

## Antonello Gerbi

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Director of the Research department of Banca commerciale italiana (Comit) from 1932, at the time of the implementation of the racial laws, he was convinced to leave Italy by his own boss at Comit, who also provided him with help. He left for Peru, in October of 1938, while his siblings settled in New York. Everything was organized: he worked in the most important Peruvian bank, and traveled and studied; he took many photographs and had two children. Nevertheless, his stay was also forced, and had stripped him of «his employment, savings, books, family, academic degree, citizenship and some other illusions»<sup>1</sup>.

He carried out important studies on Peru and Latin America from the viewpoint of European culture, and continued them after his return to Italy, in 1948, alternating between them and operational work at the helm of the Research department.

### Education and job at the helm of Comit's Research department

Antonello Gerbi was born in Florence on 15 May 1904, son of Edmo (1874-1944), who came from a Jewish family of stockbrokers from Livorno, and Iginia Levi (1878-1926), a Venetian, sister of philosopher of law Alessandro Levi and of Olga Levi, wife of socialist congressman Claudio Treves. He had two brothers: Giuliano, born in 1905, and Claudio, born in 1907. The Gerbi family returned to Livorno in 1913.

After finishing his classical studies in Milan, Gerbi graduated in 1925 in Jurisprudence from the University of Rome with a thesis in philosophy of law, despite attending class only in his first year.

Link to other connected Lives on the move:

[Alessandro Levi](#)

[Claudio Gerbi](#)

[Giuliano Gerbi](#)

[Paolo Treves](#)

[Piero Treves](#)

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<sup>1</sup> See note 9. I wish to thank Sandro Gerbi for his help and reading of this text.

He was a literary critic and collaborator for various progressive newspapers of Milan and Genoa in the period 1923-31, during the gradual elimination of freedom of the press. Between 1927 and 1932, he alternated between active practice in a legal studio in Milan and his studies of political-philosophical nature. He was able to delve into the latter thanks to a Rockefeller scholarship that he received upon Benedetto Croce and Luigi Einaudi's recommendation, which supported different internships in Berlin, London and Vienna (March 1930 - October 1931). In 1933 he obtained *libera docenza* [teaching qualification] in history of political doctrines at the University of Rome, and for a couple of years he taught a course at the University of Milan.

He entered the banking world at the invitation of Giovanni Malagodi<sup>2</sup>, his childhood friend, and Raffaele Mattioli<sup>3</sup>, who entrusted him with the management of the Research department of Banca commerciale in March 1932. Gerbi profoundly transformed this office and put it in line with the internal reform of Comit, which became in those years an ordinary credit bank. From 1937 he was an active member of the international network of banking economists, which comprised the directors of the research departments of the main banks of the Western world, an activity that he also pursued during the postwar period.

### **The bank helps its Jewish employees**

In September 1938, Mattioli was well aware of the imminent promulgation of

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<sup>2</sup> Giovanni Malagodi (1904-1991), after graduating in Law, joined Comit in 1927. His career progressed quickly and in the 1930s, he became central co-director and Mattioli's right-hand man in the reform of the Banca. In 1937 he moved to Comit Sudameris, first in Paris, later in Buenos Aires; in 1947 he returned to Comit in Italy from which he resigned in 1952 to undertake the political activity that led him to be for a long time the secretary of the Italian Liberal Party, minister of Budget in 1972 and president of the Senate in 1987. See the entry by Giovanni Orsina, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, vol. 67, 2006 <<https://www.treccani.it>> (accessed 15 February 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Raffaele Mattioli (1895-1973) was one of the most important European bankers of the 20th century: CEO of Comit from 1933 and president from 1960 to 1972, in the 1930s he guided Comit out of a serious crisis, reforming it profoundly. See the entry on him by Francesca Pino, *ivi*, vol. 72, 2009 <<https://www.treccani.it>> (accessed 15 February 2021).

the racial laws both because of the vast inside knowledge of Comit's representatives in the Roman political environment and because of the information regarding the Italian and international situation constantly shared by Comit's Research department directed by Gerbi. Mattioli therefore decided to send the latter to Peru under the pretext of having him write an essay on that country's economic situation, in order to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the foundation of Banco italiano of Lima, the most important Peruvian bank and an affiliate of Comit for roughly twenty years. Gerbi could thus escape the forced removal of all the Jewish personnel at Comit (70 employees) that occurred between 11 and 12 November 1938 and which was formalized with their permanent dismissal on 28 February 1939; central director Giorgio Di Veroli, who was able to emigrate first to Lausanne and then to New York, was helped in a similar way<sup>4</sup>. Other Jewish employees, less close to Mattioli's entourage, were also assisted in emigrating abroad, but to a lesser extent; for almost all the ousted Jewish employees, the bank resorted to the use of early retirement to help them, since only ten years of service were in fact needed to retire.

### **Benefits and costs of leaving**

Mattioli organized the trip, overcoming the opposition of Gerbi himself, who was not aware of the danger, and had to pressure the Roman authorities to get him a visa<sup>5</sup>. After brief stays in Paris and London to gather, at the main libraries, useful material on Peru for his research, and after a couple of weeks of exhausting wait for the visa, Gerbi boarded the *Rex* in Genoa on 19 October to go first to New York, where he made a stopover on 26 October and was able

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<sup>4</sup> On these events, see Guido Montanari and Francesca Gaido, *La Banca Commerciale Italiana di fronte alle persecuzioni antisemite (1935-1945)*, Milan, Intesa Sanpaolo, 2020, pp. 8-15 and the entry on Gerbi, pp. 47-48.

<sup>5</sup> A nice reconstruction of these events is found in Sandro Gerbi, *Raffaele Mattioli e il filosofo domato*, Milan, Hoepli, 2017, pp. 79-84.

to see his brother Claudio, who had left in September<sup>6</sup>. His brother remembered that meeting in this way:

I met Antonello in New York, prior to his sailing for South America, and I remember that he hastened to cash a bank-check for four hundred dollars for an article he had written, before the [American] publisher could mail it to Italy where it would have been confiscated.<sup>7</sup>

Setting sail from New York on 5 November on the *Santa Lucia* steamship, he arrived on 17 November, after crossing the Panama canal and sailing along the Pacific coast, at the port of Callao and started to work in Lima on the 19th<sup>8</sup>. His trip in first class was very comfortable and interesting, but Gerbi could not forget the coercive character of that experience:

Despite that certain Leopardian little dialogue, one can this time be pretty sure that the new year will be better than the one that is about to finish (with which however I do not want to concern myself further): it has not given me a toothache, and has made me learn about the waterfall of the Rhine, this noble city of Lima, the skyscrapers of New York, the castles of the Loire, Freiburg, Carcassonne and Panama, Nonantola, Bourges, Liechtenstein and Trujillo; in exchange it has only stripped me of my job, savings, books, family, academic degree, citizenship and some other illusions.<sup>9</sup>

### **Airplane, train, boat and mules: exploring Peru**

Just after arriving, Gerbi immediately devoted himself to his new job, and started to explore Lima and its surroundings, as these first impressions, found in a personal notebook of his, attest:

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<sup>6</sup> See his boarding pass in Ellis Island Foundation, *Passenger Search, ad nomen* <<https://heritage.statueofliberty.org>> (accessed upon registration 15 February 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Claudio Gerbi, *Out of the Past. A Story of the Gerbi Family*, Washington, not-for-sale edition, 1988, p. 137.

<sup>8</sup> On Gerbi's trip and acclimatization in Lima, see his correspondence with Mattioli in Historical Archive Intesa Sanpaolo (ASI), *Patrimonio Banca commerciale italiana* (BCI), *Corrispondenza di Raffaele Mattioli* (CM), b. 124, f. «A. Gerbi».

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Gerbi to his friend Mario Einaudi, end of December 1938, in ASI, BCI, *Carte personali di Antonello Gerbi* (CAG), b. 49.

Lima, laid out in a grid pattern established by Pizarro (but it is like all other Spanish-colonial cities). Narrow streets, and they seem even narrower with the protruding signs and the intense traffic of busses, 8-cylinder American trucks, and their straightness that extends and slenderizes them. Sometimes, when the traffic light changes, the rush forward of the various-sized vehicles, among noise of the rusty motors, smoke from open exhaust pipes, and the crowd on the patched sidewalks, makes one think of the rush of cowboys or *pellirosse* [American Indians] into the pioneers' village, as one sees in American Far West films.<sup>10</sup>

His Viennese fiancée Herma Schimmerling joined him in Lima in September 1939, after a very adventurous trip from London, but a car accident on the rough Peruvian roads caused their marriage to be postponed. It was eventually celebrated on 11 January 1940. In 1940 the newlyweds were joined by Antonello's father, Edmo, who had been in Cleveland at his son Claudio's home since 1939 and who died in Lima in January 1944. In Lima in 1941 and 1943 their children Daniele and Sandro were born; they could play freely at length in the backyard of their home at Avenida Orrantia 581.

In May 1939, to enrich his research on the Peruvian economy, Gerbi also undertook a grueling fifteen-day trip in the south of Peru, using all types of public transport available (airplane, train, «littorina» [rail-cruiser], paddle boat, mules), to go to Arequipa, Cusco and Puno, taking over 400 photographs<sup>11</sup>. As a result of this intense work, Gerbi edited a small volume for the fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Banco in 1939 (*Banco Italiano-Lima, 1889-1939*); again for the Banco he published in 1941 *El Perú en marcha* and in 1944 a book on the Peruvian roads (*Caminos del Perú*)<sup>12</sup>.

### Longer than expected

Contrary to expectations, his stay in Lima was not of brief duration. After being

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<sup>10</sup> Excerpt from one of Gerbi's handwritten notebooks in *ibidem*, b. 12, f. 5, n. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, bb. 76-79.

<sup>12</sup> Antonello Gerbi, *El Perú en Marcha. Ensayo de Geografía Económica*, Lima, Banco italiano-Lima, 1941 (2nd ed., Lima, Banco de Crédito del Perú, 1943); *Id.*, *Caminos del Perú. Historia y Actualidad de las Comunicaciones Viales*, Lima, Banco de Crédito del Perú, n.d. [1944].

dismissed from Comit in 1939, Gerbi had most likely to deal with Ernesto Magnani, the new director of the Banco, to get hired on a full-time basis, with a three-year contract, later renewed<sup>13</sup>: he was tasked with creating a «Sección Estudios Económicos» in the Banco which he organized after Comit's Research department, drafting on a regular basis statistical data and notes on Peru's short-term economic circumstances.

His duties with the Banco were not burdensome however, and Gerbi had more free time in Lima than in Milan to cultivate again his historical-philosophical studies. On the other hand, the dramatic lack of resources in the local libraries, including the library of the University of San Marcos in Lima, caused him to soon abandon every ambition to return to the history of romanticism and political theories of the 19th century. After some years, with a now vast wealth of knowledge of Peru, enriched by numerous books purchased in London and in New York, Gerbi was ready to write a book of great breadth on the history of Peru. He persuaded Oxford University Press in New York to commission him to write the book, provisionally titled «A Portrait of Peru», for which he used *El Perú en marcha* as a point of departure, including the material he had not published in 1941 and other articles of his on Peru, but the project did not go through<sup>14</sup>; the texts he completed were published only posthumously, in 1988<sup>15</sup>.

### **His research in American studies**

His passion for American studies, which were always tied to Europeans' vision of the New World, originated from his studies of Peru. The three editions of the *Viejas polémicas sobre el nuevo mundo*, published with funds provided by the Banco between 1943 and 1946, marked this turning point in his interests. This passion monopolized Gerbi's work in the following decades. In the war

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<sup>13</sup> Gerbi's contract from June 1940 is found in ASI, BCI, CAG, b. 1, f. 7.

<sup>14</sup> The material collected for this research is found in ibidem, bb. 14-16.

<sup>15</sup> Sandro Gerbi (edited by), *Il mito del Perú*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 1988.

period, Peru was also, like the other South American countries, closely monitored by the United States to avoid possible conspiracies with countries of the Axis powers; in this context, Banco italiano itself changed its company name to Banco de Crédito del Perú in 1942 to avoid closure. Gerbi's competences, as an astute expert on Peru's political and economic situation, aroused the interest of the United States military and academic circles, and led him to collaborate between 1941 and 1942 with the Bureau of Latin American Research in Washington, directed by Max Ascoli, to whom he sent eight reports on Peru, which he wrote in part with Alberto Pincherle, a scholar of the history of Christianity and a contributor to the Treccani Encyclopedia, who had also sheltered in Lima after being expelled from the University of Cagliari. In addition, in 1943 Gerbi published along with professor J. F. Normano, director of the Latin American Economic Institute in New York, the book *The Japanese in South America. An Introductory Survey with Special Reference to Peru*, with the objective of describing the problematic situation of the numerous Japanese immigrants in South America.

### «Don't perish in Peru»

His motto – he would repeat it to his relatives – was «don't perish in Peru»<sup>16</sup>. But at the end of the world conflict, Gerbi delayed his return to Italy; he was not entirely convinced of Italy's situation and he had the temptation to go and work in New York at some international organization<sup>17</sup>. In 1947 he traveled to Europe: first he went to Milan where he was able to meet Mattioli who reassured him and told him to return to Comit. Then he went to Rome and Naples, where he met philosopher Benedetto Croce. At the end of May he went to Eastbourne, in the south of England, to participate in an international

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<sup>16</sup> S. Gerbi, *Raffaele Mattioli e il filosofo domato*, cit., p. 97.

<sup>17</sup> See the correspondence with his brothers Claudio and Giuliano between May and October 1947, in ASI, BCI, CAG, b. 50, f. 2. See also S. Gerbi, *Raffaele Mattioli e il filosofo domato*, cit., pp. 112-114.

convention of banking economists that lasted two weeks. After a brief excursion in Scotland, he returned to Milan towards the middle of June. The brief period in Italy had convinced him to return to his homeland. His brother Claudio thus wrote to his sister-in-law Herma about this matter:

For many days we have been without news about Antonello, who we imagine is on vacation in Scotland; in his last letter he announced to us that he had booked a London-New York flight for the middle of September. Who knows how many things the children will have to recount to him when he returns to Lima. I hope that upon his return you all can already start your new move to Europe.

At the end of September Gerbi returned to Lima to organize his return trip with his family, after resisting his bosses Salocchi and Magnani, who pressed him to remain at Banco de Crédito del Perú<sup>18</sup>. He left at the end of April 1948 from Lima with the whole family, after receiving, that same morning of his departure, the medal of the Ordine del Sol, the country's highest honor, delivered in person by president José Luis Bustamante<sup>19</sup>. Herma stayed at a hotel in Rome for a month, while her husband was in Milan organizing the family's move.

### **At the helm of Comit's Research department**

Having returned to Milan, Gerbi resumed his leadership position at the Research department working closely with Mattioli and Comit's management on statistical and financial research; the esteem for him had remained intact. At the same time, he continued his research in American studies that he had cultivated profitably in Peru (in 1955 he published *La disputa del Nuovo Mondo*), and which allowed him to collaborate assiduously, upon Mattioli's request, with the Ricciardi publishing house.

He retired in 1970, but in the following years he furthered his research in

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<sup>18</sup> See Antonello Gerbi's letter to his brothers, 14 October 1947, in ASI, BCI, CAG, b. 50, f. 2.

<sup>19</sup> See S. Gerbi, *Raffaele Mattioli e il filosofo domato*, cit., p. 97.



American studies: he published *La natura delle Indie Nove* in 1975 and prepared the second edition of the *Disputa*, which was edited by his son and published posthumously by Ricciardi in 1983.

### Main publications

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For a complete bibliography of his writings, see *La disputa del Nuovo Mondo*, Milan-Naples, Ricciardi, 1983, pp. LXXV-CVIII.

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Guido Montanari

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