

Alessandro Portelli, Biography of an Industrial Town, Terni, Italy, 1831–2014

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Alessandro Portelli, *Biography of an Industrial Town, Terni, Italy, 1831–2014* (Cham: Springer Nature 2017)

THIS IS A CREATIVE, complex and magnificent book: creative for its expert and emotionally moving utilization of stories and events told to Portelli by 280 “narrators” over a 40 year period, complex in its analysis of the at once continuous and disrupted events and time periods it covers, and magnificent in the manner and style which Portelli employs to bring this all together.

For those readers and researchers who are in tune with oral history, the above acclamations will come as no surprise. Alessandro Portelli is most assuredly a household name among oral historians. Indeed, his name may very well be on the entrance to the door. For decades now, he has “gathered a little knowledge” on subject matters ranging from the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the Nazi massacre, on 24 March 1944, of 383 Italian prisoners in so-termed “retaliation” for the deaths of 33 German soldiers by Italian resistance fighters, to the historical and contemporary lives and struggles of generations of Harlan County denizens to, here, the citizens, the steel and textile workers and to the socialists, the communists, the resistance fighters, and the fascists of Terni, Italy, from 1831 to 2014. By any measure, this is a body of work that is unmatched in the field of oral history. It is inspirational.

When asked, I was eager to review this book. First, it provided an opportunity to engage with Portelli and his particular brand of oral history, e.g. the book is composed largely of successive excerpts from his interviews, cogently strung together via historical and political observations, analyses, and where important, “corrections” to his participants’ narratives. Second, I was also drawn to it by the seeming parallels between the

importance and the historical trajectories of the steel industries in Terni and in my hometown, Hamilton, Ontario.

With regard to my second point, I found at least three significant connections. First, although evolving in patently different economic, political, social, cultural – indeed, national – circumstances, the steel industry came to dominate – became hegemonic – in the lives and politics of both cities. In the case of Terni, the steel company by the same name arrived in the late 19th century (as it did in Hamilton) and by the 1930s was the most powerful employment, economic, and political player in the region. (Again, as with Hamilton.) In Terni’s case, this hegemonic position was, in no small part, aided and abetted by fascist rule, including determining who could work at the steel company and who could not (e.g. no jobs if you were a member or in close association with members of the Communist and Socialist parties). Second, the last three decades tell the tale of the pervasive decline of the steel industry in both cities. In the case of Terni, the seeds of this decline began to flower, ironically, in its hegemonic moment when its *raison d’être* – making steel almost exclusively for governments who were maintaining the industry for employment and political reasons – could no longer be sustained. From the 1950s onward, but picking up steam in the 1990s through the early 2000s, production was slimmed down, divisions were sold off to foreign investors and the city of Terni underwent a painful and largely unsuccessful – for steel workers and the Terni working class at least – forced march to a promised post-industrial renaissance.

The third connection lies with the workers – the working classes of Terni and Hamilton, in both instances, steelworkers, with at various moments larger working-class support. For example, in 1946 and 1981 in Hamilton, and in 2004

in Terni, steelworkers went on strike to protect their jobs and their ways of living. In 1946 Hamilton steelworkers won the day and, I would argue, thereby blocked the way back for employers and governments desirous of industrial relations as they were in the 1920s through the 1930s. In the 1981 strike they managed a draw in what was over the ensuing years to become a bitter and protracted fight between workers and their union and Stelco – a battle that has featured the loss of thousands of jobs, the sell-off of the company to foreign interests, and, ultimately, the closure of the main Hamilton production plant. It is a battle, the aftermath of which has forcibly placed these workers, their families, and the larger working class on the outside of Hamilton's own purported post-industrial renaissance.

As Portelli tells it, the 2004 strike by Terni steelworkers also turned out to be for all the marbles. Sold to German interests in the mid-1990s, it was quickly clear that the new owners felt few, if any, moral obligations to their Italian workforce. Indeed, as with other capitalist firms around the world in this period of rampant restructuring, their interests began and ended at profit making and profit talking. In the momentous 2004 strike – one that Portelli writes took on all the elements of a “national” rather than a “class” strike and that revealed the great strengths and traditions of the Terni working class – the workers held their ground against an all-encompassing closure plan. History repeated itself in 2005 as tragedy when this agreement turned out to be a farce. Terni's owners, and the local political class, recanted on their promise to maintain steel production levels and an ensuing strike was not supported by union and political forces who historically stood by them. It was a long time in the making, and while nothing about the transformation was inevitable or came easily, Terni in its current

configuration is a city with bourgeois ambitions amongst its middle and political classes, but it is also, like most other industrial centres around the world that have experienced deindustrialization, a city with new-found generational divides, a worrisome future for its youth, and a working class searching for meaning from a past that does not accord with the present.

This search for meaning is really what Portelli's book is all about. In the 280 oral history interviews that he draws upon for this book, he writes that he was not looking for the “truth.” He was, rather, listening for how his “narrators” remembered/constructed/reconstructed the past – a process or processes that gave their lives meaning. As an occupational health and safety researcher, I was deeply interested in the countless examples of injury, disease, and death recalled by male steelworkers and female textile workers. I was likewise intrigued by how these events, often vividly retold as if they happened yesterday, were reconciled or made to fit with the sense of pride they felt in working – and surviving – dangerous work.

As I come to the last part of this review, I know full well that I have not done justice to this book. It is a book teaming with momentous historical events – the constitution of Italy as a nation, two World Wars, the role of the Catholic Church and Catholicism more generally, the rise of Fascism, the courage of the resistance fighters who took as their name the “Gramsci Brigade,” the rise and decline of socialist and communist ideas and the parties who congealed those ideas and promises. Among those topics I was especially interested in the narrators' accounts of the rise and the experience of Fascism from the 1920s through the early 1940s. As the narrators' recount, Fascism did not come to Terni from within. Rather, it came from outside. Still, there were those who took up fascist ideas, and,

at times, violent actions. Many years later, some of these supporters of Mussolini's cause spoke openly into Portelli's tape machine about what drew them into this political world. "Fascist sources," Portelli writes, "give three reasons of the founding of Fascism in Terni... the landed feudal aristocracy; the nationalist middle class; the war veterans. The real and supposed mistreatment of war veterans and the real and supposed hostility of Socialists towards them has often been credited as the cause of many veterans' sympathy towards Fascism." (115–116)

How "truthful" are these stories? Again, Portelli is not mainly interested in the truth of these stories. Indeed, as he writes, the inspiration for this book came from the questionable stories of one man, Alfredo Filippini. One such story by Filippini put him in the resistance movement as a member of the Gramsci Brigade. Moreover, Filippini put himself at the founding meeting of the Italian Communist Party alongside his friend, Antonio Gramsci. Well, the 'truth' of the matter was that he was not at this founding meeting and he never could have met Gramsci. He was, however, very active in socialist and communist circles and was arrested a number of times for his activities in these circles. But, how did he get his participation so wrong? According to Portelli, he was expelled from the Communist Party in 1949 and all-but-excluded from Terni political life from that point forward. Hence, when Portelli

interviewed him in 1972 he was "75 years old; he had been ill for a long time and deeply resented his exclusion from political life. As the conversation went on and he became tired and the conscious controls gave way, the epic tones with which he began crumbled and slipped into fantasy, as though the weariness of age eroded the controls of rationality and memory, and gave way to a daydream of desires buried in his subconscious." (168)

Memory, then, is charged. In 2014 Terni steelworkers, what was left of them, were once again forced to strike when their employer announced plans "to cut 500 jobs, the turning off of one furnace, the cancellation of company contracts. ... Once again they blocked the highway and, just like 10 years before ... invaded the AST office building and forced the CEO Lucia Morselli to escape under police protection." (368) One of the strikers told Portelli: "They say that workers today are discouraged, demoralized, and yet that day the whole town was in flames, a huge square full of people, who were no longer willing to delegate decisions to the unions, to the institutions. You're asking me about memories, feelings. Well, this was it: the feeling that all our work was not in vain, that the baton had been passed on to a younger working class that still carried on the tradition of a hundred years of working class struggle in Terni." (369)

Portelli's last words: "This history isn't finished yet."

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