

Homenagem

Fausta Deshormes La Valle

An artisan of women's network in Europe

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Fausta Deshormes La Valle is a “daughter of art”. Born on the 20th February 1927 in Naples, although raised in Rome, she is the firstborn of Renato La Valle – a brave journalist, well-known at that time also for having reported for the Italian review *Il Giornale d'Italia* the *Revolution of the Young Turks* and for his strong aversion to Fascism – and Mercedes Trotta, a highly educated woman moved by lots of passions, dreams and an unusual determination.

When Renato suddenly dies of a heart attack, in 1939, Mercedes is only a young woman with three children to raise: Fausta, Fidelia and Raniero. She has not any job and they are almost in the middle of the Second World War. However, she is firmly motivated not to surrender. She knows she has all the right competences to continue the job of her husband and to ensure a bright future to her daughters and to her son. So, from a certain point of view, this unexpected and suffered loss helps Mercedes to find her way as a journalist, but also as a poet, as a writer and, in general, as an artist.

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Her curiosity and stubbornness leads her to learn, as self-taught, Portuguese and to write articles and poems in that foreign language too. In addition, she accepts and she overcomes the challenge to translate the popular epic poem *The Lusiads* – written by Luís Vaz de Camões – in Italian.

The incredible strength, and versatility, of this mother – together with the highest sense of responsibility and consistency of her husband – are undoubtedly inherited by the three little children who love to play, imagining to become, one day, journalists as their parents. Growing up Fausta does not forget her dreams as a little child and when she starts attending the Faculty of Law at the *University of Rome* (actually *Sapienza University*) she finds a way to pursue her most profound predisposition. Very soon, in fact, she becomes involved in the editorial staff of some reviews and she works as:

- Editor of *L'Universitario* – from 1945 to 1946 – a review promoted by a group of students of the *University of Rome*;
- Editorial Secretary of *Annali Ravasini* – from 1946 to 1951 – a medical journal;
- Editor of *Ricerca* – from 1951 to 1955 – the bulletin of the *Federazione Universitaria Cattolica Italiana* (FUCI);
- Editor-in-chief of *Giovane Europa* (EYC) – from 1955 to 1958 – the bulletin of the *Italian Secretariat of the European Youth Campaign*.

In these years Fausta Deshormes learns how to communicate effectively, how to interact with people of all around Europe, how to promote and to manage initiatives, how to work in teams and she becomes an expert of the third-sector activity amongst young people. In addition, it is in this context that she finds the love of her life. A love which, together with her interest about the future of the European integration process, brings her to the European Commission. During the period spent in the Italian Secretariat of the EYC – a youth association, founded in 1951, and linked to the *European Movement* and to the *American Committee on United Europe* – she meets, in fact, a young and charming man, Philippe Deshormes. Philippe is Belgian and as many other young members of the EYC has already, despite his age, a strong curriculum. Forced to leave the *University of Brussels* – closed due to the outbreak of the Second World War – he joins resistance movements and from 1941, during the conflict, he begins to travel all around Europe.

After the end of the war he is called to work for youth associations, such as the *World Assembly of Youth* (WAY), and in 1953 he is appointed second (and last) General Secretary of EYC.

In a certain sense, we could affirm this encounter was made possible thanks to the EYC even if it is exactly in correspondence of the blossoming of this love – Philippe and Fausta get married in 1958 – that the EYC starts its downward trend. For this reason, Philippe Deshormes is pushed to look for a new job and, in the meanwhile, the newlywed couple moves to Paris and, soon later, to Brussels. Fausta, in these years, leaves the job market to devote more time to her babies (a girl and a boy); but this break does not last long. Despite the fact that her husband is starting a brilliant career at the NATO, she wants to return to work, to be independent and to have a real job. The example of her mother, Mercedes, is probably still vivid – even if in an unconscious way – in her mind.

In 1961 she is hired, as an expert, by the European Commission and more precisely by the *Joint Press and Information Service* (later named *Directorate General for Information*) in the division responsible for the youth sector and education issues. She deals with these topics until 1974 when the Commissioner Carlo Scarascia Mugnozza asks her to work for his Cabinet. These two years are for her, as she affirms in some interviews, a sort of interlude, a passage from the information/formation for young people to the information/formation for women.

This watershed is undoubtedly represented by the launching, by the United Nations, of the *International Women's Year* in 1975 and, later, in 1976-1985 of the *United Nations Decade for Women*. For the first time the voices of women – which until that time seem not to receive a strong consideration, even from European institutions – finally find a place in the political speeches. Fausta Deshormes understands that it is the perfect time to act. Public debates about the conditions of women are increasing and women are starting to ask for a more effective presence in social, economic and political affairs. Fausta is in the right place, at the right moment: the Cabinet of one of the vice-presidents of the European Commission who is, additionally, very sensitive about the topic.

So, moved by these convictions and by the generous support of her past boss – Jacques René Rabier, first Director of the DG for Information and inventor of the Eurobarometer – she promotes the launching of an inquiry

about the conditions of women and men in Europe. The results of this survey are discussed in a public conference in Brussels, held on the 12th and the 13th of March 1976, together with more than 100 women coming from all around Europe. The participants use the event as an opportunity to put forward some innovative proposals and suggestions. For example, at the end of the meeting, they ask for the setting up of two offices about women's issues. An office is established in the DG Social Affairs – with the aim to tackle the working situations of women and it is headed by Jacqueline Nonon – and the other one is established in the DG Information – with the aim to inform women and in particular women's associations. This office after a short time is assigned, from the 31th December 1976, to Fausta Deshormes La Valle.

The small unit, better known as *Women's Information Office*, has not a lot of human and financial resources, but it benefits from the unstoppable imagination and creativity of Fausta Deshormes La Valle. Strong of her experience and knowledge about the world of the third sector – and by taking inspiration from strategies and techniques already used in the world of youth associations – she demonstrates her abilities. In less than a couple of months, in fact, a first draft of the review *Women of Europe*, the most powerful tool of that office, is published. A bulletin destined to remain in the history and the first cover of which reports an unusual call to women inviting them to stimulate and activate all their energies for a new goal: the first election, by universal suffrage, of the European Parliament.

Fausta Deshormes La Valle is, for all these reasons, one of the protagonists of the success of the European elections in 1979. Her little office is, undoubtedly, intended since its foundation to become the landmark of women – simple citizens as well as candidates – and their associations. The unit can be imagined as a sort of a window able to give a strong visibility to women by supporting their activities, creating connections among different experiences and, above all, informing them. The main instrument as already mentioned is the review *Women of Europe*, which collects relevant data and information useful to create synergies and positive emulation processes. At this time there are few reliable sources on these aspects and women candidates are, in a certain way, left to fend for themselves.

Women of Europe operates, on the contrary of some old logics of power, in order to encourage women to create networks, not to surrender and, especially, to empower them. Step by step the Office increases even more

its reputation – and as previously said the elections can be regarded as an important milestone – among women and associations. The most grateful are almost certainly the women members of the European Parliament who, after the election results address many official, but even more informal, letters to Fausta Deshormes La Valle. Among them a touching letter is the one written by Vera Squarcialupi and a communication, dated 25th June 1979, from Simone Veil. The French politician and magistrate who, even if she still is not, is going to be chosen on the 17th July 1979 as the first president (as well as the first woman to hold that position) of the European Parliament.

This is only one of the most popular impactful contributions attributable to Fausta Deshormes La Valle and to the *Women's Information Office*. Nevertheless, the European elections represent only a starting point for the political actions undertaken by the European institutions for the improvements of women's conditions. From 1977 until 1992, the year when Fausta goes to retire, the direct and indirect impulses coming from the *Women's Information Office* are numerous. First of all, Fausta Deshormes continues to contribute, even thanks to the role of the review *Women of Europe*, to the process of information and formation of women. She pursues the idea that information is one of the best tools to mobilise women – as well as young people and citizens – and to assure the establishment of a real democracy in Europe. She keeps faithful to these principles even when the bureaucracy of the European Commission seems resolute to put an end to that unprecedented phenomenon. Several attempts follow each other, but Fausta Deshormes La Valle is always there – helped by the support coming from the outside and in particular from the women MPs – ready to block them.

Inevitably, all these aspects have an impact on her career too, but she does not care about money and prestige. She is simply passionate about her job, just because she believes – as many other “militant officials” arrived in Brussels in the 50s and the 60s – in what she is doing. It is not a coincidence that after her retirement the *Women's Information Office* begins its process of decay. The first main signal is the end of the publication of the historical review *Women of Europe*. To be sincere, this decision is taken by Fausta Deshormes La Valle in person. She is aware of the fact that her job is not just a job, but it is a mission. People with the same perspectives and ideals, the same capacity to overcome obstacles and to create networks, are rare to find. For this reason, before putting an end to the review *Women of Europe*, she launches in 1989

a new and handling bulletin called *The Letter of Women of Europe*, a sort of paper newsletter composed of only 4 pages. She does not intend to cancel also the monographic numbers related to the past bulletin, however the die is cast. After her retirement a few specific numbers are published and *The Letters of Women of Europe* are going to be disseminated for less than 10 years.

A similar process of oblivion involves other initiatives supported by the *Women's Information Office* such as the enhancement of some prestigious prizes aimed at recognising the role of women in political and social matters as well as promoting a realistic representation of the image of women through mass-media. Such as the Prize *Women of Europe* launched by the European Commission for the first time in 1987, on impulse of the *European Union of Federalists*, and the Prize *Nike for the Image of Women in Television*, launched by the European Commission in 1988. All these initiatives – made possible thanks to the determination and the creativeness of Fausta Deshormes La Valle – share a common fate: a slow death. Year after year the old interest on these issues starts to decrease. Maybe the institutions, as well as the public opinion, start to convince themselves the time to look with more confidence towards a bright future has just arrived. At the end of the 90's women's conditions have significantly improved. There is a wide perception that women have finally reached their own place in the society, that they have enough tools to continue that path. It is just an illusion, but it is broadly accepted.

Fausta Deshormes disagrees with this widespread belief and also after her retirement, she continues to have, as a simple citizen and as a member/supporter of some movements and associations, an active role. For example, she still gives some inputs to the activities promoted by the *European Movement* and its *International Women Committee*, to the *European Lobby of Women* (which was born from her idea and support and has become the major network of women's associations in Europe), to some informal networks of women, to the *International Association for the Promotion of the Prize Women of Europe* (AIPFE). In addition, she spends a lot of energy also on topics related to the information/formation of young people. She is always more convinced that the only way to remain faithful to the original project of the European Economic Community, later European Union, is to involve as many European citizens as possible – women as well men, young people as well as older people – through a good information process.

She has still so many dreams and objectives to reach, when she is diagnosed with a lung cancer – caused by exposure to asbestos at the Berlaymont building in Brussels, which hosts the European Commission. The suffering caused by the terminal disease is unquestionable, but it does not reduce her combativeness. On the one hand, she continues to pursue some activities – such as, for example, hosting in her apartment the meetings of the Roman section of the association *Libertà e Giustizia*, a major Italian association defending civic rights; on the other hand she starts a new battle. This struggle is called *Break the Silence* and it is addressed to the European Commission. She finds unacceptable the lack of information and clarity on this point. The employees of the European Commission have to be aware of the risks caused by this exposure. Once again, the last one, she emerges as a forerunner. The institutions recognise her occupational disease and her gesture of generosity opens a breach for other employees.

She has passed away on the 2th of February 2013 surrounded by the love and the esteem of relatives, friends, colleagues, by leaving them a very simple message – “life is beautiful” – which well reflects her personality. A discreet, elegant, moderate and smiling woman that, if necessary, knows how to fight against the abuse of power, the bureaucracy and the failure of respect for human rights. Her testimony has still nowadays an undoubted value, but it has not to conduct people to create myths. Probably if she were here she would not appreciate it, but she would appreciate more if someone could pursue her battle. She is conscious of the fact that there is still so much work to do, and this is certainly one of the reasons persuading her to donate to the *European Archives of Florence* some precious documents, images and folders.

Once again she is a visionary, because without these documents it would have been impossible to reconstruct more than 20 years of history about the involvement of women in the European integration process. In a certain way Fausta Deshormes La Valle has saved European women twice: by informing them, from a political, social and economic process of marginalisation and by saving documents and primary sources about women's struggles in the first decades of the history of the process of European integration, from an historical oblivion.

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Personal Archive of Fausta Deshormes La Valle at her home.

The author has interviewed more than 20 people to write her thesis: relatives, friends and colleagues of Fausta Deshormes La Valle.