

Forgiving the factory: the trial of Marghera and the memory of twentieth-century industrialization

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the importance of memory for the study of de-industrialization and its consequences, focusing on the industrial site of Porto Marghera, the area surrounding the historical city of Venice, which can be acknowledged as a representative of those large-scale sites of heavy industry whose rise and subsequent decline has marked the history of Italian “Fordism”. By giving attention to the spatial dimension of memory and representation, this contribution points out the controversial relationship between the factory and the city that has emerged as a key feature of twentieth-century modernization in the Venetian area, triggered by an important trial held against the management of the main factory of the area. Eventually, it is argued that this “criminalization” of twentieth-century industrial history bears a profound analogy with the pattern of collective remembrance of war.

ABSTRACT

De-industrialization, Porto Marghera, Memory and representation

In 2002, a special issue of the *International Review of Social History* provided a broad framework for the historical study of de-industrialization.¹ Particularly Bert Altena's and Marcel van der Linden's preface and Christopher H. Johnson's introduction pointed to three desirable new directions for research in this field: first, to "integrate the concept of de-industrialization fully into the long-term history of economic globalism", thus exploring the phenomenon also before the Industrial Revolution; second, to understand that industrialization and de-industrialization are "two sides of the same coin" once they are considered in the global context; third, to investigate also the social, cultural, and political aspects of de-industrialization, instead of exploring exclusively its economic causes and outcomes.

Within this framework, this article stresses the importance of a further dimension, that of memory, for the study of de-industrialization and its consequences. In order to do so, it focuses on the industrial site of Porto Marghera, the area surrounding the historical city of Venice. This not only underwent a fundamental phase of industrialization during the twentieth century, but was followed by one of de-industrialization whose consequences are still largely felt. With its main chemical plant (Montedison, then Enichem) manufacturing at its peak almost half of the grand total of petrochemical production in Italy, it also stands as a representative of those large-scale sites of heavy industry whose rise and subsequent dismissal has marked the history of Italian "Fordism".²

Moreover, this contribution underlines the spatial dimension of memory and representation, by pointing to the controversial relationship between the factory and the city that has emerged as a key feature of twentieth-century modernization in the Venetian area. And it argues that the ultimate rejection of the "Fordist" industrial experience is linked to a process of dissociation between the factory, the workers and the local population, triggered by an important trial held against the management of the Enichem (the

¹ ALTENA, B. And VAN DER LINDEN, M. eds. *De-Industrialization: Social, Cultural and Political Aspects*, "International Review of Social History Supplements", 10, 2002, pp. 3-33. The quotations in the text are, respectively, on p. 3 and on p. 2.

² This has been attempted in my book, *Perdonare Marghera. La città del lavoro nella memoria post-industriale*, Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2007. This work arose from a group research project, "Memory and Place in the Twentieth-Century Italian City", based at University College London, and, from 2001 up to 2005, under the direction of David Forgacs. The research focuses on a series of case studies, carried out *in situ*, of five Italian cities or popular districts or areas of these cities, where there have been, in the course of the twentieth century, sudden and dramatic changes (bombings, earthquakes) or more gradual ones (industrialization, deindustrialization) or both. The overall aim of the research was to understand how, in all these cases, the inhabitants' memory interacts with the place, analysing the oral accounts as diverse, and sometimes conflicting, representations, significant in relation to the historical processes experienced by the places in question.

“petrolchimico”, as it was epitomized) for the death by cancer of hundreds of workers since the 1970s, due to the lack of security measures. Again, this shift from industrial relations to criminal law can be easily detected in cases that have recently occurred in other major industrial sites. For instance in Turin, the once prominent industrial city in north-west Italy, the death by fire of five workers in the Thyssen-Krupp metalwork branch would have had no consequence at all for the factory management responsible for the ill-maintenance of the machinery that caused the fatal accident, if the case had not been dragged in front of a jury that pronounced the management liable to conviction. Similarly in Taranto, the southern city with the largest petrochemical industrial plant in Italy, the intoxication of a very large part of the resident population with the poisonous emissions as a byproduct of the manufacturing process has been ignored for years, only to be pulled in front of public opinion by the local justice system, determined to treat it as a “crime”, and to punish it by closing down the factories.

Finally, this article stresses the fact that this “criminalization” of twentieth-century industrial history bears a profound analogy with the pattern of collective remembrance of war. Indeed, since the memory of the factory follows a pattern that resonates with the processing of traumas,³ a comparison can be made between the memory of the factory and the memory of war. This might also be considered as an ironic and untimely overturning of the visionary metaphor of the worker-soldier forged by Ernst Jünger in the 1920s.⁴ Indeed, extensive research has recently taken place that puts the relationship between labour and war in historical perspective.

The local historical background

The plan for a Greater Venice dates back to the early 1900s. It foresaw a strategy of “dual” development aiming at setting up heavy industry linked to the port in the coastal area of Bottenighi, west of the Mestre-Venice railway line, where Porto Marghera is now situated. The envisaged increase in heavy industrialization of the mainland was expected to attract traffic for the port activities and the railway lines in a way that industry would be kept away from the historic centre of Venice. The latter would specialize in commercial activities, the strengthening of the structures catering for tourism – like the big hotel chain Ciga founded in 1904 – and cultural initiatives such as the

³ See PETRUNGARO, Stefano. “A scuola di trauma, in Jugoslavia e poi”, *Passato e Presente*, 69, 2006, pp. 75-98.

⁴ JÜNGER, E. *L'operaio*. Parma: Guanda, 2004, (or. ed. *Der Arbeiter. Herrschaft und Gestalt*, 1932)

Biennale d'Arte and the Film Festival at the Lido, accentuating its museum-like and “anti-modern” character and therefore its reduction to a prestigious scenario for the financial, touristic and cultural activities of a cosmopolitan clientele. This dualism actually entailed a close interdependence and hierarchical organization of both elements: for without the tertiary-museum-touristic plan for the historic centre, the functional concentration of a heavy industrial site on the mainland – separated from the historic city but strategically subordinated to it – would not have played such a pivotal role in the twentieth-century Venetian history.⁵

Porto Marghera's birth certificate was signed during the Great War, in the summer of 1917, with an agreement between public institutions – the State and the Municipal Administration of Venice – and a consortium of industrialists and bankers. The latter, under the name of the Company of the Industrial Port of Venice, was presided over by the financier and electrical power industrialist Giuseppe Volpi, who established an alliance between the local patrician élite represented by the mayor Count Filippo Grimani and economic-financial interest groups of national standing, such as Volpi himself, the nationalist Count Piero Foscari, and the financier Count Papadopoli. Entrepreneurs enjoyed decidedly advantageous conditions in terms of generous tax concessions and substantial public funding,⁶ and therefore the leading figures of Italian industrial capitalism – Ernesto Breda's shipyards, the Ansaldo Company, Terni's smelting works, the Orlando firm of Leghorn, Piombino's steelworks and the Agnelli family – soon rushed in. In 1926, with Volpi now Mussolini's finance minister, the considerable tax concessions further increased. Moreover, the administrative area of “Greater Venice” was created, so that the mainland territories, Mestre, Marghera and the adjacent villages, were amalgamated with the insular historic centre, thus constituting the present boundaries.

The industrial port's rapid growth in productivity accelerated in the 1930s because of the “autarchic” policy of the Fascist government. The increase in production and port trade also enabled the Venetian docks to face the trade slump following the Great Depression without experiencing too many

⁵ See CHINELLO, C. *Porto Marghera 1902-1926. Alle origini del “problema di Venezia*. Venice: Marsilio, 1979; DORIGO, W. *Una legge contro Venezia. Natura, storia, interessi nella questione della città e della laguna*. Roma: Officina ed, 1973. For an overall approach to Venetian history see ISNENGHI, M. And WOOLF, S. eds. *Storia di Venezia. L'Ottocento e il Novecento*. 3 vol., Roma: Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, 2002.

⁶ See PETRI, Rolf. *La frontiera industriale. Territorio, Grande industria e leggi speciali prima della Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1990; PETRI, Rolf. *Storia economica d'Italia. Dal fascismo al miracolo economico (1918-1963)*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002. For other case studies see CERASI, L.; PETRI, R.; PETRUNGARO, S. *Porti di frontiera. Industria e commercio a Trieste, Fiume e Pola tra le due guerre mondiali*. Roma: Viella, 2008.

setbacks. Moreover, the imminence of the war occasioned a further increase in productivity, thanks to the demands of the national war-time industry:⁷ on the eve of the conflict, about 15,000 people were employed at Porto Marghera, three-quarters of them in medium-sized and large firms.

Although it was presented as a national “model” of industrialization, the creation of the industrial zone did not achieve all the declared objectives of the “Greater Venice” plan. In particular, there was a deep division between the territorial areas and their working sectors, starting with the labour market. As a matter of fact, the growth of Porto Marghera did not represent an employment opportunity for the Venetian working class; conversely, this witnessed the decline of the historic centre’s industrial plants and consequently began to feel alienated towards the big factory. The entrepreneurs preferred to hire peasant workers from the neighbouring villages – virtually unskilled, trained to carry out their tasks within the factory and prepared to accept the strenuous work pace and the strict internal organization – rather than turning to the island city working-class, that was more qualified and more skilled, but also organized in trade unions and often rooted in districts hostile to Fascism. Even when it came to recruiting technical and specialized staff, the entrepreneurs rather looked beyond the city itself, bringing workers in from other Italian regions.⁸

From a residential point of view, this non-integration had important repercussions. The municipal administration had heavily invested in the industrial zone with a view to alleviating the massive working-class unemployment which afflicted the historic centre; moreover, in order to reduce the chronic overcrowding of the island city’s most run-down districts, it had committed itself to setting up the neighbouring urban district of Marghera, planned next to the factories according to the Anglo-Saxon model of the “garden city”. However, Marghera in the 1930s never became the

⁷ See PELI, S. “Le concentrazioni finanziarie industriali nell’economia di guerra: il caso di Porto Marghera” *Studi Storici*, 1975, n. 1, pp. 183-204; BIANCHI, B. “L’economia di guerra a Porto Marghera: produzione, occupazione, lavoro 1935-1945”. In: PALADINI, G and REBERSCHAK, M. eds. *La Resistenza nel Veneziano, I, La società veneziana tra fascismo, resistenza repubblicana*. Venezia: 1984, pp. 163-233; PETRI, R. “Strategie monopolistiche e “Veneto industriale”. Porto Marghera alla vigilia della seconda guerra mondiale”. *Venetica*, 1984, n. 2, pp. 5-39; PETRI, R. “La zona industriale di Marghera 1919-1939. Un’analisi quantitativa dello sviluppo tra le due guerre”. *Centro tedesco di studi veneziani, Quaderni 32*. Venezia: 1985.

⁸ See PIVA, F. “Il reclutamento della forza-lavoro: paesaggi sociali e politica imprenditoriale”. In: PIVA, F. and TATTARA, G. eds. *I primi operai di Marghera: mercato, reclutamento, occupazione 1917-1940*. Venezia: Marsilio, 1983, pp. 325-463, and RAVANNE, F. “Migrazioni interne e mobilità della forza lavoro. Venezia e Marghera”. In: SAPELLI, G. ed. *La classe operaia durante il fascismo*. Milano: Giugiaro Feltrinelli Editore, 1981.

industrial suburb the authorities had envisaged, because the workers continued to live in the villages of the province: at Mirano, on the Brenta coast, near Castelfranco and Chioggia, within a radius of thirty to forty kilometres – the distance that could be covered by bicycle. The garden city would be therefore rather inhabited by shopkeepers, technical staff and white-collar workers, railwaymen and skilled workers often coming from other regions; its margins hosted a small working-class community of a few thousand people and a large village-ghetto – Ca' Emiliani – built by the municipal administration to house Venice's unemployed and the evicted tenants: an urban sub-proletariat with no links with the factory and which turned into a long-lasting, ultimate symbol of urban degradation. These divisions shaped the rifts between the factory and the city, work and residence, Porto Marghera and Marghera, and the mutual alienation of the different elements which contributed to the – sometimes even confrontational – development of Marghera, Mestre and Venice.

After the Second World War, the urban district of Marghera, together with the whole mainland area around Mestre, underwent a massive, rapid and disordered process of urban growth, which “exploded” in the 1950s and the 1960s. This made Marghera a mainly working-class district, albeit one with a remarkable social segregation among different areas. Meanwhile, the industrial port also expanded through the establishment of a “second zone” with primarily petrochemical plants. By the early 1970s, this industrial growth had spurred on the development of the mainland city and Porto Marghera had become an industrial colossus employing approximately 45,000 people, 15,000 of whom worked for *Petrolchimico*. During the great cycle of working-class struggles between the 1960s and the 1970s, it was one of the country's most mobilized industrial centres, provoking a deep impact on the townspeople in the surrounding area. In that period, between Mestre, its large “outskirts” and the factory, there emerged a veritable link which expressed itself through a political and trade union identity⁹.

Criminalization and trial

The production plants of Porto Marghera had a record of frequent accidents. Some were small, while others were very frightening for the resident population, as with the November 2002 discharge of a big “toxic cloud”, a phosgene leak that, if not immediately stopped, could have caused a disaster

⁹ See CHINELLO, C. *Classe, movimento, organizzazione. Le lotte operaie a Marghera/Venezia. I percorsi di una crisi. 1945-1955*. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1984; CHINELLO, C. *Forze politiche e sviluppo capitalistico*. Roma: Editori riuniti, 1975; CHINELLO, C. *Sindacato, Pci, movimenti negli anni Sessanta. Porto Marghera-Venezia 1955-1970*. 2 vols. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1996.

similar to the one occurred in 1984 at Bhopal, India, where approximately 8.000 people were killed. The number of accidents slowed down because of the progressive closure of important factories. However, even if the production was actually decreasing, the collective feeling against the industrial plants gradually increased.

The complex judicial case known as the “trial of the Petrolchimico” or the “trial of Marghera” proved to be a defining moment in this controversial process. After several years of hearings and alternating verdicts, it ended in May 2006 with the prosecution’s charges being upheld. The prosecution had claimed that the managers of Petrolchimico were directly responsible for the many deaths by cancer among the employees working with a particular chemical used in the production of plastics – VCM –, for although they had been aware of the dangers of those production processes since the 1970s, they had not implemented adequate safety measures. The point is, however, that the majority of the public opinion experienced the verdict not just as a part of a judicial proceeding, but as a reassessment of the cultural representation of the history of Venice in the twentieth century, viewed through the mechanism of the “criminalization” of the industrial economy. As one of the judges underlined, “These verdicts signal the crisis of the old production methods [...]. The emergence of Petrolchimico on the shores of the lagoon now reveals itself to be a *crime against humanity*”.¹⁰

The trial thus turned into a controversial mirror of self-identification for the Venetian population. The mechanism is well known. The public ritual of the trial, in fact, has been said to play a significant role in the formation of memories and collective identities, above all when the legal proceedings involve many individuals, and there are wide-ranging charges such as “environmental disaster” and “crime against humanity”. Starting with Hannah Arendt’s work on the Eichmann case,¹¹ “big trials” dealing with collective tragedies has been shown to produce dramatic clashes between parties and therefore, through the strong impact of the rhetoric utilized in the arguments, to provoke intense emotional response in the audience, resulting in the tragedy being turned into some “educational show”. The tragedy in question, through the reworking and re-presentation of the disputed facts in the hearing, contributes to establishing a collective memory of what has happened, so much so that it appears a “basic myth” of a shared identity.¹²

¹⁰ BENATELLI, N; CANDIELO, G.; FAVARATO, G. *Laboratorio Marghera tra Venezia e il Nordest*. Venezia: Nuovadimensione, Portogruaro, 2006, pp. 18 e 16.

¹¹ QUAGLIONI, D. “La cultura giuridica e le “incertezze” dei diritti umani”. In: CORNI, G. and HIRSCHFELD, G. eds. *L’umanità offesa. Stermini e memorie nell’Europa del Novecento*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003, pp. 469-488.

¹² Also consult OSIEL, M. J. “Politica della punizione, memoria collettiva e diritto internazionale”. In: BALDISSARA, L. And PEZZINO, P. eds. *Giudicare e punire. I processi*

In the case of the “trial of Marghera”, the projection of the responsibilities of the accused on to all the citizens remained implicit, if not in the judicial verdict, in the way it was perceived by local public opinion. Yet, a widely read book of interviews of the families of the deceased workers defined the episode as a “crime in peacetime”. In so doing, it unequivocally underlined the *criminal* nature of chemical production at Porto Marghera, suggesting that it should be dealt with by instruments of law and criminal proceedings. It also voiced the analogy with the expression “war crime”, making the *criminal* episode of the chemical works at Porto Marghera appear to be of such a scale and intensity that the destruction and divisions of a *state of war* could be evoked.

This *criminalization* of the factory goes hand in hand with the *victimization* of the workers. In published works, newspaper articles and television programmes, the workers were presented, above all, as victims. Or rather they are equated to “cannon fodder”, the waste of human lives on the battlefield as a consequence of the irresponsible exploitation of subordinates by military high commands. The reference to a wartime context is again explicit. The accounts of the hearings presented the images of the workers’ widows and children, especially their daughters. Through the gender distinction and the emphasis on women’s grief, the “families of the victims” – as they are frequently referred to in the media reports of dramatic events – a type of post-war scenario unfolded here. In these representations, persistently repeated by the media, a re-evocation takes place of the mass destruction produced by twentieth-century wars by means of the recurring war-time metaphor used to describe the “disaster” produced by industry.

The mechanism of victimization links the fate of the industrial workers with that of the resident population. Both have suffered from the devastating effects of the factory. This reveals a marked change of the cultural paradigm with respect to the twentieth-century cultural and political tradition of the workers: what was once claimed as an independent subjectivity, now ceases to be an autonomous group and simply merges with other participants in the episode. Workers are associated either with the company executives, responsible for the “criminal” management of the production process depicted in the “trial at Marghera”, or with the citizens, the victims of violence. The “victim paradigm” addressed by the anthropologist René Girard resonates in this way to see both the workers and the citizens as “victims” of the violence produced by the large factory, and by extension by the industrial

economy as such:¹³ the community that has been subjected to – and victim of – violence, perceives itself as *passive* and therefore as *innocent*. The self-representation as victims and the mechanism of collective victimization here imply a sense of self-exoneration and make the condition of passiveness to be perceived as close to the condition of innocence. In other words, workers can be considered innocent by the townspeople only as far as they are seen as victims of the factory; conversely they would be regarded as co-responsible in the crimes of the factory.

By virtue of these mechanisms, the whole history of twentieth-century industrial development and of twentieth-century industry in Venice is fundamentally re-written through the suffocating image of the *Petrolchimico* at Marghera – which, it should be remembered, is situated on the confines of the lagoon, outside Venice's historical limits. Not only is the relationship between the townspeople and the workers redefined, but the history of Porto Marghera as the driving force and generator of the years of the “economic miracle” and then as a symbol of gradual disinvestment in the last decades is reconsidered. It is turned into a local metaphor of Italy's type of industrial development and its impact on people's lives. Porto Marghera then stands, on the one hand, as the synthesis of the high costs of Italian modernization, and on the other as *the* most specific and controversial aspect of Venice's twentieth-century modernization.

Memory and place

There exists only one common theme in the different representations of the industrial zone. Everyone, including those who still work there, perceives the industrial zone as a *completed* cycle, as a story that has reached its conclusion. Porto Marghera is understood not only as being physically *delimited*, surrounded by boundary walls and the great arterial highways; it is also *delimited* in time, finished, like the Fordist cycle of which it was, to a great extent, the historical expression. The *segregation*, in time and space, makes the factory and the industrial zone a striking “event”, something that has spanned over several generations, but whose clear and well-defined contours separate it now completely from the rest of life. One can only remember

¹³ See also GIRARD, René. *Delle cose nascoste sin dalla fondazione del mondo*. Milano: Adelphi, 1983, pp. 17-68. Original: *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*. Paris: Grasset, 1978.

something which has happened and belongs to the past, and Porto Marghera, in this sense, is a past “event”.

Besides this single common feature, no shared memory emerges. It is virtually impossible to be in the district of Marghera without “seeing” or at least realizing that one is close to one of the biggest industrial complexes in Italy, among the most important ones in the 1900s. Yet there exists no common representation of its relationship with the adjacent industrial zone, on account of which it was created. To this day, Marghera has not emerged as the reference point of a collective history, one that could be celebrated through important moments and commemorative ceremonies. There exists also no institutional body responsible for keeping alive the memory of a homogeneous and collective recognition of Marghera’s role and thus make the industrial zone a ‘place of memory’ and of identity constructed by recalling the past.

For Marghera, then, the constructivist key of “collective memory” – which can be traced back from Maurice Halbwachs to the “places of memory” of Pierre Nora and Mario Isnenghi – is not appropriate and we are forced to turn to a less formalized dimension.¹⁴ Paul Ricoeur has noted that besides the two recognized dimensions of memory – the individual and the collective – there is a third one, concerning the concrete relationships of proximity between people that emerge in the course of time: “Between the two poles of individual memory and collective memory, isn’t there perhaps an intermediate reference level, in which there is a concrete exchange between individuals’ living memory and the public memory of the communities to which we belong?”¹⁵ In our case then, as Winter and Sivan have suggested, it is appropriate to enter the more informal sphere of this *communicative memory*, related to the recent past, not very formalized, and tied to generational experiences: half way between individual-psychological remembering and socially-defined remembering, between individual and collective memories, and sensitive to the importance of the act of remembering and its relational aspects.¹⁶ Through this theoretical tool we may therefore discern the existence of conflicting attitudes in defining the place Marghera, the differences in defining the sense of belonging, the different views emerging in different groups when referring to the same place.

¹⁴ NORA, P. (sous la direction de) *Les lieux de Mémoire*. 3 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1997; ISNEGHI, M. *I luoghi della memoria. Personaggi e date dell’Italia unita*. 2nd Edition. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2011.

¹⁵ RICOEUR, Paul. *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*. Paris: Seuil, 2000.

¹⁶ WINTER, Jay; SIVAN, Emmanuel. “Setting the framework”. In: WINTER, Jay and SIVAN, Emmanuel. eds. *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 10.

The absence of a shared, official, institutional memory of the place that represents Venice's industrial twentieth century, favours an attitude of oblivion, *forgetfulness*, alienation. Those who have lived close to the factories, don't know them; those who worked there, talk of them in different ways depending on their biographies and personal experiences; those who live in Marghera today experience it as a foreign body. One can sense a natural alienation between the different conditions; a form of *repression*, with regard to the industrial zone, that goes through all groups of residents. Different representations of the factories, by the workers and the residents, are implicit in their different experiences of it; yet, the repression of such a macroscopic phenomenon, so manifestly present in each person's life, needs closer examination.

In the process of identity formation, and particularly of those collective identities which define themselves through the dialectic of memory and forgetfulness, violence plays a fundamental role: "At the root of the pathologies of memory – Ricoeur insisted – one always finds the fundamental relationship between memory and history with violence."¹⁷ Once it has been segregated in space and time, the cycle of the Fordist factory is perceived merely as a traumatic event. And the appropriate solution for *trauma* is repression, that is as well one of the fundamental elements in the creation of memory/forgetfulness.¹⁸ Moreover, as those who undergo repression find it difficult to view themselves as active participants in a process/event, they are more easily prone to see themselves as being passive, as those who have merely undergone the experience. They are its victims.

Divided memories

Violence, trauma, victim, repression. It is at this point that this discourse evokes the analogy with another central event of twentieth-century history, i.e. war and the memory of war. Through this perspective, the contrast between the workers' memories and those of the residents becomes understandable: those who actively "participate" in war, those who fight, are also the ones who narrate it, recount it, and make it a fundamental element of memory; while those who have to bear it have a different perception. Again with the words of Ricoeur: "Victimhood and agency have always been and remain in problematic juxtaposition; they form a duality with different meanings in different historical settings".¹⁹ The analogy between the workers

¹⁷ RICOEUR, Paul. *Ricordare, dimenticare, perdonare. L'enigma del passato*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004, p. 72.

¹⁸ WINTER, Jay and SIVAN, Emmanuel. "Setting the framework". *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

and the soldiers, on the one hand, and the victimized “civilians”, on the other hand, should not, however, be taken too far. The correlation between soldiers and workers is a key element of the twentieth-century culture of war, when the use of vast armies and huge amounts of war materials made the experience of a total and industrial war comparable to the hard, forced “labour” in the trenches; but the opposite does not hold true, because the concept of working class stems from the left-wing tradition of politicization and internationalism.

We might rather want to refer here to the concept of “divided memory”, in the same way as it is used to distinguish between the memory of the partisan-combatants, that have created the public memory, and the private memory of the families of the victims of the Nazi massacres perpetrated in Central Italy in 1944. Different aspects of the conflicts operating in the sphere of memory then emerge, beginning with those between different dimensions and levels of memory: “official”/private; national/local; combatants/civilians; male/female; agents/victims. Here some interesting characteristic mechanisms can be observed. First, the *repression* of the efficient cause of the massacre: memories do not focus on the German troops who carried out the slaughter. Second, the shifting of the blame in accordance with the scapegoat-principle,²⁰ so that the responsibility for the massacre is not attributed to those who have carried it out, but to the partisans, whose actions are regarded as having unleashed the violence of the German troops, thus indicating not the effective agents, the Germans, powerful and alien, but people from the same village, closer and more familiar. Third, the “naturalization” of the violence wrought by the German troops, whose “cruelty” is displaced from the human sphere, ascribed to the state of nature and so “removed from the realm of moral judgement”.²¹ The latter is the paradigm of the *innocence* of the victim, whose existence belongs to the natural order of things, which has been overturned by the senseless intervention of those who have unleashed the violence:²² as Eric Leed has observed, “one should not yield to the natural identification with these victims. In fact, for many, their wounds exempted them from any moral obligation, becoming a source of innocence, a means by which many felt

²⁰ CONTINI, Giovanni. *La memoria divisa*. Milano: Rizzoli, 1997, p. 210 sgg. Contini refers to GIRARD, René. *Le Bouc émissaire*. Paris: Grasset, 1982.

²¹ PORTELLI, Alessandro. “Lutto, senso comune, mito e politica nella memoria della strage di Civitella”. In: PAGGI, L. ed. *Storia e memoria di un massacro ordinario*. Roma: Manifestolibri, 1995, pp. 85-104.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 90-95

relieved of any responsibility about these events which had caused their sufferings”.²³

It is necessary to reflect on the association of the victim and the witness in the procedures to validate our knowledge of the past. Through their own pain, those who have suffered violence testify the truth transmitted by memory. However, this entails a fundamental weakening of one of the most important assumptions about the reconstructive nature of memory in historical research – the renouncement of a merely “realistic” view of the analysis of eye-witness’ accounts, in order to frame them in the conversational and pragmatic context in which they are formulated. Entrusting the transmission of truth to the witness/victim results in a clash with the principles of historical research that has rightly attracted attention.²⁴ Moreover, the victim’s redemption is necessarily accomplished through a mechanism that can render justice – a trial – and through an act that can erase the evil – forgiveness.

Forgiveness

The characteristic features of the twentieth-century modernization of the lagoon regional capital and the phases of the urban and industrial development of the metropolitan city originated in the controversial relationship between the factory and the city – experienced by the inhabitants and the workers alike – and its repercussions on memory. From the very beginning, division and alienation have emerged as the fundamental elements by which the inhabitants and the industrial world represented the “place” Marghera. This feature was temporarily overcome during the years of the full “Fordist” development, because of the key role played by the factory in providing employment and giving the place an identity. However, an increasing repression and hostility again emerged starting with the period of the factory’s decline.

Considering the spatial dimension of memory and representation has enabled us to decipher the nuances, divisions and conflicts that emerged in the construction of identity. Marghera does not appear to be a “place of memory”, a reference point of a shared history capable of triggering processes of identity recognition based upon the reconstructive nature of a community’s collective memory. Conversely, Marghera seems part of a “transmitted”, unofficial memory, that has different meanings for each generation, gender, social class and individual; it stands between forgetfulness and memory, but is

²³ LEED, Eric J. “La legge della violenza e il linguaggio della guerra”. In: LEONI, Diego and ZADRA, Camillo. eds. *La Grande Guerra. Esperienza, memoria, immagini*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 1986, pp. 21-22.

²⁴ WIEVIORKA, Annette. *L'Ère du témoin*. Paris: Hachette, 2002.

characterized, for everyone, by the spatial delimitation of the factory. The latter makes it remain constantly aside from the life of the inhabitants, hidden behind enclosing walls, separated by impassable boundaries – “a world in itself”, “a city within a city”, “like going to Mars”.

The spatial segregation of the factory results in the perception of industrial history as something that has come to an end. Something, also, that is to be repressed as a trauma, naturalized as a disaster and personified as a source of violence. At “the time of the factory”, represented as “war-time”, the personified factory exercised its violence on civilians. In turn, this discourse triggers the mechanism of simplification and displacement from which the “divided memory” stems, through the identification of the agents of violence not with those who are responsible, but with the closest and most visible participants: the workers. Likened to soldiers, the latter accept for themselves the role of “scapegoats” for the redemption of the civilian victims, who protest their innocence. The metaphor of war-time and the “victim paradigm” acts throughout the whole work of memory and fundamentally affects the representation of the present. Through the sustained impact of the “Petrolchimico trial”, the analogy with the war-time context manifests itself both as an impetus towards the criminalization of the industrial episode and as a “culturalization” of a judicial episode that therefore comes to operate as an “educational show” producing a basic myth of identity.

In this case, identity works through the equation of the workers with the townspeople as victims of “crimes of peace”, chemical disaster and environmental pollution. Only as victims of the factory can the workers recover the innocence and establish a communication with the townspeople; conversely, they would be viewed as responsible for the harm produced by the factory, and thus condemned together with it. This is a major change in the representation of work and its social function, one that has emerged at the perceived end of the industrial “modernity” in the Western world and that retrospectively overturns the perception of the whole of twentieth-century culture.

Throughout the trial of Marghera, the escalating spiral of criminalization and victimization surrounding the factory raised the problem of the resolving mechanism that could “render justice” for the “crime of peace”. A reconciliation between the factory and the city through the decommissioning of the industrial zone seemed then the only way to achieve it. However, we believe that the mechanism of “resorting to the law” and the related perspective of reconciliation should be avoided if this episode is to be understood within the historical context in which the representations are rooted, therefore pointing at the very concrete and material peculiarities of the twentieth-century modernization of the lagoon city.

Legal mechanisms necessarily entail a judgement of the past and therefore an ethical project of using the past in the present. Reconciling the divided memories and the contrasting representations regarding the relationship between the factory and the city, would mean to hypostasize and perpetuate the rejection of the industrial past and to “normalize” the unusual nature of industry in the lagoon by equating it to development of the whole surrounding north-eastern Italian region. Conversely, it seems more appropriate to remain in the sphere of the “irreparable” – the event which has occurred in the past and cannot be modified in the present, being bound to its own irreducible temporality.²⁵ For it is only if we approach the divided memory as a trace of a specific relationship with twentieth-century industrial modernization in Venice-Marghera that we are able to narrate its contradictions and developmental costs, and how they have impacted on people’s lives.

²⁵ “It will never be possible to understand forgiveness without realizing the importance of this being-past, of a being-past that never let itself be reduced, modified or framed into a past present or a presentable and changeable past. It is a being-past that does not go by, so to speak”. My translation from DERRIDA, J. *Perdonare. L'imperdonabile e l'imprescrittibile*. Milano: Cortina Editore, 2004, p.51. Original: *Pardoner. L'impardonnabile et l'imprescriptible*. Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2004. In this text, Derrida addresses Vladimir Jankélévitch’s arguments, presented in the pamphlet *L'imprescriptible* in the context of the debate on the prescription of Nazi crimes in France in the early 1970s. In this way, he refused the sequence of the admission of guilt, expiation and reconciliation that is implicit in the request for historical pardon, and advanced the idea of unconditional and unrequested pardon. Thus he accepted the logic of “hyperbolic ethics”, which “would conversely entail that pardon, even for the most radical of evils, is given when it is neither demanded nor deserved. Pardon therefore becomes meaningful [...], it becomes able to pardon only when it is called to do the impossible and to pardon the un-pardonable”, p. 46.

