

Claudio Pavone's *Prima lezione di storia contemporanea* ("First Lesson in Contemporary History"): A Guided Reading

*"Young people are not responsible for what happened in the past.
But they are responsible for what will be made of it in the course of history"*¹.

Abstract

This paper offers a guided reading of Claudio Pavone's *Prima lezione di storia contemporanea* ("First Lesson in Contemporary History")², retracing its methodological core: the epistemological legitimacy of a discipline whose object is contemporaneous with the researcher; causality, chance and individual freedom; the tension between memory and history and the historian's civic function; the specificity of contemporary sources amid documentary overabundance and the digital revolution; historical writing between science and art; and periodization, closing with Pavone's itinerary through the continuities and ruptures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The author adds some remarks on the current relevance of Pavone's insights, from social media as a future historical source to the risk that rigid privacy rules may condemn historically valuable records to destruction. Since, to the best of our knowledge, the book has never been published in English, this contribution also aims to fill that gap and to extend beyond Italy the knowledge of a fundamental author of contemporary historiography.

1. Introduction

Approaching the threshold of ninety, Claudio Pavone — historian, archivist and former partisan — published in 2007 his "first lesson in contemporary history", offering an overview of the discipline's method and of its central questions. The biographical detail should not be taken as merely descriptive: the work is at once a dissertation on certain specific features of the historian's craft — and, above all, of the scholar of contemporary history — and an impassioned defence, by a scholar at the close of a long career, of the civic importance of this discipline.

Framing its application in a contemporary key, the book addresses in seven chapters some fundamental questions of historical analysis, ranging from its very epistemological legitimation to the problem of sources, from the criteria of periodization to the relationship between memory and history — the latter a theme dear to Pavone, addressed in what is perhaps his best-known work, on the Italian Resistance³.

2. The legitimacy of contemporary history

The work opens with a reflection on the very legitimacy of contemporary history, on its *ubi consistam* within the framework of the historical sciences and, ultimately, on its specificity.

The teaching and study of this subject has an evident peculiarity compared with the history of other epochs of humanity: the object of research is contemporaneous with the researcher — so much so that striking a balance between detachment and empathy, and avoiding misunderstandings, becomes particularly difficult. This unavoidable involvement has even cast doubt on the very sustainability of

¹ Quotation, reported in the preface to the work, from a German school textbook mentioned in Y.N. Soysal, T. Bertilotti, S. Mannitz, *Projections of Identity in French and German History and Civics Textbooks*, in *The Nation, Europe, and the World: Textbooks and Curricula in Transition*, ed. by H. Schissler and Y.N. Soysal, Berghahn Books, New York-Oxford, 2005, p. 29.

² C. Pavone, *Prima lezione di storia contemporanea*, Editori Laterza, Bari-Rome, 2024 (first ed. 2007).

³ C. Pavone, *Una guerra civile. Saggio storico sulla moralità nella Resistenza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 1991; English translation: *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*, trans. by Peter Levy with David Broder, ed. by Stanislao Pugliese, Verso, London-New York, 2013. See also the preface to the 1994 Italian edition.

historical discourse about events so close to the narrator⁴. It is no accident that in the Italian university system the first chair of contemporary history was established only in the 1960s, on the margins of a still-unsettled debate over the teaching of twentieth-century history — long neglected, not by chance, in school curricula.

A still highly topical example of this peculiar sensitivity of the contemporary historian is the *Historikerstreit*, which broke out in Germany after the publication of Ernst Nolte's famous 1986 article on the "past that will not pass", that is, on the heavy moral burden the Nazi regime had left upon the German people⁵. In Italy too, the fear (or the hope) that ideologies of a fascist stamp might reappear still weighs on the historical judgement of those events.

If the relationship with the (recent) past is delicate, no less complicated is the contemporary historian's stance towards the future. Here too the Author highlights the physiological limit (but perhaps also the peculiar beauty) of this discipline: its being immanently pervaded — in Vittorio Foa's words — by a "nostalgia for the future"⁶.

3. Freedom, causality, chance

This reflection on the dialogue between history and the future leads the Author to examine the relationship between contemporary historical analysis and the categories of positivism, determinism and historicism (both idealist and materialist) — cultural currents which, united by an idea of predictable progress, guaranteed by the development of science, the growth of the Spirit or the unfolding of the class struggle, questioned whether history was sufficiently scientific in nature. The legacies of that season, which Pavone does not regard entirely negatively, were a heightened philological scruple — which allowed contemporary historiography to free itself from the charge of "journalism", levelled at it precisely because of that closeness to events noted above — and the development of a quantitative and statistical approach. While holding, with Le Goff and Bloch, that numerical data must necessarily be accompanied by a qualitative reading, the Author appreciates a highly specific factual feature of this period, namely the availability of a rich and regular statistical base.

The crisis of positivism and the rise of twentieth-century irrationalism brought chance and free will back to the centre of historical discourse. Can chance — Pavone asks — be regarded as a corrective to causal chains, or is it merely an expedient for naming what we do not understand, or for excusing ourselves from judging it?

The discussion of "chance and necessity" offers the occasion to reflect on a peculiar degree of freedom available to the contemporary historian: the possibility of working, more comfortably than colleagues in other fields, on the "ifs" — on counterfactual history. Not, of course, out of a certain taste for the absurd, but as an ideal counter-test of a particular reading of events. Indeed, while for most historians the "ending" of the story they are telling is largely known, this is not necessarily so for the contemporary historian, before whom several possible outcomes of the events narrated still remain open.

⁴ The idea that "historians are a part of the process about which they are writing" thus seems to apply with particular force to contemporary history (see M. Howard, *The Lessons of History. An Inaugural Lecture*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981, p. 9).

⁵ Nolte's article, originally published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 6 June 1986, is translated as "The Past That Will Not Pass" in *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust*, trans. by J. Knowlton and T. Cates, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands (NJ), 1993; Italian ed.: *Germania. Un passato che non passa. I crimini nazisti e l'identità tedesca*, ed. by G.E. Rusconi, Einaudi, Turin, 1987.

⁶ V. Foa, *Passaggi*, Einaudi, Turin, 2000, p. 11.

Many of these problems converge on the theme of choice and individual freedom, that is, on how and why certain decisions and attitudes were adopted not only by the protagonists but also by those anonymous masses that so profoundly marked the history of the twentieth century. Here the reflection ranges from Max Weber — whose distinction between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility offers a criterion for investigating individual choices — to Hannah Arendt, in her reflections on the psychological mechanisms that bound the entire German people to Nazism.

4. Memory and contemporary history

In the complex relationship between history and memory, contemporary history must by its nature accept the confrontation with witnesses — often martyrs, in both the etymological and the lexical sense — of the events under study. A witness's memory is a source, but a living source, at times not yet crystallized, which often hands itself down to collective memory through one of those “long generations” of which Bloch spoke⁷. Not by chance did Le Goff define history as the “scientific form of collective memory”.

This is a territory of frequent political incursions: collective memory — which protects, but also selects, manipulates and even erases its own recollections — is an essential element of any process of *nation building*. The Author recalls how, after the Second World War, many European countries, including Italy, Spain and France, reckoned with various forms of removal or revision of their own past. It is here that the historian intervenes — must intervene — as an “uninvited guest”⁸, to disturb and even upset the historical conscience of a people.

These pages convey the profound civic value that Pavone attributes to the historian's work, a bulwark against the spread of a “culture of the present”.

5. Sources

These considerations lead the Author to reflect on the specificity of the question of sources in the contemporary age, characterized first of all by a quantity and variety of sources unknown in other epochs. It is indeed in this period that some of the great public systems for cataloguing and accessing shared knowledge were established, such as the French National Archives (created in 1790), followed by similar institutions in other European states and in the United States of America.

The sheer abundance of sources and records — largely the product of public administrations, and therefore invaluable for studying the deep workings of state apparatuses — makes it particularly difficult to develop shared methods and criteria for their cataloguing and preservation. The practice of *records management* (also called *birth control* or *préarchivage*) aims to rationalize this process, but it entails the definition of rigid selection criteria that are by their nature inevitably fallible⁹.

To this must be added the revolution brought by technology to the methods of producing and transmitting documents. From the invention of the telegram down to electronic mail (and, I would add, to communications via *social media*), the customary methods of investigating and defining the

⁷ M. Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, trans. by Peter Putnam, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1953 (original ed.: *Apologie pour l'histoire ou Métier d'historien*, 1949; Italian ed.: *Apologia della storia o Mestiere di storico*, Einaudi, Turin, 2009).

⁸ Y.H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1982 (Italian ed.: *Zakhor. Storia ebraica e memoria ebraica*, Pratiche, Parma, 1983, pp. 105, 113 — page references are to the Italian edition).

⁹ The Author recalls the decision of some Italian State Archives to destroy the papers of the agrarian committees (*comizi agrari*), evidently deemed of little or no historical relevance — thereby destroying an important source for scholars of agricultural history and of the rural classes.

document have been progressively overturned. Not by chance, a diplomatics of the contemporary document has begun to take shape only in recent decades. Pavone predicts that today's IT technicians are likely destined to become the future practitioners of the auxiliary sciences of history, when it comes to understanding how to reconstruct the original content of a digital document (saved where? and which format will truly be able to withstand the challenge of the centuries?) or to determine its actual author, its addressee and its context¹⁰.

The traditional distinction between primary and secondary historical sources proves harder to draw in contemporary history. Consider newspapers: their nature as primary sources is overlaid with readings, interpretations and manipulations that often stray from the original event.

The broadening of the media field then leads to the claim that today "everything is a source". Beyond the traditional written document and the revolutionary rise of the digital document (or message), consider the recordings of radio and television productions, cinema, photography and the figurative arts.

Finally, the contemporaneity of these documents with the historian's work raises unprecedented questions of accessibility, tied to two main issues: state secrets (or, more generally, the need to protect secrecy) and the privacy of the persons involved¹¹ — both in constant evolution.

6. Writing contemporary history

How are the results of research transformed into a historical text? With regard to this question too — fundamental for the historian of every epoch — Pavone examines its specific features when applied to the contemporary age where, for the reasons already discussed at length, a careful contextualization is needed first of all: of the sources and — recalling Carr's admonitions — of the historian himself¹².

The confrontation with positivism and the growing technicality of the auxiliary sciences posed in definitive form the need to resolve an old question: whether the writing of history is science or art. Pavone adopts a position of compromise. Recalling, with Huizinga, that "history must be regarded as the inexact science par excellence"¹³, he holds that history is neither science nor art, though it mimics both: science, in its conceptual coherence and philological rigour; art, in its adoption of expressive forms capable of serving its need to narrate.

But the confrontation with the sciences does not end there. This is indeed the age in which the social sciences arise and establish themselves — seeming, on the one hand, to take fields of inquiry away from the historian and, on the other, offering new and unheard-of forms of collaboration and intellectual

¹⁰ Consider — a personal remark — the day when tomorrow's historians will want to study today's society through the content of social media: ephemeral, of uncertain attribution, at times comprehensible only to a specific audience, and yet often a vivid representation of contemporary society.

¹¹ It is the present writer's personal view that a rigid and uncritical application of privacy rules is condemning to pulping and irreversible destruction records produced in a wide range of sectors of contemporary society, from businesses to the liberal professions, from research to public administration. Documents that today look like useless paperwork may instead prove a precious research source for the historians of the future (it should not be forgotten, for instance, that some of the most interesting documents for the study of Italian urban societies in the early modern age are found in the notarial and mercantile archives of the time, and consist of deeds of sale, account books or even notebooks of family accounts). Will it all be lost in the name of privacy? The present writer proposed to the Milan Bar Association a project for the creation of a historical archive, open to collecting selected records of Milanese lawyers otherwise destined for destruction and oblivion.

¹² E.H. Carr, *What Is History?*, Macmillan, London, 1961 (Italian ed.: *Sei lezioni sulla storia*, Einaudi, Turin, 1966).

¹³ J. Huizinga, *De wetenschap der geschiedenis*, H.D. Tjeenk Willink, Haarlem, 1937 (Italian ed.: *La scienza storica*, ed. by Piero Bernardini Marzolla, Laterza, Bari, 1974). The quotation is rendered here from the Italian edition.

speculation¹⁴. Their dialogue is complex and, according to some authors, even a failure, for it ended up burdening history with epistemological problems belonging to other disciplines. Here again, Pavone's position is not so rigid. Having already expressed himself favourably on the legacy that positivist thought left to the historical sciences, he now dwells on the interaction between history, on the one hand, and law, economics, sociology and anthropology, on the other. Consider, to cite an emblematic example, the confrontation that took place in the courtroom at Nuremberg between legal categories and the need to answer, through them, far broader problems of deep historical significance that tormented (then as now) the collective conscience.

The chapter closes with a reflection on the relationship between historiography and politics and on its uncertain outcomes. In the contemporary age historiography has, on the one hand, programmatically freed itself from the tutelage of political power; on the other, in totalitarian states it inexorably fell under political control. Returning to a leitmotiv of the work, Pavone recalls the grave responsibility that contemporary historians assume when they adopt an "immediately political use of history".

7. Periodizations

When does contemporary history begin, and what are its internal divisions?

This theme, common to all historical epochs, again acquires a peculiarity when applied to this field of interest. While it may be possible to agree, if only conventionally, on a *terminus a quo*, the *terminus ad quem* will by its nature keep slipping forward, at least until a consensus forms around a decisively periodizing event.

The periodizations of contemporary history and of its phases have traditionally referred to events belonging to the fabric of political or political-military history. As the latter lost its centrality, historiography began to follow various periodizing threads, discovering at the same time a polycentrism opposed to traditional Eurocentrism.

Admittedly, even in the contemporary age it remains easier to periodize by great events than by long processes, given the capacity of the former to bring out the dominant note of social or historical phenomena that would otherwise be harder to read. The contemporary age is indeed rich in symbolic events, from the French Revolution (which we here conventionally declare part of this epoch) down to — moving to another sphere — the numerous discoveries, inventions and applications that have marked the entire period.

Returning to the question of the starting point of the broader general periodization of this age, Pavone finally reflects on the uncertain boundary separating it from the modern age. The question, of course, does not turn on the mere identification of a date, but on discerning a clear caesura, if one truly exists, between these two historical epochs. Not a few authors have tried to devise intermediate categories to solve the problem: hence the talk of a "modern and contemporary" history and of an "early modern European history" — expressions that seek to capture longer or shorter phases of transition from one age to the other.

It is in any case beyond doubt that contemporary history unfolds essentially across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Author therefore dwells briefly on their differences and continuities, finding in any event in the First World War a sure element of discontinuity between the two centuries. Inevitable

¹⁴ Broadening this field of inquiry, consider the still unexplored possibilities of applying artificial intelligence in areas such as codicology or archival science, and its potential capacity to connect diverse sources and make them speak to one another.

here is the reference to the notions of the “long century” and the “short century” and to the well-known essays of Hobsbawm¹⁵ and Furet¹⁶.

8. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries: an itinerary

These considerations are taken up and expanded in the final chapter of the work, where Pavone offers an interesting and articulate conceptual itinerary that leads the reader through the continuities and caesuras of these two centuries.

The route unfolds around the themes of the state, political representation and rights. It is, naturally, a limited and subjective selection, yet one rich in prompts for further and broader reflection by the engaged reader. More specifically, these are the topics addressed.

Constitutions

This period witnesses the emergence of the modern constitutional state, along a clearly Eurocentric path with an American beginning. Constitutions acquire symbolic value and become central instruments for balancing the relations between governors and governed. Pavone underscores their tension between the preservation of the *status quo* and the mobility of the popular will.

Suffrage

The extension of suffrage followed different paths: by gradual additions of new categories of voters, as occurred in Great Britain, the United States and Italy, or by removing the limits placed on an abstractly recognized principle of universality, as occurred in France. Deserving particular reflection here is the extension of the vote to women, from the suffragists’ long struggles to the truly universal extension of the franchise.

Property

With the advent of universal suffrage, full political citizenship was severed from the status of property owner, which had long been its precondition. The very concept of property was put on trial and profoundly reread (“property is theft”, cries Proudhon). Yet property has shown that it can constitute a counter-power in the face of the authority of the state and of its authoritarian and totalitarian tendencies.

Social rights

This age witnesses the progressive transformation of needs into rights, a process to which both socialist and Catholic thought and action contributed. It is a phenomenon in constant flux, around which historical reconstructions and theoretical analyses intertwine. Marshall outlined a path marked by the affirmation of three generations of rights: civil, political and social¹⁷. Bobbio, for his part, spoke of two generations: the first, of civil and political rights, which require a *non facere* on the part of the state; the second, of social rights, which require its active intervention¹⁸.

¹⁵ E.J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, Michael Joseph, London, 1994 (Italian ed.: *Il secolo breve, 1914-1991: l'era dei grandi cataclismi*, Rizzoli, Milan, 1995).

¹⁶ F. Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, trans. by Deborah Furet, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999 (original ed. 1995; Italian ed.: *Il passato di una illusione. L'idea comunista nel XX secolo*, Mondadori, Milan, 1995).

¹⁷ T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class, and Other Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1950 (Italian ed.: *Cittadinanza e classe sociale*, Utet, Turin, 1976).

¹⁸ N. Bobbio, *The Age of Rights*, trans. by Allan Cameron, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996 (original ed.: *L'età dei diritti*, Einaudi, Turin, 1992).

Fascism and anti-fascism

Fascism appeared, in the early twentieth century, as a safe and pragmatic way of solving the problems that the nineteenth century and the First World War had left on the shoulders of the European countries. It was the second conflict that marked a decisive watershed, without however bringing about the definitive disappearance of this *moloch*. There exists, moreover — Pavone stresses — in Italy and elsewhere, a generalizing use of the term “fascism” and, by extension, of its opposite, “anti-fascism”. Part of the historian’s task is precisely to reconstruct the philologically original meaning of these terms, on pain — the Author seems to say — of trivializing both.

Totalitarianism

If one takes as a reference Bobbio’s definition of totalitarianism — the total absorption of civil society into the state¹⁹ — it is Pavone’s view (perhaps not entirely persuasive) that this ideal type was never fully embodied in any historically known regime. A reflection that is obviously not meant to diminish the sufferings of the peoples subjected to those regimes, but only to invite a differentiated analysis of them, in search of the specific features of each.

Corporatism

Corporatism, too, was a path — with a long gestation, both Catholic and secular — variously intertwined with that of totalitarianism. Its origins can be traced back to the Christian social school (in Italy, its leading exponent was Giuseppe Toniolo), but there was also a secular strand. Once that season had closed, the 1970s and 1980s saw renewed attention to corporatism, above all on the question of whether it is possible within a democratic system.

State and nation

The themes and problems sketched above had, over these two centuries, the state as their prevailing frame of reference — in Europe, in the form of the nation-state. This institution has suffered an evident erosion since the Second World War, owing on the one hand to the emergence of international organizations and, on the other, to the rise of economic and financial powers, often transnational and markedly capable of eluding national democratic controls.

Its end has often been foretold; yet recent international events — which the Author, who passed away in 2016, obviously could not contemplate in his text — seem instead to tell us that the state is still the leading actor in the international arena, and that attempts to build strong international structures designed to supersede it will continue to meet with the failure that Pavone had already indicated in his work.

Gabriele Capecchi

¹⁹ N. Bobbio, *Democracy and Dictatorship: The Nature and Limits of State Power*, trans. by Peter Kennealy, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989 (original ed.: *Stato, governo, società. Per una teoria generale della politica*, Einaudi, Turin, 1985).