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Introduction

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Political History Today

Raffaella Baritono

Introduction

This issue to mark the 30th anniversary of «Ricerche di storia politica» aims to open discussion on the state of political history today: what shape it is in, what challenges are being presented by new trends in history writing. «Ricerche di storia politica» was born in 1986 thanks to the commitment of a handful of then youthful scholars grouped around Paolo Pombeni. Their ambition was to inject new life into political history which, at the time, was being overshadowed in Italy, the United States and various other European history milieus by social history, history of everyday life and bottom-up history. Political history had a reputation for being elitist and traditionalist; in the United States it was disparagingly referred to as «presidential synthesis». The very year our journal was founded, William E. Leuchtenberg wrote an article which, while actually stressing the importance of not sliding over themes of history-writing such as power, the State and institutions, made the comment that anyone presuming to argue that political history was the new historiographic frontier would be laughed out of court. One is reminded of the heroine of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* who famously admitted her lack of interest in a history comprised of «quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all»: funnily enough, whenever the health of political history comes up on the menu, that (or something like it) is still the constant refrain¹.

Ever since the 1960s (and even much earlier in Paolo Pombeni's reconstruction, included in this issue), that is to say since the «Annales» challenge and the rise first of social, then cultural, history in a variety of successive «turns», historians have periodically argued over the alleged decline and consequent renaissance of political history, or rather a constantly recurring «new political history». Only last year Fredrik Logevall and Kenneth Osgood² deplored the skimpy marginal position this discipline has been relegated to in US university departments.

The fact of the matter is that precisely since the mid-Eighties political history had been back on track in Europe and the USA, enjoying a new season: rethinking the history of

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¹ J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, London, Richard Bentley, 1833, p. 87. See also K. Offen, *The History of Feminism as Political History*, in «Perspectives on History», May 2011, p. 22.

² F. Logevall, K. Osgood, *Why Did We Stop Teaching Political History?*, in «The New York Times», 29 August 2016.

parties and political cultures, exploring categories belonging to the social sciences, and gradually becoming receptive to input from social history, cultural history and gender history. Again – to cite one of the main contributions of our journal to historians in Italy and elsewhere – there has been constant attention to historical comparison with other political and social systems: not just static comparison of models, but exploration of how apparently differing political and institutional set-ups managed to cope with common problems and challenges, how political models and ideas got transferred or transplanted; for in this way we counter the otherwise inevitable insularity of historians bound up with their own national experience and the fallacy of its uniqueness.

This was the background to our idea for an issue drawing the threads of thirty years' editorial labours in what has been an authentic historians' laboratory – laboratory and not «school», as Paolo Pombeni rightly distinguishes in summing up his own paper. The journal has pondered the scope of political history and «the political» – meaning «all that comprises a polis», to use Pierre Rosanvallon's happy phrase³: its confines and its categories, and the changes undergone in the course of this scrutiny of the scene at home and abroad which now has to reckon with the challenge of transnational and global history.

While Pombeni outlines the phases of that historiographical debate in which a band of young historians launched their new publishing venture in 1986 and took a much-needed new look at political history, it is the fruit of that laboratory and its manifold future developments that forms the canvas covered by Giovanni Orsina. Orsina focuses on the plethora of political histories that so reflect our recent *Age of Fracture*⁴, the epistemological fragmentation so common in contemporary science as, in Europe and elsewhere, we ponder the transformations of «the political», now that universalism and «master narratives» are on the wane. Within this new and still uncertain epistemological area, one crux is the complex relation between history and social science, as analysed here by Stefano Cavazza. Historically that relationship has comprised moments of quite profitable dialogue, but also moments of tension and divergence as and when social science embraced prescriptive methods and approaches allegedly suiting the aims of cultural/institutional politics, if I may use that phrase. Cavazza is for avoiding the sterile assumption of positions, which is often to do with academic power rather than epistemology; we should reflect on how best to exploit a relation between social and historical sciences – as witness, one might add, the US experience, again dating from the mid-1980s, which led to foundation of the *American Political Development Approach*. A new lease of life in the study of American state transformations, and welfare state studies by such names as Stephen Skowronek, Theda Skocpol and Ira Katznelson, go to show that dialogue between historians and political scientists can be fertile. This chimes with US political science where many, like Paul Pierson, believe that one cannot deal with political issues without considering «politics in time». Lastly, one of the most original results of «the Ricerche di storia politica laboratory» has been the introduction of the «delegitimization» category, owed to Fulvio Cammarano and the research network he leads. This,

³ P. Rosanvallon, *Il Politico. Storia di un concetto*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2005, p. 10, Italian translation of *Pour une Histoire conceptuelle du politique*, Paris, Edition du Seuil, 2003.

⁴ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.

again, is an instance of fruitful teaming between political history and social science, showing how a concept that is commonly used by political science and sociology may yield new vistas of interpretation when employed as a historian's tool of analysis.

In another direction the present issue contains a series of articles weighing the challenges to political history raised by new schools of history: gender and cultural history, transnational history and new insights arising from breakthroughs in diplomatic and international history. Wendy Pojman explains how gender history and women's history have revolutionised political history by introducing the category of gender and its focus on power relations and on male and female profiles as produced in history according to the political and social context, and by challenging the public-private divide which used to justify the exclusion of women from politics. For his part, Thomas Mergel investigates how the «cultural turn» provided a challenge that deeply impacted on the «world of political history», as he puts it in his paper. In particular, increasing attention to language, symbolism and performance, and the importance of iconography, enable us to discover new ways of studying not just political cultures and identity-building processes, but also institutions and forms of leadership and power. Hartmut Kaelble, by contrast, shows how transnational history comes closer to comparative history than historians have tended to realise. The sterile opposition between approaches that sometimes emerges from the international debate tends to lapse into an ideological clash of attitudes, and this obscures the fact that comparative history not only continues to be a fertile methodological approach, but remains compatible with attention to movement and flows among countries, circulation and transference of models, ideas and persons. In various ways, both comparative and transnational history pose a challenge to nation-state-centred political history, causing the latter to modify its research perspectives, shift its viewpoints, focus on people and not institutions, and ponder the fluidity and varying forms of power. This querying of the centrality of nation-states has also impacted on diplomatic and international history, as Mario Del Pero and Guido Formigoni show: like political history, it has had to cope with a whole series of «turns». Getting away from traditional diplomatic history – what Walter Lafeber sarcastically refers to as «what one clerk told another clerk» – shifts the central focus away from the nation-State onto processes and flows across frontiers and barriers. This makes for a subtler distinction between the «domestic arena» and the «international arena». And not only: as Jason Parker pointed out in an article a few years back, «If “domestic politics” are considered [...] in their fullest dimensions – not just elections and campaigns but political culture and rhetoric, public and partisan opinion, and State policy, power and institutions», then the boundaries between domestic politics and international politics tend to grow less clear-cut; and indeed, «the recent trends in the literature invite attention to “domestic” politics at home and overseas alike»⁵.

What, then, are the new frontiers of political history? How and how far is the impact of/reckoning with «turns» various causing it to change? How can political history go on providing a useful angle of research that helps us grasp global-driven contemporary changes as a

⁵ Jason Parker, *“On Such a Full Sea Are We Now Afloat”: Politics and U.S. Foreign Relations, History Across the Water's Edge*, in «Perspectives on History», May 2011, <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2011/1105/1105for8.cfm>

dimension that does not sweep national statehood away but affects the way we adjust the mechanisms of sovereignty-building and legitimation, and how we reconfigure rights in a given area now that «boundaries» are becoming, not a «limes», but a privileged viewpoint calling for rethinking the relationship between local and global, political cultures and local-national identities?

Does the toolbox of political history provide more interpretive devices than other approaches when it comes to reading our present-day changes? In a way this issue of «Ricerche di storia politica» claims that it does. Precisely because of the profound present-day changes, we believe that political history does ask the right questions as to how power takes shape and moulds relations among people differing in gender, race, ethnic background and religion, as well as between such individuals and institutions; that it can thus provide the Age of Fracture with bearings, adjust the compass setting without losing sight of the coordinates of space and time. This, paradoxically, means refraining from indulging in historical interpretations which tend to focus too centrally on flows and connections and lose sight of context, uniqueness, the reasons why certain events occur at a certain place and time and not others. But that is ground onto which we would like to steer discussion.

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