Interview with

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1) **Let's start by talking a little about your journey. How and when did you discover that your future would be in History? How did your family and economic context influence this career?**

I never decided I would "become a historian." To this day, I am surprised it happened. Retrospectively, someone might see a plan where there was none, although there were certainly many fortuitous circumstances, some decisions, and a few people who made a difference. I never wrote a biography and always wonder when I read one that finds a lot of coherence in a subject's life story.

I grew up in a middle-class nuclear family in which both parents worked full time. My relatives on my mother's side were affluent, well educated, and lived in cities; those on my father side were very modest and uneducated; some had become independent peasants, while others (including my grandfather) had left the fields to work in factories in the countryside. We visited both sets of relatives fairly regularly, which meant moving between two social worlds that had little relationship with one other. You could say that the theme of social stratification was with me from my childhood. I was not pressured to study any specific topic but there was a general sense that I was not good at math and science. That was probably true, although sometimes I ask myself what role gender and my teachers played in that perception.

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While in high school I became interested and involved in politics (in the way in which a teenager can). I was drawn to issues that were seemingly distant: pacifism, human rights, and the anti-nuclear movement. Unlike most of my peers, I did not enroll in the communist youth, even though I participated in their meetings. For a few years, I even joined Amnesty International, which was and remains anathema to some on the Left but which at the time I saw as an alternative to a certain dogmatism that still lived in the post-Stalinist Italian communist party. In short, politics, the present, conflict, the complexity of social life, and everything that was happening in the bigger world mattered to me. Not the past.

I went to college in Italy, where at the age of 18 or so one had to choose a major. I was interested in a great many things, from architecture to Chinese language and especially anthropology (a discipline that was not taught in any separate department and rarely in any department at all). What ultimately attracted me to history –somewhat intuitively, I think– was the sense that it was a discipline that would allow me to balance rigor and imagination – which is what I continue to find attractive. I took a couple of economics classes while in college but I was never sufficiently versed in math to become creative in that field, so I experienced it as too confining. I also had to take some literature classes, but the faculty were very conventional in their approaches. Instead, some of the historians who taught me were very clever and broad minded. I had a very good training in college, although exclusively in European and primarily in Italian history, which I regret. But the history department was a small and cozy unit, where some faculty led hands-on research seminars and urged us to question what we were doing and how we were doing it. Every seminar paper became an intellectual puzzle. That's how I got hooked.

At the moment I'm working on the concept of equity and equality in pre-modern Europe, when the notion of legal and economic equality as we understand it today did not exist and when equity meant something virtually antithetical to what it means today (a justice rooted in "natural hierarchies" between people). It was my main undergraduate teacher, Giovanni Levi, who instilled the importance of these themes in my classmates and me in the 1990s. That is how generative his teaching has been that thirty years later I am still exploring some of its facets.

2) Could you briefly talk about your recent research and what you're currently working on?

I am working on a medium-term and a long-term project. The former is in many ways a byproduct of the covid-19 pandemic, in the sense that I had to interrupt the latter, which requires research in Italian archives, because I live in the United States and last summer (2020) I could not travel abraod and this summer Italian archives remain semi-closed in spite of the fact that more and more people are vaccinated and most public spaces have reopened. The government choices

with regard to the Italian cultural patrimony speak for themselves: last week the first cruise ship was allowed back in Venice (and we know how dangerous cruise ships are in times of pandemic) while access to the state archives in Venice remains severely restricted, officially because of continuing public health hazards. Given my privileged academic position, I can delay my archival research. But younger colleagues, doctoral and post-doctoral students, those with precarious or tenure-track jobs, have been and continue to be affected adversely by the pandemic in their scholarly pursuits. It is important that we recognize this fact and address it institutionally.

To return to your question: My medium-term project is an attempt to distill, clarify, and put into a comparative perspective the research presented in the three monographs that I have published to date. It takes seriously the provocation launched by certain Left critics and academics who describe the current moment of extreme economic inequality (and its political corollaries) as "neofeudalism." Working with and against this hyperbolic slogan, I wish to illustrate the role of coercion and fixed social hierarchies, but also call attention to the room for freedom of contract that existed in feudal societies during the last two centuries of the Old Regime. I have yet to write a full page of what I hope will be a relatively short book, but my point is that the complexities of the modern world are, in part, a reflection of the complexities of the past – just as liberalism did not shed the legacy of feudalism, neoliberalism did not reinstate it. In the past, like today, some groups were afforded special privileges while others were subjected to worse treatment, sometimes, paradoxically, because they were able to make choices.

My long-term project is a quantitative and qualitative study of a particular business contract, limited partnership, in Tuscany, from 1445 to 1808. I am attracted to this project for its methodological implications. Whenever I am asked about the influence of Italian microhistory on my work, I answer that it was a profound but non-dogmatic influence. To work on a quantitative project that spans three and half centuries will give me the opportunity to show what I mean by non-dogmatic. In terms of subject, limited partnerships hold pride of place in business and economic history. They facilitated entrepreneurs in the task of raising capital beyond kith and kin, and shielded passive investors from excessive risks. For these reasons, legal historians and adherents to the new institutional economic history tend to assume that because limited partnerships were, on paper, superior forms of organization, they replaced other forms of enterprises wherever they were legally recognized. The case of Tuscany, which is exceptionally well-documented, prove that this is not universally true. Most importantly, it shows that empirical research is necessary in order to build models and generalizations. To this day, we do not know who used which type of enterprise and for what purposes. We lack answers to these simple questions because a great deal of business history (particularly that of the pre-industrial period) is framed by untested assumptions and outdated modernization paradigms about the transition from family firms to corporations. Rather than studying the migration of legal forms, I study the actual use of a multiplicity of legal forms in the same time and place and asks what factors (kinship

structure, availability of information, cultural and legal barriers, and so forth) led to the adoption of one or the other.

Mine is ultimately another way of embedding the study of credit in a historical context. But its potentialities, as I see them, go well beyond the local. The literature on the so-called great divergence, be it between Europe and East Asia or between Europe and the Middle East, so far has either marginalized business history or reinforced the older, orientalist view according to which in Europe, the family gave way earlier than elsewhere to impersonal business ties. My evidence complicates such views considerably and allows for more systematic comparisons with other regions of the world.

3) A historian and/or a work that you like and that may have marked your career

There are too many to be cited but I would like to mention two books, two very different books, that I read in college and that have shaped my work a great deal. One is Natalie Zemon Davis's collection of essays on sixteenth-century French society and religion. The volume appeared in 1975 but some of the essays gathered in it had come out as articles a decade earlier.[1] There were very few historians, let alone women, doing that kind of social history at the time. Some of those essays have remained fresh and compelling to this day. They blend history and anthropology, make room for women and gender, treat the rituals and pranks of illiterate peasants seriously and empathically, dismantle Max Weber's theory about Calvinism and secularization by tracking a group of young apprentices in the Lyon archives. They are written with verve and wear their erudition lightly. The nearly ruined copy of the book I bought in 1992 is a testament to the multiple times I read, annotated, and taught this splendid work.

The other book I wish to mention was written by an economist and is not as absorbing a read, but was also very important for me: Oliver E. Williamson's *Markets and Hierarchies*, which, coincidentally, was also published in 1975.[2] To this day, I hear colleagues in the humanities lamenting the fact that economists believe in the efficiency of free markets. In fact, most economists who won the Nobel prize in recent years (including Williamson and others who study, for example, health care or carbon emissions) are interested in market failures and in the interactions between markets and legal or political institutions. Williamson made the theory of the firm developed by Ronald Coase in the 1930s mainstream in microeconomics and showed that in certain contexts, non-competitive organizations like firms are more efficient than markets, but

[1] Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).
[2] Oliver E. Williamson, *Markets and Hierarchies: Analysis and Antitrust Implications; A Study in the Economics of Internal Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).

he also warned against the excessive power of certain corporations. Williamson gave me the toolbox to understand the dynamics hidden behind the archival data that I was processing when I studied the glass industry of pre-industrial Venice[3]. I never embraced the new institutional economic approach all the way through; in fact, in my current project on limited partnerships I am critical of it, especially the version of it by another Nobel laureate, Douglass C. North, but I appreciate its rigor and found engaging with some scholarship in economics a productive aspect of my work – it enriches my way of being a historian rather than detracting from it.

4) **Your book "familiarity of strangers" was originally published in 2009, but the translation into Portuguese only took place in 2020. In addition to editorial issues, is there any other reason for the delay?**

I am afraid the answer is very mundane, although it speaks to broader trends. Academic books like mine have a small readership and translations are expensive endeavors. It is not unusual for a press to require subsides in order to undertake foreign translation and to rely on the advice of their academic consultants. In my case, I owe the initiative to a colleague in Lisbon, Professor Diogo Ramada Curto, whom I saw in early 2018 after many years, and to my ability to offer a subside thanks to a translation fund at what was then my home institution, Yale University.

5) **Do you have any expectations about how this publication in Portuguese might contribute to the Luso-Brazilian debates about modern history?**

The academic world is less "global" than we wish to imagine. National academic traditions weigh a great deal on how we think about, write, and teach history. In the past few months, I have had the pleasure of discussing the book over zoom with audiences in Brazil. I was pleasantly struck by the fact that the questions it generated were informed by the vibrant debate on the relationship between microhistory and global history (in its multivarious forms) that has been developing in the past dozen years. I am pleased to see that the book still has something to say and don't mind that in certain respects, it has been superseded. I was also comforted by some emails I received by students who are working on the networks of Brazilian and Portuguese merchants at the edge of the empire. As you know, private business archives are scant, to say the least, for the pre-1800 period, especially in Portugal, and few have been able to use notarial and court records in systematic and creative ways. I am heartened if my book

[3] Francesca Trivellato, *Fondamenta dei Vetrai: Lavoro, tecnologia e mercato a Venezia tra Sei e Settecento* (Roma: Donzelli, 2000).

can stimulate any new research that bypasses these source problems. The empirical and theoretical debates about how merchants built "trust" within and across communities remains at once polarized and unsatisfactory.

6) **Now more specifically about the book, on page 364 (chapter 9, portuguese ed., 2020) you state that Portugal and England were "the two countries most involved in exporting the [coral] product to India" In view of this important Portuguese presence in the Mediterranean coral market , to what extent can we say that the relations between Lisbon and Livorno were not based on acquiring coral for the Asian market? And how much could this be verifiable in times of war and scarcity of silver in Portugal? Is this a secondary market for grains?**

Neither Portugal nor England were involved in the harvesting of coral in the Mediterranean, which was conducted by poor fisherman from Tuscany, Liguria, Naples, Sicily, and Sardinia, as well as by some French boats who ventured to the coat of Tunisia. They usually borrowed money for the summer fishing season from merchants, who then acquired their coral and shipped it abroad. But with the exception of France, which had a small colonial presence in southeast India (Pondicherry), none of the Mediterranean states had an empire in South Asia, where coral was most in demand. That is why merchants based in Italy sold coral to those in Portugal and England, the two countries that in the eighteenth century had a strong foothold in India. We do not have comprehensive statistics but we know that, unlike grain, which was destined for domestic consumption, coral beads were destined for re-exportation and subject to the fluctuations of the marine harvest as much as Indian demand.

7) **In another interview to a Brazilian colleague, you say that you don't exactly consider yourself a global historian. How can the relationship between localisms and more global interpretations help to understand the current world?**

One of the reasons why I do not consider myself a global historian is because I do not read and write any non-European language. Although this is not a universally or even widely accepted criterion for defining who is affiliated with global history, I prefer to leave the pursuit of this approach to those capable of accessing and deciphering non-European archives and putting them into meaningful relations with those of other regions. That said, I hope to write a comparative piece on credit instruments with a colleague who is an expert in the medieval Islamic Mediterranean. I believe collaboration and co-authorship are important in this day and age. But I

have also supervised dissertations by doctoral students who have a much broader global reach than I do, and find that they are better equipped to shape the future of the field than my generation of historians of Europe.

Of course, in some periods and locations in the past, like today, it is impossible to isolate a village from global connections. This became truer after 1500, and certainly on the American continent. But it was neither a sudden nor an all-encompassing phenomenon, as many have noted before me. Machivelli's *Prince* famously says little to nothing about the so-called New World, although it was written in 1513. Similarly, today there are few areas of our economic and political lives that are untouched by what happens outside of our regions or countries, but we continue to live in national (and even nationalistic) cultures. If nation-states have lost power vis à vis corporations, inter-state governance institutions have hardly replaced them. The radically different policies and cultural reactions to covid-19 (even within the European Union) are a case in point.

8) How do you understand the role of history and the historian at a time when fake news takes on so much preponderance and the post-truth appears as a new context?

My latest book is about "fake news" that shaped European economic ideas about private finance for a good two and a half centuries: the legend according to which medieval Jews invented bills of exchange and marine insurance.[4] I call it a legend because the story is false but had enormous traction. So the first point I wish to make is that fake news is nothing new. What is astounding is that today we have much more sophisticated means to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information, and yet the latter proliferates. Historians, especially in the United States, do not have a high social status so it is difficult to exert our professional expertise in the public sphere, particularly for those who are not specialists of the history of the nation where they work. Otherwise, it would be easy and important to point out that historians have long developed methods to ascertain what is "true" and what is "fake." In my field of study, one could mention Lorenzo Valla, who in the fifteenth century demonstrated that the pope had falsified the document he used to claim sovereignty over central Italy. Valla mobilized philology (the study of language) for this purpose. His achievement was a big deal, but even then, it did not gain political traction… Today people expect national and international police to use the most sophisticated instruments

[4] Francesca Trivellato, *The Promise and Peril of Credit: What a Forgotten Legend about Jews and Finance Tells us about the Making of European Commercial Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). A slightly abbreviated version exists in Italian: *Ebrei e capitalismo: Storia di una leggenda dimenticata*, trans. Filippo Benfante and Francesca Trivellato (Rome: Laterza, 2021).

to detect false documents and pursue criminals, but seem more relaxed when it comes to the patent lies that some politicians and corporations feed them.

Of course, historians also know that no narrative of the past is pristine. There are fake documents and untrue facts. But there are also divergences of interpretations, and tales of the past that incorporate different views. This does not mean that history is intrinsically relativistic, not at all. It merely recognizes that since time immemorial, the writing of the past has been inseparable from political and cultural conflicts, and still is.

9) Braudel stated that "the historian is clinging to his time, as the wet earth clings to a gardener's spade". Currently, in Brazil, social issues, especially those related to racism, arising mainly from the maintenance of an elite still with a colonial thought, have influenced historiographical research. To what extent do you consider that this ideological tendency can affect historiographical production, in a negative and positive way?

I am always a bit troubled by versions of this question because they imply that certain victims of structural discrimination make excessive demands. Excessive with respect to which standard? It is a way of thinking that, at bottom, betrays a profound discomfort toward minorities within majoritarian liberal democracies. When the nation and nationalism were the single most important topics of historical research and writing, few saw them as crowding out other subjects or as not giving enough weight to minorities within the scope of nationalism. I am not directly familiar with what is happening in Brazil. In the United States, the legacy of racism is finally becoming part of the public discourse, but it has always been a topic of academic study and classroom instruction. If today the interest in this topic is more intense, it also generates more research, and not necessarily a new consensus. For example, among economic historians, there is a lively debate about whether slavery accelerated or slowed down industrialization. The so-called new history of capitalism regards cotton plantations in the Southern states of the United States as having been instrumental to the development of capitalism in the Northern states. Not everyone subscribes to this thesis, however, and its global applicability has been contested. New research on Brazil (the country that received the highest number of enslaved individuals from Africa) confirms and updates the older Marxist view according to which slave plantations were paternalistic and inefficient modes of production.[5] This is just one area in which the interest in the legacy of racism

[5] Eric Hilt, "Revisiting *Time on the Cross* After 45 Years: The Slavery Debates and the New Economic History," *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics*, 1, no. 2 (2020): 456–83; Nuno Palma, Andrea Papadia, Thales Pereira, and Leonardo Weller, Slavery and Development in Nineteenth Century Brazil," *Capitalism: A Journal of History and Economics*, 2, no. 2 (2021): 372-426.

has opened up new avenues of research and sparked new inter-disciplinary exchanges between historians and economists.

10) This being a university publication and therefore especially to be read by young historians, what advice would you give to those who are starting now on this path?

This is a moment of such crisis for the humanities that it is no longer possible to build careers, to predict what one degree or one decision will lead to. Paradoxically, there is no point in trying to be cautious. Of course, young historians need to be particularly resourceful in order to pursue their interests at this junction. But they also need to take risks, to think and work outside of conventional wisdom, even when someone from an older generation may appear skeptical. The so-called history wars between social historians and cultural historians are long past. Global history –the mantra of the day– is a peculiarly malleable approach, sometimes even too capacious insofar as it can comprise opposing ideological tendencies (border-line celebratory histories of empires on the one hand, and post-colonial perspectives on the other). There is something disorienting in this open-ended world of possibilities, but there are also great opportunities and intellectual rewards for those willing to step out of conventional molds.

Interview given on June 21, 2021.