The Construction and the Negotiation of Ethnographic Voices
Notes From an Italian Post-Industrial Area

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Abstract: *Oral sources vary according to their specific use in a particular social arena. In this respect, the ethnographic encounter is a context where significant discourses and narratives about the past are produced, both at the institutional and individual level. Even if less immediately evident, also written sources are the products of specific historical, political, and cultural agendas. This paper is intended as a methodological reflection on the socio-political construction of oral and written sources in the context of extensive fieldwork, carried out between 2008 and 2010, in a post-industrial area of the city of Milan, Italy known as Bicocca. Today, the University of Milano Bicocca, the Theatre Arcimboldi, CNR, and Siemens Italia, among others, occupy the site. However, until the 1980s, the same area hosted the Pirelli Industries, one of the major Italian plants for the production of plastics, tires, and cables. Even if the site has subsequently been transformed into a "technological integrated area", it is still permeated with both material and immaterial historical traces of its industrial past. I consider here the historical archive of the Pirelli Industries and my conversations with former unionists and workers of the Pirelli; I focus on the accounts of the years 1968-1969, also known as the "Second Red Biennium" or the "Autunno Caldo", an exceptional phase of two years of intense demonstrations and strikes. I explore both archival sources and personal accounts, in short: the plurality of voices that are part of the site's memory, past and present. My analysis will stress a specific methodological issue that is the need of a multidisciplinary approach in the context of my fieldwork research, given the malleability of the concept of memory itself and considering the fruitful collaboration between anthropology, oral history and the sociology of memory.*

Keywords: *Anthropology, Memory, Pirelli Industries, Working-class History, Archival Research*

1. Introduction

This article is intended as a methodological discussion towards the study of memory within anthropology. It is based on ethnographic and archival research in the post-industrial area of Pirelli-Bicocca in Milan, Italy. Memory has long been a topic within social sciences and anthropology makes no exception. The popularity of memory studies in the past century lies in the rapid transformations that have characterized modernity in a broad sense. Marc Augé (1992) aptly spoke of *surmodernity*, to underline the rapid acceleration of history and compression of space that undermine a sense of continuity between the present and the past (Zerubavel, 2003); others (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009) underscored the emergence of sophisticated technologies that assist social actors in their efforts to recall and to recount events and experiences, thus undermining their very own ability to remember; some (Beker, Beyene and Ken, 2000) linked the construction of the idea of memory with the notion of trauma; others (Olick, Robbins, 1999) argued that that the tragic events of the past century world history and the consequent need to deal with them were the reason for the boom of memory studies. The different disciplinary approaches to the studies of memory – delineated, for example, by Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy (2011) –made blurred and opaque the boundaries between fields of knowledge making and memory an object for different fields of research and studies (Radstone, 2000).

Memory is a complex subject matter: it is not only what is remembered or what is forgotten, but it is also the ways to remember and to forget (Cattel, Climo, 2002). As anthropologists, then, we are not only concerned with the contents of memory, past and present, but also with their construction by social actors through a variety of means and strategies. From a methodological point of view, then, the study of memory involves the accurate examination of multiple sources, numerous "ethnographic voices" (Comaroff, Comaroff, 1992). Because memory is volatile, consolidated, lost and recuperated, hidden and exhibited, anthropologists, their questions, their investigation techniques play a crucial role in the construction of memory. Daniel Fabre maintained that sources did not pre-exist any investigation; rather they follow it (Fabre, 1992). Moreover, Arjun Appandurai (1988) wondered how we, anthropologists, could construct our voices so that they could represent the diversity, the polyphony of voices heard during the fieldwork. For these reasons, plural and several "voices" should be examined.

Overall, I consider here two methodological issues: reflexivity on the part of social scientists, the ways they negotiate and produce themselves sources while attempting to collect data; the second is linked to the first and has to do with the

need for a multidisciplinary approach in the study of memory. I brake this article into three parts: first I provide information about the context. I present the Pirelli area, its most relevant historical changes and introduce some of my informants and research sites. Second, I illustrate the processuality of archival research and its relation with life stories critically discussing the assemblage of sources and the researcher's methodology. Ultimately, I introduce concept of narrated field. What kind of knowledge is produced in the ethnographic encounter of memory, documents, social actors and social scientist?

2.   The Post-Industrial Area of Milano Bicocca

Although an examination of the transformations of the Pirelli is beyond the scope of this article, I would like to briefly present the site to give a general idea of the places I visited to conduct fieldwork. The Bicocca is an area (around 700 thousand sq.mts) in the Northern outskirts of Milan. The area takes its name after the Bicocca of the Arcimboldi, a fifteenth century villa that was commissioned by the noble Arcimboldi family as a summer residence. Though hidden by thick vegetation, the Bicocca of the Arcimboldi is still visible from Viale Sarca and can be found on the list of the most important cultural buildings in the Lombardy region.

Today, the Bicocca neighborhood is the headquarters of several public institutions and private companies, such as The Università degli Studi di Milano Bicocca, the Centro Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR), the Arcimboldi theatre, a cinema and an exhibition space for contemporary art – the Hangar-Bicocca. Moreover, a range of commercial activities more or less directly linked to University such as libraries, copy shops, bars and restaurants could be found in the neighborhood. Therefore those who visit the neighborhood today will find themselves in front of a series of modern buildings built in perfect order. However, even in the architectural structures, it is possible to find some traces that testify to the recent industrial past of the neighborhood. In actual fact, the Bicocca had been the main headquarters of Pirelli, the Italian multinational, since 1908. Starting from 1975, with the industrial group's Reorganization Plan, the neighborhood was the theater of a progressive series of changes. From a practical point of view the main stages which have inaugurated these processes of transformation were: The approval of the Bicocca Project, the ratification by the Consiglio Comunale di Milano of the Change of the City Plan which defined the area as "an area for urban recovery". In a press conference in September 1985, Leopoldo Pirelli, the then president of the group, had announced that the spaces of the Bicocca neighborhood would become, over the years, an "Technological Integrated Area" that is a set of spaces destined to receive the so-called "advanced tertiary". During a walk on the neighborhood streets with Serafino Balduzzi[1], on a sunny afternoon of November 2009, starting from the Arcimboldi theatre and returning there after passing the houses of Borgo Pirelli and the building covering the cooling tower, he said: "It is hard for me to orient myself there, I don't seem to find any of the landmarks I used to see". The changes that interested the Bicocca neighborhood were the results of a project of urban transformation that involved its visual aspect. At another level of analysis, these transformations shed light on strategies of local government about the management of space and territory; as Luigi Mazza, professor in Urban Planning, underlined: "Bicocca is […] an example of the occasional, partial and unpredictable actions through which contemporary cities are transformed and of the dragging effects that limited and occasional changes may have on urban region in which they occur" (Mazza, 2003:10). The disorientation of Serafino Balduzzi from a geographical point of view led him to reconstruct his mode of orientation along the axis of time: "Do you know what happened here? -He asked me once arrived at the crossroad between of Viale dell'Innovazione and Via Piero Caldirola- "Do you know the battle of Bicocca?" (Serafino Balduzzi). The question posed by Serafino Balduzzi led me to reflect on the deep connection that characterizes the dimension of time and space and their role in the stories I was listening to and in the discourses about memory. "We should compare our memory to the night sky, look up on a clear night, in a dark place and see the stars that shine, pulsate slightly (...) mind! It's a trap! (...). You're not watching space, but you're watching time. Do you know when the light you are looking at started from there? The image you see? It left when Joanna the Mad was killing herself in Naples, while her husband was killed by her lover or during the Great Depression of '29. Similarly we can continue to see Betelgeuse even if it is gone, it is exploded… the explosion… we will even see that… not me, not you, but our extra-great-grandchildren… when? Not when it will happen but when we could see that image. Our way of thinking is done in the same way, we are full of ruins and remnants"(Serafino Balduzzi). The transformations and the density of the research field led me to examine, in their complexity, spaces and people. In the early stages of my research, in 2008, I was

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[1] Serafino Balduzzi was executive manager at Pirelli for forty years, he retired in 2002. "I didn't use to do stuff, I just watched others I used to deal with the Human Resources Management and with Labor Relations" (Serafino Balduzzi)".

interested in the biography of the neighborhood trying to find a research methodology that could shed light on the historical density of the neighborhood itself. Moreover, I was particularly concerned with the urban politics that have changed Bicocca both in the landscape and in its social composition. However, soon, I shifted my interest on the way in which these transformations were perceived by the former employees, workers and unionists of the Pirelli Industries throughout their life stories, the ways they presented their life and life-trajectories several years after the Pirelli had closed down and the area that once constituted their workplace had underdone significant changes.

Thus, my interest shifted to the production of that body of knowledge and to the processes that informed it, at a more historical and political level, and I began to combine empirical work with archival research. From there, I began to wonder what role I – myself- played in the production of those very memories that I was collecting, as I was unquestionably soliciting not only detailed accounts or going through hundreds of documents, but I was also soliciting a specific field. I call it "narrated field", because it no longer materially exists but is highly evoked through narratives.

3. Dusty Archives and life stories

My research began in the Historical Archives of the Pirelli Industry, in what seemed a legitimate place to investigate the past and its representations. Archives are projects; as such, they are selective and convey a specific message. For the purpose of my research, I was interested in investigating how the Pirelli Industries had represented themselves over the years. Viviana Rocco, who was working as an archivist and in the administration at the same time, urged me to consider the Pirelli Archive as a "current" archive, that stored administrative and bureaucratic documents. As Zanni Rosiello pointed out, the administrative documentation is in itself historical documentation; it does not become such with time (Zanni Rosiello, 2005). Other material that I was able to look into consisted of books on the history of the Pirelli Industry, accounting documents, photographic material about the Pirelli and its products. Most of this material seemed to suggest some sort of interest, on the part of the Pirelli, into preserving its own history, but left little or no space to actual social actors, those very individuals who were working at the Pirelli at that time.

I would like to add a further point about this segment of research. Archives are projects indeed; however their scrutiny might turn out to be a messy business. Zanni Rosiello for instance maintains that documents are often misplaced, misleading, and might turn out to be dead-ends (Zanni Rosiello, 2005). Between 2008 and 2009 for instance, the Pirelli Archive changed address three times, although within the same area, and the material was hard to trace at times. Overall, I was left with piles of chronological evidence and scarce testimonies about actual work within the Industry.

In October 2008 Viviana Rocco suggested I attend a conference titled "From 1968 to the Hot Autums: class-struggle, workers and their involvement at the Pirelli" and meet some of the former workers of the Pirelli. Their testimony proved to be a turning point in my research. From then on I began working with a network – albeit small – of informants and came face to face with a different account of past events, one that focused more on life stories and trajectories of individuals and groups. Overall, their testimonies seem to interact well with the information stored in the archives, that my new informants labeled "the patron's memory". On that occasion I had the opportunity to hear for the first time the words of Renzo Baricelli[2] that later published his testimony and that would become one of my key informants. His words helped me to enliven the story I had started to reconstruct through the Pirelli archival sources. "You imagine, perhaps for the young ones of today, it's hard, that a large factory was like a city, it had an identity, a collective history; if we speak about Bicocca: the opposition to fascism, the strikes of '43 and '44, and the deportations of hundreds of workers deported to the wards in the Nazi death camps, a large number of patriotic and partisan fighters" (Renzo Baricelli).

To work with life stories is to work with accounts of the past that are narrated and then collected in the present time and subsequently shaped into a monograph. As Portelli brilliantly maintained, "when dealing with life stories, scholars tend to focus on the word life, on the materiality of experience, actual and verifiable data. I like to stress the word story: events might indeed be verifiable but ultimately we are not dealing with experience and reality, but with accounts of events, which are a verbal construction through which those who narrate chose to convey a specific form to their lives". In this perspective, history is an account of events, and every narration is an interpretation of past events, filtered through the lenses of the present. Obviously, I do not want to make simplistic assumptions and I am aware that the study of life stories cannot always be subsumed within general social frames of memory. However, when writing one must acknowledge a certain degree of abstraction, as if one were to glue together the pieces of a mosaic. Such pieces might

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[2] Renzo Baricelli was the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) Italian Trade Union representative at the Pirelli Bicocca factory in the late '60 and early '70.

not be all alike, but their differences glue well together.

At another level of analysis one must consider the relation between anthropologists and their informants, which is based on a sort of silent pact. I chose to avoid the use of pseudonyms; instead, I always present people with their real names. These are institutions, define the social identity of a person and his/her action over specific life stories. Also, they seem to me more immune to time and space. The relationship I established with my informants did not suffer from any factual linguistic impediments. Indeed, we shared the same mother language. However, age difference led them to presume there would be a temporal and personal distance, and an overall disconnect that would make it hard for me to collect their accounts. For instance, let us consider the following fragment of ethnography, and excerpt from an early conversation with Vito Basilico, one of my key informants, former employee of the Pirelli Laboratory and a protagonist of the unions' struggle of the Hot Autums (Rimoldi, 2011). This conversation underlines well what he thought about my role as a researcher that he considered anagraphically inadequate to conduct research in this specific field of study. "I don't know though how a young person like you could understand our era, you continue talking, interrogating but it is difficult for your generation to understand our time. I, at your age…I don't understand why you young people aren't full of the desire to change the world. You don't even think of it because you are uninspired, you don't have any ideas, you don't see the future. Certainly it must be difficult for you because you are blind and it is difficult to imagine what you might do if you could see. We had an objective, maybe it was illusory, but it was there, now there isn't even an objective, not even an illusory one" (Vito Basilico).

In this specific case, my age and the consequent inclusion in the "world of the youngsters" made Vito Basilico question on several occasions the possibility that I could deeply understand his accounts and grasp the difference between their actions and my presumed inability to undertake political action. My long acquaintance with Vito Basilico proved fruitful and paved the way for a relationship of trust and respect. I often volunteered to help him with the transcriptions of some of his old interviews. At this point, he was able to engage in a different type of relation with me, and offer a more detailed account of his life and experience within the Pirelli Industry. Our renewed relationship opened new channels of communication and, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu (1994), a new market for the circulation of information.

4. The Narrated Field

From a methodological point of view, the knowledge of heterogeneous material is challenging at different levels. In order to represent the complexity of the situations that characterized my ethnographic fieldwork, I introduced the concept of narrated field. As I have shown, the reasons that led me to choose such category to describe my ethnographic experiences are different. Thus far, I described the ways in which my interaction with my research field led me to construct and negotiate a certain kind of narratives; I will now move to the contents of such narratives to show the specificity of the idea of the narrated field.

It seems important to emphasize that it is the narratives that emerge from the sources that I used that construct the narrated field. Indeed, these narratives, oral and written material and immaterial sources with which I interacted during the period of field research led me to construct and carry out a certain type of discourse on memory.

It is clear that, by carrying out a specific idea of social memory – narrated by several sources and reorganized into textual form by those who research, the kind of knowledge that will result will be incomplete; in fact, any discourse on memory cannot be unitary and fixed since, in some way, it reflects the fragmentation of the different sources.

First, the history of the neighborhood, its transformations that connected it to the rest of the city could represent this fragmentation. When passing by via Piero and Alberto Pirelli on a rainy afternoon and waiting for a few minutes as the cars drove by, Mario Danieli[3] underlined that the district had now become an integral part of the city: cars, buses, motorcycles traveled in and down the streets, even if before the area was encircled by factory walls and the only vehicles admitted were internal vehicles.

From this perspective, Fulvio Bella[4] told me: "First we must say that factory occupied the district site in its entirety, I remember it was almost like a fortress with the casemates, the sheds. Going in, the spaces were wide: even going from one department to another would take a while. To go from one door [entrance] to another to put up manifests we used cars since, just to cross the area, it took 10-15 minutes. Then there was also a place where trains, and even trucks,

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[3] Mario Danieli is a former worker at Pirelli Bicocca and militant of the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) Italian Trade Union.
[4] Fulvio Bella is a former employee at Pirelli Industries.

entered, so you can imagine the rows of trucks coming and going" (Fulvio Bella).

Reflecting in general terms on memory, I remember the first walk in the Bicocca area with Francesco Buratto in the summer of 2009. As I wrote on my fieldnotes: "I asked him if, along the path we were passing through, he could find some elements that reminded him of the neighborhood when there was only the factory. Francesco said that many things had been swept away, but part of the wall was still there, the shape of the buildings and the bridge that connects them are quite similar". Once arrived in front of the Arcimboldi theatre, Francesco Buratto told me that the sculptures in front of the theatre had a close relationship with the history of the neighborhood Bicocca and the Pirelli Industries.

According to Francesco Buratto, these five blocks of steel - sculpted by the artist Giuseppe Spagnuolo- were created with materials that had not been sold or transferred and that had been taken from the factory machineries. Francesco Buratto interpreted the sculpture as one of the many memory traces left but patron of the neighborhood.

When the Bicocca neighborhood enters into the reconstructions of life stories it tends to be identified with the factory itself, with the Pirelli and, more generally, with some of the significant issues related to working practices. It is important to underline that the collection and analysis of life stories is similar to accounts in general, as Jedlowsky pointed out when highlighting the constructed nature of narratives: "To tell a story is to open a world to the imagination. In this world real or invented things can be represented (a distinction not easy to make) but the point is precisely that such things are *represented*: they are not as present as the person is telling us or as the chair you are seated on" (Jedlowsky, 2009:8). These types of representations, therefore, contribute to create the narrated field.

Moreover, archival sources, written sources, are not to be considered as final results, since, as well as life stories and their narratives, are the products of specific historical, political, and cultural agendas. "To recover documents in our archive… where… I don't know how many materials there could be... I have the impression that we didn't stock it properly; we were not focused enough on making history, what a pity! It is a shame because… yes … it is a bit hard to say what it could be its use…it is useful to live, to be human beings, as well as having a conversation with someone (...) history is employed to fabricate life"(Serafino Balduzzi).

5. Conclusions

In this article, I showed, from a methodological point of view, how I constructed, negotiated and put together the sources, oral and written, which constitute the ethnographic materials, the voices of my research. Moreover, I showed the difficulties in dealing with archival sources and in collecting life stories and I highlighted that they may vary depending on the social arena in which they are used. In order to put together these heterogeneous materials, I introduced the idea of narrated field outlining its general features; it is solicited through questions, retraced through archival research and therefore evoked by the researcher. The descriptions of the job carried out at the Pirelli, the stories of oppression, alienation and transformation of destinies and landscapes emerged within documents and conversations, and helped depict a complex picture of a specific kind of memory, that of former workers and unionists at the Pirelli. The presence of the researcher is therefore crucial, as it is the researcher himself who merges together different sources and bodies of knowledge. When doing so, when recognizing his/her own presence on the field, the researcher faces the challenges posed by a heterogeneous corpus of information that requires different sets of tools, specific of other disciplines and must therefore connect reflexivity with the need for additional methodological tools.

In conclusion, this analysis shows that the knowledge of places and historical events is partial and mediated. This, therefore, is particularly interesting from the point of view of the study on memory, which, as said, is constituted not only by what is remembered or by the way it is revoked but also by what is forgotten and by the reasons why it is forgotten.

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