

Restorative nostalgia, identity closures, conflicts and divisions

Nostalgia restauratrice, chiusure identitarie, conflitti e divisioni

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Abstract

Nostalgia is a complex emotion produced by the individual and collective processes of remembering. Svetlana Boym distinguishes between reflective nostalgia, regarding the personal reactions to the passing of time, and restorative nostalgia, which acts on the collective level in response to the need to look at the past, that is presented in rigid and immutable forms and is considered a constitutive value of the present. Restorative nostalgia feeds nationalistic revivals and processes of historical revisionism and proselytism around hate speeches, based on retrotopias that, in the face of the insecurities and the crisis movements of the present time, paint a more flourishing past, in which life was easier, sheltered from the problems brought by globalization and the greater permeability of national borders. The popularity and consensus obtained in Italy, Sweden, and other European countries by nationalist parties, as well as the rhetoric of patriotism expressed by Vladimir Putin in support of his war action in Ukraine, are the most striking manifestations of a culture of identity closure, of fear, suspicion and opposition that has recently found expression also in the no vax and conspiracy movements. Hence the need for pedagogical reflection and educational interventions that know how to act on the mechanisms of presentisation of the past and identity closure, to educate to openness and not to be afraid of fragility and weaknesses.

Keywords: nostalgia, neo-fascism, xenophobia, conflict, collective imagination.

Sommario

La nostalgia è un'emozione complessa prodotta dai processi individuali e collettivi insiti nell'atto del ricordare. Svetlana Boym distingue tra la nostalgia riflessiva, legata al rapporto intimo che l'individuo elabora con lo scorrere del tempo, e la nostalgia restauratrice, che agisce sul piano collettivo in risposta al bisogno di considerare il passato, proposto in forme rigide e immutabili, come valore costitutivo del presente. La nostalgia restauratrice alimenta *revival* nazionalistici e processi di revisionismo storico e proselitismo attorno a messaggi e discorsi d'odio, fondandosi su retrotopie che, a fronte delle insicurezze e dei moti di crisi del tempo presente, dipingono un passato più florido, in cui la vita era più facile, al riparo dai problemi portati dalla globalizzazione e dalla maggiore permeabilità dei confini nazionali. La popolarità e il consenso ottenuti in Italia, Svezia e altri paesi europei dai partiti nazionalisti, così come la retorica del patriottismo espressa da Vladimir Putin a sostegno della sua azione bellica in Ucraina, sono le manifestazioni più eclatanti di una cultura della chiusura identitaria, della paura, del sospetto e della contrapposizione che ha di recente trovato espressione anche nei movimenti no vax e complottisti. Da qui la necessità di una riflessione pedagogica e di interventi educativi che sappiano agire sui meccanismi di presentizzazione del passato e chiusura identitaria, per educare all'apertura e a non avere paura delle fragilità e delle debolezze.

Parole chiave: nostalgia, neofascismo, xenofobia, conflitto, immaginario collettivo.

1. Nostalgia

Nostalgia is a complex emotion (Sedikides *et al.*, 2008; Soudry *et al.*, 2010), intimate and universal, a strong emotional state produced by the individual and collective processes of remembering, characterised by the interaction between rational and conscious components and others that are unconscious and uncontrollable (Hirsch, 1992). Nostalgia produces motions of affection for fragments of an idealized past, deprived of its negative connotations (Davis, 1979). Lowenthal (1985) identifies it with memory purified from pain, capable of producing relief especially when the nostalgic person experiences a present of suffering and personal crisis. Nostalgia is, in fact, a defensive

mechanism primarily implemented in moments of transition and radical change, when the perception and mastery of one's own identity becomes more difficult, and the refuge in an idealized past generates safety and comfort, helping the subject to preserve and recognise within oneself fragments of the child who was, loved and pampered in the years of early childhood (Batcho, 2007). At any age, especially nowadays, nostalgia gives the impulse and certainties necessary to face the uncertainty of the present time, fuelling a constant dialogue with the past, and with *oneself in the past*, that is functional to finding consistency in choices that we have to accomplish, and which often rest on rather fragile foundations (Pickering and Keightley, 2006). Recent studies conducted in the psychological field confirm this: nostalgic motion has both an introspective and socio-relational character (Wildschut *et al.*, 2006), it can focus on people, places, moments and precise events and is characterised by the transition from a negative or undesirable state (of suffering, pain, exclusion) to a desirable and positive one (of acceptance, euphoria, even triumph), providing a real redemption in those who experience it (McAdams, 2001). The results are experiences of less anxiety and worries, increased self-esteem, a predisposition to affectivity and openness, which in turn strengthen ties with others (Hertz, 1990).

Svetlana Boym (2001) distinguishes between reflective nostalgia and restorative nostalgia, bringing the former back to a historical and individual time, to the irrevocability of the past, to the awareness of human finitude, to personal meditation on one's own history and the passage of time. Reflective nostalgia favours fragments of memory, retraces the past to savour its details and commemorative signs and temporalises the space. Fascinated more by coexistence than by succession (Deleuze, 1983), reflective nostalgia does not propose to reconstruct today and elsewhere the house abandoned a long time ago and now preserved in the dimension of the myth, but stimulates the subject to retrace their own history looking for chaotic and fragmented connections between past, present and future, in the awareness that the past is what no longer acts, but could act, what will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it will draw vitality (Bergson, 1983).

2. Restorative nostalgia and retrotopia

Complementary and interdependent to *reflective nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym (2001) proposes the category of *restorative nostalgia*, characterised by the accent on the *nostos*, by the attempt to reconstruct the lost home and fill the gaps in memory through national and nationalistic revivals, which are concerned with the creation of anti-modern myths by means of a return to national symbols and through conspiratorial theories. Restorative nostalgia responds to a yearning to reproduce in the present a past that is not perceived as concluded, left behind, deteriorated but as a constitutive value of the present, always equal to itself, insensitive to the action of time. The customs of the past are considered, recovered and re-proposed as rigid and immutable, cloaked in a higher degree of symbolic formalization and ritualization, to form a kind of armour that prevents possible actualization, contextualization and contamination. They are therefore unreal, more conservative and selective, far from the original customs they would like to re-propose; Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (2012) write of *invented tradition* to indicate these sets of practices which, endowed with a ritual or symbolic nature, aim to inculcate values and norms of behaviour that would be in continuity with the past, but which in truth they misrepresent. The invented tradition is based on the sense of loss of community cohesion, particularly topical today, recovering a specific social poetics and cultural intimacy through induction to memory while offering a comforting collective script for individual

nostalgia (Boym, 2003). Restorative nostalgia proposes two main narrative plots, which are not mutually exclusive: the return to origins, evoked above all in moments of disintegration, identity loss and collective dissolution, and the conspiracy theory, founded on conspiratorial and persecutory paranoias that are based on a clear contrast between Us and Them and on the creation of scapegoats.

Avishai Margalit (2002) also intervenes on the theme of the relationship between nostalgia, memory, and the need for community, arguing that a community that can be defined as *ethical*, permeated by positive emotional ties and thick relationships, rooted in a shared past, manages to remain cohesive also through the memory of past emotions, of great solidarity in difficult times, and perhaps of aversion to a common enemy. Unlike *common memory*, which brings together individual memories attributable to the different ways in which the same events were experienced by individual subjects, *shared memory* carries out a re-elaboration, integrating the individual memories of the members of a community in a single version. Archives, schoolbooks, museums, monuments, and toponymy are the most effective vehicles of shared memory, considered in their most institutionalised meaning. Thus, *communities of memory* are born, held together by a heritage of shared memories that also unfolds in a diachronic sense, from generation to generation, through the story, the testimonies, the visual and sound documentation, the familiarity with the objects of the past, the commemorations. *Remembering* thus becomes more akin to *believing*, rather than *knowing*, since shared memory does not exactly reproduce the details that objectively occurred in a given episode but rather provides a sedimented representation of it through its narration. Shared memory contemplates in itself the concept of *tradition*, which is understood as a sanctified and immobile version of the past, just as it can easily be an expression of nostalgia, sometimes so powerful that it leads to distorting the past, idealising it and attributing atavistic innocence to places and people.

On the past projected into the present, nostalgia, distorted memory and absolutized or invented traditions also reflects Zygmunt Bauman in one of his latest works (2017), when he defines *retrotopia* those visions that, in the presence of a future deprecated because unreliable and unmanageable, re-evaluate the past as a space of freedom and hopes. In the opposite direction to utopia, retrotopia responds to the feelings of tremendous inadequacy produced by individualization and the darkening of the idea of progress, reinvesting the hopes of improvement no longer in an uncertain future but in the vague memory of a past appreciated for its alleged stability and reliability: in doing so, the path towards the future takes on the connotations of a path of corruption and degeneration, while the journey backwards, towards the past, is experienced as a sort of purification itinerary from the damage produced by this threatening idea of the future, searching for stability and self-confidence, security and freedom. Retrotopia manifests itself through the reiteration of a status quo that previously existed or that, through processes of selective memorisation and oblivion, it is imagined having existed, recovering and re-proposing true or presumed aspects of the past that would be characterised by particular virtuosity and that they would have been guilty abandoned, forgotten, ruined.

3. Invented pasts

The risk that a dangerous combination of retrotopia and xenophobia could be achieved has become a reality in numerous situations and circumstances, especially in recent years. For the Italian context, a paradigmatic antecedent, is represented by the birth and affirmation, starting from the second half of the Eighties, of what is today the longest running of the Italian parties: the Lega Nord. Its founder, Umberto Bossi, was able to

capture the discontent and insecurity of a social, economic, and cultural landscape – that of northern Italy – in profound change, in which the first significant flows of immigrants and the pressing taxes imposed by the government on the numerous small and medium-sized enterprises were often perceived as harassment. Umberto Bossi has succeeded in the political enterprise of transforming the dissatisfaction of the small and medium bourgeoisie with the tax oppression into the belief of being in the presence of a historical oppression of ethnic origin, perpetuated by *thieving Rome* – southerners and immigrants – to the detriment of the Po Valley people, theorising an upside-down racism in which the natives are discriminated against and invaded by their *guests* (Aime, 2012). Still alive in the memory of the voters are the electoral posters with captivating images, graphics and colours, certainly innovative compared to the greyness of the political communication of the time, bearing the slogans «The Native Americans have not been able to stop the invasion: do you think you are strong as Native Americans and survive in protected areas? Vote Lega Nord», «Wake up Padano (cfr. Northern people)! With the Lega Nord against Rome the Thief ».

To the national borders of the Italian state, Lega Nord opposes the ethnic borders of a territorial entity never recognised politically, without a real unitary background, and therefore never existed: Padania. It does so by connecting to an imaginary that blends history, mythology, and folklore in an arbitrary and original way, starting from which – following that identity obsession (Remotti, 2010) herald of racism, closures and xenophobia – creates an identity of an ethnic type, that of the Po Valley, completely invented, resulting from the individual choices of identification in an easy and attractive fantasy. In the absence of an already existing collective memory, Umberto Bossi has built a completely new one, projecting its origins as far back as possible in time, into a deliberately confused and indefinite past, where everything was pure and right, where people of the North Italy were not Italian, a past for which to feel nostalgia and to hope for a return, to affirm as natural a sense of community that is instead the result of an artifice. When the past is reified, it becomes an object of consumption, it is transformed into collective memory after being selected and reinterpreted according to the cultural sensitivities, ethical questions and conveniences of the present (Traverso, 2006), it becomes the tool to legitimise messages and actions that have a strong impact on the *here and now*. Padania does not exist and has never existed: most of the Lega Nord's statements on history and identity are false and without confirmation, but they become socially *true* as they feed an identity in those who choose to believe in it. Paradoxically, even if never recognised by official channels, Padania acquired its own principle of reality from the moment in which the Lega Nord, a tangible and true entity, created and materialised it not only among its own voters but also among the detractors. With the entry of Padania into the collective imagination, as a territory corresponding to the regions of northern Italy, also legitimised with expressions of popular costume with a strong patriotic and national emphasis – such as the election of Miss Padania and the Padania cycling tour –, the concept of the *Po River people* finds an easy grip and is celebrated in the electoral slogans like this: «I'm young, I'm a Po Valley inhabitant. In important moments, those with steady nerves and a heart of steel do not hesitate, do not collapse, resist and move on. Come with us».

In the Lega Nord propaganda of the 1980s and early 1990s, Padania is under siege and in decline, which is why nostalgia for its origins and the desire for their reaffirmation are legitimate: in the pictures and video recordings of the first gatherings, amidst waving of flags bearing the silhouette of Alberto da Giussano, green shirts and Celtic suns, we recognize people wearing helmets with horns, just like the ancient Gauls made famous

and *pop* by the comics of Astérix and Obélix. In the Lega Nord epic, a fascination with pre-Roman peoples is evident: they are mythical ancestors, but defined without precision, strong, proud in their genuine simplicity and immune to the corruption that, on the contrary, would have characterised the subsequent Roman invaders. Leaping centuries, the propaganda of this party identifies a second important moment, namely the experience of the Lega Lombarda, the alliance between the Lombard municipalities, sanctioned in Pontida on 7 April 1167, to face and defeat the German invader Federico Barbarossa. The unity of Italy is contrasted by the unity of Padania, the land bathed by the Po River, a myth of origins and promised land, of which to claim ownership in the name of autochthony. In the Lega Nord rhetoric, expressed in a language whose violence is often masked by the vaguely jesting and light-hearted tone of certain expressions that deliberately and wisely trace a tavern register, closer to ordinary people, who feel distant from the politics of the salons of Rome, the simplification of messages and complex problems transfers an image of reality as a clear contrast of opposites: Po Valley/others, North/South, Christians/Muslims, freedom/oppression. Following this logic, solutions that are as simple as they are immediate arise, first and foremost, the expulsion of the southerners and foreigners as subjects who undermine the bond between land and blood on which the ancestral myth of Padania is based.

Today the political party of the Lega is no longer led by Umberto Bossi. Moreover it has removed *North* from its name, abandoning the localist and secessionist rhetoric of the origins: the autonomy and independence of Padania is no longer claimed; on the contrary a strong nationalism permeates the speeches and proclamations of the leader Matteo Salvini, as if he wanted to keep the consensus of the entire Italian people and to unify them also in the name of a common aversion towards new foreign invaders.

4. Pasts that threaten the present

Parallel to the rise of the Lega Nord, in the 1990s we witness the formation of violent neo-fascist movements in Italy, united by an accentuated radicalisation in terms of identity, with the recovery of references, myths and symbols drawn not only from the history of fascism, but also from German Nazism. In ideologies, but also in symbolism and language, these groups refer to a generic nationalist, xenophobic and racist culture, which refers to an imaginary universe, completely self-referential, dominated by the element of *being against*, the naive and pre-political adhesion to pseudo-values and aesthetics conveyed by mass culture, but also to violence as a *style*, a claimed, exhibited, and ritualised behavioural model. As a reaction to a present characterised, in their view, by an excruciating crisis of values and of clear identity references, by social disorder and excessive ethnic and cultural mixing, which can only lead to a dark future, the militants of the far-right groups regret and claim a past – that of the Fascist period – in which everything was brighter, more orderly, more reassuring, at least for those who were Italian by birth, passport and mentality. On the web and social networks, posts that tell of a Fascist period characterised by development, freedom, protection of workers' rights, maintenance of legality, international prestige, work, and education for all Italians find great popularity. An Italy of *good living* is described, far from being a repressive dictatorship, and far better than the sad and cursed Italy of today (Antolini, 2010).

On the web, in the absence of shared filters, criteria and borders through which to consider the truthfulness, legitimacy and morality of information and interpretations, in the *mare magnum* of contrasting versions, the theses are confused with the antitheses, the deductions with the counter-deductions, the truth with lies, opposing facts coexist contradicting all logic, the very principle of proof becomes little more than optional,

certainly subservient to the predominance of the processes of persuasiveness and intellectual seduction (Zannoni, 2017). Transformed into the repetition of an eternal present, the historical narrative records on the web the success of the redundancy of certain theses and the effectiveness of certain languages (Vercelli, 2013). The extreme ease with which the deniers access the virtual highway has important consequences on the strategies with which the supporters of accredited historiography try to fight the phenomenon: if, with the old communication technologies (print and video), it was still possible to think of repressing it through censorship, with the advent and diffusion of the Internet this goal has become unattainable (Pisanty, 2014).

The Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) party, founded and led by the current Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, constitutes the evolutionary stage of a political force that from neo-fascist has become post-fascist, and has severed over the decades, albeit amidst ambiguity and hesitation, its links with the experience of the twenty-year Mussolini's dictatorship. As well as the Spanish party Vox, at whose meetings Giorgia Meloni did not fail to intervene and be acclaimed as a guest and friend, also Fratelli d'Italia is part of the national-populist wave that is passing through Europe since the economic crisis of 2007-2008 and which, by claiming national interests above supranational ones, hinders the development of the integration process. At the heart of the propaganda of Vox and Fratelli d'Italia, there is the rhetoric of *patriotism* and *sovereignty*, also functional to disguise the underlying *nationalism*, of which they constitute two functional, more polite and elegant equivalents. Giorgia Meloni and Santiago Abascal use the word *homeland* as nationalism from the end of the nineteenth century used the term *nation*, claiming the monopoly of representation: in a divisive way, to mark the distance between those who defend Italy or Spain and others. It is not in the name of homeland and nation but in the name of their peculiar nationalist conception of homeland and nation, that Meloni and Abascal claim to bring together their respective voters, also by resorting to an instrumental use of religion, reduced to an identity factor, even by nationalising the saints (Botti, 2022).

Meanwhile, in Europe, other far-right parties are gaining increasing support, attenuating the language so as not to scare the more moderate voters, but remaining anchored in their past. While in Germany the Alternative für Deutschland assumes increasingly xenophobic, Islamophobic and, recently, pro-Russian positions, in France the Reassemblement National of Marine Le Pen aims to present itself as a government force and not just as a receptacle for fears and protests, in Poland the PiS expresses Prime Minister Morawiecki and in Hungary Fidesz by Viktor Orbán continues its hegemony, in Sweden it is shining the star of Jimmie Åkesson, since 2006 leader of the Sverigedemokraterna (Swedish Democrats, SD) party, founded in 1988 by a group of neo-Nazis.

If still in 1995, the public demonstrations of the party were characterised by significant participation of Nazis, step by step Åkesson worked to exclude the most extremist figures and to eliminate from the political and ideological program any reference to biological racism, replaced by a strenuous fight against multiculturalism. The populist and ethno-nationalist party of the SD, Islamophobic and hostile to immigration, today would like to eliminate the arrivals of asylum seekers and encourage the repatriation of immigrants who do not integrate, strong in the belief that most Swedish citizens are concerned about waves of crime and immigration perceived as overwhelmingly out of control.

5. Conflicts and divisions: educating to openness and to the future

The nationalist and xenophobic populisms that hinder the path towards true European integration, as well as the aggressiveness with which autocracies around the world make

claims, are part of an overall picture of *democratic recession* (Diamond, 2015) of which the current conflict in Ukraine is nothing but the loudest expression. As in the face of a dangerous non-playful Risk, we are at the apotheosis of divisive and contrasting rhetoric, which unfortunately materialise in reality of death, destruction and violence: the Russians against the Ukrainians, the West against the East, but also the pro-Russians against the pro-Ukrainians, the *pacifists* against the supporters of military aid, the *patriots* against the *deserters*, those who are always right against those who are always wrong. Conflict and deep-rooted divisiveness today characterise not only the contexts of war, but also those where migrants land, or in any case the places where debate and the public manifestation of different opinions are allowed. The tendency is increasingly to close in on the different factions, to extreme the discrepancies and raise barriers that do not allow to recognise meeting points and reach positions of mediation and exchange.

The Covid-19 pandemic, experienced and suffered worldwide, beyond some initial manifestations marked by solidarity, has, above all, exacerbated the divisions and the propensity to contrast inherent in men and women, well exemplified in the unresolved conflict between *vax* and *no-vax* (Zannoni, 2021). At the root lies, in the first place, the fear that grips everyone, and that arises from the impact with something foreign and unknown, most of the time perceived with opposite characteristics to those we consider desirable, which insinuates in us the fear of losing what we are most attached to, such as freedom, dignity and health (Svendsen, 2008). Unlike what happened to his predecessors in past centuries, today's man tends to consider himself perennially exposed to dangers and to attribute them to the effects produced by globalization, first of all the possibility of coming into contact with what, human, living or immaterial as it may be, it is characterised by its extraneousness.

The philosopher Elena Pulcini (2014) considers that produced by the impact with *the other*, one of the two great fears of our time, together with that of the future. She starts from the Hobbesian reflection, according to which the conflict is generated by universal equality and the struggle to pursue the same rights and the same passions. Today, however, *the other* is no longer *the same as me*, my fellow man who, although in conflict, is clothed with the same dignity, but is *the different*, the one who does not enjoy the same characteristics of equality and similarity: he is first the foreigner, but also the poor, the elderly, the disabled, the marginalised. While not enjoying a similar condition of equality and the recognition of the same rights, *the other* perpetually challenges us with his irreducible and fearful difference, to the point of raising questions about the safety and the possibility of our lifestyles, making himself a threat. The fear of *the other* intersects with the fear of the future, in turn produced by the situation of insecurity that characterises the global age (Bauman, 1999). Born together with modernity, with the eruption on the scene of the notion of the future as an open space (Koselleck, 2007), the fear connected to it is the dominant passion of our time and is increasingly presented as an enigma that is difficult to solve, from the moment that man is losing the ability to foresee, control, manage, even imagine such an uncertain and indeterminate horizon. There is a lack of expectation and openness to the future, overwhelmed by closed visions of an unexciting future, to which a return to the past is preferable.

The circle closes: we regress to the past, until we ardently desire it, because the future scares us or because the present obscures its horizon. In our present, we perceive others, those different from us, first as obstacles, dangers and rivals in our struggle to conquer a horizon. This happens on an individual level but also on a collective level. On a psychological level, but also on a social, cultural, political level. For these reasons, pedagogical analysis on issues of conflict and divisions with an ethnic and cultural background cannot ignore intersectionality with analysis of a political, historical,

economic, sociological, and psychological nature. The reflection on the present cannot ignore the reflection on the past that is *inside* the present: deepening the theme of nostalgia, and then intervening on its most dangerous manifestations, especially on a collective level, can constitute an interesting and effective starting point, a key for analysis and design that can help to find the key to the problem. Accepting the complexity of temporal and spatial planes, and, with it, the intersections of human trajectories, constitutes a perspective that touches utopia but which can provide an orientation. Educating to openness, anti-racism, dialogue, and multicultural encounter also means educating not to be afraid of the present and to look to the future in a proactive way, in order not to be overwhelmed by critical issues and difficulties, and not to surrender to the temptation to seek refuge and security in an illusory, divisive and imaginative past.

In today's multicultural societies we cannot ignore nostalgia, even in the educational field. On the contrary, it is now essential to educate *about* nostalgia. Educating nostalgia means assuming the perspective of the pedagogy of emotions and placing oneself in the continuous game of reciprocity between the cognitive and the emotional (Contini, 2001), to promote forms of awareness and confidence with the nostalgic emotion that leads the subject to recognise it as constituent of one's personality, of one's way of making choices and therefore of the underlying existential project. It is precisely in nostalgia that memory finds its most effective emotional vehicle, as professionals of communication are aware. Educating nostalgia means accompanying the subject to emerge from a condition of irreflexivity towards emotional situations that can disorient or block him, to lead him towards experiences consciously crossed by a reflection intentionally oriented to gaining a sense of what is happening, since the decision to maintain a reflective relationship with oneself must be considered as a necessary condition for placing oneself as a subject of one's being there, responding to the properly human call of being in a reflective posture on one's becoming (Mortari, 2014).

A subject who knows how to dialogue in a critical, harmonious and reflective way with his own nostalgia, accepting its opacity without losing his sense directions, will more easily manage not to be duped by the cynical and instrumental messages that characterise the business of nostalgic goods, as well as he will be able to have antibodies against the aggressive and attractive temptations offered by political, cultural, social and sometimes criminal movements which, even by denying historical evidence, seek consensus through nationalist and xenophobic positions and manifestations.

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