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# **(In)visibility and counter-narratives in public space.**

A sociological perspective on the defacements of the statue of Indro  
Montanelli in Milan.

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## ABSTRACT

The object of this research is the series of defacements of Indro Montanelli's statue in Milan by various groups and collectives, including the feminists of Non Una Di Meno and students belonging to the Rete Studenti Milano and Laboratorio Universitario Metropolitano. Their "vandalistic" acts are interpreted as practices of bottom-up consumption of and in public space in the light of Cultural Studies, which allow to frame them as consumption-production activities of social actors and cultural agents involved in the struggle for meanings and identity construction processes.

I discuss how the voice and identity of subalterns, usually invisible or unambiguously represented in dominant narratives, can be made manifest by intervening in symbols deemed important to society, such as statues and public monuments. More specifically, I consider the particular situation of subaltern, female subjectivity, which bears the brunt of a "double" discrimination, at once sexist and racist. Through an intersectional approach, I highlight the coexistence and "intertwining" of different axes of oppression linked to categories such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, sex, etc., and how these intersections contribute to construct positions of marginality. In this case, since the story claimed by the soiling is that of the child bride Destà, bought by Montanelli during the fascist African campaign, the situation of specific subalternity and marginalisation that is considered is highlighted by the contributions of Gayatri Spivak and bell hooks. Their perspective as feminist and post-colonial scholars allows us to read the double violence exercised on non-white women by the patriarchal and racist society that has the power to shape the public space and reiterate through its symbols the dominant narratives and meanings, at the same time marginalizing the presence of others, as much in space as in history.

The aim of the research is to bring out the profound polysemy characterising these practices, sometimes pointed out as vandalistic, sometimes claiming collateral histories and counter-hegemonic positions, and which reveals different degrees of adherence to the dominant hegemonic codes of the society they belong to. In order to highlight the public conversation around the events, I analyse users' comments and reactions to a series of significant posts published on Facebook in relation to these actions, both by activists directly involved and by official institutions, thus highlighting the diversity and polarisation of opinions regarding the practices and status of the work in public space.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>INTRODUCTION - Social (in)visibility and representations in the public space</b> .....	11
1. The politics of public space .....	11
2. The subaltern in public space and the negotiation of power .....	16
<b>1. Introducing Cultural Studies</b> .....	27
1.1. Origins and context .....	27
1.1.1. British Cultural Studies: from the “culture and civilisation” tradition to culturalism .....	27
1.1.2. The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the expansion of British Cultural Studies .....	31
1.1.3. Cultural Studies today .....	34
1.2. Main approaches and key issues .....	38
1.2.1. Structuralism and post-structuralism .....	39
1.2.2. Political approach and Marxism: hegemony, agency and resistance .....	41
1.2.3. Meaning as practice in “Encoding and Decoding” .....	45
1.2.4. Representation and identity .....	49
1.2.5. Gender and race .....	52
<b>2. At the intersection: Spivak, hooks and the subaltern subject</b> .....	60
2.1. What is intersectionality? Who is at the intersection? .....	61
2.2. bell hooks and the margin as a site of resistance .....	67
2.3. Gayatri Spivak, the subaltern and the impossibility to speak .....	72
<b>3. Case study and methodology</b> .....	82
3.1. Case study: the statue of Indro Montanelli in Milan .....	82
3.1.1. Backstory: the controversial legacy of Indro Montanelli .....	82
3.1.2. A chronicle of the contestations .....	87
3.2. Methodology .....	92
3.3. Analysing online debates .....	99
<b>4. Digital-ethnographical inquiry of iconoclastic practices</b> .....	105
4.1. Facebook glossary: some definitions .....	106
4.2. Counter-hegemonic actions .....	108
4.3. Institutional responses .....	146
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	180
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	190
<b>List of figures</b> .....	203

## Introduction

The object of the present research is the series of defacements that feminist and student collectives, namely Non Una Di Meno (NUDM), Laboratorio Universitario METropolitano (LUME) and Rete Studenti Milano (RSM), made on the statue of Indro Montanelli in Milan between 2019 and 2020. This work aims at demonstrating how social and political activism is differently interpreted by audience at large – citizenry with a more or less homogeneous national-cultural background – according to the different positioning they adopt, the value they believe in and identify with, and the consequent narratives they read in such symbols and practices. Literature, but especially news about this topic abound mostly in international, post-colonial contexts, with the most recent contributions linked to the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement. In fact, the toppling and demand for removal of statues have been a worldwide phenomenon, particularly in the last three years. Nonetheless, the debate about controversial public symbols in Italy has attracted less attention, also because of the little (if not missed) addressing of the country's colonial past and its legacies – both in ideological and representational terms. In this sense, the attacks to the statue of Montanelli had the power to shake consciousnesses, create debate and show contrasting instances within society. For this reason, I chose to analyse in depth the case which seemed to be the most interesting in the Italian scenario, since it has foregrounded the issue of representation the need for a critical rethinking of it and the question of (in)visibility in public space.

I firstly encountered this topic during a course of Sociology of art consumption I was attending to, where the soiling by NUDM on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2019 was presented by our teacher as a case study. The “attack” to the statue – that was, pouring washable pink paint on it - had the clearly expressed aim of igniting a debate on history: by means of the paint, the activists wanted to draw attention on a controversial aspect of the life of the journalist, dating back to his young years as volunteer soldier during the Ethiopian campaign fought under the fascist regime. They claimed the presence of a counter-story, the life and existence of the child-bride Destà, a young girl of twelve that Montanelli married with a *madamato* contract. Although legal at the time, from the feminist viewpoint of NUDM that kind of marriage was nothing but colonial violence, so they answered to the “official” side of history celebrated by the statue by affecting that very symbol. They could manifest their dissent and, giving that space and representation a new meaning, building counter-narratives through it.

Although unknown to me until the lecture, the case particularly attracted my attention for its high symbolical reach, for its modalities and power of the message it aimed at sending. I eventually decided to go deeper into it, also considering the numerous other alterations and interventions which that statue has provoked and has come to *embody* in the last couple of years. In fact, after the action made by NUDM, the statue continued to be the target of various “attacks”, among which also the soiling with red paint and black spray made by the students belonging to the LUME and RSM collectives. These and other actions (I also quoted Le Indecorse and Manu Invisible) were labelled differently, sometime as art, social activism, or vandalism too, (un)civil protests or symbolical reappropriation, in a much larger global context which, on the wave of the Black Lives Matter movement, saw the toppling and ask for removal of statues of colonialists and confederates, newly interpreted symbols of racism and oppression.

In order to show the polyphony of voices meeting and rising from the symbols of our past, which overtly became controversial and contested in the present times, I considered these bottom-up practices on public symbols as well as the reception of the same by “common” people, who daily attend and inhabit such spaces. For this reason, I took advantage of the material I could find online, which gave me the opportunity to reach a good number and variety of voices and perspectives. Beside the high number of articles, videos and interviews – which also allowed me to hear from Montanelli himself –, I decided to direct my analysis on Facebook, a social network used by NUDM, LUME and RSM - for reaching a direct and closer communication, far from mainstream media channels – and by the institutional players I considered as *contra*, namely the mayor of Milan, Beppe Sala, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Luigi Di Maio. I particularly focused on some contents, such as posts from NUDM, the video-post of the soiling of the students, the video-answer of Sala and Di Maio’s response to the demand for removal.

I approached the data gathered from Facebook with a qualitative perspective and my inquiry was informed by digital ethnographic research. In fact, I started from the premise that digital media involves direct and sustained contact among social actors within the context of their daily lives and cultures, that expands beyond but is still very closed to the physical world, thus providing an additional, informative level useful and worthy to be looked at in this respect. Indeed, the actions of the collectives did not remain confined to the “offline” dimension, but the digital played an essential part in the spreading of the news, in the possibility to directly communicate with the followers and in creating follow-up debates which could be accessible even months or years after

they actually took place. Therefore, I conducted a “textual” analysis of their posts on Facebook. By “reading” the contents posted by users, mapping their social positions through their claims, their mutual relations (or absence of them) and semantic (not merely textual) choices, I could collect information about how they make sense of their lived experiences, who they say to be, how they fit within and negotiate their world and experiences. I proceeded from the particular to the general, allowing research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes occurring in the posts as much as in the spontaneous threads of comments created by the interactions among users. Chapter 3 contains a chronological report on the statue and is dedicated to the methodological aspects which I accounted for during the analysis, whereas Chapter 4 is entirely dedicated to it. The introductory chapter, together with Chapter 1 and 2, are more theoretically oriented and served me to prepare the floor for the following ones but especially for providing the framework sustaining my reasoning and supporting my analysis.

I began by wondering why so many different meanings public objects like statues – in their physical and material existence – can signify, and how they could also mean something so radically different from their initial intent. In order to understand the power that images, and in this case public representations, have on us, I introduced the topic of public space, recognizing its political potential in the way it is built and used, contributing to shape people’s ideas by proposing – and promoting – certain ways of seeing reality at expenses of other ones. In fact, reflecting on the urban visual landscapes– both in Italy and abroad – I also noticed how the building of dominant rhetorics, proposing and reinforcing the values of the ruling classes, also work by means of exclusion and invisibilisation. In the Western visual worlds, subjects with different attributes from the dominant ones (meaning whiteness and maleness most of the times) are systematically excluded from representations in public space, to the extent of invisibilizing their presence (and existence, consequently), affecting the processes of identity construction. Moreover, although sometimes the dominated is also represented, still his/her appearance is crystalised in specific ways, which also subtend the dominant rhetoric. In this sense, I took as exemplary the cases of the Emancipation Memorial (also called Lincoln Memorial) in Washington D.C. and the statue to the *Spigolatrice* in Sapri, Italy. In fact, both testify the shaping gaze of the white, chauvinist, racist and patriarchal society that built and commissioned them: the former, in its proxemic construction, reiterates the idea of a white, good saviour that the Black cannot but thank and knee down to; the latter, in its representation of a woman working in the fields, eventually resulting “historically” out of context

and explicitly sexualized by a male gaze. Therefore, I tried to give evidence of the non-neutrality of monuments in public spaces, embedded in the wider context of cultural hegemony. The idea of hegemony I relied on draws on Antonio Gramsci, whose theories were at the core of the theories developed at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies.

Indeed, Chapter 1 is dedicated to Cultural Studies (CS), a “field” rather than a discipline, which I adopted as theoretical framework for interpreting the practices of these collectives. CS have allowed me to consider the actions of the groups as bottom-up, active consumption-production practices, based on the premise of the agency recognised to subgroups in the social world, involved in the struggle for meanings and participating in power discourses, including those inscribed in public space. The openness and anti-disciplinary status of the field could bring attention on such practices, making them a worthy object of study in sociological research. In fact, after introducing the birth and development of CS, its main contributors and status with respect to other “more traditional” sociological approach, in the second part of Chapter 1 I reviewed the main influences and themes which informed both theory and practice as developed at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. After giving evidence for their inherent political commitment, and the expanded focus on gender, race and class questions, I also exposed Stuart Hall’s theory on communication and the encoding-decoding model to which I mainly referred for understanding the “misaligning” of positions between the “sender” (Milan’s city council which commissioned the monument) and the “receiver” (audience at large, including collectives), and thus the consequent mis-interpretation of the message embedded by the statue. Furthermore, the CS attention to an intersectional understanding of social phenomena made it possible to bring the attention to specific forms of injustice, subordination and marginalization while analysing forms of cultural resistance with a special attention to specific social intersecting variables.

In Chapter 2, I focused on the theme of intersectionality, adopting it as a lens for reading the multiple and co-occurring axes through which white, male power has come to oppress and exploit those different from him. In fact, the actions – especially that of NUDM – aimed at visibilizing the existence of a subaltern subject, black *and* female, who colonialist power relations also relegated to a sub-proletarian class position, so that racism and sexism embedded in colonialism could go hand in hand with the capitalist logic for the extraction of value. Given such co-occurring – but not competing – levels of discrimination and oppression, I wondered whether the subaltern could actually speak, and be listened to. To this purpose, I considered Gayatri Spivak’s idea and



development of the notion of the “subaltern” and bell hooks’ concept of the margin. More specifically, I aimed at highlighting the existence of a space for a re-articulation of practices and counter-hegemonic positionings of cultural players, which make it possible to create new, alternative and more inclusive representations where the dichotomy colonizer/colonized eventually disappears. hooks identifies such space with the margin, where it is possible to end discrimination and marginalisation insofar one is willing and capable to meet the marginalised in the space she has been forced to, but where she deliberately chooses to stay and speak from. The highest degree of marginalisation in representational terms is invisibility, as the total absence of Destà’s story in the “official” version proves: by acting on Montanelli’s physical embodiment, they avenged the presence of an “absence”, in historical and representational terms, which finally becomes visible.

After placing the practices of the collectives in the frame of Cultural Studies and acknowledging the existence of a space where they could work and challenge dominant meanings, I introduced the methodological aspects informing my research in Chapter 3. As already mentioned, there I provided a report on the history of the monument and a chronicle of the contestation of which it was object. I also traced key points of feminist methodology which moved closer to CS cultural research, particularly the notion of self-reflexivity and situated knowledge, in understanding self-awareness about one’s position, as being part of the object of study, and partiality of viewpoints. I eventually discussed a qualitative approach and the methodology of digital ethnography, accounting for the pros and cons one may encounter.

Finally, in Chapter 4 I provided more information about the social media I studied for the purposes of my research, that is Facebook, helping readers in understanding which specific contents and feature of the platform I focused on. The core of the chapter is dedicated to the screening and categorisation of data. I firstly gathered the posts I found interesting, analysed them in forms and contents, and then reported some of the most significant comments and repartees sparked from them. I commented on the comments in turn, trying to understand with whom people were identifying, who they claimed to be, where conflict rose from, on which bases they labelled the actions as vandalistic, or why some others referred to them as artistic intervention. I identified the different logics working behind, which reflected different degrees of adherence to dominant values and narratives, thus coherence with hegemonical codes and position. In fact, by applying Hall’s model of communication, I finally retraced separated categories of opposers or supporters, concluding that, although belonging to the same national community, meanings, practices and

representation are indeed never completed, concluded or closed in themselves; they are always susceptible to change and to be re-appropriated, where re-appropriation much resembles an activation process of “new” meanings, which were already embedded in them, but that could only now – in historical and contextual terms - find the spaces and means for their expression.

The controversy and debate on the statue are ongoing, for it has been cleaned and made to stay exactly where it was as it was, despite the demands for its removal, the various soilings and all the manifestation of dissent about it. Finding a solution that would meet everyone’s reasons is not an easy task and in any case, it would not solve structural discrimination and social injustice. I therefore concluded that, in order to prevent similar cases in the future, a radical change should take place right when cultural agents begin understanding such representation as “the norm” and acquire certain representational “canons” as natural. The long-term solution, in my opinion, could be acting in the field of education, teaching not only to question inherited symbols but also to challenge “traditional” education and canons in schools. In short, “visual literacy” and schemes of interpretations of reality could be advantaged if informed by feminism and intersectional thought. As bell hooks conceived it, a feminist education is the key to comprehension and reciprocal understanding, a disposition of listening to others without claiming to speak on their behalf. As I see it, a feminist education today would mean decrease of discrimination, hate and oppression in future society. As a consequence, exclusionary visual environment and social discrimination perpetrated (also) by means of representations could more easily disappear. An inclusive society could be born where no statue is toppled or removed, because no one feels discriminated, sexualised, alienated or angry by looking at public representations. If one day this is going to happen, then it will be the proof that patriarchy, racism, and chauvinism have finally lost their status of dominant narratives, ceasing to be the logics working behind symbols and images in public space.

## INTRODUCTION - Social (in)visibility and representations in the public space

### 1. *The politics of public space*

Public space is not univocally definable. Even if it happens to be so from a legislative point of view – depending on national legislation as well – it has been the concern of several fields and disciplines (from architecture to cultural sociology, from geography to political studies) to the extent it acquired more shades in meaning through different contributions. Nonetheless, our aim here is not to provide or search for a proper definition of public space (we will rely on Parkinson's view anyway), rather to consider it from a sociological perspective, paying attention to social processes and interactions happening *in* and *through* urban public space and its symbols, especially in the case of social conflicts. We will then try to understand why social conflicts also develop in the public space, and how.

The view of the social and political philosopher John Parkinson could be of help to investigate these questions. Parkinson recognizes three ways for defining public space (2009), but his concern as democratic thinker pushes him to consider *public space as the space used for public purposes*, for meetings or collective celebrations, but also the space “where the nation represents itself to itself; or where the state represents itself to the demos” (2009:3). In this sense, Parkinson asserts that capital cities in the specific are deliberately built to act in a symbolic way, both in their constructed existence, since they feature institutional buildings, monuments to public figures, memorials of significant events and in the use made from this space, hosting major national rituals or housing decision makers of political institutions. They embody symbols of national identity, ideals and aspirations, bringing the past into the present with its stamp of legitimacy and its contemporary political implications as well.

Parkinson (2009) considers how some US capital cities (Washington DC, Canberra, Ottawa) are built in order to symbolise their respective federations and reinforce the sense of national unity, while leaving out natives' representation in such spaces (thus, presence on the national identity level). In Ottawa for example, there is very little sign of the aboriginal Algonquin people and in the province of Nunavut (created in 1999): official buildings, statues and memorials to the native community are absent. In short, by design or by usage (or both), capital cities are symbols of national institutions, values, myths and norms, *containing* symbols but also *being symbols* in their turn. In

this sense, it can be seen how cities and their spaces “send signals of inclusion and exclusion, deliberately or otherwise” (Parkinson, 2009:10). Indeed,

They [cities] are also symbols of *who* constitutes the nation, *who* is recognised as being a part of the demos and *who* is not. This is partly on the basis of who gets depicted in dignified, formal settings [...] but [...] also on the basis of whose story lines and memories are given physical anchor points in the very fabric of the city itself (ibidem).

Public space conveys meanings, which are always socially constructed, and are filled with representations that actively contribute to shape both individuals’ and groups’ identities, beside provoking responses in actions and behaviours. Holding on to or affecting something physical in the public space – a depiction or the signifier level of a symbol for example – seems to be a way to assert one’s presence and position, visually in the first place, but also in a wider symbolical frame of reference, that has much to do both with past and its confrontation and the politics of identity. As Parkinson remarks, public space constitutes a significant part of the answer to the question about identity posed by McIntyre, “*of what story or stories do I find myself a part?*” (ivi, 5).

This is the major point. The presence and absence of depictions or symbols (thus occupation of space) in the public space mirror lower, asymmetric power relations among groups within a society. Such unbalance can be easily read in the spaces of Western cities. As a matter of fact, the spatial and geographical legacy of the Western world is bond to the choices of the leading groups politically in charge. They have held the power and the means to shape the world around them, by creating spaces, urban landscapes, distinguishing the private from the public. They have then placed buildings, statues, squares, flags – symbols, *things* they meant to communicate something to those who *look* at them. Indeed, it is true that symbolic resources of cities speak to some people but may not speak to others. The maps of meanings into which those resources are inscribed are not universally shared but always culturally constructed, thus likely to be misunderstood, their sense may remain opaque to some people or groups. In the case some people adopted an oppositional position – based on the premise of a shared and recognized system of interpretation -, social agents may deliberately address such symbols through counter-acts of resignification, which is what statues removals, destruction, substitution or general “affection” is meant to communicate.

The fact is that for the major part of what can be generally defined as Western history, leading groups were (almost) all white and men. I would like to frame this “coincidence” of attributes both from an intersectional and Marxian perspective.

To see it from an intersectional perspective means to consider the very peculiar situation of those individuals living at the intersection of multiple axes or categories that co-occur in building disadvantaged position in society. Here specifically, I confront the privileged position of Western ruling classes with individuals that are mostly non-white and non-male and live in a society in which they may have been experiencing positions of disadvantage and marginalisation. In fact, the term “intersectionality” was actually coined by the lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw in her paper *Demarginalizing The Intersection Of Race And Sex: A Black Feminist Critique Of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory And Antiracist Politics* (1989) to address the “opposite” situation of some black women who had asked for her help. In fact, she coined the word “intersectional” to give visibility - “for if you do not name things, you cannot see them” (Crenshaw, 2016) - to a phenomenon regarding her assisted, who suffered from discrimination on their job place *both* as women and as black individuals. Their condition was somehow “ambiguous” within the US legal system, since – as they suffered *both* from gender and racial discrimination – their case did not have correspondence with a specific “legally recognizable” situation; they could not be led back merely to one “category” of discrimination – thus could not receive proper legal protection, whereas according to Crenshaw the view should have been more global and considered the several dynamics interlacing different social variables, each having a weight in that specific situation.

By introducing intersectionality, Crenshaw tried to solve the “cracks” in the national legal framework to allow the judge *to see* the problems of her assisted. Intersectionality does not refer to the crossing of racism and sexism only, it also applies in more general terms to the social challenges experienced today from people living at the intersection of different social categorisations and belongings (so, beside sex and race, also class, gender, religion, disability, age, and all the possible intersections among them), which variably overlap and create interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Intersectionality is useful to consider the especially marginalised condition of black women, who suffer a double and very specific discrimination for entering the very same categories of race and gender with completely opposite attributes (*woman* and *black*) with respect to the hegemonical ones, physically embodying “the Other” of the white man *par excellence*. From the other side of the spectrum, intersectionality also contributes to shed

light on the privilege lived by white, male individuals in Western society, and all that comes with their chauvinist, colonialist legacies and mindsets.

Including a Marxian perspective and its materialistic approach to history here means to recognize the *actual* power of the dominant class – a specific group of white, male individuals - who were the historical force in Western society holding both the power and *actual means*<sup>1</sup> to display and deploy their values, also physically, in the real world<sup>2</sup>. Holding the power means holding the possibility to “imprint” the ways people come to understand the world they inhabit, by *proposing* (without enforcing) certain sets of codes as natural and legitimate: language, social behaviours and norms, political or economic models (thus, generally speaking, any aspect of culture) all pass through the “shaping gaze” of the dominant classes, which negotiate it with the other members of society, but with the final aim of orienting and guiding their ideas, values, beliefs and norms – and, of course, the interpretation of symbols at a very general level. In short, the ruling class creates ideologies from the economic structure, and they rule the society also by means of a cultural hegemony, which means to build consent in a pervasive manner but without imposing or enforcing it on society.

In short, this is the notion of hegemony as theorised by Antonio Gramsci (1975/1948) and elaborated by cultural practitioners at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. They saw ruling classes passing their codes and values to the other classes as inevitable and beneficial for everybody, to keep the power in their hands and the current status-quo in social interrelations. Hegemony is never intended as coercion, rather as the most “natural” way of doing and thinking<sup>3</sup> and it is valid for every aspect of life, comprising the idea itself of national heritage and public symbols. In fact, as Stuart Hall commented

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Western ruling élites – the dominant classes - held the means of production who allowed them to build society. The means of production are all those physical (financial capital, raw materials, tools) and non-physical (human capital, knowledge, theories and models) inputs that allow the production of goods and services. We will see in what follows how the dominant ideology resulting from a specific economic system is negotiated with subaltern classes from Gramsci’s perspective (Gramsci, 1975 ).

<sup>2</sup> Language fits into the matter as well, since the use of the masculine as the general rule to indicate individuals belonging to both sexes is the norm in several languages – including Italian -, but still it reveals an ideology working behind it (a male chauvinist one of course), given the arbitrariness of languages (see for example sociolinguistic studies spurred from Second Wave Feminism, which has developed into the independent subfield of Language and gender studies, as reported by Cameron, 2020). The pushing demands for changes in language too – the preferences for the more neutral graphic signs of the *schwa* and asterisk in place of masculine-markers – do witness counter-hegemonic attempts of (sub)groups who aim at symbolizing their own counter-values and positions through oppositional choices of expression within the same code.

<sup>3</sup> Such Gramscian notion of hegemony was fundamental for the development of British cultural studies, and class was their first category of analysis, then complicated by the consideration of ethnicity and gender.

the state is always, as Gramsci argued, “educative”. [...] Through its power to preserve and represent culture, the state has assumed some responsibility for educating the citizenry in those forms of “really useful knowledge” (Hall in Littler and Naidoo, 1999/2004:22).

On the premises that nation is a construction and that it is constructed by those who hold the power, Hall recognized national heritage (thus also statues and monuments) as a powerful source of meanings, meanings which are not natural or univocal, and that work bijectively. On the one hand, they vehiculate the hegemonic interpretation provided by the set of codes of the dominant group (we see statues and understand respect, honour, celebration); on the other hand, they contribute to reassert such meanings and perpetuate their existence in the social world, which in turn have an impact on the processes of identity construction of the citizens (understanding them as honour and celebration, we recognize them as important for the collective identity at large).

From this point of view, national heritage appears as the heritage of a specific class or groups, which has hegemonically built it on an akin arbitrary idea of nation and has consequently shaped public space so to see themselves – embodiment of the *nation* – in such spaces. Therefore, citizens recognize the importance of representation in the public space, they are able to see in it the reflection of *who they are*, or better *who they are supposed to be* as member of the nation-state, they can decipher the symbols surrounding them – for they have been given the codes to understand it -, but “it follows that those who cannot see themselves reflected in its mirror cannot properly ‘belong’” (ibidem). It is indeed true that the infrastructures of white supremacy form a material hierarchy, ranging from statues and monuments to informal housing of global cities within the global South (Mirzoeff, 2021:182). In fact, according to Nicholas Mirzoeff (2021), public spaces are “racializing assemblages” which “articulate colonial race theory” and “history as colonial destiny” (p. 184), in an attempt of whiteness to produce itself as a singular “Self”, also by means of segregation within the optical space of appearance. Despite its fractures and fragmentations, whiteness has tried to give itself a monolithic, solidified form through statues. By excluding and confining the visibility of others, the state-statue has reinforced itself and “over time, the dominating statue became part of the unnoticed established order, in various forms including the war memorial or Confederate statue” (185). In this sense, the statue of a colonist on pedestal

exemplifies, incarnates, and surrogates hierarchical domination: in its materiality and appearance, the statue aims at making “the racialized hierarchy static [...] immobile and unchanging”.

For example, Paul Gilroy considered the English context from this perspective, showing how, far from being outside of political meaning and cultural formation, race has been at the heart of English debates on what is meant by national culture, and on the nature and value of European culture and aesthetics. For him, nationalism has meant repudiation and exclusion, the drawing of borders and boundaries that by virtue of their very existence have defined a certain population *in negative terms* and tried to keep them within, but only in relations of exclusion and subordination (McRobbie, 1992:721).

Applying this reasoning to the reality of public spaces, it suffices to count how many public monuments (both in Italy and abroad) depict women, non-white people or disabled (and list could go on for a while) or how many streets, squares or gardens are entitled to them. The answer is almost none<sup>4</sup> – if none at all in some cases. This representational gap then pairs with the gender gap existing in our society at different levels, providing further evidence for public space non-neutrality.

## 2. *The subaltern in public space and the negotiation of power*

With a top-down movement, dominant groups could shape – also *materialistically speaking* - public spaces and fill them with symbols, building white-man-centred visual environments that systematically alienated and marginalized any form of subaltern’s presence in those spaces. The term “subaltern” is much appropriated here for it refers both to Gramsci – thus including a Marxist perspective – and to the postcolonial thought, especially with the birth of the Subaltern Studies group<sup>5</sup>. In *Quaderni del Carcere*, the idea of the subaltern appears as a relational more than a categorical definition (Liguori, 2016:99), since Gramsci applies it to different groups in history and to different contexts (from slaves in ancient Rome to Middle-age proto-proletarians and obviously

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<sup>4</sup> According to the analysis conducted by ATF (Associazione Toponomastica Femminile) in Italy in 2012, on one-hundred streets and squares dedicated to men, for example, only seven are dedicated to women (50-60% of which are religious representations of Mary, saints or martyrs). (“Le strade sono degli uomini: solo 7 su 100 intitolate a donne”, 2020) (“Donne dimenticate nei nomi delle strade: a loro intitolate solo 7 su 100”, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The Subaltern Studies Group is a group of South Asian historians who aimed - in a post-colonial view - at writing an imperialist history *from below*, so from the (intellectual) perspective of the colonised rather than the one of the colonisers (Ludden, 2003). Their focus is the political and active role of people belonging to the disenfranchised, valorising the perspective of those neglected by Eurocentric view of history, *the subalterns*.



industrial proletarians), anyway always highlighting their lower position in the social hierarchy and focusing on the interactions with the dominant class in the framework of cultural hegemony<sup>6</sup>.

The term was then employed by postcolonial discourse and came to determine those colonial subjects excluded from the hierarchy of power of the imperial colony, systematically relegated to an inferior position with respect to the colonialist class and deprived of an agency of their own. In any of the two acceptations, the subaltern is the subject kept at the margin of society and thus disempowered. The postcolonial subalterns are indeed defined by their impossibility to speak, for that when they speak, they cease to be the subaltern. The concept will be discussed more in detail later when commenting on Gayatri Spivak and her idea of the subaltern, linked to the group of Subaltern Studies. However, the possibility of speaking from a marginal space, intended as a radical space of possibility from where is possible to dialogue with the centre, is theorized by bell hooks.

Philosopher and post-colonial thinker Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) started from Gramsci, developing her notion of subaltern and drawing a further distinction between the subaltern and the oppressed. In her opinion, Gramsci used “subaltern” quite as a synonym of the word “proletariat” (Morton, 2007), but the term has then undergone a deep change in the post-colonial framework. In fact, it is true that all subalterns are oppressed, but not all the oppressed are subalterns: the oppressed can still react or be represented (for example an oppressed worker can claim their rights through syndicates), but the subaltern cannot, since although in some cases they can tell or speak about their experience, the only means through which they can do it are those furnished by the West, who legitimizes what the Other says only insofar it says it in the language of the dominant. In the end, the true voice of the subaltern disappears, which eventually justifies Spivak’s conclusion: the subaltern cannot speak. But this is not because of an absence of voice: although “the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard”, given that “hearing complete[s] the speech act” (Spivak, 1996:292). Then, the inability of the dominant in listening to her is the real reason why she cannot communicate. However, in her later theorisations, Spivak talks about some possible negotiations of the hegemonic position that could open spaces for the subaltern to *speak*. Those privileged should work to transform the “mainstream” in which the subaltern cannot enter

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<sup>6</sup> As previously introduced, cultural hegemony is defined as the general, shared perception that some commonly accepted (and dominant) codes, norms, beliefs are natural, legitimate and perpetual, whereas they are the product of artificial construction that contribute to the affirmation and perpetuation of the power of the ruling classes (Gramsci, 1975).

(Centro de Estudos Sociais da Universidade de Coimbra, 2018) and so creating conditions enabling her to speak.

From another - although somehow similar – perspective, bell hooks conceives the “margin” as the very space from where the subaltern can and has to speak, on the premise of an availability (and will) of the dominant to reach her in that very space. This overturns the idea of the margin from a space for oppression to a site of resistance: entering the margin while acknowledging one’s own position and privilege, without claiming to talk in the place of the marginal subject, is the first steps toward a mutual understanding and dialogue, which according to hooks is the path to follow if we aim at destroying the categories of colonizer/colonized.

In any case, the subaltern experiences different degrees of marginalisation, as it is possible to observe also (and especially) in the public space, at the material and at the symbolic level, both in the cases it is publicly represented and in the case it is not, thus excluded from the space where power and knowledge are produced and perpetuated.

In fact, Western visual imagery is populated by many representations, depictions of the *Other than itself*, the embodiment of everything that was different, the one who *was not* or recognized as the “negative” (meaning the lack in the moulding of identity) - the brute, the barbarian, the unfaithful, the *negro*, the redskin, the woman, the animal/ized. To reinforce their position in the society, the ruling classes managed to keep *the Other* confined to a marginalised position in the social structure - on different levels and with different means, legal and economic too - sometimes offering a physical embodiment (so visual presence) of its inherent difference in public space too. For example, during Universal Exhibitions - main events of attraction and *spectacle* in Europe between XIX and XX century, linked to the affirmation of Modern Nations and their “progress” – the Exotic was brought into the domestic visual asset by putting altogether animals, plants, curiosities, food and also people, most of times neglecting their human nature and reducing them to objects for showcasing (see for instance the human zoos exhibitions<sup>7</sup>), thus revealing an implicit racist and dehumanizing mindset.

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<sup>7</sup>As Jonassohn (2000) notes, the success of human exhibitions has to be located in the wide-spread European interest in foreign cultures and peoples which already existed since Columbus’ return from America, but that intensified during the XIX (and between XX) century, as the high demand of art and artifacts from India, Japan, China demonstrates. Moreover, he also argues that within the framework of imperialism and Western colonialism, human zoos largely contributed to provide conclusive evidence for the inherent superiority of the colonizers. Evolutionists and eugenicists could access human zoos as open data archives and conduct (pseudo)studies aimed at demonstrating the close connection of those ‘uncivilised’ people with apes and primates, rather than with white people. In this way, human zoos were useful for the scientific legitimation of the white race as the top-ranked race in hierarchical terms. Human zoos were successful also for economic reasons since such “attractions” were travelling exhibits and therefore

Many public monuments are explicative in this sense too, one among many being the Emancipation Memorial at Lincoln Park in Washington D.C. Although this monument aimed at celebrating positive values of emancipation and struggle for freedom<sup>8</sup>, the spatial position of the ex-slave within the composition is still clearly subordinated to the one of the President – the subject in the position of power - for the former is still on his knees and still depends on the white man even in (and for) his freedom. The ex-slave is still confined to subalternity and used to reinforce the positivity of the White, here being the hero and the freer. If one enlarges the picture and considers representations in the fine arts – paintings and sculptures –, literature – as Man Friday’s character in *Robinson Crusoe* – or advertisement<sup>9</sup> as publicly circulating visibility affirming a form of normative/dominant social gaze, it can be reasonably acknowledged that such representations ultimately existed only in a Western, upper-middle class white-man centred and polarised system, where Otherness was represented only to reassert the dominant subject position in the (social) world while contributing to perpetuate it as natural.

So, on one hand, marginal subjectivities suffer – most of times – from stereotyped, Western-centred and “social-crystallising” representations; on the other hand, they are deprived of the possibility to make up their own visual representations in the public sphere because they are not

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produced much more income. The “exotic” was often brought into households as well, where those people performed and served primarily to demonstrate the wealth of their owners and to impress their peers (at the very same level of *Kunstkammern*, thus as symbolic devices that demonstrates power and prestige). As a matter of evidence, objectification of the Other (non-white, animalised) to reinforce the Self (white, human) is the main relation established between West and East within the human zoos (Jonassohn, 2000). Similar examples also come from the freak shows, as the case of Saartjie Baartman, also known as the Hottentotus Venus, exemplifies. She was an African-born girl, sold as a slave, who was exhibited in Europe during the XIX century. Her body, considered “strange” and far from the Western standards was showcased around noblemen and middle-class salons, was reduced to an attraction and eventually crystallised in that objectified condition, as *something* to look at, coerced under the Western gaze and de-humanised.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the monuments dedicated to Lincoln was funded with wages of freed slaves. It was really wanted ‘from below’, by ex-slaves who wanted to celebrate the president that finally abolished slavery with the Emancipation Proclamation. Former slave Charlotte Scott started the funding in 1876 with the first free donation, to which many other followed thanks to publicity and some sort of crowdfunding. Nonetheless, once realized - by a white sculptor –, the monument attracted much criticism, for it shadowed the role of African Americans in their battle for freedom, and especially for the two figures that remark a condition of subalternity of the slave.

<sup>9</sup> In the advertisement world as well, representations of women and non-white women and men based on stereotypes were exploited to perpetuate subordination and despair relationships. For example, many American advertisement campaigns (soon extended to the whole Western society under the influence of the US hegemonical control in the Cold War context) of the Fifties and Sixties explicitly relegated (white as the only ones represented) women to the only role of wives and mothers, completely subjugated to their husbands, both in economic and social terms, and contributing to reinforce the strong patriarchal basis of the American society (Jacobs and Edwards, 2014). Another example could be old advertisement by Cook’s Lightning Soap which emphasised the power of the soap, able to wash blackness away. The message, which should witness the power of the soap, unconsciously reinforced the idea of blackness as something negative that should be solved.

involved from above to participate in making of public space. In a socio-cultural context where statues articulate white-male power, the Other's claim to exist disrupts nationalist claims and creates dissonance. Actions "affecting" the embodiment of the state, the state-statue, target the "aesthetics of respect" and unveil the material operations of colonial reason (Mirzoeff, 2021:190). That is why movements of protests do affect what already exists to show their presence, agency, and identity claims<sup>10</sup>: they bring "the world of the dispossessed into and onto the world of statues" (ibidem), since they were historically deprived of the possibility to speak and the means to do it, by. Without (re)presentation in it, the subaltern is further weakened, deprived of symbolic resources, and becomes even less socially *sighted*, invisibilized, or even worse, constricted into certain stereotypical representations that only reassert the hegemonic viewpoint on them.

One of the most recent examples of such distorted albeit naturalized viewpoint in national context is the monument dedicated to the *Spigolatrice*, set in Sapri in September 2021. This standing woman figure, "La Spigolatrice", should have celebrated the fictional character of Luigi Mercantini's poem, a woman working in the fields who follows at distance the failed attempt of Carlo Pisacane's expedition together with "three-hundred young and strong men", for starting a revolution against the Borbons at the time southern Italy was under their control in 1857. In short, the statue should have commemorated an important episode of the Italian Risorgimento, should have been a symbolic reference recalling a tragic event of the history of the country. Nonetheless, the statue that has been realised is a complete misrepresentation of reality - first of all in historical terms -, for no woman working in the fields could have worked in such adherent, light, quite invisible clothes, nor her body could have been exposed in such a way at the time. This case exemplifies the patriarchal and sexist point of view at the basis of the codifications that populate our public spaces today, the physical embodiment and actualisation of the implicit chauvinism pervading our visual world. One of the worst aspects of this case is the blindness of authorities in recognizing something wrong about that representation, unaware of the ongoing sexualisation and objectivization of women's body in public space, as well as the fact that both the (male) artist and the commissioners endorsing it are (as of now) deaf to the protests coming from female community, and so are politicians (F.Q., 2021).

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<sup>10</sup> As regards Italy, we can consider some practices of decolonization of the city of Padua through bottom-up initiatives, involving both marginal subjectivities and city communities committed to integration, solidarity and inclusion. (Frisina A., Tesfau M.G. and Frisina S., 2020).

Moreover, this case connects to the matter of subalterns' possibility of auto-representation in the public space. In the American context for example, artist Luciano Garbati realized a statue of Medusa in NYC on the wave of #metoo movement – who also positively welcomed the artwork - trying to overturn the classic Greek myth, choosing to represent Medusa with the head of Perseus in her hands and not vice versa. Although the message is quite clear and obviously in favour of women and empowerment, still the realisation of the work was assigned to a white, male artist, preventing again a direct participation of “subalterns” in the making of their own representation, as happened with the *Spigolatrice*, realized by a man. In addition, it is worth noting that Medusa's body is a completely naked one here too (apart from being very “normative”). This led me to question such formal representations, reflecting on whether they were a form of empowerment, sticking to traditional representations, or – again – another chance for showcasing a good-looking female body.

What to do, then? How could one speak against, or speak at least? Can the subaltern intervene and negotiate power and knowledge production making itself *(re)present*? And if it can, which means should it use?

On the premise that being powerful or powerless is inextricably linked to the occupation of space (de Certeau, 1984), de Backer, Dijkema and Hoerschelmann (2019) have focused their attention on everyday embodied spatial practices, micro-political acts of subversions actively performed by subgroups aimed at negotiating power via space occupation and practices of visibility/invisibility. Indeed, as public space is conceived as the locus for counter-politics and activism (Mitchell, 2003) (Low and Smith, 2006), Dijkema and de Backer (2019) investigate the performative and affective politics of everyday use of space, following Himada and Manning (2009:5) as they believe that “the micropolitical is that which subverts this tendency in the political to present itself as already formed”. This quotation echoes the Gramscian notion of hegemony, since it sees subgroups enabled with the possibility to contrast and subvert the dominant ideology – a body of politics given “as already formed” and aiming at passing as the natural and legitimate way of *doing, thinking*. In fact, in Gramsci's thought, dominant ideology indeed reflected the values, interests and beliefs of the ruling classes, but it was not imposed or enforced on the dominated classes. Instead, it was consensually negotiated insofar as it was presented as natural, permanent, beneficial for everyone, eventually going unquestioned. Since cultural hegemony is a *consensual negotiation of ideology*, it enables subalterns with the possibility of negotiating messages, values, beliefs, also overcoming the determinism implicit in traditional Marxist ideology.

The analyses collected in *The everyday politics of public space* (De Backer M., Dijkema C., Hörschelmann K., 2019) indeed highlight subalterns' agency in the public space, who claim their part in the city by disobeying norms that can be patriarchal, racist or intersectional, linked to practices of negotiating visibility/invisibility in the city. For example, Wijntuin and Koster (2019) point at the notion of resistance to analyse responses of this kind, such as those of female teens of North-African origin (the intersectional perspective here resurfaces again) seen as *agents* who resist male spatial dominance, in the perspective that sees them both as non-native in the context (*non-white*) and females.

Occupying space<sup>11</sup>, acting in and on it, modifying its symbols, are all practices imbued with strong political value, which involve processes of power negotiation and knowledge production embedded in the discourse of public space. The problem is still about the vocabulary one should use to enable change. Cindy Katz's minor theory (1996) is interesting in this sense, since she advocates for the constitution of a "minor literature" (a concept derived from Deleuze e Guattari), a space where the major language is subverted from within, "forcing it to express something different [...] in the capacity of the minor [...] [to be] transformative [...] a way of negotiating and reworking a space of betweenness to produce something new" (1996:496).

But assuming the existence of places where it is possible to concretely counter-act, destructive practices and physical affections of symbols can reasonably be interpreted as an attempt to break with the dominant ideology of the West and its values (in light of Gramsci's hegemony theory). In very recent years, those which had a major impact - at least on a media level for sure - are the worldwide upheaval against monuments that followed the homicide of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020. Images and news of people pulling down, destroying, soiling, or asking for removals of public statues (dominants' symbols) reassert some possible ways to manifest one's position against a whole system, to become publicly visible and contest the sexualising, racializing, objectivising gaze

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<sup>11</sup> Connected to this aspect, although from a different perspective, is the practice of occupation of public space as that which took place during the Occupy Wall Street protest in September 2011. The protestors occupied a portion of public space, Zuccotti Park, very close to Wall Street NY's stock exchange, for two months. They deliberately chose to make their presence evident in a place they considered meaningful, claiming their instances affecting what was seen as the centre of the capitalist system. This example reasserts the highly symbolical processes that underlie practices in the public space and the radical politics embedded in them. Franck K.A. and Huang T. (2012) comments on this intensive, creative use of urban public space as a tool of political action in four different cities, including NY and its Zuccotti Park. The occupation of a physical space gave these political movements international visibility especially through the transmission of detailed and evocative images in the media. This aspect is essential, for being visible on media means to reach more and more people and helps gaining that so yearned visibility.

of the dominant. The modality is then to appropriate his codes and oppose them from within, by contrast and counteractivity.

From a symbolic perspective, the reading from the margin, through “post-White-Man” lenses, has finally unveiled the patriarchal and racist dialectics that has created and placed those statues in the public space under the *social gaze*, which so much contributed to the building of symbolical environments, beside physical ones. Indeed, depictions of the White-Man *as* the Colonizer, the Master, the Father, the Husband have been visually and physically affected to provoke a reaction in the system sustaining them, at a deeper level. At the same time, attacking a monument, intervening on it somehow, is a way to appear and make their presence manifested in the public space: subgroups fighting for their “right to appear” (Butler, 2004) in a system where “visibility is the vehicle and guardian of social existence” (Honneth, 2004). This reading eventually explains why social movements that represent subaltern communities (Black Lives Matter, MeToo, Non Una Di Meno, Decolonize This Place) have directed their counter-practices toward public monuments. They challenged dominant representations and claimed the right to look back, to (re)appropriate the dominant imagery critically through bottom-up practices eventually creating some sort of “visual resistance”<sup>12</sup>. By disobeying norms<sup>13</sup>, subaltern and marginalized subjectivities reveal their presence and their status of social agents in the public space in the attempt to overcome the socially constructed condition of invisibility in which they have been historically confined (and defined). Bottom-up upheaval against monuments is a worldwide phenomenon, witnessing the presence of subalternities’ claims throughout different system of oppression linked to Western legacy, may them be more or less patriarchal, racist, or both.

Anti-racist claims were indeed at the basis of monuments violent removal, as in the case of slave-trader Edward Colston’s statue (BBC, 2020), thrown in the water of Bristol Harbour during protests in 2020, or that of Confederate General Lee in Virginia, officially asked for removal after being completely covered with colourful writings and projected with portraits of George Floyd and other

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<sup>12</sup> Also, artistic practices such as graffiti or murals may be seen as bottom-up, counteractivities of this kind, since their aim too is to draw attention on those which are invisibilized in the actual visual environment of the city.

<sup>13</sup> That is, by affecting dominant, visual representation in counter-active ways. Indeed, “affection” and “alteration” are here used as general labels since there are different degrees of intervention on public monuments which develop in different ways. It can be destruction or removal, violent at times – those more likely to be addressed as “iconoclastic” practices; they may be interventions, more or less invasive, ranging from “vandalistic” soiling, to graffiti or collaborative project connected to street art, negotiating practices that aim at integrating social conflicts keeping in consideration eventual preservation of the monument on a heritage level.

victims of white police violence (Morris, 2020)<sup>14</sup> in the wake of the BLM protests. A similar case – that primarily started from women’s protests and concerns – is the dismissal (after the vandalistic attack of February 2019) of “Unconditional Surrender”, a public statue in Sarasota, Florida, that recalls Alfred Eisenstaedt’s black and white image of Time Square celebrations at the end of World War II and that many interpreted as non-consensual, thus an event that should not be celebrated or romanticised (Chapman, 2020). Another outstanding example is the dislocation of Marion Sims’ statue in NY. Despite being considered the father of modern gynaecology, Sims conducted tremendous experiments on female slaves, usually without any anaesthesia. In August 2017, several members of Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100, 2017) - an equal rights Black youth activist group founded in 2013 – avenged the “collateral” side of medical progress by staging a demonstration in protest of the statue. Dressed in hospital gowns spattered with red paint, their visually impacting demonstration called attention to Sims’ practice of surgery and experimentation on three enslaved Black women, Anarcha, Betsy and Lucy (Igbo, 2017). They stated their names, called them, in order to recognize them with a dignity of their own and aiming at giving them a space in history, from where they were excluded by the dominant narration embedded in Sims’s monument and celebration (Lockhart, 2018).

Although different in modalities and outcomes, such claims are increasing in number, asking to be *looked at* and *being heard*<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, the interest for this topic sparked from a very specific case - which is also the leading case of the present research, the soiling of Indro Montanelli’s statue in Milan by the feminist collective NUDM (Panico, 2019) (La Repubblica, 2019). With very similar means and aims of the Sims’ statue removal case, NUDM poured washable, pink paint on the monument of the journalist, avenging the existence of a “collateral” story that official representation has neglected and shadowed, the story of the young girl that Montanelli married in Ethiopia during the fascist colonial campaign. Such marriage was legitimate – also legally - at the time, thus “justified” and tolerated in that context, but what about now? Can a monument to such a person be tolerated in public space? It overtly clashes with other values that the same democratic,

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<sup>14</sup> Updated list of removals following George Floyd’s death is available at “List of monuments and memorials removed during the George Floyd protests”, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> This kind of political activism is also referred to as “wokeness” or “woke culture”. The term was first used in the US to incite people to “stay awake”, meaning to be aware in recognizing social injustice and discrimination in all their forms, including sexism. Although already existing in Afro-American Vernacular English in the 30s, “woke” was reappropriated by BLM after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. From there on, “woke” has been used both “as a shorthand for political progressiveness by the left, and as a denigration of leftist culture by the right” (Romano, 2020). In rightist environment, woke is usually paired with political correctness and cancel culture, also acquiring a pejorative and sarcastic meaning.



anti-fascist society defends and bring on – in theory. The accuses of paedophilia are legitimate, for the girl was very young at the time<sup>16</sup>, as much as those of racism, since Montanelli stated that he would have not done the same with a European girl of the same age. But beside accusations, the matter is *who decides which story is the story worthy to be told?* The multiple soilings on the statue (NUDM's one was not the only one) clearly reveal wide disagreement with that symbol, with that representation. Montanelli was an important journalist, a reference for free thought, but still, he married and raped a child and never regretted it. And then, *who decides who and what is going to be represented? Should counter-instances be neglected? Can they find a proper place besides dominant narratives or, eventually, dismantle the latter?*

In conclusion, understanding symbolic representations is essential for democrats and politicians as much as for cultural practitioners since, beyond accessibility concerns, public space remains the place where society and its members see themselves *represented*, not merely depicted, but to have their narratives symbolised – thus also narrated and commemorated - in public space, and this is the true challenge. As the news shows us, public space and its representations are the battlefield – one among others - for competitive narratives and alternative stories, those who have always been there (and “legitimized” to be there) and those who have always been there too but remained in the shadow of history, unheard or without the means or possibility to publicly speak.

Among the many cases of counteractivities in the public space from contemporary world, Montanelli's case will be specifically investigated. In order to provide a socio-cultural analysis of such practices and eventually answer the question about subalternity presence and the possibility of counter-narrations, Cultural Studies are chosen as theoretical framework and digital ethnography as research method. Indeed, the approaches belonging to the Cultural Studies tradition will allow me to consider a variety of themes – such as the already mentioned identity, representation, political agency, oppositional codes – and interconnected theoretical frameworks according to an intersectional perspective – helping to keep the focus on *people doing things*, so on material practices which affect and develop through and within the real world, holding to the CS lesson of *theory as practice* (and of representation as a process of identification). On the other hand, the qualitative approach of digital ethnography will be useful to analyse the already existing online debates where users (on social networks) and commenters (interviewed politicians) have argued

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<sup>16</sup> The actual age of Destà – or Fatima, also her name is in doubt – was uncertain, for Montanelli himself was not precise in recalling the details about his young “spouse”, but, as he reported in different occasions, she was approximately between twelve and fourteen.

and – some more, some less – explained their positions, develop their arguments in favour or against modifications/removals, providing an interesting conflictual landscape of voices, which enlighten the polysemy of both the actions against social symbols and the status of a public work such as a monument.

## CHAPTER 1 - Introducing Cultural Studies

Cultural Studies (CS) has never been easy to inscribe neither in a definitive label or in a univocal method. Its very being – or better, *becoming* – has rejected the “constrictions” of academicism while keeping its boundaries sensitive to other disciplines’ contributions, eventually welcoming scholars and thinkers from countless other fields that enriched and progressively tried to complete its view and approach in the analyses of culture and cultural products. Indeed, CS should not be thought of as a specific, “orthodox” scientific area nor can it be defined within the boundaries of a specific field of interest. It should be rather thought as a *space* where “diverse set of analytical practices can take place” (Walton, 2007:291), conceived more as a practical way of investigating man’s *everyday life* through a research strategy which takes advantage of a large number of disciplines, objects and approaches (Grossberg, 1994).

CS is heterogenous in contents, contexts and applications, mirroring its neither linear nor homogeneous history, which suffered from many ruptures, discordances and debates as well. Nonetheless, scholars have generally recognized some focal points that marked the origins and turning moments in the development of CS as a socially and politically engaged intellectual practice.

### 1.1 Origins and context

#### 1.1.1 British Cultural Studies: from the “culture and civilisation” tradition to culturalism

The origins of CS date back to the end of the XIX century in Great Britain, where a lively interest for culture, and especially popular culture, animated both the work of Matthew Arnold and the following reflections of the Leavis circle, linked to F.R. and Queenie Leavis. These thinkers are still regarded as early influential models of cultural analysis for their efforts in defining culture, the emphasis they put on and the debate they opened on it, eventually inaugurating the so-called “culture and civilisation” tradition (Walton, 2007).

Arnold’s work was inherently bond to the broader reflection of his time on literary critic and literature, seen as *the* embodiment of English culture – i.e *Englishness* – and the proper way to bear and spread civilisation and moral education. Indeed, Arnold defined culture as “the best that has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold, 1960:6), a means of moral guidance that could

counterbalance the excessive materialism and utilitarianism of his age while bringing a positive change in society. In this sense, culture for him was charged with a sort of mission and could not be divorced from politics (Walton, 2007:26). Indeed, the teaching of English Studies – as the core of English culture – acquired a political connotation, both in the case it was used as “civilizing” guide for the education of Indian élites and in the attempt of gentrifying (some parts of the) working-classes in the view of a hegemonic control. In any case, Arnold’s cultural critic was soon adopted and extended by F.R. and Queenie Leavis and their circle around the journal “Scrutiny”. Still taking the moves from literary critique, the Leavises reasserted the elitist nature of English culture, especially comparing it to the “lowering” mass culture coming from the USA, seen as the main responsible of the cultural crisis of their time. In their advocating for the defence of “high” – English – culture, they eventually draw the attention (albeit negatively) to forms of popular culture and mass consumption, contributing to develop a form of cultural criticism linked to resistance (of high culture against the low) and consciousness-raising, which was to be essential for the future development of CS. Moreover, popular cultures like the press and advertising were analysed, valued and understood through the literary technique of “close reading”, thus contributing to the shift from the analysis of texts to cultural texts in general. The Leavist circle became the arena for the debate between high and popular culture, defining what “exploring culture” would have meant in English academic life for a long time to come. Although Arnold and Leavis are not the only influential thinkers setting the field of interest of CS<sup>17</sup>, they are nonetheless essential for the rise of cultural criticism in Great Britain while underlining the prominence of English Studies and literary critic to it.

Literature, literary critic and adults’ education were the starting point also for an essential author in CS development, Richard Hoggart, and his *The uses of literacy* (1958). Hoggart believed that the methods of literary critic were useful also for the investigation and analysis of other cultural forms and products, thus enlarging the field of English Studies beside the canonical “high” cultural forms of literature, music and art. The first part of the book was based on his ‘lived’ experience, as he was himself a member of the working class. He extended the Leavis’ view on popular culture offering an “insider” view and, by relying on the participant observation typical of the ethnographic method<sup>18</sup>,

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Walton (2007) also cites T.S Eliot – for his transnational view on culture close to anthropology - and T.W. Adorno – for his critique to culture industry.

<sup>18</sup> The first part of *The uses of literacy* was based on his personal experience as he was himself a member of the working class, while the second part relied instead on academic research. Despite not concerned with method questions, the lived experience as methodological starting point was to become essential in Cultural Studies and highlights Hoggart’s importance in grounding the field.

he aimed at showing the richness, meaningfulness and value of working-class cultural practices, conceived as a legitimate object of study and positively connoted. His analyses were not focused on culture intended as exemplary works, but his concern was everyday life, which was “intrinsically interesting” (Hoggart, 1990:120). Moreover, with his insights on tastes, behaviours, language and common practices, he aimed at showing the active role of working class in making, choosing and adapting culture, taking the distance from the disempowered and passive view of Adorno’s critique<sup>19</sup>.

At the same time, along with his considerations, E.P. Thompson also underlined the agency of working classes beyond conditioning from the dominant culture. As a Marxist historian, Thompson conceived working class as an “historical force itself [...] present at its own making” (Thompson, 1963/1968:8), and involved in the struggle with other groups for the articulation of identity (based on their shared common experiences, that made them unique) in the general idea of class as *a relation* rather than a category, created through processes driven by human agency rather than from merely structural determinants. In his view, conflict between different forms of cultures was crucial for the formation of the working class: by observing patterns in relationships, ideas and institutions throughout history (from Jacobin agitations to Luddism), Thompson showed the inherent agency and counter-hegemonic behaviour of the working class, claiming rights and expressing its thoughts, fighting for political and social recognition, eventually developing its own class consciousness. Although being a historical work, *The Making of the English Working Class* could explore how popular and alternative cultures were produced through struggle, political agitation and resistance, emphasising the role of culture as igniter of social changes (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:24).

Similar instances were also at the basis of *The Long Revolution* (1961), another milestone text for the grounding of CS. In fact, its author - Raymond Williams<sup>20</sup> - shared with Thompson the politically

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<sup>19</sup> In Adorno and Horkheimer’s view (1982) – and more in general, according to the philosophers of the Frankfurt School - masses had no possibility to subtract themselves from the manipulation circuit and subordinating forces to which they were subjected by the capitalist system. Mass culture was intended as a product itself of the industrial system – a commodity within the culture industry - and merely another means of their exploitation, providing an entertainment which contributed to keep them alienated and unaware of their conditions. From this perspective, working-classes were deprived of agency, totally absorbed by the system and disempowered.

<sup>20</sup> Williams shared with Hoggart both the proletarian origins and the job in the field of adult education. Moreover, they both started their cultural analyses by applying the “close reading” typical of literary critic to “texts” generally intended as cultural productions of different kind, newspapers, advertisement, radio, films and also urban planning (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:22).

engaged approach to the reading of culture, insofar they both saw it as a dynamic process resulting from struggles for social and political changes, showing awareness of historical circumstances and materialist basis. Williams defined culture as the set of “relationships between elements in a whole way of life” (Williams, 1965:35), thus encompassing an entire world of active and interacting relationships including politics, art, science, religion, family life and so on. Indeed, important for his method was to get close to shared values and experiences, the ‘actual life’ as it was lived by particular groups in society (Walton, 2007:134). It follows that in his cultural analyses everything becomes a worthy object of study that should be understood in relation with other to discern meaningful patterns and interrelations. Since no aspect of culture should be left off from investigation, Williams helped to reinforce an anthropological view of cultural analysis as well as expanding its object also to media, television, press and other communication systems – a broadening of literary reading similar to Hoggart’s.

In the light of their common theoretical concerns, Hoggart, Thompson and Williams’ texts may be considered as a whole body of work that marked the emergence of the future approach of CS to popular culture, known as culturalism<sup>21</sup>. Actually, culturalists were not a specific group or movement following common goals, but they were defined as such only by later critics. Culturalism is an important approach to cultural analysis for methodological reasons since its perspective stresses on agency and experience, beside recognizing popular culture as a worthy area of study. The culturalist paradigm inaugurated by these authors was to become a milestone in CS research because

by analysing the culture of a society – the textual forms and documented practices of a culture – it is possible to reconstitute the patterned behaviour and constellations of ideas shared by the men and the women who produce and consume the cultural texts and practices of that society (Storey, 2006:29).

The culturalists are generally acknowledged with the merit of having broken with the previous culture and civilisation tradition – thus the Arnoldian-Leavist approach - and overcome it, contributing to Cultural Studies by placing great emphasis on the importance and meaning of

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<sup>21</sup> As Storey reports (2006:39), culturalism carries two quite different meanings. Here it is referred to as the description of a particular methodology and not as a term of critique.

working-class history, consciousness and ways of life (Walton, 2007). Although each of them was important for grounding theoretical bases, it was Hoggart that took the credit for the foundation of the first institutional home of CS, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in 1964.

### *1.1.2 The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the expansion of British Cultural Studies*

So, British Cultural Studies drew on the basic assumptions of culturalism, channelled through the traditions of English sociology and history. Gradually, culturalism was soon brought into complex - and often contradictory - relations by research in the Centre, especially under the directorship of Stuart Hall, who imported influences of French structuralism as well as the neo-Marxist thoughts of Althusser and Gramsci.

In Hoggart's view the studies conducted at the Centre should have allowed analyses of a variety of cultural products especially focused on proletarian life and culture, from practices to institutions, fashions, and media, keeping in mind the literary origin of the studies themselves while adding sociological and political<sup>22</sup> components as well. Interdisciplinarity was key in this sense but required more stable, theoretical basis, which is the reason behind Stuart Hall's arrival at the Centre, of which he became director from 1968 to 1979.

On the one hand, Hall introduced French structuralism, thus linguistic structuralism and its semiotic variants, from Lévi-Strauss' anthropology to Barthes' cultural critique, allowing the "textual" interpretation of culture; on the other hand, the complex notion of ideology – as elaborated from Althusser and Gramsci – brought the political concern at the root of cultural analysis, which, in conceiving culture as the site of ideological struggle, eventually opened to the recognition of polysemic nature of cultural messages and the understanding of the power relations inscribed in culture. Furthermore, post-Freudian<sup>23</sup> thought as that of Lacan contributed to expand the theoretical and methodological basis of Cultural Studies, reuniting semiotic, psychoanalytic, and

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<sup>22</sup> The rise of Cultural Studies in Great Britain cannot be divorced from the political instances of the New Left, a radical political movement which developed around the '50 and had a strong influence in the intellectual panorama of the time. Differently from the Labour traditional left – still centred on work, class and class struggle – the New Left enlarged its concerns to anti-racism and anti-imperialism. This political commitment was evident in Hall's leadership at the CCCS.

<sup>23</sup> Psychoanalysis was used as a method for reading texts and practices as well. Lacan developed Freud's theories by applying structuralism to it, anchoring psychoanalysis to culture rather than biology. His account for the development of a human subject was of special importance in Cultural Studies and in the study of films (Storey, 2006:79).

neo-Marxist theories in the analyses of cultural phenomena, making textual analysis the preferred method for the interpretation of these phenomena (Lutter C. and Reisenleitner M., 2002/2004:29).

The inherent interdisciplinarity of the project was directly linked to a certain theoretical opening towards methods and approaches which allowed British Cultural Studies to never lose its innovation capacity. Beyond Hoggart's main interest for popular, working-class culture, lived experience and daily life became a special concern and aspects of ethnographic research entered the textual analysis<sup>24</sup> of culture (Lutter C. and Reisenleitner M., 2002/2004:30). In *Resistance through rituals* (1976), Hall and Jefferson gave insights on the most important theoretical methods and methodologies developed at the Centre in those years. They expanded Hoggart's interest in popular culture first to youth subculture, and then to subcultures in general, analysing how each relates to the categories of class, gender, race, ethnicity in its responses, processes of meaning negotiation and identity formation.

In any case, those very categories of race and gender were problematised and enlarged firstly from scholars inside the Centre, witnessing the irregular and disrupted history of CS. In fact, feminist theories and post-colonial thought problematised the notion of class and brought to a further expanding of CS field, as it will be explored in more detail in what follows (paragraph 2.2.2).

In 1979, the directorship passed to Richard Johnson, who reduced the importance previously given to textual analysis in favour of daily-life history and culture, especially considered at the light of both Gramsci and de Certeau's theories on hegemony and human agency. Cultural analysis in this period was increasingly directed towards forms of resistance and open conflict (*in and over culture*), on meanings elaborated by non-dominant classes (and their possibility to adopt and adapt hegemonic culture). With Jean Larrain as director, the CCCS eventually assumed the features of a regular academic institution (Lutter C. and Reisenleitner M., 2002/2004:32).

British Cultural Studies in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies were the pioneering field for cultural analysis grounded on a Marxist basis still able to complexify it, by means of a constant, close confrontation at the light of the hermeneutic stimulus of French theorists such as Althusser, Foucault and de Certeau. They represent the very first attempt of emancipation from

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<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, given the peculiar tradition and origin of CS, ethnographic research with its participant observation and empirical social research were not translated into corresponding methods in CS. Rather, they were adopted as part of a more general, politically engaged approach.



Marxist “determinism” (intended as economic reductionism) without renouncing to the class-based analysis of culture. Indeed, they were the starting point for important academic and non-academic renewals also outside Great Britain. In the late Seventies and during the Eighties, British Cultural Studies international spreading met an enormous success in the US: its overseas developments, claiming the centrality of other categories than class, further problematised CS and expanded the field.

Cultural Studies in the United States were rooted on the political background of the second post-war epoch. It rose as intellectual and political project in opposition to the conservative atmosphere of McCarthyism at the beginning of the Cold War and the birth of the US as a superpower. Despite the political ferment of the Sixties – including protests against the Vietnam War and civil rights movements - the socialist critic against consumerism was neglected and leftist positions gradually emarginated. Indeed, the notions of class, culture and working-class struggle had a marginal role in American Cultural Studies, which remained less progressive with respect to the British CS and more oriented toward consensus (Lutter C. and Reisenleitner M., 2002/2004:37). Nonetheless, CS’s success in the US was witnessed by the boom of courses, enrolment, publications, and projects at the beginning of the Eighties (Ferguson and Golding, 1997:XVI), which much linked American Cultural Studies to the institutional and academic world, attracting critics that commented the loss of the original political and pedagogical instances, seeing publications and conferences as the only – insufficient – instruments of communication and engagement with the reality (Davis, 1995:140).

Cultural Studies faced a “crisis” – intended as a moment of change – in the rise and encounter with alternative forms of cultural analysis emerging from Europe and USA, from overseas, especially from the ex-colonies of the British empire, which involved a post-colonial discourse and reflection as well. The hegemonic position of British-American Cultural Studies was problematised with the introduction of themes such as sex, gender, race, and nation because they needed to be re-considered into cultural analysis at the light of the emergence of post-colonial (and feminist) subjects. Indeed, “non-Western” Cultural Studies aimed at expanding the traditional British concern on class-belonging as the main social determinant, and instead claimed the existence of inter-classist forms of determination<sup>25</sup>, that were more complex and linked to cultural-biological factors (Lutter C. and Reisenleitner M., 2002/2004:XXIII). Each of these “new” development of Cultural

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<sup>25</sup> This aspect will be essential in the discussion on intersectionality in following chapters as the peculiar condition of Black Women is doubly discriminating, both from a gender and racial perspective, as female and as black individuals.

Studies was declined in themes and discussion according to contexts, following cultural and historical features that determined relevant questions in each context<sup>26</sup>. The emancipation instances of subgroups such as feminists, new sexual identities (queer, lesbians, gay, cyborg), black people and post-colonial identities in general could be welcomed in Cultural Studies thanks to the deep openness in approaches and methods which has always characterised it in all its forms. Indeed, Cultural Studies shares with feminist and post-colonial research the political demand of making knowledge and its production useful tools for uncovering the power relations and dominance structures hidden in (dominant) culture (ibidem, 122).

Stuart Hall summarised the interrupted, “cracked” history of Cultural Studies when stating that “it has never been one thing” (Hall, 1990a:11). It has always been a “conjunctural practice” in the sense it has always adapted to its “terrains”, thus variable socio-historical contexts populated by different groups, involved each in its own way and on different dimensions in the processes of meaning and identity making, which are indeed the focus of CS. Indeed, beside the different implications it has acquired, the multiple methodologies it has adopted and the concerns it has focused upon across time and space, a common feature to Cultural Studies lays in its being an intellectual *praxis* that aims at reading and describing the daily life of social actors embedded and inscribed in their actions, practices and interrelations *in their happening throughout the world*; at the same time, the search for a balance between political commitment – thus practical attempt to change -, theoretical approach and empirical analysis makes it a powerful approach for the investigation of cultural practices still today.

### 1.1.3 *Cultural Studies today*

To complete this introduction on Cultural Studies, it is useful to understand how it is related to contemporary sociological analysis of culture, which is mainly divided in two distinct approaches, the sociology of culture and cultural sociology.

In first place, the main difference and basic assumption from which to start is that, while the sociology of culture seeks to explain the cultural *in function of the social* (thus intending it as a

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<sup>26</sup> For example, in Latin America they were media, democracy and the relation between “native” culture and USA’s one; in Africa, they were the struggle for cultural freedom and political activism; in Canada, it was linked to its past of bilingualism and multiculturalism, beside the difficult relation with the hegemonical power of the USA; in Australia, they were rooted in its historical experience of fragmentation and overlapping of identities (Lutter C. and Reisenleitner M., 2002/2004:42).

dependent from), cultural sociology – as practiced and theorized by Jeffrey Alexander, for instance in *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology* (2003) - insists on a view of society as intrinsically cultural and always culturally constructed. In cultural sociology, culture “is an ‘independent variable’ that possesses a relative autonomy in shaping actions and institutions, providing inputs every bit as vital as more material or instrumental forces” (Alexander, 2003:12). In short, while the former looks at cultural phenomena as a product of social processes, the latter sees culture as a nodal component to grasp the meaning of social phenomena (Griswold and Carroll, 2012). Nonetheless, since cultural sociology gives primacy to the cultural sphere and brings questions of the symbol to the forefront, Alexander sees an implicit form of cultural studies in Durkheimian sociology, specifically in his work on the elementary forms of religious life (1961/1997), which accounts for the centrality of the symbolical and the sacred, rituals and networks of symbols underlying societies (Alexander, 2003) - as well as in the anthropology of Marcel Mauss and his theory of the gift (Serafini and Lash, 2016).

On the other hand, Cultural Studies does not share, at least from the beginning, the same sociological and anthropological bases, as it was born from literary critic and largely developed in the field of humanities. Still, we can affirm that the humanities act like a bridge between Cultural Studies and cultural sociology, mainly because Alexander has relied upon concepts belonging to them (humanities) for the development of his theories and social research. For example, he has considered as central the notion of discourse (starting from its Saussurian origin) and the binarism of semiotic codes (applied to the Durkheimian distinction between sacred and profane) to develop a relational theory of meaning, but has also taken into account hermeneutics and interpretation, the literary concept of narrative, performance (in place of the more general concept of “action”) and iconic symbols (Larson, 2014:76/78). Furthermore, the interest in speech and - most important - in discourse has directed cultural sociology toward the use of a large variety of data, from recordings to in-depth interviews, but also polls and data sources from social media and the blogosphere, which “produce a tremendous thickness of meaning and cultural structure” (ibidem, 79). From this point of view, it can be seen how the question of scientificity<sup>27</sup> is not paramount neither in cultural sociology nor in Cultural Studies, as far as their analyses are still able to provide cultural interpretation of social phenomena and insights on discourse and meaning production. In fact, whereas sociology was purposely founded upon works which aimed at making it a discipline of

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<sup>27</sup> With this, I intend that such disciplines do not focus on demonstrating their scientific rigour neither aim at getting the “official” label of “science”, as far as their methodological and analytical tools work in practice and enable to produce effective analyses of cultural phenomena.

its own, clearly distinguishable from psychology or philosophy and built on scientific bases with its own methodology, Cultural Studies has always criticised traditional understandings and practices of disciplinarity, maintaining and promoting an interdisciplinary basis for its praxis. According to Scott Lash, representant of the “second generation” of British Cultural Studies at the Goldsmiths College of London, Cultural Studies

will have reference not so much to Durkheim and Mauss [...] but instead to Foucault, Deleuze, and say Agamben or Negri, who are philosophers. But this doesn't mean that Cultural Studies is not in touch with cultural processes, and by extension, the symbolic (Serafini and Lash, 2016:6).

Indeed, for Alexander, the adjective “cultural” found in both Cultural Studies and cultural sociology refers far more to a sociology of symbolic processes (Serafini and Lash, 2016:1). He claims that Durkheim turned to the study of religion "because he wanted to give cultural processes more theoretical autonomy" (Alexander, 1988:2), suggesting that there were "parallels" with the work of Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Barthes, and Foucault, which in some cases seemed to be an unacknowledged influence of Durkheim (Wolff, 1999:505). Although taking the social-theoretical basis from Durkheim, Alexander takes the distances from mainstream sociology connected to Bourdieu, rejecting the limitations implicit in the assumptions of a conscious, rational and voluntary behaviour that is central to his method (Serafini and Lash, 2016) and the consequent risk of determinism that he finds in the French sociologist's theory – an aspect rejected by Cultural Studies too. Nonetheless, Alexander's cultural sociology still operates with an understanding of discrete layers - the social/institutional and the cultural/symbolic - which reveals a fundamental conception of culture and society that is potentially mechanistic and “grounded in the sort of ‘layered’ model of the social world which the crudest notions of base and superstructure once gave rise to” (Wolff, 1999:505) and that consequently distances it from Cultural Studies.

In the end, cultural sociology looks at Cultural Studies as a “fresh”, new discipline which investigates topics - such as the social construction of meanings - that were already at the centre of symbolic interactionism and late-Durkheimian sociology, to the extent it “claims both to preempt Cultural Studies and to improve on it. [...] But in doing so, it retains the fatal weaknesses produced by

ignoring a central aspect of cultural studies namely, a theory of representation" (ibidem), which is indeed the distinctive feature of CS.

Although Alexander gives credit to the CCCS for the development of a "strong program"<sup>28</sup>, CS is eventually more concerned with philosophical implications and political commitment than cultural sociology is, providing another difference between them. In fact, for example, Cultural Studies conducted at the Goldsmiths College relies more on philosophy than sociological bases for it takes advantage of a "phenomenological" method, as Lash thinks that philosophy "goes far deeper on certain issues than social sciences do" (Serafini and Lash, 2016:3). His method is consistent with that of Cultural Studies, because it works "phenomenologically" on *a posteriori* evidence, looking at data as they appear in the reality and then proceeds to abstraction, from detail to general. Indeed, he refers to a "sociological phenomenology", whose research starts from empirical questions resembling ethnomethodology (Serafini and Lash, 2016:9) since they "start from the particular, not from the universal" (ibidem). Thus, he recognizes Cultural Studies at Goldsmith as anti-positivist with respect to Durkheim's sociology, because "positivist sociology focuses on causation while a more phenomenological mode will focus not on the why but the hows of social (and cultural) life" (ibidem, 8). The special attention which Cultural Studies puts on subjects, materiality, everyday practices and lived experience, makes it far more empiricist with respect to sociology, although it goes along with cultural sociology for the prominence given to the cultural with respect to the social.

In short it can be assumed that Cultural Studies distances itself from the field of the sociology of culture<sup>29</sup> - because of its inherent interdisciplinarity (also anti-disciplinarity we can say), its literary origins and anti-positivist positions -, and also goes beyond that of cultural sociology, for even when it focuses on social theory, it "recasts it as cultural theory rather than sociology"<sup>30</sup> (Serafini and Lash, 2016:5). As Wolff notices (1999), sociologists often cannot grasp the discursive nature of social relations and institutions and are still retaining to a concept of the subject as coherent, unified, and

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<sup>28</sup> Alexander recognizes the ability of CS to recreate social texts and lived meanings by engaging with the notions of hegemony and resistance, thus developing what he calls "a strong program" in cultural sociology, that "tries to anchor causality in proximate actors and agencies, specifying in detail just how culture interferes with and directs what really happens" (2003:17).

<sup>29</sup> Sociology has always overtly rejected Cultural Studies, as Stuart Hall himself once told that, on the day of the opening of the Birmingham Centre, they received letters from members of the English department saying that they could not really welcome them. "We have read *The Uses of Literacy* and we hope you don't think you're doing sociology, because that's not what you're doing at all." (Hall, 1990:13).

<sup>30</sup> Intended here as "traditional sociology", centred on rigorous methods and with a restricted focus

stable – aspects that are “obstacles” for sociologists, even cultural ones. As she has also pointed out:

Most sociologists of culture and the arts base their work on pre-critical, sometimes positivistic, premises [...] usually the institution is detached from both its social and its historical context, since the sociologist is dealing with the microsocial sphere. Ironically, the result is that this work is often both ahistorical and unsociological. The tenacious social-scientific commitment to ‘objectivity’, even in qualitative (rather than quantitative) work, blocks such scholarship from addressing certain questions of interpretation, representation, and subjectivity (Wolff, 1999:503)

which are instead central in CS research.

These are the reasons why Wolff advocates for bridging sociology and CS: on the one hand, sociology completes CS research with a focus on institutions and social relations which see class, race, gender, nationality, as social constructs built on axes of social differentiation with their historical transformations; on the other hand, CS may bring to a “relativised sociology” (Seidman, 1997) able to include a theory of subject and subjectivity, putting aside the value-neutrality quest in favour of a more critical-moral approach, thus a propensity for political commitment over the question of proving the scientificity – thus legitimacy - of the discipline.

Cultural Studies are not an impartial science, rather a political and strategical project. As Grossberg (1993:64) remarks “the maps of cultural studies fabricate the real in an attempt, not to represent or mimic it, but to strategically open up its possibilities, to intervene into its present in order to remake its future”, a remark which well describes the spirit behind the present research and the choice of CS as theoretical framework.

### *1.2 Main approaches and key issues*

At this point, interdisciplinarity as the only “stable” basis for CS and its practice should be clear. However, there are some methods and approaches that need to be deepened more in detail as they

really affected the work of cultural practitioners and the development of a critical thought from the very beginning, first at the Birmingham Centre and then in its further developments.

### 1.2.1 *Structuralism and post-structuralism*

Structuralism had a major impact on Cultural Studies, especially through to the consequences of its “overcoming”, thus post-structuralism.

Structuralism is a way of approaching texts and practices based on the linguistic work of Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure, F. (1916) in Bally, C., Sechehaye, A., & Riedlinger, A. (1955). *Cours de linguistique generale*. (6<sup>th</sup> ed). Paris: Payot) and his distinction between *langue* and *parole*, who aimed at tracing back the very *structure* (*‘langue’*) of languages– intended in the large sense as systems of signs – by analysing the speech (*parole*), so the repeated written and spoken linguistic acts of everyday life. He acknowledged that the correspondence between a word (so a graphic sign, but also its phonetic reproduction) and its meaning (so the idea that comes up with that word or sound) is not based on any ‘natural’ rule that justifies it. Its nature is arbitrary and the result of a convention. In fact, languages work and allow us to communicate as far as they circulate and are used by individuals (humans but animals too, since they communicate languages – *systems of signs* – too) that share the same set of conventions and pass them to the new members of a linguistic community. Structuralism was extremely important for it influenced a large number of thinkers, as Althusser in Marxist theory, Barthes in literary and Cultural Studies, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard and Deleuze in philosophy, Lacan in psychoanalysis and Lévi-Strauss in anthropology (Storey, 2006:87). Indeed, it was Lévi-Strauss that first introduced structuralism into the humanities, inaugurating the so-called *linguistic turn*, since for him the linguistic model/structuralist paradigm could be applied to cultural phenomena in general. Indeed, his studies on totemism, myths and kinship were aimed at discovering the fundamental structures that drove them and gave them specific characteristics in their existence and development in the real world, so applying the distinction *langue-parole* to every aspect of human culture and representations (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:60) .

Linguistic-anthropological structuralism directly entered cultural analysis at the Birmingham centre through the work of Roland Barthes (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:61), who in *Mythologies* (1973) provided a structuralist analysis of French popular culture analysing the process of signification, so of the mechanisms through which meanings are produced and put into circulation. In his opinion, these mechanisms were deeply influenced by cultural factors, that “mislead” from

literal meaning – *denotation* as first level of signification – charging words with culturally *connoted* meanings on a second level. For example, the word “dog” identifying a four-legged canine creature is the meaning production at a first level, but the same signifier<sup>31</sup> “dog” can also identify an unpleasant human being (Storey, 2006:93). The second signification is the level where culture operates and

myth is produced for consumption. By myth he [Barthes] means ideology understood as a body of ideas and practices, which by actively promoting the values and interests of dominant groups in society, defend the prevailing structures of power (ibidem).

From this perspective, there is a political dimension in Barthes which affects meaning production and connects him to Marxism and the concept of ideology (discussed later in next paragraph). His work is a milestone for he was able to introduce a social dimension into saussurian semiology (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:61) embedded with a political discourse as well, for he saw in the connotation processes the influence of the dominant class (thus its ideology), that benefits from that specific set of connotations. Indeed, his aim was political from the very beginning, because in his essays on wrestling, soap opera, advertisement, toys, tourism and so on, the common guiding principle was always “to interrogate the falsely obvious” (Barthes, 1973:11), trying to unveil the ‘ideological abuse’ of the bourgeois norm. In this way, he could analyse *texts* tracing the ideological system and interests of dominant class at the basis of it. His works became the fundamental guideline for the interpretation of non-linguistic texts, seen as places where *consensual negotiation of meanings* happen (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:61-62).

During the Sixties and Seventies some French philosophers – including Barthes and Derrida - brought structuralism to its extreme consequences, causing its radicalization and progressive overcoming ending in looking from a ‘post-structuralist’ perspective. Post-structuralism was not much an opposition rather a direct consequence of structuralism, since the basic structuralist distinction in signifier, signified and sign was still considered but further complicated.

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<sup>31</sup> In the linguistic notion of sign, Saussure divided between the *signifier* – the ‘material’ part of a sign, so the graphic symbol or sound – and the *signified* – the meaning activated by that specific graphic sign or sound.



From their point of view, there was no fixed structure upon which meaning could rest because meaning itself is never fixed and always in process: what we call “meaning” of a text is only a momentary stop (an instantaneous coincidence between signifier and signified) in a continuous flow of ever-changing interpretations (Storey, 2004:98). Meaning is only created in the moment of the reception of the text<sup>32</sup>, as also Barthes noted in *The death of the author* (1977) “the text is experienced only in an activity of production” (157). Therefore, text in post-structuralism is the space where a variety of meanings are produced, defined and redefined at each activation in relation with other texts and contexts (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:68). If meaning is not uniform nor univocal - rather it is “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings [...] lend and clash” (Barthes, 1977:146) - then the research for a structure becomes useless. Indeed, according to Derrida, a good critic text does not identify a correct reading – because there is none in the proper sense -, rather it can explore a text looking for the meanings it can retain, *deconstructing* the text itself (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:68).

By opening symbolic orders to the possibility of multiple meanings, post-structuralism became the theoretical foundation for the new Cultural Studies to overcome Althusser’s concept of ideology, a philosophical concept of Marxian derivation that influenced CS research from the very beginning and, mostly, through the work of Stuart Hall at the CCCS during the Seventies. In order to fully understand the importance of his contribution, implications of Marxist thought on Cultural Studies research are now being considered.

### 1.2.2 *Political approach and Marxism: hegemony, agency and resistance*

Marxism and its legacies have had a paramount influence on Cultural Studies. As McRobbie noted (1992:719), already Hoggarth, Thompson and Williams displayed a difficult and unresolved relationship to Marxism, but it was neo-Marxism, between 1975 and 1985, that had a real impact on theory and research at the Birmingham Centre. In fact, both the culturalist and the structuralist paradigms described by Stuart Hall as informing the field of cultural studies at that time drew on traditions well beyond that of Marxism. Specifically, they referred to the structuralist reading of the *Capital* by Althusser and the Gramscian notion of hegemony, both adopted in the attempt to

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<sup>32</sup> Here, “text” is intended in a broader sense as the product of one or more authors that is *deciphered* by a receiver and whose meaning relies in the act of the decoding. From this perspective, texts can be TV programmes, songs, pieces of news, artistic products in general, and also symbolic representations such as flags, parades, manifestations.

overcome the determinism inherent in the original Marxian relation between base and superstructure<sup>33</sup>.

Already Williams and his contemporaries were not satisfied with the traditional Marxian paradigm because it reduced the latter (superstructure) to a mechanic consequence of the former (the base). It was considered a too simplistic and deterministic way of interpreting the relation, also because it intended ideology as the simple imposition of ideas from the dominant class (“false consciousness”) – which held the productive means - to the subordinate one, who passively accepted the false myths and ways of seeing imposed by the dominant group (in that case the bourgeois) to perpetuate the social, political and economic state of things, thus the subordination of the working-class, without the latter being able to realize its condition of exploitation<sup>34</sup>.

Ideology was already problematised at the time by the French philosopher Louis Althusser. For Althusser, ideology did not express the relation between individuals and their condition of existence; rather, it was the (imaginary) relationship between them and their condition of existence. It meant that people’s lived condition was different from the way they represented it to themselves and others (which is, ideology). Ideology was seen “a system [...] of representations [images, myths, ideas or concepts]” (Althusser, 1965/2005:231), but also a material practice, made up of rituals, customs, pattern of behaviour, reproduced by the ideological state apparatuses such as education, religion, family institutions, politics and so on. Ideology has the power to “construct” individuals as subjects through “interpellation” (Storey, 2006:62).

With “complex structure of dominance” (Althusser, 1971), Althusser intended to shed light on a more complicated relationship linking base and superstructure, going beyond the Hegelian dialectic link between the two. Althusser explained the relationship between base and superstructure in terms of “overdetermination”, intending there were a multitude of factors and influences behind

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<sup>33</sup> In Marxian theory, the base of a society is its economic structure, its backbone. The base is made up of the means of production and the relations of production, so the materialistic components (tools, machines, land) and their organisation in terms of relation among people, often including hierarchies in power. On the other hand, the superstructure is the set of socio-cultural “schemes” – composing ideologies - that exist as direct outcome of the base’s economic relations (Marx, C. 1859/2021).

<sup>34</sup> A different Marxist approach informed the Frankfurt School’s critical theory and Theodore W. Adorno’s position with respect to mass culture. Indeed, in their opinion, masses had no possibility to subtract themselves from the manipulation circuit and subordinating forces to which they were subjected by the capitalist system. In their opinion, mass culture was a commodity, a product of the capitalist system and another means through which the dominant class kept workers alienated and unaware of their condition of exploitation. In this view, working classes were deprived of agency, absorbed by the system, and disempowered.

phenomena which could not be reduced to economical explanations. Althusser's elaboration of Marxism is in the middle between those orthodox Marxist theories which saw relations of production as the only structuring element of social, political and cultural spheres and those who saw structure and superstructure as reciprocally influencing each other. Instead, his theory of overdetermination attributed to the economical a primary role in determining/causing events, but also intended superstructure as offering its own determinations and a certain degree of autonomy with respect to structural elements – the economical ones. In his opinion, it was not just a matter of "expression", with the superstructure being only a passive reflection or "epiphenomena" of the base; rather, it was seen as necessary for the base's existence, recognizing to it a range of autonomy (Storey, 2006:56). He interpreted every social system as the product of *multiple* "contradictions", of clashes between the dominant articulation of meanings and the secondary ones but without implicit hierarchies happening in the process. In fact, the dominant position defined all the others, but at the same time it was only through the existence of the others that the dominant could manifest itself (Althusser, 1965/2005).

In any case, his reformulation of ideology was still considered too deterministic, for it did not let enough space to human agency. Indeed, Althusser thought that "all ideology has the function of 'constructing' concrete individuals as subjects" (Althusser, 1971:160), which means it is a material practice (ibidem, 155) that "creates" subjects by means of the "interpellation", defining their identity through the position given by the system - which means they are "invited" to take up some roles (for example, mother, church attendant, housewife, perfume consumer) that eventually define him or her as subject, in a context where individuals believe to have free will and control over their choices but it is not true, for ideology is working behind it and no one can read through it. It is the poor agency given to individuals that led Williams firstly and Hall later to draw their attention on another Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci, and his development and eventual overcoming of the canonical notion of ideology with that of cultural hegemony<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup>In truth, Gramsci's legacy in British Cultural Studies was much wider and deeper and cannot be limited to the "productive metaphor of hegemony" (Hall, 1992:284). It also involved useful suggestions about the nature of culture, the importance of historical specificity and the way of thinking about class relations through the notions of ensemble and blocs – in addition to his concern for the theoretical and practical activity of organic intellectuals. As Stuart Hall commented on it (1992:284) "His importance for [...] British cultural studies is precisely the degree to which he radically *displaced* some of the inheritance of Marxism in cultural studies".

Tony Bennett defined as a “turn to Gramsci<sup>36</sup>” (Bennett, in Storey, 1998:217f) the adoption by Cultural Studies scholars of the Italian philosopher’s instances, due to the general dissatisfaction both with Marxist theory’s determinism and the limits of Althusser’s critique. “Turning” to the Gramscian notion of hegemony allowed them to challenge the rigidity of that system (Walton, 2006:198,199) and to give floor to the dynamic nature of the base which Raymond Williams, for instance, much valorised. For Gramsci, the base had its dominant tendencies and characteristics but did not lend itself to simple description, rather it could be better envisioned as setting limits and exerting pressures on the superstructure. Against the idea that ideology determined the effects of social behaviour in a single, unidirectional way, Gramsci proposed an alternative view, where that very same ideology was instead the result of negotiations and allegiances between groups: in his opinion, hegemonic control could not be reduced to a matter of “bourgeois vs working class [...] [in] the organisation of the cultural and ideological relationships” (Bennett in Storey, 1998:226). On the contrary, hegemony was more subtle and complex: it comprised moral and intellectual leadership that took shape both through political power (coercive, also violent at times) and civil society, by means of those institutions not directly controlled by the government and which pervaded people’s cultural life (Walton, 2007:194). In any case, even if the dominant group was able to convert its ways of seeing and understanding the world and society in common sense (they were naturalised, generally acknowledged as legitimate) and to make their interests pass off as the interests of the whole community, for Gramsci this process still resulted from a continuous exchange and negotiation between groups, built upon concessions and compromises. Here, political change was still possible for the subordinated who, by moving in a non-monolithic space, could counter-act and claim for more rights and recognition.

It is at this point, in acknowledging working-classes with a possibility of active response and asserting ideological domination as dynamic and interactive that Gramsci and Hall meet. Intellectual activity becomes a matter of politics (Hall, 1992) since only organic intellectuals, arising from those very subordinated classes, will be able to break down the barriers of common sense and develop counter-hegemonic practices which will in turn open to political change. This is exactly what Hall

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<sup>36</sup> With the expression “turn to Gramsci” Tony Bennett commented the adoption by cultural studies practitioners (first among others Raymond Williams), of Gramsci’s instances because of the unsatisfaction with the traditional Marxist relation between base and superstructure, considered too simplistic. The mechanism implied in traditional Marxist theory and the determinism it eventually led to, were both refused by Cultural Studies, which instead preferred the Gramscian notion of hegemony that challenged the rigidity of that system (Walton, 2006:198,199). Further clarifications on Gramsci’s influence on cultural studies will be made in the following section.

wished for as director of the CCCS. He wanted to make their work within the Centre politically relevant with the “production of organic intellectuals<sup>37</sup> who could both theorize culture but, at the same time, attempt to transmit counter hegemonic ideas to a wider public – outside [...] the confines of academic institutions” (Hall, 1992:283). The “turn to Gramsci” had important implications for the practice of cultural analysis for it was a way of assuming that “those working in Cultural Studies could be theoretically informed but, at the same time, politically engaged” (Walton, 2006:199).

Thanks to Gramsci, Hall completed the critic to ideology questioning the Althusserian “interpellation” and introducing the possibility of subversive behaviours (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:66), thus emphasising collective agency. The contributions of both Gramsci and post-structuralism to CS were essential to acknowledge the existence of (potential) subversive meanings and reading them as an active process (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:60). This in turn led to an increasing interest for audience’s reception of cultural products and their (potential subversive) consumptions practices in Cultural Studies. This is why, in his analysis of mass-media communication, Hall preferred to focus on contradictions, on the ambiguities in meaning creation – for example within television discourse, as he made clear in the famous essay *Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse* (1973).

### 1.2.3 Meaning as practice in “Encoding and Decoding”

Hall clearly exposed his theory on communication for the first time in *Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse* (1973) where he tried to make up a different approach for the analysis of mass-media communication, drawing on structuralism but going far beyond. He criticised the traditional model adopted by mass-media studies, which saw a linear and unidirectional relation between source and receiver and put too much emphasis on the level of exchange of the message, eventually leading to behaviouristic explanations (a form of determinism which Hall had always tried to avoid). The model was considered too simplistic and unsuitable for reproducing the actual complex structure of relations behind communication processes, which instead led him to recover the model of commodity production as proposed by Marx in *Das Kapital* (1867).

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<sup>37</sup> Gramsci saw in the organic intellectuals the coincidence between the “homo faber” – the man who makes – and the “homo sapiens” – the man who thinks, in the sense he thought about intellectuals that were actively engaged in the construction of the emancipation of the working class, not only theorizing or advocating it (Gramsci A., 1948/1975: 1550-1551).

The application of the Marxist model to meaning production had the advantage of highlighting the articulation of different moments within the circuit of communication, each of which retained its own “distinctiveness [...] specific modality [...] forms and conditions of existences” (Hall, 1980:117). Production, circulation, distribution/consumption and re-production were indeed all essential for the circuit as a whole, but still, none of them could guarantee for the articulation of the following one nor pre-determine it in any way: they maintained a certain degree of independency the one from the others although still strictly interconnected as necessary “passage[s] of form” (ibidem). This process was based on the premise that any historical event – largely interpretable as any situation or action taking place in the real world – must become a narrative event so to be meaningfully decoded and integrated in social relations – which means to “have an effect, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences” (Hall, 1980:119). So, even if meanings were produced from the source within a specific code, the circuit was concluded, or better, the communication happened, only when the re-production took place, that is, the receiver activated its own decoding processes and recognized the form as meaningful for them.

From this perspective, it is clear that audience for Hall never has a mere passive role, limited to the reception of a “pre-packaged” message impossible to contest or contradict. On the contrary, audience is actively engaged in the process of meaning production to the extent it can be considered – in Philip Elliott’s words - both “the source and the receiver of the message”. This is also supported by the fact that receiver’s feedback always re-enters the process of meaning production through the moments of circulation and reception. So, since production and re-production are two distinct, independent moments where the former can only “pre-fer but cannot prescribe [...] the latter” (Hall, 1980:125), there is no certainty about the total identity of the “meaning structures” employed during the encoding and decoding, i.e. the adoption of one code in a previous moment (prior only in chronological terms) never pre-determines the final meaning in any way. The degree of symmetry between the two codes defines the degree of equivalence between what the encoder-producer aimed at communicating and what the decoder-receiver eventually deciphered, thus the degree of understanding or “misunderstanding” of the message.

The interesting point is that in Hall’s opinion television broadcasters do not confront with audience’s misunderstandings rather with systematic distortions of the televisual message, closer to what can be defined as a different translation or interpretation of the same, dependent on the position the

audience assumes with respect to the code of the source. Hall described three possible positioning, three different “degrees of correspondence” between encoding and decoding set of codes: the dominant-hegemonic position, the negotiated position, the oppositional position. These three possible positionings indeed witness the openness of meaning production but not its randomness, since meanings and positioning still exist within the limits of the dominant ideology (which can be contested, anyway).

In fact, any culture or society tends to impose its own classification of the world, providing in this way a dominant cultural order and some preferred maps of meanings, which “have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs” (Hall, 1980:124) and into which events are reported and accordingly interpreted. This is what Hall defined as the hegemonic viewpoint, a

mental horizon [which defines] the universe of possible meanings” – so the meaning structures offered from external forces to the individuals – and “that [...] carries with it the stamp of legitimacy [appearing] coterminous with what is “natural”, “inevitable”, “taken for granted” about the social order (Hall, 1980:126-127).

In any case, even if these maps are structures in dominance and can be employed during the encoding of the message, there is no guarantee that the same will be put in use during the decoding. They can trace a path of preferred meanings but not determined ones, remaining open structures. In this respect Hall takes the distance from traditional semiology, because in his opinion it neglected the “interpretative work”, thus the active participation, of the audience.

Communicative process does not consist in the unproblematic assignment of every visual item to its given position within a set of prearranged codes, but of performative rules—rules of competence and use, of logics-in-use—which seek actively to enforce or pre-fer one semantic domain over another and rule items into and out of their appropriate meaning-sets. (Hall, 1980:124).

So, when talking about dominant meanings, it should be kept in mind that they are not established by a one-sided process that also keeps them valid, rather “it consists of the ‘work’ required to enforce, win plausibility for and command as *legitimate* a decoding of the event within the limit of dominant definitions in which it has been connotatively signified” (ibidem).

The question of power always enters the discourse of meaning production, and indeed it is here that Gramsci’s influence on Hall arises again loud and clear. As the ruling class manages to pass their interests for the interests of society at large, justifying the social, political and economic status quo as the legitimate, inevitable state of things – rather than as the result of an artificial construction – the same is still valid at the level of communication, with the “soft imposition” of dominant structures of interpretation of the world which claim to be the natural and inevitable maps for the production of meanings – and not the result of an artificial construction as well. Nevertheless, hegemony is always negotiation, not imposition. It never *determines* the effect of social behaviour in an only-way direction, yet it leaves breaches where new interpretations can make their own way. This is the way Gramsci and Hall enable consumers (on a communicative level) and subaltern groups (on a cultural-political identity level) - with active responses, recognizing their counter-acting and resistance against the dominant cultural order or signifying structures. Again, it can be seen how Gramsci permeated all of Hall’s work and how his contribution was essential for overcoming the determinism inherent in the transmissive model of information as well as in economicism.

The present theory on communication – which finally acknowledges people with the possibility of agency and counter-actions - is only one aspect of a phenomenon encompassing human culture at large. Indeed, for Hall, culture is an open system, made up of different codes and schemes of interpretations that may be linguistic but also behavioural, political, economic, and so on. Culture is still a “complex whole of things”, able to shape but also *to be shaped*; it is never given *a priori* but it is realized through performances, practices, acts of *articulation*. Articulation is indeed a key-term in post-Marxist Cultural Studies and refers to the “partial fix[ing] of meaning” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001:113) that recalls Derrida’s post-structuralism while putting the process of meaning-making in a social and cultural perspective.

Hall uses the concept of articulation to explain why culture is the terrain of ideological struggle. Like Laclau and Mouffe (2001), he argues that texts and practices are not inscribed with meaning, rather they are always the result of an act of articulation, since “the world has to be *made to mean*” (Hall,



2006:134) – so, a matter of culture and politics in the end. In his opinion, popular culture is not only the instrument through which dominant ideology works, but it is also the place for resistance and productive appropriation of meanings, given that the conflict for cultural meanings is never pre-determined. Culture “is not much a set of things [...] as a *process*, a *set of practices* [...] culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings – the giving and taking of meaning (Hall, 1997)”, but meaning making (so representation itself) is always the site of potential struggle and/or negotiation (Storey, 2006:68). This is why the concept of representation is paramount in Hall, in CS research and in the analysis here conducted.

#### 1.2.4 *Representation and identity*

Representations are meaning-producers: they are essential for our lives for they are the processes through which people attribute meanings to the reality around them, in the sense they *build* meanings through practices. Meanings do not lay in objects and concepts *therein*, rather they are the result of *signifying* (that is articulating) *practices*, in the literal sense “*sign-ify*” as to make it a *sign*, to “make[s] things mean” (Hall, 1997:24), conveyed through representational systems such as language and codes. The ways and processes the world *is made to signify* have material effects on it, since significations are embodied in material practices that directly affect our lives<sup>38</sup> (Storey, 2006:68). By interpreting and counter-interpreting dominant meanings on a symbolical level, everyone has the potential to *act* on reality, since it goes to affect the way people think, interpret, and define reality. In fact, given the premise that nothing has true or proper meaning, everything becomes a matter of interpretation, of *positioning* oneself with or against certain maps of preferred meanings, to the extent that changing and challenging an established representation of any event, object or idea of the world, means to change its meaning and challenge the ideological system behind it.

Moreover, representations directly engage with the question of identity too. In fact, identity is built through confrontation with others within power and classification systems, which highlight difference and exclusion both on a social and symbolical level (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:91). Identity construction always develops through the recognition of difference, so it is built *through* and not outside it, by means of interpersonal relationships and relying on culturally

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<sup>38</sup> It is enough to think about the material effects on traffic given by colours conventional meaning. ‘Red’ and ‘green’ are arbitrarily attributed meanings ‘stop’ or ‘pass’ (obviously not inherent to them) that regulate traffic only thanks to the common sharing of the same convention/rule.

constructed processes, that therefore work through systems of classifications and representation as well (Hall, 1997). Identity is continuously *produced*, consumed and ruled within and through culture, creating meanings through symbolic systems of representations (Woodward, 1996:2).

From Hall's perspective (Hall, 1990), the construction of identity can be seen either from an essentialist or discursive point of view. The first system relies on an "naturalistic" view of identity as to be "rediscovered", posing an existential nucleus as centre of shared characteristics and experiences which define groups and provide the fundamental basis for solidarity and sense of belongingness (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:90). One can look for its "true" or "natural" self within the cultural environment and practices that regulates its life, felt as natural and *essential*. But once acknowledged that culture and meanings are constructions, then also identity become a continuous production "which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted *within*, not outside, representation" (Hall, 1990a:222). The process is always open and in progress and there is no stable or invariable nucleus on which we can base *who we are*. Therefore, identity too is about positioning oneself: it becomes "strategical", "situated".

The concept of position (already mentioned in *Encoding and Decoding*) is essential in Hall, because it allows him to overcome the binary oppositions in which identity seems to be given, between being/becoming, past/future, individual/society. In fact, identity is finally formed through difference, through the relationship with the Other. The last brings to light the "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 1987:116) intrinsic in Hall's thought, that overcomes the idea of a tradition made of univocal and undeniable meanings and, at the same time, to avoid a complete dissolution of a subjectivity looking for its identity. He saw subjects engaged in active practices of meaning production but still partially dependent on the symbolic plots in which their actions take place, acknowledging historical and cultural coordinates as tracing the horizon of possible meanings for their agency. Indeed,

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence [...] lying unchanged outside history and culture. [...] It is not once-and-for-all. [...] It has its histories - and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual "past" [...]. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.

Cultural identities are [...] Not an essence but a positioning. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position [...] (Hall, 1990:248).

This extract from *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* also highlights Hall's critical attitude in the reception of the past, since the view of an already completely realized structure left the floor to a more flexible way of intending it, conceived as a sort of "warehouse" of possible, virtual meanings where historical events are affirmed – both "materialistically" speaking and especially on a narrative level - although still in a partial or provisory way, always susceptible to change and reappropriations. Thus, identities are not "recovered" from the past as untouched, rather they are "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (Hall, 1990a:225). Indeed, if meaning is a practice, then identity is a position. It is all about what people *do*, make of/on reality, that defines who they are while communicating it to others. The interesting aspect is to observe how, within the same culture, the same event can be decoded from different perspectives, acquire different meanings, being differently connoted and thus contributing to allow identifications in different ways.

Colonized people – but this is valid for all marginalized and subaltern groups – were proposed, or better imposed, a Western narrative in which they were forced into the label of the *Others*, built in the representation of the *different*, eventually engaged in a rhetoric they themselves came to believe and conceive their identity<sup>39</sup> in, a process that ended up in a very expropriation of the cultural identity of the colonised. Nonetheless, it can be changed - and must be challenged - in the light of the agency that Cultural Studies attributes to subgroups, including minorities and subalterns. Nonetheless, identity as positioning is the key to escape imposition and stereotypes, a way the subaltern and the colonised can actively respond to the Western hegemonic viewpoint and create their own subjectivity in a space – either symbolic (but with material effects) or material (but imbued with symbolic meanings), or both— that is open to dialogue and where official meanings and versions of history can be challenged.

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<sup>39</sup> Here Hall directly refers to the concept of "orientalism" of the American anthropologist Edward Said. In his most famous essay, *Orientalism* (1978), Said asserted that the very category of "oriental" was a product of Western society which built the narrations of the Other and the Exotic to reaffirm its superiority and legitimate colonialist campaigns, eventually reflecting its hegemonic view on the submitted peoples - to the extent they think of themselves as the Others from the perspective of the West.

In fact, if we apply what has been said up to here to the question of monuments and representation in the public space, it becomes clear how the alterations of such symbols – thus representations - is far more complex than it meets the eye and involves identifications and the way cultural expressions perform it differently that go beyond the simple categorisation of a gesture as vandalic or artistic, as to be praised or condemned.

We continuously decode the reality around us trying to give it a meaning, but still acting on it physically and symbolically, complying with or challenging it, because we *perceive* – as cultural agents, more or less consciously – the power that symbols have on us and on the ways they affect *who we are*. So, those kinds of interventions or “visibilizing” practices listed in the introduction (about statues removal, soiling, substitution or general modification) are to be framed in a space of meaning negotiation directly linked to identity and political claims, especially for those individuals belonging to subaltern groups which recognize the dominant - chauvinist, racist - languages encoding the reality they live in and that they deliberately choose to contest by assuming counter-hegemonic positions.

Among the many categories that co-occur in the processes of identity construction, gender and ethnicity (or race) are specifically relevant here. In fact, the identity claim of subaltern subjects specifically investigated in the analysis of the case of Indro Montanelli’s monument involve racialised women, so gender and race become the two main discriminating categories in minorities counter-hegemonical practices in the frame of patriarchal and racist dominant narratives. Therefore, to also provide a basis for the matter of intersectionality later discussed in Chapter 2, it is necessary to conclude the theoretical panorama of Cultural Studies with an excursus on how gender and race have entered cultural analysis as it was conducted at the Birmingham Centre.

#### 1.2.5 *Gender and race*

Cultural Studies have embraced the examination of race and gender, among other aspects of identity, and developed them in a number of key books published collectively under the name of CCCS in the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women’s Subordination* (1978, Routledge) and *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (1982, Routledge). As Hall remarked (1992:283), “movements provoke theoretical moments”, witnessing the sensibility of Cultural Studies in acknowledging and welcoming “historical conjunctures [...] real

moments in the evolution of theory” (ibidem), showing also the “interrupted” nature of Cultural Studies and its "extrinsic" sources of formation on theory.

At the time *Women take issue* was published, Cultural Studies were more or less already asserted as a distinguishable area of research thanks to the work of Stuart Hall and his publication *The popular arts* - together with Paddy Whannel (1964, London: Hutchinson Educational) - which officially recognised subculture as a proper area of study (Walton, 2007). Hall’s work took the moves from the cultural analyses of Hoggart, Thompson and Williams on working-class and young subcultures, involving the concepts of class-consciousness and struggle, agency and resistance. Nonetheless, in their research the notion of “class” and its theoretical implications with Marxist legacy – so the elaboration of ideology, hegemony, class struggle and resistance - were the main key concept for the reading of cultural phenomena. Even if they contributed to re-evaluate those forms of culture - previously considered “lower”<sup>40</sup> - as a worthy object of study, they still neglected other kinds of interactions and oppressive mechanisms linked to the questions of gender and race (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:102), which is what led other scholars from the CCCS to broaden the focus and include such matters within CS research at the Birmingham Centre. “There were at least two interruptions in the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies: the first around feminism, and the second around questions of race” (Hall, 1992:282). Hall acknowledged the great impact and contribution of feminism to CS in general and within the Birmingham Centre. In fact,

For cultural studies (in addition to many other theoretical projects), the intervention of feminism was specific and decisive. It was ruptural. It reorganized the field in quite concrete ways [such as] the question of the personal as political [...] - the centrality of questions of gender and sexuality to the understanding of power itself [...] - the opening of many of the questions [...] around the dangerous area of the subjective and the subject, which lodged those questions at the center of cultural studies as a theoretical practice [...] - the "re-opening" of the closed frontier between social theory and the theory of the unconscious— psychoanalysis. [...] Because of the growing importance of feminist work and the early beginnings of the feminist movement outside in the very early 1970s, many of us in the

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<sup>40</sup> Specifically, by previous theoreticians such as Mathew Arnold, the Leavisist circle, T.S. Eliot and, most of all, Theodore Adorno and the Frankfurt School.

Centre—mainly, of course, men—thought it was time there was good feminist work in cultural studies (ibidem).

Indeed, *Women take issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination* (1978) was the attempt of cultural practitioners Angela McRobbie and Jenny Barber – belonging to the Women's Studies Group in the CCCS - of balancing the male bias of Cultural Studies on subcultures with a feminist perspective, given the marginality – if not almost total absence - of young women in the analysis of subcultures and the reinforcement of stereotypes around them (their presence was bound to physical appearance or to a general depiction as passive and stupid). They focused on the further restraining conditions for young women - with respect to those of their male peers from the same class - both in economic and social terms in the British society of the time, a society which limited their visibility and autonomy of space while reproducing cultural subordination (within the social, also in sexual terms). With their insights into psychoanalysis and the importance that Beatlemania represented for the sexual revolution, the two scholars managed to reshape and widen the field of Cultural Studies, exploring the category of gender as culturally constructed and, most important, arguing on the structures that allowed the perpetuation and consolidation of that status quo.

McRobbie has underlined the subversive power of feminism in questioning the canonical - patriarchal and man-centred - dialectic about male/female, hetero/homosexual, also recognizing in Butler's theory on gender as performative the same idea at the basis of Hall and Jefferson when they talk about "resistance through rituals" (Hall and Jefferson, 1976), which is a milestone in CS tradition insofar it acknowledges individuals with the possibility to resist by acting and moving both politically and at a deeper subjective level (McRobbie, 1997:182).

Feminist instances thus enlarged the scope of CS by means of the overcoming of traditional oppositions woman/man and heterosexual/homosexual behaviours (generally understood as norm vs exception) and eventually highlighting (through the same constructivist approach that already entered the Birmingham Centre) the inherent cultural and social nature at the basis of such distinctions (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:109), apart from the importance of making the analysis based on class a more complex one. Some feminist researchers in Cultural Studies, as hooks (2014) and McRobbie (2005) have shown how sexual differences and the power relationships built

on gender are not natural nor essential at all, thus never fixed, and they must be considered the result of cultural and social processes on which individuals *can act*.

In more recent times, the internal criticism in feminist studies by the American philosopher Judith Butler has proven to be useful also within the context of Cultural Studies, in order to understand how, within popular culture, the “heterosexual matrix” still retains its dominance (McRobbie, 2005). With the words of Angela McRobbie in *The uses of Cultural Studies* (2005, Sage Publications),

Butler’s work allows us to navigate better the complex ways in which popular culture, in a post-feminist environment, where some degree of gender equality is nominally invoked and upheld, nonetheless works to reconsolidate gender norms.

Her critique has extended to the definitions that feminism has offered on *what it is to be a woman* and on which categories it has built its discourses, interrogating the stability and also the existence of such labels (on the basis of a performative theory of gender) to enlarge to a set of possibilities and potentialities that aim at opening feminism itself and overcome its hierarchical politics. Her critical practice much resembles the overcoming and development of Marxist thought within Cultural Studies through the “turn to Gramsci” and Hall’s “wrestling with angels” in his attempt to work “on Marxism, against Marxism, with Marxism or trying to develop Marxism” (Hall, 1986:103). Butler’s work relates to Cultural Studies also for two other reasons: the prominence that everyday life gains in her theories, for it is the space where “relations take normatively symbolic forms” (McRobbie, 2005:69) and across which re-signification practices can operate and effectively mark radical change; the understanding of cultural and subcultural forms as the “sites for the production of re-articulated meanings” (ibidem).

Furthermore, contemporary feminist research looks closer at how women’s identity is constructed in and within different cultural schemes, places and times, thus paying more attention to the differences among women in specific historical contexts. Indeed, they deny the category of “woman” as fixed and immutable: following the discursive approach to identity, they see it as continuously involved in exchanges with other categories (Lutter and Reisenleitner,

2002/2004:101), which re-affirm the fragmented nature of identity especially in the post-modern world.

Through a concept of *discourse* [...] feminist post-structuralism is able [...] to explain the working power on behalf of specific interests and to analyse the opportunities for resistance to it. It is a theory that decentres the rational, self-present subject of humanism, seeing subjectivity and consciousness, as socially produced in language, as a site of struggle and potential change (Weedon in Storey, 2009:330).

Moreover, within feminism there is also an increasing consciousness about the differences among women, especially on the axes of gender and race in defining identity and in the effects that these axes have on the formation and perception of identities and sexual roles. Indeed, it is the reason why many black feminists and scholars – among which bell hooks and Angela Davis – have criticised their white “sisters”, because in their opinion the latter have not properly considered the complexities involving identity formation at the crossing of gender and race, thus the specific social marginalisation and sexual discrimination they instead suffered. In short, white feminism was accused of having “universalised” women’s experience, claiming to speak for *all* independently from their peculiar experience of (also) racialised subjects. In any case, this topic will be dealt with more in-depth in the next chapter when discussing about intersectionality.

A similar critique was made on the matter of race from those non-white cultural practitioners – first among others Paul Gilroy – who still saw the “classist” paradigm in British Cultural Studies as too strong and causing the underestimation of other categories like race and ethnicity in social and identity dynamics. In fact, the literary origins of Cultural Studies developed from a fundamental idea of “Englishness” inevitably linked to ethnocentric and nationalistic instances, which indeed excluded black people but still was at the base of the Hoggart-Thompson-Williams model. In his introduction to *The empire strikes back* (1982), Gilroy questions that model, retracing some guiltiness of the British left in ignoring the exclusionary effects that the residuals of “sanctity of nation” and “integrity of Britishness” (McRobbie, 2005:45) in its rhetoric has had on black people settled in the UK, systematically excluded by the nationalistic notion of “Englishness” and neglecting the role of black people in forming (and transforming) the English working class.



Gilroy's engagement with previous tradition in CS continues with a close confrontation with Marxism (from within, according to McRobbie, "the most sustained and engaged thinking around race and its relation to class has taken place" (ibidem, p.44)), exploring the relations between class and race, until reaching his contemporaries, black activists, intellectuals, or writers that work in the field of race relations. His critique is directed towards those who still rely on the category "race" as a distinction between "who we are" and "who we are not", whereas he understands it as "an outward-looking category for independent struggles against injustice" (ibidem, p.45). This shift enables his political analysis to go beyond the concept of nations and states while making of him one of the most powerful voices in the field of Cultural Studies, also thanks to a position which is simultaneously inside and outside European modern thought.

Gilroy understands culture as the site where meanings are created and enacted, which is why it represents a central component for political movement and organisation and an important point in the analysis of Montanelli's monument. Indeed, art – in its broadest sense - is for Gilroy a critical means with which freedom can be envisaged (McRobbie, 2005:53), that also explains why his starting point are those very artists – in the broadest sense - who engage with both race and class, after Hall's claim that for black people "race is the modality in which class is lived" (Hall et al., 1978). This aspect also pairs with the call for Cultural Studies to historically explore those forms of communication which recorded the suffered experience of people's racial subjugation, may they be verbal, non-verbal, musical or written forms, "artistic" to some extent. His active commitment and intellectual power connect him with Butler's practice inasmuch both "sustain the imagining of an entirely different political formation, of being beyond race and nation in Gilroy's case (and beyond gender and normative kinship in Butler's case)" (McRobbie, 2005:42).

Gilroy is the example of an intellectual who was able to start from certain categories – in which he himself was found to be framed - and who ended up in blurring them via revision, negotiation, retreatment, with a flexibility of thought and practice that only in Cultural Studies could be accepted and valorised. The complication of "race" as a category is what puts him in common also with Homi K. Bhabha, Indian-born literary critic who moved within post-colonialist thought by challenging the discrete nature of those categories canonically used to understand relations of power, transcending the boundaries of nation and culture and for this reasons accounted by Angela McRobbie as an important cultural critic as well, able to maintain the all-embracing tension of Cultural Studies toward other disciplines.

In fact, Bhabha theorizes a “third space” (Bhabha, Homi K., 1994), which is an in-between, *translational* space, where migrating individuals happen to inscribe, build their identities by constantly “translating” themselves (their languages, codes, practices, behaviours) into and between different contexts, as they move – both physically and symbolically - between the *motherland* and the *abroad*. From the point of view of dissent, the third space is both the space where the dominant/oppressor’s culture and the migrant’s/colonised/oppressed one meet, but especially it is the space where the oppressed plot their liberation (Bhabha, 1994). In fact, Bhabha relies on Benjamin’s essay on translation when arguing about an “untranslatable residue” (Benjamin, 1973) in the culture of the colonised, which can be put in use as a site for contestation and resistance. The colonised subject of Bhabha is enabled with productive resistance and a certain performative agency<sup>41</sup>, because it is in the space of translation that his or her resistance can take place while still contributing to the writing of a “national” culture by marginalised, disenfranchised perspectives. The process of translation allows for the possibility of subversion, twisting meanings away from the hands of the colonizer and providing a space for insubordination, which much resembles Judith Butler’s re-significations of the heterosexual norm.

Bhabha’s discourse here lingers around Derrida’s argument about the absence of a fixity in meaning, as a never-closed or tied-down entity which is instead always “haunted by the traces of other meanings” (McRobbie, 2005), a reflection which eventually leads to the opening of a space where ambivalence does exist and allows processes of semantic re-articulation. This same space also shapes up to be the location of culture where critical artistic practice takes place, an argument not so far from Stuart Hall’s theory about meaning as a practice and its production as an open system. In any case, by focusing the attention on such a space, Bhabha acknowledges the existence of identities which are fundamentally hybrid and fragmented, of individuals who struggle between different cultures (thus, set of preferred meanings) trying to find social, political and representational recognition in those translations which represent the opportunity for change (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2002/2004:122).

In conclusion, the concepts of race and ethnicity contributed to enlarge the perspective of cultural study on the politics of exclusion and prejudice in the view of “race” as a social construction – so, as

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<sup>41</sup> Bhabha’s cultural critic focuses on the colonial subject framed in a post-colonial context, victim of subjectivising practices enacted by the colonizers but enabled of an opportunity to respond thanks to a model of Foucauldian derivation about power as productivity.

for gender, not an objective category - and “ethnicity” as inherently relational, since the ethnic minority recognizes itself not only on the basis of what is shared in terms of values and beliefs, but also on the basis of what is not shared: to say it with the words of Chris Barker, “what we think of our identity is dependent on what we think we are not” (Barker, 2000:195). In fact, race does not exist in biological terms and, like for gender and sexuality, it is a cultural and historical category. Phenotypical differences exist, but difference *per se* is not meaningful, rather what matters are the ways it is *put into practice*, the processes through which *it is made meaningful* in terms of social and political hierarchies, because, since racism is not about biology but about *signification*, the ways it is made to signify are always linked to matters of power and knowledge production, thus politics.

As it happened for Feminist, Gender and Woman studies, also Colonial and Post-colonial studies have entered the theory and practice of cultural research at the Birmingham Centre. These two traditions witness again the profound interdisciplinarity of CS, but - most important - they showed the importance of gender and race as “overlapping” categories (together with class) in the formation of individuals’ identities, groups and dynamics of social marginalisation of those perceived as “not being one of us”. For analysing the case of Indro Montanelli’s soiling, special attention will be given to the specific condition of the subaltern subject of the black (colonised) woman, whose identity is inscribed at the crossing of race and gender, causing a condition of “double discrimination” within the hegemonic, Western representational schemes. For this reason, the issue of intersectionality will be foregrounded in the following chapter, since its approach enables to understand the patriarchy and racism inherent in the mainstream, Western frameworks and how their dynamics develop in the actual world, performing subordination and marginalisation of such gendered and racialized subjects – also in material representations in the public space. Finally, the main concern here is always to observe how such arbitrary schemes and the meanings they produce can be challenged from within and in which ways, through agency and practices of those who claim to speak from their marginalized, silenced, invisibilized positions.

## CHAPTER 2 – At the intersection: Spivak, hooks and the subaltern subject

With the aim of investigating the case of the multiple soiling of Indro Montanelli's statue in Milan, up to now special concern was given to: the "empowerment" of the subgroups, intended as the possibility for non-dominant classes – in Marxian terms – to counter-act somehow the ideology of the dominating groups and be acknowledged as endowed with agency within processes of negotiation of meanings (so, knowledge production)<sup>42</sup>; also, the condition of marginalised subjects and subaltern groups within public space was discussed, relying on set of meanings and their possibilities to express *their* point of view, on history in general but especially on themselves and their identities (as built in socio-cultural contexts), so breaking/counteracting the dominant, thus white-men centred *encoding* of the world which deeply affected their consciousness; moreover, attention gradually shifted on the matters of race and gender in CS research to introduce some specific kind of subgroups, identified as minorities, subaltern or marginalised groups on the basis of such categories - culturally constructed but still preeminent in identity-making processes – and their specific "intersection".

Attention is driven here on the notion of intersectionality for one of the main concerns about Indro Montanelli's story involved another subject, a young Ethiopian girl whom he "legally married" – which meant, he formally bought with a contract together with other goods, such as weapons and a horse - during the African campaign between 1936 and 1937, a subject *at the cross* of the categories woman/colonised. Specifically, one of the soiling concerning the statue was from a feminist collective called NUDM and its explicit aim to "ignite a debate on history", thus questioning the current hegemonical representational system and all that goes with it (about the matter of subaltern presence in public space as well as the importance of symbols in identity construction), trying to give a hint (at least) to the collectivity of what (else) was behind the face of a great intellectual.

Destà – or Fatima – was the name of the subaltern in this case, but her story is one among countless similar others, women that have – throughout history and circumstances – suffered the gaze of a racializing, sexist dominant subject. In any case, intersectionality, for it allows to observe

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<sup>42</sup> Such aspects were underlined as integral part of the development of Cultural Studies at the CCCS and included in Stuart Hall analysis of communication circle.

very specific overlappings of power relations at different levels and within different categories, is the necessary lens through which the peculiar subaltern conditions shall be read, as racialised and sexualised subject in the eyes of the white-man, colonizer, and considering the potentiality for them to speak, being seen (thus represented) or being heard. In fact,

In terms of methodology, intersectionality makes the research harder, but it can also make the results less partial and more powerful in terms of their potential for social justice and transformation. The intersectional paradigm is not a simple sum of identities and categories, it is about the consequences of the interplay of different oppressions (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020:829).

In this sense, the experience of an individual living at the intersection is not comparable to the “sum” of the intersectional categories which “create” their condition, meaning, for example, that a black woman will be likely to experience both racism *and* sexism, but neither in the ways black men face racism or white women face sexism, nor as the sum of these two socially lived experiences. As I shall explain in some paragraphs, intersectionality is a key concept to understand how different systems of oppressions - interlocked and intertwined, not simply added, so with a different weight for each position in question - contribute to create very specific conditions of subalternity and invisibility. Intersectionality also highlights the importance and peculiarity of the lived experiences of such individuals, showing they are much more complicated than it could appear at first sight because they operate – work on and in - at a very deep level both in social and personal dimensions, relying on socially constructed (passed as natural) categories.

### 2.1. *What is intersectionality? Who is at the intersection?*

Intersectionality was already mentioned in the previous chapter when explaining the origins of the term as it appeared in *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (1989). Here, the Black<sup>43</sup> feminist

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<sup>43</sup> Although subtle, the use of Black with a capital letter marks the difference between “a colour and a culture” (Coleman, 2020). Although specificity is preferable wherever possible (about African, American or Afro-American

lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw aimed at giving visibility to the peculiar condition in which certain groups or individuals find themselves in social life, interwoven into multiple discriminatory processes, so at the cross of some axes which eventually bound them to positions of further marginalisation or invisibility. Indeed, this was the case of one of her assisted, whose discrimination on her job place was an interplay of being black *and* being a woman. This very condition, at the intersection, did not find any “correspondence” in the US legal system and antidiscrimination laws, thus causing the “invisibility” of her problem – and herself to some extent – in front of the eyes of the judge.

Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination - the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women - not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women (Crenshaw, 1989:149).

Indeed, to think in intersectional terms means to acknowledge the existence of interlocking systems of discrimination which “are not the simple addition of inequalities, because these categories function together in complex dynamics, in an entanglement of challenges that an individual or group face in everyday life” (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020:825). By coining “intersectionality”, Crenshaw finally gave a name and a position – *at the cross* - to some disadvantaged social-experiential<sup>44</sup> conditions which many subaltern people suffer, so to make them visible, first of all (in Crenshaw’s view) in legal terms.

Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) also gave interesting insights about a large spectrum of intersectional invisibility, in legal, historical, cultural, and political terms. In fact, they argued that

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origins), the adoption of Black aims at reflecting a shared cultural identity beside the many possible origins of Black people living in the US. It is not a choice led by activism, but the stylebook wants to reflect common usage, thus accordingly change. As Destinée-Charisse Royal, a senior staff editor in the Graphics department (and one of the editors consulted on the change within The Times’ Usage Guide), “the capital B makes sense as it describes a race, a cultural group, and that is very different from a colour in a box of crayons” (Coleman, 2020).

<sup>44</sup> We linger on the “experiential”, situated aspect (without intending to romanticize it though) of lived experience here. In fact, although both race and sex are socially constructed categories, nonetheless the individuals experiencing discrimination are discriminated on the basis of the acknowledgment of their belonging to such categories and conditioned in their subjective experience by the power that such categorisation produce.

some people have multiple subordinate-group identities, in the sense they do not fit into the prototypes of their respective identity groups because they cannot be “univocally” inscribed into one or the other. For example, ethnic minority women are not prototypical individuals neither of ethnic minorities nor women, as black gay men are neither only Black people or heterosexuals. They are seen to hold on some *other* characteristics – blackness in the case of black women, or homosexuality in the case of black men – which eventually put them in the special condition of not being recognized as part of the majority, thus the norm, and marginalised, misunderstood in their life experience for this reason. In this view, these people will be destined to experience what they have called “intersectional invisibility”. As a starting point, they relied on the key concept of “double jeopardy” as developed by Frances M. Beale in the Seventies. According to the double jeopardy hypothesis, minority women suffer the effects of both gender and ethnic prejudice in their society, addressing the dual discrimination based on racism and sexism<sup>45</sup> (Beale 1979). Their model of intersectional invisibility draws on the concepts of androcentrism, ethnocentrism – and also heterocentrism (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008) – to explain why people with intersecting identities will tend to be defined as non-prototypical members of their constituent identity groups and thus relegated to marginal positions, which has consequences also in social and representational terms. Indeed, androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and heterocentrism are three ideologies in which a dominant perspective and experience achieves hegemony and becomes defined as the societal standard. Such ideologies create distinctions on the basis of socially and culturally constructed (arbitrary) categories which address individuals who do not share the “prototypical” characteristic of a group eventually building their identities on the basis of what “they are not”, thus on the perception of a difference that becomes a lack, a missing property, so something negative. Missing some “standard” attributes in such hegemonic framework works negatively both on personal identities – pushing individuals to change their behaviours or physical connotation to adapt and enter the mainstream categories, so to feel more socially accepted – and on the kind of representations in the public sphere, which, in their perpetuation of such standardized attributes, neglect subjectivities who do not see themselves reflected in them and do not conform to the norm, thus contributing to marginalisation and exclusion dynamics of “extra-

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<sup>45</sup> A very interesting aspect of jeopardy theorisation is its further enlargement to a “third” and “fourth” level which also include class and sexual orientation (King, 1988).

ordinary” (mostly non-white, non-heterosexual, non-masculine) people who, however belonging to the community, are not represented in it and cannot be seen as being its part.

Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach meet Crenshaw in their argument on historical invisibility<sup>46</sup> exemplified by the case of Black women. Their model suggests that the experiences and historical narratives of people with intersectional identities will tend to be marginalised or misrepresented in the hegemonic historical records, (which attain to the white-androcentric historical perspective) but also within “their” most identifying narratives of Blacks and female subjects – which means, they end up being further marginalised within already-marginalised groups. Indeed,

Intersectional invisibility in the historical record is demonstrated by evidence of the relative neglect of the narratives and experiences of African-American women in both mainstream African-American history and women’s history. [...] Black feminist theorists have long argued that scholars, policy makers and lay people implicitly associate race with African-American males and gender with white females (Crenshaw 1991). Thus, African-American history tacitly implies African-American male history, rendering African-American women historically invisible (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008).

The same discourse is at the base of the Black feminists’ critique toward White feminism, which can be found both in Crenshaw and bell hooks, but also in the figure of the subaltern woman as theorized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

In fact, theories regarding intersectionality emerged also earlier than 1989<sup>47</sup>, when Black feminists began to speak out about the white, middle-class nature of the mainstream feminist movement, which seemed not to recognize differences among women and neglecting the weight of “race” in the dynamics of oppression (Lutter and Reisenleitner, 2004:101), eventually universalizing their experience and claiming to speak for all women<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Intended as the marginalization of intersectional experiences in historical narratives (Crenshaw, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> Specifically, Angela Davis’ *Women, Race & Class*, dated 1981, is worth of mention here.

<sup>48</sup> At the same time, many Black women also experienced sexism in their participation to the Civil Rights movement and were often left out of leadership positions. This intersectional experience of facing racism in the feminist movement and sexism in civil rights encouraged black women to call for a feminist practice that centralized their lived experiences (“What is intersectionality, and what does it have to do with me?”, 2019).



In her genealogical mapping of feminist theorising on intersectionality, Nina Lykke (2010) has explored - beside the explicit approach linked to anti-discrimination and social justice typical of Crenshaw - how the lens of intersection was already used for reading history even before the official introduction of the concept in 1989. Indeed, arguing about the implicit feminist theorising on intersectionality (that is, not conducted under the official label of “intersectionality”), Lykke demonstrates how both the couples gender/race and gender/class were simultaneously problematised already in XIX and XX centuries, the former within the debate between feminism and the anti-slavery movement<sup>49</sup>, the latter at the crossing of feminist claims within socialist movements<sup>50</sup> (Lykke, 2010:76). Moreover, Lykke also accounts for akin theorisations conducted under other names, first of all the work of the feminist Combahee River Collective, active in Boston between 1974 and 1980. As black women and lesbians, the members of the collective argued that both the white feminist movement and the Civil Rights Movement were not addressing their specific needs. On the one hand, white feminism was not able to bring on their instances as *black* at the same level of their being *women* – the racial focus was missing; on the other hand, they also suffered from an inner sexist, patriarchal mindset within the Civil Right Movement. Even in this case, the basis for theoretical development and practical commitment was the lived experience of the group and not essentialist claims, which eventually became a political battle. In their statement (1977/1982), the members of the collective recognized that systems of oppression were *interlocking*, rather than working as *crossroads*, providing an effective metaphor for describing the inseparable nature of such oppressive dynamics and arguing for the need of an integrated analysis and practice that could fight – at the same time - racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression. The statement is a milestone for feminism as well as for grounding intersectional thought and understanding even before it was officially coined by Crenshaw.

In fact, generally speaking intersectionality as an approach draws on

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<sup>49</sup> In 1851, former slave and activist Sojourner Truth held a powerful speech to the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron that contrasted the politics and images conjured up by white feminism. In repeatedly questioning *Aint’ I a Woman?* (Gates and McKay, 1997), Truth as a woman slave drew the attention to her specific condition of individual oppressed both by patriarchy and racism, anticipating of a century the fights of black feminists.

<sup>50</sup> Lykke makes the example of the Russian socialist Alexandra Kollontai, who organized women workers in the Bolshevik movement in the pre-revolutionary Russia. In her speeches, she attacked the bourgeois feminist identity politics and discourses about a “global sisterhood”, problematizing the relation between gender and class in an intersectional perspective already at the beginning of the XX century.

a continuity of the work of African-American women – and [...] of feminists from other parts of the world – who have articulated the need to “think and talk about race through a lens that looks at gender, or think and talk about feminism through a lens that looks at race” (Crenshaw, 2014: para.2 in Guimarães Corrêa, 2020:825).

The problem of black women who “unfit” into white feminism is also valid to some extent within the academic field of feminist studies. Beside the difficulty to find many women in university departments, it was (is it still?) even harder to find Black women in such positions, for they have always been marginalised (Collins, 1986) . Moreover, more often than not, the relationship between (female) white and black scholars – as also bell hooks hints about in her writings (hooks, 1998) – was affected by those paternalistic tones that white women adopt in their words or behaviours.

Or at least it is such from the perspective of Patricia Hill Collins (1986), that sees Black women in academia experiencing both a disadvantaged and privileged position. As “outsider-within”, they have the disadvantage of not belonging to *a* group (White feminists, Black scholars) but also the “privileged” position as “strangers” which enable them to see patterns, rules, behaviours that the insiders could not notice. Collins’ “outsider-within” is indeed very close to Hall’s “familiar stranger” (Hall and Schwarz, 2017), in the definition of an individual who lives between two worlds, with the ability to observe from within the arbitrariness of behaviours patterns and conventions that rule it (the world of the White hegemony). The same concept echoes in hooks – as I shall explain in the next paragraph – and her idea of the margin, a place far from the centre but still in close relation with it.

The outsider-within lives in (at least) two worlds – *two islands* in Hall’s case - and knows that many (white, masculine, racist) hegemonic perspectives are not universal, and that they can be confronted. For this reason, they are at the forefront of the development of social sciences and of the investigation of social dynamics, as they can bring new perceptions and perspectives to various fields of knowledge (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020:825).

## 2.2. bell hooks and the margin as a site of resistance

bell hooks' work is a milestone in this sense, also because her idea of the margin and the centre much echoes Collins' perspective of the outsider-within. In fact, as hooks explained in the preface to *Feminist theory: from margin to center* (1984), "to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body". hooks – born Gloria Jean Watkins - was born and raised in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, where she attended segregated school and directly experienced racial discrimination. She later moved in an integrated school and managed to enter university, trying to set herself – first as a student, later as teacher - in an environment mostly dominated by white people, facing both the difficulties of being a Black and a woman academic. Her lived experience of individual coming from the margin and moving to and into the centre was essential in her life, both at a personal and professional level. In her works, she brings at the forefront questions of race, gender and class as intersecting axes that sustain and reproduce systems of oppression and discrimination. Throughout her production, she recalls her personal (and her family's) experience of Black individuals living in segregation as a very important marker in her life, living in a place where their non-belongingness to the centre was also physically represented in the space they inhabited.

As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in [...] as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town (hooks, 1984).

Indeed, it is the lived experience in the margin that largely contributed to the development of hooks' critical sense toward the hegemonic, white-centred social and cultural structures as well as toward White feminists and academics. In fact, on one hand, when she comments

living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as on the margin (ibidem).

she is reasserting what Collins said about the “privileged” position of an outsider-within, capable of unmasking and counter-acting the dominant, naturalised ways of understanding and “categorizing” the world.

In fact, Collins argues that the contribution of Black women’s observations and perspective is useful for it can enrich sociological research in academia. Since white males have long been the dominant group in sociology, the sociological worldview has always reflected the concerns of this specific group of scholars (Collins, 1986:26), eventually creating a white-male *insiderism* within the field, concerning the choice of themes and questions subject to be studied, which ones/what to dismiss and neglect, and the methodologies as well. Moreover, group insiders have similar worldviews acquired through similar educational and professional backgrounds, which might be especially alike if they also share similar social class, gender, and racial characteristics, informing their ways of thinking and systems of knowledge. Growing in and learning certain patterns as natural make such insiders blind to them, eventually rendering it difficult to observe phenomena critically because they – as subjects – were formed and informed into such patterns. While white male subjectivity – living and acting in the centre - has assigned Afro-American womanhood a position on the margins (in society as much as in sociology), Black women speaking from there, in that space which is still embodied but displaced from the centre - both in and out, as hooks put it, can propose an alternative view not only on themselves, but on social phenomena at large. For they are “strangers” – in Simmel (1921) and Schutz’s (1944) terminology – they do not share the basic assumptions of that group – white males.

For example, Black female sociologists typically report the omission of facts or observations about Afro-American women in the sociological paradigms they encounter or the distortions of facts and observations about Black women and their experience. More specifically, Black female sociologists rely on their personal experience as Black female subjects to trace the difference between the conditions and contents of their lives and the sociological descriptions of the same phenomena – based on an “external” (academically recognised as valid), white-male viewpoint. “Outsiders within

occupy a special place [because] their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see" (Collins, 1986:29). In "the choice between identifying as black or female", in their ability to recognize different and interlocking systems of oppressions, Black feminists and scholars as Collins and hooks can see - more clearly than others in relation to that particular experience - "[the] product of the patriarchal strategy of divide-and-conquer and the continued importance of class, patriarchal, and racial divisions, [which] perpetuate such choices [of identifying as black or female] both within our consciousness and within the concrete realities of our daily lives" (Dill, 1983:136). Thus, Collins (1986) concludes, "the approach suggested by the experiences of outsiders within is one where intellectuals learn to trust their own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge" (29).

Indeed, with her *Feminist theory: from margin to center*, hooks aimed at "exploring all possibilities" (ibidem), as furthering the horizon of feminism beyond its mainstream, white connotation, as she felt

the absence of feminist theory that addresses margin and center [...] Much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live in the margin. As a consequence, feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences.

The experience of the margin is precious for hooks, because it provides her with "an oppositional world-view", a mode of seeing and understanding reality which is "unknown to most of our oppressors" (hooks, 2015:229) and that is *central* to her academic theorizing and practice. Her reading from the margin is also essential to feminist practice as well, if one shares her same view on feminism as "a mass based political movement [that has to] have a revolutionary, transformative impact on society" (hooks, 1984).

Although living and working at the centre, hooks has always reasserted her will to stay in the margin, as she conceives it as a special space, a chosen space too – and not only a space of subjugation - and from where to speak. In fact, she underlines that the marginality she has chosen is not the one

imposed by oppressive structures, rather it is a site of resistance. The margin where she locates herself is not the site of deprivation but of possibility, of a “radical openness” that “nourishes one’s capacity to resist” (hooks, 2015:230).

[..] that space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor, is located in the margins. And one can only say no, speak the voice of resistance, because there exists a counter-language. While it may resemble the colonizer’s tongue, it has undergone a transformation, it has been irrevocably changed (ivi, 235).

In her opinion, the margin must be conceived as the “site of creativity and power” for it is only in this way that it can work as an inclusive space. In fact, hooks is against those feminists and critical thinkers who still contribute to make discourse on “the Other”, who still conceive the margin as the site of domination and who pretend to talk on behalf of all women, neglecting their heterogeneity and deeply different lived experiences.

I am waiting for them to stop talking about the “Other” [...] Often this speech about the “Other” annihilates, erases: “No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk.” Stop. (hooks, 2015:233).

The point is to avoid thinking about the margin as a place of deprivation because it reiterates the oppressive and constricting silence to which those women were bound by hegemonic narratives, including those of their White middle-class sisters. On the contrary, hooks invites them to conceive the margin as the space of resistance and to enter it, to meet right there, for this is the only space where critical response to domination is possible and where “we recover ourselves [and] move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer”.

Then, for hooks, it is possible for the marginalised woman to speak, to enter in dialogue with the centre insofar the space where she speaks from is understood as a space for possibility and for the recognition of differences, and not for their erasure or hierarchisation. Indeed, her feminist practice challenges the logic and conceptual flaw that see all women as natural allies of the other women (Nadotti, 1998:7). In her view, differences should be accounted for and valorised in the margin, there where an open dialogue to reciprocal understanding and appreciation, comprising also gender and sex dimensions, can take place.

hooks' intersectional feminism also emerges in *Reflections on race and sex* (hooks, 2015), where she acknowledges the two systems of racism and sexism as interrelated systems of dominance which reciprocally sustain each other and therefore must be fought simultaneously (and not as separated issues, as many feminists still consider them) (hooks, 1998:39). As an example of such binary "defect" of thinking, hooks considers the public reception of the rape of a young (white) woman by a group of black teenagers in Central Park in 1989.

Public response to the Central Park case reveals the extent to which the culture invests in the kind of dualistic thinking that helps reinforce and maintain all forms of domination. Why must people decide whether this crime is more sexist than racist, as if these are competing oppressions? (hooks, 2015:104).

As in this case, hooks' commentary of cultural phenomena witnesses her sharpness of thought and importance as Black feminist scholar, for her specific position *at the crossroad* enables her to discover the underlying binarism of white hegemonic thought – rooted also in white feminism – that has prevented the understanding of those phenomena encompassing individuals with multiple subordinated identity. Her perspective is useful to understand how much naturalised and restricting such ways of conceiving the world are, which is why she hopes for the need of disrupting them, by entering into a space where dialogue, discussion and valorisation of the differences can exist as knowledge-productive practices.

### 2.3. Gayatri Spivak, the subaltern and the impossibility to speak

The critique to white feminism and the ability to look at sexism and racism (and eventually much more) as co-occurring oppression forces are strong and founding in hooks' work as they are in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's one. Spivak is an Indian-born scholar, theorist and feminist literary critic who achieved international notoriety for her English translation of Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (1967) and her essay *Can the Subaltern speak?* (1988), where she investigated the condition of the colonized subject and, more specifically, of the woman subaltern by considering the Indian ritual called Sati<sup>51</sup>. She has also been a member of the Subaltern Studies Group, which explains the numerous historical studies and literary critiques of imperialism and international feminism she has carried out. In fact, in *The Post-colonial Critic* (1990), Spivak rejected "single-issue" movements for the analysis of culture and practices, that is modes of investigation that attempted to explain phenomena from a univocal perspective, aligning with a more intersectional approach. This is also one of the reasons behind her continuous revision of Marxism, inasmuch it aims at explaining everything in terms of class struggle, as well as a certain (white) feminist approach that finds women's oppression as the final determinant of any problem. In fact,

I find feminism as a single-issue movement somewhat terrifying because it leads to the totalizing that all great narratives explanations finally bring us face to face with. And as someone interested in deconstruction I'm deeply concerned with a persistent critique of a totalization which can in fact in the long run lead to totalitarianism (Spivak, 1990:118).

The totalizing tension of feminism as single-issue perspective criticised by Spivak leads back to hooks and the previously mentioned necessity of and within feminist movement to recognize and valorise differences among women. Indeed, Spivak refuses "high feminism" intended as the feminism of those privileged women that "see their face in the mirror and define 'Woman' - capital w – in terms of the reflection that they see there" (Spivak, 1990:119), evaluating who is a Woman according to physical characteristics of "sometimes [...] their faces", "sometimes [...] their genitals" (ibidem) and thus underestimating the cultural aspects of the category "Woman". In this sense, in Spivak's

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<sup>51</sup> Sati or Suttee is an ancient Hindu practice according to which the widow "voluntarily" sacrifices herself on the pyre of her husband.



opinion, what she calls “high feminism” reproduces the structures of the patriarchal societies of which they (white feminists) are the product and makes it clear why she refuses it as such.

As Pamela De Lucia also comments in her reading of Spivak (2013), the Western Woman Subject - the “International Feminist” – “produces” the will of the Third World, rural, subaltern woman, who is eventually manipulated and shaped in her image and likeness (ibidem, 111). The result of this process is merely another construction of the Other as inferior subject, purpose-built to reinforce the International Feminist image as Saviour(ess), as the *White Woman saving Brown Women from Brown Men*<sup>52</sup>, which only seems to be an “updated” (self-declared feminist) version of the same colonialist (and still patriarchal) narrative of the *White Men saving Brown Women from Brown Men*.

With this last sentence, Spivak wanted to explain the double-shadowed condition suffered by the subaltern woman, in this case specifically within Indian society. In fact, on the one hand, British colonizers abolished the practice of the Sati (or Suttee) - the “voluntary” self-sacrifice of the widow on the pyre of her husband - in the imperialistic view that saw women’s protection as a guarantee for the establishment of good society, so still imposing British law on the colonised culture. On the other hand, Indian men’s response was that “women really wanted to die”, then covering with their voice that of the subaltern woman, who is eventually deprived of any own’s possibility to speak or act. Action as affirmation of her free will is indeed denied, or better, limited to the decision of self-immolation, for in the Hindu sacred texts woman’s free will seems only to take place by means of her sacrifice. It is indeed the condition of the subaltern woman who can’t speak at all, simultaneously oppressed by the colonizer’s claim to save her and the domestic-patriarchal system that ideologically confines her freedom to the “choice” of death. Western imperialism and local patriarchy haunt the poorest woman of the Third world, who in her marginalization<sup>53</sup>, voicelessness and invisibility becomes an object built by others and always told by others, to the extent that any attempt of giving her a voice is fictitious, an instrumentalization, because the subject of their talking is an absence, a woman who does not exist, unreal (De Lucia, 2013:100), who is artificially built by external narratives.

Spivak asserts the impossibility for the subaltern woman to speak because of the “epistemic violence” operated by the Western colonizers too. With this expression, Spivak intends the

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<sup>52</sup> “La Femminista internazionale ha costruito un’Altra inferiore per potersi sentire superiore. Per poter diventare la donna bianca che salva donne scure da uomini scuri.” (De Lucia, 2013:111).

<sup>53</sup> In economic terms as well, the third-world woman is exploited within the capitalist system of the division of labour.

imposition of certain European codes – English common laws, different educational systems, but also other representational mechanisms at large – which the colonizer enforces on the colonized society on the premise of their presumed “barbarism”, thus also justifying such imposition. Indeed, in enforcing and exporting such systems, the White Man asserts himself as creating-subject, *worlding a world* in Heideggerian terms, in the sense that he is able to cast on the Others’ world his own modalities of knowledge production, his representational and value systems, and thus building an idea of the Other which is eventually enforced in their minds and self-perception. In doing so, the colonizer enacts a violence in the “épisteme” of the Other and creates it as an object of his narratives, managing to control it through those very systems of narrations and representations. It is always a dialectic process, where the colonizers build the image of the inferior colonised to create its own role of superior, educated and civilising subject, while depriving the Other of its own means of expression, in cultural, linguistic, legal, economic, *representational* terms.

Analysing the condition of Sati women as a subaltern group, Spivak detects the presence of co-occurring systems of oppression working on them: “the British humanist discourse calling for [their] individual freedom [...] and the Hindu native policy calling for voluntary participation in the ritual” (El, H. L., 2012) and, eventually, “the ‘voice’ of the Hindu woman herself disappeared while these two discursive groups tried to give her a voice” (ibidem). hooks retraced the same problem among white feminists who only want to know the story of the oppressed, the story of the woman subaltern, in order to make it theirs, to tell them their own, eventually closing any possibility for the subaltern to make her voice heard.

Indeed, coming back to Spivak’s critic to feminism, it then seems to her that, although with a new face, that kind of feminist practice reiterates the normative, closed subject previously played by the colonizing White Man and in her opinion, the struggles of such feminists risk worsen the conditions of other groups, i.e., subaltern women in non-Western, Third worlds.

So, although in the IV Section of *Can the subaltern speak?* (1988) Spivak recognizes the commitment of such feminists in addressing the situation of the subaltern woman – as “participating in antisexist work among women of colour or women in class oppression in the First World or the Third World is undeniably on the agenda” (295) - she also comments on how Western feminism is actually incapable of confronting the woman as subaltern, since “her ‘femaleness’ [of the Western feminist] is not enough to connect with the woman as subaltern” (McCandless, 2015:42). In fact, “in the long

run, [Western feminism] cohere[s] with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be mute as ever” (Spivak, 1988:295). The importance of the lived experience as already seen in bell hooks surfaces again and witnesses the impossibility for White women and feminists to access the consciousness of the subaltern woman, which is “heterogeneous and inaccessible” (McCandless, 2015:41).

Western feminists must *re-situate* themselves in another space and leave any claim of universality behind, together with their privileges<sup>54</sup>, because it is clear that this kind of feminism is built on the wrong premises and fails in acknowledging the privileged position where it speaks from.

In seeking to learn to *speak to* (rather than *listen to* and *speak for*) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual *systematically* ‘unlearns’ female privilege (Spivak, 1988:295).

Therefore, the Western feminist has, first of all, to recognize her privilege and then trying to unlearn it – *acting self-reflexively from her positionality* -, if she aims at *speaking to* the subaltern woman, there where

the differentiation between *speaking to* as opposed to *listening to* and *speaking for* is key, as it signifies a conscious decision to avoid the complicated positionality implicit in the represented/representative relationship (McCandless, 2015:42).

From a methodological point of view, the need to self-reflect on one’s position directly links to Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge” (1991) and her articulation of the epistemological tradition in Feminist Studies. In line with postmodern philosophers of science, Haraway conceives of the researchers as always *in medias res*, thus inserted in, in the middle of the world they analyse

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<sup>54</sup> Some intersectional study such as Case (2017) have underlined the importance of focusing on privilege (beside oppression) as an essential aspect to be studied inasmuch it contributes to the maintenance of oppression.

– or, as she puts it, “in the belly of the monster” (Haraway, 1991:188). On the basis of such premise, it comes that there is no “outside” from which one can talk, no comfortable distancing position that guarantees scientific objectivity in knowledge production. In fact, “the researcher is involved in compliance with and co-responsible; and knowledge production will always imply a subjective dimension” (Lykke, 2010:5), to the extent that science itself becomes a “story-telling practice” (Haraway, 1989:4). Despite the foregrounding of the subjective dimension, Haraway does not abandon objectivity in favour of an all-embracing relativism. Instead,

[her] principle of situated knowledges suggests an answer to the postmodern feminist dilemma of wanting to take a clear moral and political stance, but at the same time wishing to avoid universalizing master narratives with their illusory claim that it is possible to give a ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ depiction of the world (Lykke, 2010:5).

In her critique objectivity still exists insofar as the knowers recognize the relativity of their position where they speak from: both the tendencies towards totalization/universalization and absolute relativism are thus avoided. In theorizing a *situated knowledge*, Haraway re-locates the observer within the world and builds a new epistemology in Feminist Studies that starts from self-reflection, exists as mobile and embraces a multiplicity of viewpoints. In fact, for Lykke the researcher can obtain a partial objective knowledge, the one of the specific reality that they see from the position in which they are “materially discursively located in time, space, body and historical power relations” (2010:5). The same aspect is also remarked by David Grossberg (1992) within cultural research, as he noted that

the cultural analyst is directly implicated and involved in his or her story, for the storyteller cannot help but be as much a character in the story as any other socially defined subject. The stories told, the knowledge produced, are never innocent or neutral (Grossberg, 1992:62).

Haraway emphasizes the need for the researcher subject both to “site” and “sight” themselves: *siting* meaning *localizing, situating* oneself at the same level of the “informants”/research participants, abandoning any pretension of omniscience or omnipresence implicit in universalizing master narratives, like those of white feminism about “all women’s way to liberation” (Haraway, 1991:191); *sighting*, intending a reflection on the ways in which our “visions and optical systems are crafted in technological, ideological and bodily biological senses” (Lykke, 2010:6), underlining the relativity of one’s interpretational codes of reality and consequently opening to reflections about the Others’ perspective and point of view. Therefore, according to Haraway, if researchers manage to follow this program, they can talk with an authoritative voice about the *partial* reality that they see while making themselves ethically and politically responsible and democratic players in it (ibidem).

Although reflexivity as a methodological tool is useful as it allows a critical observation of one’s own reflections, it still has its limitations. In fact, to observe critically does not really make a difference, does not bring beyond “the logic of the Same” (Lykke, 2010:155), because reflection is still a reproduction of the Same. Therefore, Haraway argues that if one is willing to really change the world, *diffraction*<sup>55</sup> is a far more useful tool. In contrast to the unchangeable entity arising from critical reflection, diffraction is a more dynamic and complex process, which creates new, ever-changing patterns of difference (Lykke, 2010:155). “Diffraction can be a metaphor for *another kind* of critical consciousness [...], one committed to making a difference and not to repeating the Sacred Image of Same” (Haraway, 1997:273). It is about heterogeneous history and its advantage stands in the fact that it does not look at the original, rather at the interactions, interferences, difference itself, and this is the reason why feminist scholars find it methodologically relevant: “it is useful to analyse change or dynamism related to processes of sociocultural transformation, liberation, emancipation” (ibidem)”, and therefore Lykke lists it, together with *siting* and *sighting*, as important methodological principles that must be considered and included in feminist research, and on which I will also rely for the aims of this analysis.

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<sup>55</sup> Metaphorically speaking too, diffraction is more “productive” than reflection. In fact, diffraction is a term borrowed by physics, and refers to the phenomenon encompassing a ray of light entering a prism and exiting it with in a different form, showing its being made up of, composed of different colours (i.e. parts of light with different wave lengths). By diffracting light, the prism makes it possible to observe the contrasting parts which could not be seen before. In this sense, diffraction opens to new possibilities, is not just a re-depiction of oneself but it allows to see *in* and *through* oneself and therefore is more useful for critical thinking.

Therefore, positioning oneself and acting self-reflexively is the first step of the necessary process of systematic unlearning of one's privilege that the postcolonial and feminist intellectual must achieve, learning to critique their (her) own ideology to the best of their (her) ability, while avoiding the temptation to represent some lost or muted voice of the subaltern woman (McCandless, 2015:42). And since each privilege represents an obstacle for welcoming the Other, unlearning their privilege means dismantling the binary logic of Us/Them and inaugurating a space for exchange, mutual learning, and relationship (De Lucia, 2013:112), a space which much resembles hooks' special view on the margin. It is necessary to "look at the ways in which you [Western feminists] are complicit with what you are so carefully and cleanly opposing", thus analysing their place and position, becoming aware and able to conduct an even more powerful intellectual and political practice.

Spivak is indeed convinced of the inseparable nature of theory and practice, which puts her even closer to cultural practitioners in the field of CS (who also recognize her contribution, together with other feminist thinkers like for example Judith Butler). Indeed, in her view, no activism or practice can be disjoined from textuality and textual analysis, since she intends them as the possibility that every socio-political, psycho-sexual phenomenon is organized and "woven" by many strands, that are discontinuous and out of our control, since we are inserted in them. Being politically active does not imply the backgrounding or disregarding of texts, rather it means to "become more and more aware of the problems of the textuality of the socius" (Spivak, 1990:120). Political activism is not just "mindless engagement" (121): it is a constitutive part to the reading of the *representations* embedded in the world we live in, the response to a specific comprehension of those dynamics producing power and knowledge and which actively operate in order to challenge or attempting to modify them.

As Guimarães Corrêa already commented about Stuart Hall's intellectual work (2020:828),

The interplay between multiple systems of oppression affects the experience of individuals, and the awareness of these intersecting power relations may give them tools to see and understand the world through new lenses and perspectives. This intellectual work has the potential of reflecting back into everyday life: into discourses, practices and movements, eventually leading to societal change. In short – and only didactically separating life from theory – I would defend the functioning of a cycle where life (or lived experience) informs theory, which could change life.

In this perspective, theory and practice, texts and lived experience and/or political activism seem to be bi-univocally connected, in the sense that there is no monodirectional movement from theory to practice – which postulates a certain rigidity in changing things in the real world – but reciprocal influence, opening up the possibility of change in theoretical assumptions through (counter)practices operating in the context. Conversely, this close, mutual connection also allows a “re-reading” of specific practices and their interpretation in theoretical terms that eventually re-enter theory while enlarging both their comprehension and theoretical field itself, while politically working too.

In the case of the soiling of a public monument, iconoclastic practices may be theoretically informed – more or less formally, people *do* things because they somehow know they *mean* something – but always practically enacted. In any case, once they are carried out, they become discursively productive also in theoretical terms, since they become new object of investigation for their political and identity value. Indeed, as already argued in the introduction to this work, embodied spatial practices and discursive constructions mirror each other in the case of statues’ soiling, removal or toppling, insofar as they claim different political positions and active engagement against hegemonic representation. Nonetheless, Spivak makes an essential point in marking the shift from general political activism to critical political activism. The shift lays in the acknowledgement of a sort of lag-effect between the world for what it is, and the system used to refer to it. She means that political activism can (and in fact does) rely on cultural self-representation, slogans for mobilization – antiracist ones, for example – and so on, but it always has to do it with the awareness of that “lagging-behind effect, so that you don’t take your slogan as adequately representing a reality” once and for all (1990:125).

The same applies to the acknowledgment of someone’s privileged position in scholar and political engagement, comprehending white feminists. What Spivak is asking for is a de-hegemonization of their position, learning to occupy the subject position of the Other (Spivak, 1990:121) without claiming to substitute to their voice.

In conclusion, although feminists have approached intersectionality in different ways - as Lykke (2010) has finely reported in her genealogical insight into intersectionality in *Feminist Studies* – they generally agree on the necessity to adopt intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological tool.

Especially for post-colonial and anti-racist feminisms, intersectional theorization has proved useful for “establishing platforms where it was possible to analyse intertwining processes of tenderisation, racialisation and ethnicization” (Lykke, 2010:50) as well as to conduct analyses which can enlighten how historically specific kinds of power differentials and/or constraining normativities (based on discursively, institutionally and/or structurally constructed socio cultural categorizations) interact, (ibidem) and eventually produce (and reproduce) unbalanced relationships among groups and individuals in society. Moreover, intersectionality functions well as a tool also to analyse

how political resistances vis-à-vis intertwined power differentials and normativities are being built around a *resignification of categorizations and normative identity markers*, and, more generally, how *individual subjects negotiate the power-laden social relations and conditions in which they are embedded* (ivi, 51, emphasis added).

Applying intersectionality in empirical research on Cultural Studies will mean to observe and consider the perceptions, interpretations and theories which come from non-hegemonic groups – not only within the academic field but also in everyday and peripheral spaces where knowledge is constructed (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020:824) - in order to qualify, decentralize and decolonize the investigation of social phenomena. Although the insights of Cultural Studies on production, context and reception are themselves productive and useful, many Cultural Studies scholars have often stressed the importance of drawing on the theoretical and methodological approaches of different disciplines as well as contexts, whereas it is also crucial “to pay attention to different gazes – including the ones which do not come from inside academia” (ibidem).

Indeed, this is what I tried to do in my analysis of the online debate born around the counter-hegemonic acts and claims of subgroups like NUDM and LUME/RSM. I aimed at valorising the bottom-up perspectives, both of the involved activists - and the rationales behind their actions -, and of the commenters, their opinions regarding these actions, the statue and the perspectives at work behind their taking a side. One of the main aims of this research is in fact to understand the dynamics (and symbolical processes) operating behind specific social actors’ choice of soiling a monument in order to manifest dissent – given that they are recognised with the possibility of counter-acting despite their marginalisation. At the same time, marginalisation is observed through



intersectionality, for its application to the case will uncover the multiple, oppressing mechanisms working behind it (marginalisation) in the hegemonical, ideological framework of society - of which statues are only one among many physical embodiments – and interpret counter-practices as political resistance within those very ideological structures. While framing this aspect, much attention is given to the historical and ideological circumstances within which these groups exist and operate, who they are (or better, who they claim themselves to be), on whose behalf they are speaking (which accounts for identification processes as well), why such gestures, what they believe they are doing, what they expect their actions to cause, why they think it is meaningful, what is their final aim. Last but not least, I also tried to provide a relevant range of reactions (of Facebook users) that such acts have provoked, so to propose a framework – as complete as possible – of the many “bottom-up” positioning, of people who also do belong to non-dominant positions, but still do not only take *one* side – either totally pro or totally against such actions. In this sense, the research relies on the concept of cultural hegemony as employed by Cultural Studies, highlighting the fragmentation with the dominant meanings in the different forms they are negotiated, meanings which, nonetheless, appear in the common, *naturalized* interpretation of vandalism and unjustified violence.

## CHAPTER 3 – Case study and methodology

Before introducing the analytical tools that are employed in this research, it is necessary to finally provide a full-length insight and report on the largely already mentioned case at the centre of the analysis, namely the defacing on Indro Montanelli's statue in Milan. After the explanation of the events and the reasons for choosing it as the leading case study, it will be useful both to sum up what has been said up to now in theoretical and methodological terms, so as to proceed and introduce the instruments and resources used for conducting this research.

### *3.1 Case study: the statue of Indro Montanelli in Milan*

#### *3.1.1 Backstory: the controversial legacy of Indro Montanelli*

As already mentioned throughout the previous chapters, the main case at the centre of this research, focused on bottom-up interventions on public monuments, is the series of soilings and alterations/defacing of the statue dedicated to journalist Indro Montanelli in Milan, Italy.

Indro Montanelli (Fucecchio, Florence, 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1909 – Milan, 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2001) was an Italian journalist, considered one among the most important in the Italian intellectual panorama of the last century. Generally acknowledged as a sharp thinker and conservator critic, he began his journalistic career in France and New York, until he decided to come back to Italy to become a correspondent from Africa, in the period Mussolini was invading Ethiopia, around 1936. As another journalist, Webb Miller, was chosen for that role, Montanelli enrolled as a voluntary soldier. Although initially joining the enthusiasm of the fascist era, Montanelli became increasingly critical of it and took the distances from the regime, which caused him to be deleted from the journalists register and his party membership withdrawn. Nonetheless, also thanks to his acquaintances, he could continue to work as writer and journalist, and his name became known to the public especially for his long-lasting collaboration with *Il Corriere della Sera*, one of the most important newspapers in Italy of which Montanelli became a symbolic figure. With Pietro Ottone as director during the Seventies, *Il Corriere* became more and more leftist, causing Montanelli to leave it to found his own *Il Giornale*. Again, after it was taken over by Silvio Berlusconi in the Eighties, Montanelli decided to leave and found another newspaper, *La Voce*. In both cases, as Montanelli disagreed with the new political

headings that the two newspapers got into, he decided to leave his positions whenever he felt his independence as thinker to be threatened.

As an eminent representant of free thought and master of journalism, the mayor of the city of Milan, Gabriele Albertini (in charge from 1997 to 2006), firmly advocated for dedicating him a monument – Albertini was very close to Montanelli, stating he was like a second father for him (Fontana, 2006) - and the right-centre city council of the time eventually agreed on it, in a more general view which saw Milan’s public spaces gradually filled with symbols of the conservative right (Fasani, 2020). In fact, some years later it became clearer the intention of the city council to commemorate some symbolic personalities of the national and Milanese conservative right. For example, three years earlier they dedicated a square to Josemaría Escrivá, founder of a catholic, conservative congregation and the same happened for a public park in via Solari, which was dedicated to the founder of the catholic movement called “Comunione e Liberazione”, don Luigi Giussani. Both the people involved and their congregations were much influential in Milan and Lombardy in general in terms of political conservatism. Also, a street was entitled to Fabrizio Quattrocchi, a security guard who was kidnapped and killed in Afghanistan in 2004 and that became a symbol of the Italian right (Fasani, 2020). Such examples highlight again the political nature of public space also in democratic contexts and the power of the symbols that fill it, used to vehiculate and promote some instances at the expenses of others (which result neglected and therefore further marginalised).

The statue was inaugurated on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2006 in Via Palestro, Milan, close to the gardens where Montanelli used to spend much of his time before going to and after returning from work, and where he was kneecapped by two members of the Red Brigades<sup>56</sup> in 1977. Thus, the space they chose had a high symbolical connotation, for it was the place where *the* journalist, “hero of free thought”, was attacked by terrorists. As any other event, the episode was framed and interpreted following the mainstream narrative, and the attack *ad personam* has become an attack to the freedom of thought and speech. For the same reason, the public gardens of Porta Venezia were already renamed after him in 2002.

The bronze statue is placed within the park in a semi-enclosed space, aimed at recalling “Montanelli’s room” (“La stanza di Montanelli”), a column he used to hold in *Il Corriere della Sera*.

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<sup>56</sup> The Red Brigades were a left-extremist terroristic group active in Italy during the Seventies and Eighties. They chose Montanelli because, as founder of *Il Giornale*, he represented one of the first that, considered a representant of the middle-class, European democracy, was carrying out an anti-comunist line inspired by conservatism. (Messina, 2017).

The artist Vito Tongiani<sup>57</sup> modelled the sculpture on an older photograph of Montanelli, portrayed sit on a pile of newspaper in the halls of *Il Corriere della Sera* newsroom, while writing pieces of news with his historical typewriter on his knees, gaze fixed on his work. At the beginning the statue was not particularly contested. Beside some critics regarding the aesthetical choices of the artists, the only controversies it raised were given by the well-known rebuttal of Montanelli of statues and monuments in general (Merlo, 2006). In any case, Albertini firmly defended it and remarked his will to keep the statue where it was (Gallione, 2006) (Giannattasio, 2020). It was only later, from 2012 on, that the statue began to be the target of vandalistic attacks of various kind, with the rising of debates about his past as soldier during the Fascist era.

In fact, the event which especially attracted popular interest and that ignited the whole controversy about the statue - and his acknowledgement as a “great intellectual” - dates back to 1935. At that time, Montanelli was an enthusiast, young fascist who, as many others, enlisted as volunteer for the Ethiopian war, the colonial campaign that Italy was fighting in Africa to expand its colonial empire and stay at pace with other European powers. Like most of its comrades and according to a diffused practice in the colonies called “*madamato*”, Montanelli “took wife”, in the specific meaning that he bought a young girl of 12 (or 14, or 16, since in the interviews he gave he changed the information sometimes) together with a weapon and a horse with a sort of “leasing” contract – in the words on Montanelli (2001) (2020) to Rai Teche (2015).

Destà (or Fatìma, according to another version that Montanelli gave) was one of the many African women, young girls and children (the younger they were, the lower the possibility of being sexually ill) involved in this kind of temporary, extra-marital relationship with Italian soldiers at the time of the Italian invasion of Eritrea and Somalia first, Ethiopia and Libya then. In fact, they were engaged in the social practice called *madamato* (from “*madama*” meaning “*mistress*”), a practice justified on the basis of an already existing local tradition called “*dämòz*” (Cerri, 2021), a form of marriage contract which bound both the man and the woman to a series of obligations, including the man’s care of the children even after the end of the contract. Legitimate continuation or the “*dämòz*” or not, the *madamato* was an act of cultural appropriation, where the colonizers took possession of the culture of the Other – in this case the indigenous African people – to adapt it in their favour. Indeed, the *madamato* became an easy way to get free access to sexual and domestic services, often

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<sup>57</sup> Vito Tongiani (29<sup>th</sup> March 1940) is an Italian painter and sculptor, already known for the realization of the monument to Giacomo Puccini in Piazza Cittadella, Lucca, where the composer was born.

neglecting the duties it involved and giving birth to numerous “half-breed”, unrecognized children. It was the actual institutionalization and legal tolerance of concubinage and was preferred to the frequentation of prostitutes or brothels because the latter lowered the prestige of the colonizers and were more dangerous for the risk of venereal diseases. The madamato was eventually prohibited with the enforcement of racial laws in 1937, but the practice was not so easy to stop then. Among the many Italian soldiers who bought an indigenous “wife” there was also Montanelli.

Historical circumstances are always essential to frame such events, also because it is on such basis that many people justify his actions. He was young and joined the general wave of enthusiasm of what seemed to be a new era for Italy. Times were different and mentalities were different too. Colonialism was on the political agenda and racism, as recognizing and legitimizing the existence of hierarchies among human beings, was ideologically and “scientifically” (through eugenics) sustaining it. Montanelli’s actions have been explained and sometimes justified in different ways, according to the frame adopted and opinions are widely discordant.

Those who defend him do it in the name of “the time it was”, in the attempt of historicizing actions which may *now* be labelled as “racist”, but not at that time, when to consider other populations as beasts was the norm, as also Montanelli more than once described Destà, a young woman, as “a tame, little animal”. Defenders advocate for contextualisation and for weighting what he did (or did not) with the yardstick of that age, defining opposite opinions as anachronistic. On the other hand, the “mitigating circumstance” of the context, the “cultural excuse” behind which Montanelli sheltered himself from the accusation of violence, rape, and paedophilia, do not stand at all here.

Although “in Africa, it is different. At twelve, they are already women” (Montanelli, 2001), the TV confrontation with Elvira Banotti (zosozeppelin, 2020a) highlighted the total absence of a critical sense towards his own actions in Montanelli, as if the great intellectual was really unable of understanding that there is no biological difference between a white child of twelve and a non-white child of twelve, and that rape and sexual violence has no colour and no culture. Moreover, her intervention in this context was more unique than rare, for it gave the possibility to *hear* (although probably not listened) – maybe for the first time on a “white” TV broadcast - the direct voice of someone really entitled to comment such events, as an individual bearing witness of her lived experience as *woman* and *colonised* in front of an audience of a white audience, including the

colonizers who had never really confronted the legacies of their national, quite recent colonial history.

*I lived in Africa, you know, and yours [relationship with Africans] really was the violent relationship of the colonialist, who arrived there and took possession of the 12-year-old girl. Without considering, on a human-relational level, that, in this relationship, you were the winners, the soldiers who have been doing the same things wherever they have been, and wherever men showed up as soldiers. History is full of these situations<sup>58</sup> (Banotti in zosozeppelin, 2020a).*

With less than a two-minute speech, Elvira Banotti explicitly denounced the historical violence of the white Western *man* as a soldier and colonialist, that wins and loots lands and women's bodies wherever he goes

Also, in the case one accepts the historization and is willing to overcome some deplorable, still "excusable" *for that time*, actions, the question raises again as still in 2001, with the consciousness and awareness of new times –intending, a more "racism-aware" way of thinking and contextualise - Montanelli still did not show any sign of self-criticism, reasserting his actions as legally, historically and culturally acceptable despite new legal, historical and cultural circumstances. Past cannot be changed, but the recognition of one's mistakes – or controversial actions – is something that people, especially minorities or non-hegemonic groups which were the target of certain discriminatory practices, expect from intellectuals, in particular from a journalist who "has always fought to represent the voice of those who could not speak", as Enzo Biagi once commented (Rai Teche, 2015), and that the national community they live in honour and celebrate with a statue. Instead, as witnessed by the interviews he gave<sup>59</sup>, Montanelli never showed regret, never asked for forgiveness,

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<sup>58</sup> From *L'ora della verità* (zosozeppelin, 2020a) her original speech was: "Guardi, io ho vissuto in Africa e il vostro era veramente il rapporto violento del colonialista [...] che veniva lì e si impossessava della ragazza di dodici anni, senza assolutamente tener conto che in questo tipo di rapporto sul piano umano eravate i vincitori, cioè i militari che hanno fatto le stesse cose ovunque sono stati i vincitori e ovunque gli uomini si sono presentati come militari. E la storia è piena di queste situazioni" [personal translation].

<sup>59</sup> Specifically, there are two interviews which are interesting and easily available online. The first he gave was to Gianni Bisiach in 1969 in the tv program *L'ora della verità*, during which Banotti addressed Montanelli in first person. The second interview was to Enzo Biagi in 1982 in an episode of *Questo Secolo* (zosozeppelin, 2020b). Here, Montanelli referred to Destà calling her Fatima and stating she was of Muslim faith.

because he never recognized his actions as violence. In Africa *it was different*, it was his only justification. He never retreated what he said, nor changed that unemotional, paternalistic tone with which he talked about a *person* as his “tame, little animal”.

### 3.1.2 A chronicle of the contestations

The concerns and consequent contestations of some groups and individuals have taken physical form and poured onto the statue on several occasions in the last nine years. Given Montanelli's death in 2001 and the impossibility to directly address him – as instead Elvira Banotti had the chance to do in 1969<sup>60</sup> –, people have started to manifest their dissent by acting on one of the few *things*, symbolical representations left of him – for he did not even want a tombstone. They attacked an institutional, symbolical reference, the public tribute of the city of Milan (or at least, of those in power which should represent it at large) to his personality. Contesters have claimed for change, asked for removal, tried to unveil the “other side of the coin”, a collateral and less known story involving the straight-shooter, committed journalist so much celebrated by the administration, but with whom they clearly did not agree.

The first soiling dates back to 2012, when the statue was dirtied with red paint and a fake bomb was found under the hat (il Giornale, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2012), but the perpetrator(s) stayed anonymous.

On 28<sup>th</sup> April 2018, the collective Le Indecorose, whose members come from LGBTQIA\*’s activism, migrants’ realities, feminism and queer transfeminism, added an epitaph on the pedestal (Le Indecorose, 2018) (Neve, 2018). Near the inscription “Indro Montanelli. Giornalista”, they added a piece of paper that commented in capital letters “children raper” [Stupratore di bambine]<sup>61</sup>. In their blog (Le Indecorose, 2018), the collective symbolically renamed – intending, not in formal and legal terms – the gardens of Porta Venezia, also entitled to Montanelli, to the “victims of colonialism, of yesterday and today” [“Giardini per le vittime del colonialismo di ieri e di oggi”] (Le Indecorose, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2018). The day following the “attack”, street artist Manu Invisible realised a work on canvas, *Violensasi* (Fig. 1), mocking the typical sign “vendesì” – “on sale” by relating it to the figure

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<sup>60</sup> During an interview with Gianni Bisiach at “L’ora della Verità” (1969), the Italian-Eritrean journalist Elvira Banotti directly pressed Montanelli with a series of questions which revealed his blindness in conceiving his actions as violence and rape and a certain narrowness of thought on questions such as racism, the colonial history of Italy and of his past personal experiences (zosozeppelin, 2020a).

<sup>61</sup> From here on, except where differently specified, all the translations from Italian are mine. The original text is reported after the translation in square brackets.

of a young, black woman. It was a direct reference to the practice of the *madamoto* and Montanelli's involvement in the matter (Le Indecorose, 2018).



Fig. 1 - "Violensasi", Manu Invisible, 2018

The third and one among the most resonant practices which affected the statue took place during the International Day of Women on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2019. During a march organised by the Milan section of the feminist collective Non Una Di Meno (NUDM), some members poured washable, pink paint onto Montanelli's statue (Fig. 2). They defined their gesture as a "due act of redemption" [doverosa azione di riscatto], aimed at "igniting a debate on history" by shedding light on the collateral, neglected story of the child-bride Destà (NUDM, 2019). The statue was then cleaned again without reporting any damage, but their gesture had indeed a high symbolical connotation. They were able to make their dissent *visible* and understandable to the larger part of the people watching, as they relied on the cultural-hegemonical codification of the pink colour as a colour for women and the act of soiling as protest. Pink stood for women; soiling paint stood for dissent. In this way, they could *re-signify* a symbol of the past, somehow updating it to the present times, witnessing how meanings, culture and identity change and are continuously made and remade. NUDM eventually returned to Montanelli's statue the following year to reassert their oppositional position in its regard and the ideological apparatuses it entails. On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2020, the collective intervened again on the monument by hanging on it a banner which recalled Destà's story and presence in official history as much as in the public space. In fact, the banner (Fig. 3) stood for a symbolically renaming the gardens to the young girl (similarly to the actions of Le Indecorose), reminding who she was and Montanelli's



actions in Africa. It should be noted how both the interventions were based on a *visibilizing tactic*, intending they meant to make the subaltern presence (in history at least) visible in the public space.

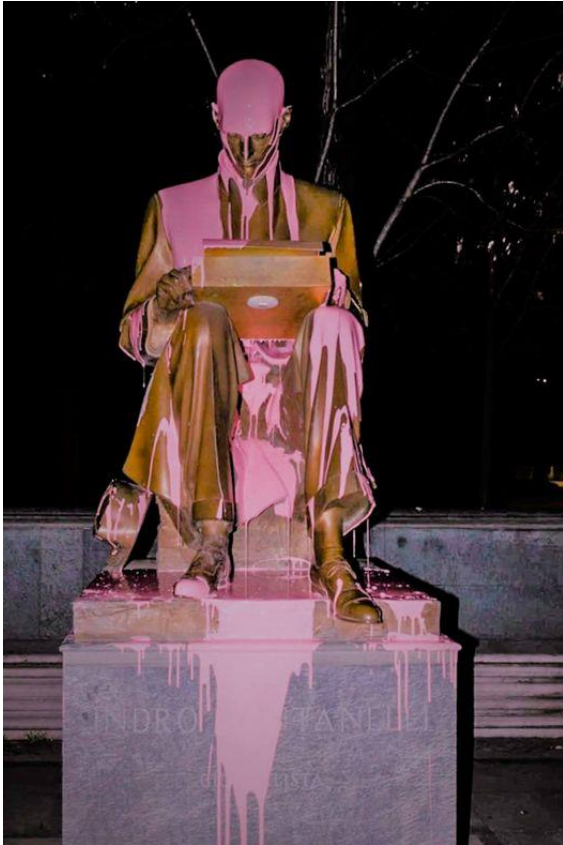


Fig. 2- Montanelli's statue after NUDM's attack on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2019.



Fig. 3 - Montanelli's statue after NUDM's attack on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, the laic and antifascist movement I Sentinelli, active in Milan as well, officially asked the removal of the statue with an open letter to the city mayor Beppe Sala (I Sentinelli, 2020a). In the wake of the worldwide protests raised after the homicide of George Floyd<sup>62</sup> in Minneapolis, they commented on Facebook (ibidem) that a statue dedicated to Montanelli, who proudly claimed until the end of his days of having bought and married an Eritrean child of twelve to be his “sexual slave” (although Montanelli has never used such words), was an insult for the city

<sup>62</sup> George Floyd was an Afro-American man killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020 by four policemen. His homicide, due to asphyxiation, had a huge worldwide resonance also thanks to the video of the arrest and homicide which largely circulated on social media, with protests and fighting fast spreading throughout the globe. At the same time, the rise of the movement Black Lives Matter aimed at denouncing the abuse of power of police and exposing racial violence embedded in the institutions.

and its democratic, anti-racist values. They eventually asked the city council to rethink both the removal of the statue and the re-naming of the gardens to someone else, “more worthy to represent the history and the memory of our city, gold medal of the Italian Resistance” [qualcuno che sia più degno di rappresentare la storia e la memoria della nostra città Medaglia d'Oro della Resistenza] (ibidem). Following the wave of protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, they “strongly invite any city administration to rethink the symbols of their territories and what they represent” (ibidem).

The answer of mayor Sala arrived fast and straight in an interview to *Il Giorno* the day after the request: “I am not in favour”, therefore no official debate was open and the statue remained again where it was (la Repubblica, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2020). Defence also arrived from other politicians such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio, a member of the Movimento 5 Stelle, who wrote on Facebook in favour of the statue and of what it represented, a tribute to free thought and fine intellectual practice (Di Maio, 2020).

Although apparently the request did not produce any outcome and it seemed to remain unheard by the institutions, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June the statue was attacked again. This time, vandals used red paint and sprayed the pedestal with the writings “racist”, “raper” “[razzista, stupratore] (fig. 4).



Fig. 3 - Montanelli's statue after LUME and RSM soiling, 14th June 2020.

In the following days, the “blitz” was claimed by two student collectives: RSM - Rete Studenti Milano, which gathers students from all grades, and LUME (Laboratorio Universitario Metropolitano), which mainly operates within the university context. The direct witness of the attack was posted by the latter group with a video on their Facebook profile (LUME, 2020). Students were obviously supporting and supported by I Sentinelli, who furtherly commented on the matter through another Facebook post (I Sentinelli, 2020b), accusing the press and the mainstream channels of communication of having depicted them as “talebans” and of having misrepresented what they meant and what they aimed at doing with their gestures (ibidem).

On the other side, this was the attack that mainly provoked responses from the institutions and eventually created debate on the question. Several politicians, belonging to different parties and coming both from the right and the left-centre, generally condemned their act (Merlo, 2020). Albertini, the ex-mayor who wanted the statue, addressed them as “teppisti” (“hooligans”) and strictly interpreted the soiling as a crime which did not need many other explanations (Giannattasio, 2020); mayor Beppe Sala directly answered with a video, also posted on his Facebook profile (Sala, 2020), where he has condemned the gesture and reminded Montanelli’s value as a journalist, thus worth to be and stay there; Matteo Salvini, leader of the right party Lega Nord, sharply addressed the students as “violenti, ignoranti, arroganti e coglioni” [violent, ignorant, insolent and assholes] (Salvini, 2020), in a clear, straight-forward opposition to their actions.

The iconoclastic act perpetrated by the students had the aim of bringing attention to the neglected parties, those uncelebrated by official history and representations. Non-white, non-male actors are almost totally absent from the spaces that shapes us as citizens, from the narratives of the collective world we inhabit. They claim a space for the subalterns to exist insofar they can be *seen*, so that they can be heard. But to assert oneself from below is not an easy task, especially when obstacles come from different directions. As already mentioned (and also commented afterwards), the response of institutions, thus the “official voice” of the State, has totally rebutted and condemned them; from “below”, among the public opinion, there are controversies as well, as not everyone share the subgroups’ claims and position (also because otherwise, they would not be “sub”-groups anymore) and reassert their own interpretation of symbols and representation within the dominant and hegemonic codes.

This case was chosen in light of the contradictions it brings to the surface, shedding light on the problems concerning violence and colonialism embedded in narratives that we, most of times, are not even aware of or, nevertheless, comply with. Among the BLM contestations which have had global spread, the case of the Montanelli statue represents the most interesting one in the Italian panorama. In fact, although it is not the only one, since many Italian cities have conflictual, painful meanings and memories, it was chosen as emblematic for it had a big resonance and gathered around it a multitude of social actors who, although belonging to the same territorial community, manifested quite different reception of the same monument and actions around it.

In this research a qualitative approach is adopted in order to provide a comprehensive and comparative view on the different perspectives regarding the case, about the soilings, the hypotheses of removal or recontextualization, and the positions that people take on the basis of their role, belonging, relations, and beliefs on what the monument represents. The resonance of the case in the online sphere provides plenty of material, which is why the research will rely on digital ethnography as a method. Comments and conversations on the case are recognized as central in the debate which started from the “offline” activity of agents, thus I do not aim at confining them merely on the virtual side. On the contrary, the online conversations are seen as a resource for investigating the polysemic nature of the case itself from a “privileged” position – that of a lurking observer in which the researcher is “a user among the users”, embedded as the others in the environment she is trying to investigate.

### *3.2 Methodology*

Before deepening on the qualitative nature of the research and on the tools employed, let us recall and shortly sum up what has been said up to now. As seen in Chapter 1, the general frame of reference into which the soilings and activities against the monument are intended is the one of Cultural Studies for a variety of reasons, here enlisted in points but intertwined and merged both in theoretical and practical aspects. First of all, (1) since CS does not look for certainties, rather it aims at producing knowledge and diverse forms of understanding which are constantly open to further questioning (Walton, 2007:295), the adoption of such perspective empowers this research with a flexibility of thought necessary for arguing cultural and historical controversies dealing with symbols and meanings’ negotiation in the public space (like in the case of Montanelli’s statue); (2) the

openness and anti-disciplinarity of Cultural Studies allows to consider the different groups' actions as bottom-up, active *consumption-production* practices, a worthy object of study in sociological research. The initial premise is the recognition of different groups' members as active agents in the social world who are involved in the struggle for meanings (important for their identity construction) and participate in the power discourses inscribed in public space; (3) for its historical awareness, essential to frame the events concerning monuments destruction or removal in the socio-political world context, linked to feminist and anti-racist activism, as seen in the introduction with NUDM's struggles, but also the #MeToo movement, and agitations linked to the Black Lives Matter movement; (4) for the political commitment of CS, which has not only demonstrated great interest in analysing groups considered marginalized, oppressed or silenced (Walton, 2007:238), but especially because it pairs with the my intention to provide some practical procedure for dealing with such cases, since "what makes cultural studies attractive to many people is that there's the possibility of not only analysing the world but being involved in efforts to change it" (Walton, 2007:200); (5) because CS makes possible to analyse forms of cultural resistance which challenge the dominant political order with a special attention to specific social intersecting variables such as gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality, and their overlappings, according to an intersectional perspective; in this sense, the sensitivity of CS to intersectional understanding of social phenomena contributes to bring the attention to specific forms of injustice, subordination and marginalization; (6) because of the importance of CS theories on communication, on the production of meanings and of identity and culture as a constant work-in-progress. To rely on Hall's perspective, and the notion of the margin as theorized by the feminist scholar and cultural practitioner bell hooks, it is possible to explore the spaces for practices of re-articulation and counter-hegemonic positionings of the participants in the cultural sphere, which make it possible to create new, alternative and more liberatory and inclusive representations where the dichotomy colonizer/colonized eventually disappear.

As accounted in the SAGE Handbook of Qualitative research (2017:46), a Cultural Studies use of ethnography brings a set of understandings from feminism, postmodernism, and post-structuralism to the project, understandings that are essential landmarks in this research and contrast with more traditional and rigid methods of mainstream sociologists. In this sense, such methodology also goes beyond the textual analyses in literary studies, which often treat texts as self-contained systems. Indeed, poststructuralist interventions in social research shifted interest towards the reader of the

text, opening questions of identity and subjectivity in new ways. This also involved reflections on discourse and performance, on subjectivities as always positioned and fragmented, never given. CS informed by post-structuralism acknowledge that nothing is natural even if real, being experienced, but always constructed and produced, the result of a continuous process of negotiation of meanings, which, in their multiplicity, cannot ever produce an unitary subject but only a situated one, who adopts from time to time one specific perspective but among countless possible others.

Moreover, as explained in Chapter 2 when discussing Haraway's notion of situated knowledge and Spivak's materialist approach to discourses, CS shares much with feminist philosophy the recognition of the place of power and difference in all cultural processes, including those of research. Cultural Studies together with a feminist situated and intersectional approach allow to read texts in terms of their location within a historical moment marked by a particular gender, race, or class ideology – and their intersection. From the discussion in Chapter 2 it becomes clear how feminist research has been influent in CS and its method, as also Lawrence Grossberg - one of the main theorists on cultural research in the US – commented (1992:44) “self-awareness and self-reflexivity are part of the research process and develops an outline for a method for cultural studies as we currently see it. [...] As cultural researchers, we are ‘inside’ our object of study”, which is what I meant by positioning the researcher-observer as “a user among users”. Indeed, feminist and cultural researchers pair together in their anti-essentialism and anti-objectivism. As poststructuralist theories suggest, we are actively constituted as knowing subjects by the theories and discourses we work with. At the same time, the object of knowledge is not something that we can find outside, as an object, separate from ourselves because “our participation in our subject of research is, on the contrary, inevitable” (Grossberg, 1992:65), but still, “the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (Haraway, 1991:196). As earlier discussed, Haraway has not given up on objectivity of the researcher, rather situates truth as partial, which is also what Grossberg advocates for when he says

The cultural analyst must recognize his or her own paradoxical situation, always implicated in the structures of power he or she is trying to dismantle or change. Declaring oneself to be on the side of the oppressed too often serves as a way of avoiding the more difficult task of

locating the points at which one already identifies and is identified with those who hold power in society (Grossberg, 1992:65).

At the same time,

The cultural analyst cannot assume that people are so totally colonized that they are incapable of actively engaging in the processes by which a contingent and changing history is constantly being made unmade and remade. He or she must be able to identify those sites, those moments, when people do struggle to win a bit of space for themselves in the world (ibidem).

It is with such an awareness that the present research is – hopefully – conducted. I myself am aware of the position where I speak from – as a *white*, educated, young Western woman –, the mainstream codes and cultural maps into which my thoughts and ideas have grown and developed - the hegemonical framework of a typical Western patriarchal society - and obviously conditioned by. In such a framework, I also recognize the practices of “soilers” as acts of resistance within these same codes and maps, as attempts of resignification of the meanings they vehiculate and that we, as members of the same community, share to some extent. In any case, I am not trying to substitute my voice to the voice of anyone else, although I am investigating whether the counter-hegemonic practices of people affecting the monument are – maybe unwillingly or unconsciously – doing so. My work of researcher is here intended as a *bricolage*. The reasons for this definition and the rationales that justify the adoption of a qualitative analysis approach are explained in what follows.

In developing qualitative methods informed by Cultural Studies, Pertti Alasuutari (1995) starts from the premise that to approach culture from a Cultural Studies perspective means not to reduce it to mere reflection of other structures (i.e. economy) and to see it implicated both with the question of power and with that of politics. Moreover, since qualitative analysis deals with the concept of culture and with explaining meaningful actions, in his view researchers should not be content with borrowing methodological tools from the humanities or with making new observations about qualitative data with their methods. Rather, such observations should be used to problematize

social phenomena, at least. In this sense, Alasuutari sees Cultural Studies (and qualitative methods as he investigates them) as a bridge between the humanities and the social sciences (1995:2). Interdisciplinarity and anti-positivism typical of CS enable it with multiple points of view, with the idea that theories and methods are not blinders but “additional viewpoints” on reality, which is also why its methodology has been defined a “bricolage” (ibidem). In fact,

one is pragmatic and strategic in choosing and applying different methods and practices. The cultural studies perspective emphasizes that the real objective of research should not be to repeat old “truths”, it is to find out about new points that contribute to the scientific and public discourse on social phenomena” (Alasuutari, 1995:2).

In his opinion, the real essence of CS is that it makes use of all useful theories and methods in order to gain insights about the researched phenomena. This also explains why he advocates for the use of qualitative methods of research typical of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology in CS research, since “qualitative analysis always deals with the concept of culture and with explaining meaningful action” (ivi, 2). Very much like CS, qualitative research as a set of interpretive activities privileges no single method over another, nor it has a specific set of methods or practices that are entirely its own.

Given such premises, the choice of a qualitative approach for inquiring the positionings regarding the soilings of the statue from a Cultural Studies’ perspective seemed quite natural and obvious, but it found evidence by the further closeness that some scholars have drawn between Cultural Studies and qualitative research. In the SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017), the authors stated that it was difficult to agree on any essential definition of the field, for “it is never just one thing” (47) – very much like Hall defined CS -, once considered the separate and multiple uses and meanings of its methods. Interestingly, they relied on Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg’s (1992) description of Cultural Studies, putting the two in close relation.

We borrow from and paraphrase Nelson et al.’s (1992) attempt to define cultural studies: qualitative research/inquiry is an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and sometimes counter-



disciplinary field. It crosscuts the humanities, as well as the social and the physical sciences. Qualitative research is many things at the same time. It is multiparadigmatic in focus. Its practitioners are sensitive to the value of the multimethod approach. They are committed to the naturalistic perspective and to the interpretive understanding of human experience. At the same time, the field is inherently political and shaped by multiple ethical and political positions (47).

Both Cultural Studies and qualitative methods, which CS privileges, have been seen as *bricolage* and the work of the researcher as a bricoleur (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017:45). More specifically here, the researcher is indeed intended as a *bricoleuse* from different perspectives. First of all in theoretical terms, as the researcher-as-bricoleuse-theorist is knowledgeable and works between and within overlapping perspectives and interpretative paradigms (feminism, Marxism, cultural studies) and take this aspect into consideration while doing her research; (2) in interpretative terms, the bricoleur understands that research is an interactive process shaped by one's personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity and those of the other people in the setting. Such acknowledgment recalls previous discussion in Chapter 2 about situated knowledges and the reflexive consciousness that researcher must have about the partiality of her interpretation, which is always situated, thus in the context, and indeed linked to the gendered, narrative bricoleur (3). She knows that all researchers tell stories about the worlds they have studied. Thus, the narratives of the scholars are accounts framed within specific storytelling traditions as well, or "encodings" of the world (Hall, 1990a). In practical terms, the gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology), which are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways. Every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community, which configures the multicultural, gendered components of the research act (52). That is, as in this case, empirical (online) materials are collected and then analysed and discussed under such conditions; (4) last but not least, in political terms the bricoleuse knows that science is power, for all research findings have political implications and that there is no value-free science. Indeed, as also Grossberg commented (1992:64), cultural analysts do not have the luxury of assuming that their stories have no impact upon the world they attempt to describe. In conclusion, the product of the *bricoleuse's* labor is a complex, dense, reflexive and collage-like creation that represents the researcher's images,

understandings and interpretations of the world or phenomenon under analysis. This collage aims at connecting the parts to the whole, stressing the meaningful relationships that operate in the situations and social worlds studied (Weinstein & Weinstein, 1991:164)

On such premises, as a researcher I am holding to practice that is empirical, strategic, and self-reflexive (Grossberg, 1992:2); I am conscious of my own partiality, which is “an essential part of the dialogue with the other [and what] constitutes the process of research” (ivi, 46). As cultural researcher, by mapping descriptions, stories and explanations, which are important parts of how people come to organize their daily lives and social relations (ivi, 64-65), I will try gain a better sense of the state of play on the field of forces, not with the aim of providing a univocal and definitive, final explanation, but indeed to map them, since the “[CS] analytic project might be described as a cartography of daily life which attempts to (re)construct at least a part of the complex texture of a certain terrain” (Grossberg, 1992:62). I am following the Cultural Studies attempt a contour map (ibidem), measuring the effects of underlying processes over time. The map describes a configuration of practices which is constantly working on itself, deconstructing and reconstructing, reproducing and changing (64) and the task of the researcher is, in this sense, to keep up, address and report such changes. At the same time, the analyst is consciously repositioning herself in the maps she is constructing, without at the same time undermining the map in a self-reflexive work with no end. As Grossberg reminds us, “the cultural analyst moves through the complexity of social positions and social identities [...] with and within the field of popular culture and daily life, mapping as best he or she can the configuration of practices [...]”.

With the final aim of

look[ing] at how both domination and subordination are lived, organized and resisted. [...] understand the possibilities of subordination that are opened and allowed within the structures of domination [...] understand the ways in which resistance itself can become a strategy for rearticulating the structures of domination (Grossberg, 1992:66-67).

This last quotation briefly resumes the aim of this research would like to achieve: the methods employed to empirically analyse the considered case study are explained in what follows.

### *3.3 Analysing online debates*

The initial analytical project of this research imagined gathering people who both acted directly and replied to the acts of soiling and to embrace them in a focus group discussion, creating room for divergent opinions and perspective to rise during an *ad hoc* occasion and so to observe debate and contrast in the making. Unfortunately, due to technical obstacles, since it eventually became difficult to reach some of the parties involved, I turned my attention to the online sphere, which is also plenty of useful material that may be analysed with the same purposes relying on the tools offered by a digital-ethnographical approach.

Indeed, since all the cultural players at stake do have a Facebook page or profile, I chose to consider, for my analysis, both a couple of posts by the collectives NUDM (2019a) and LUME (2020a), and another couple by institutional characters, namely the mayor of Milan (Sala, 2020) and the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Di Maio, 2020). In addition, I focused my attention on the relative threads born from these posts so as to gather the information and contrasting views that could emerge from a focus group discussion. In this way, it also became easier to include and comment the response of institutional players, that would in fact be the most difficult parties to get involved in the discussion.

The online debate generated on Facebook around the Montanelli' statue case provides useful material for comparing the set of conflictual views and perspectives – thus the set of identity-meaningful values – on the symbolic alteration (soiling) of representations (the statue) in the public space. The analysis of the public conversation around such events reveals the inner polysemy of such practices as interpreted by different social actors, as much as the different ways of codifying the status and value of the public artwork, which mirror different degrees of coherence with the hegemonical, dominant set of codes. Considering the different approaches and perspective to the event, I have tried to codify the comments under general labels, to facilitate the evidence of the polarisation of opinions around the soiling. This ethnographical inquiry is indeed more focused on content than use of the social network itself. The starting point for conducting digital ethnographic research is to acknowledge it is not a mere translation of the traditional concepts and methods of traditional ethnography into digital research environments, for it explores “the ethnographic–

theoretical dialogues through which ‘old’ concepts are impacted by digital ethnography practice” (Pink et al., 2016:2). Methods and theory are two aspects of ethnographic research and analysis that change when carried out by different researchers (ibidem). Ethnography is a way of practising research, it is not a meaningful practice in itself inasmuch as it becomes useful when engaging with a particular disciplinary – or interdisciplinary – paradigm, used in relation to other practices and ideas within a research project (Pink et al., 2016:1). Here, the paradigms it confronts with are those outlined in Chapter 2, regarding the researcher’s self-reflexivity and her works as bricoleuse.

O’Reilly’s (2005) quite “open” definition of ethnography allows to usefully consider what differences the digital makes to our practice as ethnographers, and thus to contemplate digital ethnography as it evolves. Indeed, as he conceives it, ethnography is an “iterative–inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods [...] that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher’s own role and that views humans as part object/part subject” (2005:3), digital media becomes part of an ethnography that involves direct and sustained contact with human agents within the context of their daily lives and cultures that expands beyond the physical world. Indeed, I will rely on the particular type of digital ethnography practice outlined by Pink et al. (2016), which takes as its starting point the idea that digital media and technologies are part of the everyday worlds that people inhabit. Indeed, Garcia et al. (2009) advocate for an ethnography which incorporate the Internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC) into their research, in order to adequately understand social life in contemporary society and “explore some of the main and enduring concerns of ethnographic research [...] such as the nature of specific social worlds and subcultures; the construction of identity; the beliefs, values, and world views underlying human action and social life; and the experience of everyday life [...]” (2009:53).

Indeed, although most ethnographers still conduct studies firmly situated in the “offline” social world, they see the online and offline worlds as increasingly merged and in continuous interaction and transformation (Garcia et al., 2009:52-53). The “virtual” world is not a different social space than the “real” world, rather they argue that there is one social world which contains both traditional and technologically advanced modes of communication and sites of social activity and which are, therefore, also worthy to be looked at and analysed. In fact, according to sociologist Giovanni Boccia Artieri (2004), the reality of the world existing in and on the media sphere has become visible and practicable, as a universal, connective and shared reality, only in very recent times. *Media-worlds* are the operative space where communication changes and its change

observable. In media-worlds subjectivities are constantly negotiated and new languages are created, substituting themselves to those inherited by the past, “out of date” and unable to describe the contemporary worlds we live. In short, media-worlds are the result of the evolution of communication, from orality to the dimensions linked to new technologies. Media is increasingly structuring like a world, becomes the “place” where society reflects itself, a territory of experience and expressivity for the forms of subjectivity (Artieri, 2004).

Researching social interactions happening online has both advantages and disadvantages. Despite their inherent technological limitations, social platforms are precious as they provide an easy access to a whole communicative and relational field regarding specific topics and arguments, which are all gathered in the same “space” at the same time, thus helping the researcher both in its collection and analysis. In fact, in this way it is possible to observe a large audience “speaking”, interacting and claiming certain positions in a sort of virtual arena, also inside an environment which is apparently more “democratic” (which are out of doubt advantages for research). As a matter of fact, in online discussions, people do not experience face-to-face confrontation with others, avoiding those components of direct, physical communication – such as the tone of voice, kinesics or proxemics - that could prevent them to speak freely or that could push them to follow communicational rules or etiquettes which may weaken or partially change what they really meant to say. Moreover, on a technical level, social platforms offer everyone the same means, thus the same opportunities, to express their opinion, thus partially shadowing the power structures and hierarchies existing on the offline world that also could lead individuals to reformulate or change what they think. The “democratic” aspect is especially true for the social network chosen here, namely Facebook, as it provides the users with a specific range of options of engagement and expression (technically speaking, of “affordances”) with respect to other social networks, such as reactions, comments, replies, shares, without any specific technical limitations (such as a limited amount of typing characters).

On the other hand, one should not misunderstand the democratic potential of the Facebook environment as a legitimization of disrespect or as an arena of free speech, giving whoever the possibility of insulting, assaulting or discriminating others, as they may see eventual consequences *in the real world* far from them and do not have to physically face people. In any case in fact, FB pages and groups are regulated to some extent by a set of rules that communities (pages, groups, forum, blogs) create and ask their users to follow. These set of rules, generally called *netiquette* (as

a neologism coming from the words *network* and *etiquette*), may largely vary according to the values the community believe to be important, on which basis it is built and that eventually go to regulate the users' behaviour in their interactions on the platform. As it will be seen for example in NUDM's post later, the administrators of the page explicitly imposed a netiquette limitation to users when stating they would have banned everyone who had insulted or mocked them<sup>63</sup>.

Moreover, although the online environment is likely to be more democratic in modalities, such democracy exists only within the boundaries of the platform itself. In fact, the very access to Facebook activities depends both on economic availability and subscription option, which means, one can actually post, comment or share on Facebook only if they both have a device with an Internet connection and an active subscription to the social network. These two initial conditions, and the language used as well, which are not given for granted for everyone, delimit the field of potential expression of one's concern about a specific topic in such an environment, nonetheless they still offer a fertile ground for a wide audience to debate "simultaneously", for the comments are all kept there in the thread (even if moderated), and in time, for everyone can still comment and the debate is potentially never closed.

In short, digital ethnography helps the researcher with the collection of data in temporal and "spatial" terms while providing a democratic environment in terms of the possibilities for expressing opinions. Nonetheless, while practicing a digital ethnographical inquiry, the researcher must always be aware of the *a priori* limitations of social networks, given both by the technological accessibility to the social environment and to its inherent rules regarding expression and engagement (including modalities of expression and netiquette).

In this research, the online activity and interactions of users addressing the counter-hegemonic acts of NUDM, RSM and LUME, comprising the responses of official institutions, are collected as useful data to underline conflicts of opinions and debate around cultural symbols and representation. However, it must be said that such investigation does not abstract from the "real" world, for it is the "real", most physical affection of symbols in the public space that generated and nourished the consequent online debate. Indeed, most of the threads regarding the case have been triggered by

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<sup>63</sup> Anyway, it shall be argued that also the ideas of insulting or mocking are relative, since NUDM could find some comments offensive or rude whereas in the commenters' intentions they were not. This could reveal, again, that the underlying interpretational structures which drive our decodification processes are multiple and diverse, and that is difficult to communicate if one speaks adopting an hegemonical point of view and one received the message from an opposing position.

the digital recording and posting of such events, for example the photos of the soiled statue or the video of the soiling itself from the students of RSM. While or just after happening in the “real” world, these events have been recorded and reproduced on Facebook thanks to some technological devices, such as smartphones and cameras, which have allowed the two spheres of the material and of the immaterial to increasingly merge each other. The online is therefore the space where the researcher is moving for the purposes of this investigation, nonetheless it does not draw its limits. I am working on and researching the online sphere with the consciousness that it is the outcome and direct consequence of social phenomena happening offline, but that nonetheless have an impact and cause reactions in both the dimensions.

In any case, as Garcia and al. report (2009:57-58), participant observation of phenomena online must be adjusted according to the online settings. They note that the observer must be aware that, since she does not directly observe the people she is studying, the nature of observation changes. Second, the ability to technologically record events, interactions, and locations in online research settings also affects the role of field notes and how findings are reported in traditional offline ethnography. Moreover, the nature of online data (so textual and visual material rather than people speaking and acting) requires a different set of skills for understanding and analysing it, which CS, in conceiving texts at large as all the practices, spaces and artifacts meaningful for and is social life, usefully brings into the analysis. Last, one should pay attention not to privilege text-based phenomena at the expense of visual phenomena, as many existing ethnographies of the Internet/CMC tend to (*ibidem*).

Most of the data analysed here is textual, in the form of captions or comments to posts, but attention is also given to hybrid textual/visual data such as emoji<sup>64</sup> reactions. Emoji and emoticons are important as well, as Campbell (2006) found them and other aspects of online communication to be used by members to construct identity and form relationships. He also argues that what participants write conveys important information about their identity, presentation of self, and how they define and perceive their world. However, researcher must be aware that these and other aspects of participants’ text-based interaction pose interpretive puzzles for the ethnographer in terms of their presentation of the self. Indeed, the use of emoticons, style of communication, or skill at writing, could lead to make assumptions on the individual characteristics or behaviours which

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<sup>64</sup> An emoji is a small digital image used to express an idea or emotion in emails, on the internet, on social media, etc (Oxford Dictionary Online, n.d.).

may not be reflected in the offline too. However, since the focus here is more on the content of the comments rather than the use of the social platform, it suffices to concentrate on what people are stating rather than how they are doing it.

Another point is that, while in the offline world observation requires at least the minimal participation of being “present”, the online setting here provides the opportunity for completely unobtrusive observation. Some ethnographers as Bell (2001) see lurking as weakening ethnographic research, for it is a one-way process, whereas “one of the strengths of ethnography is its emphasis on dialogue with respondents—recasting research as collaboration rather than appropriation” (Bell 2001:198). Nonetheless, I argue that in the case of interactions on social platform, it is the whole chorus of voices and the eventual dialogues among respondents which produce knowledge and inform about their positioning. In this way, observation, comparison, coding and report of textual data are seen as powerful enough to provide insights on the dominant and the counter-hegemonical claims against the statue.



## CHAPTER 4 - Digital-ethnographical inquiry of iconoclastic practices

Before moving deeper into data research and analysis of the posts from NUDM, LUME and the institutional counter-parts, Beppe Sala and Luigi Di Maio, I would like to spend some words on few practical aspects which will be taken into consideration and on some definitions of the digital environment in which I will move, so to provide basic landmarks for readers who are not confident with Facebook supporting them for a better navigation of the research process and findings.

The digital ethnographic analysis carried out here is both inductive and textual. In fact, as Thomas reports (2006), an inductive qualitative approach allows research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data (238), being in this case digital and (mostly) textual. Also, according to McKee (2003), textual analyses help researchers collect information about how people make sense of their lived experiences, including who they are, how they fit within and negotiate their world (36), which is indeed what I am trying to grasp in order to underline differences and contrasting opinions. Beside users' comments, I also focalized on the contents published by the different parties, for I found them much informative about their positions and reciprocal relations. In this sense, I meant starting from the singular, specific thoughts formulated in textual or mixed forms (textual + multi-media, for example image + caption, or text + video recording) by users in order to provide an interpretation of the major themes at stake, then proceeding toward the general.

During the analytical screening of textual data, I paid attention both to the cleaning of the data, thus trying to delete any personal information (such as name, age, location – with except from gender and sexual orientation which, instead, I sometimes found interesting to report) and to the anonymization of users when quoted. Moreover, since the data collected here are all created and available on Facebook, I think it could be useful for the reader to have some sort of “glossary”, in order to understand what I am referring to and also to have a wider knowledge of the digital environment in which such data exist.

#### 4.1 Facebook glossary: some definitions

*Posts:* content created on Facebook by the official profile of the person/group considered. The format and content of the post may largely change, as it may account for texts alone or reporting links to interviews, photos, videos, and/or attachments of various kind. Each post will be described in such terms and compared to the other as well. In the case the post presents a multi-media content (audio, video, photo), the textual part accompanying it is defined “caption”.

*Mentions:* in a textual content (such as captions or comments), it is possible to directly address other users by mentioning them, thus notifying them that they are being quoted/named in someone else’s post or comment.

*Reactions:* one of the three possible interactions that users can have with respect to posts on Facebook is an “emotional” answer – in fact, reactions -, where several emojis<sup>65</sup> enable to express a set of feelings that the encounter with the post may have provoked. In order of appearance as options, the icons are:

- a thumb (the most popular “like” option),
- a heart (“love” reaction),
- an emoji hugging a heart (“hug” reaction),
- an emoji laughing (“ahah” reaction),
- a surprised emoji (“wow” reaction),
- a sad emoji (“sigh” reaction),
- an angry emoji (“grr” reaction).

Although limited, the range of reactions is the easiest and most straightforward engagement option that shall be found and also the fastest response offered to users with respect to the post. Despite their superficiality, reactions provide fast insight about the general reception of the post, as they do not ask users the “effort” to write and articulate their opinions but instead record impressions about contents. Moreover, reactions may also be found as responses to comments as well, fostering confrontation and interactions among users (as for example the “reply to” option, see “answers” below). In any case, reactions will be reported in the analysis for the sake of completeness, but not

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<sup>65</sup> An emoji is a small digital image used to express an idea or emotion in emails, on the internet, on social media, etc (Oxford Dictionary Online).

specifically considered as a data source for the purposes of the analysis as they are much more ambiguous than comments and do not disclose very much about positionalities. In fact, more times than not taken alone they could appear to be more ambiguous than informative and for that reason I decided to background them within the analysis.

*Shares*: the second engagement option with the post is the “share” one, thus the possibility to re-post a public post on one’s personal profile. The numbers of sharing are important too, for they may provide information on the spreading and popularity of the post, but do not directly account for the potential, additional comments that users can add when sharing the post itself.

*Comments*: the third engagement option is the personal and direct commenting of the content. This option is the one that provides a deeper information, for not only it enables the users to write down what they think, and therefore enabling the researcher to directly access their opinion, but also to note how they do it both on a content and a formal-linguistic level. From these perspectives, comments open the researcher to a deeper investigation on the values and sources users hold on to and the modalities of speech they realize.

*Answers*: the last option of engagement does not directly address posts but refers to the comments of other users. In fact, Facebook also allows users to directly reply to other users’ comments and to address them specifically. This option eventually creates debates, repartees and/or conversations which provide further useful material that is doubly interactive: on the one hand, such answers are born as “vertical” comments, so addressing the post/its content and the people who created it; on the other hand, they develop “horizontally” and create room for debate among users themselves, allowing different, conflictual perspectives to clash or supportive narratives to be observed in their making (whereas comments alone may give only a “closed” amount of information within the limits of the comment itself).

After giving such definitions, which should help the reader better navigate Facebook’s environment, I now analyse the various posts (and related threads) I found useful for the purposes of this research, specifically those closely related – with regard to time and/or content – to two of the main soilings of Montanelli’s statue. In addition, to further facilitate the reader in her familiarisation with such contents, I propose here a brief resume of the main events and related Facebook posts regarding the statue written by the considered parties:

- March 8th, 2019: first counteract with pink paint by NUDM. The related post is published the following day. It is the first post (NUDM, 2020a) analyzed in 4.2 (fig. 2 and fig. 5).
- March 8th, 2020: second “softer” counteract from NUDM, with a banner hung on Montanelli’s statue. The related post is published the very same day (fig. 3).
- June 10th, 2020: I Sentinelli ask for a removal to mayor Beppe Sala. The related post is published on the same day, mentioned but not specifically considered for analysis, since I found the post directly related to the soiling to be more interesting.
- June 12th, 2020: the Minister of foreign affair Luigi Di Maio also commented on the request of the I Sentinelli with a post on his official profile (Di Maio, 2020). The post is analysed in 4.3 (fig. 10).
- June 14th, 2020: LUME and RSM publish the video of the soiling with red paint and black spray (which took place on the evening of 13th June). The post (LUME, 2020a) is analysed in 4.2 (fig. 7).
- June 14th, 2020: Mayor Beppe Sala publishes a video on its official Facebook profile (Sala, 2020) addressing the Montanelli affair. The video and its thread are commented in 4.3 (fig. 9).
- June 15th, 2020: second post from LUME and RSM where they further comment on their action and invite their readers to the demonstration organised by NUDM the following day. This post (LUME, 2020b) is also considered in 4.2 (fig. 8).
- June 16th, 2020: live protest organised by NUDM in front of Palazzo Marino to demand the statue removal and joined by LUME and RSM as well. The demonstration is advertised also on Facebook as a FB event (NUDM, 2020) and cited in this analysis in 4.2.

#### *4.2 Counter-hegemonical actions*

The first post considered for the analysis is that written by the feminist collective NUDM Milano and posted on their official Facebook profile on 9<sup>th</sup> March 2019 (NUDM, 2019a), the day after the soiling with washable, pink paint during the demonstration organised for the 8<sup>th</sup> of March (Women’s Day in Italy).

The content is both textual and visual. The post (fig. 5) reports a photo of the pink-soiled statue with a caption written by the members of NUDM.



Fig. 5 – NUDM, 2019a via Facebook.

From the very beginning of their post, NUDM drew a sharp cut and acknowledged a huge difference between the interpretation of their gesture given by la Repubblica and their own, since “For la Repubblica it is about vandalism. For us instead, it is a due act of redemption” [Per la Repubblica si tratta di vandalismo, per noi invece è una doverosa azione di riscatto].

La Repubblica in this case, as one of the most popular newspapers in Italy, stands for the most mainstream – if not official and legitimated, we could say *dominant* – point of view on the events,



Fig. 6 – NUDM, 2019b via Facebook.

overtly in contrast with NUDM’s claim. Here, NUDM refers specifically to an article published by the newspaper and shared on its official Facebook profile (la Repubblica, 2019), where journalists firstly commented the act as “mere vandalism” (Fig. 6 on the right). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that such an accusation was later modified by La Repubblica itself. In fact, as NUDM highlighted with a following post (NUDM, 2019b, Fig. 6), La Repubblica changed both the title of the article and the caption which commented it, passing from defining it in terms of an overt accusation to “a gesture claimed by the collective Not One Less” [“un gesto rivendicato dal collettivo Non Una Di Meno”] adopting a more neutral, “distanced” tone (Fig. 6 on the left). According to NUDM, the change was due to the support received by the people who defended their gesture and explained the rationales behind it (NUDM, 2019b).

In any case, the post from NUDM continues by reporting an extract from Montanelli’s interview to Enzo Biagi where he talked about Destà and the circumstances of their marriage, thus offering the audience a direct source of information from Montanelli himself, which is also available online (zosozeppelin, 2020b) and largely accessible. They conclude with an open question, then, asking their audience “are these the men we should admire?” [sono questi gli uomini che dovremmo ammirare?], directly engaging their followers and opening a space for responses and debates.

The post<sup>66</sup> registers a total amount of 3892 *reactions* (of which 3255 *likes*, 305 *grr*, 275 *heart*, 39 *sigh*, 11 *ahah*, 7 *wow*), 1035 comments and 1809 shares<sup>67</sup>. Worthy to be noted, only 340 comments are direct answers to the post, thus meaning that the remaining 695 are replies to other users' comments which constitute actual debates.

The first comments are additions to the main post made by the collective itself. In fact, they used them to broaden the discussion started in the caption to information systems, providing the users with further sources of information (such as articles and studies) about the gender gap in the journalistic and news environment, reminding of the difficulties encountered by women in accessing such world and also promoting a call to action to stop sexism in journalism. They did it to highlight the fact that (almost) all the media and news channel are directed and controlled by men, and that women do have little (if almost none) power and way of expressing a different point of view on the matter. With reference to their gesture, they wanted to provide evidence for the narrowness and rigidity with which their gesture is considered and consequently narrated in the public sphere through media and press: vandalism, that is all. In short, by quoting such articles and studies, they wanted to focus the attention also on the univocal and quite homogeneous narrative proposed by media in general, as product of a specific group, namely white, male journalists, that have addressed them as vandals and have not or cannot read their gesture otherwise. In other terms, the mainstream narrative proposed by traditional media (such as tv channels, newspapers, radio) is so much permeated by dominant values that it could not provide a different interpretation of their gesture, nor could give it a different meaning from vandalism.

Moreover, NUDM pre-emptively attached the links to other documents, such as: the original piece written by Montanelli about his marriage with Destà (Montanelli, 2001) published by *Il Corriere della Sera*; an extract from Silvana Palma's book *L'Italia Coloniale* (1999), providing details about the *madamato* practice; a piece of an interview given by Elvira Banotti herself (the journalist who provoked Montanelli during the interview to Enzo Biagi) (zosozeppelin, 2020a). Each of these additional materials was added in order to foster the discussion on the topic, as they overtly stated: "Yes, we have prepared it. We inserted it here too to continue the discussion" ["Sì lo abbiamo preparato. Abbiamo inserito anche qui per continuare la discussione"].

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<sup>66</sup> Up to January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

<sup>67</sup> considering the 40.012 "likes" of NUDM's page and 44.033 followers.

It should also be noted that NUDM mentioned (blue characters in the text) both la Repubblica and Indro Montanelli's official profiles, directly addressing other parties and aiming at provoking their response (needless to say, in Montanelli's case those who manage his page/profile). This aspect is interesting too because the direct involvement and addressing of other parties, which witnesses openness to confrontation, is not always given for granted. In fact, this engagement is absent in the opposers' attitude – namely Sala and Di Maio - who in their interventions never mentioned NUDM or other subgroups, eventually minimizing their contribution to the events and subtly shadowing the presence of a non-hegemonical thinking and active-reacting subjectivities.

Nonetheless, the general openness of NUDM has to deal with their role as page “moderators”, specifically toward whoever may have insulted, offended, or trolled them, as they were going to be banned [+++ ça va sans dire: chi ci offende, insulta, trolleggia, verrà bannat\* +++] (NUDM, 2019a). Although it might be seen as a preventive banning of those with contrasting or opposite opinions, their “closure” was not much on the content of the replies but rather on the modalities, for they were accepting critique or confrontations but without insults or offenses. Nonetheless, during the analysis I noted that, in some comments, users were mentioned but they did not figure in the thread, so I hypothesised that, eventually, some comments were actually deleted.

Beside the initial, additional comments, NUDM never replied to their commentors within the whole body of comments, whereas much space is left to people for debating among them and advocating for their points of view. The only, general answer from NUDM is to those who defend Montanelli's on the basis of his work as a journalist. In this sense, they remind that a journalist who witnessed gas bombing during the Ethiopian war and denied it for years (even at the light of documentary evidence) “cannot be considered a great journalist” and that “only stubborn chauvinism can consider such an individual a great journalist” [Non si può considerare un grande giornalista uno che è stato testimone dei bombardamenti all'iprite durante la guerra di aggressione fascista all'Etiopia e poi lo ha negato per anni, anche di fronte all'evidenza documentaria. Solo il maschilismo pervicace può far considerare un grande giornalista un individuo del genere] (NUDM, 2019a).

Beside NUDM limited presence in the thread, users' comments have provided a very interesting source of information, for they have largely demonstrated the multiplicity of interpretations and positions with respect to the same gesture. I will try to gather them according to the basic distinction



“agreement/disagreement” so to report them in general labels and then proceeding to explore the different extents to which they are expressed.

Starting from those who agree with the washable soiling, two main general reactions can be noted, which I define as “moderate” (the majority) and “extremists” (far less numerous). Extremists do not only agree with the action itself but assert they would have done something different (even worse) to it, both in terms of physical damage of the public good and of denigration of Montanelli’s figure. Some of them would have used brown paint (clearly mocking excrements), while others affirm they would not have used paint but directly real excrements, or a steel casting (since “in this way [with pink paint] they have only embellished it”), or also explosives such as napalm or dynamite. Extremists advocate for the statue’s destruction, denigration, and removal, not only approving NUDM’s actions but eventually declaring a stronger iconoclastic position.

Shifting towards the “moderates”, many users assert how much they liked the gesture, its modalities and outcomes. Some exemplary comments in this sense are:

*In my opinion it would be better if it remained like this [soiled], it is beautiful and strong*  
[secondo me meglio che resti così, è bella e forte]

*It would be better if it was permanent, that colour suits it* [sarebbe meglio fosse indelebile, quel colore gli dona]

*That’s how a mediocre and controversial statue acquires value and becomes the symbol of two ages. This is art.* [Ecco come una statua mediocre e discutibile acquisisce valore e diventa il simbolo di due epoche. Questa è arte.]

Specifically, the last comment brings with it two interesting and important questions: the additional, aesthetic value that the paint gives to the statue and the resignification both of the statue and their gesture to the status of art and artistic intervention.

According to the user who wrote the comment, the washable, pink paint poured onto the statue was able to bridge two ages, in the sense it could make an argued symbolic representation coming from the past “updated” to contemporary social claims, which involve civil rights battles and

bottom-up requests for visibility. The paint makes the statue “beautiful and strong”, and in changing its aspect, it changes its perception and reception, as if the layer of paint became a new signifying layer for an additional, more inclusive meaning. The meaning-changing power of the paint, thus its symbolical “boost”, surfaces several times in the conversation following the post, as also another user added

*If we talk about aesthetics, now is a beautiful statue. Now it conveys an important social message instead of celebrating a fascist, colonialist raper [se vogliamo metterla sull'estetica, ora è una bella statua. Ora veicola un messaggio social importante invece di celebrare uno stupratore colonialista e fascista].*

The user identified a shift in the meaning of the statue, as it now stands for an important social message - subalterns' payback - rather than Montanelli's celebration. But the shift is made possible by the presence of the paint, an additional signifier which modifies the final meaning.

This comment, and the similar ones that are analysed in what follows, expose the intertwined relation of arts and politics, and specifically the social and political function covered by art in public space. According to the art historian Horst Bredekamp (Gamboni, 1997:13), art is indeed a medium of social conflicts: it does not exist in a “pure” field for it is always entangled in historical, cultural, and social contexts in which it is created and consumed. As already argued for the non-neutrality of public space, images, objects and representations in general do possess other functions and meanings beside aesthetic pleasure or contemplation<sup>68</sup> and their alterations – ranging from addition to subtraction, destruction, removal, musealisation and so on – go beyond their mere materiality. Looking at iconoclasm and vandalism from this perspective, rather than “defunctionalizing” their original use, such practices may be seen as able to bring a *change* in function, or also a redistribution, in the system of functions and uses that those artworks previously covered (Gamboni, 1997:22). Indeed, Gamboni prefers to adopt the concepts of “uses” and “misuses” to

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<sup>68</sup> For example, in the context of the French Revolution, Dario Gamboni (1997) recognised the strong political function that the Monarchy attributed to art (mainly through portraits of sovereigns), but especially the kind of proportional relation that he saw between symbols and the intensity of their destruction: the more the artistic object is thought and used with a specific intent (may it be political, social, identity), the stronger the iconoclastic impulse against it can be.

refer to such practices, because creation and destruction are not the only ways such artefacts come into being or on the contrary disappear and there are many other nuances in the middle. Moreover, use/misuse labels can be equally applied to any geo-temporal context. Uses and misuses recall each other, because “images [art objects, statues] are used to express, impose and legitimize a power that the same images are misused in order to challenge, reject and delegitimize” (Gamboni, 1997:23).

NUDM’s gesture has been labelled iconoclasm, vandalism, protest, or as in the last case, an artistic intervention, but beside the ways people name it, the act can be finally defined as a *misuse*, an action that has changed the function of the monument, “redistributing” it in a fairer, more equal way, as “now it conveys an important social message” (cfr. previous comment). Activism of this kind, together with general movements of bottom-up upheaval linked to BLM, reveal again the subtle and blurred border between arts and politics, highlighting the correlation between power and representations, and the role played by aesthetics in the reiteration of power relations as much as in their negotiation.

Furthermore, Gamboni identifies a wide range of possible misuses of images and monuments, but he notes that the easiest way to interfere with a monument is to *add* to it rather than subtract (1997:56). Beside verbal and/or iconic inscriptions, which enable critical confrontation, he points out how the addition of colours has been used to deliver specific messages<sup>69</sup>. In this case specifically, the matter of the paint and colours was also in focus throughout the thread. In this regard, I report here a very short still interesting exchange between two users with opposing perspectives: one advocates for the inherent civility of communicating with colours, whereas the second contests the modalities in which colours have been used. In any case, the last reply provides the most interesting point of view on the power of the paint-based gesture.

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<sup>69</sup> Gamboni reports two examples, Dzerzhinsky’s statue in Warsaw and the Russian Tank in Prague. “The hands of the Warsaw statue of Dzerzhinsky, for instance, were painted red prior to its destruction, visualizing the reasons for the execution in effigy of “bloody Felix”. In Prague, an important debate was provoked by the unauthorized pink-washing of the first Soviet tank allegedly to have entered the town in May 1945, which had been promoted in 1946 to the status of monument to the liberation of Czechoslovakia but was considered, especially since 1968, as a symbol of invasion and occupation” (1997:56).

A: *“What is more civil than using colours to send a message?”* [Cosa c'è di più civile che utilizzare i colori per trasmettere un messaggio?]

B: *“If you want to send a message use colours to make a banner”* [se vuoi trasmettere un messaggio usa i colori per fare uno striscione]

A: *“The purpose of putting the colour on the statue is to **delete its meaning**<sup>70</sup>. The aim, in fact, it is not to propose an alternative view to the one which sees Montanelli as someone to respect, but to impose the only ethically and culturally possible vision, that of a shitty fascist. Putting the banner aside means to **give dignity** to his message and want to oppose it, while overlapping the colour means to categorically refuse it”.* [Il punto di apporre il colore sulla statua è di cancellarne il significato. L'obiettivo, infatti, non è presentare una prospettiva alternativa a quella che vede in Montanelli una figura da rispettare, ma imporre l'unica visione eticamente e culturalmente possibile, ossia quella di un fascista di merda. Mettere lo striscione accanto significa dare dignità al suo messaggio e volersi opporre a esso, mentre sovrapporre il colore significa rifiutarlo categoricamente].

In A's opinion, colour is a signifier charged with a specific symbolical power, able to operate on an already existing signifier – the statue – affecting the dominant cultural code on a deeper level, by disturbing and interrupting the linear decoding of its message (which here, the user hegemonically decodes as celebration and respect). The colour is a source of visual “disturbance” which does not aim solely at opposing the previous message, rather wants to refuse and cancel it, imposing a new one on the basis of a new act of de-codification.

Related to this aspect there is also the question of the visibility, highlighted by other users as well:

*It is not vandalism... it is **a way to make evident** what hides behind this human being and too many others like him... let's say it is **to wake memory up**... which is often too short... [Non è vandalismo, è un modo per rendere evidente cosa sta dietro questo essere e troppi come lui... diciamo risvegliare la memoria... che spesso è troppo corta...]*

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<sup>70</sup> From here on, bolds is always mine and used to highlight the pieces of information which I linger on in the analysis.

*To soil Montanelli's statue (...) is a **symbolic gesture**, which one who wants to have visibility cannot do without [Imbrattare (...) la statua di Montanelli è un gesto simbolico, di cui oggi non si può fare a meno se si vuole avere visibilità].*

Such comments show how much of the power of the gesture itself lies into its bringing to the surface, in showing and *making visible the presence of an absence*, the existence of a life and a story, that of Destà, which was indeed invisible, uncelebrated, running the risk to be (furtherly) forgotten.

As monuments are decoded as reverence and remembering, honour and prestige, pink paint<sup>71</sup> *naturally* - hegemonically – stands for the female sex within the same dominant, interpretational codes. By relying on this very set of cultural-interpretational rules, NUDM tried to communicate dissent with the dominant narrative reiterated by the statue as much as to claim the “other side of the coin”, by exposing other (negative and awful) sides of the character depicted and celebrated and which the original work did not stand or could account for.

Since we are talking about it, I also found that the “decodings” of the gesture and the “re-semanticization” of the monument after the soiling were worthy of reporting.

Although all the following belong to the same “approval” group, I found that the pink paint on the statue has given slightly different outcomes in terms of the renewed meanings attached to the statue. As mentioned before, one of the users (but they were not the only one) refers to it as “art”, expressing a personal, aesthetical judgement which aligns with the oppositional position of NUDM, but not with their intentions (as they were to ignite a debate on history, and not to create any kind of artistic intervention). Still, it highlights again the intertwined nature of the social and the aesthetic, which cannot be really separated in the context of political activism, where the physical alterations of the material always aims at attacking the deeper level of the symbolic. Also in artistic terms, another user said it was “(...) a situationist gesture, harmless, highly symbolical (...)” [Vernice lavabile. È un gesto situazionista, inoffensivo, molto simbolico]. I could not be sure here whether “situationist” was used as a general adjective for a time- and site-specific act, linked to “the situation” on the moment, or if it was a specific reference to Situationism, a wider cultural-political movement founded in 1957 and active throughout the Sixties in Europe. In fact, in its artistical

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<sup>71</sup> Worthy to be note, pink, together with black, are the identifying colours of NUDM.

practice, Situationism<sup>72</sup> resulted as site-specific and context-based, often including a high political commitment, characteristics that the user may have evidently found in NUDM's soiling and potentially categorised as such.

Other favourable/in line meanings attached to NUDM's action were "an act of protest", "a symbolic (not vandalic) act", "a definitely civil protest sign", "the most civil, pacific action possible against rape culture", "a notification to the institutions", "a necessary provocation", in short

*It shall be called civil disobedience, rebellion, nothing so tragic or extreme, **just protest** [chiamasi disobbedienza civile, ribellione, niente di così tragico o estremo, solo protesta].*

Generally speaking, it can be assumed that those in favour of NUDM's gesture (which are the majority of the commenting users) tend to justify their action as a legitimate act of protest, although not belonging to the instruments allowed by democracy (as a strike would be) and sometimes recognized it still as vandalism. Nonetheless, someone has seen it as part of a more general communication strategy. As they reported:

*(...) There are different plans of communication and political struggle. (...) Instead, those like Pillon and Fontana<sup>73</sup> are alive (poor us), therefore they must be contrasted **with the instruments of democracy (for example the strike of Not One Less)**. The two actions **are part of the same political project and have the same weight and value** [(...) Ma ci sono piani di comunicazione e lotta politica diversi (...). Invece i Pillon e Fontana sono vivi (ahinoi), quindi*

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<sup>72</sup> The Situationist International was a group of avant-garde artists, political theorists and activists of the late '50 founded by Guy Debord in Paris. The group had an outspoken political connotation, anti-capitalist, and left lining, opposing mainstream culture and idea of art. In fact, their work aimed at questioning the milestones of the art world, working together to destroy the myth of the "artistic genius" and criticising the institutional spaces of the gallery from the inside. Against the influences coming from the USA, they tried to show how those spaces were not neutral, not immune from ideologies and politics, but always questionable (Bertelé, 2021).

<sup>73</sup> Simone Pillon and Lorenzo Fontana are two Italian politicians, both belonging to the conservative party Lega Nord. They are quoted several times in the thread as they are seen as two main antagonists in the battles for civil rights. Specifically, Pillon, as a member of the Senate, was the main promoter of a reform regarding the custody and maintenance of the children after divorcing. The draft law was hardly criticised as many – both politicians and citizens – read it as weakening the rights of women and children. Between 2018 and 2019, at the time Fontana was minister for Family and Disability, he advocated for the abrogation of the Mancino Law, a law punishing and condemning words or behaviours that incite hate, violence, and discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity and/or religion.

si contrastano con gli strumenti della democrazia (per esempio lo sciopero delle Non Una Di Meno). Le due azioni fanno parte di uno stesso progetto politico e hanno uguale peso e valore.]

On the other side, it is on this very point that those against the action insist, by underlining that the damaging and destruction of goods belonging to the community are always to be condemned as vandalistic modalities. In addition, the analysis of the comments clearly shows the relativity of the concept of vandalism, as some still justify NUDM's action as a civil manifestation of dissent while others refer to laws and official definition of the crime – into which the actions can anyway be legally inscribed. In this regard, also Gamboni in *The destruction of Art* (1997) argued on the origins, uses, translations and semantic extensions of both the words “iconoclasm” and “vandalism”. He considered “iconoclasm” and its associates in English, German and French, translated from the Greek words for “breaking” and “images” into European vernacular languages after the Reformation. The translations gave different outcomes, as in German they became three terms (“Bildersturm”, “Ikonoklasmus”, “Vandalismus”), while two in English (“iconoclasm”, “vandalism”) and also different in French, where an equivalent for “iconoclast” (brisimage) did not survive. “Vandalism” instead is an adaptation from the French “vandalisme”, and generally associated with the French Revolution. Still, it derives from a metaphorical use of the term “vandal”, chosen among others to symbolize barbaric conduct, already in use in England by the early seventeenth century (ivi, 15). The semantic extensions of the terms have eventually drawn some (at least ideological) “legitimation” on iconoclasm – which means, destroying with an intent, a reason – while vandalism is left with an unreasonable impetus of destruction<sup>74</sup>. Gamboni concluded the inherent “relativism” of such words in the sense they are adopted differently according to different contexts, thus linked to specific geographical and temporal coordinates but recognizing the much more negative connotation that the latter has eventually assumed. In fact, especially during and after World War II, enemies were always blamed of being vandals and not iconoclasts, because in time the word “vandal” ended up defining someone who destroys without reason, whose actions are violent and gratuitous. Whereas iconoclasm implies an intention - sometimes a doctrine - vandalism has been

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<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the reckoned presence or absence of a reason guides the choice of one or the other term (ibidem). “Iconoclasm” is always used for Byzantium and is the preferred term for the Reformation; for the French Revolution, “vandalism” remains in favour, although sometimes it is offered (in quotation marks) as “Revolutionary vandalism” (Gamboni, 1997:15).

stigmatized, implying blindness, ignorance, stupidity. Vandalism recalls barbaric and uncivil actions against one's own culture, thus relating it to a symbol of negative identity.

In any case, different meanings regarding the gesture of re-encoding made by NUDM are decoded according to the different perspective adopted (also, position taken) by the users in question. Following Hall's model of communication (Hall, 1980), here the source of the message, pink paint (which in its turn *influences, affects* the original signifier of the statue), is the object of a decoding process, as the many different meanings attributed to it demonstrate. Although pink paint is "apparently" only pink paint, the moment the message is produced, NUDM does it with a specific intention and meaning in mind, making the paint a symbolic vehicle of an oppositional, counter-hegemonic message and position. But, as any other historical event – largely intended as an action or situation happening in the real world -, it finally arrives to the audience (in the moment of reproduction) through the two moments of circulation and distribution. Where in first place production requires "means", thus some material instruments that become the necessary form of appearance of the meaning in the form of sign-vehicles, circulation and distribution take place in a discursive form, that is, the paint - and mostly its throwing - become *narrative events* in order to be meaningfully decoded and integrated in social relations – which in turn means that they are "translated" so to "have an effect, influence, entertain, instruct or persuade, with very complex perceptual, cognitive, emotional, ideological or behavioural consequences" (Hall, 1980:119). Nonetheless, as highlighted in this analysis, the narratives coming out from the same event are multiple and may be more or less "congruent" with the original intentions of its creators. Indeed, as someone noted

*A coat of paint itself **has no meaning**. Therefore, it is who does it and why that make the gesture deplorable [A rendere il gesto orribile, quindi, è chi lo fa e perchè. Una mano di pittura in sè non ha alcun significato].*

So, even if meanings are produced from the source within a specific code, the circuit is concluded, or better, the communication happens, only with the re-production moment, that is, when receivers activate their own decoding processes and recognize the form message as meaningful for them, also according to their specific social positioning (including identity issues, political orientation, gender,



ethnicity and so on). It is clear then, that the final, resulting meaning one attaches to such actions also depends on their specific reception, as every event becomes a communicative event and a story which is deciphered according to one's own thoughts, values, opinions, de-codificational framework and consequent position assumed with respect to it, as more or less aligned with the dominant-hegemonical meanings, adopting negotiated or overtly oppositional positions. In fact, it should always be kept in mind that in Hall's view (informed by Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony), audiences never have a passive role, but are actively engaged in the process of meaning production and negotiation of ideologies. In fact, although any dominant class (here recognized as groups of white, males individuals and institutions) tends to impose its own reading of the world, providing a dominant cultural order (the presence of symbols in the public space) and tracing a path of preferred meanings (a statue stands for honour, commemorating an important character), these are not determined and remain open, thus subject to contestation at different levels and in different ways. In addition to this question, I would like to report two significant comments that enriched the discussion on the inherent relativism of what shall be considered vandalism or not.

*It is vandalism because made by women to report "crimes" against other women. If it had been made by men, it would have been a brave gesture of rebellion (...). [È vandalismo perché fatto da donne per denunciare dei "crimini" contro altre donne. Fosse stato fatto da uomini per denunciare dei "crimini" contro altri uomini sarebbe stato un gesto coraggioso di ribellione (...)]*

*So, when these "situationist acts" - as soiling the walls of community centres or of literacy schools for minor migrants, or affixing posters that exalt brutal things - are made by Casa Pound they are "awful, fascist provocations". When they are done by feminists, then they become "militant situationism". P.S. also the writings by Casa Pound and the banners in front of Arcigay's headquarters were washable and removable. [Quindi quando questi "atti situazionisti" come imbrattare muri di centri sociali o scuole di alfabetizzazione per minori migranti, o affiggere manifesti che inneggiano a cose orrende li fa Casa Pound sono "orribili provocazioni fasciste". Quando li fanno le femministe sono "situazionismo militante". P.S. anche le scritte di Casa Pound e gli striscioni affissi davanti alle sedi Arcigay erano lavabili e rimovibili.]*

The first commenter, a woman, reports a very general gender-biased (and -based) interpretation, recognizing an underling dominant, chauvinist narrative that persuades people to interpret this action as mere vandalism only on the basis of the *femaleness* of the acting subject. According to her, public opinion seems to be driven toward a certain interpretation because it follows the same patriarchal logic which sees women as always guilty, even when they are victims.

On the other hand, the second user, a homosexual man<sup>75</sup>, absolutizes NUDM's action and strips its symbolic meanings off from it, decontextualising the gesture and taking it objectively for what it was, the damage to a public good. In his opinion, it does not matter either who did it or why, as instead the *how*, thus pairing their modalities of contestation with the soilings practiced for completely opposite reasons by Casa Pound, an Italian political movement of extreme right. He drew attention on the complications related to the *manners* adopted to express dissent: as he sees it, the claims behind NUDM's gesture vanish as they adopt a dissent-manifestation practice which affect public goods and damage things belonging to the community at large in the same way "fascists" did it. Indeed, this is one of the most representative comments among those I grouped as the "disagreeing" and that largely relied on this point, evidently independently from their gender or sexual orientation and more in line with their political affiliations

In fact, despite many people claimed to be on NUDM's side, and also to share their struggle and be against the statue, they refused the collective's demonstration and did not recognize themselves in their gesture, nor did see it as useful or civil at all.

*Although made with respectable motivations, it is a public good anyway and **juridically speaking it is an act of vandalism**. It was **not made for abject ends or devastation in itself**, but formally it remains such. [pur fatta con motivazione apprezzabile è comunque un opera pubblica, giuridicamente è atto di vandalismo. Diretto non per fini abietti o per devastazione in se. Ma dal punto di vista formale è sempre tale.]*

*Vandalism, of course I disagree with its presence [of the statue] and its sculptural eulogy, but if you welcome certain gestures as "revenge", then you are left with a shameful condition of*

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<sup>75</sup> I could find this information through an explicit declaration of the user during one of the debates he took part to.

*intellectual naïveté* [Vandalismo, non condivido ovviamente la sua presenza ed il suo elogio scultorio, ma se plaudite certi gesti come "rivalsa" siete rimast\* ad una vergognosa condizione di ingenuità intellettuale.]

*This post, you could AVOID IT. **Vandalism is to be CRITICISED** in any case. I'm always on your side, but it is not by taking the law in your hands that things can be solved. Mostly because, for better or for worse, the statue is property of the city.* [Questo post, potevate EVITARLO. Il vandalismo è da CRITICARE in ogni caso. Sempre dalla vostra parte, ma non è facendosi giustizia da soli che si risolve qualcosa. Soprattutto perchè la statua nel bene o nel male è di proprietà della città.]

The discourse on vandalism eventually focuses the attention on the legitimacy of one's actions against the status quo, on the binary civilness/uncivilness with respect to the modalities employed to fight the oppressive structure of dominance.

Within the group of "disagreement", the dichotomic couple civilness/uncivilness seems to overlap with the couple legitimacy/illegitimacy, suggesting and subtly reinforcing the thesis according to which protests and dissent of marginal, oppressed groups can be manifested, as each civil, self-respecting democratic society allows, but only within the limits of the legitimacy which that very democracy has drawn and recognized as such.

This aspect in the specific has reminded me of what Franco Palazzi referred to as the "good manners of oppression" ["il galateo dell'oppressione"] (2020:47). Following what Wolf Bukowski already called the "good education of the oppressed" (2019), Palazzi argues that oppressed people are generally acknowledged with the possibility of protesting and claiming their rights as far as they do it with *civil manners*, which means doing it "kindly", putting the respect for "the system" at large (with its symbols and rules) forth their claims. But, Palazzi continues, to ask the oppressed to keep their rage constrained, to follow an etiquette, means to implicitly ask the oppressed something more – and worst - than oppression itself, a situation in which oppressed people have to renounce *a priori* to any form of protest or resistance to present themselves happy of their status and position, and in which any outbursts of rage is reduced to unmotivated hostility, to a wrong perception of reality, and, to some extent, to insanity and madness (Palazzi, 2021:26).

Moreover, it is worth noting how such hegemonical logic does not limit to the dominant group – indeed white men – but, as Gramsci rightly theorised, it is naturally passed to and adopted by other members of the society, subaltern and non-dominant as well. Indeed, now I want to report some comments all written by women, who despite identifiable as non-dominant subjects in this gendered context, are nonetheless driven by dominant narratives in their interpretation of the events. In this sense, belonging *only* to one discriminated category (women) seems not to be enough to discover the dominant (chauvinist, patriarchal, racist) codes and interpretational frameworks of the society they live in<sup>76</sup>. Instead, looking (and acting) from a deeper disadvantaged position, resulting from the *intersection* of different axes of discrimination, may function as a better tool for “detecting” oppressing narratives, as they act simultaneously “hit” the individuals from different directions (maybe on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation). For this reason, the adoption of an intersectional approach is further justified, in its being something more than “additive” and going beyond the classical categories of sociological analysis, making able to investigate the much more complex and intertwined nature of oppression.

*It is not a race to who screams louder and there's ways to do things* [Non è una gara a chi urla più forte e c'è modo e modo di fare le cose]

*I found staging a civil protest to have it removed to be more effective* [Trovo più efficace fare una protesta civile e farla rimuovere]

*A collection of signature would have been far better* [Una raccolta firme sarebbe stata di gran lunga meglio]

The previous comments, by focusing the attention on the necessary civility that their protest should have had (as to not go wrong), or by listing the “civil methods” they would have preferred to the soilings, do witness a certain reassessment of those dominant positions which see the primacy of the material good over (some) people’s lives and form of oppression, which is also evident in the

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<sup>76</sup> The same reasoning similarly applies the already cited homosexual user, who, despite being homosexual (thus belonging to a non-dominant subgroup on the basis of sexual orientation) still cannot exit the univocal interpretation of vandalism of the action of NUDM, probably because, nonetheless, he still belongs to categories such as white and male, thus mostly “normative”, making him not “oppressed” enough to detect such narratives.

case of the vandalistic attack against flower pots that Palazzi also commented (2021:15-19). In fact, on 5th March 2018, a group of Senegalese protesters damaged six flowerpots – public goods for decorative purposes – in Florence during a non-authorised demonstration, after the city mayor Dario Nardella made himself unavailable to meet them. The trigger of the manifestation was the shooting and murdering of a conational of theirs on that very morning, Idy Diene, killed by Roberto Pirrone, a supremacist white man in his sixties. It was not the first episode of racist violence and the African community organised to notify it, make it evident, *visible* through their bodies occupying public space (squares, streets) to the mayor of the city. Behind their protest there was not only a general attack against urban decorations, but the claim of the value and dignity of their existences beyond the distance of the institutions and their minimization of the events (Palazzi, 2021:18). The interesting aspect that Palazzi highlights is the position of those who firmly condemned the rage of the protesters against the public goods, flowerpots in this case, implicitly pairing the damages of an anti-racist protest to the loss of a life due to murdering. The problem for Palazzi resides in the naturalness with which we – as white, Italian citizens, both men and women - have come to consider such juxtapositions in the political discourse, as part of a larger hegemonical frame. Do we really think that the damage of some flowerpots can be compared to the murdering of a person (with clear, although not lawfully recognised, racial aggravating)? Are we really pairing *things* to *lives* in importance?

A very similar reasoning is at the basis of one of the most interesting comments I found in the threads of the post too, for they went over the merits of the previous matters or dichotomic positions approval/disapproval, legitimacy/illegitimacy, vandalism/protest and so on, arriving to the core of the question.

*On the seriousness of the gesture, it can only be highlighted that they talk about a bronze statue and not a human being (raped, sold, enslaved, and, possibly, killed)” [Sulla gravità del gesto si può solo osservare che si parla di una statua di bronzo e non di un essere umano (stuprato, venduto, schiavizzato e, perché no, ucciso).]*<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Noteworthy, this was the only user that explicitly did not refer to themselves as man or woman for they used the neutral “schwa” in their nickname. I have assumed that a user like this one, who shows a certain sensibility to gender question, is more likely to be able of exiting the dominant-hegemonical cultural codes of the patriarchal,

*I don't understand those who equate soiling a statue with systematic rape... as if damaging a "thing" is the same of irremediably damaging a person [Non capisco chi mette sullo stesso piano imbrattare una statua e lo stupro sistematico di un pedofilo... come se danneggiare una "cosa" fosse uguale a danneggiare irrimediabilmente una persona.]*

I found such comments enlightening as they foreground a certain “habit” (also “defect”) of thinking included in a mainstream way of reasoning that, by acknowledging the coherence between what is right and what is legal, by levelling the import of rape, murder and vandalism, reveals an implicit logic that equates people to things, that sees the violence used against things at the same level of the violence against humans and which, for these reasons, is undeniable cruel and inhuman. As Palazzi concluded, the victim, the oppressed, is recognized as such in first place because it is forced to be silent, whether in the opposite case, any manifestation of their rage becomes an “unexpected speaking up, the demonstration of a political subjectivity” (Palazzi, 2020:18) that is scaring, stigmatized and furtherly oppressed/repressed.

In short, those who suffer forms of oppression and pay for them with their lives are asked to protest in a “correct”, kind, educated way – which means, in ways that are accepted and respectful of the status quo created by the dominant class.

Such perspective has often reoccurred in the group of those who dissent, as many comments both from men and women have suggested. On the other hand, anyway, positions are nuanced – although, at least here, most of the comments were generally favourable -, indeed some users showed a certain awareness about this “defect” of reasoning, as for example two white women commented:

*It does not seem to me that nice words and peaceful demonstrations make activists being listened to. Some symbolic (and not vandalic) act as this one is fair enough. I believe that the paint should have been permanent. The statue is far better this way [soiled], do not remove it, it would be like to deny history or the character [Che poi con le belle parole e le*

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discriminating society they live in and is also able to observe it from “outside”, enriching the debate with observations that only its non-hegemonical position allows to.

dimostranze pacifiche non mi sembra che le attiviste siano particolarmente ascoltate, qualche atto simbolico come questo (e non vandalico) ci sta tutto. Io sono dell'idea che la vernice non doveva essere lavabile. Molto meglio così la statua, toglierla no, é come rinnegare la storia o il personaggio]

*I'm sure Afroamerican asked for forgiveness to their masters during their struggles for liberation from slavery* [Sicuramente gli afroamericani chiedevano scusa al padrone mentre lottavano per la propria liberazione dalla schiavitù].

About the dissenters, there are, also among them, different degrees of “disapproval”. One group relies on the need for contextualisation, which is surely the more common argument used to justify Montanelli’s actions also in other media (see for example Telese, 2020 and Travaglio in TVLoftOfficial, 2020). Indeed, many commenters do think that the young Montanelli’s violence should be framed in the context it happened, in the place and in the times it was carried out. As a consequence, they see NUDM’s claim as anachronistic:

*To contextualise the actions and narrations to the historical moment and understand the reality of a man from another century was too complicated or counter revolutionary, I suppose (...).* [Contestualizzare le azioni e le narrazioni al momento storico e rendersi conto della realtà di un uomo di un altro era troppo complicato o controrivoluzionario, immagino. (...)]

*Without contextualisation, you become obtuse too* [Senza contestualizzazione diventate ottusi anche voi].

*Applying the contemporary yardstick for events happened almost 100 years ago is ridiculous. You dirtied the statue of a great journalist. Nothing more.* [Usare il metro di oggi per fatti di quasi 100 anni fa è ridicolo. Avete sporcato la statua di un grande giornalista, nient’altro.]

Specifically, the last one links to another thread of comments, those who linger on the question of *who* the statue is actually celebrating: the journalist, the soldier, the human being? The premise in

this case is to acknowledge whether the monument is celebrating a person at 360-degrees, for everything he did, or if it is celebrating an aspect of his life (his work as a journalist), which is in this case detached from the round character himself. Which aspect of Montanelli's life is celebrated in the monument?

The matter is quite complicated because brings in numerous other perspectives, opinions and positions which are all worth considering for the sake of the analysis. In fact, on one hand, some users affirm that the statue celebrates a great journalist and writer, a martyr of free thought (as victim of terrorism) and an eminent master in his job. Needless to say, if one starts from the premise that the statue *only* celebrates the journalist-Montanelli, the soiling acquires no other value than vandalism, on the basis that the meanings the statue aims proposes and reiterates in the society are commonly shared by every citizen.

*This gesture is foolish because it attacks a monument to the journalist (the best in the history of Italian journalism [...]) and not a monument to the man (paedophile or awful he was, we could write a book on this...) [Il gesto in questione è una stupidata perché va ad attaccare un monumento al giornalista (il migliore della storia del giornalismo italiano [...]) e non un monumento all'uomo (pedofilo o pessimo che fosse, su questo potremmo aprire un libro...)].*

On the other hand, if one acknowledges that, besides being a great journalist, he was – as a matter of fact – also a colonialist, a fascist and a rapist, no matter the context in which he was all that, maybe they could see that a statue dedicated to him could really be insulting for every person who still suffer discrimination of that sort. Anyway, we shall come back to this issue later, when discussing the response of the institutions to the soiling of the statue, since they defended it on the basis of very similar instances.

The only conclusion I can reach is that right or wrong, legitimate protest or vandalism, such labels are relative and end in themselves. In the end, NUDM's action reached its objective: to ignite a debate on history. They were able to draw the attention on the historical revision that Italy has never undertaken with its colonial past and of which Montanelli's statue is only an example among many. They could unmask the chauvinism and racism at the very basis of dominant logic which has



built public space and overtly refused its symbols, decoding a different meaning in the statue thanks to their non-hegemonic position.

*Indro Montanelli (...) was a piece of shit, self-confessed paedophile and misogynist, therefore today he is chosen as the symbol of a hateful abuse* [Indro Montanelli (...) in gioventù fu un uomo di merda, pedofilo e misogino confesso, quindi oggi viene scelto come simbolo di una odiosa prevaricazione].

Events like this, starring subgroups acting against oppression, involving bottom-up practices which challenge established meanings and are active - although oppositional – practices of cultural consumption, witness the processual nature of our lives, history, culture and manifest the need to review and reconsider some of the landmarks for our identity, of individuals as much as of national community. National heritage, which in fact comprises monuments, is “a powerful source of meanings” and “it follows that those who cannot see themselves reflected in its mirror cannot properly ‘belong’” (Hall, 1999:22). Moreover, it should always be kept in mind that “[cultural] identity is not a fixed essence, [...] it is not once-and-for-all [...]” (Hall, 1990:248) and that past continues to speak to us, continuously constructed “through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth” (ibidem), and, I would add, also through counteractions, by including new interpretations and emerging perspectives. Activism of this kind is the proof that past, and its legacies (statues among others) do not address us “as simple, factual past” (ibidem), rather as a sort of warehouse of possible, *virtual* meanings where historical events have existed, both on a material and symbolic plane, but always in partial, provisory ways, susceptible to change and reappropriations. And in fact, as T.S. Eliot already figured out in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (1919),

The new defines itself in response to what is already established; at the same time, the established has to reconfigure itself in response to the new. Eliot’s claim was that the exhaustion of the future does not even leave us with the past. Tradition counts for nothing when it is no longer contested and modified. A culture that is merely preserved is no culture at all (Fisher, 2009:7).

And in fact, the new and the canonical reciprocally define each other, the same way use and misuse do, according to Gamboni (1997). What we shall focus on, as someone has recently told me, is not destroying the past, rather building the future, keeping in mind that “building”, here, paradoxically includes iconoclasm, destruction or removal, as tangible signs of change and development in society: “building” as attaching new meanings through practices, which are *signifying, making things meaning (something new)*.

Proceeding with the analysis, the second post I am taking into consideration is the one published by the students belonging to the collectives LUME and RSM<sup>78</sup>, shared on the former’s official profile but signed by both the groups and referring to the soiling of the statue with red paint and black spray after I Sentinelli’s unsuccessful request to the mayor for its removal (10<sup>th</sup> June 2020). The post consists of a video and a written caption.

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<sup>78</sup> LUME stands for Laboratorio Universitario Metropolitan (Metropolitan University Laboratory) while RSM stands for Rete Studenti Milano (Milan Students Web).



Fig. 7 – LUME, 2020a via Facebook<sup>79</sup>

The video (LUME, 2020a) is an amateur recording – most likely made with a mobile phone data – of the students’ action against the statue. It begins with a bicycle riding toward the park, passing nearby the street which reaches the monument and its surrounding. Then, two hooded people are seen while throwing red paint on the statue and writing with black spray “razzista” [racist] and “stupratore” [rapist] on the pedestal, just below the official inscription. The video ends with a frame of the soiled statue and the sound effect of an applause, followed by the signs of the collectives. The whole action is accompanied by pieces of the song “The revolution will not be televised” (1971) by the American poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron. The choice of the “soundtrack” is interesting for two reasons. On one hand, it recalls struggles for self-determination and racial pride, as the

<sup>79</sup> Extracts from the Italian caption are translated throughout the analysis when specifically considered.

song's title was originally a popular slogan among the 1960s Black Power<sup>80</sup> movements in the United States (Hamilton and Ture, 1967). On the other hand, it clearly reveals the positioning of the authors with respect to their own action, conceived as revolutionary and for that reason not streamed through mainstream media and communication. They also seemed to be aware of the possible "misrepresentation" they were going to be subject to by such media and since the revolution "will not be televised", they decided to record and publish it on their own, taking advantage of the participatory and more easy-to-access environment offered by social networks. In this way, they could give their own revolutionary version, beside the ones proposed by official media (television, radio, popular newspapers), which mainly depicted them as vandals according to the dominant viewpoint they vehiculate. In fact, from a communicational perspective in line with Hall's model (1980), the students managed to provide the audience with a "transparent" narrative (with respect to their intentions), which could counterbalance the given-for-granted mainstream codification of their actions as mere vandalistic, thus the *dominant narrative* that audience at large would have received by official media just before their own final decoding of the message. In this sense, social networks are empowering tools for subgroups as they allow them to offer alternative narratives to the dominant-hegemonic one, giving audience the opportunity to discover other possibilities of interpretation, aside from an eventual understanding or agreeing with them.

In the caption of the post, the students advocate for a *proper*, critical revision of history, intended as a lively matter, susceptible to change. They acknowledge the "social and collective function" of statues in the public space and recognize in them the history of the ruling classes, the version the latter decide to celebrate [le statue che ne celebrano i protagonisti hanno una funzione sociale collettiva, perché occupano lo spazio pubblico rappresentando ciò che una classe dirigente decide di celebrare della propria storia] which in the end becomes the only, official and hegemonic version of it. They see Montanelli's celebration as damaging for everyone, besides being a contradiction in itself, since he was a "colonialist" and a "slaver", whereas Milan is a city honoured with the gold medal for Resistance. On the wave of the global protests which are destroying "the idols of a world which must not exist anymore" [idoli di un mondo che non deve più esistere], they clearly state their

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<sup>80</sup> The label "Black Power" have addressed several ideologies which have aimed at achieving self-determination for Black people (Scott, 1976). The Black Power movement, prominent in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was primarily used by Black Americans but not exclusively from them, as it generally addressed black people to create their identities despite already existing (mostly white-based) societal factors.

position in line with that of Black Lives Matter and NUDM, for an intersectional struggle which may put an end to slavery, sexism and racism.

The post<sup>81</sup> registers a total amount of 776 *reactions* (of which 572 *likes*, 22 *grr*, 139 *heart*, 0 *sigh*, 35 *ahah*, 0 *wow*, 8 *hugs*), 235 comments, 209 shares and the video almost 27.000 views (in the face of 20.068 “likes” to LUME’s page). In this case, good part of the thread is also composed of responses and replies, as only 85 are direct comments to the post while the remaining 150 – more than half of the total – are discussions started by users.

The very first comment, as in the case of NUDM, is from LUME’s members:

*Since we are partisans and we have picked a side, we are not interested in the opinions of those who have nazifascism and alt-right as their historical and political references. For this reason, we are going to delete the messages of these people. [Essendo partigiani, avendo scelto da che parte stare, non ci interessano le opinioni di chi ha come riferimenti storico-politici il nazifascismo e l'alt-right per questo procederemo all'eliminazione dei messaggi di queste persone].*

The opening comment is in someway similar to the one seen in the post from NUDM, which said they would have banned those who insulted or mocked them, so referring to the community’s netiquette, but here LUME and RSM lean more overtly on political positions. They declare they are not accepting the opinions of those with opposite values and political beliefs, namely fascism and Nazism. In this sense, they behave differently from NUDM, as the latter provided a space for debate limited by the “form”, the “modalities” of the comments (i.e., no insults, no joke), more than content, as instead the students decide to do. They seem less open to debate as they choose to systematically delete all open, radical form of criticism towards them – specifically those of the extreme right -, thus showing far less will for confrontation than the first group. Nonetheless, not all the “contrasting” comments have been deleted, thus there is some space left to criticism, although not from their direct political rivals.

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<sup>81</sup> Up to 10<sup>th</sup> January 2022.

In fact, in the same comment, LUME and RSM's clearly define their political position by identifying themselves with *partisans*, so with those spontaneous although organized forms of resistance – ranging from ordinary guerrilla to especially violent attacks - to the fascist regime and to Nazi occupation in Italy during the second World War. In doing so, they intended to bring in the debate lively political instances that have been discussed throughout the thread and constitute a further topic not so evident in NUDM's case.

The political question has raised lots of discussion, the very first one starting from the inconsistency of the meaning attributed to “partisan”, since the one given by the students seems to clash with the “official” given by the representatives of the Resistance in Italy, the ANPI (Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d'Italia). Indeed, despite the students claim to be partisans and of acting against nazi-fascism (and all that it entails), their action is rejected by those who officially represent partisans in Italy, as the president of the ANPI section of Milan, Roberto Cenati, commented in an interview (Giannoni, 2020). Cenati paired the soiling of Montanelli's statue to the numerous soilings of plaques and monuments dedicated to members of the Resistance made by right movements (the “natural” enemies of partisans in this sense, those whose opinions LUME and RSM preventively rejected), moving closer to one the comment of the previous analysis that quoted Casa Pound's soilings. Cenati defined the act as “a hateful gesture against a great journalist” (ibidem), reminding that the statue was to commemorate the episode of the assault of the Red Brigades against Montanelli, not the person he was in Ethiopia, and that

*The battle against discrimination and racism is not fought by knocking statues down or by soiling walls, rather by planning cultural and historical initiatives which may act on consciences” [La battaglia contro le discriminazioni e il razzismo non la si fa abbattendo statue o imbrattando monumenti, ma dispiegando una vasta iniziativa di carattere culturale e storico, che agisca sulle coscienze] (Giannoni, 2020).*

From this perspective, LUME and RSM's gesture is eventually delegitimized by those who they claim to identify with. It may be also argued that the meaning that LUME and RSM give to “being partisans” is different: theirs may be “updated” to different times and contexts; maybe they do not identify with the ANPI and their historical idea of “being partisans”; maybe they are reappropriating

the concept of being partisans in the third millennium, fighting the new forms that fascism and discrimination have acquired. The two views, the minoritarian (students') and the official (ANPI's) here collide, and it is this collision which makes the whole thing interesting, because it is representative of how different groups (and generations in this case) judge such practices, act and behave differently in name of the same values and of the same flag.

Cenati's opinion is quite popular and shared in the thread, as some users who claimed to share the students' political position have also underlined:

*I am an antifascist, communist and I never lose any demonstration or assembly. Therefore, I **speak as a comrade** [...]. I am very sorry, but **yours is vandalism!** The emergency of racism, sexism, omophobia and so on is not fought with this rubbish! [...] Talking about **coherence** [...] I ask you, why do you fire and throw on the ground all those fucking rockets during demonstrations but then you call yourself environmentalists? Why do we take to the streets declaring ourselves antifascist, against violence, but then you hear sentences like "burn fascists' houses but only with fascists inside"? Really? **We distinguish ourselves for non-violence**, culture, for being able to argue without wishing death to our political rivals, don't we? **This foolish act** will have an only consequence, to **put antifascists again in the showcase of vandals**. I'm sorry, but I far prefer to argue, reason and discuss" [Io sono antifascista, comunista e non mi perdo mai le manifestazioni o i comizi. Di conseguenza parlo [...] come un compagno. Mi piace molto ma il vostro è un atto vandalico! Non è con queste baggianate che si combatte l'emergenza razzismo, sessismo, omofobia, eccetera! [...] Se vogliamo parlare di coerenza nelle nostre lotte allora vi chiedo perchè accendete quei fottuti bengala a ogni manifestazione ma poi vi dichiarate ambientalisti buttando per terra di tutto? Perchè scendiamo in piazza a dichiararsi antifascisti e contro la violenza ma poi dai camion si sentono frasi del tipo "bruciare le case dei fascisti, ma solo con i fasci dentro". Ma sul serio? Non ci distinguiamo proprio per la non violenza, per la cultura, il saper articolare argomentazioni senza augurare la morte ai rivali politici? Quest'atto idiota avrà una sola conseguenza, mettere per l'ennesima volta gli antifascisti nella vetrina dei vandali. Scusate molto ma io preferisco di gran lunga argomentare, ragionare e discutere].*

Moreover,

*Well, what are you planning now against racism? [Bene, e ora cosa avete in programma di fare contro il razzismo?]*

*Seriously, what did you obtain? They cleaned it up, now it's like before, nothing has changed. Tell me, what exactly did you obtain? [Seriamente, cosa avete ottenuto? L'hanno ripulita, adesso è come prima, non è cambiato nulla. Ditemi esattamente cosa avete ottenuto?]*

As in the case of NUDM, such comments highlight the perceived negative aspects of such gestures, as they damage a public good belonging to everyone and paid with public money; the fact they do not really impact or affect the reality of things (that is, they work only on a symbolical level), thus it is useless in this sense; they are perceived as antidemocratic and violent, therefore they go against those same values they try to claim and reassert. Opposers advocate for changing things *in the present*, instead of taking it out with a statue (of a dead person among the other things), for fighting against people who sell their daughters *today* and for doing it “in the proper way”, that is by arguing, explaining, not destroying, or using the same violence they struggle against.

Although in the first post (by NUDM) the two *pros* and *cons* groups were quite balanced, here the comments explicitly in favour appeared less numerous, despite the initial warning of deletion.

In fact, although there certainly are people in favour, as for example

*Congratulations [...] For the **double artwork**. Firstly, **the soiled** – unfortunately for short – **statue** of the racist paedophile, the perfect physical representation of the transience of beauty. Secondly, for **this video**, where you established a good relation between the multimedia artistic work and the audience, made up of dozens of fascist, ignorant assholes who don't have the guts of declaring they want to defend the memory of a racist journalist [...]. Congratulation again! [Complimenti [...] Per la doppia opera d'arte. Primo, la statua del pedofilo razzista imbrattata, purtroppo per poco, perfetta rappresentazione materiale della caducità della bellezza. Secondo, per questo video, dove avete stabilito un ottimo rapporto*



tra opera artistica multimediale e pubblico fruitore composto decine di coglionazzi fascisti senzapalle ignoranti e merde che non hanno il fegato di dire chiaramente che vogliono difendere proprio la memoria di un giornalista razzista [...] Ancora complimenti!],

I believe that the overt political connotation of LUME and RSM action and the aggressive tone of their post may have caused more dissent than admiration among the commenting users (on average, dissenters were more numerous than in NUDM's post), also independently from their political orientation. In fact, I noticed how, both here and in NUDM's case, users who also share their (political) position have also generally condemned the modalities of their intervention and violence as form of protest. This aspect is exemplified by a user commenting a second post by LUME and RSM, published the following day, June 15<sup>th</sup> 2020 (LUME, 2020b), where he provides an interesting argumentation of his point of view on what it means *to be a partisan*, an opinion which was unfortunately left without any replies from the students (as in fact all the comments in the thread).

*I do not agree with this action and other similar ones [...] But do not dare calling fascists those who disagree with this action. Antifascism is a way of being, a daily behaviour [...] attention toward the community for everybody's social welfare [...] Antifascists are those who fight against abuse, hate, revenge, violence as political action, which is the only political action of fascism. [...] **struggle is carried on by refusing and protesting, with determination and reason, against any form of discrimination, of race, genre, class, political belonging, but always with antifascist behaviours** (that is, they burnt books and soiled their opposers' symbols, and still do it). You are not like this [...] this statue-stuff has nothing to do with you and the social and supportive value you created [...]” [...] Resto in disaccordo con questa azione e altre simili nel mondo. Ma non ci si permetta di dare del fascista collusivo, per il disaccordo a questa azione. L' antifascismo è un modo di essere, è un comportamento quotidiano [...] attenzione verso la comunità per il benessere sociale di tutti. [...]. Antifascista è colui che combatte il sopruso, la sopraffazione, l'odio, la vendetta, la violenza come azione politica: l'unica azione politica del fascismo. [...] La lotta va fatta non accettando e protestando, con determinazione e ragione, verso qualsiasi forma di discriminazione,*

razziale, di genere, di classe, di appartenenza politica, ma sempre con comportamenti antifascisti, appunto (loro bruciavano i libri e deturpavano i simboli degli oppositori, lo fanno ancora ). Voi non siete così [...] questa roba della statua non c'entra un tubo, davvero, con il valore veramente sociale e solidale, che avete realizzato [...]

In short, this user sharply resumes Cenati's reason for disapproval: violence is the medium of fascism and to adopt it means to be a fascist; disagreeing with such gesture does not make of me a fascist because I share your political orientation, and I acknowledge that discrimination and social unfairness do not change with this kind of actions. But still, one should always keep in mind that the violence we are talking about is one of a specific type, which affects *things* and not people, and although it is not really harming anyone, the defacing of the image is perceived as truly *bloody* (and the red colour really suits its role here), and the affection of the symbol as *wounding* at a deeper level of representation, power and identity.

Another quite spread rationale for critic is the accusation of “following a trend”<sup>82</sup>, with reference to the worldwide toppling and soiling of statue of confederates, slavers and racist people throughout 2020 – mostly in the USA -, and of using such gestures just to “advertise themselves”.

*Beside the judgement on Montanelli, since you are a cultural centre, you could have protested in an artistic and civil manner, instead of **vandalizing a public good on the wave of trend** [Al di là del giudizio su Montanelli, essendo nominalmente un centro culturale, avreste potuto protestare in una forma artistica e civile, anziché vandalizzare un bene pubblico, sulla scia dei trend].*

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<sup>82</sup> The “trend” the user is referring to is the so-called *cancel culture*, an umbrella term which not only in Italy has been used to address several behaviours and practices, ranging from iconoclasm, preventive censorship, ostracism on social media – *unfollowing, deleting* people accused of sexism or racism or else -, statues removal, and also the “politically correct” matter at large (Adragna, 2021). It began as the boycotting of public characters who have “made mistakes”, but the impact of the cancel culture has been considerable both in the social and the economic world, to the extent it affected marketing choices too. An example is the re-filming of the scenes where Kevin Spacey was present in the film *All the money of the world* (2017) after he was accused of sexual harassment. Since he became a sort of *persona non grata*, the film studio decided to *cancel* him to prevent low incomes and bad reception of the film.

The user is blaming their action on the basis of what they are – or are supposed to be: a cultural centre, so they should have acted *artistically, in a more civil manner*, as if culture was inherently linked to those very specific modes of expression, perceived by the user as the “proper” ways in which culture communicates or also, *is performed*. But this comment implicitly draws borders to the concept of culture, automatically excluding that kind of practices, labelled as vandalism, from its sphere. In these arguments, the dominant perspective of the mainstream ideology can be retraced, which sees cultural agents (in this case in a narrow sense, as members of a cultural centre) adopting other means, artistic and civil, which do not contemplate violence, rage, counteractions of that sort as “legitimate cultural” modalities of expression. In this sense, culture is relegated to art and civilization, someway “higher” and almost detached from the social and political worlds in which it is also created, lived and intertwined with. Eventually, this view clashes with the more holistic concept of culture at the centre of CS approach, which conceives it “as a process, a set of practices” (Hall, 1997) and as the site of potential struggle and/or negotiation (Storey, 2006:68), given that it is *into culture* that the production and exchange of meanings take place.

In conclusion, although largely criticised and maybe useless – as not resolving anything in the real state of things -, these actions have indeed reached their purpose: “[...] to create and keep alive the debate about Montanelli’s statue”, as stated by LUME and RSM in the second post I have just mentioned above (LUME, 2020b). I found the caption of this last quite interesting for different reasons, so I decided to report it and deepen it a bit.



LUME - Laboratorio Universitario METropolitano

15 giugno 2020 · 🌐



● Ancora due parole sulla nostra azione di sabato sera  
🖨️ Per la stampa: scrivete a [chiedialume@gmail.com](mailto:chiedialume@gmail.com)

In queste ore siamo sommersi da messaggi, e-mail e commenti, sia di apprezzamento sia di odio nei nostri confronti. Ringraziamo vivamente per entrambi: era nella nostra volontà continuare a creare dibattito e mantenere vivo il fuoco dell'opinione pubblica sull'argomento Montanelli.

A decine e decine gli uomini bianchi benestanti dell'opinione pubblica italiana, assieme al fascistume che sono riusciti a raccogliere lungo la strada, si sono scagliati in difesa dell'incommensurabile valore artistico di una statua del 2006.

Siamo stati accusati di voler cancellare la storia. Ma una statua di bronzo non è una biblioteca: serve per essere ammirata, non per insegnare. Anche se volessimo dare alla statua una funzione educativa, riteniamo che con la nostra aggiunta alla dicitura "giornalista" delle parole "razzista, stupratore" la statua possa dare un'idea molto più completa e coerente della figura di [#Montanelli](#) (che ricordiamo essere vissuto fino al 2001, non certo nel 500 a.C.).

Si tratta solo di una statua, dal povero valore artistico, ricoperta di un po' di vernice rossa lavabile, che le fascio-spugnette hanno prontamente e senza fatica ripulito. Da come i liberali e i benpensanti di tutta Italia si sono infervorati per opporsi a questo gesto di "inaudita violenza" (che non colpisce persone, ma cose), appare chiaro che non si stia più difendendo solo una statua, ma qualcosa di più: ovvero il razzismo, il fascismo, la misoginia che permeano l'ideologia della classe dominante e dei suoi servi.

Che uno dei parchi più importanti di Milano sia dedicato ad un colonialista pedofilo è un insulto per tutte e tutti coloro che ogni giorno nella "città più all'avanguardia d'Italia" sono vittima di razzismo, di sessismo e di ogni tipo di discriminazione.

Per questo, rilanciamo l'invito di [Non Una Di Meno - Milano Stupro e Pedofilia non sono un errore. Presidio a Palazzo Marino](#) milano per domani, 16 giugno.

Saremo tutt\* in presidio sotto palazzo Marino per chiedere ed esigere a gran voce la rimozione della statua di Montanelli e per rispondere collettivamente alle aberranti parole del Sindaco [Beppe Sala](#), che relegano lo stupro, lo schiavismo e l'apologia di fascismo a trascurabili e insignificanti errori da contestualizzare nella storia.



1500/?... 764

Commenti: 133 Condivisioni: 105

Fig. 8 - LUME, 2020b via Facebook.

*A few more words about our action on Saturday night*

*[...]*

*In these hours we have been overwhelmed by messages, e-mails and comments, both of appreciation and hatred towards us. We thank you for both: **it was in our intention to continue to create debate and keep the focus of public opinion on the Montanelli issue alive.***

*Dozens and dozens of **wealthy, white men** of the Italian public opinion, together with **the fascist garbage** they managed to gather along the way, came out to defend the **immeasurable artistic value of a statue of 2006.***

*We have been accused of wanting to cancel history. **But a bronze statue is not a library: it is there to be admired, not to teach.** Even if we wanted to attribute an educational function to the statue, we believe that with **our addition of the words "racist, rapist"** to the inscription "journalist", the statue may give a **much more complete and coherent idea of the figure of #Montanelli** (who, we recall, lived until 2001, certainly not in 500 BC).*

*It is just a statue, of poor artistic value, covered in a bit of washable red paint, which the fascist-sponges have promptly and effortlessly cleaned up. The way in which liberals and well-thinking people from all over Italy have raged to oppose this gesture of **"unprecedented violence" (which does not affect people, but things)**, it is clear that they are no longer defending just a statue, but something more: **racism, fascism, and misogyny that permeate the ideology of the ruling class and its servants.***

*The fact that one of Milan's most important parks is dedicated to a paedophile and a colonialist is an insult to all those who are victims of racism, sexism and all kinds of discrimination every day in Italy's most avant-garde city.*

*For this reason, **we issue again the invitation of Non Una Di Meno – Milan. Rape, Pedophilia and Colonialism are not a mistake. Presidio a Palazzo Marino, for tomorrow, 16th June.***

*We will all be sitting-in in front of Palazzo Marino to ask and loudly demand for the removal of Montanelli's statue and collectively answering to the **awful words of Mayor Beppe Sala, who relegated rape, slavery and fascism apology to negligible and insignificant mistakes to be contextualised in history.** (LUME, 2020b)*

The very first aspect that drew my attention was the insisted use of politically connoted words, which reinforce the radically political intent of their action and the overt oppositional position they speak from. They address their rivals as “fascist-sponges” [fasci-spugnette], “fascist garbage” [“fascistume”], “liberals and well-thinking” [liberali e benpensanti], those dozens of “white, wealthy men of the Italian public opinion” [uomini bianchi benestanti dell’opinione pubblica italiana] of which the “dominant class” is composed. Their words make clear how their action is directed against a specific group, it is not just sporadic, free violence, but a gesture which targets a specific enemy, that conformist, wealthy, white men that have historically hold the power and implemented their chauvinist, patriarchal, racist – thus fascist, in their opinion – ideology onto other members of the society.

Beside this, what interested me the most was their defence from the accusation of iconoclasm and cancel culture. They say:

*We have been accused of wanting to cancel history. But a bronze statue it is **not a library**. Its function is to be **admired**, not to teach.*

The point here is again a matter of *meaning*, the one attributed to the statue on the basis of the process of decoding it as *signifier* of a specific cultural message. In their view, the monument does not serve an educative function insofar it is only decorative, aesthetical at large and merely symbolical and self-celebrative (not of the society itself, but of a singular individual). They believe it to be “just a bronze statue [...] of poor artistic value” and that its soiling has not harmed anyone, since - they underline - their “unprecedented violence” targets *things* not people. This violence is physical but mostly focused on the symbolical: through the alteration of the signifier, the action aims at challenging the dominant rhetoric which has produced and sustained it, right where the hegemonic group in power has seen itself represented, at the core of what it identifies with, and by means of which (dominant rhetoric) it differentiates among subjectivities it has created *subjectivities*. “It is through identifying with these representations that we come to be its [of the State] ‘subjects’ - by ‘subjecting’ ourselves to its dominant meanings” (Hall, 1999:23). In fact, “the state is always, as Gramsci argued, ‘educative’. [...] Through its power to preserve and represent

culture, the state has assumed some responsibility for educating the citizenry in those forms of ‘really useful knowledge’ (ivi, 22).

The statue, as streets name, flags, also language and the definition itself of cultural heritage, are created by those in power – dominant classes - to vehiculate meanings and maintain their power, always proposing their way of interpreting the world as the natural status of things and the neutral description of reality. By deciding what is important to remember and who has the right to be seen, thus socially sighted, the dominant class has shaped public space, celebrated itself within it, also implicitly establishing hierarchies and power relations in the visual landscape. By systematically excluding non-normative (non-white, non-heterosexual, non-male) individuals from public representations, they could reinforce their privileged position by “educating” to the *norm*, and by enforcing in “the Others” a sense of non-belonging, of missing some essential attributes which could make them true citizens, true *subjects*. In some sense, the lack of representation, “*representational invisibility*”, mirrors unequal social relations but also affects the individuals more deeply at an ontological level, translating into an *existential invisibility* as well. It goes unquestioned that, when the canon is imposed and constantly reiterated (as public space cannot be “unlooked”), the recognition of one’s own difference can only be lived as an anomaly, destined only to the *margin* or, if one is willing to live quietly *in the centre*, as something to be hidden or to apologize for. Were I a black, lesbian woman in a society dominated by white, heterosexual men, I would always feel marginalized, discriminated, my presence in that society as merely tolerated, to the extent that the last chances left are conformation or segregation, both extremely painful.

These points should make clear the importance of having multiple, other-than-hegemonical, *new* (in T.S. Eliot’s acceptance) visual representations, especially in public space. In this regard, the work of South-african artist and performer Sethembile Msezane is worth mentioning. With her performances, Msezane disrupts and deconstructs the process of commemorative practice in South Africa, demanding space next to colonial-era statues for her country’s and her gendered erased histories. Understanding visibility as the recognition for the Self of one’s own existence, she now “stand[s] tall in [her] work, celebrating women’s histories, in the hope that perhaps one day, no little black girl has to ever feel like she doesn’t exist” (Msezane, 2017).

Coming back to the comment, the social-cultural subgroup of students acknowledges Montanelli’s statue as a mere symbolic device with a self-celebrative function, one among other physical

embodiments of the dominant class' ideology, inherently permeated by "racism, fascism and misogyny". Indeed, it is not by chance that (almost) all public monuments in Italy represent white men<sup>83</sup>, the same "white wealthy men" that defended the statue in the name of its "immense aesthetic value". From this subgroup's perspective, defending the statue of Montanelli means defending the "ideology of the dominant class and its servants", which is the real point, the target of the protest itself. By attacking the statue – a signifier -, protesters were contesting the dominant symbolic regime of the hegemonic group within their own codes: they adopted the language of the oppressor, as they needed it to be heard. Their counteraction aimed at sending a message of refusal, an active practice of consumption of a cultural product – a statue – specifically decoded as emblematic of a certain group and ideology. Harming it had the only objective of challenge them, open a space for debate, create new discourses and giving visibility to their dissent as much as to the victims of that colonialist, patriarchal, white-centred ideology and culture. They compare Montanelli's monument to libraries, conceived instead as the counter pole, the *meaningful* places where history and collective knowledge are built and learnt. In their opinion, they have attempted nothing really *essential* for the history of the society and community *at large*, including non-dominant groups, but only attacked a symbol of a racist, chauvinist society. They argue that, even if one is disposed to recognize to it some educative function, then their soiling shall be interpreted as completing the view, providing with the "additional writings [...] *racist* and *raper* [...] a more comprehensive and coherent idea of Montanelli".

Subgroups like NUDM, LUME and RSM have managed to adopt external, non-hegemonic viewpoints able to reveal other meanings embedded in symbols of the public spaces, meanings which the hegemonic group – in the position of creator and as *insider* - cannot see or understand, for they are completely into them, unable (more often unwilling) to exit their own schemes of interpretation of reality and stopping claiming their view as the only true and fair. It naturally follows that such acts may only be condemned, as iconoclasm and vandalism, because they are not able of moving out from the centre and joining the subalterns and the unrepresented in the margin, in that space of dialogue and confrontation which bell hooks conceived as a site of creativity and power (hooks, 2015:233) and which the soiled statue seems to me to have become.

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<sup>83</sup> This is indeed true for Milan, where a study (AssociazioneMiRiconosci, 2021) has revealed the presence of only one statue entitled to a woman, Cristina Trivulzio Belgiojoso, with respect to the other 125 statues entitled to men.



These subgroups have acted in the name of those invisibilized in several ways, either because uncelebrated or materially oppressed, by white-male-centred history, on behalf of all the victims of the dominant ideology, each racialised and/or sexualised, discriminated person who does not fit the “normative” standards and, for this reason, is socially and visually marginalised, while also oppressed and exploited in the post-fordist, “Western” society.

The end of the post is informative as well since it shows LUME and RSM’s solidarity with NUDM and how they overtly joined the latter’s intersectional struggle against any form of structural discrimination. In fact, beside the very similar modalities of protests directed against the monument, they have invited whoever reading their post to a special event organised by NUDM for the following day, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2020:

*[...] we issue again the invitation of Non Una Di Meno – Milan. Rape, Paedophilia and Colonialism are not mistakes. Garrison in front of Palazzo Marino<sup>84</sup>, for tomorrow 16<sup>th</sup> June. We will all be sitting-in under Palazzo Marino to ask and loudly demand for the removal of Montanelli’s statue and collectively answering to the awful words of Mayor Beppe Sala, who relegated rape, slavery and fascism apology to negligible and insignificant mistakes to be contextualised in history.*

As a matter of fact, both the groups eventually turned again to those “more democratic” and “proper” ways of protesting that many contesters have suggested in the threads to their posts, leaving physical violence behind in favour of a meaningful “civil” occupation of public space, using their bodies to manifest their presence and their requests in front – not a random choice – of Palazzo Marino, the headquarter of the city council and symbol of the power of that dominant class which wanted, and still defends, the statue. In fact, the sit-in was organised by NUDM on 16<sup>th</sup> June in response to the words of Mayor Beppe Sala, who, in turn, had answered to the soiling of LUME and RSM (Sala, 2020).

To conclude, I wanted to draw attention to the engagement of other parties in this last post by means of the “mention” option. In fact, LUME and RSM directly addressed both NUDM and the

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<sup>84</sup> Underlining stands here for the link to the event, in blue in the original post.

Mayor Beppe Sala, providing users with the possibility to easily and fast reaching other relevant people (blue characters embed direct links) involved and contributing to build networks, as also the mention of the demonstration at Palazzo Marino shows.

Before considering the official responses of the institutions to the aforementioned counteracts, let us sum up the events and posts quoted and/or analysed so far in order to have a clearer view in mind. Beside some posts which have been considered mostly to provide a more informed view on the events and on the activists (for example fig.3, fig. 8), we have considered the two most resonant soilings from NUDM and LUME, RSM, which took place, respectively, on March, 8<sup>th</sup> 2019 and June, 14<sup>th</sup> 2020. Specifically, the second attack – which brought Mayor Sala to publicly talk about the question Montanelli - took place after I Sentinelli's request for removal (June, 10<sup>th</sup> 2020), which instead caused Di Maio's response.

#### *4.3 Institutional responses*

In order to complete the panorama of opinions and positions about Montanelli's statue, it is now time to consider the other side on the coin, thus the official, "top-down" institutional responses. For this purpose, I decided to analyse two posts, the video-answer of the mayor of Milan, Beppe Sala (Sala, 2020), and the post by the minister of foreign affair Luigi Di Maio (Di Maio, 2020). This choice is strategic for three reasons. First, because by choosing a Minister and the city Mayor I could provide data sources both from a "larger", national context and from the more specific, "local" one, directly relying on the speech given by the Mayor. Secondly, I wanted to underline how political belonging seems not to influence politicians much in their shared condemnation of the gesture and defence of the monument. In fact, whereas Di Maio has always been an important personality within the Movimento 5 Stelle, Beppe Sala was an independent at that time<sup>85</sup> - although always in leftist environment. From the right, also the leader of Lega Nord Matteo Salvini, as mentioned in Chapter 3, shares their same position (Salvini, 2020). Last but not least, because both the politicians have released their own declarations not only to "official" media, as many online available interviews have shown, but also via less formal media of communication like social media platforms (Facebook

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<sup>85</sup> He has been a member of the European Green Party since 2021.

being my focus here), giving me the opportunity to also compare data gathered from similar sources for my analysis.

The third post I analyse here is the video-answer of the mayor of Milan, Beppe Sala, to the soiling of Montanelli's statue which took place on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

This was not the first intervention of the Mayor, as he already intervened in the debate about the monument when, during an interview (la Repubblica, 2020), he answered negatively to the request of I Sentinelli – dated 10<sup>th</sup> June – for removing the statue. After the soiling of the 13<sup>th</sup> June, Sala recorded his response and published it on his official Facebook profile, talking directly to the citizens to explain his position and the rationales behind his defence of Montanelli, both as character and his monument.

In this case, the post (fig. 9) is only made up of a video recording of 3.09 minutes entitled “Racism and Montanelli” [Il razzismo e Montanelli”] without any captions. It registers<sup>86</sup> a total amount of 3491 *reactions* (2958 *likes*, 257 *grr*, 190 *hearts*, 38 *sigh*, 28 *ahah*, 13 *hugh*, 7 *wow*), 1648 comments, 516 shares and 86.511 views. Up to now, this is the post with the biggest number of interactions – counting both comments and reactions -, reasonably as a consequence of the higher number of FB users following Sala's official profile and so of his – and his contents - broad exposition on the social platform. In fact, it accounts a total of 225.285 followers, so more than five times those of NUDM and almost ten times those of LUME. Interestingly, despite the follower gap between NUDM and Sala's profile, the difference in number of comments is much less, for Sala registers only about 600 comments more than NUDM, thus suggesting that the latter counts on a lively and engaged community despite being minoritarian.

I report here a textual translation of the speech in order to simplify the commenting below.

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<sup>86</sup> Up to 10th January 2022.



Fig. 9 - Sala, 2020 via Facebook.

*Good morning Milan, this is an unscheduled good morning Milan, but I felt obliged to talk about the Montanelli question.*

*In Italy and around the world **consciousnesses are very active** on the issue of racism, and this is good, **because racism exists**, indeed, and not only in the United States, but **also in Italy**. Although, as a preamble, I must tell you that **the Milan I know**, the Milan I have tried to lead over the years, **knows which side it is on, not only in words, but in facts**. We have integrated, we have welcomed those who came from afar, fleeing hunger or war. And **when it was necessary to act symbolically**, such as the "Together without walls" **march** that brought 200,000 people to the streets, **we did so**. This is a political premise. But let's deal with the Montanelli issue.*

*I have watched several times the video in which he confessed what happened in Africa, and personally **I can only confess my own bewilderment at the carelessness with which Indro Montanelli confesses such a behaviour**. However, Montanelli was much more than that. He*

*was a **great journalist**, he was a journalist **who fought for freedom of the press**, he was an **independent journalist**, perhaps for all these reasons **he was shot in the leg**.*

*Now I invite all of us, I invite our community to reflect on two questions. The first question I would like to ask you is: **what do we ask (...) to the people we want to remember** with a statue, a plaque, the name of a street, a square or a garden? Do we ask **a stainless life**? Do we ask a life in which everything was extremely right? It is possible, but there would be few left to remember.*

*And the second question I ask myself and I ask you is: but when we judge our lives, **can we say "is our life without stains"**? Are there things I would not do again? I'm putting my hands forward, my life is not. I have made mistakes, I have done things I wish I hadn't done. But **lives must be judged in their complexity**.*

*For all these reasons I think the statue should remain there. Nevertheless, I am available for any discussion on the theme of racism and that of Montanelli, whenever you want. I wish all of you a good day<sup>87</sup>.*

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<sup>87</sup> Translation from the original speech transcription: "Buongiorno Milano, questo è un buongiorno Milano fuori programma ma mi sentivo in dovere di parlare della questione Montanelli, di affrontare la questione Montanelli. In Italia e nel mondo le coscienze sono quantomai attive sulla questione razzismo, e questo è un bene perché il razzismo c'è, eccome, non solo negli Stati Uniti, anche in Italia. Anche se, come premessa, vi devo dire che la Milano che io conosco, la Milano che ho cercato di guidare in questi anni, sa bene da che parte stare, non solo a parole, ma nei fatti. Noi abbiamo integrato, noi abbiamo accolto chi arrivava da lontano, scappando dalla fame o dalla guerra. E quando c'è stato... è stato necessario fare gesti simbolici, come la marcia "Insieme senza muri" che ha messo 200.000 persone in piazza, beh l'abbiamo fatto. Questo come premessa politica. Però affrontiamo la questione Montanelli. Io ho rivisto più volte quel video in cui lui confessa quello che è successo in Africa e personalmente non posso che confessare a mia volta il mio disorientamento rispetto alla leggerezza con cui Indro Montanelli confessa un comportamento del genere. Però, Montanelli è stato di più, Montanelli è stato un grande giornalista, è stato un giornalista soprattutto che si è battuto per la libertà di stampa, è stato un giornalista indipendente, forse per tutti questi motivi è stato gambizzato.

Ora io invito tutti noi, invito la nostra comunità a riflettere su due questioni. La prima domanda che vi faccio è, cosa chiediamo (...) ai personaggi che vogliamo ricordare con una statua, con una lapide, col nome di una via, di una piazza, o di un giardino. Chiediamo una vita senza macchia? Chiediamo una vita in cui tutto è stato estremamente giusto? È possibile, però ne rimarrebbero pochi da ricordare.

E la seconda domanda che mi faccio e vi faccio è: ma noi, quando giudichiamo le nostre vite, possiamo dire "la nostra vita è senza macchie"? È senza cose che non rifarei? Io metto le mani avanti, la mia vita no. Ho fatto errori, ho fatto cose che vorrei non aver fatto. Ma le vite vanno giudicate nella loro complessità.

Per tutti questi motivi io penso che la statua debba rimanere lì. Cionondimeno sono disponibile a qualunque confronto sul tema del razzismo e sul tema Montanelli quando volete. Buona giornata a tutti voi." (Sala, 2020).

Since the data source here is a video, I included in my analysis the non-verbal components of the communicative act, thus the proxemic and para-linguistic elements that first catch the eye of the user. In fact, I noticed the high level of informality with which the Mayor of a big, important city like Milan talks to his citizens. Sala sits on a comfy armchair, most probably in his house (he greets with an “unscheduled good morning Milan” [Buongiorno Milano fuori programma], intending the situation in which he is speaking is extra-ordinary), wearing daily clothes and probably recording with a mobile phone<sup>88</sup>. His words are direct and clear as he personally addresses the whole urban community and tries to make himself understood by everyone. The will of reaching them is clear, as he deliberately opted for an unofficial channel to express his opinion, namely Facebook. This time, instead of relying (only) on press or television, Sala was able to put himself, literally his face, on the online sphere too, in the very environment where subcultures gathering around I Sentinelli and NUDM addressed him in their post and where good part of the claims, events, debates had taken place.

Coming to the speech, Sala begins his discourse with a couple of premises. First, he contextualises the “Montanelli question” in the more general framework of the “consciousness activation” linked to the protests coming from the US, adding “this is good, because racism exists, indeed, not only in the United States, but also in Italy” [questo è un bene, perché il razzismo c’è, eccome, non solo negli Stati Uniti, anche in Italia]. In fact, as also the title of the video suggests, the core of the issue is Montanelli’s controversial relation with racism embedded in his colonial experience. But Sala continues reminding that his city, the city he has tried to guide, “knows which side it is on” [sa bene da che parte stare], implying that Milan is an antiracist city, “not only by words, but in facts” [non solo a parole, ma nei fatti]. In practice, he claims that “we” – the city of Milan, the community at large – have actually welcomed and integrated those who escaped from famine and war; symbolically, for “when it was necessary to act symbolically” [quando (...) è stato necessario fare gesti simbolici], people in Milan have taken to the streets and have demonstrated, pacifically, with a big march in May 2017 called “Together without walls” for a more pluralistic and welcoming society. With this premise, Sala is implicitly giving for granted that, when a community demonstrates – practically and symbolically – its values and beliefs, a statue cannot really change anything.

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<sup>88</sup> I assumed this information from the framing format, which is vertical and automatically balanced out by Facebook to fit the desktop screen horizontally.

Interestingly, Sala does not condemn the soilings, he does not even mention the collectives – who also directly addressed him – in any way. Throughout his intervention, the Mayor gives so poor importance to the symbolical counter-acts that in the end he does not even name them, *invisibilizing them* in turn. The symbolical he advocates for is the “proper”, authorized, “democratic” march he and his administration contributed to organize and took part in. counteracts are deprived in this way of their revolutionary potential, for they have not even been mentioned by *the* authority.

Then, Sala gets to the heart of the matter by commenting the interview in which Montanelli “confesses” his colonial experience and the marriage with Destà (zosozeppelin, 2020a). Sala tells he is disoriented with respect to the “carelessness” with which Montanelli “confessed” his behaviour, which objectively was the marital and sexual relation with a girl of twelve. “But” – he advocates – “Montanelli was much more than that”. Sala puts on a scale two weights, two parts of the same character which do not collide in his personality – as Montanelli continued to talk the same way about the question in 1969 as in 2001 – rather in the perception and reception that others, the Milanese community and people at large, may have of him. On the one hand, there is a colonialist, a fascist, a man who married a child on the basis of a cultural practice and that never changed its mind about it; on the other hand, there is a great journalist, “who fought for the freedom of the press”, was independent, and for these reasons a victim of terrorism. They are the same person, but like also Di Maio (Di Maio, 2020) points out, the statue is there to remember his kneecapping, so referring exclusively to the second aspect and not the first.

At this point, Sala addresses his listeners with two questions. The first is what we ask to those we *remember* with statues, streets, squares, gardens, “do we ask a stainless life? Do we ask a life in which everything was *extremely* right?” [Chiediamo una vita senza macchia? Chiediamo una vita in cui tutto è stato estremamente giusto?]. From this perspective, Montanelli’s actions and behaviour are reduced to just mistakes anyone can do, including the events in Africa as much as the interview released in the first 2000. They are intended as mere “stains”, blackspots of a life which, beside them, was and is worthy to be remembered and honoured with a statue in the public space, so important a question with all the identity concerns it entails. Msezane’s speech was enlightening in this sense, underlining the consequences that “representational” invisibility has on those “different” people, with non-normative attributes.

Sala has clear in mind the evocative function of symbols in the public space, as he states that statues, name of streets, squares and gardens are meaningful, do stand for someone worth to be *remembered*. I noted that he never uses the word “celebration” with reference to the function of the monument, but only “memory”, “remembrance”. From this perspective, it can be argued that his limitation of the function only to “memory” is strategical, for it makes his defence stronger and enables him to avoid further contestations that the use of celebrative tones in Montanelli’s regard could further rise. The same strategy applies to the matter of the “context”, which Sala never takes advantage of, probably conscious that it is not enough an excuse to justify Montanelli’s actions.

In general, Sala acknowledges Montanelli’s mistakes, but leverages on the positive work of him as journalist and “martyr” of independent thought. In conclusion, Sala also asks his citizens to judge their own lives and check whether theirs are stainless too. The final message is that although everyone makes mistakes, “lives must be judged in their complexity”.

The defence of the statue is therefore based on a general judgment which seems to weight differently some controversial behaviours regarding racism and colonialism and a brilliant, lifetime career as a journalist. It seems that “in the complex” means to adopt an “extensive” criterion, intending that some “guilty spots” are neglectable with respect to an entire, continuative life of good journalistic work. Given all these reasons, so the fact that none of us is unblemished, that everybody makes mistakes, and that Montanelli was kneecapped for being a free thinker, Sala eventually remarks his will of keeping the statue where it is, as it is. He ends his speech making himself available for any discussion on “the theme of racism and that of Montanelli, whenever you want” [sul tema del razzismo e sul tema Montanelli quando volete].

From the opposite perspective, the activists have leveraged instead on those very “stains” – rape, paedophilia, racism – to maintain and foster their claims for the removal of the statue and the very same opinion was popular in the thread too.

*Calling a “stain” the buying of a human being - a child – for sex, sounds quite serious, beside the statue. [Caro sindaco chiamare l'acquisto di un essere umano, una bambina, a scopo sessuale una "macchia" mi sembra abbastanza grave. A prescindere dalla statua.]*



*Mayor, you take the distances from your mistakes and say, "I did things I would have not done". He [Montanelli] DID NOT. [Sindaco, lei prende le distanze dai suoi errori e dice "ho fatto cose che vorrei non aver fatto". Lui NO.]*

*Mayor, as always, I agree with you, but there is something missing. **One repents of his faults, and then they become mistakes, otherwise they are positions.** (...) [Signor Sindaco son come sempre d'accordo con lei, ma mancano le sfumature: degli errori ci si pente, e diventano sbagli, altrimenti son comunque prese di posizione. (...)]*

In this sense, it can be argued that the criteria that some people – activists for sure, but also their supporters - use to judge Montanelli, the lenses through which they look at him, are different from Sala's (and the dominant view at large) one, and the weight they attribute to his scattered, controversial actions, heavier.

*Objectively speaking, there are mistakes of different kind. And **the fact he was a great journalist does not oblivate nor resize the violent and inhuman gesture of buying and sexually abuse another human being.** Seriously, don't you consider it enough to pull that statue off? [Ci sono errori ed errori oggettivamente parlando. E il fatto che sia stato un grande giornalista non cancella nè ridimensiona un gesto così violento e disumano come aver comprato un altro essere umano per poi abusarne sessualmente. Maddai, ma sul serio non vedete già in questo motivo sufficientemente valido per buttare giù quella Statua?]*

*Guys, this is not a small mistake (...) Let's try to **give due weight to things**, without judging, without justifying, it would be an insult to the weakest. [Ragazzi non è un errorino (...)]. Cerchiamo di dare giusto peso alle cose , senza giudicare, senza giustificare, sarebbe un affronto ai più deboli.*

Contesters do not admit any contextualisation, any cultural excuse and do not accept Montanelli's work as journalist enough to wash away his colonialist guilts. Then, it does not surprise that both NUDM and LUME/RSM hardly answered the words of the Mayor.

In fact, the days after the publishing of the video, Sala was again personally addressed via Facebook by both the collectives. As already mentioned in the previous analysis, LUME and RSM reasserted their overt oppositional position and defined Sala's words "awful", as they limited "rape, slavery and fascism apology to negligible and insignificant mistakes to be contextualised in history" (LUME, 2020b). They also backed up and advertised NUDM's protest organized for 16<sup>th</sup> June in front of palazzo Marino.

In this regard, NUDM's response to Sala took place both online and offline, as they used Facebook not only to reply to him, but also as a means to reach as people as possible and involve them in the physical demonstration planned for the following days. Also here, a certain continuity of the online debate is kept, for each updating on the "Montanelli's controversy" has a Facebook-corresponding content of some kind.

In this case, the content is an event created on Facebook and entitled "Rape, Paedophilia and Colonialism are not mistakes!" [Stupro, Pedofilia e Colonialismo non sono un errore!] (NUDM, 2020) and was clearly born from the collective's will to answer the Mayor and all the Italian journalists, "representatives of a power group which has always absolved itself and nourished a culture of structural violence, denying debates on colonialism and racism" [giornalisti italiani che rappresentano un gruppo di potere che finora si è auto-assolto, alimentando una cultura della violenza strutturale e negando qualsiasi discussione su colonialismo e razzismo]. NUDM speaks up against public institutions which, again, "choose to deny the atrocities of the past and the present" [scelgono un'ennesima volta di ignorare le atrocità del passato e del presente]. As some users did, they take up on Sala for his reductionism and the tendency to minimize Montanelli's guilts to simple mistakes. In the description to the event, they list in points:

1. *Rape and paedophilia are not mistakes, but crimes against people and against humanity.*  
[Stupro e pedofilia non sono errori, ma crimini contro la persona e contro l'umanità].

[...]

4. To **define rape and paedophilia as "stains"**, potentially part of everyone's life, **means to banalize and normalize violence.** [Definire stupro e pedofilia come "macchie" potenzialmente presenti nella vita di tutti significa banalizzare e normalizzare la violenza]

[...]

6. *When Sala says what he has concretely done about racism, he talks about “gestures and symbolic demonstrations”. [...] [but] the symbolical is not that strong if one refuses to question the tradition and the celebration of racist and fascist characters.* [Quando Sala deve dire cosa ha fatto concretamente sul tema del razzismo parla di "gesti e manifestazioni simboliche". (...) il piano simbolico [nemmeno] è molto forte, se si rifiuta di mettere in discussione la tradizione della celebrazione di figure razziste e fasciste.]

[...]

8. *Accepting rape and paedophilia as “mistakes” is doubly serious if it comes from a public, institutional figure, and a dangerous precedent. We ask the Mayor: so, now is everything valid in Milan? Shall we be worried for us and our daughters?* [Lo sdoganamento di stupro e pedofilia come "errori" è doppiamente grave se viene dal una figura pubblica istituzionale e un precedente pericoloso. Chiediamo al Sindaco: quindi adesso a Milano vale tutto? Ci dobbiamo preoccupare per noi e le nostre figlie?]

[...]

As NUDM and many commenters to Sala’s post point out, those actions he calls “spots” are instead crimes, against people and against humanity. On the other hand, many others believe it different, as in Montanelli’s time it was not illegal to marry a 14-year-old girl and, in the colonialist context, the *madamato* was totally legal, thus the word “crime” does not apply to the events and does not stand in *that* framework. The controversy about what shall be considered as a “spot”, a crime, a use or custom, and so, what is justifiable or not, is again a matter of social perspectives, of the framework adopted *now* to give interpretation to the whole matter.

Montanelli’s actions are seen as rape and paedophilia by subjects who had suffered similar discrimination and forms of oppression, or from those who share at various levels the experiences of subalterns, marginalized, racialised and/or sexualised people. Sala’s speech, although embellished with his “leftist”, democratic manners, lacks comprehension with regards to the victims of colonialism and reasserts that univocal perspective which sees itself as the most obvious, proper and rightful one. As the journalist and feminist Carla Panico has reasonably noted (Panico, 2019),

when *la Repubblica* cries out for vandalism and Telese<sup>89</sup> explicitly exposes himself to justify “daddy Montanelli” [...] we are not only dealing with a capillary and naturalised culture of rape, which is sexist and patriarchal. We also have, in front of us, the evidence of the fact that no one in Italy wants to face “our” colonialism and its contemporary continuity<sup>90</sup>.

In fact, all these repartees, comments, replies, interventions, and debates have eventually revealed only the multiple and conflictual nature of viewpoints, shown how each party’s “pro” arguments are the others’ “contra” but are all valid the same way. Most of all, they have enlightened on the missed revision of the Italian colonialist past, which has indeed celebrated itself but has not yet faced the changes of the contemporary times and perspectives, shaken by international events, and the upheaval of “new” subjectivities, who have always been there but never *visible*, never heard, and who have now found their way to be listened to, to be looked at, as damaging and illegal as they may be. In short, they have shown how, despite the loudness of marginal and minoritarian voices, Italy is not still ready to listen to them, still not ready to “to question the tradition and the celebration of racist and fascist characters” (NUDM, 2020).

The answer to Sala’s question “what do we ask to the character we want to remember with a statue?” is not a stainless life, because it is true, no one can be considered totally blameless and also other symbols - which are indeed part of our tangible cultural heritage - are entitled or closely related to people who made “mistakes”. And in fact, one of the most popular logics in defence of the statue sounds like “if we remove this one, we should remove them all”, enlarging the same reasoning to the Colosseum – for example - since “people were killed there”, or the EUR neighbourhood in Rome, so closely related to the fascist era, or in general to all those public spaces and heritage which carry with them the ideological scope of a past that not everybody is willing to accept anymore.

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<sup>89</sup> Luca Telese is an Italian journalist who has defended Montanelli in various occasion, see for example Telese for *The Post Internazionale*, 2020.

<sup>90</sup> “Nel momento in cui “Repubblica” grida al vandalismo e Telese si espone esplicitamente per giustificare babbo Montanelli [...] non solo abbiamo a che fare con una capillare e naturalizzata cultura dello stupro, sessista e patriarcale. Abbiamo anche davanti il sintomo del fatto che nessuno in Italia voglia fare i conti col “nostro” colonialismo e con la sua continuità contemporanea”. Translation from Panico, 2019 is mine.

*Montanelli is there for he is exemplary of journalism. And today, competent, independent, and sincere journalists as he was, there are a few, if none. I ask you: **have you ever questioned Garibaldi, Da Vinci or Montesquieu's personal lives?** Maybe, **from this point of view, no one is worthy of a statue.** And yet remembrance, for some actions, jobs and goals, is necessary for the present times and to the new generations. [Montanelli è lì ad esempio del suo mestiere il giornalista. E di giornalisti indipendenti, competenti e sinceri come Montanelli oggi ce ne sono pochi, se non nessuno. Vi chiedo: ma siete andati ad indignare sulla vita privata di Garibaldi, Leonardo Da Vinci o Montesquie? Forse, da questo punto di vista, nessuno meriterebbe una statua. Eppure la memoria, per certi atti, professioni e raggiungimenti, serve al presente e alle nuove generazioni]*

There are important people who are still commemorated, remembered, celebrated to some extent, for what they have done or who they have been. Although they were and/or are recognised as “heroes” - more or less “stainless” -, it is likely that such judgements would collapse in future times and contexts, with different people populating public spaces together with their different beliefs and values. And maybe they will ask for those statues to be pulled down too.

The core of the question is that statues, but symbols in general as part of our “heritage”, are not fixed essences with stable properties, neither formal and aesthetic ones: they are “discursive practices”, (Hall, 1999:23), *formations*, always in process, created and adapted by the communities which make them meaningful. Montanelli himself believed that monuments were made to be pulled down (Di Maio, 2020). People constantly charge them with new meanings, so they become *the embodiment of the sense they are disposed to give them* and, consequently, to the narratives they carry on and to the history of the community itself. Sometimes, the change is explicated by contextual modifications (soilings for example, artistic interventions, banners), but in general the signifier may stay the same, and its meaning changes according to the eyes that look at it, according to the decoding act which ignites in the moment such symbols materially appear in front of us, in the spaces we inhabit, to tell us the story of who we were, who we are, and who our children will remember us to have been.

Once recognised the boundary of factual truths, how do we play with interpretations? It is on me then, on myself - on my Self -, with all my filters and my expectations, with everything I can project, as if [history] were a black and white comic, and I have to colour it (Dufer, 2021).

To give an interpretation always means to be partial, to *perform a part*, to role-play. “Interpretation is defined more from what it leaves out than what it holds, and it is an exceptional mirror to understand the world” (ibidem), because the more interpretations we can recognize, welcome and valorise, the closer we get to a good (I cannot say *whole*) understanding of the world around us and of its symbolical, more hidden and controversial aspects as well – although this does not mean to adopt a relativist approach, since not all interpretations can be weighed on an equal plane, considering their history, if not for the analysis. Since truth holds all the interpretation about everything and does not leave anything out, it is inaccessible, and therefore the best we can aspire to is comprehension, mutual and constructive comprehension of each other in the perspective of a more inclusive and fairer world. Institutions, men in power, mainstream thinkers, “contextualisers” should all adopt this kind of spirit as political and “interpretational” guide for those forms of resistance they insist to observe from “above”, from their top-down privileged position. In order to understand the rage of these social movements, which is directed toward “emancipatory directions, rather than oppressive ones” (Palazzi, 2021:201), they should stop “rationaliz[ing] them from outside, more or less paternalistically [...]” and start to “listen to the voice of those who participate” (ibidem). In short, it is only by leaving the centre and coming to the margin that such resistance practices could be properly framed and the dominant history and subjects finally recognised for what they are: (arbitrary) dominant versions sustained by a *stronger, hegemonical* signifying power, which have indeed put themselves forward – in political, economic, social and cultural terms - at the expense of all the others. Although not all groups in society have the same power over signification, the *rearguard theory* as conceived by de Sousa Santos (2014) seems to be a good start for, at least, getting closer to the minoritarian ones, helpful for understanding their perspective since it is “based on the experiences of large, marginalized minorities and majorities that struggle against unjustly imposed marginality and inferiority, with the purpose of strengthening their resistance” (2014:44). In his opinion, the *rearguard* theoretical work

follows and shares the practices of the social movements very closely, raising questions, establishing synchronic and diachronic comparisons, symbolically enlarging such practices by means of articulations, translations, and *possible alliances with other movements*, providing contexts, clarifying or dismantling normative injunctions, facilitating interaction[s] (ibidem).<sup>91</sup>

In this sense, rearguard work is what is really missing here and what instead should be implemented in order to bring the official, institutional acknowledgment of another perspective, the interpretation and instances of the *Other* - the oppressed, the woman, the child, the non-white individual, the non-heterosexual, who tries to speak but has no ears listening to them. NUDM, LUME and RSM, as subgroups in a society mainly administered by white and male Western subjects, stand here for all those non-hegemonic subjects whose interpretation of the world collides with the mindset of the oppressor and aims at exposing it to itself. Indeed,

the paint on Montanelli's statue exposes the fairy-tale about the historical "impartiality" of the great intellectuals, there where the neutral is always the *naturalisation of the partial perspective of the winners*, a white and male partiality which proclaims itself as neutral and absolute (Panico, 2019).

As Panico (2019) points out, the news here is the exchange of roles between those who has finally come to the side of visibility, thus given the possibility to narrate, and those who instead are used to being the "masters" of visibility but are eventually on trial. Italian journalism, official institutions and many commenters have relied upon "the context", blind to the fact that the real context where they speak from is the one which they created, a "context" that sees white proprietary Western

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<sup>91</sup> Emphasis is mine.

males accustomed to considering themselves the spokesmen for the "neutral" and "absolute" views of global history, for it is on this that they have built their domain (ibidem).

The counter-hegemonic actions and requests of I Sentinelli, NUDM, LUME, RSM, Le Indecorose, Manu Invisible (and I think the list will be longer by the time this thesis will be finished), are active consumption practices of the outcome of a culture (the monument) which they have overtly rejected, and they do not identify with. Their common, ultimate objective was to open and foster a debate. The symbolical scope of their behaviours was to disclose the eyes of hegemonic thinkers on lives lived at the margin, on the experiences of the oppressed, and let them see something they could not see before. Still, a comment from di Sala's post:

***Fruition context** must be contextualised too. Today, this "stain" (...) makes the fruition of this monument more complex. It aims at bringing Montanelli's shadows out into the light to stop them being a taboo and turn them into fertile soil for current instances. Therefore, I would leave the statue soiled, **this is story too**... You may see it as an act of **reappropriation** of the citizen about the proxemic **of urban monuments**. It seems to me a symbolical, reasoned gesture that really leads to debate and discussion on important themes. [bisogna contestualizzare anche il contesto di fruizione di un monumento però. Oggi questa "macchia" (...) rende la fruizione di questo monumento complessa, le ombre di Montanelli vogliono essere portate alla luce perché non siano più tabù ma terreno fertile per istanze estremamente attuali. Quindi io lascerei la statua macchiata, anche questa è storia... (...). Vedila come una forma di riappropriazione del cittadino della prossimica dei monumenti urbani. Mi sembra un gesto simbolico sensato e che porta effettivamente a una discussione e un dibattito su temi importanti.]*

Subgroups are powerful and active cultural performers insofar they take possession of the means that the hegemonic culture offers (and rejects, as vandalism) to use them against it. However, as the data analysis has foregrounded, the dominant reading which drives the decoding of the events is still very strong, not only among ruling groups but also in the public opinion, showing how deep this way of thinking is rooted and naturalized, to the extent that each action challenging it is



eventually resized and brought back within the dominant ideological framework through the narrative of vandalism and iconoclasm.

In conclusion, the whole question seems to be reduced to: *who* does the statue represent? Meaning, which members of the community really identify with it, accept its meaning, are willing to keep it where it is, as it is? Some users have highlighted such matter, for example:

*When the statue was put up and the gardens entitled [to Montanelli] it was an offence to the city, which has always been better than that little petty-bourgeois, conformist fringe which Montanelli represented [Quando fu posta la statua ed intitolati i giardini fu un oltraggio alla città, che è stata sempre migliore di quella frangia piccolo borghese, sedicente benpensante, che Montanelli rappresentava].*

*Dear Mayor, in my city, in my neighbourhood, in my park, I would like to have **statues of people in whose values I recognize myself**, not statues of rapists. Each life has stains but in this case is an especially serious one. The – ugly – statue has been there from 2006 and the previous name of the park was Porta Venezia Gardens. It is the park I used to go as a child, **Porta Venezia is the Eritrean-Ethiopian and LGBTQ neighbourhood**<sup>92</sup>. The actual name of the park and that statue are an **offense for what this neighbourhood represents for Milan**. [Sindaco, io nella mia città, nel mio quartiere, nel mio parco vorrei statue di persone nei cui valori mi riconosco, non statue di violentatori. ogni vita ha una macchia ma in questo caso si tratta di una macchia particolarmente grave. la statua, brutta, è lì dal 2006 e il parco prima si chiamava Giardini di Porta Venezia. è il parco in cui andavo da piccola, Porta Venezia è il quartiere etiope-eritreo ed è il quartiere LGBTQ. il nome di quel parco e quella statua sono un insulto per quello che questo quartiere rappresenta per Milano].*

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<sup>92</sup> The Eritrean community is set in the nearby of Palazzi Street, since the first wave of migrations around the '70. It is quite an exceptional example of a stable foreign community in Milan (except for the Chinese one), to the extent that the area has been called "Asmarina" ("Little Asmara"), recalling the Eritrean capital (Il Toro, 2019). Moreover, Lecco Street is famous for being the *rainbow street*, and Corso Buenos Aires for hosting the parade for the gay pride. These and the numerous gay-friendly bars and clubs have made Porta Venezia the LGBTQI+ neighbourhood of the city (Sorvillo, 2020).

In short, it can be said there is no right or wrong decoding, no more valid or less valid argument and all depends on the rhetoric adopted to interpret the statue as much as the events. Still, it is not a matter of relativism, because the initial premise is always the existence of a relevant gap in power positions of the social players, a question of oppression against resistance, also of *symbolically boycott* in some sense. But the matter reduces to the ability – or at least the attempt - of the institutions to exit the narrative they are so entangled with and finally acknowledge that this resistance is really motivated, that this violence they condemn is the direct consequence of what *they* have been doing, legislating, broadcasting, proposing and reiterating with their symbolic regimes, through statues, through advertisement, and all those cultural “soft” weapons that the ruling class adopts to keep its power and, of course, its privileged position (Gramsci, 1975/1948). The signifying power coming “from above” is certainly stronger, more rooted in the minds of citizens, but still such forms of activism coming directly *from below* demonstrate *meaningful* contestation in response to certain rhetoric, and that alternatives are not only possible but loudly demanded. The statue is supposed to reflect the values the local and national community which should identify with, but, as I tried to demonstrate by giving relevance to the several threads, this is not happening. As a matter of fact, the statue continues to be soiled and the strenuous defence and the firm imposition of a univocal perspective – which is the (also very shared) dominant one – cannot be a solution and does not erase discontent.

Although Sala declares himself open to debate and to confrontation, the statue - as of today - is still there, as it was before the soilings and the gardens still entitled to Montanelli. It is the hegemonic power reasserting and reiterating *himself* through public space in the citizens’ minds and personal identities. The institutional response is not surprising nor unexpected, it could not be different, also because to tolerate these actions would have set a precedent for the damaging of public goods, and this is collectively recognised as unfair, also in legal terms. So, it is just the obvious response to subversive acts which they must somehow *reabsorb*, maybe by showing themselves open to debate and confrontation, but in the end, they see only what they are disposed to see and do only what they are willing to do.

As last example, I would like to consider the post by the minister of foreign affair Luigi Di Maio, so to provide data also from a higher representative of the national community and from a politician with a different political orientation with respect to Sala.

Compared to all the previous ones, his post (fig. 10) registers<sup>93</sup> the highest amount of likes and reactions, 17.407 (15.259 likes, 882 sigh, 839 heart, 147 hugh, 144 grr, 74 wow, 62 ahah), of comments (4336) and shares (2526), in front of the 2.599.848 followers of the profile. It goes unquestioned that his opinion, as a high functionary of the government, is not only the most popular and in view, but also emblematic of the official position of the institutions with respect to the matter. It should also be noticed that the political movement he belongs to, Movimento 5 Stelle, has always been one of the most active parties on social media and has leveraged on it for their political doings and campaign, thus could count on a large community of followers.

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<sup>93</sup> Up to 10th January 2022.



Luigi Di Maio  
12 giugno 2020 · 🌐

...

Il 2 giugno 1977, più di quarant'anni fa, Indro Montanelli prese a camminare lungo la cancellata dei giardini pubblici di Milano. Gli si avvicinarono due giovani. Uno dei due estrasse dal giubbotto una pistola con silenziatore e sparò otto colpi. Quattro proiettili andarono a segno: tre attraversarono la coscia destra e l'altro trapassò un gluteo e si fermò contro il femore sinistro. Montanelli non cadde subito. Il suo pensiero, anche in quegli istanti, fu quello di restare in piedi, aggrappandosi a una inferriata che aveva accanto. In piedi, con la schiena dritta, com'è sempre stato. Era stato colpito il più grande giornalista italiano di allora, oggetto in quel periodo di una campagna d'odio senza precedenti. Le Brigate Rosse rivendicarono l'attacco. Oggi, nei giardini pubblici di Milano, c'è una statua che ricorda quel momento. Ritrae Montanelli con la sua Lettera 22 sulle ginocchia. E in passato, è vero, lui stesso sostenne che i "monumenti sono fatti per essere abbattuti". Idee e valori di un giornalista attento e scrupoloso, ma soprattutto di un uomo libero. Anche questo era uno dei tratti che lo distingueva da tutti gli altri. Montanelli vantava un'onesta intellettuale che gli permetteva di soprassedere alle logiche dei personalismi e della vanità. Lavorava per raccontare i fatti. Scriveva per la verità. Non aveva bisogno di elogi, né di onorificenze. A distanza di oltre 40 anni, però, questo non significa che qualcuno possa arrogarsi il diritto di rimuovere quella statua, di cancellare la memoria di quell'agguato. Un agguato contro un uomo e contro la libertà che quell'uomo stesso, con grande dignità, ha sempre rappresentato. Mi auguro che il Comune di Milano quella libertà voglia difenderla. Pensiamo al futuro, costruiamo nel presente. Prendiamo lezione dal passato e guardiamo avanti, con fiducia e determinazione. L'Italia è anche questo e dobbiamo esserne orgogliosi.



👍👎 17.407

Commenti: 4336 Condivisioni: 2526

Fig. 10 - Di Maio, 2020 via Facebook.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>94</sup> "On June 2, 1977, more than forty years ago, Indro Montanelli started walking along the gate of the public gardens in Milan. Two young men approached him. One of them pulled a gun with silencer from his jacket and fired eight shots. Four bullets centred the target. Three crossed his right thigh, the other reached the gluteus and stopped in the left femur. Montanelli did not fall. His thought, also in that moment, was to stay standing, holding on to the iron granting just beside him. Standing, his back straight, as he had always been. The greatest Italian journalist of the time, the object of an unprecedented campaign of hatred at the time, had been shot. The Red Brigades claimed the attack. Today, in the public gardens of Milan, there is a statue that reminds of that moment. It depicts Montanelli with his Lettera 22 on his lap. And in the past, it is true, he himself claimed that "monuments are made to be pulled down". Ideas and values of an attentive and scrupulous journalist, but above all of a free man. This, too, was one of the traits that distinguished him from all others. Montanelli boasted an intellectual honesty that allowed him to overlook the logics of personalism and vanity. He worked to tell the facts. He wrote for the truth. He had no need of praise or honours. More than 40 years later, however, this does not mean that someone can assume the right to remove that statue, to cancel the memory of that assault. It is an assault against a man and against the freedom which that man, with great dignity, has always represented. I hope that the City of Milan wants to defend that freedom. The greatest Italian journalist of the time, the object of an unprecedented campaign of hatred at the time, had been shot. The Red Brigades claimed the attack.

Since the post is preceding the main soiling by NUDM and LUME/RSM, it does not really address the question “vandalism/protest”, “iconoclasm/reappropriation” as in the other posts, but it focuses instead on the figure of Montanelli as “man vs journalist” and question of “legal vs moral”, especially in the thread made up by comments, where users have extensively argued about whether being a good journalist was enough to deserve such a recognition.

A couple of days after I Sentinelli’s request for removal, the minister published an original photo of Montanelli on the day of his aggression by the Red Brigades (fig. 10), which depicts the journalist laying on the ground just after being shot in his leg, with a quite light grimace of pain on his face and some people around trying to help him. The photo is accompanied by a text which comments the event, already suggesting in which direction the minister’s discourse is moving toward.

Indeed, on a visual level, the attention of the users is caught by a very specific picture that frames Montanelli at his most vulnerable, as a victim. Di Maio remembers the day of June 1977, when Montanelli was walking nearby the gardens of Porta Venezia, as his habit, and was suddenly hit by four bullets. The attack to the “greatest Italian journalist of that time” [il più grande giornalista italiano di allora] was claimed by the Red Brigades, a terroristic group of extreme left active in Italy throughout the Seventies. The tone and the style which Di Maio uses to describe the just-shot Montanelli resembles the tale of a modern hero:

*Four bullets centred the target. Three crossed his right thigh, the other reached the gluteus and stopped in the left femur. Montanelli did not fall. His thought, also in that moment, was to stay standing, holding on to the iron grating just beside him. Standing, his back straight, as he had always been. [Quattro proiettili andarono a segno: tre attraversarono la coscia destra e l’altro trapassò un gluteo e si fermò contro il femore sinistro. Montanelli non cadde*

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Today, in the public gardens of Milan, there is a statue that commemorates that moment. It depicts Montanelli with his Lettera 22 on his lap. And in the past, it is true, he himself claimed that “monuments are made to be torn down”. Ideas and values of an attentive and scrupulous journalist, but above all of a free man. This, too, was one of the traits that distinguished him from all others. Montanelli boasted an intellectual honesty that allowed him to overlook the logic of personalism and vanity. He worked to tell the facts. He wrote for the truth. He had no need of praise or honors. More than 40 years later, however, this does not mean that someone can claim the right to remove that statue, to erase the memory of that ambush. An ambush against a man and against the freedom that that man, with great dignity, has always represented. I hope that the City of Milan will defend that freedom. Let’s think about the future, let’s build in the present. Let’s take a lesson from the past and look ahead, with confidence and determination. Italy is also this and we must be proud of it”.

subito. Il suo pensiero, anche in quegli istanti, fu quello di restare in piedi, aggrappandosi a una inferriata che aveva accanto. In piedi, con la schiena dritta, com'è sempre stato].

After the pathetic, impressionistic description of the assault, the reader is brought to the present day: today in Milan “there is a statue that reminds of that moment” [c'è una statua che ricorda quell momento].

Clearly and straight, Di Maio soon identifies the exact function of the monument, that is remarked some lines later. The monument is in that specific place for a reason, because it is there that Montanelli was shot. And the monument is not a mere celebration of the journalist-Montanelli because the Montanelli assaulted by the Red Brigades was bearing on his shoulder the weight of freedom of thought in years where such freedom was in danger. The statue stands for something more than Montanelli himself, as a person, character or journalist, because the assault to Montanelli was symbolical too, and indeed aimed at hitting “the freedom which that man, with great dignity, had always represented” [la libertà che quell'uomo stesso, con grande dignità, ha sempre rappresentato], and – he adds - no one, more than forty years later, “can assume the right to remove that statue, to cancel the memory of that assault” [possa arrogarsi il diritto di rimuovere quella statua, di cancellare la memoria di quell'agguato].

Di Maio praises Montanelli's work, for “he worked to tell the facts. He wrote for the truth” [Lavorava per raccontare i fatti. Scriveva per la verità], and his intellectual honesty, which allowed him to overlook vanity and personalisms – the very reasons why he never wanted any statue or eulogy. By focusing exclusively on one specific aspect of the character – which is, of course, the most “prevalent” in his life on a temporal-extension view – the minister finally hopes that “Milan city council wants to defend that freedom” [Comune di Milano quella libertà voglia difenderla], since the central point for him is to learn from the past, build the present and look to the future “with trust and determination” [con fiducia e determinazione].

In Di Maio's view, the meaning of the statue is univocal and unequivocal and there is no valid reason why it should be removed. It commemorates the event more than the character because the assault to Montanelli was intimidation and terrorism, and terrorism is always wrong regardless reasons and political orientation.

The Red Brigades claimed they fired Montanelli as “servant of the multinationals” (M JB, 2021), at the time he was a “flag of the right” (Messina, 2017), whereas the brigades had a Marxist-Leninist matrix. It was true, Montanelli was a conservative and left *Il Corriere della Sera* when he felt its positions to be too far from his. He found his own *Il Giornale*, which some believed to be more than rightist, almost “fascist” (Consani, 2017). But the political scope is limited here, because Di Maio, whose political orientation is anyway far from Montanelli’s one, still defends him, his courage, his work. And that because the minister, by defending Montanelli’s statue, is reasserting the condemnation of terrorism, and putting the freedom of thought at the front, as basic, essential value for the whole community, local and national. The same instance is to be found also in several comments that, although not sharing Montanelli’s political positions, still recognize the value of his work as journalist and believe it enough for the statue to be kept.

*An excellent journalist, but quite a controversial character, with many shadows. Very far from my ideals. However, as a Milanese I believe the proposal for removal to be useless. May it stay, in the case those who do not know its history, they can get informed, and then judge what kind of man he was.* [Ottimo giornalista, ma personaggio alquanto discutibile con molte ombre. Lontanissimo dai miei ideali. Ritengo da Milanese, comunque inutile la proposta di rimuovere la statua. Che rimanga, magari chi non conosce la sua storia si andrà ad informare e poi giudicherà che uomo era]

*(...) I consider him a great journalist and opinionist, despite he’s not of my political idea [(...) lo considero un grande giornalista ed opinionista, nonostante non sia della mia idea politica].*

Beside the commenters just mentioned above, who recognize journalistic merit despite political differences, I identified throughout the thread three main orientations based on the dichotomy “journalist/man”. In fact, there are those who defend Montanelli at 360-degree, on the basis of his greatness both as a man and as a journalist.

*What I have to read, Montanelli was not a great man. Do you know the story when he told Berlusconi to fuck himself? If you don’t, go study before saying stupid things. (...) Judging*

*Montanelli on the basis of this episode [the marriage with a 14-year-old girl] is meaningless, on a man who defended his ideas and had the courage and freedom to change his opinion, also in so unfavourable times for him (...). [Ma guarda uno cosa deve leggere che Montanelli non è stato un grande uomo. La sai la storia di Montanelli quando mandò a fanculo Berlusconi? Se non la sai studia prima di scrivere stupidaggini. (...). Quindi dare un giudizio su Montanelli su questo episodio non ha nessun importanza su di un uomo che ha saputo difendere le proprie idee ed aver avuto il coraggio e la libertà di cambiare opinione in momenti anche meno favorevoli per lui. (...)]*

*What the f\*\*k are you writing, go **study** instead! You don't know anything about Montanelli and for sure, you are referring to fascism but you certainly don't know that he left it during its most glorious moment because he did not agree on racial laws. And it took a lot of courage to exit fascism in that historical moment. [ma che cazzo scrivi ma studia. Non sai niente di Indro Montanelli sicuramente ti riferisci al fascismo ma sicuramente non sai che ne uscì nel momento di maggior gloria del partito perché non condivideva le leggi razziali. E ci voleva coraggio uscire dal fascismo in quel momento storico.]*

Then again, there are those who only admit his journalistic talent, but despise him as person:

*Memory is fundamental but remembering that **in that human being there was no Man**, is fundamental as well. No Dignity, even less ideals of Liberty and Equality. Freedom, he contributed to take it away from others. **He was a great journalist, it is true. But not a human worthy of honors or eulogies.** [La Memoria è fondamentale, come è fondamentale ricordare che in quell'essere umano non c'erano nessun Uomo; nessuna Dignità e men che meno un ideale di Libertà e Uguaglianza. La libertà aveva contribuito a toglierla agli altri. Era un gran giornalista, è vero. Ma di certo non un essere umano degno di onorificenze o elogi].*

*Indro Montanelli, the person who showed solidarity to Erik Priebke and that abused a girl of 12... **good as writer, awful as man...** [Indro Montanelli, la persona che dimostrò solidarietà ad Erich Priebke e che abuso' di una ragazzina di 12anni.... buona la penna pessimo l'uomo....]*



*He is to be **estimated as journalist, a lot. But the man, is another thing.** Also because the same should happen to all the great, from pederast Pasolini to murder Hemingway. [E' da stimare come giornalista e molto, anche. L'uomo è altra cosa. Anche perchè la falce dovrebbe tagliare quasi tutti i grandi, da Pasolini pederasta ad Hemingway assassino.]*

Eventually, there are those completely against him,

*Reprehensible the assault, but Montanelli **was never a great man nor a great journalist.** [Riprovevole l'attentato ma montanelli non fu mai nè grande uomo nè grande giornalista]<sup>95</sup>.*

*I am sorry Minister, but I do not agree with you this time. On the premise that pulling statues off now is meaningless, but **if he was really free, then he had to guarantee the same freedom to the child to whom he did not recognize the same right.** [Mi dispiace Ministro ma stavolta non condivido, premesso che togliere statue adesso non ha senso, ma se era veramente un uomo libero doveva garantire la stessa libertà alla bambina a cui non riconobbe lo stesso diritto.]*

The thread constitutes again a useful source of information, as these comments have two important implications.

On the one hand, they open the question about the *man-Montanelli*. What is the yardstick adopted to measure his value *as person*? As a matter of fact, Montanelli never committed any crime because the *madamato* was codified as a law, many girls married at 14-year-old girl in Italy too at that time. But he had a good social background, was educated and out of doubt a very smart man. How is it possible he could not distinguish the gap between *what was legal* and *what was moral*? During the repartee with Elvira Banotti he stated that he would have not done the same with a white girl of the same age (zosozeppelin, 2020a) – which implies a racist assumption. He continued to narrate the events in the same way, with more or less “mitigated” tones, in 1969 as in 1982 and 2001.

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<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, this comment was one of the most interacted with. It accounted an amount of 319 reactions (almost all *likes*) and developed a thread on its own involving 149 replies from other users, who have animatedly discussed about the greatness of Montanelli as person and journalist.

Beside subjective judgements that may see him as a rapist, paedophile or not, the core of the question is that Montanelli never realised – or at least, publicly admitted – of having played the *historical* role of the oppressor. What could even pass as a “mistake”, a behaviour conditioned by many external factors out of his control (which is not considering that racism and colonialism are oppressive in any case), becomes even more reprehensible the moment a specific context does not exist anymore. Still, he continued reasserting his positions as if nothing had changed after the Thirties, for he was firm in his convictions of being on the right side, on the basis that “in Africa, it is different”.

On the other hand, there is the question of splitting the journalist from the *man*. At this point, I think it is clear that the hegemonic narrative sees and proposes the statue exclusively as the memory of a *great journalist*, who worked for the truth, who always said what he thought, who was independent and was a victim of terrorism because of this. Out of doubt, they are all valid reasons for having a statue entitled to him, because the meanings it bears from this viewpoint are essential to any democratic society - as the Italian one is -, and universally shared among its population. But, as facts – soilings, requests, protests, online debates – demonstrate, not everybody shares the same view and still sees in the statue the celebration of the *man* who Montanelli was at 360-degree.

In theory, the celebrated part is the *journalist-Montanelli*, as emblematic figure of good journalist practice and victim of terrorism; in practice, people *see* his face, his *body*, his entire person is *visible*, and they consequently decode the statue as a celebration of the character, who was *also* a racist, fascist and a colonialist. And this is because, in the end, the journalist-Montanelli cannot be separated from the man-Montanelli.

Each person is always many persons, and in the time we live, we live many lives. We change, evolve, and that is good too. And it is on the basis of this inner multiplicity, of the *person* in first instance, that the statue cannot have a univocal meaning, despite all the efforts of the hegemonical thought – through its representatives – to reassert exclusively its vision. But theirs is just one of the many possible, and there will always be someone reading something different in it, for hegemony is a negotiation of ideology and the subcultural counteracts considered in this work are the proof.

The role of the signifier at a visual level – thus the physical aspect of the statue - is crucial in its attempt to separate the two Montanellis, and in fact, it depicts the journalist sit down on a pile of newspaper writing with his typewriter, so neither in a different pose (proxemic has its importance

as well) or in his soldier uniform. The message is clear here, but still, it seems not to be enough and could even work as a covering of his doings. Moreover, the gardens are entitled to Montanelli too, and here the matter becomes even more symbolical. Interestingly, the signifier in this case is abstract as much as its meaning because having a garden, a street, a square entitled to someone is collectively decoded as honorific, but it involves only a name, and the name of a person identifies the person in his entirety.

If the statue, with its features and position, at least hints at the reasons why Montanelli is remembered, with the gardens' name is different and much more difficult. Actually, it also causes more indignation, because those gardens are attended by children, people the same age Destà was when he married her, and also because they are in the neighbourhood of Porta Venezia, famous for its LGBTQ community. Thus, having public gardens entitled to a (former) fascist, a racist, an anti-meridional and conservative as Montanelli was in such a part of the city, seems to be at least out of context, as good as he could be as a journalist and however fair it may be to remember the place where he was kneecapped.

In any case, as it is clear in Di Maio's words, there is one official version of the story of the statue, and it is – no doubt – the one of the ruling class. Other interpretations are dismissed as vandalic, unfair, illegal and so on. As a matter of fact, this story, as much as history, is written by the winners, and the losers, the marginalized, the subalterns, are very often left with no other means than guerrilla, protests, using the oppressor's language against him.

Di Maio does not mention I Sentinelli's name, their official request and the rationales behind it. With his post, the minister provides users with facts, tell them the story behind the statue and the journalist, implying that the choice to make it was exclusively for that reason. The words "rapist", "paedophile", "racist" or "fascist" never appear in his discourse, nor in Sala's one. Although in the latter's speech there was at least the hint of a counterview, of the accuses coming from other parties (he mentioned the interview where Montanelli "confessed" what he did), in this text there is nothing which could even implicitly lead to consider other position or perspectives, other possible decodings of the message embedded in the monument. So they pass unobserved, neglected, unmentioned and invisibilized, until one day someone speaks up and cover the statue with pink paint.

What politicians, rulers and institutional players are missing in their view, is that

the fact that today a generation refuses the symbolical value of Montanelli does not have much to do with a posthumous process to the intellectual value of this character, rather with the unsolved, historical role he fulfils. [...] Removing the statue is symbolical, burning a book is stupid, and this is valid both for Montanelli, Pasolini and whoever passes in the cultural history of an age. Those who feel threatened by the defacing of a statue should know that the intellectual heritage of a character is handed down through their works, not with bronze, and maybe this can explain also because no one has gone to Ostia to throw paint on a monument built there [entitled to Pasolini] (Olivieri, 2020<sup>96</sup>).

To ignore bottom-up requests and straining to reassert one's own version, because believed to be the only right one, cannot be a solution and the official representatives of power in charge should acknowledge both this and the fact that counteractions are the legitimate – although not legal – requests for a visibility which they have always been denied. To include marginalised subjects in the public space would mean to make them signify it as a truly shared space, and thus a recognition not only as part of it, but as part of history too.

To conclude my analysis, I would like to quote some of the comments of a special group which I shall call “the alternatives”. In fact, many users participating to the threads have hypothesised possible alternatives both to the removal and the vandalism, demonstrating that beside conflicts and discussions, there is also people who think that the encounter of different perspectives and parties is possible, that a space exists that becomes also a celebration of the injured party, and where “we recover ourselves [and] move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer” (hooks, 2015:233). This is the spirit that institutions should adopt, because such gestures are not harming no one's memory and more, truer openness to bottom-up instances would not only stop violent attack to pieces of our tangible heritage, but could be a laboratory for experimenting a more inclusive and fair society, which are also objectives and values that they claim to sustain and follow.

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<sup>96</sup> Translation is mine.

*Washable, every year, and year after year. No one will say "a cowardly, vandalic act", but "preventive maintenance" at most (...)* [lavabile, ogni anno, e anno dopo anno. Nessuno potrà parlare di "un vile gesto vandalico": al massimo "manutenzione preventiva" (...)]

*Actually, repeating the same action regularly with the same paint could be a pertinent solution I did not think of* [effettivamente ripetere la stessa azione con la stessa vernice regolarmente potrebbe essere una soluzione pertinente a cui non avevo pensato].

*I would leave it like this [with pink paint]... I would put a banner next to it explaining the sense* [La lascerei così.... ci metterei a fianco un cartello che ne spiegasse il senso].

*In my opinion, it should be written his quotation [Montanelli's referring to Destà as a pet] so to commemorate him as he deserves! Let's stop pretend separating the job from the awful human being* [Secondo me c'è da scrivere questa sua citazione così da commemorarlo come meglio merita! Basta far finta che si debba dividere il lavoro dall'essere umano orrendo].

*A statue dedicated to young Destà, that would be a good idea. It would take a crowdfunding and a private hosting it in a space accessible to the public* [La statua dedicata alla giovane Destà, anche quella è una bella idea, ci vorrebbe un crowdfunding ed un privato che la voglia ospitare in un luogo accessibile al pubblico]

*Personally, I dont like vandalism: I would have preferred a video-installation transmitting in-loop the clip of the confrontation with Elvira Banotti* [Personalmente, non amo il vandalismo: avrei preferito una installazione video che trasmettesse in loop lo spezzone di dibattito con Elvira Banotti].

Obviously, these are only opinions, suggestions, and they will probably remain as such if institutions will not be willing to reconsider the case of Montanelli's monument. On the other hand, the destiny of statues toppled during or after the BLM protest throughout the world have been vary and different depending on the contexts, communities and rulers and could provide a whole tank of possible solutions they could draw inspiration from. Among them, there is one that particularly stuck with me and is the substitution of the statue dedicated to Christopher Columbus in Mexico City with one celebrating indigenous women. However, the explorer's statue, which was also decoded as a symbol of oppression and violence, will not be destroyed or musealized, rather placed in a "less

relevant location” of the city (Lommi, 2021). In this way, the past is preserved but new (actually old) instances are finally welcomed and represented as well and brought back in the collective memory of the community by their being visible in the narratives of the public space.

As I already said, if one considers the modalities in which social conflicts has occurred – with special regard to the BLM protests and akin ones of the last three years – it will clearly result the main role that public space and symbolical representations (especially monuments) cover in its *material* outcomes. As past continues speaking to us, statues erected to celebrate those men who (were believed to) have brought positive changes and advancement in Western society are now recovered from it as symbols of domination, violence, oppression and exploitation. Toppled or removed, musealized or re-located, sometimes artistically implemented - and who knows how many other possible ends they are going to encounter – monuments have been “welcoming” on them a wide range of different meanings, “stratified” on a fixed, stable signifier whose final sense – also in historical terms - is eventually given by their sum and overlap. In fact, although symbolical representations may stay the same at the level of their brutal materiality – beside natural deterioration or artificial alterations here widely considered -, they are continuously attached with new meanings and become *different things* depending on the net of social relations and cultural schemes of interpretations they are embedded in. Their aspect is fixed, but not their “essence” and despite changes, they do not lose the original intent which made them, and which consequently figures as the very premise for the existence and manifestation of dissent, given that new meanings arise from negotiation and opposition to mainstream thinking. In this sense, statues become a sort of warehouse of possibilities, of new meanings which could develop and grow according to changes in society and to people’s decoding frameworks, and mostly, in their possibility to contrast and contest the dominant viewpoint that created them. In this sense, public artworks are the medium of social conflicts: as their existence depends on their being *seen* and decoded by people and society, their materiality serves as physical support to communicate conflict and give visibility to the new, oppositional sense they are attached to. This specific volatile, ever-changing nature at the level of meaning is what makes such symbols (and images) extremely interesting across not only the humanities and social disciplines, because they become a privileged space for observing social claims and contestation of cultural hegemony in their making.

The visibilization of alternatives to the dominant on a physical level is essential for the history of the community as much as for the monument itself. In this sense, restorative cleanings of inscriptions

or paints, as in the Montanelli case, could be judged as amounting to the same “cleansing of history” as the elimination of other monuments (Gamboni, 1997:56), whereas stratified layers of paint (as additional “linguistic” signifiers) would be a visual strategy to express that same stratification of meanings along time, witnessing the continuous process of decoding and re-encoding of the object, its outcomes, and somehow promoting a more “informed access to history” (ibidem).

In fact, from this perspective, to cancel the marks of protests (paint, banners, inscription) *means* to cancel the efforts to expose non-dominant perspectives to the public spectacle and, consequently, on the building of socio-cultural identities. Cleanings and mainstream (condemning) communication of the events were both part of the compelling strategy of the dominant imaginary to reabsorb such oppositions, to silence resistance and the claims for visibility of neglected stories and subaltern existences. Here, cancelling means to oblivate again those marginalized, oppressed and exploited by white, male capitalism (in all the forms it has assumed, as a multi-headed monster which simultaneously relies on patriarchy, white suprematism, racism, sexism, classism); it means to avoid confrontation and deny the legitimacy of the counterviews, on the basis that they “miss contextualisation”, have not “studied” enough, are “violent” and “adopt the wrong means” to communicate their objection.

This case, as of today, is still open, and despite its cleaning and restoration, its strenuous defence and circumstantial excuses, it will not stop to cause problems or dissent, because it is clear that his statue is not *only* the statue of a great journalist anymore: today it is also chosen as the symbol of an “awful prevarication”, and this is something that no cleaning or institutional impasse can change.

By visually highlighting the absence of a counterpart, of the Other, invisibilised subject, by making their dissent evident and their voice loud, the requests and gestures of the activists – with special regard for NUMD - could disclose the core of the problem with public representations in the Italian context: the missed revision of its colonialist history, together with the hegemonic patriarchal thought which has sustained it - by putting the white man *above* other human beings, and in building inherently oppressing social relations – and worked with a constant, heavy reiteration and self-reinforcement by means of symbols, especially through iconography in the public space. In fact, its non-neutrality has been largely demonstrated by NUDM, LUME and RSM’s action, despite the attempts of the hegemonic thought to make it pass as such, they aimed at opening a debate on the matter, eventually succeeding in it.

Moreover, the reach of the soilings does not limit to their disruptive, enlightening potential. With a knock-on effect, the Montanelli issue naturally opens on the more general matter about the kind of representations existing in our public space, which *physically* appear to be the ideological domain of white males and of having become a privileged space for observing the negotiation of cultural hegemony. As also the census conducted by the association Mi Riconosci (2021) has demonstrated, not only the number of statues and monuments dedicated to or representing women is ridiculous compared to those of men (the ratio is 7:100 - “Le strade sono degli uomini: solo 7 su 100 intitolate a donne”, 2020), but the situation is further heightened by two other factors.

On the one side, less than half of the 171 statues mapped by Mi Riconosci is entitled to really existing/existed women, while the others are dedicated to legendary, literary or symbolical characters or also anonymous ones (MiRiconosci, 2021:3). Moreover, as the mapping highlights, very few of them commemorate women for something different than cure and sacrifice, values exclusively linked to family, domestic duties and care, which the patriarchal mindset commissioning the works has attentively ensured to be displayed and crystalised as the very (maybe only) reasons making women worthy to be remembered.

On the other hand, the representation of the female body clearly exposes the extent to which patriarchal rhetoric and chauvinist aesthetical canons have bended the monumental iconography of women, while also affecting the perception of their bodies, creating and reasserting in an endless circle of “soft imposition” certain normative standards for female representation and acceptance. Age is cancelled, while *beauty* (in the dominant and hegemonic aesthetical definition of it) and *youth* are constantly and forcedly depicted, as in the case of Cristina Trivulzio Belgiojoso’ statue in Milan, who is represented as an elegant, graceful, young girl although her social and patriotic commitment dates back to her maturity years (ivi, 5). Or also, as in the case of the journalists Ilaria Alpi and Maria Grazia Cutuli, whose bodies represented in a fountain in Acquapendente (VT) are naked and sexualised: they were journalists, exactly like Montanelli was, nonetheless Montanelli was depicted with his typewriter on his knees, but Alpi and Cutuli apparently deserved to draw public attention mainly and in first place for their bodies and nudity. In a patriarchal and chauvinist society as ours, doing good journalism, being an important writer, scientist, politician is never enough if you are a woman, because the *norm* imposes that women have to attract men’s attention on the basis of their physical appearance, not intellectual merits, and this is true and re-proposed also through public representations. Women’s body continues to be instrumentalised and proposed as the terrain of



male domain and spectacle in public space too, but the worst aspect is the fierce determination with which administrations and institutions refuse criticism and blindly deny the offensiveness, denigration, racism and sexism of their view, heir of the same mentality with which Montanelli justified himself for having bought and raped a child of twelve.

In this sense, I found the photo of the inauguration of *La Spigolatrice* more significant than any other comment I can make about this question.



*Fig. 14 - La Spigolatrice (Boldrini, 2021) via Twitter.*

As widely discussed in the introduction, visibility and representation in public space are essential for identity formation and also on the development of a critical thought. When it comes to decide which symbols and representations are going to fill our public spaces, the matter of “who is” and “why” they are being celebrated is not enough anymore. There are others questions that should be kept in mind, however, and they sound something like “how is this representation affecting the identity formation of the children attending such spaces?”, “how will it impact on young girls, black people, disabled individuals, homosexual, non-binary people (and all the possible intersections among these categories)”?

A true inclusive and fairer society is impossible if people must constantly handle with a social and visual world which proposes them mainly (only) white men as models and examples as well as privileged beholders, where women are worthy of attention only if young and beautiful (and white), and where whoever does not fit the normative standards is systematically excluded and invisibilized.

But the solution cannot be establishing “female quotes” in matter of monuments, or more “inclusive” canons of representations, because the rhetoric building and informing them would stay the same.

Until the decisional processes within administrations and public spaces themselves will be guided by androcentric schemes, the involvement of female characters in the public, visual repertoire will be insufficient and out of place [...] the problem cannot be ignored anymore: public space and monuments shape our way of thinking, offer models, remember, and celebrate. For these reasons, a feminist and analytic approach is necessary<sup>97</sup> (Mi Riconosci, 2021).

Therefore, the challenge against our current representational asset is only part of a broader struggle, against patriarchy and white supremacy, against the discrimination, oppression and exploitation which have always accompanied them in all the forms they have assumed throughout history. The intersectional thought cannot but help in this, and the lesson of bell hooks inform this fight in all its forms. In fact, if we really aim at changing the representational and symbolic asset of our public spaces, if the target is making them *really* inclusive spaces (mirrors of a truly, more inclusive society), where everyone shall never feel out of place, discriminated, or *invisible*, the only possible solution is to intervene at the root of the problem, creating a “mass educational movement to inform everybody in matter of feminism” (hooks, 2021/2000:64), thus providing children with a new “visual literacy”, informed by feminist education . Such an education may work *a priori*, preventively acting against intersectional forms of discrimination and marginalisation, interfering with the hegemonic rhetoric at a “zero” level, before it could subtly and softly enter their mind and make chauvinism, patriarchy and racism pass as the natural way of interpreting the world. And also, to implement such educational programs in schools of every grade as soon as possible. But in order to do so, it is first necessary for us to *unlearn* that way of thinking, emancipating and contesting the

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<sup>97</sup> “[...] finché il processo decisionale all’interno delle amministrazioni e gli spazi pubblici resteranno caratterizzati, nel loro complesso, da schemi androcentrici, il coinvolgimento di figure femminili nel repertorio figurativo pubblico sia insufficiente e fuori luogo. [...] Non si può continuare a ignorare il problema: lo spazio pubblico e i monumenti plasmano il nostro modo di pensare, offrono modelli, ricordano e celebrano; per questo un approccio analitico e femminista è necessario”. Translation is mine.

cultural hegemony of the dominant class so to reappropriate ourselves –our bodies of women - and our spaces.

I know it is not an easy task. Also, I am aware of the limits of micro-political actions, and that education alone (as a matter of fact, quite impossible to implement in legislative terms) will not solve oppression and discrimination at large. Still, I believe that we have to start somewhere. And since “the world” does not change often, then our first revolution will be to change ourselves. That somewhere to start is into ourselves, by starting in the first place a work of self-consciousness, *unlearning our privilege* and “learning to learn” from a different position, committing ourselves to self-care and to the care of others, and adjusting the aim of our rage, with ballistic precision toward egalitarian direction (Palazzi, 2021:235).

## CONCLUSIONS

The objective of this research was put in light the polysemy and heterogenous interpretations – *decodings* - of the political activism of two Italian collectives, namely NU DM (Non Una Di Meno) and LUME (Laboratorio Universitario METropolitano) - together with RSM, Rete Studenti Milano -, who soiled the statue of Indro Montanelli in Milan between 2019 and 2020. To do so, I started my dissertation by introducing an idea of public space that could enlighten both its sociological and artificial, non-neutral nature, preventively relying on Parkinson's (2009) definition of it. In fact, in conceiving public space as the space used for public purposes, but also as the space where the state *represents itself to the demos*, Parkinson's view enabled me to consider two aspects. The first was related to the physical presence of people in public space, which actively engage with it through their corporality, their bodies, in a variety of cases, ranging from celebrations to parades, but also protests, demonstrations and sits-in. On the other side, Parkinson's study was useful in retracing the constructed nature of public space, as not only materially shaped by man's hands (let's say, *handcrafted*), but also as the embodiment of specific symbols related to national identity, ideals and aspirations which disclose the past and tradition of the nation to the eyes of *demos*, bringing with it its stamp of legitimacy and naturalness.

Then, by introducing an intersectional and a (Marxist-)materialistic approach to the matter, I intended to underline some specific "coincidences" which evidently conditioned the construction of public space. In fact, although (momentarily) overturning the original use and connotation of the concept of intersectionality, I wanted to highlight how the members composing dominant classes have been living at the intersection of race and gender as categories with whiteness and maleness as attributes. In this sense, I maintained that those who have hold the *means of production*, thus were the true in-power members of Western society, were those that had decisional power about subjects and modalities of celebration and representation in the public space. Consequently, the presence and absence of depictions - and symbols at large - in the public space is seen as the mirror of asymmetric power relations among groups within a society and witness the assertion of dominant rhetorics, which implicitly work for their self-reinforcement and for that of their class.

In fact, I then proceeded introducing the notion of cultural hegemony as theorised by Antonio Gramsci, whose contribution was a milestone both in the development of Marxist thought as much as in the tradition of British Cultural Studies. Gramsci asserted that the dominant class holding the

means of production – thus controlling the economic structure of society – managed to keep their privileged position also by means of “soft” weapons of control, concerning *super-structural* (i.e. non strictly economic) apparatuses like religion, entertainment, advertisement, fashion, but also language, social norms and behaviours, in short, each aspect of culture at large. The ideology of the dominant class, their set of beliefs, morals, and perceptions, have guided citizens in their processes of decodings of the world by providing certain frames of interpretations. Although they appear as the most neutral and natural way of thinking and understanding reality, and of being beneficial for everybody, they actually mirror the interests of the ruling class, which it has adopted to build consent in pervasive manners, *coercing* - thus without imposing or enforcing with violence - people on each level of society. In my reasoning, I looked at public space, with special regard for the symbols filling it, through this lens, intending it as the space where the dominant Western elites, historically composed by white men, have built Western cities and their spaces to fit their own image, and propose to the public gaze a specific image of themselves, with the final aim of subtly controlling and orienting their opinions so to preserve their privileged position. On the other hand, the proposal of a univocal perspective, of a “single story”, and the reiteration of certain models also meant the exclusion of others, of iconographic representation of differences (non-white, non-male). Consequently, those people possessing such traits have historically remained at the margin of both the visual and the social world.

In any case, the most relevant outcome of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony was the possibility it opened for contestation and opposition, thus intending non-dominant classes as able to negotiate the cultural hegemony of the dominant classes and their normative standards for the interpretation of reality. In this sense, Gramsci acknowledged “masses” as active agents, and not merely passive spectators as instead other Marxian thinkers (as the group of the Frankfurt School) saw them. This aspect was also what led cultural practitioners at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies to adopt Gramsci in the development of their critical thought, a passage that Tony Bennet defined as “turn to Gramsci”.

In Chapter 1, I therefore proceeded to introduce Cultural Studies, which I adopted as theoretical background for framing the soilings of Montanelli’s statue by NUDM and LUME, RSM.

Specifically, the attention drawn on popular culture since the very origins of the field – with the works of Hoggarth, Williams and Thompson – helped me in considering the activity of those not

officially “in-power” groups in society who, nonetheless, can and do resist hegemonic discourses by deploying their counteractivity in materialistic and/or symbolical ways. In this sense, the acts of vandalism of which the collectives were accused are indeed intended as consumption practices involved in the processes of meaning construction and negotiation. Moreover, Stuart Hall’s work was essential in this regard. In introducing French structuralism – in linguistics and semiotics -, together with the elaboration of ideology by both Althusser and Gramsci, Hall could bring into CS both a “textual” interpretation of culture and, most important, political concerns at the root of cultural analysis (as Hall shared with Gramsci the idea of an organic intellectual, not limited to theory but able to put it into practice). In conceiving culture as the site of ideological struggle, Hall eventually opened to the recognition of the polysemic nature of cultural messages, and the understanding of the power relations inscribed in culture. Moreover, the idea of identity as a not-fixed essence, as “situated” – thus a matter of positioning (Hall, 1990a) – was important for my analysis as much as his discourse on processes of meaning construction/negotiation and the encoding-decoding model of communication.

In short, not only Cultural Studies could provide me with a notion of cultural agency that other approaches lacked (as for example more traditional sociology connected to Bourdieu), but it also enriched my approach of the matter of the soilings by bringing in the contributions of feminist and post-colonial thought. In fact, themes such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity and nation needed to be re-considered in cultural analysis at the light of the emergence of post-colonial (and feminist) subjects, and in this way, the traditional British concern on class-belonging as the main social determinant was expanded.

Following this path, in Chapter 2 I decided to deepen on the matter of intersectionality, as a way of intending oppression resulting from the overlapping and intertwining of different categories, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, sex and so on. I chose to adopt this perspective because the marginalized subject at the centre of the controversy on Montanelli was an Ethiopian young girl of twelve (or fourteen, this data is uncertain), whose name was Destà (or Fatima, her name was uncertain too), a neglected subject who lived a double discrimination on the basis of her femaleness and blackness (and young age to some extent). By acknowledging the existence of multiple axes of oppression and investigating them, I could retrace multiple, co-occurring rhetorics in the discourses embedded in public space, which simultaneously address audience-citizens with patriarchal, sexist, colonialist and racist messages, although their high degree of naturalisation make them perceived

as neutral and natural. I therefore framed the actions of NUDM and of the students' collectives as contesting those very symbolical apparatuses, the values they insisted on proposing and, by extension, the groups in power who mirrored in those values and felt important for their identities – as much as for the maintenance of their privileged position.

More specifically, I considered the views and works of Gayatri Spivak and bell hooks. The former's reflections on subalternity (from its Gramscian origin) (1988) problematized the interventions on the statue, as they could be interpreted as an attempt to speak *for* the subaltern, on her behalf, from feminists with a more privileged position. But since NUDM conceives itself as a trans-feminist, trans-national collective – which aims at fighting oppression in all its forms -, I preferred to focus on the latter's notion of the margin. In fact, although Spivak's strategic essentialism could result a solution to the subalterns' impossibility to speak, I fostered the idea of margin as site of resistance as a more powerful tool. hooks (2015) invited "centred" subjects – women and men in society as in academia, feminists or not – to meet the marginalised in that very space where they have been relegated by the oppressor. But she overturned the concept of the margin from a space for oppression to a site of resistance: by meeting them in the margin, "centred" subjects could really get to know their lived experiences, stopping claiming to talk on their behalf and work together to avoid the categories of the colonizer/colonized. But the premise to enter such space is always self-consciousness and self-critic, acknowledging one's specific position and consequent "situated knowledge". In fact, differences must be accounted for and valorised in the margin, because only by avoiding essentialism and categorisations then an open dialogue to reciprocal understanding and appreciation, comprising also gender and sex dimensions, can really take place.

Applying intersectionality in empirical research on Cultural Studies has meant to observe and consider the perceptions, interpretations and theories which come from non-hegemonic groups specifically in everyday spaces where knowledge is constructed, in order to qualify, decentralize and decolonize the investigation of social phenomena.

Such preliminary understandings were also at the basis of feminist methodologies that I connected to Cultural Studies in approaching the case study at the centre of my work. Still in Chapter 2, among the feminist scholars I quoted, I also talked about Haraway's "situated knowledge" (1991), which re-locates the observer within the world she investigates and builds a new an epistemology in Feminist Studies arising from self-reflection, existing as mobile and embracing a multiplicity of

viewpoints. In fact, I maintained the role of researcher while conscious of my partiality and specific position, as a young, white, Western-grown and educated woman, neither *really* inside academia nor totally outside; I held on a practice that is empirical, strategic, and self-reflexive, attempting to look at how both domination and subordination are lived, organized and resisted and mapping the configuration of social practices the best I could; conscious of being part of the story I am telling, I have investigated and *trying to understand* social phenomena by gathering pieces of information that, once put together, could “map” them and provide a good approximation for describing events; last but not least, I also tried to keep together theory and practice, as inseparable aspects of a good intellectual work which, informed by a certain political commitment, aims at creating real change.

Indeed, in Chapter 3, after the presentation of the case – where I gave a full-length report about the statue, the soilings and the parties at stake – I introduced the qualitative method which allowed me to conduct the empirical research, specifically through digital ethnography. In fact, one of the main reasons I chose a qualitative approach is its affinity with Cultural Studies, as both have never been “one thing” (Hall, 1990a) (Alasuutari, 1995). Indeed, both the fields allowed me a certain “flexibility” of thought thanks to their openness, welcoming a multiplicity of viewpoints based on the idea that theories and methods are not blinders but “additional viewpoints” on reality, thus understanding the work of the researcher as a “bricolage” (ibidem). I carried out an inductive and textual analysis, since the former aspect allowed research findings to emerge from the frequent or significant themes inherent in raw data, while the latter was useful to collect information about how people make sense of their lived experiences (including their identities, positions and negotiation of the world).

Although I initially aimed at creating a focus group, I eventually turned to digital ethnographic tools of inquiry, because I found it easier to get the information I needed so to gather and compare public opinions at large. In fact, the online sphere came out to be a rich source of material. I took advantage of many articles from online newspapers and sometimes also of the recordings of old interviews to Montanelli. But the real focus was on Facebook, a famous social network employed for communication by all the parties I chose to consider. Facebook was also useful as far as it regards formal homogeneity of raw data. In this way, I could deepen both on the contents created by the collectives (NUDM, LUME and RSM), those by the institutions (namely Mayor Beppe Sala and Foreign Affairs Minister Luigi Di Maio), and the whole body of answers and replies of users constituting the threads to these posts.



In Chapter 4, after giving some reference points for readers not confident with Facebook, I started the analysis of each post (a couple from the collectives and another couple from institutional players) with a textual and content description, underlining the presence of video or photos – thus commenting multimedia components -, the level of engagement both of the Facebook community (accounting for comments and reactions) and other parties at stake (with the “mention” option), and references to other people, events or posts. I also tried to underline interrelations among content creators: I found that, while the two collectives had a closer connection (the students fostered NUDM sit-in in front of Palazzo Marino) and directly addressed Mayor Beppe Sala (and Montanelli) in their posts, institutions never did the same. Particularly, I noticed how the soilings were never really mentioned, neither were their makers. I understood such behaviours as an attempt to minimize dissent and shadow counteractions that have the potential to shake the status quo. In fact, although Sala made himself available for discussion, he rose no doubt about the legitimacy of the statue and the merits of Montanelli as journalist, thus putting the matter of removal off the table.

After commenting the posts, I drove my attention to the threads, trying to grasp people’s opinions and positions in regard to the matter, figuring out recurring themes, justifications, blamings or encouragements. From the gestures themselves, the matter soon enlarged to other questions. Indeed, the research has highlighted the multiplicity of opinions and points of view with respect not only to the counteractions of the collectives, but also on the “ontology” of the monument itself and on the matter of *who* the statue is actually representing – Montanelli-journalist? Montanelli-fascist-raper?, eventually questioning whether such aspects can really be divided when turned into a symbolic representation. I could not find an ultimate answer to these questions because also here it depends on a matter of positioning, on the more or less “conformed” sight which looks at the statue, valuing and weighting Montanelli’s actions in more similar or different ways with respect to the original (dominant) position.

By relying on Hall’s model of communication (Hall, 1980), the analysis and comparison both of the contents of the posts and their relative threads has pointed out the discrepancies between the dominant encoding of the message – celebration of a worthy character and of the freedom he, at his turn, symbolized – and the specific decodings of the audience, who in translating it into “meaningful” form for them, have adopted more or less aligned position with the original one.

Those who could not exit the dominant rhetoric and looked at the events within hegemonic interpretational schemes have indeed maintained a dominant-hegemonic position, defending Montanelli (and consequently blaming the counteractions) on the basis of contextualisation and/or his work as journalist.

As far as it regards the context, the two main justifications in this sense were that, at the time, the practice of the *madamato* was legal – thus Montanelli formally acted within a legal framework – and that also Italian girls used to marry at a younger age than today. As it was “the norm” for that time, Montanelli’s behaviour was only conforming to societal standards accepted (and encouraged) at that time, so in this perspective, the soiling is blamed on the basis of a “missed contextualisation” of the events. On the other hand, accusers kept considering only one side of Montanelli’s personal history – that is, the one “officially” celebrated by the statue -, valuing his journalistic work and his kneecapping worthy of honour above any other awful action he could have done in his life. This last position was also shared by Mayor Beppe Sala and Minister Luigi Di Maio. Especially in Sala’s video-answer, when he rhetorically asked “what are we asking to the people we celebrate with a statue? A stainless life? A life in which everything was *extremely* right?”, it was clear that he was focusing only on a specific aspect of the life of the character, providing evidence for the legitimacy for that statue to exist while both defending it and who it represents.

The general wave of indignation that the soiling of – objectively speaking - a piece of bronze has provoked throughout social classes and groups (as we have seen, contesters had different backgrounds in terms of gender, political and/or sexual orientation) is symptomatic of the power embedded in representations and which the symbolic regime in force has on citizenry and public opinion. The attack to the signifier, of the statue as a “linguistic” structure, has touched far deeper, reaching their egos of individuals in ways they could not really explain or be conscious of: it concerns and affects their identities at an inner level, where they are subtly formed and informed by that very celebrative, naturalized rhetoric regime, which is instead the final target of the attack itself. According to this position, the activities of the collectives could be decoded in no other way than violence and vandalism. In this regard, I also discussed about the “relativity” of the concept of vandalism, as it varies not only in literature (Gamboni, 1997) but especially on the positions adopted by the audience.

In the case the decoding partially differed from the encoding, interpretations contained a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements. They recognised Montanelli's actions as deplorable, also acknowledging that maybe someone else could have been more worthy of being honoured with a statue or that entitling him the gardens would have been enough. They demonstrated to have a "wider" perspective in this sense: they did not claim for contextualisation because, as they saw it, rape and colonial violence are condemnable in any circumstance. Nonetheless, they criticized the modalities of the protest, reiterating the same dominant (ultra-liberal?) position which absolutizes violence and condemn it regardless of who is making it, their reasons, and the nature of the target. Here I lingered on the notion of "good manners of oppression" (Bukowski, 2019), reflecting on which means are really left to non-hegemonic, oppressed groups for expressing their dissent. In this context, I found particularly interesting the debates among women, whose different aligning with dominant-hegemonical position has revealed how patriarchy and racism are indeed rooted at a very deep level and affect oppressed groups in different ways. Regarding this, I acknowledged that living a condition of intersectional oppression can function as a "boost" in these cases to unveil and oppose to dominant narratives. According to this position, the activism of the collective was sometimes addressed again as mere vandalism – with all that it entails in its common use, as reasonless and gratuitous acts of violence -, sometimes with less "negative" connoted terms. That is, some users said they understood their (NUDM, LUME, RSM's) perspective and acknowledged what they aimed at communicating, but still they would have preferred more "civil" and "democratic" modalities of protest.

When instead the code used was overtly oppositional – with respect to the dominant –, it eventually coincided with that adopted by the collectives, so mirroring their intentions and justifying their actions, eventually resulting in a favourable position about what and how they did to the statue. The label of "vandalism" is never used in this case, whereas users preferred to call it a symbolic protest, a situationist action, a reappropriation of an "old" symbol which is not fitting the neighbourhood's social (and demographic) identity.

I concluded the analysis by reporting a branch of comments that argued about the destiny of the statue, proposing some kind of interventions which could "do justice", "fixing" the problematic and controversial aspect of the monument by intervening on it on a symbolical level through physical alterations. By quoting them, I aimed at leaving the floor open to discussion, for, as the many

worldwide cases of toppling, musealisation, substitution, artistic implementations et cetera of controversial monument have witnessed, the case Montanelli is anything but closed.

Ignoring bottom-up manifestation of dissent, delegitimizing their view in the name of an established, canonical understanding of the world is not a solution. The collectives have reached their goal, focusing public and institutional attention on one among the many symbols of a patriarchal, racist society, which has been populating our cities with silent reminders of the greatness and merits of the white man, while, for contra, suggesting the insignificance of those who are not white, nor men. Beside what shall (or shall not) happen to Montanelli's statue from here to few – or many – years, I think that the problem should be handled at the root, there where critical thinking can be taught even before such logics could appear as natural, neutral and beneficial for everybody. This is the reason why I concluded my dissertation with an incitement for providing children with a feminist education.

I mean, changing the visual and symbolical panorama of our cities should be on the agenda, but it is not an easy task for two reasons. First, because institutions – as it emerged from the analysis –, although available for discussion, are not so available to question their symbols and perspectives, not ready to enter the “margin” as bell hooks conceived it. Moreover, although some kind of modifications were allowed “from above”, the views and opinions are so varied and heterogeneous that it would be difficult – although not impossible – to find a fair solution for everybody. The bare minimum should be the creation of an *ad hoc* council formed by representatives of all the parties at stake – activists and institutions, white and black, male and female Milan citizens, rightist and leftist –, whose work of cultural mediation may find a good compromise, acceptable for everybody. I know it sounds utopic, but I also know that the statue cannot remain as it is and that destruction or removal are the same as museumization: they do not allow a real confrontation with the object (Gamboni, 1997), they are not the answer. In this sense, I found paint as an “additive, semantic layer” a potential solution in the middle between removal and preservation, with an informative and educative function.

But still, in the case Montanelli's matter was solved somehow, the problem at large would not be. Actions like those of NUDM, LUME and RSM, contesting representational, mainstream aesthetic canons, remain confined on a micro-political dimension. Despite their powerful symbolical reach and the debate they ignited, they do not change the *actual* status of things on a material level, they

do not affect existing social and power hierarchies and the logic of the capital continues its course, keeping at earning through the exploitation of the labour force agents – especially in the Third World, where non-white women and children are the most in-danger subgroups.

Conscious of the limits both of my works and activists' actions, I finally suggest that only a proper education (to which additional paint could contribute), both of today and next generations, shall be the key for disrupting the logic of the capital, abolishing oppressions and exploitation in the circumstantial forms it acquires in time and space. For this reason, I would have made the paint on Montanelli permanent, as the evident, powerful, *beautiful* proof that there is not only a single story, that change – if really wanted - must be loudly demanded and also communicated, that there is still someone doing it, for when the subaltern cannot speak, she can now become visible.

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## LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1 “Violensasi”, Manu invisible on Montanelli’s statue. Available at <https://indecorose.wordpress.com/2018/04/28/blitz-porta-venezia/>

Fig. 2 “Per La Repubblica si tratta di vandalismo”, from NUDM’s action on 8th March 2019. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/nonunadimenomilano/posts/807900662903237>

Fig. 3 “DE GENER AZIONE PER NUDM”, from NUDM’s action on 8<sup>th</sup> March 2020. Available at [Facebook](#)

Fig. 4 “Razzista, stupratore”, from online article Maida, D. “Storia Della Statua Di Indro Montanelli Imbrattata a Milano.”. 14th June 2020. *Artribune*. Available at <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2020/06/statua-di-indro-montanelli-imbrattata-a-milano-tutte-le-volte-che-la-scultura-ha-creato-dissensi/>

Fig. 5 NUDM, 2019a. Facebook post. *Facebook*. Available at [Non Una Di Meno - Milano - Post | Facebook](#)

Fig. 6 NUDM, 2019b. Facebook post. *Facebook*. Available at [Non Una Di Meno - Milano - Post \(facebook.com\)](#)

Fig. 7\_LUME, 2020a. Facebook post. *Facebook*. Available at [Watch | Facebook](#)

Fig. 8 LUME, 2020b. Facebook post. *Facebook*. Available at <https://www.facebook.com/LUMe.occupato/posts/3017549861691417>

Fig. 9 Sala, 2020. Facebook post. *Facebook*. Available at [Watch | Facebook](#)

Fig. 10 Di Maio, 2020. *Facebook*. Post available at [Luigi Di Maio - Post | Facebook](#)

Fig. 11 From Boldrini, 2021. *Twitter*. Photo and tweet available at <https://twitter.com/lauraboldrini/status/1442235735478702081>