

MISCELLANEOUS ARTICLE

Power to the People *Danilo Dolci: A Life Lived Intensely*

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Translated from Italian by Sabina Langer

Danilo Dolci was an educator, poet, sociologist, anthropologist, and Nobel Peace Prize nominee. He went on hunger strike after the death of a child, invented the “reverse strike” – where participants work for free on projects for the public good – and was even imprisoned for defending the rights of the poor. He received the Lenin Peace Prize in Russia, but was slandered by the Church in Sicily. He founded the “Center for Full Employment” and the Mirto school. He was internationally known yet often ignored in Italy.

Born in Sesana (now Slovenia, then part of the Province of Trieste) in 1924, Dolci spent his childhood and youth in northern Italy. Just before he was about to graduate in architecture, he abandoned his studies to dedicate himself to those most in need: “*You cannot be happy if another human being suffers.*” As an architect, he thought, he could not help people who did not even have a home. The question that guided his entire life was: How can we give power back to each person?

After a short time in the Nomadelfia community (Grosseto, Tuscany), he moved to Trappeto, Sicily, where he would live until his death on December 30, 1997, the same year when and seven months after Freire passed away. Dolci had first visited Trappeto briefly in the early 1940s following his father, a railway worker. In this small fishing village, he chose to live poorly among the poor, sharing their hardships to understand them from the inside. There, he began one of the most powerful chapters of Southern Italy’s renewal.

In this small village of farmers and fishermen, he began his work of popular self-analysis: he asked questions, starting from his ignorance of the place, to understand the most urgent needs of the people and to be able to plan together a better life. On the bed of a child who had died from lack of food, he began his first hunger strike. Too many children were dying or risked dying from hunger and poor hygiene conditions; too many parents, without work, were forced to steal to feed their children and were accused of being bandits. *"Here we must act quickly and well because people are dying."* Italian society needed to know how people lived in that Sicilian land.

By asking people directly how to change their situation, Dolci brought back to light, from the Socratic tradition, maieutics: a method based on questions that help new ideas to be born. (Morgante, 2024) Among the first proposals that emerged was to have water for everyone, democratic water. This work of awareness, born from asking questions and from dialogue, transformed water into a lever for economic, social and cultural change.

The maieutic structure becomes the condition for anyone, at any time and place, to recognize and use their own power. Other actions followed: the reverse strike, a thousand-person fast on the beach against illegal fishing, the creation of a free radio, and precise denunciations against the Mafia. Then the educational experiment of the Mirto school, where, between the mountains and the sea, maieutics became a method to make each person grow through discussion and communication. Here everyone could dream of themselves and give life to new possible futures.

The "Borgo di Dio" is another fundamental place where, from the maieutic approach, concrete actions for the rebirth of the territory took shape. The Borgo is the place where Danilo laid the foundations of his life, hosted friends from all over the world and built the house where he lived until the end of his days. There a structure was built – first called the Center and Initiatives for Full Employment, today the Center for Creative Development – with a library, meeting room with a large round table, auditorium, and guesthouse. Here reflections turned into organic planning, the people of Trappeto met with world-renowned scholars and, together, they planned change: city-territory planning, non-violent struggle initiatives and marches after the earthquake in the Belice valley, the Mirto Educational Center. Today the Borgo has been revived thanks to the work and tenacity of one of his daughters, Daniela Dolci, who managed to recover those spaces to return them to all those who want to carry the torch forward.

Who was Danilo Dolci? A man who all his life transformed dreams into projects.

An exhibition shown in various places, including, most recently, Merano near Bolzano, “A Life Lived Intensely”, was reconstructed from the archive of the Sicilian anarchists of the province of Ragusa, purchased by the Danilo Dolci Committee of Trieste and, a few years ago, kindly donated to T.R. Morgante, the present author, to make the best possible use of it. What follows is a list of captions each accompanying a specific illustration.

The Panels of the Exhibition

‘POWER OR DOMINATION?’

In the late 1980s, after his experiences in nonviolent struggle, Danilo delved deeper into a theme that had, in fact, always permeated his reflections: What is the difference between power and domination? Domination spreads like a virus, like a tick — how can we free ourselves from it? How can each person unlock creativity and discover their own power?

He immediately suggests, in the verses of one of his poems that open the exhibition: *“Concentrate, we are rendered dull in endless ways!”* His is an invitation to work together seriously and deeply on ourselves and on others, so as not to collapse... an invitation to listen and engage in dialogue, beyond empty chatter.

‘THE ENCOUNTER’

Dolci was born in Sesana (now Slovenia, but previously Italy) in 1924, and at about 16 years old he encountered Sicily for the first time. His father, a railway worker, was often transferred for work, and one of these many assignments was to the small station of Trappeto. Danilo joined his father for a short summer holiday and discovered Sicily, with its beauty and its contradictions — a land that stayed in his heart, like its people. A land he would never leave again.

‘THE CHOICE’

Just before graduating, Danilo experienced a deep crisis and decided to abandon his studies. Where to go? Where to start? He began with a short

but intense time in Nomadelfia (near Grosseto, Tuscany), the community founded by Don Zeno Saltini, another leading Italian critical community educator, where everything was shared, where war orphans and abandoned children were welcomed into large families alongside biological children. It was a self-sufficient community with no money, where everyone learned to give and to give of themselves. Danilo saw it as a wonderful reality, but too isolated from society and the wider world. He chose to leave again.

In 1952, he decided to move permanently to Sicily. He saw a dramatic reality — devastating poverty that required both careful analysis and urgent action. Unfamiliar with this world and this territory, he learned to ask questions to understand the most urgent needs and how to meet them, helping people to act independently from the ground up. The work was immense; poverty and poor sanitation made life precarious for the weakest, especially children. He realized action had to be targeted, but years of resignation and immobility made even the smallest change difficult.

Trappeto was a valley with a road that was really an open sewer, where children played among flies and filth. Fathers were forced to become bandits, stealing fruit and vegetables to feed their children, risking prison every day. Yet nothing changed — the State did not intervene, and no one cared how these people lived, resigned to whatever fate brought them.

On 14 October 1952, there came a turning point. Danilo was urgently called to get milk for a child who was near death. He searched in the only pharmacy, in the nearby village of Balestrate, but did not arrive in time — the child died in his arms. Danilo felt he could not eat again unless this reality changed. It was an instinctive act, born from deep empathy: on the bed of little Benedetto Baretta, he began his first fast — there was no time to lose. People understood what he had chosen to do and were ready to take his place. The first letter of solidarity came from Aldo Capitini (critical educator, scholar and philosopher of active nonviolence, among the first Italians to interpret Gandhi's thought, who would soon become a friend and supporter).

'FROM BANDITS TO CITIZENS'

Four years passed after the first fast. Some things had changed — the open sewer in the valley was covered — but there was still much to build. These were years in which Danilo formed deep collaborations with friends,

colleagues, and supporters, some close by and many from other places, ready to help.

During this period, he married Vincenzina Mangano, a Sicilian widow with children, with whom he had five more: Libera, Cielo, Amico, Chiara, and Daniela. For Danilo, she was not only a wife and the mother of his children, but also a collaborator and ally, sharing with him years of struggle and commitment. With courage and generosity, she supported his choices and learned to emancipate herself.

In those years of work from the ground up, from within the community, some essential points became clear to guarantee the legitimate right to work: farmers had the right to cultivate their land, and for this they needed water; fishermen had the right to fish, while respecting the sea. But how could they make themselves heard by those who refused to listen?

On January 30, 1956, a fast of one thousand people took place on the beach of San Cataldo in Trappeto. A few days later came the first reverse strike, followed by a sensational arrest on the charge that a public fast was illegal. From conversations with the local people came the realization that the real problem was not an unproductive sea or barren land, but the injustice that denied the right to work and other basic rights. Fishermen knew the laws of the sea well: their fishing respected its life cycle, they paused for natural breeding seasons, and they did not use destructive fishing methods such as trawling or underwater explosives. But illegal fishermen, protected by the Port Authority that did not intervene, acted undisturbed, destroying the sea.

Likewise, the farmers knew the land was fertile and that water was not truly lacking. The problem was that most of the water, much of it wasted, was owned by a minority who sold it at high prices. A land without water dies.

So fishermen and farmers united, chose a creative and revolutionary way to demand their right to work. First came the fast on the beach of San Cataldo, where a thousand people, accompanied by the music of Bach and gazing at the sea, fasted peacefully. The protest had been announced to the authorities in advance, but they intervened anyway, ordering the participants to continue their fasts in their own homes, out of public view, claiming that fasting in public was a crime.

A few days later, the protest continued. This time, the unemployed worked together to repair an old, impassable country road. They worked peacefully, without carrying even the knives needed to cut bread. Again, the authorities arrived and, after three trumpet blasts, ordered the crowd to disperse. When they continued to work, Danilo and several collaborators – described as troublemakers with a marked tendency to crime – were forcibly apprehended, loaded into cars, and taken to prison. At Ucciardone, the notorious prison in Palermo, Danilo spent a month with the very bandits whose children he had once cared for. It was a month of work and study, during which he learned a great deal – the only month of his life lived at the expense of the State.

‘HOW TO GIVE VOICE TO THOSE WITHOUT A VOICE?’

Without ever abandoning the poetic language that was his most natural form of expression, Danilo Dolci constantly documented his work – a habit that allowed him to publish fundamental investigative books denouncing the inhuman living conditions of an entire population. Among them were *Fare presto e bene perché si muore* (Do things quickly and well as people are dying) (Dolci, 1954), *Banditi a Partinico* (Bandits in Partinico) (1955) (Dolci, 2009), and *Inchiesta a Palermo* (Inquiry at Palermo) (Dolci, 1956).

This precise documentation of the work carried out was part of his methodological approach: the process of popular self-analysis, over the years and with growing awareness, evolved into what Danilo called “reciprocal maieutics.” It became increasingly clear that a new way of relating to the community had been born: dialogues and reflections made it possible to plan concrete actions, which in turn generated new paths of reflection, in a continuous process that transformed individual voices into a collective one – the *I* became *We*. Each person became a midwife for the growth of another, while at the same time valuing and developing themselves. No meeting was worthwhile unless everyone left it being more than they had been before. As in Freire, it was a case of *ser mais* (becoming more).

Many scholars and intellectuals took an interest in his work, supported him, and contributed actively. He received numerous international recognitions, including the much-debated Lenin Prize, and above all, the press began to arrive. But how to bring about real, deep change?

‘WASTE’

In a land rich and beautiful, like its children, yet at risk of dying from suffocation because it is neither valued nor protected, but instead drained and abused — how can so much waste be avoided?

‘ANALYZE TO PLAN’

To organize grassroots change that can generate development in the territory, greater awareness and critical analysis of problems are essential. Beyond protests, beyond fasts and marches, it is necessary to analyze clearly so that an organic plan involving the entire population can be created — an alternative must be found. For this reason, meetings became more frequent, often with the participation of many experts: urban planners, architects, educators...

‘THE DREAM: DEMOCRATIC WATER’

After long discussions and growing awareness among the people — born from the process of popular self-analysis that evolved into the *maieutic* method — the “Study and Initiatives Center for Full Employment” in Partinico designed the first essential action for change: the construction of a dam on the Jato River. Water there would be the lever for transformation, bringing wealth back to those lands.

In 1962, with funding from the *Cassa del Mezzogiorno*, construction work on the dam began. The site operated day and night — the work was unstoppable.

‘THE ANTI-MAFIA ACTION’

The awareness process sparked by the *maieutic* approach gave life and courage to a community that was growing stronger and more attentive to the needs of the territory. After the dam was built, it was necessary to protect the achievements that had been won. It became increasingly clear that the mafia had to be isolated, as they represented only a small minority of the population — a minority that dominated by stripping others of their power. After filing precise, signed complaints, the decision was made to organize a march across Sicily.

'THE LENIN PEACE PRIZE'

In 1967, Danilo Dolci received the Lenin Peace Prize — the communist world's equivalent of the Nobel Prize (for which he was nominated eight times). On that occasion, he gave a speech that stood as a manifesto for nonviolent action and peaceful dialogue. The prize money was used in Trappeto, at the *Borgo di Dio* (see Schirripa, 2010), to build the "Centro di Formazione per la pianificazione organica" (Training Center for Organic Planning). The Center was inaugurated seven months after construction began and quickly became a key place where people could meet — often with experts — to find alternatives and plan the changes that were needed.

'THE FREE RADIO'

January 15, 1968 — a tragic date: the earthquake in the Belice Valley. At the Borgo, in the "Centro di Formazione per la pianificazione organica" (Training Center for Organic Planning), all activities were suspended to go and provide assistance. But where was the State? Ministers arrived from the skies, yet the poor lived in shacks — freezing in winter, scorching in summer. How to give them a voice? After two years, still nothing! Meetings at the Borgo became more frequent to find a concrete solution and help the people of Belice.

Cries of despair, combined with verses from the poetry collection *Il Limone lunare* and the music of Bach, echoed through the first free radio station. In Partinico, on March 25, 1970, Franco Alasia and Pino Lombardo — two long-time collaborators of Danilo — began broadcasting news about the living conditions of the Belice Valley's population, two years after the earthquake and after countless unfulfilled promises from the State. As their voices spread over the airwaves, together with Danilo's poetry and Bach's notes, the police burst into the broadcasting room and forced the program to stop. The radio was shut down after just twenty-four hours — this time the State found a way to act quickly. Pino Lombardo and Franco Alasia were sent home without being arrested.

From that radio came another important experience: "Radio Aut" by Peppino Impastato, who was also involved in the Center's activities during those years.

‘SILENCE MEANS COMPLICITY’

Deeply honest people now had the courage to speak out, to denounce those who resisted change because they wanted to keep their privileges. The group gave strength and courage — for the first time, a population once divided, intimidated, and labeled as bound by *omertà* found the resolve to denounce the mafia clientelist system that had blocked the area’s development for years.

The testimonies were gathered by Danilo Dolci and his collaborators and presented to the police headquarters. The response was an accusation of slander and defamation against Danilo Dolci and his team. In *Processo all’art.4* (Dolci, 2011), the trial is documented with precise, detailed analysis — a trial brought for the accusations against ministers Volpe, Messeri, and Mattarella. It ended, after the historic defense speech by Piero Calamandrei, with an unbelievable sentence: two and a half years in prison, never served due to amnesty.

‘MIRTO: A NEST OF CREATURES’

Why should children be forced to go to school? Why isn’t there a school where listening and dialogue happen, as in our meetings? Can the reciprocal *maieutic* approach find space in a different kind of school — one where each person feels valued and respected, and where everyone can discover their own power?

These and other questions arose naturally in *Chissà se i pesci piangono* (Who knows whether fish weep) (Dolci, 2018), the record of the creation of the Mirto Educational Center — a new dream-project that emerged among the people of Trappeto and Partinico, who had increasingly become a renewed and united community.

‘INVENTING THE FUTURE’

Danilo Dolci’s vision grew ever wider, with increasing contacts abroad and with foreign committees. During those years, Danilo separated from Vincenzina and began a new relationship with Swedish photographer Elena Norman, with whom he had two children: Sereno and En.

His focus expanded more and more toward the school, which became a new educational center, designed and built with principles completely different from the traditional school — a type of school Dolci called “transmissive”. After long periods of reflection and rethinking — even

about where to build the center — with the participation of figures such as Freire, Galtung, Chomsky, Vonèche, Rodari... the Mirto School was inaugurated in January 1975.

Among olive and almond trees, near a natural amphitheater set into the rock, on a promontory from which you can glimpse the sea, along a small road that crossed a crumbling, cracked bridge (the only maintenance expense the Municipality of Partinico would have needed to secure the route), the educational center took shape — still an avant-garde example today, especially in its architecture.

Where else can the foundations of a new future be laid, if not at school?

‘THE GOD OF TICKS’

Domination is a parasite on every creature, sucking away its power and vital sap. Where does the tick hide? Danilo Dolci increasingly felt the desire to spread everywhere the awareness he had gained through his experience in Sicily (see, for instance, Dolci, 1966). In every place and in every time, the problem is the same, though dressed in different clothes: the tick drains vital energy, feeds on, and destroys its host.

How can a tick be recognized? How can its sly infiltration and parasitism be stopped? How can every creature be helped to defend itself?

‘THE PULSE OF CONNECTIONS’

In a flourishing of ever more fruitful connections, Danilo Dolci developed his core themes, along with the need to clarify, on a linguistic level, certain pairs of essential words: *Educate / Instruct*, *Transmit / Communicate*, *Power / Domination*. It became increasingly clear to him that the condition for each person to grow into a sense of shared responsibility is the widespread adoption of the reciprocal *maieutic* approach.

‘DRAFT MANIFESTO: COMMUNICATION AS THE LAW OF LIFE’

Mass communication does not exist — people reduced to a formless mass do not think, do not feel, do not live; they numb themselves in countless ways...

To foster change, we must not fear diagnosis. We need to spark and raise questions.

What is Peace? This was one of the themes explored at the Borgo, later transformed into the Center for Creative Development, which still works today to promote the creation of *maieutic* groups in Italy and beyond.

Danilo Dolci leaves behind a great legacy, and in his words echoes a question that is also an invitation to choose the direction we will take: “*Must we work so that this world perishes, or so that this world is reborn?*” Each person, everywhere, as a co-responsible being, will find their own answer and their own path.

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Power to the People. Danilo Dolci A life lived Intensely

Tiziana Morgante

Abstract. This article pays tribute to one of Italy's foremost critical educators, also among adults, and community activists who taught, organised and grabbed headlines with his radical actions. It does so just

one year after the centenary of his birth A poet and writer of works of strong sociological and anthropological significance, Danilo Dolci's reputation extended internationally to render him a household name in places such as Canada where translations of his works could be found. His maieutic Socratic approach brought him close to fellow critical pedagogue, Paulo Freire, with whom he worked and collaborated at Trappeto and Partinico in Sicily when Freire was still in exile and based in Geneva. This tribute to Dolci is written by one of his closest collaborators in his latter years.

Keywords: maieutics, community, reverse strike, peace, water

Le pouvoir au peuple. Danilo Dolci. Une vie vecue intensement

Tiziana Morgante

Résumé. Cet article rend hommage à l'un des plus grands éducateurs critiques d'Italie, également parmi les adultes, et à l'un des militants communautaires qui a enseigné, organisé et fait la une des journaux grâce à ses actions radicales. Il le fait juste un an après le centenaire de sa naissance. Poète et auteur d'ouvrages à forte connotation sociologique et anthropologique, Danilo Dolci s'est forgé une réputation internationale qui l'a rendu célèbre dans des pays comme le Canada, où ses œuvres ont été traduites. Son approche maïeutique socratique l'a rapproché de son collègue pédagogue critique, Paulo Freire, avec lequel il a travaillé et collaboré à Trappeto et Partinico en Sicile, alors que Freire était encore en exil et basé à Genève. Cet hommage à Dolci est rédigé par l'un de ses plus proches collaborateurs de ses dernières années.

Mots-clés: maïeutique, communauté, grève inversée, paix, eau

Poder para el pueblo. Danilo Dolci: una vida vivid intensamente

Tiziana Morgante

Resumen. Este artículo rinde homenaje a uno de los educadores críticos más destacados de Italia, también entre los adultos, y a los activistas comunitarios que enseñaron, organizaron y acapararon los titulares con sus acciones radicales. Lo hace justo un año después del centenario de su nacimiento. Poeta y escritor de obras de gran importancia sociológica y antropológica, la reputación de Danilo Dolci se extendió internacionalmente hasta convertirlo en un nombre muy conocido en lugares como Canadá, donde se podían encontrar traducciones de sus obras. Su enfoque socrático mayéutico lo acercó a su compañero pedagogo crítico, Paulo Freire, con quien trabajó y colaboró en Trappeto y Partinico, en Sicilia, cuando Freire aún estaba exiliado y residía en Ginebra. Este homenaje a Dolci está escrito por uno de sus colaboradores más cercanos en sus últimos años.

Palabras clave: mayéutica, comunidad, huelga inversa, paz, agua