

Violence and resistance in cultural transmission

Giovanni Levi
(Università Ca'Foscari)

1. The transfer of knowledge and culture is always a complex issue, it often entails relationships of unequal strength and authority and, in any case, involves progressive transformations in the encounters between different contexts, cultures and psychologies.

I see the relationship between transmission and reception therefore, as the most important theme whereby to avoid triumphalist visions of scientific progress and to understand success or shortcomings in cultural transfer, refusals, impositions and the consequences thereof. Furthermore, the term knowledge is ambiguous and it is only right to add the idea of cultural exchange to signify an exchange between different cultures. Moreover, since knowledge is in continuous, and often non-linear development, when speaking of knowledge we always speak of something with a specific time dependency as well as a fragile and non-permanent legitimacy: was the christianisation of the New World a transfer of knowledge or merely a cultural imposition?

Consequently, we ought to consider the transfer of knowledge as an operation that is often selective, in the majority of cases it is transmitted only to one part of society, to men and not to women, to one's fellow countrymen and not to others, to one's own sphere of interest.

Culture is something different as it is composed of knowledge, but also of traditions and behaviours and is tied in with social or ethnic groups that wish to preserve values that are not scientific in character, but rather have an intrinsic strength of their own. In this case it is less selective than the transfer of knowledge insomuch as it tends to confirm social roles rather than modify them, also when it is not transmitted within the group but in the encounter with external groups. And, as I shall point out, the negative features arise not from the production of knowledge itself but in the abusive aspects of its transmission and likewise they do not occur in cultures but grow from unequal exchange between cultures.

2. *Generations and time.* These two issues – knowledge and culture – have to be dealt with on two levels at least: individual, family or close knit group transmission and the relations between countries, collectivities and/or ethnic cultures.

Starting from the first level we can say that many factors, which are more or less psychological and unconscious, are at play in this case: memory, imitation and curiosity alongside refusal, selection and individual identity.

Let us examine two important cases: how are religious beliefs transmitted? With considerable optimism, for example, examining testimonies from the Ancien Règime Albert Soboul and Michel Vovelle have measured dechristianisation. This process however, which seemed linear and progressive to them, today appears to be tied in with a specific historical phase when we consider the reassertion of the role of religions in contemporary life. Of course very broad political and anthropological factors were also involved, which cannot be limited to internal religious issues: belief is, first and foremost, an individual matter, imbued with conscious and unconscious psychological elements.

Why do I feel it useful to examine this case? Because it suggests that cultural transmission – not only in this field – is not linear and irreversible but rather cyclical. Within the family it occurs not only between parents and children, but often, as linguistic sociologist Joshua A. Fishman suggests (*The Sociology of Language. An Interdisciplinary Social Science Approach to Language in Society*, Newbury House Publ., Rowley, Mass., 1972), between grandparents and grandchildren, skipping a generation: if parents are believers children frequently, thanks also to a generational conflict that is typical and natural, tend to free themselves from the bonds of belief and family liturgies. But the opposite is also true: religiously agnostic parents will often have children who return to religion. The same applies to language. Fishman studied the revival of interest in Yiddish among second generations, whereas the first generation would have led to the conclusion that Yiddish would progressively disappear. In this case, the disappearance of millions of Yiddish speakers during the Shoah ought to have dealt an apparently fatal blow to this language, nevertheless revival confirms the cyclic pattern I am speaking about.

I would also like to dwell on another aspect of the cycle: all the historical traumas, even recent dictatorships and massacres, the Argentinian and Chilean dictatorship, the massacres carried out under Franco and under the Nazis – these are merely examples among many others – have been followed by long periods of repression (*Verdrängung*) and silence, one generation long at least, the generation of those that were not present.

To speak about these experiences and transmit them to new generations seems to be psychologically painful. But, at a certain point and 'for circumstances that could not be predicted' the period of repression broke off: transmission became a flood that spoke to those that were not there; it would be futile to examine the complex consequences of this here. This is what is known as *Afterwardsness*, *l'après coup* (*Nachtraeglich*) in psychoanalysis, though I use it here in a manner that is probably quite far from the definition acceptable to psychoanalysts: the factual trauma becomes a mature psychological trauma at a later date, a time at which the consequences are different and complex, in a different world. Of particular relevance is the chronological structure of trauma and the idea of a discontinuous time. Such is the power of the traumatic phenomenon that it does not allow for an immediately defined perception and verbalization and reappears with a completely different significance, becoming much more evident after a period of latency: memory becomes trauma *afterwards*, *après coup*.

In the second chapter of *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), examining the case of Emma, Freud speaks of this as “an example of a memory producing an effect that could not have been produced in the state of experience... worthy of note is the fact that what entered consciousness was not the element of interest itself but another element as a symbol”. We always find that the memory which is repressed only becomes a trauma later “after undergoing complex transformations”. This theme, examined in depth in the case of Little Hans, reemerged with considerable significance more recently in the psychoanalytical debate (Lacan, Laplanche) and, though tied in with issues of personal neurosis, I feel it is also of particular interest to historians: the inverse process, whereby the trauma that emerges later becomes the principal theme rather than the experience which is repressed, has many implications for collective historical and political traumas where shock and reaction manifest themselves as awareness of trauma at a later moment.

3. *Transmission and reception*. This is clearly the problem with reception. Cultural transmission always implies a modification inherent in the resistance produced by the psychological, biographical and cultural differences between transmitter and receiver. An example of cultural transmission which occurred but was transformed during reception: the catholic church long grappled with the problem of conveying the concept and representation of the trinity in images. Missionaries in the new world continuously wrote of their difficulty in transmitting the concept of a one and triune

god to the native Americans. The counter-reformation had set down rigorous criteria regarding such representation: they were three distinct figures, an old man, a young man and a dove and they could be represented neither as a human figure with three faces nor as three equal figures side by side. This is an example of impossible transmission: churches and homes in New Granada were, and are, filled with forbidden representations. In a society traditionally capable of conceiving a plurality of divine figures, a divinity with multiple functions was conceivable, but his divine unity could only be imagined as a unity of the person (if we think of Gregorio Vasquez marvellous painting in Bogotá) or as three distinct persons that are equal in their common divinity. It is evident that here the time that lapses between the definition of awareness and its subsequent diffusion comes into play.

As I have already pointed out, the transmission of historical facts to new generations modifies the meaning of trauma. But time has a fundamental role to play in the transmission of knowledge in every field, in economy for example. Some decades ago the issue of first-comers and late-comers in industrialization was under discussion: the agricultural and industrial revolutions had implied that a series of technological innovations would be passed on slowly from the former to the latter. The cost of research and invention was borne by the first-comers, but when, for example, the mechanical loom reached Italy or Spain its adoption was, at that point, immediate. Nevertheless, the size of industry in the first countries, England, France and the Netherlands, implied that the late-comers needed considerable investments in new industry so as to compete with these first countries that had a greater advantage and opportunity for further investment thanks to their initial monopoly. Alexander Gershenkron (*Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective*, Harvard U.P., Cambridge, Mass. 1962) has examined the effects of this distortion on late-coming countries, his examples are Italy, Germany, Russia and Bulgaria. Speaking of the advantages and disadvantages of delayed industrial development, Gerschenkron is not content to echo Marx saying that 'the more industrially developed country simply shows the less developed one the image of its future' because 'development in an underdeveloped country, may be under many aspects, thanks to its backwardness, fundamentally distant from that of a country in advanced development' (p.8): development can proceed faster because of already consolidated forms of technology and organization, new institutions can be established which were absent in early industrialized countries or development may occur in a less conflictual ideological climate. The disadvantages are also numerous, however, since here we are dealing with

the transfer of knowledge, I prefer not to dwell on this, this specific example demonstrates how the moment of transfer is a fundamental factor in the process of knowledge transmission between two different contexts.

4. Authority and power. The role inevitably played by relations of power and authority is another important aspect of cultural transmission and it implies varying degrees of violence and varying degrees of resistance. The family, school and peer groups are all clear examples of the transmission of knowledge through forms of authority, even in cases of simple transmission by imitation or custom and certainly when there is a conscious intent to teach, correct and accustom. Resistance is more often the result of a refusal of authority rather than cultural content. Naturally, these imply psychological conflicts in the assertion of individual autonomy and one's own personality which need to be accomplished even through differences. Each one of us positions that which is transferred to us through our culture within the context of what we already know; we read what we learn within the light of our own knowledge: nobody reads a novel or sees a film without remembering parts to which others are indifferent, without positioning that which we read or see along our own scale of values.

However, let us return to the transfer of technical and economic knowledge. In the case of industry and indeed particularly in the case of agriculture, the most prominent aspect that innovation brought was brutal transformations in production systems, the dimensions of property, market relations and a tendency towards crop specialization; the earlier reality was one of small farms growing a broad variety of crops largely for personal consumption, with family labour and hardly any monetization. The million olive trees planted by the Venetians on Corfu or the onion monoculture imposed by Britain on Malta, the vast coffee plantations in Brazil, sugarcane on the Canary Islands or Cuba, or the vines on Madeira, often in unsuitable areas or zones originally used by a population living on subsistence farming, represent nothing less than violent abuse with long lasting and dramatic social consequences: deforestation, erosion, desertification because of loss of water etc. Despite the devastating effects of colonialism on knowledge and culture, there was nevertheless a rise in environmental concern among mid-seventeenth century intellectuals which led to important developments in botanical and natural research; yet this interrupted neither the policies of economic exploitation nor the suppression of indigenous resistance (cfr. Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism. Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, Cambridge U.P. 1995). An example is the case of

corn in Europe: one of Braudel's beloved themes. It is a known fact that the cultivation of corn spread very slowly across a very favourable climate belt in southern France and the north of Spain, Italy and the Balkans from the second half of the seventeenth century after an initial period of 150 years of strong resistance. Apart from typical hostility to an uncertain novelty, three factors account for this resistance: first, resistance to the extra weeding and hoeing involved in cultivating corn when compared to traditional cereals, second, its shorter storage life when compared to wheat and rice and third, the most important factor, a deterioration in tenancy agreements whereby farmers were left with a greater part of the corn crop which was commercially less viable than wheat, while landlords tended to keep the more precious and profitable cereals. It was a long and dramatic struggle, from the end of the eighteenth century and through the whole nineteenth century, leaving thousands dead from pellagra, a vitamin deficiency disease caused by a diet based exclusively on corn. This is a good example because it clearly reveals both the sluggish transmission of botanical knowledge and a clash with social and cultural aspects of rural lifestyle. Consider also how the potato was even slower in becoming part of the European food crop because of a purely cultural resistance to eating roots. After all, writing on rye in the Middle Ages Marc Bloch noted now "it spread relatively quickly across central Europe: taking only three hundred years".

5. *Channels of circulation.* Another issue: how new knowledge is spread. Generally speaking, historians rather simplistically imagined that technical knowledge followed the social strata: for the most part from top to bottom. But this is not true: we must bear in mind that proposing innovation is not a linear process. The principal resistance to diffusion is competition. It is no coincidence that technological innovation was accompanied by the spread of patents and copyrights which were actually barriers to dissemination. It has been shown that in a society that is stratified not only horizontally but also vertically in a patronage structure, technological innovation advances in accordance with the social relations the innovator holds vertically with his clientele. An example is the circulation of chemical fertilizers in central and northern Italy during the nineteenth century: what appears to be a disorderly and haphazard advancement of knowledge was, in fact, governed by a network of social relations. As we can see from these examples the spread of knowledge confirms and consolidates power structures and authorities which interact with social and cultural resistance but also with economic conflicts which distort the circulation of knowledge.

We must therefore speak of selective cultural diffusion, in other words, forms of transmission which intentionally exclude a part of society. We can examine two examples from the many available. The first deals with the obligatory mediation of the catholic clergy between the Bible and the faithful. Until not too long ago (around 1850) the prohibition on direct reading of the Bible existed not only to guarantee the mediating role of the clergy and thus the hierarchical structure of the church, but also to protect the transmission of knowledge from heretical or improper interpretations.

In other religions too, in Judaism for example, women were forbidden to have direct access to the Talmud. Just three years ago the Chief Rabbi of my community sent out a circular inviting people to lessons on the Talmud which concluded with the blunt phrase “women may not attend”. This was linked with a rigorous image of women, not so much of intellectual and moral inferiority, at least in principle, but a specific positioning within daily life and family organization rather than the study of Scripture. This is a second general example of selective cultural transmission. For centuries, this worldwide ideological construct of the diversity and often inferiority of women has led to their exclusion from specific sectors of knowledge and has enjoyed visible support in diversified access to education.

These two examples tell us a lot about the relationship between transfer of knowledge and social and ideological structure: all societies that are characterized by inequality create differentiated mechanisms of knowledge diffusion. This also happens in apparently advanced and democratic societies: we might want to recall extreme and paradoxical examples such as the belated admission of women and even later admission of African Americans to the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton or the debate in Britain regarding the capacity for abstraction among children of middle and upper class backgrounds compared to the purely practical abilities of working class offspring. In the post-war period this latter debate, thanks also to the contribution of sociologist Basil Bernstein, strongly influenced the Labour party's education policy.

An aspect that needs to be considered is the different velocities between knowledge development and knowledge diffusion. We historians write books and articles which become known only after publication. Months and sometimes years pass before periodicals are issued or publishers decide to print our work. History is a slow science, it is fragmented by geographic and linguistic boundaries which delay diffusion. It is not the case for other sciences: physics for example, uses its periodicals as a historical archive while research is immediately broadcast by electronic media to a much more

homogenous and global scientific community. While an actual Italian historiography exists there is no such thing as an Italian physics except meaning research carried out in one country but valid throughout the entire scientific community.

I should open a parenthesis and point out that this situation is difficult to correct. In the field of historiography there has certainly been a drive towards linguistic unification (English is becoming more and more the common access key to studies). But there are two serious issues at hand here that have had serious effects on recent American historiography. First, only books in English are taken into consideration. This is the case, for example, of a book that I do not recommend reading (Faruk Tabak, *The waning of the Mediterranean 1550-1870. A Geohistorical Approach*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008) by a Turkish-American who proposes himself as a Braudel of the seventeenth century: studying the Mediterranean in the century after Braudel's principal work. The author cites many works on Italy, France, Greece, the Balkans, Turkey and the Maghreb etc. by authors from these countries, but only if translated into English. And even the recent much discussed and pretentious manifesto by Jo Guldi and David Armitage entitled *The History Manifesto* ignores too much of the historiography of other countries to claim the right to suggest what we need to do in the future. And this is the second defect: it is the publishers who decide what is to be translated and therefore they mediate the transmission of knowledge, often for commercial reasons and obviously producing effective informative bias.

6. *Knowledge and culture.* There is one relevant issue that I have not taken into consideration up to now: the indefinable quality of the terms knowledge and culture. Scientific research advances continuously and we are doomed to partial truths which can always be both extended and contested. The transmission of knowledge occurs therefore on continuously shifting ground and often depends on different interpretations. Furthermore, as we said before, the knowledge that is conveyed is in conflict with that which science continues to correct and elaborate. In short, knowledge is something that is deeply embedded in society. Consider, for example, the marvellous description of society based on analogical classification systems described by Michel Foucault in *Les mots et les choses* or more in general, the classification systems described by Raymond Needham (*Reconnaissances*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto-Buffalo-London, 1980) so as to have a readily available system of knowledge working as a long-term form of knowledge organization which would be slowly overcome by new successive scientific organizations, the conveyor of a different truth.

And we should consider the relationship between science and beliefs with respect to the close historical ties between religion and cosmological theory in the slow process of secularization in attitudes towards the environment and the growing assertiveness of the human right to manipulate it (cfr. For example, L.J. Jordanova- Roy S.Porter, eds., *Images of the Earth. Essays in the History of the Environmental Sciences*, The British Society for the History of Science, Chalfont S.Giles,1979)); or else the relationship between science and politics when it comes to defining environmental risks. I remember the US Secretary for the Interior in 1983 (I think it was under the Reagan government) replying to a group of environmentalists protesting over the destruction of forests. The environmentalists insisted they needed to think about future generations; following his religious beliefs about the imminent end of the world the reply came: 'and who says there will be future generations?' The communication of knowledge occurs in a landscape of ideology and false truths; a landscape where it is difficult to create new legitimacy or deny the ancient ones. And on the internet we are told that the communication of knowledge often occurs with neither control nor verification: it has always been so and it is not by chance that Marc Bloch has shown us that *les fausses nouvelles de guerre* can be disastrously effective thanks to the process of transfer and diffusion of news.

7. *Conclusion.* To conclude these rather incomplete notes we need to address the issue of resistance in intercultural exchanges directly. I think I have already suggested that considerable caution needs to be exercised in examining exchanges of this type because there are always phenomena of hybridization; any two cultures that meet have each got a past that preceded that encounter, and one culture can never completely substitute another without residues, mixtures and discordant interpretations. Weak or strong, depending on what a society deems legitimate, in every culture there is always a selective and protective safety net. Cultural encounters often imply a fierce battle where the stronger part tends to undermine the legitimacy of the other culture: it is a battle for legitimacy. Consider christianity versus paganism, a very long war that also involved adaptations on the dominant side which proposed new interpretations of already existing rituals and beliefs as well as a long war of persecution and power. Very often liturgical dates were conserved while their significance was changed, customs were maintained in exchange for the recognition of different authority. These wars lasted centuries.

But it is also a war between different dimensions: resistance is generally more

fragmented than the invasive proposal, more local when compared to a global assault. In any case, it is a violence which prevails in the end albeit with compromises, where politics plays a powerful role. The peasant wars of the modern age are clear examples: nobody could win despite strong collective will and great loss of life. These are a mixture of political power, religious ideology (think of Luther's condemnation of the great peasant revolt of 1524-5), ideologies about modernization, legal mechanisms and institutional powers, all carried out in the name of the right to property, to market and economic growth.

Perhaps this is the historian's task, as Walter Benjamin teaches: "cultural heritage reveals (to the materialistic historian) a background he cannot consider without horror. It owes its existence not only to the great geniuses who created it, but also to the nameless toil of their contemporaries. Never has there been a document of culture which was not simultaneously one of barbarism. And, as it is not free from barbarism, neither is the process of transmission by which it passes from hand to hand. Therefore, the historical materialist takes as much distance as possible from this. He sees that his task is to brush history against the grain." (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, VII).