

The History of the United States in Italy: Generations in Dialogue – Special Issue in Celebration of Tiziano Bonazzi’s 80th Birthday

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In May 2020, with the support of the Inter-University Center of Euro-American History and Politics (CISPEA) and the U.S. Embassy in Rome, the conference “The History of the United States in Italy: Generations in Dialogue” was to be held at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna to celebrate the 80th birthday of Professor Emeritus Tiziano Bonazzi at the University of Bologna. From the publication of his first research project, (*Il sacro esperimento. Teologia e politica nella America puritana*, Bologna, 1970), up to his most recent books on the American Revolution and Abraham Lincoln, he has made an important contribution to the development of American Studies not only in Italy. As a scholar of US intellectual and political history, Tiziano Bonazzi has taught for several years in important American universities and has thoroughly investigated the political and scientific culture of the United States, the complex historical relationship between institutions and politics, the role of Protestantism in shaping American politics and society, the intellectual and cultural exchanges between the United States and Europe, ultimately contributing to the growth of American History within Italy, which has been fully included in international academic debate.

The conference that was conceived as an opportunity for discussion between different generations of Italian scholars of American History, was cancelled due to the health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. With the organizers — Raffaella Baritono, Matteo Battistini and Angela Santese — we decided to ask the invited speakers and discussants to publish their papers and comments. The result is this special issue that provides an important illustration of current attitudes and approaches to the study of American History by the new generation of Italian scholars. Their essays highlight research trends and historiographical practices that reveal elements of continuity, but also substantial changes from the scholarship of the older historians with whom these authors grew up, in dialogue.

The special issue is organized in three round tables, dealing with political and social history, intellectual history and international history.

In the first round table on political and social history, Lorenzo Costaguta casts light on the American socialists’ efforts to grasp the nexus of class and race in the labour struggles of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, showing how their racial thinking shifted from “scientific racialism” to

“colour-blind socialism.” Giuliano Santangeli Valenzani examines the promotion of tourism in Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina from 1976 to 1981, with the underlying exploitation of black heritage in the South — in particular the heritage of the Civil Rights Movement — used to lure African American visitors from other parts of the country.

In the second round table on intellectual history, Serena Mocci focuses on Margaret Fuller, the pioneer of white American reformism and the women’s movement, by analyzing the dispatches she sent from Italy from 1848 to 1849. Francesca Cadeddu explores the life, thought and faith of Anna Howard Shaw and her contribution to the Social Gospel Movement. Both essays deal with a critical theme in women’s history, namely, the deconstruction of the Victorian cultural paradigm of the “separate spheres.” Matteo Rossi reviews the recent historiography that has enriched the stagnant debate about if and when the United States became an empire, by outlining a cluster of categories — empire, state and market — which were indispensable for reconstructing the role of the United States in the world prior to the American Century through the political thought of Henry Charles Carey. As part of broader research that intends to outline the institutional implementations of participatory democracy, Marta Gara reconstructs the literature regarding participatory democracy during the Long Seventies, providing a framework for navigating the public use of the political keyword for the “movement of movements.”

In the third round table on international history, Gaetano Di Tommaso focuses on the entanglement of natural resources and national security in the politics and culture of the Progressive Era, arguing that geologists and natural scientists working for the Department of the Interior were the first to grasp the reason for a “control” of supply. Dario Fazzi retraces his research path by starting from his first study on the nuclear arms race “from the point of view of those who opposed it.” He also introduces a research agenda on the social, cultural, economic, and environmental impact of U.S. military bases in Europe throughout the Cold War. Angela Santese highlights the intermingling of pacifism, anti-nuclearism and environmentalism during the Reagan administration, underlying the impact of the antinuclear movement. She then introduces a research project that looks at the history of Greenpeace, investigating it as a political and social manifestation of environmentalism. Alice Ciulla analyses the attitude of American experts and policymakers towards the Italian Communist Party during the 1970s as a part of her broader project regarding the Italian Communist Party in the wider context of Euro-communism. Alessandra Bitumi discusses Jacques Delors’ narrative battle against “Reaganomics,” showing how the former President of the European Commission has nurtured Europe’s exceptionalist self-perception and contributed to shaping America’s understanding of the Old World.

These essays cannot obviously provide an exhaustive sample of the new historiographical trends in American History on a European scale, but they offer a stimulating view of how transnational changes in the practice of American history are working within a new generation of (not only) Italian scholars. As all the discussants — Ferdinando Fasce, Stefano Luconi, Cristina Bon, Arnaldo Testi, Matteo Battistini, Marco Mariano and Federico Romero — highlight, these young historians have been influenced and, at the same time, contribute to the main historical processes that have affected American historiography since the cultural and transnational turn of the Eighties, which involved the internationalization of American History and the contamination of different perspectives of historical research. Gone are the days when American History in Europe was organized along national lines. Even though the nationality of scholars still matters in terms of a cultural and an academic context, the decline of the nation-state as the prevailing unit of analysis, and the increasing mobility of scholars across Europe, places new generations of scholars along lines that cross not only geographical, but also disciplinary borders. The methodological — almost political — disputes around strict and exclusive definitions of historical fields that featured historiography in the last century do not characterize new research, or at least not significantly. The struggles that pitted social versus political history, bottom up history versus top down history, and cultural history toward economic and institutional history have been replaced by blending topics, methodologies and perspectives. What prevails is the interplay of the social and the political, the cultural and the economic, the national and the international by picking up social actors and political groups, collective movements and intellectuals, scientific and political discourses and public opinion, governmental and non-governmental institutions and policies.

If the multifaced centre of gravity characterizing the new American History in (not only) Italy put aside the traditional approach to international history, political and intellectual history, the essays of this special issue represent an ultimate challenge to American exceptionalism in historiography that previous generations of scholars have led by stating the peculiarity and importance of American history outside of the United States. Scholars like Bonazzi have not only improved American history in the Italian academic environment, but they have also opened windows of dialogue with United States historians by constantly comparing and enriching their academic world. From this perspective, although the historical approaches of the essays presented here follow very different trajectories in intellectual as well as methodological terms, not one of them is fundamentally distant from Bonazzi's research on American, political and scientific cultures. As Ferdinando Fasce writes in his commentary by quoting one of Bonazzi's overviews of American historical studies in the peninsula, an "Italian dimension" of American History is still alive and well. There seems to be no better way to celebrate Tiziano Bonazzi.