

## Interview with Prof. Dr. Gabriella Valera

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Dear Professor Gabriella Valera, you are the organizer of this year's annual conference of the ISCH entitled *Gender and Generations*, which took place in Trieste from 18-22 July. You are an eminent professor of History at the University of Melbourne and the president of a new Research Centre dedicated to Youth Culture. We are glad to have the opportunity to talk with you about cultural history and its perspectives as well as about the special connections that could be explored between cultural history and other humanistic disciplines such as philosophy, the arts and cultural studies.

1. Could you tell us some of your conclusions about this conference, as you are the one who could best explain what the purposes of the conference were and how many of them were really achieved? As participants, we are indeed convinced that the conference was a real success, not only thanks to the impressive number of those who attended the event as speakers, and to the scientific level of the discussions, but also to the way in which the whole programme was set up. Could you explain to us why you chose these topics for an annual conference of the ISCH?

Answer

Thank you for providing me with the opportunity to think once again about the results of our Conference on Gender and Generations, emphasising an aspect that was fundamental for me: "the way in which the whole programme was organised".

When proposing the combination "Gender and Generations", I imagined a significant contemporary theme and its cultural-historical aspects: the uncertain status of subjectivity, its relationship with identities, and the work of deconstructing traditional identities without backsliding towards other fictitious or serialising identities. In the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "Gender Studies", Gender History, Women's History and important areas of Cultural Studies have provided interesting insights into the overview of the statutes of subjectivity; particularly, Gender Studies keeps promoting intense interdisciplinary work: from the question of the body to the problems of the relationship between gender and rights, with intersection between institutional history, economic history, the history of work (for example, certain important aspects of feminist legal theory), to the reflection on differences and conflicts, especially those concerning identity. Moreover, especially in Cultural Studies, the theme "young people" has generated a stream of reflection about "youth culture" as an antagonist "subculture" as compared to the one expressed in the societies taken into consideration. Analyses of "youth cultures" and the political and social history of the "young" have thus brought to light new subjects that are bearers of cultures, needs, capabilities, rights, relations, powers... I proposed "generations" instead of "young people", to draw attention to old and new temporalities. "Generation", as defined by Karl Mannheim in 1928, incorporates the historicist notion of a homogeneous time, the time of national progress. In our "global space", time has been shattered into a series of internal encapsulations that oblige us to ask ourselves whether collective historical narratives are able to represent the trajectories of individual, temporarily inconsistent experiences. After all, the lectures given by Patrizia Dogliani, Guido Ruggiero, Jonas Liljequist and Alberto Mario Banti – which cut across eras and touched upon very different contexts of European history – showed how complex and diverse the logic of gender and of generations are, requiring each time a redetermination of the categories.

Something that I find very interesting emerged from the individual contributions, from the

plenary lectures, from the methodological and historical-historiographical round tables, and from the macro areas of reference structuring the panels (institutions, rituals, identities, work, power, body: the physicality that cultural history tends more and more to bring under its gaze constitutes the statutes of subjectivity; the "spaces" in which subjects play their "games" and spend their time (time was the topic of the 2015 conference), especially constitute the statutes of subjectivity. Spaces and times open or close, between institutions and movement, between regulation and life. Michel de Certeau wrote that space is composed of "intersections of mobile elements" and that in a certain sense it is the set of movements within it. Mobility and time variations qualify spaces and allow one to define the interpretative frame of reference, as it emerged from the interesting discussion on "decontextualization" during the final methodological round table, as opposed to a certain conceptual indolence that could bring one back to hermeneutical attitudes.

All of this characterises cultural history. Perhaps its task is not to propose "strong" historiographical categories. However, its task and continuous vocation is to deal with other categorial and theoretical apparatuses, in its capacity as embodied history. Cultural history can show complexity in the apparent simplicity of minimal contexts. I would like to say that as a result of the conference, I also began to think that the "spatial turn" is perhaps one of the most significant moments of a large "cultural turn", also because it crosses and confronts itself with a consolidated framework of political stories in which the spaces are essential: the spaces of politics, of states and of empires. However, these spaces can and must be revisited in their lively characterisations of small and large scales, of institutions and people, places and passages.

I believe that all this is a true interesting and not partial result of a Conference where the "risk" of a strong structure, built on categories that do not necessarily stem from cultural history, was welcomed with intelligence and curiosity by the speakers and put forward again in the debates with great vivacity.

2. There were not only individual contributions with very challenging subjects, but also very dynamic talks during the round tables. We would like some details concerning the topics of two such round tables: Cultural History in Italy and New Perspectives in Cultural History. As it was pointed out, in Italy we can find various rhythms and paths of this domain in comparison to France, for instance, or other European countries. There are both enthusiastic and reticent attitudes among Italian scholars. Could you comment on this? Which steps should be taken in Italian research on these topics?

Answer –

In Italy, the debate on "cultural history" began in 1905 in an essay by Benedetto Croce, who introduced himself into the wide debate that was taking place above all in Germany on the contrast between political and cultural history. Recalling that same essay, Croce proposed the subject again in 1924, when he spoke about economic and political history by comparing it with the legal-historical orientation of historiography that was becoming increasingly established at the time. In short, Croce came to the conclusion that cultural history resulted in an ethical-political history or moral history *tout court*. He even said that progress cannot be explained with the force of reason but rather with that of religion.

Why should we go back to Croce? Alessandro Arcangeli wrote very interesting pages on the developments of cultural history in Italy, recalling the weight that the history of ideas embodied in the biographies of great historians (he makes reference, for example, to the school of Turin) had in its journey, which was perhaps a bit slow and not entirely completed.

Alongside the history of ideas, we find the history of the spread of ideas (of the book, of writing

practices, of censorship...).

In Italy, the great turning point of popular history came about with Gramsci's philosophical thought. All this is linked to changes in the PCI (The Italian Communist Party): the uncertain use of the basic themes of "the people" united, patriotic and rooted in traditions, the masses, in which the tension between the masses and the leader prevails, or the partial and conflictual tension characterising "class". Books by Carlo Ginzburg were also involved in a very complex debate regarding the definition of "popular culture". As Alessandro Arcangeli points out, Ginzburg was only appointed lecturer of "History of European Cultures" at the University of Pisa in 2006, about forty and fifty years respectively after the publication of "The Night Battles" (1966) and of "The Cheese and the Worms" (1976). As highlighted by the colleagues in the panel devoted to this subject, a certain difficulty in accepting cultural history endures to this day.

Which steps should be taken? – You ask me.

And I ask you: where to?

Each regional path leads towards a specific method and can contribute to the definition in progress of Cultural History "in the broadest sense of the word", leading to awareness of a methodological, formal, and content nature: the materiality of sources, of practices, of intertwined discourses, of relationships and of languages and their performative contents. I believe that knowledge of the history of "cultural historiography" in Italy, as in the different regional contexts, provides a way in which to observe, revise, redefine and identify fields and methods of action.

3. Looking, for example, at Foucault, a philosopher who is primarily interested in extending philosophical research towards sociology, history, anthropology and political or cultural mentalities, what is, in your opinion, the relationship between Cultural History and philosophy (which philosophy? which philosophical domains?), how tight could this relationship be and what would the perspectives be for such double connected domains of research? We are asking you such a question since our journal focuses on philosophical research. Special attention is paid to the philosophy of culture and aesthetics, but also to the philosophy of values.

Answer

Foucault has undoubtedly questioned every political history by re-thinking power as *practice of power*, with all that this could mean with respect to the "modern" (in the sense of Western and European modernity) relationship between subject and power. He has thus also affected the disciplinary histories in which these issues were processed and normalised, together with their traditions and the way in which they are upheld.

I believe that a main path to follow is the one of disciplinary histories. Carefully recording the internal transformations of the disciplinary histories, statutes and basic categories means verifying their changes and turning points: the more through the comparisons between the disciplinary histories, the better these transformations, turning points, intersections and contaminations can be understood in their cultural meanings.

We must apply this method to what was historically called "Philosophy", i.e. the disciplinary traditions that philosophy has generated: the various philosophies of law, of politics, aesthetic, ethical philosophies, etc. Thanks to the breadth and originality of his studies (at the time in which he wrote and proposed them), Foucault has become a fundamental point of reference, almost an icon.

However, the time has also come to recognise that establishing the issue of subjectivity and its statutes of power (and against power), his thought is to be reread as an expression of a crisis of

paradigms involving many authors and many different elaborations of the same theme, and it concerns an entire great (cultural) history of knowledge. You speak to me about aesthetics and the philosophy of values. Dialogue is important: aesthetics has become a crucial reference point for historians, too. The theme of form and performance (which contains within itself the very notion of the form) is suggested. Just think of the current basis of legal aesthetics. As for the philosophy of values, values as relational facts are certainly constitutive of the cultural histories to which we, as historians of the Society, turn. Today, a philosophy of values, in the light of cultural histories, must call back into question even ethics itself as a discipline. Major issues build bridges between the different disciplines by accepting an interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary challenge without ignoring disciplinary structures and methods.

A cultural-historical profile in the dialogue between the disciplines, a "cultural history" of disciplines may indicate to historians cultural-historical issues to deal with, fields of reference and paths otherwise not recognised. Once again: the "documentary materiality" of cultural histories is among the broadest you can imagine. The *proprium* of cultural history is to recognise the physical spaces of their substance and articulation, the reality of microcosms and macrocosms. Cultural history has several links with other histories and needs, for this reason, to monitor the relationships that it establishes with them.

4. Some participants suggested that the domain of the new *average* should have an important impact on future research in cultural history. This was mentioned especially during the round table organised on the last day of the conference, which took place in a very impressive historical place, the Duino Castle. What is your opinion on this proposal? How much could these new media contribute to a better understanding of certain topics?

Answer –

I have no experience in this field. I can only say that the media (in the broadest sense of the term) may become the subject of cultural history since they are mediators of culture or of specific aspects of culture. But, in my view, this is not the most important aspect of the issue. In the language of the media, which the new media propose, the communicative function is replaced by a far more substantial "performative" function that changes the cognitive status of the interlocutor. Just think about the continuity and fragmentation of being connected, which leads to a multiplication of *points of view*: places from which to observe, senses of belonging to be saved, sudden definitions of an event in which we participate only through a "like" or "dislike": but the event is immediately true. How can we think about a text or a hypertext on the basis of the offer made by the new media? How can the cultural historian deal with all this? I don't have an answer. However, if Cultural History today responds to the need to welcome new historiographic inputs and to process them in a disciplinary way, the impact of the new media should lead us to reflect on the approach to sources and the creation of "events".

5. You are the scientific director of a newly founded Research Centre for Youth Culture, which manifests very different interests connected to the young generations, their culture and their way of living. Could you tell us about the main purposes of this Research Centre? How much is this Centre interested in research on the cultural connection between the West and the East (of Europe)? We know that Trieste is a place of cultural and ethnic interferences. Does this Centre promote such intercultural research?

## Answer

The International Study and Documentation Centre for Youth Culture (iSDC) collects the results of actions through which, for many years, I have promoted the cultural production of "youth"; scholars, artists and social workers in various areas and with different languages (whether artistic, literary, performative or reflective). By organizing competitions and forums (in particular the World Youth Forum Right to Dialogue), I have created a network that has reached up to 90 countries worldwide and has linked thousands of young people.

However, some clarifications must be made.

"Youth culture": our centre needed a name, but it should immediately be said that "youth culture" is not an abstraction. Rather it is the culture expressed by young people according to an "age group". No more and no less. An age group roughly corresponds to experiences of a certain type. Working life is generally not structured, research is not yet formalised, information tools and life conditions change. Among "young people" there are differences in accordance with places, stories and projects. All this makes intergenerational dialogue important. "Youth culture" is (perhaps) the most intrinsically subject to change. The heart of the work set by the iSDC lies in the continuous comparison of elaborate and normalised scientific paradigms and the not completely formalised generative capacity of a certain culture of which young people – especially in our historical period – are bearers. The Centre promotes, studies and is willing to provide documentary evidence by setting up a telematic archive. The specificity of our work consists in proposing contemporary issues – we would dare say *the contemporary issue* – and re-thinking them in the light of the necessary cultural-historical profile that "young people" – but not only young people – usually ignore. It is a dialogue among *histories/stories* even more than a dialogue between *cultures*. Each code seems to be inadequate for the representation of what is happening; and prompts us to exercise a continuous redefinition and a continuous reorientation that eventually reshapes the bigger picture. Accepting the challenge of this movement is a great intellectual effort of our time.

And I come to the dialogue between the "two Europes": it is historically evocative and deeply felt, especially by the participants in our initiatives who come from Eastern and Central-Eastern Europe and the Balkans. In those areas, the sense of a historical fracture and of an unachieved cultural recognition is particularly intense. The Centre keeps track of this aspect and integrates it into analysis of the *contemporary issue* as experienced by younger generations and as a feature of a historical intergenerational relationship. In addition, the Centre aims to work specifically on these points by recruiting into its Scientific Committee scholars from this area of Europe. Everything depends on how the Centre will succeed at growing. It is born from an opening, without neglecting the scientific form of elaboration and verification. That being said, we believe it can have a significant role and a great history.

Thank you Professor Gabriella Valera for your answers and for the very interesting conference you organised this year in Trieste.

Thank you again for interviewing me, and thanks to all the participants in the July conference, to the colleagues who helped me in organizing the conference and to the staff that welcomed our guests and gave them the opportunity to feel, at least a little, the "soul" of Trieste and our territory.

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