



THE CITIZEN'S VOICE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICS AND LITERATURE

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And History Continues

Elsa Morante's *History* may be read as a political novel in every sense of the term. It tells the history of the twentieth century and while doing so suggests invaluable insights on the politics of that century. This is not an obvious point for we usually tell political history differently. We write it from the perspective of the political leaders and events that shaped it. The telling of history has always accompanied its makers, whether explicitly – when historians have served as writers of annals and myths – or implicitly – when they did so unconsciously as “fellow travelers.” Even when historians left the courts of the kings and rulers who were their patrons, and had to earn their living by selling their trade to the general public, they never abandoned the tendency, developed over many years of patron–client relations, to place political leaders at the center stage of political history.

Therefore, in a book telling the history of the twentieth century we usually expect to find such hooligans as Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini starring in the narrative. Historians are forever preoccupied with the lives of these

figures, the social, economic, and political conditions that brought them to power, the political regimes they constructed, the states and lives they destroyed, and the international moves they initiated.

Elsa Morante writes not the history of the hooligans but of hooliganism. This may have something to do with her own life. She was born in Rome in 1918 as the daughter of a Sicilian father and Emilian mother. Her formal education was incomplete, and she left home at the age of eighteen. She became involved in Italy's literary circles where she met and married the writer Alberto Moravia. During World War II they lived the life of refugees in the countryside near Cassino. Her first novel, *House of Liars*, was published in 1948, her next novel, *Arturo's Island*, nearly a decade later, and *History* in 1974. She died in Rome in November 1985.

History is the political history of the mid-twentieth century written from the unique perspective of a woman who, unlike many historians, is not fascinated by the leaders who shaped the events. From the point of view of the protagonist Ida Ramundo, it really does not matter whether the leader presently dominating the scene is called Hitler, Stalin, or Mussolini. Ida is a woman who tries to survive, and as we are studying political history by focusing on her private sphere, it takes a different turn. Ida's age, we learn, was thirty-seven, and she certainly made no effort to seem younger. Her rather undernourished body, the withered bosom, the lower part awkwardly fattened, was more or less covered by an old woman's brown overcoat, with a worn fur collar and a grayish lining whose tattered edges could be seen hanging from the cuffs of the sleeves. She was a teacher born to a Jewish mother who, due to an animal-like foresight, had her baptized. She is the mother of Nino, born in 1925 to a father who died of "the disease of our time"¹ – cancer, and of Useppe born in 1941 as a result of Ida's rape by a Nazi soldier.

In one of the first pages of the book we learn of Ida's nightmare dreams complementing her daytime life "with pauses and recurrences, to the end, entwining around her days more like a parasite or prison-guard than a companion."² In one of these dreams, she saw herself running in a place gloomy with soot or with smoke (factory, or city, or slum), clutching to her bosom a little doll, naked and a vermilion color, as if it had been dipped in red paint. This image may be seen as the motto of the entire novel. *History* is the history of the years 1941 to 1947, the most horrifying and

disgusting years in the history of humankind, from the perspective of an undernourished woman holding her baby, who will die at the age of six, and trying to survive with him. When seen from this perspective, the historical events differ from their presentation in common historical narratives in three ways: they lose their uniqueness, their glory fades, and any hope that could be pinned on them is lost. For the image of the mother holding a baby in her arms, hopelessly trying to survive, is repeated again and again in history.

History thus provides us with major insights on twentieth-century history. It tells that history in total detachment from notions stressing its messianic nature. It reminds us that we live in history, not in an a-historical era in which people and events are seen in a unique, glorious, and hopeful light. All the grand ideologies coming to power in the twentieth century – communism, fascism, and no less so industrial capitalism, the ideology cherishing the modern industrial state – attributed a grand design to history. They endowed leaders with vision, pictured events as exceeding their time and place, and added a purpose – mostly a utopian one – to the historical process. Individuals were seen as components in the grand design, and events were explained accordingly. The state was no longer the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century construct intended to provide its citizens with security but a sacred entity. In this novel, however, nothing of that sacredness remains. At the beginning of each chapter, the historical events of the era are presented in the dry, schematic language in which they appear in history textbooks. Yet, to the readers of this novel, influenced by the above perspective, the events seem very different:

“The latest scientific discoveries concerning the structure of matter mark the beginning of the atomic century,”³ writes Morante in the dry language in which Ida, the schoolteacher, probably taught these events in the classroom. But she does not allow us to gloat over the discoveries of the scientific age, which fascinated the twentieth century, as we are also aware that nothing new will happen in the world as a result. Like all centuries and millennia that have preceded it, to Elsa Morante and her character “the twentieth century also observes the well-known, immobile principle of historical dynamics: power to some, servitude to others.”⁴ When history is taught by focusing on the holders of power – the kings, the noblemen, and the dictators – it may appear to be rather glorious. Even the history of the great clash between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat may seem festive. But to Ida it does not matter

much what force will win in any battle of history, not even in the battle of the proletariat she belongs to, because even when the proletariat wins, she will find herself with her child in search of rescue.

Therefore, all the historical writings declaring the victory of one power over another in this book turn into nonsense. We are reminded of the moments of glory in the century which lose their glory simply because they are presented not from the perspective of the victors, or their fellow travelers, but from that of a woman who is conscious of the fact that the gap between those destined to power and those to servitude never closes. In this book, the founding of the Comintern in Moscow in 1919 with the pretension of summoning all of the world's proletariat, regardless of race, language, or nationality, to the common goal of revolutionary unity, amid the massacres, epidemics, and poverty of the civil war simply seems crazy. Mao Tse-tung's long march in which he led 130,000 men of his Red Army across 7,500 miles of Chinese land to elude the preponderant forces of the nationalist government becomes less glorious than it is depicted in most history books once we identify not only with the 30,000 who survived the march, but also with the 100,000 who did not.

The world leaders seem so different in this book than they do in the tales and pictures inspired by their great deeds. To Ida, Benito Mussolini is nothing other than a mediocre opportunist, a combination of all the worst flotsam of Italy. His invasion of Abyssinia, which promoted Italy from a kingdom to an empire, leaves little impression on her; it seems as remote an event as the Punic wars. In the Italian classroom where she taught, at the center of the wall, just above her desk, next to the Crucifix, there were enlarged framed photographs of the new King-Emperor. In the tradition of King-Emperors, Mussolini is portrayed on the wall as a heroic figure, but Ida remains unimpressed, for "in reality, with the exaggerated jut of the chin, the artificially clenched jaws, and the mechanical dilation of eye-sockets and pupils, it resembled more a vaudeville clown playing a sergeant scaring recruits."⁵ As we shall see later, the horrors of Nazism are treated in this book very seriously, but this does not make Hitler less of a failure and serf, sick with a vindictive sense of inferiority.

Even the victory over the forces of evil is not drawn in other colors than those by which the victims of history view it. The end of World War I is presented here in the form of seventy people seated at the peace table, to

re-divide the world among them and to draw the new map of Europe. After dragging us for hundreds of pages through the horrors of World War II, Elsa Morante, in contrast, say, to Time-Life photos or Hollywood films, gives us no respite even when victory over Nazism has been finally reached. We are not allowed to treat it in apocalyptic terms because, despite the various “summit meetings” in which the great personalities of the age are busy re-establishing some kind of appropriate order, not much can change for Ida:

The landowners still held the land, the industrialists the machinery and the factories, the officers their ranks, the bishops their dioceses. And the rich were fed at the expense of the poor, who then aimed, in their turn, at taking the place of the rich, according to the general rule.⁶

This novel provides us with a rare opportunity to learn about the events neither from the perspective of the rich nor of the poor. Ida, says the author, belonged to a third species that lives and dies and gives no news of itself, except at times, perhaps, in the crime reports. One of the powerful scenes in the book concerns Ida’s mother, Nora, whose death did not even make the crime reports. In the summer of 1938, amidst official anti-Semitic propaganda, word is spread of an imminent census of all the Jews of Italy. All imaginable forms of near and future persecutions become confused in her mind, and she decides to emigrate. The story of Jewish emigration to Palestine in the 1930s has often been told in heroic terms inspired by the rhetoric of the Jewish national movement – Zionism – but never had it been told from the perspective of a sixty-eight-year-old Jewish woman of the “third species” who goes to the coast in search of some freighter flying an Asian flag, where she finds, of course, her death. Needless to say, this story, stripped of any heroism, is the more realistic and common one for Jews in 1938.

This special perspective generates very different insights on major political movements and ideas in the twentieth century, especially on anarchism, fascism, and Nazism.

Even after the demise of the grand ideologies of the modern era, and the sober realization that their messianic rhetoric had mostly been a deception, many still maintain a warm place in their hearts for anarchism. Possibly because anarchism has never come to power as communism and fascism

did, it remained in its purity – an ideology of the young and restless who are truly seeking a better world. Anarchism is a belief in the replacement of government authority by a political order based on cooperation. Inspired by thinkers like Gandhi and Tolstoy, anarchism became largely associated with pacifism, and its origins were traced to early Christian communities. Even when anarchists were advocating the use of violence, they were treated with a touch of romanticism stemming from the movement's naïveté, secrecy, and international reach.

The book is filled with anarchists, but from its special perspective, anarchism loses its romantic flavor. Here, it is associated with Ida's father Giuseppe, teacher and drunk, who shouts anarchist slogans on Sunday in his house. He feels a sense of betrayal because, as an employee of the state, he betrays his comrades and brothers. As a teacher, he would have to preach anarchy in school, but this can be done only in romantic visions of anarchism while Ida's father has a family to feed. Thus he settles for his own house where he shouts the slogans accompanied by exact references ("Freedoms are not granted, they are seized. Kropotkin!") while his worried wife, Nora, would run to close the doors and windows, to muffle these subversive notions from the ears of neighbors or passersby. Anarchism is thus stripped of its romanticism and turns into a set of slogans shouted by a drunk "like a wagon-driver singing to the moon."⁷ In a sense, Elsa Morante returns anarchism to what it really was in modern history – a marginal ideology. The only place where Giuseppe can share his views is a tavern in which he meets with other "poor Sunday anarchists."⁸ Even there, a traitor can be found.

A more serious encounter with anarchism is given us through the figure of Vivaldi Carlo who tries to reconcile between anarchism and pacifism in a world in which such reconciliation is hopeless. Here is a conversation between Carlo and Ida's son Nino:

'My-ideals-REJECT-violence. All evil is derived from violence!'

'Then what kind of anarchist does that make you?'

'True anarchism cannot admit violence. The anarchist ideal is the negation of power. And power and violence are the same thing...'

‘But without violence how can you manage to have an Anarchist Government?’

‘Anarchism rejects Government ... And if the means has to be violence, then it’s no good. We don’t pay the price. In this case, Anarchism isn’t achieved.’

‘Then, if it isn’t going to get done, I don’t like it. I like things that get done.’

No wonder Carlo’s anarchism ends up where Giuseppe’s did, as part of a drunk’s sermon in a tavern on Sunday. In a very moving scene towards the end of the book, Carlo, who is by now known by his real name Davide, expresses his views about anarchism. The author is sympathetic to the cause yet also aware that it has no chance. This is conveyed to us in the form of a long, confused speech made to card-players in the tavern who show no interest whatsoever. The description of the scene seems like a confession by the author about her helplessness vis-à-vis her own writing. She writes a huge book on the horrors of the twentieth century, knowing she has no chance to prevent future horrors: “And when I try to recapitulate his talk that afternoon in the tavern,” says the author about Davide’s sermon, “I see it in the image of many horses chasing one another around a circular track, always passing the same spots.”⁹

Indeed, Davide, haunted in 1947 by the burden of the evils exposed in World War II, does not find the means to communicate them in a way that would spark interest or commitment. As the anarchist sermon goes on over many pages, its academic nature becomes clear. In the real world, what existed in the past will be in the future, as the following dialogue illustrates:

Suddenly, Davide took umbrage, and breaking off his speech, he pulled the chair up behind him, silenced. But before flinging himself down on it again, with sudden resolve, he thrust out his chest towards the company seated around him. And in a self-accusatory tone (though with a provocative brutality, which was the equivalent of a fist brought down hard on the table), he cried:

‘I was a bourgeois!’

‘And I’ replied the old man with the medal, not looking at him but with a frank and kindly laugh, ‘was born a porter at the wholesale Market’¹⁰

Fascism is presented as no less ridiculous than anarchism. Through the story of Nino, Ida’s elder son, we learn about the rise, upbringing, and behavior of a fascist. Again, from the special perspective of this book, we are exposed to a unique image of fascism; Nino is first and foremost a “little street ruffian.”¹¹ Our first encounter with him is through a photograph portraying him as:

[A] little hoodlum of perhaps fifteen or sixteen, wrapped in a sumptuous camel’s-hair coat, which he wore as if it were a flag. Between the fingers of his right hand you could vaguely discern a cigarette’s whiteness; and his left foot rested on the running-board of a custom-built sports car (parked there at random by some unknown owner), with the masterful attitude of tiger-hunters, in the great forests.¹²

This photograph points at fascism, at least in its Italian version, as nothing more than a tendency by a half-baked hooligan to resemble the images spread by popular culture. He may feel masterful, but there is little he truly masters – his foot is on a car that does not belong to him and may disappear soon from under it. The effect of popular culture stands out in the description of his room, which does not differ much from that of every other teenager:

On the wall, over the bed, in the place of holy pictures, there were various photographs, cut out of magazines and held by thumbtacks, of movie actresses in bathing suits or evening dress: the most spectacular had been marked with great scrolls in red pencil, so emphatic they seemed the trumpet signals of an assault, or the cries of an amorous cat out hunting. On the same wall, but to one side, and also attached with thumbtacks, there was also a copy of a poster showing a Roman eagle clutching the British Isles in its talons.¹³

This does not reduce the danger of fascism but demonstrates its adolescent nature. It is merely a meaningless set of slogans used by a fifteen-year-old. This becomes very clear in a scene in which Nino asks his mother for pocket money to party. In the somewhat routine conversation between the son and his mother, he boasts he will end up chief of the Black Brigades and fight for the fatherland and for the Duce, but it is hard to take him seriously:

The excess of defiance in his voice as he uttered these capitals, betrayed a blasphemous intention. You could sense that, in his boyish demands, Fatherlands and Duces, and the whole theater of the world, were reduced to a farce, which had value only because it agreed with his rage to live.¹⁴

Fascism then is reduced to a farce fitting a teenager's rage. Therefore, when it will no longer fit him, other ideals and leaders will be sought. Nino will join the partisans in the forests, admire Stalin, and when Stalin will disappoint him, aim at the next scene fitting his rage to live – American capitalism. Elsa Morante tells us that all ideologies, movements, and leaders are only anchors for the Ninos of the world. Here is Nino speaking about himself:

Stalin and the other Big Cheeses, it's all one system: they play footies with each other to screw everybody else and to screw each other, too. And Nino doesn't give a shit about them. Nino wants to live, he wants to enjoy all life and all the world, all the universe! With the suns, moons, and planets!!! Now, 1946, it's America's big moment ... Nino ... wants to get rich, a superbillionaire, and go off to America in a special de luxe plane.¹⁵

Nazism however is very different. The terror of Nazism is presented in its full horror in a rape scene. The depiction of the Nazi soldier raping Ida as a confused adolescent magnifies the horror a thousand times. When we encounter Gunther at the opening of the novel, he seems like a caricature of a boy turned soldier:

[I]n contrast with his martial stride, he had a separate expression in his eyes. His face betrayed an incredible immaturity, although he was six feet tall, more or less.¹⁶

Dressed in a uniform short at the waist and in the sleeves, Gunter lives in Dachau in which 66,428 corpses will be found during the liberation in 1945. When Ida meets him on a January day of 1941, however, Dachau is still a rural village and Gunter is a young German soldier shipped to Italy while thinking he was being sent to Africa. He suffers from loneliness and melancholy and broods constantly in bitter compassion about a prostitute in Munich, who had lost a customer.

When Ida, that “decent-looking thing, coming home just at that moment, laden with shopping bags and purse”¹⁷ encounters the Nazi soldier before her house, she stares at him with an absolutely inhuman gaze, as if confronted by the true and recognizable face of horror. And she is right. The humble soldier described as “a mamma’s boy”¹⁸ is indeed an embodiment of absolute horror. The fears haunting the Jewish woman, writes the author, prevented her from seeing anything of him except a German army uniform. And on meeting, at the very door of her home, that uniform which seemed to be stationed there, waiting for her, she thought she had arrived at the terrible rendezvous preordained for her since the beginning of the world. But this is exactly the point. When the Nazi atrocities became known, the world had difficulty in attributing them to regular German boys, but Ida’s perspective places the atrocities where they belong – as the deeds of eighteen-year-old mamma’s boys.

In 1941, the Nazis are those in power, and thus, from Ida’s perspective, there is no escape, just as there is no exit from the room in which she finds herself with her rapist. As a victim of history, she is aware that even when Gunter falls asleep in her bed, and it seems easy to kill him, this cannot be done. For the killing of rapists who fall asleep is done in biblical myths, but very rarely in real life:

It would have been easy, now, to kill him, following the example of Judith in the bible, but Ida, by nature, couldn’t conceive such an idea, not even as a fantasy.¹⁹

The scene turns both more realistic and surrealistic when Gunter wakes up and rushes to fix a loose wire that causes a light in the room to flicker. Elsa Morante places the traditional eagerness of many men to fix light sockets and of many women to be afraid to do the job themselves, in a rape scene between a Nazi soldier and a Jewish woman. The woman “observed him in mute admiration, because in her (as in certain primitive peoples) there remained a timid, unconfessed distrust of electricity and its phenomena.”²⁰

Through such literary means, the horrors of the Nazis are attributed to the real people who committed them. When Adolph Eichmann, for example, was brought to justice in Jerusalem and the world watched his trial, it was extremely difficult to adjust to the fact that he looked not like a monster but like a regular clerk. This dissonance caused Hanna Arendt to develop her theory about the banality of evil, according to which evil is embodied in regular people.²¹ Gunter is a strong literary expression of that theory. Elsa Morante makes us realize that the historical encounter between ultimate brutality and its victims can be found on a January morning in an Italian home where a soldier whose last name is not even known, and who will die within three days in an air attack, fixes a light socket.

I would like to argue that the special perspective we get on twentieth-century history by learning about it through the eyes of Ida Ramundo makes a significant contribution to modern political theory. It casts doubt on the utopian – messianic connotations that have been added to that theory since the French revolution. Let me explain this point. Despite the expectations that the scientific revolution would enhance pragmatic and realistic attitudes in the world, utopian yearnings have remained an essential component of twentieth-century political thought. Utopianism is the postulation of a definite goal or preordained finale to history, for the attainment of which you need to recast all aspects of life and society in accordance with some very explicit principle.

Utopian notions have deep origins in Christian millennial theology.²² We find them in the Book of Revelations’ promise of Christ’s second coming and his rule for a thousand years on earth, followed by a second judgment and resurrection, after which the righteous will live in peace with God. We also find them in political theory from St. Augustine’s “city of God,” through Rousseau’s general will to Marx’s rule of the proletariat. The notion that a

utopian political order may be prepared for on earth has been labeled by Jacob Talmon “political messianism.”²³

Political messianism can be found in the national movements of Europe as well as in those of Asia and Africa where utopian promises made against a religious background functioned as a source of mass mobilization. National leaders often used messianic rhetoric in which the construction of the modern state was associated – metaphorically or not – with the coming of the messiah. The state was not conceived just as a political association but as a framework for the fulfillment of utopian desires. Whether the utopia was Platonic, Augustinian, or socialist, it was part of the political discourse even in societies in which the messiah was seen merely as a metaphor.

The discourse over political messianism has focused mainly on its cost. The question was not whether rule by Plato’s philosopher king, Augustine’s God, or Marx’s proletariat is desirable in its pure form, but whether it can be implemented on earth without enormous cost. Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies* threw light on the cost of any heavenly utopia whose implementation on earth requires the suppression of traditional political forms. Utopians – notably Marx – have realized the cost but believed that it is worth paying it in return for a just, universal order and a redeeming society. This was in line with religious messianic movements that have realized since the biblical prophet Ezekiel that a terrible war would precede the messianic age of peace on earth.

History adds an important phase to the discourse on political messianism. It takes a wholly different orientation in regard to the coming of the real or metaphorical messiah. It does not deal with the desirability, feasibility, or cost of redemption. It does not involve itself in the theological questions about the coming of the Messiah in the religious or political sense. In this book, the chance of the human race to reach utopia and redeem itself is not a question whose answer depends on events in the end of days, or on acts to be committed in order to hasten the coming of the Messiah. *History* makes an original point: the Messiah has already been here, on earth. He lived among us in the years 1941 to 1947, the dreadful years of human history, but his coming has made no difference whatsoever. Thus, the book brings us back from millennial dreams to history as we know it. It kills our hopes for redemption of any kind by claiming not that the messiah cannot

come, would not come, or should not come because of the cost involved, but that he has already been here and still we have not been redeemed.

History provides no hope for redemption from the historical process with its bureaucratic institutions, social structures, and moral evils. This idea is conveyed through the character of Useppe, Ida's younger son born as a result of the rape, who may be seen as symbolizing the messiah. His birth is reminiscent of the birth of another messiah in Bethlehem:

The infant was so small he could fit comfortably in the midwife's two hands, as in a basket. And after having proved himself by the heroic enterprise of coming into the world on his own, he hadn't even the voice to cry. He announced his presence with a whimper so faint he seemed a little lamb, born last and forgotten in the straw.²⁴

Useppe comes into the world with his own strength, in order not to cost suffering to others. He is pure, innocent, sinless, virtuous, sick and will die at the age of six. He accompanies his mother in the horrible events of the mid-century but is never affected by them. He is always there, side by side with the actors, touching-not-touching them, like a floating angel. A typical image is that of the naked child sleeping between two armed warriors in a war shelter for refugees. Another image is that of his brother Nino going to fight for the Duce in a battalion of Blackshirts, solemnly shaking Useppe's little hand, "in a real pact of honor and importance."²⁵ From the beginning, when Ida is terrified about Nino finding her illegal half-Jewish child in the house, there is brotherly love there; Nino even brings friends home to see the smiling baby and nothing bad happens. While Nino gives political sermons in the house, which lead his appalled mother to take refuge in her room, the child, "would stay in a corner to gaze at his brother with great respect, but with no fear: as if he were facing a volcano too high to strike him with its lava. Or as if he were in the midst of a stupendous storm at sea, through which he was recklessly passing his tiny boat."²⁶

A particularly strong image of the child as "touching-not-touching" history is presented in the story of the newspaper. One day a vendor in a kiosk made a hat from a newspaper, like a carabinieri's headgear, to amuse Useppe. Shortly afterwards, on a Sunday in June 1945, Useppe found a sheet

of paper in which some fruits were wrapped, thinking, perhaps, of making himself a carabinieri's hat. The magazine included photographs and the relentless author informs us what they depicted:

1) a heap of murdered prisoners, naked and sprawling, and already partly decomposed; 2) a huge quantity of piled-up shoes, which had belonged to those or other prisoners; 3) a group of prisoners, still alive, seen behind a metal fence; 4) the 'death stairway' of 186 very high and irregular steps, which the forced laborers were made to climb under enormous loads right to the top, from which they were then often flung down into the pit below as a spectacle for the camp authorities; 5) a sentenced man on his knees before the ditch he himself has been made to dig, guarded by numerous German soldiers, one of whom is about to shoot him at the nape of the neck; 6) and a little series of frames (four in all) which show successive stages of a decompression-chamber experiment, performed on a human guinea pig.²⁷

It will be forever impossible to know what poor illiterate Useppe may have understood of those meaningless photographs, writes Morante, but we, the readers, know. Here is a depiction of history in the years in which Useppe lived on this planet. The angel-like little happy child resembles the messiah which theology and political theory were looking for in their search of redemption, but *History* leaves no room for redemption. The little child accompanies the most horrible events with an innocent smile but manages to redeem nobody. Thus, it becomes much more difficult to walk the messianic route. Despite our Augustinian yearnings for the city of God, we are doomed, like Ida Ramundo, to live in history. This idea is put before us boldly and vigorously in the closing sentence of the novel: "and History continues...."²⁸