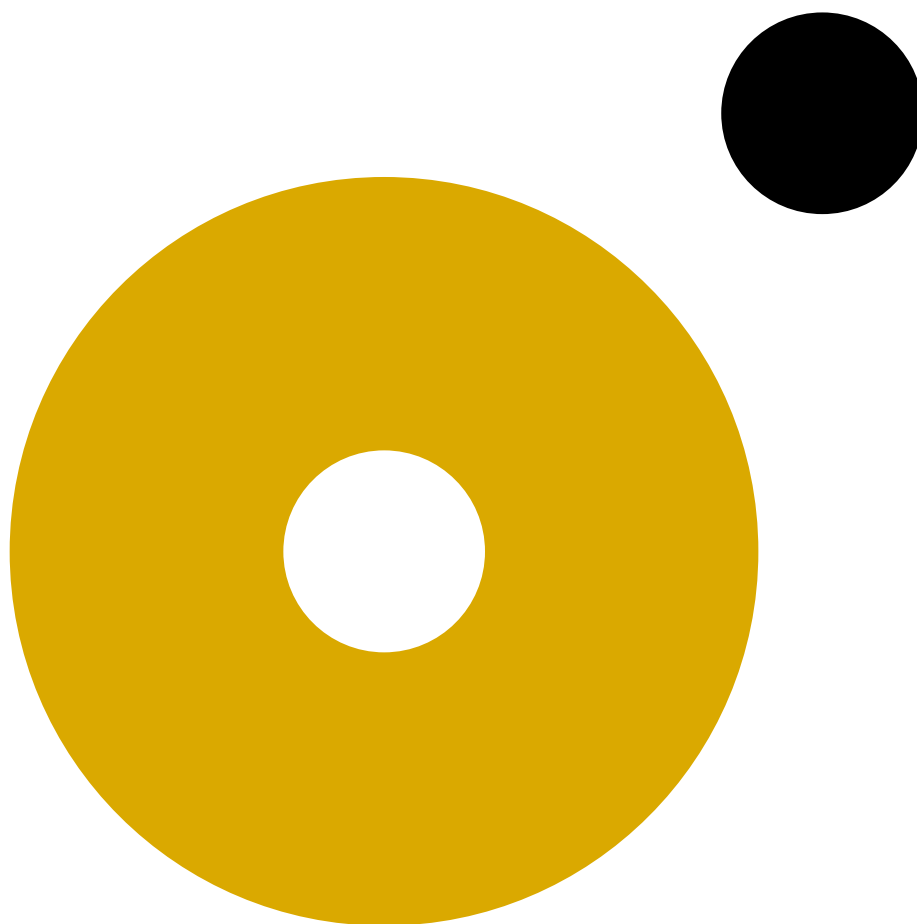


MEMORIA **SCOLASTICA**



The School and Its Many Pasts

edited by Juri Meda, Lucia Paciaroni and Roberto Sani



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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, stereotypes 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. Devoid of 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 rituals»¹.

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, Italians' 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, memories, 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 themes 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.memoriascolstica.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 Bandini) for the project "School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation (Italy, 1861-2001)", coordinated at national level by Roberto Sani of the University of Macerata⁵.

¹ G. De Luna, *La Repubblica del dolore. Le memorie di un'Italia divisa*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2015.

² P. Gabrielli, *Anni di novità e di grandi cose. il boom economico fra tradizione e cambiamento*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2011.

³ J. Meda, *La memoria della scuola tra rappresentazione collettiva e uso pubblico del passato*, in S. Polenghi, G. Zago, L. Agostinetto (edd.), *Memoria ed educazione*, Lecce, PensaMultimedia, 2021, p. 30; A. B. Escolano, *Más allá del espasmo del presente: la escuela como memoria*, «História da Educação», vol. XV, n. 33, 2011, pp. 10-30.

⁴ J. Meda, A. Viñao, *School Memory: Historiographical Balance and Heuristics Perspectives*, in C. Yanes-Cabrera, J. Meda, A. Viñao (edd.), *School Memories. New Trends in the History of Education*, Cham, Springer, 2017, p. 2.

⁵ R. Sani, J. Meda, *School Memories between Social Perception and Collective Representation: an Innovative Research Project with a Strong International Focus*, «History of Education and Children's Literature», 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 school's "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 vast, and by no means circumscribed, universe that is memory. Indeed, on the contrary, memory studies are currently being further expanded.

To use Patrizia Violi's incisive summary, our epoch is «obsessed and permeated by the thought of memory». Beyond the aspects investigated by cultural studies on memory and its relationship with history, in recent years, again in Violi's words, «the 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

⁶ Yanes-Cabrera, Meda, Viñao (edd.), *School Memories*, cit.

⁷ Please refer to the page on the portal, where you will find the updated list of publications originating from the project <https://www.memoriascolastica.it/le-nostre-pubblicazioni> (last access: 10.03.2023).

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 past»⁸.

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 intertwined, contradictory and confusing way»¹⁰.

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 completely unbalanced towards memory, which ostensibly, but only superficially, seems to be able to respond more effectively to the processing of the past.

Thus, with the complicity 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 understanding 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.

⁸ P. Violi, *I paesaggi della memoria. Il trauma, lo spazio, la storia*, Milano, Bompiani, 2014, p. 15.

⁹ B. Bonomo, *Voci della memoria. L'uso delle fonti orali nella ricerca storica*, Roma, Carocci, 2013, pp. 32-38; C. Pavone, *Prima lezione di storia contemporanea*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2007; M. Halbwachs, *La memoria collettiva*, Milano, Unicopli, 2001, pp. 123-66.

¹⁰ M. Flores, *Cattiva memoria. Perché è difficile fare i conti con la storia*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2021, p. 107.

¹¹ G. Bandini, *Tempi duri per la storia. Il contributo della Public History of Education alla consapevolezza delle nostre complesse identità*, in G. Bandini, S. Oliviero, M. Brunelli, P. Bianchini, F. Borruso, *La Public History tra scuola, università e territorio. Una introduzione operativa*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2022, pp. 95-110.

The increasing focus on memory, however, as we have mentioned, also implies the growth of *memory studies*, and thus the emergence of new historiographical perspectives.

The “Educational Memories on Video” (MEV) database, as we shall see in shortly, was created precisely in an attempt to respond to the need to develop new approaches to making educational history and, at the same time, to offer a glimpse into those aspects of everyday school life that are difficult to detect with traditional sources.

3. *The “Educational Memories on Video” database*

The MEV database, an integral part of the *memoriascolastica.it* portal, currently contains almost 300 video interviews, including school and childhood memories of ordinary people, as well as workplace memories of teachers, educators, headteachers and educational directors¹².

The video testimonies were produced by students, volunteers and researchers from the University of Florence and then uploaded to YouTube by the interviewers. The University’s research team then incorporated the testimonies into the *memoriascolastica.it* portal and catalogued and indexed them according to pre-established parameters, with the help of a software programme, *Mnemosine*, specially created (and patented) by the national research group coordinated by the University of Macerata¹³. Finally, each memory is accompanied by a descriptive sheet, also drafted by one of the team members. All the material is open source.

The interviews vary in length from 30 minutes to over two hours and average 50 to 60 minutes. The topics covered focus on everyday school life, material conditions and relationships between pupils, parents and teachers.

With regard to the quantitative distribution among the various types of video testimonies, out of all the resources, school and childhood memories currently represent the overwhelming majority compared to other categories. School testimonies covering the period from the 1960s to the 1980s are the most prevalent overall.

As for the geographical location of the eyewitnesses, i.e. their birthplace or place of residence, this is mainly concentrated in Tuscany (of which Florence is, indeed, the capital), with a few cases in other parts of Italy.

Among the many issues addressed by the eyewitnesses, it is worth mentioning at least three: the processes of modernisation in Italy that form the backdrop to school memories and the very perception of school; the considerable social recognition of the role of teachers that seems to populate the memories of many of the eyewitnesses; and the

¹² G. Bandini, S. Oliviero. *Memorie educative in video*, Vol. I, Firenze, Edizioni Forlilpsi, 2021; G. Bandini, S. Oliviero, *Memorie Educative in Video*, Vol. II, Firenze, Edizioni Forlilpsi, 2022.

¹³ P. Alfieri, G. Bandini, A. Barausse, C. Covato, A. Debé, C. Ghizzoni, C. Lepri, L. Levantesi, J. Meda, C. Meta; M.C. Morandini, S. Oliviero, R. Sani, F. Targhetta, G. Zago, *Mnemosine. Historical Open Data Management Software*, 2021; Patent Number: D0000150490.

theme of punishment, often recalled as a natural and integral element of the curriculum, especially between the 1950s and 1970s. We shall return to this in a moment.

Of particular interest is the use of photographs taken from the interviewee's family album, or other objects kept by the eyewitness, as memory triggers; photos and objects filmed by the cameras and captured in the video testimony thus become further sources on which research paths could be built.

In terms of methodological aspects, it is worth highlighting the intergenerational relationship between interviewer and interviewee sparked in each video interview – a relationship that, beyond the content collected, has thus also taken on an educational value¹⁴.

Ultimately, the MEV database, as mentioned above, has therefore taken up the challenge of renewing approaches to, and languages of, history. Moreover, it has opened up new historiographical horizons by presenting previously unpublished school memories¹⁵.

Indeed, MEV stems from a research project that emphasises, first and foremost, the aspect of engagement, which we have seen to be a highly sought-after and emerging social need. This active participation involves both the researcher and the non-academic public, who are free to access sources thanks to open-access digital technology. Moreover, the participatory approach is also evident from the active role attributed to the interviewees (and the eyewitnesses), who retain the intellectual property of their videos, which are uploaded to YouTube through their accounts. While this method of collecting and storing video interviews certainly does not fulfil all the requirements that the professional archiving of sources would entail, it is undoubtedly useful from a technical and manageability point of view, as well as being beneficial in terms of the interviewer's active participation in the research.

As mentioned above, the MEV project is undoubtedly helping to open the school's "black box", allowing us to take a closer look at some of the practices of everyday life that only memories can restore. In other words, the "Educational Memories on Video" database not only provides a consistent and continuously updated archive of individual memories, but also offers the opportunity to gain an overview of certain phenomena that defined many people's school experience.

Analysis of the sources stored in the MEV suggests various avenues of research that may contribute to supplementing the history of schooling, which is event-based or predominantly reconstructed from legislative sources.

In the following pages, however, we will focus on some reflections on the relationship between stereotypes and memories collected in the MEV and in particular, as Juri Meda has incisively observed, «to define how the present looks at the past and interprets or reinterprets it». «School memory», Meda continues, «does not interest us merely as a

¹⁴ P. Clemente, *La postura del ricordante. Memorie, generazioni, storie della vita e un antropologo che si racconta*, «L'ospite ingrato», II, 1999, pp. 65-96, <https://www.ospiteingrato.unisi.it/la-postura-del-ricordantememorie-generazioni-storie-della-vita-e-un-antropologo-che-si-raccontapietro-clemente/> (last access: 10.03.2023); D. Demetrio, *Pedagogia della memoria. Per se stessi con gli altri*, Roma, Meltemi, 1998.

¹⁵ G. Bandini, *Educational Memories and Public History: A Necessary Meeting*, in Yanes-Cabrera, Meda, Viñao (edd.), *School Memories. New Trends in the History of Education*, cit., pp. 143-156.

channel to access the schools of the past, but as a key to understanding what we know today or believe we know about schools of the past and how far what we know corresponds to reality, or whether our understanding is merely the result of prejudices and stereotypes that have become ingrained in the common sentiment, and difficult to uproot»¹⁶.

Let us try, then, to trace and examine some of these judgements and stereotypes in the individual memories collected in the MEV. In particular, we will refer to school and childhood memories.

4. *School memories and conventional wisdom*

Among the topics covered by the video interviews collected in the MEV, there are of course certain topics that lend themselves best to this discussion on prejudices and conventional wisdom.

Take, for example, punishment, a practice mentioned in many of the testimonies and to describe which memories are essential¹⁷. Beyond the singularities and variety of the punishments recounted in the various interviews, which could therefore even be indexed according to their specificities, what interests us most is the way in which these practices – the punishments – are remembered by the eyewitnesses. In short, we are interested in better understanding the perceptions that the eyewitnesses have of school punishments.

It is, above all, immediately clear that the individual's recollection is conditioned by the social perception of the punishments, based, however, on the era in which they occurred. Conversely, detached observations are rare. Indeed, the eyewitnesses recount the punishments they experienced themselves, or were subjected to by other pupils, as a routine part of everyday school life. They do so without stigmatising the negative aspects, but rather, on the contrary, recognising (or in some cases even extolling) their pedagogical value.

Although punishment was banned, it seems to have been an integral part of curricular activities until well into the 1970s and does not, therefore, always appear to be distinguishable in the eyes of the eyewitness. One eyewitness, for example, recounts an incident during the late 1960s when, after a spelling mistake, his teacher forced him to rewrite the word correctly a thousand times. However, the witness, who was eight years old at the time, merely filled several pages of his notebook with the word "convicted", without counting the total. The teacher did do the maths, however, and upon ascertaining that the child had only partially completed the task, increased the number of lines from one thousand to two thousand. It can hardly be said that the teacher was sympathetic... Nonetheless, the eyewitness recalls this episode without ever describing it as a punishment,

¹⁶ J. Meda, *Memoria magistra*, cit., p. 31.

¹⁷ G. Bandini, V. Francis, *Corporal Punishment at School and in the Family: a Long Process for its Complete Elimination*, «Rivista italiana di educazione familiare», vol. 16, 2020, pp. 1-9.

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 tears¹⁸.

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 routines, without implying any judgement. Indeed, there are video testimonies in which the punishment 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 tied 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 standards¹⁹.

In the eyewitnesses' 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 wrong», says one eyewitness, 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 uproot.

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 studious.

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

¹⁸ S. Oliviero, *1000 volte già. Memorie d'infanzia di Massimo Avanzati*, «Memorie Educative in Video», DOI: 10.53221/2073, Last updated: 31.12.2022, <https://www.memoriascolastica.it/memoria-individuale/video-testimonianze/1000-volte-gia-memoria-di-infanzia-di-massimo-avanzati> (last access: 11.03.2023).

¹⁹ L. Paciaroni, *Memorie di scuola. Contributo a una storia delle pratiche didattiche ed educative nelle scuole marchigiane attraverso le testimonianze di maestri e maestre (1945-1985)*, Macerata, eum, 2020; Chiara Martinelli, «Le querce non fanno limoni». *Mutamenti scolastici e sociali nelle testimonianze orali relative agli anni Cinquanta, Sessanta e Settanta*, «History of Education and Children's Literature», vol. 17, n. 1, 2022, pp. 517-536.

calling²⁰. The memories of this eyewitness, which are worth 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 historiography²¹. There is, on the other hand, an interesting passage in which Burberi describes the studiousness 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 isn't 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 Burberi 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 known²². 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 danno 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 schooling²³. The book makes

²⁰ Interview with Agostino Burberi, last updated: 24.11.2022, <https://youtu.be/Y3PeO2K1kGo> (last access: 10.03.2023).

²¹ A. Santoni Rugiu, *Don Milani. Una lezione di utopia*, Pisa, Ets, 2007.

²² P. Fasce, *Sul vanverismo pedagogico*, last updated: 03.12.2020, <https://www.educazioneaperta.it/sul-vanverismo-pedagogico.html> (last access: 11.02.2023); C. Raimo, *L'aula vuota di Ernesto Galli della Loggia è un libro pessimo sotto ogni punto di vista*, «Minima et Moralia», 12 June 2019, last updated: 12.06.2019, <https://www.minimaetmoralia.it/wp/altro/laula-vuota-ernesto-galli-della-loggia-un-libro-pessimo-punto-vista> (last access: 11.03.2023).

²³ L. Ricolfi, P. Mastrocola, *Il danno scolastico*, Milano, La Nave di Teseo, 2021.

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 thesis 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 Mastrocola and Ricolfi, but can be found, as we have seen, in numerous stances 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 model²⁴.

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 himself²⁵. In this video, Matteo Renzi explains his reform using a slate blackboard – an object that is in itself evocative, as it is imprinted in the school memories of Italians of all generations. Then, 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 she enjoyed.

Today, teachers have lost some of the social authority they had in previous years. My teacher, Eda, in the small town where I grew up, used to enter the bar, enter the club, and was respected by everyone, just like the pharmacist, the marshal or the parish priest, because hers was a figure that had social prestige. Today, that 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,

²⁴ S. Oliviero, *La scuola nella società delle gomitate (2010-2020)*, in S. Santamaita, *Storia della scuola. Dalla scuola al sistema formativo*, Milano-Torino, Pearson, 2021, pp. 228-270.

²⁵ *La Buona Scuola*, last updated: 13.05.2015, <https://youtu.be/yEM1Xnx4Uvs?t=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 stems from the fact that when you ask pupils to boycott the INVALSI [Italian National Institute for Educational Evaluation] tests, or threaten 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), imprinted 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 analyze 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 re-interpret 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 analyzed to better understand the school and its many pasts.

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