



Fayetteville, AR, August 1, 2022

To the RIAS' Director, Staff, Post-Doctoral Fellows, Graduate Students:

“The Italians are coming!,” as a recent American commercial featuring the FIAT 500 put it. That is how RIAS director Damian Pargas first greeted me, seeing that the Italian cohort at the Roosevelt Institute had rapidly grown from one (Dario Fazzi) to two (recently adding post-doctoral fellow Gaetano Di Tommaso) to now three, including me. First stop: the espresso maker conveniently located between Gaetano’s office and mine. Although the spoken idiom on Hofplein 16 occasionally switched to Italian, it should be noted that Gaetano and Dario have been “citizens of the world,” cosmopolitan through and through in their academic and life experiences, that I have now lived longer in the US than I ever did in my native Florence, Italy, and that, like everyone else at RIAS, the three of us are deeply steeped in all things American. Better still, it is the truly global and transnational approach to US history that I found most congenial here - ever since I first set foot in Middelburg, for a conference held in the fall of 2018.

I knew from the first moment we all (staff, directors, fellows) sat together on the library’s sunny patio celebrating Gaetano’s birthday with not one, but four cakes, that the atmosphere at the RIAS would be not only productive but also quite friendly and convivial. First take on that friendly nature: the factotum, ever-present, charming Leontien Joosse, picking me up at the train station and walking me and my suitcases to the residence she had expeditiously found for my two months stay in town – literally twenty steps from the institute.

My abode, overlooking the bell tower of Lange Jan (the ever-chiming Long John), also introduced me to the local cultural milieu – thanks in no small part to my graceful and kindhearted landlady, Edith, who immediately invited me to a fine choral performance

(Mozart) in the nearby Nieuwe Kerk. So I quickly learned that Middelburg does not exactly shut down at 5 pm, as most visitors think. Concerts, celebrations (including a stunning memorial on Dutch Liberation Day - May 5) punctuate the otherwise quiet capital city of the Zeeland region; and lively brew pubs offer excellent local beer with quite imaginative names and ABV contents. In Middelburg you can either enter a time warp walking around the perimeter of the fabled 14<sup>th</sup> century Abbey, or attend an avant-garde pop concert inside its courtyard. To me, this stunningly beautiful town simply offered the best return to all things Northern European. To my American lady, Julie, who joined me for a few weeks, this was the ideal European small town.

But of course I was not here just to enjoy the local scene. And inside the finely renovated Roosevelt Institute, now housed within the also much celebrated Zeeland Archives, we did not spend but a few of our precious moments sipping espresso on the patio. On my first day, I was also fortunate enough to overlap with a fine, inspiring public lecture by Charles Postel, a colleague I had read and had long wanted to meet. The speaker as well as an impressive audience of graduate students addressed one of the “elephants in the room” of American politics, discussing Critical Race Theory and the politics of History (more than the history of politics). Within a week, I was then fully engaged in RIAS’ biennial International PhD Symposium. I was also impressed and frankly a bit humbled by the quality of the candidates’ papers, and the sophistication of their methodology, the area that I was tasked to address in my presentation. So I just added my few takes drawn from experience, for an audience of talented and, on their own, already quite experimental young scholars.

The innovative quality of all these projects, by resident fellows or by invited guests, is the result of the long thriving debate among the members of the New Diplomatic History Network, founded by my old friend and colleague, and now “former” RIAS director, Giles Scott-Smith. This group, which I entered at its founding stage ten years ago, has indeed helped revamp a field of study that, like the current practitioners of global diplomacy, needed multiple insights from cultural studies and social sciences, and, in general, a broad, multidisciplinary approach to the exploration of international relations.

Even before this group and its initiatives fully took off, I had the pleasure of engaging with Giles, as our elective affinities led us to a similar understanding of, and perhaps even theory on US post-war cultural diplomacy (though I would not venture to call ours a full-fledged school of thought – or maybe I am just talking for myself). The news (immediate upon my arrival) of Giles leaving RIAS was bittersweet. Surely there was the sad part of losing him and not having a chance of daily interactions; the sweet part was that he’s been appointed Dean of Leiden University College in The Hague – a crowning achievement to an already stellar career. In the few days (hours) we could have together, Giles and I still gave each other a helping hand and the usual constructive critique for the sake of academic engagement – no, what am I saying?, nothing was purely academic in the urgency we both felt about the current bursting return of geopolitics and warfare in Europe – a persistent, stubborn feature perhaps, more than a return, as many doomsayers

of the liberal world order would now contend. In any case, neither of us, I presume, would think that we should reevaluate *realpolitik* simply at the expense of all other means of influence and exchange.

The RIAS remains in expert hands, and this was proven to me not just during the PhD symposium, but also in frequent conversations I found myself having with the doctoral candidates, the program's director, the intern, Karla Kiefer, whose term entirely coincided with my stay at the institute, and, of course, Gaetano and Dario. From Christine Mertens, Debby Esmé de Vlugt, Manar Ellethy, and Marcella Schute, and from RIAS director Damian Pargas I learned more on race relations and Civil Rights in approaches that dwell deep into social history (for ex., the bottom-up investigation on free blacks issuing petitions against slavery in mid-nineteenth century US South) or that are truly transnational (on the connections between civil rights movements in the US and similar emancipation movements in other parts of the world). Paul Brennan reminded me of the importance of the ACLU in US intellectual (not just social) history. Gaetano and Dario, whenever they were not "on tour" in Italy, New Orleans, or even the US Embassy in The Hague, sat with me several times to help me brainstorm about the importance of Liberal Internationalism, its legacy, and its current challenges.

That is also what led to the public lecture I finally gave in the auditorium of the Zeeland Archives. The talk was on how transatlantic relations have been affected by the Trump presidency, and, even more, are being reshaped by the war in Ukraine. Titled "War and (Anti)Americanism in Europe," the lecture was the occasion for a collective reflection on the various interpretations, and, frankly, blame games that have attributed the current tension mainly to either US hubris, or to European complacency, or to ethnic and economic populism. I wish I could say I remain confident and consistent in my arguments, but, ironically as the recurring theme of my research through the past decades would have it, some inconsistency, if it means flexibility rather, benefits a scholarly career as much as it does a nation's diplomacy. That is at least what I have been arguing in defense of the liberal international order: that open dissent, pluralism, and flexibility have been the main assets of the US and the West (broadly defined), in their most troubled times and contentious moments.

That is basically the common thread running through my current project. Choosing Senator J. William Fulbright as a prism through which I look at broader trends in US foreign policy in the period between the 1950s and 1970s, I explore the importance of dissent at the institutional level. The main questions I have been asking myself are on the US ability to display and harness dissent, or even more, on the ways in which the United States, by acknowledging its own fallibility, also demonstrated its own flexibility at crucial moments. That, I presume, has become an attractive feature for America's allies, countering America's failures; it has perhaps been the most genuine manifestation of its proverbial exceptionalism.

I could find plenty of sources in RIAS, including the papers of the Fulbright Commission of the Netherlands. Like my predecessors, I also found the quiet environment of the

institute (no contradiction with the above impressions – most of the time, researchers are left alone to mull over their thoughts) helpful and leading to a productive period for my research.

And it ended as it began. Damian gave me and Karla a nice farewell at a genuine Dutch restaurant under Lange Jan – and Leontien ran to the train station to arrive just in time to stand on the platform next to Edith and bid me farewell – more like “arrivederci” - a “see you later” - I hope. Thank you all.

Best Wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alessandro Brogi". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

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