

“American Lessons”: Interdisciplinarity, Multimediality, Diachronic Analysis

di Michela Minesso

Three words may summarize some of the many positive aspects of my U.S. experience as Fulbright Visiting Professor at the Northwestern University of Chicago: Interdisciplinary, Multimediality and Diachronic Analysis. These words are also by themselves three possible fields of comparison on the way of doing History and on the profession of Historian between Italy and the U.S.

Thinking back to my experience in the U.S. I feel compelled to start from the word “multimediality”, meaning the diffusion and the availability of multimedia tools to support research and teaching. A significant example may be represented in this case by the Northwestern University Library, where I spent many enjoyable hours, working on my researches and preparing my classes. This library represents very well the American concept of an academic library. It is located at the centre of the University Campus, is open for six days a week, offers a wide variety of services, not least the delivery of books to one’s personal office. Items are freely available to consult and each scholar, but also any student of the university, has the possibility to immediately duplicate the parts he is interested into, because near his desk there is the necessary equipment. In addition, the library offers an incredible corpus of already digitalized materials; for example entire historical collections of newspapers and magazines coming from all over the world. The existence itself of a library such as this has an immediate and direct impact on the times, the completeness and the productivity of the research.

From these first considerations we can sketch a first comparison between Italy and the U.S. The principal conclusion, that is almost obvious, is that we cannot avoid to underline the gap, that is still present, between the two realities concerning the conditions in which the research activity is carried on. That is partially due, and we know it very well, to the fact that Italian most important

libraries are generally located in historical buildings, of high artistic value, that constrain the space available and, therefore, for example, do not allow for an open shelf system.

Some could say, however, that this particular problem may be solved with a digitalization of the catalogue of each library. This is, of course, true and on this particular aspect the comparison between Italy and the U.S. is less negative. Our country, in fact, even if with some difficulties also related to the availability of funds, has started that path and in some of our universities or Historical Institutes a large share of the catalogue is available also in digital format. Another interesting example is represented by the gradual growth of the *open source* systems, that despite rather new, is already established in several research centres. A last example may come from my own research field: history. In effect significant efforts have been devoted recently to the project “Archivi del 900”, that aims to make available online the archives of the most important institutions for the study of the contemporary age, starting from the Central National Archive (Archivo Centrale dello Stato).

Also concerning the teaching, Italy has greatly improved in the availability of instruments and facilities to support the lecturer, even if the gap with the U.S. is still significant. We do not have, for example, facilities such as the “Projection room” of the Northwestern library, a room with dedicated staff and a vast collection of movies and documentaries, but, however, in the day by day activities the two systems are relatively similar. American students are used to study with the help schemes and images presented in PPT presentations during lectures; in addition they can count on additional materials uploaded on a dedicated online platform. Similarly, students in Italy and in Milan are now used to follow lectures supported by the presentation of slides and use digital platforms such as Ariel. Finally, as I was able to verify myself, Italian and U.S. students show the same interest for the archive materials proposed during lectures, such as the movies of the Italian “Luce Institute”, that, generally, raise a rich debate.

Therefore, to reach a conclusion on this point, in the availability of technical and technological instruments to support research and teaching, Italy is still far from the American standards. It is also true, however, that our country has already set the path to fill this gap

especially if we consider in the historical research the work done regarding oral and visual sources (another very important example is constituted by the so called “Teche Rai”).

Considering the interconnection between different fields of study, I believe that the wide availability of sources of different types (images, documents, videos, etc.) had a primary role in helping the development of the cross-disciplinary approach that is typical of the U.S. This type of approach is at the core of the scientific debate between scholars, as I could verify personally participating at seminars and conferences organized by the Northwestern University and other academic institutions.

To make an example, we can think at the series of conferences organized by the Chabraja Center for Historical Studies of the Northwestern, a very rich moment of scientific debate with perspectives from different fields. The cycle was organized with monthly meetings about themes that differed for historical period, geographic area, types of sources and methodology used. It was focused on themes of American and European history between the late medieval period and the modern and contemporary age. We addressed problems of methodology (for example, the ‘modalities’ and the categories of historical research or the use of new types of sources), we confronted different fields of study from Political History to Social Sciences, from Literature to the History of Art, for example discussing themes related to: the French Revolution, the history of Native Americans, the lifestyle of the English Bourgeoisie during Industrialization, the leisure time in the XXth century Europe.

Similarly happened at the conferences promoted by the French and Italian Department, where the discussion between scholars coming from different fields (history, literature, philosophy) was ordinary, also for the nature of the institution itself.

Concerning Interdisciplinarity, which conclusions can we get from the comparison between the two sides of the Atlantic? On this topic, I believe, there are the major differences between Italy and the U.S. In our country it is not only rare that scholars from different backgrounds discuss the same themes, but are also present divisions between researchers of the same field of study. An

example may be represented by the difficulties with which historians of medieval, modern and contemporary age work together. Certainly, these divisions are the result of the different traditions of the disciplines, connected with their origin and development in Italy. Of course, we have also to consider that there are indicators of a change in this trend, also in our country, where now exist initiatives to connect researchers and different disciplines with common topics. I have organized some of them myself on the themes of Welfare and of the technical élites. But that kind of initiatives is still limited and the road ahead is long. The differences with the American reality are significant on that point, but, nevertheless, the comparison with the U.S. should push toward that direction.

To the diffusion of Interdisciplinary we should link also another difference between the U.S. and Italy: the way in which scientific discussion takes place. In America conferences, seminars and other informal meetings are organized frequently throughout the year, more often than what happens in Italy. They give the possibility of a more “practical” analysis on the theme of interest, introduced by one or two speakers, that give rise to an authentic debate between the scholars present. This is the real qualifying aspect of these meetings; the debate allows a real exchange of scientific experiences and points of view that is enriched by the contribution of every participant. Clearly, it is true that seminar series have been adopted also by our academic and research system. However, in Italy, the communication of research results is mostly carried on by the more formal type of meeting represented by the ‘congress of study’. Also in this case, I speak for direct experience. Our congresses, even if they generally are of great scientific level, end without a real debate. The discussion, in a sense, is unidirectional, confined to the report of the findings. Therefore, concerning Interdisciplinary, I believe that the two systems are still different, at least in my field of study.

I want to conclude on a final point, of great interest to me, concerning History in particular. It is the specific attention devoted in the U.S. for the diachronic dimension of historical analysis. It is as if History in U.S., while on one hand is opening to a more interdisciplinary approach, on the

other struggles to maintain a deep connection with its roots, treasuring the diachronic dimension that represents the most characterizing aspect of historical analysis. As mentioned before, the activities promoted by the Chabraja Center is really exemplary also in this case. This approach, that is absolutely evident in the American experience more generally, is not to be taken as granted in Italy. But in any case, I believe that is necessary to valorise it also in our country, especially in the study of Contemporary History. It is not a mystery that researchers of Contemporary History, the youngest between the historical sciences, have been often tempted to avoid the confrontation with previous ages to, somehow, protect their own temporal area. It is also true that this is much less common now than in the past, when it caused probably also some limitations to the scientific analysis. However, overcoming too tight temporal borders, as the American experience can show us, improves the quality of the discipline. And, therefore, in my opinion must be considered one of the main “American Lessons”. Similarly, a more aware use of the new media and a more interdisciplinary approach would be of great help to History and Humanities in order to reaffirm themselves inside and outside the Academia.

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