Isolationism and internationalism in transatlantic affairs
Guest Editor: J. Simon Rofe

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Isolationism, internationalism and the Monroe Doctrine

Marco Mariano*

Università del Piemonte Orientale, Vercelli, Italy

The Monroe Doctrine had been a pillar of US foreign policy in the nineteenth century, but its importance in the twentieth century is disputed. On the one hand, it laid the grounds for American expansion in the Western Hemisphere and, on the other, it provided a framework of reciprocal non-interference in transatlantic relations. Therefore, a reconsideration of its impact is relevant to the discussion of the tension between internationalism and isolationism. An assessment of the relevance of the Monroe Doctrine in twentieth-century US diplomacy must take into account that (i) it outlined a space-based, regionalist view of world affairs and (ii) it expressed widespread notions of American culture, history, and national identity.

Keywords: Monroe Doctrine; Western Hemisphere; US diplomacy; isolationism; internationalism

There is a paradox in the way in which the Monroe Doctrine and its impact on US foreign policy in the twentieth century is currently discussed or rather neglected. On the one hand, the Monroe Doctrine seems to be a revered object, but on the other neglected among historians of American foreign relation. Journals in the field have by and large focused on the Cold War years and relatively few essays discuss nineteenth century issues, let alone the sacred text of 1823. Its legacy does not seem to attract much attention among historians: major monographs centred on it are seasoned pieces of scholarship, and the 'Monroe Doctrine' is mentioned but once in one of the best historiographical overviews in the field.1

This is not exactly an impressive record for what Bradford Perkins aptly defined as America's 'declaration of diplomatic independence'.2 What does this neglect reveal? In his stimulating but rather isolated work on this subject, Gaddis Smith argues that excessive emphasis by diplomatic historians on the cold war framework overlooks the Doctrine both as a guideline for national security and as a marker of national identity.3 This is probably true, but it is only part of the story.

If this is the state of the academy, we might expect that a rather solid and widespread consensus has been reached on what the Monroe Doctrine is and on its long-term implications for US foreign policy. As historians we steer clear of topics which do not seem to offer much room for new, cutting-edge scholarship, either because of overproduction on the topic and/or because the topic is considered not relevant to the prevailing agenda of historical inquiry. However, the opposite is true with the case of the Monroe Doctrine. Even a cursory look at the literature in the field suggests that we are not even close to a full understanding of the long-term

*Email: marco.mariano@lett.unipmn.it
implications of the Monroe Doctrine which, I believe, are extremely relevant to the discussion of ‘internationalism’ and ‘isolationism’ as cornerstones of US thinking on foreign policy in the twentieth century. In this article I will first discuss major divergences over Monroeism, that is the foreign policy tradition based on the Monroe Doctrine. Then, I will discuss briefly why a re-interpretation of Monroeism—seen as a crucial element of American national identity—is worthy of discussion.

Lack of consensus on the influence of the Monroe Doctrine for twentieth century US foreign relations is apparent in two inter-related aspects: its twentieth-century impact and its relation to the two poles of isolationism and internationalism. On the one hand, historians who study Monroeism as a typical nineteenth century phenomenon obviously have a limited interest in studying its twentieth century impact; on the other, those who stress the enduring legacy of that tradition sharply disagree on its meaning and implications. This scenario invites a brief reconsideration of the literature, if only because transatlantic relations were at the core of James Monroe’s message to Congress and of John Quincy Adams’ concerns. As David Ryan has pointed out, ‘Latin America was the object of the document, but the subject was Transatlantic relations; the New World versus the Old World’.

On one end of the internationalism versus isolationism spectrum we find the dean of NATO studies, Lawrence Kaplan, a leading voice among those who equate the meaning of the Monroe Doctrine to isolation. Comparing US attitude via-à-vis Greek independence in the 1820s and Greek instability in the 1940s, he sees the Monroe Doctrine and the Truman Doctrine as ‘antithetical’. Both responded to the imperative of ‘national security’ in radically different contexts, but they called for opposite means to that end. Kaplan concluded that ‘as the Monroe and Truman doctrines indicate, Greece played a role both in confirming the power of American isolationism in the 19th century and in leading the nation out of isolationism in the twentieth century’. Consequently, as isolationism now seems to be a minority tradition in the American public discourse, if not a relic of a distant past, we might infer that the import of Monroeism on US foreign policy sharply declined with World War II and is almost non-existent now. In this view, the irrelevance of the doctrine reflects the end of the ‘New World versus Old World’ dichotomy since World War II and the consummation of the Atlantic alliance.

This defensive reading stems from an orthodox interpretation of US foreign policy which tones down the long-term roots of its assertiveness and struggles to come to terms with its imperial character. As far as inter-American relations are concerned, it was articulated in the 1940s by Samuel Flegg Bemis, who emphasised US concern for self-determination of the American republics and, at the same time, the ‘natural’ and non-imperial character of US hegemony in the hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine as an ideological tool reconciling the contradictions of US foreign policy was essential in Bemis’ reading of America’s diplomacy, and identity, as anti-imperial.

This nationalist narrative has been famously targeted since the late 1950s by William Appleman Williams. In The Contours of American History he reversed the traditional understanding of the Doctrine as ‘a defensive statement of the territorial and administrative integrity of North and South America: no further colonization, no transfer or extension of existing claims, and in return America would not interfere in European affairs’. Quite the opposite, Williams argued,
this standard interpretation neglected three major facts: the men who formulated it were concerned as much with European commercial and economic expansion as with schemes for colonization; they viewed it as a positive, expansionist statement of American supremacy in the hemisphere, and Monroe actually intervened in European politics in the very same speech he asserted that Europe should stay out of American affairs.

As such, the Monroe Doctrine was, according to Williams' economic revisionism, 'a statement of the expansionism inherent in American mercantilism that was clearly the manifesto of American empire'.

The end of cold war and with it the associated historiographical warfare coupled with the rise of post-revisionism did not contribute much to shape a shared view of Monroeism. In the 1990s, a time when the spread of US power and influence seemed to be unchallenged by rival powers or spatial limitations and encouraged optimistic celebrations of the 'unipolar moment' in the public discourse, among historians a subtler Wilsonian revival was underway. Works by Thomas Knock and Frank Ninkovich argued that Woodrow Wilson based his vision of the post-World War I order not on starry-eyed idealism, but rather on a realistic understanding of how 'power' works in an international arena transformed by 'modernity'. This transformation resulted in an unprecedented degree of economic and political interdependence which in turn informed a holistic, one-world view of international affairs and made collective security necessary. We might wonder then, on the legacy of the Monroe Doctrine and its two-spheres, space-based world view in light of a Wilsonian globalised, shrinking world; and how the American special, oppositional relation with Europe, which was at the core of the Monroe Doctrine, has been transformed – or diluted – by such context.

In this perspective the Doctrine witnessed a gradual transformation, a continunum from the regionalism and defensiveness of its original formulation to the globalism and assertiveness of its twentieth century adaptation. As if the holistic vision of Wilsonianism and of the cold war were a piecemeal development; an evolutionary stage of the principles stated in 1823. Ninkovich sees the legacy of the Monroe Doctrine as a set of assumptions which were rooted in the original nineteenth century local horizon of US foreign policy, and were formulated in the regionalist jargon familiar to the American public. However, in fact these assumptions paved the way to twentieth century globalism, and therefore had little to do with isolation. His discussion of the Latin American policy of the United States in the late nineteenth century – rapprochement with Britain, imperialist expansion, the Roosevelt corollary, the Panama Canal – emphasises that the American viewpoint was not hemispheric anymore. In fact it reflected the sense of a growing proximity with Europe and a sharp departure from the old, Hamiltonian vision of the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia as four distinct spheres. In this light, Theodore Roosevelt saw the United States waving the 'Big Stick' to police the Americas in the common interest of 'civilization', rather than as a tool for regional hegemony. As an example the Panama Canal was conceived as a 'highway for civilization' with benefits for all parties involved in world trade. 'Global considerations' moved US policies in the hemisphere at a time when the growth of American business worldwide inspired national(ist) confidence, modernity seemed to threaten the traditional principles of European diplomacy, and the existence of separate spheres was undermined by modern
industrialised civilisation. Hemispherim persisted, Ninkovich argues, but only to the extent that it was instrumental to the emergence of this global outlook.\textsuperscript{10}

If the turn-of-the-century imperialism had been the last act of Monroism, Wilsonianism and the return to ‘normal internationalism’ in the 1920s made it virtually irrelevant. This was the time, Ninkovich maintains, of the ‘globalization of the Latin American policy’ which had lagged behind the general trend towards an holistic sensibility in US diplomacy exemplified by the Open Door. In the 1920s the Open Door was universalised, and the Doctrine declined in influence accordingly. It is interesting that the author concedes the enduring significance of the Doctrine as a ‘cultural icon’, but dismisses its influence as a ‘coherent pattern of geopolitical belief’. This sharp distinction of course raises methodological issues on the relation between culture, identity, and diplomacy – a crucial debate within a discipline that only in recent years has been going through its own ‘cultural turn’.

In this view the legacy of the Monroe Doctrine is closely linked to internationalism, rather than isolation. At the same time, it is a thing of the past, a pre-modern tradition which by the 1920s was virtually meaningless in an increasingly universalised and interdependent world. Discussing Franklin Roosevelt’s worldview against the backdrop of twentieth century modernity, Ninkovich writes that ‘the economic integration of the world meant that time, space, and history were the same for all’.\textsuperscript{12} In a shrinking world, with distances reduced by technology and continents brought together by interdependence, the geographic foundation of the Monroe Doctrine vanished, and the space-less vision of a universal Open Door emerged.

Similarly, Tony Smith’s \textit{America’s Mission} discusses the Monroe Doctrine as the prelude of the globalization of US influence. His focus, however, is national security internationalism, rather than business internationalism. Smith discusses another Wilsonian fixture, the worldwide promotion of self-determination, more than economic expansion in world markets. In his view 1823 and 1947, far from being antithetical, are closely interrelated, the Truman Doctrine being the global extension of the Monroe Doctrine. In 1823 the US

\begin{quote}
gave official notice of its determination to prevent the reimposition of European rule in Latin America once popular forces secured the continent independence from Spain … In the years 1941–47 the US gave notice that it intended, in effect, to globalize the Monroe Doctrine in the aftermath of the Axis defeat. People liberated from German, Japanese, or Italian control by Allied armies were to establish their own sovereign governments, not become dependents of new empires.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

The Manichean, two-sphere vision of the Monroe Doctrine, positing an opposition between mutually exclusive ‘systems’, endured, while the East versus West cold war confrontation reshaped the spatial Old World versus New World dichotomy.

It is fitting that the title of this chapter in \textit{America’s Mission} is ‘FDR and World Order. Globalizing the Monroe Doctrine’. In this view the principles of the Doctrine informed the globalist world view of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the tenets of liberal internationalism: the commitment to self government, self-determination and democracy, and the rejection of great powers sphere of influence. Interestingly, this is how the Truman Doctrine was sold to the American public: not an aberration, but a new chapter in the old American tradition of protecting small nations from the imposition of an alien ‘system’, which ultimately would endanger US security. As
James Reston wrote in the *New York Times*, ‘Like the Monroe Doctrine ... [the Truman Doctrine] warned that the United States would resist efforts to impose a political system or foreign domination on areas vital to our security’.14

The universalism of the Truman doctrine, Gaddis Smith maintains, ‘divided the world by ideology, not by geography’. However, one might counter that the Cold War with its ‘East’ and ‘West’ moniker’s maintained a geographical dimension. On the one hand, Truman’s speech paved the way to a globalisation of US commitment in the postwar order. On the other, it might be argued that the Truman Doctrine only moved several thousand miles eastward the East–West divide between alternative ‘systems’ that the Monroe Doctrine had traced across the Atlantic more than one hundred years earlier.

Truman was not the first president to embark on a globalisation of the Doctrine or, rather, to wrap a universalist agenda in the old, reassuring discourse of Monroeism. On the eve of the US intervention in World War I, Woodrow Wilson had proposed in his characteristically emphatic style that

> the nations should with one accord adopt the doctrine of President Monroe as the doctrine of the world: that no nation should seek to expand its polity over any other nation or people, but that every people should be free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little along with the grand and the powerful.15

However, his use of the Monrovian dogma, which he tried to purge of geographic premises and sphere-of-influence implications, turned out to be, in the words of Gaddis Smith, ‘an interesting piece of intellectual gymnastics bound to cause confusion’ which did not significantly alter the meaning of the Doctrine for the American public. In fact, since the late 1910s and early 1920s the anti-Wilsonian reaction of unilateralists and isolationists alike in the US Senate successfully recurred to, and reinforced, the traditional understanding of the Doctrine as a dichotomy, rather than holistic, model. The reaffirmation of the Monrovian ‘two-spheres’ principle in the battle against ratification of the Covenant of the League of Nations voiced deep-rooted anti-European sentiments in the aftermath of World War I. The revolt against internationalism in the interwar years was frequently expressed in terms of ‘distance’ from the Old World; this brings us back to the importance of space and geography in an allegedly Wilsonian, or post-Wilsonian, world.

In other words, did considerations about space continue to play a role in American foreign policy thinking throughout the twentieth century, or rather US foreign policy makers by and large acted according to the postgeographical mental maps of a globalised world order? And, more important, did the emergence of a holistic, somehow Wilsonian view of the role of the United States in world affairs necessarily obliterated thecontinentalist legacy of Monroeism and the oppositional view of transatlantic relations that went with it? Answering these questions, I believe, can contribute significantly to our discussion of isolationism and internationalism in the twentieth century.

To be sure, the Wilsonian revival did not silence radically different views of the Monrovian sacred text and its impact in the twentieth century. Alfred Thayer Mahan defined it as ‘an inherent principle of life, which adapts itself with the flexibility of a growing plant, to the successive conditions it encounters’.16 Mahan was writing at
the turn of the century, when US foreign policy discourse combined exceptionalism and imperialism: it situated the US within the Western Hemisphere and, at the same time, it legitimised a future global role for the nation. Monroeism was crucial to reconcile the conflicting claims of anti-European, anti-colonial exceptionalism on the one hand, and American empire on the other. In the twentieth century, the ‘growing plant’ of the Monroe Doctrine continued to display its flexibility and to shape the discourse of US foreign policy in three fundamental ways. First, as the assertion of an American sphere of influence; secondly, as a call for unilateralism vis-à-vis ‘collective security’; and finally, I argue, as an effective formulation of the place of the United States in the world and of its role in history, and therefore a tenet of the American identity and a codification of American nationalism. As a consequence, the impact of Monroeism on how the United States has envisioned its relations with Europe throughout the ‘American century’ is evident in three areas.

First, defining the contours of American influence as an exclusive, closed ‘sphere’ is controversial. Such a notion evokes European-style balance of powers rather than a holistic, Wilsonian approach to foreign affairs. However, US foreign policy discourse seems to have merged these two poles at critical times of the nation’s imperial rise.

Building on the legacy of New Left revisionism, Walter LaFeber has been especially penetrating in dissecting this discourse. He maintains that the original formulation of the ‘non interference’ principle in Monroe’s address sheds light on a long-term contradiction in American thinking on foreign affairs. The US required a total ban on European intervention in American affairs, with no exceptions. It also pledged not to interfere in European affairs, with President Monroe stating that ‘in the war of European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy to do so’. This qualification, according to LaFeber, was meant to have it both ways: ‘under certain circumstances – which the United States could define on its own – Americans could interfere in European affairs’. Such a contradiction, he maintains, had long-term consequences on US foreign policy thinking.

At the turn of the century, Theodore Roosevelt’s ‘use of the Monroe Doctrine as an extensive, indeed open-ended sphere of interest’ in Latin America was clearly not informed by the principles of the Open Door, which the United States were ready to claim elsewhere. At the same time, he interpreted the Doctrine with a strong unilateral twist, which defined Monroeism in the twentieth century. Later, LaFeber continues, both Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt in their own way tried to persuade Americans ‘to think of the Doctrine as intertwined with a global responsibility they would have to assume’. While the tactics, and the achievements, of the two statesmen were quite different in this respect, the strategy was the same: ‘sealing off the hemisphere into a de facto US sphere while ensuring that other parts of the world would be open’.

Finally the Doctrine, which had been adapted to the globalisation of international economy in the early twentieth century, was also adapted to the globalisation of US engagement in world politics during the cold war. Both the East versus West division of the world, and US economic and political power in the Western Hemisphere pointed to the enduring significance of the principles of 1823: the Doctrine was so resilient that it ‘did not have to be again proclaimed’. In fact its ‘sphere of influence’ legacy was resurgent during the cold war, and especially during
the so-called 'second cold war', with Ronald Reagan's policies toward Nicaragua and El Salvador. This was just a demonstration of its adaptability and instrumentality to American nationalism, from the jargon of Western Hemisphere defence during and after World War II to its ability to mobilise support and unleash deeply felt emotions in the American people.

Second, Monroism in the twentieth century was also a call for unilateralism vis-à-vis collective security—a crucial chapter in twentieth century transatlantic relations. The unilateralist, hemispheric view informed by the Doctrine successfully competed with the multilateralist, universalist view behind the League of Nations and the UN. In both the battle for ratification between Wilson and the Senate and the negotiations which led to the San Francisco conference in 1945 showed that the regionalist unilateralism based on Monroism was very powerful.

In the debate over the ratification of the United Nations, many of its critics opposed the mantra of George F. Kennan's famous Foreign Affairs article forwarding containment exactly because, among other things, it did not explicitly guarantee the US unilateral, exclusive freedom of action in the Western Hemisphere. Furthermore, as Gaddis Smith points out, in the 1920s the prospect of relatively innocuous international commitments like the Permanent Court of High Justice (established in The Hague in 1923) and the Kellogg–Briand Pact on disarmament of 1828 triggered flag-waving assertions of unilateral Monroism in the US Senate against what was seen as the relinquishment of national sovereignty. This suggests that the latter was a reflection of profound sentiments and widespread orientations pertaining to America’s self-image and its relation to the world: the Monroe doctrine apparently voiced not only diplomatic concerns about US involvement in international organisations, but also concerns about US identity and its separation from the Old World across the Atlantic.

In the 1940s the unilateral thrust of Monroism powerfully affected the US attitude towards the foundation of the United Nations. What emerges throughout the negotiations that led to Dumbarton Oaks and later to the San Francisco conference is the recurrent US attempt to play the continentalist card in the pursuit of what Neil Smith defines as 'nationalist internationalism'. The United States tried to reconcile unilateralism in the Americas and multilateralism worldwide with respect to two crucial issues: UN membership, for which the United States even swallowed the admission of Peron's Argentina in order to put together a faithful bloc of 'Monroe Doctrine nations', and the attempt to seek recognition of the Act of Chapultepec on inter-American defense as a regional exception to the otherwise globalize Articles 51 and 52 of the UN Charter. Once again, the US tried to have it both ways.

The third area where the Monroe Doctrine's influence is evident the scope of the debate over the utility of the Doctrine's legacy: especially one which appears to be so multifaceted and accounts for such a wide range of cultural and political orientations—internationalism, isolationism, continentalism, globalism. I think it is, provided that we relate it to the concepts of 'national identity' and 'nationalism'.

Discussing the legacy of the Monroe Doctrine in the twentieth century, especially in terms of the debate on internationalism versus isolationism, is relevant to the extent that the sacred text of 1823 and its many adaptations and interpretations expressed not just diplomatic guidelines or national security axioms, but also a definition of the place of the United States in the world and of the mission of the
United States in history. Such a definition was again threefold. First, the division of
the world in two spheres created an American identity against an 'other', and rooted
the American experience in the Western Hemisphere – that is in the natural, as
opposed to artificial, realm of geography. Second, opposition to further colonisation
reiterated the exceptionalist historical mission of America and its opposition to
European imperialism; in fact it made clear that the United States were willing to
lead by intervention, not only by example (whether or not such 'intervention' was
viable, or necessary, in the 1820s is besides the point). Finally, the Doctrine merged
graphy and history, space and time in a discourse on national security: preserving
the geographical separation and carrying on the historical mission was vital to the
survival and, later, the expansion of the American republic. It was a 'declaration of
diplomatic independence' as it framed national security as a natural development of
US history and geography which was easily understandable to the American public.
It was also flexible enough to shape the American 'imagined community' against
changing notions of 'the Other' – from the ancient regime, tyrannical Old World to
the totalitarian, barbarian East during the cold war. In fact, the legacy of the
Monroe Doctrine is relevant to US identity because it has succeeded in providing
multiple answers to the question: 'What is the relationship of the US to the world?'
Monroeism turned out to be compatible with, and in fact has provided the
foundations to, different narrations of the American experiment: 'the empire for
liberty and the postcolonial retreat from Old World power, US isolation and
expansion, the American missions to reform the world and to escape from history'.

In this light, the discussion on the legacy of the Monroe Doctrine in the culture of
US foreign policy implies a discussion on 'national identity' and 'nationalism'. In his
classic work on American nationalism Hans Kohn has discussed the vexed question
of the exceptional character of US nationalism, which, he maintains, 'was not
founded on the common attributes of nationhood – language, cultural tradition,
historical territory or common descent – but on an idea which singled out the new
nation among the nations of the earth'. This peculiar brand of nationalism still
carried on two classic functions of nationalist thought: it allowed individuals to
identify themselves as members of the national community, and it exalted the
mission of the American nation over all other nations. Monroeism did just that, as it
adapted like Mahan's 'growing plant' to the rise of the United States from
regionalism and republicanism to globalization and empire. To sum up, this tradition
has been a powerful ideological tool in Michael Hunt's understanding of ideology as
'an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a
particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate
ways of dealing with that reality'.

It is precisely the ideological power of Monroeism that prompts a closer
examination of its impact on twentieth century US foreign relations, and especially
on isolationism and internationalism which, as we have seen earlier, have been both
articulated in Monrovian parlance and grounded in Monrovian orthodoxy at
different times in the twentieth century. Of course I am not suggesting here that the
tradition of Monroeism defined the world view of generations of architects of
American foreign policy; the mental maps of the members of the foreign policy
establishment in the twentieth century are much more complex. Rather, I am arguing
that taking Monroeism seriously as a flexible, resilient formulation of US
nationalism can contribute to the understanding of both isolationism and
internationalism meant not as abstract poles of a false dichotomy, but as historical variables of American nationalism.

Understanding US foreign policy discourse and practices not just as a state’s pursuit of national interest but also as a nation’s pursuit of identity is one of the major contributions of the cultural turn to the study of US foreign relations. As Andrew M. Johnston put it, ‘nation-states contain two competing subjectivities, one as states-like-other-states, with a common interest in sovereignty and security’ and the other as nations that

are built around particularist identities . . . constantly articulating images of themselves, in their history texts, political speeches, popular culture, and so on, in order to create the social unity needed to mobilize power for the state, and to differentiate between inside and outside, us and them. 25

The process of shaping national identity through the construction of the Other is especially relevant for the United States. If every nation can be seen as an ‘imagined community’, the United States is the quintessential imagined community, that is a nation whose identity heavily depends on practices of cultural representation in which the construction of alterity has played a major role not only in the identification of foreign threats, but also in definition of the ‘self’. 26

The Monroe doctrine embodied the relation between US identity and security through the creation of a Manichean world in which Europe was the negative Other. Its lingering legacy shows how relations between the New World and the Old, between the West and the rest have continued to play a peculiar role in US foreign policy as well as in the transformation of American identity and the rise of American nationalism up to the twentieth century, when the United States emerged as a global power whose interests and influence had expanded way beyond the Atlantic world. Internationalism and isolationism – the poles of US policies and attitudes toward Europe which have been both legitimised by Monroism – are best understood as the outcome of state bureaucracies operating under utilitarian assumptions believed to be universal as well as the particularist ‘desire to satisfy unstable internal arguments about the character of the nation itself’. 27

Notes

7. Murphy, Hemispheric Imaginings, 31–2.


15. Quoted in Smith, Last Years, 29.

16. Murphy, Hemispheric Imaginings, 130.


22. Murphy, Hemispheric Imaginings, 153.


27. Johnston, Hegemony and Culture, 10.
Notes on contributor

Marco Mariano is Assistant Professor in Contemporary History at the University of Eastern Piedmont and a member of the “Piero Bairati” Center for American Studies of the Universities of Turin and Eastern Piedmont. He has been research fellow at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies of Columbia University and Fulbright fellow at the History Department of Columbia University. He specializes in transatlantic relations, Atlantic history, and US intellectual history. He has published books on historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (Franco Angeli, 1999) and journalist Anne O’Harc McCormick (Otto, 2000). He recently edited Defining the Atlantic Community, Culture, Intellectuals, and Policies in the Mid-Twentieth Century (London: Routledge, 2010). He is currently working on the relations between the Italian states and the US in the 19th-century Atlantic world.