reform would give to every teacher, the Prime Minister recalls his teacher and the prestige he enjoyed.

Today teachers have lost some of the social authority they had in previous years. My teacher, Eds. in the small town where I grew up, used to enter the class, enter the class, and was respected by everyone, just like the chairman, the marshal or the parish priest, because here was a figure that had social prestige. Today, the social prestige has been lost. We, as new parents, are partly to blame, because when my father was called by a teacher to say that I had misbehaved, he blamed me, my generation of parents.

²⁰ S. Oliviero, 2009 *Indie già. Memorie d'infanzia di Massimo Accorci*, «Memorie Educative in Video», DVD, 10.10.2021/2023. Last updated: 31.12.2022. <https://www.memorieeducative.it/tema/indie-gia-video-testimonianza/1000-video-gia-testimonie-di-infanzia-di-massimo-accorci/> (last access: 11.02.2023).

²¹ L. Piccioni, *Memorie di scuola. Convivialità e una storia delle pratiche didattiche ed educative nelle scuole* (unpublished manuscript of a manuscript prepared in 1985), Milan, 2009, 2020 (Clarin Martelli), *Lo spazio dei giorni ininterrotti? Alleanze educative e sociali nelle memorie scolastiche negli anni Cinquanta*, *Scienze e Lettere*, «History of Education and Children's Literature», vol. 17, no. 1, 2022, pp. 57-79.

²² Interview with Agostino Barbei, last updated: 24.11.2022. <https://youtu.be/3Y3R025314Go> (last access: 10.03.2023).

²³ S. Santori-Raghi, *Don Milani. Una lezione di utopia*, Pisa, Eina, 2007.

²⁴ P. Fucci, *Sul successo pedagogico*, last updated: 01.12.2020. <https://www.observatorio.it/analisi/variante-pedagogica.html> (last access: 11.02.2023). G. Galimberti, *La crisi di fronte agli occhi della legge. I sei libri prima sono ogni parte di vita*, Milano e Mondadori, 12 June 2019, last updated: 12.06.2019. <https://www.observatorio.it/analisi/variante-pedagogica.html> (last access: 11.02.2023).

²⁵ L. Rocchi, P. Mastroluca, *Il danno scolastico*, Milano, La Nave di Sesto, 2021.

²⁶ S. Oliviero, *La scuola nelle società della postmodernità (2010-2020)*, in S. Santorini, *Storia della scuola. Dalle scuole di massa formative*, Milano-Torino, Pearson, 2021, pp. 228-270.

²⁷ *La Buona Scuola*, last updated: 13.05.2015. <https://www.buonascuola.it/EMK/Video/352> (last access: 10.03.2023).

on the other hand, often blames the teachers. So the primary responsibility lies with us, the parents of the new generation. But let's be clear: there's also a share of responsibility that comes from the fact that when you ask pupils to boycott the INVALSI (Italian National Institute for Educational Evaluation) tests, or demand to block the exams, you're not doing the school a service and you're not doing those pupils a service. That's why it's important to be able to intervene by giving teachers more money, not because social authority derives from this, but because it's a matter of justice.

Matteo Renzi's arguments, as previously mentioned, are thus clearly emblematic for the purposes of our discourse. Indeed, social recognition of teachers passes through the filter of individual memory. This recognition is in itself strongly intertwined with the collective social representation of schools, past and present, and their actors (teachers, pupils and parents), impregnated in the common sentiment. The individual and collective school memory, with its mechanisms, therefore also becomes a basis on which to plan reforms.

In conclusion, research on school memories opens up horizons to be explored and can provide support in understanding the conditioning of conventional wisdom on our memories and thus on our identities. It also provides support for a deeper understanding of the processes by which ideas on schooling take shape, sometimes determining choices that influence the future. Indeed, the collective school memory continuously reconstructs itself by proposing in the present a selection of memories of the past made by social groups and individuals to determine a precise cultural identity. School, as the undisputed protagonist in the life experience of many people in advanced societies, is undoubtedly an essential cog in this mechanism.

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The School and Its Many Pasts

History is not memory; both, however, affect the way we perceive the past. In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on memory in order to critically analyse shared narratives of the past and their implications. Memory studies not only allow us to expand our knowledge about the past, but also help us to define the way in which today's people, social groups and public bodies look at it and interpret or reappropriate it. In this sense, school memory is not only of interest as a gateway to the school's past but also as a tool to understand what they know or believe they know about the school of the past and how much what they know corresponds to reality or is influenced by prejudices and stereotypes deeply rooted in common sense. These volumes aim to address these complex issues and broaden the perspective from which the schooling phenomenon is analysed to better understand the school and its many pasts.

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