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Towards a Global History of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Italy. An Introduction

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Towards a Global History of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Italy

An Introduction

Abstract

Guido Formigoni's essay introduces the most recent trends in Italian historiography, reflecting on the significance of the expression «global history» and its methodological implications in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italian context.

Keywords: *Global History, Italian History, Historiography, Global Turn.*

For some time now, contemporary historians have been engaged in a kind of «global turn», which is coming to dominate the international scene. «Global» peeps from all book and article titles, calls for papers, seminar and workshop invitations. The new trend takes its place alongside other changes of tack deemed to be genuine turning-points or at least moments when methodological novelties are to the fore. It is of course typical of how knowledge unfolds that past study models should need to be constantly updated and made to appear more original, innovative and convincing than ever before¹.

This specific new turn comes for many reasons. Recent decades have thrown out the State-centred, self-isolated way of recounting national history. Partly it has been a development inside the history discipline which has broadened its canvas in weariness at repeating the old patterns. But there has also been an undeniable trend of modern times affecting our present historian colleagues. One thinks primarily of the marked globalization fever that set in during the 1980s (though some claim that was its second wave). The new space-time dimension to human relations has prompted awareness of more complex connections between political history, cultural history and the history of economies, driving us towards a potential «global history»². The trend has naturally forced us into distinctions from certain other schools of research, without our wishing to challenge them: from academically accredited *World History*, for example, launched by the Chicago school at least fifty years ago and covering the long-term presence of humans on this

¹ Some thoughts on such novelties are to be found in M. Del Pero, G. Formigoni, *Towards a New International History*, in R. Baritono (ed.), *Political History Today*, «Ricerche di storia politica», 20 (2017), Special Issue, pp. 25-32, <https://www.rivisteweb.it/doi/10.1412/87616>.

² A.G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History*, London, Pimlico, 2002; C. Grataloup, *Géohistoire de la mondialisation. Le temps long du monde*, Paris, A. Colin, 2007.

earth; or from *Big History*, whose time-span is even longer, embracing the history of the planet and its geo-historical cycles; or again from the Braudelian *longue durée* brand of history, eschewing all mere *événementielle* surface treatment of human affairs³.

Needless to say, it is still not clear or accepted what «global history» actually is. Everyone must be on their guard against fashions and caricaturing the new approaches and methods employed by the globalizing study trend. It seems fairly easy to steer clear of the «totalizing» ambiguity that the term is fraught with: for clearly one author or even a finite research group can hardly expect to marshal a complete set of in-depth insights into distant and disparate cultural, linguistic, ethnic and social milieus. Apart from the monumental erudition needed to pull off a global history conceived in such terms with all the attendant linguistic and cultural obstacles entailed, there is anyway the immense problem of the evident archival asymmetry among different world areas. Besides, the distinguishing feature of historical research – painstaking philological sifting of sources – runs the risk of being dwarfed by any such vast-ranging narrative canvas – a fate that is surely enough to dispel all delusions of the kind⁴.

So if we speak of global history we distinctly do not mean some new totalizing ambition, but rather the building up of new and ever-deeper connections between the local and the global. There again: how should we study such connections? For example, for each past epoch one might study phenomena presenting a transnational and not just inter-national dimension; to do which, there already exist relatively accepted categories and avenues of study. In short, one may study how the local dimension is affected by drives, concepts and experiences emanating from distant centres of power, following principles that have nothing to do with the classic geographic and political frontiers of modern States. One may thus explore the relations between plural movements, exchanges of ideas, mutual influences between forces operating transversally across historical borders of the States. This canvas has proved its potential for enlarging our knowledge⁵.

Often, though, picking up such connections has called for the monographic approach, even in works whose impact is undeniable⁶. Here we need to distinguish: such an approach is potentially fertile where detailed study of the tie-ups between the two dimensions – macro and micro, local and global – throws light on more general historical processes. An important issue conditioning the development of a broad human area may be investigated by detecting a number of cruxes that may be documented within a limited ambit. This opens for consideration aspects that once tended to be underestimated under the implicit assumption that all human

³ For a fine portrait, see L. Di Fiore, M. Meriggi, *World History. Le nuove rotte della storia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011; E. Vanhaute, *Introduzione alla World History*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2015; D. Olstein, *Thinking History Globally*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015.

⁴ On this point see the thoughts shared at the round table *AHR Conversation How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History*, «American Historical Review», 5 (2013), pp. 1431-1472 and K. Pomeranz, *Histories for a Less National Age*, «American Historical Review», 1 (2014), pp. 1-22.

⁵ A. Iriye, P.-Y. Saunier (eds.), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History. From the Mid-19th Century to the Present Day*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; with comments by G. Abbattista, *Una mappa per una storia transnazionale*, «Contemporanea», 14 (2011), 4, pp. 773-779.

⁶ See for instance A. Giardina (ed.), *Storia mondiale dell'Italia*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2017, drawn up in parallel with P. Boucheron (ed.), *Histoire mondiale de la France*, Paris, Seuil, 2017.

facts or decisions were unique, completely understandable in their own terms or at least immediate context. But now we have gone in for reconstructing medium-range, wider- or even extremely wide-range flows and connections, avoiding the trap of some factors «preceding» others, or of seeking the key event that relegates all others to the background. What is needed, instead, is to «weigh» the various connections, reconstruct them and link them all up together.

This approach proves even more sterile if it reflects the convenient fallacy that it suffices to study a milieu, human character or techno-economic process set midway between different worlds (preferably belonging to the category of «excluded» or «subordinate» phenomena), for one to be able to account for an entire epoch. Every influence and connection, when reconstructed and analysed, says something about the complexity of history; it is not necessarily the case that every scrap of life contains a key giving access to the overall meaning of joint human coexistence in its chronologically defined entirety.

Picking its way through such methodological mazes, the globalizing trend is forging ahead – and this applies to the Italian scene as well. In reality it is not a complete novelty. Often in the past, however, the issue of new international tie-ups with Italian history has surreptitiously been resolved into a kind of «implicit comparison» with other countries, as though these represented some compulsory reference model. In the early 1990s, for example, when a series of overviews of post-war Italy began to appear, there was a spurt of reflections on the «anomalous case of Italy», mirrored by the eternal quest for what constitutes a «normal» country⁷. This obsession largely stemmed from the works of foreign Italianists (especially of the British school, from Denis Mack Smith on)⁸, who seemed bent on proving the anomaly or backwardness of Italian society by comparison with the presumed civil normality of their own country, even to the point of according it some implicit «normative» status. Some Italian historians took their cue from this (somewhat superficially) – a sign of our inveterate provincialism, as though there could be a normative yardstick for each nation's historical rise and fall to be found in the history of other more advanced civilizations⁹. From this standpoint global history actually seems no more than a history of different individual anomalies, to be pondered in the light of the deep relations and connections among them. Rejection of the concept of «exceptionalism» does not mean abdicating from the historian's art of discriminating between the quality of different local experiences or noting the lasting historical weight of certain experiences underpinning issues and bound up with each distinct and delimited geographical, political and social context¹⁰. But it does mean refraining from fossilizing differences into hazardous pre-judged stereotypes.

⁷ P. Ginsborg, *Storia d'Italia dal dopoguerra ad oggi. Società e politica 1943-1988*, Torino, Einaudi, 1989; S. Lanaro, *Storia dell'Italia repubblicana. Dalla fine della guerra agli anni Novanta*, Venezia, Marsilio, 1992.

⁸ The interpretative series continues as far as C. Duggan, *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy since 1796*, London, Allen Lane, 2007 (It. trans. Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2008).

⁹ Many acute insights have now been collected in F. Benigno, E.I. Mineo, *L'Italia come storia. Primato, decadenza, eccezione*, Roma, Viella, 2020.

¹⁰ As rightly asks E. Fimiani, *Origini e principio di una Repubblica. Una breve interpretazione di lungo periodo del caso italiano*, in M. Ridolfi, P. Gabrielli, E. Fimiani (eds.), *L'Italia repubblicana. Costruzione, consolidamento, trasformazioni*, vol. I, *Il primo ventennio democratico (1946-1966)*, Roma, Viella, 2020, pp. 17 ff.

Once these possible traps are avoided, global history may reveal all its fertile worth. The reconstruction of links, mutual influences and points of dependency, whether long- or short-term, narrow or broad range. This web of relations hence needs reconstructing with close attention to local peculiarity, and to the way remoter, broader connections impinge on reality and gradually, steadily change worlds that are relatively circumscribed. In this sense it may be necessary to embark on a new generation of classic comparative history. Learning from Bloch, that is, we may have to undertake a history of analogies and differences, proving the utility of such connections in explaining both the poles we are examining¹¹.

Global history may thus be placed on different registers. Tie-ups and processes of reciprocal influence may have a broader or narrower horizon. To Italy the European dimension is necessarily crucial, comparable only with that of the Mediterranean. Thus, one might envisage the possibility of a finally mature «European history» of each country on the old continent¹². An intriguing project which I for one would see in a twofold though converging perspective: in-depth investigation of how each national history is conditioned by common European issues, and how each nation or local reality – original by definition, different from all others, while being affected from outside – has coped with similar common challenges in its own peculiar way. It may thus be easier to understand singularities if they are seen in correlation against a common background. Such an approach will necessarily be at once peripheral and generalizing.

The pages that follow may be viewed as a possible introduction to such new horizons of Italian history covering the last two centuries, which is to say, since political unification. Our prime intention is to update an international readership on the state of a research that is original (and moreover in some cases already at an advanced stage of exploration). We asked a number of qualified Italian authors, men and women, to tackle the crucial phases of the peninsula's contemporary story, showing how these have by now already been studied (or alternatively have not yet been properly studied) in relation to the global context they were set in. Many new points for reflection have emerged from recent historiography in our country; this has sometimes been limited in circulation by the language barrier, though it is proving to be increasingly interwoven with international interests, authors and studies.

Arianna Arisi Rota reports on the marked increase in studies that have set the Risorgimento and the nineteenth-century national unity building process in a global context, while tracing the roots of this trend to certain classic reappraisals of the Piedmontese rulers' decision to join up with the flow of European developments and exploit the crisis-ridden European concert as a geopolitical prop to the Savoy kingdom. This evergreen focus of interest has gradually been amplified by research into political exile, economic migration, increasingly modernized traffic and transportation networks, exchange of subversive revolutionary ideas throughout the Mediterranean, the impact of a «conflict paradigm» inherited from revolutionary times, and the

¹¹ M. Bloch, *Pour une histoire comparée des sociétés européennes*, in Id., *Mélanges historiques*, vol. I, Paris, Cnrs, 1963, pp. 16-40 (It. trans. *Storici e storia*, Torino, Einaudi, 1997, pp. 105 ff.).

¹² The expression came up and circulated during a debate on various recent works of Italian history. For the proceedings, see D. Pipitone (ed.), *Settant'anni dopo. Ripensare la storia dell'Italia repubblicana*, «Passato e presente», 36 (2018), 103, pp. 17-46.

early dawnings of imperialism. Ever more clearly, studies are depicting a «global Risorgimento», which deserves further investigation for that very reason.

The building of a unified State following 1861 – writes Fulvio Cammarano – was itself steeped in a European liberal, constitutional culture that was widely integrated. And this, despite the limitations due to the uncertain outcome of «independence» and colonial wars, the lack of a unifying ruling class, and the low international profile of the Savoy monarchy. The essay discusses the prevailing widespread models, beginning with British bi-party parliamentarianism (which took an original turn in Italy, given the component of the radicals, present on the political stage right from Risorgimento times). Gradually thereafter the German model took over, seen as a more efficient form of modernization suiting the climate of order and centralization. As in other European countries, the end-of-century crisis in Italy hinged on a dialectic between bolstering the executive versus liberal parliamentarian dynamics. Giolitti's way out of that crisis, a mixture of dialogue with wide-ranging social interests and a tendency to reduce politics to administration, was not destined to survive the First World War.

In the post-war bid to relaunch democracy, which failed after the rigours of the «red biennium», a new form of authoritarianism arose: the fascist dictatorship. Stefano Cavazza explores the recent broadening of historians' various approaches to the dictatorial years, reading their innovations on various different levels. On the one side stand innovative in-depth studies on some features of Italian fascism (the national-local dialectic, the question of violence, the party-State relationship) which have contributed to the international debate on «global fascism», as well as on the common characteristics of various forms of resurgent authoritarianism in response to the Thirties crisis. On the other hand, lies the exploration of what was peculiar to Italy's dictatorship, in terms of symbols and myths, totalitarian trends and volitions. This, too, has contributed to an international debate over political religions or – in other words – sacralization of the political: a far-reaching and long-lasting frame of debate.

Michele Marchi takes the cruxes of post-war reconstruction and the birth of a democratic republican State, after the fascist regime evaporated in military defeat. Without minimizing the peculiarly Italian features, the key moments of democratic rebirth show a close link between local evolution and the «dual constraint» (of being European and being Western). Beginning with the resistance epoch, then the constituent assembly and the 1948-49 «decisive choice» between the new conflicting worlds, the fledgling Republic of Italy was characterized by the vigour of its national pluralistic parties and equally by the clear-cut stances that were taken during the early phases of the Cold War. Cold War conditioning mingled with constitutional consensus (anti-communism overlapping without ousting the original anti-fascism). Being Italy in the Western camp also meant that the Italian reconstruction and subsequent economic «miracle» formed a structural part of the global capitalist «golden age».

The crisis (or change of tack) experienced in the Seventies, which international historiography finds increasingly crucial, is depicted by Carlo Spagnolo as a junction point for conflict and tension connected with three forms of modernization: the end of the peasant society, the precarious stabilising of a belated Fordism, and the mass cultural dimension of «Euro-Americanization» already in full swing. The speed with which Italy was changing socially, even

anthropologically, created new problems in the political management of the country. The early leaders of democracy-building found it more and more fraught and complex to hold together anti-authoritarian and libertarian pressures. Thus, even the short season of «national solidarity» left the PCI at a loss how to handle the «transition to socialism», while the moderate Keynesians on the left-wing of the DC and the lay reformist parties found increasing difficulty with the international swing towards a monetarist and anti-inflationary trend.

Lastly, Simona Colarizi ponders that extraordinary event – an all-Italian happening, let us remember – which was the radical crisis to Republican Italy's political system occurring in a short space of years from the late Eighties to early Nineties. That total collapse (or transformation) of the old parties and the emergence of new political figures coincided with a feeble response to what was by then full-blown globalization. The essay traces some of the roots of that crisis to difficulties dating from previous decades: State management of public finance and of an extensive system of State-owned companies. This triggered the progressive delegitimization of political forces. The fact of apparently weathering a productive crisis and entering a new phase of individualistic consumerism only made it harder to take the issue of financial equilibrium seriously. Tightening up of the European rules reduced the scope for mediation until, unexpectedly, the political system broke down in 1992–1994, pending a new and severe financial crisis.

We see, then, a gamut of research themes, some well-worn, some innovative and perhaps still to be thoroughly explored: a kind of dialogue among differing approaches which may prove to be the most intriguing side to the historian craft that we are pursuing.

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