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Andrea Hajek

* University of Warwick, Department of Italian Studies, Coventry, UK

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Teaching the history of terrorism in Italy: The political strategies of memory obstruction

Andrea Hajek*

University of Warwick, Department of Italian Studies, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

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Although more than 30 years have past, Italy continues to struggle with the difficult memory of the 1970s, a decade marked by an extreme intensification of political violence. The incapacity and unwillingness of Italian society to come to terms with this traumatic past contributes to the maintenance of a range of conflicting memories, which is particularly immanent in history education, one of the primary sources in processes of memory construction. In this essay I analyse a number of Italian school textbooks published over the past 30 years, using the concept of cultural forgetting in an attempt to unfold the political strategies of memory construction, or rather, ‘obstruction’ in history education. I find that Italian school textbooks use facts in very selective ways, often creating distorted images of the past which contribute to the difficult memory of the 1970s in Italy. In discussing the findings, I consider the role of memory communities in the creation of ‘counter-memories’ as opposed to the dominant, ‘official’ memories that tend to omit, sideline or simply ignore facts that might contribute to a better understanding of the origins and consequences of political violence in Italy in the 1970s.

Keywords: terrorism; Italy; forgetting; history; education

Although it has been more than 30 years, Italy continues to struggle with the difficult memory of the 1970s, a decade marked by an outburst of political violence which has therefore become known as the ‘leaden years’. However, important social and cultural developments also marked the 1970s, among them the various law reforms that improved workers’ and women’s rights, for example. Nevertheless, the numerous violent incidents that occurred throughout the decade continue to dominate the collective memory of this part of modern Italian history, which was perceived by public opinion as ‘a decade to forget’ almost as soon as it was over (Gundle, 2000, p. 138).

This form of ‘defensive amnesia’ (Glynn, 2006, p. 318) is imminent in historical analyses of the 1970s, in particular school textbooks: as I will demonstrate, the majority of these tend to reduce their accounts of the ‘leaden years’ to stereotypical images of political violence without making any distinction between left- and right-wing terrorist organizations, nor taking into consideration the complex socio-historical context in which this violence originated. The fact that few judicial truths have been established naturally complicates the historians’ task to give a faithful, convincing account of the 1970s: as De Luna (2009) observes, ‘it is exactly this legal void that

*Email: A.L.Hajek@warwick.ac.uk
keeps the wounds open’ (p. 30), and we shall see how these lacunae have led various memory communities in Italy to try to unveil the truth behind the various ‘mysteries of Italy’ and lead the country to some sort of reconciliation with this difficult past.\(^1\)

Furthermore, an increasing public and political use of history in recent times has resulted in historiography having to ‘compete’ with other sources of (often pseudo-) information: mass media, in particular, increasingly undermine the exclusivity of historiography as an instrument of knowledge and conservation of the past. Related to this is the ‘boom in memory’ (Huyssen, 2003, p. 17) of the past few decades, which allows anyone to produce history, and so the historians’ discourse is only one of many (often revisionist) discourses that propose different interpretations of the past, which complicates the construction of a national, collective memory. Finally, many of those who embark upon writing or teaching a history of the 1970s still have a very direct ‘living’ memory of those years, an often painful memory which renders the task of analysing this past particularly difficult (Leccardi, 2008).

As a consequence of the legal void, the predominance of the media and the personal memories of historians with regards to the 1970s, these remain an open wound which impedes any serious historical reflections on this period, and instead helps to maintain a range of conflicting memories. In this article I analyse how this apparent memory loss has manifested itself over the past 30 years in historical writings on 1970s political violence in Italy. The focus is on school textbooks, since these play a fundamental role in the formation and diffusion of collective and national memories of the past. An empirical analysis of 29 secondary school’s textbooks published in the period ranging from 1980 to 2008 illustrates, first, which events are highlighted and which are ‘forgotten’ or sidelined, and why. Secondly, a more semantic analysis of the definitions that are used to describe political violence will discuss the way acts of violence – and their perpetrators – are narrated and shaped in the textbooks. I shall conclude with an analysis of memory communities in Italy and their role in the creation of a ‘counter-memory’ of the 1970s.

**Method of analysis**

In my analysis of school textbooks I gathered a similar number of textbooks for each decade, and at least one book published every two to three years, in order to examine how representations of the 1970s have evolved over time. I have focused on textbooks published for teaching at the final level of the so-called ‘secondary school’ (regarding students between 16 and 18 years old), since they contain more elaborate information than textbooks used at lower levels of instruction, and may therefore be more representative of history education in Italy. The selection of textbooks centred around two factors: (1) having been written or edited, with some exceptions, by a variety of authors and published by different publishing houses; and (2) availability. As the selection of textbooks for history education strongly depends on the personal choice of teachers, and consequently varies according to the geographical location (Cuomo, 2005), the implementation and use of textbooks in Italy is very diverse and difficult to analyse. In order to evaluate the ‘canon’ of history textbooks, I consulted with historians, history teachers, similar textbooks (D’Agnelli, 2005; Venturoli, 2007), as well as the National Laboratory for School Education (LANDIS), which contains a rich corpus of more recently published school textbooks.

The analysis consists of a quantitative and a qualitative examination of the material, and is divided in two parts. First, I inquired which of the incidents generally
considered as or related to terrorist acts recur in the textbooks, and which have instead been omitted, and for what reason. Accordingly, I have counted the number of references to these incidents. Second, I examined how these incidents have been defined, that is, what definitions were most frequently used in the textbooks and what is expressed in these definitions. The way the textbooks distinguish, for example, between acts of violence perpetrated by left-wing and right-wing terrorist organizations, if at all, and what this says about the type of narrative the author is constructing, was central to the analysis. Accordingly, I selected five different notions that can be related to political violence in the 1970s, and counted the number of references in the school textbooks (see Table 2).

Teaching the history of terrorism in Italy: learning to forget

If we accept the postulate that the main function of historiography is to offer a narrative description or report of past events which may contribute to the creation of a national history, and consequently collective identity for a specific community, education primarily has the task of diffusing this identity among the members of that community (Venturoli, 2007). As we shall see, Italian school textbooks are very limited and partial-sighted in their analysis of the 1970s, which has resulted in an increasingly poor and erroneous knowledge of this decade among younger generations. Hence, two opinion polls held in 1999 and 2005 among high-school students residing in the three Italian cities where the most aggressive terrorist attacks of the 1970s had occurred demonstrated how knowledge of these events has decreased over time. Whereas in 1999, 96.6% of the students in Milan, for example, claimed to be familiar with a bomb attack that had occurred in their city in 1969 (the Piazza Fontana massacre), in 2005 this number had gone down to 81.6% (Venturoli, 2007, pp. 260–262). Furthermore, almost half of the students identified, on both occasions, the notorious left-wing terrorist group Red Brigades as the authors of the massacre, ignoring the simple fact that this group had not yet been founded at the time (Venturoli, 2007). Similarly, almost a quarter of the students in Bologna (21.7%) – a city struck by an even more serious bomb massacre in 1980 – again pointed the finger at the Red Brigades, despite the fact that two members of a neo-fascist terrorist group have been sentenced for the Bologna massacre. In fact, an almost equal number of students indicated neo-fascist terrorists as the culprits of the massacres (22.2%), which demonstrates the extent to which memory for this event is distorted.

However, were these events really forgotten? Or have they simply never been told, as Foot observes: ‘You can’t forget what you have never learned’ (Foot, 2001, p. 213, my translation). In fact, research has demonstrated that no more than 2% of the volumes that deal with twentieth-century Italian history are dedicated to the period ranging from the 1960s to the 1980s (Venturoli, 2007). Furthermore, forgetting does not necessarily mean that something is ‘lost’: it merely becomes (or is made) ‘inaccessible’. Indeed, if information is available, ‘it does not follow that it is at any given time accessible’ (Singer & Conway, 2008). In other words, from all the possible memories that are available to us, why are only a small number of these accessible? As Rigney (2005) has noted, ‘memories are always ‘scarce’ in relation to everything that theoretically might have been remembered, but is now forgotten’ (p. 17), and which depend mainly on the social group or community we belong to and the ‘memory work’ it performs (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994), as Halbwachs – founding father of collective memory studies – has demonstrated in his seminal work On
collective memory (1992). Moreover, Singer and Conway observe that ‘cultures […] make selections through textbooks, celebrations and educational curricula’ (p. 282), selections which rely on the values this culture aims to defend and represent. When these selections change, this implies a shift or ‘re-assignment of meaning and accessibility rather than banishment from memory’ (p. 282). I would therefore consider the concept of forgetting not as an unconscious process but as a deliberate, conscious process of omitting or underscoring information that does not fit into a certain narrative.

Therefore, events such as the Piazza Fontana massacre have apparently been made ‘less accessible’ to younger generations of Italians. If anything, there is a local memory which relies on the presence of external sources such as monuments, commemorative plaques, public practices of commemoration and other ‘memory sites’ (Nora, 1989) for the preservation of the past. In fact, the opinion polls I mentioned above also demonstrated that the memory of a specific bomb attack depended strongly on the place of residence of the interviewees: students in Milan, for example, were most familiar with the Piazza Fontana incident (96.6%), but were less informed about two bomb attacks that occurred in the cities of Bologna and Brescia, some years later (62.8 and 55.8%). Students in Bologna, in turn, were much more familiar with the Bologna bomb than with the incidents in Milan or in Brescia: 50.6% against 12.8 and 8.9%, respectively (Venturoli, 2007, pp. 260–261).

In the following section we shall see exactly how much ‘access’ school textbooks have given to the 1970s over the past 30 years: which facts have been reported, and more importantly, what events have been ‘forgotten’ or sidelined, and with what (political) motivations?

Recurrent themes and ‘forgotten’ memories

The main themes proposed in the majority of the textbooks I have consulted include important social developments such as the referendums on a divorce and an abortion law, political transformations such as the great success of the Italian Communist Party (PCI) at the national elections of 1976 and the parties’ general attempts to enter the government through a political alliance (Amyot, 1981). Other themes related to the countries’ political and economic situation include the PCI’s so-called ‘politics of austerity’, a reaction to the economic recession that followed from the oil crisis of 1973, and financial scandals (e.g. Lockheed bribery scandals), although the latter are much less elaborated on in the textbooks.

The most frequent theme in the textbooks is, however, political violence. Before discussing this argument, I would first like to note how some events related to political violence tend to be ‘forgotten’ or sidelined. This may of course be motivated by reasons of brevity or comprehensibility, but it nevertheless implies a choice which reveals something about the narrative the historian in question wishes to transmit (White, 1985). Quantitative analysis has demonstrated (see Table 1) how the most frequently mentioned terrorist attacks in the 1970s include the Piazza Fontana massacre in Milan (17 dead and 88 wounded), the bomb attacks in the Northern city of Brescia (eight dead, 103 wounded) and on the Italicus train (12 dead, 44 wounded), both in 1974 and, finally, the 1980 bomb attack on the railway station of Bologna (85 deaths and 200 wounded). Very few references, however, to a series of incidents which – although they may not have had a similar impact – have an historical importance. In the first place, the incidents that occurred in the Sicilian town of Battipaglia:
here police killed two people and wounded 200 during a protest in 1969 against the closure of local factories, the only means of income for the inhabitants of this poor region. Reggio Calabria, another extremely poor, Southern locality, was the stage of the ‘revolt of Reggio Calabria’, which led to three deaths and 200 wounded, in 1970 (Ginsborg, 1990). Two years later, a trap set by members of the neo-fascist terrorist organization Ordine Nuovo killed three police officers and wounded one in the town of Peteano, while another neo-fascist attack in 1973 killed four people and wounded 46, when a bomb was launched in front of police headquarters in Milan (Associations of Victims’ Families of Terrorism, 1996). In 1980, finally, 81 people died when an airplane heading towards Sicily mysteriously went down and crashed near the island of Ustica (Armenio & Benedetti, 2005).

With the exception of the latter, a possible reason for the scarce attention these incidents have received in the textbooks is the smaller number of fatal victims that they have caused, compared for example with the massacre of Bologna (85 deaths). However, in the first two cases, the number of wounded was considerably high, and the dramatic circumstances in which the incidents occurred seem serious enough to be taken into consideration by the authors of the textbooks; in the case of Reggio Calabria, for example, the conflict lasted for an entire year. Perhaps the omission of the incidents in Battipaglia and Reggio Calabria may best be explained by the fact that they cannot be considered strictly terrorist acts of violence, which would imply that the majority of the textbooks aim at producing a strictly ‘terrorist narrative’ of the 1970s. The Ustica incident – mentioned in only two out of 29 textbooks – may have suffered from this procedure as well, since for a long time the airplane crash was put down to a simple technical failure, and therefore did not fit well into a narrative of terrorism. However, investigations eventually revealed that the tragedy was actually caused by an (unauthorized) military intervention by the USA, which officials of the Italian State had subsequently tried to cover up: it was therefore more than a simple incident, and the omission of this tragedy – especially in the textbooks published after 1999, when the investigations had been concluded and most of the truth had come out – as well as that of the incidents mentioned above, implies a rather selective process of interpretation which ‘prefers’ talking about forms of political violence directed against the Italian State and the nation as a whole, rather than acts of violence, injustice or throwing off tactics performed by the State.

The bomb attacks in Peteano and Milan offer similar examples of a desire to forget an ‘uncomfortable’, compromising past, and this therefore suggests that the authors of the textbooks adhere to a political strategy of forgetting: contrary to the incidents mentioned above, these did actually have a terrorist matrix, and their omission can therefore not be motivated on the basis of their not being ‘appropriate’ in a story about terrorism in the 1970s. The omission or sidelining of these cases lies rather in the controversial
memory they convey: in the Peteano case, hypotheses regarding a communist, ‘red trail’ – and subsequently even a ‘yellow trail’ which focused on local criminality – were pursued with particular zeal, revealing an explicit desire to put the blame on the left-wing milieu. Meanwhile, investigations that could have led to what would eventually turn out to be the truth, that is, a neo-fascist matrix, were systematically obstructed (Bull, 2007). Similarly, an ‘anarchist trail’ seemed evident in the case of the massacre at the police headquarters in Milan: the bomb was thrown at a crowd attending the inauguration of a commemorative bust for Luigi Calabresi, a police superintendent assassinated one year earlier by a left-wing terrorist group that held him responsible for the death of anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, (falsely) accused of the Piazza Fontana bombing and who had died under mysterious circumstances (Di Giovanni, Ligini, & Pellegrini, 2006). The executor of the bomb attack in Milan furthermore proclaimed himself an anarchist, but he was eventually identified as a sympathiser of a neo-fascist terrorist group, and may even have collaborated with the secret services of the State.

These omissions therefore seem to reply to what Paul Connerton (2008) has defined as ‘prescriptive forgetting’, that is a type of forgetting that helps restore ‘a minimum level of cohesion to civil society and […] re-establish the legitimacy of the state’ (p. 62) by ‘keeping quiet’ about incidents that reveal an undemocratic, criminal side of the Italian State and which might therefore jeopardize its present legitimacy and authority. In other words, information about obscure connections between neo-fascist terrorists and the State – or any attempts by its representatives to protect these terrorists – is omitted in order to facilitate the task of historians of creating a clear and consistent narrative where the capacities and willingness of the Italian State to defend the nation from and condemn all acts of political violence cannot be put into question. Thus these textbooks produce a narrative that avoids any information that might deconstruct and destabilize the image of a nation victimized by subversive acts of terrorism aimed at destroying democracy, and where – as we shall see in the following section – accounts of left-wing terrorism directed against the State are much more appropriate.

Definitions of violence

After exploring a number of violent incidents that have been omitted from the textbooks, I shall now focus on the way the incidents that are reported have been shaped. By looking at five possible definitions of political violence, I hope to come to some understanding of how the textbooks interpret this violence. The results of the quantitative analysis of these definitions are reported in Table 2.

The ‘strategy of tension’

One of the most frequent notions that are used in the textbooks is that of the ‘strategy of tension’. This term appeared for the first time in an article of the British journal The
Observer, a few days before the Piazza Fontana massacre in 1969. In his analysis of the political situation in Italy at the time (Biscione, 2003), a British journalist describes it as follows:

For the whole political line-up on the Right, from the Saragat Socialists to the neo-Fascists, the unexpected mildness of the ‘hot autumn’ threatened to puncture the fear of revolution they were counting on. Those who planted the bombs have brought that fear back to Italy.² (p. 242)

The journalist is referring to a number of bomb attacks that had occurred earlier in 1969, insinuating that these were part of some sinister strategy of the Italian State that aimed at increasing the fear of a revolution in order to justify an authoritative response which would bring an end to the social upheavals of 1968 and 1969, and eliminate or weaken the power of the Left in general.

The textbooks all present the Piazza Fontana massacre as the first in a series of massacres that constitute this ‘strategy of tension’, which include the massacre of Brescia, Bologna and the Italics train bombing. From a chronological perspective this is, however, not entirely correct. Previous incidents that might very well be related to such a strategy include the repression of laborers by police forces in the Sicilian town of Avola in 1968 (two deaths and 48 wounded); an attempted coup d’état in 1964; the protests against a neo-fascist alliance with the Italian government in 1960; and we may even draw the line back to 1947, when gunfire was opened on a group of peasants in the Sicilian town of Portella della Ginestra during the celebration of International Workers’ Day and shortly after the success of left-wing parties in recent regional elections, which suggests that the shootings were an attack on the rising power of the Left (Billi, 2001; Rapini, 2001). Thus, as historian Andrea Rapini observes, Piazza Fontana was not an isolated event, and its significance lies perhaps more in the changing modalities of violence. What binds these incidents, Rapini continues, is the ‘intrinsic goal of the political violence to bring a stop to or, at the least, slow down the emancipation of subordinate classes’ (p. 199, my translation), which threatened to disturb the international relations Italy had developed in the wake of the Second World War (p. 200). Thus, by ignoring any connections between the incidents mentioned above and the Piazza Fontana massacre, presenting the latter instead as the beginning of this ‘strategy of tension’, the textbooks undermine the possible existence of a more complex, anti-communist programme.

Furthermore, the textbooks interpret the ‘strategy of tension’ in a rather simplistic way, as a sort of universal conspiracy against democracy or a ‘destabilisation project […] based on a progression of provocations and attacks that may be brought back almost certainly to a right-wing matrix’ (Capra, Chittolini, & Della Peruta, 1993, p. 898, my translation). This interpretation dominates in public debates as well, although Venturoli (2007) observes that the multitude and heterogeneity of the different elements behind the strategy excludes the idea of a clearly outlined project: we should rather consider the ‘strategy of tension’ a political climate of fear and alarm provoked by a variety of right-wing organizations which, attempting to put the blame on the left-wing milieu, tried to legitimate a turn to a more authoritative, right-wing government.

Venturoli’s (2007) assumption that the massacres of the 1970s were committed by right-wing terrorist organizations is confirmed in most of the textbooks analysed here, although the authors at times choose their words carefully and generally fail to go beyond the mere judicial facts: thus, Carocci (1985) notes how the instigators of
the Piazza Fontana massacre ‘were never found’ (p. 1473), ignoring the very likely involvement of two exponents of the neo-fascist Ordine Nuovo organization who were arrested in the early 1970s and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1979, although subsequently absoluted by the Court of Appeal. Hence, although it is true that many of the presumed perpetrators of these massacres have not received official prison sentences or have been absolved, investigations have produced ‘a clear and convincing picture of the responsibilities of the neo-fascists from the Veneto and Lombardia regions’ (Biscione, 2003, p. 240, my translation); in other words, ignoring the neo-fascists’ involvement in the massacres again reveals a certain political strategy of forgetting, which may have nurtured a certain reluctance to be more explicit about cases which can easily provoke (revisionist) public debates (Venturoli, 2007).

Venturoli’s (2007) description of the scope of the strategy, that is to create a situation of alarm and panic among the Italian population, also finds consensus in the majority of the textbooks, although again word choice differs, and the gravity of the situation is not always acknowledged. Some authors use for example very restrained words, bringing the situation down to a case of destabilization or disorientation, which obviously weakens the impact and the undemocratic character of these massacres. Thus, the ‘strategy of tension’ is presented as a necessary, almost legitimate ‘re-establishment of order’ (Finzi, 1990, p. B38, my translation), which aimed at the ‘disorientation’ of public opinion in order to promote ‘changes in the institutional order’ (Galasso, 1994, p. 723, my translation).

**Stragismo**

A notion that is linked to the ‘strategy of tension’ is stragismo, a word derived from strage (‘massacre’) and which implies a sort of uncanny terrorist-like ‘practice’⁴. It is, however, used very rarely in the textbooks (mentioned only six times), although Bull (2007) considers it a key notion in relation to the ‘strategy of tension’; she observes how stragismo – defined as terrorist bomb massacres carried out by radical neo-fascist groups and used by the ‘strategy of tension’ as a means to create an atmosphere of terror so as to promote a turn to an authoritarian type of government – was part (at least until 1974) of a wider anti-communist conspiracy which included both neo-fascists and the secret services of the State (p. 7). However, there is no evidence for any such involvement of the State in stragismo, and so again, this concept is perhaps considered too controversial and compromising to be used in the textbooks.

In fact, references to the role of secret services and the State are rarely elaborated: Cortesi confirms this ‘scarce attention of Italian historiography […] to the Italian State as subject/object of international, military and nuclear politics, and as subject of violence’ (cited in Venturoli, 2007, p. 240). Similarly, Cucchiarelli and Giannuli’s essay on the role of the State in the ‘strategy of tension’ demonstrates that only ‘an average of 1% of the texts dealing with the history of the Italian Republic since 1946 [is] dedicated to these themes’ (cited in Venturoli, 2007, p. 239). This absence is not only the result of the lack of court sentences or the risk of causing polemics, but is furthermore sustained by the difficult accessibility to documents that may reveal important information on the possible involvement of the State in the stragi, and which suggests that ‘in all these incidents representatives of the State have been involved’ (De Luna, Meriggi, & Tarpino, 2009, p. 31). It is a vicious circle, though, since the difficulty of accessing certain documents ties in with the judicial problem of not having
any definite sentences, as Carucci (2002) explains: the fact that many trials are still running or have been reopened makes it ‘more difficult, if not impossible, to transfer the primary sources to the State Archives’ (p. 47). In fact, only a very small – and furthermore insignificant – number of documents have been deposited in the archives so far, and in Italy it takes even longer before similar documents can be made public than elsewhere (Carucci, p. 53). Hence, historians prefer to use less controversial and conflicting notions such as terrorism, mentioned no less than 169 times.

Terrorism

Until at least the second half of the 1970s, ‘terrorism’ was not used in public debates: in an essay on the social and political uses of definitions of violence in the 1970s, Lettieri (2008) explains how, for a long time, concepts which evoked memories of fascism were used instead. This recurrence to explicit fascist connotations can be interpreted as the attempt of the government to create fear, among the population, of a return to the fascist regime, which would justify and reaffirm its repression of the opposition. In the 1980s, some textbooks still use words with fascist connotations, but as the distance in time increased and (inter)national, political transformations from the late 1980s onwards changed the ideological landscape, ‘terrorism’ became more common. Thus, the more frequent use of the notion of terrorism from the late 1970s onwards may be connected to the increasingly violent actions of left-wing terrorist organizations at this stage, which could not be connected to any fascist legacy and required a different definition such as that offered by terrorism abroad (e.g. the Palestinian resistance or actions of left-wing organizations in other West-European countries such as the Rote Armee Fraktion in Germany and Action Directe in France).

In general, the textbooks make a rather indistinctive, undifferentiated use of the notion of terrorism, simply dividing it into two poles: right-wing terrorism on the one hand, often referred to as ‘black’ or (neo-) fascist terrorism and connected to the ‘strategy of tension’; and left-wing terrorism on the other hand, also called ‘red’ or proletarian terrorism, and represented mainly by the notorious group of the Red Brigades. In the textbooks published in the 1980s and early 1990s especially, left- and right-wing political violence is represented as two sides of the same coin, with one and the same goal: that of destabilizing the Italian democratic system. Consider the following examples: “‘red’ or ‘proletarian’ terrorism […] accomplished, objectively, the same results as “black terrorism”” (Camera and Fabietti, 1987, p. 1384, my translation); and ‘left-wing terrorism […] contributed, alongside terrorists of opposite colour, to the creation of an increasingly dramatic situation in the country’ (Salvadori, 1990, p. 593, my translation). Consequently, any ideological or moral differences between the two types of violence are eliminated. Furthermore, many textbooks ignore the political and social conditions which need to be taken into consideration in an analysis of the various ‘terrorisms’ of the 1970s, and instead offer a rather superficial and limited reading where ‘the traces of right and left are often mixed up’ (Finzi, 1990, p. B39, my translation).

This plain division into a left-wing and a right-wing ‘variant’ of terrorism is also supported by a simplified temporal differentiation, as the textbooks tend to allocate right-wing terrorism in the very first years of the decade, while left-wing terrorism is connected more to the second half of the 1970s. It is true that left-wing terrorist actions became more frequent and violent after 1975, especially those performed by the Red
Brigades, as they moved from relatively innocent actions to premeditated killings which involved representatives of the State and other public figures. The strong media coverage of these more ‘spectacular’ actions may further have contributed to the temporal separation between left- and right-wing terrorism. Statistics confirm the strong presence of the Red Brigades in the late 1970s (29 victims in 1978, 22 in 1979 and no less than 30 in 1980, Crainz in Benigno et al., 1998), while the extreme Right must be held responsible for 95% of the terrorist attacks in the period from 1969 to 1973, 85% in 1974 and 78% in 1975 (Della Porta and Rossi in Venturoli, 2007). However, we must not ignore the fact that both left- and right-wing groups were active throughout the entire decade, and that modes of violence changed over time. Thus, rather than reducing the situation to a simple opposition between two ‘types’ of terrorism, it is perhaps more sensible to distinguish between developments in forms of violence within the groups themselves. We could, for example, consider two ‘phases’ in right-wing terrorism: a first phase which covers the stragi of Piazza Fontana, Brescia and the Italicus train, and a second phase that features a different, new type of violence perpetrated by younger generations of neo-fascist activists and aimed more at authorities (Bull, 2007; Venturoli, 2007). Similarly, around 1975 a watershed moment occurred in the left-wing milieu: as the Red Brigades changed tactics and launched a fierce attack on the State, the number of clandestine organizations multiplied and the conflict with the Communist Party – ‘which in the eyes of the extreme-left activists had betrayed the deals of the Resistance and the revolutionary cause’ (Bull, 2007, p. 5) – reached a climax.

The ‘years of lead’

Another notion that is used frequently in public debates about the 1970s is that of the ‘years of lead’. However, textbooks use this notion much less (mentioned 16 times) than other definitions analysed here, and only from 1990 onwards. This may be explained by the fact that the term was adopted in retrospect of a German movie on terrorism, Die Bleierne Zeit (‘oppressing times’), presented at the Venice Film Festival in 1981, and it may therefore simply have taken some time for this definition to enter the collective memory of the 1970s.

Another reason for this delay is that the first publication that uses the concept of ‘years of lead’ was not a scientific text but a journalistic essay, published only in 1991 (Montanelli & Cervi, 1991). The essay was the first of many successful pseudo-scholarly journalistic essays on the 1970s which have undoubtedly contributed to the insertion of the notion – throughout the 1990s – into the collective memory of the decade. The collapse of Communism in 1989, which brought about significant changes in political powers in Europe as well as on a national scale, has also had a significant role in the proliferation of the notion in this period: traditional political parties went into crisis, and when a major political and financial scandal provoked a radical re-organization of the Italian political system in 1992, historians massively embarked on the task of writing a comprehensive history of the Italian Republic, where the notion of ‘leaden years’ apparently turned out to be a suitable one. In other words, the events of the early 1990s ‘put researchers before the necessity of confronting themselves with a period of Italian history which was perceived as finished and closed off only in that moment’ (D’Agnelli, 2005, p. 200, my translation).

After 2000, references to the ‘years of lead’ diminish again, although Lettieri (2008) has noted how, from 1997 onwards, the definition became more popular in essays, works of fiction and other cultural products. Often, however, these works have
little to do with the political context in which the notion ‘piombo’ is situated, which leads Lettieri to conclude that a certain loss of the semantic meaning of the notion has resulted in a ‘linguistic inflation’ (Lettieri, 2008, p. 50, my translation).

Some doubts may be raised as to the choice of the Italian translation: initially the movie mentioned above was translated as *Gli anni plumbei*, ‘oppressing times’, a less politically loaded title than *Anni di piombo* (‘years of lead’ or ‘years of the bullet’), as the movie was subsequently entitled and which refers more explicitly to the use of fire arms, ‘piombo’ being a metaphor for bullet. Thus, the notion is strongly connected to left-wing terrorism, which in fact resorted to fire arms rather than to bombs, the exclusive terrain of the neo-fascist Right as it manifested itself in the first half of the decade in particular. However, the majority of the consulted textbooks use the definition of the ‘years of lead’ with regards to the *entire* 1970s, and thus contribute to the creation of a strongly distorted memory which either ignores – or ‘forgets’ – the presence of *stragismo* in the 1970s (O’Leary, 2007, p. 51), or underscores the distinction that must be made between different types of violence (De Luna et al., 2003; Salvadori, 1990). Thus, much like the concept of terrorism, ‘anni di piombo’ is used rather inattentively and has become a sort of common place.

**Civil war**

A final definition which I would like to explore very briefly here is the notion of ‘civil war’, used in only one textbook, but which tends to be used quite frequently in public debates, especially by former members of armed bands both on the Left and Right. Bull (2007) attributes the recurrence to this concept to the fact that it allows these individuals to reject the label of terrorists and to justify their requests for amnesty. It furthermore diminishes their personal responsibility in the violence of those years, and perhaps the reason why almost none of the textbooks use this definition may be explained precisely by the fact that it indeed ‘relieves’ the terrorists, in a way, from their personal responsibility. I would also like to suggest, however, that the definition of ‘civil war’ is unsuited in this context as it implies a war between citizens, while we have seen how the political violence of the 1970s did not regard citizens alone but often involved the State as well, even if this has never been officially proven.

**The culprits**

With regards to culprits, we have seen how most of the textbooks attribute the *stragi* – although not explicitly – to right-wing terrorist groups, and it is indeed very likely that the massacres of the first half of the decade were perpetrated by the extreme Right, despite the divided opinions and conflicting memories related to these incidents (Bull, 2007). However, the occasional use of the adjectives ‘occult’ and ‘obscure’ in the description of these groups seems to undermine this thesis, as it implies something we cannot possibly see, something we cannot understand or know the meaning of: thus, ‘occult’ is defined as ‘hidden from sight’, and ‘obscure’ refers to something ‘which is difficult or impossible to understand, comprehend or verify’ (Zingarelli, 2003, p. 1201; p. 1234, my translation). The political matrix of these incidents remain somewhat vague and open to interpretation, and some textbooks even refuse to take a clear stance on the question who is to be held responsible for the massacres. We read, for example, how ‘often neither the executors nor the motives [of the massacres] have been clarified’ (Galasso, 1994, p. 723, my translation). Perhaps similar descriptions
also reflect some sort of ‘uncanny’ desire for the unknown, and the popularity of TV programmes, movies and detective novels dealing with the so-called ‘mysteries of Italy’ may explain this fascination with the unresolved crimes of the 1970s.

The responsibilities for left-wing terrorism, on the other hand, are very explicit in the textbooks: here the focus is – at least until the early 1990s – exclusively on the Red Brigades (Venturoli, 2007), and it is not surprising that younger generations nowadays believe this group to be responsible for the various *stragi*, as we have seen.5 The Left also dominates in appendices: half of the documents which deal with terrorism focus entirely and exclusively on the Red Brigades, while the other half deals with both forms of terrorism. In other words, no documents can be found which refer exclusively to right-wing terrorism (Venturoli, 2007). Perhaps the strong media coverage of the increasingly violent and ‘spectacular’ actions of the Red Brigades after 1975 may have contributed to their (visual) predominance in the accounts of the 1970s. Another possible reason for the strong focus on left-wing terrorism is the fact that many former left-wing terrorists have published autobiographies or novels about their experience, which may very well have contributed to their gaining public visibility and notoriety (Glynn, 2008). Right-wing terrorists, on the contrary, tend to consider themselves as blameless and innocent victims of the ‘strategy of tension’, and will not easily admit to having committed the crimes they are suspected of (Bull, 2007). Thus it is easier for the public to connect left-wing rather than right-wing terrorists to the trauma of 1970s political violence.

Interestingly, there are only very few references to the ‘anarchist trail’ which was pursued after the Piazza Fontana massacre, and which resulted in the mysterious death of anarchist railway worker Giuseppe Pinelli. We have already seen that cases in which the left-wing milieu has been falsely accused of and persecuted for a bomb attack are generally omitted (Peteano and Milan). Similarly, not even half of the textbooks analysed here refer to the ‘anarchist trail’ related to the massacre of Piazza Fontana (11 mentions), while Pinelli’s death is mentioned only five times. Nevertheless, it is an historical fact which is strongly connected to the entire Piazza Fontana affair, perhaps the most famous of the massacres of the 1970s and which has had important consequences over the years, among which is the assassination of superintendent Calabresi by a left-wing terrorist group. Pinelli allegedly ‘fell’ out of the window of Calabresi’s office, where he had been interrogated for three days. The police suggested that the anarchist had thrown himself out of the window, yet its versions of the event led to suspicions that Pinelli was pushed. Eventually, no consensus was reached, and the verdict – which stated that Pinelli neither killed himself nor was thrown out of the window – obviously did not satisfy his companions. Consequently, Pinelli became a myth for the Left, a martyr as well as an instrument in the battle against the ‘strategy of tension’, and thus, even after 40 years, Pinelli’s death still seems too controversial, politically loaded and mostly inappropriate to be included in a narrative where the left-wing milieu was in the wrong, and the State on the ‘right’ side of the law.

All in all, the vagueness about the culpability of the extreme Right, as well as the fact that the authors of the school textbooks simply ignore the ‘judicial investigations [which] uncovered evidence showing that the extreme-right perpetrators of [stragismo] have been abetted, protected and shielded from the investigating magistrates by sections of the intelligence services and the armed forces’ (Bull, 2007, p. 7), implies a manipulation which reinforces the impression that most of the textbooks aim to produce a narrative in which the only true terrorism is that of the extreme Left.
Memory communities

Italian historians have not managed to create an undisputed and commonly shared historical perspective on – nor have they contributed to the creation of a collective, national memory of – terrorism in the 1970s, as their interpretations have been and continue to be contested and confronted by other forms of remembering such as public commemorative rituals. In the case of Piazza Fontana, for example, no less than five different commemorative plaques have marked its process of memory construction, two of which were dedicated to Giuseppe Pinelli and aroused polemics regarding the ideological message they contained (Foot, 2001). Often, it is also because of the polemics caused by similar ‘counter-memories’ that the memory of certain incidents are kept alive. In fact, as we shall see in this final paragraph, it is precisely when there is no consensus on the past that debates and polemics increase and the memory of an event is kept alive: ‘Ironically, consensus may facilitate inertia, and […] controversy rather than canonization may be the most important motor in keeping a memory alive’ (Rigney, 2008, p. 94).

This example furthermore shows how a monument alone does not suffice to keep the memory of a social group alive. On the contrary, as Rigney (2008) states: ‘while putting down a monument may seem like a way of ensuring long-term memory by giving it an official status, […] it may in fact turn out to mark the slow beginning of amnesia and indifference by foreclosing further discussion’ (p. 93). Remembering requires a memory ‘agent’ or community that will ‘actualize’ or ‘activate’ the memory in question, if it is to remain vivid. In Italy, the role of such memory communities is particularly important, considering the low commitment and unwillingness of the State to bring justice to the victims of the massacres of the 1970s and stimulate a more serious historical debate. The investigations which eventually led to the truth behind the Ustica airplane crash of 1980, for example, were put in motion by the Association for the Victims’ Families of Ustica; without its continuous pressure on authorities, the airplane crash would have continued to be remembered as a mere technical failure.

The very first association that gathered family members of victims of terrorism was the Association for the Victims’ Families of the Bologna Railway Station Massacre of 2 August 1980, set up in 1981 after diversionary manoeuvres with regards to the investigations of the bombing had come to the fore, and the Italian court had furthermore acquitted the suspects in the trial for the Piazza Fontana massacre of 1969 (Tota, 2003). Not much later, more associations of families of victims were also set up for the other massacres. More recently, the Italian Ministry of Justice founded an ‘Observatory for Crime Victims’, which focuses among other things on the definition of the status of the victim (Venturoli, 2007). One of the more remarkable initiatives of the Observatory is the institution of the ‘National Commemoration of the Victims of Terrorism’, held on the day statesman Aldo Moro was assassinated by the Red Brigades. The choice of this particular date to commemorate these victims demonstrates, once again, how the narrative of the past is written in accordance with a specific political intent, one which condemns certain acts of terrorism more than others in the representation of a national, collective identity.

These memory communities generally have two main functions. First, they seek to find out the truth behind the massacres, and have a particularly important role in this process: being relatives of the victims grants them a special status or authority in the ‘promotion of the truth’ (Tobagi, 2009, p. 3, my translation), and entitlement to have the ‘last word’ in the matter (Tota, 2003, p. 128). Their is therefore a powerful form
of ‘counter-memory’ (Foucault, cited in Bouchard, 1980), a memory which is defined in opposition to hegemonic, official or state views of the past such as those exhibited in the majority of the school textbooks analysed above.

Apart from their role as promoters of the truth, both from a legal point of view as well as from an historical one, such memory communities in Italy have an important role in keeping the memory of an event alive (i.e. through didactical projects in schools and the creation of archival networks such as the more recent ‘Houses of Memory’, Tobagi, 2009). Through the initiative of the various victims’ families associations, these structures reply to the laceration terrorism has left behind in Italy and which official instances fail to amend, by collecting and archiving documents, testimonies and other material which may enhance research on the stragi, and by organizing initiatives with didactic purposes. The internet has proven particularly useful, as it has facilitated access to documents, helps connect different entities and makes associations more visible to younger generations, thus taking the task of commemorating on to a new level. The creation of the ‘Network of Archives Against Oblivion’ in 2006 is particularly interesting in this perspective as this network brings together the victims’ associations and documentary centres and archives which work on political violence, tries to make these visible and more accessible to the public, and furthermore has significant educational purposes.

Thus, the aim of these forms of public commemoration is to construct a ‘counter-memory’, or rather, a ‘memory culture’ (Tota, 2003, p. 157, my translation) which goes beyond traditional, official commemorative ceremonies, and which aims to divulge ‘[the] recent acquisitions in historiography which may contribute to the enrichment of a “shared historical sense” based on scientifically correct foundations’ (Tobagi, 2009, p. 5, my translation). In other words, they create a network of information which attempts to make up for the absence of any convincing, undisputed and commonly shared perspectives on terrorism in the 1970s, and allows for the memory of events to remain alive and not become yet another one of the ‘mysteries of Italy’.

**Conclusion**

In this essay I have demonstrated that Italian history education has failed considerably in transmitting a faithful, impartial and complete interpretation of the ‘years of lead’. I have shown how rarely any of the consulted textbooks offer any (detailed) information on the role of the State in the stragi, or on the illegitimate attempts by authorities to protect right-wing organizations that are very likely to have been behind the massacres. Often the almost certain responsibility of right-wing extremists is ignored or underscored, while the textbooks overflow with accounts of left-wing terrorism. The textbooks furthermore reduce their account of the ‘strategy of tension’ to the massacres that occurred in the 1970s, without considering other, predating expressions of an obscure, anti-communist project that seems to have been set in motion shortly after World War II. Finally, there is a rather confusing, inattentive use of terminology, where notions such as ‘years of lead’ are used in a very generalized manner, and political violence is described without taking into consideration the crucial differences between the two forms of political violence performed by left- and right-wing groups.

Thus, by omitting, sidelining, underscoring or simply ignoring facts, the authors of the analysed textbooks promote a distorted and incomplete narrative of the 1970s,
where only certain facts are made accessible to the public. This cannot simply be explained by the fact that few or no official, judicial truths have been established with regards to certain uncomfortable or difficult incidents – mainly the role of the State in the massacres and the responsibilities of right-wing terrorist groups; after all, court sentences are not the only sources on which an historian should base his or her analysis, and there are several documents that may demonstrate the role of neo-fascism in the stragi.\(^9\) Nor should historians be conditioned or limited by the public discourse, and so the inaccessibility of certain elements for the readers of the textbooks rather seems to imply that the authors of these texts apply a strategy of forgetting to those compromising memories that might incriminate the Italian State, in order to create a more coherent narrative of a democracy governed by a State which has fallen victim of a massive insurrection of the extreme Left.

However, in Italy the state does not control or prescribe any guidelines for school textbooks regarding the sort of information they should contain. Thus, the specific narrative that is promoted in most of the textbooks is not in any way imposed on the authors by the state.\(^10\) At most, publishing houses perform a somewhat superficial form of control as to the comprehensibility of the language used, the presence of certain key issues in the texts, the balance between information, etc. (E. Zanette, personal communication, 28 October 2009). As these controls are not based on any specific ministerial guidelines or prescriptions, but depend on the schools and the programmes for which the textbooks are produced, we may conclude that there is a widely accepted interpretation of this past according to which left-wing terrorism dominated in the 1970s.\(^11\) This memory has been shaped by the great media attention to left-wing terrorism and the actual court sentences for left-wing terrorists, on the one hand, as well as by the many movies on left-wing terrorism (Uva, 2007) and their autobiographical writings, on the other: the latter in particular have contributed to the creation of a very clear narrative on their role in the ‘years of lead’ (Glynn, 2008). Incidents which imply involvement of neo-fascist terrorists and the secret services of the state, on the other hand, have – for various reasons – remained obscure.

In other words, whereas information about left-wing terrorism is easily ‘accessible’, to take on Singer and Conway’s (2008) definition of the (in)accessibility of memory, details about right-wing terrorism are left untold. Hence, historians need to start considering a greater variety of sources and let go of the commonly accepted representation of the 1970s in Italy. It is time to start thinking more critically and without prejudices and stereotypes on a past which seems not to be ‘passing’. If not, the ‘years of lead’ will remain an open wound, a ‘decade completely invaded with violence’ as well as a ‘desert of imagination and creativity’, as one journalist recently put it (Battista, 2006, p. 28), thus ignoring the important cultural transformations and social reforms – such as the Workers’ statute, one of the greatest successes of the workers’ movement of 1969 – which also marked the 1970s. However, as Venturoli (2007) notes, ‘[t]he highly dramatic presence of terrorism, […] on the Italian public and political stage, is one of the elements which has most falsified and complicated the transmission of the memory of those years’ (p. 44, my translation).

For the time being, however, the task of healing this wound has been taken on by the various memory communities, which demonstrates the social legitimacy granted to victims in processes of truth finding and dealing with a difficult past. In fact, in sight of a State which fails to do justice to the victims of terrorism and bring about a national process of reconciliation which does not limit itself to a mere equation of
left- and right-wing violence, the victims’ families associations have become the new promoters of a truth which has been denied to the Italian nation for much too long.

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Notes
1. By ‘reconciliation’ I mean not merely reconciliation between victims and perpetrators, but also the coming to terms of Italian citizens with the problematic 1970s more in general.
2. The ‘Hot Autumn’ refers to a period of high social tensions in 1969, when workers joined the students’ protests of 1968. At the time Giuseppe Saragat was the President of the Italian Republic.
3. Stragismo is a ‘terrorist practice which recurs to massacres and acts of violence, with the aim of intimidating or destabilising the political situation, used by extremist groups or deviated organs of the state’. Retrieved from http://old.demauroparavia.it/115531.
4. Many textbooks explain this intensification of left-wing terrorism at this stage as a result of the ‘historical compromise’, unacceptable for the alternative Left and which pushed many young militants towards terrorism.
5. From 1990 onwards, some of the textbooks also include other left-wing groups, although the focus remains on the Red Brigades, in particular on the abduction and assassination of an important statesman in 1978, and these also dominate visually (most of the photographs feature victims of left-wing terrorism; Venturoli, 2007, p. 278).
6. In 2006, for example, the second plaque dedicated to Pinelli – which stated that he had been assassinated and which had remained in tact through the years – was secretly substituted by an official plaque which instead referred to his death as a ‘tragic’ event. This stirred up polemics again, and a copy of the original was placed next to the official plaque: at present the two contradictory commemorative plaques coexist, illustrating the complexity of the memory of the Piazza Fontana bombing and its aftermaths.
9. The difficult accessibility to fundamental sources in Italy may perhaps be a legitimate ‘excuse’ for the lacunae in historical interpretations of the 1970s, but it does not exclude the possibility to produce a more balanced account, considering the availability of other documents that may shed light on certain incidents.
10. From personal communication with Emilio Zanette, author of a variety of school textbooks, 28 October 2009. The fact that the State has no real control over the textbooks is also supported by the proposal of a right-wing politician, some years back, to create a commission of historians that was to revise history books, which he believed to contain an explicit ‘pro-Marxist’ approach (regarding the Italian Resistance period in particular).
11. Often the inclusion of information in school textbooks also depends on issues that are (re)discovered and become ‘hot topics’ in the media.

Notes on contributor
Andrea Hajek is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Italian Studies at the University of Warwick, UK. She also studied French, Comparative Literature and Italian at the University of Utrecht, Netherlands. Her research deals with the role of commemorative rituals in the construction of collective memories for the protest movement of 1977 in the Italian city of Bologna.
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