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Department of Gender Studies

Review of Elisabeth Pedersen's master thesis *Autobiography, Subjectivity, and Agency: Dorothy Day's The Long Loneliness* (2020), submitted to Department of Gender Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague. Supervisor: Lubica Kobová, PhD.

Elisabeth Pedersen approached me with her research ideas very early on, just a few months into her enrollment in our MA Gender Studies Program. Her initial idea was to explore how the identities of U.S. teachers of English as a foreign language living in Prague are formed with respect to their gender, precarity and the affective labor they carry out. Since then, her research interests shifted to analyzing and interpreting one of a few autobiographies of Dorothy Day, the founding figure of the Catholic Worker movement. Even though the topic of the master thesis changed overtime, some underlying themes remain – such as inquiry into the question of how to “care for one another” (p. 16), for “vulnerable communities” (p. 18) and how to think of one’s life as caring life.

As becomes clear from the first chapter of the thesis, Dorothy Day (1897 – 1980) was a contradictory figure, who sought to make sense of her tumultuous life in several autobiographies she authored. In the context of Central and Eastern Europe, except for a few mentions in Roman Catholic outlets¹, Day is largely unknown. This ignorance of Day’s life and work is in stark contrast to the interest Day elicits primarily in the United States, as she crossed paths with a number of social movements as well as historical figures throughout the whole 20th century. However, we can predict to hear of the subject of Elisabeth Pedersen’s thesis more in the coming years as Day’s beatification and canonization are expected.

Even though Day explicitly criticized both the first wave as well as second wave feminist movement, this does not prevent researchers to approach her life and her writings from a perspective, which Elisabeth Pedersen describes, “as if gender matters” (p. 17). Given the vast body of work of Dorothy Day as well as methodological decision not to attempt to make any claim truths regarding Day’s life, and rather focus on constructing and negotiating Day’s self in her writings, it was essential for Elisabeth to carefully select the material to be researched (p. 31). As is clear from the Conclusions and the interpretative Chapter 4 of the thesis, *The Long Loneliness* published in 1952, during McCarthyism, makes for a rich material that needs to take into account primarily the historical and political context of this era and to position Day within it. The submitted master thesis convincingly shows how, in *The Long Loneliness*, Day skillfully navigated gender ideologies of Cold War anti-communism. A question that Elisabeth Pedersen does not explicitly entertain in her thesis (due to understandable limitations given the scope of the master thesis research project), which, however, needs to be addressed perhaps in further research is, why did Day put so much effort in this autobiographical maneuvering through the then

¹ E. g. a Slovak conservative online daily Postoj published an article on the teachings of Peter Maurin, in which Day is mentioned as Maurin’s colleague putting Maurin’s ideology into practice. See Píry, M. (2019). Peter Maurin – tak trochu iná revolúcia [A slightly different revolution]. *Postoj*. Retrieved from <https://blog.postoj.sk/45701/peter-maurin-tak-trochu-ina-revolucia>. A short biographical notice of Day is supposedly included in Putna, M. C. (2010). *Obrazy z kulturních dějin americké religiosity* [Scenes from the cultural history of American religiosity]. Praha: Vyšehrad.



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anticommunist discourse. Did she do it in order to claim a significant place for Catholic Worker in the field of social assistance to poor and severely marginalized populations in the USA? What motivated her to write yet another autobiography? (Could we speculate about this?)

Except for Roman-Catholics claims to usurp Dorothy Day's life's work as well as her stirring conversion narrative (from socialism to Roman Catholicism) for their interest, there is no consensus on how to classify or categorize Day's thinking. As recent biographers of Day, John Louhgery and Blythe Randolph state, "[t]he ideas Dorothy Day began to formulate in the early 1930s and exemplified to the time of her death in 1980 put her profoundly at odds with much of both secular and religious thought in the United States"². In this light, I am rather content with Elisabeth's decision to ignore my suggestions and think of Dorothy Day as social and maternal feminist in the vein of Jean Bethke Elshtain's thinking³ and to consider Day's self-representation as a mother to communities that she is helping as only a part of a larger construction of Day's autobiographical self (pp. 67 and 82). I would very much like to appreciate the scholarly courage of Elisabeth Pedersen to work with the contradictions and ambivalences that her research subject brought her as well as to retain them.

While carrying out her research, Elisabeth proceeded very independently and was always ready to provide good substantiation for the research decision she had made. I believe her research effort and rather mature consideration of various questions and contexts of her research (current political situation globally and in the US notwithstanding) is visible in Theoretical Approaches chapter, especially in her reflexivity and positionality section. The thesis is very well organized and the argumentation is clear and conclusive. In her thesis, Elisabeth shows great skills in interpreting her material both respectfully (see e.g. her treatment of Day's abortion in the Silences subchapter) as well as critically (e.g. when she suggests that more research is needed to assess Day's participation in Black liberation movement).

The submitted diploma thesis meets the criteria for a successful thesis. I recommend grade "excellent" (1) and that the candidate proceeds to oral defense.

Lubica Kobová, PhD.

Prague, September 21, 2020

² Loughery, J., & Randolph, B. (2020). *Dorothy Day : dissenting voice of the American century*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 2.

³ Elshtain, J. B. (1998/1982). Antigone's daughters. In A. Phillips (Ed.), *Feminism and politics* (pp. 363 - 377). Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press; Elshtain, J. B. (1989). Antigone's daughters reconsidered. In S. K. White (Ed.), *Lifeworld and politics : between modernity and postmodernity* (pp. 222 - 235). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.