

Fulbright Distinguished Lecturers Alumni Meeting November 15-16, 2015 – International Rome Global Gateway

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Acting as discussant of contributions so diverse in scope and style is not an easy task. This is why, rather than addressing each contribution in detail by pretending to be an expert in every field, I will describe my reactions to what I have heard, keeping in mind the four issues that the Fulbright committee brought to our attention: 1) the state of international cooperation in research; 2) our experiences in the USA and the lessons to be learned; 3) the role of interdisciplinarity; and 4) a comparison between the two academic systems.

Vito Zagario from University of Roma Tre, with *American Sniper and American Wars*, offered a cinematic presentation of the power of images in Hollywood movies, to send strong, political messages to the audience. It reminded me of a declaration made by a chief executive officer of the show biz in USA, after the Supreme Court recent regulation in favor of gay marriage. The sentence passed with 4 vs. 3 votes, the difference being made by a conservative judge. The CEO attributed this result to the cultural change instilled day by day by the Hollywood industry in the minds of the average American. According to the CEO, bringing into people's homes the many changes happening in everyday life, such as gender issues through TV series, would help public opinion become more accustomed and more tolerant toward new behaviors, once defined scandalous. Such an educational use of mass media is not as evident in Italian cultural production where the attitude to portrait reality as it is rather than how it should be, sometimes with a cynical tone of resignation or complaint, is the norm.

Marina Calloni from University of Milan-Bicocca, with *Rethinking the Polis: from national belonging to global responsibility*, brought to our attention the need for interdisciplinary discourse. In fact the Humanities – in her opinion – include the subject matters that might help to transform the *clash of civilizations* in a *dialogue among civilizations*. In turn, such a dialogue will be able to extend the radius of national belonging, and transform it to global responsibility. Her argument made me think back to the previous session (Political Science I), where professor

Daniele Checchi stressed the prominence of quantitative methods in social science, a prominence due - in his opinion - mainly to economic research. His thesis sounded to me a little bit apologetic, biased toward economics. I tend to agree more with professor Calloni and the need for interdisciplinary discourse. In fact, taking for example the case of cultural economics, many prominent economists today such as Tabellini, Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales, introduced cultural factors (such as religion, institutions and the like) in their econometric models, after the seminal work of a political scientist, Ronald Inglehart (1996), who at University of Michigan in Ann Arbor has collected the widest archive of opinion data in the world, called *World Values Survey*. Such an archive spans 25 years (1990-2015) and 95 countries, representative of the 85% of the world population. Thanks to his pioneering approach, nowadays economists have become more prone to interdisciplinary discourse than before, and their analysis, consequently, have become more pregnant and predictive.

Here is where the recollection of my first encounter with professor Inglehart sheds some light to issue n. 2 of the Fulbright committee: i.e. the lessons we learned from our American experience. I recall having spent six months of my first stay as Fulbright scholar at University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, elaborating a theoretical model of the values and attitudes that promote economic growth. Then I flew to Ann Arbor and I met with professor Inglehart to submit my thesis to his evaluation. He looked admired by my presentation, but then he asked me: "How do you test your theoretical ideas?" Stimulated by that challenging question, I produced an article published by *The Journal of Socio-Economics* in 2004, which was the first example of cultural economics published by an Italian scholar. But, more than that, the episode was to me a perfect example of the difference existing between Italy and USA in the methodological approach to socio-economic research. Whereas Italians are masters in discussions and theoretical speculation, the pragmatic American prefer to test his/her ideas, before proceeding with further speculations. From then on, I tend to do both: having a strong and clear hypothesis, and applying a good methodology with the right data to test it. In my opinion pragmatism helps to avoid an ideological approach, and gives openness and flexibility to socio-economic theory.

Carlo Mongardini from Sapienza University in Rome, with his contribution *Post-parliamentary democracy*, introduced the up-to-date issue of the relationship existing between civic culture and institutions. He stressed the role played by civic culture in the US in supporting the strength of institutions. Such an argument reminded me of the classic work by Almond and Verba (1963) on

The Civic Culture: political attitudes and democracy in five countries, where the two authors explain Italian political instability by the relative lack of civic culture. In other words, democratic institutions do not work as well in Italy as in the Anglo-Saxon world, because of the lack of political and civic culture in the population at large. The argument goes like this: when civic and political culture are low, people are at the mercy of demagogues, and institutions are weak and instable. From the standpoint of issue n. 2 of the Fulbright themes (i.e. the lessons we learned from our American experience), Almond and Verba's observation may be linked, at least in part, to the transmission of culture through generations, i.e. the teaching styles which I observed in the two countries: the American professor is generally driven by capturing the attention of students in order to instill in them knowledge in the plainest possible way, whereas the Italian professor is generally driven by impressing the students with her/his exoteric language, no matter how much the students may understand of it. On the other side of the coin, when it comes to verify the competence reached by students, the American professor will administer proficiency tests every week, making sure that students keep up with what she/he is going to explain next week. While in the Italian system, students are expected to take exams only one month after classes end. The result of this difference is like in the joke about the former Soviet Union: Italian professors and students pretend to work and the state pretends to remunerate them. Besides, civic culture does not take off.

Aide Esu from Università degli Studi di Cagliari, with her contribution *Governing the borders, bodies and lives*, addresses another up-to-date issue: the theme of political violence in contemporary world. She maintains that this is a violent century. "Violence is a structural part of contemporaneity," I read in my notes. Contemporaneity is certainly marked by political and ethnic violence, and if we give to contemporaneity the meaning of time dimension, we may conclude that violence is a contemporary phenomenon. But from an epistemological point of view, violence can be better defined as a residual, conditioned reflex of antique habits of conflict resolution, more than a modern praxis. As Samuel Huntington put it: "Modernity is desired, but modernization is painful". That means that while every nation aspires to obtain the level of consumption of the industrialized world, not all of them is willing to abandon those old habits and beliefs that modernization implies. This is why cultural clash may become the origin of contemporary conflict, unless the whole world takes an illuminist stance of abolishing political discriminations based on ethnicity or religion. From my experience of having spent 5 years of the

last 25 of my life working in the US, I believe that Europe may learn from the US a lot in terms of multicultural environment and the so called “melting pot”, since that country started deliberately an immigration policy, while Europe is only undergoing an unexpected and sometimes unwelcome demographic phenomenon, which is the immigration wave from East and South.

Daniela Parisi from Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, with her contribution *Rockefeller philanthropy and pioneering of specialization in the USA*, addresses another important theme, which constitutes a characteristic divide between American and Italian society: the incidence and width of scope of elite’s philanthropy. Corporate philanthropy in the US enhances overall corporate image, improves relations with political stakeholders, and fosters brand recognition. However, this practice is not widespread among Italian corporations, to put it mildly. Only recently, sporadic episodes of Italian philanthropy witness of a possible change in attitudes. In my experience of visiting scholar in American universities, I have benefited from such a philanthropic attitude indirectly. I was awarded a fellowship by the *Cultural Change Institute*, hosted by the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in the Greater Boston area, in 2010 and 2011, which resulted in an article entitled *The Traditions of Modernity*, published by *The Journal of Socio-Economics* in 2013. That institute, in turn, had been funded by John Templeton Foundation from 2007 to 2010. Without this Foundation, my experience in American Universities would have been limited to the Fulbright experience. This reminds me of another important role of the Fulbright fellowships. They may be used by foreign professors to activate professional networks during their American stay as Fulbrighters.

In turn, this brings me to another American academic custom which is rarely found in Italian academy: the openness of American professors to foreign colleagues and a sincere curiosity for their work. I was able to write letters to important scholars, who invited me to give a talk in their Universities, which resulted in collaborations. On the contrary, generally speaking, in the Italian academy networking is still ruled by paternalistic criteria of fidelity to the main theoretical schools, rigidly segregated from one another.

Finally, I would like to share some thoughts on issue n. 3 requested by the Fulbright committee for our meeting: the interdisciplinary approach. I am a development economist, who went to the US to study sociology and anthropology, because I believe that development is a multidisciplinary enterprise by definition. In my experience, however, interdisciplinary discourse is rare on both sides of Atlantic. Italians scholars are more prone toward transdisciplinary discourse, which is the

effort of a single individual to trespass her/his own disciplinary boundaries, to capture other dimensions of the phenomenon object of the study. Americans, on the contrary, prefer specialization, so it is rare to find individual researchers able and flexible enough to engage in transdisciplinary discourse. However, Americans are better fit to team-work, so that interdisciplinary research, when pursued among specialists, is more effective than the Italian one. From my experience this is still a rare event, even in America. And that is a pity, because I am convinced that without interdisciplinary approach, social sciences are destined to go nowhere. In conclusion, I believe that our meeting was a success because of the style of interaction and the chance to meet Italian colleagues which shared the same experience. I wish there would be other, more structured, opportunities to continue to foster interdisciplinary and international discourse.