USAbroad – Journal of American History and Politics. Vol. 3 No. 1S (2020)
ISSN 2611-2752

Roundtable: Intellectual History

Arnaldo Testi* Matteo Battistini†

Published: November 10, 2020

Arnaldo Testi

The four essays in this section are all notable pieces of historical research. As agreed upon with Matteo Battistini, I will focus my attention on a couple of them, Francesca Cadeddu's *Comrades in a Sacred Cause* and Serena Mocci's *An American in Rome*, but I will briefly comment on the other two. In fact, I will start right away with Marta Gara's paper on participatory democracy, a subject that brought back memories of my first encounters with things American (the Port Huron Statement, first, and the "compromised second draft," to quote from *The Big Lebowski*). On Matteo Rossi's *State, Market and Colonization* I will return to, also briefly, later on.

What strikes me most in Gara's clear-minded analysis, what I have learned, is summed up in two points. First, it is apparent that, at the end of the day, all observers agree that participatory democracy may have a limited impact on our contemporary government systems. The framework of representative liberal democracy remains predominant, perhaps necessary, inevitable. Participatory democracy may add some value at the local level, but it is an addition not a substitution. With a few warnings: localism in an unequal society means self-government of unequal communities with unequal resources. Certainly, the relationships between participatory units and other, larger decision-making structures remain unresolved. Secondly, Gara's suggestion of a possible right-wing populist declination of the concepts and practices of participatory democracy is well taken and should be developed. Yes, "opposition to centralism and the liberal Establishment frequently blurred in the 1970s with anti-statism." And yes, when in the 1970s C.B. Macpherson lamented of "citizen disengagement" he overlooked the growing civic engagement feeding the new conservative popular movements.

But let me move on to the two essays I am supposed to discuss more closely. Both essays deal with a critical theme in women's history and gender history, namely, the journeys that white middle-class women in the long nineteenth century took to deconstruct the Victorian cultural paradigm of the so-called "separate spheres," sometimes exploiting its contradictions, sometimes repudiating it, sometimes combining the two attitudes, in order to exit their assigned places in the family and enter

* University of Pisa (Italy); ✉ arnaldo.testi@unipi.it

† University of Bologna (Italy)

public space, join and shape conversations on national and international issues, claim equal rights and suffrage. It is a kind of historical inquiry with an established tradition that still produces original insights, exploring new territories. Like in these two excellent cases.

In Cadeddu's case, the territory is the Social Gospel movement of the white, Methodist variety. And the specific insight regards not so much the presence of women in its ranks (itself a little known fact, given the gaps the historical literature) as the dynamic roles they had in extending the tasks they fulfilled while, at the same time, extending their independence, authority, and agency. The passage from theological commitment to social action, pairing individual salvation and social salvation; the passage from subordinate voluntary work in the church to winning the right to be ordained ministers; the passage from charity to the professionalization of social work, an element that radically changed the approach to social problems, bringing them squarely in the field of institutional and political reform and, therefore, of suffrage — all these questions are defined with subtlety and discussed persuasively. They are questions that, of course, do not pertain only to the Social Gospelers but resonate with many other women's experiences during those years. Regarding the central issue of why demand the right to vote, what public rationale are offered for it, Cadeddu hints at the two classical categories articulated more than half a century ago by Aileen Kraditor, namely, the "argument from justice" and the "argument from expediency." There is just a hint, in the main text and in a footnote, and I would expect a more general discussion of these, in greater depth and perhaps being more critical of their assumptions, not only speaking of a single elite woman, a prominent leader like Anna Howard Shaw.

To highlight this expectation of mine is actually a bit unfair, because this is exactly what Cadeddu herself promises to do in the course of her research — explore the life and thoughts of the most prominent woman in the movement as a starting point for a larger project with a larger scope and a much larger data base. On Anna Howard Shaw, for now, we have a short presentation based on her autobiography. And here I know that I preach to the converted with a historian as astute as Cadeddu, but I say it just the same: be careful to take an autobiography as a reliable source to single out "turning points" in the life of the narrator. Those turning points are usually well-pondered constructions for public consumption.

Bringing us back in time to the mid-nineteenth century, Mocci introduces another elite woman, Margaret Fuller, dealing with the same predicaments — sorting out the trappings of the separate sphere, turning domesticity into public engagement — in a context where women's movements were in their infancy. Being an unusually well-educated woman with an unusual career in journalism, her emancipation journey was quite singular and personal. Her job as a foreign correspondent for The New-York Tribune took her abroad, making it easier for her to secure independence as well as to acquire a taste in international affairs. Living in Europe as expats was crucial for several American women of the period, for instance for the professional artists who moved to Rome to hone their skills and there formed, to quote the always patronizing Henry James, a "strange *sisterhood" of American*"lady sculptors."[1]

Mocci's essay is extremely perceptive. My way to engage with it is to enlarge the conversation to include her assumptions about American nationalism — as exceptionalist, imperialist, racist — and the relevance of the American revolution. Of course, in the nineteenth-century transatlantic space, this kind of nationalism was not unique, instead, it was the common language of all nation-states, being established as well as in the making. American exceptionalism was not exceptional. All nationalisms felt that they had a special mission in the world; and that mission included expanding influence, submitting and governing new territories and alien peoples. From this point of view, I agree with Matteo Rossi's approach in his *State, Market and Colonization*. Yes, it is "sterile" to debate if and when the United States turned imperial. Imperial thought and politics have always been there since its conception. The U.S. matured as part of an empire, became independent as the spearhead of a set of transatlantic imperial transformations, continued to operate as the core state of a continental expanding empire. It enforced at home the imperial racist policies that European powers had the luxury to enforce far from home, overseas, perhaps in settler colonies; the U.S. was a settler colony, and the benefits and scars of its colonial policies marked directly its own body (and soul, and of course they still do). And yet, to the language of empire the Americans added the revolutionary language of liberty and some sort

1. James Henry, *William Wetmore Story and His Friends*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & co., 1903, 257.

of an anti-colonial attitude. Was it a ploy, a dirty trick? I don't think so. Does it make a difference? I think it does.

It is a difference that is crucial to an understanding of Fuller's thoughts and actions. The United States was created by a national revolution that, being acted out on an imperial world stage, had an imprint that transcended the national. It proclaimed universal principles pertaining to the salvation of all mankind. Its expansionist urge was also a revolutionary urge pushing not just for territorial acquisition but for political and social transformation — to build the world anew. Again, nothing unique in that, such were the ambitions of the "sister" revolutions in France and Latin America, of the Black revolution in Haiti. This kind of universalist revolutionary nationalism is so pervasive that it allows for its own internal critiques and alternative interpretations. And this is what Fuller does when she complains that contemporary America is not true to her original principles of liberty and equality, betraying them at home and abroad. She articulates the classic "jeremiad," the ritual exceptionalist lamentation that, in fact, is part and parcel of all revolutionary rhetorical traditions: the founding was glorious, the present sucks, something went wrong, let's go back to the unadulterated sources of our virtues. (Frederick Douglass did the same with his celebrated Fourth of July address of 1852.) Indeed, Fuller believes that the thrust of the revolutionary promise is not exhausted. My country is not dead, she says, "but in my time she sleepeth," she better wakes up and be herself again in a new revolutionary age. However, I find it hard to characterize her words as an appeal for an American "imperial role." Here I guess that I disagree with Mocci on the interpretation as well as a factual point in that Fuller does not call for her country to "export democracy" to Europe; she knows that the ongoing nationalist movements are home-grown and have their own goals. Rather, she calls for some sort of public "noble sympathy" and private aid for "a sister cause." She clearly states: "Politically [America] cannot interfere." She calls for republican solidarity.

Matteo Battistini

The four essays in this section are part of the historiographical trend which, in the United States (and in other countries), takes the name of intellectual history. It is a field of research with its own specific history that Tiziano Bonazzi has studied, and with which he has constantly confronted himself and which he has enriched in dialogue with the American academic world. Beginning with the publication of *New Directions in American Intellectual History* (1977) and from the crisis — of the idea — of the exceptional nation that had shaped post-World War II historiography, intellectual history has also been affected by ferocious debates which, in the light of the rise of new social history, of history from below and, finally, of transnational history, have directed it towards a path of contamination with other disciplines. As Bonazzi recently argued in his review of *The Worlds of American Intellectual History* (2017), edited by James T. Kloppenberg and others, having overcome the exceptionalist nationalism of the Cold War with its organization of intellectual history around guiding mega-concepts such as American Civilization, American Mind or Liberal Consensus, intellectual history has become a "construction site that has recovered credibility and space." It cannot be reduced to the history of ideas or to the *Begriffsgeschichte* of European origin because it is proposed — according to the definition of Daniel T. Rodgers — as the "social history of ideas." A history, Bonazzi continued, "founded on the close relationship of ideas with the social position of the subjects and, therefore, with class, gender and race and more, as well as on transnationalism." If intellectual history is a construction site in which the research movement moves from the bottom up and vice versa, connecting different social and cultural, political and religious positions, then the essays in the section are important contributions to ongoing historiographical work.

Therefore, it is from this perspective that, in agreement with Arnaldo Testi, I will focus my attention on the essays by Matteo Rossi and Marta Gara. In his essay, Rossi reviews the recent historiography that has enriched the stagnant debate on whether and when the United States became an empire. Today it is no longer possible to consider the American Revolution as a national event because the war of independence took place within the international framework of the European powers and because colonists and settlers also fought to colonize the North American continent. The expansion into western territory following the foundation of the republic took place through wars of conquest and government policies of the indigenous, slave and European populations which, despite their anti-colonial streak, had an evident imperial character. This is not a paradox of American history, but a coherently constituting element of its democratic experiment, that is, the historical link — not only American, but which takes on its own specificity overseas — between liberal universalism and nation building, between democratization and racially characterized politics because it was built on slavery and segregation of blacks, on the violent control of indigenous peoples and on the subordination of minorities. However, what is important to highlight is not only that historiography reconsiders the turning point of 1898 as highlighting the original imperial character of the United States. Above all, through historiography, Rossi indicates the long nineteenth century, which begins with the revolution, as the period that cemented the political and economic, scientific and ideological foundations of the United States together as an empire. In this sense, the essay underlines the centrality that the American state is acquiring in historiography. During the nineteenth century, its construction was functional not only to territorial expansion, but also to the formation of a national market and economic nationalism that allowed the United States to enter the twentieth century in a political position that made it possible to influence the dynamics of power that crossed and shaped the world market of the first globalization.

Rossi outlines a cluster of categories — empire, state and market — which, on one hand, is indispensable for reconstructing the role of the United States in the world prior to the American century. On the other hand, it must be historicized. The study of the political and economic scientific thought of Friedrich List and Henry Charles Carey should not trace only the intellectual history of two founding fathers of American political and social science. Their academic work and public and political action should also provide the key to reconstructing the social history of the ideas of empire, state and market that legitimized and shaped the project by which the United States became a global power and ruled as an "agent of globalization." This seems to me to be the most relevant, although still open,

contribution of his research: to examine to what extent the intellectual history of the U.S. in the nineteenth century presents an ideological project — both political and scientific — of dominating the world market, and in what way this project — which in no way can it be isolated from the hierarchies of class and race — has had an effect on the international and transnational dynamics of globalization that characterize the history of American (and others') capitalism which, like the history of the empire, is today the subject of renewed historical interest.

Marta Gara's essay presents an acute critical reconstruction of the foremost literature on participatory democracy in the long period of the 1970s, marked by the "movement of movements." Part of a broader research that intends to outline institutional implementations of participatory democracy in the case studies of Tom Hayden in California and Julius Hobson in Washington DC, the essay provides a valuable framework for navigating the complex public use of words, such as, participation and participatory democracy. While these terms have imposed a participatory turn in the academic, public and political discussion on decision making, they have had a limited impact on the political and institutional system. In the light of this apparent paradox, Gara carries out an important operation, that is, her critical reconstruction of the literature shows not only the diverse political and institutional declinations and the different intellectual developments in the direction of a participatory vision of the government of society (participatory government), or of a vision of government through participatory society, but also the contradictions and tensions within the discourse and practice of participatory democracy.

Three seem to be relevant issues that emerge in the essay and which I believe are worthy of further study for both the analysis of the literature and for the historical reconstruction of the case studies. In the first place: what relationship was there between participation and equality? Participatory democracy was not the only word in the movement's language. Freedom and equality defined a horizon of expectation of individual and collective autonomy, which over the 1970s impacted the position of race, gender and class. Investigating whether and how this vocabulary entered into the theories of participatory democracy would allow us to grasp the limits and difficulties that the implementation of participation in local and state government encountered. It is plausible to affirm that if participatory democracy in an unequal society implied forms of self-government of unequal communities with unequal resources, then the new forms of participation would become vehicles of consensus for — and not *of* change of — the political and institutional system. In light of the institutionalization of the requests for participation, not only the historical problem of the relationship between participatory democracy and populism, which Gara identifies above all in consideration of the growing conservative mobilization against the liberal establishment, but also the problematic relationship between movement and institutions could be deepened; which, although present, remains hidden in the essay. In particular, but not only, the work of Arnold Kaufman is significant because it anticipated a specific change in the meaning of participatory democracy. If, in 1960, he intended to introduce the requests for participation in democratic discourse, in 1968 — year that marked both division and radicalization movements — his problem became that of their limitation as a function of their orderly institutional integration. The intellectual history of participatory democracy should here actually become the social history of the idea. If it arises in the movement as a "principle of agency," in what way and with what political purpose does it become a "principle of government" in the theory of its promoters? What social and political clashes, protests and debates inside and outside the movement explain this "paradox of participatory democracy" which also marks the question of leadership?