

H-Diplo ESSAY 217

Essay Series on Learning the Scholar's Craft: Reflections of Historians and International Relations Scholars

17 April 2020

Mindset, Training and Serendipity

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E217>

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I went to college in 1972 and I had no idea I would eventually specialize in history. I had grown up in families with a decent, though not high, degree of education. My mother and my grandmothers were well-read, the men less so. To all of them, the intellectual world was a fascinating but distant one, and they had a reverential respect for it. In the upward mobility ethos that defined urban middle class (and working-class!) life in 1950s and 1960s Italy, I was brought up to imagine no other future for me but a professional one based on university education. I was not too proficient in the hard sciences, though, and my struggle with math was a hopeless one. Thus, I enrolled in a four-year degree in Humanities, which at the time meant primarily Literature, Philosophy and History, at the University of Torino.

We were fairly free to choose the courses we liked, and therefore to prioritize one disciplinary area upon the others, but we were also supposed to take a broad range of subjects. What really mattered was the choice of topic for the final, book-length thesis. Thus, one could hop around for two or three years, and then make a firm, binding choice. I quickly realized that my interests and mind-set were far more attuned to a historical approach. I found philosophy too abstract and literary criticism too remote from the current issues I was passionate about, even though I enjoyed some engaging and enlightening classes in both fields.

After all, history was the language I was most accustomed to. The long post-war boom had nurtured a public lexicon fashioned by basic notions derived from sociology, economics, and psychology. Yet, both the public and private spheres were still dominated by historical concepts, analogies, myths, and memories. Throughout my childhood, family conversations and friendly gatherings resonated with countless personal stories of World War II, which was also ever-present in the films I saw. Wehrmacht occupiers and Anglo-American liberators, evil Nazis and resistance fighters populated my mental and emotional landscape. Fascism and anti-fascism were the key currency of public and private debate. Communism and anti-Communism, revolution and democracy dominated the media and coloured the urban aesthetic of posters and graffiti.

Besides, the university and Italian society at large were still steeped in the cultural and political conflicts that originated in the late 1960s. In the early to mid-1970s, mass mobilization was still the order of the day in factories, schools, local communities. As a New Left activist, I did not consider my studies primarily as a path to a professional future. I rather assumed that it had to provide responses to the questions emerging from the societal struggles I felt we were engaged in

Thus, what attracted me most was modern and contemporary history. I remember classes on the industrial revolution and labor history, on the French revolution, on the rise of fascism, on European socialism and Russian Communism. Usually stimulating and challenging (but occasionally also stodgy and dull) they spelled the stages of my formal education in the categories and conventions of a loosely Marxist approach to history. However, I was too steeped in my generation's massive exposure to, and conflicting fascination with, American culture to remain focused on the tragedies of European and Italian history. From the received wisdom on America's positive, decisive role in the Second World War, and from my own negative views of the Vietnam war, I derived an urge to explore the goals, modes, and rationale of U.S. international power. From my

increasingly disillusioned questions about class politics and Socialism (whose public appeal was clearly far more limited than radical mobilization had led us to believe) I wanted to understand how capitalism shaped public values and nurtured a substantial, though far from universal, democratic consent. When I found a small group of dedicated, unconventional, and most welcoming scholars of the U.S. (Gian Giacomo Migone, Maurizio Vaudagna, Aldo Lanza) I decided on a thesis under their supervision and threw my lot with “American history,” as it was then called.

Our library had a good collection of U.S. journals on political science, industrial relations, and labor issues. Thus, after toiling there for a few months, I managed to stitch together a decent, though uneven, lop-sided and no doubt very raw, account of the main ideas and institutional arrangements that presided over attempts to promote collaborative industrial relations for the sake of national economic mobilization during World War I. My focus was on the peculiarity (from a European perspective) of the American Federation of Labor’s ‘business unionism,’ and I was discovering that my desire to understand ‘why there is no Socialism in the United States’ had a well-established and highly reputable intellectual pedigree.

The thesis got high marks and my mentors found a local publishing house that was ready to offer me a contract for a book. History books, even narrowly focused monographs, were still selling rather well at the time, and the advance I got was enough to support a three-month research trip to Washington, D.C., for a stint in the archives. Even more fortunate was the invitation I received to join a group of European and U.S. scholars summoned by German historian Dirk Hoerder to a symposium in Bremen, in late 1978, on American labor history. There I met junior and senior scholars (I remember David Brody and Alan Dawley, in particular), had my first direct experience of a ‘field,’ and began to realize that my work—even though I was utterly inexperienced and very naïve—could relate to broader research efforts pursued by far more robust and intellectually rigorous scholars.

However, turning into a full-time researcher was no easy task. Italian universities did not yet have Ph.D. programmes at the time, and the entry-level assistant professor jobs were temporarily frozen after ten years of precipitous expansion. Thus, I did my twelve-month compulsory military service and then took up emergency teaching in high schools, while labouring through my archival notes to upgrade my thesis to a proper book.

A first breakthrough came in 1981-1982, when an Italian Research Council scholarship enabled me to spend a year in the United States. I was just starting a new project that began with a focus on U.S. trade unions’ Cold War activism and soon expanded to the broader Marshall-Plan effort to remodel industrial relations in post-war Europe. I went to Yale where, in between short trips to the archives in Washington and New York, I had the privilege to work with David Montgomery and join his outstanding research seminar. There I learnt that U.S. labor history had many conflicting aspects; that most of the established scholars and virtually all of the younger ones were engaged in ‘bottom-up’ social and cultural history; and that my institutional focus on union leaders and the government-labor nexus was therefore unfashionably peripheral to a fast changing field. Yet, David’s immense knowledge and astute suggestions, together with the pointed yet friendly criticism I received within his seminar, were of immense help to enhance my project and contextualize it in different, rich historiographical fields.

Back to Italy with clearer ideas and still chaotic boxes of xeroxes and notes, I once again divided my time between teaching history to high school pupils (particularly in evening classes for working students) and pursuing my scholarship. The prospect of an academic career did not need to be ruled out, but the weak labor market made it truly unpredictable. I was encouraged to hang on, though, by a lively, welcoming band of ‘Americanists’ who coalesced in workshops and conferences throughout Italy. Established historians like Tiziano Bonazzi, Bruno Cartosio, and Anna Maria Martellone, and younger ones like Nando Fasce, Arnaldo Testi, and Elisabetta Vezzosi were not only practicing but actively promoting U.S. history in a national academic context that still largely focused on the history of Italy or, at most, of Western Europe. Thus, we felt we were internationalizing and renovating an introverted academe, and that wildly outsized self-perception sustained us in spite of our diminishing but still substantial marginality.

For me, a second, crucial breakthrough came in 1984 when Italian universities – finally convinced to adopt the Ph.D. model - launched their first doctoral programmes. I was admitted to a modern history one run jointly by the universities of Bologna, Padova, and Torino, which had some of the best history departments in the country. In the first year I was exposed

to, and indeed absorbed by, wide ranging seminars on the historiography of modern Germany, Japan, Latin America, and of course Italy, but also on economic and diplomatic history. After that, I was left to my own devices, since supervision was conceived, or at least practiced, as a very distant, cursory, almost perfunctory check on what I was doing. I was fairly happy with such an arrangement, though, since the faculty had no specialist on my topic, and I felt I had enough experience to organize my own research.

Most importantly, I had another fundamental venue where to test, expand, and improve my scholarly approach. Within days after my admission to the doctoral programme, I received another letter granting me a fellowship at the European University Institute in Florence. I did not know much about the EUI, which had been set up only in 1976, except that British economic historian Alan S. Milward was conducting cutting-edge research on European post-Second World War reconstruction. When I got there, I found out that he had gathered a lively cohort of doctoral and post-doctoral students, from all over (Western) Europe, who were investigating Europe's reconstruction and integration policies. We were all working on archival materials that were just coming to light, due to the 'thirty-year rule,' and we all felt that systematically cross-referencing our findings in the British, French, German, Dutch or U.S. records was opening up a truly new vista on the remaking of Western Europe, its internal and international integration, and its post-war momentous transformations. Moreover, unlike in the Italian universities I was used to, there were funds that could be used to bring over the key scholars working in the field. Thus, the weekly seminar and ad hoc workshops allowed us to systematically engage with such diverse historians as Werner Abelshauser, John Gimbel, Michael J. Hogan, Charles S. Maier, Michel Margairaz, Herman van der Wee, and Vera Zamagni. In the mid-1980s, Milward's seminar operated as a genuine hub for international historical research on the post-war structuring of European and trans-Atlantic 'interdependence' (the defining concept for many of those studies).

I felt from the very beginning that such a stimulating crossroads of scholarship was the most helpful and congenial place to conduct my work. My focus expanded from the intentions and plans of U.S. actors to their interactions with their European counterparts (in unions and governments), embracing the tensions and dilemmas inherent to national reconstruction policies and diverse traditions of labor relations. In particular, I piggybacked—as many others did at the time—on Charles S. Maier's concept of "the politics of productivity"¹ to broaden my approach from Cold War labor policies to the political economy of international reconstruction. Milward's friendly, challenging, and always thought-provoking stewardship nudged me towards a more rigorous approach to sources, a broader consideration of diverse historiographical contributions, a more meaningful set of research questions, and a more ambitious 'interpretative framework' (a symptomatic set phrase of those times). Above all, his example and influence dragged me out of a purely U.S. viewpoint to a larger focus on international (and also transnational, as we would say today) interactions.

Thus, by 1987 I managed to conclude my Ph.D. and was happy to move to the Department of Economic History at the London School of Economics, as a research associate with Alan's evolving project on the history of European integration. There I started to deal more directly with issues concerning the origins of the European Economic Community, particularly labor migration policies and relations with the U.S. and the broader trans-Atlantic sphere. I also had my first full-fledged experience of university teaching, with an MA course on twentieth century international economy and, soon thereafter, classes on European integration history at the College of Europe in Bruges.

I then realized – much to my relief - that the previous tension between the pursuit of scholarship and the need to make a living, between vocation and necessity, could finally be solved. Though still employed on short-term temporary contracts, I no longer felt as a trainee in the historian's craft, but rather as an early career scholar whose learning curve would obviously continue (as it always does for us all, and this is our job's greatest benefit) but whose role and trajectory had ceased to be in question. In 1992, I was hired by the University of Bologna as associate professor in the Department of History. Teaching became an integral part of my scholarly life, providing a most welcome daily test of the ideas and concepts that my research was bringing up, and a constantly refreshing exchange with young men and women with different experiences, background,

¹ Charles S. Maier, "The Politics of Productivity: Foundations of American International Economic Policy after World War II", in *International Organization*, XXXI, 4 (1977): 607-633.

and views. Thereafter, my career followed the (relatively) predictable path of the tenured scholar. I moved to the University of Firenze as full professor in 2000, and in 2010 I was offered the chair on the history of Post-War European Cooperation and Integration at the European University Institute, where I am now.

As I hope this brief account makes clear, I see chance and serendipity as playing a considerable role in the early stages of my education and career. One type of fellowship rather than a different one (or none!) can send you to very different destinations, just like a railroad switch. The fortunate encounter with an inspiring scholar or group - at the right moment - can accelerate, influence or even bend an intellectual trajectory. After all, we operate within a collective system of scholarship, with multiple and incessantly changing gravitational fields. Yet, personal background, culture, interests, and mindset matter, as they channel your work and delineate strands of continuity over time. In my case, I worked on U.S. labor history and then European reconstruction and integration issues. I then moved on to U.S. foreign policy, Cold War issues, and trans-Atlantic relations. In more recent years, I have dealt with international economic governance in the 1970s, the external relations of the European Community, and the Socialist regimes' interaction with the West during détente.

Within the terms in use at the time of my training, these strands would probably have been defined as historical inquiries in the international political economy of the Euro-American sphere. In current terms, I find myself at home in conversations pertaining to the history of internationalism, trans-national history, the history of globalization and, perhaps, the new history of capitalism. I can see the connecting tissue that links the various strands of my research, although with increasing distance and variations overtime. I can also still see the connection (albeit ever looser) with my initial interests and queries. However, I would not be too surprised if an external reader instead saw a disorderly jumble.

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