

Being demanding is a duty: culture as civic responsibility

The recent death of Goffredo Fofi has left a deep void in the cultural and civic life of our country. A void that will be hard to fill, as shown by the many tributes published in recent weeks by intellectuals, writers, and scholars from vastly different disciplines.

And it could not be otherwise. Fofi was many things: a critic, essayist, cultural organiser, educator, social worker, magazine founder, and discoverer of talent. A profoundly erudite thinker and, above all, an ‘intellectual of action’, as he was often described. A definition I’ve always loved.

An intellectual of action, yes, but also Italy’s critical conscience. A figure who traversed the social and cultural upheavals of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first century without ever adopting a neutral stance. For Fofi, culture was a form of civic engagement, a social responsibility, a rigorous practice in service of the collective. He belonged to a generation that worked doggedly to rebuild the country, people who helped shape what we might call a genuine ‘workshop of thought’. A demanding generation we would now refer to as a ‘community of practice’¹: individuals united by a clear and militant idea of culture.

Fofi was trained at CEPAS, the school for social workers led by Angela Zucconi, and studied under teachers like Guido Calogero and Maria Comandini. At the seminal 1946 conference in Tremezzo, where the foundations of social work in Italy were laid, Comandini famously said that the goal of social workers should be «to help others help themselves»².

Fofi worked alongside Danilo Dolci and from then on charted an independent and original path through his leadership of magazines like «Lo straniero» and «Gli asini», and through a body of writing always guided by a pedagogical mission, never by complacency³. His was a demanding cultural ethic, aimed at awakening critical consciousness, not at seeking consensus. He wasn’t interested in pleasing people, but in serving, challenging, and provoking.

In this brief reflection, I’d like to offer a personal memory rather than retracing in detail his extraordinary life, for which more systematic accounts exist. I’ll instead share two encounters that deeply shaped my own journey.

The first took place during a sweltering Roman summer, in the midst of the pandemic. We met at Termini Station, masked and distanced, for an interview I had requested while working on my book about Giulio Einaudi and the promotion of public reading in Italy⁴.

1 Etienne Wenger, *Comunità di pratica. Apprendimento, significato e identità*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2006.

2 Questo ricorda Goffredo Fofi nella Introduzione a Angela Zucconi, *La parola comunità*. Roma: Edizioni dell’asino, 2015.

3 Voglio solo ricordare *Son nato scemo e morirò cretino – scritti 1956-2021* (Minimum Fax, 2022) una raccolta curata da Emiliano Morreale che copre oltre sessant’anni di carriera di Fofi.

4 Chiara Faggiolani, *Come un ministro per la cultura. Giulio Einaudi e le biblioteche nel sistema del libro*. Firenze: Firenze University press, 2020.



I remember the apprehension I felt before that meeting: Fofi's relationship with Einaudi had been far from smooth. In 1963, the publishing house had blocked the release of his book *Southern immigration in Turin*, despite support from figures like Raniero Panzieri and Renato Solmi. The book was eventually published the following year by Feltrinelli. I expected the topic to be a sensitive one. Instead, the conversation flowed with surprising ease. Fofi was curious about my work. Warm, even. «We were a community, all with a clear idea of culture», he told me. And that sentence captured his whole world.

The second meeting is more recent and even dearer to me. This past April, he presented my book on Adriano Olivetti's libraries⁵ at the Sperelliana library in Gubbio, where he now rests. The event, meticulously organised by Giovanna Pietrini and Francesco Mariucci, became an intense and passionate conversation. Fofi spoke with unstoppable energy: about Zucconi, Olivetti, his life, books, publishing, and more. He spoke of libraries with a kind of critical affection. These were places he had inhabited, supported, observed, but also questioned and reproached. Too often, he felt, they remained neutral, detached spaces, unable to the present.

Today, the Sperelliana library houses a collection of around 10,000 books he donated, now being catalogued. Part of the collection is displayed in a room dedicated to him, furnished with eight bookcases, a rotating shelf, and a reading station; the rest is kept in storage. Many of the books bear dedications, annotations, and reading marks. Traces of a lifelong dialogue with texts and authors, testament to his personal and elevated form of intellectual activism. The library has expressed a desire to gradually bring this legacy to life, through periodic rotations and curated exhibitions, in order to make it accessible and dynamic, just as Fofi would have wanted.

In his writings, Fofi often concluded with strong, clear-eyed words, implicit calls to collective responsibility. I'd like to close with one such passage, which I believe resonates especially for those who work in education and culture:

The work of an educator, which can only arise from a sense of vocation, entails duties that take on different nuances depending on whether one operates in times of peace, war, or crisis: different ways of seeing one's work, and different ways of carrying it out⁶.

Now more than ever, in an era marked by instability, radical change, and new forms of inequality, these words call us to embrace a cultural ethic grounded in renewed responsibility and courage. The legacy of Goffredo Fofi calls upon us and, as ever, commits us. Because our times demand clear and deliberate choices.

Chiara Faggiolani

Ai fini della citazione, utilizzare esclusivamente il testo in lingua italiana, che presenta il DOI, la paginazione, l'abstract e gli altri dati ufficiali.

When citing, please always refer to the Italian translation only, complete with DOI, page numbers, abstract and other data.

[Chiara Faggiolani, *Essere esigenti è un dovere: cultura come responsabilità civile*. AIB studi, vol. 65 n. 1 gennaio/aprile 2025), p. 5-6. DOI 10.2426/aibstudi-14173]

⁵ Chiara Faggiolani, *Il problema del tempo umano. Le biblioteche di Adriano Olivetti: storia di un'idea rivoluzionaria*. Roma: Edizioni di comunità, 2024

⁶ Goffredo Fofi, *Salvare gli innocenti. Una pedagogia per i tempi di crisi*. Molfetta: La meridiana, 2012, p. 4.