

That many pasts for a common future?

History on television in the countries of the European Union.

What brings together the various states that coexist in Europe and can be the basis of an Union? The Foreword to the Maastricht treaty (1992) affirmed that the European Union was founded upon democracy, the respect for human rights and a free and democratic constitutional status. The text was clearly oriented towards the future, it missed out all that had existed before the decision to create a new confederation. Twelve years later, after the union had been enlarged to twenty five nations, the Preamble to the Constitutional Treaty opened a much wider prospective by stating that its "cultural, religious and humanistic legacy" provided Europe with an unquestionable identity. This time, history was taken into but, carried along by a burst of optimism, the Preamble forgot the enduring conflicts that had divided Europe for centuries, it ignored the massacres, occupations, annexations and durable hatred those had generated, in other words it did not care about the sequels of a common but contending past.

Hereditary resentment being one among the many obstacles in the way towards a tightening of the bonds between European nations, the Italian Assemblée Legislativa of Emilia-Romagna Region has entrusted the Parri Institute of Bologna with a survey of the presentation and uses of historical narratives **on television** in the European Union countries.

The term "history" has two different meanings. On the one hand, it is an attempt to account for the evolution of human societies through a rational study of the traces left by earlier periods. Historians know that they will not tell "the truth", they are only intent on evidencing reciprocal relations between occurrences and showing how foregone events may have an impact on our epoch. Usually, with a few

exceptions, they confine their research inside the national boundaries, even international relations are seen from a local point of view.

This version of the past, transmitted at school, supplies fellow citizens with shared references and the illusion of an uninterrupted continuity from prehistory to the our days. School lessons are quickly forgotten and here comes the second aspect of "history", the string of legends, fabulous biographies, magnificent victories and glorious defeats, inexpiable antipathies and desires of revenge that strengthen the feeling of belonging to a particular entity, distinct from the others, at times hostile to them and threatened by their supposed enmity.

History, in the second acceptation of the word, appears in the press, in novels, films, tales, political speeches, almanacs, visits to old buildings, local or regional commemorations. However, in our time, television channels have become the main purveyors of glimpses at the past. The channels are careful to point out that theirs are serious broadcastings, grounded on authentic documents and pictures, and checked by renowned specialists. Their programmes, nevertheless, share in common many features with the fanciful storybook versions that find favour with the general public.

A first reason for such attachment to formulaic tales is that most televisions do not have a broadcasting policy. Few of them bring into being the transmissions that they put in the air, more often than not they accept a project brought by a production company because it is not expensive and should please the audience. They pay also much attention to anniversaries or to happenings that may be connected to previous events. The result is that broadcast history is a patchwork of unrelated narratives, a ride throughout various epochs, a mix of small details and world-wide evocations, a delightful wandering which does not call into question prejudices or generally accepted ideas. A second point is that the channels, being committed to gratify their spectators, follow blindly audience assessments and repeat successful

programmes. For that reason the same periods, the same characters endlessly return on the small screen, history becomes thus enjoyable but does not give a chance to reconsider previous and unfavourable bias against other countries.

Television broadcast open a window onto the standard historical knowledge, the trickiest questions, the ongoing sources of distrust and also on the mechanism of evolution taken for granted by a good many onlookers.

To fulfil the mission commissioned by the Region, the Parri institute gathered a team of experts from fourteen countries of the European Union ¹. Theoretically it would have been necessary to involve the twenty-seven European nations, but the cost would have been excessive and in some cases it was not possible to find a specialist of both audiovisual media and history. As it is, the panel involves the seven most populated countries and corresponds to slightly more than eighty per cent of the inhabitants of the Union.

A guide-line and a questionnaire were sent to the participants who answered by writing a first draft. Revised by those in charge of the inquiry the texts were entirely rewritten. Three meetings with the group, organised in Bologna, allowed to compare the various treatments of the past, with the support of examples taken from history programmes. The final version of the reports, bringing out the common features and the most preoccupying problems, while respecting the personal orientation each member has given to their account has been published, in two volumes, by the Region Emilia-Romagna. It is freely available for all interested.

In their original form, the written statements are heavy, often complicated, at times loaded with particulars interesting but not directly related to the main topic. On the other hand, the liberty granted to all participants resulted in stylistic or thematic

discrepancies. The present volume is an entirely new version, inspired by the reports, but offering a comprehensive synthesis of the research.

Events, periods, characters, as well as the ways of dealing with them vary from one country to another, but the main categories of history programmes are the same everywhere. There is not much variety in the definition of what is historical, all the more that most channels tend to recycle the most popular programmes.

Fictionalized history comes first. A period considered dramatic or particularly stirring, usually a war or a domestic conflict, serves as a background for a romance, a spy tale, or both together. Epoch clothes, old vehicles and songs are enough to evoke the environment and provide the feeling of strangeness that is the charm of the genre. A much-appreciated kind of historical fiction is the *anecdotal biography* of famous men, preferably an account of their love affairs, statesmen as austere as Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, the Portuguese dictator, become, on the screen, seducers more preoccupied by their conquests than by politics. *Dramatization* is another form of "creative history". Many events, plots, secret negotiations, murder attempts have left few traces, are only indirectly documented, and leave free rein to imagination. All over Europe enigmas of yore take up much room on the schedules. Weird behaviours, strange practices, open fascinating windows onto remote societies and a sense of the oddness of life within them. Such broadcasts are akin to novels more than to historical studies, but their impact must not be undervalued, they are received as credible history, any effort to aim programmes at a pan-European audience will have to take into account the infatuation with the footnotes of history.

¹ Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Rumania, Slovakia, Spain, United Kingdom.

National history is another important sector of television production. A nation is a collection of individuals who happen to live in a given area and believe, rightly or not, that they share certain common features. A simple narrative, describing the birth and growth of the nation provides these people with the feeling that, being descended from the same ancestors, they are different from the unlike and potentially menacing "others". Epics, going back several hundred years, achieve favour in countries politically unified for a long time, Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom, while the span is reduced to the last centuries in more recent states. The historical heritage is a much more continuing presence in the west European societies than in the eastern ones which, in the modern era, were subjected to more powerful neighbours. Countries whose independence has been recently achieved necessarily take a distant view of earlier periods, and some simply do not feel the need to develop a systematic account of them. Televisions, in Hungary, Poland, Rumania substitute a defective history with the *saga of "great families"* whose continuity through times compensate for the discontinuity of the "national" past. Ruins, monuments, traditional ceremonies offer a localized construction of what went before. Cultural geography, intermingling space rather and time, is less concerned to interpret earlier periods than to keep nostalgia alive.

The dramas that bathed Europe in blood during the 20th century, the two world wars and the local conflicts, totalitarianism, Nazism, communism, are an inexhaustible supply for serials, fictions, anniversary celebrations, shorts, debates, recollections. All along the hostilities production companies, armies, amateurs filmed extensively. The dictatorships did the same to advertise their policy and demonstrate the enthusiasm of their followers. A considerable material allows showing again and again the same crisis, battles, street demonstrations. The leading figures, Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, their

henchmen, admirers, generals and women, being supposed to captivate the public, reappear frequently. Europe, relatively shielded from the troubles that have disturbed the world since the end of WWII, seems to focus on the happenings that provoked its decline.

Such attention to remote periods may act as a screen against more *unpleasant issues*. TV channels are among the places where corpses kept in the cupboard can be either laid open or conjured away. Contemporary Europe has not yet done with two legacies of its past, the destruction of the Jewish communities and colonisation. Both questions surface episodically, here or there, on the occasion of a trial, a death, a commemoration, provoking every time harsh controversies. *Shoah*, a six-hour programme, editing of testimonies delivered by survivors, witnesses and executioners (1985), gave rise to endless hesitations, countermands, and partial broadcastings. In some countries the mere reference to the persecution triggered off polemics, in others viewers were obliged to lobbying for months before obtaining the presentation of this programme, completed but put in reserve. All European countries are concerned by the Shoah. On the other hand, the domination of African or Asian territories took a different character depending on the particular cases, but calling it forth on television implies a lot of precautions.

Interviews do not cost anything and witnesses, provided they are entertaining, appeal directly to the audience. *Oral history* has become a new, unavoidable historical source. At times history broadcasting is nothing but a sequence of chats about former times, and even the most serious programmes have recourse to individuals who, directly or indirectly, were involved in past events. The importance given to testimonies is part of what has been called 'the privatisation of public life' - the fact that, to form an idea about a past epoch, situations affecting only a particular person are considered as revealing as affairs involving a large community. Amateur films fall in the same category.

However awkward they may be, pictures taken by soldiers during a military campaign, by immigrants trying to settle in a foreign country, by workers intent on displaying their craft, by travellers or explorers provide information that cannot be found from other sources. Chronicles by witnesses are sometimes futile but, at their best, they interweave the particular into broader collective patterns, adding thus an alive, concrete touch to the aloof historical accounts.

Many history programmes tackle serious issues and require a minimum amount of attention. Reconstitutions, the purchase of archival footage, are expensive. For that reasons, commercial channels give little space to historical re-enactments, unless they are diverting and can be produced cheaply. History is mostly put in the air by public televisions. Throughout the communist era state broadcasts were mere propaganda, people were on their guard against them. Mistrust has not vanished with the end of the Soviet rule, a large majority of those living in east European countries follow exclusively commercial stations. There is thus a discrepancy between the two parts of Europe, eastern public channels, given their weak audience, cannot make elaborate transmissions, viewers are offered a much lighter representation of ancient times than their western counterparts.

The main centres of interest are also rather different. Western Europeans have a superficial view of life in "peoples' democracies" and televisions do not help to improve their acquaintance of the situation. The rare programmes dealing with the topic, bringing to the fore the political oppression and the revolts against the authorities, do not try to explain how the societies changed along the four decades of Soviet government. In the former "socialist republics" even those born after the fall of the Berlin wall feel concerned by what happened in the "gloomy years", but the memories of that epoch are ambiguous. There was the strict control maintained by the police. There were also small

rates of unemployment and social security benefits. Television transmissions attest such mixture of resentment and vague regret; retrospective serials tell how the communists took hold of the power and how opponents prepared the collapse of the regime; yet the broadcasting of newsreels or fictions dating from that period meets with a favourable response as if it aroused some nostalgia.

West European televisions are more ambitious than the eastern ones; they do not hesitate to embark upon broad historical issues such as gender, social and cultural differentiation, relationships between individuals and corporate bodies. They can do it because they have better resources and reach bigger audiences than the eastern channels, which buy many of their prestige transmissions from American companies. Tradition comes also into the western policy, the way of looking at the past is determined by the norms prevailing in a given society and referring to ancestors is customary in the west. Going back a very long time, occidental narratives have often lapsed in ritualism, a set of characters, heroic exploits and discoveries affirm a distinctive personality. Since there are many such different identities, the evocation of earlier periods, instead of pointing out what is common to various nations, has been transformed into a terrain of oppositions involving such concrete political issues as the legitimating of violence in past wars, the right to control some territories, the autonomy of economic and financial strategies. The national independence fiercely claimed has its roots in history and is strengthened by historical discourses.

A much preoccupying fact is the absence of broadcasts dealing with the transformations that occurred in Europe and led to the present state of affairs. In the month preceding the election to the Parliament, information is given about the institutions of the Union, but this never goes beyond a cold exposition of constitutional measures. The polling day might be an opportunity to compare the way so many

different regimes, heirs to specific and often incompatible beliefs and practices, evolved and converged on a common solution. For the time being televisions do not care about producing such kind of transmissions. Their guiding principle will not change unless they are prompted to adopt another course, and this implies a preliminary reflection about what ought to be done.

It is not possible to promote understanding and an active, durable cooperation among dissimilar cultures without presenting each of them opinions and values emanating from the others, especially when some have long been contenders and foster a deep sense of injury. Inter-European committees of historians have listed the most controversial problems and written accounts that confront the viewpoints of the opposing parties. This will help to adjust the teaching of conflicts, crisis, rivalries and mistaken interpretations. However, quite often, the grounds of complaint date back several generations, their ancientness, and the fact that the family circle or members of the community passed them on prevent from questioning them. Televisions are uniquely equipped to remedy this kind of inherited prejudices. They can interview "ordinary" people, asking them why they distrust, and at times hate those who live on the other side of the frontier. A face to face with the latter, a glance at the documents would permit to assess the initial cause of anger and evaluate what remains really significant in the world of the 21st century. TV channels are fond of reconciliation meetings; encounters between aggressors and victims, brothers who have fallen out or former lovers always stir spectators' heart. Why do televisions not gather nationals of countries that were once in conflict to make them explain their grievances?

Overcoming deep-rooted legends is one aspect of television's possible task; the channels could also show Europeans that they have a common past. It is true that the states have recurrently fought each

other and that national histories, meant to sustain a particular "identity", are first and foremost accounts of battles and conquests. Yet, despite slaughters, forced conversions and looting, the memory of which has been meticulously kept by the chroniclers, other forms of exchanges have permanently developed, craftsmen and missionaries, traders, writers, inquiring visitors and self-interested industrialists have been over the continent, their diaries and letters display a genuine curiosity about the foreign styles of life. Geographical broadcasts please a large audience. Usually, they stress what is diverse and even surprising in other regions. They could also put emphasis on the likenesses, on the building methods, recipes, songs, feasts borrowed from other parts of Europe.

What makes it difficult to produce "European" history programmes? TV channels are not prone to modifying their habits, they buy transmissions from foreign channels but are not willing to organise with them effective co productions, on an equal footings. War serials and fancy biographies usually have a good audience. Because spectator like them? Or because nothing else is proposed? An opening upon a common past and reciprocal influences might interest the Europeans, the main thing is to begin.

In the age of global information highways it should not be difficult to develop multi-media projects. Linguistic differences were long taken as an excuse. Overcoming them is now straightforward, the Eureka 147 system allows not only to carry out a digital transmission, terrestrial or by satellite, but also to put several soundtracks on a single canal, so that a number of languages are available behind the same images. Between 1993 and 2007 the European Union sponsored *Network Europe*, a series of information programmes carried through thanks to the participation of six broadcasting institutions. The experience was interrupted for technical reasons, resuming it is only a matter of operative political will.