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**PROGETTO 'PASSIONS: INTERVISTE A PERSONALITÀ DI RILIEVO
INTERNAZIONALE'**

REF. DEL PROGETTO: PROF. FILOMENA MITRANO

CHIARA MAMINI

INTERVIEWS

PROF. DANIELE FIORENTINO



What drove me to engage in the "Passions" traineeship with Professor Mitrano was the opportunity to interview a prominent international figure in my field of interest, which is international relations. Discussing US-Italian relations from a historical point of view with Professor Fiorentino was an exciting experience that enriched my personal cultural background.

Daniele Fiorentino is professor of U.S. History and Chair of the Department of Political Sciences at the University Roma Tre in Italy. He is also director of CISPEA (The Italian Center for the Study of Euro-American History and Politics) and sits on the board of the Center of American Studies in Rome. A specialist of US-Italian relations in the 19th and early 20th centuries, he has also written extensively about Native American history and culture at the beginning of his career.

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In this interview we discussed his passion and how he made a career out of it – and, of course, his inspiring knowledge of modern history. In fact, our discussion revolved around the topics of his volume on the history of US-Italian relations, *Gli Stati Uniti e il Risorgimento d'Italia (1848-1901)*², which is complemented by the book he edited with Matteo Sanfilippo, *Stati Uniti e Italia nel Nuovo Scenario Internazionale (1898-1918)*.³ This is an interview about enthusiasm, love and devotion: Fiorentino's love for history; Garibaldi's enthusiasm towards his principles; Margaret Fuller's devotion to her cause and love for Italy. During this short time together, we explored the many facets of passion from the lenses of history.



Professor Fiorentino, could you please tell us briefly about your career and the educational background which lead to it?

Well. I've always had a passionate interest in history, which has reached its peak during my years at Sapienza University of Rome. There, I started my bachelor's degree in political science, driven by my fascination for contemporary history and politics. But in those years, I accidentally discovered a few seminars on modern history of colonialism – it's funny, though, how some things happen by accident. During this seminar I was to write a paper, so I asked the professor whether I could write about the colonized instead of the colonizers; not that I had any knowledge on the subject at all – mine was a blind curiosity to learn about the flipside of a story too well-known. Just to be clear: everything I knew about the subject came from readings, movies and a general knowledge based on shared knowledge. Therefore, I began my research on the Indians and the related domestic policies of the US in the mid XIX century.

Fascinated by this country, I applied for a Fulbright scholarship which brought me to the University of Kansas, in the heart of the United States, because the Midwest is where Native American studies were obviously most flourishing, due to their proximity to the Indian reservations. It was there that I embraced my American studies study path in the history department, where I completed my postgraduate degree first, and my PhD in America History secondarily. During my PhD I started teaching history in that same university. While finishing it, I was thankfully suggested I undertook a PhD in Italy too, and so I did: this way, in the early 90s I completed both my American and Italian PhD. Thus, I made the decision to come back to Italy and start a career here in my country. In the meanwhile, I had published my first two volumes on Native Americans, which were the result of my thorough research for my American PhD.

A sort of shallow period went through. But if it hadn't been for the unemployment, I would have never applied, almost without thinking, for a position at the cultural office of the American embassy in Italy: they were looking for a young person with professional experience in the United States and with a background of studies on American history and culture.

That was basically the description of your resumé.

Exactly. For this reason, I became the Cultural Affairs Specialist at the Embassy. This led to my obtaining the position of Director of the Center of American Studies based in Rome. In the meantime, I was still doing research and writing, until when I gained my

first chair at the University of Macerata, and later at Roma Tre, where I'm still teaching today.

During these years, my field of research changed slightly, partly due to my involvement with the CAS, which is the center of cultural exchanges between Italy and the US, and partly because of my intellectual curiosity which brought me to dig in a historical period still not really explored at the time. Thus, I started cultivating my interest towards the kind of relations and political exchanges which tied the US and Italy between the end of the XIX and the first decades of the XX century. This led to the publication of my book *Gli Stati Uniti e il Risorgimento d'Italia (1848-1901)* at the end of year 2013. For the same reason, I also published some papers about the foundation of the Center for American Studies and of the American Academy in Rome, and the relations between the two countries from the Risorgimento up until wartime (the first World War). I found it especially striking that this historical period hadn't still been deeply explored, since it is the cornerstone of nowadays international relations. I also founded a research group to deepen the research on this period, and five publications issued from our work, plus my monography.

This part of modern history analyzed from the perspective of Italian-American diplomatic and cultural exchanges is particularly interesting but also understudied. Why do you think is that?

This subject is usually labelled as a matter of minor interest because the focus is mainly pointed on major historical phenomena of that period like Fascism and the Republican Era, from an Italian standpoint. But in the late years, things have changed: I noticed an increased interest on the subject even from my American colleagues. During the last years I also covered the topic of contemporary migration and identity with my volume on cultural pluralism in the United States.

Professor Fiorentino, would you mind telling us about the main historical characters that shaped the diplomatic relations between Italy and the United States in the XIX century?

Well, the two main characters of the historical events which took place in that period were Lincoln on the American side, and Garibaldi on the Italian one. For what concerns Garibaldi, at the time he was a well-known political figure in the USA, too. In fact, a few demonstrations honoring him took place in the United States: first, after the

Roman Republic declared on 9 February 1849; the second time occurred in 1861 to celebrate the unification of Italy.

As far as Lincoln was concerned, he was not among those liberal Republicans who looked at the events taking place in Italy with the hope of a continuation of the American liberal-republican revolution, but he was nonetheless sympathetic towards the Italian cause. Throughout time, a story about Lincoln inviting Garibaldi to lead his troops during Civil War has taken shape and spread worldwide. As a matter of fact, this myth – as I wrote in my book – is not quite accurate and things didn't really go as it's commonly said. What actually happened was a diplomatic bungle triggered by a young American diplomat based in Brussels at the time. In order to understand his act, we must keep in mind an interesting historical fact: the years between 1840s and 1870s were marked by a strong liberal-republican spirit which permeated the Atlantic; young people from all over Europe and the US moved around to chase and take part in any conflict in place, boosted by the willingness to spread the principle of freedom. In a way, globalization already existed, insofar as information spread around quite quickly. So, this young diplomat sent Garibaldi an official invitation to lead the American troops, but Garibaldi, contrary to what expected from a man of action like he was, didn't seize the opportunity. Instead, he thought through it because, first of all, he knew that it would have been an offense to the American officers, and on the second place, because that wasn't an official invitation from the American government. Thereafter, the American Minister Plenipotentiary Italy was sent to confirm the invitation, but only to lead one regiment and not the entire American army. At that point Garibaldi declined the invitation, diplomatically stating that Italy still was to be unified, and that he would fight for the US when they abolish slavery once and for all.

Eventually, that's the truth beneath the myth. But something that really happened – and that contributed to the building of this mythological friendship tying the two characters – is Garibaldi writing some moving words on the occasion of Lincoln's assassination in 1865.

But there are numerous characters noteworthy in the history of Italian-American cultural connections, who are not given enough space in the books. One among all, Margaret Fuller. Born in 1810, she was an earnest liberal Republican, who thought that the principles of the American Declaration of Independence had been betrayed by the United States, and that they could only flourish in Italy – the one hope for republican principles to root in the future. In fact, she looked at Mazzini in admiration, contrary to

how many Americans saw him – as, basically, a madman. All these reasons led her to move to Italy, where she married a former member of papal black aristocracy in Rome who had converted to republicanism. She, too, fought in defense of Rome in 1849 by volunteering as a nurse and she worked as a reporter for the *Herald Tribune*. She also wrote a book on this event, which eventually got lost in the tragic shipwreck in which she lost her life along with her husband and her one-year-old son.

Another interesting biography is reported in Silvio Pellico's book of memoirs *Le Mie Prigioni* (1831), which was translated twice in the 1840s and was taught in school in the United States. Countless extremely fascinating histories have been cut off from the course of history, but we should start paying attention to all its different facets.

Professor, what are your plans for the future?

Well, I would like to write the continuation of my book, now that I have collected enough information to complete such task. Because, you know, the exchanges between the US and Italy continue up until the 1910s and further – they even become more solid. So, this is my plan now.

¹ All the biographical information is cited from Fiorentino's resume on the website of Roma Tre University for better accuracy:

Prof. Daniele Fiorentino. *Università Roma Tre*. Retrieved January 4, 2022, from <https://www.uniroma3.it/persone/WHZJdXgvMEtZR01zSzh3eVRGQnQrL1liYzdxMFpHmV4U3NNck81MWN2cz0=/>

² Fiorentino D., 2013. Gangemi.

³ Fiorentino D., Sanfilippo M. 2012. Gangemi.