

Chapter 30. An “unaccomplished memory”: the period of the ‘strategy of tension’ in Italy (1969-1993) and the Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan

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ABSTRACT

In Italy the ‘strategy of tension’ period represents a still very obscure time in country’s recent history. The terrorist attacks that took place from 1969 to 1993 have never been included in the Italian public discourse. Can one imagine that this is due to various forms of instigated amnesia? It seems to be an ‘unaccomplished memory’ that could never be inscribed in the international public discourse. When ‘State Terror’ occurred in Italy, access to legal and political arenas was systematically denied and cultural trauma process could be performed only in aesthetic arenas. After addressing the hypothesis of the role played by international intelligence services (especially CIA) in the Italian ‘strategy of tension’, the chapter focuses on a case study of the first Italian terrorist attack happened in Piazza Fontana (Milan, 12 December 1969) and analyses the social trajectories of this public memory.

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1. Introduction: the Italian cultural trauma

The terrorist attacks that took place in Italy between 1969 and 1993 (during the so-called 'strategy of tension' period described below) have never been inscribed in the nation's public discourse. As a result, the Italian public lacks an understanding of the country's recent history. Since 1970 these deaths and massacres have not been included in the majority of terrorist cases properly understood and remembered. This absence of collective awareness has been the 'natural' consequence of various forms of amnesia instigated in the past and today. At the international level there is also a lack of awareness that there is any terrorism of this kind in Italy. Only the crimes of the Red Brigades and the Mafia have been properly inscribed in the international public debate on contemporary Italian history. Why is this so? One hypothesis, often propounded but never proven, is that the 'strategy of tension' was made possible in Italy by a degree of cooperation between the deviant part of the Italian state intelligence services and the activities of international intelligence services, especially clandestine operations of the CIA. There would be a purported analogy between what happened during the 1970s in

South America² and Italy. After addressing the issue of the political implications of the 'strategy of tension' and the involvement of international intelligence services in Italian politics, this chapter focuses on the specific characteristics of the trauma of the first Italian terrorist attack. This happened in Piazza Fontana (Milan, 12 December 1969) and initiated an obscure period in recent Italian history. The chapter examines the cultural forms of 'Piazza Fontana memory' to verify their degree of importance and visibility in the public sphere and to analyze the negotiations among different social groups competing to define this crucial event. Finally, it considers the relation between, on the one hand, the recent powerful role of the association of victims' relatives and new reconciliation policies, and on the other, the inscription of this terrorist attack in Italian public discourse.

In contemporary societies, cultural codes are often required to intervene actively in the public definition of 'crucial events' such as wars, terrorist attacks, or disasters. These events impact on the entire collectivity, and they usually require a long process of public elaboration (Alexander 2004). Cultural codes shape both the contemporary representation of a crucial event and its future public memory.

To what extent can cultural trauma theories (Eyerman 2001; Alexander *et al.* 2004) be applied to the case of the Italian terrorist attacks? In the majority of these cases, access to the legal arena was not available to process the cultural trauma: when 'state terror' occurred in Italy, access to the legal arena was systematically denied through a variety of tactics. For this reason, cultural elaboration of the trauma took place on other levels, such as aesthetic ones. By conducting a case study on the Piazza Fontana terrorist attack, this chapter investigates the specific characteristics

² For example, in the case of Salvador Allende in Chile. See Torres Dujisin in this volume.

of the trauma process in the Italian context and its consequences for 1) the inscription of the crucial event in public discourse, and 2) its relation with notions of justice. Moreover, it will illustrate how and to what extent aesthetic codes affect the public definition of justice and the collective understanding of what happened.

The question of how to locate terror in the public space is a complex one. It is analyzed here by considering the nature of the aesthetic codes used to transform a place of violence into a space of collective remembering. The process of transforming place is shaped by the performative nature of the narratives used in various national contexts. The sensitive nature of these places can be analyzed by looking at social and public trajectories of the commemorative sites that have been planned and constructed where the terror attack occurred. Cultural symbols and artistic codes become resources with which to articulate the struggles over the past that influence the process of constructing national identities.

In Italy, for example, there is a long history of state collusion between parts of the government and criminal organizations like the Mafia and the Camorra. This collusion has deeply affected the functioning of the legal system, which is normally the most important arena for the expression of collective trauma. When this mode of expression is denied, the expression of trauma is pushed outside the formal legal and political system. In these cases, cultural elaboration of the trauma takes place at the aesthetic level and the culturally produced memories are very often counter-memories (Tota 2002; 2010).

2. The 'unaccomplished' public memory of 'State Terror' in Italy (1969-1993)

The period of modern Italian history between 1969 and 1993 is characterized by a perception of the state as unable to defend its citizens, lacking the political and institutional will to pursue terrorists and, in some cases, as being the instigator of terror attacks. During that period, violence and terror were used as a political means to obtain political consensus in a process commonly referred to as the 'strategy of tension'. Citizens' access to the legal arena for justice was frequently denied. Indeed, numerous terrorists have not yet been prosecuted. In many cases, even after decades, there have been no convictions.

The terrorist attacks, rather, entered public discourse only through their cultural depictions (films, theatrical performances, exhibitions, concerts). In light of Alexander's model (2004), it can be argued that the cultural process of healing the nation and the Italian citizens from these traumas was enacted in the artistic arena. Terrorist organizations had been highly active in Italy since 1970, with numerous attacks resulting in many deaths and mass casualties caused by bombings in railway stations and central squares of cities. There is a long list of such terrorist attacks, but most Italian citizens have forgotten this chapter of Italy's past. As Dickie, et al (2002: 46) attest:

The extent and duration of the period of the *stragi* in postwar Italy have no real precedent in contemporary Europe. The series of peacetime outrages that marked the 1969-84 period cannot be compared with the effects of various coups or civil wars in other southern European countries. Only in Italy did the strategy of tension last for so long and cause so much damage within a democratic system. Only in Italy do many

of these outrages remain a mystery to this day. Few of the protagonists of the postwar *stragi* ... have ever been convicted. Many were not even tried.

In the Italian case, the expression 'strategy of tension' has come to denote the past four decades of internal terrorist attacks. Yet, as said, behind this veneer lies a strategy of terror and violence pursued by an extremist part of the democratic state and the intelligence services in order to gain and maintain a political consensus unobtainable through democratic elections. Surprisingly, despite the frequency of terrorist attacks, this recent past has been largely forgotten. Numerous Italians, especially younger ones, cannot remember key details of these tragedies – dates, victims, and places.

In 1992, *Cuore*, a satirical magazine, published a series of student essays on the massacre in Piazza Fontana. It was evident that the majority of these students had no idea of what had happened only twenty-three years previously (Foot 2002). Yet the real problem is not forgetfulness, because, as Foot (2002) argues, you cannot forget something you have never learned. As already mentioned, the Italian public seems to lack a complete understanding of the country's recent history. Since 1970 these deaths and massacres have not been included in the nation's public discourse. Can one imagine that this is due to various forms of amnesia instigated in the past and today? It is interesting to note that at the international level there is a lack of awareness of any terrorism of this kind in Italy: within international public debate on contemporary Italian past only the crimes of the Red Brigades and the Mafia have been considered. This entire period remains relatively unknown to the rest of the

world, not to mention its obscurity in the collective consciousness of Italian citizens. It is an 'unaccomplished memory', in this sense, in that it could never be inscribed in public debate because of the public's lack of awareness of a large part of these terrorist actions.

As said, the hypothesis, often propounded but never proven, is that the strategy of tension was made possible in Italy by collusion between the deviant part of the Italian state intelligence services and the activities of the international intelligence services, especially the CIA. Without direct understanding of the role played by the CIA, and perhaps also by other international intelligence services cooperating with the United States, it is impossible for this public memory to accomplish its complete form. It is not just a matter of elaborating what happened at the public level. It is a matter of granting the Italian nation and to its citizens the right to properly 'label', or to name, what happened, and therefore subsequently the right to forget.

As said, there is an analogy between what happened in the 1970s in South America and Italy, even if the democratic state was maintained in the Italian case. During Bill Clinton's second term as the US President, the CIA acknowledged that it had played a role in Chilean politics prior to the coup, but its degree of involvement is still debated. Perhaps in the future the CIA will also acknowledge that it played a role in Italian politics during the strategy of tension.

Aldo Moro, Prime Minister of Italy from 1963 to 1968, was kidnapped by the Red Brigades on 16 March 1978 and murdered after 55 days of captivity. In an extract from the report of the Red Brigades on their interrogations of Moro during his imprisonment, he underlines the role of associate countries in the strategy of tension:

The so-called strategy of tension had the purpose, although fortunately not attained, to restore Italy to normality after the events of 1968 and the so-called 'hot autumn'. It can be assumed that the associated countries [who were] interested in various ways in our policy and therefore interested in sponsoring a certain politics were somehow involved through their [intelligence] services. (Commissione Stragi, *Memoriale Aldo Moro*, 2: 360).

On 14 November 1974, Pier Paolo Pasolini, an Italian intellectual, writer, filmmaker and poet published a long article under the headline "What is this coup d'etat"? I know" in *Corriere della Sera*, one of the leading newspapers in Italy. It has been considered his death sentence. Pasolini was beaten to death on 2 November 1975 on the beach at Ostia, near Rome. Giuseppe Pelosi, a seventeen-year-old hustler, was arrested. He confessed to Pasolini's murder. On 7 May 2005 Giuseppe Pelosi retracted his confession, which he said had been made under the threat of violence to his family. This is the part of Pasolini's article, where he mentions the role of the CIA in the Italian strategy of tension:

I know. I know the names of those responsible for what has been called a coup (and what was in fact a series of coups organised as a power protection system). I know the names of those responsible for the Milan bloodbath of 12 December 1969. I know the names of those responsible for the atrocities committed in Brescia and Bologna in the early months of 1974. I know the names of the powerful people who, with the CIA's

help, first created (although they failed miserably) an anti-Communist crusade (...) and later, again with the help and inspiration of the CIA, recovered a fascist identity to reverse the disaster of the referendum... I know the names of those who, between one church mass and another, gave orders to, and ensured the political protection of, old generals (kept in reserve, ready for a *coup d'état*), young neo-fascists or rather neo-nazis (to create a real base of anti-communist tension), and common criminals ... I know all the names and I know what they are guilty of (attacks on institutions and public bloodbaths). I know. But I have no proof. I have not one clue. Probably - if American power will allow it - maybe deciding 'diplomatically' to grant to another democracy the same prerogative that the American democracy has granted about Nixon - these names sooner or later will be revealed. I know because I am an intellectual, a writer who tries to keep abreast of what is happening, to read everything that is written, to imagine things that nobody admits to knowing or things that are left unsaid. I link distant facts, I put together the shattered and scrambled pieces of an overall coherent political picture that restores logic where arbitrariness, madness and mystery seem to reign ... After all, it is not that difficult to reconstruct the truth about what has been happening in Italy since 1968. (Pier Paolo Pasolini, "What is this coup d'etat? I know", *Corriere della Sera*, 14 November 1974).

During the trial for Pasolini's murder, Guido Calvi (1976), the prosecutor, said:

Why did Pasolini die? Indeed, one does not need to be an intellectual or a storyteller to acquire the awareness that drove Pasolini's pen that day. Millions of Italians 'know', and every day in city squares, factories, schools, everywhere, they express the dissident fruit of their knowledge. In the same way, we know who are the real instigators and the 'ideal' perpetrators of Pasolini's murder, as they stand behind the scenes. And the crowd of Romans full of anguish and rage who came to bid farewell to Pasolini in Campo de' Fiori, they knew. That crowd, so heterogeneous, so 'Roman' and therefore so 'unreliable', they knew and they know. But like us, they have no proof. Only a few clues [...]

Boschetti and Ciammitti (2010), in their book on the Bologna terrorist attack, argue that international intelligence services, mainly the CIA, were involved. According to these authors, during the strategy of tension in Italy the NAR (*Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari*), a neo-fascist terrorist group found guilty of many attacks (including the bomb attack at Bologna railway station on 2 August 1980 which killed 85 persons) played a central role as the link between the Italian intelligence services, the CIA, and a group of Italian politicians who wanted to take control of Italy's right-wing political parties, even through a coup.

On 7 December 1970 there occurred in Italy a failed coup d'état known as the 'Golpe Borghese', taken from the name of the fascist Prince Junio Valerio Borghese who was its main organizer. It took until 18 March 1971 for the coup attempt to become public knowledge, thanks to an article in the left-wing newspaper *Paese Sera* entitled: "Subversive conspiracy against the Republic: far-right plot

discovered.” To be noted, December 7 is the anniversary of the Pearl Harbour attack (7 December 1941). In its final phase, the plan for the coup may have seen the involvement of US and NATO warships on alert in the Mediterranean Sea, but this remains a conjecture.

The most detailed study on the role of NATO’s secret armies and terrorism in Western Europe has been conducted by Daniele Ganser, a Swiss historian who has investigated the role of a ‘stay-behind’ paramilitary organization with the official mission of countering a possible Soviet invasion of Europe (Ganser 2005). This organization was called ‘Gladio’ and its origin can be traced to alleged ‘anti-communist NATO protocols’, which enrolled various intelligence services of NATO member states with the purpose to exclude communist parties from power in Western Europe by any means. According to Ganser, CIA director Allen Dulles was one of the key organisers of Gladio with the CIA, having financed most Gladio operations. During the Cold War era this paramilitary organization was tasked with limiting Soviet influence within Europe.

In Italy, the existence and the activities of Gladio were first revealed on 24 October 1980 by Giulio Andreotti, an Italian politician of the Christian Democracy party. Andreotti, who died in 2013, served seven times as Prime Minister, and held the office during Aldo Moro’s kidnapping and murder by the Red Brigades. He also served eight times as Minister of Defense. On that occasion he described Gladio as a structure of defense, information and safety. A film has been made about his very controversial life: *Il Divo* directed by Paolo Sorrentino (2008). This film documents Giulio Andreotti’s strong influence on Italy’s recent past, with a special focus on the strategy of tension period and the relation between the Mafia and the

state. However, the existence of Gladio in Europe had been already revealed by William Colby (1978), CIA director from 1973 to 1975, in a book about his career in the CIA. This is the very complex national and international context that aids understanding of the terrorist attacks in Italy from 1969 until 1993. There is no direct proof, but several clues that make the hypothesis of the CIA's involvement plausible. Perhaps the day of official acknowledgement by the CIA of its role in Italy during the strategy of tension will soon come. American, European and Italian citizens deserve to know the truth and the right to memory.

The following table lists the terrorist attacks of the strategy of tension period. However, the names of the perpetrators are missing. This is because in most cases they are still unknown.

Table 1: Terrorist attacks in Italy during the 'Strategy of Tension' period, 1969-1993

Date	Place	Number of Victims
12 Dec 1969	Milan (Piazza Fontana)	17 dead, 88 injured
22 July 1970	Gioia Taura (train)	6 dead, 72 injured
31 May 1972	Peteano di Sagrado	3 dead, 1 injured
17 May	Milan	4 dead, 76 injured

1973		
28 May 1974	Brescia (Piazza della Loggia)	8 dead, 103 injured
4 Aug 1974	San Benedetto Val di Sambro, Italicus	12 dead, 44 injured
27 June 1980	Ustica, DC9 aircraft	81 dead
2 Aug 1980	Bologna Railway Station	85 dead, 200 injured
23 Dec 1984	San Benedetto Val di Sambro, Train 904	15 dead, 267 injured
27 May 1993	Florence (Georgofili)	5 dead, 41 injured
27 July 1993	Milan (Palestro)	5 dead, 14 injured

But not all acts of terrorism have been forgotten in Italy. There are several differences among the ways in which these crucial events have been inscribed, or otherwise dealt with, in Italian public discourse. However, notwithstanding the marked differences, one discerns a common pattern that can be taken as a concise representation of what happened. In all cases, the trauma process (i.e. the gap between the event and its public representation) could not be performed in legal and political arenas, but only in aesthetic ones because the Italian intelligence services have systematically misled judicial investigations. For instance, whenever a magistrate

has been on the brink of discovering the truth, the trial has been moved to another city. Thus a new magistrate has had to take up the case and in fact start the investigation from the beginning. This was, for example, the case of the investigations related to the Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan. The trial was moved from Rome to Milan and then to Catanzaro and Bari, two cities in the south of Italy more than 1,200 km from the site of the massacre. In more extreme measures, other magistrates were murdered because their investigations were too efficient and effective: neo-fascist terrorists murdered the Italian magistrate Mario Amato on 23 June 1980 (only some weeks before the Bologna massacre of 2 August 1980). When he was killed, he was investigating the role of the NAR and their relationship with the Italian and international intelligence services. He died before being able to reveal what he had discovered.

This prompts the following question: what are the main consequences of cultural, aesthetic processes for and in a democracy, particularly when there is no legal recourse available? The public gains its knowledge of the recent Italian past from films and exhibitions, as in the case of *Romanzo di una strage*, a film related to the Piazza Fontana bombing directed by Marco Tullio Giordana in 2012.³ In other words, in order to understand past events in their country, Italians must go to the theatre, museums or the cinema. However, in the end, they have 'only' been at the theatre or at the cinema or in a museum. Put otherwise, public knowledge of this particular past has been produced through the aesthetic mode of production. This public knowledge has a 'degree of truth' not comparable, for example, with that of

³ Also the film *Romanzo di una strage* (2012) suggests a relationship among NATO, international intelligence services, Italian ones and the NAR (*Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari*).

traditional historical or political discourse. In the end, citizens will be induced to think that 'perhaps it tells the truth, but it is only a film'. Thus reaffirmed is a type of 'conspiracy narrative' in regard to those traumas: plausible, yet the degree of reality produced through aesthetic codes is insufficient to compete with other narratives in the nation's public discourse.

Moreover, in most cases, the cultural memories generated in relation to the terrorist attacks are 'counter-memories'. They are sometimes marginal voices. Other times they can become hegemonic ones, but they are nevertheless counter-memories (Foucault 1977). When in a democracy a large portion of the recent past can only be recounted as 'counter-memory', this is likely to have a major impact on the collective identity of the entire nation.

However, despite all of these constraints mentioned, commemorative rituals in Italy are opportunities for civil and political society to contribute to the values of democracy. They are also significant for the hegemony process, in that they make democracy possible. Since cultural trauma processes can be carried out *at least* in the artistic arena in Italy, it is possible to reaffirm the ideal of belonging to a democratic state. Hence, ultimately, notwithstanding the above-mentioned constraints the cultural forms of these controversial pasts contribute to making democracy possible in Italy. The following section examines the case of the Piazza Fontana terrorist attack in 1969 and analyses the extent to which aesthetic codes have shaped the public knowledge and memory of that crucial event.

3. Piazza Fontana, 12 December 1969: the beginning of the 'strategy of tension'⁴

The National Bank of Agriculture is located in Piazza Fontana in the center of Milan, a small square just behind the city's cathedral. On 12 December 1969 at 4:37 pm, an explosion in the bank's hall killed seventeen men, fourteen upon impact. The blast additionally injured 88, including 33 employees of the bank. The victims were in the bank for the agricultural market held on Fridays after normal business hours. The blast was a tragedy that struck the nation, in part because of the socio-demographic profile of the bank's customers on that particular afternoon: a bomb seemingly placed at random but appearing as a symbolic assault on the working class employed in the agricultural sector.

A few minutes before the explosion at the National Bank of Agriculture, a second bomb was found undetonated in the headquarters of the Italian Commercial Bank, in Piazza della Scala, again in the center of Milan. Investigations were made, but on the same evening, at 9:25 pm, the bomb discharged, destroying all possible evidence with which to identify who had prepared the explosive devices. On the same

⁴ This case study by Lia Luchetti (2013) is based on data collected through: a) ethnographic observation during the commemorative ceremonies held on the anniversary; b) 25 in-depth interviews with members of the Piazza Fontana victims' relatives association, Pinelli's daughters, members of the Italian Union of Victims' Relatives, Italian Partisans' Association, and other witnesses; c) documentary analysis of 580 news articles published in nine national newspapers and magazines. Moreover, all the significant material (commemorative programs, speeches by victims' relatives belonging to the association and the Italian President, videos, social media contents) and all the cultural artifacts (books, comics, songs, paintings, theatrical performances and movie) have been analyzed. The research started in September 2011 and ended on December 2014.

afternoon, additional explosions occurred in Rome: one at the National Bank of Labour and two in front of the a famous Italian monument, "Altar of the Fatherland" (*Altare della Patria*) in Piazza Venezia, with about twenty wounded. In total, five terrorist attacks concentrated within just 53 minutes occurred simultaneously in Italy's two largest cities. Thus began the so-called 'strategy of tension'.

The victims' funerals were held at the cathedral of Milan on 15 December 1969. Even though it was a cold and gray day, 300,000 people gathered in the cathedral square. There were no flags, no party symbols, no one shouted or clapped. All maintained respectful silence in honour of the Milanese dead and to support the victims' relatives. The crowd seemed to form a 'human wall' as if to defend the country from those who wanted to provoke a reactionary backlash.

One relative of a victim, Francesca Dendena, remembers that during the funeral, Prime Minister Mariano Rumor approached victims' relatives to embrace them. Dendena, who was seventeen, wouldn't return the embrace. She disapproved of the state for not doing anything to prevent the massacre. Francesca's remembrance is significant, because it shows how as a victims' relative she is required to deal with the public dimension of this tragedy. Francesca made a two-fold choice: to attend the state funeral, but at the same time to refuse proximity with the institutional authority.

December 15 was also the day of the death of Giuseppe Pinelli, an anarchist railway worker taken to the police station by the police inspector Luigi Calabresi on the evening of the massacre together with other left-wing activists. After Pinelli had been questioned continuously for three days, he 'fell' from the window of Calabresi's office on the fourth floor. The police's official version was that Pinelli had committed suicide. Police commissioner Marcello Guida told a press conference that Pinelli's

action was a voluntary act resulting from the collapse of his alibi and thus, indirectly, evidence of his involvement in the massacre. Most newspapers complied with the police version. The headlines read:

“Dramatic turn of events: suspect kills himself in police station”, *Corriere della Sera*, 16 December 1969,

“Dramatic fall from the fourth floor of the police headquarters by railway anarchist”, // *Gazzettino*, 16 December 1969;

“Anarchist kills himself by jumping from the window at police headquarters”, // *Giorno*, 16 December 1969

“Pinelli was a leading suspect”, // *Giorno*, 16 December 1969

“Revealing Action”, *La Notte*, 16 December 1969

Yet some courageous reporters began to organize counter-information: *Lotta Continua*, an extra-parliamentary left-wing Italian movement, launched an aggressive campaign in its weekly magazine to prove the inconsistencies in the police version and undermine the credibility of the police, especially police inspector Luigi Calabresi, who always claimed that he had not been in the room at the moment of Pinelli's death. In 1970 Calabresi brought legal action against the editor-in-chief of the *Lotta Continua* newspaper, while Pinelli's wife and mother, in 1971, brought suit against Calabresi and the police present during the questioning for voluntary manslaughter, kidnapping, private violence, abuse of office and abuse of authority. Luigi Calabresi, however, did not see the end of the process because he was murdered

outside his home on 17 May 1972 with two gunshots.⁵ The trial, presided over by judge D'Ambrosio, ended in 1975 with not guilty verdicts for all the defendants on the basis of 'lack of evidence'; Pinelli's fall was considered the consequence of an "active illness"⁶.

It is important to consider the Piazza Fontana trial because it affords understanding of many of the political divisions that are still today apparent during the commemorative ceremonies. The courts first tried anarchists, then fascists and anarchists together, later fascists together with officers of the Italian intelligence services. Guido Salvini, the investigating judge in the last inquiry (from 1989 to 1997), explained in his indictment the motive for the bombs: to induce the prime minister at the time of attack, the Christian Democrat Mariano Rumor, to declare a state of emergency in the country. The declaration of a state of emergency would thereby facilitate the establishment of an authoritarian government and it would halt union advances and the growth of the left (Salvini 1995).

But Prime Minister Rumor never proclaimed the state of emergency. The slaughter of Piazza Fontana and the mass participation in the funeral ceremony had frightened him. Aldo Moro (at that time the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs) had also advised not to declare a state of emergency. This is most likely why Rumor was the

⁵ Sixteen years later a *Lotta Continua* activist, Leonardo Marino, admitted that he had been one of the perpetrators and gave the names of his accomplice, Ovidio Bompreschi, and the instigators, Giorgio Pietrostefani and Adriano Sofri, who, although they had always declared their innocence, were sentenced in 1997 to 22 years in prison after a long trial.

⁶ In Italian it is unclear what the term "malore attivo" is supposed to mean.

target of a bomb that exploded in 1973 at the Milan police headquarters during the commemoration of Luigi Calabresi's death, which killed four people and injured 52.

4. Cultural forms and public knowledge of the Piazza Fontana case

After the terrorist attack, the media became the primary arena where the conflict between two opposite political and ideological movements was enacted. Left-wing newspapers, such as *l'Unità*, mounted a campaign to explain the reason of the bomb attacks; right-wing ones, such as *La Notte*, hunted the attackers, who were immediately identified as members of two anarchist associations called *Ponte della Ghisolfia* and *22 Marzo*. Many newspapers, such as *Corriere della Sera* and *Corriere d'Informazione*, complied with the official version of Pinelli's involvement as provided by the police and the judiciary, while others, like *La Stampa* and *Il Giorno*, contested the controversial account of Pinelli's death. Besides the 'orthodoxy' of the majority of newspapers, there were some journalists who decided to set up defense committees and who anonymously published in 1970 a book entitled *State slaughter. A counter-inquiry (La strage di Stato. Controinchiesta)*. Hence counter-information became, besides cultural artefacts, a means to articulate a counter-memory in the media and aesthetic arenas of Piazza Fontana. As Tota argues (2004: 283):

If there is a pattern to the Italian experience of terror, it has surely to do with the concept of counter-memory conceived in a Foucaultian sense of a collective (group) memory grounded and based in the civil society, conflicting and competing with the state's version of that past.

In addition to the news media, the arts began to play an increasing role in affecting public knowledge for those who had not experienced the event and represented a past that had difficulty finding space within the institutional arena. The first two emblematic cultural artefacts representing the Pinelli case analysed here are: 1) the painting *Anarchist Pinelli's funeral (I funerali dell'anarchico Pinelli)* by Enrico Baj, and 2) the play *Accidental death of an anarchist (Morte accidentale di un anarchico)* by Nobel laureate Dario Fo.

Baj's monumental collage work⁷ is composed of 18 figures cut from wood that are suffering at Pinelli's death and 11 hands descending from the top of the picture. It directs the viewer's gaze from the core of Pinelli's figure that is falling headlong from above to three foregrounded figures representing his wife and his two daughters with expressions of extreme grief. The artwork simultaneously depicts the anarchist's fall and the funeral. Compared to the divided memories of Piazza Fontana, it takes care to summarise into an organic and single symbolic representation the different versions of Pinelli's death.

In the painting Pinelli is caught between two oppositional tensions: a group of 'generals' - typical Bajian figures symbolizing the police and the authorities - on the right, and crying anarchists on the left. The story of this picture is emblematic: Calabresi was murdered in Milan in the morning of the same day when Baj's exhibition was inaugurated at Palazzo Reale in the center of Milan (17 May 1972), a few meters distance from Piazza Fontana. The exhibition was immediately suspended, and the painting became a symbol of 'counter-memory'. It also became a

⁷ 12 x 3 meters, inspired by Picasso's *Guernica*

case of 'memory in fragments' as it was dismantled and abandoned in a warehouse. Finally, in 2012, the exhibition took place in exactly the same place where it had been originally inaugurated decades before (Palazzo Reale in Milan), but was only open for three months. The painting, owned by the Marconi Foundation, was thus canonized in public discourse on the massacre and there is now a petition for it to be part of a permanent exhibition. Baj's painting, has become a visible 'piece' of public discourse on the massacre and demonstrates how art can create public opinion and assume a role of moral and civil proof (Foot 2009).

Fo's play is certainly the best-known Italian example of 'counter-memory'. Immediately after the massacre, in 1970, it proposed an antagonistic version of Pinelli's death. Dario Fo, in open conflict with the official channels of information, decided to denounce an injustice and staged what he regarded as the truth with his expressive codes of satire and farce. The timing was the prime variable because Fo wanted to intervene immediately in the tragic affair of Pinelli's death.

Fo played a madman who was arrested 12 times for pretending to be another person (a surgeon, a naval engineer, a bishop). While being questioned at the police station, he impersonated a judge investigating the accidental death of an anarchist. In grotesque and ridiculous manner, Fo shows the incongruities in the police reports on the Pinelli case. The performance of the play led to more than forty libel suits filed against Fo in various parts of Italy. To avoid problems, however, Fo moved the action of the play from Italy to the United States, where in New York in 1920, a true story similar to Pinelli's happened to Andrea Salsedo, an Italian anarchist who fell from the window of the police headquarters on 3 May 1920 after having been questioned and beaten by policemen for several days. Fo used the similarity

between the two cases to narrate the Pinelli case without directly mentioning his name.

The story of this play, like Baj's painting, is emblematic of Italy's forgetting: it has been staged throughout the world, but only a few times in Italy, and always with a clear communicative intent to take a position on disputes related to Pinelli's case: for instance in 1987 Fo restaged the work in Milan to denounce the attempted removal of an anarchist plaque to Pinelli in Piazza Fontana.

Besides an ethical role, artworks regarding the terrorist attack at Piazza Fontana have a marked emotional function. Artistic productions like films, plays, comics, paintings and music seek to produce in their receivers some sort of identification with the victims so that they share the pain that the event has caused. Facing the traumatic process within aesthetic arenas triggers the catharsis of painful events in the audience. In the case of Piazza Fontana, this "*transference*" effect with the victim happens more directly because all of them are based on the testimony of the victims. This transference seems most significant in theater and in comics.

Comics⁸ have been powerful mnemonic artefacts in the case of Piazza Fontana because of their capacity to reach a wide audience and produce a transformation in public knowledge of the past. In the past ten years on Italy, publishing houses such as Round Robin, Coconino Press and BeccoGiallo have used the comics as a form of civic politics in order to narrate some of the most controversial episodes in the country's past. In particular, the comic book *Piazza Fontana* (BeccoGiallo 2009) focuses on the memory of the massacre by the victims'

⁸ For example, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

relatives, the moral entrepreneurs conveying the trauma to the audience. The comic book is victim-centered through the figures and accounts of Fortunato Zinni, an employee of the bank who survived the massacre; Francesca Dendena, daughter of a victim and the first president of The Piazza Fontana Association; and Licia Pinelli, Giuseppe Pinelli's wife. The comic book recounts the explosion, investigations and trials and is combined with verses from Pasolini's *Patmos*, a poem dedicated to each victim, which he wrote immediately after the massacre. In this way the poetry constitutes a sort of 'requiem' composed in ink to honor the 18 victims, including Giuseppe Pinelli. In general, the analysis of these cultural artefacts—Baj's collage, Fo's play, the *Piazza Fontana* comic and Pasolini's poem—reveals the central role assigned to the moral testimonies of the victims and their relatives.

5. Commemorative Meanings and New Public History

Activities of victims' relatives of the Piazza Fontana case can be divided into two temporal phases: 1) from 1969 to 2009 and 2) from 2009 to the present. Family members initially acted jointly in a spontaneous manner: filing a civil action, finding a lawyer, organizing attendance at legal hearings, consoling each other (Carlo Arnoldi, interview: June 13, 2013). At the beginning, widows of the victims created a network of support that was characterized by strong affectivity and a capacity to exchange both organizational information and emotional comfort. The widows were especially concerned about family management. They faced enormous practical, economic and emotional difficulties and their children were not mature enough to cope with the trauma. The mothers encouraged their sons to go on with their studies

and extracurricular activities in order to lead them to good personal growth (Carlo Arnoldi, interview: June 13, 2013).

After the Bologna massacre (see Table 1 above) in 1981, the most active Piazza Fontana victims' families decided to form an association, but without formalizing it with a notary. The widows felt that a man could better represent them (Carlo Arnoldi, interview: June 13, 2013) so Luigi Passera⁹ became the association's spokesperson while Francesca Dendena, one of the most dynamic relatives, acted as secretary.

Originally this non-formalized association was composed of a small number of family members. The majority of them did not reside in Milan but were scattered throughout the province. It supported the activities of two official associations: the Partisans' Association and the Union of Victims' Relatives of Massacres (established in 1983). such as-taking part in trials, organizing commemorative ceremonies and giving out press releases. These two official associations represented the interests of the victims' relatives and helped them to understand what had happened. They had to group together to build a shared version of the past.

Adding to the failure of legal process to render a material consequence to the trauma is the memory battle between two opposite social groups on the legitimate version of Pinelli's tragic 'fall' from the fourth floor of the police headquarters. Two antithetical frames (murdered/died), which are still propounded by two political groups, right- and left-wing, are condensed in the inscriptions on two adjacent

⁹ The son-in-law of Carlo Garavaglia, one of the victims of the bombing.

memorial plaques to Pinelli in Piazza Fontana, analyzed by Foot (2002). The first, placed by anarchists in 1977 without official permission, reads:

To Giuseppe Pinelli, anarchist railway worker, innocent and killed in the police headquarters of Milan on 16 December 1969. Milanese students and democrats

The second one, placed by the city of Milan in 2006, after an attempt by the municipality to replace the first plaque, reads:

To Giuseppe Pinelli, anarchist railway worker, innocent but tragically died in the police headquarters of Milan on 15 December 1969.

The result of this war of definitions is a visible part of public discourse and identity of a city divided about a controversial and painful past. This controversy has also greatly complicated the commemorative frame in which the victims' relatives proceed.

Therefore, the inscriptions are very similar: they both recognize Pinelli's innocence. The main difference is in the frame of the anarchist's death; for the first plaque, Pinelli was killed, for the second he died tragically. Considering the two stones side by side, the repetition of the adjective 'innocent' (KILLED – innocent / innocent – DEAD) produces an oxymoron: The imaginary intersection between the words 'killed' and 'dead' creates an estrangement effect and prompts reconsideration of the meaning of the first plaque. This is clear from the statement of Claudia, Giuseppe Pinelli's youngest daughter:

I didn't give great importance to the plaque in Piazza Fontana. I almost thought that Pino didn't need memorial stones, until the plaque with the words 'killed innocent' was removed and replaced with that of the municipality saying 'innocent but tragically dead', almost as if he died by accident. And in the replacement of that word I saw the intent to clear the state officials, who had held him illegally and questioned him, of any kind of responsibility (Claudia Pinelli, interview: June 24, 2013).

Besides suggesting reflection, the two plaques provoke action: there is evidence of several acts of sabotage on the two commemorative plaques. These acts seem similar to the creative resistance¹⁰ and 'semiotic guerrilla' strategies implemented by so-called culture jammers. These inscriptions have been manipulated to overturn their meanings and bring the municipality of Milan's plaque back into the frame of Pinelli's murder (Luchetti 2013). For example, students sabotaged the municipality's plaque in 2010 and changed the sentence 'innocent but tragically dead', which emphasized the correction to 'innocent but tragically killed'. Again in 2010, during the morning commemorative march, students threw red paint at the municipality's plaque to underline with the color of blood the tragic murder of Pinelli and the inadequacy of the official explanation (accidental death due to the so-called "active illness"). In 2011, students covered the inscription on the municipality's plaque with a sticker of the same shape but with the phrase "innocent but shamefully killed".

¹⁰ Obviously, compared with the advertising that activists seek to sabotage with distortive actions (subvertising, billboard banditry, and media hoaxing), in the case of the plaques the targets of the attack were not corporate strategies or brand images.

Finally, in July 2013, after the City Council issued a regulation that plaques must display only the judicial truth, some activists made a 'corrective' intervention to the first Pinelli memorial plaque: the word '*ucciso*' (killed) was changed to '*uccisosi*', which means 'committed suicide'. Such an intervention again put forth the incriminating suicide version originally issued by Milan police commissioner Marcello Guida in 1969. Thus a third alternative meaning proposed to the two frames 'killed/died' crystallized on the marble.

The distortion of the inscriptions has a strong oppositional and symbolic tension and evidences how different social groups engage in 'semiotic guerrilla' actions in order to impose their definition of a controversial past. The process of re-signification performed on the two memorial plaques reflects in the divided public memory of the Piazza Fontana massacre.

5.1. *Toward a New Phase Public History*

In 2005, after seven trials (in Rome, Milan, Catanzaro, again Catanzaro, Bari, Catanzaro and Milan) and 33 years of investigations, the Corte di Cassazione of Milan (the court of last instance), confirmed the not guilty verdicts for all the defendants in the Piazza Fontana bombing case. In particular, Freda and Ventura, two Venetian Nazi-fascists belonging to the *Ordine Nuovo* group, had already been acquitted in 1987 by the Corte di Cassazione of Bari for lack of evidence and the action of '*ne bis in idem*', the Italian double jeopardy principle. The judgment of the Milan court, however, stated that the Piazza Fontana massacre had not been committed by a "splinter group, but was the result of a well-organized conspiracy, though of obscure origin". Even though no convictions were made, the legal arena

had performed its function within cultural trauma process by recognizing the responsibility of the *Ordine Nuovo* neo-fascist group and discussing the material consequences of trauma.

The victims' families regarded this verdict as one of two breakthrough events that ushered in a new phase in public history. In 2005, when the Supreme Court's judgment put the 'headstone' on the legal truth, the Piazza Fontana victims' families began to feel the need to be an official and public actor, in order to become independent from the other associations and to more forcefully disseminate the historical truth revealed by the sentence.

They first managed to dialogue directly with civil society, lodging an appeal with the city of Milan immediately after the final judgment. Punitive damages were awarded to civil parties, including the victims' families, in compensation for all court costs. This issue testifies to the resilience shown by the association's members, and it became the driving force for the official establishment of the association. More than the legal arena, it was the institutional one that was crucial for the decision to establish the association in a structured form and for its enhanced visibility in the public sphere.

The second breakthrough event was Law no. 56 of 4 May 2007, which instituted the *Remembrance Day for Victims of Terrorism and Massacres* as being 9 May, the anniversary of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro's murder by the Red Brigades. During the second celebration of the *Remembrance Day*, in the same year of the fortieth anniversary of the Piazza Fontana massacre, President Giorgio Napolitano¹¹ (2009) focused on the memory of the Piazza Fontana massacre:

¹¹ Napolitano, G. (2009) available at: www.quirinale.it/elementi/

Remember that the massacre, and with it the start of an obscure ‘strategy of tension’, means remembering a long and harrowing story of investigations and trials which have not produced complete legal truth (...). The purpose was to create an atmosphere of convulsive alarm and confusion and thus destabilize the democratic system in order to create the conditions for an authoritarian turn in the country (...). Not minor pieces of the plot - in particular misleading activity by part of the state - were often not able to clearly identify those who were responsible. Also a painful part of Italian history in the second half of the twentieth century is what remains unfinished in the pursuit of truth and justice, especially in punishing criminal responsibility for the terrible destruction of human lives. Our democratic state, because it has always remained a democratic state and not a phantom ‘dual state’, places this burden upon itself [...]

With these words, the President accomplished a crucial act of taking responsibility because he legitimated a specific version of this controversial past within the public sphere. Napolitano made it possible for the cultural trauma of the massacre to be inscribed in the national public discourse by defining all the issues underlined by Alexander (2004: 12-15):

- a) *the nature of the pain* in the “creation of an atmosphere of convulsive alarm and confusion” and in “destabilization of the democratic system in order to create the conditions for an authoritarian turn”;
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- b) *the nature of the victims* in “those who have suffered not only for terrible personal and family losses, but for every ambiguity and lack of response to their expectations and their calls”;
- c) *the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience*, recognizing the role of guarantors of associations as “people who provide such an essential moral and civic engagement” and victims’ family members “first overwhelmed by the loud and shameless exhibitionism of the guilty, and discouraged by the indifference and ambiguity of the information media”;
- d) *attributing the responsibilities* for the massacre because “a historical truth has been achieved, with the emergence from the judgments of the neo-fascist extreme right matrix”.

The 9 May 2009 celebration was also an opportunity to carry out an intense and unexpected act of reconciliation by recognizing Giuseppe Pinelli as the ‘eighteenth’ victim of the massacre. The President pronounced this speech in front of the widows of Pinelli and Calabresi. With this act Napolitano wanted to resolve the dispute between two social groups that had competed for years to assert their own definition of the past. Analysis of the in-depth interviews with Giuseppe Pinelli’s two daughters shows that the reconciliation was accepted with some reservations: because Pinelli was innocent, the institutional act was not a rehabilitation, but rather an official sanction which allowed public recognition. This was not a reconciliation, which would have required also “knowing what happened that night in that room, and we still do not know” (Silvia Pinelli, interview: July 7, 2013).

Finally, national policy was successful in strengthening the association's role as a guarantor of this past. Similarly, local government helped in this project: in 2011 the mayor of Milan recognized December 12 as the Remembrance Day for all the Milanese victims. The establishment, in 2007, of the *Remembrance Day for Victims of Terrorism and Massacres* expressed the proximity of a state, which had been felt to be absent or adverse. Finally, on 28 January 2009, the association decided to proceed with legal recognition by acquiring its own statute and internal organization. Francesca Dendena held the role of president and after her premature death on 6 October 2010, it moved to Carlo Arnoldi, the current president of the Association. Thereafter, a new public subject was officially born – the Association “Piazza Fontana December 12, 1969, a center of studies and initiatives on the political massacres of the 70s” – which established direct relations with civil society, media and institutions. The association's mission was to become a powerful ethical lobby able to help elaborate the cultural trauma in civil society.

A new visibility of the traumatic event within artistic arenas has recently been apparent. In the past five years the Association's members have very often lent their voices to writers, filmmakers, journalists, photographers, dramatists, and graphic novel authors. Moreover, the Association organizes, with the support of cultural associations and local governments, meetings and discussions in schools, in order to disseminate the historical truth that emerged from the 2005 judgment and especially to make young people aware of it. The passing of the memory baton to younger generations is a key moment in the transmission of public memory of the Piazza Fontana massacre.

6. Conclusion

The 'strategy of tension' (1969-1993) is still a very obscure period in the recent Italian past. Although the terrorist attacks occurred only a few decades ago, they are in many cases almost forgotten or, at least, not yet properly inscribed in the Italian and international public discourse. It seems that some sort of instigated amnesia has been at work, with the consequence that even Italian citizens lack a public understanding of what happened in those years. Why is this so? It is probably because this public memory cannot be accomplished. There is a 'missing piece' that needs to be finally acknowledged. Is it true or not that a part of the international intelligence services (especially the CIA) played a role in the Italian strategy of tension? Is it true or not that the terrorist attacks of those years were intended to provoke an authoritarian turn in Italy and prevent the leftist parties from gaining too much consent in the elections? These are crucial questions that today, many decades after the end of the Cold War, should be finally answered.

The second part of the chapter analysed the social trajectories of the public memory of the Piazza Fontana terrorist attack. Piazza Fontana marked the beginning of the strategy of tension. It is for this reason that it is so important. It has been shown that, even if the role played by the victims' relatives association has become more effective and prominent over time, the memory of Piazza Fontana is still divided and 'unaccomplished', because its meaning cannot be placed in its international context. How long must American, European and Italian citizens wait to know the truth?

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