



THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF MEMORY  
CARLO SEVERI

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Carlo Severi is an Italian social anthropologist working in Paris as Directeur de Recherche at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique and as Directeur d'études at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. He has conducted fieldwork in Italy, in Arizona, and among the Kuna Indians of Panama. He has extensively published on American Indian shamanistic traditions, the nature of ritual action, and the anthropology of images. Currently working on a comparative study of the non-Western mnemotechnics and arts of memory, he is particularly interested in the role of action and image in the so-called "oral" traditions. Before becoming a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg, he has been a Visiting Scholar at King's College, Cambridge, UK, an Invited Professor at the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, and a Getty Scholar at the Getty Institute for the History of Arts and the Humanities, Los Angeles. – Address: Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale, EHESS, 52, Rue du Cardinale Lemoine, 75005 Paris, France.

When, at the end of August 2002, I arrived at the Wiko, I expected my life in Berlin to be made of long days of work and of many evenings at the Berliner Philharmonie. My research project was reasonably simple. During the last three or four years, I had accumulated a huge, and desperately messy, amount of notes on how memory devices (so-called picture writings and other kind of memory-related symbolisms) work in a number of oral traditions, both in Oceania and America. My idea was to put some order into these notes and then to write a book on the anthropology of memory. Something has emerged from this first idea – a lengthy manuscript is now in press at the Einaudi Publishing Company in Turin, leaving me alone and a bit uneasy.

I could say too, then, like other Fellows have in the *Jahrbücher* of other years, that “I came to the Wiko to write a book and I wrote it”. I am very grateful to the people working at the Institute. They have helped me a lot, with unfailing kindness and goodwill.

However, to say only that I have written the book I planned to write would be an incomplete account of my year. Life and research at the Wiko were to be far less simple than I had expected. There has been much more. I had many occasions of exchange, many topics of interesting conversation, many papers read and written thinking of my neighbours’ ideas and their potential comments. I had many surprises and encountered several unexpected questions. Let me give just one example. In early October, I had lunch with some biologists. They seemed, quite unexpectedly, interested and cultivated in the field of anthropological research. We had an interesting conversation on several topics. Then, in a polite but direct way, they expressed some concern about the fact that today only few anthropologists seem interested in the concept of evolution. Why was that? What was wrong with the idea of “cultural evolution”?

I have to admit that I was a little taken aback. My first answer was a defensive one. I remarked that a certain way to apply Darwinism to social sciences had proved very misleading, in the past. They nodded politely: they knew about that. However: did that mean that the very idea of “evolution” had become entirely useless in the study of culture? That seemed frankly unreasonable to them. They agreed that a bad use of the idea could lead to unacceptable prejudices. But: was that a good reason to rule out *any* evolutionary perspective in the study of culture? Also, one of them remarked, to refute a scientific theory, one needs scientific reasons. What were they?

I realised that my reference to the political taboos of the professional anthropologists had been rather predictable. I tried to become more technical: if by “evolution” one means a linear process of progressive increase leading from a set of elementary traits to complexity, one had very good chances of being desperately wrong. In the field of culture, the process of “evolution” – I argued – takes several different paths at the same time. For example: a technique like the American Indian picture-writing was perfectly adapted to its goals and still could seem extremely inefficient from the point of view of phonetic writing. Probably, techniques like picture-writing never really “prepared” for the so-called invention of writing. A number of illustrious linguists and historians who wanted to transfer precisely the concept of evolution into the field of culture had failed to see the real nature, and even the effectiveness, of technical devices such as picture-writing. In techniques of that kind, I

insisted, the refined and the rudimentary seemed to co-exist. There was no simple way to judge them “primitive” or “evolved” from a cultural point of view.

The smile of my table companions was almost triumphant: my example, and my way of looking at it, was a good example of what *they* called evolution. The conversation stopped there: as usual, everybody was busy in the afternoon, and we all got back to work. Once in my office, however, I began to realise that, far from leading to oversimplification, the evolutionary approach, seen as contemporary biologists see it, could become a theoretical model to account for certain kinds of cultural complexity, precisely where “the rudimentary and the refined” co-exist.

During the year, I had many conversations of that kind: on music (for instance, following an unforgettable Sextet by Brahms performed by the Artemis plus the Berg in the Seminar Room) on art, or on politics. And even on anthropology.

However, when I look back on the year spent in Berlin, that exchange on the idea of evolution seems to me a typical example of the many ways that life at the Wiko can be enjoyable and intellectually enriching. I am grateful for these exchanges – not only because “I came to write a book and I wrote it”.