

Contested memorial stones and the conflicting memories of the “years of lead” in Italy

Federica Rossi

The decade of the 1970s, following the wave of students’ and workers’ protests in 1968, is characterised in Italy by the emergence and radicalisation of leftist groups and their growing use of violence as a means of political struggle, including kidnappings, targeted shootings and assassinations. Those years were also marked by neo-fascist militancy and violence, particularly associated with bombings in public places, as in Piazza Fontana in Milan in 1969, in Piazza della Loggia in Brescia in 1974, and at Bologna train station in 1980.¹

Since the early 1980s the preceding decade has commonly been referred to as the “years of lead”² and continues to be a source of debate. Controversies about political and judicial, individual and collective responsibilities, as well as the state’s involvement and support of neo-fascist bombings, frequently re-appear in the public sphere at various occasions, such as the release of a new film or publication of a book on the 1970s, commemorations, trials, etc. The persistence and vigour of polemics about this recent history reveal the co-existence of multiple interpretations and concurrent memories of the 1970s and, more specifically, of political violence. On the one hand, the official memory, celebrated through commemorations, plaques and discourses, highlights the victory of the Italian democracy over “terrorism” and subversive projects, reaffirms the State order and

¹ For the history of the ‘years of lead’, see Donatella Della Porta, *Terrorismi in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1984), Robert Lumley, *States of emergency: cultures of revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978* (London: Verso, 1990), Isabelle Sommier, *La violence politique et son deuil: l’après 68 en France et Italie* (Rennes: PUR, 1998), Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and disorder. Social protest and politics in Italy, 1965-1985* (Oxford: OUP, 1988).

² The expression “years of lead” started to be used in the Italian media, after the release of Margarethe Von Trotta’s film *Marianne and Juliane* in 1981 fictionalising the story of two sisters, one of whom was involved in a German armed group (Red Army Faction). The German title *Die Bleierne zeit* was translated in Italian as “years of lead”.

heroises victims (especially if state officials). On the other hand, sceptical, alternative and oppositional representations of the past also exist, preserved and maintained through local or activist forms of memorialisation.³

The two cases examined here resonate closely with the other studies presented in this collection, all of which show the simultaneous attempts to use the political instrumentalisation of historical events to silence minorities and deny state violence, and the incessant forms of resistance they face.

This paper explores the controversies surrounding two memorial stones referring to two key events and landmarks in the construction of the “years of lead” narrative. The first is the plaque commemorating the anarchist railway worker Giuseppe Pinelli, located on the Piazza Fontana in Milan; the second one is the plaque commemorating the neo-fascist bombing at Bologna train station. These two cases objectify the constant tensions and struggles that characterise the memorialisation of the specific events, and more generally of the 1970s in Italy. They are also key to understanding processes of politicisation and depoliticisation of memory and debates about past events, and to seizing the articulation between the local and national context.

Activist memorialisation: resisting and contesting the official truth

On 12 December 1969, after two years of growing and intense workers’ and students’ movements, a bomb exploded inside the Bank of Agriculture in Milan causing the deaths of 16 people and dozens of casualties. The police investigations were initially directed against radical left groups and two anarchist activists, Giuseppe Pinelli and Pietro Valpreda, were arrested and held at the Milan Police Station to be questioned. Three days later, Giuseppe Pinelli was found dead

³ On the memory of and controversies about the 1970s in Italy, see Andrea Hajek, *Negotiating memories of protest in Western Europe. The case of Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), Anna Cento Bull and Paul Cooke, *Ending Terrorism in Italy*, (London: Routledge, 2013), Giovanni De Luna, *Le ragioni di un decennio* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2012), Federica Rossi “La lutte armée entre justice, politique et histoire. Usages et traitements des années de plomb dans l’Italie contemporaine (1968-2010)” (PhD thesis, Université de Nanterre, 2011).

outside the police headquarters, allegedly from falling from the fourth-floor window of the Superintendent Calabresi's office. In a period of intense politicisation and powerful social movements, Pinelli's death sparked fierce polemics and campaigns against the police and particularly the Superintendent Calabresi. Official inquests into the circumstances and responsibilities for what happened were conducted, while radical groups also organised their own counter-investigations.⁴ The judicial inquiry closed in 1975, and the public prosecutor Gerardo D'Ambrosio concluded the trial by acquitting all police officers and affirming that the anarchist's fall had been caused by fainting and losing balance due to long hours of stressful questioning. This decision, instead of appeasing the disagreements, triggered a long-term controversy and reinforced the political activists' mistrust of the state's role and involvement in violent episodes throughout the decade. In establishing an official truth, the verdict created an unbridgeable gap between the state's account of the event and the citizens' and activists' views that is still dividing people almost fifty years later. It is precisely this conflict that is re-enacted and reproduced incessantly through the controversies about the memorial stones, to the extent that today two plaques jostle for space in the memory of Pinelli in Piazza Fontana.

The first plaque was placed in the square in 1977 by a group of activists, students, members of the antifascist resistance and friends during the annual commemoration for Pinelli organised by the anarchist collective *Ponte della Ghisolfia*. It contained the following inscription: "To Giuseppe Pinelli, anarchist railway worker, innocent who was killed in the premises of Milan police headquarters on the 16th December 1969. Students and democrats from Milan". The choice of locating the stone at Piazza Fontana, was highly symbolic and carried a double denunciation of the state. Not only did its words contest the official truth about Pinelli's death, but it also blamed the state's involvement in the bombing. By placing the memorial stone at the square, rather than where the anarchist died in front of the police station, Pinelli was included among the victims of the explosion, as "the 17th victim", that is, among the victims of the

⁴ Numerous intellectuals and public figures campaigned and signed a petition accusing the police, Dario Fo wrote the theatre play *Accidental death of an anarchist*, and several songs have been written for Pinelli.

state collusion with neo-fascist violence.⁵ In the following days, local politicians and members of the police forces demanded for the plaque to be immediately removed on the grounds that it was not authorised and it was defaming the Milan police officials, whereas the judicial verdict had acquitted them two years earlier. In fact, the main problem faced by the authorities was not the existence of an illegal plaque commemorating the activist, but the fact that its inscription was re-opening an uncomfortable polemic that it was hoped had been solved. The redefinition of Pinelli's death as murder was challenging the official narrative affirmed by police officers and corroborated by the judicial inquiry, defying the state's capacity to define historical truths in the court.

Despite several attempts and campaigns to remove it, the plaque remained and became a site of memory⁶ and a cornerstone of the militant memory of the city.⁷ Over the years, the plaque has been damaged and destroyed several times by far-right activists, but every time remade and replaced by Pinelli's anarchist comrades. At the end of the 1980s, during the mayoral electoral campaigns, the socialist party promised that the plaque would be removed. After the elections, the newly elected socialist mayor announced the council's will to move the memorial stone to the Museum of Contemporary History of Milan. The declaration was received with immediate public protests and mobilisations from political groups, intellectuals, students, and citizens. Under the pressure, the mayor decided to suspend the removal, but inevitably received criticisms from police unions and right wing representatives.

It was only in 2006, towards the end of his mandate, that the right-wing mayor Gabriele Albertini⁸ gave the green light to remove the memorial stone, which was replaced in the middle of the night by a new official plaque by Milan council. The new inscription changed

⁵ *La strage è di stato* (This is a state massacre) was the slogan often used in the radical press and demonstrations at that time, as well as for the bombings that happened in other cities in later years.

⁶ Pierre Nora, *Lieux de mémoire* and Nora (Paris : Gallimard, 1992) and Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", *Representations* 26 (1989).

⁷ Also see John Foot, "La strage e la città: Milano e Piazza Fontana, 1969-1999", in *La memoria contesa. Studi sulla comunicazione sociale del passato*, ed. Anna Lisa Tota (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001).

⁸ Elected in the coalition list including Berlusconi's party and other right wing parties.

only two words, but fundamentally modified the meaning of the inscription and reaffirmed the official interpretation of the anarchist's death: "To Giuseppe Pinelli, anarchist railway worker, who tragically died in the premises of Milan police headquarters on the 16th December 1969". This substitution has two implied significances: firstly, it legitimised the existence of a plaque in memory of the activist, as the Council acknowledged the fact that it could not just remove the unauthorised stone; secondly, it acted as an admission that the main issue with the previous plaque was less its illegality than the counter-narrative it was displaying on the public space.

A few days later various groups and citizens marched to the square to place a new plaque, with the original wording, next to the council's plaque. Since then, both plaques have coexisted on the square and are the objects of incessant debates and controversies. They are also the target of direct actions from neo-fascist groups that damage the anarchists' plaque, or, more often, from radical left groups that "correct" the words on the council's plaque and replace "tragically dead" with "murdered".

Memory of violence and the political identity of the city

On 2 August 1980 at 10:25 am a bomb exploded in the second class waiting room at Bologna train station causing the death of 85 people and seriously injuring a further 200. It was the fourth and the deadliest of a series of similar attacks perpetrated since 1969. Since the immediate aftermath of the bombing, local authorities, victims, intellectuals and political activists have blamed neo-fascist groups and the state's secret services for the attack; however, almost 40 years and several trials and inquests later, the judicial truth is still uncertain and no one has been held accountable for organising the attack.⁹

The memorial site at the station is made up of several components: the split in the wall destroyed by the explosion has been kept visible, the memorial stone saying "2nd August 1980. Victims of fascist terrorism"

⁹ Antonella Beccaria and Riccardo Lenzi, *Schegge contro la democrazia. 2 agosto 1980: le ragioni di una strage nei più recenti atti giudiziari* (Bologna: Editrice Socialmente, 2010).

lists all victims and their ages and is placed over the hole left by the bomb and next to the partially destroyed wall; the hands of the clock on the front entrance of the station are stopped at 10:25, time of the explosion. The station therefore has become something beyond its immediate functionality as the main train station of the city: it is also a site of memory, where annual commemorative marches converge. Bologna is a city with a strong leftist tradition, known for student movements and activism, and where the memory of the resistance against fascism is still strongly alive. Every year, the commemorations of the bombing are widely followed by the population and become an occasion to reaffirm the anti-fascist identity of the city, as well as to express political discontent towards the central governments.¹⁰ In this perspective, the commemoration of the bombing in Bologna visibly performs the additional role of a collective action of protest.¹¹

In contrast to the case previously studied, the controversy about the memorial stone does not come from political activists challenging the official discourse, but rather from right-wing politicians who attempt to oppose the memory of the urban community and the widely accepted political definition of the event. In a way, these attempts resonate with the example of the suppression of local memory of the deportations in Chechnya, and the replacing of the ‘Day of memory and grief’ with the “Defender of the fatherland day” by pro-Russian authorities, which are discussed in Klocker’s contribution to this collection. Likewise, in Bologna, changes in the political climate, political parties and power relations open the possibility of attacking local memories, shared by the community, and attempt to redefine them.

In Bologna, the inscription “fascist terrorism” on the memorial stone has been contested since the beginning by right-wing politicians, at local and national levels, arguing that there is no judicial evidence

¹⁰ Anna Lisa Tota has conducted an ethnographic study of the commemorations: Anna Lisa Tota, *La città ferita. Memoria e comunicazione pubblica della strage di Bologna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003) and “Ethnographing public memory: the commemorative genre for the victims of terrorism in Italy” *Qualitative Research Methods*, 4 (2) (2010).

¹¹ Stéphane Latté, “Le choix des larmes. La commémoration comme mode de protestation” *Politix* 110 (2015).

pointing at a neo-fascist plotting.¹² Nevertheless, it was only during the late 1990s and early 2000s that demands to modify the plaque's wording could be openly articulated and became more audible. In large part, this became possible due to the rise of a new right on the country's political scene, and the legitimisation of Silvio Berlusconi and his allies, some of whom were activists in far-right groups in the 1970s. It is interesting to note that during the same period, the political elite displayed a fierce will to rewrite the political history of the country, more specifically in relation to the period of fascism and anti-fascist resistance, through the requalification of specific historical events or the establishment of new commemorative days.¹³

The election of a right-wing mayor in 1999, Giorgio Guazzaloca,¹⁴ for the first time in the history of Bologna, intensified the pressure from right-wing politicians to have the plaque's inscription modified: the spokesperson of the right-wing coalition (Pdl) defined the "fascist matrix" of the attack as a "political and judicial dogma".¹⁵ The mayor did not authorise the change of the memorial stone, probably aware of the discontent this would trigger among the population and especially from the Association of victims of the attack. However, he always omitted the adjective "fascist" during the annual commemorative speeches for the duration of his mandate. The original expression was re-included in the official speech only by the new left wing mayor, Sergio Cofferati,¹⁶ after his election in 2004.

¹² Trials and investigations in relation to the bombing in Bologna have been marked by contradictory verdicts and the condemnation of three neo-fascist militants for the actual execution of the plan, but no one as the masterminds of the bombing.

¹³ Two examples of these are the establishment in 2004 of the Day of remembrance for the victims of the very controversial Foibe massacre after WWII and the establishment of the Day of freedom to commemorate the fall of the Berlin wall in 2005. More cases of the requalification of past events are analysed by Angelo Del Boca (ed) *La storia negata. Il revisionismo e il suo uso politico* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2009).

¹⁴ Member of the People of Freedom (Pdl), the right-wing party coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi.

¹⁵ Paolo Cascella, "E il Pdl annuncia: dal 2010 manifestazioni separate", *La Repubblica*, August 3rd, 2009.

¹⁶ Member of the centre-left party Democrats of the Left.

A new controversy about the memorial at Bologna railway station was sparked by the placement of an additional plaque by a delegation of UNESCO in 2010, following the inclusion of the station in UNESCO's programme on 'Heritage for a culture of peace and nonviolence.' The new plaque says: "This site, witness of the terrorist massacre of the 2nd August 1980, has been included in the 2001-2010 Unesco's programme on 'Heritage for a culture of peace and nonviolence' so that the sorrow is not immobile in the memory, but living witness of the will to defend peace in the mind of the youth". This wording not only reactivated the right/left divide, but also triggered the protests of intellectuals, students, activists and other other actors of civil society that had been critical of the absence of absence of the epithet "fascist". The Italian UNESCO delegate Vittorio Covino defended the inscription presented as an "objective choice", while right wing groups and parties welcomed the new wording.¹⁷ The president of the Association of victims of the attack, Sergio Bolognesi, also welcomed UNESCO recognition, as long as the old stone remained untouched.

Resilient memories: between depoliticisation and re-politicisation

Collective memories are shaped by ceremonies, memorials, symbols, monuments and days of remembrance and are part of the process of constructing a nation, as an imagined community.¹⁸ Nevertheless, they can also be the battleground that cements social groups and their oppositional identity. The two cases above present challenges to official declarations of unity, consensus and cohesion of the national community over past events: the resilience of activist and local memories delegitimise the official discourse, by making the cracks in official monuments' stones visible. It is in these interstices that forms of micro-resistance surface and claim their share. Focusing on the micro- or local level of struggles for memorialisation, as in here for Milan and Bologna, has the potential for going beyond the dichotomy opposing the state and the suppressed or marginalised voices to examine the complex and continuous interplay of actors, groups and

¹⁷ Eleonora Capelli, "L'Unesco e la strage non più fascista. Così si travisano sentenza e verità", *La Repubblica*, September 25, 2010.

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

levels that shape the interpretation of the past in each context. It offers the possibility for understanding official historiography as an attempt, rather than an achievement and a conclusion, that is always open to being contested and deconstructed in different ways in different places. It also allows us to look at how ‘sites of memory’ are constantly re-created in their material, symbolic and functional aspects to crystallise and secrete collective and/or minoritarian memories.¹⁹ As with the other papers in this collection, the forms of resistance and contestation discussed here reveal the extent to which commemorations, sites of memory and monuments are at the heart of political struggles that reflect the continuity of past controversies as much as present political interests, competitions and interpretations.

From this perspective, the difficult and divisive life of Pinelli’s plaque in Milan objectifies practices of micro-resistance to the definition of the past in consensual terms imposed by an official truth. In the case of the Italian ‘years of lead’, this mainly coincides with the judicial truth, as the political crisis was handled primarily with a judicial, more than a political, approach based upon the criminalisation and depoliticisation of non-state violence.²⁰ This case then illustrates not only how militant forms of memorialisation resist the official discourse that aims to reconcile the society through the forgetting of its political divisions; by staging the dissent over the past event, it prevents both its forgetting and its depoliticisation. Hence, the coexistence of the two memorial stones on Piazza Fontana in Milan signifies the failure of the holders of power to impose a depoliticised and pacified narrative of Pinelli’s death and the irreconcilability of conflicting memories of a politically and emotionally charged past. Inscribed in local history, the political field and power relations, the struggles around Pinelli’s plaque epitomise the wider controversies and polarisations that still characterise the interpretation of the ‘years of lead’ at the national level.

Similarly, the debates surrounding the memorial stone at Bologna train station, although rooted in the local context, resonate at national level, because they echo the broader tendency to depoliticise the political violence of the 1970s and rely upon the judicial definition

¹⁹ Pierre Nora, *Lieux de mémoire*.

²⁰ Federica Rossi “La lutte armée entre justice, politique et histoire. Usages et traitements des années de plomb dans l’Italie contemporaine (1968-2010)”.

of the events. The judicialisation of the interpretation of the decade leads to the extraction of specific events from their historical circumstances and subsumes collective political acts into their individual criminalisation. The growing moral and humanitarian discourse in the definition of past conflicts is particularly evident in the more recently placed UNESCO plaque. The public discourse on the ‘years of lead’ has been increasingly dominated since the 1980s by the emphasis on ‘terrorism’ at the expense of the political significance of social struggles. However, the elaboration of a decontextualised discourse on terrorism that posits the necessity of the condemnation of violence – of any kind of non-state violence, regardless of contexts, ideologies and goals – and the celebration of the suffering of victims has been the hallmark of the turn of the century.²¹ In this ideological context of the early 21st century, those mobilisations and debates are less significant for what they achieve than for what they reveal about contextual power relations and how the past is reconstructed according to the conditions and to fit the frames of the present.²²

Conclusion

The controversies and mobilisations around the memorial stones in Milan and Bologna illustrate the extent to which memory is a competitive field, permeated by power relations and reflecting the present (rather than the past) *zeitgeist*. More specifically, these two cases show that the memory of the 1970s in Italy continues to be divided and divisive, and remains politically charged for at least three reasons: firstly, that decade was a period of intense and deep political polarisations, and the two events mentioned (Pinelli’s death and the bombing in Bologna) were politically motivated and deepened those polarisations in society. Secondly, the interpretation of the two events, as well as of the whole decade, is still political because it is continually re-politicised by different actors that instrumentally use the past for current political purposes. Finally, it is a political memory because all official representations of the past – plaques, monuments, street

²¹ Didier Fassin, *The Empire of Trauma. Inquiry into the Condition of Victim* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Michael Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Robert Meister, *After evil: a politics of human rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

²² Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1992).

names, commemorations – are the result of power relations and political struggles to give a sense to past events, to construct an official narrative that aims to be consensual and politically neutral, but which is (or may be) constantly challenged.

This analysis contributes to the discussion of how local, marginal and militant memories – and objects and rituals that embody them – are shaped by official truths, but also challenge, resist and subvert the dominant narrative on the past. Together with the other two articles in this collection, this paper has aimed to uncover the interactions, oppositions and conflicts as ongoing processes that use, mould and impact on the interpretation of events and incessantly recreate meanings, symbols and motives for political agency.