



DIALOGUE

WHAT TIMES THEY WERE!

“Finding solutions together is politics. Finding solutions alone is egotism.”
(Father Lorenzo Milani)

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“The Committee appreciated your course of study and thesis. We’ve given you the top grade of 110, but you gave up your chance for honors with all that political content, like those quotes from Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*.”

That’s how a member of the dissertation committee for medicine and surgery students at the University of Florence reprimanded me as I left the lecture hall one morning in mid-November 1967. My thesis was titled “*Hunger Around the World*”, and Giuseppe Mazzetti, a professor of hygiene who’d acted as my thesis advisor, had himself been supportive of my historical and political analysis, which contended that the mass poverty and starvation afflicting some two-thirds of the global population at the time was largely the result of colonial exploitation, as well as a glaring contradiction of the principle of the equality of peoples – “*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights*”; Article 1, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948 – upon which the new order established in the aftermath of the WWII was based.

Back then, college students both studied and *engaged* in politics. We medical students had our own electoral roll including Catholics, communists and some liberals, one that consistently trounced those of our right-wing adversaries. We were a close-knit group of young people who would meet up to discuss not only how our study programs could be improved, but also how both our university and health care policy could be reformed from an equality and social justice perspective. A group that organized shoestring-budget group summer vacations to the most remote parts of Sicily, Sardinia and Calabria, and once even a tour of the former Yugoslavia, as far as Sarajevo; and who rushed to help when Florence was devastated by a flood in 1966, clearing the mud from health facilities in the hardest-hit areas of the city.

Those of us studying at the Faculty of Medicine used university funds to publish a journal called *Quaderni d’informazione - giornale degli studenti della facoltà di medicina di Firenze*. We wrote up the April 1967 issue (see its cover and editorial staff list on this issue’s inside front cover) ahead of our planned occupation of the faculty in May; it contained our political platform and a number of demands for the dean of the faculty. Our two-week occupation was primarily symbolic; we only occupied the medical library. Even so, seeing that building located in the center of the Careggi Polyclinic covered with posters and sheets hanging from windows still made quite an impression. On the third day of the occupation, at 7 a.m., we heard a knock on the front door. We were convinced it was the police coming to take down our names and so forth (that actually did happen a few days later); instead, it was Antonio Lunedei, our dean. It surprised us to see that he was by himself, and asked us if we could get him a cup of coffee. After climbing out of our sleeping bags, we made gallons of it using our camp stove, then gathered round for a long talk with the dean. Its outcome would become clear over the next few months.

Aside from our respective post-university professional paths, those years were truly life-changing for many of us. The public debate over conscientious objection to military service exploded in 1965, following Father Milani’s response to a statement put out by a group of retired military chaplains that cast contempt on such objectors. His published rejoinder read in part as follows:

*I am not going to discuss the notion of a “homeland” here; I don’t like that sort of division. But if you claim the right to divide the world up into Italians and foreigners, I will say this: I have no “homeland” in your sense of the term, and I claim the right to divide the world up into the dispossessed and the oppressed versus the privileged and the oppressors. The former are my “homeland”; the latter my “foreigners”.*¹ Father Lorenzo’s response cost him two trials for speech in defense of criminal acts. As for myself and my wife Loretta, it inspired us to opt for a lengthy period of civilian service abroad following graduation from university instead of military service – the beginning of our story with CUAMM and all that came thereafter.

NOTES

¹ Father Lorenzo Milani, *L’obbedienza non è più una virtù* (“Obedience isn’t a virtue anymore”): <https://www.famigliacristiana.it/articolo/l-obbedienza-non-e-piu-una-virtu-il-testo-di-don-lorenzo-milani.aspx>