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## The making of a civic discourse on controversial historical past: from denial to parrhesia

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**Abstract:** This contribution discusses the pragmatic effects of different rhetoric strategies conveying evidence of past ingroup violence after a long lasting social denial (Cohen, 2001). In particular, a case study is presented on the making of a civic discourse on controversial historical past: war crimes committed by the Italian Army during the colonial invasion of Ethiopia (1935-36). Although very well proved (Del Boca, 2005), these facts were only recently inserted in Italian history textbooks (Leone & Mastrovito, 2010; Cajani, 2013). In this same period, evidence of these crimes was officially presented during discussions of the Italian Parliament. In spite of these recent acknowledgments of the Italian responsibilities for these crimes, a social myth is still widely shared by the public opinion, representing Italians as good fellows (*Italiani, brava gente*: cfr. Del Boca, 2005), unable to be cruel both in everyday life and in wartimes (Volpato et al., 2012). This specific situation, denying even the reality of facts happened, has been defined literal social denial, i.e. the deepest among the three possible states of denial (literal, interpretive, implicative: cfr. Cohen, 2001). The issue of literal social denial of past ingroup violence is at the intersection among theories on narratives on national past (László, 2003), social representations of history (Liu et al., 2014), conflict ethos (Bar-Tal et al., 2012; Kelman, 2008), group-based emotions (Allpress et al., 2010; Leone, 2000) and intergroup reconciliation processes (Nadler et al., 2008). Namely, understanding how a social denial could break down implies the theorization of human mind's reflexivity as grounded on historical awareness (Ortega y Gasset, 1930), and the notion of social change as primarily rooted in natality, i.e. the fact that each birth represents a new beginning (Arendt, 1958). Drawing on this theoretical background, we will present an ongoing research program (Leone, in press) on the literal social denial (Cohen, 2001) of war crimes committed by the Italian army during colonial period and on the pragmatic effects of different kinds of communication on this controversial past. In order to address this issue, we will particularly focus on the concept of parrhesia as defined by Foucault (1983): the communicative choice of

«frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, [...] the moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy » (Foucault, 2001, p.19). Studies we conducted in this line tested the change in beliefs and the emotional reactions of young citizens confronted with mild or parrhesiastic descriptions of socially denied war crimes (Leone & Sarrica, 2014, 2012). Empirical evidence will be discussed in order to reflect on our core idea: that a parrhesiastic communication is a risky though necessary pragmatic move to break long lasting denial of ingroup wrongdoings, to trigger critical civic discourse in the place of social myths and to start reconciliation processes.

**Keywords:** social denial, communication, reconciliation, parrhesia, war crimes

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*Faire un discours civique sur le passé historique controversé: du déni à la parrhésie*

**Résumé:** L'article traite des effets pragmatiques de différentes stratégies rhétoriques qui témoignent, suite à un déni social durable, de la violence perpétrée par un groupe social (Cohen, 2001). En particulier, une étude de cas est présentée sur la réalisation d'un discours civique sur un passé historique controversé, c'est-à-dire les crimes de guerre commis par l'armée italienne lors de l'invasion coloniale de l'Éthiopie (1935-36). Bien que très connus parmi les historiens (Del Boca, 2005), ces faits ne soient que récemment insérés dans les manuels d'histoire italienne (Leone & Mastrovito, 2010; Cajani, 2013). Dans cette même période, la preuve de ces crimes a été officiellement présentée lors des discussions dans le Parlement italien. Malgré ces reconnaissances récentes des responsabilités italiennes pour ces crimes, un mythe social est encore largement partagé par l'opinion publique, représentant les Italiens comme de bons camarades (*Italiani, brava gente*: cf. Del Boca, 2005), incapables d'être cruels à la fois dans la vie quotidienne et en temps de guerre (Volpato et al., 2012). Cette situation spécifique, en supprimant même la réalité des faits, a été définie comme un refus social littéral, c'est-à-dire le plus profond parmi les trois états possibles de déni (littéral, interprétatif, implicatif: cf. Cohen, 2001). La question du déni social littéral de la violence dont son groupe est responsable se pose à l'intersection des théories concernant les récits sur le passé national (László, 2003), les représentations sociales de l'histoire (Liu et al., 2014), l'ethos de conflit (Bar-Tal et al., 2012; Kelman, 2008), les émotions basées sur le groupe (Allpress et al., 2010; Leone, 2000) et les processus de réconciliation des groupes (Nadler et al., 2008). À savoir, comprendre comment un déni social pourrait s'écrouler implique une théorisation de la réflexivité de l'esprit humain qui soit fondée sur la conscience historique (Ortega y Gasset, 1930) et la notion que le changement social soit principalement enraciné dans la natalité, alors que chaque naissance représente un nouveau départ (Arendt, 1958). En nous appuyant sur ce contexte théorique, nous présenterons un programme de recherche en cours (Leone, sous presse) portant sur le déni social littéral (Cohen, 2001) des crimes de guerre commis par l'armée italienne pendant la période coloniale et sur les effets pragmatiques de différents

types de communication sur ce passé controversé. Pour aborder cette question, nous nous concentrerons particulièrement sur le concept de parrhésie tel qu'il est défini par Foucault (1983): c'est-à-dire le choix communicatif de «la franchise au lieu de la persuasion, de la vérité au lieu du mensonge ou du silence, [...] du devoir moral à la place de l'intérêt personnel et de l'apathie morale» (Foucault, 2001, p. 19). Les études que nous avons menées dans cette ligne de recherche ont exploré le changement des croyances et des réactions émotionnelles des jeunes citoyens Italiens confrontés à des descriptions légères ou parrhésiastiques de ces crimes de guerre socialement démentis (Leone & Sarrica, 2014, 2012). Des preuves empiriques seront discutées afin de réfléchir à notre idée fondamentale: proposant que une communication parrhésiastique, tout en déclenchant des réactions dangereuses et difficiles à gérer, soit néanmoins la plus utile pour briser un déni durable des actes répréhensibles commis par le groupe, et soit l'unique solution viable pour provoquer un discours civique critique sur les mythes sociaux d'un passé idéalisé du groupe, favorisant le commencement des processus sociaux nécessaires pour une véritable réconciliation.

**Mots-clés:** déni social, communication, réconciliation, parrhésie, guerre, crime

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## **Introduction**

By officially declaring that leaders of enemy groups agree on banning violence to face each other, the signing of a peace treaty signals that a first settlement of intergroup conflict has been reached (Kelman, 2008). After conflict settlement, however, further important social and psychological processes have to be elaborated before a new trusting relationship among former enemies may finally be regained. During this long and difficult period of reconciliation (Nadler & Shnabel, 2015), a profound shift is expected regarding the societal ethos that frames intergroup relations. When violence was chosen as the best way to confront the other groups, the societal ethos ruling relations with 'the others' began to represent them as enemies. At that stage, intergroup relations were therefore described as a zero-sum game, coming to an end only with the victory of one group against the others. This particular kind of social representation of relationships between groups, the so-called societal ethos of conflict (Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin & Zafran, 2012), by foreseeing outgroups' prior aggressive intentions, morally justified violence enacted against enemies. Therefore, it had to be continuously maintained and nourished by official social discourses throughout the period of intergroup violence.

Reconciliation processes require this intergroup ethos to shift into a new one, where the idea of being ready to fight against the enemy group becomes more and more marginal from the core of self-definitions shaping one's own social identity (Kelman, 2008). When intergroup violence has been particularly destructive and long-lasting, however, this marginalization could not happen but when the social life of groups is renewed by new generations coming to age: It makes intergroup reconciliation processes to be founded not only on social and psychological changes,

but on biological renewal of groups too (Leone, in press). This is one of the reasons why, besides always being difficult and fragile, reconciliation processes are often also very long lasting. When considering reconciliation after a severe intergroup conflict, therefore, the issue of intergenerational narratives on past intergroup violence is always at stake.

The aim of this article is to explore psychosocial factors hindering intergenerational communication on ingroup responsibilities for past violence, and to propose some first ideas on how to face this specific difficulty that can affect long-lasting reconciliation processes.

More in particular, we aim to focus on the problem of intergenerational silence affecting historical narratives meant for young generations, denying past violence enacted by the group before their own birth. After conflict settlement, in fact, sometimes responsibilities for past intergroup violence are not made clear to new generations of young adult people, in spite of the fact that they have come to the age of being informed on the historical past of the group in which they happen to be born.

At a face value, omitting to narrate violent acts committed by their ingroup before their birth could seem a protective move of older generations towards younger ones. However, if we take a closer look, a different interpretation could be proposed, suggesting that such an intergroup reconciliation presents a lack of historical information disempowering young generations' capabilities to cope with past responsibilities of their group, which are necessary in order to restore its social and moral image damaged by older generations' crimes (Allpress, Barlow, Brown & Louis, 2010).

Referring to inter-generational silence on past ingroup violence, a recent body of empirical data support the latter interpretation, and shows that the acknowledgement of past ingroup moral responsibilities is the first unavoidable step that triggers the unfolding of subsequent intergroup reconciliation processes (Vollhardt, Mazur & Lemahieu, 2014). We may therefore assume that a withdrawal of historical information on ingroup responsibilities for past violence makes it impossible for such an acknowledgment, slowing down the building of a renewal of intergroup trust between young generations of former enemy groups.

According to this general conceptual framework, two theoretical issues have to be addressed. Firstly, reasons and processes leading to denial of ingroup responsibilities for past violence, or even to the elaboration of social myths representing the ingroup as characterized by delusive optimistic features, have to be reviewed. Secondly, it has to be explored how and under which circumstances these states of denial and social myths come to an end.

In the following pages, these two points will be exposed separately. We hope that their strict intertwining, although not explicitly stated for brevity's sake, will be nevertheless evident enough.

After introducing these two theoretical issues, a brief account on empirical research on war crimes committed by the Italian Army during the colonial invasion of Ethiopia (1935-36) will be presented. This is, in our opinion, an exemplary case of intergenerational silence: although very well proved (Del Boca, 2005), these historical facts were inserted in Italian history textbooks (Leone & Mastrovito, 2010; Cajani, 2013) and the evidence of these crimes started to be overtly debated during discussions of the Italian Parliament (Camera dei Deputati – Senato della Repubblica, 2006) only recently.

Despite this initial breaking of intergenerational silence, the making of a civic discourse in Italian society on such a controversial historical past is still far to be reached, since until now these past ingroup crimes are not fully known by the large majority of young Italian people (Pivato, 2007). This example is therefore used to understand if denial may be better coped with using a clear and frank communication on past crimes of the group, proposing that this communicative move, although risky, could help the making of a civic discourse on responsibilities for violence enacted.

In the last part of this article, therefore, empirical research conducted on this case study will be briefly analysed in order to propose some primary ideas on how to cope with reactions observed when the Pandora's box of social silence on past crimes is finally open. Apart from their specificity, these data suggest that not only contents of narratives but also their communicative strategies matter, in order to compensate a long-lasting lack of intergenerational communication on past intergroup violence.

## **1. Denial of ingroup responsibilities for past violence**

After conflict settlement, recognition of ingroup responsibilities for violence is quite rare. South Africa is one of the few examples in which atrocities have been clearly and overtly recognised and shared narratives negotiated between the parties (Meiring & Tutu, 1999). More than often, a first period of silence among perpetrators, bystanders and victims is functional to restoring everyday exchanges and encounters among groups, which constitute the surface of everyday coexistence (Eastmond & Selimovic, 2012). In the long run, especially where former enemies constitute distinct communities with limited and superficial exchanges (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008), the groups involved in a conflict develop alternative narratives, aimed at preserving a positive social identity. Despite these narratives they serve a self-protective function, a number of socio-psychological consequences derive from such biased perspectives (Kelman, 2008), including the avoidance of intergroup contact, the polarisation of collective identities, and the permanence of conflict related beliefs (e.g. competitive victimhood, mutual distrust, delegitimization) that foster the permanence of long-standing intractable conflict (Andrighetto, Mari, Volpato & Behluli, 2012; Coleman, 2003; Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011).

Once self-protective narratives becomes dominant in a community, the avoidance of recognition for atrocities committed during the conflict may last in time. A number of examples can be found in contemporary societies, from the rhetoric of Thanksgiving day (Kurtis, Adams & Yellow Bird, 2010) to the *forgotten* Armenian genocide (Hovannisian, 1998; Bilali, 2013); from the silence over collaborationism during the regime of Vichy (Campbell, 2006) to the social amnesia about the Italian colonial crimes (Leone & Mastrovito, 2010; Leone & Sarrica, 2012). Many of these example involve an active role of élites and individuals. States construct symbologies and technologies (Liu, Fisher Onar & Woodward, 2014) aimed at perpetuating cultural, structural and even direct forms of violence. Individuals may intentionally and voluntarily withhold information from others, and practice self-censorship even in the absence of formal obstacles (Bar-Tal, 2017). However, organised manipulation of history and self-aware intentionality is not always necessary: when victims are weak or socially isolated denial is a banal occurrence, « a gradual seepage of knowledge down some collective black hole » (Cohen, 2001, p. 13). Such a banality of denial can be explained by the fact that mechanisms involved in the process of denial fulfil basic individual and group needs.

Cohen (1993) identifies three main bodies of literature, which focus on different yet related aspects of denial: The victimological focus on the bystander, the psychoanalytic and social-cognition traditions of research on individual and group processes, and the body of literature on motivational accounts provided by perpetrators. A number of explanations have been identified for the well-known bystander effect: diffusion of responsibility, social influence, inability of sympathising or empathising with the suffering of the victims hinder the intervention of third parties. In the case of denial, the absence of intervention from third parties contributes to the legitimization of the dominant narrative. Psychoanalytic and social-cognition perspectives, though from different premises, largely contribute to understand the protective goals served by denial. Psychoanalysis first conceived denial as a self-defensive mechanism of individuals towards external menaces. Social cognition research further developed this concept by looking at self-serving and group-serving biases intervening in information retrieval, storage and transmission (Allport & Postman, 1945). In this latter perspective, basic memory processes such as forgetting, selective recall and assimilation are considered on the basis of denial, omissions, psychological distancing and positivistic reconstruction of past events. Through these processes, individual and groups cope with negative events that threaten individual and social identity and reject criticism about human right violations (Paez & Liu, 2009; Paez, Marquez, Valencia & Vincze, 2006). An extreme form of coping strategy, in this regards, is represented by the denial of the human nature of the outgroup members. Such a process contributes to moral disengagement of perpetrator and intervenes after other forms of denial fail (Castano, 2008). A number of strategies have been identified, including emotional minimization (lessening the victims' psychological reality of suffering), dehumanization, and exclusion from the scope of justice

(Kelman, 1973; Leidner, Castano, Zaiser & Giner-Sorolla, 2010; Opatow, 2000). A third body of literature identified by Cohen (1993) focuses on the neutralisation techniques used by offenders to account for their wrongdoings. Quoting Sykes and Matza's list (1957), Cohen identifies five common accounts of past wrongdoings: the denial of injuries (*no one was affected*), of the role of victims (*it's their fault*), of the legitimacy of judges (*they are just as bad*), of responsibility (*we had to do it*), and the appeal to shared loyalties (e.g. ingroup, family). It is relevant to underline that, in order to be acceptable to their audience, the techniques used by offenders have to refer to a « cultural pool of motivational vocabularies available to actors and observers (and honoured by systems of legality and morality) » (Cohen, 1993, p. 107).

Referring to narratives of perpetrators, that is the issue analyzed by our article, neutralisation techniques may contribute in the long-term to establish veritable states of denial (Cohen, 2001). Three main states have been identified: the literal denial mirrors the denial of injuries, and the refusal to even admit the historical reality of facts (*it didn't happen*); the interpretative denial corresponds to the re-framing of roles of victims and perpetrator, in order not to recognise the moral responsibility of the latter for violent facts (*it happened but... we are not responsible*); the implicatory denial is a refusal to assume the consequences of one's own responsibility (*it happened, we admit our responsibilities ... what else do you want?*).

Taken at a face value, each of these states seems to serve to the need of perpetrators to avoid social exclusion due to their own (and their ingroup) wrongdoings. However such biased accounts constitute a serious limitation to re-establishing intergroup relationship based on mutual trust and acceptance. Indeed, when these defensive coping mechanisms are effective, the motivation to act is diminished (Coleman, 2003).

Concluding all evidence collected on silenced and denied historical past stresses that, despite new generations may be more able to acknowledge past wrongdoings, the intergenerational dynamic *per se* is not sufficient to break such denial, if intergenerational communication does not deeply change. In fact, essentialism, a belief that all members of a social category have as an essential feature in common, may contribute to perpetuate denial of ingroup responsibilities by children and grandchildren of perpetrators, as in research on post-genocidal reconciliation shows (Vollhardt & Bilewicz, 2013; Zagefka, Pehrson, Mole & Chan, 2010). Moreover, when a state of literal social denial of violence lasts across generations, social myths on idealized historical past can be created and socially diffused (Volpato, Andrighetto, Mari, Gabbiadini & Durante, 2012), actively hindering the development of critical historical knowledge and its communication to new generations. Literal and interpretive denials, in fact, negate the access to facts or limit the capacity to develop more complex accounts and shared narratives of these facts and may contribute to the permanence of conflict ethos even across generations (Bar-Tal, Sharvit, Halperin & Zafran, 2012). Finally, implicatory denial minimise



the psychological, political and moral implications of such facts, thus preventing the activation of reconciliation processes for those who were involved in the conflict and for their descendants (Shnabel & Nadler, 2015).

Processes of denial of ingroup responsibilities for past violence are therefore often lasting in time, because their effects tend to perpetuate such incapacity of older generations to communicate a clear knowledge on past events to younger ones. However, this obstacle for reconciliation processes to develop across generations may be removed, because of needs to protect a positive social identity leading to denial and silence on violence that are counterbalanced by other powerful needs, to master the history of the group where one happens to be born.

## **2. The need of a positive social identity and the need to know the historical pre-existence of the group**

Studies very briefly reviewed show how often intergenerational denial and silence about controversial aspects of the ingroup historical past are banal occurrences after a conflict settlement and may last across generations. It could be argued that it is so since denial and silence on violence enacted fulfil basic personal and societal needs, presenting young people with a positive image of the community in which they happen to be born and, consequently, of their own social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Nevertheless, intergenerational historical narratives may be conceived not only as self-serving processes, but also as basic cultural tools for young adults, enabling them to grasp their starting points in life, « the strange condition of human person » being his essential « pre-existence » (Ortega y Gasset, 1930), i.e. the fact that lives of humans do not begin with their birth, but are pre-shaped by the history of their community. Past ingroup history is therefore a powerful cultural instrument allowing young people – made aware of their historical past – to better understand their current intergroup relations and to take wiser decisions about their own future. If we accept the idea of historical pre-existence of human mind (Ortega y Gasset, 1930), by not only receiving a positive image of one's own group, but also being informed of what happened before one's own birth and have a clear understanding of it, then it could be conceived as the basic needs for young generations coming of age.

In our opinion, intergenerational communications on the group's past are shaped by the changing balance of these two opposed basic needs. On the one hand, silence and denial on crimes committed by older generations avoid threatening the positive moral image of the group where one is born (Eastmond & Selimovic, 2012). On the other hand, intergenerational narratives on past historical crimes have to be offered to descendants of perpetrators because these stories are, in spite of all, cultural tools allowing young generations to understand their current social positions (Leone, 2012).

As it has been recently observed, such an ambivalence may be applied, at a more general level, to all suppressed information, that can be seen « either as a double-edge sword that with its revealing has negative and positive implication or as a one-sided blade indicating that when the information is revealed, it can clean the malignant growth » (Bar-Tal, 2017, p. 40).

To break a long-lasting denial on past violence enacted by older generations, a clear and frank narrative on past crimes may be seen as a risky communicative choice, yet also as a *one-sided blade* aimed at *cleaning the malignant growth*. However, in order to be effective this difficult communicative role has to cope with a powerful arousal of intergroup emotions. According to the intergroup emotion theory (Mackie, Smith & Ray, 2008), in fact, these emotions are triggered by reactions towards events that refer to the ingroup, that are completely unrelated to personal concerns and that sometimes occurred before one's own birth. These kinds of emotional reactions signal that intergroup relations have become salient enough to shift people's attention from what *I* (as an individual) feel, to what *we* (as members of a group) feel when facing events affecting intergroup relations. Interestingly, being based on intergroup relations instead of on personal concerns, emotions linked to group membership – in sharp contrast with the highly stable stereotypes and attitudes (Smith & Mackie, 2006) – show a large and sometimes dramatic over-time variability, being at the same time a key feature with which to understand the dynamics of intergroup relations as well as a basic driver of their interactions (Smith & Mackie, 2015). Clear narratives on past ingroup crimes, proposed to new generations after a long period of social denial and inter-generational silence, may powerfully influence this over-time variability of intergroup emotions. Therefore, the issue of actual advances of intergroup reconciliation due to frank narratives of formerly denied crimes is inextricably intertwined with the issue of emotional and cognitive effects of these narratives.

### **3. Opening the Pandora's box: what happens when states of denial and social myths come to an end**

In our opinion, a clear inter-generational narrative breaking a long-lasting silence and denial about past ingroup crimes against former enemies may dramatically vary intergroup emotions. More precisely, showing an unexpected flaw moral character of the ingroup, such a kind of inter-generational narrative may expose young generations to group-based emotions due to a sudden awareness of moral indignities of one's own group (Allpress et al., 2010).

However, we assume that this kind of narrative, although discomfoting, may eventually empower young generations.

A first theoretical reference corroborating our assumption is based on the already quoted work of Ortega y Gasset (1930). According to his stance, in fact, narratives of older generations are meant to enhance the historical awareness of the younger

ones about their historical pre-existence, enabling them to better act in the social arena.

Also the theory advanced by Hannah Arendt on the importance of natality adds important insights to our hypothesis that opening the Pandora's box of denial and silence on past ingroup wrongdoings is a troublesome yet inescapable communicative choice, that may lead in the end to positive consequences. Her theoretical expectancies on consequences of this difficult communicative move, however, are very complex.

According to this Author, intergenerational communication is a never-ending way to cope with the inescapable gap between generations. But, after the bitter violence of World War I and II, Arendt is fully aware that any possibility of direct communication of traumatic experiences between generations has been lost (Benjamin & Zohn, 1963). Nevertheless, she also conceives such a dramatic intergenerational gap as an essential driver for social change (Arendt, 1958; 1977). In her theoretical point of view, therefore, although the gap between generations will never be totally reduced by narratives, a narrative bridge is however required to allow a slow elaboration of violence either enacted or suffered by the group. In fact, according to her view (Arendt, 1977), it is precisely the inescapable difference between narrative intentions of older generations and the sense-making of new ones that may open up the real opportunities of intergroup reconciliation, thanks to the intrinsic novelty introduced by the natality of new individuals coming to age in the social arena.

However, a part from these intrinsic complexities of inter-generational communication, to fully understand the mixed effects of narratives on past denied violence and the way in which they unfold in time, not only novelty of contents when introducing formerly denied historical facts has to be taken into account, but also communication strategies matter used to convey them. A third theoretical reference has therefore to be discussed, in this regard is provided by the Foucaultian re-elaboration of the classic concept of Parrhesia (1983/2001). According to his interpretation of this notion, parrhesia can be conceived as the choice to speak frankly the truth in order to empower receivers by providing them a frank clear account of facts they are ignorant of, being fully aware and ready to accept the risks linked to this difficult choice.

When tracing back the roots of this concept in Greek philosophy and its following Christian re-elaborations, Foucault suggests the importance of focusing on the social consequences of this act rather than on its epistemic foundations, so to acknowledge the links between this communicative format and power issues. On the one hand, the very choice of communicating an uneasy and discomforting truth to unprepared listeners shows that receivers are judged able to cope with these difficult contents. On the other hand, a parrhesiastic discourse manifests the intention of fully taking care of oneself, avoiding to expose one's own communication to the flaw of hiding or denying facts or inner states. By taking together these two perspectives on

reactions foreseen as coming from oneself and from receivers, parrhesia can be conceived as an empowering communicative act in social discourse that empowers both. A parrhesiastic discourse, indeed, manifest the intention of fully taking care of oneself, without hiding or denying facts or inner states. Speaking frankly, the parrhesiastes (those choosing to communicate with parrhesia on difficult topics) prove their courage and their preference for high moral standards. At the same time, the speakers engaged in this communication aims at giving receivers a full picture of the uneasy situation and implicitly recognises that they are strong enough to deal with the harsh reality of facts (Foucault, 1983/2001).

We thus suggest that intergenerational and parrhesiastic communication is a crucial communicative act, which can be used to face the communicative difficulties that affect long-lasting reconciliation processes. Such a communicative game, however, requires a shared effort and careful maintenance of emotions, in order to avoid the risks of opening the Pandora's box just for curiosity. In the next section we will draw upon a series of studies conducted on a specific case study, in order to identify potential benefits and pitfalls of parrhesiastic communication to face societal denial and to foster intergroup reconciliation processes.

#### **4. An empirical case study: The Italian war crimes during the colonial invasion of Ethiopia**

The case study chosen as an example of empirical research on the breaking of social silence about violence enacted by the group was related to the episodes of crimes committed by the Italian Army during the colonial invasion of Ethiopia.

Serious war crimes, being historically well proven (Labanca, 2004), were in fact committed during this campaign (1935-1936). However, these war crimes are largely ignored in the general social discourse, and Italian historians proved, in effect, that widespread social denial has up until now covered up these crimes (Labanca, 2004; Pivato, 2007). We thus used this case study, to explore both the representations currently shared by young generations of Italian university students, and their reactions when presented with the unexpected information of war crimes committed by the Italian Army.

To easily win the war, Italian troops used chemical weapons, primarily the blister agent sulphur mustard, forbidden by the Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use in War of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare of 1925 (Geneva Protocol), which fell under the mandate of the League of Nations. Roughly 2,500 bombs with poisonous gas were used, and the war caused roughly 200,000 Ethiopian civilian casualties.

Nevertheless, despite the great difference between weapons and soldiers available to the two groups, Ethiopian resistance continued also after the official end of the war. Particularly in response to a failed assassination attempt on Governor Graziani (1937), Italian repression was cruel. Some six thousand civilians —

according to Western sources— were executed, among them the roughly three hundred monks of the religious community of Debra Libanos.

After the fall of Fascist regime, a long silence on these war crimes affected the democratic institutions. Italian historians proved, in effect, that widespread social denial has covered up these crimes (Labanca, 2004; Pivato, 2007). As a consequence of this actively withdrawn information, these crimes were for a long time not officially recognised. In fact, they were until recently a matter of parliamentary debate (Camera dei Deputati – Senato della Repubblica, 2006). However, these war crimes are until now largely ignored in the general social discourse.

We thus used this case study, to explore the reactions of young generations of Italian university students when presented with the unexpected information of war crimes committed by the Italian Army.

## **5. Procedures of research**

A number of studies have been conducted to examine how the Italian war crimes committed during the colonial invasion of Ethiopia are presented to new generations, and to examine their reaction to alternative narrations.

Using different procedures, all these studies explored different facets of the general case study of social representation of Italian colonialism, and of what happens when the Pandora's box is opened, making previously self-censored (Bartal, 2017) information on ingroup crimes committed during colonial invasion finally available.

A first study examined if and how information on Italian colonial crimes is conveyed by history textbooks (Leone & Mastrovito, 2010). The corpus was composed of seven textbooks in use from the beginning of 2000 and addressed to students attending the last year of Italian high school (usually aged 18). These texts were chosen by Italian historians as particularly representative of present-day history teaching. The corpus was analysed by a quanti-qualitative analysis of contents referred to the Italian colonialism.

A second study explored collective memories of national history spontaneously recalled by Italian participants of three different generations. Four focus groups were organized, and participants were invited to recall and discuss moments when they felt that their own personal life was embedded in history. This first question allowed observing how participants framed their own personal memories in the context of memories related to the past of their group. Verbal contents of discussions were transcribed and these texts were submitted to an analysis performed by the APPRAISAL system. This system was perfected by Martin (2000; 2003) in the context of systemic-functional linguistics (SFL) to observe the ability of language to express opinion and ideological views. Participants were Italian high-school students, their teachers and elderly people who attended a kind of community

university for senior citizens. Participants were belonging to three different generations since theoretical expectancies of the study were based on the idea that disputable memories of the collective past could be coped with only through a social elaboration going on for several generations.

A third study (Leone & Sarrica, 2012) explored if present-day social representations of Italians in everyday life and during wartime was still affected by a social myth, depicting Italian people as good types unable of cruelty. This social myth was in fact until recently proven to be widely shared by previous studies of Italian historians (Del Boca, 2005). The participants were 103 Italian students (of whom 75 were female; mean age 21.8) who chose to take part in this research as a part of their lessons on social psychology. Participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire that gathered information on their gender, age, knowledge about, and attitudes towards, Italian colonisation, and agreement with the myth of Italians as good fellows. The myth of Italians as good fellows was operationalized through a set of items constructed on the basis of shared knowledge of this representation (Volpato et al., 2012). Items included statements about Italian people in general, e.g.: *Humaneness is a distinctive trait of Italians* and *Italians have always been better than their rulers*, as well as items specifically describing Italian behaviour during war, e.g.: *Italians, during conflicts, have always behaved in a reasonable way* and *Faccetta nera [a Fascist song] is an indicator of the benevolence Italians always had towards Africans*.

A fourth study (Leone and Sarrica, 2014) was based on an experimental procedure, observing reactions to different communicative strategies unveiling formerly ignored information on Italian colonial crimes in Ethiopia. Each participant was presented with an historical narrative conveying this information. However, participants were randomly assigned to one out of two experimental conditions, expressing either in a clear and detailed or in a more nuanced and mild way how these historical facts deserved a negative moral judgement. This quasi-experimental procedure investigated whether participants reacted with different intergroup emotions to these two communicative strategies on socially denied past ingroup crimes, and whether these different reactions could influence their reparative intentions toward the group of those former colonized. Reactions were collected both while reading the text to which each participant was randomly assigned, and immediately afterwards. Reparative intentions were also explored.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. *History teaching and collective memories on Italian colonial crimes*

Despite the blatant cruelty of these crimes, that were also used as a propaganda tool against Ethiopian resistance, Italian history textbooks ignored for more than seventy years these episodes and have only recently begun to explore this issue (Leone & Mastrovito, 2010; Cajani, 2013). Only few pages of present-day history

texts are dedicated to narrating the colonial invasion of Ethiopia, that is described as a short period or even as an *adventure*, intrinsically linked solely to the Fascist regime.

It should be noted that among the many narratives contributing to the social representations of historical past, history teaching plays a role apart in democratic societies. Halbwachs (1950/1992), in his seminal books on collective memory, proposed to draw a dividing line between narratives meant to historical knowledge and narratives aimed to built a social representation of it. In spite of its different societal aims, it has been proposed that also the narrative conveyed in textbooks is meant to be another state technology (Liu, Fisher Onar & Woodward, 2014). Nevertheless, it is built on a scientific work that has to be evaluated by an international community of researchers, helping and controlling each other on methodologies and discussion of empirical results. Therefore, history teaching may often be the crucial kind of communication for breaking down social denials and social myths, fostering the making of a critical civic discourse on past ingroup responsibilities for violence and crimes (Leone, in press).

A detailed study explored how textbooks in use at the beginning of 2000 narrated the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (Leone & Mastrovito, 2010). A quanti-qualitative analysis of 7 textbooks addressed to students attending the last year of Italian high school (usually aged 18), chosen by historians as particularly representative of present-day teaching, showed that this topic was scarcely treated, and was related only to the Fascist era (in spite of the fact that Italian colonial interests in African resources originated long before the decision of Mussolini to attack). Also, the images used to accompany the texts were almost all taken from the archives of Fascist propaganda or from books of images meant for Italian children of the time, in which the colonial war was presented in a diminishing and childish way. Finally, only a minority of texts used clear, matter-of-fact language, while the majority brushed over facts, presenting them in an evasive manner (Leone & Mastrovito, 2010).

Interestingly enough, results of the explorative research on collective memories of past national history spontaneously recalled during focus group discussions among Italian participants of three different generations (Leone & Curigliano, 2009) further showed that colonial wars were never mentioned, even by older participants who often recalled the Fascist period when these wars occurred. In this research we conducted a number of focus group discussions among Italian participants of three generations: high school students, their teacher and older people that were young during the Fascist regime. In order to highlight the evaluative dimensions of discourses, texts were submitted to the APPRAISAL system. All focus group discussions confirmed the difficulties in facing Italy's collective responsibilities during WWII, suggesting that the protective function of historical identity is still at work down the generations; but they also showed a less frequent use of affective resources by the younger generation, indicating a slow progress towards ingroup reconciliation.

### 6.2. *Shared myths: Italians as Good Fellows*

When historical information on the group is lacking, a second form of communication about social identities linked to the historical past is performed through shared myth on salient features of ingroup. In fact, the circulation of a social myth (characterized by Italian history scholars as *Italiani, brava gente*: cfr. Del Boca, 2005) has been shown to have taken place, depicting the Italian people as good and generous types in everyday life and incapable of any cruelty in the military context.

In order to grasp this point, a third research (Leone & Sarrica, 2012) explored the current social representation of young Italian students on past colonial times and their agreement, if any, with the myth depicting Italian people as good fellows both in everyday life and during wartime.

The results of this study showed that participants neither shared knowledge of the historical period of Italian colonial wars (percentage of wrong answers = 84%) nor had been exposed to family narratives on it, thereby confirming the hypothesis of a collective amnesia as regards this period of national history (Pivato, 2007). On the scale measuring agreement with the myth of Italians as good fellows, a further distinction was set between a sub-scale called Italians as good fellows always (IGFa, for items describing Italians as good fellows in everyday situations) and Italians as good fellows in war (IGFw, for items referring explicitly to war situations). The means, standard deviations and reliability of the two subscales were: IGFa M= 4.53, SD= .76, alpha = .86; IGFw M= 3.18, SD= .83, alpha = .84. A one sample t-test showed that the mean scores were significantly different from the central points of the response scales ( $p < .01$ ). These results confirmed the endorsement of the myth of IGF always, showing altogether a modest but not total disagreement with the idea that Italians are good fellows also at war.

### 6.3. *Breaking the silence: the effects of different communicative strategies on formerly denied crimes*

Building on these previous researches (Leone & Curigliano, 2009; Leone & Mastrovito, 2010; Leone & Sarrica, 2012), a quasi-experimental procedure was set in place, observing reactions to different communicative strategies unveiling formerly ignored information on Italian colonial crimes in Ethiopia. Results showed that participants reacted not only to the new information received, but also to the way in which it was conveyed. More in particular, narrative frankly taking a moral stance on past violence (a strategy that was named, after classic works of Foucault, 1983/2001, parrhesia) provoked an increase of negative reactions, both self-assessed by using a list of group-based emotions and directly observed during the text reading. Interestingly, the intensity of all self-assessed negative emotions increased when reading the text judging with parrhesia the moral violations of the Italian Army, with the exception of collective guilt, that did not differ between participants exposed to a clear or a more evasive text (Leone & Sarrica, 2014). Also directly observed reactions of Italian young participants showed great differences according



to the experimental conditions. When presented with a frank narrative of ingroup colonial crimes, literally denied in the social discourse, participants showed in fact not only the group-based emotions of self-awareness that are usually expected for perpetrators' descendants, such as shame or guilt, but also other-condemning emotions, as contempt, emotions linked to the loss of a positive self-image, as sadness, and first immediate reactions of disgust (Leone and Sarrica, 2014). Taken altogether, these emotions and reactions may signal that, when presented with clear information about formerly silenced ingroup crimes, the brand new generations are not only acknowledging the moral responsibilities of older ones, but are also taking a moral distance from them.

According to these first explorative data, a frank narrative of past moral shortcomings of the ingroup, formerly denied or silenced in the social discourse, may cause uneasiness and even sadness to young people receiving it. At the same time, however, this dangerous communication could also allow young people to express not only self-conscious emotions due to the perceived continuity between their own personal lives and the history of the group, but also their own third-part morality (Rozin et al., 1999), stepping back from any confusing overtone sometimes hidden in the very concept of collective guilt (Arendt, 1945).

## Conclusions

Sometimes processes that we choose to observe by our researches « foster the development of the intelligent, autonomous, reflective, active characteristics of mature adults, whereas other (processes) encourage the development of immature, passive, dependent uncritical cognitive capabilities resembling those of a submissive child » (Deutsch & Kinnvall, 2002, p. 17). This quote, referred to all kinds of processes involved in civic participation, perfectly fits also the issue at stake in this article, i.e. the making of a civic discourse on a controversial historical past of the group, that was formerly silenced. Reaction of young citizens when finally exposed to a troublesome historical knowledge about past violence enacted by the group in which they happen to be born could in fact be foreseen as guided by a somehow childish attitude about their ingroup past, or could be conceived as reactions of mature adults, taking a critical stance on their historical past and asking for knowledge more than for delusive accounts of events. Although seemingly protective, intergenerational silence and denial about past violence occurred before the birth of younger generations has been discussed in these pages as an example of communication processes foreseeing and therefore fostering an uncritical and somehow childish attitude about the historical past of own one's group. After a theoretical discussion, the article described four studies devoted to explore this issue as applied to the case study of social denial on Italian colonial crimes. The first three studies reviewed have shown how deep negative consequences of a long-lasting social denial on ingroup crimes could be. Not only factual knowledge on past history is lacking, making the social representations of Italian university students on past

colonial history extremely weak and unable to account for present-day situations. But also a social myth is spread, depicting a too idealized image of the attitudes and behaviours of past generations for young adults that on the contrary are supposed to master a critical civic discourse in order to effectively participate to democratic debates. On the other hand, taking for granted the importance of the narratives to convey to young generations the gist of national past (László, 2003), the last research reviewed in this article dealt with the issue of communicative choices apt to break down such a former denial on ingroup war crimes. Certainly, empirical data of this fourth research show how becoming aware of a previously unknown flawed moral character of one's own group is a discomfoting experience. Nevertheless, to enhance their democratic participation young adults are expected to maintain a realistic attitude when facing this information, without grasping on past delusive images of a too much idealized group. Moreover, for those who are able to regulate them (Frijda, 1986), negative group-based emotions linked to this new awareness of moral indignities of one's own group may turn into powerful motivators of collective moral action (Smith, 1993).

As a conclusive remark of this article, we may suggest that a very strict link ties together the knowledge of a negative one's own historical pre-existence (Ortega y Gasset, 1930) and the adult civic participation that is expected in democratic societies. We may also advance the hypothesis that a clear and frank account on crimes of the group formerly denied (a kind of communication that, according to Foucault, 1983/2001, we propose to call parrhesia) can be the better way to open the Pandora's box of these past wrongdoings. However, much more work has to be done to explore this new field of research. Actual understanding and interiorization of the factuality, together with regulation of group-based emotions, has to be checked not only immediately after receiving a parrhesiastic account on past crimes committed by the group, but also when more time is elapsed. Defensive processes can be in fact activated, that have to be taken into account in order to avoid unwanted backlashes. Especially the role of moral emotions has to be explored in depth, since violence is the crucial point at stake. Finally, much more research is required to understand to which and to what extent historical knowledge mediated through formal teachings may change the overall social representations of historical past. Concerning this last issue, that is indicative of realistic anxieties about the future of intergroup relationships, we agree with scholars' evaluations proposing that in an growingly interdependent world studies on the post-colonial reimagining of the colonial past have to play a crucial role for unveiling the dangerous risk of a selective myopia that still disseminates uncritical versions of history among young generations (Mycock, 2017).

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