National Identities and Transnational European Élites

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In the last few years, research on 19th-century European history appeared sidelined by the momentum gained by the historiography of the 20th century. And yet, it not only shows signs of vitality, but it also poses questions which invite contemporary historiography to investigate further and with innovative approaches. It is not just a matter of fine-tuning or updating traditional themes, as may be dictated by new sensibilities leading to occasionally unexpected interpretations, like in the field of the history of the Risorgimento.\(^1\)

The fact is that while exploring those research fields aimed at understanding the European dynamism of the 19th century – a dynamism as appreciated in public debate as forgotten by the advocates of disciplinary boundaries – the limits of consolidated interpretative paradigms become clear. These frameworks need urgently to be subsumed into wider interpretive horizons. It is actually these new avenues’ initial outcomes that, in order to explain events and processes that enhance our understanding of history, position themselves at the intersection of several scientific fields of historical research, thus re-shaping their limiting boundaries and providing, simultaneously, further methodological developments. This was the case for research conducted on social relations and cultural relations in Europe, but also for research on the evolution of European institutions themselves. There is by now some consensus on the actual possibility of individuating associations and groups of scholars capable of playing an active role in international society and of shaping international social relations.\(^2\) In such contexts, individual and collective agents have been identified who, while rooted in a given national space, can still shape

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2. Similar considerations have already been suggested in A. Ciampani, *Soggetti sociali e relazioni culturali internazionali*, in A. Ciampani, F. De Lucia Lumeno, F. Marcorelli (eds.),
international relations as “independent subjects”, “without necessarily going via the activity of the States”.

For a synthesis of the general sense that informs the thinking behind such research, we take the liberty of re-contextualizing a well-known phrase by Pierre Renouvin who, already in the 1950s, fostered innovative solutions in the field of history of international relations. In contrast with what was still current at the end of the 20th century, it is now possible to identify within the European context, those relations which develop “entre l’appartenance à un groupe social” independently from their “comportement à l’égard des questions de politique exéterieure” (which presupposes different action strategies within the same State).

However, the need remains to deepen the focus, and to share methods and notions in order to identify the scope of a research – focused on those voluntary initiatives promoted by social agents – which has so far been “based on a set of relevant case studies”. It is in such context that the research proposal entitled European élites of the 19th century. Access to processes of political, economic and social decision making is to be framed. Began in May 2008 within the national research seminars organised by the Società Italiana per la Storia Contemporanea (Italian Society of Contemporary History), this research work has led to the formation of a European network of scholars from three Rome-based Italian universities – LUMSA, LUISS and “Sapienza” – and three other European institutions: the Catholic University of Leuven, the Jagiellonian University in Cracow and the University of Jena. In this context a database of prosopographic profiles

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6. L. Medici, op. cit., p. XVI.
of personalities and associations of European élites was compiled and, in 2013 it was presented in both Rome and Bruxelles.

The seminars held between 2009 and 2012 promoted a discussion of the European dimension of 19th-century political, economic and social establishments, and examined aspects and issues relating to the historiography of European élites. The ensuing analyses focussed on geographical areas, institutional and political profiles, religious environments, diplomatic circles, and cooperative movements of liberal Europe. The choice of such focus and testing ground, shunning ideological approaches and research tools typical of the social sciences, was dictated by a dual objective: to offer a historical-political perspective in retracing those processes, and to present an interpretation of the kind of agents involved in them.

During the course of this project, involving many European scholars, three interrelated aspects have emerged, which characterise historiographic trends in this field. First, the importance of the comparative dimension in researching élites, clearly implicit in the project of the group, and at the same time the need to overcome it, in order to understand the “European” traits typical of the national contexts under scrutiny. Second, the strong national imprint in the élites’ background and the difficulty to establish a European standpoint for their observation, given the lack of a historiographic tradition in this sense. Third, the opportunity to reject the temptation to carry out investigations by category or themes, and the resolve, instead, to focus the attention on the dynamics of interdependence of a decision-making process which is invariably local and at the same time national and European.

It is likely that in the next few years, the tools offered by the aforementioned database and its prosopographic technology, will allow an assessment of which research avenues can effectively develop those aspects, in order to understand contemporary European élites. In the meantime, one can heighten one’s awareness of the deep paradigm shift which is emerging thanks to the inclusion of analytical research studies informed by a historical perspective, which is aimed at understanding the complex paths of 19th-century Europe. The essays presented in this volume are effectively part of this state of the art: as a whole, these studies about different political, social, cultural and geographically distant realities share some peculiar traits which allow us to progress in the context outlined so far.

As it is well-known, in the 1830s European élites start having to confront with the aspirations to national independence of peoples belonging to either Nation-States still struggling for unification, or supra-national empires which they relate to for cultural, religious and linguistic affinity. The élites share with them the aspirations to specific improvements in economic conditions and expectations for constitutional equilibrium. Economic changes in the complex European rural world, the uneven introduction of technological advances in companies, the development of administrative bureaucracies, and the promotion of a wider tertiary sector all take place alongside deep changes in the lifestyle of the bourgeoisie and of a widening number of lower class citizens, as well as of the aristocracy and the Christian clergy.

In the slow and difficult modernization process that differentiates the central and eastern European empires from the might of imperial Britain in the wake of the Ottoman decline, the élites in these territories appear engaged in a process of re-discovery of national roots, thus playing an important role in building a national conscience beyond the small circles of intellectuals, and reaching wider sectors of society. Leszek Kuk’s essay discusses the debate/confrontation between the Russian rulers and the ruled Poles, a relationship which appears to influence the Lithuanian and Ukrainian territories. Again in this geographical area, and despite the composite historical-political and cultural tangle, the idea of a confederation of Slavic peoples begin to emerge as a means to contrast the attempts at Russification, and Oxana Pachlovksa’s study well charts the complexity of those national identity formation processes while they turn towards Western Europe for inspiration. Around the same time, the analyses of a “cooperation” among national entities within an imperial structure is complicated further if one takes the political point of view of the elite of Hapsburg Galicia, as suggested by Bogdan Szlachta; here too, as in the Western territories ruled by the Russians, Polish élites take care of maintaining and preserving their language and culture, whose communication power with the lower strata of the population they are well aware of.

It is undeniable, however, that in such a vast geographical area of Europe stretching from the Elbe to the Vistula, increasingly larger élites would find themselves at the brink of WWI still torn between continuity and change. Undoubtedly, though, the centrality of the Danube-Balkan region in the 19th century, shadowed by the divisions effected by the iron curtain in the post-WWII period, allows a clear delineation of paradigmatic features of European dynamics. For example, in focusing on the socio-economic aspects of Hungary during the Dual Monarchy, Alessandro Vagnini’s essay illustrates the connections of the early 20th-century Hungarian liberal elite
with the British and Prussian cooperative movement, and argues that its participation and economic contribution to the International Cooperative Alliance was higher not only than that of Italy and Russia, but also of Italy and Belgium. When the links between religious identity and national identity are examined, as in Cecilia and Ion Cârja’s essay on the élites of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church, we can fully appreciate the centrality of religion and its dynamics in making this European region a veritable bridge between the West and the East (and vice-versa).

What is more, the specialist nature of this contribution introduces us to a fundamental dimension of our study of the élites of continental Europe: a North-South perspective. Carlo M. Fiorentino presents the strategies of the Italian aristocracy (connected to the Catholic hierarchy), when facing the Savoy monarchy in the southern Italian regions. Christiane Liermann, on the other hand, in comparing the strategies of the Italian Catholicism with those of the German Protestantism, is able to identify an important common trait: they both put themselves forward as dominant features of national identity (the consequences will however be different in the two countries’ political context of the 20th century).

A perspective focused on the processes of access to the decision-making of the European élites, stresses therefore the multiple components and the relationships that develop between aristocracies, domestic courts, military leaders, politicians, diplomats, state bureaucracies, agrarian and industrial classes, financial and professional groups, intellectuals, church hierarchies, leaders of social groups. In this context it is also possible to identify the dynamism between the elite groups, which still appear to dominate the socio-political conflict, and the more marginalized groups, or perhaps the less visible ones, being in the opposition. The latter fact hints at a possible process involving a reversal of roles and balances. As a result, the avenues of research presented here, which in other contexts of interpretation would appear somewhat heterogeneous, when set within the current research framework on European élites allow us to find more and more complex tensions between the two European dimensions, the national and the supranational. As a result, thanks to works that allow appropriate comparisons, the limits of analyses confined to the emergence of national élites are apparent, and invite further studies on the constitution of élites as transnational networks, which would pave the way to a history of the European ruling classes⁹.

⁹. After all, in such a research context it has already been observed that in the 19th century «local élites have also thought about protecting themselves from transnational course of events»; R. Tölomeo (ed.), op. cit., p. 8.
Methodological concerns intended to encourage the inclusion of case studies from an all-encompassing historical perspective are again placed in the foreground, a perspective which includes interdisciplinary approaches in order to achieve a significant impact on the interpretations of contemporary history. Therefore, it is not only about how to combine social, economic and political history, but how to outline the basic premises of a study that can explicitly capture the transnational dimension of the presence of 19th-century European élites. This presence transcends the individual nations – overcoming its boundaries and limits (not just geographical ones) –, involves both people and nations and is developed within several states: this presence is what constitutes the peculiarity of the work programme of our network *Encounters of European Élites in the 19th Century*, which, as mentioned, has promoted the essays in this volume. And it is in this perspective that, aided by the tools of the database prepared this year, the network is promoting a conference (to be held in 2015) dedicated to *Transnational social practices and exchanges and their impact on national and European identities (1875 -1914)*.

The research on the 19th-century bourgeoisie as a social group has offered insights which are partly in line with the requirements mentioned above, especially thanks to a series of studies examining the 19th-century sociability, which were able to highlight the processes of continuity/discontinuity in themselves without the double chagrin of the conservation/revolution dichotomy. More specifically, the search for a transnational approach has been advocated by research into «arenas» of changing élites (*Arenen des Elitenwandels*)\(^\text{10}\): “the concept of «arenas» allows us to analyze agents, modes of action and interpretation, meaning-making processes, interests, institutions, places and traditions in their actual peculiarity. Agents, arenas and negotiation processes are to be understood as relational, that is to say, they condition one another. This way one can show how in the 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century it was not only the élites that were re-defined as legitimate social groups, but also the same leadership roles in society were re-defined each time accordingly.”\(^\text{11}\)

In effect, the research avenue that focuses on the meetings of the European élites aims to account for the progressive “amalgam” of the European élites’ national groups, their coming together both to initiate the processes to form new generations of élites, and to broaden (or restrict) the


\(^{11}\) *Ivi*, p. 113.
means of access to decision-making. This is achieved through biographical profiles of single personalities (by retracing their professional and family background) and collective agents (by analyzing their constitution and composition). This way, the promotion of studies on places and occasions of the European élites focuses on “what practices and arenas allow individuals and groups to emerge as élites”, rather than on the modalities and rules of the “variety of arenas” themselves. This is the context the scientific debate is facing: the need to find a methodology that can provide an interpretive paradigm suitable for a much-needed deepening of the discussion about the more distinctly “European” élites as they enter the space of transnational relations.

After all, it is not difficult to identify the profiles that link the essays in this volume to the topics in the debate on “transnational history”, a debate that started with momentum during the 1990s and is still witnessing open methodological discussions. In that context too, there was a process of self-awareness that was introduced by specific research programmes as part of a rethinking of American history, which gave rise to the debate about the type of “exceptionalism” of the US (led by Ian Tyrrell and Thomas Bender). At the same time those programmes were linked to the need to connect national dynamics to internationalization processes, which in turn led to the notion of “transnational cultural history” promoted by Akira Iriye. It is interesting to notice that such ideas on academic circles in Europe have led to historical research that address the same areas of interest of our volume, namely the areas of central and eastern Europe and Ukraine. After all, even the above-mentioned studies on the European “arenas” have been promoted within a wider German project on the tran-

12. *Ivi*, p. 117.
sition from class-based societies to nation-based ones, which centred on the change of élites and social modernization in Central and Eastern Europe (Von Ständegesellschaften zu Nationalgesellschaften. Elitenwandel und gesellschaftliche Modernisierung in Ostmitteleuropa. 1750-1914). There is no doubt, that many of the issues raised in this book can be framed within the more general debate about the processes of reconstruction of national histories, as well as how to study phenomena that are projected beyond the national border and explore “interconnections across borders”\textsuperscript{17}. It should be noted, however, that the methodological debate about the relationship between transnational history and global history remains still open\textsuperscript{18}. But once the traits that distinguish it from comparative history were outlined, transnational historiography has laid claims to its distinctive remit that sets it apart from global history. By emphasizing its interest in achieving a transnational understanding of national history, it places the latter in a broader context and tries to explain the nation in connection with its influence beyond its borders\textsuperscript{19}. In this perspective, proponents of transnationalism are no longer seduced by studies foregrounding global issues (like racism or the environment) that produce fascinating descriptions but are often of little substance in the reconstruction; conversely, in following the trends of transnational relations they ultimately appear to be afraid of the new shores these are leading them to, and seem to head for the familiar lands of national historiography instead.

A study on the European élites of the 19th century with both national profiles and transnational dynamics, can not only benefit from an adequate framework of reference by becoming part of this debate, it can also contribute to the recovery of important ideas and clarify the aims of these studies. For example, the emphasis put on the role of international social agents such as the European élites, seems to confirm the effectiveness of the concept of transnational history in understanding the broad spectrum of relationships that develop between political and social life, thus allowing one to overcome those notions that still prefer the “high

\textsuperscript{17} A. Iriye, Global and transnational history: the past, present, and future, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York 2013, p. 11.
