

States, Europe, and the World from the Perspective of the History of International Relations and Area Studies

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Abstract

This article examines the historical and methodological evolution of the History of International Relations and Area Studies within the Italian academic tradition, focusing on their progressive opening toward interdisciplinary approaches, transnational perspectives, and global historiographical debates. Starting from the nineteenth-century origins of diplomatic history, the analysis reconstructs the transformations that led to the emergence of contemporary International History, emphasizing the contributions of French historiography, the Annales school, and Italian scholarship. Particular attention is devoted to the dialogue between the History of International Relations and the History and Institutions of Africa, the Americas, and Asia, highlighting the role of interdisciplinarity, methodological pluralism, and the increasing engagement with themes such as globalization, transnational actors, decolonization, migration, gender, and environmental history. The chapter further reflects on the challenges posed by the Global Turn and by attempts to overcome Eurocentric paradigms, while also underlining the continuing relevance of local archives, territorial knowledge, and area-specific expertise. Ultimately, the essay argues that the History of International Relations and Area Studies remain dynamic and evolving disciplines, capable of contributing significantly both to historiography and to the broader development of political sciences.

Abstract (Italiano)

Il contributo analizza l'evoluzione storica e metodologica della Storia delle relazioni internazionali e degli Area Studies nella tradizione accademica italiana, soffermandosi sulla loro progressiva apertura verso approcci interdisciplinari, prospettive transnazionali e dibattiti storiografici globali. A partire dalle origini ottocentesche della storia diplomatica, il contributo ricostruisce le trasformazioni che hanno condotto alla nascita della contemporanea International History, evidenziando il ruolo della storiografia francese, della scuola delle Annales e degli studiosi italiani. Particolare

attenzione è dedicata al dialogo tra Storia delle relazioni internazionali e Storia e istituzioni dell'Africa, delle Americhe e dell'Asia, mettendo in luce il contributo dell'interdisciplinarietà, del pluralismo metodologico e del crescente interesse verso temi quali globalizzazione, attori transnazionali, decolonizzazione, migrazioni, studi di genere e storia ambientale. Il capitolo riflette inoltre sulle sfide poste dal Global Turn e dai tentativi di superare i paradigmi eurocentrici, sottolineando al contempo la persistente centralità degli archivi locali, della conoscenza del territorio e delle competenze area-specifiche. Il saggio sostiene infine che la Storia delle relazioni internazionali e gli Area Studies rimangano discipline dinamiche e in continua evoluzione, capaci di contribuire in modo significativo sia alla storiografia sia allo sviluppo delle scienze politiche.

Keywords: *international history, area studies, global history, historiography, interdisciplinarity, political sciences*

The History of International Relations, the History and Institutions of Africa, the History and Institutions of the Americas, and the History and Institutions of Asia constitute the four distinct fields that define the Scientific Disciplinary Group of International History and Area Studies. At its core, this group is characterized by an interdisciplinary methodology that enables the diachronic study of international relations, societies, and institutions across world regions, while also tracing the processes through which these interactions and structures have shaped global history (Redaelli, 2025a: 5-6). The meaning and complexity of their objects of study are articulated through research questions, sources, periodizations, concepts, terminology, and other analytical tools that address the national, international, and transnational dimensions of historical phenomena. This definition is drawn from the Declaratory statement of the Scientific Disciplinary Group, which came into force in 2024 (MUR, 2024: 544-548). Such a reference proves particularly useful, as it succinctly clarifies the rationale uniting these disciplines while still acknowledging their respective specificities, some of which I will attempt to highlight. Moreover, by fostering dialogue with other fields and encouraging openness to the analysis of

international and transnational historical problems, the Declaratory statement illustrates how the History of International Relations and Area Studies are naturally and productively situated within the scientific and educational domain of Political Sciences—a field whose very *raison d'être* is grounded largely in its multidisciplinary and cross-border dimensions.

A second brief introductory remark is in order. The title of this essay might be read as suggesting an interpretative trajectory, given the implicit climax it contains: the progression from a single object of study—the State—to objects that transcend it, namely Europe and, ultimately, the world. Such a trajectory could also suggest a value judgment, leading the reader to see these disciplines (and their scholars) as gradually broadening their perspectives—becoming, in a sense, less parochial. This interpretative key, however, would be misleading. A broadening of scholarly horizons did indeed occur, as in other disciplines. However, tracing its development requires looking beyond the objects of study and attending to the growing engagement with the international academic community. This engagement fostered methodological refinement, expanded the range of documentary sources, and, more generally, strengthened research practices. It should be emphasized, moreover, that precisely because this was a reciprocal academic interaction, Italian historians working in these fields did not occupy a merely passive role but actively contributed to the broader advancement of scholarship.

With this in mind, I would like to outline the main trajectories of the disciplines under discussion, highlighting the affinities that connect them—while, as noted, without obscuring their differences—and placing particular emphasis on methodological questions. To this end, it may be helpful to begin briefly with the origins of the History of International Relations, a subject that continues to command enduring interest among scholars. This is unsurprising, since the epistemological status of any form of knowledge is constantly evolving, albeit at different rates depending on historical circumstances, and reshaping the professional profile of its scholars. Such evolution, which may also be driven by exogenous factors, such as the emergence of new types of historical sources, must be carefully considered in relation to the discipline's epistemological framework and, more broadly, its identity. The need to navigate the interplay

between innovation and tradition can inspire a reflexive examination of one's own discipline: to trace its origins, study its transformations, and draw from the past the insights necessary to guide present change. Only the certainty of having come from afar can impel one to look ahead—as Walter Benjamin taught (Prosperi, 2021: 114-115). In this light, *What is History (of International Relations)?* (Carr, 1961) emerges as a question that recurs frequently, as it does across other domains of historiography.

Today, this kind of self-inquiry also arises from a widespread, but distinct, concern: the need to counter indifference toward the past and the marginalization of History, which is increasingly denied both scientific legitimacy and social relevance as a discipline. We live in an age characterized by “presentism”, that is, a conception of time radically transformed by the digital turn—simplifying processes, accelerating experience, and compressing history into a narrow present rather than situating the present within its broader historical continuum (Marcone, 2013: 158).

How, then, did the History of International Relations come into being? Its origins can be traced to the nineteenth century, within the field of diplomatic history, closely tied to the emergence of an “international sphere” and the technical evolution of modern diplomacy, which produced a particular kind of documentation that would become the privileged source for numerous historical reconstructions. Initially, its focus was on the texts of international agreements, studied primarily for their legal implications. Over time, however, diplomatic history underwent a process of maturation and refinement, gradually evolving into what we now recognize as the History of International Relations (Di Nolfo, 2006: 42 ff.) This development owes much to the influence of French historiography. A first significant transformation is attributed to Albert Sorel, who in 1872 assumed the chair of Diplomatic History at the École des Sciences Politiques in Paris. His methodological and conceptual contributions were considerable. Drawing inspiration from the teachings of Leopold von Ranke—“both the *pater familias* of professional history and the godfather of diplomatic history (Reynolds, 2016: 265)—who had identified the critical use of documentary sources as the scientific foundation of historical reconstruction, Sorel emphasized that diplomatic history should be grounded in a historical-political interpretation, rather than primarily a legal one, of documents.

Moreover, he argued that it should encompass international dynamics in their full scope and complexity, going beyond the texts of treaties.

A subsequent turning point occurred during the interwar period, driven by the school of the *Annales* and, in particular, by Lucien Febvre. A passage from his 1931 review, published in the *Revue de Synthèse*, of *Histoire diplomatique de l'Europe* (1871–1914), edited by Henri Hauser in 1929, aptly illustrates the French historian's incisive critique of diplomatic history “as such”:

[L]es faits particuliers, et dans une certaine mesure anecdotique, les rédacteurs de l'*Histoire diplomatique de l'Europe* les relèvent bien à l'occasion (...); mais les forces cachées, les ressorts secrets qui font agir et se mouvoir les masses humaines, il se soucient beaucoup moins de les tirer au grand jour (...). Eux, retranchés derrière un parti pris simple, celui de n'utiliser jamais que les documents diplomatiques proprement dits (...) eux ne se soucient que de la croûte apparente de leur globe, de leur sphère politico-diplomatique... Faut-il leur en faire grief? A eux, non. A des hommes, non. A une tradition, peut-être (Febvre, 1931: 10–11).

That tradition was anthropocentric and largely descriptive, with little attention paid to the understanding of social, economic, or cultural processes. The time had therefore come to move beyond it, enriching the historical analysis of international dynamics through the incorporation of geographical, demographic, economic, and psychological factors (“les vraies causes, les profondes causes” (Febvre, 1953: 67). For the co-founder of the *Annales*, it was equally essential to consider the role of public opinion in shaping international politics, which could no longer be regarded as the exclusive preserve of elites (Bucarelli, 2025: 11–12).

Pierre Renouvin likewise echoed the call to set aside the *histoire bataille* and advocated for the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach (Renouvin, 1953: XI). For the Sorbonne historian, it was essential to assess the influence of the “deep forces”—demographic trends, economic dynamics, political cultures, collective mentalities, and the like—that helped shape the actions of government officials and diplomats. In pursuing this undertaking, which was at once scientific and cultural, Renouvin did not rely exclusively on the methodological tools developed by the *Annales* school. Among his

references was the Italian historian Federico Chabod (Frank, 2012: 11-12, 27-28), author of the influential *Storia della politica estera italiana dal 1870 al 1896. Le Premesse*, published in 1951. Renouvin underscored its importance by citing Chabod's work in the introduction to his *Histoire des relations internationales*, published two years later, and again in 1955, when, at the Tenth International Congress of Historical Sciences in Rome, he singled it out as one of the most significant examples of the "vigor" with which new methodological approaches were reshaping the study of international relations history (Renouvin, 1955: 379). This recognition is hardly surprising. Chabod's book, as the historian Luigi Salvatorelli noted, employed an innovative methodology that allowed him to move beyond "the narrow confines of Italian diplomatic history" (Salvatorelli, 1952). Salvatorelli was not alone in appreciating the significance of this work, though the discussion it provoked remained rather parochial:

[...] reviewing today, thirty years later, as a whole, that dense group of articles, notes, and essays that accompanied the publication of Chabod's book, which can rightly be considered a significant episode of our cultural life, the impression nevertheless remains that many, indeed most, of the critics were unable to avoid enclosing the book within the narrow mesh of the legendary polemics of the 1950s (Vigezzi, 1983: 434).

It is important to bear in mind that Renouvin's approach was far from deterministic; he did not see the "basic factors" as negating human agency, including the influence of "great men" in history. Nor did he downplay the significance of political history (Frank, 2012: 16). Yet Renouvin's approach was met with considerable caution, if not outright suspicion, among Italian historians. Particularly revealing in this respect is the position taken by Mario Toscano, who, from 1953 onward, held the Chair of the History of Treaties at the University of Rome while also directing the Historical and Documentation Service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Monzali, 2011; 2024). Toscano acknowledged that the importance of considering a broader spectrum of material and spiritual factors in the analysis of foreign policy formation and interstate relations was widely recognized. Yet he cautioned that it would be a mistake to forget that "the object of

this field of study is the relations between states”, and that attention to the “deep forces” was intended to remain instrumental in analysing the decisions upon which the trajectory of those relations depended (Toscano, 1963: 8-12). Toscano’s willingness to engage with the new French historiography (Riccardi, 2018a: 388-401)—albeit from a broadly conservative perspective aimed at preserving a scholarly tradition he continued to regard as fruitful—gave way to an uncompromisingly defensive stance when he perceived that the critique of diplomatic history was beginning to verge on a wholesale rejection of its validity:

[in the History of International Relations] the diplomatic aspect retains all its importance and, indeed, assumes a preeminent position, because it provides a political interpretation of events, which is already a synthetic interpretation in itself. To follow a different path would be tantamount to altering the object of our discipline, risking its loss of validity as a specialized history, without, however, providing a more satisfactory explanation of the reality of international relations (Toscano, 1970: 850-852).

This assessment highlights the limits that Toscano placed on dialogue with the French historiographical *nouvelle vague*. Likewise, the approach of Pietro Pastorelli, who trained under Toscano and was also a reference point for Italian historians of International Relations, did not align with the study of “deep forces” advocated by Febvre and the “revolution renouviniennne” (Lefebvre D’Ovidio, 2024: 634; Lefebvre D’Ovidio and Garzia, 2024). Moreover, according to Lefebvre D’Ovidio, Pastorelli displayed little interest in methodological issues. As a result, he took no part “in the debate for or against *histoire événementielle* and for or against diplomatic documents”, nor did he attempt to theorize “what should be the primary focus or methods of the history of international relations” (Lefebvre D’Ovidio, 2024: 627).

Adopting a distinct argumentative stance, many years later Ennio Di Nolfo criticized Renouvin for his overly schematic didacticism (Di Nolfo, 2006: 58–59) and his reliance on a limited set of variables (Di Nolfo, 2002: 366). This critique—and here a clear distinction emerges from the objections raised by Toscano—reveals an

internalization of Renouvin's framework, which was subsequently transcended through a further broadening of the discipline's horizons. Di Nolfo himself had acknowledged that the impulses emanating from French historiography had prompted a methodological renewal which, once initial doubts had been overcome, produced far-reaching effects within Italian historiography. This renewal enabled scholars to revisit even long-standing research topics with a more up to date "toolkit", thereby yielding innovative results. Among these, the study of liberal Italy's foreign policy deserves particular attention. Between the two World Wars, it became a central subject within the discipline that, in 1938, was formally designated *Storia dei trattati e politica internazionale* ("History of Treaties and International Politics") and was progressively institutionalized within the Faculties of Political Science. To this day, the history of liberal Italy's foreign policy remains a major focus for historians of international relations (Lefebvre D'Ovidio and Varsori, 2018: 171; Riccardi, 2018b).

Naturally, Renouvin's approach—along with that of his school, which included, among others, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle—is only one of the pillars of the bridge connecting the discipline's past to its more recent transformations. Yet it is significant, as it points to one of the principal directions the field has taken and continues to define: namely, the cautious yet substantial broadening of the scope of the history of international relations (a process that, as we shall see, also pertains to Area Studies) and its growing engagement in dialogue with other disciplines (Varsori, 2016; Borzoni, Onnis, Rossi, 2021; Bagnato et al., 2015). This evolution has unfolded, on the one hand, alongside a shifting perception of the international system—particularly regarding the number and nature of its constituent actors. This, in turn, has led to a growing focus on international organizations (Tosone and Villani, 2024: 301-413; Tosone, 2024; Guerrieri and Tedoldi, 2024; Mugnaini, 2023; Villani, 2016), which for a long time were treated as a neglected stepchild in the field of the History of International Relations (Mechi, 2013). Conversely, the broadening of International History's scope of inquiry has led the four scholarly areas under discussion to progressively refine their scientific profile. The implications of recent Cold War scholarship are a case in point. Its origins lie in an earlier turning point,

emerging between the 1970s and 1980s with the so-called “discovery of America” (Varsori, 2016: 274-277), namely the reception of Cold War history through its successive interpretive paradigms – “revisionist”, “post-revisionist”, and, more recently, global (Berrettini, 2017: 39-62; Romero, 2014; Varsori, 2008: 159-160).

Efforts to “globalize” the Cold War—exemplified more recently by the ambitious work of Lorenz M. Lüthi, who reinterprets the Cold War from a global and comparative perspective, shifting the focus from the traditional US–USSR rivalry to regional conflicts in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (Lüthi, 2020)—draw on Odd Arne Westad’s seminal *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*. Westad contends that the central dynamics of the conflict should be located in the non-Western world (Westad, 2005: 396). In Italy, scholarly engagement with this work has highlighted both its considerable merits and the questions that Global History may raise. In this respect, a roundtable discussion with historians of International Relations and Area Studies devoted to another of Westad’s books, *The Cold War: A World History* (2017), provided particularly significant insights. All participants agreed that the book is commendable for “its broad chronological range, the erosion of geographical boundaries, and the extraordinary variety of areas of investigation” (Bagnato, 2018: 134). However, critical remarks were also raised, illustrating the limits of Global History. These include the reliance on interpretative frameworks that can be overly simplistic, the difficulty of mastering the extensive scholarly literature required for global reconstructions, and the limited attention given to social actors and bottom-up dynamics. The ambition to offer a comprehensive perspective—which requires allocating space proportionate to the relative importance of various actors, both state and non-state—can also produce interpretive imbalances. This is particularly evident in the case of Asia, where a Sino-centric reconstruction predominates and Japan is largely “absent” (Samarani, 2018: 153). Finally, the expansion of the concept of the Cold War as an all-encompassing analytical category may be less persuasive in the Latin American context, where an emphasis on the conflict between capitalism and communism tends to obscure other, potentially more explanatory lines of fracture—particularly the tension between liberalism and a sacralised vision of politics and history, of

which communism represented only the latest expression (Bagnato et al., 2018: 134-165). These critical insights, as we shall see, extend beyond the specific subject—in this case, the Cold War—analysed from a global perspective. Naturally, this does not detract from the value of recent Cold War studies, which, for instance, highlight the role of both individual and collective actors in transcending the boundaries that divided the two blocs, thereby paving the way for the convergences, conversions, and interactions that helped shape the post-bipolar world (Romano and Romero, 2022).

Transformations in international history have likewise been driven by the incorporation into its analytical domains of topics such as the “Global South” (Comte and Paoli, forthcoming; Garavini, 2012; Zaccaria et al., 2019; Nuti and Pulcini, 2025), the exchanges and networks fostered by non-state transnational actors, and the diverse expressions of internationalism (Berardi, 2024; Mechi and Coppolaro, 2020; Mechi, Migani, and Petrini, 2014; Nocera, 2009). In some cases, these are research fields that have yet to be developed to the extent they deserve (Calandri, 2018). However, through these and other avenues, the history of international relations and area studies has undergone profound renewal, engaging in dialogue with trends such as “world history” and “connected history” and contributing to the formulation of concepts such as the “global turn”—an approach already mentioned and to which I will return later.

The process summarized above represents a historiographical development that has incorporated an expanding range of human activities, including the economy, culture, demography, the environment, energy, public opinion, and more. It has been, and remains, a fascinating journey, albeit not without risks. On the one hand, it has enabled the development of new “metahistorical” categories which—echoing the remarks of scholars such as John Lewis Gaddis (Krakauer et al., 2017)—have proven useful in enriching the work of historians of international relations and area studies. On the other hand, it has also generated significant challenges. In short, if the subjects of international history are so numerous, what, then, is its defining object? If its lexicon is multifaceted, reflecting the plurality of its fields of inquiry, what linguistic system distinguishes it from other disciplines? How can “primary” themes be differentiated from “secondary” ones without reducing the complexity of international

history? These questions are far from trivial, and historians are confronting—and, I would argue, effectively addressing—them with considerable expertise.

Indeed, a careful and mutually respectful dialogue with other disciplines—particularly those most closely related (Gaddis, 1997)—is the only alternative to insularity, understood as a form of scientific entrenchment that would ultimately prove counterproductive. This is true for two closely interconnected reasons. First, the adoption of a measured form of cross-fertilization allows the history of international relations and area studies to remain aligned with developments in political science (Coppolaro, 2025; Fotia, 2025; Giunchi and Dornetti, 2025; Melfa, 2025; Diodato and Niglia, 2017), as well as with broader changes affecting the university system. This remains the case even though recruitment procedures and curricular design continue to follow a strongly disciplinary logic, as further confirmed by the recent ministerial decree establishing the scientific-disciplinary groups. Second, without diluting their own scientific identity and distinctiveness, scholars in these fields must respond effectively to external pressures favouring interdisciplinarity, particularly those exerted through research funding schemes. This is especially true of international funding, which, given the depletion of national resources, now represents a substantial share of available support. In this context, it is worth recalling a 2019 statement by the then-President of the European Research Council, the French mathematician Jean-Pierre Bourguignon. Noting that the most innovative ERC projects were often interdisciplinary in nature, he stressed the importance of dedicated funding lines designed specifically to encourage such approaches, thereby providing a significant incentive to overcome the not infrequent reluctance to engage across disciplinary boundaries:

Even more to the point when we are talking about originality in an interdisciplinary project is the fact that sometimes the true breakthrough is not in the contributions in separate fields but in crossing knowledge and methodologies from different fields in a radically new way. This often generates a mixed opinion from experts who tend to limit themselves to their usual horizons

without accepting the risk of betting on the possibility of a truly new cross-fertilisation between fields (Bourguignon, 2019).

In any case, the scholarly fields in question have, for quite some time, been well equipped to respond to pressures favouring interdisciplinarity. In this respect, they have not needed to undergo any substantial process of redefining their scientific status. The History of Africa, for example, has been characterized from its inception by a marked openness to engagement with other fields of knowledge, driven by the need to gather sources in the absence of internally produced written documentation. The great methodological—and, in a sense, existential—challenge for historians of Africa has therefore been to construct a history “from unwritten sources”, particularly with regard to the precolonial period (Zaccaria, 2025: 42), and consequently to diversify the range of documentary materials (Melfa and Pallaver, 2025: 211). For this reason, they have engaged—often fruitfully, though not without tensions and misunderstandings—first and foremost with archaeology, linguistics, and anthropology, drawing on material artifacts, linguistic classifications, and oral traditions as their primary historical evidence (Melfa, 2025: 203-205; Baldinetti et al., 2019). Notably, the Declaratory Statement of the scientific-disciplinary field History and Institutions of Africa identifies interdisciplinarity among the “essential elements for the interpretation of the history, societies, and institutions of Africa”; these elements are described as conferring on History and Institutions of Africa both clear recognizability and flexibility (MUR, 2024: 547).

One of the origins of American studies lies in the effort to transcend the constraints of disciplinary boundaries and traditional academic domains. Its emergence was shaped by an emphasis on key categories such as “identity” and “culture”, with the aim of constructing broader interpretative frameworks for analysing American society. Over time, both its objects of inquiry and its conceptual paradigms have undergone further transformation and redefinition (Fotia, 2025). As Elisabetta Vezzosi has observed in a review of major historiographical trends over the past two decades, scholars of the United States in Italy have often drawn on the social sciences and political science to examine topics such as the Cold War in its multiple dimensions, new social movements, processes of global integration,

the crisis of welfare policies, gender relations, and re-readings of transatlantic relations through the lenses of public diplomacy and soft power (Vezzosi, 2025: 132). A new generation of scholars is likewise developing research that integrates themes and methodologies in order to capture the interplay between the social and the political, as well as between the cultural and the economic, through analyses of both collective and individual actors (Mariano, 2020).

These dynamics are often linked to the emergence of new research fields and the declining importance of others. For example, the growing interest in the history of populism among historians of Latin America has drawn upon—and further developed—the work of sociologists and political scientists on the subject. At the same time, ethnohistory and the study of transformations among indigenous groups—which had fostered fruitful engagement with disciplines such as anthropology—have gradually lost prominence (Morelli, 2025: 155-159).

Needless to say, the engagement of historians of International Relations and Area Studies with other historical fields or with scholars from contiguous disciplines is by no means obligatory, nor can its mere presence be regarded as a reliable indicator of research quality. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, in Italy, International History has become increasingly open to dialogue with other disciplines, and that such exchanges have frequently produced innovative and intellectually stimulating results (Masina, 2025; Caroli and Soriani, 2023; Nocera and Wulzer, 2020). Parallel to this interdisciplinary dialogue—which, it bears repeating, has never compromised their epistemological foundations—the History of International Relations and Area Studies have undergone a process of growing internationalization. This trend has fostered the incorporation of new research fields and themes, such as environmental issues (Di Tommaso, 2020; Fazzi, 2020; Santese, 2020; Fasanaro, 2019), gender studies (Biancani, 2025: 119-122; Pallaver, 2025: 125-136; Baritono, 2024; further back in this field is the History of International Relations: Tosone, 2025: 151-161), migration (Pretelli, 2025; Guarnieri Calò Carducci, 2001) and, partly under the influence of Minority Studies, increased attention to previously neglected actors and subjects (Baldinetti, 2018: 67, who noted that, at least in the case of Libya, “family studies is an open field for

scholars”). While internationalization has enhanced the scholarly standing of the historians who have promoted it, it has not always translated into a corresponding strengthening of their disciplines within universities (Vezzosi, 2025: 134; Melfa, 2019: 11).

One may also draw a connection between the dialogue historians have engaged in with other disciplines and two further, closely interrelated aspects, which I will briefly address. The first concerns the overcoming of Eurocentrism, and the second the challenges posed by the so-called Global Turn, which, on the one hand, has prompted these historians to probe more deeply into the epistemological status of the four disciplines and, on the other (as we have already seen), to confront certain issues or shortcomings inherent in Global History and related approaches. With regard to the overcoming of Eurocentrism, it is worth recalling that the very idea of “areas” as objects of study was originally structured around world divisions conceived and hierarchized in the West. These divisions began to be questioned with the collapse of colonial empires after the Second World War and were then openly challenged following the end of the Cold War (Valsecchi, 2013: 181). Concurrently, Area Studies developed critical tools that allow them to move beyond the paradigms of Eurocentric or Western historiography, fostering the creation of new models, interpretive frameworks, and periodizations (Rognoni, 2025; Trentin, 2025). For quite some time now, scholars have recognized that the peoples of Africa are the agents of their own history. As Daniela Melfa has highlighted, this assumption is grounded in the concept of agency—developed by theorists of social action, who have emphasized, at times, its rational or instrumental dimension and, at times, its normative one—a concept that aligns closely with Africanists’ aim of placing the continent and its inhabitants at the centre, thereby restoring both their voice and their autonomy (Melfa, 2025: 205-206; Pallotti et al., 2023: 8-9). In this regard, remarks made in 2002 by Alessandro Triulzi remain highly pertinent. Referring to the history of the Italian colonies in Africa, he argued that this field both requires and is nourished by “reflections and investigations shared and undertaken by two historical subjects, so as to reconstruct and compare multiple memories and historiographical accounts capable of reflecting the different ways of seeing and perceiving the colonial situation” (Triulzi, 2002:

9; Guazzini, 2024). This call serves as a reminder that the History of Africa established itself in opposition to colonial history, which had regarded the continent merely as a recipient of a history produced in the West. In Italy, in particular, by the late 1960s a new generation of historians—driven in part by political and ideological motivations, themselves rooted in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology—initiated an “African-centred” reading of decolonization and its subsequent developments (Lenci, 2023).

The rejection of the Eurocentric historiographical legacy—which conceives the history of “the other” as little more than an appendage of European and Western history—has also played a decisive role in the renewal of Italian historiography on China and, more broadly, on East Asia (Lanna and Samarani, 2025: 187).

Polycentrism has been both a fundamental component and a consequence of this approach. In this context, the “spatial turn”—not without its risks, particularly when embraced as a historiographical dogma (Vaghi, 2025: 33–34; Calchi Novati, 1995: 15 ff.; Samarani, 2008: 133)—has encouraged scholars to move beyond the assumption that modern state formations or colonial legacies constitute fixed and self-evident units of analysis. Instead, these have come to be understood as historically contingent configurations, significant in their own evolution yet best interpreted through comparison with other historical actors and political formations grounded in different assumptions, trajectories, and experiences (Del Pero and Formigoni, 2017: 30).

As we have seen, the overcoming of Eurocentrism has provided both a methodological lesson and a path to interpretive renewal in the History of International Relations. One area in which this renewal seems particularly promising is the history of European integration, not least because it has offered a significant stimulus to the traditional historiography of international relations (Garavini, 2016: 288)¹. *Prima facie*, it may seem paradoxical to speak of transcending Eurocentrism when studying the making of the European Community. Yet this is by no means the case. On the contrary,

¹ For representative examples of the contribution of historians of international relations to the history of European integration, cf. Petrini (2025); Pasquinucci (2022); Dundovich (2021); Laschi (2022); Guasconi (2020); Lefebvre and Micheletta (2017); Varsori (2010); Graglia (2008); Cruciani (2007); Caviglia (2000).

this process has given rise to a strand of scholarship—one that has also attracted considerable attention in Italy—whose initial impetus came from Kiran Klaus Patel's essay *Provincialising European Union: co-operation and integration in Europe in a historical perspective* (2013). The title deliberately echoed a volume published some years earlier by Dipesh Chakrabarty, a key contribution to the field of postcolonial studies. In that work, the Indian historian advanced a critique of the discursive and categorical assumptions through which Europe has represented itself as the entelechy of universal reason—that is, as the yardstick of a form of progress that all peoples were presumed to follow. Its hegemonic force enabled European thought to become the dominant paradigm for the writing of history, to the extent that even in non-European contexts there has been a tendency to stress the absence of certain fundamental characteristics associated with European societies, on the assumption that the latter constitute the normative model of reference. Overcoming this approach would require the provincialization of Europe—its very decentring (Chakrabarty, 2000).

What Chakrabarty argued regarding the role of European thought in postcolonial societies can be applied to the analysis of European integration. This task is undertaken through the adoption of the concept of asymmetric ignorance. In postcolonial studies, this limitation is addressed by foregrounding two-way exchanges and the entanglements between what is conventionally construed as a supposed center and its lateral or alternative sites. In the case of European integration, asymmetric ignorance consists in the unwarranted attribution of exceptionalism to the Community—since its establishment in the 1950s—relative to other international organizations created in the postwar period. This presumed exceptionalism quickly became the dominant lens through which European integration was interpreted. By contrast, a decentralized perspective emphasizes that, at its founding—and at least until the 1970s—the European Community (EC) was merely one international organization among many (Patel, 2020). This has significant implications for how the history of European integration is often written and taught: portraying EC institutions, from their very inception, as uniquely capable of meeting great expectations—most notably peace and prosperity—lays the foundation for a historical narrative

of integration that is both anachronistic and teleological, a narrative on which much historiography has relied, and in part continues to rely, to this day (Gilbert and Pasquinucci, 2020).

It is also through sustained engagement with other disciplines and through efforts to rethink the relationship between centres and peripheries that International History in Italy has gradually confronted one of the most influential interpretive paradigms of the contemporary era: globalization. Over the past two decades, significant progress has been made, marking a departure from a period when historians of International Relations remained largely detached from both the historical and theoretical debates surrounding the subject (Romero, 2005: 71).

These developments have encouraged engagement with the analytical perspectives associated with the so-called Global Turn. Emerging in the context of the polycentric international order that followed the end of the Cold War, this approach sought to provide an interpretive framework capable of explaining the new phase of globalization, reconstructing its historical genealogy, and highlighting the growing challenges faced by nation-states, no longer viewed as the exclusive architects of an international system organized around the pursuit of national interests.

As the resurgence of nationalism and related—though distinct—phenomena such as sovereigntism, Euroscepticism, and nativism suggests (Pasquinucci, 2005), however, the extent to which domestic dynamics are shaped by the predominance of a global system remains an open question. Consequently, the future role and fate of nation-states in an age of globalization also remain uncertain.

The foregoing discussion underscores the heuristic and epistemological dilemmas posed by the emergence of the global, echoing both the title of this article and the observations advanced in its opening pages. On one hand, the Global Turn has fostered increasingly sustained incursions of Area Studies into the field of comparison—both temporal and spatial—as well as research on the circulation of ideas, goods, people, and practices, and on the complex networks that connect them. On the other hand, the History of International Relations has been transformed both by a broader, more nuanced perspective that encompasses not only the great powers but also other actors, and by the rise of transnational approaches

attentive to non-state actors, their networks and exchanges, and international organizations (Romero, 2018). As I noted earlier, the Global Turn has also raised challenges and critical questions, making it worthwhile to revisit these concerns. Area Studies, in particular, caution against the risk of swinging from the notion of isolated civilizations—now largely anachronistic—to the opposite extreme: the erasure of difference under the illusion that globalization renders all societies essentially alike. In such a scenario, Area Studies risk becoming redundant; one could argue that, under globalization, difference survives only in remote, “exotic” corners, thereby losing its analytical relevance (Giunchi and Dornetti, 2005: 199). Indirectly, this brings us back to the starting point: the notion that the histories of Africa or Asia are merely byproducts of the West, effectively denying agency to local actors. In Area Studies, by contrast, local-level analysis remains indispensable, without implying any restriction of assumptions or objectives. Although such analysis allows for generalizations through comparison, it still requires a thorough understanding of the territory. As two scholars of Asia have noted, approaches that focus on endogenous factors arise from the difficulty—or indeed the impossibility—of fully understanding complex societies, such as those outside Europe, without beginning from their local specificities (Abenante and De Giorgi, 2018: 44). By contrast, expanding the scale of analysis is often accompanied by the adoption of externally derived explanatory models. This tendency may reflect a limited—or at times entirely absent—engagement with local archives and primary sources (Dornetti and Miorandi, 2024: 10). Similar considerations apply to African history, where the debate over the relevance of Global History remains lively and where attention to global interconnections is generally balanced by sustained attention to local specificities.

It should also be noted that Area Studies have traditionally proceeded from the assumption that the regions under investigation possess a sufficient degree of internal coherence, at least as a heuristic and methodological starting point. This has inevitably given rise to forms of essentialism. In African Studies, for example, this has sometimes encouraged the search for a distinctive “Africanness”—an assumption that has not always sat comfortably with the conceptual premises of Global History (Pallaver, 2018: 77).

The issues outlined above are methodological challenges posed by Global History. Addressing them has enabled Area Studies to contribute significantly to the historical analysis of processes that have intensified connections among cultures, peoples, and institutions on a global scale, thereby helping to overcome Eurocentric approaches.

In conclusion, what I have attempted to reconstruct here—necessarily in outline—are some of the principal developments in International History. These developments, I believe, show that both the History of International Relations and Area Studies remain open to renewal, ready to engage with other scholarly fields and, I would even suggest, capable of linking historical research to broader societal and political transformations to which they have always been closely connected (Onnis, 2025; Del Pero, 2025; Redaelli, 2025b). One example—among many—of the capacity of scholars of International History to interpret, through their conceptual and methodological tools, the ongoing transformations shaping society and politics at the global level is provided by “Asia Maior”, which publishes essays that explore the “present of Asia as history” (Torri, 2011-2013).

A rather recent article on the development of the History of international relations in Italy refers, in its title, to a “a legacy not to be despised” bequeathed to historiography (Riccardi, 2018a). While the wording reflects a commendable understatement, a careful reading of the article encourages moving beyond the caution of this litotes. Indeed, it highlights the contribution—what I would describe as noteworthy—of historians of International Relations to both national and international historiography, as well as to the advancement of political sciences in Italy. This assessment should be extended equally to Area Studies, as I hope to have demonstrated throughout this contribution.

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