Discovering the World

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Luciana Castellina. D*iscovery of the World: A Political Awakening in the Shadow of Mussolini*. Trans. Patrick Camiller. London: Verso, 2014. xiv + 194 pp.

Autobiographies by radicals are essential histories of political eras and of individual roles in collective struggle. As these portraits reveal the dialectics of growth and transformation, they prove that we can make our own history, even if not always as we please. They also provide a mode of insight into the ways social movements function as catalysts for political consciousness, especially when these lives parallel momentous shifts in political orders as neatly as Luciana Castellina's.

Castellina's adolescence coincided with World War II and Italian political upheavals. She traveled throughout the country during various stages of national hubris and foreign occupation; her stepfather served as a military lawyer; her family secretly harbored Jewish relatives. Castellina was 14 when Italy surrendered to the Allies; she was 15 when the German occupation of Italy ended; she was 19 when Italy joined NATO in 1949. Luckily, in 1943 Castellina began a "political diary," which she sustained for five years (2). Castellina uses this record as primary material for *Discovery of the World: A Political Awakening in the Shadow of Mussolini* to "reconstruct the stages of my early political development" (3). Little is included from the diary itself, and her reflections mostly avoid the tedium of accomplishments, famous people, and childhood memories. Instead, Castellina narrates the evolution of her political self by contextualizing entries with the wisdom of experience. Castellina was an important leader of the Communist movement in Italy and Europe, and *Discovery of the World* is an explanation (partly for her grandchildren) of why and how she became a revolutionary. The result is brief, keen, amusing, and often fascinating. *Discovery of the World* provides an instructive and generously personal perspective on education, anatomies of oppression, postwar feminism, organizing in democracies, and the lifecycles of perennial movement crises.

Like many revolutionaries, Castellina's childhood did not portend a radical adulthood. Her immediate environment was comfortably middle class, and she describes the wider social environment as initially complete: "the Fascist regime was the only context I had when I reached the age of reason" (3). However, enough sand worked its way into the Fascist oyster. Castellina depicts her family and schooling as two "contradictory lines": while her teachers emphasized Italian race glory and fascist truth, her relatives were generically non-fascists, and members of her mother's family

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were officially labeled "mixed" (half-Jewish), which forced name changes and, later, hiding (6). Art and cinema provided additional contradictions. Fascist films unintentionally suggested "the world was much more complicated" when they introduced her curiosity to words like "Soviet Union" and "Communist," and she became fascinated by modern painting when "Fascism and provincialism" restricted access (15-6, 78). Leftist groups hosted the best exhibits, and work considered degenerate by the regime "became a symbol of liberation" (77). Contradictions like these challenge the ostensibly apodictic narratives of hegemony, though this creative tension usually needs support to become constructive. Castellina recognizes negation, but she could use a system to understand its production. As she puts it, "My agony is that is I do not have ideals" (37).

Italy itself supplied the sharpest juxtapositions shaping her worldview, and the most urgent questions for her then concerned the dilemmas of national identity and political affiliation. Her family was based in Rome, they spent their summers in Venice, and she moved to Verona during the war. The "bigotry and conservatism" she found in Verona shocked her; Rome and Venice "seemed part of a different century" (14). This ugly milieu encouraged its negation: "since the young Veronese ladies were loyal to the regime, I felt bound to consider myself a little anti-Fascist" (15). The political affect she cultivates here would bloom as the war wound down, even though she lacks the knowledge and the agency to work out her questions. "Why should we now respect Badoglio?" she asks in late 1943 (37). "Or should we perhaps be for the king?....What the devil is Italy?" "I don't know what to answer," she concedes, "and the fact that I do not have to choose because I am female and adolescent makes me even more desperate" (ibid.). With her "political thinking no more than an adaptation of school reading to the new context," events intervene, and the concrete ground of national reconstruction facilitates a different perspective (50). The diary documents how "muddled pieces of knowledge began to acquire a clearer form…and how the events of the turbulent early months after the Liberation somehow took on a systematic shape" (71).

One event succinctly dramatizes the unscripted process of discovery that results from negation. Castellina's entry on 4 May, 1945, begins: "Today was an earthshaking day; I'm totally confused at the end of it" (82). She joined the front line of a protest march to Rome's Piazza dell'Esedra "against the Communists and Socialists, who allegedly want to abandon Trieste to the Yugoslavs." They were greeted by a counter-demonstration of "workers, and pretty muscular ones at that." Fights broke out, and Castellina was ironically hit in the head with a flagpole bearing the royal emblem. In the process of retreating, she encountered a smaller rally:

They were Communists and Socialists: the best informed, people whispered to

> me. They had come straight from the nearby PCI headquarters, which had apparently been attacked by an armed gang under a certain Captain Penna Nera; I knew nothing about him, but it seems he had been at the head of our demonstration. I stopped to listen, a good distance away. I confess that, as they spoke, I was gradually becoming convinced that what they said made sense. (83)

"These are things I have never thought about," she admits (84). "I should go and see those Communists at Il Tasso to understand things better." Less than two weeks later, she notices an important shift in her political consciousness: "I'm beginning to have doubts about my privileges, which until now I've taken for granted as if they were a fact of nature. Of course I've used the word equality thousands of times, but I've never drawn inspiration from it for ideas of any consequence, never applied it to myself" (88-9). Here, she is 15 years old.

Castellina soon attends Communist Party meetings and events regularly. At 16, she accepts an invitation to speak to a mildly hostile audience about Cubism, where she presents an affirmation of abstract art that she considers her "first political gesture" (98). She is part of a movement and a generation "'seized' by history, by the reality surrounding us—even if the road ahead was slower and more tortuous for those, like myself, who had not been old enough to experience the Resistance" (99). This community provides a radical alternative to the nationalist rhetoric of the old regime still resonating in the latest Risorgimento of postwar Italy. Communism's "collective dimension helped me to find a way out from the circle of self-reference and even to rediscover the meaning of patria….The love I began to feel for neighbors quite remote from my social ghetto…gave me back a sense of solidarity" (100). She stops capitalizing the "p" of "patria" in her entries as the indefinite homeland explored through her activism usurps traditional habits of nationalism.

Castellina's testimony extends Antonio Gramsci's 1930 discussion of state authority when leaders lose legitimacy. Eights years into Mussolini's rule, Gramsci was talking about our ability to contest hegemony and the "so-called 'problem of the younger generation'" that Italy faced after World War I: whether or not "the simple exercise of force" could prevent radical alternatives (276). The Fascist Party unified political and economic forms in a force of martial order, corporate statism, and scripts of a singular national spirit. Gramsci recognized that as long as the problem is reduced to traditional social formations, we ignore its only solution: "the possibility and necessity of creating a new culture." Fascism was maintained precisely by the suppression of the communist community Castellina discovered.

Castellina nurtures her awareness by immersing herself in the study of economics, philosophy, history, and social movements. The more she learns about the world, the

more she recognizes sharp incongruities, including the difference between her knowledge and those close to her: "I have realized that a whole mass of people, including so many of my traditional friends, live as if it were twenty years ago, outside time.... They don't realize how important the social question is right now, or that bourgeois conventions and principles must be abolished" (122). She worries about not being able to comprehend the present crisis, but she appreciates the significance of her engaged integration with this social ground: "I was in the very midst of that world...my essence was not something other than what I did but included it" (124). Rejecting a positivist conception of identity and accepting authenticity as a process rather than a rule, she sees herself in the state of becoming rather than the act of completion: "I think I am more like I will be, but I will no longer be like I was or dreamed of being, like I thought I could always be" (142).

Sometimes Castellina misses the security of self-certainty and fears the "overwhelming estrangement" of kinesis, but even the most personal contradictions reward her with the vistas they reveal (177). These vistas echo Grace Lee Boggs' own autobiography of a radical life, where she underscores the power and necessity of dialectical reason for communists and fellow travelers:

> [I]n times of crisis or transition in any organization, movement, or society, it is a matter of life and death for the organization, movement, or society to recognize that reality is constantly changing, that the contradictions present in everything are bound to develop and become antagonistic, and therefore that ideas or strategies that were progressive and mind-opening at one point have become abstractions and fixations. (60)

"So over the years," Boggs advises us, "I have always kept my ears close to the ground, testing ideas in practice and listening closely to the grass roots for new questions that require new paradigms. As a result, new unforeseen contradictions have challenged rather than discouraged me, and I have never felt burned out" (46). Boggs and Castellina's emplotments of their pasts teach us how praxis, the purposeful activity by which we participate in history, can transform individuals and draft creative futures. They remind us that the site of the social always includes the potential for a new collective form, for a new negation that creates space for radical reflexivity and the optimism of new conflicts.

Works Cited

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