

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Luisa Passerini. *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1996. siv + 166 pp.p. \$21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8195-5286-0.

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Luisa Passerini, Professor of Twentieth-Century History at the European University in Florence, is best known for her work, *Fascism in Popular Memory*. In that project, she examined how the working-class of the northern Italian industrial city of Turin—dominated by the massive FIAT factory works—reacted to and remembered the fascist era. She has also edited *Memory and Totalitarianism*, which examines this subject from a variety of perspectives. Here, in *Autobiography of a Generation*, she mines different material, but always with the same concerns: how do memory and history interact; how do they refract off each other; and how do individuals and societies deal with the constant interaction of the private and the public? Although others have also addressed these issues, Passerini here has crafted something out of the ordinary, indeed unique. This is the complete subjectivization of history, or the history of subjectivity. The result is a complex interpretation of the reciprocal relationship between history, memory, identity, agency, and subjectivity.

Passerini organizes the book with a brilliant concept: alternating chapters of self-reflection based on her diaries (1983-1987) with oral interviews of participants from the 1968 movement. The four odd-numbered chapters based on her diary are a free exploration of her own psychoanalysis. The intervening even-numbered chapters are based on forty-seven interviews conducted in the early- to mid-1980s. What ties the seemingly disparate material together is Passerini's interest and fascination—one might even say obsession—with the mysterious workings of memory.

As the author subtly acknowledges, her psychoanalysis was the result of issues left unresolved not only from her childhood and adolescence, but from her own participation in "1968." Here, "1968" refers not only to that dra-

matic year, but to an entire decade marked by unresolved conflicts left over from the fascist era and the "economic boom" of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Students, workers, intellectuals, and women forced Italy to re-examine, re-consider, and re-vision its complacent and conservative society.

Passerini offers her own psychoanalysis of the protagonists from 1968: from the "ambiguity toward fathers," to the "rejection of the Mother." In addition, she examines such topics as space, democracy, power, transcendence, and gender. Much of this only became clear to the actors a decade or more later. What becomes clear to Passerini in the course of conducting her interviews is that "our identity is constructed on contradictions ... [with] ... recurring themes of division, of difference, of contrast" (p. 22). At the heart of autobiographical memory is the connection between the individual and the collective (p. 31), and this poses the problem of power. The "demise" of the question of power is the "central grief" of the post-1968 world which still haunts us today. Passerini understands that posing the question of power was "a way of recognizing transcendence, in the secular sense ..." (p. 132).

Erdberg's translation captures the spirit of the text, especially the occasional note of nostalgia or wistfulness in the oral interviews. Scott's brief but valuable Foreword will be useful for the reader unfamiliar with Passerini's work. Perhaps Scott offers the most succinct evaluation of the work when she writes that it is both "an individual and collective autobiography ... innovative in its method, fascinating and instructive in its substance..." (p. xiv).

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