Public History of School: A Different Way of Enhancing the School Past?

Juri Meda
Department of Education, Cultural
Heritage and Tourism
University of Macerata (Italy)
juri.meda@unimc.it

ABSTRACT: In recent years, a fundamental question has been raised in international historiography on education, namely what we mean exactly when we use the term *public history*. Public history, in fact, in its most up-to-date conception, should be an history written in a participatory form both by experts and specialists and by ordinary people, those who had long been the recipients of the traditional historical narratives, who become co-producers of the historical reconstruction. Actually, this is not always the case and public history today consists of a widest range of initiatives. Then we wonder whether the public history is defined – rather than by contents treated and the nature of their treatment – by the recipients to whom it is addressed and by the tools used to transmit those contents. Moreover, it must aim to reach non-professionals and must use tools suitable for this purpose, obviously not coinciding with those of traditional scientific communication, such as books and articles, unless they have non-canonical features. If there is a substantial difference between history and public history – which however still too often is written by historians without the creative contribution of the ordinary people – it is this. Some scholars claim that public history is also subject to the risk of making a public use of the past, since – despite being subject to a scientific constraint and to the application of the historiographical method, based on a critical analysis of sources – its objectivity can be challenged. The interpretation of the past expressed by a certain community, which can also be the main customer of the historiographical reconstruction, can be partial and affected by a vulgate spread over time within the community itself, which can determine a distorted view of the past predetermined by common sense, difficult to eradicate. This risk, however, is actually taken every time we make history.

EET/TEE KEYWORDS: Public History; School; Education; Memory; Museums.

Introduction[1]

In recent years, a fundamental question has been raised in international historiography, namely what we mean exactly when we use the term *public history*. According to Serge Noiret, public history is about promoting historical knowledge and historical research methodologies to broad audiences and particularly enhances practices and experiences that focus on the active involvement of groups and communities, including through digital tools[2]. It consequently – by popularising historical knowledge – counteracts the abuses of history, namely the practices of mystification about the past aimed at manipulating public opinion.

These practices are increasingly prevalent in the digital environment, as the web and social media constitute extraordinary channels for the dissemination of incorrect, inaccurate and misleading news, which can very quickly change the common sense – the opinion of the large majority of the population – regarding specific issues and/or historical events.

In recent years, in fact, in the academic field, the awareness that the social impact of the new knowledge produced by scientific research is only possible through the adoption of a new mediation paradigm, which recovers the public role of the intellectual, has begun to make its way[3].

This new paradigm is embodied by the Public Scientific Communication, which – in contrast to the communication between members of a scientific community – is the type of communication that takes place between experts and

[2] Special issue *Public History. Pratiche nazionali e identità globale*, edited by S. Noiret, «Memoria e Ricerca: rivista di storia contemporanea», vol. XVIII, n. 37, May-August 2011 (see in particular: Id., *La "Public History": una disciplina fantasma?*, pp. 10-35); S. Noiret, M. Tebeau, G. Zaagsma (edd.), *Handbook of digital public history*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022. To further explore this research topic, it was essential to read: F. Herman, S. Braster, M.M. del Pozo Andrés (edd.), *Exhibiting the Past. Public Histories of Education*, Berlin, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022.

[3] For a critical analysis of the spread of principles of open science also in the humanities, see: S. Bartling, S. Friesike (edd.), *Opening Science: The Evolving Guide on How the Internet is Changing Research, Collaboration and Scholarly Publishing*, Cham, Springer, 2014; K.L. Smith, K.A. Dickson (edd.), *Open Access and the Future of Scholarly Communication: implementation*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017; S. Aliprandi, *Fare open access: la libera diffusione del sapere scientifico nell'era digitale*, Milano, Ledizioni, 2017; M. Knöchelmann, *Open Science in the Humanities, or: Open Humanities?*, «Publications», vol. 7, n. 4, December 2019; C. Heise, J.M. Pearce, *From Open Access to Open Science: The Path From Scientific Reality to Open Scientific Communication*, «SAGE Open», vol. 10, n. 2, April 2020 (doi: 10.1177/2158244020915900); F. Führ, E. Bisset Álvarez, *Digital Humanities and Open Science: Initial Aspects*, in E. Bisset Álvarez (edd.), *Data and Information in Online Environments*, Cham, Springer, 2021; M. Cassella, *Citizen science, open science e digital humanities: relazioni e contaminazioni*, «Biblioteche Oggi», vol. 41, n. 1, 2023, gennaio-febbraio 2023, pp. 6-12.

non-experts, between knowledge creators and knowledge users, and consists of high quality scientific dissemination, capable of mediating knowledge contents to a non-specialist audience. This also aims at counteracting the dangerous degeneration of a pseudo-scientific popularisation that in recent years has conquered the top of the trending topics in social networks and infiltrated the society, spreading misconceptions and stereotypes and increasing individual scepticism towards science.

This phenomenon was recently denounced by the 55th annual report of CENSIS on the Italian social situation after pandemic, in which has been stressed the wave of irrationality – i.e. «the rejection of rational discourse, namely the tools with which we built progress and our well-being in the past» and the «flight into magical thinking»[4] – that hit Italian society and its socio-economic roots has been analysed.

This risk had already been realised at the beginning of Seventies by the educationalist Bruno Ciari, who had emphasised the fundamental action carried out by schools in contrasting the «*cognitive divide* evident between the common sense development and the evolution of science» and therefore «also between those who design, invents, creates images and messages, and the consumer of linguistic and visual products, who absorbs the messages themselves and does not dominate the intentions and mechanisms that reach them, becoming passive users»[5]. The objective of overcoming the *cognitive divide* was set by the need to bridge the growing gap between the culture of researchers and scholars and the culture and citizens' common sense. The action to shorten this distance consisted not only in a work of information, but also in creating favourable conditions for a wider culture, that would enable people to be part of the development process and not undergoing it. Ciari therefore posed in critical terms the progressive divergence between the centres of culture production and the dynamics of cultural consumption, and pointed to the school – as the place where knowledge is generated – as the only institution capable of conducting this hard work of mediation and interfacing, avoiding deep lacerations in the social body.

The diffusion of the increasingly pervasive mass media implies that the results of scientific research must be effectively communicated through television, radio, world wide web and social media, for which – however – it is necessary to use techniques, linguistic registers and terminologies quite different from those used in scientific publications.

The participatory approach of public history is crucial in order to counteract the ongoing disintermediation between centres of production of scientific knowledge and the audience. Public history does not consist only in a high

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[4] CENSIS, *55° Rapporto annuale sulla situazione sociale del Paese/2021*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2021.
[5] B. Ciari, *La grande disadattata*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1973, p. 183.

quality historical popularization or at least not only in it. Indeed, it does not only require the historian's ability to elaborate contents that can be enjoyed by a wider audience, mediating them in clear and comprehensible language. It provides the active participation of members of that audience – who are no longer passive – in the very elaboration of those contents.

Public history, in fact, in its most up-to-date conception, should be a history written in a participatory form both by experts and specialists and by ordinary people, those who had long been only the recipients of the traditional historical narratives. So ordinary people become co-producers of the historical reconstruction through a participatory action research.

In fact, as Gianfranco Bandini stated in 2019: «Public history moves from social needs and tries to provide ways of co-constructing knowledge, moving away from the usual idea of popularisation, dissemination and transmission. If historians listen to each other and if the process moves from specific social needs, it is not a matter of inventing ways of popularising or spectacularising historical content: instead, it is a matter of getting out of the transmissive model and making sure that historians work with stakeholders to initiate a critical thinking exercise, to build knowledge and awareness together»[6].

Moreover, in accordance with the principles of "democratic science" and the global responsibility of scientists[7], public history must take into account the needs of the communities in defining its research addresses. In the past mutual misunderstandings between scientists and wider society have undermined the results of scientific research in many fields. Even the beginning of the actual work on a research project is too late for injecting social considerations. Once a project has begun, wider social considerations can modify the course of the project only minimally. If science is to be done ethically and responsibly, all

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[6] G. Bandini, *Manifesto della Public History of Education. Una proposta per connettere ricerca accademica, didattica e memoria sociale*, in G. Bandini, S. Oliviero (edd.), *Public History of Education: riflessioni, testimonianze, esperienze*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2019, p. 49. The genesis of this manifesto is interesting. On 6 November 2018, the University of Florence in collaboration with the Italian Association for Public History (AIPH) organised the national conference «Public History of Education: riflessioni, testimonianze, esperienze» (Public History of Education: reflections, testimonies, experiences). On that occasion, the first draft of a Public History of Education Manifesto was presented, addressed especially to the educational and care professions in order to ensure that history and public history play an appropriate role in the training of educators. The final version of the Manifesto was published in the volume collecting the proceedings of that meeting (2019). During the General Assembly of the AIPH of 29 June 2020, the establishment of a working group on the topic of the Public History of Education was presented by Gianfranco Bandini and approved. The AIPH working group continued its activities, participating in annual congresses and producing further studies, as: G. Bandini, P. Bianchini, F. Borruso, M. Brunelli, S. Oliviero (edd.), *La Public History tra scuola, università e territorio. Una introduzione operativa*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2022.

[7] Cfr. R.H. Brown, *Toward a Democratic Science: Scientific Narration and Civic Communication*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1998; A. Weale, *Science advice, democratic responsiveness and public policy*, «Science and Public Policy», vol. 28, n. 6, December 2001, pp. 413-421.

parties who may be affected must be represented in the deliberations before significant modifications have become unacceptable. The implication is clear: non-specialists and non-scientists must be involved in research projects from the very beginning. They do not provide technical assessment, that remains the job of the specialists. They must control that specialists' self-interest does not override the wider interest. This also applies to history. Does it make sense to promote local history research without involving the citizens and understanding what would be important for them to know about their past? How the new historical knowledge produced by historians will be useful if those who are its recipients do not know what to do with it? Specialists will gradually come to see that the common people's views are an essential part of the legitimation of their researches. It is not just a question of participation, therefore, but of listening. Without listening there can be no cooperation. Without cooperation there can be no participation. Public history must therefore be based on democratic principles.

This reflection presents us a first concrete problem. On what scale is this type of activity feasible? On small, medium or large scale? We will return to this issue later.

1. *Public History, Collective Narratives and the Risks of Memory*

We have tried to provide a brief definition of "public history". Now let us try to understand what "public memory" is and how it works. First and foremost, it does not coincide with "collective memory", nor with "social memory". The "collective memory", as defined by Maurice Halbwachs, in fact, designates the shared pool of memories, knowledge and information of a social group. Instead, "social memory" designates the broader sphere of communicability that delimits the space within which different collective memories compete for the relevance and plausibility of their discourses[8]. It necessarily interfaces with public memory, although it does not exactly coincide with it. Public memory – indeed – is promoted by local and national public institutions in order to encourage people to commemorate a given event and/or a given person. It is not the result of social processing. It has a political nature. To some extent, it generates an induced memory, not a living and spontaneous one. It selects the past and relates it to the present.

For this reason, this expression (public memory) is frequently used in relation to the "uses and abuses of the past" for which politics is responsible, or when

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[8] M. Halbwachs, *La memoria collettiva*, Roma, Unicopli, 1987 (1st edition, 1950). On Halbwachs and his studies on memory, see: G. Namer, *Halbwachs et la mémoire sociale*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000.

in the social debate "memory struggles" are denounced, an appeal is made to a "shared memory", or the dream of a happy past is cultivated. Public memory, moreover, constitutes the outcome of precise memory policies, namely the discourses and practices through which it is decided how, when and under what conditions, a society chooses what to remember or forget. Halbwachs himself had noted how «circumstantial interests of social groups can influence the selection of memories and the construction of collective memory»[9].

But, who makes this selection? The local and national public institutions, or rather the political parties and coalitions able to impose their vision of the past by majority vote. They are – in representative democracies – the temporary expression of the will of the community, including with regard to the interpretation of the past (I deliberately do not use the word *reconstruction*) and its phylogenetic relationship with the present. Institutions are often unable to express the multifaceted social, moral and cultural composition of the local or national community they represent, synthesising its many souls and recomposing them into a shared narrative.

Institutions look to the past and provide an interpretation, according to the interpretations suggested by the historical moment or imposed by political contingencies. Public memory, in this sense, is strongly affected by the public use of the past. It is not an aseptic and neutral representation of what happened, but a re-interpretation of what happened in the past that is functional to an reading of the present time[10]. Not surprisingly, it often ends up coinciding with particular anniversaries and celebrations. These considerations lead us to consider another interesting aspect: that of the historical reliability of the public memory. Having celebratory purposes and often being inclined to a public use of the past, in fact, its reliability can be strongly compromised by the celebratory mandate received by the proposing institutions.

What role do historians and history play in this phenomenon? According to Italian historian Nicola Gallerano: «We speak of public use of historiography when the results of historical research are used in any way to produce effects of any kind. The most striking case is when there is a transfer of elements from historiography to official memory. Or when politics formalises in commemorations the results of a historical reconstruction by making them public memory»[11]. Historization is both a process and a result and foresees – among its many fundamental methodological factors – distance, interpretation and subjectivity; in other words, the historical perspective need to distance itself from its object; it must adopt a reconstructive-interpretive attitude; it must lead to a shared, intersubjective and multifocal reconstruction of the past.

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[9] *Ibid.*, p. 45.
[10] On this concept, see: C. Yanes Cabrera, J. Meda, A. Viñao (edd.), *School Memories: new trends in the history of education*, Cham, Springer, 2017.
[11] N. Gallerano, *Le verità della storia. Scritti sull'uso pubblico del passato*, Roma, Manifestolibri, 1999, p. 14.

It is clear, therefore, that history does not sacralize memories, insofar as it places them – through interpretation – in the context of a general framework, that is the result of historical reconstruction. History, by its very statute, strives to de-sacralize all testimonies and objects of mythopoetic transfiguration. History structures an objective time based on the sole and pure logic of historiographic reconstruction, which goes beyond all subjectivities of memories and all individual perspectives. Thus, the two symbolic and cultural universes, the two models of historicity generated by history and memory, can act effectively and productively if they are kept strictly separate.

Historiography uses memories as the documentary basis for its reconstructions (let us think about oral testimonies), stripping them of their value connotations and subjecting them to critical screening. Public history is based on the same assumption, but it is in a close dialectical relationship with social memory on the one hand and public memory on the other, as these are the repositories of the past narratives whose level of plausibility and reliability need to be verified. This entails risks, as the pressures toward conformity exerted by the whole society or a smaller community on the historian to adapt his scientific reconstruction to tradition are very strong.

Public memory therefore presents many critical issues, fundamentally resulting from the fact that it has specific commissioners, which we have already discussed. Does this also apply to public history? Or is public history more democratic thanks also to the participatory practices it is able to implement? We noted that often public history also has clients and commissioners: in this case, the communities that identify the research object, propose it to the historian or even participate in the historical reconstruction, providing testimonies, making private sources available, eccetera. They influence historical reconstruction, as they have a certain idea of the past, which is the result of the narrative of that past prevailing within the community itself and accepted as historical truth.

Public history is likewise exposed to the risks of altering the historical reality. What can preserve it from this risk? The historian and his professionalism, which remain central. The possibility of co-constructing historical knowledge with community members and their active participation in historiographical elaboration does not imply the equalization of roles. Recalling us once again to the principles of democratic science, we think that public history is not so much about historians writing history with non-specialists, which in any case would need historiographical training to perform this, but about historians listening to other people's knowledge needs and not choosing for themselves which histories to reconstruct. Those dealing with the global responsibility of scientists are very clear about this: historians leads the process of historiographical reconstruction, subjecting sources to a strict review, interpreting them as objectively as possible and counteracting homologative pressures from below; non-historians have to control that historians' research interest does not override the wider interest, thus legitimating their reconstruction also from a social point of view.

The historian as public intellectual has to account to his community for what he does and what he does has to be useful to his community, helping them to develop an awareness of the past based on scientific data and not on political propaganda, urban legends, fake news, rumors, ecc. I mean that it is not necessary for everyone to be a historian. What is necessary is for all members of a community to be interested in knowing their history and for historians to talk to each of them, focusing especially on the most current or most debated issues.

Even within the framework of the public history understood in a more participatory sense, ultimately, I wouldn't focus so much on asymmetry between those who make history and those who then use it, but on their being together (indispensable) parts of its making.

2. *Some Possible Interactions between Public History and Public Memory of School*

I stated earlier that historiography uses memoires as the documentary basis for its reconstructions. This – even more so – is done by public history, which can use the concretions of public memory as a documentary basis for its own reconstructions. In this case, public memory does not constitute an alternative narrative of the past to that proposed by historiography, but the very object of historiographic research inspired by the principles of public history.

I would like to give a concrete example concerning historical narratives and museum representations of Italian school reforms and educational reformers between memory and public history. In other words, we want to investigate how – on the one hand – regular schooling and – on the other hand – school reforms and educational reformers were represented on a public level by commemorative publications, exhibitions and museum throughout the 20th century in Italy.

The history of education is characterized by long periods of stasis, fast transitions, leaps forward and sudden slowdowns. The school resists changes very strongly, but there are times when changes happen. Again, however, changes do not produce a systemic change in school, but – more often – adaptations, casts, advanced experiments, utopias. There was a misalignment between the school theorized by educationalists and codified in laws and the real school, the everyday school, that school in which conforming to the grammar of schooling prevails.

What exactly do we mean by tradition and innovation in education? It is from the continuous tension between these two opposing trends that educational reform projects arise. How do we remember and represent changes in an

immobile institution, able to quickly reabsorb its revolutionary impact? How do we remember and represent the ground-breaking educational reformers?

In 1970, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron with *La reproduction* denounced the use of educational institutions by state apparatuses as organisms of ethical conformity and social reproduction. The two French sociologists observed that: «The school is the institution invested with the social function of teaching and therefore also of defining what it is legitimate to learn. […] There is no legitimate culture: every culture is arbitrary and imposed by the ruling classes. The school, however, makes this culture its own, masks its social nature and presents it as the objective, unquestionable culture, rejecting the others»[12]. To achieve this, the school must be transmissive, as it must transmit its values unchanged to the society as a whole, without subjecting them to personal interpretations through a dialectical approach, so that they retain their homologating nature.

In 1994 David Tyack and William Tobin wondered why "grammar of schooling" has been so hard to change[13]. They coined this concept to describe the almost invisible architecture that organizes much of what goes on in education. Its constituent element are the separation of classes by discipline, age-graded classrooms, teaching as transmission, leveling and tracking, and schooling as a mechanism for sorting students by perceived ability. This grammar reinforces the dominant culture, excludes the perspectives of non-dominant groups, and serves as a means of reproducing social inequalities from one generation to the next.

The grammar of school regulates what we refer to as traditional or regular schooling. There is a mainstream of education that is a standardised and reassuring narrative that tells us all what we want to hear about education, that represents it to us as we have always heard about it, also as we have experienced it.

Studying the Italian primary school in the early post-Unification period, I realised that many teachers continued to use the individual method and to oppose the adoption of the normal method in their classes because they cannot resist the demands of parents, who want their children to be taught individually as their ancestors had also been taught. I believe this is still the case today. The normal method is now over two hundreds years old and yet it continues to be applied in the majority of classes, often uncritically, without introducing those correctives and mitigations that pedagogical science has been calling for years.

School remains in the collective imaginary often linked to this system, to its transmissive, authoritarian and passivating approach. Memories of the

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[12] P. Bourdieu, J.-C. Passeron, *La reproduction. Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1970, pp. 53-54.
[13] D. Tyack, W. Tobin, *The "Grammar" of Schooling: Why Has It Been So Hard to Change?*, «American Educational Research Journal», vol. 31, n. 3, 1994, pp. 453-479.

school are therefore often linked to this vision. The dominant narrative of the school is this and the school ends up coinciding in the collective imaginary with this. Every narrative that does not conform to this, every alternative vision corresponds to a malfunction, a brief defect in the system.

We would like to give the example of the representation of school reforms and educational reformers in museums, which are among the spaces within which the historical contents are mediated to a wider public, also promoting public history initiatives.

Over 90% of Italian school museum exhibits – over 60 – focus on primary school. This fact can be explained by the fact elementary school constitute a great collective experience, making it possible to identify large parts of the population in the representations of a school's past displayed within these museums. It follows that the most represented school level should be the one that was historically attended by most Italians, i.e. elementary school. In Italy, in fact, pre-school and secondary education was never as strongly rooted in the collective imagination as was primary school which, by its very nature, was for the masses. The profound changes in Italian society during the "short Twentieth century" did in fact ensure that these educational levels were available to an ever increasing number of students. It was, in fact, the process of de-ruralisation and development of the service sector in the labour market which promoted the establishment of educational institutions (such as kindergarten) capable of supporting the transition from a patriarchal family model to a nuclear family as well as giving access to secondary education to an increasing number of young people.

The relative novelty of this phenomenon – beginning with the Italian economic miracle of the Fifties and Sixties – explains why these two levels of education cannot be used to effectively represent the school as a great collective experience in a museum context. The upper secondary schools are, however, much older, but – at least until the sixties of the twentieth century – represented elitist education, which only a limited number of people could access. Due to this complex set of reasons, a clear majority of these museum exhibitions represent the primary school because they constitute the educational experience shared by several generations of Italians of all social classes and is therefore capable of catalysing the memory of a great number of people.

But if we move on to the category of those schools that we have defined as "sacred places of education"[14] namely those places (usually schools) that constitute the spatial incubators of innovative educational experiences so as to be considered unique and be counted as such in the annals of the national education system. In this case it is especially interesting to observe the asymmetrical relationship between the nationwide occurrence of educational

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[14] See J. Meda, *The «Sites of School Memory» in Italy between memory and oblivion: a first approach*, «History of Education & Children's Literature», vol. XIV, n. 1, 2019, pp. 25-47.

experiences which took place in them and their locations in peripheral regional and economically depressed contexts[15].

This fact seems evident from the examination of an initial, provisional selection of these particular "sites of school memory", carried out by taking into account the exceptionality of the educational experiences conducted there and the timeframe of those same experiences within a chronological spectrum between 1800 and 1968, which is understood as the ideal watershed between a traditional conception of school and one which is more open to educational innovations triggered by the process of democratization of formal education contexts brought about by student protests around the world. In fact, these issues are closely intertwined, as the exceptionality of those educational experiences was greatly determined by the attitude of their promoters to emerge from the rigid patterns of traditional schools in a historical context in which the school was still seen as the dominant pedagogical model.

From a quick analysis of this first list of at least 15 sites, it seems immediately apparent that most of the "sacred places of education" are circumscribed within compulsory schools and how – despite the local dimension of the places where these historic educational institutions were based (small hamlets like Vho and San Gersolè, rural villages like La Montesca, Rovigliano, and Barbiana or the city suburbs like Mompiano and Pietralata) – you find yourself faced with the places of the national school memory, well known outside the narrow confines of local communities and elevated as models.

Paradoxically, we observed that these "sacred places of education" did not become «sites of memory». What are the reasons for this phenomenon? It is likely that over the years, these places have undergone a process of dematerialization and symbolic signification by intellectual elites who, through their theoretical paradigmization, have slowly withdrawn them from the spatial context and social environmental in which they had been created and have therefore relegated them to pedagogical imaginary. For this reason, these symbolic places are not able to evoke collective memories outside of rather small intellectual groups and/or certain geographical areas.

This consideration leads us to make a first general reflection based on the following paradox: the need to collectively celebrate the memory of a small mountain school with the impeccable philological refurbishing of the school of the past is recognised, but not the interior of a school where extremely innovative educational experiences found in every teaching manual took place. In this sense, it can be said that "sacred places of education" tend to be more imaginary pedagogical places than real places in the national school memory, since they don't disseminate the memory of educational experiences which

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[15] On this topic, in particular, see: B. Franco, *Decentralizing Culture: Public History and Communities*, in P. Hamilton, J.B. Gardner (edd.), *The Oxford Handbook of Public History*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 69-86.

took place there. They just establish pedagogical culture, which has fostered the myth of those experiences over the years. They are therefore non-places[16] rather than places. They have become so sanctified and mythologized, that they might as well be considered immutable reliquaries.

It is not by chance, in fact, that only an infinitesimal percentage of these symbolic places has undergone true musealization. The reasons for this phenomenon are still to be investigated. Some preliminary hypotheses, however, can be made.

Scrolling through the lists of these "sacred places of education", we immediately realize that most educational experiences conducted within them might be considered as shining examples of progressive education. Is there a link between this data and the lack of musealization of the spatial incubators of such experiences? We can try to explain this trend by the fact that these museums are based on a perception of the school as a great collective experience, able to allow those who have experienced it to identify with the representations of the schools' past there proposed. It can therefore be deduced that the school level most represented within these museums can be no other than the one attended by the greatest possible number of people, namely the elementary level, which is the only one capable of creating a shared emotional foundation between extremely diversified generations (that of the older students who stopped at the fifth grade and that of the younger ultra-schooled generation). As a result of this, if the school which is better able to generate memory is the "school for all", it follows that experiences which are exemplary from a pedagogical point of view – being extremely innovative but often linked to the charisma of a single figure of an educator (such as Mario Lodi in Vho di Piadena) – have not been able to fulfill the difficult task of incarnating a great collective experience, shared in general terms by the largest possible number of people from all social classes and multiple generations.

It is conceivable, in essence, that it was precisely their uniqueness, the fact that they were directly experienced by a small social group, which does not make it possible for them to become «sites of memory», capable of solidifying the memories of a wider community to those who remember and therefore generating feelings of collective identification.

The French philosopher Paul Ricœur, moreover, in his seminal study *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, suggested that in order to study public memory in all its complexity, we should consider the proximity relationship that creates

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[16] On this concept, in particular, see: M. Augé, *Non-lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1992 (trans.: *Non-places: introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity*, London-New York, Verso, 1995). Marta Brunelli proposed a first application of this concept in the field of historical research in education in: *Non-Places of School Memory: First Reflections on the Forgotten Places of Education as Generators of Collective School Memory between Oral History, Public History and Digital History*, «History of Education and Children's Literature», vol. 14, n. 1, 2019, pp. 49-72.

connections between those who are closest and linked by family ties, social relations and any other form of belonging of a subject to a group. The concept of memory of the closest is related to that of thick relations, contrasted by some philosophers with that of thin relations[17].

This distinction is used, for example, by the philosopher Avishai Margalit in an essay in *The Ethics of Memory*, in which he defines as thick the relationships entertained with those who are close to us – kinships, love ties, friendships – and thin those that instead concern those who are foreign and distant[18]. Human relations, in short, can thicken or thin out more elastically than one would think and therefore determine densities and rarefactions around occasions of public memory.

It is our impression that the proximity effect, after all, also favours public history initiatives and this leads us to assume that the effectiveness of these initiatives is inversely proportional to their scale.

These are just some initial reflections, which will be subject to further checks.

3. *"What Went Wrong?": Perspectives on New Histories of Education*

One of the purpose of our research is to define what public image of – on the one hand – regular schooling and – on the other hand – school reforms and educational reformers has established in collective imaginary, how it has changed over time and for what reasons. Which historical narratives have been made of these (successful or unsuccessful) reforms over time? First researches suggest that school reforms were more studied in an academic perspective, but had almost never become objects of historiographical mediation to the society as a whole; on the contrary, the traditional school – which resisted those reforms – is the one that was most commemorated and represented. If the school which is better able to generate memory and to arouse the interest of people is the school for all, it follows that educational experiments – being extremely innovative but often linked to the charisma of a great reformer – have not been able to fulfill the difficult task of incarnating a great collective experience, shared by the largest possible number of people from all social classes and more generations.

Besides that, it would be interesting to study the complex relationship between innovation and tradition/conservation in our schools. Indeed, a large part of the evolutionary path of the Italian school system between the 19th and 20th centuries is played out on this historical dichotomy. Over the course of the various historical periods, what were the ideal movements and phenomena that from time to time embodied the two opposite poles of an extremely complex

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[17] P. Ricœur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2000.
[18] A. Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge-London, Harvard University Press, 2002.

evolutionary process, such as the one that in the course of the 20th century led – at least in the more evolved western countries – to the definitive affirmation of mass schooling? In other words, what has innovation consisted of in each of the various epochs mentioned above, and what has tradition/preservation consisted of within the school world? In short, what was considered new and/or a driving force for innovation and what instead was interpreted as old, obsolete, outdated?

These questions help us get to the core of the matter, which is to try to define the evolutionary process of public education within Italian society in the contemporary age from a less linear perspective than we are commonly accustomed to, in an attempt to clearly periodize that path and provide a description that highlights its often fluctuating and oscillating course. That is, by including within this reconstruction the long-lasting phenomena, but also the permanences and overlaps that characterise it and that are often not surveyed or are only marginally analyzed within the official reconstructions.

Innovation, on the one hand, and tradition/conservation, on the other, are two opposing thrusts that have always been co-present within the school's evolutionary path, as indeed within any evolutionary path. The school, however, as a public institution entrusted by the state with the education of society, has been particularly characterized by this discontinuous trend, made up of accelerations and sudden stops, but also of continuous slowdowns and sabotage aimed from time to time at keeping the school as it was, without modifying curricula, teaching methods and inveterate habits, without updating the knowledge transmitted and skills instilled, without modernising learning spaces, their organization, furniture and teaching aids made available to teachers and students. The school and its history – in short – are full of resistance and leaps forward, often embodied in the bursts of invention that teachers themselves have been able to theoretically elaborate and implement in their teaching and schooling.

I do not believe that an effective mapping of these resistances and leaps forward exists to date, not least because the school – which has always been considered a temple of modernity and, from late 19th-century positivism onwards, an indispensable tool for combating ignorance and overcoming the obscurantism exercised by the social hierarchies on the plebs in previous centuries – has always attempted to conceal the strong resistance to change that existed within it, and has instead pretended to coincide with the glossy image mentioned above and self-represent itself as a place of innovation. Analysing then what each period has interpreted as new-old, innovative-antiquated, reactionary-revolutionary in relation to teaching and learning (I am thinking for example of the early 19th century debate between the supporters of the individual method and those of the simultaneous-collective method), is fundamental to understanding what has slowed down or accelerated certain processes and also to verifying the reasons for this in order to understand how it was possible to make in certain mistakes

for decades and instead how certain innovations have struggled to take hold and spread in schools.

The impression one gets – but which should be supported by more detailed scientific research – is that the pointing to new configurations of learning spaces and new teaching methods as being extremely innovative has historically meant that they have been considered difficult to reproduce, if not outright unattainable, or rather true privileges reserved for the few, in any case not reproducible on a large scale within the national school system as a whole.

This acted as an alibi to avoid implementing all those necessary innovations in time, making them age prematurely, thus nullifying their disruptive effect and accumulating delays. In short, this inerted their disruptive capacity and precipitated their generative potential, not allowing them to be disseminated more widely and thus systematized, which would certainly have had a knock-on effect within the school world.

A public history of these processes, made in collaboration with other school's agents, could ensure interesting new results and above all – precisely because it is produced from a need shared by its same recipients – could help us understand how to overcome this dichotomy.