

Dolci Fights Sicilian

Fears With Trust

THE MAN WHO PLAYS ALONE

by Danilo Dolci (Pantheon Press, New York 1968). Reviewed by JOSEPH GERACI

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In March of this year Danilo Dolci was in New York for three days to see the publication of his book, "The Man Who Plays Alone" with Pantheon Press. Dorothy Day and I had the good fortune of meeting with him for an hour and a half at that time and I thought it would be of interest to the reader if I recorded a few personal impressions of that meeting before launching into my review of his book.

The meeting took place in the lobby of the Algonquin Hotel, in a quiet, softly lit corner with leather settees and red, plush carpet. There were 10 or 15 people present including Jerre Mangione, the author of an outstanding book on Dolci called "A Passion for Sicilians: The World Around Danilo Dolci" which I reviewed in the March-April '69 CW.; Dolci's editor at Pantheon and Eileen Egan who, I thought, asked the most relevant questions that afternoon.

Dolci is a large man with a peculiarly shaped, balding head that bumps in the back then slants inward and rises in another bump in step-like fashion, like the side of a rock abutment. He is over six feet tall and though is well over 200 pounds he gives the impression of solidity rather than softness. He immediately strikes one as a man of immense culture and grace, an impression engendered by a certain harmony of facts about him: his carefully groomed appearance, well-knit suit and quiet tie; his direct way of speaking, with no superfluosity of gesture as one might expect in an Italian, no outbursts of passion; his short, precise and thorough way of answering questions, always meeting the eye of the questioner, sometimes with a graceful smile, sometimes returning a question with a penetrating question of his own (he spoke only in Italian); the way in which his dark blue, narrowed eyes set deeply behind gold-rimmed glasses look at you with an intense glance that never intrudes or intimidates as some intense glances do, all these seem to bespeak a personality totally together, with no affluence or waste either of intellect or emotion. Self-contained, calm, impressive, a sense of humour one would have to say of him.

Dolci speaks with great articulation and conciseness. He never seemed to be speaking for more than a minute or two at a time. His answers were short and accurate and more than once he extracted a "Yes, yes" or an "Oooh" from one of us for his way of dealing with a raised problem. He seemed to be one of those rare individuals who can immediately detect what is in his questioner's mind, behind the question. It struck me at one point that Dolci was a poet and he has indeed published a book of verse. He speaks in metaphors and isolates the concrete, two distinctly poetic gifts.

Eileen Egan asked him a series of questions on non-violence, specifically what he thought about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and whether such deaths didn't threaten

(Continued on page 6)

BOOK REVIEWS

(Continued from page 5)

the future of the non-violent movement. He replied that he did not agree when people spoke of the death of King or Gandhi as a proof that non-violence couldn't work (he might have pointed out that by such logic the death of Che would prove that violence couldn't work) or that now that they were dead non-violence could not continue. Non-violence, he said, was like a man working in an electric factory. The worker might be killed but the electricity went on. But of as much significance as these remarks was an answer he gave to a question concerning what his present work was. It was two fold, he answered. First, it was the reconstruction of the area devastated by the floods of the previous year and second it was one of education and he spoke briefly of his Center of Studies at Partinico which was an attempt to attract experts and produce experts on the problem of social change and organization. Someone then asked him if he considered himself primarily an educator and he answered significantly, "Yes."

I would close these observations with a slight incident but again one showing the immense grace of the man. On the couch were sitting Dorothy Day, Jerre Mangione and Dolci in that order. Someone sitting opposite was talking to Dolci in Italian and had been for about 10 minutes. Dolci, perhaps wanting to cut off the speaker, whatever the motive at one point just quietly reached across Mangione and took Dorothy's hand. At the same time he leaned slightly forward and turned slightly sideways but did not turn his attention from the speaker. It was an extremely delicate gesture and it worked. The speaker stopped and Dolci was able to turn to Dorothy, smile and say, "Now tell us about your work."

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"The Man Who Plays Alone," written in 1966-67, tries, in Dolci's words, "to understand exactly what the obstacles to associative life in Western Sicily are." It is built around a central motif, the Sicilian proverb, "The man who plays alone never loses" and there is a constant return to this proverb and discussion of it. The book is primarily a series of taped interviews, a cross-section of Sicilians from a street sweeper to Cardinal Ruffine. Divided into three parts, the first part deals directly with the themes of "associative life," organization, individualism, paternalism, the Sicilian temperament. The second part, a record of meetings held at Castellamare elaborates on the role of the Mafia in Sicilian life and documents the connection between the Mafia and Bernardo Mattarella, former Minister of Foreign Trade, Post Office, Agriculture, etc. who, according to Dolci's evidence owed his election to his hob-nobbing with the underworld greats. This section also illustrates, especially in the record of the Castellamare meetings, how the people once they lose some of their fear of speaking out are articulate in their denunciation of the Mafia. Part three, entitled, "The Trial" is an account of the libel suit brought against Dolci by Mattarella and associates and the subsequent verdict of guilty and fine of Dolci. (Pantheon provided us with an excellent pamphlet entitled "The Mafia and Politics: Danilo Dolci on Trial" (15 pages). It is in some ways a clearer account of the trial than that in the book and has a summary of the Appeal. It is available through the Publicity Dept. of Pantheon.)

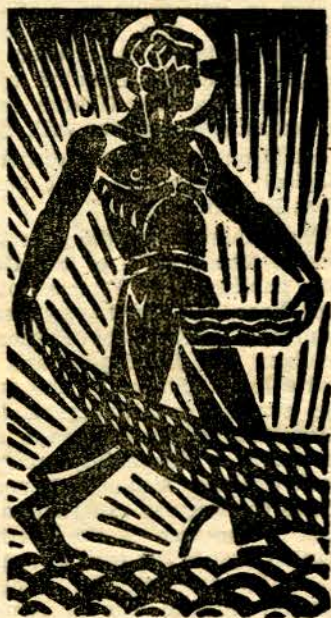
By "associative life" Dolci means social cooperation, working together to overcome a social ill, for a common goal. He does not extend this concept to the whole society but implies that he is trying to get things done first of all on a local level, "Pianificazione del basso" (grass-roots planning), with the local people learning to fend for themselves, to analyze their own problems in order to find their own methods to correct them. One of the ironies

Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy, but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness.

IMMANUEL KANT

of this is that Dolci found that radical independence ("the man who plays alone . . .") was one of the obstacles to making the people independent. take for example the following interview with an emigrant back from Switzerland. Dolci is the questioner.

- Have you ever been a member of any organization?
- How d'you mean?
- Have you ever taken part in any organization, of any kind?
- I've always kept to myself.
- Why have you never belonged to any organization?
- I've always kept myself to myself—nobody's ever told me what to do.
- What do you think a (political) party is?
- A party's like . . . well, like the father of a family, who can get certain jobs done.
- You've never felt like being a member of some religious group?
- No, never.
- Did you go to school?
- Only a few days. I'm illiterate. Is he close to other people besides his family?
- No, not really close. In fact we keep our distance. It's habit. The



proverb says, "The man who goes his own road can never go wrong."

- Couldn't the poor all get together and agree, and change things, make a different world?
- How could they all agree to make a different world?

I don't think they can ever agree. The book begins with this interview (quoted in part) and the theme is pursued throughout the book.

The problem of associative life is for Dolci a problem of getting Sicilians to break with their basic mistrust of others, getting them to accept others as partners in their work and their entire social life. What he asks is no less than a reeducation of the personality, a transformation in fact, for if the Sicilian is to make the leap from "the man who plays alone" to associative life he must in fact begin with basics, reorient his concept of the neighbor from someone who is out to get him to someone with whom he can cooperate to better himself. The Sicilian believes that others are out only for their own good and will only try to cut him down if he tries to get ahead. After all he himself is like that. His fear and mistrust are re-enforced by a tradition of paternalism that begins with his family (father) centered childhood ("no one is any good outside your own family") and extends to the Church and its hierarchical structure and ends finally in the Mafia which, as all criminality, feeds on the negativity within the temperament of the people it threatens, harasses and finally controls. This standing alone finally results in a disbelief in the other, a cynicism grounded in fear and expressed in mockery, a fear of the new, a dependence on tradition, and at bottom a longing for unity and independence from fear that is often only a nostalgia but sometimes breaks out as an articulated sentiment. Compare the following two dialogues for example.

—It's every man for himself.

—Why is that?

—They're (Sicilians) afraid of the unfamiliar, they have no initiative. —(another speaker) each man is afraid of being robbed by the next . . . and that's why they prefer to be on their own.

Compare this with the following extracted from the Jan. 1, 1966 meeting in Castellamare where, when people began to see that they could speak openly without fear of reprisal said such things as:

—I think this proverb (the man etc.) was born from ignorance . . .

I think it's madness to play on your own, because each of us needs to live with other people. It's absolutely untrue that if you play alone you always win. Men must cooperate.

—It's a dead proverb. It's had its day.

—(A Blind Man) we must organize ourselves in common agreement to try and conquer dishonesty and encourage honesty in the interests of everyone. No one can deprive us of the right to life. Every single person has the right to liberty, work and freedom of thought. Anything that's discussed peaceably, systematically, and in a right frame of mind is sure to turn out well. (Applause)

The number of obstacles to associate life seem innumerable. Dolci asked a Jesuit, Padre Noto what he thought these obstacles were and the priest replied, among other things:

— . . . mutual mistrust; uncertainty due to ignorance and to the absence of proper channels of communication; the citizens lack of faith in the State; lack of leadership; lack of culture at the base, etc.

The hope of unity seems grounded in the abstract ability of men to objectify themselves, to transcend themselves for a brief moment, to educate themselves, to change their consciousness by making the bold leap of thought from "alone" to "together". This is brought about through education and organization and you will recall that in the first part of this review I quoted Dolci as saying that he considered himself primarily an educator. What Dolci is trying to do through his interview method is first of all make the people aware that there is an alternative called "associative life" and that secondly they can express themselves to someone else who approves and will not take reprisal against them. The menacing father is replaced by the non-violent, peaceful man. Dolci reminds me of A. S. Neill's dictum that education is basically approval of the child. Social reform, associative life is basically for Dolci approval of the person.

Having set out the basic points of his argument in Part I, having shown the constrained character of the Sicilian temperament and the Sicilians' intelligent awareness of their own feelings Dolci, in Parts II and III illustrates how the working of the Mafia feeds on a structure of negativity and fear and this reinforces those characteristics in people which are most opposed to constructive change. To preserve itself the Mafia must rule the people. It does so through fear and violence, by brutally getting the power for itself. Its method of infiltration is both blatant and subtle. It convinces the church that its members are both good family men and supportive and regular church goers. It masks itself behind a front of legitimate businesses so that, its criminal work being beneath the surface it can play on the old fantasy-reality, Pirmandellian question, "Is it really so?" Dolci says it is. He mounts impressive evidence as to the fact that Bernardo Mattarella used the Mafia for political purposes. Through association, allowing himself to be seen with, photographed with, escorted and welcomed home by mafiosi Mattarella won the votes of his constituency in Castellamare, an area Mafia controlled, and by continued association manipulated himself into the ironic post of Minister of Foreign Trade, ironic because as Minister he could regulate exports, among them perhaps the exports of his friends, experts in drug traffic. But Mattarella is influential and powerful. He levels a libel suit against Dolci and wins.

Reading this book gives an in-

credible impression of the staggering obstacles Dolci faces in his work. One wonders constantly how he can go on, so good-humouredly too. Why doesn't he give up? Must non-violence always breast the impossible? As an explosive life this book is both unique and comprehensive. The way out for Dolci is clear, education, knowledge, planning, faith, hope, work—a working "in spite of". Or as that wonderful blind man said so well, "Anything that's discussed peaceably, systematically, and in a right frame of mind, is sure to turn out well."

THE MAGIC OF WALKING by Aaron Sussman & Ruth Goode. (Simon and Schuster, \$7.50.) Reviewed by STANLEY VISHNEWSKI.

The ideal book for the armchair walker; it is a little too big and heavy to slip in the back pocket while one is out walking along a back road. (Perhaps a paperback edition will be forthcoming.) But the book is full of entertaining and instructive articles on all aspects of walking by writers as diverse as Dickens, Thoreau, Mumford, Nabokov—all testifying to the pleasure that awaits one who is hardy enough to leave his car behind, slip out the door, and walk alone just for the sole enjoyment of walking.

The book is guaranteed to transform the sedentary person into a devoted walker. One will find in its pages practical advice on where, why, and how to walk. It would be hard for a person to resist the call of the open road after reading and enjoying this book.

Love without justice is a Christian impossibility, and can only be practiced by those who have divorced religion from life, who dismiss a concern for justice as "politics" and who fear social change much more than they fear God.

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(Continued from page 1)

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