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Roundtable: International History

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Gone are the days when surveys of the practice of American history in Europe could be neatly organized along national lines. *Teaching and Studying US History in Europe: Past, Present and Future*, edited by Sylvia Hilton and Cornelis Van Minnen in 2007 identified a few common political and institutional trends in the spread of the discipline across the continent, but by and large it offered an overview of single national cases within Western Europe.

Now the picture is quite different, due to the acceleration of the internationalization of American history, of the decline of the nation-state as the prevailing unit of analysis and, finally, of the mobility of scholars across Europe. Historians cross borders very frequently, and European historians of the United States do so even more. Yet the positionality of scholars still matters, as does the multinational project that culminated in the volume *Historians across Borders. Writing American History in a Global Age* (2014) made clear. The way we choose our topics, research and write about them and interact with other disciplines is still inevitably affected by the generational, cultural, and institutional context in which we operate.

While these five essays cannot obviously provide an exhaustive sample on a European scale, they offer a telling, stimulating glimpse of how these changes in the practice of American history are working within a new generation of Italian scholars in the field of American foreign relations.

First of all, almost nothing is quintessentially Italian in the research topics discussed here. Italian matters are prominent only in Alice Ciulla's contribution and, even there, they are part of a broader project in which the Italian Communist Party is studied within the wide-ranging context of Eurocommunism. The old bilateral approach of previous generations seems to be gone for good. It is the result of transnational, Atlantic, and global approaches that, in different ways, inform all five essays as well as increasingly internationalized processes of training and recruitment. This might seem like a foregone conclusion, also given the fact that three of these five authors were partially trained abroad

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and/or work abroad. However, it is also a testament to these authors' ability to navigate the relatively uncharted waters of a rapidly evolving international academic environment.

Similarly, the shared focus on the cultural dimension of political processes shows how all five authors have coped with and responded to the "cultural turn" that transformed the study of American history across national borders as they were coming of age. Politics and institutions are never far from the spotlight, as in Alessandra Bitumi's take on Jacques Delors' European project, Alice Ciulla's essay on Western European Communist Parties, Gaetano Di Tommaso's contribution on the officials of the Ministry of Interior, Dario Fazzi and Angela Santese's presentation of the interplay between social movements and national governments. Still, the focus on the ability to shape narratives, affect public discourse and mobilize consensus prevails over a strict focus on the workings of political institutions. To a lesser extent, political ideas are also investigated and taken seriously in a way that is reminiscent of the work of earlier generations of Italian scholars in the field of American history.

Another common feature that runs through most of these essays is the focus on the relational dimension of the projection of American power and its limits, with the partial exception of Di Tommaso's paper, (even there, however, the reactive thrust of Progressive era "petro-modernity" in the context of inter-imperial competition plays a major role). Delors's narrative battle against Reaganomics, transatlantic anti-nuclear and environmentalist movements and organizations, and Southern European Communist Parties conjure up a notion of American power that is not exactly irresistible and unbounded, while the agency of those at the receiving end is always there, and sometimes takes center stage. This seems to be the reflection of broader trends among European scholars in the field of American foreign relations. Since Alan Milward's work on the Marshall Plan, they have often shown how, especially when transatlantic relations are concerned, the deployment of American power does not take place in a vacuum; in fact, it is confronted by multiple institutional and non-state actors.

The fact that challenges to U.S.-centric narratives of American history inform most of the essays, brings us back to the issue of positionality. While all five authors, in different ways, adopt a fluid combination of the methodological tools offered by recent, US-based historiographical "turns," the way in which they deploy such tools places them quite firmly in the territory of European challenges to American exceptionalism. Inevitably, this relational approach also accounts for what is left out of the picture. The politics of American foreign policy and domestic factors, in general, are not investigated in depth, with the exception of Di Tommaso's "intermestic" approach, and race is notable due to its absence.

Finally, what brings most of these essays together is periodization. Again, with the exception of Di Tommaso, whose focus on the narrative of oil as an imperial asset and on its relationship to water takes us to the early 20th century, the decades following the 1960s are the predominant chronological focus. And while none of the other four essays can be defined as classic Cold War history, the post-1945 bipolar confrontation is clearly visible in the background. Again, this should not be taken for granted, given that the absolute predominance of post-1945 research topics is being slowly but steadily eroded in major threads through conferences like SHAFR annual meetings and journals like *Diplomatic History*. More importantly, the issues that all five papers tackle — the fate of the European project vis-à-vis the challenge of neoliberalism, the environment and nuclear weapons, natural resources and US empire, social movements as local/global actors, the interplay between academia and politics — are extremely relevant to the present. It is refreshing to see that an emerging generation of scholars is not shying away from important topics and is, in fact, able to combine academic specialism with a concern for the public relevance of historical research.

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It would probably be a bit too adventurous to consider these authors' reflections on their scholarly trajectories as fully representative of larger trends among their generational cohort of young historians. Yet, when taken together these papers provide a good sample (at least as good as any, at any rate, short of a full-fledged survey) of current attitudes and approaches. They highlight trends, practices and inbuilt assumptions that reveal elements of continuity but also substantial changes from the scholarship of the older historians these authors grew up with, in dialogue.

The first element is perhaps the most obvious, but worth noticing nonetheless, as it springs out so forcefully when reading these texts from my vintage point of observation. Gone are the days of the methodological wars around strict, self-contained, mutually exclusive definitions of historical fields and approaches that featured so prominently in the early career of those of us who are now in, or close to, retirement. Those dogmatic struggles — at times almost theological disputes — that first pitted social versus political history and history from the bottom up versus top down diplomatic history, and then cultural versus socio-economic history, not only seem very distant now, but are truly eclipsed, probably forgotten and not at all mourned. What we see here, instead, is an accomplished practice of mixing and blending, with little apparent interest in categorical definitions of alternative, opposite methodologies and theories. In their place, what prevails here is a flexible, experimental, perhaps even eclectic usage of very diverse approaches, tools and perspectives that are comfortably juxtaposed and intertwined.

For sure, all these authors are children of the cultural turn (to a certain extent also of the linguistic turn), whose texture has become deeply ingrained in the way almost all of us write nowadays. It certainly colours the way these scholars not only analyse their topics but, more broadly, conceive and practice historical research. If one wants to identify a common thread, a shared grammar (quite a stretch, admittedly, but perhaps acceptable in this context) this appears to be the focus on the "interplay of power, identity and culture," to replicate Alessandra Bitumi's apt formula.

This — it seems to me — is what sits at the centre of gravity of many of these papers. They all deal with images and projections of power, with policy constructions and the ideas that fuel them, broadly speaking with political cultures. The key, though, is that they prioritise the noun over the adjective. Here is their shared trait and the distance from many of the oldest among us. Even a paper like Alice Ciulla's, that is more closely and deliberately focused on a genuinely political topic, looks at it primarily through the lens of intellectual constructions and the intellectuals' own attempts at influence and agency in the political realm.

A second feature that leaps out from most of these texts, and defines another shared trait, is the prominence of environmental topics or, to be precise, the attention to environmental sensitivities among social actors, political groups, collective movements and public opinion (an elusive notion if ever there was one, and yet few of us can bypass or fully do away with it). It is not so much environmental history per se – even though there is a clear inclination towards it, most obviously in the second project in which Dario Fazzi is now engaged — as the unproblematized recognition that an environmental angle can open up new perspectives, redefine old issues along new lines of inquiry and interpretation, perhaps even reorder our epistemological priorities. Thus, well established topics of inquiry — like the genesis, nature and trajectory of America's imperial expansion — can actually be reconceptualised and acquire new connotations and implications (as most noticeably evidenced in the essays by Gaetano Di Tommaso and Angela Santese).

Something has to give, though, and what is lost here or, rather, deliberately left aside and probably behind, is the traditional approach to international history, and particularly Cold War history, as a struggle about allegedly holistic models of society, structures of power, all-encompassing projects of modernity, opposite ideological constructions and representations of historical progress. These used to be the underlying frameworks and assumptions that shaped research and writing on Cold War themes that some of these essays also touch upon, albeit with a very different approach. Instead of a close angle on the centres of power and their self-serving visions, which are now marginalized or perhaps taken for granted, what prevails here is a focus on horizontal connections and networks (most obviously but not exclusively in Angela Santese's work), on the local-global nexus, and an unprob-

lematized but subtly influential embrace of the Anthropocene lens (that is brought to the fore most explicitly by Dario Fazzi, but that does not seem so far from some of the other authors' sensitivities).

A similar dislocation vis-à-vis previous generations of historians dealing with similar topics concern economic growth, which is not openly questioned and investigated as a historical issue, but rather incorporated as a given condition. In these essays, capitalism (or socialism, for that matter) is not so much dissected as a structure, project or ideology, but rather assumed as a material and cultural context. Its ever-present structures and strictures are explored primarily in their environmental dimensions and implications but also, and most crucially, in their cultural representations, constructions and mythologies that inform policymaking as well as public orientations (particularly, but once again not exclusively, in the essays by Alessandra Bitumi and Gaetano Di Tommaso).

None of these studies is fundamentally and irreconcilably distant from Tiziano Bonazzi's inquiries on American political cultures and languages, which maintain a central place for these authors. Their approaches, though, follow very different trajectories in intellectual as well as methodological terms. An alterity perhaps best emphasized by the complete absence of religious themes and tropes, a stark variation from Tiziano Bonazzi's characteristic threads. On the other hand, most of them, and most cogently Alessandra Bitumi, are directly or indirectly engaged with the Euro-American compact and its game of mirrors, which seems to remain the key perimeter visited by these studies (the only partial exception being Gaetano Di Tommaso) in an ever-changing and yet persistent effort to explore the making of the modern trans-Atlantic world.

Finally, these papers qualify, call into question and perhaps put to rest a ubiquitous stereotype. It is often said that younger scholars usually tend — by choice, by necessity, or a combination of the two — to dwell on niche topics (the nastier gossips occasionally hold that they take refuge in them). We all know how the pressure towards overspecialization is built up by the way in which university recruitment works (and most often does not work), by the vagaries of a standardized peer-review process in scholarly journals, by the quirks of research funding. The incentives towards a niche positioning are all too real and serious for young scholars who have to build a career in trying and adverse circumstances.

Some of the research topics illustrated here — carefully circumscribed, shy of bold generalizations — might appear to confirm the stereotype. Yet, these authors explore new scholarly parameters, experiment with unusual methodological hybrids, and are clearly searching for new intellectual paths, even though they might not explicitly theorize about them. As they learned from previous scholars in order to go beyond the latter's works, so should older scholars learn from these innovative works.