

PREFACE

When I sat down to write these memoirs several years ago, I asked myself this question: what aspects of my personal experience as an Italianist might be of interest to people whose working lives do not revolve around Italy and Italian studies? Concisely put, I concluded that what mattered in my own story as a specialist in Italian studies were the people I met over many decades in Italy and the ideas that these people generated in response to some of the problems of modern civilization; problems such as the appeals of totalitarianism, the struggle between Fascism and anti-Fascism, the relationship between socialism and democracy. These are the issues that have engaged me from the beginning of my work in the 1950s and remain with me today; they are what I have mainly written about and what I hope and believe will engage readers for whom these kinds of questions resonate.

For centuries Italy has exerted her charms on travelers looking for aesthetic gratification and intellectual stimulation. I place high value on this aspect of Italian civilization, and in fact began my Italian graduate studies at Columbia University in 1953 strongly influenced by what scholars such as the Renaissance art historian Bernard Berenson and the noted scholar of Renaissance humanism, Paul Oskar Kristeller had said about Italy's artistic and humanistic culture. Their interpretations of Italian humanism underlie my understanding of this key intellectual current in the history of early modern Europe.

But because of my particular bent and proclivities, the writings of another Renaissance scholar was more germane to the direction that my work took in the 1950s, and was indirectly responsible for giving my memoir the shape that it has taken. I'm speaking of Eugenio Garin, who introduced me to an historically and sociologically based approach to the Renaissance that turned out to be relevant to almost everything I've been able to accomplish over the past almost six decades. His first essays on the Italian Renaissance (1941) and several of the books he published in the 1950s, especially his work on Italian humanism (1952), were fundamental to my own development. Partly because of his writings, subjects that might have otherwise seemed remote to me took on an immediacy and vividness that have stayed with me to this day. There were other writers and thinkers who encouraged me to move in the direction I did. These

ranged from the Italian Marxist Carlo Salinari to the American literary critic and historian Maxwell Geismar. But it was Garin who gave me the initial impetus to undertake the kind of studies that I have done over the past five decades.

The 1950s, it should be remembered, was the heyday of the New Criticism as theorized by such figures as I.A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks. I instinctively rejected their arguments concerning the primacy of aesthetic and stylistic questions in the study of literary texts. Yet without the example of Garin, who made a strong case for relating Italian humanism to real social conditions and political issues in Renaissance Italy, I might have lacked the confidence to do the kind of work I have in fact done; work, that is, inspired by a belief that literature and history are intimately connected to each other by bonds of “necessary reciprocity”, as Gramsci phrases it, innumerable threads of continuity and interdependence.

Thus, early on in my Italian studies I found myself moving away from the aesthetic side of things toward an encounter with a country and a people whose destiny had been marked indelibly by political questions of vast import, one of which was the struggle between Fascism and anti-Fascism. Fascism, after all, and its offshoot, anti-Fascist resistance, were both born in Italy. They were part of a dialectical unity that I felt was a subject worthy of a lifetime of study. I came gradually to understand why Italians who resisted the appeals of Fascism produced such a rich harvest of ideas in the realms of literary criticism and in that of political theory and practice.

My study of the literary, political and historical writings of Italian anti-Fascists strengthened my own inclination to think of socialism and democracy as inseparably interrelated and interdependent. This conviction is reflected in most of the work I have produced since the 1960s, beginning with my studies of the Florentine novelist Vasco Pratolini and of the Italian anti-Fascist press, which appeared respectively in 1965 and 1968, up to my most recent books on the poet Giacomo Leopardi and on Antonio Gramsci, published in 2012 and 2014. It can be seen as well in all four parts of these memoirs, which I have organized as follows.

In Part One much of what I have to say about Pratolini (1913-1991), who was the subject of my doctoral dissertation, revolved around his attraction to and then gradual repudiation of Fascist ideology. Because of my own struggle to achieve an independent and critical attitude toward another political phenomenon of the twentieth century, namely Soviet communism, I was able to identify with and understand this aspect of his ideological formation.

Part Two deals mainly with the years I devoted in the 1970s to the life and thought of one of modern Italy’s greatest revolutionaries, the jurist Silvio Trentin (1885-1944), who expanded my understanding of modern political thought well beyond the bounds of conventional liberal theory to embrace the idea of council democracy, which he viewed as the cornerstone of a decentralized and federated socialist society. My friendships with Trentin’s three children – Giorgio, a specialist in the art of engraving,

Bruno, a renowned labor leader, and Franca, a French professor – were among the most significant of my life in Italian studies. I describe various facets of these friendships in chapters seven to nine.

Part Three comes to grips with the varieties of socialist experience as I understood them mainly in the 1980s. It was at this time that I tried to reconcile two different aspects of my personality and way of seeing the world, one deeply influenced by classical liberal principles, which I assimilated from my own family background and from the four years I attended Adelphi College in the second half of the 1940s, the other formed by my early fascination with what many people called “the Soviet experiment”. The key figure around whose life my socialist studies revolved in the 1980s and beyond was the Marxist revolutionary Antonio Gramsci, to whom I have devoted many years of study and writing. But my most important and personally most challenging experience in the 1980s was the eight years that I devoted to a journal I co-founded in 1983 whose title, *Socialism and Democracy*, as I explain in chapter thirteen, I owed primarily to my Italian sources.

Finally, Part Four diverges somewhat from the Italian emphasis of Parts One to Three, inasmuch as, after my retirement from CUNY in 1992, I immersed myself in French studies, and after the turn of the new century I began six years of research and writing on the Trinidadian political thinker C.L.R. James. But in the last chapter of my memoir I return to Italian studies. My reading and interpretation of Leopardi draws on my previous work on Italian literature and politics, inasmuch as I chose to see the poet as the embodiment of a longing for human connection and community that lies at the core of the socialist project.

Since my early twenties, I have certainly felt this longing, and have shared in the small victories and bitter frustrations of America’s embattled socialist and radical movements. I was just finishing my college years in 1950 when politics in the United States fell under the anti-communist spell cast by Senator Joe McCarthy, whose witch hunting had a ruinous effect on thousands of American progressives and leftists, including several of my friends and relatives who were marked as subversive and therefore became unemployable when their names appeared in the booklet *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, which was published in June 1950. One of its victims, the actress Jean Muir, was married at the time to my cousin Henry Jaffe. Together with many others I sprang instinctively to the defense of McCarthy’s victims. The vilification to which they were subjected added fuel to my still inchoate leftwing leanings. I’ll never forget the painful ordeal of five or six of the New York City public school teachers whom I got to know in Greenwich Village, at the height of the McCarthy-induced anti-communist hysteria in the early 1950s, who lost their jobs when they refused to sign the oath of loyalty demanded by the New York City Board of Education. In early March of 1952, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld, in a 6 to 3 decision, a New York State statute called the Feinberg Law that prohibited “anyone who called

for the overthrow of the government” from teaching. Jobs were lost, careers were ruined, and the honor and rigor of American liberalism were severely damaged.

My support of McCarthy’s victims was not motivated solely by altruistic sentiments. Although in 1950-1951 I had not yet decided to enter the academic profession, I did realize that any pretensions I might have concerning my intellectual honesty would have to draw on the kind of principled stand taken by some of my friends who lost their jobs rather than bend to a law they believed to be unjust. Fortunately for me, I never actually had to deal with anything comparable to the Feinberg Law, but it was clear to me in 1950 that, no matter what career path I might choose, I would inevitably find myself in situations comparable to the one that my friends faced in the early 1950s. In other words, as a far from fully developed young man after my graduation from Adelphi College in 1950, I needed models of behavior that I could depend on in times of uncertainty. I was not by nature a courageous person and I needed examples to follow in moments of doubt that I knew were sure to come. This was the far from altruistic reason why I identified myself so closely with teachers who refused to take the loyalty oath demanded by the New York City Board of Education.

The anti-Communist zealotry of the 1950s evolved in the 1960s into the still more virulent official anti-Communism that accompanied the United States’s intervention in the Viet Nam war, which precipitated one of the most powerful resistance movements in American history. I was teaching at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio at the time, and was able to make a small contribution to the work of the antiwar Teach-in Committee in Cleveland in the 1960s. The horrors of the Viet Nam war pushed me further to the left: along with many others, I began to wonder whether it was still possible for the antiwar movement to achieve its goal without struggling for fundamental changes in the U.S. economic and political system.

Partly as a result of these experiences, in the 1960s I developed an interest in Trotskyism. Subsequently, a decade later, after some intense readings and discussions with friends in Cleveland and New York City, I joined the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party and began attending meetings of my branch. My five years (1975-1980) in the SWP proved to me that I had neither the temperament nor the kind of rock-solid convictions required for membership in a political party that demands adherence to a set of ideological principles. I was never meant to be a doctrinaire socialist or communist. Nevertheless, throughout my adult life, as I have just said, I remained very closely tied, emotionally and politically, to the world socialist and communist movements. This is one of the questions that I’ll be discussing throughout this book, for it underlies a great deal of what I’ve done and written over more than five decades.

The 1980s were a crucial period in my life as a non-sectarian man of the Left. In 1983 I began eight years of work for a research group that I

co-founded with the sociologist Michael E. Brown, the Research Group on Socialism and Democracy (RGSD), which in 1985 began publishing a bi-annual journal, *Socialism and Democracy*. Mike and I shared editorial responsibilities with a group of like-minded scholars and writers, most of whom earned their livings in the academy, as did Mike and I. We were both professors at Queens College. In chapter thirteen I provide a rather detailed account of how this project developed while I was co-editor of our journal. For now, suffice it to say that my contribution to the Group was inspired in great part by my study of the socialist components of the Italian anti-Fascist movement. This is one of the ways in which my American and Italian experiences have blended to form a fundamental part of my life.

Another aspect of my Italian experiences that proved to be of decisive importance not only to me but also to my wife Lucy hinged on our one year's residence in Bologna from August 1981 to July 1982 when I served as director of a six-college Study Abroad consortium administered by the University of Indiana. As I explain in chapter ten, the principles of cooperativism that we were able to observe and study on a daily basis in Bologna became an integral part of the business philosophy of a home care agency which Lucy founded in 1985 that she named COHME, standing for Concerned Home Managers for the Elderly. From its inception, I gave this agency my full and unqualified support, because I felt that it represented the most socially progressive type of enterprise possible within the framework of an economic system dominated by corporate capitalism. My positive view of cooperativism was pragmatic as well as idealistic. From what I could learn about the way in which cooperativism functioned in an Italian context, not only in Bologna but in Italy as a whole, I saw no insuperable reason why it could not thrive in my own country as well, despite the differences in political culture between Italy and the United States. Bologna provided an especially active and progressive example of the ways in which a medium-sized urban metropolis of about 400,000 people went about integrating the principles of cooperativism into the social and economic life of its citizens.

I was aware that Bolognese cooperativism formed part of a political culture that had been nourished by a specific set of historical circumstances that allowed socialist progressivism and traditional liberalism to co-exist more or less successfully. For this reason, during our year's stay in Bologna, while relishing the chance we had to observe cooperativism in action, I became more acutely aware than ever of the anomalies and contradictions of what I call my "ecumenical" attitude toward different kinds of socialist polities in the contemporary world. These included not only the social democratic countries of Western Europe but also the tightly regulated one party system that prevailed in the Soviet Union and its satellites in Eastern Europe, as well as in Cuba and Viet Nam. Since this is an issue that comes up frequently in my memoirs, let me take the present moment to clarify at least one aspect of the problem I'm talking about, namely my attitude toward liberalism.

Liberalism has two rather different connotations in the modern world. One – frequently called neo-liberalism to separate it from its older radical forebear in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – refers to a political philosophy that elevates the free market to a privileged position in the scale of human affairs. According to neo-liberalism, the State, which has traditionally been understood to be the protector and advocate of the public interest, becomes virtually the enemy of a free society, a kind of bugaboo used by its propagandists to frighten and confuse people, thereby facilitating a rightwing political agenda. I see this brand of liberalism as anti-democratic in that it operates according to principles that have heightened the risks that have always been endemic to the capitalist system and that affect the lives of ordinary people much more profoundly than they do those of the corporate and finance elite.

This brings me to a consideration of the other meaning of liberalism that has had an enduring influence on how I see the world. It is a meaning to which I do subscribe; it involves the notion that freedom of thought and expression, together with freedom of association, are the bedrocks of a modern democracy worthy of the name. I have been especially concerned with how this type of liberalism can be reconciled with socialism. I have never had any difficulty in seeing a necessary interdependent relationship between socialism and democracy, but I have had serious difficulty reconciling socialist and liberal conceptions of society. Are liberalism and socialism mutually exclusive, or can they be reconciled with each other in such a way as to win the approval of people who identify themselves with both schools of thought?

I first began to think seriously about these and other related issues as an undergraduate student. I learned at that time that socialism in all of its many varieties requires a high degree of economic planning and coordination, and a role for government in the lives of the citizenry far greater and more multiform than in a capitalist or predominantly capitalist system. It also depends on the assumption that human beings are in fact as well as in theory capable of cooperative relationships with each other; that the social good must be protected against incursions by those who want to maintain private control over the means of production and exchange. Socialism is the political expression of a movement that originated in the rise of heavy industry and advanced technology and that aims to bring these two manifestations of modernity under social control.

My four years at Adelphi College from 1946 to 1950, which I attended on the G.I. Bill after fourteen months in the United States Navy, added heft to the liberal views I had assimilated as a member of an affluent Jewish-American family. Three of my English instructors at Adelphi, Jim Murray, Bill Curry, and Dick Bodtke, were believers in the idea that the life of the mind depended on approaching the world from a flexible, open-minded point of view. In the field of American studies, which I was exposed to in courses taught by all three instructors, whether it was a novel by Hawthorne, a treatise by John Dewey, a poem by Emily Dickinson, or

a play by Eugene O'Neill, the task of the student was to probe what these writers and thinkers had to say in a spirit of unfettered critical inquiry. I absorbed the idea that there was nothing to be gained from insisting on a single reading, a single interpretation of a literary text. Appreciating diversity was the key to the life of the mind.

As a college student, and in the following decades, I could not deny the anti-liberal nature of Soviet-style socialism not only under the rule of Joseph Stalin (1926-1953) but also in subsequent eras even when, as under the administration of Nikita Khrushchev (1953-1964), reforms were introduced and efforts were made to open up the country to currents of thought other than that of the ruling version of dialectical materialism. Yet at the same time – and this is the nub of the question that I have long debated with myself as much as with others – even in my earliest critical reactions to the Soviet political system, I never agreed with the kind of sweeping repudiation of everything Soviet that characterized the dominant trend of liberal thought in the United States, particularly after the beginning of the Cold War and the years of McCarthyism. This will become evident in an especially clear manner in what I have to say in chapter fifteen about the anti-Communist politics of a man whom I greatly admire, and to whom I devoted six years of study: C.L.R. James.

My understanding of Italian political history in the twentieth century led me to think of the world communist movement in a way that differs from the usual lockstep anti-communism of most liberals in the United States. When I began to learn about the crucial role played by the Italian Communist Party in the struggle against Fascism, and gradually assimilated the thought of Antonio Gramsci and other leading figures of Italian communism, I became more open than I might have otherwise been to the contributions made by communist movements in many different corners of the globe – from South Africa to Spain, from Central America to Southeast Asia – to popular liberatory struggles. I put behind me the simplistic formulations used to dismiss communism as being utterly alien to democratic values. This does not mean that I was indifferent to the arguments advanced by anti-communists, especially those of militant democratic socialists such as Michael Harrington. It meant instead that I refused to go along with facile generalizations about the equivalence of communism and fascism, and with the blurring of what I took to be significant distinctions and differences between the ruling ideas of Communist and Fascist regimes.

Before launching into my main narrative, let me review here the first stage of my Italian studies, just prior to my ten months of research in Florence and Rome in 1956.

In the fall of 1953, with several years of reading Italian novels in the original and a Masters from Columbia University in English as my certificates of entry, I was admitted to the Ph.D. Program in Italian at Columbia.

My lack of a strong background in Italian studies up to that point put me at a disadvantage in relation to most of the other students enrolled in the Program. But I decided to take the gamble, and the Italian Department seemed glad to have me.

In mid-October of 1955, after two years of very hard work in courses for which I was not very well prepared, I was thrilled to get a phone call from a young professor of Italian at Columbia University, Luciano Rebay, telling me that I had passed the qualifying written exam required for a doctorate in Italian. I immediately began thinking about possible dissertation topics. By December, I made my decision: I wanted to work on a contemporary Florentine novelist, Vasco Pratolini. There was little serious scholarship on him in English, which boosted my hope that I could add something new to the field of modern Italian studies.

I learned of Pratolini through one of his early novels, *Il Quartiere* (translated into English with the title *Naked Streets*), which I read quite by accident after seeing it on a table at the S.F. Vanni bookstore on West 12th Street in Manhattan. The novel touched me, for reasons that I'll describe further on. This was in the fall of 1953, when I began my doctoral studies at Columbia. The proprietor of the bookstore, Signor Andrea Ragusa, and one of his two daughters, Olga, turned out to be extremely important people in my life. I'll save what I have to say about Olga for later chapters, but a few words about her father are in order here.

Signor Ragusa was a cantankerous, almost perversely engaging man who introduced me to some of the deep questions concerning Italian political and cultural history. To say that he was critically oriented in his attitude toward his native country would be a gross understatement. He held nothing back from his criticisms of Italian backwardness, inefficiency, unreliability, almost every trait one can think of that suggested a degraded state of affairs. Rarely, he would make a complimentary remark about a particular Italian writer or politician, but no sooner had he given himself permission to do so than he was off, in his inimitable way, on another of his censorious discourses. I sometimes wondered whether he was trying to talk me out of pursuing Italian studies; he was that vehement and unrelenting in what he had to say about "beautiful, sunny Italy". I was not turned away from my chosen path by what he had to say. I could see that he was critical and obstinate by nature, and his opinions had to be taken, not with a grain of salt, but at least with due caution. His was not the whole story, of that I was convinced. Yet precisely because he was so stubbornly opinionated and ready to air his views to anyone willing to listen, Signor Ragusa was an important figure to budding young Italianists like myself who were striving in the postwar years to understand the differences and relations between Italy and the United States.

Why Pratolini? I'll try briefly to explain the qualities of *Il Quartiere* that prompted me to look more deeply into its author's life and work.

A group of adolescent boys and girls on the streets of Florence in the 1930s: these were the main characters of the novel. But they were not al-

ways the streets familiar to tourists and visiting scholars. These were not the delicate, refined faces of Florentine youth depicted by Botticelli, or the larger-than-life figures sculpted by Michelangelo. They are ordinary boys and girls belonging mainly to the lumpen proletariat, most of whom grow up in the Santa Croce neighborhood, near the famous Church of that name. But they are only dimly aware of this Church as the resting place of such figures as Leonardo Bruni, Michelangelo, Machiavelli, and Galileo. Ranging in age from sixteen to eighteen, with very little schooling, they form a self-protective group of friends, not bent on crime, usually, but involved in escapades and love affairs that are beyond their years. From within this group of adolescent youth, Pratolini had managed to extract something of their humanity that caught me up immediately. The language he used for his short novel was, I was later to learn, drenched in the rhythms and sounds of the Italian spoken in Florence by ordinary people, sounds that I picked up during my stay in the city and remember fondly.

The novel was my introduction to the real Italy, we might say, as opposed to the official Italy of manuals and guidebooks, the Italy of great art and music that has been passed down through the centuries. It was one obscure corner of what many Italians called *L'Italia reale*, real Italy, as opposed to *L'Italia legale*, legal or official Italy. The distinction proved to be a significant one. The world of high culture is a closed book to the adolescent kids who form the social stratum that Pratolini depicts, lovingly, but also with more than a light touch of realism, and a bit of sad resignation. One of the stories narrated in the novel is of a boy named Gino who cannot be saved from his self-destructive ways, and who becomes enmeshed in a crime that leads to his death. Others are about girls who choose the wrong man to become involved with. In effect, the book is an exercise in what one critic called "minor naturalism", a deft handling of themes and problems that, on a far larger scale, and with much greater detail, occupied the attention of writers such as Emile Zola. I knew that Pratolini was a Florentine himself, and had based his story on his own experiences growing up in the Santa Croce quarter, on Via dei Magazzini, the street whose name was the title of an earlier, largely autobiographical work by Pratolini, published in 1942. Later on in my studies I learned that Pratolini's "minor naturalism" had a specific literary source: it was the work of a little known French novelist, Charles-Louis Philippe (1874-1909), one of whose stories, *Bubu de Montparnasse*, Pratolini translated into Italian in the 1940s.

But there was more to what attracted me to Pratolini than the fragmentary impressions I've mentioned. First of all, I had been told that Pratolini was a communist, not only a party loyalist but someone who had assimilated communist values and infused them into his writing. This appealed to me, since, although I was not a card-carrying communist myself, I strongly identified myself with some of the representative figures of Italian Communism. What struck me with great force was the solidarity of the boys and girls of Santa Croce, their sense of mutual respect and friendship, their commitment to the small community they created within

the larger city surrounding them, from which most of them felt remote and alienated. The distance between them and the city's decision-makers grows wider by the day, especially as the period depicted in the novel is the 1930s, when a powerful group of autocratic local officials ruled in concert with the Fascist government elite.

As I was to find out later in my studies, in his youth Pratolini was an enthusiastic supporter of the Fascist regime, and remained so until the late 1930s, when he began to become critical of the government's policies regarding art, literature, and culture. But this side of his life was completely unknown to me in 1953, and remained so until a few weeks after my arrival in Florence, when I was compelled, almost against my will, to deal with it, and reconcile it with the democratic vision that seemed to inhere in his writing as a novelist. In a sense, Pratolini forced me to confront my own politics with a fresh eye. He unwittingly posed for me problems that are inherent in all new research, which has a way of revealing aspects of reality that the researcher had not counted on when undertaking a new research project.

I was at least somewhat aware that what I found in the writings of Vasco Pratolini went far beyond his literary originality. Basically I found a social world in *Il Quartiere* that gave me a feeling of vital connection between human beings that I had never felt in my own life. It was the same kind of human connections that Pratolini evokes in the novel that followed *Il Quartiere* in 1947, *Cronache di poveri amanti* (*A Tale of Poor Lovers*). As a boy, I was acutely sensitive to what I perceived as injustices in my home and community. It was natural for me, therefore, to be drawn to a writer whose sensibilities struck me as similar to my own.

This same theme was what attracted me to the early fictions of Ignazio Silone, *Fontamara* and *Bread and Wine*, both published in the 1930s. These novels were my introduction to an aspect of Italian history and society that I wanted to know more about, for political and moral reasons as much as literary ones. I was not the type of person who approaches and evaluates a literary work purely on the basis of its aesthetic qualities. This is where I encountered some thorny methodological problems. What were the boundaries and aims of literary research? Where did my loyalties lie, as a researcher and not only as a man of the Left, and what effect would my methodological concerns and scruples have on what I was able to see and integrate into my writing? This question presented itself to me from the outset of my studies. Suffice it to say here that it occupied a much larger portion of my consciousness than I had expected when I left the United States for Italy in early February of 1956. I was on the Left, but I was not attached to any particular party or ideology, and I was willing to consider the possibility that the assumptions I brought with me to my Italian studies might turn out to be incorrect, misguided, or, even worse, inimical to the fundamental methods and aims of scholarly research. Dealing with this set of problems, too, was an integral part of my education in Italy.

Six weeks before leaving the United States, I wrote a long, carefully worded letter to Pratolini, who was living in Rome at the time with his wife

Cecilia. My letter explained what I have just said about how and when I discovered him in 1953, but also included some of the questions I wanted to discuss with him, along with the request that we meet, no later than the summer of 1956, which would give me time to complete my preliminary study in Florence. I was already fairly well informed about his experiences during and after World War II, but knew little about his earlier years. He was born in 1913, so that his adolescence and youth coincided with the rise and consolidation of the Fascist regime. I received a cordial response from Pratolini, who encouraged me to contact him after my arrival in Italy.

With this letter in hand, I felt ready for my Italian adventure, several key aspects of which I'll describe in chapters one and two.