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INTERVIEW WITH EDOARDO TORTAROLO

ENTREVISTA CON EDOARDO TORTAROLO

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Edoardo Elio Flaminio Tortarolo, a. Edoardo Tortarolo (1956, Turin, Italy). Doctorate in history from the University of Turin in 1987. Specialist in historiography, early modern history, theory of history and the Enlightenment. Professor of Modern History at the University of Eastern Piedmont, Italy. Secretary General of the International Committee of Historical Sciences for the period 2021-2026.

INTERVIEW WITH EDOARDO TORTAROLO

Turin, Italy – Ciudad de México, July 17th 2023

Today is July 17th, 2023. I have the great pleasure of speaking with Eduardo Tortarolo, who has agreed to answer my questions for this book. First of all, tell me about your family and academic origins, please.

Well, thank you for inviting me. Obviously, I'm very glad to talk to such a wide audience like the one that is being addressed by your book. I was born in Turin, Italy in 1956 into a family of natural scientists, both graduated in chemistry. So, I'm sort of an exception within the family tradition. I went to school in Turin in the 50s and in the 60s and early 70s and I finished high school in 1975, exactly on time, so I didn't have to wait to get to the university. I see myself as a very typical product of the sort of bourgeois, educated northern Italian family in the 50s and 60s, not exactly the most emancipated intellectual climate. The Christian Democrats were still very much in power in those years, so, there was a sort of very repressive intellectual climate, but it was very interesting. Overall, I had a very peaceful, quiet and interesting youth. I met interesting schoolmates, good friends, interesting intellectual adventures, and I studied in a very traditional way: Ancient Greek, for instance, Latin, a lot history of philosophy, History per se, Italian literature. And since my mother is German, I studied German and I was interested in the German intellectual climate and works. And my father was very much a fan of British culture in general, so I studied English as a young person and that set me aside from most of my schoolmates and school friends. But, basically, I'm a typical product of the philosophy of [Benedetto] Croce¹ and [Giovanni] Gentile² and how they helped Italy to get out of the 20 plus years of fascist rule. It was an interesting time until I went to the university, and I started to study history seriously. So this is more or less a unexceptional family development and education as a young man.

¹ Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), Italian writer, philosopher, historian and politician. Founder in 1946 of L'Istituto italiano per gli studi storici, editor of the journal *La Critica*. His conception of history has been defined as “absolute historicism” since he considered that “historicism is the affirmation that life and reality is history and nothing but history”. <https://metahistoria.com/benedetto-croce/> Author, among others, of *La storia come pensiero e come azione*, Bari, Laterza, 1938, published in Spanish as *La historia como hazaña de la libertad*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1942.

² Giovanni Gentile, (1875-1944), Italian neo-Hegelian idealist philosopher, educator and fascist politician. Author, among others, of *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro*, Pisa, Mariotti, 1916. He debated with Benedetto Croce in the philosophical field. See Patrick Romanell, *La polémica entre Croce y Gentile: un diálogo filosófico*, Spanish version by Edmundo O'Gorman, Mexico, El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Sociales, 1946 and Michele Ciliberto, “Una biografía di Gentile”, *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1996), pp. 155-163 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44023090>

Why did you choose History?

This is a very good question. I do not have a very clear answer. For some reason, I didn't want to pursue a career in business. That was not my intention. I considered becoming a lawyer, then it sounded somehow dull and boring. So I decided studying the past and, in order to understand what was going on in contemporary society, it was probably the best way. It was fascinating. There were some very interesting charismatic figures of historians in the university of Turin whom I obviously met and appreciated a lot and for some reason I made-up my mind in that direction. I never regretted it. I obviously, as everybody after 60 plus years, we all see that we had good times and bad times. But I never regretted my decision back in the early 1970s. And the person I referred to, who really was a sort of catalyst for my interest in history, was Franco Venturi,³ who was a charismatic figure at Turin University in the 1970s and 1980s since he had been an active member of the Resistance in 1943-45.⁴ And he was really a very quiet person, but his political and intellectual experience was so powerful that everybody was under the spell of his extraordinary experience.⁵ He was not a very engaging teacher, he was quite boring, but nonetheless I became one of his favorite students and I started studying history seriously under his guidance.⁶ But in general, before the transformation of the Italian university system, Turin University had outstanding scholars who were professors in Italian literature, German literature -which I loved a lot-. Medieval history was excellent. Ancient history was excellent. I mean, it was, to me, a very vibrant environment. I enjoyed it a lot. And, in a way, I think I profited as much as I could from those four years at the university.

At the Istituto Mora, where I work, we made an edition of one of the volumes of Franco Venturi's Settecento Riformatore in 2007.⁷ And we have known some important scholars in Italian historiography like himself or like Benedetto Croce, which was very important for me when I was studying history because

³ Franco Venturi (1914-1994), Italian historian, professor specialized in the Enlightenment. Author, among others, of *Settecento riformatore*, in 5 vols., Torino, Einaudi, 1969-1990. See Angelantonio Spagnoletti, "Franco Venturi. Settecento Riformatore", in Alberto de Bernardi and Scipione Guarracino (a cura di), *Dizionario di Storiografia*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 1996.

⁴ Edoardo Tortarolo, (ed.), *Leo Valiani e Franco Venturi, Lettere 1943-1979*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1999.

⁵ Edoardo Tortarolo, "Historians in exile: Franco Venturi in Paris in the 1930s", in David K. Adams, Maurizio Vaudagna (eds), *TransAtlantic Encounters. Public Uses and Misuses of History in Europe and the United States*, Amsterdam, VU University Press, 2000, pp. 89-118. Edoardo Elio Flaminio Tortarolo, Manuela Albertone, Daniela Steila, Antonello Venturi (eds.), *Franco Venturi, Comunismo e Socialismo. Storia di un'idea*, Centro Studi di Storia dell'Università di Torino/Lezioni e Inediti di 'Maestri' dell'Ateneo Torinese/Università degli studi di Torino, 2014. "Chabod e Venturi. Dal Partito alla Rivista Storica Italiana" en Marta Herling, Pier Giorgio Zunino (eds.), *Nazione, nazionalismi ed Europa nell'opera di Federico Chabod. Atti del convegno Aosta, 5-6 maggio 2000*, Firenze, Olschki, 2002, pp. 283-297. "Venturi, le repubbliche e i giochi linguistici" en *Il repubblicanesimo moderno. L'idea di repubblica nella riflessione storica di Franco Venturi*, Napoli, Bibliopolis, 2006, pp. 249-270. "Franco Venturi e il comunismo" en Franco Sbarberi (ed.), *La forza dei bisogni e le ragioni della libertà. Il comunismo nella riflessione liberale e democratica del Novecento*, Reggio Emilia, Diabasis, 2008, pp. 327-340

⁶ Edoardo Tortarolo: "Illuminismo e rivoluzioni. Biografia politica di Filippo Mazzei", Dipartimento di storia dell'Università di Torino, Angeli, Milano 1987, thesis under the direction of Venturi.

⁷ Franco Venturi, *Ilustración y reformas en el siglo XVIII. 1. De Muratoria a Beccaria*, México, Instituto Mora, 2007, 2 v., (Itinerarios).

I had a professor who made us read his publications. I know you are interested, and you are dedicated, to historiography so tell me about other historians who made great contributions to Italian historiography.

Oh, absolutely. History in the 60s and 70s was the discipline, one of the most important areas of study. This is a quite a striking difference between the 60s and 70s and I would say the early 80s and nowadays. There is a widespread discourse in Italy nowadays that history, as a discipline, has declined a lot, and it's not important. The future is so rapidly taking place before our eyes that, what has occurred in the past, is not really relevant to younger generations. This is a striking difference between the contemporary situation in directional terms and those years where I grew up about understanding the past of history. The 18th and 19th century were deemed crucial to understanding the options in politics and society that were available in post-war Italy. So historians had this sort of leading role in orienting the younger generations in politics, in making good decisions from that point of view. The role of historians has changed a lot and the historians that I met in the 70s and 80s were really, as I said, charismatic figures. They were not populist leaders. Venturi was not, Giovanni Tabacco,⁸ the great Medievalist was not sort of mass leader or charismatic in that sense. But what they said and wrote about the history of past societies, distant past, ancient history, medieval history or more recent past like the 18th and 19th centuries, had an impact on what the reality was at the core of its nature. Croce, obviously. His prestige declined a lot in the 50s and 60s and he was replaced, in a way, by the Marxist interpretation of Croce, which we didn't like a lot as young students, but we were fascinated by [Antonio] Gramsci,⁹ for instance. And the interpretation of Gramsci in the 60s and 70s was completely different from the one that is now available in post-colonial terms or postmodern terms. So if you compare the different interpretations of great interpreters of the past, you see really that the changes that took place, have been impressive, really amazing. But again, 60s and 70s history was like computer science in terms of importance, or not really. I'm sort of pushing it too far, but definitely very crucial interesting area of study and I regret obviously that this is not the case anymore. But on the other hand, I do think that, despite the rapid pace of change in contemporary societies, there is a hidden burden of the past that we have to deal with. We have to understand that the past is still very interesting despite the changing perspective that has taken place. And this generation that I was referring to, Venturi in the first place,¹⁰ but all the rest, they all grew up under dictatorship in a very different set of circumstances. So it was

⁸ Giovanni Tabacco (1914-2002), Italian historian, professor of medieval history at the University of Turin. <https://www.torinoscienza.it/personaggi/giovanni-tabacco> Author, among others, of *Spiritualità e cultura nel Medioevo: dodici percorsi nei territori del potere e della fede*, Torino, Liguori, 1993, (Nuovo Medioevo, 44) and *Sperimentazione del potere nell'alto medioevo*, Torino, Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1993.

⁹ Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), Italian philosopher and Marxist theorist. He was one of the founders of the Communist Party of Italy in 1921, imprisoned under the Benito Mussolini regime in 1926. During his time in prison, he wrote 33 texts known as *Quaderni del carcere*, considered a fundamental contribution to political thought and a “crossroads of the great questions of our time”. <https://www.amazon.com/-/es/Antonio-Gramsci/dp/8806223445> There are many editions, like Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, Edizione critica dell'Institut Gramsci a cura di Valentino Gerratana, 4 voll., Torino, Einaudi, 2015. In México: Antonio Gramsci, *Cuadernos de la cárcel*, México, Era, 1981-1984, 6 v. They were also published as *Obras de Antonio Gramsci*, México, Juan Pablos Editor, 1975, 5 vols.

¹⁰ Franco Venturi, *Scritti sparsi*, edizione de Edoardo Tortarolo, Torino, Aragno, 2022.

very interesting to get closer to them in terms of life experience and what they decided to do in very different and crucial moments of their life, how they became members of the resistance movement, for instance, how they opposed in the late 40s and the early 50s, the return to a sort of neo authoritarian regime and the rule of the Christian Democrats. The Cold War experience was something that really molded our experience in Italy since it was something very tangible, very close to our everyday experience, and it influenced every aspect of our life, from friendships to the books that we wanted to read. So like Eric Hobsbawm¹¹ would say, those were interesting years, indeed in a different way. I mean, all years are interesting, of course, since they are part of our life. But those were really interesting years, especially with the benefit of hindsight; in retrospective, definitely very interesting and good history books were written in those years.

You say, and it is a fact, that young people are not interested in history. Maybe it's because some of them, in Europe, are immigrants and history has to do with identity. But how do you make people interested in history? On the other hand, readers like to read history books, not scholar books, but books made for spreading the knowledge of history without footnotes, without a very specialized language. So history has changed a little bit. Also, in a way, it is trying to approach people not only to explain the past, not only to increase the identity of a certain nation, but also to make people aware of what they are living. So how do you deal with this kind of history? And how do you deal with people not being interested in the past?

This is a very good point and a crucial one. Let me sort of approach it in different steps. Step #1 is that I strongly believe that academic history, scholarly research, is very important and we should not get rid of it. I know it is sometimes extremely boring, extremely dull. I've been on several commissions, and I've had to read very dull works in the last 25 years. I know they can be, in a way, discouraging the interest of readers, even of professional readers. But still, I think it is very important to keep this area of investigation safe and protected from other concerns. The second step is that there is a change of perspective. You have mentioned immigrants. If you have in your classroom a black young man or young woman, what you say about the slave trade will be different because you really touch feelings that are different if you come from a middle-class bourgeois Turin family like myself. And some are, in many cases extremely bright, interested and thought provoking, those whose parents came from Senegal or Congo 30 or 40 years ago, so it is really something different. And I think we should definitely, as university professors or lecturers, be aware of this and be as inclusive as possible. I'm totally against any form of nationalistic history writing. I don't think that it serves the purpose of history as a discipline. It is not only a form of awareness of the audience that you're addressing. It takes us to step #3. I was born in a society where the book with the capital B was the main way to acquire knowledge. It is not the case any longer. I mean books, -see step number one-, are very important. Learned journals, scholarly journals are extremely important, but they are not the only way to discuss and address topics in the historical sciences. So this is something that historians should spend time discussing and should be really courageous in addressing. I will mention only one example. There has been in the last few months a long discussion about

¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times. A Twentieth-Century Life*, New York, Pantheon Books, 2002, [Eric Hobsbawm, *Años interesantes: Una vida en el siglo XX*, Barcelona, Crítica, 2013].

the artificial intelligence, Bard,¹² ChatGPT,¹³ etcetera. And the obvious reaction is of sort of diffidence and being careful about going too deep into artificial intelligence. As a matter of fact, I think we should be interested in applying forms of artificial intelligence to give our students and interested public a new perception of the past with avatars, with new ways of reenacting the past, be really more interested in future perspectives. This is not necessarily against scholarly investigations. Let's take the idea of historical truth. You can be truthful in narrating the history in the many different ways, and this takes me to step #4. Something that I do not like, and I'm strictly against it, is the ways in which history has become entertainment. The confusion between good effort to understand the past and fiction, I don't like it, I totally disagree. And I think that the best way to have an interesting approach to the past is to be very clear that whatever the medium we are using, we are interested in assessing what it is really been the case in the past. And we can reach this with the learned book, with the scholarly journal, with artificial intelligence, with games. The gamification of history is a tremendously interesting area.¹⁴ I'm totally unapt to play with those games, but I know many students have their approach to history through games. The gamification of history can be a very serious question,¹⁵ but what I'm against is the distortion of history. And you can distort and twist history even writing a book. I mean, it's not a matter of media, it's a matter of rules and the criteria that you apply to the effort to understand the past. So you see that I'm doing my best to keep what has been achieved in the last 100 years or so with a sort of guarded, careful openness to the future. But I definitely think that historians should be more open to the new media. And the majority of them are.

You were talking about journals. You have directed the Rivista Storia della storiografia,¹⁶ which is very specialized. It is well known in the academic world, but I don't know if general readers understand the texts; it's only for specialized readers, for scholars. You have very important discussions on how history and historiography have progressed or have changed in the past decades. How do you deal with this change of history in a specialized journal?

This is again a very interesting question. Now, let me tell you something about *Storia della storiografia*. The origin of this journal took place in in the early 1980s, and the journal was established to enter into a dialogue between Eastern Europe and Western Europe. It was basically to build a bridge between two different historiographies, sort of liberal historiography, led by Georg G. Iggers,¹⁷ American German, sort of mixture of the two with the touch of French historiography,

¹² “Bard is an Artificial Intelligence system created by Google. It is a conversational system, so you will be able to interact with it through normal messages. In these messages, you will write something you want to know or want it to do, and Bard will respond or do it.” <https://bard.google.com/>

¹³ <https://openai.com/gpt-4>

¹⁴ See, for example, <https://gameranx.com/features/id/295765/article/30-best-historical-games-that-will-give-you-a-history-lesson/>

¹⁵ Guillermo Paredes-Otero y Nuria Sánchez-Gey Valenzuela, *De la filosofía digital a la sociedad del videojuego. Literatura, pensamiento y gamificación en la era de las redes sociales*, Madrid: Dykinson S.L., 2021, <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/libro?codigo=830982>

¹⁶ The journal can be seen at <http://www.libraweb.net/riviste.php?chiave=115>

¹⁷ Georg Gerson Iggers (1926-2017), American historian specializing in modern Europe and historiography. Author of, among others, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century. From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern*

[Charles-Oliver] Carbonell¹⁸ in particular. And then the idea was to have partners in Eastern Europe and it was established as such. And then, when the Berlin Wall fell, basically, the premise of the journal disappeared before your very eyes. So that's when Guido Abbattista¹⁹ and myself became editors together with Georg G. Iggers, who has been a tremendously important personality again, somebody who I loved and cherished a lot until the very last days of his life, and he was very adamant in keeping dialogue open. He left Germany because of the Nazis in 1938, went to the United States, came back to Germany on a regular basis. He was always open. He knew what intolerance meant for individual lives. So he was always very open, very kind to everybody. And in scientific terms, his idea was to keep communication open; that was his main target for his life. This is something that we carried on since we became editors and obviously things changed a lot in the last 30 years. First of all, what we had been trying to do was for the journal to have new generations, younger than ourselves, to become contributors with new topics, and new ideas. Second, I would say to be open and to encourage contributions from the global South and especially in some cases we have been successful; in other cases, we have been less successful. For instance, we wanted to have contributions from the Muslim countries. Especially in the early 2000s that was crucial to understand what sort of idea of history those cultural forms had. And we have been not really very successful. It wasn't easy to get contributions to that. We have been more successful with other historical cultures and we have been printing quite a few less than we wanted, less than we expected, quite a few contributions with information about those historical cultures. And I would say this has been the third important topic that we have been consistently dealing with, as being the question that I addressed in a couple of minutes ago about fiction and the reality. This is again a tremendously important task that we engaged in a dialogue with Hayden White,²⁰ who was a tremendously kind and nice, really amazing person and we have been quite successful in starting a collective reflection about the legacy of *Metahistory*, what it really meant. And I disapprove all simplified interpretations of *Metahistory*.²¹ I think *Metahistory* is a very complex work and Hayden White

Challenge, Hannover, Wesleyan University Press, 1997 and *New Directions in European Historiography*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 1984.

¹⁸ Charles-Olivier Carbonell (1930-2013), French historian at the University of Montpellier, promoter of the field of European History and historiography. Author, among others, of *Histoire européenne de l'Europe*, tome 1 Mythes et fondements et tome 2 : D'une renaissance à l'autre, Toulouse, Editions Privat, 1999 and of *L'Historiographie*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France PUF, 1981 (Que sais-je édition), [*La Historiografía*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1990, (Breviarios, 353)].

¹⁹ Guido Abbattista (b. 1953), Professor at University of Trieste, author, among others, of *La rivoluzione americana*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1998 and *Enigma Cina. Leggi, diritto e giustizia cinesi nella cultura europea tra 700 e 800*, Trieste, EUT, 2018, (Collana 'Studi di Storia', n. 5).

²⁰ Hayden White (1928-2018), American philosopher and historian. In his *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, [*Metahistoria: La imaginación histórica en la Europa del siglo XIX*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992], he shows that "a realistic representation of the past is not only difficult to achieve, but inherently contestable. For what is at stake in all our disputes over the representation of reality is the very idea of a representation of reality". See Veronica Tozzi, "Hayden White (1928-2018)", in *Prismas*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 337-340, 2018 <https://www.redalyc.org/journal/3870/387059373016/html/>

²¹ Edoardo Tortarolo, *Hayden White, Forme di storia. Dalla realtà alla narrazione*, Roma, Carocci, 2006.

was far from debasing the importance of history. He was very much passionate about history and the importance of narrative. But he was very open to different forms of narrative. So, back to your question, what we chose to do was to modernize the journal by keeping its academic character. We didn't want to compete with other more popular forms of discussion, and this has been the consequence of a very explicit decision we made. And I would also add the fact that the journal has been established as a part of the activity of CISH, the Comité International des Sciences Historiques. It became independent, but now we are still very much in touch with the committee, and we are working together to make the Jerusalem Congress in 2026 an important Congress. There is so much to be done in order to foster the dialogue between historians that we will really be very busy in the next three years to make the Congress in Jerusalem in 2026 really something significant, not just one Congress among many others, but something that will be durable.

Before we go to the CISH, which is a very important part for myself, and especially for yourself, I want to go back to something else. I found a video where you said that historiography tradition is a very crucial element in global history.²² And I know you are interested in global history, which is a trend. It's a very common thing to say that it's the new way to make history. But global history has a very, very long history. It has not begun yesterday. And you are very aware of it. Tell me a little bit more about it.

Oh, this is a tremendously interesting question. First of all, I wish global history were really popular because what we feel in Western Europe, at least now, is that there has been a backlash in global history and there is much talk about a return to nationalism and the identitarian historical traditions and all that stuff, which I don't like, but definitely we shall have to deal with. But obviously you're right that global history has sort of determined the orientation of historians in the last 20 or 30 years significantly. Now I obviously subscribe to this perspective. I think it is fascinating. It has something to do with the Enlightenment legacy, the idea that we all belong to the same humankind and one of the other most reasonable tasks that we have is to tell the story of humankind. Now what? But what I came to think, at least in the last 10 or 15 years is that, what we mean by world history, universal history, global history, whatever you call it, is a very different thing in different contexts.²³ And what we are not sufficiently aware of is that we should be considering on the same level different approaches to global history and universal history. And what is fascinating is to see how all cultures have developed their own approach to global history and that we should be carefully not discarding approaches that do not agree with our view. History of global history, of universal histories, should be really a target of the activity of some of us historians, so that we see how different cultures have envisioned the interaction and the isolation in different degrees between cultures making sense with the instrument that they had, with the categories that they had of these being together in sort of an universal adventure, which is the history of humankind. And obviously it is very important going back to the interest

²² “100 World Histories in 100 Words” – Edoardo Tortarolo, project by the Network of World and Global History Organizations (NOGWHISTO), the Leipzig Research Centre Global Dynamics (ReCentGlobe), and Sogang University. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M1zHPuH2JFw>

²³ Edoardo Tortarolo, “World History in the Twenty-first Century and Its Critics”, *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, I, 2, december, 2004, pp. 331-342.

of students and general public, the tremendous importance that an approach to ecological history and the idea that global history has also to do with the interaction between humankind and natural environment. And this is an interaction that is crucial for the future humankind, but that has been disregarded, unfortunately, in the analysis of the recent past. I mean, the industrial revolution has been a tremendous change in the interaction between some societies; at least they are increasingly uniting more and more societies with natural environment. So this is not to idealize natural environment, that has been changing all the time, but to consider this an important area of study. Which is relevant for the younger generations, so instead of narrating diplomatic history, we should do something about forests and water resources in society. This is also a very decent form of history, slightly unconventional, but more interesting, more relevant for the younger generation than, let's say, with all due respect, diplomatic history.

As we know, history has two components, one of them is time and the other one is space. With global history, there is an approach between many places and spaces. But you also talked about the importance of the problems we have with the environment. Do you see a new approach to history with environmental history?

Well, absolutely. I'm very much interested in environmental history. I will never be able to do original research in that, but I think, as a general historian, that we should make an effort to be open to those, especially from the younger generations, who are focusing on the interactions between societies and environment, natural resources of all different kinds of sources and ideas about the way to deal with the natural environment. I think it is very difficult for my generation at least to have the disciplinary tools to do good environmental history. It needs a highly interdisciplinary approach; I should know more about biology or chemistry or whatever, than I possibly will never be able to do. But it is important. It is a first step to be open to the result of the research for those who are dealing with natural environmental history. This leads me to another point. In general, professionalization of the historians has been a good thing. It's been definitely very profitable for the discipline but should not be taken too seriously. We should, as historians, also be curious of approaches about which we have no clue at all. I would rather be mistaken, because I'm too curious, other than the other way around. And I'm an avid reader of the *New York Review of Books*²⁴ from cover to cover. In general, being slightly amateurish is not a bad thing, in some context at least. I take responsibility for what I'm saying, but I think being open and curious has some advantages.

*Patrick Boucheron published the book called *Histoire Mondiale de la France*,²⁵ and you coordinated the book called *Cosmopolitan Italy in the Age of Nations*²⁶ following that example in order to insert Italian history into global history. Why are these approaches necessary nowadays?*

²⁴ *The New York Review of Books* began in 1963, when its founding editors, Robert Silvers and Barbara Epstein, and their friends, decided to create a magazine in which the most interesting and qualified minds of our time would discuss current books and issues in depth. <https://www.nybooks.com/about/>

²⁵ Patrick Boucheron, *Histoire mondiale de la France*, Paris, Seuil, 2017.

²⁶ Edoardo Tortarolo, (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Italy in the age of Nations. Transnational visions from the eighteenth to the twentieth Century*, London, Routledge, 2022, (Ideas beyond Borders: Studies in Transnational Intellectual History).

Well, again, this is a very important and relevant question. The volume that you mentioned that I have edited is part of the wider effort to change the position of Italy within global history. Why is this necessary? Because Italy traditionally has been founded on a very nationalistic approach to history. For many years, history in Italy has been Italian history with some exceptions. France, for instance, has been sort of included in our perspective, but despite the fact that, for instance, Argentina has been made-up of Italians who immigrated there. Mexico has not been so relevant in this perspective. But the case of Argentina is really almost ironic because it is a part of Italian history. I mean, you cannot understand Argentinian history without knowing something about Italian history and Italian history really lacks an important component and important elements from a demographic, economic, social perspective if you not consider Argentina. So we had a sort of slightly polemical approach to the notion of Italian history when we designed those volumes obviously. The great example of Boucheron's *Histoire mondiale de la France* has played its role in devising this effort. But basically, the idea of the two books, the one edited by myself and the one edited by Guido Abbattista,²⁷ has been that Italy was never isolated. It was always a part of a circulation of ideas, men, commodities, and general political interest. And it was also the idea that even church history, ecclesiastical history, should be seen as part of a global circulation of ideas instead of evangelization and strictly religious perspective. There is much interest in Italy, among the younger generation of historians, for a global approach to Italian history, but we are definitely still in the beginning of a much more important process of revising Italian history. And this, to me at least, has a meaning compared to the effort that was made in the 50s and 60s to disentangle Italian history from the fascist legacy. That was an extremely isolated approach in most cases at least, with some exceptions. But what we need nowadays, since Italy is a part of a global movement of people and ideas, is that we really reflect on the roots of this in the past and there are so many roots that the two volumes consider the whole early modern and modern history from the 15th centuries until the early 20th century. We stopped there because obviously 20th century history needs a different kind of methodological approach, but basically there is so much to be done in the early modern and modern period. There is some work for the next few generations at least.

*I am very interested in *Lieux de Memoire*, this proposal by French historian Pierre Nora²⁸ and I know that in Italy Mario Isnenghi has edited some volumes called *I luoghi della memoria*.²⁹ You said that history in Italy has been very nationalistic, that it has had to deal with Italian identity. How do you manage to make this kind of history. The *luoghi della memoria* are very important to explain the national identity. But on the other hand, you are trying to insert yourself into global history and put aside this nationalistic view. I don't think it's very easy to do that.*

²⁷ Guido Abbattista, (ed.), *Global Perspectives in Modern Italian Culture: Knowledge and Representation of the World in Italy from the Sixteenth to the Early Nineteenth Century*, London, Routledge, 2023, (Ideas beyond Borders: Studies in Transnational Intellectual History)

²⁸ Pierre Nora (dir.), *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984-1992, 7 vols. 2^e edición Paris, Gallimard, 1997, 3 vols, (Quarto).

²⁹ Mario Isnenghi (éd.), *I luoghi della memoria*, vol. 1 *Simboli e miti dell'Italia unita*, vol. 2, *Personaggi e date dell'Italia unita*; vol. 3 *Strutture ed eventi dell'Italia unita*, Roma, Bari, Laterza, 1996-1997.

No, it is not easy. First of all, Italy has had the continuity in buildings, settlements, landscape, that has evolved very slowly, basically until the end of the 19th century but has changed a lot during the 20th century. But even during the Second World War, only isolated parts of Italian cities in the northern part of the country have been really destroyed. Turin, which is an industrial city, still has buildings from the 15th century. But if you walk through Rome, it is the past living around you now. So that Isnenghi is perfectly right that the *Luoghi della Memoria* is an important part of Italian identity. It's an important part of the way we as Italians approach history. And it is something that has to be cherished and to be kept up as much as possible. On the other hand, my feeling is that - and this is the legacy of Hayden White- the burden of the past should not be too heavy.³⁰ It is something that already [Friedrich] Nietzsche³¹ said and I always shock students and they say "OK, Nietzsche said something good and something right". Especially when he said that we should not be strangled by the burden of the past. So what is happening in Italy is that, sometimes, the burden of the past is really overwhelming. There must be a continuity in the identity of the cities and the identity of the landscape. At the same time things are evolving and changing. And we have to deal with that. And the identity of the Italian society is also based on strikingly modern elements. Milano, much more than Turin -where I live- is a modern city. It may look ugly sometimes, it's not nice and pleasant, but this is something that is the outcome of modernization and then the real challenge to me is that we have to keep the *Luoghi della Memoria* which are really a way to connect to the past and to have a solid and clear identity. On the other hand, we should not turn all Italy into a sort of Venice or Las Vegas, where everything from the past is kept and, if there is nothing from the past really available, we invent it. Because the other important topic is that the *Lieux de memoire* are an important element of historical consciousness. No way around it. I fully agree with that. But we should not run the risk of inventing traditions that become binding elements. Let me mention just one example: the idea that there is an Italian population which is a single unit. This is something that really infuriates me, because, if there is a nation, a country where people have mixed along since the very beginning, from the time of the ancient Greece, before Rome was established, that's Italy. And Italy is really a place where people mix a lot and the idea that there is a single Italian identity, is not something that I really like. I don't think it is accurate. It is a fiction that has been invented to serve all possible political purposes, not all of them very justifiable.

Yes, identity is something that is very complicated because, not only in Italy, but in France and in Mexico and many other countries, we are a mixture of cultures. Here in Mexico, metissage is very common. We have the European root and the indigenous root. I was going to point out that, for example, some places of memory, Lieux de Memoire, are monuments. And we had a monument to Christopher Columbus in Mexico City. It had to be protected every October 12th because the Neo indigenous and other groups were

³⁰ Hayden White, "The burden of history", in *History and Theory*, 1996, vol. 5, n. 2, pp. 111-134.

³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), German philosopher whose philosophy defends the free existence of the human being in the face of all types of external bondage, be it social or religious. https://encyclopaedia.herdereditorial.com/wiki/Autor:Nietzsche,_Friedrich

trying to paint it and put it down. And finally, in 2020, it was put down by the government itself,³² and there has been a lot of discussion on what to put in that place.³³ Italy has been linked to us precisely through Christopher Columbus. Unlike the United States, we don't have the Columbus Day defended by the big Italian community. But now it is complicated to celebrate anything because his arrival has been transformed into an act of violence against the indigenous people and so the relationship between our indigenous people and the West part of Europe in general, is very complicated nowadays, especially with so many resentments. I also read that you have participated in a book about the relationship between Italy and the United States.³⁴ You talked about Argentina. I mean Italy is everywhere, in China, in America. So it's very significant that you point out that Italy has been really important in different parts of history. Italy is not only the boot shaped country that we know but Italy is not one, it's many Italies as there are many Mexico's and many Frances and many other places.

Absolutely. And we as historians should really be aware of these complex set of relationships and do our best to account for them. I'm totally against the "cancel culture"³⁵ because you cannot cancel the past. The past has been there; in most cases it was not a good past but, I mean, what can we do? What we can do is to really register, in a way be aware of all the different forms of past that have been discovered that are relevant to people. So I, as a matter of fact, would never tear down a monument to Christopher Columbus. I think it is stupid but, at the same time, I understand that there can be sort of deep resentment from the underprivileged exploited part of society that focus on the symbol. Which is just a symbol, it's nothing more than that. After all, it is clay or iron or marble. But it is nothing living. It is a symbol. And they, in a way, focus on that to establish their own identity. I think we should be, in a way, tolerant; we should argue and discuss with those people, but you should also be tolerant. After all, in Eastern Europe, we saw the same manifestations when communism was abolished after 1989. Statues of Lenin and Stalin were drawn to the ground and nobody objected to and it was justified as the right thing to do in order to abolish the evil path of communism. After all, "cancel culture" is a contradiction in itself since culture is evolving. Discontinuity is something that keeps on living. But we have to accept it as a very simple, not particularly sophisticated, form of political expression. We have to accept it and after all, Western Europeans from different countries, not only Spain, have responsibilities, whatever criteria you might choose, for what happened in America. It's really

³² Arnaud Exbalin, «Mexique: Christophe Colomb est mort, vive la jeune femme d'Amayac!», *The conversation. Academic rigour, journalistic flair*, november 21, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/mexique-christophe-colomb-est-mort-vive-la-jeune-femme-damayac-170903>.

³³ A year after the statue of Colon was torn down by the government, feminist groups placed the silhouette of a woman and renamed the space "Glorieta de las mujeres que luchan" (Roundabout of women who fight). Mexico City's government tried to change the silhouette to a pre-Hispanic figure but was unsuccessful. In July 2023, the statue of the Young woman from Amajac was put in the same roundabout where Colon's monument existed but it has not replaced the silhouette because it was placed it on another pedestal nearby.

³⁴ Edoardo Tortarolo, "From the Pilgrim Fathers to the Founding Fathers: Italy and America", in William J. Connel and Stanislao G. Pugliese, *The Routledge History of Italian Americans*, New York, Routledge, 2018

³⁵ "Cancel culture refers to the popular practice of withdrawing support for (*canceling*) public figures and companies after they have done or said something considered objectionable or offensive. *Cancel culture* is generally discussed as being performed on social media in the form of group shaming.", <https://www.dictionary.com/e/pop-culture/cancel-culture/>

something that is appalling. After a couple of centuries, we should really stop and say was it all right? I doubt it.

In order to make global history, you have to connect historians from different parts of the world, and that is one of the main goals of the CISH. When have you begun your connection with the CISH? I know you have started many years ago and now you are an important part of the Bureau. Tell me a little more about it.

Yeah, CISH was founded after World War One in 1926. So the *raison d'être* of CISH is to make historians talk to each other from its inception: the main issue was between French and German historians after World War One. After WWII It was mainly a dialogue between Western Europe and Eastern Europe and it has evolved in the last 30 years. I happened to participate in the first CISH congress in Montreal [in 1995]. I honestly do not remember exactly why, but I was on board. And the idea of flying to Canada to an important Congress with all expenses paid by the Italian committee was very appealing. So I didn't say no and I said "OK, I'm on, of course I'm ready to join you". I gave one or two papers. I met very interesting people and, ever since, I have participated in all CISH congresses. Now the most exciting aspect of CISH Congresses, and I'm very open about it, is not the traditional exchange of new knowledge; it's not about that. You obviously listen to interesting papers sometimes; sometimes papers are not directly interesting or exciting, but what is really exciting is that, for one week, you have people around you from all over the world, literally. South America is well represented though it should be more. And last year we had historians from Africa, from China, despite the very difficult situation.³⁶ We didn't have historians from Russia, which was terrible. That was really something that we all miss for a complex set of reasons, diplomatic, economic, political, whatever the Ukrainian war is, really. A terrible blow to the historian community all over the world. But still, we had important and very different circumstances. We have this idea that we are coming together and we're exchanging ideas and experiences, and this is something that is not replaced by specialized conferences. This situation has changed obviously since the Oslo congress in 1928 and we were all traveling all around, especially before the pandemic. Nowadays we are sort of regaining the same pace, but despite this interruption, basically no international conference on a specialized theme can really appeal to all historians and CISH congresses really do this. They are interesting from a specialized point of view, but they are more interesting from an experiential point of view. The next one, that will take place in Jerusalem, should become a sort of symbol, since Jerusalem is, from all possible points of view, a city of dialogue or confrontation, of fight, of struggle, but also mutual understanding and creativity. It should really be the symbol of dialogue and we are, together with the board, doing our best with the help of the Israeli historians, to provide the most conducive conditions for this dialogue to take place. Practical details, it is too soon to tell a lot about them, but I'm very confident that this mission of CISH, the dialogue, interaction, sharing of experiences, will be at the center of the Jerusalem Congress in the 2026. The experience in the last 25 years has been that all different venues have provided

³⁶ The XXIII International Congress of Historical Sciences took place in Poznan, Poland, from August 21 to 27, 2022. <https://ichs2020poznan.pl/en/>

some opportunity for new experiences Sydney [2005], Amsterdam [2010], Jinan [2015], there were always political challenges. There are always objections, difficult moments. But we, more or less, always went beyond the difficulties.

Belonging to CISH and this kind of organizations should help us make more global history, but unfortunately many countries still do their very isolated and local histories. So CISH has an important role in trying to encourage people to break out the boundaries, the limits of their own countries, and do more connected histories with other parts of the world. And you have done it in several of your publications. I see that you have worked on the relationship between Italy and Germany,³⁷ Italy and America and I think you are very open. But what's in the future for you? Which new publications are you planning to do?

Oh, I wish I could write what I mentioned before, a history of the world histories or universal histories, which is something that has tremendous challenges, obviously, since I do not read Chinese, for instance, and I will never learn Chinese. One of the most interesting historians, universal historians is Sima Qian,³⁸ who wrote at more or less at the same time as Herodotus in Chinese.³⁹ So there is no hope that we'll ever get in touch directly with Sima Qian.⁴⁰ But he has really interesting things to say about the Chinese vision of universal histories. And many others. What is interesting is, as you said, to keep the interest open for connections and interactions. You kindly mentioned that I have written something about the interrelationships between Italy and Germany.⁴¹ Obviously, it was because of my knowledge of German language and history, and it was from the Italian point of view, already something quite audacious and interesting. Because the Second World War had left a legacy of misperceptions especially from Italy towards Germany. But things have evolved and I think it is important to really open up the mind to interactions between more different countries and more different cultures and to see that, after all, something that social anthropology has already discovered, we share more elements that we expect. After all, we expect to be very different and we are not, not terribly different. This is the man of the Enlightenment that speaks from within me,⁴² that's one of the great legacies of

³⁷ Edoardo Tortarolo, *La ragione interpretata. La mediazione culturale tra Italia e Germania nell'età dell'Illuminismo*, Roma, Carocci, 2003. Also see "Italia-Germania: affinità elettiva o relazione pericolosa?", *Società e storia*, 167, 2010, pp. 123-144.

³⁸ Sima Qian (c. 145 BC - 90 BC) Chinese historian who lived under the Han Dynasty. He produced the first historical compilation of China between 109 and 91 BC, translated as *Historical Records*, in which he narrates 2500 years of Chinese history "putting impartiality before propaganda". Jaime Márquez, "Sima Qian, China's first great historian", in blog *Sobre China*, 22 March 2013, <https://sobrechina.com/2013/03/22/sima-qian-el-primer-gran-historiador-de-china/>

³⁹ Thomas R Martin, ed., *Herodotus and Sima Qian: The First Great Historians of Greece and China: A Brief History with Documents*, New York, Bedford Books, 2009, (Bedford Series in History & Culture).

⁴⁰ There are several editions in English with selected texts. The full text in Chinese is in: <http://www.guoxue.com/shibu/24shi/shiji/sjml.htm>

⁴¹ Edoardo Tortarolo, "Censura e censori: tra antichi stati italiani e antichi stati tedeschi. Temi della storiografia recente", in Giorgio Cusatelli, Maria Lieber, Heinz Thoma, Edoardo Tortarolo (eds), *Gelehrsamkeit in Deutschland und Italien im 18. Jahrhundert. Kontakte, Übersetzungen, Institutionen/Letterati, erudizione e società scientifiche negli spazi italiani e tedeschi del '700*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1999 (Hallesche Beiträge zur Europäischen Aufklärung, Bd. 8), 281-294.

⁴² Edoardo Tortarolo, *Il pensiero politico dell'illuminismo*, Torino, Loescher, 1982.

the 18th century, the idea that we all have essentially the same needs and the same wishes and we have to connect with each other.

Your approach to Illuminismo⁴³ or illustration is very interesting because it is wide open. It's not only the French version or the Italian version, but it's a universal version considering the extents of the known world of that time, of the world that participated, not the separation between rulers and those who were ruled. And you also have a very interesting approach on censorship⁴⁴ and how it is something that stops public opinion. In your publications I have had a chance to know about, underlies the circulation of ideas, which has existed from the beginning of history and continues nowadays. How do you approach this circulation of ideas nowadays?

Well, circulation of ideas is obviously crucial and nowadays I welcome the Internet and the communication, the new media, to a very high degree. I think it is a unique chance that we have to interact more constantly and more easily with each other. On the other hand, you mentioned my research on censorship. I do think that communication also has embedded in its sense, in a way, an element of control. What we say is always excluding something else that has not been said, that has not made it into the expression that we chose to communicate. So circulation of ideas is crucial but we always have to be open to what has not been said, what has not been communicated clearly enough and, very much in the sense of [Jürgen] Habermas,⁴⁵ I think the communication is a self-generating process. You have not said everything, you never make it. There is always a sort of circle that opens, closes and reopens again. And communication is a form of censorship and censorship is also a form of communication. We have to be aware that promoting an idea, promoting a value, promoting a perspective always entails the exclusion of something else and we have to be open to the new hidden meaning of what we have said or what people outside our circle are saying. So history is never stabilized, it is always in movement, it's always changing. And what we call censorship is, in fact, the way to channel what we are saying and what we expect other people to tell us.

*There is always something new to learn.
Always. Always.*

⁴³ Edoardo Tortarolo, *L'illuminismo. Dubbi e ragioni della modernità*, Roma, Carocci, 1999.

⁴⁴ Edoardo Tortarolo, *L'invenzione della libertà di stampa. Censura e scrittori nel Settecento*, Roma, Carocci, 2011. Translated as *The Invention of Freedom of the Press. Censorship and Writers in the 18th Century*, New York, Springer, 2016.

⁴⁵ Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929), German philosopher and sociologist. Author, among others, of *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns. Band I. Handlungsrationalität und gesellschaftliche Rationalisierung*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981, translated as *Teoría de la acción comunicativa, I, Racionalidad de la acción y racionalización social*, Madrid, Taurus, 1987. He considers that communicative action is not a metatheory but the beginning of a theory of society that strives to account for the critical canons it makes use of.

*I really appreciate this talk! Thank you very much. Have a good day or evening.
Thank you. You too. Bye.*

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