

Foreword

With this *Quaderno* the Milan Group ventures into a new territory. After four volumes centering on the American and French revolutions and their long aftermaths – especially in the minds, historic imaginations and civic feelings of the populations involved – we found ourselves in 1996 in self-interrogation. The historian as such became at last a theme, pressed upon us by our own experience as a group. Meeting every two years to discuss change in history (the revolutions, the order, the memories) and to show forth the change in ourselves as we lived the complex decades that closed the century, we could not but note that – as an Italian singer had militantly declared some years earlier in a tune much favored by young protesters of the time: “History is us”.

A sobering and exhilarating thought. But one easily elided with “We are the champions, my friend”. To the chagrin of some of us, the title “Historiography; Practitioners and Public”, which was meant to put the “public” in tandem with the “practitioners” as parenthetical producers of “historiography” (with perhaps even a slightly self-deprecatory undertone hinting at “adepts” reaching for the defence of expertise and proper procedure to lord it over the “secular”) was taken as an invitation to look into what practising (professional) historians have said about “the public” or “done to” it. The public elaboration of history by word of mouth, multiple individual acts, convictions lying between mentalité and conscious elaboration, that we might call civil or societal, has only timidly come into view – though all of us, practitioners though we may be – participate in its making, too.

Indeed, when it becomes persistent enough to overcome “real” history, we dignify it with the name of “myth” and study it as cultural anthropology, often ending up subsuming cultural history into what in Italy was once called “usage and custom” and, even worse, “folklore”. That is not to say that “popular history” (sometimes more smartly called “vernacular history”) has not been re-discovered. It has indeed: but I have not noticed its being treated as if its shape and content included in any real way the practitioners and historiography. It seems very like the “us” is always only “some few” with a residual – large – “them”.

So what is the practitioner’s role? What is a historian’s responsibility? And what, also, can the public teach the practitioners? Are the strongly material ways in which ordinary people bring history with them

from the experienced present into a later future then only commemoration – and thus anecdote and ritual – or are they a warranty of the past’s persisting, physical, pertinence?

Are the relatives and friends who continue after a quarter of a century to leave objects at the foot of the Vietnam wall on the Washington mall and run a pencil line into the engraved names only “vernacular”, folk, anecdote - or are they expressing a historical view of that war, those who fought in it and the role of government? What about the middle class Lombards who, during the Risorgimento, burned their unit flag and drank the ashes in a glass of wine rather than have it captured by the Austrians? A romantic anecdote only, or were they – brought up in a Catholic country, facing Catholic enemies – engaging in an embodiment whose implications are historiography of some interest? Is what is called “testimony” perhaps, by the very selectivity of what is recalled – testified –, also a form of historiography, if the practitioner is able to understand it (as friends, relatives and descendants have always done)?

In a very stable, or even largely immobile, society it seems more feasible to speculate on such questions – surely E.P. Thompson did so in some sense when he discerned the presence of elements from the English Revolution in the working class in formation in early industrial Britain, though even he and his followers used such glimpses more as signs of continuity and process than as a form of historiography in themselves; as tools for the practitioner. Was there, in fact, no elaboration, no evaluation? Are we in the presence of the intellectual equivalent of the dna patterns through which real millennial – historic – presences act biologically in the fellow next door and in ourselves. History is *us*?

In a multimedial era, when both practitioners and public live in the same flow of words, images, impressions which, in private and in public, engage mind and senses in new quantitative and technical interactions, thinking and speculating about historiography and its formulators and purveyors is much chancier. And, I sense, the distinctions and the boundaries between you and me practitioners and you and me public are vaguer than they were and fading fast – how many of us find history being pushed out of “modernized” European curricula as irrelevant or part of sociology or international relations or the “science” of politics? Ancient History went, Mediaeval History went, Modern History is slipping, Contemporary History often means ten years ago (perhaps even five years ago). History is dizzyingly us, even as this menaces to make it invisible.

One is tempted to echo the convinced but problematic gesture with which my cousin Louie, who worked at the GE and had done Junior High in the 1920s, took a visiting European friend of mine to see Salem in the early

sixties. Drawing up finally, after long meanderings, before the House of Seven Gables, uncertain whether Hawthorne was one of the witch people, a character in a story or a writer – but game – he waved towards the building and declared: “OK. There’s a lot of history over there” and stepped back as if to add, “go to it, fella”. And, unvoiced, perhaps, as well, “formulate it for me; give me words to hold together what I see and ‘know’ ”.

Even a distracted look around us cannot but show the need to indeed “go to it”, to give us an image, words; to “grab” and hold history. A lack of historiography that speaks up and speaks out on lived realities, on “us” over time and in the various ways and places “we” lived/live/propose to live (“What will our posterity say of our actions here?” the American revolutionary generation asked itself, accurately viewing its living as history in the making) has made it easy for the post World War II policies of the prevailing nations and systems to abound in missed and unnoticed possibilities and gives us as practitioners and public scary signs of a future fraught with suffering, hatred and aggression that might have been at least in part avoided.

The first sections of this *Quaderno* are therefore devoted to reflections by practitioners on themselves – “The Responsibilities of an Historian” (or, for Gildea, of “the historians”) and “The Stakes of Historical Narrative”. The former was the title of the opening and closing Round Tables of the 1996 Symposium. As a practitioner, I find it interesting to notice that the opening Round Table went off as programmed – that is, the people who were to speak spoke as listed and an orderly discussion ensued. By the closing Round Table, things were very different: several participants were eager to restructure the programmed panel. The final on the spot formation included, besides Michel Vovelle (who had chaired the opening panel), David Brion Davis, Robert Gildea, Gabriele Ranzato and, as participating Chair, Paolo Viola. Interestingly, scholars dealing with the 18th century were the more numerous – and both Viola and Gildea had been engaged in the development of concepts rising in the French revolutionary period, though Gildea, as the two reflections included here show, was moving into the study of attitudes in contemporary France. Ranzato is a specialist on the Spanish Civil War – an area of great tension as regards the responsibilities of historians. David Brion Davis’ interests are in the questions regarding slavery in the entire Atlantic area and in the broader one of the defense of civil liberty.

Unfortunately for us, the acoustics of the room where the Round Tables were held were so bad that the registrations defied all attempts over several years and by several people, to transfer the sessions to paper. And, with the thoughts of the panelists, those of the discussing public of their

peers were also lost. Davis later published a version of his remarks elsewhere; Vovelle became ill and, after several attempts to recall the passion of the moment, regretfully decided it would not do. So the history of ourselves as a Group shows how slippery data is. What is the authentic version of the two Round Tables: the program (available still on paper and in the on-site “archive” reproducing it)? The vague memories of those of us who were there? The few texts gathered here (and set in a different order, as well as being all placed at the beginning of the volume)? Choose your authenticity. Or, if you were not there or cannot remember, take the one offered here and do a bit of de-structuring on your own to find a footing you feel secure.

In the formulation you find here the Round Tables become three reflections, one of which written some years later. The second section, entitled “The Stakes of Historical Narration” is homogeneous by theme, but not by time, place or scholarly discipline. It moves from the theoretic to the empiric – in the case of Isaac within the same essay and with the author fully included in the first person – and attempts coordinated reflections on very early language and self-views with quite recent ones (Jansen and Pompejano), a problem Wahnich considers at a high conceptual level. Wahnich also puts in an impassioned defense of intuition as a moving force in proper history of the most professional sort. Is such an intuition of the importance of frontiers in American history a valid one, or has it simply furnished a myth as master narrative, Gregory Nobles asks in an early formulation of questions he would look into in the following years, and which he had come to caught up in the fascination of early maps and his own intuition.

History is not only us, but art as well as observation or science, heart as well as mind. And personal disposition. Myth and history and literature combine in complementary studies by Doyle and Delfino on the American South. Adamo views the views of the more fervent groups of the Puritan Revolution in a formulation that throws its mantle forward and turns the glance of contemporary masks backward (a different “use” or “understanding” of the period than that of Tawney, analysed in a paper by Recupero).

Since “the look of things” has come forward as an important element in historical narration, the next section takes the title, “The Body in Historiography”. As early as 1990, the Milan Group had touched on this theme with a paper by Dorinda Outram. Here you will find papers by historians (Ullmo and Sioli), art historian Widdifield and literary scholar Castillo, who, quoting historian Hayden White to the effect that “ history is

no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation”, examines the interweaving of “fact” and “narration” regarding slaves and a white mistress in Louisiana through a story by George Washington Cable which links back to Doyle and Delfino and, as writing on the body, to Ullmo’s workers and Sioli’s tattooed Indians. Nor is the body absent from Jansen’s pictograms narrating the story of a nation; Widdifield links here into the space between Jansen and Pompejano in her examination of the Indio as the assigned “body” of the nascent Mexican nation.

In our final section, “Images and Historiography”, Mechal Sobel’s examination of the inner world and ethos of the ex-slave artist, Traylor, shows us curious echoes of the idea that trees may be the origins of humans which we saw in the Mexican Indios and brings us to the body as represented by those who are “used” in Widdifield’s world or cancelled out in Ullmo’s. The difficulty of representing republican battle – the body securing liberty in its blood – watering, as Jefferson put it, the roots of the tree of liberty – is the subject of Plax’s study: what is a republican hero like? How can we distinguish one from the many? Should we? And, if not the commanding officers, what is the center of our representation and how is it distinguishable from a mere, casual, crowd? Washington was conscious of the problem when he pleaded with the Continental Congress to provide at least for hunting shirts, if conventional uniforms were impossible to give his soldiers the look of an army, to ensure respect from the enemy and consciousness and dignity in them.

But the body, as Dupuy reminds us, is also the body of the king, a representation, for a long period, of the nation itself and of the shadow of divinity. Killing the king thrust the body politic – the nation – into chaos, loosing all the bonds, which protected as well as constraining. Clothing the killing of kings in Shakespearian imagery distanced the fact, but heightened it as well by bringing it full into the mythology of Englishness. Somewhere, between the Shakespearian Plantagenets and the Tudors taking comfort and warning from their flaws and fates and the French king brought down by his, one English king had been beheaded and another erased from the present and future of a continent. What history did the artists and their patrons think they were offering in the images they made, and what history did their publics draw from the images observed?

There seemed no doubt to us that the next symposium would examine history and media.