

INTERVISTA A RONALD P. FORMISANO (UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY)

D- Why do you think in the US political debate there is often a need to "invoke" history in order to legitimize and strengthen a given political position (as in the recent case of the Tea Party)? In this "public use of history" do you see proof of a vitality of history or not? Do you think such propensity to invoke/use history to be a distinctive character of the US public and political debate?

R- A Historical analogies have entered into political discussions in the United States for a long time with contending interests seeking to gain greater legitimacy for their side. Historical accuracy usually has not characterized these references to earlier events (e.g. The American Revolution, the Civil War, the Depression, and many others) since collective memory tends to be an imperfect filter of the past, as historians in their own practices know very well. Contending movements, parties, and interests engage further in selective memory, sometimes consciously and often not.

D- In your scholarship, you have often dealt with the history of conservative populism: more recently that of the Tea Party. Do you see any analogies with European forms of right-wing populism? Would it be possible, and scientifically productive, to approach the phenomenon comparatively?

R- Right-wing (or reactionary, my preferred term) populist movements in the United States and Europe share several features, notably stains of nativism and ethnocentricity. European scholars of neo-populist right wing movements have engaged in comparative approaches for some time and so the answer to the question as to their productivity is already evident. Political scientists in both Europe and the U.S. have studied such common features as: the impact of right-wing movements/parties on established parties; the rationality of voters who are attracted by these parties (or, no more irrational than voters who favor established parties); and the policy consequences of major parties taking up the agenda of the challengers.

D- What problems do you envision in doing research, and writing, on very contemporary political issues and problems? What do we sacrifice, in terms of scholarly rigour, and how can other disciplines be of help?

R- I see no difference between research on contemporary political issues from those in the past.

D- What changes - if any - are occurring in teaching (method, tools, subjects) and in the popularization of history in the American universities?

R- I really do not know. American universities for economic reasons are expanding on-line course offerings. The internet and other technologies (e.g. "Blackboard") have made it easier to assign articles from scholarly journals and other materials to students.

D- "Storici in pubblico" - one of the on-line columns edited by the Associazione Ricerche di Storia Politica - gathers the recommendations of articles published by scholars and researchers on the daily and periodical press, websites, blogs, etc. What do you think of the participation of historians in the civil, social and political debate by means of arguments taken by historical studies? According to you, does "popularization" prevail on what in Italy is usually called "public use of history"?

R- Historians in the United States try their damndest to get essays (op-eds) published in the New York Times, The Washington Post, or the Los Angeles Times. While I have occasionally sent off historical essays relevant to current politics, or simply commentary on the latter, to the New York Times I have for decades published op-eds wherever I have been living in small cities. I think historians waste their efforts seeking publication in elite newspapers and should direct their efforts locally (before, perhaps, those newspapers disappear).

D- Do you know any rigorous effort to popularize history via the Internet which you consider deserving to be recommended? Generally speaking, in your country is it possible to identify a popularization of contemporary history beyond the academic circle? In this case, in what ways does it arise?

R- Various fora exist on the Internet in which U.S. historians debate and discuss many topics from many periods-I do not participate.

D- One of the ways through which history can aim at widening its audience is to intertwine its analysis with the one of the social sciences (from anthropology to sociology, from demography to psychology). Through which research paths do you consider possible to make the dialogue between these two disciplines ever more effective? And how does the American academic institutions face this new challenge?

R- Since the cultural turn U.S. political historians are less interested in using political science, sociology, and anthropology than they were about three or four decades ago.