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International History at the EUI:

An Interview with Professor Federico Romero by Frank Gerits

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Why did you start writing international history?

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My initial work, in the late 1970s, was on US labour unions' participation in industrial mobilization during World War I. In America and elsewhere, labour history was being transformed by a bottom-up social history approach that turned the field – at least for a few years – into a very lively one. I was attracted by this renewal but was also interested in issues of political economy, of the broad transformations of capitalism in the 20th century. My main interest was in the rise of Fordism as the triumphant mode of capitalism in the 20th century and particularly in the patterns of social and political bargaining that turned it, after the New Deal and World War II, into an engine for growth and democratic stabilization. I was at first focused on its American core and its peculiar, uneven and unstable triangular relationship between state, business and labour.

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What did you find particularly intriguing about international history? Was the international dimension immediately clear in your work?

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I am trained as an Americanist, was very happy to be one, and defined myself as such, but I must have been motivated from the very beginning by questions that touched much closer to my home ground. And that was Italy, where I grew up and did most of my training. They also touched upon post-war Europe, which at the time meant Western Europe, in many ways "Atlantic" Europe. My second project addressed the Marshall Plan as the promoter of an American model of industrial relations in Italy and Europe. I was looking at US labour unions as agents of cultural as well as political transformations – or at least attempted transformations – of the political economy of post-war Europe.[1] In today's terms we would perhaps label it as trans-national history, given its focus on non-state actors and circulation of ideas. At the time, though, I saw it at the intersection of international history (we still used to call it diplomatic history, although more and more people were unsatisfied with such a narrow definition) and the history of political economy. So, the international dimension was certainly there, and rapidly became more relevant to me. A low-key, unacknowledged comparative dimension was also part of the mix. But it was not yet international history in a fully-fledged and self-conscious way. That came soon after, though, as I moved from reconstruction to the history of European integration and then to Cold War history.

[1] Federico Romero: The United States and the European Trade Union Movement 1944-1951, Chapel Hill 1993.

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Your current work on European integration brought you to the EUI in 2010. What is unique about international history at the EUI Department of History and Civilization?

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I do not think the History Department (HEC) at EUI is unique in the way we define or approach international history. In this respect it is not dissimilar from most of the leading history departments in other universities. But it is unique for its peculiar institutional structure, which affects practice, and this makes a difference, a big difference also in intellectual terms.

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We certainly don't see international history as purely diplomatic history, not at all. None of us teaches or writes in that fashion and as a department we are in fact very far from a diplomatic history approach. Like many historians in this fast changing and expanding field, we are seeking to integrate cultural, social, ethnic, economic, and gender issues into a broad understanding of processes of international change. Politics, strategy, and diplomacy are obviously part of it but neither our seminars nor our research activities look at them isolated from context, cultural configurations, and the agency of non-diplomatic actors. We simply don't do diplomatic history as such. We have a keen focus – in many ways a priority interest – on transnational dynamics and global processes of change. Even those who, like me, work more closely with the policy and state dimension of international history, do not study it in a vacuum, nor conceive of it in opposition to other approaches. In fact, our seminars deliberately tend to compare and confront, but also mix and amalgamate, global, transnational and international history. And so do many, if not most, of the individual research projects that HEC doctoral students are engaged in. We are not so much interested in drawing sub-disciplinary boundaries, with self-limiting definitions, as in exploring their various points of intersection, and pursuing the fruitful interactions they can give life to, epistemologically as well as empirically.

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The historian Matthew Connelly has indicated that for him the biggest problem of American international history is that it is "overwhelmingly white and male" and it should be "larger and more diverse". You seem to suggest that the EUI is able to amend this problem. What do you think about the pluralistic character of the History Department of the EUI? The mission statement of the history department reads: "Plurality, diversity and dialogue are key words within the Department of History and Civilization".[2]

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As I said, we are helped in breaching boundaries by our structure. We have a wholly international faculty and a student body recruited all over Europe (and to a limited extent – much too limited, in fact – also outside Europe). Without undergraduate courses, we do not have to have a large faculty with several single-country specialists. Each of us brings a specialization – whether comparative, transnational, international – that cuts across boundaries, and so do all our ongoing research projects as well as most of those pursued by

[2] History and Civilization, 2011 (http://www.eui.eu/DepartmentsAndCentres/HistoryAndCivilization/Index.asp, <14.02.2013>; Matthew Connelly / Robert J. McMahon / Katherine A.S. Sibley / Thomas Borstelmann / Nathan Citino / Kristin Hoganson: SHAFR in the World, in: Passport: The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Review 42 (2011), here: 4.

the doctoral candidates. They are not always Europe-wide, of course. They might insist on smaller areas: say, the Balkans, Central-Eastern Europe in the Cold War era, or selected West European societies. Or reflect the plurality and complexity of key themes of European history, from cultural transfers to business or intellectual connections. But they are always cross-national in one way or another. Thus, we have a fairly large community (a faculty of 12 and an annual intake of almost 35 doctoral candidates and 10 post-doc fellows) at work on transnational, international or global approaches. This provides a critical mass – with continuous cross-feeding and precious synergies – that is highly exciting and rather rare, perhaps unique.

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The European character of the university presents us with a new question: How does the international historian's preoccupation with the global side coexist with the EUI's focus on Europe? How to understand the intellectual agenda of "Europe and the World" that the department emphasizes?

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Being a *European* university – in name as well as staffing, orientation, and focus – has all the advantages I just mentioned but obviously entails some in-built limitations as well. As much as we strive to take a global approach to European history, we are not a global university with students from all over the world. It would be preposterous if we'd claim to do African, Asian or American history on an equal footing with European history. We try to reach out in many ways but we have neither the resources nor the "mission" of a global university. We would very much like to, but we simply do not have the means and facilities to recruit students from, say, India or Nigeria. The type of diversity and plurality that we can achieve is therefore much larger than in most – especially European – universities, but it is not infinite.

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What we do, though, is to enmesh European history – in every way we can – in the tangle of contacts, transfers, interactions, and conflicts with the world that defined the early-modern and modern history of Europe. Thus we do, for instance, more Atlantic history than French or British history – in terms both of intellectual focus and the number of ongoing research projects. To give another example, we study European integration as a component of the international and transnational redefinition of Western interdependence, Cold War rivalry, and global change, rather than an isolated and inward-looking process. And yet, we give priority to the study of European integration rather than Latin American or South-East Asian regional cooperation.

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How do you see the field of international history developing?

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It seems to me that we have being operating – for quite some time now – within a deeply contradictory and difficult setting, and I am afraid that things will get worse rather than better, at least in the foreseeable future. Funding and resources for the humanities have been decreasing throughout the university systems of most Western nations, in several cases quite dramatically. This gradual but relentless starving of the humanities will continue, if not intensify, since no countervailing trends are visible or even imaginable in the current economic situation. Chairs, positions, programmes, sometimes entire departments or institutes are disappearing everywhere, from Great Britain to Italy or California. Modern

history is not the worst hit but it is nonetheless facing a marked decrease of resources. At the same time, the intellectual and methodological trends towards global and transnational history, with complex multi-archival and multi-country research, often carried out by international teams and networks, require and actually use far more resources than the traditional single-scholar effort in local libraries and archives. The net result of these contrasting trends is a tougher competition for diminishing resources, with most of them getting increasingly concentrated in fewer institutions of large, if not global, reach while everybody else has to survive on less and less.

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Thus, the profession is growing divided between a relatively well-endowed and highly cosmopolitan elite that can carry out ambitious projects and an impoverished majority with less and less funds, clout and opportunities for advanced research, with all the concomitant demoralizing consequences. The most depressing of which (after the individual hardship suffered by young aspiring scholars) is the decreasing quality of PhDs in non elite institutions, because they have to be written in less time, with more limited access to records, and under multiple pressures for quick results. I have no way to know if this is already engendering a movement away from broad topics in favour of narrow, localized subject matters. Perhaps not but no one should be surprised if that begins to take place. What we can already see, however, is that many projects of international reach are forced into a straitjacket that makes a mockery of the ambitious scholarly goals that we all propose and would like to be able to pursue. I have seen theses built around not the most appropriate resources but only those available locally or online, or projects specifically tailored around published sources. In a few instances PhDs are increasingly resembling extended Master theses.

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We have to keep this bleak and divergent background in mind when we try to gauge "the future of international history". Because the amazing availability of resources online, and of electronic tools to collect, reorganize and process them, helps a lot but that does not really bridge that increasing gap. It might occasionally produce the illusion that a decent PC is all that is needed to access the resources for a high-quality international research project. As a matter of fact, there are very few cases – if any – when that is true, and they almost invariably narrow down to materials from the governments and a few other institutions of the richer Western countries.

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Research in international history is thus not necessarily a story of progress in which research will become more multi-faceted in its approaches and truly international in its scope?

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What I am saying is that all the most cherished goals of current transnational, global and international history are not within reach for the large part of the historical profession. Multi-lingual training, multi-archival research (often in countries with poorly organized records), multi-national contacts and interactions with scholars from other continents, are all worthy goals that only a smaller and smaller contingent of scholars in elite institutions will be able to pursue. Therefore, gauging a future that is going to further divide the profession and its practices – setting in motion an unfathomable variety of responses and reactions – is a perilous exercise.

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This being said, I believe that those who are able to will further pursue a more integrated scholarship at the global level. That all the current approaches (global, transnational, and international history) will further grow without hardening into rigidly separated subfields. In fact, the opposite is more likely to take place, i.e. a fluid mixing and remixing of the angles, methods, and solutions devised within each of them, since their overlapping and interlacing is too dense to be artificially separated. We need more mutual learning and dialogue – in explicit recognition of the inextricable tangle of global, transnational and international in almost every realm and subject matter – rather than the solidification of sub-disciplinary walls.

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Does this mean that we will truly break the cage of a Western-based history and integrate the vast plurality of actors, cultures and agencies whose interactions define history in a global sphere? We should certainly strive towards such a goal, but also be aware that it is ultimately unreachable. In epistemological terms, it would amount to a utopian or, more likely, dystopian urge for total, holistic knowledge. In cultural (as well as empirical) terms it would require a distributed and cooperative effort that is simply unattainable in view of the different resources, approaches and priorities of scholarship (or lack thereof) around the world.

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What do these developments mean for the future of international history as a field? Where will we be in a decade?

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When I try to envisage what a global history of the Cold War would look like 10 or 15 years from now, I see a rather established trend and two serious problems. The former is, as I said, the intermingling of cultural and diplomatic history registers, of transnational, international and global history approaches. What precise mix will emerge is impossible to say, and is certainly not predetermined, but blending rather than separation is already with us and will likely get deeper.

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The first problem is: who does it? Mario Del Pero is right in my opinion.[3] The imbalance in archival, library and digital technology resources (not to mention funding) is so huge and entrenched that all the efforts made so far to break out of an American- or European-centred vision are as useful and commendable but subtly and inherently limited. However determined we may be, retrieving the voices of Cambodian peasants, Indian merchants, or Kenyan insurgents is far more difficult than tracing the activities of French diplomats, American propagandists, or even Soviet bureaucrats.

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We have certainly come a long way from analyses of the Cold War confined within its bipolar core, and steeped in the mental languages of the superpowers and their closest allies. The very concept of a global Cold War that we now discuss and dissect in umpteen ways was virtually absent a generation ago. But can we seriously believe that a global historiography of the Cold War will come about through the outreaching efforts of increasingly multiethnic and multicultural departments in top European and especially American universities? Pluralizing

[3] Mario Del Pero: On the Limits of Thomas Zeiler's Historiographical Triumphalism, in: The Journal of American History 95 (2009), 1079-1082, here: 1082.

the subjects of this effort is constructive and necessary, and it is certainly the best that can be done from our side. But studying America in the world (or Europe, for that matter) is still an outreach rather than a globalized, multilateral exploration of a much more complex, plural and broad history. A truly global history of the Cold War will need the relevant, continuous and eloquent voice of scholars, institutions and resources from China, Brazil, Iran, Ghana and many other places. The de-centering of Europe and America can be facilitated by diversifying our intellectual and methodological approaches, but it ultimately requires the emergence of other relevant centres. We cannot do much in this direction but we should always be aware of this inherently unbalanced and constraining condition.

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This issue of who does what brings to the fore the second problem that I want to touch upon. When seen from Indonesia, Nigeria, Egypt or Argentina will it still be Cold War history? Or will the history of the Cold War decades be conceptually organized around other themes, with the East-West rivalry decentred as an exogenous – although insidious, conditioning and occasionally shattering – dynamic? We already have this problem now and I bet that it will grow more substantial. Was it the Cold War that reshaped and defined social processes, political conflicts or cultural transformations in Latin America? Or were rather the latter to determine what was – and more importantly what was not – the Cold War in that continent? And the same question should be asked when studying areas of conflict that intersected even more directly with the East-West rivalry, like the Middle East or even South-East Asia. The weight of French and, even more, American resources and scholarship has driven a massive historiography of the Vietnam wars as stories of imperial crisis and defeat within a Cold War framework. Will it not be a different story when Vietnamese, Thai, Chinese or Laotian readings and sensibilities are brought to bear with at least comparable relevance? Will it simply be the same story seen from the other side or a distinct story, with different hierarchies of meaning?

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What seems to be at stake here, is the position of the Cold War within international history. While the bipolar conflict used to be the main pre-occupation of diplomatic historians, the new international historian tends to "situate the Cold War within the wider history of the twentieth century." Historians as Odd Arne Westad try to understand how "the Cold War conflicts connect to broader trends in social, economic, and intellectual history as well as to the political and military developments of the longer term of which it forms a part."[4]

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Historians of international and transnational dynamics in the second half of the 20th century have built an increasingly expansive reading of the Cold War as an all-encompassing process on a global scale. We have done this in order to break out of a self-enclosed American and/or European horizon, and to explore the much larger scale of change throughout the world. When doing this, however, we must also test and question the validity – and most certainly the presumed universality - of the Cold War paradigm that moved us in the first place and still dominates our language and conceptual syntax. The transformative and often destructive reach of the Cold War affected many, in myriad ways great and small. But many actors and agents that we increasingly try to integrate in our studies were neither

[4] Odd Arne Westad: The Cold War and the International History of the Twentieth Century, in: Melvyn Leffler / Odd Arne Westad (Eds.): The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume I: Origins, Cambridge / New York 2010, 1-19, here: 2.

inspired nor moved by Cold War imperatives, did not live and operate in a Cold War logic, and most certainly did not simply react to exogenous Cold War pressures. It would be a supremely sad irony if we pretended to de-center America and Europe not by relativising that peculiar concept of theirs, but by projecting it upon the many other actors and processes – cultural and demographic, political and economic – that transformed the world in the second half of the 20th century.

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