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## Book Review

*The Nonviolent Revolution: The Italian who Embraced Gandhi's Satyagraha to Oppose Fascism and War, An Intellectual Biography of Aldo Capitini*, by Rocco Altieri (2008)  
Translated by Gerry Blaylock. Madurai, India: Vijayaa Press

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## **THE NONVIOLENT REVOLUTION: THE ITALIAN WHO EMBRACED GANDHI'S SATYAGRAHA TO OPPOSE FACISM AND WAR, AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY OF ALDO CAPITINI**

Aldo Capitini (1899-1968) was an Italian scholar and advocate for nonviolence who published over 40 books and numerous essays, letters, pamphlets, poems and articles on various subjects: religion, nonviolence, antifascism, philosophy, education, and historiography. Capitini founded the Center for Nonviolence in Perugia; promoted the Vegetarian Society, the East-West Conferences, the still active Nonviolent Movement for Peace, and the first Italian Peace March from Perugia to Assisi on 24th September 1961 from which the Italian Consultation for Peace was founded. This champion of non-violence is not very well known outside Italy because his books have not been translated into English.

This book by Rocco Altieri, a lecturer on non-violence at the Peace Studies Program at the University of Pisa, provides a valuable English introduction to Capitini's thought. Capitini was active in organizing antifascist groups in many different parts of Italy. He was twice sent to prison for opposing fascism and for his advocacy of independent religious life. In contrast to the daily glorification of violence and of war under fascist rule, which went unopposed by many intellectuals and Catholics, he took from Gandhi the idea of nonviolent opposition based on non-collaboration; from St. Francis of Assisi, the return to the original Christian values; and from modern thinking, that which he called the most serene application of the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Capitini was opposed to the violence of the status quo. He tried to instil Gandhian principles in

the Machiavellian world of Italy where politicians opposed evil with force. Capitini argued that spiritual principles point to the higher morality of non-killing. Faith and politics became linked together as individuals commit to non-violence and societies embrace the principles of love in action.

The strength of nonviolence lies in the possibility it gives, to the few or the many, to withdraw their consent and support from an oppressive system. Non-cooperation gives strength to conscience which, faced with injustice, professes the superiority of its own moral law. It is not a cowardly choice that allows you to escape from the consequences of violence, for it requires you to testify your fidelity to the principle of non-mendacity and non-killing, even to the sacrifice of your own life. (p. 47)

Nonviolence provides an individual a set of principles upon which to base moral beliefs and in the political realm a set of strategies based upon non-cooperation that challenges authoritarian rule. Capitini looked to a merger of religious and political values to create a better society. Similar to Tolstoy, Capitini advocated a new religious life based upon a critical reading of those sections of the New Testament that promoted pacifism. Nonviolence is the infinite openness of the soul. It is cosmic love that embraces both humanity and in the Franciscan spirit all of nature. Capitini denounces the sharp divergence between the non-violent principles found in the Sermon on the Mount and the papal encyclicals. In 1956 one of his books, *Open Religion*, was condemned by the Church and put on the Index (a list of books Catholics were not supposed to read).

Liberalism for Capitini became a religious and spiritual pursuit of freedom that opposed the dogma both of the church and the fascist state. Faced with the injustices of capitalism, a deep spiritual and political transformation needs to take place. Education can help create a moral conscience that promotes a decentralized socialism based upon self government and collaboration among the oppressed that leads to a fairer sharing of the world's resources. "Jesus is not a king, but a brother who stands by our side" (p. 95). Education has the responsibility of developing this new political consciousness based upon ethical and religious goals.

Capitini opposed world government. He saw that non-violence is a third way between capitalism and communism. He advocated for a more active form of democracy and argued for the establishment of Social Orientation Centers where citizens could discuss their common problems and advocate for non-violent solutions. Such centers would be "the fortresses of non-violence and the catacombs, places where democratic, anti-despotic solidarity is formed" (p. 67). In these centers people can experience the power of grassroots democracy. Without a new public space, people's assemblies built upon Social Orientation Centers, the state risks falling into a new oligarchy. Bottom up reform, not top down reform, gives power to local citizens and authorities. In this way Capitini's non-violent strategies resemble those of Danilo Dolci (1924-1997), another Italian adherent to non-violence who worked among the peasants in Sicily and promoted community development in order to counter the oppression of the state, the church and the mafia. Like Dolci, Capitini advocated for fasting and other forms of civil disobedience. He saw that violent revolutions (the Bolsheviks in Russia, etc.) end in wickedness that leads to despotism of a leader, party, or army:

If I use violence against violence, violence continues to reign in this world, and so

humanity loses the hope of freedom. If I take revenge, another will take his revenge. We have to open up the tools of violence, of revenge, of justice, remembering that there we have a person whom we want to be united with us for eternity. And we want that person to find good within, since good is an all of us if we look for it. (p.83)

People can look to each other to find power and not hand over their authority to unjust rulers. Individuals need to commit themselves to a Gandhian search for truth not in a library but in the communities and neighbourhoods they inhabit. Capitini emphasized that conflict is not to be avoided but rather stirred up in order to change unjust situations. In every person there is always the capacity for overcoming wrong and committing to the truth. There is good and evil in each of us.

This small, one hundred and eighty page book provides an intellectual biography of Aldo Capitini. *The Nonviolent Revolution* could use a bibliography of Capitini's published works, so they could become more accessible to the reader who would like to pursue his thoughts in greater depth. It also could use a more concise chronology of Capitini's life. As it is currently written profound philosophic statements surround events in a way that is unclear about where Capitini is located. At some point the reader is aware that Capitini is participating in the anti-nuclear movement in the nineteen sixties. At other point Capitini is in jail in fascist Italy, but the events in his life are not clearly tied to the developments of his thinking. This valuable text also lacks an index. Aside from these shortcomings, this is an important book because it gives the readers access to one of the past century's more dynamic non-violent thinkers.

The book can be ordered from the International Gandhian Institute for Nonviolence and Peace (IGINP), CSC, Majagram, Kadavur, Madurai—65014, TN, India. Cost is \$10.