

Public Uses of the Past
International Research Workshop
Paris, September 1st 2009

I. Introduction

Over the last decades a double and apparently contradictory process has been taking place, consisting of a form of passion for the past on the one hand, and of a loss of confidence in historical knowledge on the other hand. These two tendencies are marked by the inflation of different modes of the presence of the past, among which commemoration, patrimonialization and reference to «memory». But an equally ordinary and impulsive form of skepticism, based upon the idea that history has always been and will always be written by the winners, seems to prevail. This suspicious attitude is reflected in the press («manipulated history», «hidden history», «what the historians have concealed from you») and even in literature. This first observation requires to be clarified, and becomes even more complex if we add the growing power of historiography in the wide sense, having strengthened the figure of the witness, which has become central in an increasingly mediatized public sphere, more and more in need of authenticity and immediacy.

In this complex context a series of «*affaires*» have mobilized public opinion on some history objects: from the memory of slavery to the Nazi's gold, from the war in Algeria to communist crimes, from the accusation of ritual murder perpetrated by Jews to the Italian *Risorgimento*. The multiplication of public controversies and other disputes is certainly one of the main reasons why the question of public use of the past has become a recurrent theme of reflection for historians. The most frequently debated issues are often linked to specific events of contemporary history (such as the Jean Moulin's arrest, *Enola Gay Controversy*, the crimes in Nankin, the slaughter at Fosse Ardeatine in Rome), but they can also be connected to long term «identity» issues concerning national or religious definition (in this case the signs of the past are narrated as a basis for foundation or rupture statements).

The large amount of conferences and articles, the birth of civic groups, the debates within professional associations show that historians from different countries set up the objective of highlighting the «deformations» of history and their substantially political reasons. We think that the concept of *public use of history* should now be widened, and local and individual initiatives should be granted greater continuity.

II. Public Uses of the Past

At the very beginning of the Seventies, Moses Finley had already observed that the political uses of the past were not a new phenomenon and he encouraged historians and «sociopsychologists» to take that object and turn it into «legitimate historical exercise». The concept of *public use of history* was subsequently developed by Jürgen Habermas during *Historikerstreit* in order to oppose a cultivated, neuter arena (where the observer speaks in the third person) to a public and mediational arena (where each participant speaks in the first

person)¹. In the following years this expression was further analyzed by various studies, stressing in particular the way in which various social actors represent the past in the field of patrimony (museums, monuments, ceremonies), at school, in mass media, among local associations, etc.². We believe this perspective needs to be studied in depth, without transforming the concept of use into the concept of manipulation or instrumentalization for political reasons. The use of the past, almost always indissoluble from the retrieval of the past, does not necessarily entail the risk of misuse.

III. Our Objectives

Our research programme is based in particular on three complementary considerations.

The first one is about what might be called **geography of affaires**: we deem it essential to overcome the national dimension and foresee internalization and globalization forms. The most burning issues of the last few years basically concern two kinds of situations. On the one hand, they envisage the relations between two or more national entities: for example the historical events linking and dividing Korea, China and Japan, Israel and Palestine, Poland and Germany, the Balkans, Cyprus, etc. It is significant that, inspiring themselves to the Franco-German history textbook, all these countries are working to prepare common history textbooks for secondary school. On the other hand, though, some problems are sharpened by tensions and sometimes also misunderstandings that are incomprehensible on a national scale, such as the Nazi's gold in Switzerland, the black slave trade, the colonization memory, and the accusation of committing ritual murders for the Jews. This gap among different perceptions of the past also contribute to set up the use of the past as political and social stake.

The second consideration has to do with **public sphere**. Recent reflections on the political use of the past have often been marked by nostalgia for an alleged «golden age» (widely overestimated, for sure) when the past was the prerogative of historians. It is certainly better to overcome this viewpoint and analyze the communication process together with contemporary transformation of public sphere in its various dimensions – national, religious, mediatical, etc., often overlapping or intertwining. Always in this perspective, we would like to extend our investigation to our responsibility as researchers. As the Aubrac *affaire* or the Toaff *affaire*, among others, have clearly demonstrated, the time of reflection and the creation of a specific space for this are of the utmost importance in order to weigh the role of the historian in the public sphere, quite apart from the urgency of this *affaire* or the other. The historian does not play the role of an «absolute third party», just like the legislator or the judge. But he/she can contribute to form «dissent» respecting the weight of the past and characterized by a better shared responsibility in the present.

Finally, the last consideration concerns the confrontation with **other forms of knowledge of the past**. Since professional historians do not have the exclusive rights of the interpretation of the past, we think it would be useful to examine more systematically other forms of social memory, such as literature and cinema. This has obviously nothing to do with

¹ Jürgen Habermas, « De l'usage public de l'histoire. La vision officielle que la République fédérale a d'elle-même est en train d'éclater », in *Devant l'histoire. Les documents de la controverse sur la singularité de l'extermination des Juifs par le régime nazi*, Paris Les Editions du Cerf, 1988.

² Cf. Nicola Gallerano (sous la direction de), *L'uso pubblico della storia*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1995 ; François Hartog et Jacques Revel, *Les Usages politiques du passé*, Paris, EHESS, 2001 ; Alban Bensa et Daniel Fabre (sous la direction de), *Une histoire à soi*, Paris, Paris, Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2001.

putting history back under the protective shield of the arts – more simply, we would like to confront them, so as to add more depth and variety to the historical approach.

IV. International Research Workshop

In order to follow this programme we would like to set up a research workshop on public uses of the past. The word «workshop» indicates that we refuse any strictly prescriptive viewpoint and we do not encourage the creation of a new organism to control the uses of the past.

In this perspective, we are going to publish some widely different material in our website:

- Specific case studies (in the section «*affaires et controverses* »)
- critical reflections of a more general historiographical and theoretical nature (such as reflections on public sphere, memory, and the media)
- interviews as well as an analysis of present-day events and book reviews.

As far as the chronological horizon is concerned, beside interventions that are strictly linked to the present, the section «*inactuel*» is going to contain classical texts and reflections on public uses in the past.

The website is in French, English and Spanish.

We are grateful to Francis Zimmermann, who has enforced the website in the framework of the Ehes interdisciplinary research programme *Sites web dynamiques*, to Jean Blanchaert, the author of the banner, and to Maurizio Garofalo, art director of the Italian magazine *Diario*, for his graphic contribution.