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From Communist to Catholic Anti-Communist: Bella Visono Dodd's American Journey

Submitted by Karen Campbell in Partial Completion of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College, May, 2000

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ABSTRACT

From Communist to Catholic Anti-Communist: Bella Visono Dodd's American Journey

Priscilla Murolo-Thesis Director

This thesis makes more intelligible the enigma of Bella Visono Dodd, a minor player in the American social and political movements during the tumultuous times of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Bella Dodd was an Italian-American lawyer who in the 1930s and 1940s rose to power as a union leader for the Teachers Union, ran for elective office under the American Labor Party banner, courted politicians, and publicly announced her Communist Party membership. In the 1950s Dodd, an ex-Communist, became a Catholic and a virulent anti-Communist who testified against her former Communist Party associates before the assorted congressional committees. Dodd traveled the country expounding on the evils of communism, ran for elective office on the Conservative Party ticket, edited a right-wing newsletter and turned into a "superhawk" in the 1960s. This thesis explicates her personal and political motivations for turning from left to right and posits that Dodd did not change, instead her political definition of an American mutated through the years. Critically examining her autobiography, *School of Darkness (1954)* this thesis contends that Dodd's life, her years both as a leftist and as a rightist, was a continuum of a zealous quest for acceptance as a loyal American. This thesis argues against Dodd's interpretation of events in the *School of Darkness* and highlights the consistency of Dodd's views--despite the seeming reversal in her political sympathies, and takes into account psychological, ideological and social factors. The work demonstrates how Dodd's political actions and beliefs at once reflected a genuine commitment to principle while serving Dodd's personal needs and interests.

CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to make more intelligible the enigma of Bella Visono Dodd, a minor player in the American social and political movements during the tumultuous times of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Bella Dodd was an Italian-American lawyer who in the 1930s and 1940s rose to power as a union leader for the Teachers Union, ran for elective office under the American Labor Party banner, courted politicians, called the mayor of New York City, Fiorello LaGuardia, a friend, worked on Vito Marcantonio's U. S. Congressional reelection campaign and publicly announced her Communist Party membership.[1] In the 1950s Dodd, an ex-Communist, became a Catholic and a virulent anti-Communist who testified against her former Communist Party associates before the assorted congressional committees. Dodd traveled the country expounding on the evils of communism to Catholic and secular civic groups, ran for elective office on the Conservative Party ticket, edited a right-wing newsletter and turned into a "superhawk" in the 1960s. This thesis explicates her personal and political motivations for turning from left to right.

In her autobiography, *School of Darkness,* Dodd depicted her metamorphosis from a Communist Party member to a reborn Catholic anti-Communist. This thesis posits that Dodd did not change, instead her political definition of an American mutated through the years. Throughout her life as a student, a teacher, a Communist and an ex-Communist Dodd saw herself as a loyal patriotic American, interested in social justice and working for the greater good of America. Examining her book critically, this thesis contends that Dodd's life, her

[1] Fiorella LaGuardia (1882-1947) was a Democratic Party reformer and mayor of New York City from 1933-1945. Vito Marcantonio (1902-1954) a leftist, served as a United States House of Representatives from 1934-1936 and 1938-1950 from Harlem. Marc was known for his support of the working classes in his district. For more information on Marcantonio see Gerald Meyer, *Vito Marcantionio: Radical Politician, 1902-1954* (Albany: State University Press, 1989).

years both as a leftist and as a rightist, was a continuum of a zealous quest for acceptance as a loyal American.

Bella Dodd's Autobiography-*School of Darkness*

School of Darkness remains the only account of the life of Bella Dodd. Dodd testified that she lost her personal papers when she sold her home on Lexington Avenue.[2] She may have deliberately destroyed her personal papers if they contradicted anything she wrote in *School of Darkness (1954)*. Dodd wanted her book to stand as the sole depiction of her life. She wrote *School of Darkness*, a typical conversion tale, to illustrate from a Catholic anticommunist viewpoint the evils of communism experienced by one disillusioned ex-Communist. Dodd's cautionary tale is plagued by selective overstatements and understatements framed within the standard formula of a confessional and new vision of morality. A critical examination of Dodd's book can provide a new analysis of her actions. This thesis argues against Dodd's interpretation of events in the *School of Darkness*.

Dodd's autobiography was written to portray the darkness of an education that led her to embrace Communist ideology, an education that lacked any enlightened Christian training. Her book, published by a Catholic press, coincided with the McCarthy witch hunts. Her book was a kind of repentance. One of many ex-Communist confessionals popular at the time, *School of Darkness* allowed Dodd to absolve herself of her past involvement with the disfavored Communist Party and, according to Dodd, warn others about this dark ideology

[2] Dodd said in published government testimony that with the sale of her house personal material was destroyed. Bella Dodd testimony, Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee Appointed Under Senate Resolution 231, *State Department Employee Loyalty Investigation*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 25 April 1950, 636.

that had fooled even her, an educated, loyal American.[3]

In her autobiography Dodd claimed that she disregarded the Party leaders' intentions of building a Soviet America. Dodd wrote that when she finally realized her mistake it was too late to extricate herself without professional and personal ruin. She further explained in her book that her participation in the Communist Party was in support of the Party's advocacy of the working classes. Looking back through a Catholic anticommunist lens, Dodd recalled that she believed the Party offered a solution to social injustice.[4] Dodd portrayed herself as naive, when in reality she was quite savvy about the mechanizations of the Party and was also an integral part of the Party's labor movement strategy. Dodd wanted readers to believe she was unfamiliar with Party philosophy, but as an active member she was familiar with Party activities. Dodd designed *School of Darkness* to substantiate her contention that she participated in the Party out of blind devotion. She did this to exculpate herself from leftism and to portray herself as indoctrinated and unwittingly following orders.

According to her autobiography Dodd's personal experience with communism gave her the ability to teach others. In her text Dodd transforms her suffering into a show of strength without consideration of her past. She fails to provide convincing explanation of her attraction to communism, which she later condemns. Though Dodd attempts an explanation, she rationalizes it with abstract reasons such as "did not realize the Party's objectives, . . .

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[3] Other conversion texts include: Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess, The Truth About American Communism* (1940); Louis Budenz, *This is My Story* (1947); *Men Without Faces: The Communist Conspiracy in the USA* (1950); Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (1977); Elizabeth Bentley, *Out of Bondage, The Story of Elizabeth Bentley* (1951); Hede Massing, *This Deception* (1951); Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (1952); Granville Hicks, *Where We Came Out* (1954) and *Part of the Truth* (1965) and the essays that appeared in Richard Crossman, ed., *The God That Failed* (1949).

[4]Bella V. Dodd, *School of Darkness* (New York: Kennedy and Sons, 1954) , 73.

thought one could disregard the dictatorship of the proletariat and accept the communist ideology."[5] Dodd blames her "materialistic conditioning," learned from her progressive education, for her adherence to an ideology that, in retrospect, seemed so empty. With this context there arises a difficulty in Dodd's recall. The Party is presented as an unyielding monolith. The conversion texts pose these problems because authors like Dodd never reveal how belonging to, or involvement in, the Party affected the day-to-day lives of members.

Dodd portrayed herself as a poor but studious child and a popular student with a strong desire to assimilate into American culture through education. Later in life, as a lawyer, Dodd embodied the popular image of a grateful, selfless immigrant who fought social injustice and took *pro bono* clients. According to Dodd her newfound anticommunist and Catholic perspective brought light into her life, while continuing her focus on social justice.

Dodd's memoirs add little substance to the literature of ex-Communists prevalent during the late 1940s and 1950s. A perceptible sadness at the waste and ruination of a life runs through the histories of Dodd and others as they attempt to justify their disaffection and disillusion with a politics to which they were once committed. Such rationalizations are evident in many revisionist histories to describe a personal, moral, or political conversion. In Dodd's case her condemnation and vilification of her past were a critique she viewed as virtuous, thereby entitling her to some absolution.[6]

Given the circumstances during Dodd's authorship, times fraught with fear of accusations and harassment, *School of Darkness* took some artistic license. In the

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[5] Michael E. Brown, "The History of the History of U. S. Communism," introduction to *New Studies in the Politics and Culture of U. S. Communism*. eds. Michael E. Brown, Randy Martin, Frank Rosengarten, and George Snedeker (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1993), 31-33.

[6] Brown, "The History of the History of U. S. Communism," 31-32.

manuscript, Dodd changed the names of her family and friends to shield them from publicity and never mentioned any of her siblings by name except Katie, her deceased sister. The actual location of Dodd's neighborhood, and the church where she played, was a mile away from what Dodd detailed.[7] Throughout Dodd's book there appears a lack of clarity concerning certain details and an overuse of jargon especially her condemnation of her former "materialistic" ideology, a term used extensively by Catholic anti-Communists as a coded word for communist ideology.

The few secondary sources that concern Dodd locate her on opposite ends of the spectrum. One source views Dodd sympathetically, as a victim of circumstances, caught in a personal and professional collapse, who informed on only a few ex-comrades.[8] In another, Dodd is viewed as a smart labor organizer for the New York City Teachers Union who also named names in the next decade, prodded by the Catholic church.[9] Dodd is condemned in yet another source; she is considered a professional informer, who ruined people's lives with her testimony. This source also implicates the Catholic Church for orchestrating her actions.[10]

Dodd's life and accomplishments require a greater examination. A more critical, yet sympathetic, analysis of Dodd's actions and motivations, in a historical context, will provide

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[7] George Marsilio, (Dodd's nephew) said Dodd changed her half-brothers' family name to protect them from harassment. Dodd used the name Marscia. George Marsilio in a telephone interview with the author October 30, 1999.

[8] Ellen W. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986; Oxford University Press, 1986), 168-170.

[9] Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1990), 26, 164, 173, 186.

[10] David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 131, 437-38.

a better understanding and recognition of Dodd's particular circumstances. This new analysis is essential because Dodd's history requires a closer view.[11] Dodd needs a different history, one that depicts her as more than a disillusioned ex-Communist who named names before the congressional investigations, and then dropped out of sight. Her time with the Communist Party is more than just an inadmissible past, confessed with a sense of righteousness, and a deep commitment to anticommunism. Though Dodd's *School of Darkness* repeats that moral pathos of blind commitment and subsequent betrayal so typical of the ex-Communist stories of the time, the text deserves a more focused reading.

School of Darkness, though a formulaic book, can yield valuable insight into Dodd's life if we read it against the grain, looking beneath the genre's conventional form. The narrative of a new enlightened self that tells cautionary tales about an old benighted self can be used to explore what this thesis contends are the continuities and similarities between Bella Dodd's left and right history. The central question this thesis asks is what were the forces and influences that enabled Dodd to adjust to shifting ideologies and revise her political beliefs from a communism to a Catholic anticommunism?

Dodd considered herself a patriotic American in the 1930s when she joined the Communists to solve the problems of poverty, unemployment, assaults on workers' rights and fascism emerging from the Depression. At the height of the Second World War America allied with Russia, and Dodd formally joined the Communist Party. In the 1950s Dodd again regarded herself as a loyal American when she became an FBI informer and named names in

[11] Brown, *New Studies*, 34; Maurice Isserman, "Three Generations: Historians View American Communism," *Labor History* vol. 26 no. 4 (1985): 525.

the congressional investigations into communism.[12] According to Dodd's autobiography she committed a great reversal of political ideology from Communist to Catholic anti-Communist. Or did she? Dodd, influenced by changing ideologies, continued being a "good American" though the definition mutated. This thesis contends that Dodd did not revise her ideology so much as the interpretation of a good American that was never rigidly defined and had changed through the years. To be a radical in the 1930s was to be an American; to be anticommunist in the 1950s continued this identity. A good American in the 1930s could become an "un-American" in the 1950s. The climate of 1930s America fostered radical solutions for the economic and social justice problems of many Americans. The 1950s milieu shifted and championed anticommunism as a weapon against the presumed threat of communism. A good American took loyalty oaths, informed on presumed Communists and espoused the anticommunist rhetoric emanating from conservatives, liberals, and the Catholic Church. The desire to be a good American greatly influenced Dodd throughout her life. The malleable definition of a loyal, patriotic American aided Dodd's political revision from left to right. Dodd's memoirs attempted to show a complete break from her revolutionary past. However, in reality the transition from one camp group to another was more complex and not so clearly delineated. From communist to Catholic anti-Communist, it would be a circuitous journey for Dodd.

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[12] Dodd, 245. There is some question about monetary payments to Dodd from the FBI. In 1951-52 the FBI offered Dodd a sum of money, but files show Dodd refused the stipend stating that she wanted to get out of her financial trouble on her own, without government help. She wanted to freely give information to her country to atone for her Communist Party activity. No record exists in her file that indicates that she took payments. But a later memo describes Dodd as a paid informer. SAC, NY memorandum to Director, Feb. 7, 1952, Bella Dodd #100-6951-132, Part 2 of 4; SAC, NY memorandum to Director, June 6, 1954, Bella Dodd #100-6951-166, Part 2 of 4.

Chapter I

The Education of an American

"A Leader in the Class"

Dodd's early life exemplifies the struggles and successes in the education of an immigrant American during the first three decades of the twentieth-century. Education was paramount to Dodd. Free public education allowed her the freedom to improve herself and rise to be a leader in the community, whatever community she found herself in.

In *School of Darkness* Bella V. Dodd called herself "an American born on Italian soil as the result of a series of accidents."[13] That opening comment in her autobiography revealed how Dodd saw herself and wanted others to see her in the middle 1950s, as a patriotic American. Her early life of trauma shaped Dodd and her political ideology.

Dodd's birth and early life proved pivotal to her ideological development. Born Maria Assunta Isabella Visono, in Picerno, Italy, on October 8, 1904, Bella Visono Dodd was the only child from the marriage of Teresa Marsilio and Rocco Visono. According to Dodd, Rocco Visono, a Swiss-Italian from Lugano, Switzerland had proposed marriage and suggested that they emigrate to America. As Dodd recollected, her mother Teresa, a young widow and mother of several children, did not want to leave Italy or the farm she owned that had been in her family for generations. However, eventually Teresa acquiesced and agreed to marry Rocco after they had settled in America.[14] Teresa's decision to postpone her marriage

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[13] Dodd, 1. Dodd's mother was barely in America three months before she traveled to her homeland where she bore Dodd. According to Immigration and Naturalization Service records Dodd became a naturalized citizen in 1928 when she was twenty-four-years old. SAC, NY, letter to Director, April 25, 1947, Bella Dodd #100-6951, 65x1.

[14] Dodd, 1, 2, 3.

may have been a way to maintain her autonomy; that is to say, in case she disliked America she could return to Italy. Leaving a fiancé would be easier than to divorce a husband.

Rocco and the boys from Teresa's previous marriage emigrated to America first, followed by Teresa and her daughter, Caterina. In January 1904, according to Dodd, Teresa and Rocco were married in East Harlem. Other records indicate that Teresa and Rocco married in Italy. Dodd located her parents' union in America to help Americanize herself. Possibly, to Dodd, parents who married in America produced American children, wherever the birth occurred. The family resided in a five-room tenement on 108th Street in New York City's East Harlem. Within a few months trouble with farm management called Teresa back to Italy.[15]

During the voyage to Italy Teresa realized she was pregnant and, in Dodd's words, "was dismayed [that] the baby might be born there," which indeed the baby was.[16] Teresa left the infant in Italy with a foster mother and returned alone to America. In her autobiography, Dodd explained that her mother always hoped to return to Italy and thought that leaving the baby there might hasten the homecoming. Teresa planned to come back within the year for the baby, but the years spread to five because, according to Dodd, the family could not afford the cost of passage for two people.[17]

So for her early years Dodd lived with a peasant couple in the rural countryside of

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[15] Dodd, 1-4. U. S. Dept. of Justice, NY, [name deleted] office memorandum to J. P. Coyne, Oct. 24, 1947 Bella Dodd #100-6951 Part 1 of 4; U. S. Dept. of Justice, NY, letter to the Director, April 25, 1947, Bella Dodd # 100-695165x1, Part 1 of 4. FBI files Bella Dodd state that Immigration and Naturalization Service records state that both of Teresa's marriages took place in Italy; U. S. Dept. of Justice, NY, letter to the Director, April 25, 1947, 100NY-6951-80; 100-69511-65x1, Part 1 of 4.

[16] Dodd, 3.

[17] Dodd, 11.

Avialano, Italy. Too poor for leather shoes, Dodd wore cloth ones. Dodd's memories of poverty were woven with memories of the "protecting love" she received from her foster parents and her close attachment to her foster father, Taddeo, a shepherd.[18] Teresa sent money regularly with her letters, and Dodd knew the couple were her foster parents. When Dodd was five years old, Teresa appeared to reclaim her. In telling the story Dodd did not express any feelings of abandonment by her mother. No doubt these deep-seated feelings would have been repressed. Mother and daughter sailed from Naples and arrived in New York City on March 8, 1909.[19] Dodd later wrote in her autobiography, "I left everything I knew and was going into the unknown."[20] In her memoirs, Dodd barely touched upon her experience as a little girl leaving one life to begin anew with a strange new family. Dodd's maternal abandonment doubtless helps to explain her deep desire for a sense of belonging in the United States.[21]

As with many other immigrants, education became the greatest Americanizer for Dodd, though there were other influences. For example, Dodd's seventeen-year-old half-sister, Caterina, Americanized her own name to Katie and she changed Maria Assunta Isabella's to Bella. Katie enrolled Dodd in Primary School One (P. S. 1) in the fall of 1909. Katie wrote Dodd's birth date as 1902 (instead of 1904) so Dodd could start in the second

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[18] Dodd, 4.

[19] U. S. Dept. of Justice, NY, letter to the Director, April 25, 1947, Bella Dodd #100-695165x1, Part 1 of 4.

[20] Dodd, 11.

[21] Dodd, 3, 10, 5. Though it was common in Italy to leave children with a wet nurse, and in 1904 travel abroad held dangers for a newborn, given all the extenuating circumstances I maintain that this maternal abandonment and reclaimination, estrangement from foster parents, coupled with living with strange people in a strange place affected Dodd psychologically. In her book Dodd's repeated use of the term "Forgotten Man" symbolized herself feeling "Forgotten" by her birth parents. See page 31 footnote 110.