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Transnationalism and Universalism of the Memory Tourism of the Great War

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Abstract:

Thanks to the Centenary, a renewed interest has undoubtedly affected the landscapes of the memory of the First World War, moving away from the aims of past patriotic pilgrimages because it includes different perspectives. Over time, a broader and disenchanted view of the conflict has allowed a narrative of memory that also contains counter-memories and meets the different needs of visitors, in which the practices of commemoration and the duty of memory aspire to a universalist dimension. The article focuses on some findings of a field research aimed at analysing the existence of commemoration and remembrance practices in the memory tourism of the Great War in Friuli Venezia Giulia. One of the goals is also to explore how memory tourism can transform the collective memory of this war into a shared and participatory representation, overcoming national memory policies. The interviews highlighted general trends concerning the processes of individualisation of memory and growing post-national dimension, because a different awareness is present in memory mediators, influencing the same purposes of the memory tourism of the Great War, which is so anti-rhetorical and transnational.

Keywords: Collective memory, Identity, Memory tourism, Transnationalism, Great War.

1. Symbolised genealogies

Also called “emotion tourism”, memory tourism may be considered a sort of ethical tourism, rooted at the same time in collective sharing of the past and in individual emphatic attitude to understanding and remembrance. Places of memory embody the contemporary interpretations of the past, inspired by the loud universal call of “Lest we forget”, also leading to critical considerations on the responsibility to select, to include and exclude, to restore or destruct (Jansen-Verbeke, George, 2015). However, mass tourism has erased the distinction between visitors and possible descendants, forcing a critical rethinking about the valorisation and uses of places of memory, often difficult to interpret in their tragic

dimensions. In fact, the place of memory and memory tourism potentially make the tourist an heir in the “almost patrimonial sense” of who has a particular look at the places that refer to his relationship with past generations (Davallon, 2002).

The reflexions that follow focus on some findings of a field research¹ at analysing the existence of commemoration and remembrance practices in the memory tourism of the Great War in Friuli Venezia Giulia, Italian region profoundly marked by this war event and characterised by its nature of crossroads of cultures. In detail, the research investigate the ways in which the memory of the Great War is today proposed and transmitted to tourists, and how the experience of the visit may be significant from the emotional, cultural, social exchange points of view. The qualitative technique of in-depth interview has been employed to collect the opinions of 21 local actors, belonging both to institutional organisations and to voluntary associations, actively engaged in memory tourism. These local actors have the strategic role of mediators and facilitators in the dissemination and transmission of collective memory, therefore it was important to detect any difference between the two approaches and their central themes.

One of the goals of the research is also to explore how memory tourism can transform the collective memory of the Great War into a shared and participatory representation, overcoming national memory policies. Many studies and researches have already been realised about memory tourism on the Western front, even assuming a paradigmatic significance in memory studies, while a similar approach is practically absent as regards symbolic places in the context of transnational narratives. Thanks to the Centenary, a renewed interest has undoubtedly affected the landscapes of the memory of the First World War, moving away from the aims of past patriotic pilgrimages because it includes different perspectives (“our part” and “the enemy”; soldiers and civilians, etc.). Over time, a broader and disenchanted view of the conflict has allowed a memory narrative that also contains counter-memories and meets the different needs of visitors, in

¹The research “The Memory of the Great War in the Tourism Experience in Friuli Venezia Giulia (MEMTOUR)” was funded in 2019 by the DILL Department of the University of Udine, and carried out by Antonella Pocecco and Monica Pascoli.

which the practices of commemoration and the duty of memory aspire to a universalist dimension.

Making a risky comparison, one can mention a place of memory like the 9/11 Memorial & Museum in New York, which potentially attracts visitors from all over the world by its nature of memorial paradigm transcending any form of national and generational belonging, on the base of the so-called flashbulb memories². It was obviously unrealistic in our case study to refer to the individual experience to try to confirm the transnational and universal dimension of World War I memory tourism, rather the idea of symbolised genealogy (Candau, 1998) offers a useful interpretative tool.

The meaning that each individual attributes to the memories of previous generations allows him not only to conceive his own biography within a shared referential framework, but also to recognize himself in the cultural identity organized by this memory: “[...] safeguarding the memory of his ancestors, he becomes aware of himself” (*Ibidem*, p. 134). Collective memory does not progress in linear fashion, but can be disrupted, move back and forth across generations, and may be re-invented and re-actualised. Each generation remembers historical events from own perspective in order to satisfy own needs; collective memory may be interpreted with new meaning and according to different priorities by generations: it is the reconstruction of the past in the light of the present (Halbwachs, 1994; 1997). In the findings of the field research the concept of symbolised genealogy is confirmed, although with some specifications:

- Older tourists seem more interested in an in-depth discussion on the subject of conflict, the historical memory, because in some cases they still have links with the family memory of an ancestor who fought there;
- Younger visitors are more interested in a narrative that relates to contemporary reality, and therefore able to involve them.

To support our hypothesis about the transnationalism and universalism of memory tourism of the Great War there are also some contextual considerations inherent its collective memory in general, like territorial

² The concept of flashbulb memories refers to the precise memories of the situation in which the individual was when he became aware of a shocking and traumatic event, so this type of memory corresponds to a memory amalgam between personal circumstances and historical events (see for example Brown, Kulik, 1977).

extent of the conflict, the number of belligerent empires and nations and the total involvement of societies. The first modern conflict (because technological and mass) has not been only a crucial event from the military and geopolitical point of view, but also an “imaginative event” able of changing from then on the way of thinking war, and, more generally, social reality and culture (Hynes, 2011). Essential condition of Twentieth-century consciousness, the First World War remains a key event, both in terms of intellectual reworking and popular sensitivity: an immense storage of memory, studies and research, debates, conflicts and doubts that has lasted for over a hundred years and the search for a sense that for someone is not over yet (Fussell, 1984; Federici, 2015; Winter, 1998). As Young (2020) states, this conflict was less a catalyst for heroic memories than an occasion for controversial and critical memories - in the words of the poet “never such innocence again”.

2. Between remembrance and memory marketing

Memory tourism is a topic of increasing interest to scholars across the social sciences and humanities, producing wide-ranging work on the role heritage institutions and memoryscapes play in mediating processes of individual and collective memory and identity (Rapson, 2014). It is a global phenomenon marked by dissimilar nationwide evolutions and even strong controversial, like, for example, the opinion of the French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut regarding a universal place of memory as Auschwitz, in his thought mortified by the drifts of mass tourism. On the one hand, it is undeniable that memory tourism is not always sober and respectful; on the other hand, visitors to a place with the exclusive purpose of an act of remembrance represent a minority: among the millions of visitors to Auschwitz, many take advantage of their stay in Poland to visit the camp. It is then understandable why Finkielkraut has asserted that respecting the memory of Auschwitz is equivalent to not going there (Remy, 2011).

The definition of memory tourism is rather complex given its multidimensional nature, which motivates different scientific approaches and involves concepts such as collective memory, identity, politics, local development, etc. By focusing on the sociological approach, the delimitation some notions can help to better understand its potentials and

contradictions. For example, the use of the expression “place of memory” is more restricted than can be commonly supposed, employed to evoke the memory of war events, especially the First and Second World Wars, and generally linked to a traumatic event in the background of an exceptional context. It corresponds to the patrimonialisation of negative and painful memories, so every place witnessing the traumatic history of the last century must be preserved as if memory should today be embodied only in its material dimension and no longer in the symbolic.

The conceptualization of Nora (1992) of place of memory has decidedly innovated the previous definition of high place of remembrance (*haut lieu du souvenir*), suitable to designate a site scene of significant events. In fact, he specifies the concept in terms of unit of material or ideal order, which human intentionality or the work of the time has transformed into a symbolic element for a community. The place of memory thus seems to coherently respond to the needs of societies in identity crisis, in which prevail the instant, the existential precariousness and the ontological uncertainty about future, and which turn to the past to find some references, recreate the sense of living together and of belonging gradually weakened, first of all, by globalisation processes. Identity, memory and heritage appear as the three key words of contemporary consciousness (Nora, 1992). As Martin (2000, p. 785) writes

The ‘disenchantment of the world’, the postmodernism, ‘the end of history’, the era of emptiness or insignificance have broken the pact: history is written for an unpredictable future in a present without reference points, while of the past, open to any rewriting, everything has become memorable and ‘capitalisable’, definitively upsetting any illusion about the power to change the world starting from a founding project.

The acknowledgement of social value to a place of memory implies the search for origins, identity roots, often according to a “principle of autochthony” which presupposes the finding traces of the past to anchor in a territory the individual’s filiation (Boursier, 2002). Sharing the thesis that the “memory-moment” we live reveals the uncertainties that weigh on memory and history more than it hides them, the visit to places of memory is by its nature a peculiar experience for the individual / tourist: a sort of alchemy among communication forms, relationship with history, issues related to memory and sharing of a social practice (Lavabre, 1994; Trouche, 2012).

A first attempt to a schematic definition of memory tourism highlights the critical mix between the purpose of an intellectual and civic enrichment (given by the exemplarity of the memorial narratives contained in places) and that of incentive / support for economic and cultural vitality of territories (considering the impact that this form of tourism can produce).

The coexistence of these functions originates at the factual level a dialectic without obvious outcomes, due to their changing balancing: they should not be seen as exclusionary, but rather in terms of transitory prevalence of one over the other according to the historical moment. It is reasonable to mention the probable loss of visibility and tourist attractiveness when the relevance of a place of memory is only perceived by small groups or minority ones, or when the spatialized memory is part of a cyclically recalled public and institutional narrative, assuming a predominant ritual character. Some interviewees stress that the visit to the Memorial of Redipuglia³ is for Italian tourists a visit to a “total site” because place-bridge of the nation’s memory, so that the identity dimension imposes itself, very often, on the narrative made by the mediator. On the other side, the prevalence of the tourist vocation can lead to a “memory marketing”, transforming references to the past into consumer products, gadgets and souvenirs, altering their meaning and giving rise to a fleeting and superficial fruition—to a Disneylandisation of the place (Naef, 2014). The panel placed at the entrance of the Douaumont Ossuary reveals the ambiguity of a memory-commemoration and a memory-object of consumption, since it states “Do not miss to visit this important place during your holidays”.

The effects of a 'possible commodification of memory clearly refer to the general dynamics of collective memory and it is likely that in memory tourism acquire visibility and emphasis. If the danger of amnesia is always latent when collective memory is not supported by multiple social practices and actions (as memory tourism), an objectification of it as a mere consumer product can lead to a total impoverishment of its meaning, as well to forms of mystification and exploitation. The risk of falsifications and manipulations of the past, more or less intentional, may never be

³ The remains of the 100,000 buried soldiers make the Memorial of Redipuglia (near Gorizia) as one of the largest European military memorials, with the Douaumont Ossuary, erected near Verdun in the French Department of the Mose, as well as one of the most impressive monumental complexes dedicated to the fallen of the First World War.

marginalized since it causes the spread of unilateral or at least partial narratives that distort the original symbolic content of the physical site.

3. Transnationalism and individualisation of collective memory

Thanks to memory tourism, history can be reinterpreted mainly as human history, even decades or centuries later, translating dates and statistics in terms of experience, imagined by the visitor because witnessed by the place. Based on the use of space in which memory materializes, and intimately linked to sensory perceptions and emotions experienced by the individual, the tourism of memory also provides the framework for a complementary creation of subjective memories. In other words, the memory of a place is accompanied by the experience of the place of memory, as an interaction of the individual with the symbols, references and physical signs impressed on the landscape.

An analysis on memory tourism must in fact focus on what and how is visited, considering the meaning attributed by visitors (Seaton, 2000), since alongside the narrative contained in the place there is the narrative that the individual himself build. In 2012, the World Heritage Tourism Research Network (WHTRN) has carried out an online survey with a sample of 2,472 individuals, of different nationalities, ages, educational level, etc., trying to identify the main reasons for memory tourism of the Great War, before the Centenary celebrations (Jansen-Verbeke, George, 2015). Among the different questions, one concerned the purpose of keeping alive the memory of the conflict, to which the subjects replied in majority indicating the understanding of events that have changed world history, the memory of the sacrifice of millions of individuals and the pedagogical action in order to prevent future wars. At the same time, the value recognised to memorial sites consisted, in the perception of the interviewees, in their specificity as places of memory, places for the acquisition of awareness about human suffering and places of reflexion. It is therefore evident that sharing the meaning of a place of memory is a dialectical synergy of the aspiration to transmit memory, of the related commemorative practices and of the subjective motivations that push the visitor to emphasize certain aspects of the past than others. The re-creation of the memorial landscapes of the First World War implies questioning the reasons why individuals

from different nations remember this war today and how they do it (Jansen-Verbeke, George, 2015).

The collective memory of the Great War holds a character of “alive memory” because even today, despite the elapsed time, it returns traces and material signs of that past, rekindling the attention and public interest. The melting of some glaciers in the Alps still allows the remains of soldiers and military posts to be found, and therefore the consequent reconstruction of symbolized genealogies. Verdun’s Zone Rouge has never stopped returning unexploded grenades, howitzers and ammunitions, periodically recalling the dramatic intensity of the battle; even in the “silent places of memory”, so defined because not publicly and institutionally valorised, it is not infrequent to find a corroded belt buckle or a spoon. Beyond the concreteness of these traces, the symbolic narrative of the conflict, more manifest in some territories, is substantiated in a sort of karst re-emergence of “what has been”, a materialisation of memory that does not so much appeal to rational understanding as to subjective empathic capability to identify oneself with other’s experience. As stated in an interview, some tourist guides use artefacts related to the feeding of soldiers (tins, water bottles, etc.), that is elements of daily life that “give a face” to anonymous soldiers: the highlighting of the human aspect allows a greater understanding and also forms of identification. On the other hand, some respondents claimed that most visitors wonder about the daily life of the fighters and only a few seem more fascinated by the technical aspects, such as war strategies, deployment of armies, firepower, etc.

Nowadays the elaboration processes of the collective memory of the Great War seem to move on at least two main lines, strictly interrelated:

- The clear and growing trend of transnational memory practices and memory tourism, which overlap and often become more significant than national memorial policies;
- The parallel process of individualisation of memory, which overturns the axiom of the sacralisation of collective death, although not immune to contradictory consequences.

A decisive change has occurred in world public opinion in conveying the narrative of this conflict, which has overcome the emphatic tones of nationalist rhetoric, celebrating the sacrifice of the nation’s collective body,

to reach an interpretation free from heroic indulgences and focused mainly on individual memories. The contemporary narrative of the Great War integrates in the collective imaginary some places of memory, places-witnesses of emblematic historical episodes, mainly in light of the existential experience of those who fought and lost their lives. It also affirms with the same strength the will to pass on to the new generations a warning for the future and a clear appeal to the duty of memory. This is undoubtedly due to the elapsed time, which gave to the First World War a sort of “peculiar status”, reason why its memory is viewed consensually, universally significant and producing integrative effects, unlike other wars (Antichan, Gensburger, Teboul, 2016).

The Centenary celebrations have highlighted how much this collective memory has acquired a noticeable transnational character, more than simply international or post-national. For example, on the anniversary of the outbreak of the conflict, a joint commemoration was held in the cemetery of Saint Symphorien, near Mons in Belgium, which collects the remains of British and German soldiers.

Overcoming the state framework, it integrates collateral but universal dimensions (such as the sufferings and losses suffered by the civilian population; social and ethnic conflicts; gender issues; war culture, etc.) and reveals a “memorial activism” that is present from some time (Dalisson, 2015; Offenstadt, 2014). This is attested by the several commemorative ceremonies carried out in common, because inspired by the deep intuition the conflict must necessarily be remembered in an interpretative key able of transcending the exclusivity of national memorial practices (Zimet, Gilles, Offenstadt, 2014). The process of negotiation among different national memories is the epilogue of a long phase of inevitable and difficult confrontation, also because the First World War left behind endemically extra-territorial and multinational places of memory - for example, Ypres, Verdun, Somme, Caporetto, Gallipoli. This is understandably the case in almost all places of war of memory, even if it is not assured: instead of promoting a policy of shared memory on the basis of mutual recognition, some sites become reason for renewed forms of nationalisation of memory⁴.

⁴ Among many cases, in the Croatian city of Vukovar a war played on memories seems to have taken the place of weapons: recognized as martyr city of the ex-Yugoslavia war, it has become the destination for national tourism, mirroring a memorial practice aimed to rebuild the local identity in opposition to the aggressor identity of Serbs.

Conclusions

In our case study, the interviews highlighted how a different awareness is present today in memory mediators, influencing the same purposes of the memory tourism of the Great War, which is so anti-rhetorical and transnational. This reflects a global change, such as in Flanders where the memory tourism has been renamed “peace tourism”, thanks to the synergetic action of the institutional actors of memorial policies and the tourism industry. Firstly commemorating the victims of a war presented as absurd, the Flemish authorities insist on the deadly nature of the conflict and on the peremptory need to avoid its repetition (Bouchat, Klein, Rosoux, 2016).

The symmetrical erosion of the epic-warrior declination of the war has had some contradictory consequences, because the transfiguration of the conflict in mass sacrifice for the “right cause”, firmly supported for decades by national memorial agendas, has fragmented into thousands of individual memories. As the Italian historian Isnenghi (2014, p. 5) writes “[...] to each one his own valley, his regiment, his fort, his battle”, stigmatizing the not too veiled contemporary agnosticism towards macro-concepts as homeland and nation, which however prevents an understanding of the civism and spirit of self-denial of the generations involved in the war. On another side, the individualisation of memory can arouse in the tourists forms of identification and empathy, thus making them participate in the construction of memory and its transmission:

To understand history and to understand territories, you have to think with your feet. [...] The only way we can avoid a rhetorical drift is to think with our feet, that is to walk on the places of the Great War and evoke these people, call them to tell this experience of people (statement of an interviewee).

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