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Toward a New International History

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Towards a New International History

Abstract

International history as a discipline has a solid and lasting background. This article identifies two aspects of a methodological discussion that has lasted over the years: the first is connected to the broadening of its objects of study; the second concerns the never-ending discussion on how historians' evolving views and perspectives have affected their approach and therefore the nature of the discipline itself. A further challenge, and disciplinary revision, seems to be under way today, as the field grapples with the demand to adopt a more «trans-national» and/or «global» approach. By identifying the opportunities and limits of these changes, the article calls for a «new and mestized international history», founded on some of the most solid elements of its tradition (beginning with the centrality of the State in the structure of international power), but capable of incorporating new approaches that connect the «micro» and «macro» dimensions.

Keywords: *Political History, International History, Global History, Transnational History, State*

The debate on the evolution of international political history has long characterised the historiographical landscape. In recent times, it seems however to have undergone a sort of acceleration. Many have urged we abandon the classical approach based on the study of the relations among States in favour of a richer, multifaceted, «transnational» or «global» approach. The current cultural and historiographical climate seems to challenge the established scholarly tradition and impose radical renovation. We believe, however, that the picture is rather more complex.

1. A solid and lasting background

Few words are needed to remind us that international history has a long-standing pedigree with points of extreme solidity and even nobility. Diplomatic history was one of the components and drivers of the modern codification of the historical method. In the 19th century reflections of Leopold Von Ranke one sees how charting the actions of State leaders, governments and foreign ministries (*Grosse Politik*) formed a crucial field in the codification of a discipline that aimed to reconstruct past events with absolute precision, using solid documentary sources; and in doing so, to make full use of the vast accumulated depository of materials pro-

duced by the bureaucracies in charge of State diplomacy ever since the structure of the modern State consolidated and there formed in parallel a «European system of states»¹.

This tradition of historical research has survived for more than two centuries, along with its oscillating dynamic whereby it can be more or less diverse and ramified, more or less concentrated and specialized. On the one hand, the drive to extreme specialization may produce a very «narrow» version of history, as in «diplomatic» or «juridical» history – which developed in Italy under the peculiar form of the «history of treaties» – thus often conceived as an appendix to International Law. Criticizing this kind of approach, Walter Lafeber effectively ironized on the «what one clerk told another clerk approach»². On the other hand, great historians have always used foreign policy to offer a broad and pervasive representation of the «spirit of an age». In a few instances, the broad horizon of problems and choices that were discussed took on a meaning that was much deeper and broader than the simple discussion of viewpoints espoused by a limited circle of statesmen and bureaucrats. To mention one classic Italian case, Federico Chabod's investigation into the history of Italy's post-unitary foreign policy opened with a volume of «premises» that actually provided a great fresco of cultures and mentalities, passions and material dimensions – in addition to the intentions and thoughts of the country's individual protagonists. In its comprehensive complexity, this made an important contribution to the broader history of Italy³.

What is important to remember here is that the solidity of this tradition, at least during the 20th century, has been frequently criticized and therefore subjected to periodic waves of methodological change. What we are discussing, therefore, is not something entirely new. This demand for innovation stemmed both from the evolution of the objects under investigation and from how the approaches of «diplomatic» historians were affected by deeper historiographical transformations, in turn strongly influenced by national contexts and new scientific dialogue challenging and reaching beyond those contexts. For convenience sake, one may approximately identify two main criticisms in this discussion. The first, and more «objective», pertains to the issues studied, the way this is done, and their meaning; the second, more «subjective», concerns the intellectual environment of the historian, his/her cultural, interpretative, narrative experience along with his/her prejudices and preconceptions.

With regard to the first criticism, the controversy has often focused on the need to broaden the conceptual and methodological horizon of such international historiography. In some cases, this criticism was codified in intense methodological debates, branding the experience of a whole generation of historians. One might mention here the great reflection by Pierre Renouvin – so strongly indebted to the thinking and challenges of the *Annales* school – on the need to examine not only the intentions and deeds of individual actors or statesmen, but to consider specific issues in light of the «deep forces» operating in history (from demography to

¹ Sufficient here to mention E. Di Nolfo, *Prima lezione di storia delle relazioni internazionali*, Bari-Roma, Laterza, 2006, pp. 26ff.

² Quoted in C. Maier, *Marking Time: The History of International Relations*, in «Diplomatic History», 5 (1981), pp. 353-382.

³ F. Chabod, *Storia della politica estera italiana (1870-1896)*, vol. I, *Le premesse*, Bari, Laterza, 1951.

finance, from commerce to collective psychology and «public opinion»⁴. Or, more recently in the fundamental field of Cold War studies, the historian has had to open his/her toolbox to dimensions of ideology and political culture that have forced us to move in completely new directions (history of collective mentalities, political institutions and their machinery, the role of parties and their impact on the organization of political space)⁵. This has been pursued through an interdisciplinary embracing of political science and international relations – often as fruitful as it was partial and frustrating. Path-breaking, in this respect, was the British school of international relations built around scholars like Herbert Butterfield, Martin Wight and Hedley Bull. From the very beginning, this group of scholars proved to be very attentive to the interactions between theory and historiography⁶. In other cases, the stimulus provided by new fields of inquiry and new methodologies has left international history more on the sidelines, marginalized by new trends and approaches (such as the *Annales* broadside against *evenementielle* political history, which ushered in a historiographical vogue that was primarily interested in social issues, and focused on everyday life or collective mentalities). While cross-fertilization seemed possible in some cases, in others international history was considered *passé* and out-of-date. The other critical challenge to tradition derived from the relationship between historiographical practice and the historians' general milieu, the ideology or culture expressed in their works and thus their prejudice, whether conscious or not. From the Rankian claim to «objectivity» (reconstructing the past «*wie es eigentlich gewesen*») the discipline shifted to periodic denunciation of the hidden national or culturally conservative pre-comprehensions that have informed many phases of diplomatic historiography. Not accidentally, Arnold Toynbee long ago proposed we devise a more «ecumenical» history, capable of considering different civilizations in a more respectful and inclusive way, abandoning narrow ethnocentric national frames⁷. On a different front, decades of challenges, more or less absorbed, from theoretical Marxism produced another way of deconstructing the alleged neutrality of historical knowledge, identifying its implicit and explicit elements of «class»⁸.

At the same time, however, such criticisms did not limit, let alone destroy, traditional scholarship, but forced it to define its intellectual underpinnings more clearly. This led to awareness of the existence of a «hermeneutical circle» between research and theory, highlighted for example by Marc Trachtenberg: behind each historical explanation lies a theory; each theory as such is built upon a solid historiographical approach (not simply embellishing itself via oc-

⁴ P. Renouvin, J.B. Duroselle, *Introduction à l'histoire des relations internationales*, Paris, A. Colin, 1991⁴; more recently R. Frank (ed.), *Pour l'histoire des relations internationales*, Paris, Puf, 2012.

⁵ See for example the introductory essays by Odd Arne Westad and David Engerman in the first volume of M. Leffler, O.A. Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War. I: Origins*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010. See also M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power*, vol. IV, *Globalizations, 1945-2012*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

⁶ H. Bull, A. Watson (eds.), *The Expansion of International Society*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 1977.

⁷ Cf. T. Tagliaferri, *Storia ecumenica. Materiali per lo studio dell'opera di Toynbee*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2002.

⁸ M. Perry, *Marxism and History*, New York, Palgrave, 2002; on the Italian case, P. Favilli, *Marxismo e storia. Saggio sull'innovazione storiografica in Italia (1945-1970)*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2006.

casional, and often very fragile, «examples»); each history needs the theoretical framework that the works (and schools) of international relations can define or delineate⁹. Trachtenberg, together with John Gaddis, Robert Jervis and John G. Ikenberry, offers one of the best examples of the major heuristic effort – so central and productive in the Eighties and Nineties – to promote this dialogue between History and International Relations. This effort helped radically renovate the historiography of the Cold War; it produced some of the best works we still have at our disposal, but gradually waned, often falling victim to extreme disciplinary (and sub-disciplinary) specialization¹⁰.

2. New challenges, but not entirely original problems

It appears evident that this periodic renovation of international and diplomatic history often promised more than it delivered. Nevertheless, such debates did not go in vain. International history has progressively evolved and changed, developing a greater, subjective awareness and differentiating and multiplying its fields of inquiry: becoming, in other words, more cognizant of the knowledge, prejudices, fears and ideologies that affect the historian's work, on the one hand, and the need to broaden investigation to the magmatic complexity of human events, on the other; and meanwhile following a consolidated method of historical research. It decisively contributed to the great debates that dictated the tempo of the historiographical conversation – in particular those on periodizing the early modern and modern age, which is impossible to comprehend without considering its international and global dimensions¹¹.

If this long itinerary makes sense, then it becomes possible to examine recent discussions from a less bitter and tense perspective. Even the new challenges that international historians face may perhaps be schematically classified through an analogous dual horizon (objective and subjective).

On the one hand, there is the problem of not excluding from the perspective of future research further dimensions of human life that may not have been entirely neglected in the past but can certainly no longer be overlooked today without cramping our historical understanding. One might mention here the so-called postmodern «cultural turn», which has led to paying specific and overwhelming attention to language, forms of communication and mental changes which have all become part of a world of past «facts» calling for investigation¹². Or one can consider the importance of the modern de-centralization of the role of States, which has given greater value to various studies focusing on key issues and processes unfolding across (and

⁹ M. Trachtenberg, *The Craft of International History. A Guide to Method*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 30-50.

¹⁰ J.L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment. A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1982; M. Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991; R. Jervis, *Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma*, in «Journal of Cold War Studies», 3 (2001), pp. 36-60; J.G. Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001.

¹¹ See for example the impact of the essay by C.S. Maier, *Consigning the Twentieth Century to History. Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era*, in «The American Historical Review», 105 (2000), pp. 807-831.

¹² For a sober assessment, D. Reynolds, *International History, the Cultural Turn and the Diplomatic Twitch*, in «Cultural and Social History», 3 (2006), pp. 75-91.

sometimes above) State borders (intellectual and technological exchanges, human migrations, cultural influences, reciprocal imitations), which lay at the heart, for example, of William McNeill's pioneering work¹³. Or again, the importance of scholarship focusing on international organizations (inter-governmental or non-governmental), which have become a sizable historiographical sub-field in their own right¹⁴. Similarly, one may emphasize the impact of the *second wave* of globalization, which has fuelled a more detailed examination of the links between politics, cultures and economies, towards «global history», which is so careful to incorporate in its analysis connections and nexuses often overlooked by diplomatic history. Here, the historiographical novelties have frequently overlapped with paths that have already been trodden – and academically validated – in the field of *World History* concentrating on long-term dynamics¹⁵.

In this perspective it is surely important to stress how speaking of world or global history does not (and must not) imply proposing a new, totalizing research agenda. It means, on the contrary, developing a heuristic attention to the historical examination of deeper and richer links between the local and the global, cognizant that they are intensely interconnected by a rich web of various forms of interdependence¹⁶. From an even broader perspective, environmental history has connected human agency (and thus international politics) with the natural environment, proposing larger periodization and all-encompassing panoramic visions which, in what some scholars have called *Big History*, coincide with the history of cycles of man's life on earth¹⁷. In such a debate – on the possible (and necessary) scale of historical investigation – reflection on international relations is unavoidable if not crucial. International history must engage today with a global history that seems to offer new opportunities for the kind of micro-historical approach with which international relations have often been reluctant to interact, though it can offer useful insights into the causes and effects of globalization processes over the last few decades¹⁸.

However, as we have previously hinted, certain objections and challenges to the tradition stem from diverse new forms of demystification of the «subjective» assumptions often implicit in traditional scholarship. Criticism of the «Eurocentric» or «Occidental» paradigm has

¹³ W. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963.

¹⁴ A. Iriye, *Global Community. The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World*, Berkeley, The University of California Press, 2004; P. Kennedy, *The Parliament of Man: The Past, Present, and Future of the United Nations*, New York, Penguin, 2006; M. Mazower, *Governing the World. The History of an Idea, 1815 to the Present*, New York, Penguin, 2012; S. Pedersen, *The Guardians. The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2015.

¹⁵ For some excellent reconstructions see L. Di Fiore, M. Meriggi, *World History. Le nuove rotte della storia*, Bari-Roma, Laterza, 2011; D. Olstein, *Thinking History Globally*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015; S. Conrad, *What Is Global History?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016.

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ One may mention here the works of J.R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the 20th Century World*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2000; J. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1997.

¹⁸ On this see the important reflections by F. Trivellato, *Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History*, in «California Italian Studies», 2 (2011), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0z94n9hq>.

been widely adopted by scholars often (but not always) from former colonies¹⁹. Area studies, at least post-1945, have distinguished the history of non-Western/Euro-Atlantic regions and continents, producing knowledge that contested certain facile universalistic assumptions based on the European model (although they themselves have from time to time reproduced hyper-specialized and self-referential fields or put forward arbitrary artificial constructs, historically determined and influenced by certain cultural and geopolitical thinking). An apt example of the difficulties of such scholarship, when isolated from a horizon of interrelations, is provided by Soviet studies during the Cold War, as Artemy Kalinovsky has recently shown, highlighting the persistence of an antiquated and unsettling implicit divide between scholars of Soviet foreign policy and historians who deal with USSR domestic dynamics²⁰.

Polycentrism has, of course, been a key element in this approach. The *spatial turn* has called for more detailed reconstruction of the links between time and space in human history, probing beyond the instinctive idea that certain modern State constructions or colonial legacies constitute immutable realities, whereas they are themselves contingent creatures, albeit important in their internal evolution, to be juxtaposed with other consolidated histories based on very different assumptions and premises²¹. Here too, new scholarship and knowledge has entered the field, challenging falsely «neutral» approaches and trying, for example, to «provincialize Europe»²².

3. The opportunity of a «mestized» perspective

Having said that, it seems reasonable to defend – as David Reynolds does in his short contribution to this same journal – a somehow «mestized» form of «*new international history*». This history should retrieve its transnational characteristics, which are central to the history of the last forty years (Reynolds mentions topics «from international capital markets to global corporations, from peace movements to terrorist networks, from movies and popular music to the internet and the world-wide web»). A history, then, capable of broadening both its methods of research and its objects of inquiry, while preserving some of its foundational elements, especially its attention to the nature, use, projection and effects of Power, the analysis of which remains central to the study of international relations²³. This is partly due to the fact that after decades of philosophical, historical and political debates on the decadence and «crisis» of the modern State, we are still very far from any real dissolution of it when it comes to forms of control

¹⁹ R.C. Young, *Postcolonialism. An Historical Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001; S. Mezzadra, *La condizione postcoloniale. Storia e politica nel presente globale*, Verona, Ombre corte, 2008.

²⁰ A. Kalinovsky, *The Cold War and the Historiography of the Soviet Union*, in «Ricerche di storia politica», 18 (2016), pp. 295-300.

²¹ See for example the introductory overview in K. Pomeranz, *Spazi regionali nella storia del mondo*, in P. Capuzzo, E. Vezzosi (eds.), *Traiettorie della «World History»*, in «Contemporanea», 8 (2005), pp. 115-120.

²² D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008².

²³ D. Reynolds, *Turn, turn, turn....*, in «Ricerche di storia politica», 18 (2016), pp. 265-268.

of everyday life or the machinery of world governance. The State and its actions definitely need placing within a more complex frame, including a greater plurality of actors and subjects than in the past; however, excessively de-centring the meaning and weight of statehood, we believe, can lead to an impasse, where many contemporary dynamics would become almost incomprehensible.

One notes how the Italian tradition, as thoroughly described in Antonio Varsori's study, has only partly been affected by these changes. Varsori identifies some of the most innovative paths in the interactions between historians of international relations and historians of the US and the Cold War, in the new trends – led by René Girault – on the history of European integration, in the original new interplay between domestic and international factors in the history of the early Italian republic, and, finally, in recent works on international organizations²⁴. In this context, a younger generation – as Giuliano Garavini clearly proves with his autobiographical reminiscences – is trying to absorb the stimuli driven by events and suggestions connected to modern globalization, including its «darker» and more problematic aspects²⁵.

The publishing market is, again, offering unequivocal signals. The translation by Einaudi of the exacting *A History of the World* edited by Akira Iriye and Jürgen Osterhammel, co-published by Belknap-Harvard University Press and Beck in Germany²⁶, is a positive sign of this broadening of horizons, both for the magnitude of the project and the richness and originality of many (but not all) of the essays included. In most of these, attention to the relational dimension of power combines with an invitation to insert international relations within «containers» differing from the traditional ones (this is particularly true of the most original contribution by John McNeill and Peter Engelke on the environment).

It behoves us, nevertheless, to be wary of fashion and certain caricatures of the new methods and approaches that this global turn seems to be imposing. It is relatively easy to avoid the «totalizing» misunderstanding that lurks beneath the label «global history»: manifestly it is impossible for one author or group of researchers to assemble in their analysis a comprehensive plurality of cultural, linguistic, social, ethnic and political phenomena. Even leaving aside the monumental erudition needed to produce such *global history*, historians have to reckon with the immense problem of the huge archival asymmetries that exist today. The great risk is of gradually eclipsing that distinctive mark of historical research: careful philological assessment of primary sources²⁷.

One more elusive temptation is to study local and global links through a monographic perspective. Distinctions here are crucial: such an approach can be very fruitful where the

²⁴ A. Varsori, *Dalla storia delle relazioni internazionali alla storia globale? Il caso italiano fra tradizione e cauta innovazione*, in *ibidem*, pp. 269-283.

²⁵ G. Garavini, *Storia internazionale e storia globale: differenze e contaminazioni*, in *ibidem*, pp. 285-294.

²⁶ The volumes published so far are E.S. Rosenberg (ed.), *A World Connecting: 1870-1945*, Cambridge (Ma.)-London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012; A. Iriye (ed.), *Global Interdependence. The World after 1945*, Cambridge (MA)-London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014. The Italian translations appeared for the publisher Einaudi in 2014 and 2015.

²⁷ See the reflections in *AHR Conversation How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History*, in «American Historical Review», 117 (2013), pp.1431-1472 and K. Pomeranz, *Histories for a Less National Age*, in «American Historical Review», 118 (2014), pp. 1-22.

interplay between the two dimensions – the micro and the macro; the local and the global – helps to better understand complex historical processes, by highlighting important turning-points, which can symbolise and represent a season or an era²⁸. But such an approach would be much less fruitful if it reflected the complacent illusion that all we need do is study the experience of an environment, a character, a specific technological or economic practice (preferably «excluded» or «subaltern»), across different worlds, and in so doing we have explained an epoch! There is a serious risk of seeing a multiplication of largely irrelevant monographic studies. As always it is *how* research is done that makes the difference: which makes it vital we monitor and discuss that «how».

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²⁸ Among the many examples, see F. Trivellato, *Fondamenta dei vetrai: lavoro, tecnologia e mercato a Venezia tra Sei e Settecento*, Roma, Donzelli, 2000; Ead., *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009; T. Andrade, *A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys, and a Warlord: Towards a Global Microhistory*, in «Journal of World History», 21 (2010), pp. 573-591.