

RE-INVENTING THE FUTURE: THE RELEVANT THOUGHT OF DANILO DOLCI

Since 1952, at Partinico, a village in Western Sicily, Danilo Dolci had worked together with the local community and had focused on the issue of the individual accountability. Dolci and his team of collaborators put into practice democratic and non-violent ways of living and fight. Survival standards needed to be reached, but these must be achieved by developing collective participation and allowing individual contribution. Therefore, it was necessary to achieve the sharing of common goods, such as water; to fight against waste; to develop an economy made of cooperatives, consortia, popular organizations; to foster a shared popular planning interested in the agricultural produce, craft expertise and able to guarantee a strong control on the Country's highest official representatives and their choices.

All these initiatives are the result of a thought and actions based on the principles of nonviolence, accountability, self-organization, mutual listening and the ability of making decisions in a collective way.

A testimony by Mario Luzi (Italian poet) describes what he believes to be the most important aspect of the initiatives carried out by Danilo Dolci:

I believe that his perception of the existence as a vital process which everybody must take part in and his great ability to identify with this process are remarkable not only from a philosophical-literary point of view, but also ontologically. Trying all together to develop a new idea of the world: I believe this is, among the others, the main, specific and "winning" aspect of the human meaning of his path (in Barone G., "La forza della nonviolenza. Bibliografia e profilo biografico di Danilo Dolci", Dante & Decartes, Napoli 2004)

Aldo Capitini writes: *"If we take into account what Danilo Dolci has been doing at Trappeto and Partinico for years, we find that the principles of his work are based on the study of the third way: (...) What does it mean? This means that Danilo Dolci's work goes further beyond a "benefactor" and trade-unionist's work, even if it is both. (...) In Italian history and in the fight for the transformation of consciousness and society, a new form of opposition appears which is to be separated, as to its spirit and method, from that of the revolutionary materialism, even if it works next to it, since the people involved are those who oppose and fight for the social deliverance.* (in A. Capitini, "Danilo Dolci", Manduria, Lacaita, 1958, citazione tratta. Da "Danilo Dolci, una rivoluzione nonviolenta la vita e l'opera di un uomo di pace", Cura di Giuseppe Barone, Altraeconomia, 2010, Milano)

The many aspects of Danilo Dolci's thought are not easy to study because not everything appears in his works. Actually, it is often difficult to separate his thought from his actions: Dolci's actions, as Gandhi's non-violent actions, often have the symbolic meaningfulness which turns them into the words of a speech unravelling over the time and developing a new thought, an action-thought. Paraphrasing Carlo Levi, we can say that, in the works of Dolci, actions, that usually are heavy like stones, are meaningful like words. Besides, his working method and style of working behaviour are elements which are not always easy to reconstruct, but help to complete the picture.

Therefore it is essential to go over again all the actions.

At the beginning of 1952, when he is 28 year-old, Danilo Dolci leaves Nomadelfia, where, with Don Zeno Saltini, he had carried out his first training. He settles at Trappeto, a little village of fishermen, few kilometres away from Partinico, one of the poorest villages in

Sicily, a centre of banditry which had become notorious throughout Italy at that time. He had been there with his family - his father was a railway employee - when he was a boy. He finds extremely poor living conditions. Fishermen and farm labourers were starving, the sea was sailed by fishing boats which, near the shore, deserted the sea by poaching baby fish with small-meshed nets and bombs, with the leniency of the local authorities who did not intervene in most cases. An open sewer run through the village and near it played children who hardly ever attended schools or nurseries. Infant mortality was high.

At that time Sicily was dramatically underdeveloped (the other side of the thriving northern Italy) and dominated by the power of the landowners and the Mafia.

People, under the guide of the Communist Party leaders and the Chamber of Labour heads, fought hard for the division of the uncultivated feuds and the distribution of the land to peasants, as it was later provided for by the 1950 Law for the Agrarian Reform. Over fifty leaders of the peasant movement were killed by the Mafia who had been hired by the landowners. Among them Placido Rizzotto, Accursio Miraglia, Salvatore Carnevale. A defeat of the peasant movement which caused mass emigration, but formed the executive of the Communist Party and the Trade Union.

ACCOUNTABILITY TO OTHER PEOPLE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

In October 1952 the first hunger strike on the death-bed of Benedetto Barretta, a child who starved to death. When Danilo realized how desperate were the child's conditions, he tried to give him some milk, but the child died.

The hunger strike means an extreme, Levinas-like, awareness of accountability to the other people "*I began my hunger strike because I would have been disgusted by myself if I had gone on eating peacefully while other people were starving to death*". And this is "the accountability to the other people and the environment", in my opinion, one of the main topics which characterizes Danilo Dolci's thought-action and removes any suspect of charity work or paternalism.

On that occasion Dolci also realizes that the hunger strike can be very powerful: "*There was an agreement between me and some fishermen and peasants (Dolci does not work alone): if I had died they would have gone on. Many people came where I was, they cried and asked me why I was doing it (...). People know what hunger is and those Sicilian people knew it very well. I had not realized yet that hunger could be the yeast to make people move*". (in Massimiliano Tarozzi, "Come l'ape si posa su un fiore" (intervista), Rivista dell'Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai, anno X, n 49 marzo-aprile 1995.)

The hunger strike attracted the local authorities' attention and eventually they promised that within three months they would start to repair the village. In this case the promises were fulfilled.

COMMUNICATION TOWARDS THE OUTSIDE SOLIDARITY AND DE-GROWTH NETWORKS

In the sixties there is the awareness of the final transition from the peasant civilization to a mainly urban society.

If you look at the photographic documents of Southern Italy at that time, you discover a suffering peasant world strongly represented with neorealist style. You have the same feeling if you read the documents and notes of those years. The most attentive culture

representatives compared the policies which supported the emigration with the works resulted from actions carried out in a shared way and developed in a bottom-up democracy context, which aimed at fostering the agricultural production so that it might remain in the poorest areas of the Country.

Emblematic cases of the difficult reality in Southern Italy occurred immediately after the Second World War. Almost at the same time territories like Basilicata and Sicily attracted the attention of the Country since they represented the underdevelopment against which it was necessary to find a remedy.

People like Rocco Scotellaro, Manlio Rossi Doria, Danilo Dolci, Sylos Labini, from very different points of view, with different social roles and in territories in Southern Italy that were very different ones from the other, raised the issue of the principles which must be at the base of a development shared by local people.

As from the very beginning, within an already aware environment, the initiatives carried out by Dolci rise interest and great participation, also because they are different. As Bobbio says *"Danilo Dolci took a different path which was so different that appeared unusual and very original, it was the path of the refuse of the distinction between preaching and actions, of the highlighting of the good preaching from the good action, of the not giving the other the task of doing, but of the beginning to answer personally."* (in *"Banditi a Partinico"*.

Introduzione di Norberto Bobbio, Laterza, Bari 1956.)

Dolci sees to it that the information about the initiatives and the denunciation of the situation reach the press, the highest Italian authorities, and especially the Italian and foreign circles who support him with greater and greater enthusiasm and with whom he talks and prepares his initiatives accepting their advice and help.

The books themselves, that can be found also abroad, often give voice to people who usually do not have a voice: they denounce the living conditions (*Banditi a Partinico*, *Racconti Siciliani*); through the court proceedings, tell the local people initiatives and their spirit and denounce the authorities' reaction (*Processo all'art. 4*); describe how the debates about the working method occur (*Inventare il futuro*). They always aim at communicating, at engrossing.

When in 1956 he promotes the hunger strike on the beach and the upside-down strike, Dolci is not alone: at both a national and an international level a great support of his work has been developing over the time. Among his supporters we quote Carlo Levi, Aldo Capitini, who supports Dolci's work as from the first hunger strike, Maria Fermi Sacchetti, Lucio Lombardo Radice, Elio Vittorini, Piero Calamandrei who pleads for the people in charge of the upside-down strike at the old *trazzera* during the trial, Alberto Moravia and Ignazio Silone, Cesare Piaget and Adolf Huxley, Lewis Mumford and Ernst Bloch.

Young people arrive at Trappeto and Partinico from Italy and abroad to work with Dolci.

Dolci's financing mainly comes from a network made of several groups of supporters in Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, Great Britain, Netherlands, Norway, France. They are aware and deeply convinced of Dolci's work, give their financial support free of conditioning and are always involved in the initiatives. In *"Borgo di Dio: la Sicilia di Danilo Dolci (1953-1956)"* - Franco Angeli, 2010 - Vincenzo Schirripa well describes the situation: *"If Danilo Dolci managed to place the periphery where he had decided to live at the centre of a large international solidarity and participation network, this was the result of an aware use of his own image and of a strong organizational commitment: this is shown by circular reports, letter exchanges that became more frequent on the occasion of special initiatives or needs, travel plans throughout the peninsula for meetings or conferences, the telephone costs which were high even in times of great financial straits."*

Dolci and his supporters have a mutual and meaningful relationship, far away from the cold atmosphere of exploitable relations, sometimes they are good friend. Even in this case the common sense is turned upside down: the nonviolence genius.

ACTIONS: SYMBOLIC WORDS OF NON-VIOLENCE

In 1955 a double action of great meaning is taking shape. Dolci, together with some young elements of the section of the Partinico Communist Party, carries out an inquiry into the families of the bandits at Spine Sante, the poorest and roughest district of the village: the result is the book "Banditi a Partinico" (Bandits at Partinico) which gives voice to the inhabitants of the village who tell their stories that are often terrible. This book is a denunciation, but becomes also the starting point for an action involving the people interviewed, the beginning of a working method.

They need schools and nurseries different from the existing ones, they need a dam on the Jato river, "un bacile" a basin for the whole valley (...) - Zu Natale Russo suggested – which would prevent the waste of water running into the sea. The poaching of baby fish near the shore is to be eliminated and is no longer to be leniently tolerated because it doesn't make the fish grow (...) and causes the starving of fishermen. But above all they ask for a job which is a right but also a duty according to the Italian Constitution. These are the goals arising from the inquiry and from the meetings with the people involved. They start to rise the issue of the waste and the accountability to the territory and the people, they start to rise the issue of the authorities' accountability before the Constitution.

The double action is organized with the Chamber of Labour and carried out with the unemployed and the bandits of Spine Sante: an upside-down strike. Actually, whereas the workers can resort to the strike, the bandits and the unemployed must find another way of protest.

Even today the unemployed and those who do not have a steady job, but also the owners of little enterprises who are struck by the economic crisis and those who have been fired, all these people can not resort to the strike and must find different ways of fight, which become more and more extreme (climbing to the top of a crane, shutting themselves up into a mine), while networks are developing.

On 30 January an hunger strike on the beach: people, who often starve in private, go on a hunger strike in public by choice to denounce their own living conditions;

"This collective hunger strike was an action of exteriorization of consciousness, a total release from the deepest complexes, a way to bring to light, under everybody's eyes, their inhuman living conditions, and once these conditions were brought to light, revealed, they became the first declaration of an achieved human condition" – as said Carlo Levi, who testifies during the trial against Danilo Dolci and the other organizers of the upside-down strike on the old *trazzera* (in *Processo all'articolo 4*). The local authorities do not allow the initiative which goes on in private.

On 1st February the upside-down strike: the repair of the uneven old *trazzera*. The unemployed bandits, who were notorious for their violence actions, work without being paid for the common good, in compliance with the article n° 4 of the Italian Constitution which states that work is a right but also a duty. The perception of reality is turned upside-down. The violent do not have offensive tools, neither a knife to cut their bread at lunch time: the bread is broken by hands to give the strikers to eat, with a gesture that is a sort of rite.

The reaction of the authorities will lead to a trial: among the witnesses we quote Carlo Levi, Norberto Bobbio, Lucio Lombardo Radice, Elio Vittorini, etc. and among the lawyers Piero Calamandrei. Twenty three strikers, including Dolci, the secretary of the Partinico Chamber of Labour, Salvatore Termini, Goffredo Fofi, are convicted to a one month and twenty days sentence and the payment of a fee and the trial costs. However, the trial and the sentence become the subject of a great deal of comment throughout Italy and the world thanks to the publication of the book "Processo all'art. 4" (Trial against the art. 4), and therefore help to increase the number of Dolci's supporters and the interest in the situation in Western Sicily.

MUTUAL MAIEUTICS AND THE ABILITY TO MAKE DECISIONS IN A COLLECTIVE WAY

In 1958, thanks to the Lenin Award Funds, the Centre of Studies and Initiatives for Full Employment is established and located in several sites: Corleone, Roccamena, Menfi, Partinico and Trappeto. Fifty collaborators work in the Centre and go on studying the local situation by applying the methods already used at Trappeto and Spine Sante. Every fifteen days a meeting of all the collaborators allows the coordination and the improvement of the working method.

On the occasion of a meeting about the Regional Planning at the Centre in Partinico (quoted in "Conversazioni", Torino, Einaudi, 1962), Dolci talks with his collaborators about work experiences concerning the listening to the other and the welcome of different opinions as an enrichment. These are topics that, in my opinion, closely concern the deliberative democracy and the decision-making processes.

Against any kind of fanaticism

"(...) we can not oppose, and if necessary we must help, case by case, those who, assuming responsibility for their own actions, are able to live their own lives according to principles and experiences different from the ours. Some exclusivism reveals more young enthusiasm than sense of complexity (...)"

(...) Being open-minded does not mean being weak and accepting that someone else says "now behave only this way", but it means accepting that you can behave also this way: and the cooperation agreement consists of deeply accepting the plurality of ideas, always based on an actual broad-mindedness towards each other. (...)

A real communication between different groups does not depend on diplomatic skills or on the ability to plot, but on the fact that you are not close to the other, that you do not have a stuck-up attitude (...)

It can be very helpful not trying to make a synthesis before a conflict is clear, but it can be wise not wasting time and energies in pointless quarrels (...)

I do not believe in labels I feel the need to verify what there is under labels.

This verification, this actual mutual knowing, the more it turns to the potential, to the new man in everybody, the more it is to be carried out while working and living together."

These are practices based on a very open-minded attitude towards the other that can allow to manage conflicts in a constructive way.

However, the educator goes beyond: he talks about groups of appreciation, where everyone can feel the other's interest in what they think and propose. And everyone must be dreamed in order to express themselves in the best way: *"the educator knows how it is possible that, by loving people for what they might become, this can make them turn just in it"*.

FOR A NEW WORLD: SELF-ORGANIZATION AND FIGHT AGAINST WASTE

By using these methods the initiatives go on.

The fight for the dam on the Jato river against the waste of water goes on and so does the fight against baby fish poaching, which deserts the sea and causes the waste of the sea resources. A commitment for the people self-organization goes on: cooperatives, consortia. The work for an organic bottom-up planning goes on.

In 1960, the book "Waste. Documents and inquiries about some aspects of the waste in Western Sicily" - Torino, Einaudi – is published. Once more, through the stories told by the inhabitants of the villages concerned - Corleone, Roccamena, Menfi, Cammarata - the waste of people, unemployed, but also killed (over 60 people killed in Corleone alone in few years) is brought out. The killing of Placido Rizzotto, the secretary of the Chamber of Labour at Corleone, is particularly terrifying. Vincenzo Collura, a member of the Mafia, during one of his confessions, told that he had given Rizzotto to Luciano Leggio, one of the Mafia leaders, who had made him disappeared. The image of Accursio Miraglia, a local leader of the Communist Party, is mythical in the memories of one of his old party comrades: he rides a white horse at the head of a very long procession of peasants, who ride horses, mules or bicycles, they are going to occupy a feud; his death is moving.

The waste of water, which, instead of being collected in a dam at disposal of everybody as a common good and given according to the needs, is let run into the sea: this allows the Mafia of the water to become rich and commit abuses of power over peasants. And here we can compare this situation with the attempted privatization of water: even at that time the peasants managed to obtain the building of the dam and to free themselves from the power of the Mafia over an extremely necessary good like water.

The waste and the desertification of the environment and the sea caused by baby fish poaching which prevent the fish from growing, by the use of bombs along the shores, by the use of poisons; the waste which causes the starving conditions of the fishermen's families.

The commitment against the Mafia becomes more open.

In 1965, during a press conference, Dolci and Franco Alasia denounce in public the Foreign Commerce Minister, Bernardo Mattarella, the Health under-secretary, Calogero Volpe, the member of the Senate, Girolamo Messeri, and other politicians to be colluding with the Mafia and produce clear evidence. They are sued for libel and sentenced to two years in prison.

In 1967 within the tradition of the great non-violence processions: the Assisi one, organized by Capitini, the ones organized by Gandhi. Dolci and his collaborators organize the March for Peace from Partanna, in the Belice Valley, to Palermo and thousands of people take part in it: famous names of the Italian culture as well as local people including Peppino Impastato.

A recent initiative, in April 2011, explicitly refers to it. On the leaflet that announces a march from Menfi to Palermo for the rights of all people, for the self-determination of the local communities, for the public preservation of the public goods and the landscape, with a final meeting in Borgo di Dio, signed by siciliaperi.peri.wordpress.com, www.epicentrobellece.net, you can read: "*In March 1967, while Italy and the whole world were in the middle of epoch-making changes, Western Sicily started a march asking for Peace, Development and Dignity for everybody. Similarly, today we live a period full of upheavals. The nuclear catastrophe after the seaquake in Japan, the fights for democracy taking place in the Arab Countries, the war for the control over the energy resources in Libya, the*

economic and social crisis in our Country, the progressive privatization of Common Goods and Services, all that we see and suffer as if it were a television show concern and involve us!"

It reports also the appeal launched by Dolci in Piazza Kalsa at the end of the march from Belice to Palermo:

"Today I know that my voice is the voice of every sensible Sicilian person, of every person in the world who is aware of the fact that we can't go on this way. The old world is over, it is pointless trying to bring back to life corpses already decomposed, it is pointless entrusting these corpses and their laws and rules with our life: with all our affection and gratefulness for those who have struggled and thought before us, trying to make this world more civilized, to improve our life, we can't help realizing that we need a new world, where we can develop ourselves as living people, that is all bravely, actively, organically brothers ones of the others. (...)

And since our old world is a strange corpse, a corpse that talks too much, we know that a huge amount of work is to be done by everyone if we want to succeed – with the attention, the intelligence and the necessary commitment – in being alive as we need to build a new world. (...) We know that we must produce new actions, we must create healthy relationships with other people, our piece of new world. (...) If we succeed in being the life, who can stop us?"

P.S.

After 1967 times change: the 1968 events are around the corner. The new movements, that are not connected with the non-violence thought, often do not pay attention to the issues linked to the management of conflicts. Even if they are promoters of an anti-authoritarian spirit and they long for justice, the different groups born from the Sixtyeight movement are not always open to the dialogue and the appreciation of ideas different from their own ones, they do not focus on the issues linked to the listening to the other, that are so present in the actions and thought of Danilo Dolci who, with some of his collaborators, reflects upon *"some exclusivism, which under the guise of purity, easily, if you look carefully, reveals lack of experience or the need, maybe unconscious, of asserting oneself, one's own ideas, the ideas of one's own group: and not the same care for everybody's interest."*

In the Belice Valley this is also the year of the earthquake, which suddenly imposes other priorities. In Italy, and above all in Southern Italy and in Sicily, the end of the sixties marks the transition from a peasant society to an urban society. Sicily is no longer a starving land. In a completely different situation, for some years, in dialogue and somehow continuity with the methods developed by the group of Dolci, in the Belice Valley struck by the earthquake there are people demonstrations aiming at rebuilding the villages in a shared and controlled way. Their leader is Lorenzo Barbera who uses the methods of civil disobedience in a very effective way: he is one of Dolci's collaborators, who in 1969, with a little group of people, parts from the Partinico Centre.

While consumerism and mass communication steer towards external models and manipulate needs, Dolci devotes himself to education and no longer to action. He studies in depth the approach of the "mutual maieutics", a thought which has been developed and improved over the years, in the relationship with children and young adults in the Educational Centre that he established in the Seventies, which becomes a reference point for many educational associations.

And here we are at the present.

A last consideration: even if I believe that the importance of Dolci is to be found in the spirit, ways and methods of his work within the communities or as an educator, I would like to recall some results achieved by his non-violent initiatives.

Thanks to Danilo Dolci's commitment, many results have been achieved: the construction of the dam Poma; the repair of the sewerage and the roads at Trappeto; the building of the nursery Borgo di Dio; the construction of the Popular University; the establishment of consortia and cooperatives.

Besides, thanks to the fights for the rebuilding of the villages in the Belice Valley: refusal to pay taxes (bills, fines, etc.), refusal to serve in the national army, demonstration of a thousand of people in Rome for 13 days. In 1970 they manage to obtain the civil service law for the areas struck by earthquakes and later - thanks to the intervention of other parties concerned and mainly the conscientious objectors - the law for the civil service n° 772 "Regulations about conscientious objection".

And, maybe, we will be able also to develop a responsible, aware and sympathetic community.

Notes:

Danilo Dolci was born at Sesana, in Croatia, in 1924. He begins studying in Lombardia, where his father worked as a railway employee, and obtains his secondary-school diploma in Art in Brera. In 1943 he refuses to serve in the army of the Salò Republic and, therefore, he is arrested. He manages to escape and shelters in Abruzzo, where he lives with a family of shepherds. After the Second World War he attends courses of Architecture first in Rome, later at the Politecnico in Milan, but in 1950, when he is about to get his degree, he quits his studies and decides to live at Nomadelfia, in the community led by Don Zeno Saltini, who takes care of orphan children overcome by the war.

In 1952 his further decision: he leaves for Trappeto, a little village near the sea in western Sicily. Dolci knows this village because he had spent some holidays here in 1940, with his father who had worked there as a railway employee: he remembers the poverty of the village and some fishermen who had become his friends.