

CSE WORKING PAPERS 16 | 02: maggio 2016

ISSN (on line): 2384-969X

ISSN (print): 2385-0310

Two Paths of Analysing Totalitarianism in Europe **The Crises of Mankind in Kurt Wolff and Guglielmo Ferrero**

Donatella Pacelli

ABSTRACT

The debate on the totalitarian phenomenon was started by European scholars from diverse intellectual backgrounds who produced analysis and interpretive models in the 1930s and 1940s, often transforming their own personal and historical experience into a laboratory of ideas. This is the route taken by prominent interpreters of sociology of knowledge, like Karl Mannheim and his student Kurt Wolff. In 1930s Italy, Guglielmo Ferrero was among those scholars who warned of the ethical crises affecting society and politics. His intellectual work is focused on understanding the condition of modern man between wars and totalitarian regimes, but also the fears and contradictions that torment human beings in any context where a sense of limit is lost. From this starting point, this paper aims to highlight how Ferrero reflects on the totalitarian crises showing passages that recall Mannheim's view of social totality and his criticism of a policy that is incapable of being a project of sharing. The paths undertaken by the authors allow us to shine a light on different European perspectives on totalitarianism.

KEYWORDS: Totalitarianism; Europe; Mankind; Ethnicity; Democracy, Limit; Sociology of Knowledge

Direttore responsabile

Nunzio Siani

Direttore Scientifico

Massimo Pendenza

Comitato scientifico

Annamaria Amato, Adalgiso Amendola, Virgilio D'Antonio,
Luca De Lucia, Rosanna Fattibene, Giuseppe Foscari, Gianfranco Macrì,
Massimo Pendenza, Pasquale Serra, Rossella Trapanese.

Comitato di redazione

Beatrice Benocci, Luca Corchia, Salvatore Esposito, Dario Verderame

I Working Papers sono una Collana edita dall'Università degli Studi di Salerno
Tutti i testi pubblicati sono preventivamente sottoposti a due referees anonimi.

CENTRO DI STUDI EUROPEI (CSE) www.centrostudieuropei.it

Direttore: Massimo Pendenza

Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche, Sociali e della Comunicazione

Università degli Studi di Salerno

Via Giovanni Paolo II, 132

84084 Fisciano (Salerno), Italy

Tel: +39 (0)89 962282 – Fax: +39 (0)89 963013

mail: direttore@centrostudieuropei.it

Two Paths of Analysing Totalitarianism in Europe

The Crises of Mankind in Kurt Wolff and Guglielmo Ferrero

Donatella Pacelli

INDICE

I. INTRODUCTION	4
II. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND THE HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE	6
III. THE ANALYSIS OF TOTALITARIANISM	10
IV. THE DRIFT OF MODERN CULTURE AND THE “CRISIS OF EXCESS”: DICTATORSHIPS AND WARS	15
Acknowledgments	19
References	19

PROFILO AUTORE

Donatella Pacelli è professore ordinario di sociologia generale ed insegna presso la Libera Università LUMSA di Roma. Si è occupata dei classici del pensiero sociologico, di trasformazioni sociali e di vari aspetti della cultura moderna, seguendo in particolare le variazioni dell'orizzonte temporale e delle relazioni sociali nello spazio europeo.

Tra le sue pubblicazioni più recenti: *Tempo, spazio e società* (con C. Marchetti, Milano, 2007), *Differenza e differenze* (Milano, 2008), *Dalla modernità alle modernità multiple* (con C. Corradì, Catanzaro, 2011), *Europa e Società civile* (Milano, 2012), *Il senso del limite. Per un nuovo approccio di sociologia critica* (Roma, 2013), *Le guerre e i sociologi. Dal primo conflitto totale alle crisi contemporanee* (Milano, 2015).

E-mail: dpacelli@libero.it

I. INTRODUCTION

The debate on the totalitarian phenomenon was started by scholars from diverse intellectual backgrounds who produced analysis and interpretive models in the 1930s and 1940s, often transforming their own personal and historical experience into an invaluable laboratory of ideas.

Many of these ideas developed in a culture of political exile and in the climate of intellectual ferment that this produced. The issue of totalitarianism that exiles took out of Europe was reconsidered in light of new categories, accepting the liberal or republican view of liberty and widening its application (Peck 1989).

The interpretations of totalitarianism as a radical alternative to democracy, and above all as a result of the defeats suffered by weak European democracies, crossed the borders of single states to launch a challenge to the free world and to modernity. At the same time, some founding principles of Western culture and above all the spiritual vacuum caused by modern rationalism led to a view of totalitarian forms of power that work in the form of “secular religions” and have an amoral rationalism (Aron 1944).

In this broader view, beside the historical fact of radical post-war changes, an existential unease emerged, fed by a period of transition which held the risk of social disintegration. This approach to totalitarian crises as historical-cultural and existential crises leads to the recognition that on one hand the dynamics of cultural processes avoid the linearity of history. On the other hand there is no transformation, crisis or reconstruction that can be studied outside its historical context. More precisely, these dynamics cannot be understood without recalling the relationship between the historicity and sociality of human experience in a given context, like the material and spiritual sphere of existence. In these terms the problem is a prerogative of the sociology of knowledge, above all where this analyses its own age through reasoning that is not limited to declaring a social and political crisis but also asks essential questions about human nature.

This is the route taken by prominent interpreters of this perspective, like Karl Mannheim and his student Kurt Wolff, who analyse the potential of the sociology of knowledge. Differences emerge however due to the position that the phenomenon of totalitarianism takes in their research.

As we will see, in fact, Mannheim treats the theme within a project that is scientific and political at the same time. Wolff views totalitarianism as an example of a life condition in which man has lost his centrality and moral commitment has lost its cognitive and affective power (Wolff 1974, 1991).

In 1930s Italy, Guglielmo Ferrero (1871-1942) was among those scholars who

warned of the ethical crises affecting society and politics and showed awareness of the short-sightedness of modern pragmatism.

Ferrero did not join the sociology of knowledge debate, and it is not possible to associate him with a specific school of sociological thought. His intellectual work is focused on understanding the condition of modern man between wars and totalitarian regimes, but also the fears and contradictions that torment human beings in any context where a sense of limit is lost.

In this perspective his long reflection on the crises of excess includes passages that recall Mannheim's view of social totality and his criticism of a policy that is incapable of being a project of sharing. But the strong ethical connotations of Ferrero's work and his attention to the fate of a humanity that runs the risk of "destruction" allow us to identify significant elements of agreement with Wolff.

Both start from a perspective that in retrospect we can call "humanistic sociology" based on curiosity and love for mankind. The awareness of the complexity, ambivalence and limits of human nature never result in forms of pessimism, but lead to a constant moral concern. Hence the strategic attention to history, seen in its development through social and cultural processes that lead humanity back to its own responsibilities.

Their analysis of totalitarianism also forms part of this discourse. In terms of it being the ultimate expression of renouncing limits and the imitation of modernity in serious decline, it firstly poses the problem of reforming the relationship between being and having to be, recalled by Wolff (1971, 1974) in all his work. The process of rationalisation and secularisation of modernity promoted an approach that removes limits and spirituality leaving man with a «fundamental and latent insecurity», stigmatised by Mannheim. But even more it promoted the lack of ethics that leads to the inability to protest against evil, denounced by Wolff.

Hence, if totalitarianism remains a political category but not an autonomous fact for Mannheim, for Wolff it is an ethical category that challenges man and his capacity to transcend his conditioning. For Ferrero it is sometimes one and sometimes the other, as far as political interest and ethical concern are founded on a series of thoughts about man and society considered using different analytical tools.

The interdisciplinary route finds support in the variety of work by the Italian scholar, who wrote about history but – as he himself affirms – never saw himself as a "professional historian". He also published philosophical dialogues and stories but certainly was not "an expert of philosophy or fiction". Consequently, history, philosophy and fiction were the various instruments used by the author to study «problems of individual and collective living» (Raditsa 1939, 63). This approach led Ferrero to prioritise the political dimension of social phenomena be-

cause in his opinion, politics offers the most representative example of the difficulty encountered through historical explanation and through sociological reflection, regardless of the anthropological component¹.

From this starting point, this paper aims to show the similarities and differences between Wolff and Ferrero. It will also review some of their experiences that go beyond differences in origin and cultural training, but that help to outline the breadth of vision found in both.

They are two intellectuals with a somewhat eclectic profile, that move freely between boundaries of knowledge and in different times to study the same issue: the crisis of mankind.

II. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND THE HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE

In different periods of their lives (Wolff at 20 years old and Ferrero at 50 years old), the two scholars faced the absurdities of European dictatorship and, for different personal reasons, spent some time living in a condition of exile. Wolff acquired his awareness of the condition (of exile) through maturity, Ferrero by accepting it as a totally convinced opponent of Fascism from its very beginning. Wolff defined himself as “without political affinity” for his entire life, even though he frequented overtly politicised cultural circles. Ferrero played an active role in Italian political life only once, in 1924, after the assassination of Matteotti². But he participated in many cultural initiatives against Fascism and was among the signatories of the *Manifesto of antifascist intellectuals*, compiled by Benedetto Croce (1925).

They shared an uneasy situation faced by many intellectuals of the time, though their circumstances varied based on specific life events. These included whether they received threats from their country of origin; whether they easily found help and were welcomed in the country they relocated to and how they were received in the cultural or academic environment in which they worked during their exile.

In Ferrero’s case, cultural ostracism and marginalisation preceded his exile. In fact, his Italian school of Benedetto Croce had already strongly opposed his

¹ The bottom line is that Ferrero is recognised as one of the most sensitive interpreters of the second-generation of elitism or democratic elitism (Bobbio 1967), because he introduces a strong calling for the human factor through the ethical and existential problem of limit.

² In 1924, Ferrero with Amendola, Bonomi, Salvatorelli e Barbagallo funded the Italian Association for Democratic Control and was among the promoters of the first Congress of the Unione Amendoliana.

acceptance in academic circles and ignored his recognition at the international level³. As his daughter Nina wrote, Ferrero knew how difficult it was to live “*au dessus de la mêlée*”⁴ (Ferrero-Raditsa 1973; Bartolini 1998). He fought for freedom throughout his entire life without ever joining a political party or a school of thought, and this contributed to his personal isolation over the years and the late recognition of his work, at least in Italy.

Both authors were inspired by the cultural environment of Florence in the 1930s. Wolff arrived in Florence in 1933 to spend a few months abroad, but his stay was extended and he remained in Fascist Italy to hide from the racial laws of the Nazi regime. Six years later, in 1939, he left Italy because of the racial laws introduced by the Fascist regime. Nevertheless he remembered the six years he spent in Italy fondly and he did not sense hostility during his stay, thanks also to his personal relationships and in particular his friendship with Aurelio Pace.

Ferrero lived in Florence for many years, a period he also found pleasant and fulfilling. Every Sunday he welcomed cultural personalities from Italy and abroad at his home. Due to this his family felt privileged, even in the first years of the dictatorship (Lombroso 1946)⁵. Thereafter Ferrero remained “a prisoner in Italy” until 1930 when, thanks to the king of Belgium’s personal intervention, he was able to leave Italy with his wife and flee direct persecution.

Wolff’s Italian years began when Ferrero had already left Florence and was living in exile in Geneva. In Italy the regime had banned all of Ferrero’s writing, including his fiction work⁶, which is considered to be his most important writing between 1926-1936 (Ferrero 1926, 1927, 1930, 1936).

We do not know if Wolff ever read Ferrero’s work from that period⁷. What we know is that Ferrero had read some German classics such as Weber, (the often-quoted historical work above all) and Simmel (The Conflict of Modern Culture was found in his personal library). Thus, not many common references

³ For example, he received an *honoris causa* degree from Columbia University in 1914.

⁴ With this expression, adopted from the French writer Roman Rolland (1915), Nina Ferrero sketches an intellectual profile of her father: a man who wanted to be outside and/or above “*la mêlée*”, to be able to express his opinion, as a free man. She uses this expression in an interview with Helmut Goetz (1973).

⁵ Ferrero’s family were forced to take up residence outside the city, in the Ulivello property, where they remained completely isolated. The villa was under police surveillance and Ferrero was forced to decline attendance at various conferences in the United States. He was repeatedly denied a passport because he was labeled «anti-Latin, anti-Roman, anti-Fascist and a slanderer of his own country» (Anonymous 1927).

⁶ In 1936 Ferrero wrote the last of four fiction works: *Liberazione* and he dedicated it to his wife.

⁷ A large part of which is still preserved in the library of the villa outside Florence, but the collection is incomplete because the Germans have used it as a stable.

can be documented, but they certainly refer to Simmel's work: which leaves both of them with the awareness that man lives everywhere – in any case both inside and outside social relations or situations – and that exclusion and self-exclusion sometimes move in parallel.

Ferrero had left an important legacy in the Florence that Wolff found during his Italian years. From 1922, Ferrero participated in the "Cultural Circle of Florence", an initiative of Salvemini, Rossi, Limentani and Nello Rosselli. Through his writing and public addresses he voiced his opposition to the regime and played the role of the intellectual, fighting for freedom. Many subsequent works he wrote in exile after 1930 testify to this orientation.

Some years later, in 1935, at the University of Florence, Wolff gained a degree in philosophy with a thesis that sought to define the sociology of knowledge, establishing the relationship between knowledge and context, without referencing the socio-political context of the time (Wolff 1935). We have to look at his later work to see him apply his idea that you have to be carried away by the world to understand it and to realise its contradictions (Wolff 1976).

Apart from the differences mentioned, I would like to stress the fact that the two scholars developed their ideas in years of crises (among the most difficult of contemporary Europe) and both chose to focus on the human factor. They live and analyse the difficult condition of modern man, considering it culturally and historically dependent but also outside time, because of the eternal human that transcends the world (Ferrero) and because of the dualism of human nature between universality and relativism (Wolff).

*

The position of Wolff regarding the complexity of man, "a mixed phenomenon", and the dualism of cross-cultural human nature is that they always depend on the opposing forces of universality and relativism. The dualism of one's own reality that it is absolute and relative at the same time, is considered the cornerstone of his research (Corradi 1993).

This is the starting point of his research into sociology of knowledge as a science that deals with real relationships of knowledge, or truly "social relationships" thus, relationships "among human beings".

In the thesis discussed with Limentani at the University of Florence in 1935, he concluded that sociology of knowledge is the study of relations between knowledge and knowledge, relations of interhuman circumstances «[...] everything that creates the possession of a spiritual element» (Wolff 1935, 149). This is the discipline that links knowledge to the act of being human. It opens con-

crete areas for investigation for investigation of different ideal types as instrument of knowledge (groups and categories) in so far as the social phenomenon of knowledge is derived from the «sociability of the way to take part in spirituality» (Wolff 1935, 148)⁸.

Later, in *Survival and Sociology*, he will clearly state the significance of a sociology that must reveal the circumstances that brought about the contemporary crisis and those which can contribute to its resolution. And give us the knowledge that makes it possible to control relationships between groups, between different parts of the world and between events and their historical precedents (Wolff 1991). All of this inverts the tendency to exclude the complexity of human nature, a tendency that characterises different approaches of social sciences, also considering that the tradition of analysis which he relates to is not the only source of judgement. Besides, as a human subject, above and beyond a social and cultural subject, the scholar can refer to his own culture also to transcend it (Corradi 1993).

Ferrero analyses the complexity of the human factor and its contradictory tendencies, starting with the dual soul that pushes man towards totalitarian adventures and revolutions on one hand and the need for democratic reconstruction on the other. Even before this he examines an existential unease, brought on by ambitions and limits and the cognitive difficulties that derive from them.

In this way Ferrero asserts that any attempt to know reality cannot be anything but imperfect and partial like the human spirit that creates it. That means that, not only in the effort of knowing reality but also in the identification of common goals, one must consider the partiality and variety of points of view of different generations and/or “moments of history” (Ferrero 1918). Any claim to create universalism is a failure that hides hegemonic logic. According to Ferrero, to know reality man sets up boundaries between himself and other things, and he writes:

Every man, every period, every age, every population is a prisoner of the limits and the conventionalities of the truth, morals and the beauty in which they must be closed inside; and closed in those they do not see, perhaps because they lack the example to recognise the principles in which other men are closed in, so they create other types of

⁸ In the search for a definition of sociology of knowledge, Wolff recalls the contributions of authors like Scheler, Weber and Mannheim whom he recognises for having prioritised the theme as opposed to others, either “marxist or positivist”, who studied it upon reflection. In particular on Pareto, observed as if he were an expert on illogical behavior, he says: «illusion and ideology belong to man like his hope to logically motivate emotional behavior and only logical experimental science can recognise this fact». This belief created a vicious circle, however, because there is no guarantee that «this experimental logical science – as a product of man – isn't also only a logical motivation of an emotional reality or circumstance» (Wolff 1935, 1-5).

beauty, truth and virtues, Yet, he complains, hates and disapproves like a barbarian [...] all the men who are outside his prison meanwhile are pushed to evade it themselves (Ferrero 1913, 134 ss)⁹.

Ferrero's philosophy of limits therefore offers a tool to not only interpret the duality of the individual (the limited being that suffers his limits, universal and single¹⁰ but also to recognise the partiality of parameters and express rejection of absolute and dogmatic values. From this perspective, stating that an age in history imposes a point of view does not mean that this is the best view in absolute terms and for all, but maybe it is the best adapted to tackle the emerging social problems, problems that the intellectual cannot ignore.

III. THE ANALYSIS OF TOTALITARIANISM

The decision to practice sociology as an openness to the world and as a critical approach that emphasises the subject leads Wolff to identify the changes which contributed to the crisis of humanity. In particular, he writes:

The insistence on the subject, the recall, the vindication, the celebration of the subject at a time when the subject has been made into a thing by bureaucracy, snuffed out by totalitarianism, and when it will be destroyed physically if the threat from which...[our question ("Sociology?")] issues becomes fact – the last fact (Wolff 1991, 107).

These processes of annihilation are the threat that challenges sociology and its quest for knowledge. Sociology is in fact faced with a crisis that has been around for a long time but is linked to a new issue:

What is new is the extraordinarily accelerated development of this society during the last decades. Some of its results are Stalinism, nazism, and fascism and more generally, the A- and H- bombs, electronics, and the exploration of space. Perhaps the most common reaction to them is one of puzzlement foreboding, and ignorance and, more, recently, the protest against the proliferation of nuclear weapons and the war in Vietnam (Wolff 1983, 46).

⁹ The discussion is somewhat complex because, on one hand we recognise that man cannot establish an opinion of himself without limiting himself within certain principles, above all where «these limits, if he allows them to tighten around him, not only limit him in reality but alienate him from his mistakes» (Ferrero 1913: 134f). The concern about the hardening that human life undergoes due to the obsessions surrounding cultural forms is the main idea in the thoughts of Simmel. Ferrero shares the idea that cognitive experience and the tendency to look elsewhere find a limit in the impossibility to see beyond the temporary elements with which reality presents itself to human perception.

¹⁰ The man is limited being that suffers his limits, like even Simmel sustains (Pacelli 2010).

Besides Wolff sees the age in which he lives in terms of “Labilization”, an expression picked up from Mannheim and his relativism. This characteristic of our time has become incomparably strong due to the development of the nuclear industry: «for the first time in our history we are able to destroy ourselves and our planet – something that until a few years ago only nonhuman-inhuman nature was capable of» (Wolff 1991, 71).

Many contemporary events, including the end of belief in progress, the growth of rationality, chaotic development of society, industrialisation, and the dissolution of institutions, created an alienation and a climate of collective distrust and favoured a modern social technology that is «the practical management of mass drives» (Wolff 1991, 71).

Wolff does not leave us with an analysis of totalitarianism as a political phenomenon but instead he recalls this nightmare in history through his concern about a cultural approach that does not give any ethical direction to actions and favours extreme events, destructive capacities, and forms of annihilation. In other terms we can say that totalitarian crises are viewed as a tool for analysis rather than a specific object of investigation. Nevertheless, it is precisely when borrowing some key interpretations from Mannheim for the “diagnosis of our time” that Wolff encounters how much Mannheim wrote on the correlation between technological development and the rise of totalitarianism and on how his thinking is affected by the advent of Nazism.

It originated in United States and was taken over by the Soviet Union, then by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. This social technique is ‘grandiose’ because in its absence mass society would dissolve; it is ‘inhuman’, because it is a means, its goodness or badness depending on the purpose to which it is put and which in part depends on the psychology associated with the technique (Wolff 1971, CVII).

In his writing at the start of the 1930s and in particular in *On the Nature of Economic Ambition and its Significance for the Social Education of Man* (Mannheim 1952), Wolff finds an evident sign that Mannheim battles with the threatening arrival of Nazism as he tries to tackle the theme of the salvation of society: «In what must have been a terrible shock – Nazism and what it ever less deniably forebode» (Wolff 1991, 72).

Mannheim surveys social techniques that enable small minorities to exercise unprecedented power, and describes small group and cooperative controls that have disintegrated, as well as system of secular and religious beliefs that have lost their vitality. A review of the totalitarian responses to the crisis – the pessimistic answer of fascism and the utopian answer of communism leads Mannheim to advocate his own response, democratic planning (Wolff 1971, CXXVI).

According to Wolff, the change, then, which he (Mannheim) underwent as he moved from pre Hitler Germany to England during and after Hitler, was from analyst a mixture of *engagé* and political and social strategist (Wolff 1971, cxxix).

Ultimately for Mannheim totalitarianism is the perverse response to the general malaise created by historical social development and therefore needs to be included in a theory of social change. It is the first form of organisation that needs planning, but it is not because of this that it can be interpreted as an autonomous fact. From here it develops as a project that is scientific and political at the same time and that finds its privileged instrument in sociology. His method in fact makes it possible to investigate the present in its development and to find the courage to intervene in the game of fundamental forces (Mannheim 1940)

In this sense totalitarianism picks up and relaunches the challenge of democratisation and of overcoming ideology as a single belief to identify a higher dimension of communal experience. It is within this project of interpreting social totality as a synthesis of an age subjected to a radical change that Mannheim challenges the totalitarian reality. A reality that is seen in Germany as an atrocious confirmation of a structural change, and in England as a general risk that all democracies face (Mannheim 1940). As Wolff recalls:

it seems that Mannheim continues to be impressed by his experience of differences among form of society and by his insight into the pervasive impact that differences among forms of society have on their members. The first impression presumably came from his transfer to England, his acquaintance with England, his comparison of the England in which he now was living with the Weimar Republic, and his deep desire that in his new country democracy not only not suffer the fate of democracy in Germany but, by understanding itself more truly, change so as to be immune to the allurements of totalitarianism. Yet the way democracy has to change is toward a form of society of which totalitarianism is thus far the only existing instance: the planned society. This greater similarity between totalitarianism and planned society than between the latter and the only existing instance of democracy, namely, liberal democracy, may make understandable [...] when Mannheim writes as if 'planned society' were interchangeable with 'totalitarianism' (Wolff 1971, cviii-cix; Mannheim 1938, 258-267)¹¹.

Kurt Wolff goes over all the interpretation of the totalitarian phenomenon offered by Mannheim but then concentrates on the thinking that does not resort to political categories. This allows him to make a different interpretation of the role of the scholar working in the social sphere and also allows him to interpret

¹¹ *Planned Society and the problem of Personality: A sociological Analysis* 1938, p. 258 e p. 267 cit. in K. Wolff, Introduction from Mannheim, pp. cviii-cix.

totalitarian crises above all in terms of the removal of the human element.

In *Ideology and Utopia*, Mannheim (1936) had recognised that interpretation of history has always been solicited by an ideal ending or utopia and the total elimination of elements that transcend reality leads to a concretisation that implies the end of human will. In this way it leads to a static condition in which man is no more than “a thing”.

But Wolff goes further. If totalitarianism is that concrete state in which man is just a thing, it is in fact an ethical category to add to themes in humanistic sociology. The aim of this would be to remember the times and places in which moral commitment lost its cognitive and normative grasp (Wolff 1991).

Ferrero's contribution seems to fit into this strain of thought. Between the two wars his thinking focused on the analysis of symbolic parts of national and international history, seeing the most serious signals of the existential crises that modern man lives through in the developing totalitarian regimes. To interpret the contradictions of power, the Italian scholar turns to the theory of limits (Ferrero 1942), which becomes the ethical-social principle on which he founds his criticism of regimes that impede social harmony¹².

Self-limitation is in fact never considered as closing in on oneself but as a communal life experience that allows man to express himself and construct peace and democracy. In this way, the rise of totalitarianism and war are considered as consequences of refusing to internalise a sense of limits and of moving towards a «confused, uncertain, insatiable growth of power, unaware of its ultimate end» (Ferrero 1918, 175-177).

A reflection on modern totalitarianism develops from here that takes on the tone of a radical declaration significantly close to the thinking of Arendt, who interpreted the phenomenon as a “modern form of tyranny” that goes beyond the principle of “everything is permitted” to venture out into an area where “everything is possible” (Arendt 1967, 631).

In Italy, Ferrero is not the only person to denounce the political anti-democratic tendencies emerging from the cultural climate. One need only think of Giovanni Amendola, who introduced the expression “totalitarian spirit” in the 1920s, and who shed light upon the relationship of the realities that were sanctioning the radical change of Italian society and the violent “reaction” that was underway (Amendola 1923a, 1923b, 1960)¹³.

¹² It is what Ferrero wrote within *Pouvoir*, his last writing. This is a collection of twenty years of uninterrupted meditation on the fundamentals of collective living and could be considered the spiritual testament of Ferrero.

¹³ In those years, the interpretation of Fascism as a modern totalitarianism, unites the intellectuals that knew each other within the “Giustizia e Libertà” movement of Carlo and Nello Rosselli, and scholars like Gobetti, Basso and Luigi Sturzo. It is actually thanks to the translations in English of the work of Sturzo (London, 1926) that words like *Totalitarian* and *Totalitarianism* acquire a

In terms of being the radical process that intersected the phenomena of the masses that went on to reconfigure society, totalitarianism is attributed to the perverse effects of social process.

Mannheim insists upon the disintegration of classes and upon the automation that creates a favourable environment for “voluntary servitude” and “new tyrants”. But he also recalls «the idea that disorientation of experience of modernity and cultural processes have supported or sustained the threat of totalitarianism» (Mannheim 1965; Antonini 2006, 114 ss).

Besides, as it has been recently observed, even the Holocaust, the darkest shadow over Europe, can be considered a hidden possibility of modern society (Bauman 1992). This is one of the realities of the principle that everything is possible.

Ferrero focuses on the cultural dimension of the phenomenon but still more upon the anthropological side. He uses the word “totalitarianism” in his research into the historical origins of the phenomenon and the psychological characteristics of the men who have chosen it as a governmental strategy (Ferrero 1933; Goetz 1986).

Beginning in 1933, Ferrero published numerous articles in *La Dépêche* in which systematically used the word “*totalitarismo*”. It was introduced to describe the psycho-historical foundations which were the essence of the phenomenon. Ferrero will offer a definition in 1935, declaring that «totalitarianism is exclusive dominance, almost theocratic, without control and without limits only one tenet, one political party, of one group of men» (Ferrero 1935a).

According to Ferrero this “nightmare” of history has common origins, linked to the human factor, which is – as Wolff asserts – «devastating existence [...] that annihilates any distinctions of time» (Wolff 1989). Above all – for the Italian author – there is a violent protest in progress, either of one man or a group of men, all pushed by the circumstances and by personal ambition (fanaticism and/or opportunism) to take power with one blow (Ferrero 1933).

All the countries that were unable to govern by democracy after the First World War «fell into the horrible savagery of specialised courts, omnipotent political practices, of legitimised truths, organised deportations, the secretive assassinations against the regime in other words in all the horrors of totalitarian regimes» (Ferrero 1935a) that imprisoned the political system in a spiral of fear¹⁴. Mutual fears lead to reciprocal acts of violence that justify each other; revolutions and totalitarian regimes establish themselves this way; the most complete

worldwide recognition in their negative acceptance.

¹⁴ The same use of force is but fear in action because «it is impossible to make men afraid without being afraid. It derives from an unavoidable principle, the most disquieting of humanity: the mutual fear of power and all it entails» (Ferrero 1942, 384 ss).

expression of the fear that accompanies every radical transformation.

As Mannheim writes, once the dynamic forces of society become uncontrollable and chaos prevails the fear of uncertainty and the mutual distrust, primary fruits of chaos, can bring the arbitrary workings of power to anarchy and social life becomes yet more terrorised by the blind forces of nature. It is what is brought to light – according to the sociologist – by some of the modern social crises (Mannheim 1965, 107ss)¹⁵. It is also expressed by dominating of ambitions without scruples, for which the methods of intimidators come «from the well-known arsenal of tyranny» (Arendt 1967, 361) and display their ethical and cognitive vacuum that lead to the failure to reason on the «ultimate aims or end».

From this point of view, Ferrero's suggestions seem to form a bridge between Mannheim's more mature analysis and the ethical-existential reading of Wolff. In particular, Ferrero comes close to the latter's thinking in his interpretation of totalitarianism as the ultimate expression of renouncing limit and therefore as a product of a culture that has normalised excesses. Nevertheless in Ferrero's work, that reading does not close the discussion and in fact does not manage to ever free itself from its historical-political contingency and from his personal position regarding the dictatorship. During his exile, indeed, Ferrero became a point of reference for denouncing the arrogance of power and for the analysis of the illegitimacy of modern totalitarianism.

IV. THE DRIFT OF MODERN CULTURE AND THE “CRISIS OF EXCESS”: DICTATORSHIPS AND WARS

The contradictions of modern culture, that – having reached a mature phase – have not been able to bridge the gap between self-realisation and morality, lead Wolff to produce a diagnosis of our time, as the process of rationalisation that has bureaucratized human life and separated “subjective reasoning” from “objective reasoning”. Thus, “the being” that is separated from “having to be” has lost its sense and intention; and having to be, without a point of reference, is reduced to a question of tastes and becomes subject to personal will (Corradi 1993).

According to Wolff, in contemporary times “the here and now” refers to a situation in which humanity is groping in search of meaning and in which human beings have the unprecedented ability to destroy all of us, life and our habitat. Until fifty years ago only God or nature could do it, today the atomic bomb, the interventions on water, air, land, the persistence of injustice and discrimination of rights and duties act as a powerful tools of human destruction (Wolff 1991,

¹⁵ To compare the thought of Mannheim and Ferrero see also Sorgi 1983.

3-9). In this scenario it is necessary to rediscover the sense of action through its moral justification.

The malaise of modern man, repressed by totalitarianism, reduced to a thing by bureaucracy that risks being annihilated by progress (of which Wolff speaks) is revealed to Ferrero through the analysis of industrial civilisation that has produced the separation between material and spiritual elements of existence, between quality and quantity (Ferrero 1918). By making quantity its driving force, Ferrero says modern society has created a crisis above all in the relationship between the elements of diversity that are the foundation of social behavior, and has generated the constant dissatisfaction of today's society that he labels "the sleepless world" (Pacelli 1989, 72ss)¹⁶.

Industrial society led us to an idea of society as a numerical collection of individuals¹⁷. It reduced the complexities of society to one-sided progress intended in terms of pure economic expansion. Viewing wealth as the highest ideal, modern society has let itself be captivated by the logic of power that has upended aspirations and has dismissed caution and seriousness (Ferrero 1918)¹⁸.

Social instability deriving from this accumulative spiral produces a psychological condition that creates a deficit in human relationships and social solidarity. There is no final goal for which the individual is prepared to reform their own personal freedom or the increase of their own economic well-being.

We can call attention here to the crises of ethical collectivity that lead to totalitarian outcomes, as well as destructive revolutions, processes which – beyond the historical reasons that determined them – are expressions of disorientation and moral deprivation that transform the individual and collective crises into "crises of excess".

Dictatorships and war, or the two "crises of excess" crossing Europe, lead Ferrero to reiterate the importance of a qualitative view of life. War in particular, in itself an example of a tragic record of the lack of returning to self-control, becomes the key instrument to interpret a whole course of civilian life passing through into a modern reality viewed as a triumph of power (Raditsa 1939). It is in this unlimited destructive force in means, vague and imprecise in its aims,

¹⁶ The lack of self-control and the collective disorder that Ferrero means with this express is – as with Durkheim – the result of a state of anomy: society is anomic either because there are no objectives and always goes one step beyond, or because in order to progress even more quickly all the qualitative definitions are forgotten and nothing is guaranteed.

¹⁷ The world was dealt with in mathematical terms like a mathematical problem, as Simmel declared (see also Pacelli 1989).

¹⁸ According to Ferrero Major industry that prospers in consumption has extolled man who is reflected perfectly like a mirror that spends all his money, that to spend it more easily incurs new vices and needs. The obligation for a myriad of displays, incessant or even ridiculous.

that the war in Europe is the prologue to the modern crisis: it reveals the predominance of the quantitative and leads man to face the question of his limits, “geographical limits first and moral limits later”. But war was accepted by a widespread conviction that “destruction” could be the most fertile mother of all richness. This came with the paradox that if unlimited and prejudiced aspirations already create perverse incentives in material and scientific production, then the consequences of unlimited destruction are even more serious (Ferrero 1918, 8).

With these thoughts, Ferrero is a faithful interpreter of the short-sighted vision of the “spirit of the time” of modernity and, considering the years in which he wrote, he seems almost like a prophet of a contemporary society that risks destruction: the society referred to by Wolff.

In the 1940s, during his exile in Geneva, Ferrero sends a message to European society, asserting that the only way that humanity can fight against hegemonic or destructive temptations is to channel intentions towards communal efforts to rebuild social harmony¹⁹. Ferrero’s perspective focuses on the division between material activity and spiritual factors generated by modern society and it is close to the classic sociologists, known to Ferrero, like Weber and even more Simmel.

However, the constant reference to the connection between existence and history shows significant elements of contact with authors like Mannheim, Wolff and Elias. These assign Ferrero to a particular stage in European sociology: the stage that saw the drama of the dictatorships and that tried to identify the origins, drawing attention to the cultural climate and the complexity of human nature.

The diagnosis of the crises of modern society as crises of sense, ethics and solidarity lead to the need for a real democracy, that is a form of coexistence capable of mediating between the different forces that affect communal life; basing society upon respect for differences (Ferrero 1918) and promoting the “sense of us” (new and large memberships) postulated by Elias (1988) as a cross-cultural feeling of human existence.

As Wolff asserts, the world must progress in its totality, not only in some geographical areas and not only in economic terms: it is necessary to advance human capabilities to face crucial problems, from totalitarianism to the amorality of human behavior that brings us to continual catastrophes, even to a nuclear one (Wolff 1974).

We have to keep in mind however that the real progress of communal life

¹⁹ «The quantitative civilization – he confesses to Raditsa, his son-in-law – is not a real form of civilization, but a tumultuous and confusing transition: a parenthesis more or less long, but surmountable» (Raditsa 1939, 48ss).

involves creating civil societies that avoid the risk of forming around the definitions on which they have been based. In fact – as Arendt also argues – seeing the problems under a single point of view and through a unique perspective marks the end of common existence (Arendt 1951).

Faced with the inadequacy of the responses offered by philosophies that were incapable of facing the problems of a society in flux, Ferrero also distanced himself from both the exaltation of certainty and disarming relativism. Along with the most prominent interpreters of the sociology of knowledge he insists on the historicity, sociality and partiality of thought to indicate a way out from the totalitarian threats (Mannheim, 1936). Totalitarian regimes in fact represent an ethical and scientific challenge at the same time, and for this reason they redesign the role of the intellectual.

As Gaetano Salvemini, another prominent figure in anti-fascist Italy and personal friend of Ferrero, argues, the intellectual must take a position against social injustice and recognize that not one ideology has a monopoly on truth (Salvemini 1935). Being truthful, as man (and the scientist) aspires to be, is not in fact in the doctrines or in the empirical verifiability of certain assumptions, but in the search – indicated by Wolff – for a relationship between different paths and cognitive processes. This is a research that requires, as Wolff teaches us, to «let oneself be carried away by the world», according to a process based upon the connection between affection and knowledge (Wolff 1971).

Ferrero definitely started from this perspective and let himself be carried away by reality. He recognized this himself when he said, at the end of his career: «My work did not just come from books [...] It came out of life and was conceived in the midst of life» (Raditsa 1939, 49). And therefore it was supported by the experience of totalitarianism.

The interpretation of totalitarianism as the triumph of illegitimate power and the emblem of human arrogance starts from this experience. The two dimensions are inseparable due to the connection – one of the most interesting insights of the author – between the way of feeling like individuals, the spirit of the time and the recognition of legitimacy. This is in fact never just a purely political question but it is a real sociological problem, linked to the human way of living and applying a sense of limits.

The fundamentals of Ferrero's theory that our analysis covered all derive from the central role played in his thinking by "the culture of limits" that removes fear on the existential and social level and favours the difficult equilibrium between rationality and emotion, recalled by Wolff.

But it also helps to reconsider the organization of politics in terms of a project that guarantees the new instances of social integration and opposes the threats of totalitarianism.

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks go to Catherine Horneby who translated the article into English

References

- Amendola G. (1923a), *Maggioranza e minoranza*, in «Il Mondo», 12 maggio.
- Amendola G. (1923b), *Un anno dopo*, in «Il Mondo», 2 novembre.
- Amendola G. (1960), *La Democrazia italiana contro il fascismo 1922-1924*, Milano-Napoli, Ricciardi.
- Anonimo (1927), *Improntitudine*, in «Il Popolo d'Italia», 1 marzo.
- Antonini E. (2006), *Il progetto totalitario. Politica e religione nella cultura moderna*, Milano, Franco Angeli.
- Arendt H. (1951), *Le origini del totalitarismo*, Milano, Ed. di Comunità, 1967.
- Aron R. (1944), *L'avenir des religions séculières*, in «La France Libre», Luglio-agosto.
- Bartolini A. (1998), *Dal fascismo all'esilio*, in L. Cedroni (ed.), *Nuovi Studi su Guglielmo Ferrero*, Roma, Aracne.
- Bauman Z. (1989), *Modernity and Holocaust*, Oxford, BlackWell.
- Bobbio N. (1967), *L'idée de légitimité*, Paris, PUF.
- Corradi C. (1993), *Lo sguardo e la conoscenza*, Milano, Franco Angeli.
- Croce B. (ed. 1925), *Manifesto degli Intellettuali antifascisti*, in «Il Mondo», 1 maggio.
- Elias N. (1988), *La Società degli individui*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Ferrero G. (1913), *Fra i due mondi*, Milano, Treves.
- Ferrero G. (1918), *La vecchia Europa e la nuova*, Milano, Treves.
- Ferrero G. (1925), *La Democrazia in Italia*, Milano, Rassegna Internazionale.
- Ferrero G. (1933), *La psychologie des dictatures*, in «La Dépêche», 63, 13 febbraio.
- Ferrero G. (1934), *La psychose guerrière*, in «Le Progrès». 28 marzo.
- Ferrero G. (1935a), *Totalitarisme*, in «La Dépêche», 64, 23 giugno.
- Ferrero G. (1935b), *La liberté "bourgeoise"*, in «La Dépêche», 64, 7 luglio.
- Ferrero G. (1940), *Les origines du totalitarisme*, in «La Dépêche», 70, 11 febbraio.
- Ferrero G. (1942), *Pouvoir: les génies invisibles de la cite*, New York, Brentano.
- Goetz H. (1986), *Guglielmo Ferrero e gli stati totalitari*, in Baldi R. (ed.), *Guglielmo Ferrero fra società e politica*, Genova, ECIG.
- Kemple T.M. (2007), *Allosociality. Bridges and Doors to Simmel's Social Theory of the Limit*, in «Theory, Culture & Society», Annual Review, 24 (7/8).
- Izzo A. (1980), *Il condizionamento sociale del pensiero*, Torino, Loescher.

- Izzo A. (1988), *K. Mannheim. Un'introduzione*, Roma, Armando.
- Levine D.N. (ed. 1971), *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Lombroso G. (1946), *Introduzione*, in Ferrero L., *Diario di privilegiato sotto il fascismo*, Torino, Chiantore.
- Mannheim K. (1936), *Ideology and Utopia*, London, Routledge.
- Mannheim K. (1938), *Planned Society and the Problem of Personality: A sociological Analysis*, in «Soc. Soc. Phyc», pp. 253-310.
- Mannheim K. (1940), *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction. Studies in Modern Social Structure*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mannheim K. (1943), *Diagnosi del nostro tempo*, Milano, Edizioni di Comunità, 1951.
- Mannheim K. (1952), *On the Nature of Economic Ambition and its Significance for the Social Education of Man*, in P. Kecskemeti (ed.), *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, pp. 230-275.
- Mannheim K. (1965), *Freedom, Power and Democratic Planning*, London, Routledge.
- Mongardini C. (1980), *Gaetano Mosca – Guglielmo Ferrero. Carteggio (1896-1934)*, Milano, Giuffrè.
- Ortega y Gasset J. (1930), *La ribellione delle masse*. Bologna, Il Mulino, 1962.
- Pacelli D. (1989), *Una critica alla modernità: qualità, limiti e legittimità nell'opera di Guglielmo Ferrero*, Roma, Euroma.
- Pacelli D. (2010), *Dalla limitazione sociale alla consapevolezza del limite*, in Cotesta V. (ed.), *Simmel e la cultura moderna*, Perugia, Morlacchi.
- Pacelli D. (2013), *Il senso del limite. Per un nuovo approccio di sociologia critica*, Roma, Carocci.
- Peck J. (ed. 1989), *The German-Jewish legacy in America 1933-38. From Bildung to the Bill of Rights*, Detroit, Wayne State, University Press.
- Popitz H. (1990), *Fenomenologia del potere*, Bologna, Il Mulino.
- Raditsa B. (1939), *Colloqui con Guglielmo Ferrero*, Lugano, Capolago.
- Salvemini G. (1935), *Pour la liberté de l'esprit*, in «Les Humblés», 7.
- Simmel G. (1908), *Sociologia*, Milano, Edizioni di Comunità, 1989.
- Simmel G. (1976), *Il conflitto della cultura moderna*, Roma, Bulzoni.
- Simmel G. (1971), *The Transcendent Character of Life*, in Levine D.N. (ed.), *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Tönnies F. (1887), *Comunità e società*, Milano, Edizioni di Comunità, 1979.
- Sorgi G. (1983), *Potere tra paura e legittimità*, Milano, Giuffrè.
- Wolff K.H. (1935), *La sociologia del sapere. Ricerca di una definizione*, Università di Firenze.
- Wolff K.H. (1971), *From Karl Mannheim*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Wolff K. H. (1974), *Trying Sociology*, New York, Wiley.
-

- Wolff K.H. (1976), *Surrender and Catch. Experience and Inquire Today*, Dordrecht-Boston, Reidel.
- Wolff K.H. (1983), *Beyond the Sociology of Knowledge. An Introduction and Development*, Lanham, MD, University Press of America.
- Wolff K.H. (1989), *Dal nulla alla Sociologia*, in «La Critica Sociologica», 88.
- Wolff K.H. (1991), *Survival and Sociology, Vindicating the Human Subject*, New Brunswick and London, Transaction.
- Wolff K.H. (1994), *Sociologia e Significato*, in «La Critica Sociologica», 109.
- Zaner R.M. (1981), *The Disciplining of Reason's Cunning: Kurt Wolff's "Surrender and Catch"*, in «Human Studies», 4 (4).

Working papers

2014

14|01 Fabio Serricchio, *Cittadinanza europea e avversione alla moneta unica al tempo della crisi economica. Il caso italiano in prospettiva comparata.*

2015

15|01 Dario Verderame, *L'Europa in festival. Indagine sulle potenzialità e i limiti della partecipazione in ambito europeo attraverso uno studio di caso.*

15|02 Beatrice Benocci, *Tedeschi, europeisti nonostante tutto.*

15|03 Luana Maria Arena, *La regolamentazione del lobbying in Europa.*

2016

16|01 Vittorio Cotesta, *Max Weber e l'identità europea.*

16|02 Donatella Pacelli, *Two Paths of Analysing Totalitarianism in Europe. The Crises of Mankind in Kurt Wolff and Guglielmo Ferrero.*

**ULTIME PUBBLICAZIONI DELLA COLLANA
CSE WORKING PAPERS**

- 14 | 01 Fabio Serricchio, *Cittadinanza europea e avversione alla moneta unica al tempo della crisi economica. Il caso italiano in prospettiva comparata.*
- 15 | 01 Dario Verderame, *L'Europa in festival. Indagine sulle potenzialità e i limiti della partecipazione in ambito europeo attraverso uno studio di caso.*
- 15 | 02 Beatrice Benocci, *Tedeschi, europeisti nonostante tutto.*
- 15 | 03 Luana Maria Arena, *La regolamentazione del lobbying in Europa.*
- 16 | 01 Vittorio Cotesta, *Max Weber e l'identità europea.*
- 16 | 02 Donatella Pacelli, *Two Paths of Analysing Totalitarianism in Europe. The Crises of Mankind in Kurt Wolff and Guglielmo Ferrero.*

CENTRO DI STUDI EUROPEI (CSE)

Dip. di Scienze Politiche, Sociali e della Comunicazione
Università degli Studi di Salerno
Via Giovanni Paolo II, 132
84084 Fisciano (Salerno), Italy
Tel: +39 (0)89 962282 – Fax: +39 (0)89 963013
mail: direttore@centrostudieuropei.it
www.centrostudieuropei.it

IL CENTRO DI STUDI EUROPEI

Il Centro di Studi Europei (CSE), fondato nel 2012, promuove e valorizza la ricerca sulla società, la storia, la politica, le istituzioni e la cultura europea, mettendo assieme le conoscenze dei ricercatori di diverse aree disciplinari del Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche, Sociali e della Comunicazione (DSPSC) dell'Università degli Studi di Salerno. Compito del Centro è la promozione della discussione pubblica sul tema dell'Europa mediante l'organizzazione di seminari e convegni nazionali ed internazionali, la cura di pubblicazione di studi e ricerche, la presentazione di libri, la promozione di gruppi di studio e di ricerca anche mediante il reperimento di fonti di finanziamento presso enti privati, pubblici e di privato sociale. Esso offre un supporto di ricerca scientifica e di pertinenti servizi alle attività didattiche di lauree triennali, magistrali e a master dedicati al tema dell'Europa e si propone di sviluppare e favorire contatti con enti, fondazione e Centri di altre università nazionali ed internazionali interessati alle questioni oggetto di ricerca da parte del Centro, anche attraverso lo scambio di ricercatori tra di essi.