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PRIMO LEVI'S LEGACY IN NORTH AND SOUTH AMERICA¹

1. *Introduction*

At the end of his last book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi famously said that the Holocaust, «it happened once and it can happen again. This is the heart of what we have to say».² This warning, if we can call it as such, has become an emblematic sentence for the reiteration of the importance of memory and the necessity of speaking up against the rise of violence, racism, and injustice. Fewer know or remember, though, that in the same conclusive pages of *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi also points out that «the configuration of the world has changed profoundly, and Europe is no longer the center of the planet».³ If we think about these two sentences together, we can see that, in one of the final reflections on his experience in the Holocaust, Levi seems to open his thoughts to different times and spaces. First, he alludes to a time that not only refers to his past in Auschwitz but also to any future that can potentially present similar ideas and lapses in to totalitarianism, and in which his experience can help prevent those degenerations to happen again. Secondly, but not less importantly, Levi introduces the idea of a space – where such degenerations may happen again – that is no longer exclusive to European culture, politics, and society but one that includes new “peripheries”, where new significant cultural, political, and societal happenings are taking place.⁴

¹ I would like to thank the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures of the University of Notre Dame for the discussions about the importance of Primo Levi outside of Europe. In particular, I would like to thank the Spanish section of the Department, Charles Leavitt, Vittorio Montemaggi, Mattia Boccuti, and Lora Jury for their scholarly advice, availability, and encouragement.

² P. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. by Michael F. Moore in Levi, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, edited by Ann Goldstein, Liveright, New York 2015, p. 2560.

³ Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, cit., p. 2560.

⁴ Moreover, it is important to notice that Levi himself expresses his opinions on Latin American dictatorships in more than one instance. «Tutto quello che è successo in Estremo Oriente, e quello che succede in Sud America, sono numericamente meno gravi, di quello che succede in Unione Sovietica. Non si può più – io personalmente, come appunto auschwitziano oramai segnato col mio tatuaggio sul braccio, non mi sento più di sostenere questa esclusiva, di dire “Solo noi”» (D. Ansallem, “Il mio incontro con Primo Levi” (1980) in P. Levi, *Opere complete*, a cura di M. Belpoliti, Einaudi, Torino 2018, vol. III, p. 873). «Lei vede oggi la possibilità che, non dico si ripetano le stesse cose, ma ci sia una tendenza a ripeterle? – Non si può escludere. Basta vedere ciò che è successo in Argentina qualche anno fa. Per fortuna, essendo un paese male organizzato, le vittime sono state decine di migliaia e non milioni, ma se ci fosse stato a capo dell’Argentina una persona diciamo “sciamanica” come Hitler, le vittime sarebbero state milioni e non decine di migliaia. Se avessero fatto le cose *gründlich*, fino in fondo...» (M. Vigevari, “Le parole, il ricordo, la speranza” (1984) in *Ivi*, p. 443). «Non ho tendenza a perdonare, non ho mai perdonato nessuno dei nostri nemici di allora, né mi sento di perdonare i loro imitatori in Algeria, in Vietnam, in Unione Sovietica, in Cile, in Argentina, in Cambogia, in Sud-Africa, perché non conosco atti umani che possano cancellare una colpa» (Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* in Levi, *Opere complete*, cit., vol. II, p. 1232). «Non penso insomma che la storia di noi deportati si possa ripetere così, con quei dettagli, in quel modo così spaventoso. Però, come sempre avviene, possiamo assistere a ripetizioni parziali dei Lager. È stata una lezione imparata bene da tutti i regimi totalitari. Non esistono camere a gas e forni crematori, ma funzionano campi di concentramento in Cile, in Brasile, nel Vietnam, in Unione Sovietica e, appena ieri, in Grecia e in Portogallo. Ciascuno a modo suo, ma in sostanza il Lager è stato riconosciuto come uno strumento adatto a stroncare le resistenze politiche» (C. Stajano, “Le piramidi di Hitler” (1975) in Levi, *Opere complete*, cit., vol. III, p. 53).

The present contribution starts exactly from where, in a way, Levi left us at the end of *The Drowned and the Saved*, as it aims to consider and interpret Levi's thoughts from a perspective that is both different in time and less Eurocentric in space. The aim of this paper is indeed to begin a reflection on how Primo Levi's works and thought have been received in the American continent, particularly in the United States and in South America. Through and thanks to a comparison between these two directions in the reception of Levi's legacy, this work also aims to understand which broader issues have already emerged – or could possibly emerge – from the analysis of Levi's works and reflections when we make claim to the openness in time and space that Levi himself encourages us to consider. To avoid any methodological confusion, it must also be noted that the very idea of Levi's "reception" needs to be understood not only in its literal sense, which is, broadly speaking, those works by Levi that have been published in and have penetrated the American cultures. What we refer to when discussing the reception and legacy of Levi's works is indeed the ways in which Levi's thoughts have been welcomed, interpreted, and used in the target cultures and, on the other side of the coin, which cultural, political, and social discourses Levi's ideas have penetrated and enriched. In other words, the present paper seeks to pave the way, through different examples relating to North and South America, for a preliminary study of how and why Primo Levi's ideas and texts have known a popularity that is neither straightforward nor common to other Italian authors.

It should be taken as accepted that Northern and Southern American cultures have adopted very different perspectives to the interpretation of Levi's works and thoughts, given their different social and political histories. Nonetheless, it is worth noticing that it is in the American continent in its entirety that Primo Levi's works seem to know a new and rekindled life. As we will see during the course of this paper, indeed, North America, and in particular the United States, seems to give particular importance to Levi's legacy when dealing with discourses on racial discrimination. In this context, Levi's works serve as a key point of reference for anti-racist positions especially expressed by black American exponents. On the other hand, Latin American cultures appear to have engaged with Levi's ideas and thoughts when trying to represent discourses on political discrimination and anti-dictatorial struggles that occurred during the last six decades throughout South America. In this scenario, the legacy of Levi's thought becomes particularly strong for what concerns cultures of memory and the analysis of power relations in dystopian realities. The fact that these two ideas – African American anti-racism and memory culture in violent dictatorial regimes – are among the most prominent and urgent questions of recent years testify to the crucial position that Levi is taking up in the contemporary cultural panorama. Levi's thoughts and works become the point of reference for two very different but also very global phenomena. His thoughts go beyond his experience, and his reflections are not only extremely interesting – if not fundamental – *per se* but assume a universal value, as they can interpret any situation that is similar in nature to those to which Levi refers. Despite the inevitable differences, a comparative study examining Levi's works' dissemination in and effect on North and South America requires closer attention. These new perspectives can bring into the already variegated and dynamic interpretative panorama of Levi studies new perspectives that not only link different fields (e.g., trauma studies, political science, philosophy) to more canonical areas of research in Levi studies, but also show how different peoples and generations turn to Levi to find possible answers to new social, political, and ethical dilemmas.

2. North America

A necessary first step in the analysis of the ways in which Primo Levi has been received in North America is to analyze the existing scholarship on the topic. The Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin,⁵ whose archives collect a vast array of different international contributions, which have seen an exponential growth especially in the recent years, thoroughly and precisely describes the diffusion of Levi's works in the UK and in the US. By navigating the history of Levi's works' diffusion in these two countries, the following happenings seem to assume a particular importance.

- The first English translation of *If This is a Man* in 1959 by Orion Press, an American publishing house based in Florence, interpreted by a young English historian, Stuart Woolf.
- Woolf's subsequent translation of *The Truce*, published by Bodley Head (London).
- The publication of *If This is a Man* in the United States by Collier Books in 1961 with the title *Survival in Auschwitz* and of *The Truce* in 1965 by Atlantic Monthly (Little Brown) with the name *The Reawakening*.
- The success of *The Periodic Table* in 1984, published by Schocken Books and enthusiastically reviewed by Saul Bellow, who, about the book, stated: "After a few pages I immersed myself in *The Periodic Table* gladly and gratefully. There is nothing superfluous here, everything this book contains is essential." Then, the publication of the book in the UK by Michael Joseph, an affiliate of Penguin.
- The fact that almost all of Levi's works have been translated into English except for some of his short stories and essays that are missing from the collections entitled *The Sixth Day*, *Moments of Reprieve*, *The Mirror Maker*, and *A Tranquil Star*.

The real turning point was then the 2015 publication of *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* by Liveright, edited by Ann Goldstein. As Goldstein, the editor of the collection, states in an interview: «the idea was not mine at all but that of Robert Weil, now the editor in chief of Liveright, an imprint of W. W. Norton. He felt strongly about the importance of Levi's work and wanted to bring all of it together, as he had done for *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*».⁶

The totality of this information suggests that, without any doubt, Primo Levi's significance in the North American cultural and literary panorama was ever-growing and culminated in the project that Goldstein described in the previous quotation. At the same time, *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* represents something more than being "solely" the final stage (at least temporarily) of a history of recognition and appreciation of Levi's works and ideas by the US public and its publishing houses. *The Complete Works* are indeed an extremely interesting project for Levi studies for, at least, two reasons. One is that Primo Levi is one of the few Italian authors who have been translated comprehensively in the US. Possibly no other Italian author has received such attention for their work and thoughts nor has any other known a wide and deep diffusion in the North American cultural context akin to what Levi's work had attained. *The Complete Works of Primo Levi* visibly and strongly testifies to this fact and implicitly reiterates that Levi has an audience both

⁵ Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi: <https://www.primolevi.it/it/traduzioni>.

⁶ M. Leffler, *The Italianist: An Interview with Ann Goldstein on Translating Primo Levi's Work* in Jewish Book Council, July 29, 2019: <https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/pb-daily/the-italianist-an-interview-with-ann-goldstein-on-translating-primo-levis-work>.

in the United States and at a global level, as the English translation of his works can be accessible to a multitude of readers. The other interesting aspect related to *The Complete Works*, and, for the scope of this paper, an even more fundamental one, is that the “Introduction” of this comprehensive project has been entrusted to Toni Morrison, one of the most outspoken figures in the fight against racial discrimination in the United States.

Looking closer at Morrison’s “Introduction”, we see that her interpretation of Levi’s works mainly centers around the importance of poetry in expressing certain feelings and thoughts («melancholy and sorrow reside more in his poetry than in his prose»⁷), on the ethical value of Levi’s works («he refuses to place cruel and witless slaughter on a pedestal of fascination or to locate in it any serious meaning. His primary focus is ethics»⁸), and on Levi’s use of language (a mix of erudite citations and scientific tone) to reclaim «the singularity of human existence».⁹ Leaving aside a critical evaluation of Morrison’s personal thoughts about Levi’s writing, what we should instead most urgently dwell on is the significance and the possible implications of choosing the American poet to introduce Levi’s complete works. Indeed, the subtle but inevitable connection between Toni Morrison’s fight against racism and Levi’s persecution as a Jew cannot pass unnoticed. If Levi was and still continues to be one of the most important figures of the contemporary Italian literary and cultural panorama, he was also a Jew, whose first writing success, *If This Is a Man*, and many other works to follow, originated from his experiences as a persecuted and interned Jew in Auschwitz. Toni Morrison, on the other hand, is known to the literary, cultural, and political world for her strong commitment to and reflections on the racial issues that have interested modern American history. The connection is then almost inevitable to draw and the fact that Toni Morrison has been chosen as the literary authority to present Primo Levi’s works to the North American and the global audience, speaks, for itself. Even though Levi’s ideas on racism and cultural persecution can be said to be very different in tone to those that characterize Morrison’s attitude and words, Toni Morrison becomes associated with Levi to such a degree that her struggle for justice and equality for black Americans becomes intimately linked to Levi’s testimony of the horrendous injustice, oppression, and inhumanity that the Jews experienced in Auschwitz. In the last instance, anti-racism and anti-Semitism are brought together by a literary operation. The comparison that this literary operation suggests is that, at a certain level, the anti-Semitism toward the European Jewish community that Nazism and Fascism brought to its extreme and atrocious consequences relates to, dialogues, and interacts with the racism toward the African American community that happening during the twentieth century (and beyond).

Studies on the possible connections between anti-Semitism and African American racism already exist and explore the relationship between these two phenomena from various perspectives. Among the most renowned contributions, we could name *From Abraham to Obama: A History of Jews, Africans, and African Americans* by Harold David Brackman, *Strangers and Neighbors: Relations Between Blacks & Jews in the United States* by Maurianne Adams and John H. Bracey, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935* by Hasia R. Diner, and *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* by Emily Miller Budick (which also includes Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*). All these texts, by adopting different perspectives, testify to the existence of a literary and cultural discourse that clearly finds associations and points of contact between two unresolved phenomena that have most powerfully represented the escalation of injustice and the emergence of civil rights during the twentieth century: racism against black people and racism against Jews.

⁷ T. Morrison, *Introduction* in *The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, cit., pp 8-10.

⁸ *Ivi*, 8-10.

⁹ *Ivi*, 8-10.

Not surprisingly, however, or perhaps so, Toni Morrison is not the only one who has interpreted the relationship between anti-Semitism and African American racism thanks to and through the figure of Primo Levi. Paul Gilroy, author of another significant book on this topic, *The Black Atlantic* (in which he discusses the concept of diaspora for the black community), during his speech “Never Again: Refusing Race and Salvaging the Human”¹⁰ he gave after receiving the Holberg Prize (an international prize awarded annually by the government of Norway to outstanding scholars for work in the arts, humanities, social sciences, law and theology, either within one of these fields or through interdisciplinary work), so says:

Du Bois was a Germanophile before he went to live and study in that country. He visited Poland on three occasions and was clear about exactly what he had learned about the world’s “race problems” by placing colonial rule, the Third Reich and the US racial order in historical, moral and conceptual relation. One result of that effort, born in particular from his bearing witness to the fate of the Warsaw ghetto, was, he says ‘not so much clearer understanding of the Jewish problem, as it was a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem.’

Gilroy then goes on:

Primo Levi, an authoritative humanistic emissary from the grey zone of the Auschwitz Lager, warned his readers about the continuing dangers posed both by fascism and by its imitators. In 1974 he issued this famous warning to which I have regularly returned for guidance:

Every age has its own fascism, and we see the warning signs wherever the concentration of power denies citizens the possibility and the means of expressing and acting on their own free will. There are many ways of reaching this point, and not just through the terror of police intimidation, but by denying and distorting information, by undermining systems of justice, by paralyzing the education system, and by spreading in a myriad subtle ways nostalgia for a world where order reigned, and where the security of a privileged few depends on the forced labor and the forced silence of the many.

Toni Morrison can be a third harbinger. She has, incidentally, expressed a strong affinity with what she calls Levi’s “defiant humanism” and applauded his “deliberate and sustained glorification of the human” in opposition to the efforts of systematic necrology. Morrison too penned a warning about the steady resurgence of fascism in the years immediately after the publication of *Beloved*.

Here, Gilroy is not only commenting on Levi’s works but is literally considering him a guide for his own thoughts. Levi’s role is no more exclusively that of a witness or a writer but that of an ambassador who, with his words, has warned his generation and those to come about the subterranean and sometimes invisible logics of power that govern human relations and especially every kind of fascism. Gilroy’s reference to Levi becomes something more than an appreciation for his literary works and ideas. It goes a step further and gives us the idea of what, of Levi’s books and ideas contained in those books, has particularly taken root in our contemporary society and what, from those words, can be derived. Even more interestingly, Gilroy’s response to Levi’s warning passes through two figures that have been fundamental in his formation as an intellectual: Du Bois and Toni Morrison, two crucial advocates of African American civil rights in the United States. More than likely aware of the “Introduction” to *The Complete Works* by Toni Morrison, here Gilroy is reiterating

¹⁰ P. Gilroy, *Never Again: Refusing Race and Salvaging the Human*, June 4, 2019: <https://holbergprize.org/en/news/holberg-prize/2019-holberg-lecture-laureate-paul-gilroy>.

and confirming the somehow veiled but strong connection that the choice of having Toni Morrison write the introduction to Levi's complete works suggested. The struggle against racism, especially expressed by and for black people, passes through the teaching and thoughts of Primo Levi.

These two examples, which more than likely are not isolated in the North American literary and cultural panorama, testify to how Levi's reception in the United States interests and involves different points of contact. Certainly, Levi's work intersects the American Jewish culture of, for instance, Saul Bellow, as we have seen before, and Philip Roth, with whom Levi had a long friendly relationship and to whom he conceded two interviews during his life.¹¹ Equally certain is that Levi's work also currently, and perhaps surprisingly (or perhaps not), continues to inform the black culture of Toni Morrison and Paul Gilroy.

3. *South America*

The diffusion of Levi's works and thoughts in Latin America seems to follow quite different paths than the one we have just seen for North America. Relying again on information from the Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi in Turin and, especially for what concerns Portuguese culture and language, from the excellent research conducted by Professor Aislan Camargo Maceira (Universitat de São Paulo), Levi's legacy and reception in South America is starting to emerge in all its different aspects. Even though the research on when, what, and why publishing houses, intellectuals, or writers in South America turned to Primo Levi in the last four or five decades is still undergoing, we know for instance that the works of Primo Levi began to be widely available in the Iberian Peninsula only in 1987, the year of his death.¹² We also know, this time from Ian Thomson's excellent biography *Primo Levi. A Life*, that «an Argentine edition of *If This Is a Man*, published in Buenos Aires in 1956, was a disappointingly ragged version of the original. Levi complained: "*Traduttore traditore*"».¹³ At the same time, we can say that it was Brazil that probably started to show an interest in Levi before other Latin American countries. As Aislan Camargo Maceira's research shows,¹⁴ indeed:

- Levi's name first appears in Brazil in a newspaper called *O Estado de São Paulo* and specifically in connection with a statement that Levi pronounced about the death of Aldo Moro («Sento un tremendo dolore per questa fine atroce, e un sentimento di rabbia di fronte all'incapacità delle nostre autorità»).
- Brazilian newspaper articles used to name Levi as one of the major Italian writers and the famous interview Levi had with Philip Roth was published in the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* in January 1987.
- The diffusion of Levi's works in Brazil is also testified by the fact that, in November 1988, *É isto um homem?* was translated by Luigi Del Re with the publishing house Rocco. Del Re, an emigrant, and himself a writer, had a letter correspondence with Levi about his interest in translating the book.

¹¹ See Levi, *Opere complete*, cit., vol. III.

¹² Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi: <https://www.primolevi.it/it/traduzioni>.

¹³ I. Thomson, *Primo Levi. A Life*, Metropolitan Books-Henry Holt, New York 2003, p. 266.

¹⁴ Centro Internazionale di Studi Primo Levi: <https://www.primolevi.it/it/traduzioni>.

A tabela periódica was published in 1994 (Luiz Sérgio Henriques, publishing house Relume-Dumará), and in 1997, the *Companhia das Letras* publishes *A trégua* (trans. Marco Lucchesi).

Additionally, the Centro Primo Levi in Turin also reports that the diffusion and translations of Levi's books in South America have been particularly relevant:¹⁵

- in Argentina, Leviatán publishes *Entrevista a sí mismo* / "A Self-Interview" in 2000 (originally, this is Marco Belpoliti's transcription of an interview Levi had in the Italian television in 1982 during a visit to Auschwitz); in 2006, Libros del Zorzal publishes a translation (by Octavio Kulesz) of *Intervista a Primo Levi ex deportato* [a 1983 interview of PL, ex-deportee], edited by Anna Bravo and Federico Cereja.
- In Mexico, some of Levi's books have been recently translated and published: *The Periodic Table* (Alianza Editorial Mexicana - Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1990), *The Truce* (Muchnick – Océano, 1998), the *Trilogía de Auschwitz* (Oceano De Mexico, 2006) [the Auschwitz trilogy] and *If Not Now, When?* (Oceano De Mexico, 2008).

Although this information is crucial as it contributes to the idea of what among Levi's works have captured the audience and the publishing houses' attention across different countries in Latin America, it also serves to shed light, perhaps even more importantly for the aim of this paper, on the implications that Levi's reception and assimilation in South America arise. Certainly, as the editorial history that we have partly seen shows, the presence of a large Italian community in different countries of South America contributed to the diffusion of Levi's works. An example for all is Luigi Del Re, who, as we have seen, decided autonomously to translate Levi's book and started an epistolary conversation with him. At the same time, though, Levi's works seem to have also known a philosophical and political revival, like the one we have seen happening in North America, that has interested many different aspects of Latin America cultures.

Levi's most renowned idea of the "gray zone",¹⁶ for which power relations are almost always more complex than what they seem, has largely dominated the literal and metaphorical reception of Primo Levi's legacy in South America. In an article by María Rosa Olivera-Williams ("El legado del exilio de Cristina Peri Rossi: un mapa para géneros e identidades") about the Uruguayan/Spanish writer Cristina Peri Rossi's book, *La nave de los locos*, Olivera-Williams states that «se podría hablar de la expansión de la "zona gris," fenómeno sobre el cual reflexionó Primo Levi en *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986)» and then specifies that the grey zone is «la colaboración consciente o inconsciente con un régimen desaparicionista».¹⁷ The parallel between the death camp logics and that of the dictatorial realities of South America is set. Even though the two realities are not comparable in material terms (for historical, temporal, and spatial reasons), they can nevertheless be interpreted through the same intellectual means. In this sense, Levi's idea of the "gray zone" becomes a universal tool that can be applied to distant situations that share similar logics.

¹⁵ *Ivi.*

¹⁶ The chapter "The Gray Zone" is contained in Levi's last work, *The Drowned and the Saved*.

¹⁷ "One could speak about the expansion of the 'gray zone', a phenomenon on which Primo Levi reflected in *I sommersi e i salvati* (1986)"; "the conscious or unconscious collaboration with a regime that relied on the political weapon of *desapariciones*". M. R. Olivera-Williams, "El legado del exilio de Cristina Peri Rossi: Un mapa para géneros e identidades" in *A contracorriente* (Raleigh, N.C.) 10, no. 1 (2012): 71.

Similarly, Javier Auyero in the article “The Gray Zone” (contained in *Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina: The Gray Zone of State Power*, 2007) recounts the commingling of organized crime and authorities or, as he calls them, “political entrepreneurs” and “specialists in violence”, in lootings, riots, and manifestations of collective violence. Once again, as in the previous example, in expressing his ideas, Auyero makes use of Levi’s expression “the grey zone” as an intellectual tool: «this gray zone, Levi asserts, is a zone of ambiguity that challenges the pervasive we-they/friend-enemy bipartition»¹⁸ and then concludes, «it is also, and most importantly for the purpose of this book, a conceptual tool that warns us against too rigid – and misleading – dichotomies; in our case, looters, on one side, authorities and the looted on the other».¹⁹ Here Auyero repeats the interpretation of the gray zone as a cognitive tool that can find applications beyond its primary and original formulation. In particular, Auyero focuses on what Levi calls *impotentia judicandi* in the chapter “The Gray Zone”, that is the recognition that, in certain situations, it becomes more complicated than usual to express a definite and fixed judgements on people’s behaviors and situations. Possibly even more than with the example before, Auyero’s reception of the “gray zone” transcends the context for which it was firstly formulated by Levi and is used to interpret not an historical event *per se*, but the general idea of human judgement. Auyero’s mentioning of Primo Levi’s idea of the “gray zone” not only allows him to justify his argument from an intellectual, political, and philosophical point of view but also makes it clear that Auyero’s argument is founded on Levi’s idea. In this case, the reference to Levi is not instrumental – for the comparison – but fundamental – for the existence of the book.

Still relating to the idea of the “gray zone”, Nora Strejilevich, an Argentine writer and scholar, who was persecuted by the dictatorial regime and interned in a concentration camp (an experience described in *Una sola muerte numerosa*, 1997), in her most recent book *El lugar del testigo Escritura y memoria (Uruguay, Chile y Argentina)* (2019), refers to Primo Levi more than once. While depicting the figure and the role of the witness in the testimonial literature of Latin America in the Southern Cone during the ‘70s and ‘80s through different voices, Strejilevich constantly draws, among other aspects, on the idea of the gray zone, sometimes as it appears in Levi’s thought and sometimes as an intellectual tool apt to describe a variety of different situations. In the chapter “Argentina: en estado de memoria”, for instance, Strejilevich makes a direct allusion to Levi’s idea of the “gray zone”: «en la zona gris la división entre ellos y nosotros se desdibujaba, como advirtiera Levi».²⁰ In other instances, Strejilevich, who refers to the idea of the “gray zone” throughout her book, intimately links this idea to the different ways in which testimony is given. The “gray zone” is indissolubly connected to the witness and to the very act of re-telling a traumatic situation. Levi’s idea is both somehow relativized – being it dependent on the witness and the context of their testimony – and at the same time generalized – it pertains all the witnesses, despite their specific experience or ways to relate about these experiences. There seem to be different gray zones, which in turn depend on the different testimonies to which we listen.

Finally, even though the number of examples could expand, the reception of Levi’s legacy in close conjunction with memory is present in Vera Vigevani Jarach’s testimony. As forcefully argued by Monica Jansen and Maria Bonaria Urban in their paper “Vera Vigevani Jarach, ‘Witness’ and ‘Militant’ of a Double Trauma. Plurimedial Memories of a Grandchild of the Shoah and of a Desaparecida’s Mother”, Jarach, an

¹⁸ J. Auyero, *Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina: the Gray Zone of State Power*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (UK) 2007, p. 31.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 32.

²⁰ “In the gray zone the division between them and us blurred, as Levi warned”. N. Strejilevich, *El lugar del testigo Escritura y memoria (Uruguay, Chile y Argentina)*, LOM Ediciones, Santiago de Chile 2019, p. 251.

Italian Jew emigrated in Argentina, whose grandfather died in the Holocaust, and then one of the mothers of Plaza de Mayo, more than once refers to Primo Levi's words to express the importance and urgency of maintaining the memory of the victims of the Argentinian terrorism of State alive.²¹ In her words and thoughts, the memory of her past as a persecuted Jew in Italy intertwines with her role as a witness of the Argentinian repression toward the opponents of its dictatorship during the 70s. It is in this hybrid space of two memories and two testimonies that Primo Levi's figure emerges in Vera Vigevani Jarach's accounts. Primo Levi becomes both the representative of *his* own experience – the Shoah – and of all the other victims of any totalitarian and repressive regime.

4. Conclusion

Although many more examples could be made about Primo Levi's penetration in the Northern and Latin American panorama, from the ones that have just been discussed, we can already see that a new perspective is emerging in the field of Levi studies, that is a perspective that takes into consideration, and actually emphasizes, Levi's profound and compelling flexibility as an author. Despite the differences, all these ways in which Levi's thoughts and ideas have been received show that the reception of Levi's works is more present, ambiguous, and *in fieri* than what critics, especially in Italy, have thought for many years. Primo Levi becomes a guiding figure, to whom authors, intellectuals, and common people turn for trying to elaborate, and possibly know, the most urgent ethical, social, and cultural questions of our times. From all the examples we have seen and from an analysis of Levi's works' legacy outside of Europe and beyond the years of his life, we can affirm that he emerges as an author who not only has to tell a story – *his* story – but whose narration always actualizes itself in new contexts. This new direction in Levi's reception should lead us to reflect on an unusual and uncommon figure of Levi, who nonetheless exists and returns in many contemporary discourses.

To conclude, although much still needs to be done to formulate a broader discourse around Levi's reception in North and South America and to understand how widespread this phenomenon is, it is quite certain that a comparative study of Levi's reception in the Americas requires a closer attention for at least two interconnected reasons. One is that it can enrich the area of Levi studies and may illuminate new perspectives on Levi's legacy in a variety of research fields, from social to cultural studies, from trauma studies to political science and philosophy. The other is that it can reveal how Levi's ideas are more and more present under differing forms in the modern global context and how his words are important for deciphering and interpreting today's world.

²¹ M. Disegni, "Dalla Shoah a Plaza de Mayo, il silenzio è l'arma dei fascisti", 2018: <https://moked.it/blog/2018/02/16/dalla-shoah-plaza-de-mayo-silenzio-larma-dei-fascisti/>. I would like to thank Monica Jansen who kindly made me aware of the story of Vera Vigevani Jarach and referred this link to me.

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