

## Afghanistan. Daniele Mastrogiacomo. Beyond Fear

Letizia Airos (May 18, 2010)



Interview with Daniele Mastrogiacomo in the U.S. to present his book "I Giorni della Paura" (Days of Fear - Europa Editions) in which recounts his captivity in Afghanistan with the Taliban

In March 2007 Daniele Mastrogiacomo, a war correspondent for La Repubblica, was captured by the Taliban and was imprisoned for several days that took him into the most hidden places in Afghanistan, in the deep south, right on the border with Pakistan. Among the mountains, villages,

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and in direct contact with an unknown world, the journalist is faced with the fear of not surviving but also with the natural curiosity of a professional who wants to understand everything – even his enemy.

After more than two years after his release, his book *I Giorni della Paura* (Days of Fear) was released, which traces his story of being held hostage. A true, authentic account that reconstructs the hours, the moments, the breaths of a unique and terribly cruel experience spent with his fellow prisoners. All this contrasts with the colors and the evocative landscapes of Afghanistan.

The Italian journalist's driver, Sayed Haga, is slaughtered and beheaded. His execution is the obvious culmination of this story.

It must be said, though, that Mastrogiacomo still lives through difficult moments even after his release. In fact there have been many controversies surrounding the circumstances.

We have decided not to tackle the details in this interview; instead we would like focus on the book that after enjoying considerable success in Italy will soon be published in the United States.

Daniele meets us in our offices. He arrives early, along with a representative from Europe Editions. Intrigued, he looks around while we accompany him to the library where the interview will take place. *i-Italy?* What do you do?

Mastrogiacomo is first and foremost a journalist, and it becomes clear with his initial words. He answers our questions succinctly and with precision.

He is touring the U.S. for several days to promote his book. It's an intense trip, one that is packed with appointments.

Europe Edition did a great job, organized excellent presentations. We were in Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, New York, and now here. They read excerpts from the book in various book stores. It's been an important and exceptional experience for me.

### **When did the idea of translating the book for the American public come about?**

It was Michael Reynolds, a few months after its release in Italy. He immediately thought that it would be successful in the U.S. It's been translated using language that may be a little unusual; it's not exactly as it is in Italian but it retains the same sense and spirit.

The book is distinctive; it's a kind of nonfiction narrative but with a whole range of feelings behind it.

### **Days of presentations. Meetings with Americans. What was the public like?**

"Very warm, hundreds of people flocked to the presentations. And considering that thousands of other books are sold every day, I was deeply satisfied."

We tell him that perhaps one of the keys to success is the balance that he has been able to strike between retelling the events and the narrative elements...

" I don't have specific techniques; I've been a correspondent for the last 15 years. As a journalist, you always have little limited space. Writing a book is something else entirely. I think the form that I've chosen is the most direct; in any case it's what spontaneously came to me. I thought that if I told the story while I described what I was feeling that it would make an interesting mix. I worked very hard



on it, but ultimately the final draft varies only slightly from the original...."

He also tells us that at first he did not want to write the book.

"Initially I didn't want to. I didn't consider myself a star; we're journalists, other people are stars. For this reason I've maintained a very low profile. Then I sent it to my editor because he's a friend of mine, just to get an opinion. At the time there were many books on Afghanistan coming out. Why mine too? But at some point I thought it should be written, that it was even a duty to those friends who had died, people who had suffered. And then for anyone who wanted to know the rest of the story..."

**You deliberately did not address the controversy that arose after your release, even though you were working on the book while it was going on. Why?**

"In Italy everything causes controversy. They're interested in their debates, which are instrumental. In Italy, anything that's controversial is instrumental. Even the dead. "Trade, not trade negotiation." They don't even know what the Taliban is! Now they're negotiating with the Taliban.

They're things that unfortunately are happening more often, so it's obvious that when faced with human lives you negotiate. But the debates were abstruse.

So they upset me very much."

**And the Taliban was compared to the Red Brigades....**

"They did it because, in my opinion, they have no idea what the Taliban is. It's an inaccurate comparison that doesn't make any sense because in reality they are two completely separate elements.

The Red Brigades were a group in the Seventies who were highly educated. With the Taliban we're talking about a significant proportion of people, not a small group, 5% of the population.

The Taliban was not suddenly formed in the wake of a project like the Red Brigades. They have been around for ages and they've been in power for six years.

That they're different now and that there are other institutions is true, but they have left the country in a medieval state. And not only because they force women to wear burqas, but also because they ban everything - any kind of culture or information; it's because they live in ignorance.

Because they fear the spread of culture, because through culture through you fill people's minds and when a person can have an opinion and perhaps make a choice, then they can change. They fear this. "

**What is, what was fear to you?**

"Fear is a concept that we always live with. For example, anxiety in the morning, when we fear that we'll never get to the end of the day. But the fear I felt when I was a prisoner was different; it was the fear of losing everything, of not being able to continue what I was doing. In this case, then, you also have the fear of confronting yourself. The fear measured against yourself: how do you confront your own death? Then facing the fact that you are a survivor and so how do you react after that? Fear of being different and thus not being the same as before, of no longer recognizing yourself and thus no longer being able to measure yourself against the outside world. But today, fortunately, those ghosts are behind me..."

**Mastrogiacomo's capture was unusual. In fact he maintained direct contact with his captors during that time. We ask him about the Taliban, who they were.**

"Yes, we talked a lot. I found out that they are great liars who are basically criminals; they're people



who really don't want what's best for the country. They feel as though they are the bearers or custodians of absolute truth in the religious sense.

It's the phenomenon of extreme religious fanaticism, as in the times of the Crusaders.

When there is fundamentalism and radicalism, it inevitably comes to fanaticism and therefore the conviction of being right while all others are wrong.

If these people decide to blow themselves up we are very far away from the principle of freedom.

I think that someone has given you the right to do so. But who? You do it on the basis of what? The fact that you follow your own precepts of the Koran in this way is unthinkable.... I have thousands of Muslim friends, who point to them as crazy and say that they are a tiny minority; the war turned them into terrorists."

### **At this point how do you see the future of Afghanistan?**

I welcome Obama's new approach which is to involve the groups within Pakistan and the nations that surround Afghanistan. It is not a simple thing but it's necessary to convince the other countries to take responsibility."

### **So a bit of optimism with respect to Obama's approach?**

"Yes, I'm an optimist in terms of this approach because it is completely different from the Bush administration. I think that's producing results. The fact that there were more deaths in Pakistan than in Afghanistan earlier this year means that Pakistan has a serious problem at home. So we must fight it. Then you can negotiate, as soon as you get results. We now talk about negotiations, and it's normal that way. This is a word that perhaps scares Italians...."

### **Can you briefly describe the work of Emergency ...**

"Emergency is a large non-governmental organization which is also present here in the U.S. It does a superb job, and it's been recognized by everyone on both the right and the left in various countries.

They deal with the prevention and treatment of the war wounded, and they are obviously present where there are war and in areas on the front line.

The only hospital there was built by Emergency and allows anyone, regardless of affiliation, to get treatment. This may be disconcerting to the English and others who are stationed there.

If curing one's enemies by neutral parties constitutes a problem, then you must ask those who took the Hippocratic oath.

Some may even refuse as conscientious objectors, saying 'You are the enemy so we don't care about you.' I don't know but I find it a bit stupid. In reality, the decision to choose doctors for Emergency as mediators of the Italian state is something that is regulated by the Afghan government and its sovereignty. It has acted through Emergency because it was the only organization present in the area."

### **Is there a particular message that you'd like to bring to the United States more so than in Italy?**

"What I'd like to do is make a small contribution to American readers and describe these people who are living thousands of miles away. Then I can somehow take readers by the hand and carry them into southern Afghanistan, an area historically considered to be Taliban territory. Many want to know who these people are and who has helped Bin Laden take responsibility for the attack on the Twin Towers.

The Taliban kill a lot of soldiers. I want to tell the public about the world of these people, their



different concept of justice, religion, what they think of women, men, films, television.... I think it's essential that they never return to power in Afghanistan."

**Was it your choice to become a war journalist?**

"Forced, because of the two wars that were going on during the Bush administration. Before that I was an international correspondent but I often traveled to the Middle East."

**But you've also covered the justice system extensively....**

"For ten years, during the "Mani Pulite" investigation. I stopped and then went back to what I was doing before, reporting as a correspondent. Scalfari, the director of the La Repubblica asked me to follow the investigation team in Rome and then I was all over Europe. But I didn't feel at ease covering the justice system. You have to be escorted, but it's certainly a great learning experience. It's very useful because it's very practical."

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