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Cuvinte cheie: industrie, Milano, Pirelli-Bicocca, muncitori, memorii, spațiu social.

**«Îți amintești ce am făcut?»
Memoriile și urmele clasei muncitoare de la
marginea orașului Milano (Italia)**

Rezumat

Acest articol intenționează să fie o reflecție asupra construcției socio-politice a surselor orale în contextul unei ample cercetări de teren, desfășurate într-o zonă postindustrială a orașului Milano, cunoscută sub numele de Bicocca. Cercetează întâlnirile etnografice ca instrumente euristice care vizează construirea unor cunoștințe antropologice specifice. Astăzi, Universitatea din Milano-Bicocca, Teatrul Arcimboldi, CNR și Siemens Italia, printre altele, ocupă terenul. Cu toate acestea, până în anii 1980, aceeași zonă a găzduit Pirelli Industries, una dintre cele mai mari companii de producție a materialelor plastice, a anvelopelor și a cablurilor din Italia. Chiar dacă terenul a fost transformat ulterior într-o zonă integrată tehnologic, este totuși pătruns de urme istorice atât materiale cât și imateriale ale trecutului său industrial. Consider aici interviurile mele etnografice cu foști sindicaliști și muncitori ai Pirelli, concentrându-se pe conturile anilor 1968-1969, de asemenea, cunoscut sub numele de al doilea „bienio roșu” (Biennio Rosso) sau „Toamna fierbinte” (Autunno Caldo). Regândind aceste documente etnografice colectate între 2008 și 2013, descriu amintirile tăcute care au apărut cu incisivitate în relația dintre mine și subiecții implicați în această cercetare etnografică.

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Keywords: Industry, Milan, Pirelli-Bicocca, workers, memories, social space.

«Do You Remember What We Did?» Memories and Working-class Traces on the Outskirts of Milan (Italy)

Summary

This article intends to be a reflection on the socio-political construction of oral sources in the context of extensive field research, carried out in a post-industrial area of the city of Milan, known as Bicocca. It investigates the ethnographic encounters as heuristic tools aimed at the construction of specific anthropological knowledge. Today, the University of Milano-Bicocca, the Arcimboldi Theatre, CNR, and Siemens Italia, among others, occupy the site. However, until the 1980s, the same area hosted the Pirelli Industries, one of the largest plastic, tires, and cable manufacturing company from Italy. Even if the site was later transformed into a technology integrated area, it is still permeated with both material and immaterial historical traces of its industrial past. I consider here my ethnographic interviews with former unionists and workers of the Pirelli focusing on the accounts of the years 1968-1969, also known as the second “Red Biennium” (Biennio Rosso) or the “Hot Autumn” (Autunno Caldo). Reconsidering these ethnographic documents collected between 2008 and 2013, I describe the memories that emerged incisively in the relationship between the subjects involved in this ethnographic research and me.

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Introduction

This article intends to be a reflection on the socio-political construction of oral sources in the context of extensive field research, carried out in a post-industrial area of the city of Milan, known as Bicocca. It investigates the ethnographic encounters as heuristic tools aimed at the construction of specific anthropological knowledge. From the early 20th century until the 1970s, the Bicocca district was the headquarters of the Italian multinational Pirelli; one of the largest factories in Milan which employed almost half of Pirelli Group workers there. In the 1980s, the process of urban reconversion began, which led the district to host a number of functions, including residences, offices and universities, which generated and continue to generate considerable changes in the social composition of its “inhabitants”. Therefore, the Bicocca district has been configured as a deindustrialized urban space that shares with other neighborhoods the need, especially in America and Europe (Dudley 1994, Harvey 2011, India 2017, Mollona 2009, Portelli 2017), to rebuild and reinvent itself as an integrated part of a complex urban system within a global economy. Today, the University of Milano-Bicocca, the Arcimboldi Theatre, CNR, and Siemens Italia, among others, occupy the site. The site later being transformed into a “technology integrated area”, but, is still permeated with both material and immaterial hidden and silent traces of its industrial past.

During my PhD, I studied the construction of memories and narratives of a group of former Pirelli workers (Rimoldi 2011, 2013, 2014). Thus, this reflection is part of an in-depth research on the material and immaterial “traces” of the industrial past in the northern suburban area of Milan (Rimoldi 2017). My ethnographic study aimed to formulate a polyphonic discourse on the memory of the places and spaces of this Italian city. I consider here my ethnographic interviews with former trade unionists and workers of the Pirelli Group, focusing on the accounts of 1968-1969, also known as the „Second Red Biennium” or “Autunno Caldo”. Reconsidering these “ethnographic documents” (Signorelli 1986) collected between 2008 and 2013, I describe the memories that emerged incisively in the relationship between the subjects involved in this ethnographic research and me. The first part of the article focuses on the temporal and political levels. It emphasizes how the results of my investigation are positioned and negotiated with the interlocutors. The second part, on the other hand, presents an approach to the former workers on a spatial level. Through a brief reconstruction of the transformations of the Bicocca district (Dell’Agnese 2005, Bolocan Goldstein 2003), I claim that my interlocutors, acknowledging my presence in the contemporary dynamics of a former working-class neighbourhood, made possible the polyphonic dialogue on this urban area. Therefore, the specific objectives of this pages are:

to show the production processes of a form of knowledge based on repetition, observation, mimesis, listening and dialogue, and to assert that being involved (Fava 2017b) in relationships with research participants – by assuming a “role” determined by the participants – is the specific value of contemporary anthropological knowledge. In my opinion, such knowledge should be more explicit, not only the researcher’s theoretical references and contribution to wider disciplinary debates but also his or her experiences with the daily relationships that underlie fieldwork (Piasere 2002, 2009).

Making memories

During the years of my field research, I mainly met former workers of the Pirelli Industries Bicocca headquarters, active in a period between the late 1950s and early 1980s. During their careers in the factory they had been directly or indirectly involved in trade union activities of the General Italian Confederation of Labor (CGIL) and, in the two years 1968-1969, they had participated in the strikes of the Pirelli Hot Autumn. However, at the time of the research, they were retired.

I conducted semi-structured interviews mainly in the neighbourhood, taking as a point of reference a historic Bicocca trattoria, the Trattoria Toscana da Aldo, and organizing, whenever possible, walks along the roads that from the Collina Dei Ciliegi lead up to Viale Fulvio Testi. The majority of the dialogues were recorded while I took field notes for some impressions collected during my neighbourhood visits.

At the beginning of my research, in 2008, the urban transformation process seemed to erase or silence the memory of the work and workers who, up until the 1980s, represented the majority of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. It seemed to confirm Halbwachs’ theory that individual memories that do not fit into the main image of the past are rejected and censured. The transformations of the neighbourhood and the broader transformations of the work certainly seemed to make space to the memory of the neighbourhood, but not to the memory that my interlocutors called “the memory of the owner”. It was made clear by the architectural redevelopment project of the neighbourhood based on the Pirelli industrial network. The symbol of this desire to protect the “memory of the owner” was the packaging of the cooling tower. My interlocutors contributed to the silencing of their memory to a fundamental element, the failure of the “revolution” carried out during the season of the Hot Autumn which, in the present, relegated their narratives to the corner of official history.

Due to the field research and publications that followed, which in some way, made the stories of some of the workers of Pirelli-Bicocca become a part of the official memories of the neighbourhood. In my opinion, this coincided with a wider attempt to enhance the memory of the neighbourhood that led, for example, to the organization of the historical reconstruction of the famous battle of Bicocca and the publication of a volume on the history of the neighbourhood. The stories I heard, moving between the two poles of the presentation

of the self in the space-time context and the search for the self, were created to arrange the events, to what preceded them and to what followed them, to create relationships between these historical events and their presence within them, and to account for their respective situations in the present. The workers' memory of the Bicocca district invests different times and places and is articulated along paths that are not always linear, expanding it in the wider family and political dimensions, but always focusing on sharing collective working conditions.

Most of the stories began with background constructions (Bertaux 2003), that is, with the narrations of previous events and, apparently, unrelated to the main plot of the story and which, however, by cutting the course of the narrative, created the structure itself. In the case of the former workers of Pirelli Bicocca. These background constructions are, for example, the arrival in the city of Milan from different places in Italy between the beginning of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s of the twentieth century; the reasons that made them leave their hometown; descriptions of the social and family contexts that formed the respective first political formations. As Pietro Crespi mentions:

Due to the biographical approach, subjectivity of the workers is completely revealed with humanity and the multiple forms of belonging, freeing the analysis both from a historical and sociological from the bureaucratic research models (Crespi 1997, p. 8).

Given the complexity and peculiarities of human action, as well as the vast circuit of experiences whose actions are simultaneously subject and object, Crespi argues, neither historians, sociologists or anthropologists can rely on exclusively synchronous or diachronic methods of analysis. In other words, social facts and historical facts are complementary (Crespi 1979) and share a relational character of co-construction.²

The narratives of the life and work stories of Vito Basilico, Renzo Baricelli, Luigi Roma, Salvatore Ledda, Mario Danieli, Serafino Balduzzi and Fulvio Bella can be considered a good example of what links memory and identity. My interlocutors explained their identities configurations both through what they have chosen to remember, to include, to make public, and through what they have forgotten, excluded, or hidden.

Youth and political belonging

The goal of my research was to put together discourses about the memories from a polyphonic approach of my interlocutors, a well-defined position and script also contributed to my role as an anthropologist. Youth and political belonging are the two notions on which the daily relationships with my interlocutors have articulated. They have structured the communicative exchanges, making them points of contact between social worlds perceived, initially, as "strangers". From a linguistic point of view, my youth was built on biological

² See, for example, Braudel 1974, and Borutti and Fabietti 1998.

referents, and, at the same time, symbolic, cultural and, above all, political factors played a decisive role in making me cross, metaphorically, this threshold.

In adopting an intergenerational perspective and building on Mannheim's vision [1928 (2008)], the only effective way to tackle the issue of generations is by understanding generational bonds as a particular type of social positioning (Mead 1972). What shapes people position in social space is not the fact that they were born in the same year, or that they grew to become young, adults, and seniors in the same period or place. These elements generate only an opportunity to participate in the same events and, therefore, to build common historical/social spaces; the various members do not share the same stratification of their life experiences. It is not only simple participation in a specific historical-political moment that creates a generation. What binds individuals together is participation in common destinies. Although Mannheim's about generations allows us to read about the dialects of society/individuals as a reflection of dialect between history and biography, it does not consider intergenerational relations.

Including myself in the world of "young people" and referring to a more general idea of the "youth", my interlocutors, marked my incompleteness, namely, my "insufficient experience of the world". Among my first visits to the Trattoria Toscana by Aldo, Vito Basilico, who for a few minutes, listened to me in silently, as I recounted the idea of my research project to two other diners, exclaimed:

"I do not know how a young man like you can understand our Season [the workers' and trade union strike of the Pirelli-Bicocca Hot Autumn], you can continue to talk, to ask questions, but it is difficult for you to understand our season. At your age, I ... I do not understand why you, young people, are not filled with the desire to transform the world. You don't even have it in my mind because you are flat, you have no imagination, you don't see the future. Of course, it is also difficult for you because you are blind, and it is difficult to imagine what you would do if you saw. We had a goal, maybe it was an illusion, but we had one; now there is not even the goal, not even an illusion" (Vito Basilico).

The lack of experience in the areas of general political action and the little historical-political knowledge of the specific season of workers' struggles at Pirelli-Bicocca often have been configured as the establishing elements of my youth.

In the ongoing dialogue on the work ideas that I have carried out with my interlocutors, comparisons, and at times many barbs, were often made about the lack of political commitment linked to the materiality of work.

"This was an issue of appropriation of one's life, this is a thing of its own ... and therefore, this was an ever-present feeling and then, everyone, some more than others, it was thought that for everyone, it was an era in which what truly mattered was the overall change; everyone was convinced that whatever little thing you could do... it is true that, you were happy with the small thing you were doing, but the small thing would be thrown

into overall reasoning”. (Fulvio Bella).

Through the transmission of knowledge which the former workers of the Pirelli-Bicocca felt they were the keepers and, therefore, from my point of view, by listening to their stories about life and work, I was able to access those material and symbolic resources to preserve their memory. This slow and prolonged initiation rite revealed over the years my interlocutor’s perception they had about me and my work, as an outsider (in other words, I was a stranger) which, over the years, became socialized then assuming a relevant position in their life trajectories.

The relationships with my interlocutors and their decline according to the models I have described, however, it cannot be understood except within the dynamics of a specific research objective, the memories of the workers, in a specific place, the Bicocca district of Milan, and by the practices through which, sometimes, in an undisciplined and careless manner, I gathered the narratives of my interlocutors, which, in my opinion, built a relationship of mutual hospitality in a post-industrial area of the city.

Walks with the former workers in the Bicocca neighbourhood

In 1913, the Bicocca offices already had more than 3,000 employees, due to the growing growth in the electricity and telecommunications sectors, the demand for car and bicycle tires and various rubber products used in the mechanical and electrical industries, and production processes in the health sector. By the end of 1948, Bicocca employment reached 21,000 units; the next decade, on the other hand, it was characterized by a policy of reduction of the workforce which gradually declined between 1958 and 1959. Between 1940 and 1950, during the reconstruction of the destroyed part of the city of Milan in the second world war, the target industrial development was implemented along the northeast direction, which is almost entirely in that area of public property located between Viale Zara, Via Galilei and the Bastioni route.

Until the 1970s, Bicocca remained an essential Pirelli Group plant and one of the largest factories in Milan; Almost 50% of the workers of the entire Pirelli group worked at the Bicocca and, the factory was the centre of development and research at the base of the technological transformations that affected the other companies of the group (Anelli, Bovini, Montenegro 1985; Bolchini 1967, 1985).

The late 1960s were a turning point in the history of Pirelli industries; the slowdown in the economy led to a deep recession that forced the group to sell its skyscraper, one of the symbols of economic growth, and the beginning of the relocation of production that led to the emptying of the buildings of the “industrial city”. The Pirelli-Bicocca area covered an area of 750,000 square meters and was composed of factories that, until the 1980s, employed over 15,000 employees. In the 1970s, the gradual decline of Fordist industrial development led to the reconversion of almost all major Italian manufacturing industries

in the 1990s, including those in the area around the Bicocca district.
Luca Ruggiero points out:

The physical and functional transformation of Bicocca gave rise to a profound rupture in the continuity of the socio-spatial fabric that was formed during the life of the company. The closure and the location of production units not only caused many people to lose their jobs but also led to the disintegration and dissolution of the labour movement born around the social spaces of Bicocca, a movement that played a leading role during the struggles of the fascist regime and made significant demands for workers' rights in the 1960s and 1970s. The traditional social spaces built by Pirelli at the beginning of the industrial paternalism were important meeting places for workers and the community living around Bicocca that disappeared with industrial disinvestment [...] the marginal condition of the community living around Bicocca is exacerbated by replacing factory spaces with new ones. They served to promote the local area and help it pursue a new central role in the post-Fordist development of the city of Milan, but they prove to be both selective and exclusive, not accepting the pre-existing inhabitants of the area. (Ruggiero 2014, p. 94).

The construction of the factory has led to the creation of new forms of work within an eminently Fordist production model, which confronts local businesses, unions and political positions during the "hot autumn". The strong sense of identity, which has been shaped and strengthened over the years by the activity of my interlocutors and political and trade union activity, seems to appear with nostalgia and disillusionment in their narratives, revealing how the reconversion of neighbourhood spaces also had, was read as a deconstruction of the social and cultural horizon.

To this disorientation on the identity axis, I add the loss of a type of socialization aimed at collective action in favour of the functional use of neighbourhood spaces to which can be added the loss of a type of industrial work, in favour of the development of so-called intangible work. Some of these aspects are well summarized in the words of Salvatore Ledda, Fulvio Bella and Mario Danieli.

"They socialized, they had great friendships with their co-workers, from time to time, when they finished the night shift, they planned to go, for example, here, to the Greco station, to a bar that was also a tobacco shop and trattoria. However, in the morning, they made soups, but if you went out at night you could find a showcase full with soups; we went there and ate two or three dishes and paid for something, not very much. Then we went to that cafe that in Viale Sarca, which is now a sandwich shop, on the corner with Via San Glicerio. Then to the delicatessen next door that still exists, but it's not the same". (Salvatore Ledda).

Then other suggestions come to mind, such as the fog. It seems a common thing also because, the more time has passed, the more houses have been built and the less fog there

is; indeed, at that time it was somewhat more isolated. Around was the old village of Pirelli, which is still there with all the houses; which remained quite intact. In the front of Pirelli, there was the union's headquarters and the PCI headquarters and there was also the trattoria, which is no longer there. These were the meeting places. Right on the sidewalk, there was everything, the cafe. "I was young then and I remember I was shocked when I saw the workers drinking grappa Grigio-Verde at six in the morning" (Fulvio Bella).

"However, in general, when I enter the neighbourhood and walk that street here [via Piero and Albero Pirelli] I don't recognize anything anymore, I can't get over it. [...] But if I go there I struggle. The Arcimboldi, yes I know the cottage of the Arcimboldi because they left it as is". (Mario Danieli).

The transformations in the neighbourhood seem to generate an articulated conflict between an unspecified number of "guests", namely *hosts* and *guests* who, while sharing the same urban area, rebuild it in such different ways as to create a sense of disorientation. Dealing with the disorientation of my interlocutors, many walks along the streets of the Bicocca district began or ended at Trattoria Toscana by Aldo, the Historic Store of the Municipality of Milan that closed in 2015. Today, the dark windows of the trattoria and the simple dark sign with the name of the restaurant were replaced by the transparent windows of an *all you can eat* Japanese restaurant, however, throughout my research in the field, I had many lunches at the tables positioned at a short distance from each other and covered with red and white tablecloths. My presence and the sharing of food inside the walls of the Trattoria Toscana by Aldo allowed the interlocutors to socialize my role as a researcher and start building narratives on and in the Bicocca neighbourhood as "the third place" where he manufactured, although after disappearing from the urban landscape, it became a symbol of the radical changes (social, economic, political) in progress. Moreover, during the research periods in the field, the interlocutors contributed significantly to the construction or, in some cases, to the de-construction of the anthropologist profession by recognizing the ethnographic authority and the authorization agreement, even in the form of formal documents, in certain cases.

In the fall of 2011, while I was writing my doctoral dissertation, I received a phone call from Vito Basilico. He was impatient to hear about the publication of an article in which I reconstructed various moments of his life story to identify some dense phases in the history of the union (Rimoldi 2011). During our phone conversation Vito Basilico, who encourages me in developing my research, told me "You should write down everything we have told you, me, [Renzo] Baricelli and all the others... because if you don't write down these things no one will, and I would like to see you writing them down before leaving this earth." [Field Notes from 21 September 2011].

In November 2014, more than a year after my PhD discussion (July 2013), Renzo Baricelli, a retired trade unionist at Pirelli-Bicocca and informant for my doctoral research, called to invite me to the evening screening of a short documentary about his life at the

Milan Chamber of Labour screening room: “We are examining it at this time also to celebrate my eightieth birthday”, he said, “and I would be happy if you could come, too”. After completing the of fieldwork (2008-2013), I had considerably fewer opportunities to meet and talk with my interlocutors. This proves one of Roberto Malighetti points that he taught us in his course of the anthropological research methodology, namely that research “does not end” but rather “is abandoned” for economic and personal reasons because of changes in research interests or various events in researchers’ in the trajectory of researchers’ lives.

In the early summer of 2015, Renzo Baricelli informed me about the death of Vito Basilico. “It seemed fair to warn you,” he said, “there will be no funerals, but we will all meet at the cemetery in Lambrate, a neighbourhood in Milan, to remember everything together”. On the day that was set for this commemoration, during a speech in front of a coffin covered with a red flag and in front of all my interlocutors and relatives of Vito Basilico, Renzo Baricelli briefly told the story of Vito Basilico’s career using one of my articles (Rimoldi, 2011) as a source of information.

“In the last years before his illness, “he said,” Vito met a young anthropologist with whom he spent so much time; Luca, you all know him. Imagine his reaction when I introduced him to this young man who had immediately started asking him questions [laughter] ... [talking to me] you remember the things he had told you that day about Aldo [the Tuscan trattoria in the neighbourhood where I usually met former Pirelli-Bicocca workers]?” Then, after a while, he started telling stories and he went on and on ... They were always there next to Aldo talking, talking until Luciano [the restaurant manager] told him he had to hang up. Vito told Luca not only his personal story that we summarized in this discussion but also his contribution to the 1968 Pirelli-Bicocca fight; it can be said that this was his last „battle” won, before the one with the disease. I read so many things, I forgot them, but Vito did them, I did them and thanks to works like this, something of what I lived, what I fought for will be left behind” (Renzo Baricelli, June 23rd, 2015).

On that occasion, in addition to the personal regret that characterizes the loss of loved ones, I found one of the deepest meanings of the work of collecting life stories. In the life story of Vito Basilico, the ethnographic meeting had turned into an important turning point in his life trajectory, whose narrative had become, borrowing the title of my article, a “battle”.

Conclusion

[...] it is not necessary to go very far to encounter encrypted behaviours: our neighbour or relatives themselves can demonstrate this daily, and from one instance to the next we react to this incomprehensibility with indifference or curiosity, with amazement or

regret or anger or, finally, with an effort to reconstruct or understand. The ethnographic encounter focuses on this varied relationship with the other [...] by taking that which is culturally alien par excellence as the research object, forbidding indifference and systematically training [the researcher] in asceticism that represses any kind of indignation to uncover understanding under the worst of conditions, when all our cultural history, the world in which we were born and raised, is called into question (de Martino 2002, p. 393).

I understand the ethnographic encounter both as a heuristic tool and as the necessary – but not sufficient – condition for the construction of anthropological knowledge. Moreover, although, in my specific case, the field of research has been positioned as a well-defined physical space – the Bicocca district of Milan – it does not follow that the cultural features I have analysed are equally delimited. The estrangement and decentralization of the gaze (Fabietti 1999) are articulated on a temporal rather than spatial plane, and it contributes to creating a sort of “third space” which is narrated and remembered. By approaching the neighbourhood as a practised place, or space in de Certeau’s terms (1990), I highlighted some of the ways in which it was told to me by several former Pirelli-Bicocca workers. Social memory (French 1995, Fabietti and Matera 2000, Jedlowski 2001) plays a crucial role in defining a “legacy” of the past for the neighbourhood itself, a part of the city which is now considered a site of consumption rather than production (Bauman 2005). In the same way, the construction of a specific workers’ memory helps to highlight the discursive nature of the urban landscape.

According to Piasere, I believe that ethnography is above all a practice; it is “a ‘living with’, a perceptive, emotional, affective, as well as cognitive involvement” (Piasere 2009, p. 74). During my argument, I emphasized that the relationships (or, better, the bonds) that a researcher creates with his or her interlocutors during periods in the field are fundamental for anthropological knowledge. In my specific case, sharing time and space with my informants was the key to accessing a series of discourses that converged in the macro-category of “workers’ memories” of the Bicocca district.

Thus, I tried to consider the implications and social effects my field research could have had for my interlocutors from my internal perspective while simultaneously problematizing some implicit nodes in the relational and intersubjective dimensions (Fabian 1971). In doing so, I sought to keep in mind those “research gestures” (Fava 2017b) that characterize the everyday life of anthropological work “inside”, “outside” and “beyond” the field.

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